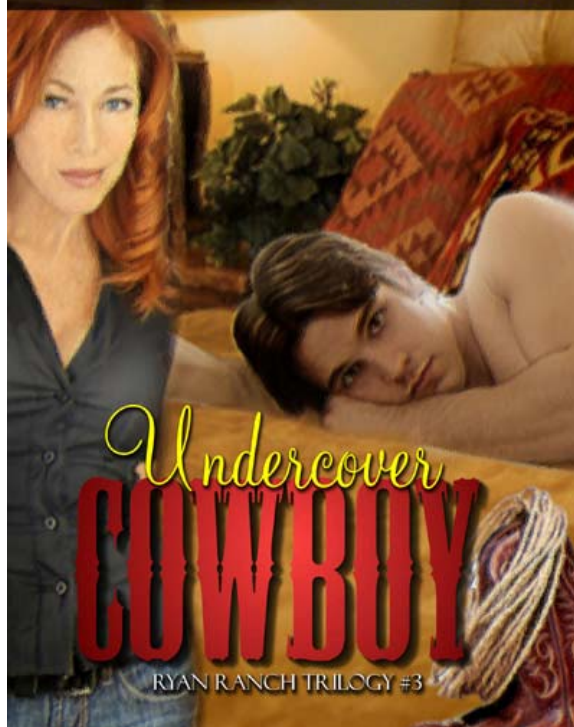


LYNDE LAKES



# *Undercover Cowboy*

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## *Dedication*

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

## *Acknowledgments*

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## Chapter One

“Twenty and restricted to the compound!” Sara Jane Ryan shouted to her horse. “Can you believe it? Well, I’ll show Dad.” She dug her heels a little too firmly into the coal-black quarter horse’s flanks. He sidestepped and tossed his head in protest. She stroked his silky mane. “Sorry, Demon, but Dad makes me see red—barn-on-fire red!” She blew at a wayward tendril of curly auburn hair in utter frustration.

Her ride had taken her to the west sector of the Ryans’ south Texas ranch, where tangles of mesquite trees, scrub oak, and cacti lined the well-beaten path. Since Verde Creek was on the way to her client’s ranch, she decided to stop for a swim to cool off both her temper and body. A shiver slid through her—this was exactly the kind of isolated area Dad had warned her against.

She shook off her uneasiness. He wasn’t making her paranoid, too. For years she’d stuck to his overprotective rules, but no more. If she let him get away with treating her like a child, how could she respect herself or expect him to respect her as an adult? In the distance, she heard a high-pitched whinny. She wrinkled her forehead. Who’d be so far out in the boondocks this time of the day? She shaded her eyes from the searing midmorning sun and squinted, looking for a rider’s silhouette or rising gusts of dust. Seeing neither in any direction, she decided that the whinny must have been from a stray from the small herd of wild mustangs that roamed these parts. It comforted her to see miles of gently rolling land and the distant purple haze where mountains reached up to meet a cloudless blue sky. In her view, God had never made anything more starkly beautiful.

Her sense of serenity faded as shadows of turkey buzzards circling overhead fell across her path. She looked up and shuddered. As useful as the buzzards were, they’d always repulsed her. She was too far out to be concerned that it might be a downed cow. Apparently the scavengers had zeroed in on some other unlucky critter. Suddenly Demon rose and beat the air with his front hooves. Sara clamped her knees tight and gripped the saddle horn. “Easy, boy.” Likely the buzzards had made him nervous, too.

A loud caw cut the air. She jumped and glanced into the trees. Carrion birds waited all humped over, eyes beady and hungry. Several expanded their wings and flew to the ground to close in on something. The foul smell hit her nostrils before she saw the body of a woman lying face down in the overgrowth of mesquite.

Her skin prickled. “Whoa, boy.” Sara Jane dismounted fast and dropped her reins to the ground, knowing Demon would stay. She remembered the whinny and wondered if the woman had been thrown, and her horse had run off. Waving her arms to shoo away the birds, Sara Jane approached the body slowly, then froze in her tracks. Her eyes widened, and a chill shot through her. From the back the woman looked just like her, same long, auburn hair and slender, athletic build. One arm was up over her head. Sara Jane spied an Indian bracelet with three turquoise stones identical to the one her dad had designed and had special-made for her thirteenth birthday. A week ago, the treasured gift had disappeared from her jewelry box. Sara Jane rubbed her arms. This was way too creepy. She felt like grabbing the bracelet, leaping back on her horse, and hightailing it out of there. Fighting the urge, she bent and turned the woman over.

The face was gone! Sara Jane screamed, jumped back, and scrambled to her feet. She pressed her lips tight to hold back the bile that burned in her throat. Through a haze of shock it registered—the face

was cut clean away, with no ragged edges. No animal had done that. She glanced around, suddenly feeling alone and vulnerable.

She had to get out of there—now! But she couldn't seem to move. Struggling with fear and trembling, Sara Jane didn't hear the horse come through the grove of mesquite behind her. At the sound of a man's succinct oath, she whirled. The guy, in his late twenties, dismounted in one fluid motion. His legs were long, powerful-looking. Jeans hugged him like a sheath. With cactus-green eyes flashing, he strode toward her, muscular and dangerous.

Standing as tall as her five feet, six inches would allow, she glared at him and raised an eyebrow. "Did you do this? Are you the killer drawn by that strong urge to return to the scene of the crime?" Sara Jane fought to keep the waver out of her voice.

"What? God, no!" he said.

Unconvinced, she slowly backed toward her horse and the saddlebag where she kept her .38.

In a lower tone, no doubt meant to calm her into a false sense of security, he added, "I heard you scream." His accent wasn't Texan. That was for sure. "Don't be afraid, Miss." He didn't say *Ma'am*, like a wrangler would.

His black jeans and Western shirt were new, unfaded. He shifted his weight, and she noticed the holstered gun at his side for the first time. The weapon and square-shouldered stance of this gun-toting stranger sent another shiver through her. He raked his inky hair with long fingers made for computer keys or a gun trigger, not ranch work.

"Stay back!" she ordered, still moving away. Hot wind blew her hair about her face and lashed her body with unnerving electricity. The call of a distant hawk emphasized the isolation—and how very alone she was with this armed stranger.

He advanced a step closer. "Take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Expect me to believe that?" Sensing she was close to Demon, she whirled, reached into her saddlebag, and drew her gun. "Don't even twitch," she said, aiming her .38 at a point between the man's eyes. His expression darkened—he stopped dead in his tracks. Uncle Luke had always told her when in a tough spot, narrow your eyes, bare your teeth, and bluff. If that didn't work—shoot the bastard. To save a family member, she could pull the trigger, but to save her own life? Not sure, she prayed the urban cowboy wouldn't test her. She wanted to order him to drop his holstered gun but feared he might try something tricky and force her hand.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. His steady gaze showed no fear. "You've got it wrong. I'm here to help."

"Mighty nice of you, stranger," she said, exaggerating her Texas drawl. "Don't think I'm ungrateful, but I don't need your help." She leveled her narrowed gaze on him, gesturing with a slight tilt of her head at the body. "And it's too damned late to help her."

He pushed his black Stetson high on his forehead. His eyes softened marginally. "Tough girl, huh?"

The huskiness in his voice vibrated through her.

“You’ve got that right,” she said, glaring at him. “You have to the count of three to climb back on that sorry-looking mare and hightail it out of here. One . . .”

He shifted his weight on dusty, black leather boots that looked as new as his duds. He showed no sign of leaving. An amused, reckless expression flicked over his face. “Who the devil are you anyway?”

“I should be asking you that, except I don’t give a hoot.” Her throat felt raw. “Now git!” To her embarrassment, her voice cracked. She cocked her gun and resumed her countdown. “Two . . .”

His jaw tightened. Raw sexuality and defiance radiated from the hard planes of his face and the lean lines of his body, charging the air between them. Her gun hand trembled. Fear jelled into a cold lump in her stomach. “Three . . .” She whirled around and swung onto her horse. As she passed his mare, she slapped the animal on the rump and yelled, “Ha!” The roan took off.

The urban cowboy’s eyes widened, and he shouted, “Hey!”

\* \* \* \*

Nicholas Reed shook his head. He couldn’t believe it. That tough little cookie with the flashing sapphire-blue eyes had flipped onto her horse like a rodeo star. Her antics told him that she could easily be the young woman he had come here to protect. Matt had told him when he hand-picked him for the assignment that his daughter had been riding since she was three—even bragged that she was one of the top rodeo performers in the state—had nine championship buckles to prove it. And this little gal certainly knew her way around a horse. But probably most of these ranch girls rode well. Heat burned his neck. Damn! He’d never live it down. Imagine, letting some measly little country-bumpkin get the best of him. He could’ve disarmed her easily enough or even gotten the drop on her. But his plan had been to let the encounter play itself out. It had, but not to his satisfaction.

Dammit. What was it? Almost a full moon or something? During a full moon, strange things happened that made him want to throw in his badge for a few days and lie low, very low, until the full moon waned.

Until he learned the name of the skittish girl, he decided to call her Rodeo Girl. Even the dead woman could be Matt’s daughter. He prayed it wasn’t, but he’d better try to identify the body. He tightened his jaw and forced himself to look again at the darkened raw flesh that once was a face. This was a sick professional job. By the clean cut, he assumed a scalpel or some other kind of surgical tool had been used. He slipped on the thin gloves he always kept handy and squatted next to the body.

From the lack of rigor and the sickening stench of the beginning of decay, urine, and feces, he guessed that she’d been there a day at least. He noticed an Indian bracelet. It looked unusual. Maybe it would lead to her identity. He pressed his thumb against the limp wrist for a moment. The skin was cold and thin to the touch, and when he released the pressure, it left no mark, meaning the blood had already clotted. He checked her pockets, finding nothing but lint. Looking for clothing

tags would require moving the body too much, so he decided to leave that for the sheriff and his forensics team.

Her clothing of jeans and a T-shirt that said “GO FOR IT” told him little. He picked up her hand again. She had painted her nails a metallic blue and green on alternating fingernails. The indentations on eight fingers indicated that she’d recently worn a slew of rings. Her ears were bare, but he detected a band of pricks on them. Whoever killed her must have robbed her as well—or later someone else had. But why did they leave the Indian bracelet? It looked valuable.

The corpse and the gorgeous creature who had just ridden away in a cloud of dust had the same long, auburn hair and general build. Were they related? The girl he was here to protect had a female cousin, but Rodeo Girl didn’t act like she knew the deceased. No tears. Just a tough front to hide her shock. She was good at hiding her true emotions. Only the glassiness in her eyes and the waver in her voice gave her away.

He glanced around the bushes, and his gaze fell on a pile of leaves near the corpse’s head. They were a brownish-red. He noticed something very thick and glossy on them. A chill went through him. It couldn’t be. He brought one of the leaves to his nose and inhaled the scent of hair dye—and honey!

Nick’s heart pounded in hard thuds. Wouldn’t it be ironic if the Bureau and their shrink had outsmarted themselves by assigning him to a case that had somehow gotten entangled with the Honey Murderer’s case? His superiors had locked him out of the loop, but he couldn’t ignore this when it fell right into his lap. He flipped open his cell phone to alert the sheriff and the FBI. All he got was static on the line. “Dammit to hell!”

Nick squared his shoulders and whistled for his horse, Jazgirl. He listened for the sound of hooves or a familiar whinny as his mind filled with Rodeo Girl. Based on the sketchy description Matt had provided, both the deceased and Rodeo Girl fit the description. How many well-stacked auburn-haired girls could there be in this God-forsaken place? It seemed at least two.

It appeared that both, in one way or another, were going to complicate the hell out of his life. Miss Rodeo, although a looker with those big blue eyes and a figure that would stop even Hollywood traffic, was as prickly as the thorny plants he passed along the way. Just like his kid sister Shirly. Shirly’s sassy mouth had always propelled her into scrapes and him into fights protecting her. A rush of unexpected tears blurred his vision, and he blinked them away. *Damn*. He thought he had closed down that susceptible part of himself. To be effective in his job, he had to stay cold and detached—from now on he was through feeling!

His thoughts boomeranged back to Rodeo Girl. The last thing he needed was to deal with a stranger bent on finding trouble, especially in this south Texas heat.

Nick placed his thumb and forefinger into his mouth and whistled again for his horse. He’d trained Jazgirl for a month at the stables in San Dimas, the closest training facility to his apartment in L.A. He wasn’t sure how she’d act now that he’d taken her away from familiar surroundings. While in training together, she’d proven to be smart and quick. But mares, like women, were known to get contrary, usually when you counted on them most. Here he was, in this nowhere land about a hundred miles north of the Mexican border, counting on a horse of all things. It’d be just his luck that, rather than hang around like she’d been taught, she’d cut out on him and make her way back to

the horse trailer he'd used to bring her here. That is, if she could find it hidden away near the line shack he'd camped out in last night. With a knot of uncertainty tightening the muscle in the back of his neck, Nick whistled for the third time—*third time's the charm*, he told himself. For extra insurance, he crossed his fingers.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane headed for the ranch at a full gallop, kicking up a dusty curtain that failed to obscure the macabre mental image of the scene she had left behind. The horror of the faceless corpse kept hitting her like rolling sand clouds in a dust storm. The single thing that had kept her from upchucking her breakfast was her run-in with the greenhorn who'd scared the urge right out of her.

Tears pushed at the back of her eyes. *Oh, God.* A woman was dead. Was she alive before the killer sliced away her face? The tears Sara Jane fought to hold back escaped and rolled down her cheeks. Angry at her weakness, she roughly brushed them away and forced her mind onto her encounter with the urban cowboy with the dangerous green eyes. She'd left him alone with the body. That would give him time and opportunity to destroy or steal evidence. Darn. She should have grabbed the bracelet. But after seeing the raw flesh . . . She gagged and forced the horrible image from her mind. Thank the Lord she'd escaped with her life. It proved she could take care of herself.

She couldn't wait to tell her dad that! A chill slipped up her spine. Was Dad psychic when he'd ordered her not to leave the compound alone? Even with his ties to the FBI, he couldn't have known about the murder, yet something had him worried. He'd bucked like he had a burr under his saddle when she'd merely asked for the keys to the horse trailer.

After galloping about two miles, Sara Jane abruptly pulled back on the reins. Demon stopped and glanced back at her with soulful brown eyes. "Sorry, Demon," she said as she flipped open her cell phone. She usually held the reins lightly, guiding her champion horse with only the slightest movement of her hands, legs, and weight. But something in her had snapped, and she couldn't calm down. If she alerted the sheriff now, he could meet her at the ranch house, and they could ride back together to where the body waited.

She punched in the number. All she got was static. *Blast it!* She was in one of those pockets where the cell phone was useless. She felt like throwing the danged contraption into the nearest ravine. But when it worked, it made life a heck of a lot easier on a huge spread like theirs. She dug her heels into Demon's side, urging him onward again. She glanced toward the rolling rocky formation called Endless Cave. The cave was another place Dad had forbidden her to go. No resentment came at the thought. This was one time she wished he was riding alongside her. Finding a body on Ryan land was bad enough. But to find one with the face torn off gave her the willies. Who was the redhead, and what was she doing on Ryan land? And why did she have a bracelet that looked identical to her missing one?

Earlier Sara Jane had believed that her dad was totally unreasonable and paranoid when he restricted her to the compound. After all, she was a grown woman with an A.A. in animal husbandry, a slew of rodeo medals, and her own horse-training business. A venture that could be on solid ground in no time if he would stay the heck out of her way.

Today was the first time she had out and out defied her dad. Following rules had always been a way

of life in the Ryan family. Her dad and Uncle Luke had always cautioned both her and her slightly older cousin, Alicia, about going out alone in the scrub. They had to have a ranch hand or family member with them on all of their trail rides. Dad's explanation was that even the best riders get thrown.

While true, she and Cousin Alicia didn't buy it as the real reason. Alicia often claimed that they had been kidnapped when they were little and that two kidnappings in one family had made their parents more paranoid than most. Sara Jane loved her cousin too much to outright call her a liar. But Alicia did have a tendency to dramatize, and no one backed up her story. Two children kidnapped in the same family didn't sound likely, but her parents' over-protectiveness from babyhood might explain her own inherent distrust of strangers.

Up ahead, beyond a low place in the trail, lay a circle of giant boulders, the leavings of an ancient glacier. Devil's Circle had always been a place of intrigue and mystery. The whinny of a horse carried on the hot breeze. A chill slid down her spine. She stiffened. Fighting goose flesh, she fumbled for her cell phone. With trembling fingers, she once again punched in the sheriff's number. Still nothing.

Gallop ing hooves thundered toward her. Gusts of dust spiraled up from the desert floor as two men with red bandannas over their faces charged her from the front and wedged her horse between theirs. The wiry rider with long arms grabbed for her. She fought him off while trying unsuccessfully to draw her gun. The brawny guy lifted his rifle and swung it at her. She ducked. The butt grazed the side of her forehead. Fighting dizziness, she gave Demon the quick signals to stop, rise, and twist. The rodeo trick she and Demon had made famous at Buck's Rodeo last year worked. The men's horses reared and backed away. She dug her heels into Demon's flanks and reined him into a *U*-turn and headed back the way she'd come, with the bushwhackers in hot pursuit.

The thunder of hooves pounded behind her—and toward her!

Stunned, she blinked at the rider galloping her way. It was the urban cowboy she had thought she'd left stranded. Was he with the men chasing her? Three against one made lousy odds. He pulled a gun and, to her surprise, fired at her pursuers. Not one to look a gift-horse in the mouth, she abruptly reined Demon to her left and headed through a grove of mesquite. She fought down a twinge of guilt for abandoning her knight-in-dude-ranch-clothes. Likely, the whole rescue was a setup. Probably shooting at those guys was a ruse to make her feel safe so she'd let her guard down. Once she cleared the low trees, she headed down a gully in a fast gallop.

\* \* \* \*

Cursing his bad luck, Nick took cover behind a boulder and returned fire. What was it about Rodeo Girl that drew trouble to her at every turn? And what force kept dragging him into the middle it? When he managed to wing one of the men, both took off, obviously finding him more potentially deadly than a lone girl. He looked around. There was no sign of her. Saving herself was smart. But it would've been an even fight if she'd stayed. He was still mad as hell at her for running his horse off and leaving him stranded. Thank God he could count on Jazgirl. He shook his head. He hadn't expected a tough cookie like that little miss to back down and leave him in the lurch. Again. Maybe she believed he was part of the ambush. That thought didn't make him like Miss Rodeo one bit more.

\* \* \* \*

Finally feeling safe and knowing that she was now within cell phone range, Sara Jane reined in Demon and called the sheriff. She scanned the countryside as she gave him the details of everything that had happened and the general locations. “Your nose and the buzzards should lead you right to the body. But meet me at the ranch house, and I’ll show you exactly where it is.”

“Take you up on that,” the sheriff said, with a heavy dose of Texas twanging in his voice. “Me and my men will fly in by chopper. Have your vaqueros saddle us a half-dozen mounts. Should be there by two.”

She flipped her cell phone closed and looked at her watch. That would give her plenty of time to explain everything to Dad before the lawmen arrived. He’d be home. He had planned to spend the day in his den, working on the ranch books. Besides that, he expected a couple of friends to show up, one from California, the other from Washington, D.C. Guys he’d worked with on a hush-hush FBI assignment last year. She hated that secret part of her dad’s life. Mom insisted that the family had to live with it, that our country needed him now and then. She was proud of him, but when he went off on some mission, she never slept well until he returned. Sure as heck, she’d never marry an FBI man. Even occasional assignments wouldn’t work for her. The worry about her dad’s safety had always been too great.

Only when the family home—a massive Spanish villa standing off by itself on a small knoll, with pillars, wraparound porch, and balconies—came into view, did Sara Jane allow herself to wonder again about the tenderfoot. What if he wasn’t with those men and she’d left him alone to be hurt or killed? It wasn’t like her to abandon someone in trouble, especially someone who’d helped her, but she couldn’t take a chance that he was with her attackers.

Minutes later, Sara Jane rushed into her father’s den, high on adrenaline and breathing hard. “Dad there’s a dead—” Her throat constricted as her dad and the man with him turned. It was the urban cowboy! “What’s he doing here?” she demanded.

The tenderfoot she’d left stranded twice narrowed his eyes. “It’s you!” An angry red blotch crawled up his jaw.

“Hold up,” Dad said, frowning at the spot on her face that was sore as the dickens. “We’ll sort this all out in a minute.” He crossed the room, his expression tight with worry. He held her at arm’s length and swore under his breath. “Your face is bruised!” He reached for the phone. “I’ll get the doc.”

“No!” She stepped back. “I’m fine.”

He tightened his jaw. “Are you sure?” When she assured him she was, he said, “You wouldn’t have gotten that if you’d listened to me.”

“I listened!” Heat burned her cheeks, and she fought to rein in her temper. “But I’m twenty, Dad, not two. Why are we discussing me in front of a stranger?” She tilted her head toward the greenhorn whose red flush had been replaced by an amused look. She’d like to slap that self-satisfied expression right off his face. She lifted an eyebrow. “Did this urban cowboy tell you about the

woman he killed? I called Sheriff Bemis. He'll be here by two."

"I know," Dad admitted. "I talked to Cody after Nick told me about the murder."

"Confession's good for the soul," she said, lifting her chin and glaring at Nick. "Is Nick your nickname or an alias?"

Nick just glared back.

Dad arched a severe eyebrow. "Cool it, Sara Jane." As usual, her father intended to control the conversation. "As you've no doubt started to figure out," he told her, "Nick isn't a murderer." Silver glistened in Dad's salt and pepper hair as he nodded toward his guest. "He's my friend from L.A. Meet Nicholas Reed, one of the Bureau's best agents." He met Nick's gaze. "And this is Sara Jane, the light of my life and the reason I'm prematurely graying."

"Thanks, Dad. Shall I fetch some rocks from outside so you can throw them at me along with your not-so-subtle barbs?"

Dad laughed. "Didn't I tell you she was a spirited girl?"

"Woman!" she corrected.

Frowning, Nick stuck out his hand, looking like he'd rather stick it in flames. She considered ignoring his gesture, but he was, after all, her father's guest, and her ingrained Texas hospitality won over her desire to show the hostility that he seemed to bring out in her. Her eyes widened as he clasped her hand in a warm, sliding grip that ended in a near bone-crushing squeeze that registered as both warlike and strangely sensual. She yanked her hand back as heat and electrical currents charged up her arm.

Furious, she looked him up and down, noting with some displeasure that Nick-the-greenhorn had the same tall, lean good looks and wide shoulders as her dad, who, according to Mom, still looked as handsome as the day she'd married him. Dad was handsome, all right, but his controlling ways could be a royal pain, and Sara Jane had a hunch that Nick was even worse.

"Thanks for saving me from those bushwhackers today," she muttered, not certain how she could feel resentful, grateful, and guilty all at the same time. She refused to admit, even to herself, that the thrill that slithered through her was a more dangerous emotion than the other three. "I would've hung around to help, but I thought you might be with them."

He gave a humorless laugh. "That's as good an excuse as any."

Dad held up his hands like a referee. "Hey, would you two quit tongue-dueling long enough to—"

"Tongue what?" Sara Jane's mom, Molly, demanded, as she sailed through the doorway, her clean, flowery scent following her. Her tone rang with her usual curiosity and a hint of mock outrage.

Red crawled up Dad's neck as though he hadn't realized that his comment had a sexual connotation. Sara Jane fought to conceal a smile. What made it so darn funny was she knew he didn't ever want

to think of her even kissing a man, let alone French-kissing one.

Mom laughed as though the same thought occurred to her. “The sheriff and his men are here,” she said, never missing a beat. “They’re waiting on the porch, raring to go.” Obviously planning to go along, Mom wore jeans and boots and had her camera bag slung over the shoulder. To her reporter-mom, with a camera always close by and loaded, viewing a body was right down her alley. She gave Sara Jane a brief hug and spied the bruise. “Honey, what happened?”

“It’s nothing.” She refused to give them an excuse to leave her at home.

Mom rolled her eyes and touched the French knot of her auburn hair, sprinkled with silver threads, and exchanged one of those looks with Dad that always made Sara Jane feel like an outsider. She wanted what they had with each other and probably would never find it.

On that discouraging note, Sara Jane spun and rushed out to greet the lawmen, her parents and Nick following.

Her best buddy, Uncle Luke, tall, lean, and handsome, in spite of the tip missing from one of his ears, was deep in conversation with Sheriff Bemis. Bemis, short with a roll of fat around his middle, had a pig face that miraculously his young wife found attractive. Some people thought money had drawn a girl twenty years his junior to him, but Sara Jane didn’t think he had enough real wealth to account for the attraction. In her book, Margie really cared for the ol’ guy. Why not? He was honest, completely faithful, and treated the blonde beauty like a queen.

The sheriff’s men, who were in the process of saddling up, were between thirty and forty years of age. She wondered which one of them would be appointed sheriff when Bemis retired in six months to take that tour of the world that he promised his young bride. Not that it mattered to her. All the deputies were very married, as were most of the men around these parts who were worth their salt. Ed Carper and Joe Fredericks, the forensics specialists on the sheriff’s team, loaded their bulky equipment bags onto a packhorse with practiced efficiency.

Aunt Amber, already mounted on Cloudmaker, looked eager to get going. She and Mom, although not related, looked so much alike they could have been sisters and were as close. Dad introduced Nick to the sheriff and his men, praising Nick’s FBI work and his forensics experience. “We’re both ready to help in any way we can,” Dad added.

It struck Sara Jane how alike her dad and the urban cowboy were. They were both top men in their fields. The difference was that Dad was no tenderfoot. He was a successful rancher who loved the land and the life that came with it.

Dad helped Mom mount up and tightened her cinch. When he looked up at her, he winked. Mom smiled like there was no one in the world but the two of them. Sara Jane fought her familiar closed-out feeling. Aunt Amber was just as in love with Uncle Luke, and his eyes sparkled every time he looked at her. Even Alicia had a boyfriend. Well, actually lots of them. Sara Jane was the only one who had no one. And she liked it that way just fine! She gave a sidelong glance at Nick and lifted her chin.

Nick swung smoothly onto his mare. Sara Jane rolled her eyes. So he could mount a horse. *Big deal.*

He was still a greenhorn. The way he slid his lean hips into the saddle sent a surge of desire though her. *Darn hormones!*

She joined the lead with the men. After a few minutes, Dad scowled at her. “You ride in the center with your mom and Aunt Amber. It’s safer.”

Sara Jane blew at a wisp of hair. “But I found the body!”

“Go. I want to talk to Nick alone.”

Cursing under her breath, she dropped back with the women. She wanted to tell her dad about the dead woman wearing her missing bracelet. But he didn’t want to hear what she had to say, and arguing with him now would only make her sound like a petulant child and amuse Nick, who rode beside him, far too much.

The sheriff’s five men brought up the rear. Her new position put her right behind Nick. For a tenderfoot, he rode remarkably tall in the saddle. His shoulders were wider than Dad’s and Uncle Luke’s, and that made them really impressive. Too bad Nick wasn’t a real cowboy, someone who loved ranching. What was she thinking? With luck, he’d finish his visit with Dad and be on his way by tomorrow. *Good riddance!* She hated everything attached to the FBI. It was that bunch who always pulled her dad away for some dangerous job. She hoped that wasn’t what this visit was about.

She couldn’t keep her eyes off Nick. He rode like he’d been born on a horse, his tight butt riding the saddle leather as though he were a part of it, horse and man moving in a captivating rhythm. Sara Jane’s heart quickened, and she lifted her gaze to the back of his head. He removed his Stetson and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Sunlight glistened on Nick’s inky hair. He had no business being so fine-looking. *Darn it.* She didn’t want to have these feelings.

She took a deep breath, taking in smells of earth and animals. From flat ranch land to rocky bluffs and purple mountains, this was her home . . . but not his. Still, as much as she tried, she couldn’t deny that this FBI urban cowboy fascinated her. And that scared her to death.

\* \* \* \*

Nick made it a point to stay close to Matt as they picked up their pace and moved ahead of the others. They hadn’t finished their talk, and he needed to iron out a few details. When he was sure they were out of earshot of the others, he took a deep breath and plunged in. “From what I’ve seen of Sara Jane, I think it’s a mistake to keep her in the dark.” He’d swear he felt the heat of her gaze on him. “If you’d just tell her about the threats, I’m sure—”

Matt laughed without humor, cutting him off. “You spent less than ten minutes with my daughter and already you know her better than I do?”

“Of course not, but, like she said, she’s twenty and capable of—”

“She’s capable of getting herself killed,” he growled. “If there’s a fight, she’s always in the middle of it.”

Nick tightened his jaw. “Maybe you don’t know her as well as you think. When I stepped into the trouble today, she took off, leaving me to handle it. That doesn’t sound like a girl hell-bent to confront danger at all costs.”

“She thought you were one of them. If you’d been a friend, she would’ve stayed and fought by your side, even if it killed her.”

Nick didn’t see it that way. Sara Jane seemed like a girl used to having her own way, one who would protect herself first. He ached to tell Matt that, but he didn’t want to destroy a father’s illusions about his courageous, fearless daughter.

“All of her life,” Matt said, “she has confronted problems and people head-on. Me especially. If she knew about the threats, she’d jump into the action. Your job is to keep her out of it. Stay with her every minute. If she balks, kidnap her if you have to. Put her somewhere safe—anywhere to give me time to find out where the threats are coming from and get the bastards involved.” Matt paused and gave Nick a long, hard look. Nick had known him long enough not to be intimidated and waited unruffled for the warning that was sure to come. “I know how you are with the ladies,” Matt continued. “Remember, she’s my daughter and off limits!”

Nick recoiled, stunned. He couldn’t have felt the blow more if his friend had uppercut him in the jaw. “Damn it, Matt. You didn’t have to tell me that.”

“Sorry, but I know how beguiling she can be to get her way. She might even throw herself at you to spite me. She gets a kick out of antics like that.”

To Nick, she sounded like an out-of-control spoiled brat rather than a woman pushing twenty-one. He would bow out now if he hadn’t discovered the honey. But this was no longer a simple bodyguard job. Now he had to see this through and uncover the connection between the honey murders and the corpse. The Bureau believed it was mainly about threatening notes against Matt’s family. And it could be. De Fuego, the guy Nick put in prison, had long arms, and rumors had it that he’d ordered a hit on Matt’s daughter. But what if it was more complicated?

\* \* \* \*

Mom and Aunt Amber rode close together and talked in low, concerned voices. “You know this may be about the offer we got on the east forty,” Mom said. “After we rejected it, someone killed a dozen cows, and now a body’s turned up.”

“Maybe,” Aunt Amber said with doubt in her voice.

Mom glanced at Sara Jane with concerned eyes as though wondering if she’d overheard their discussion. After a moment, she returned her attention to Aunt Amber and changed the subject. “Where’s Erik?” she asked. “I haven’t seen much of him.”

“Studying for his entrance exam,” Aunt Amber said. “That is, when he’s not running to Stampede Junction to see some little gal or other.”

“Well, we don’t have to worry about him,” Mom said, with affection in her voice. “He’s smart and

will go far.”

Aunt Amber sighed. “That is, if the young women in the county will just leave him be. His good looks could turn into a curse.”

Sara Jane shook her head and rolled her eyes skyward and turned her attention to her dad and Nick. Deep in conversation, they scowled at each other. A chill went up her spine. *Please don't let that be about another FBI job.* What if this murder had something to do with an old case? But how could it? No one had even known about the dead woman until today. Was Mom as concerned about having two FBI men on the property as she was? That brought up another question—where was the other agent now?

It was almost three p.m., and the heat inched upward, warming the billowing wind. Usually by noon the temperature stalled around one hundred degrees Fahrenheit, but today it had shot over the mark, making the air thick and the heat inescapable. Sara Jane had been concentrating on Nick so intently she wasn't aware when the terrain changed to rougher, more desolate land. The mesquite grove where the corpse waited was just around the next bend in the path. Sara Jane swallowed and tensed in readiness to face the grim scene. *Lord, let me handle this well. My freedom could depend on it. And don't let me show any weakness in front of Nick.* No way did she want to give him ammunition to use against her.

## Chapter Two

When the grim group of Ryans and lawmen arrived at the murder site, Sara Jane kicked her leg over her horse and slid off, dismounting on the run, the saddle leather groaning with the off-balance shift of weight. The sheriff and her dad called to her, but she kept going. She half-expected the body to be gone, but there it was in all its horror—only worse. The stench had intensified, and insects hummed and dove in, looking for their supper. Then she noticed the bracelet was gone!

Nick caught up with her and grabbed her arm. “That’s close enough. The sheriff won’t want you tromping all over the crime scene.” For a moment, she stared at the hand on her arm and briefly considered taking hold of it. Just for the comfort of contact with a living human being. She shook off his hold. “Did you take the bracelet?”

“What?” His gaze shot to the body. “Damn it! I wish I had. Sheriff, we have a problem.”

The sheriff and the forensics team joined them, carrying their bags of equipment and wearing water-resistant paper boot-covers. The sheriff handed a pair to Nick. “What’s the difficulty?” he asked.

“Someone took the bracelet I told you about,” Nick said.

The sheriff scratched his head. “You shoulda secured it.”

“In retrospect, yeah. But I was trying to preserve the crime scene for your boys.”

The sheriff didn’t respond to that, but his jaw twitched as he stared down at the body. He took in a long draw of air and exhaled. “Either of you touch anything?” His emphasis on the word *you* revealed his frustration.

“We both did,” Nick said, “but I used gloves.” Frowning, Nick pulled latex gloves from his pocket and smoothed them onto his hands as if he were one of the forensics team.

“Big deal,” Sara Jane muttered, still upset about the missing bracelet. “Normal folks don’t carry a supply of latex in their pockets.”

“Make my job easier if they did,” the sheriff grumbled as he watched Ed string up yellow caution tape around the crime scene.

When Ed finished cordoning the area, the sheriff gruffly asked Sara Jane to step back behind the tape. After he gave the same order to Uncle Luke and Aunt Amber, he began to talk in his slow drawl into his recorder, describing everything he found significant, no doubt burning everything into his mind as well. She wondered how he and his men could deal with corpses. That part of their work had to be a real downer. She was sure she’d have nightmares from this for weeks. Ed and Joe didn’t seem to mind. They worked over every inch of the crime scene, taking pictures of the body from every angle and making both written and recorded notes. Joe sketched the area and the placement of the body, calculating distances from his designated benchmarks.

From behind the yellow tape, Mom put a long-range lens on her camera and began circling and snapping pictures. At one point, she stopped and wiped moisture from her eyes. It was amazing that

she could continue. Aunt Amber and Uncle Luke stood at a distance in an area near the horses, no doubt to discuss and worry over what finding a body on the Bar R meant. They were probably as worried about Cousin Alicia as Dad was about her, but they never restricted Alicia. She had her good-girl act down to a science, fooling everyone but Sara Jane.

Dad joined the sheriff, and the two men talked in low voices. She heard the word *bracelet*. Nick remained with the forensics team. When Ed and Joe finished checking the body and taking their pictures, Nick bent down and touched the corpse's hair gently. "Smell that chemical?" he asked. He eased the head aside and showed Joe something. Joe's eyes lit up. In spite of Sara Jane's aversion to the smell and the annoying insects, she stepped closer, curious to hear what had excited Joe. From what they were saying, the woman had been killed somewhere else, and once here, the killer had poured red dye into her hair and worked it into the tresses.

Joe shook his head. "I missed the red dye spilled on the ground 'cuz it looked like blood. Course we woulda caught it at the lab."

Sara Jane rubbed her arms at the thought of what the dye might mean—the hair color was one reason she and the corpse looked so much alike. Was this a warning to her? A chill slipped down her spine. Or was it a warning to her Dad? She glanced at her father, his arms folded tight against his chest, as he watched the grim fieldwork. What was going through his head, and how much did he know about all this? And what did Nick know? It was strange that he recognized the dye and detected the chemical over the strong odor of decay. Was his examination of the body that thorough, or did he know what to look for? He would, if he saw a connection between this murder and an FBI case in progress. Another chill slid down her spine. She said a silent prayer that her dad wouldn't be dragged into service again.

Nick pointed to some leaves and twigs around the body. "See this honey? After the killer dumped the woman here, he must've poured it over her."

An image of a coyote eating the woman's face sent Sara Jane running to the bushes to empty her stomach. Then it hit her. She had found the body lying face-down! She did a fast cleanup and rushed back to Nick and Joe. "Honey doesn't make sense," she said. "I found her face-down. So, no animal did that."

"You're right," Nick said as though he were in charge of the investigation. "The honey only served as the killer's signature. The bastard stabbed her in the neck, just under the chin, and peeled off her face."

That gruesome revelation sent Sara Jane running to the bushes again. To her embarrassment, Nick followed. "Are you all right?" he asked. He pulled her hair back gently and handed her his handkerchief. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so graphic."

Her face burned. "I'm fine. Go away." She didn't want or need his help, but his gentle touch warmed her deep within and diminished her dislike for him . . . a little.

He stared at her for a moment that seemed like an eternity, and then did as she asked.

Still woozy, she sat down on a boulder and watched the men scan the area for evidence. Ed and

Nick found something in the bushes. They studied the object, excitement glowing on their faces. It was something small enough to fit in Nick's palm, so it wasn't the bracelet. Her heart pounded in hard thuds as she rose to see the mysterious item.

Before Sara Jane could see it, both men turned and headed toward the sheriff and her dad. After they all examined the article, Dad rolled his hands into fists, something he did only when very upset. He glanced toward Uncle Luke and took a step toward him. The sheriff put his hand on Dad's arm, stopping him. Dad's face flushed, his eyes narrowed, and his lips barely moved. Sara Jane knew that in a face-to-face confrontation, the less her dad's lips moved and the softer he spoke, the less likely that he could be swayed. He began to pace. It was odd that Dad allowed the sheriff to stop him from going to Uncle Luke to resolve the problem. With Dad, blood was thicker than any lawman's heavy-handed orders. Besides, he had connections with the FBI and access to two agents right on Ryan land who probably had more authority than the sheriff. The fact that Dad gave in proved something big was up, something that involved the family. If only she could be a fly on his shoulder for a few minutes to eavesdrop on the men and find out what was going on.

She glanced over at her Uncle Luke, who, other than her mom and dad, was her favorite person in the whole world and definitely the most colorful. In his heyday, he was known to be the wildest cowpoke around those parts. Did her uncle have something to hide? When he married the mysterious Aunt Amber, who never talked about her past, he added even more intrigue to his image. Sara Jane imagined that between the two, they had lots of secrets. Did her uncle have one that might ruin all their lives?

While pondering that, Sara Jane got a canteen from her saddlebag and rinsed her mouth. Fortunately, her mom had a mint in her bag. Sara Jane popped it into her mouth—now she was ready to face the world.

After the lawmen finished their examination of the crime scene and bagged the body, everyone started getting on their horses.

Uncle Luke pulled Ed aside. "Any idea who the woman is?" he asked, his face grim.

Ed patted Uncle Luke on the back. "Not yet. We'll know more after the autopsy."

The two men parted, neither looking satisfied with their exchange. Sara Jane's gaze automatically sought a glimpse of Nick. When she discovered he was looking at her, she cursed the blush that brought heat to her cheeks.

He wrinkled his brow and sauntered over to her. "Feeling better?" he asked, starting to help her onto her horse. His hand accidentally brushed her leg, and heat shot through her.

"Now I get it," she said. "FBI means female body inspector. But not this body, buster. And I'm quite capable of getting onto a horse by myself." Demon's ears swiveled back at the sharpness in her tone, and she stroked his neck to calm him.

Nick threw his hands in the air and backed away. "No one doubts that." His deep voice made her knees weak. "It's just that you're a little green around the gills."

She felt the fire in her cheeks. “You must be colorblind. I’m fine.”

He stepped toward her again. “Maybe. But humor me.”

In spite of her protest, she let him give her a boost. No one had offered to help her mount a horse since she was about six, and certainly not since she’d become a horse trainer. She both liked and resented the assistance—mostly she resented it. So, why hadn’t she stopped him? It was a mystery to her and a big mistake, she thought, as the heat of his hands burned through her jeans.

As their group headed toward the ranch, Sara Jane noticed that Nick rode as close to her as he could get without bumping horses. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him watching her as though he expected her to slip off her saddle. “Look, to ease your mind, I’ve never fallen off a horse in my life.” She didn’t bother to mention that she’d been bucked off many times and had the scars to prove it.

Almost imperceptibly, the corners of his mouth curved upward. “If I were talking to someone else, I’d say there’s always a first time, but with you, I think I’d be wrong. I’ve never seen anyone more in tune with her horse.” He paused and gave her a look that made her heart race. “I thought we might talk. You may know more about the murder than you told the sheriff.” He paused and met her gaze. “And be unaware of it.”

She was well aware of what she did know—that the missing bracelet could be hers—something neither Nick nor the lawmen knew. But admitting her suspicions might turn her into a suspect and further curtail her freedom. She laughed without humor. “I’m sure everyone here knows more about this murder than I do. Maybe you can enlighten me?” Sara Jane lifted an eyebrow and gave him a sidelong look. If she asked outright about the clue they found, he would clam up, so she decided to reel him in slowly. “Does Joe have any idea about the time of death?”

“By the stage of decay, he thinks around two a.m.”

With the stench of decay, Sara Jane had thought the woman had been dead longer, but in this heat . . . Her mind whirled. “Murdered somewhere else, right?”

“Exactly.” His eyes widened. “You grasped an important point that goes hand-in-hand with the time of death.”

Sara Jane bristled at the surprise in his voice but refused to let his astonishment get her down. The fact that he underestimated her could work in her favor. “Does Joe or Ed have any idea why the woman was left on Ryan land?”

Nick shook his head. An emotion flickered across his face that made her wonder how much more he knew about the killer’s so-called signature.

Deciding to run a bluff, she said, “I saw what you found in the bushes. By everyone’s reaction, it must be a promising lead.”

“You saw the locket?” An instant after he asked the question, Sara Jane saw awareness light up his eyes, but it was too late, he’d already spilled the beans.

It was all she could do to hold back her triumphant smile. “I was right there. I’m not blind, you know.” She watched Nick’s face. He looked unconvinced. She wasn’t good at flirting, but she didn’t know any other way to distract him. While trying for an innocent-sexy look like the one Cousin Alicia had perfected, Sara Jane raked her hair with trembling fingers and let the thick tresses fall so that they brushed her shoulders. Thanks to her mom’s good genes, she had a decent head of hair and intended to use that asset to the fullest.

Nick wrinkled his forehead, confusion darkening his eyes. She smiled within. Her hot-and-cold act was working. He stared at her for several seconds, perhaps weighing the advisability of answering at all. Finally, he said, “The locket had slots for two photos, but one slot was empty.”

Excitement rose in Sara Jane, and she forgot her seductive act. “Do you think the missing photo has something to do with the murder?”

“Maybe . . . but I was more interested in the remaining picture. . . .” The way his voice trailed away chilled her to the very marrow of her bones.

She found it difficult to breathe. Instinctively, she leaned toward him. “Why? Was the picture of someone you know?”

\* \* \* \*

Nick frowned. He’d been had, and he didn’t like it one damn bit. It wasn’t like him to talk too much. This young woman with her flowing auburn hair and innocent-looking blue eyes knew how to punch his keys. He flexed his jaw, determined not to let her get away with it again. “I didn’t recognize the person,” he said with a clear conscience. This time he had sense enough to keep to himself that everyone else at the murder scene knew the person quite well. “Since we’re at a standstill for now, let’s discuss your schedule.”

Her eyes flashed. “My schedule? Whatever for?” She urged her horse forward along the mesquite and scrub brush lined path.

Nick managed to stay parallel with her. He should have known she wouldn’t make this easy. The sun baked the earth unmercifully. He just wanted to do his job, find the Honey Killer as quickly as possible, and leave this hellish land. “Look, I’ll lay my cards on the table. The FBI has reason to believe you need protection and—”

“Hey, hold it right there! Why does the FBI think that?” She reined away a few feet, forcing her quarter horse to do a sidestepping jig.

Nick swore under his breath. Every time he opened his mouth, he landed on unsound ground. While trying to gather his thoughts, he watched with fascination how the muscles under her jeans flexed as she squeezed with her legs to urge her horse forward again. “It’s involved. But let’s stay on point. From now on—”

“Whoa! Saying it’s involved won’t cut it.”

