



Jan Scarbrough

Kentucky  
*Flame*

BLUEGRASS REUNION SERIES

# *Kentucky Flame*

By Jan Scarbrough

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Kentucky Flame

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*For Bonnie, Cindy, Sharon, Katie and Sarah, who taught me how to ride  
American Saddlebreds. The loving came naturally.*

*And for the horses I have owned: Mr. Too Little, Royal Tierra, and in memory of  
Starhart's Heritage*

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## *Chapter One*

*Royalty Farm*

*Near Simpsonville, Kentucky*

*Saturday afternoon*

A cold, black dread gripped Melody O'Shea's heart. Hands tight on the steering wheel, she scarcely breathed. In the distance, a thin plume of smoke floated from a window of Royalty Farm's main show barn.

Fire was a horseman's worst nightmare.

Her Jeep Cherokee rolled to a complete stop in the parking lot, and Mel flung open the door, sprinting toward the barn. "Fire!"

A wiry groom poked his head out of the tack room, bridle in hand, surprise in his eyes. "Mel, is that you?"

"Fire!" she shouted over sounds of panicked horses. "Dave, call 911!"

Lifting the water hose off a nearby rack, Mel raised the pump handle and hoisted rolls of it on her shoulder. The hose was used for filling water troughs, not for fighting fires. Jerking the clumsy hose down the hazy aisle of the training barn, Mel settled her intent gaze on the end stall where flames traced their liquid fingers along the sides of the wall.

Trapped horses snorted and circled in their stalls, rearing to get out of the smoke only to stick their heads into the thickest part of it. She heard the sharp complaint of a hoof striking a wooden wall and another high scream, echoing her own fear.

Already her nostrils stung from the acrid smoke. What if she couldn't put out the fire? She had to. There was too much at stake.

"Okay. Easy, easy," Mel said to the horses, knowing it wasn't okay.

Her words were as worthless as the thin stream of water she shot at the flames. The heat was intense—a noxious, gut-wrenching heat radiated from a fire she couldn’t control. Mel’s arms throbbed. Her eyes burned. This was unreal. It wasn’t happening. It happened on television or in books where heroic cowboys rescued horses from flaming barns. Other barns burned. Not Royalty Farm’s prime training barn.

“Mel, we can’t save it.”

“No!”

The old groom’s fingers were steel on her arm. “C’mon, there’s not much time. We’ve got to get the horses out!”

God help them. Dave was right. “Okay!”

Dave thrust a lead into her hand and Mel threw down the hose. Coughing, her eyes tearing from the smoke, she took the stall nearest the flames. *Dreamcatcher*. Pop had pegged the stallion his next World’s Grand Champion.

Fortunately the horse wore a halter. Mel snapped the lead on it. Then she stripped off her cotton polo shirt and tied it around Dreamcatcher’s eyes. Grasping the lead with sweaty palms, she pulled and coaxed the frightened horse from the stall, down the long aisle into the waiting daylight and fresh air. Outside, she led the stallion to an empty paddock, where she stripped the shirt from his head, let him go and firmly shut the gate.

Gulping in fresh air, her lungs hurting, Mel turned back to the barn. Others had joined the struggle—dark, silent forms silhouetted against the blazing inferno. Flying brands making a curious sparkler affect in the cloudless sky.

“Oh, my God,” she gasped in horror.

Strange black shapes ran in and out of the barn, calling out in panic, their strident voices heard above the death screams of the horses.

“Don’t just stand there. Move your sorry ass!” A vaguely familiar voice barked at Mel from behind.

“What?”

“Help, for God’s sake. The whole thing’s going up!”

Anger held her immobile for a split second as she glared at the back of the nasty-tongued man who disappeared into the barn. She took a gulp of air, determination steeling in her heart.

The barn *was* going fast.

Mel ran back into the nightmare, heat and smoke rushing to meet her. She smelled the odor of burning wood and electric wires. At the far end, the barn was now engulfed. Fierce flames licked the aisle. She ran to the first occupied stall, ducking low, trying to avoid the heavy smoke overhead.

A big gelding flailed wildly in his stall, the whites of his eyes rolling. Mortally afraid, he screamed as she approached. Mel grabbed the bolt on the door, threw it back, and shoved it open.

“Easy. Easy, boy.”

The horse wore no halter. With no other choice, Mel shooed him out of the stall, running after him toward the nearby wide-open door. The horse turned on her and tried to return to what he perceived as the safety of his stall. Mel raised her arms, waving the lead line and her shirt. She shouted until her throat hurt. The gelding veered and bolted through the opening.

In the next stall, another horse stomped and trumpeted, his chestnut head thrown high in fright, his delicate nostrils flaring. The animal refused to come out. Mel dodged his flying hooves to chase him out of the stall. Once in the aisle, she smacked his rump, hoping he’d make it to the door.

Then she turned toward the tunnel of fire that threatened to swallow the old wooden structure. She moved in a trance. Overhead, the rafters raged. Only minutes more and the whole barn would be engulfed by yellow fire.

“Get the hell out!” The stranger jogged past leading two horses.

*Not yet. No.* Mel ground her teeth together. Pop had worked too hard for this place. She had to try to save one more.

Stooping low, she staggered across the smoke-clogged aisle to the stall where Royalty’s Dreamer stood.

“Royalty!”

The black mare snorted at the sound of her name.

Thank God, she wore a halter. Mel buckled on the lead and draped the shirt over the mare’s face. Clutching the leather, she hauled the horse from the stall. Royalty tossed her head, wrenching Mel’s shoulder and pulling the lead through her hands. She grabbed it and held on.

“No! You can’t go back to the stall,” Mel cried out. Tears blurred her eyes. Her lungs

complained against the dense smoke. The open end of the barn seemed so far away.

“Give me that damn horse and get out.” The stranger grabbed the lead from her hand and shoved her toward the door. Mel blinked and stumbled. He caught her elbow and steadied her.

*Jake?* Something about the way his fingers grasped her bare flesh, the way her body fit by his side, made her think of the man she would have married.

They made it to the door just as the hayloft collapsed behind them.