Nick exhaled and reined his roan close again. Behind them, horses snorted and hooves clomped, reminding him they weren't alone. Yet the intensity between them felt like they were the only two people under the cloudless blue sky. How could he tell this feisty woman enough to get her cooperation without terrifying her? Even though Matt had made it crystal clear that he wanted her kept in the dark, Nick knew he'd have to tell her something. He studied her clenched hands, curled around the reins as though they were her lifeline. Her fingernails were short with a clear gloss—nothing flashy like the dead woman's. And she wore only one ring, a silver band with an Indian design. He wondered about the story behind that. "It has to do with a case your dad worked on."

"Oh, my God. You think it was me the killer was after!" For a moment, her tough facade slipped, and her eyes darkened with a fleeting shadow of fear.

"There's that possibility," he said, as he tried to recover from the backlash of her conclusion. He had to switch her focus. Fast. "It depends on who killed the woman and why. She had no cash, credit cards, or ID. But we'll find out who she is. Joe promised to come up with a composite drawing of the face from the facial bones in a few days. Once they circulate the likeness around, someone's bound to know her."

"Any idea what the missing bracelet means?"

Her fixation on the bracelet told Nick that she knew more about it than she was telling. "Do you know something about it?" he asked.

"Only that it could be important."

She lowered her eyes and didn't quite meet his gaze. She was a lousy liar, but he decided not to call her on it. Guilt nagged at him for not securing the damned thing. But at the time, leaving the scene as he'd found it seemed the wisest thing to do. "I blew it." He hadn't meant to say that out loud, and the minute the words spilled out of his mouth, he wanted to take them back. He stiffened, waiting for her to pounce on them. And she didn't miss the opportunity.

"You mess up a lot, don't you?" she said arching an eyebrow.

"Damn it. Not before today. But then I haven't had you to deal with until now."

She laughed. "Good comeback."

He allowed her sassy words to hang there between them—this time having the good sense to keep his mouth shut.

After several seconds of silence, she cleared her throat and said, "It isn't fair that an innocent woman is dead just because she looked like me." Vulnerability flashed in Sara Jane's eyes. She quickly looked down as though she didn't want him to see it.

Nick felt an overwhelming need to comfort her. If they weren't on horseback, he would give her a hug. "It's not that simple," he said. "Someone went to a lot of trouble to make her look like you, but she was a brunette." He decided against telling Sara Jane about the twenty-three other killings with the same MO. At this point, he didn't know if the same man had killed this woman or if someone

was trying to make it appear that he had. Whether they had two murderers with separate goals and motivations or one clever killer who knew how to muddy the waters, his job right now centered on protecting Sara Jane. “The sheriff has a real puzzle, and until he solves it, I plan to stick with you like glue.” Nick intended to work on the honey case, too, but she didn’t need to know that.

Debate glinted in her eyes, but he saw her struggling to hold back. Rather than let loose her objections, she frowned and stared at him. He watched her eyes, imagining he could see tiny wheels spinning in her head. Then her chin went up and defiance darkened her baby blues. Nick braced himself. “What about the FBI guy from D.C.?” she asked. “Will he be watching me, too? I’m active and don’t sleep much. I train horses all day. And the nights when the sandman flakes out on me, I go skinny-dipping at Verde Creek.” She arched a wicked eyebrow. “Do you two plan to watch me in shifts or what?”

Although Nick had tried to fortify himself for the unexpected, this mood swing, full of suggestive images, took him completely off guard. Was her taunting a cover-up to hide fear? He swore under his breath. Matt had warned him about his daughter’s devilment, but Nick couldn’t get the image of her swimming in the nude out of his head—or stop the heat of desire from flooding through him. He cleared his throat. “I don’t know what the other agent’s job is. But I can handle you alone.” His words tumbled out uncensored, and he regretted them at once.

She threw back her head and laughed. “Oh, can you now?” Her gaze was steady, the sapphire lights in her eyes mocking. “I haven’t seen any proof of that.”

“Stick around, baby, you will,” he shot back, but his gut tightened. He kept stepping into her little traps. She was just too quick, too full of mischief. He pressed his fingers to his throbbing head as the burden of the job settled on his shoulders. At least he’d gotten her mind off the horror of the murder for a while—and his off everything but her, dammit.

He needed a defensive tactic to use against her little schemes. Nick drove a hand into his hair, raking it back from his forehead. “From now on, this is how it has to be: I have to be the one in charge, and you have to trust me and do what I say. It’s the only way I work.”

Fire danced in her eyes. “Let me make this super clear—no one is in charge of me. Besides, trust has to be earned, and you’re a long way from gaining mine.”

Nick’s stomach knotted—she had met his hard line with an equally tough approach. “I still need a rundown of your daily routine,” he growled.

“Don’t have one. I’m sort of a ride-by-the-seat-of-my-jeans woman. . . .” She paused, pure rebellion glinting in her eyes, and gave her bottom a stroke. The way her rump curved into the saddle sent his heart into double time. He swore silently. “Guess you’ll have to play it by instinct,” she continued as though unaware of her effect on him. But she was aware all right—and he knew she was enjoying the hell out of it.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane hadn’t been able to resist having a little fun with the bossy tenderfoot. Alicia wasn’t the only woman in the family who could give a man a hard time and make him sweat. But it hadn’t

worked out as well as she'd hoped. She'd expected to get more information before cutting him loose, but he'd clammed up. Now, there was no point in prolonging the game. She had no intention of losing her freedom to this greenhorn, and she might as well make that clear right now. Doubt washed over her. She'd never had to operate on her own and had never before had to face any real danger. Maybe letting Nick hang around wasn't such a bad idea. She had to admit that he was a pretty decent guy. If he were interested in ranching instead of his FBI games, she could even be attracted to his dark good looks. She had discovered other assets, too. Joe and Ed seemed to respect his views about the murder. And Nick had a good heart. When he'd helped Joe ease the body bag onto the equipment horse, he was especially gentle with the corpse. She couldn't ignore his gallantry either. He'd helped her mount her horse in case the shock of finding the body had made her woozy. She closed her eyes, remembering the waves of warmth as the heat of his hands burned through her jeans. *Cut it out!* She squared her shoulders and shook off her vacillating and very dangerous feelings.

Straightaway, she'd seen how much Nick was like her dad, who loved and protected her to the point of smothering her. She glanced back at her dad. If he saw that Mr. FBI couldn't handle her, he'd send him packing and save her from . . . Exactly what, she wasn't sure. She only knew her feelings for Nick were more risky than whatever trouble plagued their ranch.

She'd been so caught up in her thoughts that she needed a moment to zero in on landmarks. Mesquite thickets twisted in tangled patches. In the distance lay the familiar cluster of boulders, and to the west, Eterno Cave. The path to the endless cave was overgrown but passable, and beyond the bramble stretched open land. If she could outdistance Nick and make him think she'd gone inside the cave, he could get lost in there for days. Her stomach knotted, and regret washed over her. Well, if he got in her way, he'd have to take the consequences. Sara Jane stroked Demon's silky black mane, getting him primed. His muscles tensed beneath her, and he gave a high-pitched whinny. Tossing his head proudly, he waited for her command.

Nick looked at Demon, then met Sara Jane's gaze. His frown deepened. It didn't worry her that he expected something. The greenhorn wouldn't be able to catch her even if she gave him a head start. Which she wouldn't.

With the sheriff and his men close by it wasn't likely that the killer or his bushwhackers would attack again, and her planned route would allow her to see anyone approaching for miles. She just had to get through the short, blind area of thick brush and keep her gun handy. "Tell you what," she said smiling brightly, "if you can keep up with me, you're my man. Otherwise, eat my dust and pack your bags." With that, she reined Demon to the right, dug her heels into the horse's flanks, and headed down a slope almost obscured by a tangle of mesquite. Demon knew this path well. Nick's mare didn't.

\* \* \* \*

Tensed and ready for anything, Nick called out to Matt to follow them and then reined Jazgirl down the incline behind Sara Jane. Although he had suspected that she was up to something, he couldn't believe she'd really taken off by herself after he'd explained the danger. Was she suicidal or what? How could a steady guy like Matt have such a reckless daughter?

The unfamiliar winding path and sharp mesquite and prickly pear branches forced Nick to go slow. He swore when a hidden limb slapped him in the face. He resolved to be more careful. He refused

to rip up Jazgirl's coat for some spoiled, willful girl. How could a horse trainer take her cherished steed into this snarl? This girl was full of inconsistencies, and he intended to get to the bottom of them. He wasn't exactly sure how, but Sara Jane definitely needed someone to rein her in and show her who's boss.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane guided Demon carefully to avoid branches that might scrape his glossy coat. When they cleared the bramble, she urged Demon faster, and gave him his head. Bending forward to avoid hanging branches, she clung to Demon's neck. He was black lightning. Dry mesquite crackled beneath his galloping hooves.

Behind her, the snort of a horse and the clomp of a fast-approaching mare made her heart pound. She had underestimated Nick the greenhorn and his sorry roan, but she had an ace.

\* \* \* \*

Nick cleared the prickly jungle and gained on Sara Jane. He knew now why Matt had insisted on an experienced rider and handpicked him. Nick hadn't wanted the damned assignment at first, but how could he refuse when he owed his friend his life—especially when the danger was to the man's beloved daughter?

When Nick arrived, Matt had given him a gift of a lasso. Told him to keep it handy, that it was standard issue for everyone on the ranch. As Nick got the loop ready, he laughed without humor. He doubted that Matt had intended for him to use it on his daughter.

Nick closed the distance fast. She was only about thirty feet ahead of him. He would give her one chance. "Sara Jane, wait!"

She urged her horse faster.

Only a horse-length behind now, he sent the lasso flying. It looped Demon's long black neck and slowed him. Sara Jane drew a knife from her pocket. It glinted in the sunlight as she flicked it open. She leaned forward and while clinging to the saddle horn with one hand, she tried to cut the rope with the other. Demon's twisting and bucking attempts to free himself made cutting the line impossible; the knife slipped from her hand. Nick rode close, grabbed her around the waist, and pulled her kicking and yelling onto his horse. Tightening his arm muscles and lifting, he managed to seat her in front of him.

Hearing the thunder of hooves behind him, he glanced over his shoulder and sighed in relief to see that, instead of the bushwhackers, it was Matt and Luke heading their way. With effort, while still clinging to Sara Jane, he reined Jazgirl to a stop.

When Sara Jane saw her father and uncle, she quit fighting. To Nick's shock, like a trick rider, she twisted, threw her leg over his horse's mane, and ended up facing him. He might have handled her little surprise better if she had left it at that, but she had more in store for him. She threw her arms around his neck, pulled his head down, and kissed him full on the lips. Before he recovered from that surprise, her tongue slipped in and entwined with his. He couldn't take much of that. Yet, if he

pushed her away, without a saddle, she could lose her balance and fall. Like an idiot, he gave in to the warm, soft lips and the searching tongue. She was in no hurry to pull away. He had kissed a lot of women, but never like this—on a horse with the sun beating down on him, adding to his own raging heat. Her deep probes ignited his senses, and his groin caught fire and began to pulse.

He was only vaguely aware of Luke and Matt coming parallel to them. “What the hell?” Matt shouted and wrestled his only daughter from Nick and onto his horse, who stomped in place. Angry electricity crackled in the still air. “Bring Demon back, Luke,” Matt told his brother. “Sara Jane’s riding with me. And you, Nick,” Matt said, spitting out the name like it was a dirty word. “I’ll talk to you back at the ranch.”

Nick met Sara Jane’s gaze. A swift flush rose in her cheeks. Then her ripe and anything-but-innocent lips broke into a triumphant smile. He tightened his jaw. *Damn it*, she’d planned the whole thing—and he had less than thirty minutes to decide what to do about it.

\* \* \* \*

Nick hung back behind the returning riders to give Matt time to cool off and to give himself time to rehearse his excuses for kissing his boss’s calculating, infuriating, and unnervingly sexy daughter.

As their group got closer to the ranch, the arid rangeland changed to sandy pastures with blades of thin, brown bluestem and the state grass, sideoats grama. The sedate cattle dotting the countryside seemed content to live in this sweatbox land. Matt raised a breed called the Santa Gertrudis—the best breed for this arid climate because it was unaffected by heat and insects. But what about the people who worked the ranch? How did they survive the heat day after day?

Sweat trickled down Nick’s back. Even the roots of his hair under his Stetson swam with moisture. He pulled his clinging shirt from his back, wishing he were anywhere but here. Somewhere cool and green. So, why try to stay? He had some choices! He didn’t have to defend his actions with Sara Jane. He could just let Matt fire him.

That was a joke. He knew he couldn’t leave, not while there was the chance the honey murders case and the murder on the Ryan ranch were connected. But he was tempted. He missed the city, the nightlife, the green parks, the museums—and he had been gone only a few days. He’d always loathed the desert. While in U.S. Air Force security, he’d been stationed at Edwards Air Force Base in California for two very long years and hated every minute of it.

He remembered the boredom. How could Matt and his ranch hands stand doing the same old thing day after day? Nick laughed at the irony: Actually, he hadn’t been bored for a second since arriving. Who could be with Sara Jane around? She was a hurricane, a tornado, and an earthquake all rolled into one completely frustrating woman.

One minute, her eyes flashed like steel, the next they were all soft and as blue as Lake Gregory on a sunny day. How could this complicated, athletic creature seem tough one minute and so vulnerable the next? Everything about her was a contradiction, and what bugged him beyond reason was her untamed side. It kept him guessing, off balance, and definitely upped the danger.

It would take a strong, alert man to keep her safe. Someone like him, who could keep up with her

physically and who, from now on, would never let attraction or desire get in the way—not even if the longing tore him up inside. What if the killer got to her because he ducked out?

It was clear even if the honey murder case wasn't involved, he couldn't quit. He'd never left a job, no matter where it was or the danger involved. Quitting now would go against his values and rigid sense of honor. No, throwing in the towel wasn't an option, no matter how tempted he was to chuck this job babysitting a very sexy spoiled brat.

He could imagine her rebellious smile if he was fired or quit. That alone was enough reason to fight for his job. More important, no matter how much trouble she'd given him, he was convinced after seeing her ride, that he was the only one in the Bureau with the skill, patience, and determination to keep her alive.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane stopped pacing the den and glared at her father. "Why him? He isn't even all that good at the job."

"He caught you, didn't he? That takes a helluva good rider." Her father paused and gave her one of his better-shape-up looks. "I'm warning you, Sara Jane, it's dangerous to fool with Nick. One of the qualities that make him perfect for the job is that he never lets his emotions get involved. And he's left a trail of broken hearts behind him to prove it."

*Now you tell me*, she thought, with the memory of Nick's kiss still warm on her lips and desire for him addling her brain. She could still feel the tiny shocks that jolted at random over every inch of her skin, amplifying and driving her crazy until she wanted to cry for mercy. "Don't worry about me. Just fire him, and I'll be fine."

"First, I have to hear what he has to say."

She rubbed the goose flesh on her arms. "I'd like to hear that myself. Let him try to wheedle out of trying to seduce your only daughter. I mean, how safe is it to let a wolf in the chicken house?" Sara Jane spun on her heels and left her dad to stew on that for a while. He would make the right decision. His whole life was built on caution. For her heart's sake, this better not be the exception.

\* \* \* \*

Nick strode into Matt's den just as Sara Jane was leaving. She gave him a sidelong glance as she passed and said, "Good luck, greenhorn. You'll need it."

Nick wanted to grab her, shake her—and kiss her breathless. *Damn*. He was in for the fight of his life.

"Shut the doors," Matt told Nick, his tone unreadable.

Nick drew the double wood panels closed behind Sara Jane, and without being invited, he slouched down in the chair in front of Matt's desk, hoping to feign an 'I don't give a damn' attitude. "Did she tell you what happened?" he asked.

Matt leveled a hard gaze at him. “Let’s hear your version.”

Nick gave him a blow-by-blow description of Sara Jane’s rodeo antics and tried to explain about the kiss that followed. “She took me by surprise. It won’t happen again.” He left out how his body responded to her closeness, her kiss. No father wanted to hear that, and Nick wished he could rip the memory from his own mind.

Matt listened, his expression closed. “I just need to know one thing,” he finally said, his voice steely. “Can you keep her safe?”

“She’s a handful,” Nick admitted. *And an armful of passion*, he thought. “But with your permission to treat her like I used to treat my kid sister—which could get a little rough—I’ll keep her alive.” *Or die trying*, he told himself.

“Do what you have to do,” Matt said. “I trust you.”

Heat crawled up Nick’s neck, and he quickly changed the subject to the aging crime boss, Fernando Antonio Maltese De Fuego—the guy Matt had locked up more than eighteen years ago. “I checked on De Fuego. If he’s involved in those threats you’ve been getting, it’s indirectly. He’s still in prison.”

“With long arms,” Matt said in a tight voice.

Nick exhaled to calm himself, realizing both he and Matt were knots of tension. “Right. But Angie’s checking on every visitor, phone call, and letter De Fuego’s received since his first day in the pen.” Nick knew he could count on Angie. She could tap into resources few had access to with a speed that amazed him. “She’ll get back to me with a list by secure e-mail sometime tomorrow, and you can read it over and mark the likely suspects.” Nick paused and studied Matt. “Are you worried about De Fuego’s parole hearing? Angie said it’s coming up in a few weeks.”

Matt shook his head firmly. “No. I’ll be there to block any early outs.” He was quiet a moment. “Luke thinks our trouble involves the land deal I turned down last month rather than De Fuego settling old scores.”

Nick went to Matt and touched his shoulder. “There’s even an outside chance that the murder was the work of a serial killer who happened to pick your ranch to dump his victim’s body.”

Matt stared at him with a probing gaze. “I don’t think either of us believes that. But thanks for trying to ease my mind about the family.”

“I’m personally familiar with a serial killer case with the same MO as the murder today and—”

“Was that the case they bumped you from?”

Fighting anger and humiliation, Nick nodded. “Now, back to this case—once the forensics guys do a workup of the woman’s skull and construct a visual likeness, we’ll have something to work with. Her identity might be the key to all this.”

Matt's frown deepened. "Or the key could be the locket and the photo inside."

Nick's stomach knotted. The uncertainty about the possibility of someone in the Ryan family being involved with the murder was clearly worrying the hell out of Matt. "The photo could be a false lead. If we can tie the woman to De Fuego . . ." Nick let his words trail away as another thought hit him. "Did you tell the sheriff about our long-armed jailbird?"

Matt nodded.

"Did Bemis leave?" Nick wanted to talk to him again.

"Not yet. The sheriff and his other deputies are staying the night to give them time to question all of the ranch hands. But Luke is flying the forensics team and the body to San Antonio in our chopper within the hour." Matt paused, the lines in his forehead deepening. "The sheriff said a bracelet that was on the victim's arm disappeared. Could you describe it?"

Nick nodded. "Sterling silver Indian bracelet with three turquoise stones, looked valuable, maybe one-of-a-kind."

"Damn it, I was afraid of that. I gave an identical bracelet to Sara Jane. I had it designed and special-made for her thirteenth birthday. I haven't seen it on her for about a week."

Nick had sensed that she knew something about it. He tightened his jaw. He had to find a way to get her to work with him instead of keeping secrets.

Minutes later, Nick discovered Luke sitting on the railing of the covered wrap-around front porch drinking coffee. "Where's Ed and Joe?" Nick asked.

"Gettin' last minute instructions from the sheriff, I reckon."

Nick sized Luke up from his faded black Stetson to his well-worn snakeskin boots. He'd heard a lot about the younger brother—that he was the wild card in the family. Judging from the barely noticeable scar just below Luke's eye and the slice missing from the top of his right ear, he'd been in a scrape or two and earned the wild brother tag the hard way. His smile was cocky, but his eyes held friendship. Nick wanted to believe the jovial glint didn't mask trouble. "Have you seen Sara Jane?" he asked.

"In the training corral. Taking out her frustrations," Luke said, looking amused. "You'll find her over yonder, near the largest barn. But watch out. When she sees you're still here, she'll be mad as a hornet. She expected Matt to send you packing."

Nick laughed at that. "Shows how wrong even a sharp little cookie like your niece can be. Matt and I have an understanding. Besides, I've only begun to fight."

Luke chuckled, and then his angular face went serious. "Just keep her safe."

Nick nodded and headed toward the big barn. The smell of manure hung in the air, and he

wondered how folks ever got used to it. He hadn't gone far when a tractor hauling hay passed in front of him. When it moved away, he saw Sara Jane ahead inside a split-rail corral. He stepped into the shadows of the barn to observe her without her knowledge.

She kicked up a lot of dust as she rode at breakneck speed, taking a white quarter horse through quickstepping barrel race traces. With flowing auburn tresses and flying mane, they were the most beautiful creatures Nick had ever seen. He watched in awe as Sara Jane rode hard with unbridled agility, speed, and skill while smoothly circling a cloverleaf pattern around three 55-gallon drums. Her incredible turns were tight, only inches from the barrels—and she never once knocked one over. Clearly, she and the horse were attuned to each other. He'd never seen anyone who looked more serious or all business while mounted on a horse.

She absolutely took his breath away. He had seen the dozen pictures on Matt's den wall of Sara Jane accepting her various awards, and Matt had told him that she was one of the top equestrians in the state, so he definitely expected her to know her way around a horse, but nothing as astounding as this. If he had known for sure when they first met out in the boondocks that she was Matt's daughter, her initial Rodeo Girl escape from him wouldn't have taken him by surprise. Now it made sense.

She and the horse closed the top of a cloverleaf and looped again. Knowing better than to approach her until she was done, he hung back in the shadows and planned his next and very challenging move—to corral her.

### Chapter Three

Fighting the strong, unsettling awareness that someone was watching, Sara Jane rode the horse hard, trying to stomp away the bloody image of the faceless woman. *No one deserved to be dumped out in the bush like that. People deserved to die with loved ones around. Was anyone looking for that woman? Had a friend or sweetheart reported her missing?* Sara Jane intended to ask the sheriff. Nick knew more than he was telling, but, thanks to her little game, he would be gone by the time she got back to the house. Maybe she'd acted too hastily. No, getting him out of her life before she fell for him was for the best. Attraction she could fight, but love . . .

She shook her head, refusing to consider the possibility.

Tightening the loop of Vision's gait sharply around the barrel, Sara Jane forced her thoughts back to the dead woman. What was the body of a woman who looked so much like her doing on her beloved Ryan land? Desire for an answer whipped up her curiosity. But the clincher that sucked her into the quicksand of the intrigue was discovering that the woman wore an Indian bracelet with three turquoise stones identical to her uniquely designed jewelry—a bracelet that disappeared from her jewelry box a week ago. The sudden appearance of the missing item on the dead woman made this murder personal. The missing photo and the remaining one that nobody wanted to talk about, supported her growing fear that a Ryan was the real target.

A tremor slid down Sara Jane's spine. If Dad would just tell her what he knew and what he was going to do about it. But no, as always, he kept her in the dark. She clenched the reins so hard her fingernails dug tiny half moons into her palm. It was clear if she wanted information, she'd have to dig it out herself. Luckily, she'd inherited some of her mom's talent for poking around.

Sara Jane reined Vision into a cool-down trot and then led him to the barn, her mind still churning. Tomorrow, after her training session with Monica and Vision, she would ride into Stampede Junction. Perhaps someone there was missing a loved one. Or maybe one of the girls hadn't shown up for work at Lady Leila's Passion Palace. Women in these parts hated that place, but probably not enough to kill one of the girls.

To avoid locking horns with her dad, Sara Jane had decided to ask Uncle Luke to go with her. Tangling with Dad now in her present frame of mind wouldn't be wise. After she'd stressed that she wanted to pick up Monica's horse herself, Dad had sent someone else to do it. Of course, she was glad Vision was here. She needed time with him before Monica came for her session. Monica wanted to be the first blind woman to compete in Buck's Charity Rodeo, and Sara Jane had only six months to get the horse and rider ready. It helped that Vision was reliable and sensitive and Monica had previous riding experience. Monica had two other important qualities: courage and trust. Sara Jane drew in a breath of determination. Now it was her job to bring horse and rider into a perfect oneness, a challenge even when working with sighted people. But she was up to it. When it came to horses and riders, she could teach anyone anything.

Brushing Vision's dusty white coat into a glossy luster, Sara Jane wondered if she'd be as brave and daring as Monica if she couldn't see. "You know, Vision," she told the horse, "I'd like to believe I'd at least try. But knowing Dad, in the name of sheltering, he'd probably do everything in his power to stop me."

The horse snorted and looked back at her with understanding brown eyes.

“You’re right, Vision, Dad’s overprotection is a real pain.”

Somehow she had to prove to her father that she came from his same tough Ryan stock. She shook her head. How could a man who thrived on danger and intrigue expect his daughter to accept him treating her like a glass figurine?

She laughed to herself. A glass statue couldn’t have kissed Nick like that. The trouble was, like the flames in a back draft, the heat had turned on her. She couldn’t escape it. And now she couldn’t forget the subtle salty taste of Nick’s mouth or the hot flash of emotion that blazed its way across her nerve endings and whisked her into a state of confusion and left her wanting more.

Struggling against her desires, Sara Jane led Vision back to his stall, secured the paddock door, and rushed out of the barn and ran smack into a broad chest. She stepped back and looked up into Nick’s smiling green eyes. “You’re still here!” Her voice rose as disappointment and delight warred within her.

“What’s your hurry?” Nick asked, steadying her with strong arms.

A shiver of delight slithered through her. Having him hold her felt far too good. Her face burned. “Come to say good-bye?” She hadn’t seen his roan in the barn, so it wasn’t his horse he was after.

He grinned, all cocky and self-assured. “I’m staying. We had a bargain. You said if I caught you, you’d cooperate.”

Needing to look at anything but him, she glanced up at the wide expanse of the late afternoon’s fading blue sky. What she had said was this—he’d be her man—but she decided not to remind him of that. She had to be careful and not say anything else too familiar. After all, this was a man she wanted to send away. Her little seduction game had already backfired on her. She cleared her throat. “We can discuss a compromise.”

With a start, she realized that Nick still held her. She untangled herself and stepped away.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a man’s shadow dart back and disappear behind a stack of hay. Her arms prickled. She had sensed someone watching her when she was in the training corral. “You got a sidekick around here playing spy?”

Nick’s eyes darkened. “No. Why?”

If she mentioned the shadowy man, Nick might tell her father and foul up her plans to go to town. Struggling with a sense of panic, she said, “I sensed someone watching me while I was in the corral. Did you just get here?”

Nick’s shoulders relaxed, and he closed the distance she’d just put between them, but she barely noticed. Her mind was on the shadowy man and her anticipation of Nick’s next words. “No,” he said. “Been here awhile. You and that horse looked great together.”

She exhaled in relief. "Vision is a magnificent animal." *Dad's paranoia must be rubbing off on her.* It was ridiculous to think that the killer had been watching her. Certainly he wouldn't dare enter the Ryan compound with all the tough ranch hands around. She met Nick's gaze. "You must be a smooth talker. I expected Dad to give you your walking papers."

Nick grinned again, this time revealing a hint of a dimple. "Life's full of surprises." The amusement glinting in his eyes unsettled her. He lifted a hand as though to reach out and touch her.

She forced herself to step back again, remembering the heat of his hands burning through her jeans when he'd helped her mount Demon. "How long am I gonna be stuck with you?" Her throat was dry. Every minute brought her closer to feelings she didn't dare have.

His eyes clouded. "Could you drop the attitude?"

"No. It's part of the package." In the short time she'd known him, he'd stirred her more than she'd ever dreamed possible, and that was dangerous. He wasn't a rancher—he was an FBI man who never stayed in one spot longer than necessary to get the job done. She widened her stance and placed her hands on her hips. "So, how long?"

"Look, I don't like this any more than you do, but I signed on to keep you safe."

"Hope you're well paid, because I promise you trailing around after me won't be a jog in one of your L.A. parks."

"Save the tough-girl act." His eyes narrowed, and a tendon in his jaw pulsed. "Your life is on the line."

"So you said." *My heart, too, Buster, and it scares the hell out of me.* "If you want my cooperation, it'll cost you." She stepped around him and headed for the ranch house where the family waited. Safety in numbers, she thought.

A forklift passed between them loaded with hay. She exhaled in relief, grateful for the barrier. The reprieve was fleeting. As soon as the tractor passed, Nick caught up with her and grabbed her arm, sending heat waves surging through her. He wasn't even breathing hard. "You don't bargain with the guy who's going to keep you alive." His deep voice vibrated within her.

She yanked away from him, but it was too late. His heat was inflaming every inch of her. She lifted her chin, fighting the sensations. "Hey, Urban Cowboy, I don't cave to rules I had no part in setting up. Hang around if you insist, but stay out of my way and keep your hands to yourself." She took off, running.

Nick ran along beside her, his breathing even. "Okay, you win. What'll it take to get you to work with me on this?"

Triumph surged through her. She climbed the steps, two at a time. She paused on the front porch and faced Nick. "I want to go to Stampede Junction tomorrow and talk to a few people. Somebody might be missing a loved one." She had planned to take the truck, but thinking of sitting next to Nick in such close quarters killed that idea. Horseback would be less intimate, as long as they took

two horses. “Dad won’t let me go alone. I’d planned to ask Uncle Luke. But if you have to hang around, you might as well make yourself useful.”

“Forget investigating on your own. The sheriff and his men will check out any missing persons.”

Sara Jane frowned, her patience waning fast. “Who knows how long that’ll take?”

“The sheriff doesn’t seem like one to drag his feet. Besides, it’ll be easier to protect you here in the compound. I don’t think—”

“Never mind. I’ll ask Uncle Luke.” She wanted to whirl around, leave him, and do the whole dramatic bit, but the troubled glimmer in his eyes persuaded her to linger a moment longer to give him a chance to change his mind. Nick stared at her for several seconds. She squirmed, knowing they were at a crossroads. How she handled this could change the whole balance of power.

\* \* \* \*

Savory aromas of carne asada and Texas fries hung in the air. Dinner plates clattered as Maria filled the table with huge platters of food. The whole family gathered around the table, even Sara Jane’s cousins, Erik and Alicia. The sheriff sat on Dad’s left. The deputies who had stayed to question the ranch hands were down at the chuck wagon talking to them and planned to eat there.

During introductions, Sara Jane learned that the stranger next to Alicia was the other FBI agent, Lloyd Adams, Alicia’s personal bodyguard. In spite of his sandy blond hair and broad shoulders, he faded to almost invisible when placed among Nick and the Ryan men, who were all blessed with rugged, dark good looks.

Nick’s dominant presence in the room seemed to heighten her awareness of the differences between herself and her cousin. Alicia was a striking blonde who was far too beautiful for her own good, and she was just a plain Jane with a mass of too-curly auburn hair and a light sprinkling of freckles. Their goals were totally different, too. Alicia wanted to go to the city and become a reporter like Mom, and all Sara Jane wanted was to stay on the ranch and run her horse-training business. And she would—finding one dead body, while chilling, wasn’t enough reason to hide away like a scared rabbit. Across the table, she met Nick’s gaze and quickly looked down. The lace tablecloth and wrought-iron candleholders with white candles must have been in honor of the three lawmen. Her dad always said that treating guests special was a big thing to Texans in general and to him in particular.

Through lowered lashes, she peeked up at Nick. His hard look stroked over her like hot hands. She twisted the napkin in her lap, wishing he would look at Alicia, like most men did, and leave her alone.

Lloyd leaned closer to Alicia, his gaze fixed on her, obviously fascinated by her soft Texas drawl and the way she shook her long blonde hair when making a point. Nothing new there, Sara Jane thought. Alicia collected men like she collected rodeo medals. The bodyguard’s ring finger with the telltale untanned circle was a red flag that he could be a married man on the prowl. Sara Jane caught Alicia’s eye, traced her own empty ring finger, and gestured to Lloyd’s hand. Alicia flipped her hair and shrugged.

Sara Jane's natural protectiveness toward her cousin rose strong and fast. But that instinct alone wouldn't have set her off. Her run-in with Nick had stirred her coals, and she wanted to strike out. She leveled her gaze at Lloyd. "How does your wife handle it when you're off on assignments like this?"

With a sober face, Lloyd said, "The last one killed herself."

Warmth left Sara Jane's cheeks, and she wished she could sink through the floor. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Alicia laughed. "He's lying. He caught me with that one, too. Probably that's why his wife is divorcing him—his cruel sense of humor."

Angry heat shot back into Sara Jane's face. "I hope you're a better bodyguard than you are a human being." All conversation stopped. Everyone's eyes turned to Lloyd. He just sat there, expressionless.

Nick glared at him. "I think you owe these ladies an apology."

Lloyd shrugged. "Sorry, girls. My divorce has left me bitter."

"That's no excuse!" Sara Jane grabbed the silver saltshaker and gripped it with all her might, wanting to hurl it at his insincere face. "And we're women, not girls." Then, with supreme effort, she clamped her mouth shut and uncurled her fingers. Her parents didn't like harsh words at the dinner table, and they didn't cotton to even treating rude guests badly. Besides, she'd gotten her point across—Lloyd was a jerk. What Alicia did with the information was up to her. One thing was for sure, the guy would have to work hard to get back into the good graces of the rest of the Ryan family.

Sara Jane met the sheriff's amused gaze. *Don't smile, Cody Bemis, your turn's next. I'm all wound up and still itching for a fight.* "Whose picture was in the locket, Sheriff? Anyone we know?"

The amusement left the lawman's face, and he exchanged looks with her dad.

She sensed Nick's disapproval and glanced at him. He shook his head. *Darn him.* He had no right to judge her. Indirectly, this was all his fault. If only he'd agreed to take her to town.

"Cool it, Sara Jane," Dad said sternly. "The sheriff is keeping that identity under his Stetson until we can talk to the person in the photo."

"Then it's someone on this ranch. I knew it."

Her dad gave her another sharp look. She scanned the faces of the other family members, looking for any sign of discomfort. Uncle Luke wrinkled his brow and looked befuddled. Erik shifted in his seat, his eyes concerned. Had the mention of the locket upset her handsome cousin? Sara Jane's stomach churned. She'd started all the trouble, but maybe her father's anger was a small price to pay to watch Erik squirm. Earlier when the sheriff stopped Dad from going to Uncle Luke, she'd thought the picture might be of her uncle, but now . . .

Alicia leaned forward. "I love mysteries. Just tell us this much, Sheriff—was it a man or a woman?"

A red flush crawled up from Dad's collar. Sara Jane bit her lip, trying to keep quiet, but the words just bubbled up. "Sheriff, has anyone reported a woman missing on nearby ranches or in Stampede Junction?"

"Not yet," he said, in his slow drawl. "But I don't reckon that means much. Victim hasn't been dead all that long."

Sara Jane tried to slip in one more question. "What about—"

"Enough!" Her father stood and threw down his napkin. "No more talk about murder at the dinner table. And y'all keep it under your hats about the FBI men on the property. Got it?"

Unstoppable words rolled off Sara Jane's tongue like a landslide. "So, how do we explain two urban cowboys hanging around us all the time, like bulls in rut?"

Nick shook his head and rolled his eyes upward.

"Dammit, Sara Jane," her father said. "Leave it to you to come up with an unladylike phrase like that."

Mom touched Dad's arm, and they exchanged a silent message. He took a breath and eased back down in his chair. He cleared his voice. "Although I would've liked it a whole passel better if my lovely daughter would have phrased the question another way, she has a point. We'll just let folks think Nick and Lloyd are a couple of new cowpokes who are sweet on you girls."

Alicia beamed. "Are we supposed to pretend we like 'em back?"

"No!" Uncle Luke and Dad said in emphatic unison.

Sara Jane couldn't hold back a chuckle. "Any acting ability, Nick?" His glum expression and cold silence gave her more ammunition. "Have to do better than that if you want folks to think you like me." That drew a small, begrudging smile.

After scoring that point, she turned to her father and went for another. "What'll we do about their ages?" she asked him.

"They look young enough," Uncle Luke piped up, "only a couple of years past the norm. But you girls remember that they're just acting."

What her uncle said about the FBI guys being only a year or two past the norm was true. Nick and Lloyd were only in their late twenties or early thirties—and they look great—but most cowhands didn't stick around much beyond their mid-twenties. Cowhands soon looked for work that wasn't so backbreaking and lonely or tried to start a ranch of their own. The only older guys on the ranch were key people like Alfonso Hernandez and misfits who had nowhere else to go, like Van Verdugo.

Nick was still glaring at her. Well, she'd fix him. "Uncle Luke, could you take me—"

“I’m taking you,” Nick growled before she could get it all out.

She smiled sweetly. “Why, thank you, Nick.”

He didn’t smile back—if looks could kill, she’d be buzzard bait. She decided not to stir up any more trouble—after all, she’d gotten what she wanted.

During dessert, the new hired hand, Hamm Ross, joined them.

“Would you like a plate of carne asada?” Mom asked.

“Thank ya’ kindly, ma’am. But I had my grub at the chuck wagon with Alfonso after he showed me the ropes. But it’s mighty nice to be here with your family.” His eyes took on a faraway gaze. “Family is everything. Nothing else counts.”

Sara Jane agreed with him on that point, but the fanatical passion in his tone unnerved her. Was this guy a momma’s boy? No, he couldn’t be that. In spite of the scar along his high cheekbone, he had such bad-boy good looks that Sara Jane and Alicia exchanged appreciative glances.

When Uncle Luke introduced Alicia, she licked her lips like the little vixen that she was, and said, “welcome, Hamm,” in a throaty south Texas drawl that was all invitation.

Sara Jane usually flirted, too, but she’d annoyed Dad enough for one night. Besides, with Nick sitting there, it seemed almost unfaithful, which was ridiculous, of course. She didn’t owe Nick anything. Well, maybe she did. He had saved her from the bushwhackers. But what did she owe him for that? Not faithfulness—she would never owe that to some urban cowboy.

She studied the new hired cowpoke. Hamm smiled a lot, especially at Alicia, but something about him bothered Sara Jane. For one thing, his name didn’t suit him. His dark tan and features called for a Spanish name. Her dad was wise to keep the presence of FBI men on the property a secret with the likes of him around. At least until everyone got to know him better. The more she looked at the guy, the more he reminded her of someone. Who?

What was his background? His drawl was more Texarkana than pure Texan. “Where’re you from, Hamm?” she asked. Uncle Luke had hired the guy, and her uncle was more apt to give a man the benefit of the doubt than her dad. Dad always complained about her uncle’s blind trust.

Hamm shifted in his seat, but, as if on cue, he flashed an even set of blinding-white teeth. “Folks were military—rollin’ stones. Ya’ might say I’m from everywhere.”

Sara Jane forced a smile of her own. “Well, cowboy, you had to be born somewhere.”

His gaze darted at Uncle Luke. “Didn’t expect another interview. Thought this was social.”

Uncle Luke twisted his lips to keep from smiling. “You’re on your own,” he said.

Hamm cleared his throat. “Arkansas. Pa was from there, and ma was from Berlin, Germany, but I

spent the last five years on grandma's ranch. So, I know about cows."

The guy smiled a lot, yet it bothered Sara Jane that he never quite met her gaze.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, as darkness closed around them and ranch lights flicked on in the distance, Sara Jane and Alicia sat out on the porch steps sharing feelings and listening to the crickets. Their bodyguards Nick and Lloyd sat on the railing, just out of earshot, talking in deep manly murmurs, probably about them. The agents hadn't known each other before, and Nick didn't seem to like Lloyd much.

As if Alicia was thinking the same thing, she asked, "What do you think of Lloyd?"

Sara Jane rolled her eyes and gave a humorless laugh. "Need you ask?"

Alicia leaned back and rested on her palms, striking a sexy cover-model pose for their bodyguards. Her widow's peak seemed to point down at her deep cleavage. As if men needed help to notice that. "What about the new hand?" her cousin asked in her soft drawl, tapping her foot to the peppy music drifting out from the CD playing inside.

"Too shifty-eyed for my taste."

Alicia's smile switched from amused to pure wicked. "But he sure does justice to a pair of jeans. Think that bulge is all him?"

Sara Jane laughed. "Alicia!"

Before Sara Jane could recover from the bulge comment, Alicia rushed on to her next question. "Speaking of filling out jeans, how did you rate getting Nick as your bodyguard? If he'd just smile now and then, he'd be the best-looking stud for miles around."

Sara Jane recalled one of his rare smiles and secretly agreed. "Dad chose him because he can ride like the wind—and because he's a rigid, controlling guy who reminded Dad of himself."

"Maybe I'm lucky I drew Lloyd. He's easy to twist around my fingers. I think he wants me."

"So, what's new about that? Every guy does. Even the new hand."

"But not your Nick. Is he gay or what?"

Sara Jane laughed. "Not judging by the way he kisses."

Alicia screamed in delight. "He kissed you already? That doesn't sound like an uptight guy to me."

"I started it. He just finished it."

"It was good, huh?" Alicia looked over at the men. "I wonder how Lloyd kisses. Mom invited him to stay in one of our guest rooms."

Uncle Luke and Aunt Amber had a beautiful place of their own on a knoll about a mile down the road. However, when important things were brewing, both families took meals together, mostly at Sara Jane's house because Dad had a cook on staff. When Alicia mentioned where Lloyd would hang his hat, it brought up the question of Nick. Sara Jane knew the sheriff planned to spend the night in the bunkhouse with his men. Would Nick stay there, too? Maybe not, since he was supposed to keep a close eye on her. What if Dad put him in the guest room next to hers? Knowing how Dad felt about keeping bulls out of his baby calf's pen, it wasn't likely since it had connecting doors.

Two hours later Sara Jane discovered that was exactly where Dad had put him. To make matters worse, Nick insisted on walking her to her room. "Suit yourself," she said, feeling herded like a balky calf.

They climbed the curved stairway with the wide, cherry wood banister and walked down the long quarry-tiled hall. Their booted footsteps echoed through the high ceilings, making the silence between them even more noticeable. Her room was at the far end of the hall and soundproof to those downstairs. Her dad must really trust Nick, putting him in the former nanny room with its connecting door. Would he trust him as much if he knew how passionately Nick had returned her kiss? Or how much she wanted to feel that passion again?

Finally, they reached her door. Eager to escape the tension arcing between them, and without even looking at Nick, Sara Jane mumbled, "good night," and turned the cool brass handle and shoved the door open. She froze.

Drawers hung half-open, and someone had strewn her underclothing about. Her open closet doors revealed piles of garments on the floor. Her jewelry box was open—the contents spilled out. The frame that had held a picture of her and her horse, Demon, was empty. Nick darted past her, almost knocking her over, apparently to secure the room. She followed him. "Where were you while some jerk tore up my room?"

Nick, already on his cell phone, held up a hand to quiet her. "Sheriff, someone's broken into Sara Jane's room. Can't tell if the bastard was after something specific or just wanted to scare her."

"I'm not scared," she snapped. "Let's clear that up right now."

Nick drew his eyebrows closer together and put a finger to his lips to shush her again. She glared at him but held in the rest of her thoughts.

The wind gusted from outside and flapped the drapes. The window was open! She pushed the drapes aside. "The screen's gone." She glanced out at the tangle of vines that grew up the trellis. From the rear of the wrap-around porch, anyone could climb up to her room unseen. She swallowed and fought down an urge to run downstairs. Her gaze fell on a pair of white cotton bikini panties on the floor. Her face warmed, and she darted a look at Nick. He moved to the window and told the sheriff the intruder must have entered from there. Before he could look Sara Jane's way again, she snatched up the panties and stuffed them under a pillow.

Her gaze scanned the room, seeing her things as strangers might see them. Someone had touched

her most personal undergarments—put their dirty fingers on them. Getting madder by the second, she started to pick up a broken figurine of a running wild mustang, her favorite.

“Stop!” Nick shouted. “Don’t touch anything.”

She snatched back her hand and nodded.

While she paced, aching to tuck her unmentionables out of sight and put everything back in order, Nick alerted her dad. She wished her father didn’t have to know. It would give him an excuse to tighten the reins even more. She glanced into the bathroom at the mirror and gasped at the message printed in a red substance that looked like blood—Feel Safe?

Nick was by her side in an instant. “What is it?” Then he saw for himself. “Damn!” he said and gathered her into his arms. “The bastard.”

Something silver glinted on the sink, drawing her gaze—her missing Indian bracelet!

Her knees buckled. She grabbed fists full of Nick’s collar in an attempt to keep from collapsing to the floor. It hit her with the impact of a charging bull. This break-in was definitely aimed at her. Some anonymous predator had her in his sights. “If some creep can come into my own room, no place is safe.” She was a pawn in a game with unknown rules.

“I’ll keep you safe, I promise.”