“I’ll take the mare.” Her father’s calm, familiar voice was welcome haven.

“Here you go, Pop.” The stranger thrust the lead into Pop’s outstretched hands and turned back to the barn.

Mel stared after him, unable to see his face. Then wracked by a cough, she bent double, and grasping her knees with aching hands, forced clean air into her lungs.

“You okay, darlin’?”

“You shouldn’t be here, Pop,” she said between gasps.

“Ain’t in my grave yet.”

Still doubled over, Mel lifted her head in time to see her father guide the spooked mare away. His words were brave, but she knew the old trainer’s heart must be breaking. Forty years of work at Royalty Farm was going up in flames. It may have been Bert Noble’s farm, but Pop’s knowledge and ability had built it into the greatest American Saddlebred show stable in the country. What a waste. What heartache. She fought a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Long moments later, Mel stood up and reluctantly turned to look at the chaos around the burning barn. As she watched, flames blasted from the walls like a blowtorch. *Oh, God!* She shivered. She was cold, colder than she had ever been in her life. Overhead, a blistering summer sun glinted like a horrible specter. Her heart faltered at the smell of smoke and death. In the distance, a fire siren screamed.

Slow tears trailed down her cheeks. Mel swiped the back of her gritty hand across her eyes. Shouts from the frantic men obscured the sickening silence of doomed horses. Had they saved them all? How had this happened?

“Bring that hose over here, Sam!”

“You can’t go in there, Jake! It’s too late!”

*It was Jake. Jake Hendricks.*

Mel swallowed the knot that rose in her throat. Her breath came unevenly. Dazed and shaken by the knowledge that she'd come home ironically at the same time as Jake, Mel tried to pull herself together.

She'd fallen off many horses. When that happened, she always gathered her nerve and climbed back on. Now, she fought for the same control, raising her chin and reining in her sudden panic.

If Jake was at the farm, how long would it be before he learned about Cory?

\* \* \* \*

An hour later the shell that had once been the training barn smoldered, the stench of scorched wood and charred flesh lingering along with a dreadful silence. Fire fighters remained, turning streams of water on hot spots. Like a wet rag wrung out and tossed in the tub, Mel felt weak from loss of adrenalin.

"Damn sorry sight to see." Dave came up from behind her and patted her shoulder.

She turned to the former jockey who had been Pop's groom for years. "Horrible." Her voice rasped from the smoke.

"Are you okay, Mel?"

"Sure, but what a *fine* welcome home." She shrugged at the sarcasm.

"Pop wasn't expecting you home until tonight," Dave volunteered.

Mel glanced at him. His face was smudged from the smoke, just as she guessed hers was. With his gray head and crinkled features, he seemed much older than his sixty-some-odd-years. Maybe that was the nature of the job. Caring for horses was hard work and a twenty-four hour responsibility. Losing them was even harder.

"What's Jake Hendricks doing here?" She changed the subject and shoved the baseball cap she wore up on her forehead.

Dave shifted his gaze to the barn. He refused to meet her questioning look. "I suppose Pop didn't want to tell you."

Dave had her full attention. "Tell me what?"

"Jake is our new trainer." The ex-jock let his arm drop.

"Why do we need a new trainer?"

"Pop's heart attack." It was Dave's turn to shrug. "I told Pop you wouldn't be happy

about it.”

Mel fought to remove the shock from her face. “Why shouldn’t I be happy?”

“You two were an item back when he was here last.” Dave shuffled his feet, looking down at the dirt.

“That was over and done with a long, long time ago,” Mel said, trying to hide the sudden tension she felt. She glanced at the smoking rubble. “So, Jake’s dream has finally come true. He always wanted to train at Royalty Farm. I *must* congratulate him.”

“You may get the chance.” Dave nodded at the lone figure walking toward them. “Here he comes.”

A man had separated himself from the congregating fire fighters and walked across the gravel parking lot holding a leather lead shank in his hands. At thirty-one, Jake looked the same—tall and boyishly good-looking, even though his features were splotted with grime and his clothes were covered with soot and sweat. As his crystal blue gaze raked over her, disturbing her, Mel wished she had a towel to wipe her face, knowing it must be dirty and streaked with tears. She wouldn’t cry in front of this old flame of hers.

“Damn it, man,” Jake said to Dave, his gaze resting briefly on Mel, “what in the world happened here?”

The rich timbre of Jake’s voice caused waves of longing to surge through her body. His dimples, one in its proper place beside the right corner of his mouth and the other one placed high on his cheek under his left eye, were a reminder of other days. Once she had kissed those dimples, calling them gifts from angels. Once she had run her fingers through his brown hair. Mel drew a quick breath. God help her. She had thought it all in the past. As he stood in front of her, bigger than life, she was very much aware how mistaken she was.

Jake Hendricks was an old flame and the attraction hadn’t died.

“If I had my guess, I’d say spontaneous combustion.” Dave shook his head. “The weather’s been in the nineties for weeks and not a drop of rain.”

“But how could it happen so fast? Why didn’t anyone see it?” Watching her, but not seeming to recognize her, Jake scraped a hand through his hair.

“Mel saw it.”

A slow glow of recollection lit his eyes. “Mel? Is that really you? I can’t believe it!”

"Hello, Jake." Mel kept her reply steady.

"Are you still living in Missouri?"

His blunt question rubbed Mel raw. When had he ever cared about where she lived? He'd never come looking for her. "I've come home." She lifted her chin and firmed her jaw. "I'm divorced."

"You are?" Jake seemed bewildered, his eyes softly unfocused. Then they hardened as he leveled a sharp gaze at her. "Was that you in the barn?"

"Yes."

"You could have gotten yourself killed!"

"Same for you." Would he really have cared if she'd been hurt?

"I had to do what I could do to save the horses," Jake said and slapped his leg with the leather lead.

"Those horses are Pop's life. Do you expect me not to try to get them out?" Mel curled her fingers by her side.

"No, it's where I think you'd be, but it still was a damn fool thing to do." Jake frowned. "The paramedics treated me with oxygen. Did they treat you?"

"Yes."

Dave nodded at Mel. "She hurt her hands. Wouldn't let the medical guys see them."

Mel glared at Dave and then shrugged. "They're okay. Just rope burns."

"Let me see." Jake tucked the lead line under his arm and reached for her closed fist.

Mel sucked in a breath. His fingers branded her wrist worse than any rope burn. She stared at the top of his blackened hands and found herself wanting to rub the back of his knuckles like she used to do.

"C'mon, let me see."

"Better get 'em tended to, Mel," Dave spoke up. "You were never one to complain."

*Complain. No.* Mel O'Shea had never been a complainer. She buckled down, accepted whatever came and made the best of it. Now she tried to make the best of this awkward situation. Jake, his breathing betraying his own uneasiness, towered over her, but his touch was gentle. Too gentle. These were the same hands that, with the slightest pressure, could guide a thousand pound horse or make love to a woman. Images of Jake and their first and only time together

clouded her vision. They had been in the hay loft that April day. They had been young and in love and stupid, but it had been thrilling and beautiful just the same. Mel relaxed. One by one, Jake uncurled her fingers until the palm of her hand lay open for his inspection.

“You need to have these treated.”

Unbidden, other memories flashed in her mind. Like the flames that had once raged in the distance, her thoughts blazed clearly as she recalled how comfortable things used to be between them—before the hurt feelings and disappointments. Before he left Kentucky.

Mel jerked her hand out of his grasp.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you in there.” Jake stepped back, putting distance between them. “I didn’t recognize you.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t expected this early.”

“Frankly, Pop didn’t tell me you were coming,” Jake said with a shake of his head as if Pop had pulled a fast one. He turned his gaze back to the barn. “I’ve got Sam and some other men rounding up the horses we were lucky enough to turn loose. Dave, how many do you think we got out.”

“How many did you save, Mel?” Dave asked her.

“Four.” It didn’t seem enough. Mel’s stomach churned.

“I got out five and Sam two. What about you, Jake?” Dave ticked off the numbers on his fingers.

“Five, I think.”

“Sixteen.” Dave’s voice was grim as he made the final tally.

“Damn.” Jake shoved his hand through his hair again. “Weren’t twenty-four stalls occupied?”

Mel threw a sharp glance at Jake.

“Yeah, sure were,” Dave mumbled as if he didn’t want to say it.

“We lost eight. Better start figuring out which ones so we can tell Vanessa.” Jake’s tone was bitter. “I sure hate telling my boss this on my second day on the job. And I don’t buy this spontaneous combustion theory. Damn.” He slapped the lead shank hard against his leg again.

A sudden gnawing in her stomach made Mel nauseous. Something was wrong. Pop had always been careful to keep his barn clean. Even in hot weather, properly stored hay didn’t

ignite.

“What about Royalty’s Reverie?” Mel asked, breaking the silence. She was afraid to hear the answer. The horse was a two-time World Grand Champion and the farm’s breeding stallion.

“Yes, what about Reverie?” Jake aimed a hard look at the small groom. “He’s out in the far pasture, isn’t he?”

Dave scuffed the toe of his boot in the gravel. “I put him in the barn this morning. The farrier was coming out after lunch.”

“Did we get him out?”

“I don’t think so, but I’m not sure.”

“Damn! Was he in there?” Jake pivoted and darted toward the barn.

“What’s he going to do? Raise the horse from ashes?”

Mel heard the guilt and anger in Dave’s voice. “Don’t blame yourself.”

It wasn’t Dave’s fault. No one was to blame. Yet a cold, dead feeling settled around Mel’s heart. How would her father take the news? The old stallion had been like Pop’s son. How would Jake cope with the loss of so many show horses and the famous stud so soon after taking charge? How would this tragedy affect Cory?

Mel watched as two firemen wrestled Jake away from the smoking remains of the building, shoving him hard against the paddock fence.

“Fool youngster. There’s nothing left in there.” Dave muttered beneath his breath as he left Mel’s side.

But it was so like Jake. Impulsive. Headstrong. There was an animal quality about him. Like a young stallion fighting against the bit and determined to have his way, Jake had become a man who controlled his own fate. Mel had welcomed the raw sexual power she felt radiating from him as he stood beside her only minutes earlier. What she resented was her reaction to his maleness. The fact that it wasn’t over.

Mel shivered and turned her back on the ravaged barn. Fate had taken charge of his life, all their lives. Fate had destroyed something fine and beautiful—Reverie, the legacy that was Royalty Farm. Her morbid thoughts obscured her vision. Or was it the tears pooling in her eyes?

Why did Mel have the uncomfortable feeling that destiny had for some cruel reason thrown her and Jake Hendricks together again?

## *Chapter Two*

Had destiny brought Mel back to Royalty Farm?

Jake gazed out the library window toward the smoking shell that yesterday had been the farm's training barn. His mouth tasted like ashes and his head pounded. The fierce summer heat shining through the window pummeled his skin. Numb and exhausted, he shut his eyes against the sight. When he opened them, the barn was still a burned out skeleton smoldering in the distance.

*Mel.* He hadn't recognized her yesterday. If he had, he would never have ordered her back into that burning barn. In the fleeting glance he'd given her, with the baseball cap obscuring her hair and eyes, he'd thought she was another groom.

Later seeing her near the burning barn, her face covered with soot and smudged with tears, guilt and shock had punched his gut. What if she'd been hurt? He would never have forgiven himself.

Why had she come home? Because she was divorced? *Interesting.* It must have happened recently, because he didn't know about it when he'd given up a good job in San Diego and taken the job here. Training at Royalty Farm had been his lifelong dream. He'd never thought of any place else as home.

*Destiny hadn't brought Mel and him together again. It was Pop O'Shea.*

Vanessa Noble came up behind him, jerking him out of his daze. "How many horses did you say, Jake?"

He directed a wary look at his boss. "Eight. Reverie was one of them."

Vanessa's green eyes narrowed. The lines of her angular face stretched tight and her thin lips pursed with worry. She flicked a black strand of hair from her catlike eyes. "I'm glad my father isn't alive to see this."