Instinctively, she snuggled deeper into Nick’s strong embrace. It surprised her when he kissed the top of her head as one might comfort a child. Is that how he saw her—a helpless, frightened child? She stiffened and moved away.

Out of his arms, she felt bereft and stunned at how much she missed his strength and warmth. Torn between diverse, confusing feelings, she just stood there. She considered finding an excuse to return to his arms but dropped the unwise idea when the sheriff charged into the room. He and his deputy must have run all the way from the bunkhouse. They had a fingerprint dusting kit with them.

Her dad followed right behind them, his face a scowl of concern. He gave her a hug then held her away, searching her face. “You okay, lil’ darlin’?”

He hadn’t called her that since she’d hit her teens. Fighting tears, she nodded and lifted her chin. “No little break-in can get me down.”

“That’s my girl.”

But her dad kept looking at her, as though searching for any sign of weakness. She vowed not to let him see it. He and the lawmen didn’t need to know that a mere break-in could turn her into quivering mush.

“The missing bracelet showed up,” Nick said, his voice flat.

The lawmen and her dad exchanged grim looks.

When Nick tried to put his arm around Sara Jane again, she shrugged it off. He lifted his hands in an 'I'm-backing-off' gesture and said, "Come on, Sara Jane. Let's leave the sheriff and his deputies to dust for fingerprints while we talk to the rest of your family. They'll want to see for themselves that you're all right." He paused. "You are all right, aren't you?"

She forced her chin up. "What do you think?" Before he could answer, she whirled and headed downstairs.

The two Ryan households waited in the kitchen. Dad joined them. Everyone tried to console Sara Jane, but nothing could erase the image of the bloody words "Feel Safe?" She didn't feel safe at all, but she continued to hold her head high while clenching her hands in her lap. If Dad knew just how scared she was, he would use her fear as another excuse to clip her wings.

Nick was watching her. She grabbed hold of the cup of coffee he poured for her and clung to it. He probably faced things like this every day in his work. To him a break-in would be no big thing. Yet an intensity in his eyes and the gentle way he'd drawn her into his arms led her to feel that there was something different about this time for him. Was it because the break-in happened right under his nose and he felt he wasn't doing his job? She shouldn't have hurled her accusation at him. He couldn't be in two places at once.

She met his gaze with all the strength she could muster—this man would expect Matt Ryan's daughter to stay tough. "I'm sorry for what I said, Nick. You aren't to blame. You were where you were supposed to be, with me."

The last two words settled in her mind and shook her almost as much as the break-in. While she pondered why they meant so much to her, Nick and her parents discussed what else should be done to protect her. Her cousins Alicia and Erik remained silent. Alicia's wide, worried eyes suggested that perhaps she was thinking that it could have just as easily been her room. Sara Jane reached over and patted Alicia's hand. "I think it's just me he wants to scare."

"Maybe we should send the girls away for a while," Mom said. "With their bodyguards, of course." She suggested a couple of promising places that brightened Alicia's expression.

Sara Jane had to admit that the trip to Paris sounded good, but now wasn't the time. "I can't leave now," she said, pushing aside emotions that threatened to overcome her. "My business is at stake. Besides, no second-rate lowlife is going to throw a monkey wrench into my life."

"I support you an' all that, cos'," Alicia said. "You know that. But you can start your little venture when we get back. Think of it, traveling abroad with our own private escorts. . . ."

"You don't understand, Alicia. It has taken a year to set this all up, the loan, the customers. To stop now . . . ." Seeing her cousin's lower lip jut out made Sara Jane feel rotten. "Nothing is stopping you from going, though."

"Yeah, right. As if dad would let me run off to Paris with Lloyd alone."

Uncle Luke laughed. "You got that right."

“Sorry,” she mouthed to Alicia. Her cousin shrugged.

Sara Jane wished her decisions didn’t affect others, but she wasn’t backing down, even if the whole family got on her case. She met Nick’s troubled gaze, then leveled her look at her dad. “Here’s how it’s going to go. I’m meeting with my client in the morning, and then I’m going to Stampede Junction to check on the loan I requested from the bank. I need a horse trailer of my own.” The last part was something she’d just thought of. Admitting that the real purpose for the trip was to dig around for information about the murdered woman would only work against her. “Nick has agreed to go with me, so I’ll be safe.”

A prickle of doubt flashed through her, thinning her confidence. She wished she understood why doubt always follows the bravado. She squared her shoulders. *I won’t be beaten down.*

Her dad glanced at Nick. “What do you think about all this?”

Sara Jane held her breath. Nick knew the real reason for her trip. She locked eyes with him, silently warning him not to sell her out.

He studied her face for what seemed like an eternity, then leaned over and whispered, “Are you going to behave yourself?”

She rolled her eyes.

He held her gaze a moment longer then said, “I can keep her safe.”

When the sheriff finished in Sara Jane’s room and she and Nick went upstairs again, Nick entered ahead of her. “I’ll just check things out, clean the mirror, and then you can go to bed.”

His thoughtfulness sent a lump to her throat. The welling of emotion took her off guard.

“The sheriff had to bag your bracelet and take it,” Nick said. “He’ll return it after forensics checks it over.”

She nodded, *but didn’t care if it ever came back to her—someone was in her room, had touched her things*. She flicked her gaze over the clothing-strewn room, closed her eyes for a moment, then lifted her chin. “Was this only about terrorizing, or was the intruder looking for something?”

Nick shrugged. “After you put things away, tell me if anything is missing.” The tone in his voice sent a chill through her.

While Nick scrubbed the mirror, she tidied up part of the jumble. Then, bone-tired, she just sat on the bed and stared at the remaining mess.

“Hey,” Nick shouted. “How come our rooms are laid out like a hotel?”

“Dad built them to accommodate a nanny. I had a nanny for a while when I was a baby. Do the connecting doors bother you?”

Nick came out of the bathroom, his face grim. “No, it works for us. Leave them open.” His voice had a hard edge.

In spite of her tender thoughts about him, she bristled at his demanding tone. “Did you forget so soon? I don’t take orders.”

“Maybe I should tell your dad just why you want to go to town.”

“That’s blackmail!”

“Not exactly. I figured after I backed you up that you’d feel obligated to go along with a simple request.”

Too tired to argue, she let out a breath and said, “All right, you win.” She grabbed a robe and a pair of cotton PJs and headed for the bathroom. The mirror gleamed at her, all signs of the sinister message gone. Her exasperation disappeared in a surge of tenderness.

She closed the bathroom door and wiggled the handle to make sure the lock had latched. After showering and blow-drying her hair, she peeked out, then ran on tiptoes from the bathroom, and dove into bed. She pulled the sheets up to her neck. How would she ever sleep with him so close? She wasn’t used to a virile man, who she was beginning to like all too much, staying only a few steps through that wide-open doorway.

One boot, then another, thudded to the floor. Did she just imagine the soft, metallic slide of a zipper? Her heart pounded so hard that she pressed on her chest to quiet it down. Barefoot steps crossed his room. She waited for Nick’s bathroom door to close. It didn’t. She heard a rush of water hitting tile. Steamy heat curled from the adjoining room, mingling the scent of Leather shampoo with the moist haze of Jasmine from her shower.

Sara Jane closed her eyes and then opened them again. Would Nick come out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist or buck-naked? If she leaned just a few inches out of the bed to the right, she could see him as he passed the door. Her face warmed as she imagined a tanned bare chest and a large bath towel tied around slim hips, and then she imagined a hard body minus any towel at all. Her heart pounded wildly. How would she ever fall asleep?

She had to think of something else. Not the mirror, not the bracelet, or the man who had ransacked her room. Her dad, then. How cool that he hadn’t balked when she stood up to everyone and told them how things were going to be. She’d always had to fight to hold her own and carve out her own niche. She knew she was smart and quick, and she had learned to fake an ‘I don’t give-a-damn’ attitude. Sometimes she wondered who she was under all that bluster. No doubt Nick wondered that, too. She had the scary feeling that he knew her better than any stranger passing through her life should. To complicate things, she was starting to like having him around.

\* \* \* \*

The fleeting instant of fear Nick had seen in Sara Jane’s eyes when she looked at the bloodlike letters on the mirror had intensified every protective instinct in him. Her tough facade was mostly a front, a

fight for independence. By her reaction, she hadn't realized until that moment that she was someone's target. Now that it had sunk in, she had to be scared. But even fear hadn't made her knuckle under. Even the return of the bracelet hadn't done it. To get her cooperation, he had to play this right. The open door helped, but it was a double-edged sword. He could protect Sara Jane better that way, but it was as though they shared the same room. Earlier, he had heard the shower come on and imagined the gentle cascade caressing her body. God, he ached to stroke her, possess her. By the time he climbed into his own shower, he was stiff with desire. He slicked soap over tense muscles and fantasized what it would be like to shower with Sara Jane. With her ranch-firm build, she would have a flat abdomen and firm breasts. Her slender curves would feel smooth to his touch. Did she have a birthmark or scar? He chuckled. Or maybe a tattoo?

When he finished his warm shower, followed by a cold one, he crossed the bedroom to the open door, leaned against the wall next to it, and listened for movement. If she was still up, he wanted to tell her she could count on him. Hearing no sounds, he just stood there like a fool, allowing the moist heat from the two showers to tease his senses. He breathed in her flowery fragrance, heightening a desire that his promise to Matt and his own code would never let him fulfill.

## Chapter Four

Sara Jane squinted as the sun shot yellow splinters of torture through the blinds. She covered her head with her pillow. After rolling from side to side in her bed until at least three a.m., she didn't need sunshine to jolt her awake. She lay still a moment, buried in soft down, hoping to sink back into oblivion. *What am I doing?* She had too much to do before her trip to Stampede Junction to lie here. Sara Jane threw her legs over the side of the bed and bounded to her feet. She peeked through the open door of the connecting nanny room at Nick's empty bed. Rumpled sheets lay half on the floor as though he'd twisted and turned all night. Well, that was two of them. She should have slept better knowing her protector was only steps away, but images of him—and fantasies of them together—played dangerous games with her mind. The door to his bathroom was closed. She decided not to wait until he came out. She was in no condition to face him. Besides, he would only delay her.

She dressed quickly and tiptoed out of her room. In the kitchen, she gulped down a large glass of orange juice and headed for the barn, betting Nick would be right behind her. A part of her even hoped it. The distant roar of ranch machinery and trucks hummed as ranch activity shifted into high gear. The familiar sounds that were so much a part of Sara Jane's life energized her and added energy to her steps. The morning sun beat down on her face and flashed the surrounding barns with a hot-white glare. She tilted her Stetson lower. Jeans and her favorite green long-sleeved shirt protected her from the sun, but not the heat.

Sara Jane yanked open one of the double doors of the barn and stepped inside, letting the cooler air wash over her. Light streamed through the high windows under the eaves. All the horses were out except Nick's mare, the five that she was responsible for, including Vision, and her own horse Demon. She checked them to make sure they were properly shod and had no saddle burns. Later, Tito, the foreman's twelve-year-old grandson, would groom and brush them. She usually took care of Demon herself. It was their time to talk. But today, she would have Tito groom him while she was busy with Vision.

Noticing the stalls needed fresh hay, she grabbed a pitchfork. As she worked, her thoughts shifted to the low-life varmint who had trashed her room. Thinking she was alone, Sara Jane shouted, "Damn him!" and kicked a bale of hay. Demon moved restlessly in his stall, his edginess deepened by her outburst.

"Good opening act," Van Verdugo said. "But I woulda gone for throwing the pitchfork into the hay. More dramatic and easier on the toe."

He always spoke in theater terms even though at forty he still hadn't achieved any of his pipe dreams of becoming a famous actor. Just hearing his voice and knowing she was alone with him brought back the old wariness. Van had cornered her in the barn when she was thirteen. She still remembered the flushed determination on his face, the lust glistening in his eyes, and the way her heart had pounded in loud thuds of terror. She had kicked him where it counts and escaped. After that, except for heated stares, he'd kept his distance until now. A shiver slid down her spine. Sara Jane pointed the pitchfork at him and forced herself to step forward. "What does a once-a-year rodeo clown know about feelings and expressing them?"

He backed up and laughed, but his eyes held no humor. "Right on cue—a sassy comeback. But

don't be black-listing me. I jus' came to tell ya that Monica Dickson is waitin' for ya in the wings up at the main house."

It took a moment for his message to register. Keeping the pitchfork aimed at him, Sara Jane turned her wrist enough to glance at her watch. Good, Monica was early. It wasn't yet seven, so they could finish before ten in plenty of time for her trip to Stampede Junction with Nick. Sara Jane didn't put the pitchfork down until she got outside. Van followed her out of the barn, but hung back. She walked a little faster and sighed in relief when he didn't try to keep up with her.

She'd been looking forward to visiting with her blind friend again. Monica was only twenty-six and fun to hang out with. Training a sightless person to ride in the barrel competition would be a challenge, but when it came to horses, she could teach anyone to do anything. It helped that Vision had his role down pat. Although horses don't know how to run in races or move in circles naturally, she had already trained him to do his part. Now her job was to bond Monica with her horse. They had to become almost one. Competing was a fifty-fifty proposition—if rider and horse aren't in sync, it affects their performance. She had to start Monica slowly. Monica would need hours to learn how to properly seat herself and steer the horse with minimal effort. Once they got that handled, she had to teach them unconditional trust and communication.

In the distance, in the shadow of an equipment shed, Sara Jane saw huddled figures talking. Thinking about last night's break-in, she hesitated and took a deep breath. Then, with squared shoulders, she continued walking toward them. As she got closer, she recognized the men. What would Skeeter Hoag, a man interested in buying a large parcel of Ryan land, have in common with Hamm, a new and unproven young cowhand? As far as she knew, the only thing they had in common was they were both new to Texas. In his black leather duds, Skeeter looked more suited to riding Harleys than horses. Both men waved and smiled. Skeeter had asked Sara Jane to train a horse for him, but she hadn't given him her answer. He left Hamm and sauntered over to her, his spurs jingling as he walked. "Made up your mind?" he asked.

The jingle of his spiky spurs warned her not to jump into anything. She looked him squarely in the eyes and saw no evidence of kindness in the man. Kindness was necessary for handling horses properly. An uneasy feeling told her not to reject him outright. "I just took on a blind client, and that'll take up most of my time for the next few weeks until we get used to working together. Let me get back to you."

Skeeter's plastered-on smile faded. "Don't wait too long." His low, sinister monotone sounded like a threat. She forced a smile and struggled to walk away from him at a normal pace. Once out of his sight, she quickened her steps.

\* \* \* \*

Nick dodged the news crew that pulled up in a van in front of the ranch house. One of the reporters must have had a friend in the sheriff's or coroner's office who had spilled the beans about the murder and its possible link to the Honey Killer. He would let Matt handle them. His job was to keep a low profile and stick to Sara Jane.

He stayed out of sight and watched her. She was beautiful like a wild horse is beautiful. He couldn't take his eyes off her. His insides tightened, and his skin warmed another degree in the sweltering

heat, plastering his shirt to his back. When she left the barn her stride had been brisk, her expression furious. Nick didn't like the cocky stride of the man who had followed her out. Before Nick could weigh the implications of her encounter with that guy, another unlikely cowboy in black leather approached her. At first, they seemed cordial, and then her stance stiffened. *Damn*. Even on the ranch, she could find trouble. Imagine the opportunities when she left the safety of the compound. He shook his head. Why had he agreed to take her to town? It was too late now. He had given his word. If he could help it, he wouldn't break it. Still, a cold uneasiness told him that taking her to Stampede Junction spelled disaster.

\* \* \* \*

In the music room, a lovely rendition of "Clair de Lune" greeted Sara Jane. Monica had been her piano teacher a few years back. Sara Jane eased onto the bench beside her and joined in the melody, her fingers flowing across the cool keys.

Monica turned gray, unseeing eyes on Sara Jane and smiled. "You've been practicing. Good girl."

When they finished the duet, Sara Jane asked, "Ready to play with Vision?"

Rising, Monica laughed and said, "Is he ready for me?"

As they passed the stairway, Sara Jane glanced up. Had Nick gone back to bed? Maybe urban cowboys weren't used to getting up before daylight, as did most ranch folks. She should talk—with her worries about the break-in and thoughts of Nick, she had overslept.

Earlier, seeing Nick's tangled sheets had given her a measure of satisfaction. She hated to admit she missed him. Well, she would get to see more than enough of him when they went to Stampede Junction. Her heartbeat quickened. The time alone with him could present new problems. Trying to clear her mind of the image of them alone together, and the tension that even thoughts of their closeness aroused, she hurried Monica out of the ranch house and headed for the corral. Van stepped out of the shadows of a shed and blocked their way. His look challenged her.

"You want something?" Sara Jane asked, her patience dwindling.

He shed his wolfish leer and, as if going into an act, dug the toe of his scuffed boots into the dusty earth. "Mind if I tag along and watch?"

"Yes. What are you up to, anyway? Dad doesn't pay you to follow me around." She arched an eyebrow. "Does he?"

Van laughed. "No. Just takin' a break."

"Well, take it somewhere else."

In a way, she wished she'd told her dad about Van when he first cornered her, but her father had warned her not to go into the barn alone and she'd straight-out disobeyed him. Van would have lost his job, which at the time had seemed a high price to pay, since she'd escaped him. She had to admit her main reason for keeping quiet was the knowledge that her super-strict dad would have taken

away more of her precious freedom. She hadn't thought too much about the wisdom of the decision until the murder. The newspapers and media too often carried stories of rejected men who held onto their resentment for years—then snapped. Sara Jane rubbed her arms and looked around. Where the devil was her bodyguard?

She took a fortifying breath. "Come on, Monica." Sara Jane tightened her grip on the blind woman's elbow. "We have work to do," she paused and met Van's narrow-eyed glare, aiming the rest of the sentence at him, "in the corral, where there's a pitchfork handy."

Monica smiled as though sensing that the word *pitchfork* carried a warning to the cowpoke.

\* \* \* \*

The session went better than Sara Jane could have dreamed. It had paid off that Monica's parents had raised her around horses. It took very little time to teach Monica the proper sitting stance, head up, heels down.

"I feel so alive with him," Monica said, her oval face flushed from excitement as she dismounted at the exact spot of her prearranged count.

Sara Jane understood. She experienced the same kind of high every time she rode Demon. She held the horse in place by the bridle. "You and Vision have the best psychic connection I've ever seen," she said, patting the white quarter horse's neck.

She handed Vision's reins to Tito, who had been waiting to take care of the horse. "Cool him down good," she told the lanky twelve-year-old. The boy would strip and brush the horse before putting him back into his stall. As she and Monica left the corral, she turned on her cell phone and checked the messages. "Hey, there's one from Duey," she said, hoping Monica's brother hadn't run into trouble.

She quickly dialed the number and got him on the third ring. "Can you give Monica a lift home?" he asked, sounding harried. "Got a flat and damaged my rim."

"Sure, no problem." Blast it. The changed plans meant she and Nick would have to take the truck to the junction rather than horses. So much for her decision to avoid riding in the close quarters of a truck cab with Nick. At least Monica would be a buffer for part of the way.

Thirty minutes later, after a quick shower, she found Nick waiting with Monica in the kitchen. Monica sat at the table with an empty ice tea glass in front of her. Nick leaned against the counter, looking like he didn't have a care in the world. Drops of water glistened on his inky hair. He had on another new shirt and looked clean-shaven. She breathed in his just-bathed scent. Hmm, he'd taken two showers, too. "You're here," she said, surprised. "Since I hadn't seen you all morning, I thought I might have to go alone."

"I've been close by. Besides, we had a deal. I don't renege, do you?" His tone was even, but heat burned in his eyes. "You wouldn't have left without me?" His voice rose with the question.

"Since you're here, we'll never know, will we?" For Monica's sake, Sara Jane kept the bite out of her

tone, replacing it with a gentle teasing lilt.

When the three of them approached the rusty, dented truck, Nick opened the passenger door, took Monica by the waist, and lifted her gently into the seat. Sara Jane warmed with his thoughtfulness.

She strode to the driver's side and opened the door. She heard the low rumble of Nick's voice, but not his words.

Monica laughed. "I like this guy."

"Yeah, he's a charmer." Sara Jane glanced inside the cab. Her seating choices were: get squeezed in the middle, squashed between Monica and Nick—or as driver, she could press herself tightly against the door and maintain a space between herself and the man who gave off far too much sexual energy. Guilt shot through her. With his wide shoulders it would be cruel to stick him in the middle. Still . . . Trying to relax, she tossed the keys into the air.

Nick dashed 'round the truck and grabbed them midair. "I'll drive," he said, flashing deep dimples.

His previous kind acts had made her forget who she was dealing with. She glared at him, wanting to snap at his controlling, bulldozer manner. Only having to maintain a professional facade in front of her client kept her from shouting that he would drive only over her dead body.

Before she could say anything, Nick caught her by the waist and swung her into the seat. "Scoot over and make room for me, but don't crowd Monica too much," he said, winking.

"I didn't need your help," Sara Jane muttered. "Or your instructions."

Nick climbed into the cab and slid behind the steering wheel, his shoulders touching hers. The pressure of his body sent a ripple of heat down her side. "Part of the job, ma'am," he said, faking a Texas drawl. The scent of his musky aftershave drifted to Sara Jane's nostrils, intoxicating her.

Monica laughed. "Don't stifle the gentleman in the man. It's far too rare."

"You got that right," Sara Jane told Monica, forcing a light tone. Later, she would tell Nick what he could do with his strong-arm tactics.

He revved the engine to life, and they headed down the dirt road, trailing dust clouds. Nick shifted and bumped her knee, sending an electrical charge up her left leg. "Sorry," he said, his quick glance twinkling.

Unable to move out of the way, all she could do was sit still and fight the stirring low in her belly.

Monica, far too perceptive not to feel the tension, said, "The grapevine says you two are sweet on each other."

Sara Jane couldn't give away that he was just her bodyguard. "We're still sorting that out," she said.

Monica laughed. "From the vibes in this car, I'd say that might take a lifetime."

Sara Jane sensed Nick's glance. But she kept her gaze fixed on the winding, mesquite-lined road ahead. She didn't want him to read the moment of yearning that shot through her.

Silence rose between the three of them and continued until Sara Jane couldn't stand it. She cleared her throat and with a cheery voice, said, "I think you and Vision will progress fast. You both have heart, and your communication is solid." Although everything she said was true, Sara Jane felt like she was babbling, but she couldn't stop. "You know, horses teach us a lot about life, like love those who love you back."

"But do we pay attention to them?" Monica asked, her humor-filled tone rising as though her question was really about Sara Jane and Nick ignoring that they were falling in love.

Her blind friend's matchmaking was far too transparent for comfort, and when their truck circled the dirt driveway in front of Monica's house and finally stopped, Sara Jane breathed a sigh of relief.

Nick squeezed her hand. "Wait here," he said, "I'll walk Monica to the door."

Against Sara Jane's will, his thoughtfulness touched her. His gallantry had a side benefit. Waiting in the car would give her a moment to steel herself. She didn't know how she would survive the rest to the drive without a buffer. She scooted over and pressed her side tightly against the passenger door. Nick returned quickly. He slid into the cab and again set off the trip-hammer beat of her pulse.

\* \* \* \*

Nick shook his head as he accelerated the truck to life. Sara Jane had practically upholstered herself to the passenger door. "I don't get you," he said. "Yesterday you caught me in a passionate lip-lock, and now you act afraid of me."

"The kiss was a means to get you fired, nothing more. But now that we're stuck with each other, the rules have changed. And to relieve your mind, I'm not afraid of you—or anyone."

He laughed. "Why don't I believe you?"

"Guess you're a suspicious guy. Probably goes with the territory." She paused and tilted her head. "What made you join the Bureau, anyway?"

Nick shifted in his seat, uncomfortable talking about himself. He glanced at Sara Jane, wondering if a shrug would pacify her. Her big eyes held real interest. Oh, what the heck. Maybe she'd be more cooperative if she knew at least that much about him. "While in Air Force Security, I discovered I liked tracking people down. A major I worked with hired on with the Bureau when he left the air force. He liked the intrigue and convinced me that the job would be a good fit for me."

"And is it?"

"Protecting people satisfies certain inborn needs."

She laughed. "Inborn needs, huh? How dark and mysterious. Tell me more about that."

Her voice was deep and mocking. He grinned at his own pompousness. And her guts to call him on it. “Perhaps that was overstated. Let’s just say that the adventure and travel gets into a man’s blood.”

“Don’t you miss your home and family?” Her tone lost its lightness.

He fought to block out the pain of the question. “My sister is my only family and . . .” He cleared his throat. “She’s an agent, too, now.” *Or was*, he thought. But he didn’t want to go there. “So, there’s no home—no waiting family.”

“How sad.”

Her words crashed over him like a landslide, and he locked his attention on the road, trying to dull the pain of losing Shirl.

“I complain about my relatives sometimes,” she said, “but they mean everything to me.” Sara Jane pointed ahead. “Turn left at the crossroads.”

Ahead were car-sized boulders, their pointed tops resembling fish heads. When Nick came parallel to them, he swung onto another mesquite-dotted bumpy dirt road that looked and felt the same as the one they’d left. With everything in him, he forced the past to the edges of his mind. If he let the memories eat him up, he couldn’t function. Barren, thirsty land swallowed them as their tires kicked up more dust. “Guess a young woman like you looks forward to leaving this dirt bowl behind for some exciting city life,” he said, forcing a cheery tone.

“Never! Who could leave this solitude, this vast beauty?”

Nick laughed in spite of his previous dark thoughts. “Talk about eyes of the beholder.” He sensed more than saw her sharp glance.

“Even if I were too blind to see the wonders of this land,” she said, arching an eyebrow, “like some narrow-minded city man like you, I’d never leave those I love.” Before Nick could recover enough to latch onto a comeback, she added, “You know my Uncle Luke is one of the good guys. He even helped the FBI. And Erik, as much as he annoys me personally, couldn’t harm a field mouse.”

“Maybe we’ll uncover something today to prove that.” Nick understood now. Her anger came from fear. Not for herself, but for her family. He wished he could ease her mind, at least about one of her relatives, but Matt had sworn him to secrecy. Without thinking, Nick reached across the seat and squeezed her hand. A deep warmth rose within him, surpassing his usual support of those he protected. Her wide-eyed glance and flushed cheeks told him that she felt something, too. Something wild was building between them, and what made it so dangerous was it was deeper than mere attraction. He was on dangerous ground. Honor would keep him from touching her, but how did he keep his heart from getting entangled? His only defense was to remember that they were worlds apart in experience, and even more important, what they wanted out of life.

\* \* \* \*

Perched on a rise ahead was Stampede Junction, laid out in a horseshoe of shops and offices and

anchored in the center by the brightly lit Leila's Passion Palace and Gambling Hall. Coming in, Sara Jane had been aware of the small church and the homes of merchants clustered together, as though the owners had sought normalcy in a devil-designed town. She looked over at Nick, and he smiled at her. Her awareness of him soared to unbearable heights, her feelings confusing, impractical.

"With the gambling hall centered and all lit up like that," he said, his deep voice tugging on her emotions. "I guess the town fathers think gambling is the heart of this town."

Sara Jane laughed, trying to hide the turmoil within her. "They didn't have much choice. Leila is the prime financial backer and developer of the town. She insisted upon center stage from the get-go, and because she believes twenty-four-hour sparkle brings in tourist business, she keeps the place lit up like Las Vegas around the clock."

Sara Jane had the feeling by Nick's bone-melting sidelong glance that he was as aware of her as she was of him. "We'll have to park in that dirt lot ahead," she said. "No cars are allowed in the town square." Nick helped her out of the truck. She didn't bother to protest. She needed his cooperation.

She walked beside him in silence, aware of his long-legged stride and wide shoulders. The tension humming between them tore at her calm. In self-defense, Sara Jane scanned the people coming and going on the wooden sidewalk, mostly unshaven cowboys. The few women who had risked the afternoon heat tugged tots by the hands, hurrying them along to the air-conditioned shops ahead. After riding in a hot truck without AC in the hottest part of the day, Sara Jane looked forward to cooling off as well.

"Where do we go first?" A mischievous gleam lit Nick's eyes. "Leila's place?"

"It may surprise you, but that's exactly where I want to go first. If Leila is missing a girl, it's possible that she's our faceless woman."

"Worth a try," Nick said. Their boots pounded the wooden sidewalk as they passed the sheriff's office, only about six storefronts from the casino. "Didn't know the sheriff had an office here."

"Oh, yes. They need it. It even has a two-cell jail in the back. The sheriff keeps a couple of deputies on duty for when there's trouble at the Palace, which happens a lot. Men get tanked up on hard liquor and start fights. If they think they've been cheated, they go plumb berserk."

Nick's gaze scanned a brightly displayed dress shop. "Guess the junction has something for the ladies, too."

Sara Jane looked up into his eyes and felt a connection so strong that, against her best interests, she wished he would hold her hand. "The shopping is handy if there's any money left. The local women hate having their men lose their paychecks to gambling and cavorting with Leila's girls."

Nick glanced at the two-dozen horses tied to the railing in front of Leila's place. "Looks like Leila is right about the bright lights attracting customers."

Sara Jane had seen a tour bus parked in the dirt lot. The three-story purple monstrosity drew hordes of men, those working on the ranches and those visiting the nearby dude ranch. Sara Jane laughed.

“It’s the weekend after payday. But even on weekdays, they don’t hurt for business. Mom says lust and greed keeps men coming back.” Sara Jane shook her head. “Imagine the good that could be done with all that money.”

“You don’t like this town much, do you?”

“It has its pluses and minuses. But Leila’s place is bad for families.”

Nick opened his mouth to respond, but as they entered the cool gambling hall, an earsplitting ringing announced that someone had hit a jackpot. People pushed past. Nick grabbed Sara Jane’s hand and held it tightly. “We have to stay together.”

She smiled and nodded.

They passed long gaming tables where tense, red-eyed gamblers watched a ball teasing in and out of spinning numbers. The gambling hall and restaurant, gaudy with gold velvet wallpaper, covered the bottom floor. Sara Jane leaned close to Nick and raised her voice slightly. “One of our men said that the bordello upstairs takes up two floors, each with its own sitting room and at least ten exotic bedrooms.” Sara Jane wondered what one of those looked like. “Ever see an exotic bedroom, Nick?”

He shot a hard look at her and then, rather than answer, stopped a passing cocktail waitress. “Where will we find Lady Leila?”

The long-legged carrot-top gestured with her head toward a caged area. “She has an office behind the cashier. No one is allowed to enter, but if you press the red button on the counter, she’ll come out.”

After about five minutes, the brassy blonde madam appeared wearing a long, green velvet gown and gobs of gold jewelry. She was about forty-five, with a full figure and shrewd eyes that looked Nick up and down. “You a lawman, honey?” she asked, patting her upswept crown of curls.

“I work for Matt Ryan. Found a dead woman on our spread. Wondered if you had any missing girls? Maybe a brunette built like my girlfriend.” He snaked an arm around Sara Jane’s waist and gave her a little hug. Her breath caught in surprise, and her skin tingled with awareness. She tugged against his hold, but he held her tightly. Heat radiated between them, and Sara Jane wished the feigned affection wasn’t just for show and that he was a rancher—not an FBI man.

Leila sized Sara Jane up as though inspecting a prospective whore. “I hired a girl about two weeks ago who might look a bit like this pretty lil’ heifer. Called herself Kitty, she did. Worked about ten days then disappeared without pickin’ up her pay.”

Leila was still eyeing Sara Jane, making her shift under the scrutiny.

Nick drew her closer. “Do you have a list of Kitty’s customers?”

Leila let out a boisterous laugh. “No lists, no records. We don’t kiss and tell here at Leila’s.”

Sara Jane cleared her dry throat. "Can you at least say if anyone from the Ryan spread ever visited your girls?"

"It would be easier to say who didn't. Our place is popular with the Ryan cowpokes."

Van Verdugo's name popped into Sara Jane's mind. She would have loved for the picture in the locket to be someone like him rather than Uncle Luke or Erik.

Sara Jane asked a couple more questions, trying to pin Leila down, but she found that pressing the shrewd madam was useless. After leaving Leila, they wandered through the casino.

"That was a waste of time," Nick said. "Now what?"

An image of the words on Sara Jane's mirror flashed in her mind. Her life and maybe even her uncle's and cousin's lives might depend upon her answer. Sara Jane spied a wide stairway. "We have to get upstairs." Her surge of excitement fed on itself. "If we can trick one of the girls into telling us something . . ."

A muscle flexed along the tense line of Nick's jaw. "Are you crazy? No one goes up there except horny men."

"Then I'll be a welcome change." Sara Jane pulled away from him, and before Nick could stop her, she ran up the stairway.

"Sara Jane," he called.

She kept going, hoping she wouldn't come to regret it. At the top of the stairs, a mammoth muscled cowboy with a bald head and the sleeves torn from his Western shirt blocked her way. She faked to the left and charged by him on the right. Sara Jane saw flashes of walls covered with gold and velvet. An open door led to a dimly lit bedroom swathed in red silk.

Sara Jane knew Nick would try to follow her. But the big guy would stop him. The scuffle between the men might give her time to talk to one of the girls. But she was wrong. The big guy came after her. Before she could find a bedroom or sitting room with one of the girls inside, he caught her by the waist. She pounded him with her fists and pulled free. He grabbed again, this time catching her by the arm. He spun her around, shifted his hold to grasp her under the arms, and lifted her from her feet until their faces were only inches apart.

Gasping for breath, she said, "Put me down. I have to find out about Kitty. I think she's the one who was murdered on our ranch."

The big man's nostrils flared, and he opened his mouth wide. From deep within him an agonizing, wounded-bull cry erupted from his tongueless mouth and echoed down the hallway. Sara Jane froze, terrified.

"Let her go, and we'll leave." Nick's voice was strong, deadly. He had a gun in his hand.

The giant man looked torn. Nick's glare narrowed, intensified, his finger ready on the trigger.

Without taking his eyes off Nick, the big man returned Sara Jane gently to her feet. She sighed in relief, but her mind kept working. Why had this overgrown oaf gone ballistic when she mentioned that the murdered woman might have been Kitty? “I think he cares what happened to Kitty, cares a lot,” she told Nick. Sara Jane turned and looked up at the big man. “We must talk to someone who knew Kitty’s clients.”

When the man grabbed Sara Jane’s hand, she gasped. Nick raised his gun again. The man ignored him and gently tugged on her. “Wait,” she told Nick, her heart still racing. “I think he wants to show me something.” He led her to a window and pointed at the alley entrance below. Her excitement mounted. “Is there someone down there who can tell me what I need to know?”

He nodded and pulled a tiny writing pad from his pocket. He wrote in a barely legible scrawl: *Wait for the Indian girl, Babbling Brook. Everyone calls her Brook for short. For a hundred bucks, she’ll talk.*

\* \* \* \*

The narrow alley had only about a foot of shade from the adjacent building. Nick hoped Babbling Brook made it snappy. It was hot as hell. Uneasiness gripped him. Was this some kind of setup? Something crashed behind Nick. He jumped in front of Sara Jane and drew his gun. His face heated when he found himself pointing at an overturned rubbish can. A yellow tabby cat scrambled out.

Sara Jane laughed and raised a brow. “Bit nervous, are we?” she asked in a soft, singsong Texas drawl that fantasies were made of.

He wanted to strangle her—and kiss her taunting lips. How could he handle a woman filled with such fire that it threatened to burn and consume everything in its path? “You can’t keep doing impulsive things like racing upstairs to a whorehouse.”

She bent and picked up the Stetson that had fallen from Nick’s head. The magnificent curve of her slim, firm body made him wish he were an artist.

“I know,” she said. “It was a long shot, but I had to do something.”

She handed him the hat, and, when their fingers briefly touched, his heart quickened to double time. Irksome desire and the pressure of her impulsiveness merged and twisted in Nick’s gut. “Thinking things through would be nice,” he growled.

“Message received.” She sat down within the shady strip and rested her back against the adobe building. Even though her legs were clad in denim, he couldn’t miss the graceful line of them as they bent.

He blew upward at a strand of hair that had fallen onto his forehead. His attraction to Sara Jane warred with his good sense. It was frustrating how her reckless acts, although they made his job more difficult, were the very things that intrigued him about her—her courage, her curiosity, and a mind that was always at least six steps ahead. She wasn’t a person to stand back and let life throw her like a bucking bronco. “Look, I admire how you run full steam ahead to get answers, but your safety must come first.”

If he could just get her to trust him. “That big guy could’ve lifted you over his head, tossed you down the stairway, and broken every bone in your—” Nick caught himself before he said *sexy little body*. Instead he cleared his throat and merely said *body*. “You were lucky he wasn’t as mean as he looked.”

She laughed and raked back her thick auburn hair in the most tantalizing way. “Were you afraid? A big, macho FBI man like you?” Her low drawl hummed through him again.

“Hell, no. But you make protecting you more dangerous than it has to be. If you don’t behave yourself, I’ll hog-tie you, and we’ll head home now, without answers.”

She moved closer to him. Her deep blue eyes played a seductive dance. “Oooo. I’m so scared.”

He wanted to turn her over his knee and spank her. Thinking how that cute little butt would feel against his hand sent a stirring to his groin. They sat quietly for a while, Nick trying to get his libido under control and Sara Jane no doubt planning what she’d do next to turn up the heat. He had to get his point across. “You’re like a magnet, pulling trouble to you everywhere you go. Who was that guy who followed you out of the barn this morning?”

Her eyes widened. “You were there?”

“That’s my job—watching you.” A job that was becoming more arousing and frustrating by the minute. “So who was he?”

“Van Verdugo, an over-the-hill rodeo clown.” Again, she raked back her long, wavy hair that tumbled free. Sun glinted in the auburn tresses like spun gold.

He ached to wrap those tresses around his hands and bury his face in her hair. “You looked upset.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t like child molesters.”

Nick’s gut tightened. “What?”

“It was a long time ago—when I was thirteen. Nothing happened. Van cornered me, and I kicked him where it hurts.”

Nick would have laughed if the subject weren’t so serious. “Good for you. Why the hell didn’t Matt fire him?”

“I never told my dad. At the time, I thought it might be my fault. He’d told me not to go in the barn alone.”

Nick started to say that even then she didn’t listen, but he stopped himself. That would sound like he believed she was guilty of something. “It definitely wasn’t your fault!” He’d like to pound Van’s face into hamburger. “I’ll have a little talk with him.”

Her chin shot up. “Forget it, FBI Lancelot. I’ve handled him myself for seven years.”

Nick studied her face and saw the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. He had learned quickly not to count on just her words. "But?" he prompted.

She shrugged. "I can't help but wonder if Van had something to do with the break-in and murder. I've heard that rejected guys sometimes brood and go nuts."

"Has he done other things over the years?"

"Just a look now and then, nothing really."

"Looking alone doesn't fit the profile. But I'll check the guy out. Your safety is too important to ignore any suspects."

A trickle of sweat slid down Nick's back. Sara Jane had tiny glistening drops on her upper lip. He watched them, thinking he saw a rainbow prism. He wanted to taste it. He groaned inwardly as his jeans tightened. He clenched his jaw and glanced at his watch. It had been over twenty minutes. He was about to say that the big guy had led them astray when a dark-skinned girl with shiny black braids slipped out the door and headed for them. The Indian girl's thigh-length buckskin dress was definitely nontraditional. Dark bruises on her thighs marred her legs. No wonder the girl wanted to quit. Nick and Sara Jane got to their feet and met the girl in the middle of the alley.

"Are you Babbling Brook?" he asked.

She nodded and held out her hand. "Money?"

Nick pulled a bill from his pocket, folded it in half, making certain Brook could see that it was a hundred. "Talk first."

Sara Jane opened her wallet and withdrew a snapshot of her uncle and her Cousin Erik. "Ever see either of these men upstairs?"

Brook lifted her chin. "Wally said get cash or no talk."

Sara Jane grabbed the money from Nick's shirt pocket and tucked it into her own. Her chin went up, too. "Tell me first. Have you seen either of these men upstairs?"

Brook laughed and nodded. "That one."

Nick knew it was a member of Sara Jane's family by her gasplike intake of breath. He put his arm around her waist. She swayed against him. "I had hoped it wouldn't be a relative," she whispered. Sara Jane swallowed and met Brook's gaze, her voice strong again. "Was that man a customer?"

Brook smiled. "He friend. Save Kitty from bad man."

Sara Jane closed her eyes a moment and then crossed herself. "Do you know the bad man's name?"

Brook shook her head. "He wear jingly spurs. Belt buckle have *Las Vegas* on it."

Sara Jane's eyes widened as though the spurs and engraved belt meant something to her. Nick didn't know why. Probably half the cowboys in Texas wore spurs, and lots of tourists had belt buckles from the gambling city.

"Was Kitty her real name?" Nick asked.

Brook shook her head. "She Evelyn Pikes. From Nevada."

Nick withdrew the hundred from Sara Jane's pocket and gave it to Brook. The name alone was worth the price. Brook turned to go.

Sara Jane put her hand on her arm. "Who would want to kill her?"

Brook's eyes welled with tears. She shook her head fiercely and scurried away, leaving the question to echo unanswered down the narrow alley.

## Chapter Five

“Let’s go to the sheriff’s office next,” Sara Jane said.

Ignoring her bossy drawl, Nick grinned and took her arm. “How about a sandwich and some iced tea first? We’ve earned it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, there’s a place—”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it handled,” he said, needing to feel a sense of control, yet knowing, with her, it would be fleeting.

He chose a small place down the street, intrigued by the name, Double Your Pleasure. As he opened the door for Sara Jane, aromas of chili hit them along with a blast of cool air. A sign on the wall bragged that the place served the best chili and home-baked pies in Texas. Judging by the nearly full tables, the claim had merit. Noises of clattering dishes and clinking utensils rose over the hum of voices.

Nick tensed at the mischievous sidelong glance from Sara Jane, wondering what she had in store for him now. She glanced at a table of loud children and smiled. “Let’s sit here by the window.”

Nick laughed. She was trying to get back at him by choosing a spot close to a gray-haired woman and her three boisterous grandsons. It wouldn’t work. He loved kids, even noisy ones. He learned while living in foster homes that children and noise went hand in hand. “With a threat against your life, I’ll have to insist on a table at the back.” He led her to a table just vacated, but not yet cleared and pulled out a chair for her. “Allow me, ma’am,” he said in a mock drawl.

Fire sparked in her eyes, and then faded. Whatever comeback she had dreamed up, she held back. Instead, she smiled and said, “Why thank you, UC.” Nick knew the initials referred to the nickname Urban Cowboy, which she seemed to delight in calling him.

He glanced at his watch. It was well past two in the afternoon, but the place was hopping. The twenty-something twin proprietors wearing the name tags Mary belle and May belle flashed big Texas smiles. They wore short denim skirts and fire-engine red, bare-midriff tops that showed off trim abs. They swung their hips as they rushed about. Mary belle cleared the table and took their order. “How about having a bowl o’ red with your grilled cheese sandwiches,” she asked.

“That’s spicy chili,” Sara Jane explained.

Nick laughed. “Too hot today for that.”

“Well, honey,” Mary belle drawled, “you look like you can handle the hot stuff.” Then she swished away.

Sara Jane glared after her. Nick wondered if she was jealous. He refused to analyze why the possibility tickled him.

May belle, the chef, grilled their cheese sandwiches and brought them to the table herself. “Ain’t

seen you around these parts, sugar,” she said, winking at Nick. “Plan on stayin’ a spell?”

“He’s just passing through,” Sara Jane snapped.

“Bummer,” May belle said over her shoulder as she went back to her grill.

Sara Jane sipped her tea, and Nick felt her watching him through lowered lashes, pretending a calmness he didn’t buy. But he wouldn’t call her on it. They both had to stay focused on her safety. Nick took her slender hand in his and studied it a moment before springing another question on her, one that had eaten at the edges of his mind since this morning. “Who was the other guy you were talking to this morning? The unlikely cowboy in black leather.”

Surprise flickered in her eyes. “Skeeter Hoag. He’s one of the owners of the nearby dude ranch. He wants to buy a large parcel of our land, but Dad doesn’t want to sell.”

“What were you doing talking to a guy like that?” Nick’s tone came out harsher than he intended. “Your dad said Hoag is one of the suspects who might be responsible for the slaughter of his cattle.”

Sara Jane snatched back her hand. It was just as well, he told himself, fighting the feeling of loss.

She stared at him, her gaze fierce. “Being a suspect doesn’t make him guilty,” she said. “Not that it’s anyone’s business, but he wants me to train one of his horses.”

“What does your dad think of that?”

Her chin shot up. “Dad doesn’t make my business decisions.”

Nick knew he should drop the subject, but he didn’t like the guy’s looks. “Until we know who murdered Evelyn Pikes—if that’s who she was—you might consider putting Hoag off awhile.”

Sara Jane stiffened, as though someone had run a rod up her back. “Don’t tell me who to take on as a client, Nick. Besides, I have my own reasons for holding off on my decision. Lucky for both of us, I don’t make business decisions based on emotion.”

Nick forced a cough and covered his mouth to hold back a laugh. Her emotions were tangled up in everything she did. He clamped his mouth shut, not wanting to goad her into doing something they’d both regret. He covered her small hand with his again. “Look, I’m sorry. I was out of line. It’s just that as long as Hoag has an excuse to come on the property . . .” Nick let his voice trail away, letting her fill in the blanks. A worry line crinkled at the bridge of her nose. He longed to smooth the adorable crinkle and bring back the feisty sparkle in her eyes. Forget that, he thought. Just concentrate on building her trust.

\* \* \* \*

It was almost three p.m. by the time they walked through the door at the sheriff’s office. There was only one man on duty, and he was engrossed in the data on his computer screen. Sara Jane cleared her throat twice, feeling her tension building.

Finally the deputy looked up. "Help ya, folks?"

Sara Jane rested her arms on the high counter, trying to look relaxed. "There was a murder at the Ryan spread. Have y'all identified the woman?" she said, forcing an even tone.

The deputy's alert eyes focused on her. "You Matt Ryan's daughter?"

She nodded.

"Heard ya might be comin' around."

Nick leaned so close she felt his heat. He flashed a badge. "Do you have the results of the autopsy?"

The deputy got up and pulled out a black-and-white sketch from a file. "Reckon I do. Forensics came up with this drawin' based on the woman's facial bone structure. The report sez there weren't no defensive marks or injuries, so she probably didn't put up any kinda struggle. Could mean she was surprised. Traces of chloroform on her shirt bears out that theory. When Deputy Wills gets back, I'll circulate the picture around town. Might get lucky."

"We have a possible name," Nick said. "May I use your computer to check it out?"

The deputy gestured with his head. "Help yourself."

Sara Jane wondered if Nick's badge always received such cooperation. He rolled up the sleeves of his blue Western shirt and stretched his fingers. They looked strong, capable. A dusting of fine black hair covered his suntanned bare forearms. She wondered about the rest of his body.

"Either of you care for a cup a joe?" the deputy asked, interrupting her musings. Her cheeks flamed. It was a simple question that a two-year-old could answer, but she could only shake her head.

"None for me, thanks," Nick called, sounding absorbed in punching keys and reading the screen.

The deputy propped himself against the counter and stared at her, sipping his steaming coffee. "Y'all ride in on horseback or come by truck?"

She shifted under his probing gaze. "Why do you ask that?"

He laughed. "Is it a secret?"

Her face flamed again as she thought of the sparks that had fired between her and Nick on the drive to town. "Of course not. We came by truck."

The deputy flipped a knob on the air-conditioning to high. "Hope you had AC."

She laughed nervously. "Open windows." When she shifted her weight again, he gestured to a chair. Rather than sit, she picked up the black-and-white composite sketch of the murdered woman. "May I have a copy of this? I'd like to show it to Lady Leila."

The deputy glanced at Nick. “Reckon it’ll be okay.” The lawman went to the copier and made a print and handed it to Sara Jane. She stepped toward the door.

“Wait!” Nick said, his jaw tight. “Just hang on. We’ll both go in a sec.”

His voice had an edge again, just like it did after the crashing garbage can. All of his tension in the alley wasn’t just about danger. She could tell by the way he’d looked at her, all smoldery, his gaze lingering on her face, her lips. Her knees felt weak, and she sank to a chair.

Nick’s fingers flew over the keys for about fifteen minutes while she squirmed in her seat. She was about to say she could have gone and been back by now, when he finally pressed the print button and made two copies of his findings, one for the deputy. “Okay,” he said, “we lucked out. Got complete profiles with photos on Evelyn Pikes, Verdugo, and Hoag. All three have been arrested at least once, which registered them in the system. No apparent connection between their home regions of Nevada, Mexico, and Arizona.”

His comment stirred a passel of questions, but Sara Jane decided to save them until they talked to Leila. Nick thanked the deputy. As they headed out the door, he pressed his hand firmly into the small of her back. For a moment, she savored the strength of his hand and the feeling that they were a couple. “Do you think Leila will cooperate?” Sara Jane asked, stepping over the threshold onto the wooden walkway.

He took her arm. “If not, we’ll find someone who will.”

“Hey, I like that. You’re starting to think like me.”

He chuckled. “That’ll be the day.”

His sarcasm didn’t conceal the warmth in his tone. A sense of their unity of goals sent a lightheartedness surging through her—but the feeling was short-lived. She sensed eyes boring into her back. The hair on her neck prickled. The feeling was so strong that she had to look back. A blur of a man ducked into one of the stores. A chill slid down her spine, and she rubbed her arms.

“Something wrong?” Nick asked, looking down at her with piercing green eyes, as though he, too, sensed trouble.

“I think someone’s following us.”

Nick glanced back and scanned the crowd. “What did he look like?” Nick’s hold on her arm tightened, and he quickened their pace.

“A husky blur.” Even if she’d seen the guy clearly, she probably wouldn’t recognize him. She thought of the masked men who had tried to grab her. God, the killer’s whole gang could be after her. And she wouldn’t recognize any of them. She shuddered and moved closer to Nick, relieved that he was with her.

“I wonder how those masked men who tried to grab me figure into the murder.”

Nick gave a humorless laugh. “Probably just hired flunkies. But don’t worry, I won’t underestimate them.”

Sara Jane moved even closer. “Who’s worried?”

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, driving home with Nick still behind the wheel, she felt both safe and energized by their success. Leila had identified the drawing as Evelyn Pikes, or Kitty as she called her. Sara Jane sent a sideways glance at Nick and raised her eyebrow. “Now what were you saying earlier about my rushing full speed into things?” She tilted her head and smiled saucily. “Admit it. If I hadn’t raced upstairs, we wouldn’t have learned the name of the murdered woman and we’d be going home empty-handed.”

“Not exactly,” he said, gazing down on her, recharging the awareness of him that had stayed with her all day. “We still would’ve had the picture and the forensics report. But the name helped, I’ll give you that. Let’s make a deal. If you’ll promise to tell me what you plan first, we’ll figure out a safe way to deal with your rash urges.”

She laughed. “Rash urges and safe sound like an oxymoron to me.”

“That makes my point, doesn’t it?”

She laughed again. “Okay. I’ll try to be more cautious.” She felt so alive with him and dangerously reckless. She wanted to cooperate—then she wanted to fight that willingness to bend to his will. One FBI man controlling her for most of her life was enough. You couldn’t choose your relatives, but . . . Thoughts of the bloody message on her bathroom mirror—and the suspicion that someone was following her—sent a shudder through her. For now, it made sense to accept his protection. Her breathing slowed, knowing that she could get used to having him around, but with an FBI man whose job sent him jetting around the country, that would be a big mistake.

\* \* \* \*

Nick swore under his breath at the sight of the truck’s temperature gauge pushing into the red danger zone. “Think we’d better stop and let the engine cool off.”

“I always keep a jug of water in the back,” Sara Jane said, her tone light.

“Good. But we still have to let the radiator cool down.”

She chuckled. “Well, at least this is a great place to stop.”

They were on some kind of plateau with a big tree. Nick’s urge to get out of the blistering heat was overridden by his need to touch Sara Jane. He ran to the other side of the car, knowing she wouldn’t wait for help.

She laughed when he offered his hand. “You really play the gentleman to the hilt, don’t you, UC? If

you're trying to make a helpless female out of me, it won't work."

Still, she placed her hand in his. The top was smooth and soft, but her grip was strong. He detected a hint of a callus on the pad below her ring finger. He swallowed, uncertain why finding a rough spot sent heat surging through him. "Enjoy the attention. I'll be gone soon," he growled.

With more thrust than necessary, he lifted the hood, wondering why the thought of leaving depressed him so damned much. Steam poured out, curling like warning signals in the breeze. He checked the hoses. "Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"Someone took a razor blade to one of our hoses."

"Are you sure?" She brushed against him and peered under the hood. The sense of togetherness her nearness brought cooled his anger a degree. He fought an urge to put his arm around her. He remembered the deputy asking if they had come by truck. "Wonder how many people knew we drove to the junction in this?"

"Anyone who saw us leave the ranch." Her baby blue eyes brightened. "My bet's on the guy who was following us. But he'll have to do more than cut a hose to strand us. I've got a first-aid kit in the glove compartment. I'll have that slice taped in a jiffy." She wasn't just whistling in the wind. In about a second, she had the hose pressure-taped.

He shook his head. "I like your style, SJ," he said, using only her initials as payback for the UC nickname.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his hand. "While the radiator cools down, I'll show you a sight that'll make you wish you never had to leave this place."

*Fat chance of that*, he thought. He admired how she took everything in stride and accepted the cut hose like it was nothing. He wished he could. An overheated radiator in over 100-degree heat was bad enough, but some bastard cutting their hose could mean that the killer was toying with them—and that the trouble had only begun.

He thought of the blur of a man who had followed them in town, knowing that the most dangerous enemies were the ones you couldn't recognize.

As they walked toward the shelter of the tree, sunlight caught in Sara Jane's auburn hair, turning it into ribbons of gold and burgundy. In spite of his concerns, Nick felt his lips turning up in a grin. He would love to run his fingers through that thick tangle of silk.

"This place is called Lustre Plateau," she said, seeming unaware of how her beauty had moved him. "The Spanish settlers believed that this was a spiritual site, hence the name *lustre*, or *glory*. They felt that all the land below, as far as you could see, was blessed as well."

With a graceful gesture that tightened her shirt over her breasts, Sara Jane pointed over the cliff. Nick forced himself to glance briefly at the valley of sand and grass, divided by a meandering

emerald stream. “Inspiring,” he managed to say, still thinking of the way that shirt molded to her body. Unable to keep his eyes off Sara Jane a second longer, Nick looked down at her. She moistened her lips. He couldn’t stop looking at them, wanting to crush them with his own. All day he’d wanted to kiss her, and, to his discomfort, the desire was growing. He cleared his constricted throat. “Can we see the ranch from here?”

“You could if that rock formation wasn’t in the way. It’s the outer shell of Eterno Cave. *Eterno* means *endless*. The main entrance is on the other side.”

He forced his gaze from Sara Jane to the view. The steel gray formation she had pointed to extended for miles. Beyond that lay gently rolling land, replete with scrub oak, mesquite, and cactus, and in the far distance, a haze of purple mountains. Funny, when he first arrived, the barrenness had made him long for the city. But today the cloudless sky seemed a deeper blue, the mountains more majestic, and the land, caressed by the glistening emerald stream, less lonely. Finally, he understood Sara Jane’s love of the land. He tightened his jaw. Her passion somehow reduced his eagerness to leave. And that was dangerous. Maybe if he kissed her one more time. He ached to take her into his arms, but he’d promised her father. Why was he letting her get to him? They were worlds apart in experience and even more important, what they wanted out of life. “Better see if the radiator has cooled down enough to add the water,” he said. The raspiness in his voice came from the effort it took to keep from drawing her into his arms. Abruptly, he turned away and headed for the truck in long, ground-eating strides.

\* \* \* \*

After they arrived back at the ranch, Nick escorted Sara Jane upstairs, checked her room and the windows, and then headed for the den downstairs to find Matt. He found him pacing in front of his desk. Matt stopped and furrowed his brow. “Where’s Sara Jane?”

“Upstairs showering. Don’t worry. The doors and windows are locked, and I’ll walk her down to dinner when she’s ready.”

Matt dropped to his chair. “Someone breaking into her room and leaving that bloody message makes me edgy.”

“Me, too.” Nick wondered if he should plunge right in with the new problems or ease into them after he told Matt what they’d accomplished.

Matt studied him. “Did she behave herself today?”

Nick laughed. “She was a real angel.”

Matt’s eyes twinkled. “I’ll bet. Did you learn anything, other than how determined my daughter can be?”

Nick handed him a copy of the autopsy report. “We identified the woman. She was one of Leila’s girls. They called her Kitty, but her real name was Evelyn Pikes. I ran a check on her and couldn’t find any ties to De Fuego. An Indian girl at Leila’s told us that Erik saved Kitty from getting raped. Kitty called your nephew her knight in shining armor. That might explain why she had a photo of

him in her locket.”

Matt’s shoulders relaxed. “No problems today, then?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle. We might have had a tail. And some bastard sliced our radiator hoses.” When Matt’s face clouded, Nick quickly added, “but your resourceful daughter took care of that.”

Matt grinned slightly. “That’s my girl.”

Matt’s pride in his daughter sent a warm feeling to Nick’s heart. “I found this e-mail from Angie when I checked my messages.”

Matt took the printout and studied it. “Agent Dyer is worth a thousand times her one hundred seventeen pounds.”

“And then some. As you can see,” Nick said, pointing to the list of names and dates, “De Fuego had twelve different visitors since his first day in the pen. Angie ran a check on each of them—the reports are attached. Other than his wife and mistress, the only ones who came often were Paulo Satina and Angelo De Fuego, supposedly one of De Fuego’s grandsons. So far, Angie hasn’t come up with a current picture of Angelo.” Nick shuffled through the printouts. “This is what he looked like at ten. Angie’s checking out the prison’s visitor security tapes. She’ll try to come up with a clear, close-up shot for us.” Nick paused and stared at the photo of the skinny ten-year-old. “Look at those eyes. Who does he remind you of?”

\* \* \* \*

When Sara Jane opened her second-floor bedroom door to go down to dinner, she spied the note someone had slipped beneath it. Frowning, she picked up the folded paper. Her hand trembled as she read the lopsided printed scrawl: *Razor blades cut things beside hoses, and after a slice across the neck, stopping spurting blood isn’t as easy as fixing a water leak.*

She clasped her throat, and trying to breathe normally, she glanced up and down the hallway. Bootsteps pounded up the stairway toward her. When she saw it was Nick, she exhaled in relief and raced to meet him. She ached to throw herself into his arms, but being Matt’s daughter, she couldn’t show any weakness. She squared her shoulders and handed the folded slip of paper to Nick.

As he scanned it, a tendon in his jaw twitched. “Notes can’t hurt you. But this one may help us. Got a clean envelope?”

She opened the bedside drawer and handed him one from her stationery box. He tucked the note into the envelope and slipped it into his pocket. She held his gaze, a gaze often shadowed by a darkness or sadness that brewed deep in his eyes. “If there is nothing to worry about, why do you look so worried?”

“It’s my job to worry, so you won’t have to,” he said, putting a comforting arm around her and leading her toward the dining room.

"I'm not worried," she said, hating the waver in her voice. Unfortunately, it very much bothered her that some lowlife could walk right up to her bedroom door unseen and slip a note beneath it. One kick and he would have been inside. "I think whoever Dad assigned to watch the house needs to find a new line of work."

Nick sent her a sharp look as though he thought her put-down included him.

"I didn't mean you."

"Right," he growled. When they entered the dining room full of family, he said, "We'll discuss this later. Right now, I want to talk to your dad about adding security cameras to the hallway outside your room and one for the stairway."

She nodded, painfully aware of the loss of his warmth as he moved away and wondering what more there was to discuss.

Alicia dashed through the doorway and pulled Sara Jane aside. "Cos', we have to talk!"

Sara Jane forced a smile. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm sorry I got mad at you for refusing to go to Paris. If we'd gone, I wouldn't have been home today to get the call from Mr. Jenkins, head of the Miss Rodeo Pageant Committee. They want me to cover the pageant in San Antonio next week! Can you imagine? I've been on the phone since noon, getting the lowdown and faxing my credentials and stuff. And if the trouble here isn't over, Lloyd will go with me. Dad has already agreed."

Sara Jane hugged Alicia. She knew how much getting a news assignment like this meant to her cousin. Still, it worried her that Alicia seemed naïve about how much danger they both might be in—as clueless as she'd been until the break-in. "Watch yourself, Alicia. A guy followed me today, and someone cut the radiator hose on the truck. And just minutes ago, some sneaky creep shoved a threatening note under my door."

Alicia frowned. "Where was Nick? That's why we have our big, broad-shouldered bodyguards—to keep us safe."

"He and Lloyd can only do so much." Sara Jane understood now that she'd have to do her part, too, and quit giving Nick such a bad time. "We have to help, too."

Alicia laughed and winked. "Hey, I'll do my part. I'll go sit extra close to Lloyd so he won't have to work so hard to keep an eye on me."

Sara Jane shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

All during dinner, Alicia played her usual role of the carefree flirt. Was it only yesterday that she had acted much the same way? Sara Jane glanced up at Nick. The concern in his eyes made her heart beat faster. Today their relationship had deepened. They weren't just two people who had to put up with each other—now they were friends. Maybe more than friends . . . She shivered, realizing how far they'd come in such a short time.

After dessert, she and Alicia went outside and sat on the front steps to have their coffee. Nick and Lloyd followed and positioned themselves on the railing nearby but didn't intrude on their girl talk.

"Oh, Sara Jane, I'm so excited. I just know my pageant cover story will open lots of doors. I've already done a rough draft from what I learned today."

"What's your story angle?"

"That it isn't just the horses that get put through their traces. The contestants really have to hit all their marks in a certain specified way." She paused and grinned. "Unless, of course, I uncover a scandal. You know, something about one of the judges and one of the girls."

"Dream on. No one is allowed to talk or discuss the contestants at anytime with the judges, and the judges avoid the young ladies like the plague."

"Hey, that's right. You were queen in the SA pageant when you were sixteen. Maybe I should interview you."

"Forget that! I just entered for the riding competition. I knew I wouldn't have any trouble riding a strange horse, and no judge could invent an arena pattern that I can't handle."

"Do you still have your sexy outfit? I remember it was very soft calf leather. Maybe I could borrow it?"

"Sure, but you'd better take good care of it."

"Oh, this is so cool. I understand that the girls' outfits cost anywhere from 900 to 5000 dollars."

"I made mine. But my design was top-drawer, so treat it like high-end merchandise, or your name will be mud."

Alicia shivered in delight. "Thanks, cos'. Now I'll be dressed fit to kill." She hugged Sara Jane. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, will keep me from covering this pageant."

Something about her cousin's words 'dressed fit to kill' sent a shudder through Sara Jane. She took a deep breath. She was being ridiculous. To distract herself from her downer thoughts, she glanced over at their bodyguards. Darkness had turned them into silhouettes. She felt Nick's gaze on her. Could he see her hair rustling in the welcome breeze? He could probably see Alicia's better. Moonlight played in her cousin's hair like ribbons of phosphorus. Last night, Alicia had said that Nick hadn't paid any attention to her. That was probably because her cousin wasn't his responsibility. Sara Jane knew he was staring her down and making her squirm—only because it was his job. "So, how's it going with Lloyd?" she asked, hoping he was a better bodyguard than he was a person. "He was awfully quiet during dinner for a guy who just last night had put his foot in his mouth."

Alicia beamed. "You scared the wise guy right out of him."

Sara Jane laughed without humor. “Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“No kidding. We talked a lot last night. He couldn’t apologize enough. He’s not really a bad guy. He hasn’t had it easy.”

“You’re not falling for him, are you?”

Alicia laughed. “I fall for all the hunks that come sniffing around. Don’t worry, it’s not terminal—my interest never lasts.”

Sara Jane wished she were more like Alicia. Love ’em and leave ’em had never been her style. If her heart ever got involved, it would be for keeps. That was what made her friendship with Nick so tricky.

But she couldn’t think of that now. She had to be sure her cousin was in good hands, especially when she was going off to San Antonio soon. “What’s Lloyd like as a bodyguard?”

“He stays close but doesn’t smother me. When I got busy today, I even forgot he was around.”

Sara Jane couldn’t imagine ever forgetting that Nick was around. For a moment her mind went crazy, imagining what it would be like to kiss him again. The memory of their previous kiss drove everything else out of her head. Her body relived the fire that had ignited between them, the nerve-quivering thrill of his mouth on hers. What if later tonight he heard a noise and, seeing her shivering under the sheets, he crawled into her bed to quiet her tremors. She imagined moonlight glistening on his bare shoulders as he gathered her into his arms. Her thoughts turned so fiery that she actually imagined she smelled smoke.

She sought a glimpse of Nick across the distance. Suddenly, behind him, the sky caught fire. It took her a moment to realize it was the roof of the barn. Terrified horse whinnies echoed through the night. *Demon!*

“Fire!” she shouted as she ran toward the blaze, heart racing. Over her shoulder she called, “Alicia, get Dad and Uncle Luke.”

Booted steps followed behind her. She didn’t look back. Her mind was focused on getting to the barn. Gray smoke circled like thunder clouds around the night lights and billowed out from under the closed barn doors. When she yanked a door open, a window exploded. Blast-furnace heat poured out.

Horses screamed in terror.

“Sara Jane,” Nick called. “Wait!”

But she couldn’t. Horses’ lives were at stake—Demon’s life!

She drew in a breath and stepped into the heat. Flames crackled and licked at the overhead beams. Spears of fire dropped into the hay-lined stalls. Smoke filled her nostrils and squeezed her chest with invisible clamps. Why wasn’t the sprinkler system working? Why wasn’t the fire alarm clanging? She

covered her nose and mouth with her neckerchief, narrowed her stinging eyes, and raced toward Demon's stall.

It was empty!

How could that be? Panicked, she headed for the boarding stalls where she housed Monica's horse. Instead of Vision, she found Buttercup, another mare that belonged to the ranch. Having no time to puzzle over that, she yanked open the paddock gate, and after covering the horse's head with a nearby blanket, she led the mare to the exit leading to the grazing corral, slapped her on the rump, and yelled "ha," which sent the horse galloping to freedom.

Nick called her name from somewhere inside the barn. His voice seemed far away, but even if he was close by, she wouldn't be able to see him through the thick smoke.

"Help me get the horses out!" she shouted. With the roar of the fire and the chaos of stomping and whinnying horses, she couldn't hear his answer. Smoke disoriented her. Somewhere near the inside front entrance, she heard men's voices.

Her father shouted, "Get out, Sara Jane! We'll take care of this."

She had to find Demon first! Her heart pounded as she ran from stall to stall, opening gates and setting the stomping animals free. She didn't have time to cover their eyes. They tossed their heads and screamed in fright as they galloped away. All she could do was stay out of their way. The door to freedom was open. It was up to the men to herd them outside.

Working her way down the paddock line, she discovered that all the horses had been switched around—and she couldn't find Demon. Smoke burned her eyes and throat. She could barely see.

Her heart pounded crazily. She had at least two dozen more stalls to check.

From the deepest bowels of the barn, a choked voice called, "Demon's here."

She ran toward the voice. It didn't sound like Dad or Uncle Luke. Or Nick. But who would sound like himself after swallowing smoke? When she stepped around a roof support that crackled with flames, she caught a glimpse of the silhouette of a man. The form disappeared behind her, and something came down on her head with the force of a hammer or gun butt. Bolts of light flashed behind her eyes. She gritted her teeth, fighting pain and a sinking sensation. She felt herself going under. *Please, someone, get Demon out*, she prayed as she succumbed to the blackness.

\* \* \* \*

Nick ran, calling Sara Jane's name. He traveled the whole length of the paddock and found Demon in the last stall, snorting and kicking the hell out of an exterior wood wall. Flames blocked the gate, and Nick couldn't get to it. The wood wall had been reinforced to withstand restless horses, so Demon didn't have a prayer of escaping without help. Smoke would overcome the horse before he broke through. Nick swore and tightened his jaw. Sara Jane was his prime concern. Still, if anything happened to this animal . . . Flames blocked his way to the stall. Even if he could climb inside, he knew better than to charge into a small space with a terrified horse. He spied a forklift and climbed

on. He flicked the ignition switch and pressed the accelerator. Nothing happened. Damn, he didn't have time for this. He had to find Sara Jane.

A nagging voice at the edge of Nick's mind told him that Demon would die of smoke inhalation if he didn't get him out now. That would kill Sara Jane. He tried the ignition again. The sputter of the engine gave him hope. He gave it another try. Finally, the engine roared to life. Steeling himself against the blow, he drove clean through the wall. Air rushed in from outside and fanned the flames, sending them leaping around him. Part of the stall had collapsed with the wall. Demon tossed his mane, snorted, and bolted through the opening to freedom.

Nick whirled and ran in the opposite direction. Now he had to find Sara Jane before the roof caved in. He couldn't see a thing past the walls of smoke and flames. He dodged around a support and tripped over a body. It was Sara Jane! He scooped her into his arms and struggled to his feet. With fire all around them, he'd never make it to the entrance. The opening in the wall was closer. He ran for it, yelling, "Matt, I've got Sara Jane."

Outside, chaos reigned. Men manned hoses attached to a huge water truck. But it was too little, too late. The roof caved in, sending sparks into the night like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Nick prayed that everyone had gotten out.

He glanced down at Sara Jane. He'd thought at first she'd been overcome by smoke until he saw the blood matting her hair.

## Chapter Six

In the shadow of the equipment shed, about three-hundred feet from the burning barn, Nick lowered Sara Jane to the ground and bent over her. The flames licking the night sky glowed on her face. He gently turned her head. The gash looked deep, but not fatal. From the hammerhead shape of the injury and because he'd seen no evidence of fallen debris near her, he suspected that someone had tried to crush her skull—then left her for dead. He had to get her out of harm's way, but first he had to stop the flow of blood. He folded a clean handkerchief into a two-inch square, pressed it gently to her head, and affixed it in place with his neck bandana.

An explosion rocked the earth. The rear of the barn where he'd found Sara Jane crashed inward like an implosion. He had gotten her out just in time! He closed his eyes and whispered, "Thank you, God." When he opened them again, he knew what he had to do. This was his opportunity! He would let everyone believe she died in the fire!

When she regained consciousness, she would probably go ballistic. But he wasn't hired to make her happy—only to keep her safe. Getting to the truck unseen would be risky. But he could lay her in the bed and make her comfortable. On the other hand, he couldn't travel off-path in that bucket of bolts, which added to their risk of being seen. Another vote against using it was that whoever cut the hose knew the truck and might see him drive away. He reached into his pocket. Damn. He had already returned the keys to Sara Jane, and he'd seen her give them to Matt.

Nick scanned the corral. The horses ran in clusters, whinnying, thrusting their heads, and stomping. Where was Jazgirl? Wait a minute—if Jazgirl or Demon turned up missing from the ranch, it would be a red flag to the killer. Nick frowned. His only option was to rope an unfamiliar horse.

He glanced down at Sara Jane's limp form. The thought of leaving her, even briefly, sent a sharp pang through him. He tightened his jaw. The sooner he roped their ride, the faster he could return to her. He grabbed a rope from the equipment shed and was as surprised as the black stallion when he lassoed him on the first try.

He lacked the skill to mount and ride bareback carrying an unconscious woman. He wrapped her in blankets and kissed her cheek and whispered, "I'm sorry about this, sweetheart." He had no choice but to lash her to the shifting and stomping horse's rump like a sack of potatoes. He tied her securely, and after several tries, he mounted the bucking horse. Digging his heels into the animal's flanks, he urged him away from the raging fire and the shouts of men trying to save surrounding structures. He rode into the night with only the moon and a sky full of stars to guide his way. He kept glancing back at Sara Jane, filled with worry and regret. Soft, unintelligible mumbles now and then told him that she would be coming around soon. With his care, she would be all right. His throat constricted—he had to believe that.

He moved quickly through the underbrush, ducking low tree limbs, cutting a zigzagging path to assure himself that if the man who assaulted her tried to follow, he'd fail.

An hour later, they approached a familiar clearing shadowed by a tangle of oak and mesquite trees. Moonlight filtered through the boughs, highlighting the pitched roof of the line shack. Luckily, his truck and trailer were still parked nearby.

Nick dismounted. To protect his precious cargo, he tied the reins securely to a post. He rushed inside the shack, lit the kerosene lamp, and raced back to Sara Jane, his heart beating like crazy. Feeling the pressure of the time she had been without medical care, he unlashed her from the horse's rump and gently gathered her into his arms. The wooden porch creaked as he turned sideways and entered the one-room sanctuary. He strode to the only cot, his booted footfalls loud and hollow against the bare wood floor. Nick eased Sara Jane down to rest on the two blue blankets used as a makeshift mattress for the hard canvas. He stared at her still form for a moment with a lump in his throat then headed for the first-aid kit in his truck.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane felt herself floating in and out of consciousness. Someone lifted a strand of hair at the crown of her head where all the pain was centered. She heard a loud snip. She winced when someone patted a stinging antiseptic into her wound. She thrust her head from side to side, fighting the annoying person and the bandage pressed against the injury. "Go away," she mumbled as pain radiated through her skull.

"Everything's all right," a deep, soothing voice said. "You're safe."

She tried to open her eyes but managed only a flutter of lashes. Even the dim lighting was too bright and sent more pain to her head. The man with the gentle voice pressed something wonderfully cool to her forehead. She relaxed and sank back into a troubled dream: Fire blazed all around her. Then pain shot through her skull. The man who had assaulted her tied her to the hindquarters of a horse and rode through the night with her, his black cape flying and slapping the breeze. Where was Nick? Why wasn't he saving her?

Someone shoved pills through her lips and followed it with water. She gulped the cool liquid greedily. She forced her heavy eyelids open. The room spun like a horse-training wheel in a windstorm. A man crouched beside her. She blinked to bring his face into focus. The haze cleared. "Nick!" An unexpected surge of joy swept through her. She wanted to throw her arms around his neck, but her limbs felt like lead.

"How do you feel?" His voice deepened and carried a tenderness that caressed her like a gentle prairie breeze.

"Where am I?" The small, unfamiliar room lighted with only a kerosene lamp had only a table, two chairs, and the cot she rested on.

Nick rubbed his jaw and watched her with an intensity that made her heart beat faster. Finally he said, "It's an old line shack on the east border of your ranch. After the fire—"

"Fire!" Memory shot panic through her. "Demon!" She sprang to a sitting position. Pain rushed to her spinning head.

"He's fine. I got him out."

"Thank you." She reached out to throw her arms around Nick, but another thought stopped her. "You brought me here?" Anger thrummed through her veins. "What gave you the right to take me

from the ranch? They need me now, more than ever.”

His mouth tightened, flattening into a hard line. “I called your dad on my cell phone. He’s the only one who knows, but he’ll tell your mom.” Nick raked his hair with his fingers. “When I told him about the assault, he agreed that this is best.”

She rubbed her aching head. “What are you talking about?”

Nick’s jaw tightened. “We had to let the killer think you died in the fire.” He stood and tucked his hands in the back pockets of his jeans and studied her.

“Died!” She swung her legs over the edge of the cot and struggled to her feet. She wavered. When he steadied her, she shook off his hold. A pulse throbbed in his jaw. He made no move to touch her again, but his smoldering gaze locked on her, held her immobile. “You had no right to make that decision without discussing it with me!” A flood of betrayal filled her. “I thought we were a team now, working things out together. But you’re even more controlling than my dad. At least he never made me play dead to make his job easier.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” Nick’s hard stare raked over her. “Someone left you for dead. This isn’t like breaking into your room or cutting the hose on the truck. This was attempted murder.”

Banked anger sizzled beneath his response. Fighting the way his words tore at her, she clenched her fists tightly, ignoring the pain as her fingernails dug into her damp palms. “How could you cause such pain to the rest of my family? Mom and Dad will have to go around pretending to grieve.” Sara Jane groaned, thinking of how hard that would be for them. Unable to stand Nick’s closeness a second longer, she stepped back from his blasted FBI take-charge machismo. “What about my business? All of my clients will leave me and find a new trainer. It’ll be the end of a dream that I’ve put my heart and soul into.” She closed her eyes a moment, thinking how far-reaching something like this was. Would her grandma hear about it? It would kill her. “I just can’t go along with this.”

A pulse throbbed in Nick’s temple. “You’re missing the point—you’re alive. Besides, the ruse is already in motion. I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to. When the danger’s over and the killer is behind bars, everyone will understand—and be damned glad to have you back.” Agony flickered over his face. “I know this isn’t easy for you.”

“That’s the understatement of the century!” She staggered to the window and looked out into the darkness. “How did we get here?”

“Horseback. But don’t get any funny ideas. My job is to keep you here. And I will—hog-tied, if necessary. Make it easy on both of us. Give it a few days. We’re all working on this—your dad, the sheriff, and the FBI. We want it over as much as you do.”

Sara Jane slammed her fist down on the windowsill. “Why? You have nothing to lose. All you’re out is a few weeks away from the city and whatever you do when you’re not making my life miserable.” She spun around, trying to ignore the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her, and headed for the door. Nick reached out and caught her wrist. She tugged against his steely hold. Then, everything went black.

\* \* \* \*

Nick scooped Sara Jane into his arms. Her hair smelled of smoke. How close he'd come to losing her. His heart pounded wildly. Suddenly he felt as though he had leapt off the edge of Lustre Plateau, plunging to certain disaster. He exhaled heavily. The more he held her in his arms, the harder it would be to leave her. And now, she hated him.

He eased her onto the cot and, after checking her pulse, he lay down on the bare floor beside her, listening to her even breathing. Had he made the wrong decision? He mulled it over and over in his mind, always coming up with the same question. With her life in danger, how could he pass up the opportunity to pretend she was dead? The sorrow and inconvenience he had caused tore at his gut. But, damn it, faking her death was necessary!

After turning from side to side for over an hour, he got up, walked out on the porch, and listened to the night sounds. Nearby, his borrowed stallion snorted, and, in the distance, a wolf howled. Strangely, under this wide, blue-black Texas sky full of stars, he found the sounds reassuring. The world was far away, and as long as he kept Sara Jane here, she was safe.

Nick tended to the horse, and checked the cargo space behind the seat of his truck. He sighed in relief. His meager belongings were still there in the lower drawer of his tool chest. He couldn't have left L.A. without his few possessions—the bits and pieces of his messed-up life. He stared at a photo-booth strip of his sister and him making goofy faces, their graduation tassels, her silver locket with a picture of their mom. These things reminded him of his humanity—and a vulnerability he couldn't afford to let others see. He ran his index finger over the glossy strip with its metal frame and cardboard backing and stared at a grinning Shirl. The Honey Killer had cut her down in the prime of life before she could nest and make a family for herself—a family like neither of them had ever known. Making a family was her dream and, since he was too realistic to have such a dream for himself, she wanted him to be a part of hers whenever he was in town. Now neither of them would ever share a sense of family beyond the desperate clinging of two scared kids shifted from one abusive foster home to another.

He pounded the back of the seat with his fist. *Shirl, why couldn't you have gone to secretarial school. Or have become a teacher. Anything but an FBI agent!* He knew why. She had always wanted to do whatever he did—only better. Nick wiped moisture from the lids near the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger then pressed the button on the false bottom of the chest to make sure his Glock and extra clips were safe. It was best to concentrate on this job, and not the last honey murder.

He strode back inside, determined to get some sleep. He'd need all of his strength to deal with Sara Jane tomorrow. He rubbed his burning eyes, feeling exhaustion settle into his bones. *Damn.* As tired as he was, if he ever got to sleep, he would really conk out. When Sara Jane passed out, she had been heading out the door. He had no choice. He dug out his handcuffs and cuffed himself to her. Lying on the floor with his arm propped up against the edge of the cot was as uncomfortable as hell, but even in her weakened condition, he couldn't trust her not to try to escape.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane awoke to bright sunlight pouring through a bare window and found herself shackled to Nick. Anger shot through her. She shifted her wrist to a more comfortable position and looked

down at him. Although his face was darkened with stubble that made him look dangerous, in slumber there was a vulnerability about him that tugged at her heart. Enough thoughts like that! With her free arm, she reached for the glass of water sitting on the floor. She took a small sip, and then poured the remainder into his face.

He shot to a sitting position, almost dragging her off the cot. “What the hell?” He blinked and wiped water from his face with his free hand.

“Good morning to you, too,” she quipped, glaring at him. “Is this the only way you can get a woman to spend the night with you?”

“You’re feeling better, I see,” he growled as he unlocked the handcuffs. He raked his tousled hair. “Don’t waste the water again. It’s in short supply.”

She knew that. Her dad always made sure the round-up shacks were stocked with grain and water, but the tanks were small, and it was important to conserve. Especially when they didn’t know how long they’d be stuck here

Nick got to his feet and looked down on her, rubbing his wrist and working the kinks out of his arm. “Since you were such a good girl,” he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, “I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Her stomach growled. She looked around—there was no stove, no refrigerator. “With what?”

“When out in the bush, I always carry K-rations.”

She shook her head. “As delicious as that sounds, I’ll pass.” She knew the line shacks were stocked with emergency supplies including blankets, first-aid kits, and a few canned goods, but a person would have to be starving to want any of the food. She doubted that Nick’s personal supply would be any better.

He laughed. “What? A ranch girl sticking up her nose at chow cooked over a mesquite fire?”

She laughed, too. “What’s even more surprising is that my kidnapper is my bodyguard who thinks cooking breakfast for me will smooth things over.”

He darted a sidelong look at her. “Always a snappy comeback. That’s one of the things I can count on with you.” He grinned. “But I’m not complaining. Keeps the job from getting boring.”

He grabbed some food and utensils from the cupboard and handed them to her and then loaded up his arms as well. She followed him outside.

“That’s right,” she said. “I almost forgot. This is just a job to you.” She fought a stab of disappointment. The heated tenderness in his green eyes told her that he liked her, even desired her, but this was only a temporary setup. He was destined to move on when this was over.

By the time his fire crackled with life, her hunger had increased to the point that his powdered eggs, pancakes, and canned Spam sounded pretty good. Soon, wonderful aromas of frying Spam and

chicory coffee tickled her nostrils.

Humming, Nick served up the food on aluminum plates and handed one to her. They sat cross-legged on the ground under an elm tree and ate silently for a few minutes. “Okay,” he said, smiling. “Admit it. It’s fantastic, right?”

She laughed. “Don’t let it go to your head, but it’s better than I expected.” She realized that Nick had many of the resourceful qualities she wanted in a rancher-husband. Best of all, even when she didn’t want to, he could make her laugh. She took a sip of coffee. “Thanks for risking your life for me and Demon.”

Nick gave a wry laugh. “But?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” she said, unable to keep the laughter out of her tone, “I’m not happy that you kidnapped me—but, nevertheless . . . thanks.” She looked down a moment and then met his gaze. “May we please just tell Erik and Alicia that I’m alive?”

Nick shook his head. “Impossible! That would be like splashing it across the headlines of U.S. newspapers or advertising over the Internet.” She opened her mouth to lash out at him then halted when his eyes softened. “But I have good news,” he said. “Your grandma knows.”

Relief washed over her, but she refused to let him know how much that small concession touched her. “Thanks for that,” she said coolly. “But don’t think I’ve forgiven you for the grief you’ve caused my family.” Sorrow and a sense of helplessness rippled through Sara Jane. Uncle Luke, Aunt Amber, and her cousins all mourned her. What about the ranch hands? Did they wear black bands on their arms like when Indian Joe died at the age of a hundred and ten? She inhaled deeply and blew it out. Damn it—she refused to feel powerless. She looked up at him through her lashes. “Of course, I’ll escape the first chance I get.”

He studied her for several long seconds. Slowly, he took his cell phone from his belt and dialed it.

She rolled her eyes. “Who are you calling, the escape police?”

He held up a hand to shush her. When the person he called came on the line, he asked, “How is everyone holding up?” A tendon twitched in his jaw as he listened. Finally, when he handed her the phone, she expected it to be her dad. Tears filled her eyes when she heard her mother’s voice.

“Honey, please cooperate just this once, and I’ll never ask another thing of you. Grandma wants it, too. Promise me . . .”

Sara Jane’s mom seldom asked for anything. And Grandma never did—she was all about giving. Sara Jane gripped the cell phone so tight her fingers ached. Everything in her wanted to rebel, but how could she turn down such a heartfelt plea from two of the most important people in her life? “Okay, Mom,” she finally forced out.

“Don’t worry about your business—Erik offered to help me run it.” Her voice choked. “In your memory. And your clients aren’t leaving. They want to stay on as a memorial to you.”

So many emotions charged through Sara Jane at once that she felt like she was in the path of a hurricane. She didn't know how she felt about Erik getting into the act, but it touched her that her mother would set aside her own career as a freelance news reporter for a while to keep things going. Her throat constricted, thinking about her clients' loyalty. She didn't know how she got through the rest of the conversation. After she disconnected the line, she pressed the cell phone to her heart, fighting tears again. To everyone but her parents and grandma, she was dead.

Nick opened his arms, and she moved into them. Shocked to find herself there, she looked up at him through tear-filled lashes to confirm her presence. He kissed her forehead, her eyelids—and then his mouth touched hers so gently that she thought her heart would stop. Needing more of him, she slid her fingers into the thick hair at his nape and pulled him closer. He deepened the kiss, and when she gasped for breath, he kissed her neck, slowly working his way to the hollow of her throat. She shivered in desire as heat rose between them. He groaned and kissed her until they seemed to be one burning flame, growing in intensity, raging out of control.

No! She couldn't forgive him this easily. With all of her strength, she pushed him away. "The idea of my death is a horrible thing for those who don't know I'm alive." She glared at Nick, who looked at her with eyes still smoky with desire. "Is this what they taught you at the training center at Quantico—if all else fails, kidnap the person you've sworn to protect?"

His jaw tightened. "Not exactly. Just whatever it takes to get the job done."

She touched her lips, still warm and swollen. "I thought you guys believed that your badge was something to live up to. I think you need a refresher course in ethics!"

A flush crawled up his neck. "And you need one in gratitude."

"Is that what the kiss was about? I'm supposed to be grateful enough to . . . to . . ."

"Forget it. I take back my comment, and the kiss, too."

She didn't know what to say. She didn't want to think about how much it hurt that he wanted to take the kiss back. She grabbed the first subject that occurred to her. "How come you have that six-shooter on your hip instead of a fifteen-round Glock?"

"Man! You're really on a roll this morning. Is that the bump on your head talking?" He inhaled and stared at her a moment, as though counting to ten. "If that's a serious question—a Glock would blow my cowboy cover."

She laughed, surprised that she could. "Your new duds red-flagged you as a greenhorn that first day. But don't worry. Now that they're wrinkled and blackened by soot, you fit right in."

He shook his head. "That makes me feel a whole lot better." Sarcasm dripped from his words. He paused and rubbed his jaw. "Maybe you'd feel safer to know that I have my Glock hidden nearby."

A tremor shot through her. "Have you ever killed anyone?" She wasn't sure what she wanted his answer to be. She knew her dad had killed—but only as a last resort.

“Let’s just say that at target practice, I never miss my mark. Even if it’s moving.”

She knew from her dad that agents like Nick were well trained in more than just firearms. They had to become expert at many things: DNA gathering, uncovering trace evidence, explosives, law, computer science, and—was he an expert at making love? A few more minutes and she might have found out. Imagining, she shivered in delight. *No!* Stopping had been the wise thing to do. Her dad’s words, “Nick has left many broken hearts behind,” echoed in her head. She didn’t want to be just another notch on any man’s belt. And the only way to keep him at a distance was to rev up the animosity between them. “If you’ve killed, why keep it a secret? Are you ashamed of it?”

\* \* \* \*

Lying in the darkness with Sara Jane only a few feet away and breathing in her just-bathed fragrance sent desire racing through Nick’s veins. Even several days after he’d kissed her, the memory of their second kiss teased and seduced him. On the one hand, he was glad that she’d stopped things before they spiraled too far out of hand, but he cursed himself that she’d been the one to pull back. That was his job—and he’d failed.

Every moment with her challenged his control. They breathed the same air, ate the same food, and shared the same old oak tub—separately, unfortunately. Twice a day he hung one of the blankets for privacy and filled the tub with cool well water. He’d never before realized how arousing the splash of bath water could be. The blanket gave her privacy from his eyes, but not from the images playing in his mind. He imagined her stepping into the tub with the grace of a dancer. All curves, arches, and long lines, she lowered herself until her breasts dipped into the swaying water, rosy nipples budding at the coolness. Nick closed his eyes and became the water licking over her, tasting her soft skin.

He moaned as his erection swelled and pressed into his jeans.

“Did you say something, Nick?” The tentative quality of her soft voice was sexy as hell.