Shifting uneasily, Jake raked his fingers through his hair. “We did what we could.”

“I know. I’m not blaming you.” Vanessa shook her head. “Excuse me, will you? I need to call the sheriff before Mel and Pop get here. I’ll do it from the living room.”

Vanessa might not blame him, Jake mused as she left the room, but he blamed himself. Surely, he could have done something more. All through a sleepless night he had relived the nightmare of the fire—the screams of frantic men and dying horses, the horrible stench of burning flesh. He had experienced over and over the nausea and numbness of destruction.

Turning away from the window, Jake paced the confines of the library. This was still Bert Noble’s room. It reflected his masculine presence even though the man had been dead for two years. His eldest daughter hadn’t changed a thing.

Oversized, brown leather chairs dominated the decor, along with a massive walnut desk. Bookshelves, crammed with tarnished silver trophies and books on Saddlebred horse breeding lined two walls. Above the fireplace mantel hung an oil painting of Royalty’s Reverie with a younger Pop O’Shea in the saddle. Horse and rider were making a victory pass at the World’s Grand Championship at the Kentucky State Fair. The stallion’s eyes shown with the look of eagles as he proudly wore the winning tri-colored ribbon in his brow band.

Jake gazed raptly at the painting. The horse had been the prime example of an American Saddlebred. “Kentucky Saddlers,” pioneers had called them. These splendid animals had helped settle the frontier. They had carried Southern soldiers into battle during the Civil War. Today they were show horses and pleasure horses.

Jake loved the breed as much as he loved Mel.

The errant thought drew him up sharply. He frowned and forced himself to focus on the picture. Reverie had been a once-in-a-lifetime show horse, but now the old Saddlebred was dead. Shifting his weight, Jake stuck his hands into his pockets. It didn’t seem possible.

“Hello again, Jake.”

Jake turned and his response died on his lips. Mel had paused at the threshold as if she was afraid to enter with him standing there alone. Something tightened in his chest. He gritted his teeth. She didn’t look like a boy now. She was beautiful. More beautiful than he remembered.

In the shafts of late morning light flooding from the picture window, her cascade of dark auburn hair gleamed with red highlights, creating a dramatic frame for her fair oval face. Her

amber eyes sparkled under curling black lashes. Caution was written in her expression, and as she tilted her chin upward, a look of wariness shadowed her eyes. She was petite and dainty still, with an air of quiet dignity and reserve about her. Wearing her Kentucky jodhpurs as if she had been born in them, she seemed molded inside the gray riding pants that clung to her hips and knees, tapering down her legs, and flaring around black, ankle-length riding boots like sixties bell-bottoms.

For a moment, tension shimmered between them.

Mel drew herself up, tossed her hair out of her eyes and walked into the room with an air of confidence

Jake extended his hand to greet her. This was silly. He was acting as if they had never meant anything to each other, never been sweethearts. Realizing his palm was damp, Jake wiped it on the leg of his jodhpurs before he again put out his hand.

Mel's eyes were unreadable. He felt as uncomfortable as a green colt at his first show. Their gazes connected just as their fingers touched.

The palm of her right hand was covered with a white bandage.

"Mel? I thought your hands were okay." He turned her palm over.

Jake heard her intake of breath and felt her hand tremble in his.

"They're fine," she said, "but Pop wanted to bandage them."

Mel gingerly pulled her hand from Jake's grasp and walked away from him.

"I'm surprised to see you back in Kentucky. I assumed you liked California," she said with a trace of sarcasm in her voice. Something akin to anger flicker into her eyes.

Yes, that old battle was still going on between them. Not that he was surprised. After all, he'd broken their engagement and left Kentucky for a job in California. But that was ten years ago.

"I couldn't pass up this opportunity," he replied. "I said I'd be back someday." He met her challenge with a smile.

She turned abruptly and crossed to an empty chair. "Pop should be along in a minute."

Seating herself, she crossed her right leg over her knee. The tip of her booted foot jutted from beneath her jodhpurs, and she raised her eyes to glare at him from beneath her black lashes.

He'd been right not to marry her, he thought. Although they had never communicated

since his move to California ten years, Jake knew about Mel's four-year equestrian degree from William Woods College in Missouri. He'd read about her career many times in the various horse show publications, and her fine wins at the big shows in Kansas City and Louisville.

"Jake!" Pop shuffled into the library, breaking the uneasy silence.

"Pop." Jake stepped forward, hand outstretched. The old man's fingers gripped his like the talons of a great bird.

"I'm glad you're here," the old trainer said.

Jake was touched. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more yesterday."

Pop settled down in one of the chairs facing Vanessa's desk and cleared his throat. "The horse business is tough."

"I agree with that," Jake said with a wry smile. He moved toward an empty chair as Vanessa came into the room.

"I could use a stiff drink." His new boss walked to the window and glanced at the charred ruins of the barn. "The state police think it was arson."

Like a boxer taking a punch, Jake sat down with a whoof. A knife-like pain shot through him and he gripped the arms of the chair.

"Who'd do such a thing?" Mel's question met a long silence.

Finally Vanessa turned to face them and shook her head. "They haven't a clue."

"Could be those scalawags at Neely Hills," Pop spoke up. "They were always jealous of us. Tried to cheat me out of a decent mare last year."

Vanessa's expression was bleak. "I really don't think Jim Neely would be involved in something so heinous."

"Maybe it's those real estate developers you told me about, Pop," Jake suggested.

Mel sat forward in her chair. "What do you mean?"

"Land's valuable. Even out here in Simpsonville." Pop shrugged his shoulders. "Seen all them fancy subdivisions out there just past Middletown? The city of Louisville is a comin' this way. Development. Progress. Damn shame."

"Are you saying developers want to buy Royalty Farm?"

"Yes, they've offered," Vanessa said, "but let's not speculate about how this happened. It won't do us any good until we learn more from the police."

“Damn right,” Pop agreed. “Thing is, we gotta go on. What ya gonna do now, boy?” He turned to Jake, his eyes narrowing. “Got any plans?”