He remained silent, pretending to be asleep. Trying to clear his mind of desire, he thought about Sara Jane’s question—the one that had tortured his mind for a couple of days—the one he’d refused to answer. Was he ashamed that he’d killed? Her dad was alive because he had pulled the trigger. And he was alive because Matt had returned the favor. How could he be ashamed of that? Yet the niggling fear that he had made his decision to shoot too quickly always plagued him. Killing wasn’t something he took lightly. If he ever got the Honey Killer in his sights, would he remember that? An image of Shirl flashed in his mind. His beloved sister lay motionless with honey matted in her hair. Probably not, he admitted to himself for the first time.

\* \* \* \*

Several days passed, and Sara Jane didn’t know if the kiss had tamed her or if she was merely honoring her mother’s wishes. She sighed. Maybe she suffered from the relating-to-your-captor syndrome. Or perhaps she’d hung around because her head spun every time she got up too quickly. Not that Nick gave her a chance to get away—he watched her like a hawk. But he had stopped handcuffing her. Did that mean the beginning of trust between them?

She couldn't help but notice that besides being a controlling, brawny hunk who enjoyed making her life miserable, he was dedicated to his job. He had brought a battery-operated computer in from his truck, and each morning he was up with the sun, and before cleaning up or making breakfast, he checked his e-mail for daily updates. Nick wasn't just hiding out with her, he was a one-man command center, working to make sense of the DNA and trace evidence the police and FBI gathered and shared with him. He told her earlier that they'd already learned that the blood on the mirror was animal blood. She supposed that should make her feel safer. It didn't.

Curious, Sara Jane stood behind Nick as his fingers flew over the computer keys. She had an urge to massage his neck. She gripped the posts of the straight-backed chair. "Earlier, I heard you talking on your cell phone to the sheriff's deputy," she said. "You asked him about Wally. Surely you don't think the gentle giant is mixed up in the trouble at the ranch?"

Nick shrugged. "Just routine. I like to run a check on all the players in a case. Leila might have gotten suspicious if I had pressed her for Wally's last name after asking about Kitty. Besides, I wanted more information than she would have given to a cowpoke. Our friendly deputy got it for me with no problem. In fact, he did better than that—he came up with a copy of the big guy's work application. Turns out that Wally is a very interesting guy. Before hiring on with Leila, he was a bounty hunter who worked between the U.S. and Mexico borders." Nick chuckled. "And wait until you hear his last name." Nick leaned forward to look closer at the FBI file displayed on the screen.

"Well," Sara Jane said, "don't keep me in suspense. What is it?"

"Catchum."

She laughed. "You're kidding."

Nick lifted two fingers. "FBI's honor." He worked only a few more minutes, then he stopped and they carried the supplies outside for breakfast. Now that he had everything organized, starting the fire and cooking was such a breeze that Sara Jane felt she could handle it.

"You know, I can cook," she said as he handed her a steaming plate of scrambled eggs and chopped Spam. "How about letting me prepare the next meal? I'll show you what a ranch girl can do with these rations." She doubted she could do as well. He had cooking over a fire down to a science.

He laughed and sat down beside her. "You're on. Thought you'd never ask."

Sara Jane poured two coffees from the aluminum pot and handed him a mug. "Was your mom a good cook?"

Nick's smile faded, and his eyes darkened. "Probably, but I don't remember much about her. My sister Shirl and I were raised in foster homes." The cold edge to his voice and the finality in his tone told her he didn't want to talk about it.

But Sara Jane couldn't leave it alone. "Homes? More than one?" She'd always had family around. The thought of not having them . . .

"Twelve," he muttered. "But who's counting. Shirl and I were the lucky ones. Social services kept us

together.”

Sara Jane noticed that when he said his sister’s name his voice came out soft, almost reverent. “It must have been awful to move around so much.”

“It’s been a way of life for as long as I can remember. Foster homes, the military, and now the Bureau. Moving has become part of my DNA. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to settle down in one place, even if I wanted to.”

Sara Jane’s stomach knotted, and she set her half-full plate aside. If his declaration wasn’t clear enough for her, nothing would be. She’d known in the beginning that there was no future for them, so why torture herself? Unfortunately, some little part of her had hoped for a miracle.

An invisible wall rose between them, and they each retreated to their thoughts and choked down their food in silence.

Later, while they doused the fire and cleaned up the mess, they resumed talking, even joking. Although she felt better, a cloud of sadness hung over her that she couldn’t shake until Nick made his daily call to her dad to discuss new developments. Afterward, he discussed them with her and even asked her for suggestions of other hiding places should someone find them. Her tension eased. They were in sync again. Her dad had sent him maps of the ranch in an e-mail attachment. One by one, Nick brought each one up on the screen. They sat close at the table and studied them together. His presence filled not only the space next to her, but the whole room. It tortured her to inhale his clean maleness mingled with the smoky aroma of mesquite. Soon he’d leave. *What a shame*. He had come to know the ranch almost as well as she did, maybe better. She had to admit that he was damned good at his job.

She hoped Alicia’s bodyguard was as good. “Nick,” Sara Jane said, aching to stroke his arm resting only a hair-breadth away. “Can’t I just tell Alicia that I’m alive? We’ve always shared things. I can’t bear that she thinks I’m dead. Grief might make her cancel her trip to San Antonio and walk away from a dream assignment. I can’t let that happen.”

“Your mom and dad took care of that. They convinced Alicia that she had to go and do a bang-up job for the both of you—that you’d want that for her.” Nick paused. “Trust me, she’s going.”

Nick touched her hand so gently that Sara Jane had to fight the threat of tears. His caring warmed her heart. But the other emotion in his eyes—barely bridled desire that matched her own—terrified her. And it frightened her how much the passing days alone with him were changing her and making her wish the impossible was possible.

Each night they lay only a few feet apart in the darkness with her as aware of him as if he’d actually touched her. The rhythm of his breathing and the clean male scent of him caressed her and drowned her in arousing fantasies that heated her beyond anything real that she’d ever experienced. That included their kisses. And those two lip-locks were the hottest things on the planet until her imaginings brought their glistening bodies so close that they pooled into one thrilling force, seeking release.

\* \* \* \*

Nick awoke with a start at the sound of a whinny. He grabbed his gun and jumped to his feet. Barefoot and shirtless, he looked out the front window into the darkness. Sara Jane sat up and whispered, "What is it?"

"Probably nothing. Go back to sleep." Nick sharpened his gaze. Leafy branches of an old oak swayed in the breeze. Rigid, he listened. Other than the restless stomping of the stallion he'd named Blacky and the low moan of the wind, he heard nothing.

Lightning rippled a zigzag flash of silver over a cluster of clouds and for an instant brightened the room. Thunder rumbled and shook the sky. That was all he needed—a storm. Perhaps the approaching weather front had agitated Blacky. He shaded his watch with his hand and pressed the light button and checked the time. Two a.m.

The wooden front porch creaked. Nick moved silently to the front door, his gun ready. Sara Jane slowly got to her feet, grabbed a chair, and brandished it over her head. He would have laughed at the sight, but the porch creaked again.

Someone tapped on the door.

He cocked his gun and waited, scarcely breathing.

The person knocked harder. "Need help," a woman with a young voice whimpered.

"It's the Indian girl, Babbling Brook, from Leila's," Sara Jane said softly. "She sounds desperate. You have to let her in."

Nick's awareness of the approaching storm and his natural urge to help warred with his need to protect Sara Jane. "It might be a trick," he whispered. "The knock sounded too heavy for a woman." He squeezed Sara Jane's shoulder, wishing he had time to pull her into his arms. "I'll slip out the back window and circle around to the front and take a look. Stay here, and don't open the door!"

Nick circled the shack, using the bushes and darkness for cover. Another zigzag of lightning revealed two silhouettes: a slender woman and a huge, easily recognizable, well-built man—the tongueless bouncer, Wally, from Leila's. *Damn*. Was the ex-bounty hunter back to his old trade, with Sara Jane his prey?

Wally pounded harder on the door. With the stallion, truck, and horse-trailer advertising that someone occupied the shack, the big man wasn't giving up. Nerves tight from Wally's almost continuous pounding, Nick made a quick perimeter search for others possibly waiting in the darkness, then he crept to his truck and retrieved his Glock from the false bottom in his tool chest. He tucked his other gun into the waistband of his jeans and slipped the shoulder holster for his fifteen-rounder over his bare arms.

He checked the chamber and then, with Glock in hand, he silently returned to the bushes next to the porch. "Okay, you two, hands in the air!"

They thrust their hands up. "We friends," Brook cried out in her pidgin English. "No trouble." She

held a notebook-sized chalkboard in one trembling hand.

Nick couldn't read their faces. "Wait here," he growled, not sure how he was going to work this.

Sara Jane must have been listening because he heard her unlatch the inside lock. The door swung open. Light footsteps scurried across the wood floor toward the back.

Nick hesitated in case she needed time to hide. But he had no idea where she could conceal herself. The one-room shack provided no hiding places that he was aware of. After a moment, he gestured with his gun. "Inside."

Holding his weapon on his uninvited guests, he eased to the table and lit the kerosene lamp. The room filled with a dim glow. He didn't see Sara Jane. Had she gone out the window into the impending storm? Smart of her to stay out of sight, but now he had to worry about where she was and what she was doing. His stomach knotted. What if she decided to take off? Wally and Brook scanned the room, their foreheads furrowed.

Brook wiped her palms on her tight jeans. "You alone?" she asked, her eyes darting about like a frightened doe.

Nick motioned to the chairs. "Sit."

Wood scraped wood as the two complied. Keeping his Glock trained on Wally and Brook, Nick edged to the back window and glanced out. A flash of lightning highlighted Sara Jane pressed against the wall. He couldn't see her face, but she gave him a little salute. He hoped that didn't mean 'good-bye, sucker.' Damn it. As difficult as it was, he had to trust her. He rested his hip on the window sill and focused on his guests. The Bureau had trained him to watch for true feelings in flashes of microexpressions that ran counter to an individual's dominant facial expressions. "What do you want?" Intense concentration coiled his nerves tighter.

Brook tilted her head and drew her single black braid forward and smoothed it across a breast in an exaggerated gesture, clearly faking a flirtatious ploy. "Pay me to tell you?" Her voice wavered, making her command sound more like a question than a demand.

Nick laughed without humor. At least the money-grubbing little Babbling Brook stayed in character. "Who sent you here?"

Twisting one of the fringes on her buckskin top around her finger, Brook glanced at Wally. He withdrew a piece of chalk from the pocket of his shirt, yanked the chalkboard from Brook's hands, and scribbled fiercely. When he finished, he angrily held the board up for Nick to read: *We came as friends. Why do you treat us as enemies?*

Rather than answer immediately, Nick studied Wally. Anger was often a cover-up. The mute pressed his lips together, folded his arms, and moved slightly back from the table. His body language contradicted the written claim of friendship.

Nick knew enough about this odd pair to believe that Brook's request for money was a true motivation for their visit, but he suspected it wasn't only him they wanted greenbacks from. "I think

someone paid you to come here. What do you have to do for it?" Nick darted a glance out the window. Before he could focus, he heard a chair scrape the floor. Wally was on his feet. Nick gestured with his gun. "Sit down. We're not through here."

Wally glared at him but slowly eased back into his seat.

A trickle of sweat rolled down Nick's bare back. He couldn't risk taking his eyes off this guy again. He hoped Sara Jane was hearing all of this—and hadn't, instead, taken off.

## Chapter Seven

Using sign language, Wally gestured fiercely to Brook. Nick bristled at the closed-fist gesture but masked his annoyance. Brook shook her head to her partner's demand.

Brook turned and met Nick's gaze. "Trust us. We here on our own," she said. Her soft voice failed to convey the gist of Wally's furious hand movements.

"Then, why the hell the games? Play it straight." Nick had so many questions—like why did they come here at two a.m.?

Brook glanced around furtively, as if the walls had ears. "Hear talk—secret," she said in almost a whisper. "Want to help. You pay us to tell, we all win."

"Yeah, right." He was becoming more and more convinced that this mercenary pair planned to collect money on two ends. "I don't have any cash on me, but—"

"I take stallion," she said quickly, her big brown eyes bright with excitement.

*No wonder*, Nick thought. The animal was worth big bucks. "One problem, the horse doesn't belong to me. But we'll work out the compensation after you prove your information is worth something. So, start talking." After he got their story, how the hell could he stop them from reporting back to whoever sent them?

\* \* \* \*

Gusts of wind whipped Sara Jane's hair around her face. She hugged herself and shivered. Her jeans and shirt provided enough protection from the elements, but the cool wood beneath her bare feet sent a chill through her. Her quick decision to climb out the window hadn't allowed time to pull on her socks and boots.

From her hiding spot, Sara Jane couldn't see Midnight—Blacky, as Nick called him. But she heard him moving restlessly in the clearing just beyond the trees. He probably missed the ranch as much as she did. But he wasn't the one in danger. If Wally and Brook found this shack, so could the killer. She'd be safer with her family than here. Yet, as though drawn by a magnet, Sara Jane moved closer to the open window. Before she took off into the night, she had to hear exactly what Brook had overheard.

\* \* \* \*

Nick's heart pounded. He felt torn between the scene unfolding inside this room and the possible trouble that Sara Jane might stir up for him outside. He wanted to kick the unlikely pair out on their butts and go search for her. First, he had to hear what Brook had to say and clear something up. "Who told you I was here?" he asked, purposely leaving Sara Jane out of it. "This shack isn't exactly a tourist attraction."

"That question cost you extra fifty, okay?"

“Sure, why not?” Money wasn’t his concern. He steeled himself from looking toward the window.

Babbling Brook studied his face a moment. He met her gaze head-on. Apparently satisfied, she said, “My brother, Hawk-eye, saw smoke from fires. He come look. See you and Ryan woman.”

“Can your brother see the dead?” Nick didn’t wait for an answer. “What did you hear that’s worth money?”

“Man tell Leila he pay thirty thousand dollars gambling debt in few days. Then, later, he phone someone—say he need help to grab Ryan woman.”

\* \* \* \*

Outside the window, Sara Jane gasped. What if the man wasn’t talking about her? Nick had hidden her from the world—from most of her family—and made the secret stick. What if the prospective kidnapper still thought she was dead? That would mean he and his partner were after another Ryan woman. She had to warn her dad, but first she had to hear the rest of what Brook had to say.

\* \* \* \*

“Why should I believe you?” Nick’s mixed emotions knotted his stomach.

Brook narrowed her dark eyes, looking sly and wiser than her years. “You want take chance?”

Nick didn’t allow the slightest twitch or change in expression. He hoped if Sara Jane heard the exchange, it didn’t upset her. With her quick mind, she might deduce that her attacker could still think she was dead and that this might not be about her. Nick paced a few steps and stopped. Before he notified Matt that possibly another Ryan woman was in danger, he needed the details. “Who told you about the debt to Leila and the phone call?”

Brook tapped her buckskin top with her thumb. “Me. I hear both.” Her voice rang with importance.

Nick stiffened. “That means you saw the guy.”

She nodded.

He met Brook’s gaze. “What did he look like?”

“Short, Mexican,” Brook said. “Big arms. Cross tattoo. He work at dude ranch. He friend of jingly spurs—the guy who attacked Kitty.”

Wally scribbled on his chalkboard: *he’s the uncle of the new conpoke at the Ryan spread.*

Nick had met only one new hired hand—Hamm Ross. The coppery tanned guy could be Mexican, but he claimed to be German and Caucasian. “Name?”

Wally lifted his enormous shoulder in a shrug.

Nick shifted his gaze to Brook. “You said the guy who made the phone call owes Leila money, so she saw him, too. Right?”

Wally scribbled on the chalkboard: *Better than that. Leila caught him on her security video. She films all the deadbeats.*

It sounded too good to be true. But he would deal with the truth of things later. “I’ll get the sheriff to check it out. Thanks.”

“What we tell is worth three fifty, yes?” Brook asked.

Nick exhaled heavily. “Yeah. I’ll get someone to bring cash here for you.”

“No! Bring to Leila’s.”

Nick couldn’t let them leave. “Where is this brother who sees dead women?”

“Hawk-eye wait nearby.”

Nick hadn’t seen anyone. “Signal him to join us. The three of you can sit out the storm here. It could get nasty out there. By the time it’s over, I’ll have your money for you.” Nick figured Matt and the sheriff could detain the trio until he could move Sara Jane to a safer place.

Wally slammed the table with his fist and shook his head vehemently. His inability to speak didn’t bar him from clearly showing his disapproval.

“Wally no like!” Brook said, as if Nick hadn’t figured that out. “Me no like. Hawk-eye no like when I tell him. No stay! Bring money to Leila’s.”

Nick considered cuffing these two and going after the brother, but what if he couldn’t find him? The Indian would be free to sell them out and guide trouble right to their door.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane had heard enough. Silently, she headed for the stallion. She hated to leave Nick with no transportation, but her dad could send back another horse. After all, Nick was a trained agent with a fifteen-round Glock—he’d be all right.

At the snap of a twig, she stopped and leapt back into the shadows of the bushes. Darkness kept her from clearly seeing the man sneaking up to the shack. As he slipped closer, she made out a bare chest and long, dark hair slapping against his face and shoulders. Silver bands on his biceps emphasized muscled arms. Then she saw it—the glint of a gun. Her heart pounded wildly. If he took Nick by surprise, he could shoot him before Nick even had a chance.

She couldn’t leave him open to attack, not after he’d done all in his power to protect her. When she’d deserted him twice in the beginning it was before she knew him, before she cared for him more than she should. But what could she do without a gun? If she yelled a warning to Nick, it would alert the man, and he might shoot her. What would Uncle Luke, the risk-taker, do in this

situation?

He'd bluff.

Sara Jane found a firm, gun-shaped stick that fit nicely into her hand. She tiptoed around behind the man. He had reached the porch. Time had run out. It was now or never. She took a deep breath, and slipped up behind him and jabbed the stick into his ribs. "Drop it or you're dead."

\* \* \* \*

While Sara Jane held Hawk-eye's gun on their three guests, Nick tied Wally, Brook, and her brother together with ropes he'd cut to size. "I hate to do this," he said, "but sneaking up on a man with a gun in hand isn't the way I do business."

Brook yelled at her brother. "Why no wait by horses? You ruin everything!"

"Storm close now," the Indian said. "I come get you. We cross dry river bed before flash flood hit."

"That doesn't explain the gun," Nick said.

The Indian looked daggers at Nick. He didn't even try to justify the weapon. It didn't matter, because Nick wouldn't believe him anyway, and he didn't have time to listen. Wally, tied and unable to sign or use his chalkboard, glared at Nick and mouthed the word *money*.

Brook must have been thinking the same thing. "You promise money," she said with a whine in her tone.

"You'll get it," Nick growled. He gave Sara Jane a hug. "Thanks for hanging around and backing me up. Risky as hell to use a stick, but you pulled it off." He wanted to hold her longer and fully express how proud he was of her, but the storm was approaching. Fast. He grabbed his cell phone, but it rang before he had the chance to punch in any numbers.

It was Matt. "Alicia's been kidnapped," he said without preamble. "Lloyd Adams is dead." Matt's voice choked. "Is Sara Jane all right?"

"Fine." Nick walked outside away from the shack and curious ears. Sara Jane followed, frowning as though she'd sensed the bad news. "But we can't stay here," Nick said. "Our hideout's been discovered, and the killer may know Sara Jane's alive."

"Get back to the ranch ASAP. We need Sara Jane with us, and we need you to help set up a command center to find my niece . . . before . . ." The line went silent a moment, and Nick imagined Matt struggling to rein in his emotions.

"We'll get her back alive," Nick said.

Sara Jane gasped. Her hands flew to her mouth, and her terrified eyes brimmed with tears. She grabbed for the cell phone. Nick held it high out of her reach with one hand while he drew her close with the other. "Easy," he said. "You can talk in a minute. Stay calm, and we'll work this all out." He

wished he was as certain of that as he sounded. If the Honey Killer had Alicia, the likelihood of a happy ending was slim. But if the kidnapper was a copycat working for De Fuego, chances were slightly better.

Sara Jane glared up at him. “Who?” But Nick could see by the dread in her eyes that she already knew it was her cousin.

“Alicia,” he said, fighting the constriction in his throat.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane fought the image of Kitty lying dead, faceless—*that won't happen to Alicia!* She swiped at the tears that trickled down her cheeks. She heard Nick briefing her dad on the situation at the shack. Didn't he see that none of that mattered anymore? Alicia was the one who needed his concern now.

Nick covered the mouthpiece with his hand and said, “Matt's sending deputies to take these three into custody. You can talk to him, but make it short. We have to head back.” A clap of thunder punctuated his words.

She shivered as he handed the phone to her. Her throat closed tight, and all she could force out was, “Oh, Dad.”

“It happened in the parking lot of the Miss Rodeo Competition,” her father said. “Don't worry, we'll find Alicia and bring her home safely.”

He meant his strong, positive words to make her feel better. Instead, she felt rising panic. How would they find her? “I know, Dad.” Unable to say more past the lump in her throat, Sara Jane shoved the cell phone back at Nick.

He drew her into his strong arms and kissed her forehead. She clung to him, inhaling his familiar scent, but she had to get ahold of her emotions before she returned to the ranch, or she couldn't console those who needed the most comfort. Uncle Luke, Aunt Amber, and Erik must be out of their minds with worry. How would they react to her returning from the dead? Alicia's disappearance and her appearance might be too much for them. Guilt rocked her—Nick had kept her safe while her cousin's fate was in jeopardy.

\* \* \* \*

With the mercenary trio tied securely inside the line shack, Sara Jane and Nick prepared to head back to the ranch. Fully dressed and armed, Nick tucked his Glock into his shoulder holster and Hawkeye's gun into his waistband.

“Why can't we ride Midnight?” Sara Jane asked, wind whipping her hair.

“With a lightning storm approaching, the truck is safer.”

“Not if the road washes out.”

In spite of her protests, Nick loaded Midnight into the horse trailer hitched to his truck. When he finished, he came up behind Sara Jane, took her by the shoulders, and guided her to the passenger side of his pickup. "I'll drive." His voice was gentle but firm, and the deep tone vibrated through her like an Earth tremor.

"It's your wheels," she quipped. "But can you find your way?" The last thing she wanted was to drive in circles. "After the storm hits, the road and surrounding land will look different."

"You worry too much."

"I have reason to worry. Alicia is in the hands of a monster, the family needs me to give them comfort, and I'm still here with you."

Nick sent her a sharp glance. "Yeah, if you hadn't stayed and saved my life, you could have been long gone."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded." Light rain sprinkled Sara Jane's face. Thunder rolled across the sky. "It's just that any minute the clouds are going to burst and let loose a downpour." An image of the dry creek bed turning into a raging river sent a shiver through her. She rubbed her arms. "I still think we should leave your pickup and ride Midnight."

His jaw tightened as he assisted her into the cab. "I don't have time to argue with you." He slid behind the wheel, and, to prove his point, he gunned the truck to life, and quickly they were underway. The trailer weaved behind them. Nick struggled to stay on the narrow road. He slowed down.

Sara Jane squinted as she strained to see ahead between swipes of the windshield wipers. They fishtailed around the next curve. "Pulling a trailer in a storm is plumb crazy."

Nick's fingers curled tighter around the steering wheel, but he didn't respond. They rode in silence for miles. The wind howled. Sheets of rain blurred the glass, making it almost impossible to see. Her body coiled tight as she watched for a washout. Her fear, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, turned to reality at a dip in the road. The once-dry riverbed had turned into a racing stream.

"Nick! Stop!"

"Damn!" He bellowed and applied pressure slowly to the brakes. If he had jammed them, the truck and trailer would have jackknifed.

A patch of asphalt broke loose from the force of the water and bobbed into sight, and then it joined the other debris that moved downstream. They could be next. She braced herself, her heart pounding in her ears.

Nick stopped the truck as the bumper dipped into the water. Another foot and they would have joined the patch of asphalt. He backed up slowly until they were about a hundred feet from the stream. He sighed and patted her knee. "You were right again, SJ. The only way we'll make it to the ranch tonight is by horseback."

“Being right isn’t what it’s cracked up to be. I’m not even sure that I am. There’s no guarantee we can make it across by horseback.”

“It’s up to you. Want to try?”

Sara Jane blew upward at a wayward tendril as she considered it. They could head back to the line shack to uncertainty and maybe even get trapped by another washed-out road. Or sit here and watch the stream swell. “Let’s do it.”

He squeezed her knee. “That’s my SJ.”

*His SJ?* With her thigh tingling from his touch, she just stared at him. He handed her the extra gun. The cold steel yanked her out of her trance. “What’s this for?” she asked.

“Extra protection in case we need it.”

She tucked the weapon into her jeans. “Against who? What fools would be out in this downpour?”

“Maybe the guys after you.” He touched his Glock as though reassuring himself that it was in his holster, then grabbed his heavy-duty flashlight. As he left the truck, she followed, the wind pushing her along.

Nick unloaded Midnight, and in the pelting rain they mounted him, bareback. Sara Jane rode in front and Nick behind, his body and thighs pressed firmly against hers. They dug their heels into the horse’s flanks, lay forward, and gripped hands full of mane to stay atop his slippery coat. Sara Jane urged the horse into the rushing stream. Midnight whinnied and bravely fought the currents that threatened to wash them away. He struggled to keep his footing. Water tugged at their shins. If it rose any higher, it would sweep them from the horse.

Sara Jane laughed, her emotion fueled by hysteria. “Maybe this wasn’t the right decision.”

“Don’t give up now when we’re so close,” Nick said.

As though the horse heard Nick’s deep murmur and was encouraged by it, Midnight surged forward and managed to reach the opposite bank. The warmth of Nick’s breath of relief in her hair told her she wasn’t the only one who had sighed in gratitude. Nick’s body heat and his weight pressing down on her comforted Sara Jane as they clung to Midnight’s mane and galloped through the night. Wind tore at their clothes, and the blinding sheets of rain, sharp as thin needles of glass, battered them relentlessly. After several miles, Nick said, “It’s getting worse. We’ve got to seek shelter until the storm lets up.”

“The only place between here and the ranch is Eterno Cave. And it isn’t safe.” With sopping hair plastered to her head and clothing soaked clean through, she would have loved to take shelter until the storm passed. But not in Endless Cave where pits dropped miles into the Earth. She’d heard that many people who dared to enter the tunnels were never seen again. She’d been in the cave with her dad but would never go alone. “I want to keep going. Dad might have new info on Alicia.”

Lightning scrawled silver etchings across the sky. A spear shot to the ground and split a tree in half,

and it came crashing down right behind them. “Our choices just narrowed.” Nick said. “It’s the cave or risk getting fried by a lightning bolt.”

\* \* \* \*

Matt and Luke Ryan paced the kitchen floor like warriors waiting for divine direction. Amber and Molly sat stiffly at the table, clutching crumpled tissues. Their faces were tense, their eyes teary and red-rimmed.

Erik stood by the window watching tree branches whip the darkness. “Why can’t I go to San Antonio and look for Alicia?” he demanded.

“Everything that can be done is being done,” Matt said, forcing a calm tone. “I talked to the FBI and the authorities in San Antonio. They’ve put an all-points bulletin out on Alicia.” *Damn*, Matt thought. He could operate more efficiently if he knew who, and what, was behind the kidnapping of his niece and the threats against Sara Jane’s life. Someone was targeting his family for a reason. If De Fuego wasn’t in jail . . . but he was.

“What about the shakedown trio Nick captured?” Luke’s tight voice wavered. “They might know a heap more about this kidnappin’ than they’re admittin’.”

Matt raked his hand through his silvering hair. “Sheriff’s been alerted, and as soon as the worst of the storm passes, he’ll send a team of deputies to pick them up. They aren’t going anywhere.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Luke said. “One of their buddies could find ’em and turn ’em loose.”

The possibility existed, but Matt wanted to give his family hope, especially Luke. Memories of Luke’s legendary wild years worried Matt. A tense situation like this could destroy even a very good man like his brother. Matt sighed. Maybe he should quit being the protective older brother—Luke hadn’t taken a drink since the day he woke up drunk with a gun in his hand and their murdered brother, Parker, lying in a pool of blood right next to him. And that happened several years before Luke married Amber. His brother had certainly proven himself through the years. Still, the first time Alicia was kidnapped—when she was a child—Luke almost went off the deep end. Now, she’d been kidnapped again.

“I’d send some of our men to pick up the trio,” Matt said, “but I need every available man for when we get a line on Alicia.” Matt emphasized the word *when* to bolster everyone’s spirits.

Molly stood and went to the window. “Check on Nick and Sara Jane. They should’ve arrived here by now.”

Matt reached for his cell phone just as the house line rang. He stiffened. “Maybe that’s the authorities in San Antonio with an update.” He touched the silver cross over his heart and prayed for good news. He recognized the San Antonio prefix, but not the number. He pressed the speaker button so all could hear. He could click it off if the call turned classified. “Matt Ryan, here,” he said in his official voice.

“We have your niece,” a taped and altered voice said. “Want her back? Speak favorably at De

Fuego's parole hearing on Monday. Persuade the board to set him free. Or she's dead."

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane flicked on the heavy-duty flashlight Nick had grabbed from his truck and led him and Midnight into the stone tunnel of the dank Eterno Cave. "This cave is on Ryan land. I've been in this part with my dad. Stay far to the right. There's a crevasse to the left." Her stomach knotted. "Saying the gap in the stone floor is deep is a big understatement," she said, putting sass into her words to buoy up her courage. "When we dropped rocks inside, we never heard them hit bottom."

"Good thing you aren't still trying to get rid of me. You're not, are you?" His teasing tone soothed her like a supportive hug.

Her nervous spurt of laughter echoed through the passageway. "What do you think? I stopped Hawk-eye from shooting you, didn't I?"

"That you did, SJ. That you surely did." The pride in his voice surprised and warmed her.

"There's a safe room ahead with a stone floor and no pits to worry about," she said.

She eased along the tunnel, keeping Midnight as close to the wall as possible. At the break in the smooth rock surface, she turned right into a stone cavern with about a thirty-foot ceiling and stair-step ledges on the center wall. "Dad always keeps this room stocked with camping supplies and packaged food for emergencies. When the weather's bad, sometimes cowpokes camp out here to keep from riding back to the ranch at night." She pointed to an indentation in the right wall, which served as a one-horse stall. "He even keeps straw and feed."

Nick lit the lantern on the rock table. "That's Matt, always prepared. This is more than I hoped for. It has all the comforts of home."

She laughed. "Comforts? I'd like to see your home."

"You'd be disappointed. I don't really have one, just a studio apartment where I hang my holster."

"Don't you miss having a real home?"

"You don't miss what you never had." His hard tone rang with denial. "Speaking of your dad," Nick said, which they hadn't done for several minutes but which was obviously a quick escape from a subject that made Nick uncomfortable, "I'd better give him a call and let him know we're delayed so he won't worry."

"Forget it. The cell won't work in here. And during a storm like this, probably not outside either."

"I'd better check," Nick said.

She rolled her eyes. "It's a waste of time." When a tendon pulsed in his jaw and determination hardened his gaze, she handed him the flashlight. The touch of their fingers sent her heart racing. "Going back you have to stay to the left."

“No kidding, Einstein. Your lack of faith in my intelligence is showing.”

“I have complete faith in you, but I’m a worrier.”

He laughed. “So we’ve established.”

Her nerves had her repeating herself. She clamped her mouth shut and led Midnight into the stall. She heard Nick’s booted footsteps clomp across the stone floor, and as he turned into the tunnel, they faded away. Silence wrapped around her. She shivered and rubbed her arms. She’d never been in here by herself before. What if Nick didn’t come back? Ridiculous. He would never leave her. He was hired to stay with her. Hired. It was a job. She had to keep reminding herself of that.

Using a blanket from the nearby stack, she wiped water from Midnight’s coat. She kissed his neck. “You crossed that stream like a champion, Midnight. I’ll see that you get something special when we get home.” Midnight wasn’t trained to participate in all rodeo events like her horse Demon. A horse trained in all-around rodeo skills like Demon was super-extraordinary and very valuable—but, of course, Demon was more than just an outstanding horse to her. When he was first born, she had pledged her first loyalty to caring and loving him. But Midnight had just earned a lot of extra attention, and she would see that he got it.

Just as she finished drying the horse, Nick returned. With his powerful stride and dripping clothes, he looked like a storm-ravaged warrior who had braved the regions of the damned to find his beloved. She fought her urge to race into his arms. She locked her gaze on his unsmiling face. “Was the cell phone reception any better outside the cave?”

Swiping rain from his brow with his sleeve, he laughed without humor. “Still nothing but static.”

“Hasn’t the storm eased up at all?”

“If anything, it’s worse. The sky looks like two giants are throwing lightning bolts at each other. I think we’re stuck here for the next few hours.” He gave her a long searching look. His lashes glistened with raindrops. His gaze lowered. “You’d better get out of those wet clothes.”

She glanced down at her drenched shirt clinging to her breasts. Quickly, she folded her arms over them.

“I’ll get a fire going so we can dry everything,” he said. He stared at her. She sensed he wanted to draw her close. She waited, longing for his arms to close around her. He stared at her a moment longer, then turned and walked away.

Shaken and disappointed, she followed him. “You expect me to take off my clothes right here? Right now?”

He grabbed a log from the stack of firewood and tossed it into the blackened circle used for campfires. “I’ll put up a blanket to screen you while you get undressed.”

“Are you stripping, too?”

He laughed. “Eager to see me in my birthday suit?”

“What an over-inflated ego!” If he only knew. At the line shack when he’d bathed behind the blanket, she had imagined him wearing only a smile. *Damn*. All this nudity was too much for her vivid imagination and vigorous hormones.

Nick piled kindle around the log. She crouched beside him and helped. When the base satisfied him, he lit the fire with his lighter. Firelight glowed on his tanned face, and leaping shadows emphasized his strong features. His thick, glistening wet hair curled ruggedly at his collar. She had an urge to comb the clumped strands with her fingers. “How come a man who doesn’t smoke carries a lighter?”

He laughed. “Learned that handy trick in the air force. Matches won’t light when they get wet. But this lighter never fails.”

“Dad always carries a lighter. But he keeps fireplace matches here for those who aren’t as prepared as you two.”

“You keep mentioning your dad. He must be on your mind, too.”

Sara Jane didn’t miss the word, *too—hmmm, so Nick was thinking of him as well*. Maybe that was why he hadn’t touched her. “My whole family’s on my mind. I hate that I’m trapped here when they need me.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “Alicia must be terrified. And I can’t even find out what’s going on.”

“When the storm eases, I’ll try to call again.” The gentleness in his tone touched her. He was a good man, an honorable man.

When the fire took hold, Nick hung a blanket, using two large rocks to anchor it. When he had it in place, he said, “Your dressing room awaits, m’lady.”

Smiling, she slipped behind it and stripped. The cavernous room hadn’t yet warmed, and she shivered from the cold dampness. She dried her hair and wrapped a dry blanket around herself like a sarong.

When she walked from behind the blanket with her wet clothes in her hands, her breath caught. Whoa! Nick was already naked under that wool toga! Sara Jane’s heart galloped in hard thuds. She glanced away and saw his Glock lying on a rock and his holster drying next to it, reminding her that she was with an FBI man. Nearby, he’d draped his wrung-out duds on the lowest stone ledge. She quickly crossed the room and placed her wet things beside his—then it hit her that their clothing lying side by side provided an undeniable sense of intimacy.

She turned to face him, her breasts rising and falling with her uneven breath. His gaze blazed with desire and intensified her own need. Only a few steps and she would be in his arms. The soft glow of the leaping flames dancing on the stone walls and ledges weaved a trancelike magic that touched her to the depth of her heart. She wanted this man. But if she allowed Nick to cross the intimacy line, it would change everything. She had to get out of here. She was lusting for a wonderful man—

but a forbidden man—a man who would leave her. She began to tremble.

“Cold?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he drew her into the warmth of his hard, lean body. It felt so right, like coming home.

“We’re here together. Safe,” she said, “but—”

“I know you’re worried about Alicia.” He tilted Sara Jane’s head up and looked into her eyes. “It’ll turn out all right.” His husky voice vibrated through her.

“I want to believe that,” she whispered. Her lips quivered from the bottled-up emotion. Nick covered her mouth with his, giving her his strength. In spite of the inner warning that told her to move away, she pressed her breasts tightly against his firm chest and drew his head down closer, deepening their kiss until their tongues entangled. He stroked her back and sides. She turned her body to bring his hands closer to her breasts and actually felt his control shredding. The evidence of his arousal pressed against her. Her head felt light. Her heartbeat quickened, and a steamy flush rushed over her body, making rational thought impossible.

He lifted his lips from her mouth and whispered, “I’m fighting this. But, God help me, even a saint would lose this battle.” Eyes glazed with blazing desire, he backed her up against the stone wall. She leaned back, her arms spread wide. “Tell me now if you want me to stop,” he murmured huskily.

She drew his mouth to hers again. Groaning, he pressed her tighter against the stones. He caressed her breasts until her nipples hardened and poked the cloth. Then he inched the lower edge of the blanket up to her thigh. His hands felt warm as they stroked the inside of her leg. She froze at the sound of voices echoing from deep within the cave’s tunnel. “Nick! We’re not alone!”

## Chapter Eight

Guilt rocked Nick as he clawed his way out of his fervor. Had Matt arrived with a search party? But how could Matt know they were in here? Matt's words echoed in his head: *I trust you*. Nick closed his eyes for a moment. It had been a mistake to take Sara Jane in his arms. He focused on her face. A pulse throbbed near her temple. He wanted to smooth it and trail kisses to her moistened lips. But that was where he'd made his first error—touching her. He had to face it—he felt more for this woman than he'd ever felt for anyone in his life. Her power over him had almost lured him to abandon good sense and his anchor of honor—and without his principles, he'd have nothing. He couldn't let anything like this happen again. With his job, he couldn't promise her forever, and she deserved a man who could. From now on his behavior toward her would be by the book. "Didn't you tell me there was another entrance?" he whispered in a low, all-business tone.

Hurt flickered briefly in her eyes, and she moved out of his arms. "Yes, on the other side of the mountain." They kept their voices hushed so the sound wouldn't carry out into the tunnel. Sara Jane quickly gathered her clothes and stepped behind the blanket. The soft flutter of the wool as it fell back in place had the same emotional impact as if she'd slammed a door in his face.

Damn. He should have at least kissed her forehead or given her that last little hug to prove that what almost happened between them meant more to him than lust. But her anger worked better. Now she would avoid him like a failed one-night stand. As he stepped into his damp jeans and zipped them up, the hiss of the metal sounded loud even to his ears. "Would your dad look for us here?"

"No way," Sara Jane said from behind the blanket. In spite of speaking in low tones, the spunk in her Texas drawl rang strong. "Even if he did, he wouldn't use the back entrance. It's several miles out of his way, and far too dangerous. Whoever those guys are, they know the cave well enough to risk its maze of tunnels. Or they're a bunch of lost fools."

"Or they're after us," he said, shrugging into his shoulder holster. "Hawk-eye might not be the only guy backing up Wally and Babbling Brook." Nick wiped off his Glock with a handkerchief and tucked it into its holster. "Bring your gun out with you. We'd better be ready for anything." He shoved his folded knife and other loose items into his pocket.

Sara Jane stepped from behind the curtained area, her face still flushed and beautiful. He'd love to wake up to that face every morning for the rest of his life. She shook her head. "You're as paranoid as Dad." In spite of her doubt about the danger, she tucked the gun into her waistband.

"Goes with the job. Either we're a tad paranoid, or we're dead."

"I couldn't live that way."

His low laugh sounded bitter even to his ears. "Because some of us do, you don't have to."

"Don't act like it's this big chore," she shot back. "You love every minute of it." Her resentment hung there between them, vibrating the air. He knew how much she hated his job and how much she loved the ranch. That was why, although in every other way they complemented each other, he couldn't make love to her. Ever.

Nick tightened his jaw and watched smoke curl upward from the bonfire. “We’d better do something about this fire. The smell could find its way into the tunnels and alert the intruders.”

She bent, grabbed a sand bag, and thrust it into his arms. “I’ve seen that you know how to pour it on.” Knowing her dig was about the way he had seduced her and not the sand, he ripped open the bag with more force than required and poured it on the flames. Initially the sand made more smoke, but he kept pouring until the bag was empty and the air cleared.

Sara Jane placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. “What are we going to do? Wait for those turkeys to find us or hightail it out of here?”

He ignored her sarcasm, no doubt fueled by unreleased sexual tension. “We’ll move on if the storm has let up.” He grabbed the flashlight. “Wait here a minute and I’ll check.”

Like a disobedient pup, she followed him into the passageway. He flicked on the light and kept his irritation to himself. Any words between them might carry through the tunnel and alert the intruders that they were here. Inside the safe room, the thick walls insulated their voices, but the tunnels amplified sounds.

Nick heard thunder and saw the scrawls of lightning before he reached the entryway. Behind them, coming closer were shouts, curses. Nick detected a number of voices. He grabbed Sara Jane’s hand and ran back to the stone room. He drew her to the far corner to reduce any chance that the intruders would overhear them. “It’s worse outside now than before,” he said softly. “But I’d rather battle the weather than face down a bunch of guns.”

Sara Jane looked at him with intense blue eyes. “Want to hear my opinion?”

He let out a breath of exasperation. “Sure, why not?” He gave a half-hearted grin to soften his next words. “Doesn’t mean you’ll have the final decision, mind you.”

“Kick aside the thought, Mr. FBI. You’ve made it crystal clear who you think is calling the shots.”

Nick wanted to shake her. “Don’t toy with me, SJ. This is serious.”

“Then quit grinning at me.” A woman’s blood-chilling scream echoed through the cave. Sara Jane stiffened. Then her eyes widened. “That’s Alicia!” Sara Jane’s face hardened to steely determination. It was the same look Nick had seen on her father’s face only two years ago—when they both almost got killed. “That settles it. We’re staying! And going after my cousin. Now!”

She whirled and headed for the passageway.

Nick reached out and grabbed her arm. “Hold up a minute. We have to think this through.” Mixed emotions rushed through him. This was a great break! Alicia was alive, and her kidnappers had fallen right into his lap. But without backup, he could lose both women. If he took Sara Jane to safety first and returned with help, the kidnappers could move Alicia to another location or even kill her. Sweating, he tried his cell phone, dialing with one hand. As expected, it was dead.

“You’re wasting time. Let’s go.” Sara Jane tugged at his grip, but he held tight.

“We can’t rush off half-cocked. We need to know how many guys we’re dealing with, their firepower, and location.”

“We’ve got surprise on our side.” She lifted her chin. “If you don’t help me, I’ll save my cousin alone.”

He laughed without humor. “How? You’re scared to death of the passageways, you don’t know the layout of the tunnels, and you’re outnumbered.”

“I’d rather die trying than live with myself if I didn’t.”

Sara Jane’s words drugged up Nick’s failures and sent a sharp pain through him—he hadn’t managed to save his sister, nor had he even managed to catch her killer. SJ was right. Living with himself was hell. If one of the guys holding Alicia was the Honey Killer, he couldn’t let that lunatic do to her what he’d done to twenty-three other women. Every fiber in Nick wanted to go after Alicia, but how would he keep SJ safe?

“Are you going to help me or not?” Sara Jane tapped her boot, as though counting the passing seconds.

Nick scanned the walls and ledges. “Is there a hiding place in here?”

“You want to hide like a scared rabbit?” Disappointment rang in her voice.

“No. Damn it. I want to hide you while I go look for your cousin. You’re my prime responsibility, and your safety comes first.”

“But you don’t know the cave, its twists and turns, its dead ends, or its danger spots.”

“Neither do you. But from the maps of the cave that your dad sent to me, I have a rough idea of the layout. In a manhunt, ninety-nine percent of the success rate is a combination of skill, good luck, and timing—one percent is familiarity with the territory.”

She frowned. “When it comes to navigating this cave, you’d be better off thinking of it the other way around.”

Ignoring her scorn, he studied the stone wall. “Is there a hiding place in here or not?”

Sara Jane pointed to a high ledge. “Dad and I climbed this wall once, and he showed me a mini-cave with Indian stick pictures of buffaloes on the walls. The cavity will hide two people if they spoon around each other.”

A vision of his body curved around Sara Jane made Nick’s groin pulse. Trying to ignore the sensation, he scratched his head. “How the hell did you get up there?”

“You have to know where to put your feet and have terrific balance and a determined dad who won’t accept *can’t* as an answer.”

“Think you can make it up there without Daddy’s encouragement?” Nick hoped his sarcasm would push SJ to prove she didn’t need anyone.

“I’d show you, smart mouth, but I’m going with you. You need me. I can crawl, sneak around like a panther, climb like a monkey, fight like a wildcat, and when I shoot, I hit what I aim at.” She thrust her chin high. “Honey, you’ve never had better backup.”

“Yeah, the blind leading the blind.” He had choices. He could hog-tie Sara Jane and take her back to the ranch or go after her cousin and risk SJ’s life. Neither option would make Luke or Matt happy. They wanted both girls back—safely. So did he, but his need to stop the killing of innocent women and—on an intensely personal level—his need to avenge his sister made it impossible to back off. If the Honey Killer was in the bowels of this cave and he didn’t capture him, his hell was only beginning. He drew Sara Jane closer and looked deep into her eyes. He felt her tremble. “I can’t guarantee your safety if you don’t hide.”

“I’m pretty good at taking care of myself. Now let’s go.”

Fighting his instincts not to do this—and instincts to do it at all costs—he hoisted a rolled lariat over his arm and grabbed the flashlight. His holstered Glock moved reassuringly against his ribs. “Do exactly as I say, and stay behind me.”

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane felt no elation from winning the battle. Her neck prickled from the urge to turn tail and leave this cave. They could risk their lives and find Alicia already dead. Fighting tremors, she squared her shoulders—her heart was in charge, and it said Alicia would still be alive when they got to her. Nick took her hand into his large one. She’d be safe with him. Keeping the light down, he stepped into the cold, sullen tunnel. He tested each step forward with a cautious toe, obviously feeling for holes and crevasses. Her heart pounded wildly. Reluctantly, she let him lead her deeper into the somber darkness. If only she could talk to relax, but she knew how voices carried. All she could do was cling to Nick’s strong fingers. He flashed the light on the top of the tunnel walls as though searching for something. Patterns of shadows and light etched his strong face.

\* \* \* \*

Nick felt Sara Jane’s gaze on him—she trusted him to pull off a miracle. Unfortunately, he was no miracle worker. Hadn’t he proven that in the past? He scanned the walls with a beam of light, searching for a place to launch an attack and to hide Sara Jane. He wished she had stayed in the stone room. But even if he’d insisted, the minute he got out of sight, he knew she would follow. Other than his sister, he’d never met anyone so bullheaded. His heart pounded in hard thuds as he thought of Shirl and how the Honey Murderer had snuffed out her life. He didn’t want Sara Jane to suffer like he did over his loss. That was why he had to rescue Alicia.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. The tunnels ranged from six- to twelve-feet wide with eighteen- to twenty-four-foot ceilings and twisted around in a tangled maze. For all he knew, they could be going in circles. When the tunnel narrowed, he felt a surge of claustrophobia. Why was it so silent ahead? Every cell in his body charged to alert—he felt like the trip wire on a bomb,

taut and ready to explode. He strained his ears for sounds of trouble. Three times he'd reached forks in the tunnel and had to choose, using a vague recollection of the maps he'd studied and raw instinct. Nick breathed deeply to calm himself. He was relieved when he heard voices again. They were still heading the right way.

\* \* \* \*

The tension radiating from Nick heightened Sara Jane's own anxiety. They wound through the tunnels like tentative warriors, listening for voices and footsteps. They followed the echoes from the kidnappers' clipped orders to each other and their clapping boots like radar, ever-aware that every step could be into a bottomless pit. Cobwebs brushed her face. She pressed her lips tight to avoid squealing. The tunnel curved. Nick let go of her hand. The loss of their connection sent tremors through her. She clutched a rock protruding from the wall and felt the pulse throbbing in her fingertips. Only fear for Alicia gave her the courage to ease forward another step.

Nick picked up a sharp rock, pressed it into her clammy palm, then positioned the flashlight against his chest with the light flashed upward. Understanding that he wanted her to read his lips, she watched them move. "Mark the walls with an SJ at every curve. We don't want to get lost in here." He wiped his palms on the side of his jeans.

Sara Jane had heard about the dead ends, but as long as they followed the voices, they should be all right. That is, if the kidnappers didn't make a wrong turn. Trapping them in a dead end might work to their advantage, but trapped men were dangerous. They might even take their desperation out on Alicia.

The tunnel split twice, but footsteps ahead and occasional coughs and curses kept them on course. Marking the walls cramped her fingers, but remembering the stories of those who entered and never found their way back out—the evidence, their dried bones—made her willing to press as hard as necessary.

The shouted curses, labored breathing, and thuds of heavy boots crunching rocks grew louder. Would Nick keep going until they met head-on—gun barrel to gun barrel? He picked up his pace, pulling her along. At their speed, they could step out into nothingness before they knew it.

Nick's flashlight dimmed. *Oh, no, not a weak battery*, she thought. What if they got trapped in here with no light? He shook the flashlight, and the beam brightened again, but she knew it could go at any time. The cave floor was rougher now, more stones, more dust. She swallowed frequently, trying not to cough. The wall curved, and the tunnel split again. She yanked on Nick's arm. He stopped and flashed the light just below her face. She moved her lips precisely so he could read them. "Let's wait there in that opposite fork and take them by surprise."

"Not a good idea." He flashed the light on his own face and, silently mouthing the words, said, "That'll place kidnappers between us and the only exit we know."

Sara Jane shivered. "But—"

"Besides," Nick continued, "they could decide to take the other fork, too, and make a *U*-turn into us. We don't want to force a head-on confrontation until we're ready."

“Keep going, and that’s exactly what we’ll do. If we hide here, we’ll have better than a fifty-fifty chance that they’ll go straight ahead.”

Nick looked torn. “It’s a gamble.”

“Life’s a gamble.” Her silent words were braver and tougher than she felt.

He shook his head and stared at her for a long second, the air spiked with resistance and the undeniable attraction that earlier had almost swept them both over the line. When a light briefly flickered ahead like a floating candle, he drew her into the opposite fork. He flashed a dim glow onto the upper walls, clearly looking for a hiding place. Not finding one, he tucked her into a groove in the stony surface. He flattened himself just ahead of her. She nestled against his side, trying to abate her trembling with his heat, his courage. His scent was all male, his body rigid, coiled tight.

He clicked off the flashlight, and darkness closed around them. Their breathing thundered in her ears. As the booted footsteps approached, Sara Jane held her breath and peered around Nick. Please don’t let them turn into this passageway.

Shadows and light danced on the walls as six men and a woman came into sight. Sara Jane sighed in relief. From her vantage point, she could see without being seen. All of the men wore jeans and Western shirts like cowpokes, but clothes didn’t make a cowboy. Even the greenhorns at the dude ranch wore duds like that. The leader carried a lantern and had a rifle slung over his shoulder. His low-tipped Stetson hid his face, but there was something familiar about his muscular build and cocky walk.

The next two men wore sidearms and carried flashlights. Following them, a mean-eyed man with thick, arched brows shoved Alicia along. Sara Jane’s throat constricted at the sight of her cousin shuffling toward them, slump-shouldered and defeated—a black cloth sack covered her head. The fancy beige rodeo outfit that Sara Jane had so carefully sewn had a sleeve torn clean off. The leather was stained with rainwater, mud, and a dark splotch that Sara Jane hoped wasn’t Alicia’s blood.

She touched her gun, fighting her urge to shoot the Mexican manhandling her cousin. Sara Jane etched his cruel face in her mind forever. Even if he shaved off his mustache and goatee, she could identify his angular face and the jagged scar that ran from the left corner of his eyebrow to the middle of his cheek. Her gaze lowered to his belt and the flashlight and gun tucked into it. As they passed, Sara Jane saw that Alicia’s hands were tied behind her back. She winced, thinking of the rope burns and how helpless her cousin must feel.

One of the two armed men bringing up the rear carried a second lantern. The group moved by quickly and seemed to be headed toward the main entrance.

She pulled Nick’s head down and whispered directly into his ear, “I should have stayed in the stone room like you told me. If they get there first, they’ll have the advantage of a well-stocked stronghold. And since we have no idea how to get to the rear entrance, our only exit will be blocked.”

“We’ll have to do something before they get there.”

“What?” She wished she had Midnight with her. Although he wasn’t Demon, who knew all her routines, his hooves could do a lot of damage. And a rodeo trick or two could work in their favor.

“We’ll try to divide and conquer,” Nick whispered in her ear.

Fighting the effect of his heated breath feathering over her ear, she rolled her eyes. “Come up with something better than that, or we’re dead.”

“That’s the best I’ve got.”

She’d never dreamed that she might die before her life really got started. Well, if it had to be, she’d go out in a blaze of glory. She drew Nick’s face close again and whispered in his ear. “Too bad we didn’t get a chance to make love. I think I’d be good at that.”

\* \* \* \*

Nick held Sara Jane away, his breathing erratic. Did SJ’s words, “I think I’d be good at that,” mean this feisty little number was a virgin? By the passionate way she’d kissed, he would have sworn that she’d taken a tumble or two in the hayloft. Was her teasing to lift his spirits, or was the comment on the level? If so, he should have picked up on it earlier. Whatever her intention, she’d managed, as usual, to catch him off-balance and mess up his head.

Refusing to let her distract him from their mission or let her know how much she had shaken him, he drew her to him, gave her a quick kiss, and whispered against her ear. “Don’t list your regrets, yet. I think we can do this.” He held her a moment longer then pressed his lips to her ear again. “And that other . . . we’ll discuss it later.” He grinned at the shiver that rippled through her body.

Now back to business. Nick knew to catch the kidnappers off-guard they needed to approach them silently. He let his body slide down the wall to the stone floor and removed his boots. When he placed them against the wall, Sara Jane sat down beside him and took hers off, too. Good. This time she’d trusted him enough not to ask questions. He grabbed her hand, and they silently ran after the kidnappers, retracing steps—and since they were covering familiar territory, they were more certain of the ground beneath their stocking feet.

They had almost caught up to the kidnappers again when the tunnel curved and split. Sara Jane yanked on Nick’s arm and pointed to the SJ initials on the wall of the opposite tunnel. Her message was clear—if the kidnappers were heading for the stone room, they had just made a wrong turn. But what if the outlaws knew they were being followed and were smart enough to lead them into a trap? Men who could grab Alicia away from an experienced FBI man like Lloyd weren’t dumb.

On the plus side, when they took the wrong split, it reversed their positions again. The kidnappers were no longer between them and the main entrance. With that in mind, Nick prepared to play his hand—even if it was the worst hand he could imagine. A luminance ahead gave him a focal point. If he could see their light, they’d soon see his. Quickly, he flicked off the flashlight and handed it to Sara Jane to hold.

The leader of the group shouted at the guy bringing up the rear. “Quit dragging your ass, Stupido.” His voice had a youthful tone, and he spoke with a Spanish accent.

Nick and Sara Jane crept closer, close enough to see the silhouette of the slightly built straggler. The man ignored his leader's chastising and fell farther behind, his lantern providing Nick and Sara Jane more light than he provided for his cohorts. Nick waited for a curve in the tunnel. For several seconds, those ahead wouldn't be able to see their dawdler. It was now or never. Nick swung his rope over his head and let the loop fly. It fell over the man's head and circled his neck. Nick yanked hard, cutting off the man's air. The man opened his mouth to yell, but only a muffled croak escaped.

Sara Jane dashed forward and grabbed the lantern in the man's hand before it hit the ground. With both hands free, the man clawed at the rope. Nick reeled him in and tightened the loop until the man fell unconscious to the ground. Quickly, he hog-tied him and cut the remaining rope to use later. Sara Jane bent and removed the man's gun. The lantern light dimmed, and Nick looked up. His heart hammered as he watched Sara Jane run ahead and fall in step behind the kidnappers. What the hell did she think she was doing?

The leader shouted, "Ricardo, check on your brother." The last guy in line turned and headed back toward Sara Jane. With shoulders squared, gun in one hand and lantern in the other, Sara Jane continued walking like a lamb to the slaughter. Hugging the wall, Nick crept after her.

When she had almost reached Ricardo, the Mexican's mouth fell open and he stopped. "Caramba!" he said.

Nick hurled the loop of his remaining rope and caught Ricardo around the neck and yanked tight. The guy's thick neck was solid muscle, and no matter how hard Nick pulled, the guy wouldn't go down.

"Ayuda!" Ricardo croaked, crying for help.

Nick judo-chopped him in the windpipe. Ricardo fell. Nick grabbed Sara Jane and shoved her behind him. Quickly, he hog-tied Ricardo. *Two down, four to go.*

"What's going on back there?" the leader growled. His accent had lost its Mexican flavor. But Nick figured that Ricardo would answer in Spanish.

"Está bien," Nick called in a muffled voice. But things couldn't be much worse. In unison, all flashlights turned in their direction and the leader whirled and shot. The bullet ricocheted off the stone wall over Nick's head, missing him by inches. He drew his Glock.

"Alicia, duck!" Sara Jane called.

Alicia stiffened and for a split second stood motionless. Then, rather than drop to the ground, she wrestled herself from her guard, and, as though zeroed in on the location of the familiar voice, she ran blindly toward it.

"Stop, or I'll shoot," her guard called.

Nick held his fire. He felt Sara Jane go rigid. He held her arm tightly. "Let me go," she said, thrashing against him. "Alicia will trip over Ricardo's body, and they'll catch her again." Sara Jane

jerked away from him and darted to meet her cousin. “Stay low and to your left, Alicia,” she called.

When Sara Jane reached her cousin, she yanked the cloth sack from her head. She lifted the lantern to get a good look at her. Nick saw Sara Jane wince at the sight of Alicia’s bruised and swollen face. “Damn those bastards!” she said. A bullet zinged on the wall behind her and rained pebbles down on the women’s heads.

Nick returned fire. “SJ, get the hell out of there!”

Sara Jane grabbed Alicia’s arm and guided her along. As they passed Ricardo’s unconscious body, Sara Jane bent and scooped up his gun with the ease of a pro. Pride and anger warred in Nick as he met the women and shoved them out of the line of flying bullets. He had both girls—now all he wanted was to escape the cave with them alive. He fired more shots to pin the men down.

Alicia made loud guttural sounds. Sara Jane ripped the tape off her cousin’s mouth and removed the gag. She whispered, “You were gagged. But I heard you scream?” It was a question, not a statement.

“That’s why they stuck that blasted rag in my mouth.”

Nick wanted to gag both of them. He sent a sharp glance at each of them as he handed Sara Jane his knife. She sawed the ropes that bound Alicia’s hands until the twine shredded and gave. Sara Jane pressed one of the guns into her cousin’s hand. Alicia checked the barrel then tucked the .38 into her waistband.

“Do all ranch girls know how to shoot?” Nick whispered, as they retreated back toward the tunnel that would lead them to the main entrance and safety.

“Me and Sara Jane do—an’ that’s all y’all really need to know,” Alicia said in her thick Texas drawl, made breathy by her gasps for air.

Curses echoed behind them, and bullets zinged all around. “Stay low,” Nick whispered. With the kidnappers on their tail, they headed deeper into the unfamiliar passageways, forced to move too quickly to look for the initials Sara Jane had scrawled into the walls. They swallowed cool, dank air in agonizing gulps. They ran faster, stumbling, putting distance between them and their pursuers.

After more twists and turns, they came to three forks in the tunnel. “Something’s wrong,” Nick whispered. “This isn’t the way out.” His heart hammered. Somewhere in this maze they’d taken a wrong fork. He blew upward, uncertain which tunnel to follow.

“I know these tunnels,” Alicia said. “This section of the cave is where Amber hid me from the kidnappers when I was little. That was before she married my dad and became my mom.” Nick noticed that Alicia had accepted Amber so completely as her mother that she didn’t use the term *stepmom*. It surprised him that Alicia had remembered being kidnapped since she’d been so young. But how accurate could her memories be?

“It’s all true then?” Sara Jane asked, her voice rising as though she’d still found it hard to believe.

“ ‘Course it’s true, silly.” Alicia’s whispery voice sounded almost childlike.

Nick's nerves tightened another notch. "Look, Texas belles, this isn't the time to reminisce."

Alicia drawled, "Don't get your jeans in a twist, FBI. You have more problems than our gab. Your wrong turn reversed things—the kidnappers now block our path to the main entrance. If we go to the left, we'll immediately run into a dead end." She pointed at the tunnel to the right. "This way. There's a place to hide up ahead, but y'all'll have to step carefully 'cuz jus' before it there's one of them cracks that go clear to hell and back."

Nick gave her a hard look. "Let's hope your lil' girl memory hasn't faded, because I guarantee you there's no return ticket from Hades."

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane tuned out Nick's and Alicia's dueling whispers, wondering how many more of her cousin's stories were true. Had she, too, been kidnapped, as Alicia claimed? If so, why didn't she remember? If it was all true, it explained her family's paranoia and her own uneasiness with strangers. Maybe it even explained why she hadn't left the ranch to start her business when her dad weighed her down with more and more restrictions. Did she instinctively know it was unsafe to be on her own? Or did she remain because, in spite of the overprotection, she loved her family and the ranch more than the personal freedoms she had to give up?

Alicia and Nick moved silently now as the kidnappers' voices echoed closer.

The leader shouted to his Mexican crew, "Aqui, pronto. Quit draggin' your asses. Look for lights. Listen for sounds. Don't expect they've gone far." His accent was all over the place—part Mexican, part Texan.

The words *don't expect* repeated in Sara Jane's head. There was something familiar about the words and the way the honcho had spoken them. She hadn't seen much of his face, only his dark, high cheekbones. She brought up a shadowy image of his lean hips and muscular shoulders. She'd seen that body before!

She whispered in Alicia's ear, "Did you get to see any of your kidnappers?"

Alicia shook her head. "They covered my eyes when they grabbed me. But I heard the leader talking on the phone. I know who he is."

Sara Jane's pulse raced. "Who?"

"That lowlife, Hamm Ross." Alicia kept her voice muted. "Only his real name is Angelo De Fuego. Your dad put his grandpa in prison, and Angel Boy planned to trade my life for his gramps' freedom. He speaks fluent Spanish. Guess he fakes the Texarkana drawl. To think, when he had dessert at our table, I even flirted with the slimeball."

Sara Jane vaguely remembered hearing her parents discuss a man named De Fuego. Was his grandson—Hamm, Angelo, or whatever his name was—tied to Kitty's murder? An image of the body lying in the bushes flashed in Sara Jane's mind—the red hair, the slender frame. It was looking

like she probably had been the intended victim.

Nick kept his head low, seemingly preoccupied with watching for the fissure Alicia mentioned, but Sara Jane knew—with him leading their close V formation—that he had heard her conversation with Alicia. How much did Nick know about all this? It irked her that from the beginning he had known more than he let on. That was another reason she couldn't give her heart to an FBI man—men with the Bureau were forced to keep too many secrets.

\* \* \* \*

Nick tightened his jaw. So, De Fuego was behind everything. Did that mean that his grandson was just a copycat Honey Killer? If this guy wasn't the real McCoy, Nick knew that even if he succeeded in bringing him down, he wouldn't find peace. He had to remind himself that his chief had ordered him off the case. His job now was to save the unpredictable Ryan cousins. To make matters worse, his wrong turn had positioned the kidnappers between them and freedom.

The inky unknown stretched ahead. The wall seemed to be curving. Sara Jane gripped Nick's arm and pointed to a faded drawing over the entrance to a new section. It looked like a flat hand with a fist against it. Although the meaning was clear to Nick, Sara Jane and Alicia confirmed it when, in unison, they whispered, "Dead end."

## Chapter Nine

Back at the ranch, the cold words echoed in Matt Ryan's head: "Want your niece back? Speak favorably at De Fuego's parole hearing on Monday. Persuade the board to set him free, or she's dead." Matt's throat constricted. Refusing to let the words paralyze him, he waved and threw a kiss to Molly, who stood on the veranda with her arms around Amber. Persuading them to stay behind had taken some doing. He finally convinced them that they were the best ones to handle the phones. It would keep them busy and out of harm's way. He gestured a consoling thumbs-up. The women had enough to fret about without knowing he was distraught with worry and wracked with guilt. Damn it! It was his FBI history with De Fuego that was behind Alicia's kidnapping.

If he didn't unearth the location where the kidnappers held his niece before Monday, he would have to make an impossible choice—let the man rot in jail and abandon his niece or save Alicia and let loose a dangerous revenge-crazed man. He had no doubt that, if free, De Fuego would come after the rest of his family. It was a lose-lose situation.

Rain pounded the earth and drenched Matt's yellow slicker and hat as he mounted his quarter horse. Whinnies sliced the darkness as his crew of five handpicked vaqueros and his brother joined him.

"I'm torn between stayin'," Luke said, "in case something breaks about Alicia, and makin' sure my niece is okay."

"It's your choice," Matt said. "But tracking down my daughter and Nick could lead us to Alicia. The key could be something the three people he captured at the cabin said. If we put our heads together—"

"So, what took you so long to decide to go after them?"

His brother's harsh tone cut Matt clean through to his gut. Perhaps he had waited too long. "I expected them any minute."

Luke sent him a look of disgust and nudged his horse forward, riding rigidly in the saddle.

Matt wanted to put his arms around his brother and tell him everything would be all right. But how could he when things kept getting worse. "You should've stopped Erik. Now we've got three kids missing."

Luke frowned. "He wants action. He's not one to wait for phones to ring."

Matt winced. He knew their biting words were about their frustrations, not the way he was handling things. He wondered if venting helped, or heightened, the tension, making this difficult time harder on both of them. "I'm doing all I can. When I learned that De Fuego was behind the kidnapping, I immediately alerted the Bureau. They contacted the CIA. The Agency is gearing up to send a SWAT team by helicopter to De Fuego's ranch in Mexico."

Luke reined his horse closer to Matt's mount. "Why bring the CIA into this?"

"They can cross borders that our Feds can't. If Alicia is being held on the ranch by De Fuego's

cohorts or family, they'll find her and bring her home safely."

"You have more faith in the CIA than I do. Seems to me that the more folks you rope into this, the greater chance for somethin' to go wrong."

"There'll be tight coordination. Speaking of coordination or, in this case, the lack of it, where the hell did Erik go?" Matt knew that Erik had a reckless side, just like Luke.

"Didn't say. Not to San Antonio, that's for sure. He couldn't fly in this soup."

"I hope he realizes that. There's nothing he could do there that the Feds and police aren't already doing."

"Erik's a smart boy. Maybe he'd have a different take on things."

"He's bright, but inexperienced," Matt said. "An amateur poking around and mucking things up is all this investigation needs." Rain pounded them like hailstones. He imagined all that water hitting the dry beds. "We'd better pick up our pace. If Nick and Sara Jane got caught in a flash flood, they could be in trouble."

"That's not likely," Luke growled. "Sara Jane knows the land and the danger of the dry stream beds better than a surveyor. It's Alicia you should be concerned about."

Luke's words hit Matt in the gut again. "You're scared or you wouldn't say such a damn fool thing. Alicia and Erik are like my own kids." Matt fought to control his heating temper. This had to be worse for Luke, he reminded himself. When the babe from Vegas kidnapped Alicia when she was a child, his brother had almost lost it. Now, she'd been kidnapped again. "Maybe you've forgotten the attempt on Sara Jane's life," Matt added to shift the focus.

A streak of lightning arced through the darkness as they rounded a curve in the dirt road. Ahead, on the opposite side of a raging stream, Matt spied Nick's truck and horse trailer. He directed a high-powered beam toward it. Nothing stirred in or around the vehicles. They looked as deserted as twin played-out mine shafts. Where the hell were Sara Jane and Nick?

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane stared with a sinking feeling at the wall of stone that blocked their way.

"Damn!" Nick said. Sara Jane glanced at him. Lantern light flickered on his face. His eyes seemed deeper in their sockets. Day-old stubble darkened his jaw. He'd had little sleep, and she was amazed that he didn't let loose much stronger words. He probably wanted to shake Alicia or worse. But, maybe for their sake, he wasn't losing his cool.

"I remember now," Alicia said sheepishly. "The dead end means that we've gone too far and missed the hiding place."

Nick grabbed Sara Jane's hand, then, shaking his head, he grabbed Alicia's too, and they ran back the way they had come. "Pray we find cover before the kidnappers find us," he said. When they paused

a moment to scan the walls, Sara Jane sensed that the inner drive that drove Nick had escalated to an almost crazed determination. She could hardly believe he was the same man she had met only days ago. But then, she wasn't the same woman. Unspent passion, fear, and running for their lives had changed them both. Nick must have felt her gaze because he gave her hand a squeeze, giving her hope that somehow they would survive this.

\* \* \* \*

Nick studied the passageway. The tunnel had widened between a smooth, slate facade on one side, and a ragged wall on the other. With all the twists of the cave and the way sound echoed through the tunnels, he couldn't tell by the shouts and footsteps exactly how close their pursuers were. They could be as close as a half mile or as far back as a mile. The snaking maze worked in his group's favor. For now, they didn't have to douse their lights. But soon they'd have to go to complete blackout. Feeling the seconds ticking away, he flashed the beam around. If he didn't find a place for the three of them to hide, they were as good as dead.

"Hold the lantern a little higher," he told Sara Jane. "I think I see something." The rocky wall was a mass of shadows, but it was the two mini-caves about ten feet up that interested him. One looked deep enough to hide the girls, and another a little higher up might hide him if he tucked up his long legs. One big catch—they didn't have cleats or ropes. He pointed to the covered indentations above them. "I think those would work. Anyone have any suggestions how to get up there?"

Alicia laughed. "Jus' strong bodies and determination, FBI. Ain't no elevators in our caves." She studied the wall for a moment. "Lace your fingers, give me a boost, and I'll show you how it's done." Both resenting and admiring the take-charge bossiness that ran in the Ryan family, he bent and complied. She dug her fingers into the holes in the rocks and started climbing. She seemed to know where to put her hands and feet. "This is where Mom hid me when I was a kid," she said, between gasps for breath. "I reckon if she could climb this wall carrying a child, we can hoist our sorry butts up there."

He shook his head. Alicia had nothing to cover her hands, and only one arm was protected by a sleeve, but she sure as hell had grit. Once she was out of the way, he turned to Sara Jane and met her gaze. "You game?"

"Are you kidding me? If Alicia can do it, I sure enough can, too."

Nick chuckled. He loved these girls.

He took the lantern from Sara Jane and placed it on the floor. She pulled some leather gloves from her pocket and jammed her slender fingers into them like a pro-climber, then faced the wall as though sizing it up. Shouts and curses and the thunder of booted footsteps seemed louder. This was taking too long. He grabbed Sara Jane by her firm little waist and lifted her over his head. She locked her fingers onto a couple of protruding rocks, stuck her toes into the toeholds, and climbed like a monkey. Nick watched both girls, willing them ahead faster. He sighed in relief when Alicia made it to the ledge.

Now he just had to worry about Sara Jane. With her long-sleeved shirt and gloves, she was better protected from scrapes and scratches than Alicia. But climbing this wall was no piece of cake. Sweat

dripped from her forehead. She teetered on a narrow toehold. Nick's breath caught. He reached up ready to catch her if she fell. After climbing about seven feet, she looked down and swallowed. "You're almost there," he said, with a lump in his throat.

She nodded. "Almost there," she whispered like a mantra.

Rigid, he watched her climb. The next toehold crumbled, and loosened rocks rained to the cave floor. She froze, as though stiff with fear. His heart skipped a beat.

"Only another foot, Baby."

"Baby! I'm no baby, UC." She inhaled deeply then clambered upward again, fueled by anger.

He hadn't intended to make her mad. He'd forgotten how touchy she was about being treated like a grown woman. He wouldn't forget again. The detail might be useful later. Nick sighed in relief when she finally hoisted herself onto the ledge.

With both girls squeezed together up there, he could see that the small cave wasn't as deep or its ledge as wide as he'd thought. But they'd have to make the best of it. Nick turned off the lantern and hid it behind a boulder, then stuck his flashlight into his back pocket, beam upward. Deep shadows obscured the toeholds. Sweat broke out on his brow as he hoisted his body from one hold to another. He gave silent thanks to the tough AF sergeant who had pushed him mercilessly in basic training and for the FBI's rigorous exercises that he'd lived through at Quantico.

When he passed the girls' cubbyhole, he whispered, "Be prepared to shoot at my signal, but not a second before. "If we're lucky, the kidnappers will think they lost us in the maze of tunnels. If not, they'll search every cubbyhole along the passageway. The key to our survival will be instinct and quick action."

"You can count on us," Sara Jane said, with a tremor in her voice.

Nick wanted to reach out and touch her hand, but he didn't dare. He kept both hands clamped on the wall and continued to climb. Finally, he reached his cave about twelve feet above the tunnel floor. He hoisted himself up and flashed a beam of light to the girls' cave two feet below. He couldn't see Alicia, but Sara Jane hugged the edge. He let the light linger on her. She held her tangle of auburn hair high off of her slender neck. He'd like to be down there with her, blowing a gentle breath across that swanlike stem. "You girls okay?" he whispered.

"Couldn't be better," Sara Jane said. When she looked up at him, she leaned out over the edge.

Nick's heart pounded. "Stay back from the edge." He took a calming breath. "How about you, Alicia?"

"My legs are cramping, and I feel like a pretzel."

"You'll live. Quiet, now." Nick flicked off his flashlight, plunging them into darkness.

Minutes later, lights flashed on the opposite wall as Angelo and his men paraded past below their

hiding place, guns and flashlights in hand, and disappeared around the curve in the tunnel.

When Angelo discovered the dead end, he swore “We lost them in the tunnels!”

Sara Jane leaned out to watch the men come back around the bend. Nick wanted to shout *get back*, but the men were right under them now.

Suddenly Alicia moaned, kicked out, and knocked Sara Jane off the ledge. Alicia gave a muffled gasp. Sara Jane fell onto Angelo. He cursed in Spanish as they crumpled to the floor. He shook his head, looking stunned. Gasping for breath, Sara Jane rolled off him. She glanced around as though looking for the gun she’d lost in the fall, but one of the kidnappers had already retrieved it and pointed it at her.

“Freeze,” the husky Mexican growled.

Ignoring him, she half-rose. Angelo grabbed her ankle and yanked her down.

“You bitch,” Angelo shouted. “You’ll pay for resisting me!”

Heart pounding, Nick aimed his gun, but Sara Jane kept getting between him and a clear shot. *Stay out of the line of fire, damn it!* He couldn’t yell out and give away his position before he got a shot off.

Scooting on her rump, Sara Jane scrambled back, kicking Angelo repeatedly. Red-faced and eyes narrowed in rage, Angelo let go. Sara Jane jumped to her feet and ran. He tackled her. Her forehead hit the stone floor in a thud. Angelo lurched forward and grabbed her by the neck and shook her like a hawk shakes a baby bird before devouring it.

If Nick didn’t stop him, he’d kill her. He aimed and squeezed the trigger. His gun locked. Chucking training and good sense, Nick jumped and landed on Angelo and grabbed him in a headlock.

Three men rushed forward and dragged Nick off Angelo. Two of them pinned his arms behind his back while a third jabbed him in the gut. Nick turned his head to avoid a blow to the jaw in time to see Angelo grab up the flashlight that had rolled across the floor when Sara Jane dropped on him. Angelo stuck it into his back pocket, beam up. Was he planning a quick exit?

A shot from the ledge above winged one of the men holding Nick. When that captor let go, Nick broke loose from the other guy, twisted, and performed a flying judo kick, knocking all three men down. Then he headed for Angelo, who held Sara Jane in front of him as a shield. Angelo pressed his gun to her temple. “Stay back or she’s dead.”

Nick froze. He watched Angelo and Sara Jane back into another section of the tunnel and disappear.

\* \* \* \*

“With the horse trailer empty,” Matt said, “we can assume they’re on horseback. They either rode back to the line shack or chanced crossing this rampant mess.” He looked at the raging stream full of debris and large bouncing boulders. “Look for anything that proves they made it across. Spread out on foot. We don’t want to confuse our horses’ prints with any that we might find.”

Matt heard the grumbling as the men dismounted. They shut up when he and Luke joined them. Luke went left, and he went right.

“Over here,” Luke said. He pointed to a deep print that hadn’t yet been washed away by the pounding rain. “I knew they’d make it.” The tremor in his voice gave away his fears. “After all, there’s no better horsewoman than Sara Jane.”

“But she’s a risk-taker and unpredictable.” It bothered Matt that they hadn’t passed them on the way.

“Trust her,” Luke said. “Even Sara Jane wouldn’t risk a shortcut in this downpour.”

“Then they took cover. The only place between here and the ranch is Endless Cave.” Matt thought of the dangerous fissures in the floor that plummeted miles down into the Earth.

“I’ll bet ten silver dollars to a mesquite-grilled porterhouse that that’s where they are,” Luke said.

“There’s one way to find out.” Matt mounted his horse and, feeling a driving need to get to his daughter fast, reined it toward the cave in a gallop.

\* \* \* \*

A cold chill settled into the marrow of Nick’s bones, and something within him died. All he had managed to do was trade one Ryan cousin for the other. He wanted to run after Sara Jane, but if he left Alicia to handle the remaining kidnappers, they might capture her again.

“Nick! Behind you!” Alicia cried just one second before one of the kidnappers tackled him, slamming his face into the stone floor. Blood trickled from his nose and lip.

A gunshot came from above. “Freeze,” Alicia told the other men.

Nick rolled to his back and kicked off his attacker. They both scrambled to their feet. He hit the man in the jaw. The guy returned the blow, twisted, and captured Nick in a headlock. Nick did a reverse-twist, shoved the guy against the hard slate wall, and judo-chopped his windpipe, downing him.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane’s forehead throbbed. “Can we slow down? I feel faint.” Angelo tightened his grip on her arm, jabbed his gun deeper into her temple, and hustled her faster. The flashlight beam didn’t provide much light, but he seemed to know exactly where he was going. Were they headed for the rear entrance?

The fix she was in was mostly her own fault. Nick had warned her to stay back from the edge. Her desire to get the first glimpse of the kidnappers when they paraded in front of her had cost her. Now, she headed the parade—and not as rodeo queen.

The passageway forked, and Angelo took an unfamiliar tunnel with a downward incline. She wished she had something to drop along the way so Nick would know which fork they took. Now her chances that he would find her went from slight to zip, and she could only count on her wits.

She thought of her strengths. She could outrun most folks. She had lots of experience running beside her horse during trick-mounting in rodeo competitions. The gun at her temple was a problem, but if Angelo needed a live hostage to blackmail her dad as Alicia had said, then at most he'd wound her. Sara Jane winced at the idea of getting a bullet even in an arm or leg, but doing nothing wasn't an option. Still, as Nick liked to say, timing was everything.

Rocks crunched ahead—bootsteps thudded toward them. If it was another of his cohorts, in minutes she'd have two men to contend with.

She blew upward at a wild tendril. It was now or never. Sara Jane stumbled, lurched forward away from the gun, yanked her arm from his hold, and ran like a wild mustang, zigzagging to avoid the expected bullet. Angelo gave chase, spotlighting her with his bright beam. His speed surprised her. He grabbed a fistful of hair and swung her against the tunnel wall. His hands closed around her throat. She gripped his hand to stop the pressure as she brought her knee up and jammed it into his groin. He doubled up in pain. When he let go, she grabbed the flashlight he had dropped, switched it off, and ran blindly, leaving him in darkness.

"You're a dead woman," he shouted after her.

She tripped over stones, feeling her way along the walls, terrified of stepping into a fissure, but more terrified of Angelo than the unfamiliar blackness that stretched before her. Bootsteps from behind and ahead closed in on her. Then, all sounds stopped except her gasps for breath and the wild thudding of her heart.

\* \* \* \*

Perched on the ledge like Annie Oakley, Alicia held her gun on the downed men. Experience told Nick not to leave without tying them up and disabling them. He shredded their shirts into strips. He used the strips and the men's belts to tie them up. It took only minutes, but with every second, the chance of rescuing Sara Jane lessened.

He glanced up at Alicia. In the glow of lamplight, even though she looked small, she showed no fear. She would slow him down, but he couldn't risk losing her again. Besides, her knowledge of the tunnels, regardless of how slight, might help. "Jump. I'll catch you." Without hesitation, she jumped into his arms. He stood her on her feet and handed her an unshredded shirt. "Quick, bundle all of their weapons and flashlights into this. Even if they get loose, without light or weapons, they'll be helpless."

Nick grabbed the lantern from its hiding place, lit it, and he and Alicia headed into the tunnel. He dropped the bundle into a fissure as they skirted it. He could travel faster without the extra weight. They came to a fork in the tunnel. He lowered the lantern. "Help me look for fresh prints," he whispered. They scanned the dusty rock floor of the left tunnel and found nothing. He noticed that the fork to the right had a downward incline. "I have a hunch they went this way."

“If you’re wrong,” Alicia said softly, “we could wind around for hours and Angelo could escape with Sara Jane.”

“Damn it, I don’t need you to tell me that.” Alicia’s eyes widened, and she stepped back like he’d slapped her. “If it’ll make you feel any better,” he said, gentling his tone, “we’ll take a minute to try to confirm it.” They checked the first five feet without success. He couldn’t delay any longer. He had to commit to this tunnel or go back to the other fork.

\* \* \* \*

Matt’s heart lightened when he saw Midnight in the stone room. “They’re in here somewhere!”

“Let’s pray that’s good news,” Luke said. “Them kids don’t know their way ’round these tunnels like we do.”

Matt shook off Luke’s negativity, knowing this place had a way of resurrecting his brother’s old fears. “We’ll find them. But they should have stayed put. They had everything they needed in this room to wait out the storm.” Matt knew Sara Jane feared the caves, so something stronger than fear drew her into its winding and treacherous passageways.

He ordered his men to sling the extra ropes and rescue equipment over their shoulders. He stuck a medical kit into his backpack, and armed with lanterns and flashlights, they filed into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Back at the ranch, Molly watched Amber check the phone for a dial tone. It was something she seemed compelled to do every few minutes to make sure it was still working. Molly touched her shoulder as she headed for the window. She pulled back the drape and stared out into the stormy night.

“That’s the hundredth time you’ve looked out there,” Amber said. “They’ll be back as soon as they find Sara Jane and Nick. Trying to will them back won’t work or they’d already be here.”

Molly slammed her fist on the windowsill. “I can’t take much more of this.” You know how Luke and Matt are. They hold back information to protect us. Think about it. They don’t really need us to handle the phones.”

“Well, I need to do this.” Amber’s voice wavered, and she stared at the phone again. “When the kidnappers call with more instructions, I want to hear them with my own ears.”

Molly threw her arms in the air. “The damn phone hasn’t rung since they left. Besides, it doesn’t take two of us to pick up the receiver. I have this gnawing feeling that my baby needs me.”

“Me, too—the feeling’s so strong I can scarcely breathe, but Alicia could be anywhere.” Amber’s voice broke, and more tears filled her eyes. She paced a few steps then cleared her throat. “Likely Sara Jane is fine. We haven’t had any news to the contrary, and she has a good head on her shoulders.”

“I know, but I can’t just pace and wait anymore.”

“Well, go then, damn it.”

Molly bit her lip and hesitated only a moment before grabbing her rain gear from the closet. “Forgive me for running out on you.” When it came to her daughter, she had to listen to her instincts.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane’s pulse thundered in her temple. Time had run out. Angelo’s other cohort in the kidnapping would reach her in minutes, and the two of them would sandwich her in. She had to risk turning on her flashlight to find a hiding place.

She discovered a low, narrow ledge over the next fork in the tunnel. If she crouched, she’d just fit into the small space, but then what? Ever since she had fallen from the ledge and landed on Angelo, she’d been making choices. She was free only because, each time, she had chosen to hang tough and fight. Was she pressing her luck to fight again? She could hide and hope that Angelo’s man wouldn’t look up and see her. But that gave him all the control.

Determined to have a say in her destiny, Sara Jane grabbed a loose boulder that weighed about five pounds and was a little bigger than a baseball and heaved it to the ledge. It landed with a dull thud and rolled a few inches. When it lodged in a pocket in the stone, she let out a sigh of relief.

Sweating and gasping, she climbed to the hiding place. She sent a wary glance at the other section of the tunnel where Angelo would enter and prayed that she’d be on her way again before he showed up. She flicked off her light and waited in darkness. A light flashed on the wall, and a shadowy man appeared below her. She lifted the boulder over her head and thrust it downward onto the man’s head. He cried out and crumpled to the ground. His flashlight rolled toward him and highlighted the blood trickling down his young face. *Oh, my God. Cousin Erik!* What had she done?

\* \* \* \*

Nick flashed his light in a sweeping motion as they headed deeper into the tunnel. His heartbeat speeded when he found fresh boot prints on the dusty floor. “They went this way,” he told Alicia. “I’m sure of it.” He aimed his beam on the muddle of prints. “It looks like they struggled.”

“Sara Jane’s a fighter,” Alicia said. “I’ll bet she got away.”

*But for how long?* he wondered. Angelo’s temper and Sara Jane’s never-knuckle-under policy were an explosive mix. What if Angelo decided that catching her alive was just too damn much trouble? Nick grabbed Alicia’s arm. “Let’s go. We have to find her now.”

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane jumped from the safety of the ledge and crouched beside her cousin. Before she could find a pulse, stones crunched and she raised her gaze and found herself looking into the barrel of Angelo’s gun. Her mind raced. Angelo had been in darkness long enough to be briefly blinded by it.

She flashed the heavy beam of her flashlight into his eyes. He covered his face with one hand and backed up a step. She grabbed Erik's gun from his holster and fired.

\* \* \* \*

Nick froze at the sound of a gunshot, followed immediately by a second shot. Sara Jane wasn't armed—Angelo was shooting at her! He had to get to Sara Jane. Alicia raced behind him, her lantern adding light to his. His heart hammered. *Sara Jane, hang on, I'm coming. Lord, let her be alive.*

Alicia screamed. Nick whirled as she fell forward, and her clear shriek muted to a hollow echo. He rushed to the fissure as the light from the lantern she carried faded and disappeared.

Oh, dear God. Why hadn't he held onto her? Unable to breathe and fearing the worst, he flashed the beam into the hole. Instead of black nothingness, he saw Alicia dangling from the opposite wall, pedaling her feet against the rough stone surface, her fingers clawing the rim.

"Nick, help me!"

"I'm here." Hearing the thread of fear in his own voice, Nick deepened his tone and shouted. "Hang on!"

A third gunshot rang out. His heart skipped a beat, but he didn't dare take his eyes off of Alicia. He felt trapped. Everything within him wanted to leave her and race ahead into the darkness to Sara Jane. Rocks trickled into the hole with no sound of ever hitting bottom. He propped his flashlight in a V of rocks, beam shooting into the hole, and dropped down on his stomach. Sweating, he clasped Alicia's damp wrists and pulled.

"I'm caught," she cried.

Holding onto Alicia with one hand, he yanked, ripped the caught looped fringe, then reached down and closed his right hand over her other wrist. Sweating and tugging, he finally drew her up to safety.

She threw her arms around his neck. "Thanks, pardner. Thought I was a goner." Her words had her usual gutsy lilt, but the tremor in her voice was unmistakable.

He roughly untangled himself from her trembling body and grabbed her arm. "Let's go. We have to get to Sara Jane! And this time, watch your step."

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane kicked Angelo's gun away and stared down at him. Blood-spatter painted the walls and ground, and blood oozed from the gaping hole between his eyes. She expected to feel triumphant and filled with her own power—she had proven she could take care of herself. Instead of feeling elated, bile rose in her throat. Her first shot had been to the right shoulder. But when he returned fire, missing her head by inches, it was either him or her.

She cocked her gun and stooped carefully and checked for a pulse—none. She'd killed a man. How would she ever live with that?

Erik moaned, and she forced herself to her feet and went to him. His pulse was strong, steady. At least she hadn't killed her cousin. She grabbed the first-aid kit from his backpack and drew his head onto her lap. She waved the smelling salts under his nose. When his eyes shot open, she said, "Erik, I'm so sorry."

She darted glances at the tunnels. Angelo was dead, but what about his men? Had Nick managed to capture them? She refused to consider the outcome if he had failed. At the sound of footsteps, she tensed and looked up into a bruised and battered face—a face that was the handsomest she'd ever seen in spite of the fact that one of his eyes was swollen almost closed and his lips were cut and bloody. "Nick!"

Alicia was right behind him. Sara Jane couldn't miss that they were holding hands, and Alicia was beaming. Sara Jane swallowed hard. "You're alive!" She squealed. "Thank God!"