“Other than winning the World’s Grand Championship, no. That’s what I was brought here to do.” Jake looked at Mel. He suppressed a sinking feeling that had nothing to do with championships, but everything to do with reunions.

Pop grinned and slapped his hand on his knee. “Damn me, boy. I knew you were a man right after my own heart.”

“I see no way we can go to the Junior League Horse Show in Lexington tomorrow like we planned,” Vanessa commented.

“Harrumph.” Pop blew out a breath of air. “What do you do when you fall off a horse?”

“You get right back on,” Mel offered softly before Vanessa answered.

Pop nodded his head, his white hair as short and blunt as his words. “Yes, damn me. You get right back on, pick up the reins and get on with the show.”

“But, Pop,” Vanessa interrupted. “Jake told me all of our tack was destroyed. Where will we get saddles and bridles? I don’t have enough ready cash right now to replenish our equipment.”

Pop turned a sympathetic gaze on his employer. “I know you don’t, honey, but we’ve got friends. The Saddlebred community will come through for us. Our friends will loan us the tack we need.”

They sat quietly a moment digesting Pop’s words. Maybe the old man was right. A niggling bit of optimism seeped into Jake’s heart.

“Which horse do we take, Pop? I just got here, remember? You know ’em better than I do.”

“Got the horse for ya,” Pop said with another nod. “A big bay son-of-a-gun we call Dreamcatcher.”

“Out of Reverie’s last good crop of foals, by a Supreme Sultan mare,” Mel stated quietly.

Jake cocked an eyebrow at her. She tilted her head and smiled at him a little too sweetly. She was letting him know she kept up with Pop’s operation even if he didn’t.

“We saved him?” Vanessa scanned the list of deceased horses.

Pop puffed up like a proud peacock. “Mel did.”

Jake tossed Mel another look, and she returned his glance with that same look of annoyance. What was wrong with her? This wasn't a competition.

"He trots like a dream," Pop was saying, "and his slow gait is perfection. He's comin' on well and should be ready in time."

Jake hesitated, absorbing Pop's information. "Are you saying we should go to Lexington on Sunday?"

"Damn right. Lexington, and then Shelbyville. Those two shows should set us up right for the championship in August."

When no one spoke up, Pop cleared his throat again. "With all respect to you, Vanessa." He nodded his head in her direction. "I know it's tough for you right now, money-wise. This fire is gonna set you back even more."

Vanessa nodded, agreeing. "I *have* been stressed financially lately. I suppose insurance will pay for the barn, but you know I couldn't afford to insure the young horses." She circled the desk to come closer to them. Sitting against its edge, she rested her hands on the polished wood. "Do you have a suggestion?"

"The Five-gaited World's Grand Championship is the key," Pop told them. "We gotta win it. If Dreamcatcher does it, his stud career is assured. We'll have customers knocking at our door for his services. With Jake here takin' my place, and Mel here to help him, we can start bringin' in payin' clients."

"You mean train other people's horses?" Vanessa looked perplexed.

"Yep. An' they'll pay handsomely for it too."

"But, Pop, Royalty Farm has always been private."

Jake heard the agitation in Mel's protest. He was surprised himself. Pop O'Shea was talking revolution. Nevertheless, Jake liked what the canny old trainer was saying. He was used to training horses for wealthy clients.

"Times are changin', darlin'. Folks gotta diversify to survive. Might have had a chance if it wasn't for losing so many horses. Money don't come easy around here anymore." Pop glanced at Vanessa for confirmation.

"Pop, you are astute," she said with affection.

"Don't know about that." Pop shrugged. "I do know we can't be countin' on just one

horse. Gotta double our chances.”

Vanessa leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

“Gotta have another horse ready for the championship.” Pop’s look was smug. “Royalty’s Dreamer. That little black mare is fine as crystal. We’ll show her in the ladies’ classes, and if she wins or places well in the qualifier, we’ll show her in the Saturday night stake with Dreamcatcher. We’ll have two horses in the World’s Grand Championship.”

Jake didn’t like the swerve his stomach took. “Ladies’ classes?”

“Yep. Mel will ride the mare. She’s got mighty fine credentials, don’t ya know? Did a bang up job for Mrs. Pepperdine in Missouri until she decided to come home. Damn glad she did too.” Pop nodded his head and patted Mel’s hand.

Could Vanessa afford to hire two trainers at Royalty Farm? But, he had to admit to himself, his objection was more than that. Could he handle seeing Mel each day, working with her as if there had never been anything between them?

“Finally got rid of that scoundrel she was married to,” Pop went on when Jake and Vanessa didn’t speak up. “Never did like that guy.”

“Pop.” Mel frowned at her father.

He waved Mel’s protest off with a flick of his hand. “Hold your horses. I told you not to marry that guy, but you got a mind of your own. Now seein’ that Jake here is gonna be in charge, now that I’ll be put out to pasture, the boy here could use another pair of hands.”

“I don’t believe Jake has any idea of asking for my help.” Looking up, Mel sought confirmation from the new trainer. “I came home to take care of you, Pop.”

Jake’s lips tightened. The old man was putting him in an awkward position, and what aggravated him worse was Pop knew what he was doing. He could very well use another trainer, but to ask Mel, who sat with her jodhpur-clad legs crossed, revealing a delicious expanse of taut thigh beneath the stretchy fabric, was asking for trouble. He swallowed hard and glanced around him, his gaze finally coming to rest on Mel again. Her eyes were narrowed, daring him.

Once he broke their engagement, there was bad blood between them. Could he risk taking her on with so much at stake?

“I’ll have to defer to Vanessa, Pop. With the fire, I don’t know if we can afford more help,” he said.

Rubbing his chin, Pop glanced sideways at his daughter and back at the farm's owner. "Don't know. Seems to me two chances to win the big one would be better for the farm than one. Won't have to be for long. Couple of months."

"Jake has made up his mind." Mel stood up.

"Now don't go cutting out on me, Mel," Pop complained, placing a hand on her wrist and forcing her to sit down. "The boy needs more hands and legs for what he wants to do if he's gonna rebuild this place into the best damn show barn in the country."

"But it already is the best show barn in the country," Mel argued.

"Hasn't been in years. Just wouldn't admit it," Pop went on, looking from Mel to Jake. "You need a good trainer, boy, and Mel's the girl for you. Looks like a marriage made in heaven."

The words that slipped so easily from Pop's mouth shocked even Jake. The old guy always ran at the mouth a bit, but now he'd really put his foot in it. Jake felt sorry for him, because Pop realized his mistake and appeared embarrassed. Mel had gone pale. Her teeth gnawed the corner of her lower lip. She took a deep breath and stood again, drawing herself up to her full, though diminutive height. Pain and resentment were in the gaze she cast at him.

"Look, I came home to do what I could to help my father and this farm. I didn't know you had hired Jake. If I'm not wanted here, I can certainly find a job elsewhere." Mel put the chair between her and the others. She clutched its back as if to keep from fleeing the room.

Dismayed, Jake drummed his fingers on the arms of his chair.

"Well," Vanessa drawled with a shrug. She circled the desk and sat behind it.

For once, Pop held his peace. No one seemed to know what to say. Silence settled intensely around them.

"I think Pop may be right," Vanessa finally said. She tapped her fingertips on the desktop. "For the time being, that is."

Jake inhaled deeply. His gaze shifted among the three of them. He wasn't a quitter. Now Pop and Vanessa were giving him a second chance—an opportunity to rebuild from the ashes of total ruin. A gush of excitement shot through Jake's veins as his competitive spirit burst into life. *Mel*. Her name ran through his mind like a horse newly turned out to pasture runs through the grass. Mel had become a fractious filly. He liked the change. He'd always regretted not marrying

her. Maybe he shouldn't quit on Mel either.

"Okay. Let's go for it," he told Pop.

"That's my boy!" Pop said with a smile.

"I don't have a say in this?" Mel asked in an indignant tone.

Pop brushed aside her objection. "Got any better plans for your future?"

"Pop!" Vanessa scolded. "Whatever you may think, Mel is not a child. She can decide for herself what she wants to do, but I'll be glad to have her on our team if she wants."

Jake found himself holding his breath. What would Mel do?

The library door burst open and a white and black dog bounded into the room. The English setter was followed closely by a dirty little girl with sandy brown hair and big blue eyes.

Mel's heart twisted and she gripped the chair even tighter. Being here with Jake, having a conversation as if they had no past and no history, was tough enough. *Now this*. She knew coming home would be no picnic.

"Pop!" The child threw herself into Pop's lap, all legs and arms, and hugged his grizzled old neck.

"Hold your horses, darlin'. You're like a runaway filly." He tried to sound tough, but Mel saw his eyes soften and his arms creep around the bundle of energy.

Her heart lurched. Fighting the emotion that threatened to give herself away, she ignored Jake's razor sharp glance.

"Cory, don't jump on Pop like that. Remember he's been in the hospital," Vanessa chided.

"Oh, sis, he don't mind." Cory's dimpled and adoring smile beamed at the gruff trainer.

"*Doesn't* mind," Vanessa corrected. "And take those boots off right now. There's horse manure all over them!"

Pop wagged his finger. "You act like a mother hen to this child, Vanessa."

"Well, I don't want Cory growing up like a wild street urchin. She's my responsibility now that our parents are gone."

Cory spotted Mel. Disregarding the talk around her, she jumped out of Pop's lap, dirty boots and all, and planted herself right in front of Mel's chair, looking up at her with keen eyes

that mirrored Mel's own. "Hi ya, Mel. Pop said you're home to stay. Can you give me a riding lesson today?"

"I don't know about being home to stay, but I certainly can give you a lesson. Not today, though. Soon."

"Great! You sure were brave yesterday. Thanks for savin' the horses." She quickly turned her attention to Jake. "You're Jake Hendricks. I'm Corrine Noble. I'm adopted. Vanessa's my big sister. I know all about you."

"You do?"

Mel's heart ached to see the dimpled smile Jake turned toward the little girl. His blue eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Yeah, an' I know you're here to take Pop's place, an' I know you trained Stone Davidson's horses out there in Hollywood."

Stone Davidson happened to be the most popular rock star for young pre-teens. That he rode and showed American Saddlebreds doubly endeared him to Cory.

"You're right on all accounts, Miss Noble." Jake gave her a formal nod.

"Hey, you're cute. Pop didn't tell me that."

"Not somethin' I'd think to tell a nine-year-old, now is it darlin'?" The old trainer clambered to his feet. "You come along out of here, will ya, youngster? Your sister don't want a mess in the house. I've told you time an' again to wipe your feet before you come inside." He extended his hand to the child.

She clasped Pop's hand and together they left, the white dog Major romping at their heels.

"What a pair." Vanessa sighed. "Pop accuses me of spoiling Cory, but he's no better."

"They've gotten really close," Mel mused.

"Yes, especially after my father died." Vanessa went around behind the desk. "I thought Cory took my mother's death hard, but not as hard as my dad's. Pop sort of stepped in to fill his shoes."

"I've never seen that side of Pop," Jake commented as he came to his feet.

Vanessa glanced up at Mel. "Isn't that strange? He never was one to show his softer emotions, even to you Mel. It's almost as if he has a special bond with that child."

Only Mel knew Vanessa had accidentally bumped into the truth. Her breath was shallow and a knot of fear wrenched in her stomach. Her fingers bit deeper into the fabric of the chair as she took a quick look at Jake. He was watching her through half-closed eyes, measuring her as he would an unfamiliar horse.

“What are you staring at?”

A crooked, mocking smile spread across his face, his dimples blatant. He took a step toward her. “I was wondering if you were going to work with me.”

Trying to act nonchalant, Mel shrugged. “I haven’t made up my mind.”

“Fair enough, Mel,” Vanessa cut in. “Remember, I’ll be glad to have you help as long as you can. After the championship, I’ll understand if you make other plans.”

“Thanks, Vanessa. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

Turning on her heel, Mel left the library and the big house. Outside, the morning heat and humidity seemed to suck the breath from her. She paused to adjust to it.

“I’m glad you waited for me,” Jake said coming up beside her.