"We heard gunshots and . . ." Nick's voice thickened with emotion.

Alicia laughed. "Shoulda known you'd be able to take care of yourself—you've never really needed anyone."

Sara Jane frowned. Maybe she'd given that impression, but she knew now that she'd always needed her family—and now she needed Nick, too. But she also needed respect for the woman she had become. She especially needed her dad to trust her judgment more than he did. If he'd trusted her more, she wouldn't have had to resort to reckless acts to prove she could take care of herself. It was ironic—it was probably her recklessness that made him treat her like a child. Suddenly she felt so young, so in need of comfort. She stared at Nick, longing to be in his arms.

Alicia let go of his hand and dropped to her knees beside Sara Jane, her eyes wide. "Saints above, what happened to my baby brother?"

Erik rubbed his head. "Sara Jane clobbered me!"

Nick stood over Angelo's body. His gaze met Sara Jane's. "You do this, too?"

"I gave him a warning," she said softly. "He chose his time to die."

Erik tried to sit up. Confusion clouded his eyes. "Alicia!" he said as though it had just come to him who she was. "How did you get here?"

"Long story. What about you?"

"I had a hunch about Sara Jane." He gently touched the bloody gash on his crown. "And this is the thanks I get for worrying about her. Shoulda known better. She has always had to come out on top, even as a kid. Miss tough britches. Fight to the death—that's her in a nutshell."

Dad and Uncle Luke charged onto the scene, guns drawn. Dad stopped and stared at the battered group. Disbelief, then relief, flooded his face. After one more sweeping gaze, he strode in wide steps to Nick and hugged him fiercely. "You saved our girls. I knew I could count on you."

Uncle Luke hesitated, then joined the embrace, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Whatever I have ya hanker for, pardner, it’s yours,” he told Nick.

*Even Alicia?* Sara Jane wondered, feeling on the outside again. She watched the men hugging like blamed idiots. *Damn Dad and Uncle Luke, too.* They hadn’t even considered that she’d saved herself.

## Chapter Ten

Nick stepped back from the Ryan brothers' embrace of unearned gratitude. He had to set them straight. "Matt, Luke, you need to know that I didn't save this amazing young lady. Sara Jane rescued Alicia, and then she saved herself."

For a moment, no one spoke. "Guess I underestimated you, honey," Matt said.

Sara Jane shrugged and laughed without humor. "What can I say? I'm a Ryan."

"Hey," Alicia cut in with her twangy drawl. "Ryan folks ain't the only heroes. Y'all need to give Nick credit. He cut the odds against us. And lemme tell you, this man has the emotional control of a robot." She smiled up at him. "Most men would have raced after Angelo when he grabbed Sara Jane, hell-bent on getting her back, but Nick stayed with me, made sure I was safe, and hog-tied the other kidnappers first."

Nick winced. "I just did what I was trained to do." Later when he got Sara Jane alone he would tell her what a tough call it was to secure the prisoners when everything in him wanted to race after her, but now he had to divert the attention from himself. "Alicia is another amazing Ryan. She's courageous and comes through when the chips are down." Nick watched Sara Jane lower her gaze. *Oh, damn.* He'd only made things worse. He had to let her know how proud he was of her. "But it was Sara Jane who took out the man I hope proves to be the Honey Killer."

Matt sighed and looked down at Angelo's body. "Forget that. This scum only copied the Honey Killer's MO to mess with my mind. I got word from the Bureau. They found another body early this morning in San Antonio. The real Honey Killer is still out there."

Nick's gut tightened. He knew what that meant—his hell wasn't over. But he'd deal with that later. Right now it was Sara Jane who worried him. She kept rubbing her head. All anger had left her eyes, and she kept blinking as though she couldn't focus. He inspected the cuts and bruises on her battered face. The darkened lump on her forehead especially concerned him.

He tried to catch her gaze, but she turned her attention to Erik. When her cousin rose and staggered, she shot to her feet and steadied him. As Alicia took his other arm, he let go of Sara Jane and hugged Alicia fiercely. The sight of the brother-sister hug rocked Nick to the core. His throat constricted. Had he ever hugged his sister like that—had he ever let Shirl know how much he'd cared? And now it was too late . . .

Sara Jane stood still, looking abandoned, then swayed and braced herself on the wall. Nick pushed down the emotion tearing at his gut and took two wide steps and drew her into his arms. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just fine."

She pushed on Nick's biceps, but he clung to her. He didn't believe her assurance in spite of the warmth of life that pulsed through her firm body. Suddenly, Sara Jane moaned and slumped against him. He eased her to the ground, and someone handed him smelling salts. When that failed to revive her, he called her name over and over, begging her to speak to him. Her lashes didn't even flutter.

He lifted her into his arms. “We have to get her to a doctor!”

She remained unconscious as Matt led them out of the cave’s rear entrance to the helicopter the worried father had used to fly to the rescue. Nick wondered as they soared through the darkness to the nearest hospital, if Sara Jane could feel him at her side, feel the love pouring from his heart . . .

\* \* \* \*

With coiled, tight nerves, Nick stared into the emergency room doctor’s eyes. “She’ll be okay, won’t she?” he asked past the lump in his throat.

The doctor lightly touched the lump on her forehead. “We’ll know more after a CT scan.” He turned to a burly orderly. “Wheel her to radiology.”

Nick grabbed the orderly’s arm. “I want to go with her,” he said, feeling the desperation building.

The orderly gently removed his hold. “Only staff is allowed,” he murmured as he pushed Sara Jane’s still body through the blue double doors.

Nick considered flashing his badge, but throwing his weight around might delay treatment. He choked down his frustration and joined Matt and Luke as they paced the waiting room. Nick had seen Alicia in another cubicle being treated for minor injuries and dehydration.

“Any news?” Luke asked.

“Nothing on Sara Jane yet. The doctor ordered a CT scan. Alicia’s orderly said she’ll be released soon.” Nick had noticed that Alicia was quieter than usual, but he chalked that up to exhaustion.

With nothing left to say, the men went back to pacing in silence. Nick glanced at clock on the wall several times. Time dragged. At the sound of footsteps, his gaze shot up. He sighed in disappointment. It was only Amber and Molly bringing coffee from the vending machine.

Molly handed Nick a cup. “Any word yet,” she asked, concern in her green eyes.

Before Nick could answer, the doctor came out. “Sara Jane has a mild concussion,” he said. “The first forty-eight hours are critical, and she needs to be watched. After that, her memory might be foggy, but with a few days of bed rest, she should be fine.”

Nick locked in on the word *fine*—he would make sure she was.

\* \* \* \*

Forty-eight hours later, Sara Jane awoke to the smell of bacon. Slowly, her unfocused gaze cleared and she saw Nick standing beside her bed with a big smile on his face. He was the most gorgeous sight she had ever seen, black eye, facial cuts, and all. He extended the tray in his hands toward her. “At last, sleeping beauty awakens,” he said. “Since a kiss didn’t work, I brought food.”

She touched her lips. She had felt the light kiss but thought she was dreaming. She still felt dazed.

She had floated in and out of a hazy consciousness for many hours but couldn't grab hold of it. "What day is it?" She had sensed her family coming and going from her room.

"Tuesday." Nick set the tray on a table.

"Then De Fuego's parole hearing is over?" She hated the tension in her voice.

Nick smiled. "Don't worry. He didn't get paroled."

She struggled to sit up. The sun glared against the wall, but the air-conditioned room felt cool.

"Here, let me fluff that pillow for you." He placed it against the headboard, and she sank gratefully into it. "The doc said you might wake up hungry."

Sara Jane cleared her throat. "Actually, I'm starved."

The tray he placed in front of her had everything she could want: orange juice, an array of fruit, eggs, and lightly browned toast. She noted the good china and the small vase of mixed wild flowers. She glanced at the clock. It was almost ten. Everyone would have eaten hours ago, and the housekeeper would be busy with her other duties. Maybe Mom prepared this, but she seldom cooked. If not her, who? It was way too fancy to have been put together by an FBI man whose childhood consisted of moving from one foster home to another and whose adult life was spent on the road chasing bad guys. "Someone went to a lot of trouble."

"I hope it's all right. I haven't made breakfast for anyone in a long time."

She reeled in surprise. "Who was the lucky lady the last time?"

He laughed. "I can see you're feeling feisty again. That's a good sign."

"Is it? Then answer my question."

His smile faded, and he took his hand tiredly over his unshaven face. "Let's talk about more important things."

She stared at him a moment, wondering what he considered important. His swollen, black-and-blue eye and the gash over his brow looked painful. She winced. He'd gotten that beating while protecting her. Even his good eye was bloodshot and had a dark bruise under it. He still wore the same wrinkled shirt and dirty jeans. "When was the last time you slept?"

"When we insisted upon bringing you home after your tests, the doc said it was imperative to watch you for forty-eight hours. When I'm sure you're okay, I'll hit the shower and crash for a few hours."

She touched his arm. "You've been here with me all this time?"

He grasped her hand and pressed it to his lips. "Except for making breakfast. Everyone wanted to stay with you, but I won the draw of straws." His voice was hoarse, and he looked so tired. An overwhelming wave of love crashed over her. He would leave soon, she reminded herself.

\* \* \* \*

Naked, Nick drew the drapes of the guest room against the midmorning sun. *I should take a shower*, he thought as he slid between the sheets. When his head hit the pillow, the notion passed. He closed his eyes.

*The door eased open. He breathed in the faint scent of raspberry shampoo. In the swirling steam, her nude silhouette floated toward him. Nick reached out, took Sara Jane's hand, and drew her down next to him. Her lips were hot, moist, and rose-petal soft. She moaned, heightening his desire. He stroked her satiny skin and eased her thighs apart. He hadn't wanted their first time to escalate this fast, but his need for her was too great. He thrust himself into sensations beyond his wildest dreams.*

A tapping on the door jerked Nick cruelly from his dream, his pleasure. "Open up," Matt called through the door. "It's important."

\* \* \* \*

At the same time Nick hit his sheets, Sara Jane had snuggled deeper into hers. With a full stomach and a happy heart, she turned over and her thoughts drifted awhile, then sleep claimed her again.

*She dreamed of awakening to Nick's kiss. Then she was jerked away from him and thrust back into the cave. She ran from Angelo. He gained on her. With giant hands, he reached for her. She zigzagged and stepped into nothingness. She was falling, falling, falling. Blackness and winds of tornado force whipped her body and sucked her down . . . down into the bottomless pit.*

*Suddenly she was safe in Nick's arms, wrapped only in a wool blanket. Nick covered her mouth with his. His lips were soft, yet demanding. She pressed her breasts against his chest and drew his head down closer, deepening their kiss. Their tongues searched to find and receive pleasure. He stroked her sides. She turned into his hand, and he claimed her breast. The evidence of his arousal pressed against her. Heat surged through Sara Jane. Groaning, Nick inched the edge of the blanket up to her thigh. His hands were warm as they stroked the inside of her leg. She tossed the blanket aside, wanting nothing between her and his hard body.*

The pounding next door yanked her from the promise of bliss. She glared toward the hallway and heard her father call to Nick.

She opened the door expecting to see Nick and her dad talking, but instead, she saw only her dad heading down the stairs. "What's wrong, Dad?"

"Sorry to bother you, honey, but Nick has to call our boss right away."

Sara Jane frowned. Even shutting off his cell phones didn't guarantee him the needed and well-deserved sleep. She clutched the door tighter. Did that mean that Nick would leave even sooner than she had thought? She knocked on his door, but when she heard the shower running, she returned to her room to dress. Decked out in jeans and a turquoise long-sleeved shirt, she headed for her mom's room. She needed some advice.

Her mom was in the small alcove off her bedroom that she used as an office. It had French doors

that let in lots of light and a desk with a computer. Her fingers flew across the keys. She looked up, and her face broke into a smile. She hit a couple of keys to save her work. “Honey, I’m so glad you’re up. How are you feeling? Are you hungry, thirsty?” Her mother’s warm hug and light rose scent swirled around Sara Jane, confirming that she was really home—really safe. “I’m fine. Nick brought me breakfast.”

Mom sighed. “I’m surprised that he left you that long. He hasn’t stirred from your side for over forty-eight hours.” Her mom leveled her gaze. “Exactly what’s going on between you two?”

“I don’t know. It’s so impossible. I was just wondering how you do it. I mean with Dad’s FBI life and all the danger, have you ever regretted marrying him?”

Before answering, Mom poured two mugs of hot chocolate from a pitcher on a side table and handed one to Sara Jane. “No, not marrying him. Never that. But there are times when I hate the FBI.” Sara Jane followed her mom out onto the small terrace enclosed by decorative wrought-iron. They sat down at the little round table facing each other. “When I found out that your dad’s job caused those men to kidnap Alicia and put you in danger, I hated the Bureau—hated them as much as that monster De Fuego, who was behind it all. But your father could no more give up his work with the FBI than he could stop loving us. It is part of who he is.”

Sara Jane sipped her hot chocolate. She’d heard the stuff about Dad before, but she’d needed to hear it again. “I’m not so sure I could be as brave as you have been all these years—knowing the danger—living with it.”

“Love gives you courage,” Mom said, smiling. “The key is to love someone enough.”

Sara Jane rubbed her head. Did she?

Her mom met Sara Jane’s gaze with serious eyes. “When you fall for a man, don’t expect to change him. It can’t be done.”

That was what Sara Jane was afraid of. She wanted Nick to love her enough to give up the FBI and become a rancher. But, according to her mother, that wasn’t going to happen. That meant if she wanted Nick, she was the one who had to change. And she wasn’t sure she could . . . or if she even wanted to.

She had to think this through. He would be hard to give up.

“Nick is a lot like your father. He has this need to try to save everyone and really suffers when he fails.”

Sara Jane nodded. “I call it the *world-saver flaw*.” It was Nick’s only shortcoming, as far as Sara Jane could tell. She’d never known a man with more passion. If only they had made love once. Making love to such a passionate man might convince her he was indeed worth changing for.

“If two people are right for each other,” her mom said, “and you accept the man for who he is, you’ll both change over time together and blend your goals and personalities into something deeper than you could ever have alone, or with anyone else.”

Sara Jane stood and leaned against the wrought-iron railing and gazed out at the ranch land she loved. Her mother's words sounded like something one might embroider on a pillow. At this moment, more than any time in her life, Sara Jane wished she were more like her mother and could buy into her mom's 'happily ever after' theory.

Sara Jane forced a smile and kissed her mother's cheek. "I'll let you get back to work. I need to check on Demon."

"Just don't get too ambitious—doctor's orders—no horseback riding for at least a week."

\* \* \* \*

Nick felt his excitement building as he hung up the phone. The Honey Killer had called the Bureau and refused to deal with anyone but him. His boss figured that the bastard's motivation hinged on ego—that he wanted to prove that he was more clever than the man most motivated to track him down.

His boss made it clear that he wouldn't have considered pulling him back into the case if the countdown hadn't started. His last words echoed in Nick's head: the next victim's life is in your hands.

Doubt shook him. He hadn't saved Shirl. But what if this time he could capture the killer and save not only the woman whose life was on the line, but countless others? He had to try for his sister, who had lost her life trying to bring this man down.

He knew more about the killer than anybody in the Bureau. But what if the killer had learned too much about him—what if he had learned how much he cared for Sara Jane? But how could he? Nick had only begun to realize the depth of those feelings himself. He loved Sara Jane, but he didn't want what had happened to Matt's family to happen again to her because of him. And as long as he worked for the FBI, those close to him would be in danger.

His heart pounded thinking of Sara Jane. When she does something, she does it with her whole heart—there's no middle ground. And she was a rancher through and through. To her the ranch and her horses are symbols of freedom and happiness. A woman like that would want the milestones of her life to occur on Ryan land.

With only a few hours' sleep, he headed for the corral. Since Sara Jane wasn't in her room or in the kitchen, he figured she'd gone to check on Demon. Getting some fresh air was probably good for her as long as she didn't ride.

His steps felt heavy. If only he had a few more days here. He needed more time with her—more time to look at all the options. Now he could only say good-bye. He had a lot to think about. The wild escalation of adrenaline pumping in his veins warned him that he couldn't give up the FBI life. And he sure as hell was no rancher. He had to face it. Sara Jane loved this land and would never give up the ranch or her business for him. And he wouldn't want her to. She deserved to have just what she wanted from life.

Instead of finding Sara Jane, he found Alicia. She sat in the shade of a fence post, her knees drawn up and her head resting on her arms. Her body was trembling. He stooped down next to her. "Are you all right?"

She waved him away. He heard a sob.

He sat down next to her and drew her into his arms. "Hey. What's this about?"

"I tried to tough it out. Tried to go on like nothing happened."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You were kidnapped, for God's sake."

"It's not that, Nick. I called the Bureau." Her drawl came out flat, angry. "They won't tell me anything about Lloyd's funeral." She looked up, tears streaming down her face. "I have to be there." Her voice broke. "He died protecting me."

The anguish in her voice told it all. "You fell for him, didn't you?"

"So what if I did?" She sobbed harder and buried her head against Nick's chest.

He tightened his hold on her and kissed the top of her head. Then he just held her and let her cry it out.

\* \* \* \*

The afternoon sun baked the storm-drenched land under a clear sky blotched only by two dark clouds lingering over the mountains. The roar of ranch machinery hummed like music to Sara Jane's ears and energized her steps. She waved to the ranch hands unloading materials for the new barn from the Dickson truck. She knew what that meant—Monica Dickson and her brother had contributed the materials. Sara Jane shook her head. Sometimes neighbors with the most problems were the first to give a helping hand.

She rounded the metal shed and stopped. Stunned, she stared at Nick holding Alicia, kissing her hair. Sara Jane stepped back into the shadows and blinked back a rush of tears. Had Nick joined the trail of men who had fallen for her sassy blonde cousin? No wonder, she was the Ryan who would give up the ranch in a heartbeat. They both liked city life and flitting from one affair to the next. Maybe age and experience had something to do with it. Did he choose Alicia because she was three years older and knew exactly how to please a man? Dad often said that a few years made a big difference. Sara Jane frowned. Did Nick think of her as a child?

*Damn!* He had stayed at her bedside all night. What was that—only his passion for his job? She'd seen how his dedication to those he protected drove him to go beyond the norm. Few men would give themselves so completely, drawing on every last drop of energy for others. But he'd made her feel loved.

It was heartbreaking how fast hope could be yanked away. She wiped away a tear. *Blast it.* They weren't going to ruin her day. Her steps quickened. At the corral, she whistled for her horse, Demon.

Mesquite and scrub brush blurred as she galloped along the narrow trail, letting Demon have his head. Images of Nick with his arms around Alicia tore at her heart. Sara Jane blinked back a new rush of tears. Just because he was a nice guy and stayed with her the last forty-eight hours didn't mean he loved her.

Perhaps her dad was right—maybe she still harbored childlike fantasies and impossible dreams and it was time to get beyond all that.

\* \* \* \*

Out on the veranda, sitting in the porch swing, Matt put his arms around Molly and she laid her head on his shoulder. "Sara Jane and I were talking," she said. "Our conversation reminded me how much I love you, and I decided my work could wait a little while."

Matt kissed Molly's temple. "I'm glad. I need you here in my arms." He let out an overwhelming sigh of relief. For the first time since he had received the first threatening phone call, he allowed himself to feel exhaustion, pride, and a sense of triumph. Although the Honey Killer—who thankfully wasn't even aware that his family existed—was still on the loose, the operation to protect his family was over. And even though the terror of the kidnapping and harrowing escape might take months, or even a year or two, for the girls to get over, they would recover.

Matt thought of how a few gains could right the world. After he spoke against De Fuego at the hearing Monday, the board denied his parole. Angelo was dead, and five men were in custody. Wally, Babbling Brook, and her brother convinced the authorities that they had been pawns of Angelo with no understanding of what trying to hustle a few dollars had drawn them into. Most important, his daughter and niece were alive and home again where they belonged.

Molly looked up at him. "What are you smiling about," she said in a dreamy voice.

"Just thinking about that girl of ours. She's really something. Her courage, her tenacity and ability to think under pressure makes the buttons pop off my shirt. Even some men would have given up from the beating, but she didn't knuckle under."

Molly kissed his cheek. "Just like her dad."

Matt felt a twinge of regret. Sara Jane was made of sterner stuff than he had given her credit for. From now on, he wouldn't withhold any secrets that involved her and he'd try to trust her to make the right decisions for herself.

\* \* \* \*

Ignoring the heat and flies, Luke and Amber hurried along the corral line toward the ranch compound. Alicia had slipped out of the house without telling anyone she was leaving. That alone wasn't a big deal. But whenever anyone mentioned Lloyd, her eyes would darken with an incredible sadness and she'd get quiet, which was unusual for Alicia.

Earlier, when Luke had called Matt's house, Molly told him that they hadn't seen Alicia all morning.

They could just wait for her to come home and have it out with her then. But Luke had this overwhelming need to keep his family close—at least for a few days. He thought of the loved ones he had lost in his life—his oldest brother, Parker; his first wife, Connie Lou; and his father. But this time God had answered his prayers and given him his daughter and niece back.

But Alicia had changed—and he intended to find out why and help her through it.

Although Sara Jane's injuries were more serious, she had Nick with her. When Luke and Amber saw him at Sara Jane's bedside, they had tiptoed out—she was in good hands. Luke hadn't been too worried about her. He knew she had a hard head and wouldn't let anything keep her from her horses for long. He thought again of Alicia. What if she really loved that Lloyd fella? Even so, she would get over her loss. Folks never forget people who find their way into their heart, but he was a living example that the pain eventually eased.

\* \* \* \*

Nick searched the whole ranch compound, but Sara Jane and Demon were gone. Covering the acres that made up the Ryan land could take hours, but if he didn't leave for San Antonio at once, the Honey Killer could slip through his fingers—again.

He found Matt warming up his chopper at the Ryan airport. "All set?" Matt shouted over the whirl of the blades.

"Not exactly. Sara Jane isn't within the compound, and Demon is gone." Nick threw his bags into the helicopter and climbed in. "I can't stay any longer, but I hate to leave without saying good-bye."

Matt shook his head. "That girl! What possessed her to disobey the doctor's orders? Well, don't worry. I'll get Luke and some of the hands to mount up and go find her."

Nick never dreamed that leaving Sara Jane behind could be so difficult. He had to find a way for them to be together. He had never wanted to tie himself to one woman before, and he hoped she would realize what a big step this was for him. The big stumbling block was the danger that came with his job. Since the decision he made would essentially create the destiny for both of them, she should have a say in it.

But first, he had to get the sicko who killed his sister. Sara Jane would be here when he returned. A few days apart might even make her heart grow fonder and even make her more receptive to a wild idea brewing in his mind.

What if they purchased the horse-training business in San Dimas? He could still work out of the L.A. office, and when he had to travel for the job, they could hire a manager to run things so she could go with him. Surely, she would see that it was a win-win arrangement. She could train horses, and he could keep his job with the FBI. Their home would be where their hearts were—with each other.

But what if her heart couldn't flourish anywhere but on Ryan land? He pushed away worries about what he would do if she said no.

Then it hit him. His plan didn't solve the problem of the danger.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane had ridden halfway to Verde Creek when the air grew still and she had the eerie sensation of being watched. She shaded her eyes from the afternoon sun and squinted, looking for a rider's silhouette or rising gusts of dust. Nothing moved. Her heart pounded. Someone could easily hide in the thick tangles of mesquite or behind one of the large boulders along this part of the trail. She reined Demon to a stop and listened. She shook her head at herself. This had to be simply a delayed reaction to the danger of the last few days. In spite of her denial of real trouble, when she heard a whinny come from beyond the bend in the road ahead, she reined Demon around and urged him into a gallop.

She flew by the tangles of mesquite trees, scrub oak, and cactus that lined the well-beaten path, eager to feel safe again. Halfway back to the ranch she met Uncle Luke and the half-dozen vaqueros her dad had sent to escort her back to the ranch. She expected her uncle to scold her for disobeying the doctor's orders, but he merely said he had been worried about her. Well, that was Uncle Luke, easygoing to a fault. Her father wouldn't let her off so easy. She strode into the kitchen, braced for his tirade. She found only her mother, bent over a cup of coffee, looking lost like someone had stolen her computer.

"Where's Dad?"

"He flew Nick to San Antonio."

"They're gone?" Sara Jane's throat tightened. Tears that she thought she had under control welled up again. Nick hadn't even said good-bye. She cleared her throat and tried to speak normally. "Will Dad come back tonight?"

"No. He's staying a few days to help Nick." Her mother's grim tone revealed her displeasure.

"Help him do what?" Sara Jane poured herself a cup of coffee with a trembling hand and joined her mother at the table.

"It's that honey murder case. The Bureau put Nick back on it, and your dad wanted to give him a hand."

"This is exactly why I'd never marry an FBI man! Dad didn't have to go, yet he went. It's like they're addicted to the danger."

Her mother lowered her eyes, and Sara Jane knew she'd hit a raw spot.

"What's wrong with the Bureau, anyway?" she continued. "Nick just came off a case, and he's too exhausted to operate at his best. Besides, what possessed them to put him back on a case where he is so personally involved?"

"Your dad told me that the killer demanded to speak to Nick and wouldn't talk to anyone else. A woman will die tonight if he doesn't take the call. That's why he had to rush to San Antonio."

“Okay. I get why Dad had to fly him there. But why did Dad have to stay?”

“Nick is like a son to your father. He doesn’t want him to get lured into a trap like Agent Shirl Reed. She was friends with one of the murdered women.” Mom lowered her eyes for a moment, then met Sara Jane’s gaze. “I suppose Nick told you that Agent Reed was his sister.”

Sara Jane shot to her feet, knocking over her chair and spilling her coffee. “God, this is so crazy. Emotional involvement leads to mistakes—and Nick is as emotionally involved as he can get! How can he keep a woman alive without getting himself killed?”

“That’s why your dad is there. To help him.”

*Yeab, right*, she thought. *What if they both got killed?* She kept that question to herself. Her mom was already worried enough.

Sara Jane paced. All this proved that Nick was the wrong man for her. But what was she going to do? She loved him, and the fact that they were apart didn’t stop her from worrying about him. For the rest of her life, she would wonder where he was—if he was safe. How would she live with that?

\* \* \* \*

Under harsh battery-operated fluorescent lights, the van of the San Antonio FBI field office teemed with high-tech equipment and six tense men. Nick met Matt’s steady gaze. It reassured him to know that Matt would be his backup. Matt didn’t have to be here, and it meant a lot to Nick that he wanted to be.

They had arrived an hour ago, and the time was dragging by. Nick had caught some shut-eye on the flight here. It wasn’t quality sleep, but he felt clear-headed and ready to deal with the devil. He paced the small area. The sicko had called five times before they arrived, with threats that if Nick didn’t show up soon, he’d kill three women tonight instead of one. Probably, as in the past, the killer had stolen prepaid cell phones that, when chased down, would turn out to belong to schoolkids, drug-pushers, and hookers. Apparently, he would use them once or twice and then toss them, which had kept his identity, so far, untraceable.

The bastard had training in electronics and got off on showing how clever he was. His demand to talk to Nick was part of his game. He felt, because he’d killed Nick’s sister, that Nick was the most motivated to catch him and therefore the greatest challenge. It was an ego thing. The theory fit the profile Nick had developed from past murders. It was clear from the static type of women the killer chose, that he was obsessed with killing the same woman over and over. Because of the ages of the victims, Nick discarded the idea that it might be the guy’s domineering mother. Of course, it could have been a memory of his mother, but it was more likely someone else close to him, like a sister or a girlfriend. All the murdered women had had jobs of authority—not a meek, docile creature in the bunch.

The presence of honey tied the murders together, but only the killer could know exactly what the sick ritual meant. Nick had heard of a ritual in South Africa where natives poured honey over the dead bodies of unfaithful lovers to purify their souls before sending them to the next world.

Why did the killer hate strong women so much? Had a girlfriend mocked his manhood? To shove a man over the edge and make him a serial killer, the relationship had to be long-term and all-consuming.

Nick tightened his jaw. Killing Shirl must have been a real high for him—she was not only a dynamic young woman with authority, she was one of the agents after him. Nick shuddered at the memory that would never go away: honey-soaked raw skin where her beautiful face should have been. He closed his eyes a moment. He had to numb himself and concentrate on the goal—catching the bastard.

Nick glared at the phone. *Ring. Damn you.*

A piercing ring cut the tense silence of the van.

Nick grabbed the receiver with damp palms. “Nick Reed. How can I help you?”

“You already have.” At the sound of the electronically altered voice, Nick signaled to the radio technician to put the call on speakerphone and start recording. “I know where you’ve been,” the killer continued. The FBI’s sensitive sound system picked up cows mooing restlessly in the background. “Thought you had me, didn’t you?”

A cold chill shot through Nick. It was impossible—the guy was just baiting him. “Look, let’s not waste each other’s time. What is it you wanted to tell me?”

“The newspapers carried a story about some murdered woman bathed in honey. I knew I didn’t do it, but it piqued my curiosity, so I took a little vacation to the gambling mecca called Stampede Junction. Ever hear of the place?”

Nick gripped the phone tighter. “Get to the point.”

“That’s right. You Feds like it down and dirty. Here’s the cut version. I met an Indian whore named Babbling Brook. She seemed to know a lot about the murder. And you.”

Nick recoiled like he’d been zapped with a hundred volts of electricity. He forced himself to breathe in and out evenly. “I’m sure you didn’t call to brief me on a closed case.”

The killer’s laugh echoed through the van. “You’re right. I wanted you off of the Ryan spread when I gave you the name of my next victim.”

Nick met Matt’s gaze. Matt mouthed that he would call Luke and stepped outside. Nick wanted to throw the phone down and get to the helicopter fast, but he waited, hoping against hope that the killer would say the name of someone he didn’t know, didn’t love. He could scarcely breathe.

“Sara Jane,” the killer finally whispered. Then the line went dead.

## Chapter Eleven

Sara Jane heard the howl of wolves and barking dogs in the distance. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was after nine. Nick and her dad must have arrived in San Antonio by now. They'd probably already checked in at their headquarters. She turned off the air-conditioner and opened her bedroom window. She looked out into the darkness. Menacing shadows from the swaying branches of the old elm reminded her of the earlier break-in when Angelo or one of his men had climbed into her room. The scraping boughs clawing the side of the house could easily be someone scaling the outside wall. She imagined a dark form using suction cups to climb higher and higher toward her. She fought an urge to slam the window shut. Angelo was dead, and his men were locked up. She had nothing to fear, at least about herself. But what about Nick? Had the Honey Killer contacted him? She jumped at the tapping on the door. Good grief—the last few days had really done a number on her nerves.

"It's me," Alicia said.

Sara Jane hesitated. Alicia was the last person she wanted to talk to. Still, it was best to confront the betrayal head-on and clear the air. Maybe her cousin had heard from Nick. Even secondhand news was better than nothing. She swung the door open and stepped back. "Have you heard from Nick?" she blurted, detesting the giveaway fervor in her tone.

Alicia wrinkled her brow. "Why would he call me?"

Sara Jane put her hands on her hips and glared at her man-collecting cousin. "Don't play games with me, Alicia. I saw you in his arms, clinging to him."

Alicia shook her head. "You got it all wrong, cos'. I wish he an' I had the hots for each other. Loving a super-nice guy would be a helluva lot easier than loving a dead man." Her voice broke, and she turned away.

Sara Jane's mind whirled, and a stunned awareness washed over her. She gripped her cousin's trembling shoulders and turned her around. "Lloyd?"

Tears trickled down Alicia's cheeks, but she thrust her chin up. "Yeah, can you beat it? And he loved me, really loved me—enough to die for me."

Sara Jane drew Alicia close. "Allie, sweetie, I'm sorry—so sorry."

Alicia's shoulders shook, and Sara Jane stroked her back the way her cousin had consoled her when her Australian shepherd pup, Lucy, had died. At the time, she believed that nothing could ever hurt more. But losing the man you loved had to be even more devastating. It would be like losing Nick.

Losing Nick . . .

A sharp pang shot through Sara Jane, and she held her cousin tighter. She didn't let go until Alicia calmed down.

"I didn't come up here to drag you down, cos'." Alicia plunked down on the bed and drew her legs

up Indian style. “I want to go to Lloyd’s funeral, and I wondered if you’d go with me.”

Sara Jane eased down beside Alicia and clasped her hands, wanting to say no. “Of course.”

She remembered Indian Joe’s funeral and his wife’s chanting, pulling her hair, and wailing in torment. It would be almost unbearable to watch Alicia weep and suffer over a jerk like Lloyd. But Alicia needed her. Besides, he did take a bullet for her cousin, and that made him at least a last-ditch hero.

Alicia gave Sara Jane a quick hug. “Thanks, cos’. I haven’t been able to find out the date, but Nick said he’d get it for me. I hope he doesn’t forget. He has so much on his mind.”

“He’ll remember.” Sara Jane had no doubt about that.

“This love thing is about more than tight jeans and hot sex, isn’t it?”

Sara Jane laughed without humor. “You got that right. And it’s as confusing as hell.”

It felt good to admit that. In the past, they had talked endlessly about the hunks who had crossed their paths, but not about what they really wanted from a man or what was in their hearts.

“Guys throwing themselves at my feet was sorta fun,” Alicia said. “But knowing sex was all they really wanted from me didn’t make me feel good about myself. I always admired the way you handled men—holding them off, yet not turning them off.”

Sara Jane laughed. “I envied the way you twisted every unmarried guy on the ranch around your fingers with such ease. I practiced the way you tossed your hair, your sexy sway, your twangy drawl. But I wasn’t that good at it—somehow it didn’t fit me.”

“I don’t think it fits me so great anymore either. Lloyd taught me that I didn’t have to try so hard to get love. With him, I could be myself.”

It surprised Sara Jane that Lloyd had had that much depth. “Guess I misjudged him.”

“How could you avoid it? He made a real ass of himself. But that wasn’t the real Lloyd. He’d just received final divorce papers. His wife got the house he’d built with his own hands. And she was the one in bed with her massage therapist. For a few hours, Lloyd hated everybody, himself included.” “Thanks for the shoulder, cos’.” Alicia hugged Sara Jane, and they clung to each other briefly.

Sara Jane glanced at the clock. The red numerals blinked ten p.m. “It’s too late to walk home by yourself. Stay and we’ll turn this into a pajama party.” She figured that neither of them really wanted to be alone tonight.

“Love to. But Dad and Mom are waiting downstairs. Mom told me that Dad needs to keep us all close by for a few days. We have to humor him. How about we do the PJ party thing after I,” she cleared her throat, “bury Lloyd?”

Sara Jane fought back her own tears. “It’s a date.”

Alicia bounded to her feet and disappeared out of the room, like she couldn't escape fast enough.

Sara Jane was surprised that, after only a few minutes, Alicia returned and quipped, "If you still want to have that PJ party, I'm game. Dad said we're all staying the night."

"Great." A cold, unsettling feeling slid down Sara Jane's spine. "Wait a minute. Uncle Luke likes to sleep under his own roof, in his own bed. It takes something important to make him give that up, even for a night. What changed?"

"I didn't ask."

"Well, I have to ask him." Sara Jane headed down the stairs, with Alicia right behind her. She heard her uncle's voice in the kitchen.

He, Aunt Amber, and Mom were huddled over mugs of coffee, looking grim. A gun lay in the center of the table. Tension crackled in the air.

Sara Jane stiffened. "Did you hear from Dad?"

A tendon in Uncle Luke's jaw twitched. He gave her a sidelong glance. "Yep. He and Nick are on their way here."

She doubted that they'd had time to catch the killer. "Why? What's wrong?"

A sob escaped Mom's lips. "Oh, Sara Jane. It's happening again."

Sara Jane's heart pounded. "Did De Fuego escape?"

Mom dabbed at her eyes and shook her head. "No. It's about Nick's case. Somehow the Honey Killer found out about you and Nick. We think he might already be on the ranch. Uncle Luke was just going to come up and get you girls."

Sara Jane's hands turned icy. Her heartbeat thumped against her ribs. "When I was out on the range, I had the eerie sensation of being watched. I told myself it was only a delayed reaction to the danger of the last few days, but when I heard a whinny up ahead, I hightailed it toward home. I had the same feeling upstairs a little while ago."

"Don't worry, honey," Uncle Luke drawled. "We're here—a small army of Ryans to back you up. And I've stationed half-a-dozen vaqueros around the outside of the house. You'll be fine."

"Who said I was worried? If he comes near me, it'll be at his own risk."

Mom shook her head. "Just the same, I think we should all bunk in the living room together. We'll arm ourselves and wait for your dad and Nick."

Sara Jane rolled her eyes. "It seems like overkill."

Uncle Luke shot a sharp look at her. “I think your mom is right. Remember this killer has murdered twenty-three women so far! One of them Nick’s sister, a well-trained FBI agent.”

His last words stopped her from her usual I-can-take-care-of-myself mantra. She would have to be crazy not to realize that a serial killer was beyond her experience. “I know, Uncle Luke.”

“None of your shenanigans? I have your word on that?”

“You have my word.” And she meant it. More than her life was on the line. Her rash actions had caused those she loved a lot of stress and worry in the past—had, at times, even put them in danger. If because of her, someone was hurt or worse . . . She shuddered to think of it. Another loss could destroy Nick, the man driven to save everyone. And Dad would blame himself for leaving his family open to attack.

Uncle Luke had seemed satisfied with her promise at first, but now he was eyeing her with a skeptical expression.

“Look, I gave you my word. You have nothing to worry about. But if we’re camping out down here, I’ll just run up to my room and slip into my PJs.” She headed up the stairs before anyone could object. She really wanted to get her gun. The more armed people in the house, the better.

“Make it snappy,” Uncle Luke called after her.

The distance down the upper hallway felt longer tonight. Her bedroom door was closed. She didn’t think she’d closed it. A dim yellow light glowed beneath it. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She took a deep breath. Her fear was ridiculous. The vaqueros were outside watching the house. Besides, what rational lone killer would dare come into a house full of armed Texans?

She thrust the door open and stepped into the semi-dark room. On the nightstand next to her bed, a flashlight highlighted a clear plastic cylinder of golden honey! Terror pumped through her. Before she could scream for Uncle Luke, a big, sweaty hand clamped over her mouth. Panic thrummed at her throat—she bit down hard on fat, salty fingers and kicked backward. A man cursed and clamped a rag over her nose. She thrashed her head and held her breath, but finally she had to inhale the chloroform.

\* \* \* \*

Nick ducked under the whirring propellers and ran toward the waiting saddled horses. He mounted Jazgirl on the run and spurred her into a gallop.

Minutes ago, when he’d called the ranch house, Luke had assured him that he’d stationed vaqueros around the villa and planned to gather the family together to camp out in the living room for the night. So why did he feel this brutal and overwhelming urgency to get there and see for himself that Sara Jane was safe?

When he approached the villa with its lights glowing against the windows and spilling out onto the wrap-around porch, he saw only one vaquero standing guard. Probably the others were stationed out of sight. Matt caught up with him as Nick reined Jazgirl to a stop. Together they burst into the living

room. “Where is she?” Nick demanded.

Luke laughed. “Upstairs getting her PJs and whatever other danged fool stuff women need to get ready for bed.”

Nick looked up the staircase. “How long has she been up there?”

“Five or ten minutes.”

That was too long with a killer on the loose. Nick took the stairs three at a time. Her bedroom door was closed, with a dim glow coming from beneath it. It didn’t feel right. If he was wrong, he’d apologize later. He charged into the room. The air was as silent as death—then he saw the bottle of honey. He raced to the open window and looked out. He didn’t see any guards.

He ran out of the bedroom and raced down the stairway. “She’s gone!” he shouted past the constriction in his throat. “Luke, get the sheriff! Matt, notify the Bureau!”

Luke and Matt grabbed their cell phones. Everyone followed Nick outside. He spoke to the guard—he hadn’t seen anything unusual. They ran to find the men stationed under Sara Jane’s bedroom. Nick almost tripped over the guard who lay sprawled face down on the ground in a pool of blood. Nick checked for a pulse and found none. There was a seeping wound at the back of the man’s head. The killer had used a hard object like a hammer or a big rock.

Matt rushed ahead and found the second guard half-hidden in some bushes. He knelt on one knee. “Juan’s dead, too—throat’s slashed.”

Nick met Matt’s gaze. “The killer isn’t sticking to his MO.” To Nick’s knowledge, until now, this killer had only murdered women and had never taken his victim to another site.

Matt’s jaw tightened. “He’s turned unpredictable.”

“The good news is he didn’t kill her.” Nick didn’t add the word *yet*. But he knew that they both heard the word in their heads. Sara Jane fit the image of the other women the monster had killed—strong, commanding women. He wished he had told her the kind of women this compulsive nut went after. She was bound to lift that adorable chin of hers and shoot off her mouth. And that would escalate the danger.

He heard Matt giving orders to his men to search the ranch.

“Searching a ranch the size of the Bar R will take too long,” he told Matt. “I’ll use your computer to try to pinpoint the most logical area.”

“Call me when you find something. I’m going with my men.”

Nick ran back inside to the den and sat down at Matt’s computer. Within seconds, he had the Honey Killer’s file before him on the monitor. His gaze flew through reams of data, hoping to find something that would predict where the killer would take Sara Jane. The pattern in previous murders was always the same. The killer chose quiet, isolated places where he could take his time to set the

stage for his grisly acts. Nick dialed Matt's cell phone. When he answered, Nick blurted, "Is there any remote place on the ranch that resembles a stage?"

"I'm drawing a blank," Matt said in a clipped voice. "But hold on. One of our hands thinks of himself as an actor. Maybe he can come up with something."

Nick knew who he was talking about. Van Verdugo, the lecher who had cornered Sara Jane when she was thirteen.

Two minutes later, Matt came back on the line. "Verdugo says that there are two possibilities. Lustre Plateau and Half-Moon Bowl. Half-Moon Bowl is the closest and the most likely. It's where the early Mexican settlers held their fiestas. Weddings and religious ceremonies are still held there. It's near the back entrance to Endless Cave. Verdugo can take you there."

"I don't trust that lech as far as I can throw him. How could the Honey Killer find out about that place?"

"Did you forget the reporters that came sniffing around? Kitty's murder was headlined in the newspapers all over the country. Reporters speculated, as we did, that it might be the work of the Honey Killer. This had to get that nutcase's attention. If he got curious and talked to the gossips around here, especially in Stampede Junction, he could learn all sorts of things."

Nick remembered how he'd let everyone think that he and Sara Jane were sweethearts to cover his real purpose for coming to the ranch. And Matt was right: people gossiped. That could be how the killer found out about Sara Jane, but it didn't explain how he knew about a remote place on the ranch. "I still can't see how he'd know about Half-Moon Bowl."

"Here, I'll let you talk to Verdugo. He can tell you more about that."

Verdugo came on the line. "Last week a city fella staying at the dude ranch asked one of Lady Leila's girls about a place to hold a summer concert. Since I'm the showbiz expert in these parts, Babbling Brook referred him to me. The guy wanted a place with a stage and good acoustics. I told him about Half-Moon Bowl."

Nick had more questions, but with the clock ticking, he waited until he and Verdugo met face to face and had mounted their horses before asking them. "What did this so-called promoter look like?"

"Tall city dude. Over six foot and weighed about two-hundred pounds. His pecs and flat gut made me think he worked out every day. Looked like a young version of that actor fella Van Johnson, with his carrot-red hair, freckles, and silvery blue eyes."

Nick had seen the actor in old movies. "Get a name?" He probably wouldn't use his real one, but what if he did?

"Called himself Carl Davis, but it might've been a stage moniker—he didn't look like a Carl to me."

"Do cell phones work at the Bowl?" Nick remembered the reception was poor outside Endless

Cave, and his map indicated their destination was roughly parallel to it.

“There are good pockets, but mostly it’s poor. If ya have a call to make, now would be a good time.”

Nick flipped open his cell and called the Bureau first. “We need forces to seal off two areas ASAP to prevent the killer from escaping again,” he told the dispatcher. “The most likely is a place called the Bowl, and I’m on my way there now. Matt and his men are checking out the other area. SWAT teams will need to land their helicopters nearby and slip in on foot. Don’t want to alert this guy and set him off.” Nick referred dispatch to the marked maps he had faxed to the Bureau before leaving the ranch. Then he called the sheriff. Bemis knew the place, so Nick didn’t have to go into a long explanation. The catch was the sheriff and his men had to come from all the way from Stampede Junction, and the Bureau’s rescue team had to fly out from San Antonio. Therefore, probably neither group could get in position in time to be of any help in the actual rescue. They could, however, close off both areas and hopefully prevent the killer’s escape. Nick spurred Jazgirl into a faster pace. He was on his own to save Sara Jane.