“You assume a lot. I was just catching my breath.” Mel started down the gravel driveway.

“Once you would have waited for me.” Jake lengthened his strides to catch her.

“That was a long time ago.”

“I have a long memory.”

Mel tried to ignore him and his very real presence beside her. The atmosphere grew even hotter. She had a long memory too. She remembered spending long summer days watching Pop’s new assistant exercise horses. One day from astride a young mare, he had looked back. His shirt deliciously open at the neck and his sleeves rolled up revealing the muscles of his arms, the sun glinting behind him, Jake had smiled at her. His dimples had dazzled her, his smile had enthralled her, and the approval in his eyes had swept her away. At eighteen, she had been head over heels in love.

Six months later Jake had left for a job in California, telling her they were too young to get married—telling her this was a great opportunity for him—telling her to go to college like her father had planned for her to do.

“Wait, Mel.” Jake caught her arm and swung her around to face him. “Don’t let what happened between us years ago affect your decision to help.”

Mel tossed off his hand. "I think I'm mature enough not to let that happen."

Her skin prickled as he watched her. When he didn't say anything, Mel looked away. "I came home to help my dad. I've just gotten divorced. My emotions are on edge. This fire and talk about arson have me on edge as well."

Jake drew himself up and backed away. "You're right. I have no business hassling you."

"No you don't." She turned and strode away.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out," he called after her. "We were too young."

Mel paused. Her eyes suddenly stung with unshed tears. "I'm sure things worked out for the best," she said without glancing around.

Keeping her back to him, she walked away.

## *Chapter Three*

Why had she let Jake get to her like that? Why had she acted like a hurt child? With angry strokes, Mel moved the rubber currycomb around and around Dreamcatcher's brown coat. The circular motion cast up dirt and dander, bringing it to the surface. Her thoughts moved in the same manner, around and around, casting up irate epithets. She wanted to kick herself.

Mel tossed the curry into the grooming box outside the stall door and snatched the hard brush. With firm, quick strokes, she raked the dirt and loose hair off the horse. She had promised herself she wouldn't do anything foolish where Jake was concerned. *Never again. Never.* And then look what *had* happened yesterday. She'd reacted impulsively to his hesitancy, his lack of desire to hire her as a trainer. She had taken it personally, just like ten years ago.

*Well, it was personal.* He had tried to reject her again. She still wasn't good enough. Last time he didn't want her to be his wife. Now he had the nerve to apologize for it. *What did that transplanted Californian know anyway?* Mel moved the brush down the horse's rump with one vicious stroke.

Dreamcatcher snorted in response and kicked out with his left hind leg.

"Shut up, you." Even the horse gave her no respect.

"Ain't you finished with that stallion yet?" Pop stuck his head inside the open door of the stall. "You're gonna rub the hide off that animal."

Mel dropped the hard brush and picked up the soft one. "Oh, hold your horses, Pop. I'm almost finished."

"Well, Jake's done with the first horse. Hurry it along."

Familiar with her father's gruffness, Mel slowly continued the final brushing, and then toweled out the animal's nose and ears. What had gotten into Pop? He certainly was a contradiction. She had thought for sure the loss of Royalty's Reverie and the seven other horses

he had bred and trained would have left him dejected and demoralized. Instead, her father had a new lease on life. He was on some holy crusade, which, unfortunately, included Jake and her.

Dreamcatcher was tied to the walls of the stall by two chains that fastened to either side of his halter. Mel ducked under them, and picked up the hoof pick. Turning her back to the door, she touched the massive stallion's left leg and stooped down to catch his hoof as he lifted it. She rested the horse's leg against hers and bending low began scraping out the caked dirt, cleaning out the "v" of the frog.

A cocky wolf whistle punctured the silence.

Dreamcatcher snorted and shied. Jerking upward, trying to avoid being stepped on, Mel bumped her head against the cross-ties, and tangled herself in them for one awkward moment. Flustered, she turned to see Jake standing in the doorway, his saddle in his hands.

"Hey, you startled the horse!"

"Sorry, just a natural reaction when I see a pretty animal." Jake's voice was vibrant, the sparkle in his eyes irrepressible. "Dreamcatcher is a magnificent horse. Need any help?"

She wasn't fooled by his explanation. "No thanks. I'm almost done here."

His gaze caught hers. Mel lifted her chin, her heart pounding. Jake raised one heavy brow in response.

"Good. I'll just set my saddle down outside the stall," he said and with a wink, turned away.

Mel watched him as he walked back to join Pop. *Now what had that look meant?* Was he rushing her on purpose? In his not-so-subtle way, was he trying to tell her how to do her job? She knew how to groom a horse, doggone it. She'd been doing it since she was five. Bending back to her task, a stab of embarrassment pricked Mel's heart when she realized she had unknowingly presented Jake with an excellent view of her upturned derriere.

A low growl reverberated deep in her throat. Mel hated to be at a disadvantage. No telling what the man had thought, seeing her rump stuck up like some provocative flag. She wasn't a slim schoolgirl anymore, she admitted to herself with a scowl. Finishing the fourth hoof, Mel stood up and threw the metal pick into the box. She wiped her hands on the fabric of her denim riding jeans and stepped outside the stall. Pop and Jake were in front of Royal Tiara, the equitation horse he had just ridden.

No longer was Jake a slim teen either. Dressed in black Kentucky jodhpurs that cupped his trim hips and stroked his muscular thighs, the young trainer was a picture of a mature, athletic male. Mel caught her breath, unable to still the sharp pang of nerves that churned in her belly. She fought the sudden quickening of her heart. His long-sleeve shirt failed to mask the taut muscles of his arms and shoulders beneath it. He stood with his legs slightly spread, his riding crop slapping the side of his booted leg. She sensed Jake's impatience, even from this distance. He was like a horse chomping at his bit, impatient, but he was totally absorbed in his task, his concentration on whatever Pop was saying.