\* \* \* \*

Sara Jane awoke slowly, coming out of a nightmare into a sickening, galloping reality that made no sense. It was dark, wind whipped her face and body, and she was slung over the rump of a horse, her hands tied behind her back, her ankles lashed together. The blood rushing to her brain added to her disorientation. Her hair fluttered in the jet of air as the stallion flew along a path lined with thick underbrush. The wide gait of the galloping steed hammered her stomach painfully against its hard hindquarters.

She turned her head and got a glimpse of a huge dark form in a cowboy hat straddling the saddle. Cold panic tightened in her chest as it all came back: *the jar of honey on her nightstand. The big, sweaty, salty hand clamped over her mouth—the rag saturated with chloroform—dear God, the serial killer who had murdered twenty-three women had kidnapped her!*

He reined the horse to a stop, dismounted, then moved out of sight. She tried to cry out, but the gag in her mouth muffled the sound. With mounting fury and fear, she worked at the ropes on her wrists. The coarse hemp bit into her flesh, abrading her skin as she twisted, but she kept trying. She had to escape or she would die.

She heard liquid hitting the ground and knew he was relieving himself. After a few seconds, she felt his gaze on her. He stroked her butt with hot, vile hands. Her skin crawled. *Oh, God, don’t let him rape me!*

Humming “It Had to Be You,” he unbuckled the straps that bound her to the horse’s rump. *Untie my hands and ankles, too, sicko.* All she needed was a chance.

\* \* \* \*

When Nick and Verdugo passed the back entrance of Endless Cave, Nick asked, “How much farther?”

“About a mile, I’d say.”

Their horses galloped along a darkened trail illuminated only by a moon that played hide-and-seek behind black clouds. When they came to a clump of trees, Nick reined Jazgirl to a stop. “We better go the rest of the way on foot. We have to catch this guy off guard.”

Verdugo followed Nick’s lead and dismounted, but he continued to complain. “What if we’ve hit the wrong mark? We’ll have to hike back out on foot with nothing to show for it. That’ll be a plumb waste of time.”

“Instinct tells me that your lead is right.”

Verdugo slowed his pace and dropped back a little.

“Come on, let’s get hustling,” Nick said, but Verdugo had stepped out of sight. Nick couldn’t call out without chancing that he’d alert the killer.

Nick dismounted and dropped his reins to the ground. The Bowl had to be the right place. The killer’s profile pointed almost directly to it. It was quiet, isolated, and the ideal spot to set the stage for his hideous act. What Verdugo said about that Davis guy looking for such a site made Nick even more certain. He tightened his jaw. But what if he was wrong?

\* \* \* \*

At the small Ryan Airport, Matt’s heart pounded. The cell number shown was Verdugo’s. Why the hell was he calling instead of Nick? “What’s wrong, Verdugo?”

“I think you oughta get here fast. Nick’s making a bad call. He just insisted that we ditch our horses and walk in.”

“Just do what he says. He knows what he’s doing.”

“But if the killer isn’t at the Bowl, we’ll waste a lot of time. What if he’s at the Plateau instead?”

“I’m just getting in my chopper now to check it out. It’ll take awhile. We have to land nearby and slip in unseen, just like Nick is doing there.” With the chopper, Matt could quickly cover more ground and if lucky, eliminate one place. Damn. He wished he could divide himself in two and check them both out himself. If only he knew for sure where the bastard had taken Sara Jane. He took a deep breath. Nick was checking the Bowl. He had to trust him to save his daughter. The more Matt thought about the killer’s history—that he’d escaped twenty-three times in the past—the more he knew he couldn’t take a chance. He was doing the right thing. He couldn’t let this guy get away over a wrong guess.

\* \* \* \*

The killer hoisted Sara Jane onto his shoulders. Ignoring the pain of his fingers digging into her flesh, she lifted her head. Cold moonlight shone over rows of stone benches fronting a stone stage. It was the Bowl—carved by prehistoric glaciers—where the padres had held religious ceremonies when the Mexicans first settled in the area. She shuddered. Would she be the first virgin sacrificed

here?

The killer's spurs jingled, and his footsteps thudded against the hard surface of the walkway between the benches. He climbed three steps and dumped her onto the smooth stone stage. The back of her head hit hard, and she winced as spikes of pain shot through her skull. Through the haze of throbbing, she looked up at his shadowy form with blurry eyes. He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. Then he paced and waved his arms violently. "This doesn't feel right," he said, his voice ragged, tormented. "Things are out of sync." Abruptly, he turned away and headed back toward the horses.

Was he going to leave her here, bound and helpless? Imagining the horrible things he might have done to other women—that he might do to her—made abandonment good news.

She squirmed and scraped her wrists along the smooth surface, trying to find a rough spot to cut her ropes. It was as slick as polished onyx. Exhausted, she rested a moment, trying to catch her breath. Although she might make matters worse, she couldn't just lie here. She writhed and snaked her body away from the center of the stage, cold sweat sliding over her skin. Her goal was to reach the edge, drop off into the bushes and find a rock or a branch with sharp edges.

Sara Jane had inched herself halfway to the side of the stage when her captor returned, lugging a trunk that he must have had stashed in the bushes. He carried it up onto the stage and dropped it near the center. Frowning, he whipped off his hat and scratched his head. Seized by renewed panic, she froze and watched him slowly scan the edges of the platform surface until his gaze locked on her. He laughed a sinister laugh. The hollow, skin-prickling tone echoed around her. "Good try, bitch, but you can't escape me."

She felt his darkness and a sinking feeling at her awareness of his power over her. He dragged her back to the center of the stage, where his rusty metal chest waited. He crouched on muscular haunches and opened it. After several seconds, he dug out a battery-operated lantern and turned it on. She squinted at the almost blinding wide circle of light. Then, her gaze adjusted to the glare, and for the first time, she could see his face clearly. He looked rather ordinary, with red hair in wild disarray and freckles. If it weren't for his hostile, silver-blue eyes, he would pass for some nonthreatening neighbor from a nearby ranch who had built up his bulging muscles with hard work.

He withdrew a canteen and took a long swig.

"Umm!" Her muffled appeal didn't get her point across, so she pleaded with her eyes.

He stared at her. His silvery gaze glistened with evil. "Want some water, do you?"

The chilling undertones sent shivers through her. With all the courage she could muster, she nodded. She was thirsty. But even more, she wanted an excuse for him to take the blasted gag out of her mouth.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and yanked her to a sitting position. "Guess I can give you that last request. Even if you yell, there's no one out here to hear you."

He withdrew a bottle of lye with cross-bones on it from the trunk. She shuddered, imagining what

he might do with that. Next, he withdrew a jar of his signature honey. The Special Heritage label told her that it wasn't the same bottle she'd seen in her room. The honey frightened her, but the lye totally freaked her out, and so panic rose in her throat like a scream.

"If you're stupid enough to scream," he warned, "instead of pouring water into your mouth, I'll pour lye. Is that clear?"

Her heartbeat quickened. For a moment she couldn't move, couldn't breathe. How she finally managed to nod, she didn't know. But when she did, he took off the tape and removed the rag from her mouth. Blessed air rushed in.

He knelt and tipped the canteen to her lips. Her mouth felt like she'd swallowed a week's worth of round-up dust, and she drank greedily. Water dribbled down her chin. *Damn*. Tied up, she was as helpless as a hog-tied calf. Rage curled inside her. She hated him for making her feel powerless, and it was all she could do not to rake him over the coals for it. Although she preferred anger to fear, some instinct about him warned her to keep her mouth shut.

The last few days flashed before her eyes. Life was short, with no guarantees. Why hadn't she seen it before? If she ever got free, whatever time she and Nick had, they should spend together, even if she had to give up other dreams.

The killer placed the canteen on the stage floor, leaned close to her ear, and whispered, "I'm glad you're cooperating, Rachel, not like the other times."

"Rachel! My name is Sara Jane!"

He gave a hysterical laugh. "You keep changing names, but you don't fool me." His voice broke, and he inhaled deeply as though fighting for sanity. "Why won't you just stay dead?"

Fear, cold and clammy, shivered over Sara Jane's skin. *Oh, God*. He thought he was killing the same woman over and over. She had to keep her wits about her. The longer she could keep him talking, the longer she lived. He rolled out a velvet cloth with four gleaming knives in it. One looked like a scalpel. Shivers shook her body, and she couldn't stop trembling. "What did Rachel do to you that made you want to kill her?" Sara Jane hated the tremor in her voice.

"You know what you did!" He backhanded her. She fell backward onto the stone floor, and for a moment saw stars. She breathed in, breathed out, fighting to stay conscious. His brutality bucked her anger up a notch. If she ever got free, God help him.

He jerked her to a sitting position again and balled up his fist. She didn't want him to hit her again, so she clammed up and bowed her head, trying to look meek while squelching the desire to lash out at him. Until she could trick him into untying her, she was in no position to challenge him.

He let out a string of swear words, buried his face in his hands, and rocked on his haunches. "This isn't going right—not right at all." His voice was ragged, agitated, strained.

His body shook, and she thought she heard sobs. She almost felt sorry for him. After a few moments, he circled around and sat down behind her.

Suddenly, he grabbed her. She pressed her lips tight to keep from screaming. He hauled her backward until her tied hands rested against his groin. A chill crawled up her spine. Had he raped the others? She curled her fingers as thoughts of trying to grab his balls flitted through her mind, but the odds of doing any real damage through his heavy jeans with her hands bound were slight. She decided that the safest thing to do was to raise her hands so they wouldn't touch anything that might arouse or set him off.

He picked up the scalpel and brought it to her throat. *Whoa!* Silence hadn't solved her problem. She had to say something, anything. But denying that she was Rachel had sent him into a rage before. She'd never backed down from a confrontation in the past, and the anger churning inside her was about to boil over. "I'm here to make things right with you." Her soft, hopefully soothing voice was in direct opposition to her speeding heart. "That's why I keep coming back."

He pulled her tighter against his chest, leaned forward, and glared down into her face. "You won't come back this time. Ever hear of cremation?"

Terror seeped into her bones as she imagined the searing horror of flesh set on fire. She shoved down her fear beneath barely contained fury. She blinked as unexpected lightning flashed across the sky—she'd thought the storm had passed. Her attention wavered for only a moment, and then she recaptured his gaze once more. She had to reach his humanity. "You've got it all backwards," she said softly. "Killing me won't kill the suffering in you. But I can help you get rid of it."

He grazed her throat with the tip of the scalpel. "I don't trust your soft voice and gentle tone. After the accident, you thought I'd never walk again, never be strong and virile again, so you dominated me, neglected me, and paraded your disgustingly healthy lovers through our house."

Sara Jane's heart pounded. "I'd never do something like that!" In his anger, he had pressed the scalpel a fraction deeper. She felt a trickle of blood. She was too terrified to feel more than a stinging sensation, but she knew it was possible that the cut was more serious. She imagined it all ending here in the fuzzy glow of lamplight while her blood seeped away like water from a punctured canteen. "Please, you're hurting me!" A tightened coil of fright threatened to overwhelm her.

"Nothing like you hurt me! You stole everything: my humanity, my dignity, my money, my property, even my soul. When you abandoned me in that gully in bear country, you told me my mind was gone, my body useless—that a cripple like me was better off dead. But rather than do the merciful thing and kill me, you poured honey over my head and told me that the bears would come soon."

"But you're here—healthy and strong." Was he just a crazed man who had imagined it all? Lightning cut through the sky again and highlighted his tortured face, and she realized that, true or imagined, he believed she was Rachel and was going to make her pay with her life.

## Chapter Twelve

Nick's heart pounded wildly. He swallowed cool night air in agonizing gulps. Verdugo better have pointed him in the right direction. The moon slipped in and out of black angry clouds. Nick kept his flashlight beam pointed down as they slipped from shadow to shadow. Behind him, he heard only Verdugo's labored breathing and an occasional twig snap. They had covered their boots with socks and advanced like Indians, swiftly and silently.

He paused briefly to let Verdugo catch up. Glancing at the six-shooter in the wannabe actor's holster, he whispered, "Know how to use that?"

"Good enough."

Verdugo's cocky response didn't reassure Nick about the chance of so-called friendly fire. "Well, I'm a crack shot, so I'll do the shooting. You keep that gun holstered unless I signal you or the killer takes me out. Got that? I don't want stray bullets flying around."

"What you want is to be the big hero in Sara Jane's eyes," Verdugo said under his breath.

Nick let the dig roll off him. The less useless talk, the better. Their labored breathing and twigs snapping were noisy enough. "Are we getting close?"

"Hard to tell at night. If we didn't ditch our horses to walk in, I reckon we'd be there by now."

Nick tightened his jaw. He wasn't about to explain again that to avoid the situation from spiraling out of control, they had to sneak up on the killer. "I sense we're close, so we're going to a silent blackout mode."

Verdugo snickered. "Just great. If I fall in a hole and break my leg, I'll sue you and the FBI. That oughta bring in a wad of greenbacks to set me up in Hollywood 'til my career takes off."

"Shut up, damn it," Nick said in a low growl. He flicked off his flashlight and traveled through the darkness by well-honed instinct made sharper by the desperation to save the woman who had stolen his heart.

Did Sara Jane know she wasn't invincible? With De Fuego's grandson, she'd been able to think on her feet and somehow outsmart him. But she had zero chance of dealing with this warped serial killer. Nick had never met the bastard, but he sure as hell knew what the man was capable of. Even killing the women didn't satisfy him. He had to carve away their faces and mutilate their identity, torturing their souls and the souls of those who loved them. An image of his sister flashed in his mind—sprawled in the cold, deserted alley—faceless, covered in honey, the air pungent with her blood. Nick clamped his jaw tight and ran faster, his lungs burning. *Hold on, SJ, I'm coming.*

Through the trees and brush, he saw a dim half-circle of light. Then, a flash of lightning lit up the sky, highlighting the Bowl's stage and the big man holding a glinting silver object to Sara Jane's throat. The man sat straddle-legged with Sara Jane pulled up against him. His eyes were wild, his movements jerky. In the killer's agitated state, one misstep by Nick and he would drive that knife into her jugular vein. Nick drew his gun and aimed. His finger was remarkably steady on the trigger.

*Shift out of the way, baby, that's right.* Just as he started to squeeze, the killer swung Sara Jane back into the line of fire. *Shit!* Nick swallowed and took a deep breath. Cold sweat trickled down his back. He couldn't lose it now. Her life depended on him.

The killer was absorbed in an intense discussion with Sara Jane. *Play it cool, baby. Keep him calm.*

Nick knew he had to get closer for a clear shot. He gestured to Verdugo to circle the stage to the right, and he went left, staying in the shadows.

He heard the whir of a helicopter coming in low overhead and glanced up. He couldn't identify the chopper in the dark, but he'd guess it was Matt. *Damn!* The timing was wrong. The threat from above would force the killer into action.

And it did. With panic on his face, the killer stood, bringing Sara Jane up with him, shielding himself with her body, dragging her into the shadows.

Crouching low, Nick ran parallel to them.

A beam from the chopper spotlighted the killer and the glinting blade. Sara Jane shrank from it.

Nick fired.

Sara Jane buckled to the ground.

The night exploded with gunfire. A barrage of bullets came from above and Verdugo's side of the stage. Nick winced as Verdugo's bullet grazed his arm. A wild shot or petty revenge? "Hold your fire, Verdugo!"

All shooting stopped, and there was only the whir of the helicopter hovering above.

\* \* \* \*

Matt quickly stored the rifle with its infrared sight in the rack beside him. Then, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he gripped the hand bar, leaned out of the chopper's cargo door as far as his safety-strap would allow, and directed a strong beam of light toward the grisly scene below. His daughter and the killer were sprawled side by side. He blinked away a rush of tears. "Get us down there. Now!" he shouted at Luke, who manned the controls.

Luke angled in a tight circle in preparation to set the helicopter down on the back of the stage. Suddenly, lightning scrawled the sky just in front of the chopper. "Better not land here," he drawled. "The next bolt could hit the props or the gas tank. If we crash on the stage, we'll take them all out with us."

"You're right," Matt said past the constriction in his throat. But how could he leave without knowing how badly Sara Jane was hurt? He gripped the hand bar tighter. *Madre de Dios! Don't let her be dead.* "Find the nearest clearing, and keep the rotors churning."

Luke tilted the craft about fifteen degrees and headed away.

Matt tightened his jaw. Abandoning his daughter, even briefly, hurt more than getting gored by a bull or taking a bullet in the gut. When he checked the Plateau and found nothing, he had to come here. If he'd known Nick had found the killer and was about to make the rescue, he wouldn't have jumped the gun. He hoped his rash action hadn't caused his daughter's death. He couldn't live with that. And Molly would never forgive him.

\* \* \* \*

The minute the gunfire stopped, Nick leapt onto the stage and ran to where the blood-splattered bodies lay, still as death, the scalpel still gripped in the killer's hands. Nick kicked the blade away, dropped to his knees, and gathered Sara Jane into his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Feeling the warmth and safety of Nick's arms, Sara Jane opened her eyes.

"You're alive," he murmured, his husky voice choked. "Thank you, God."

Blinking back a rush of tears, she basked in the relieved gaze of the dear man who had saved her from a horrifying death. Seeing the love glinting there eased the throbbing in her head and diminished the terror that had almost overwhelmed her.

Nick lowered his gaze and glared at her neck. "You're bleeding! The bastard cut you!"

The urgency in his voice vibrated through her. If her hands weren't tied behind her back, she'd hug him for caring so much. "I've had worse paper cuts," she quipped, still trying not to cry.

He slipped off his kerchief, dabbed her neck gently with it, then tied it loosely around her throat. "You don't faint from paper cuts, SJ."

"Faint! Are you joking, UC? I'm a Ryan, and we don't faint under fire. When you shot the killer, I simply buckled and dropped to the floor, out of harm's way. It was a darned good thing, too, with all the gunfire exploding over my head, riveting bullets into the killer's body, flinging his blood like fat blobs of rain. All I could do was squeeze my eyes closed and pray a ricocheting bullet wouldn't hit me." She took a quick breath to fortify herself. Although still shivering inside, she refused to sound scared. "Now quit making a big thing out of nothing and untie me. I want to show you how Texas girls say thank you."

He shook his head, the hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "Sweetheart, your spunk blows me away. Anything you want, you've got."

Her body trembled with the loss of his strong, protective arms as he moved away. He grabbed one of the killer's knives, circled behind her, and kneeled. It took several minutes to cut through the rope on her wrists. She felt the freedom of the last thread giving, then Nick kissing the scraped, raw flesh beneath it. After a moment, he gently massaged her stiff arms. His thoughtfulness brought another rush of tears. She blinked them back, and as he circled back into sight, she followed him with her gaze. He was broad-shouldered and magnificent. Her fingers ached to touch him, to reassure herself

that he was real and she was really safe. He faced her and knelt at her feet to cut the rope around her ankles. Like lightning, she bent, clutched his biceps, and drew him to her.

His eyes widened. “Did I miss something? I thought you were in a hurry for me to cut you loose.”

“I was. So I could do this.” She planted a kiss on his lips. It was meant merely as a down payment. But when he dropped the knife, threaded his fingers through her hair, and responded with fierce passion, she opened her mouth to him, letting desire override the awareness of the bloody scene around them and how close she’d come to dying. Suddenly, she couldn’t think of anything but getting closer to him. She moaned as their tongues entwined and fueled the fire raging between them. Thunder rolled across the sky, followed by gentle rainfall. She shuddered and pressed herself closer to Nick’s firm, warm chest, clinging with everything in her to the heat and blazing emotion between them.

Verdugo cleared his throat. “Should I go get the horses?”

Nick ended the kiss and looked around as though coming out of a daze. Raindrops glistened in his hair, clung to his eyelashes. “No, we’ll all go.” We need to get Sara Jane away from this carnage and to a doctor ASAP.” A tendon in his jaw twitched. “If your cell works, call the sheriff,” he continued. “Tell him to send the coroner.”

“Cells don’t work here,” Sara Jane said. “He’ll have to wait until we get out of the dead pocket.”

Nick nodded and picked up the knife he’d dropped and sawed through the rope that bound her ankles. She watched him, feeling embarrassed and disoriented. It was then that she noticed the blood soaking his shirt sleeve. “Nick, you’re hurt.” She’d seen spots of blood on his sleeves, but thought, like the blood splattered on her, that it belonged to the killer.

He shrugged, scowling meaningfully at Verdugo. “Just a graze. Friendly fire.”

The cold, sarcastic edge to his voice told her that he wasn’t so sure it was an accident. “Let me see,” she said. “I know first aid.”

“Later. No time now.”

Sara Jane sighed. Nick the dispassionate FBI man was back in charge—reminding her exactly who he was.

\* \* \* \*

Nick yanked two neatly folded tarps and several tangled ropes from the killer’s trunk. Feeling a new pressure building, he glared at the gnarled mess. “Damn, wouldn’t you know this wouldn’t be easy?”

“What are you doing?” Sara Jane asked.

“Before we leave, I have to protect the body for forensics.”

“Can I help?”

He shook his head. "I shouldn't even be doing this—the less contamination of the crime scene, the better." He hoped she knew the impatience in his voice wasn't aimed at her. His arm hurt like hell, making everything more difficult, and the full impact of the storm was only minutes away.

Quietly, too quietly, she sat by his side with her legs drawn up, her head resting on her arms. She seemed oblivious to the lightly falling rain. He needed both tarps for the body or he would have given her one to cover up.

Verdugo paced under an overhang at the rear of the stage, his shoulder hunched and the collar of his denim jacket turned up, smoking a cigarette. "Better hurry," he said. "It's coming down harder."

Ignoring the superfluous weather report, Nick wrapped the bloody corpse in the tarpaulin and secured it with the ropes. The mummy-like wrap would protect the body from the elements and marauding animals until the sheriff and his forensics team arrived. The FBI SWAT team would probably be right behind them, and they could hash out the jurisdiction. He felt sure the chopper had landed in the first safe clearing. In any event, he wasn't waiting around. If they were close by, he would find them.

Nick crouched beside Sara Jane. She looked pale. He gently kissed her temple. He noticed then that her face was swollen and bruised. If he hadn't already killed the Honey Killer, he would beat him to a pulp now. "You're going to be all right, I promise." He had to believe that. He scooped Sara Jane into his arms.

"I'm perfectly capable of walking," she said.

"Sure you are." Her ankles were cut and swollen, and her feet were bare. "But I want you in my arms for a while, okay?"

She gave a little smile and rested her head against his neck. *God, he loved her.*

Verdugo trailed just behind them. Nick wrestled with his mixed feelings about him. He already had a low opinion of the bastard for making moves toward Sara Jane when she was thirteen, and getting shot by him lowered that gut reaction another notch. But the wannabe actor had led him to Sara Jane, and for that he would be forever grateful.

Lightning flashed across the sky, and the rain came down in sheets. Heading for the sound of the helicopter's slowly rotating blades, they waded through ankle-deep puddles. Thick elms shielded them from the worst of the downpour, but they still got soaked. Sara Jane didn't complain—she just cuddled closer and settled even deeper into his heart.

Nick ran as fast as he could. The longer Matt had to wait for them, the more dangerous the liftoff. The sound of the slowly rotating helicopter blades grew louder, leading them to the clearing where the chopper waited. Nick lifted Sara Jane up into the waiting arms of her father.

In the process, the kerchief slipped down and Matt gasped at the thread of blood across her neck. "How bad?" he asked, glancing at Nick.

“Not deep, but we need to get her to emergency,” Nick said, hoisting himself into the chopper.

Matt stooped and gently lowered Sara Jane onto a bed of folded down seats covered with blankets. “How are you really, little darlin’?” The worry and tenderness in his voice brought a lump to Nick’s throat.

“Just peachy, Daddy,” she said in an exaggerated drawl, “other than being chloroformed, almost raped, slammed around, and a knife held to my throat . . .”

Matt swore. “Luke, get us to emergency fast!”

“Don’t have a heart attack, Daddy. I’m fine. Nick’s the one who took a bullet.”

Matt darted a look at Nick. His gaze followed the line of blood dripping from Nick’s sleeve. “They’re both hurt,” he shouted to Luke, and then he faced Nick again. “What about the killer?”

“Dead. I wrapped the body and left it for the sheriff to handle. It was a choice of getting help for Sara Jane quickly or waiting around for forensics. I could have had Verdugo haul the body out on his shoulders, but he would have balked at that, and taking the body from the crime scene would complicate the paperwork and make it more difficult for forensics.”

“I would have done the same thing,” Matt said.

Verdugo started to climb inside, but Matt shook his head. “Get the horses, and take them back to the ranch. And when you get in range, call the sheriff.”

Nick felt a twinge of satisfaction. Leaving Verdugo behind was at least a small payback for the jackass’ wild shot. Sara Jane half-rose. Nick crouched beside her and eased her back down. “You just relax.”

She barely nodded.

Nick felt the vibration in the craft increase and the sensation of going up. He prayed they could make it out of the storm system without getting struck by lightning. Nick knew Matt and Luke were worried, too. The tension inside the six-passenger cargo chopper was as electrified as the storm outside.

Nick dabbed at Sara Jane’s rain-streaked face and hair with the edge of the blanket. Her teeth were chattering. He readjusted the kerchief around her neck and tucked the dry section of her covers under her chin. She kept blinking and rubbing her head.

“Head hurt?” he asked.

She nodded, and then winced from the pain. “The killer kept slamming me down on the stone floor.”

Nick’s throat went dry. She hadn’t had time to recover fully from the last concussion.

\* \* \* \*

Holding Sara Jane's hand, Nick listened while the doctor gave his prognosis.

"Your CT Scans show a new hairline fracture about two millimeters from your earlier fracture. It may be weeks, even months, before you have the clarity of thought that you once had. The main thing now is to avoid further injury. You must stay off horses for at least six weeks."

Sara Jane frowned and gently traced the gauze bandage hiding the razorlike cut across her neck.

"That will heal and fade over time. If the scar doesn't disappear to your satisfaction, we can have a plastic surgeon look at it."

She glanced at the bandage on Nick's arm. "What about him?"

The doctor's blue eyes twinkled. "He got off easy. Just a graze. Some antiseptic and a bandage were all he needed."

Sara Jane gave a half-smile and closed her eyes.

"She'll need watching for forty-eight hours," the doctor told Nick. "She won't like it, but wake her every hour." The doctor handed him a prescription. "This will make her more comfortable."

After they arrived back at the ranch, Nick carried Sara Jane up to her room. Since leaving the hospital, she'd been dazed and disoriented from the pills, floating in and out of consciousness. As he lowered her to the bed, she gave him a faint smile and closed her eyes again. Just when he was thinking of getting her out her wet clothes and into something clean and comfortable, he remembered they were in her parents' home, and her folks might frown on him disrobing their little girl. Feeling torn and ridiculous, he called her mother to do the clean-up and strip job. He paced outside the door, until Molly came out. "You can go in now, if you like," she said.

"Thanks," he said, still feeling like a third thumb. Then, as he tiptoed across the room lit only by moonglow and a dim nightlight, all negative feelings left him, replaced by an outpouring of love. At her bedside, he kissed her forehead, tucked the covers under her chin, and just sat beside her, holding her hand, not talking except when he woke her on the hour to be sure she was still with them.

He brushed back a tendril of hair from her face. Sleeping, she looked soft and vulnerable, but she had proven herself to be a very strong, courageous woman. Even though tied up, she had dealt with the killer, calming him the best she could, delaying what she probably believed was inevitable death. Nick shuddered, thinking of what might have happened if she'd lost her cool.

Sara Jane's family drifted in and out, offering to take over so Nick could get some sleep, but he refused to budge. He'd promised Sara Jane that he wouldn't leave her side.

Two long days later, she had finally passed the crisis. When she headed for the shower, Nick stepped next door to his adjoining room to get some sleep. He fell in a heap on the bed, let out a big sigh, and closed his eyes. When his cell phone jangled a minute later, he was tempted to ignore it, but he

could see by the readout that it was his boss.

“I need you in San Antonio,” he demanded. “Today.”

Nick hoisted up his bone-tired body and packed. God, he didn’t want to leave. But with Sara Jane out of danger, there wasn’t any excuse to stay.

It was only now sinking in—somehow he had plunged into a two-for-the-bullet world. By bringing down the Honey Killer, he’d saved Sara Jane and laid his sister to rest at the same time. But it was hard to let go of the obsession. And it had been an obsession, he knew that now. After the Honey Killer murdered Shirl, nothing else had mattered to him but bringing the bastard to justice. His boss had considered his tunnel focus risky and ordered him off the honey killer case. But when the murders continued and the killer wouldn’t deal with anyone but him, they were forced to put him back on the case. Then the real Honey Killer went after Sara Jane. Nick knew it was the catalyst that defined him. When he saw that deranged bastard holding a scalpel to her throat, it was no longer vengeance that drove him. At that instant, he’d thought only of protecting Sara Jane.

Because that was who he was—a protector—not some self-appointed, one-man nemesis. He’d grown up protecting Shirl, and his entire professional life, in the military and with the Bureau, had been about protecting people. In his anger and pain over losing Shirl, he’d forgotten that and let vengeance govern him. Vengeance! That had never been his MO. Hell, by now the role of protector was probably embedded in his DNA. When Matt asked for his help, he’d had to accept. And, as it turned out, the job of protecting Sara Jane had allowed him to regain his sense of balance and become true to himself.

Not that it had been easy. Protecting her had turned into one of the most frustrating, heart- and head-confusing, sexually arousing times of his life. Not to mention the wear and tear on his honor. He’d wanted her from their first kiss—maybe even from the moment he’d laid eyes on her. It was only out of respect for Matt that he hadn’t made love to her.

So, how could he make it work with her on a permanent basis? Something he wanted with all of his heart. No, that was an understatement. He had to have her in his life. Somehow, she had gotten all tangled up in who he was down deep below the surface. She’d become his family, his own to protect at all costs.

But he couldn’t see himself as a rancher or her as a city girl. It was crazy. This was the only woman he wanted that he hadn’t made love to—and the only woman he was positive he wanted in his bed forever.

*Damn!* He wasn’t even sure she felt the same way about him. Would her love be strong enough to work through some sort of a compromise?

Without knocking, Sara Jane sailed into his room, trailing her tantalizing just-showered fragrance. Her eyes blazed as she glared at the packed suitcase on his bed. “Dad said you were leaving. Why? Are you chomping at the bit to escape something or to get back to something?”

Nick dragged his hand across his face—he was too tired for this discussion. “Neither. My big boss demanded a face-to-face meeting in San Antonio today to clear up the loose ends on the honey case

and to go over my next assignment.”

“But we haven’t had a chance to talk.” Hurt glistened in her eyes. “Were you going to leave without telling me?”

“Of course not. And I’ll be back.” He crossed the room, took her in his arms, and kissed her temple. If he kissed her the way he wanted to, he wouldn’t be able to leave.

“And then what?”

“We’ll decide that, together.”

\* \* \* \*

In a fast gallop, with white mane flying, Vision rounded the barrel carrying both Monica and Erik. Aching to get back in the saddle herself, Sara Jane coached them from her spot atop the split-rail corral. Erik took direction well and displayed the kind of patience needed to work with a blind woman and a spirited quarter horse. Even though Erik worked as trainer only on a temporary basis, he was giving it his all. Yesterday, half-joking and half-serious, he’d said he loved working with horses so much that if she ever decided to give up her business, he’d be glad to take over permanently.

The possibility that she might be forced to give up her business for Nick made agreeing to let Erik do the actual riding for six whole weeks even more torturous. She wanted to spend as much time with her horses as possible in case she actually had to leave. Her only solace was the day-to-day grooming, which kept her in close contact with them. Days had stretched into a week, and all she had to hold onto was Nick’s promise that he would be back.

“Did Nick call yet?” Alicia asked, climbing up on the railing next to Sara Jane.

“Twice, but he didn’t say much. He said we’d talk when he got here.”

“So? When is that?”

Sara Jane sighed. “Maybe by the end of the week.”

“I couldn’t stand all this waiting. Why didn’t you tell him that you love him and want to be with him?”

“His suitcase was packed, and he was heading out the door.”

Alicia slid off the fence and walked away, shaking her head. “Grab love when you can, kiddo,” she said over her shoulder. “You never know when fate will yank it away.”

With Lloyd’s funeral over only two days ago, Sara Jane understood her cousin’s feelings. And they were valid. She wished now that she had said something to Nick. It was hard to function with things so up in the air. Especially when she couldn’t get back to work—it gave her too much time to miss him. She knew he loved her, but she also knew he didn’t want to be a rancher. What would he say

when she told him she was ready to give up everything to be with him? What if he didn't want that kind of commitment?

Would she take whatever he offered just to be with him? Crazy as it seemed, she just might do that. She had no idea what a future with him would be like, but she refused to be afraid ever again—of love or anything. All she needed now was to face Nick with determination and courage. It was unbelievable how much she'd changed since meeting him. She'd learned that love didn't always come in a neat little package.

She laughed to herself. She had changed, really changed—in more ways than she ever dreamed possible. She no longer felt compelled to prove anything to anybody, except that she loved them. Facing death had made her realize that life was about loving someone more than your own dreams and accepting that, in the end, without love she had nothing.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, Sara Jane went to the barn to be with Demon. While stroking his sleek, black coat with the grooming brush, she told him all the things disturbing her. He nodded and whinnied, as though sympathizing with her. She might give up her business, but never Demon.

She checked on all of the horses in her care, gave them their treats, grabbed a clean blanket, and then climbed up to the hayloft. Silvery light from the full moon and guitar music from the bunkhouse drifted in through the open hay door. She spread out the blanket and lay down on it. She inhaled the scent of sweet straw and thought how sad it was to be alone on a night like this. Was Nick too busy to notice the full moon—too busy to think of her?

Sara Jane was so deep in thought that she had closed out the stirrings and occasional whinnies of the horses below. The soft music filtering in filled her with longing. Thinking she heard footsteps on the ladder, she sat up and looked toward the sound. Her heart skipped a beat.

“Nick!”

For an eternity of seconds, she feasted on his intense green eyes, the curly lock of dark hair dusting his brow, his muscled body.

She jumped to her feet, thrust herself into his arms, and hugged him fiercely around the neck. “I’m glad you’re finally here. I have these words burning inside of me, and if I don’t get them said—”

“They can wait another minute. I’ve been dreaming of this for seven days,” he said. He put his hand under her chin, tilted her head upward, and kissed her gently on the mouth.

She’d been dreaming of it, too, and right now, with his lips gliding warmly and possessively against hers, as if tasting, memorizing, talk seemed greatly overrated. The fact that she fit so well in his arms and the longing rising within her limbs convinced her that they were meant to be together.

He stopped kissing her. “I talked to your father.”

She stiffened. “What about?”

Nick dropped to the blanket and drew her down beside him. “I asked him to release me from my promise.”

“Promise?”

“I promised him when I accepted the job to protect you that I wouldn’t make love to you.”

Heat burned her face. “That should be my decision, not his.”

Nick’s eyes twinkled. “That’s what he said. And then he released me.”

“So, what am I supposed to do with that information, spread my legs and say ‘welcome pardner?’ ”

His jaw tightened. “I’m going to ignore you said that. You know that’s not what this is about.”

“I just don’t like it that you and my father conspired behind my back—that the two of you thought you had the right to decide what’s best for me.”

“We know that. That’s why you’re the one to call the shots on any decisions you and I make today.”

“Okay then. I don’t want just a one-night stand. I thought that might be enough, but I want more than that.”

“Agreed.”

She wasn’t sure just what he’d agreed to. But she was on a roll and let her words spill out in a rush. “I’m willing to give up the ranch and my business for you, but I have to keep Demon. We’ll have to board him somewhere nearby.”

“Hey, slow down . . .”

“I can’t. My courage might turn to mush.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. “Sweetheart, don’t look so sad. You don’t have to give up anything. I’d never take you away from the ranch.”

“You don’t want me to go with you?” *Ob, no.* She’d misinterpreted his intentions. What did he have in mind, a long-distance romance where he popped in and out of her life between jobs?

“What I’m trying to get through to you is that I’m giving up my job to live here with you, if you’ll have me.”

“But it’ll kill you to be a rancher. You’re all about protecting people . . .”

“Somehow, I’ll find a way to do that here. Even if I can’t, living with you on the ranch will be so much more than anything I’ve ever had before. And I’ve changed enough to know that having a real family is what’s been missing in my life.”

“But, but,” she sputtered. His speech had totally undone her, and she groped for the right thing to say.

He touched her lips, silencing her. “I know you love me, and I sure as hell love you. The rest is just working it out.” He took a breath and continued. “Never having had a real family, I don’t know how good marriages are supposed to work, but there’s nothing we can’t overcome together.” He took her face between his hands. “Knowing you, my high-spirited darling, I imagine it will be a juggling act of finding middle ground. And I look forward to the challenge.”

Sara Jane buried her face against his chest a moment, and he held her in silence, barely breathing, as though giving her time to consider her answer.

“Well?” he asked finally.

“Oh, didn’t I answer out loud?” Her voice rang with mischief. “Man, you urban cowboys are hard to convince—I already told you I was ready to follow you to the ends of the Earth.”

He lowered her to the blanket and traced her face, his eyes full of love. Then he kissed her lightly and murmured, “You have the softest lips in the world.”

She laughed and peppered his face with tiny kisses. “And I’ll bet you’ve sampled enough to know.”

He chuckled low in his throat. “A man has to be careful what he says around you. You weigh every word.”

The hoarse passion in his voice rolled through her like a range fire fanned by hot winds. “Then don’t talk.”

She clasped his face in her hands and drew his mouth back to hers. He kissed her softly at first, his mouth warm and gentle. Then the kiss intensified, demanding more, taking more. Soon his mouth was ravaging hers. She met his passion with equal fervor, unable to get enough of him.

He drew her tighter against his muscled body. She reveled in the lean hardness of him, unable to tell where her body began and his left off. He feathered kisses down her throat. Everything inside her stilled, gripping her in an unyielding hold. The stirring deep within her slipped lower. How lucky she was: he was the only man who’d ever made her desperate to have him—and the only one who had touched her heart.

He throbbed against her belly. He rolled with her, and she felt the weight of his body on hers, crushing her breasts against his firm chest, felt his groin nestle into the tender apex between her thighs. His aroused male scent rose and drifted to her nostrils. She felt their hearts pounding as one in a wild, erratic beat. A tingle of anticipation of the unknown shivered through her, and she held onto him for dear life.

His warm fingers pressed into her skin as he unbuttoned her shirt and unhooked her bra. He managed, with her help, to strip away the restrictive clothing. He trailed a finger down her cheek, traced the scar on her throat. “I almost lost you.” His deep voice choked.

If she hadn't already loved him, she would have fallen for him in that moment.

He touched her lips with his fingers, following with his mouth, descending lower and lower, until she could barely stand waiting for whatever he had in store for her. He covered her breasts with kisses. She felt adored, cherished. She arched, inviting him to heighten her pleasure.

Nick blew out a ragged breath. "Are we really going to do this here, now?"

She laughed a little hysterically. "What do you want—a written invitation?"

A moan escaped him as he tightened his arms around her like he never wanted to let go, and, in the silvery moonlight, his mouth sought hers. Ravaged it, possessed it.

## Chapter Thirteen

With her senses whipped into a whirlwind of desire, Sara Jane helped Nick shrug his shirt from wide shoulders glistening with sweat. Then, laughing, they yanked off boots, sent socks flying, and unbuckled one another's belts and kicked off jeans.

When they were naked beside each other, he stared at her for a moment. "Beautiful," he whispered, "take-my-breath-away beautiful."

His mouth claimed hers again, and he eased his hot muscled body onto her. He was touching her everywhere, owning all of her, sending tingling sensations to her moist and heated center. He guided her hand, and with a need that soared from the depths of her soul, she stroked him as he stroked her, wanting all of him. Forever.

She gasped when he penetrated her. He backed off and entered again, so slowly and gently that tears of love flooded her eyes. Joined as one, she heard distant guitar music and then only the wild beating of their hearts as he swept her along with him, higher and higher. Her body quivered and arched. Her pulsing core and every nerve ending, every fiber, begging for glorious release.

"Nick, Nick, I love you so," she whispered.

"Me, too, you." His words escaped in two ragged gasps as they conquered the pinnacle, crashed over, and shattered together.

Breathing heavily and trembling, they plummeted back to the blanket. Nick rested against her heaving breasts. Once he had caught his breath, he covered her face with kisses, then pushed up on muscular arms and shifted to lie beside her. She traced his jaw and the lean line of his face, touching gingerly the beginning of stubble.

He laughed deep in his throat. "I still don't know," he said. "Were you?"

She had led him to believe she was a virgin without actually saying so, and it amused her that he couldn't tell. One more benefit of riding horses all of her life. Warmed by the glints of love and playfulness in his eyes, she lowered her voice and teased him back in a throaty drawl, "Not anymore."

He laughed again and drew her close.

They rested awhile and then made love again—this time slower and more leisurely, with Nick proving that there was no limit to the pleasure he could give her. Now, even as they held each other, thoroughly spent and completely satisfied—her face buried in the curve of his neck, their legs entwined—she looked forward to the next time . . . and a lifetime of next times.

\* \* \* \*

Nick opened his eyes to a silvery dawn creeping into the darkness, followed by a burst of sun streaking the sky and the walls of the hayloft with the golden hues of a new day and the beginning of what he knew would be the best part of his life. He stared at Sara Jane still asleep beside him, her

hair a spill of light auburn waves cascading over his shoulder, his chest. He moved his stiff arm carefully so as not to disturb her and eased from beneath the long, slender leg thrown across him. Sitting up, he took his hand across his face, stunned that they had spent the whole night together in the hayloft. He covered Sara Jane, gathered her clothes, and placed them within easy reach. Then he yanked on his jeans and pulled on his boots. He stuffed the used condoms in a handkerchief and tucked them and the empty wrappers into his pocket, out of sight. He wanted to try to avoid impregnating her until they were married—and after he had time to figure out exactly how he would fit into ranch life.

Nick looked out the hay window. The ranch compound already bustled with activity. He watched a vaquero lasso a calf who kicked its rear hooves in protest. Clouds of dust swirled, polluting the air. Strange how familiar this isolated ranch—with its dusty, manure-tinged air—had begun to feel, as if he'd become a part of it and had finally come home.

On the floor below, horses snorted and whinnied. Men's voices filtered upward, and Nick hoped that no one would decide to climb up here. He heard Sara Jane stir, and he turned. She opened her big blue eyes and smiled at him, making his day.

"Hi," she said in that throaty drawl that he loved.

He grinned back at her. "You'd better get dressed."

She nodded, then stood—bare as the day she was born—and stretched, her curves as smooth and graceful as a Greek goddess'.

"I hate like hell to hurry this show," he whispered huskily, "but I wouldn't want some curious cowpoke climbing up here and looking at you like that."

Laughing softly, she gathered up her clothes and did a reverse striptease for him that was almost as sexy as when he'd helped her yank them off. Still, he sighed in relief when she pulled on her boots and faced him.

She pirouetted saucily. "Satisfied?"

He laughed. "For now." He would never get enough of her. *God, she is spirited.* Life would never be dull with Sara Jane as his wife.

\* \* \* \*

*Six months later*

Sara Jane watched Nick get sworn in as sheriff, her heart overflowing. She couldn't take her eyes off him. The sight of him, square-shouldered and earnest, filled her with boundless pride. As he took his oath, his deep voice caught with emotion. With every word, her love deepened and became rooted in her heart so solidly that nothing could ever shake it. She was in awe as she realized that she and Nick had the same kind of love that her mother and father shared in their secret glances, the kind of love she'd always craved and never thought possible.

The End

## *About the Author*

Lynde holds a Masters degree from the University of California and is the author of eighteen novels, including *Billboard Cop*, *Cowboy Lies*, *Lasso That Cowboy*, *And Undercover Cowboy* plus several novellas, including *Midnight Destiny* also with Amira Press. Her novels are mostly romantic intrigues with several paranormal and fantasy intrigues. Writing Sara Jane's and Nick's story brought back fond memories of the summer Lynde spent on a Texas cattle ranch in her teens. She is presently working on a romantic intrigue that promises to be an intense thriller. Her passions are her family and writing. She is an avid dancer, skater, and walker. And she wishes you lucky horseshoes in your life.