Jake's cutback saddle rested upright with its pommel in the dirt floor. It had been in his truck during the fire and had not been destroyed. Mel hefted the English saddle into her arms, smelling its leather and Neatsfoot Oil. Jake took good care of his equipment, just like he took good care of his body. Mel swallowed hard. Why that thought? Why was she obsessing about Jake Hendricks's body? With a huff, she made herself attend to the task.

After placing the saddle carefully on Dreamcatcher's back, she fitted the cutout portion around the horse's prominent withers. Mel ran her hand over the flat saddle until her fingers touched the brass nameplate on the back of the cantle. Her fingertips traced his name. *Jake Hendricks*.

The irony of the situation weighted her soul.

Jake Hendricks, now trainer at Royalty Farm. Pop O'Shea was retired because of a bad heart. Mel O'Shea, the once up-and-coming female trainer, was now acting as a groom. Sure, she could be assistant trainer here if she wanted it. But did she? Mel wasn't sure. She had promised herself when Jake had walked out on her, she wouldn't look back. She hadn't been consumed with becoming as famous as her father in the Saddlebred world. Not like Jake. A career hadn't been everything to her. A woman in a man's profession, she had just wanted to make her living as a trainer and be respected for her talent.

At first, it had been hard holding on to her dream. Getting pregnant at eighteen hadn't helped. When Jake had announced he was heading to California to pursue his career, Mel had not told him her problem. If he thought they were too young to get married, then she knew he would think they were too young to be parents.

Desperate and strapped for money, she had turned to Bert Noble. He had paid the medical

bills, and had given her spending money. Thank goodness she had been able to use the excuse of college to prevent Pop from finding out. When Bert and his wife adopted Cory at three days old, Mel knew she had done her best for her little girl. Their secret went to their graves with them and Mel was the only one who knew the truth.

Frowning, she lifted the saddle flap and tightened the girth. Mel wished she had done the best for herself during that time. Why had she married Lenny Stephenson? She'd never really loved him. She knew that now.

Mel sucked in a breath. What a mistake. She had realized it for sure almost four years into the marriage after Lenny had refused to start a family. Maybe she had been trying to make up for losing Cory by having another child. Lenny had not wanted children and Mel didn't believe in divorce. Not sure her motives for marrying him were that pure, she had tried to make the best of it.

Until the rumors had started. Until Lenny's veterinarian had been caught in some horse insurance scam, and her husband had been implicated. Nothing had been proven against him, but Mel had never felt right about him after that. And then she had discovered Lenny's gambling debts.

Circling the horse to his opposite side, she pulled the girth underneath Dreamcatcher's barrel and lifted the other flap. Thank heavens that part of her life was over and done with. Not like the weird instant replay going on right now between her and the man she should have married.

"Maybe the girth will slip and then Mr. Hendricks will fall off and break his stupid neck," Mel muttered as she gave an extra tug to the leather and buckled it on the snugest notch.

"What'd you say?" Dave asked.

Startled, Mel looked up to see the ex-jockey behind her.

"Nothing."

"Need any help?"

"I can tack a horse, thank you." Her reply was curt.

"Sure. No one said you couldn't." Dave shrugged and left her alone.

Mel took a deep breath. Dave didn't deserve to be the butt of her anger. He'd done nothing. She was furious with herself, and her reaction to that tall and tanned trainer from

California.

For once in his stubborn life, Dreamcatcher let her put the bit in his mouth. She had worked with the colt during the holidays last winter, and knew what a pain he could be. *Like some men she knew*, Mel thought as she tightened the cheek strap and adjusted the curb chain.

“C’mon, big boy.” She clucked to the stallion and led him out of the stall.

“It’s about time,” Pop grumbled.

Mel forced back the caustic retort she normally would have snapped at her father. All too aware of Jake’s compelling presence, she frowned, refusing to be drawn again into a compromising position.

“Get out,” she ordered Dreamcatcher. She nudged the horse’s front left hoof with her boot, and the stallion obediently stretched out so that his weight was equally distributed on all four legs.

Jake, responding to her frown with an irritating grin, lifted the saddle flap to check the girth.

“It’s tight enough,” Mel snapped.

“Force of habit.” Jake backed off and held out his hand.

Her palms stinging from sweat under their awkward bandages, Mel put the reins into Jake’s gloved hand. Like yesterday, his touch sliced sensual sensations along her spine. In one quick instant, she glanced into his eyes, and then dropped her gaze.

“Thank you.” His voice was like crushed velvet.

“No problem.” She moved out of the way.

Jake drew the reins over Dreamcatcher’s head, and gathered them in his left hand.

“Hold him for me, will you, Pop?”

Making soothing noises in his throat, Pop stepped in front of the eager stallion.

“Want me to hold your stirrup?” Mel asked to be courteous.

Catching the veiled look of amusement in his eyes, she stiffened. He must have known how much it cost her to ask. But instead of refusing her offer, Jake nodded his head in assent. Mel grabbed the right stirrup iron and held it with all her strength to keep the saddle steady. Jake mounted, his strong, right leg swinging over the back of the horse. Mel jumped away as he settled into the saddle and the stallion sprung forward.

“Hold up there, Dreamcatcher,” Pop ordered and halted the horse with an assertive jerk on the bridle. He looked up at Jake. “Horse’s got a mind of his own. Takes the bit well. Canter’s a little rough, though.”

Mel watched Jake acknowledge Pop’s remarks with another tip of his head as he collected his reins and stretched his legs down in the stirrups. The old trainer stepped back, and Jake pressed his calves slightly into Dreamcatcher’s side, moving away. Pop followed.

“A mind of his own,” Mel reflected out loud. “Just like his rider.”

“What’d ya say?” Dave asked from Royal Tiara’s stall.

“Nothing.” Her brows drew together into a frown.

“Gotta watch this talking to yourself, Mel.” Dave scraped sweat off the hot horse. “Might get to be a bad habit.”

He was kidding her. Good ol’ Dave. She could always count on him. But was her grumpiness that obvious? She shook herself mentally and stepped into Tiara’s stall.

“Need any help?”

“I know how to put a horse away,” he replied, in mocking echo of her own words.

“Okay. Point taken.” Mel rubbed sweat off her brow. “Are we done yet?”

It was hot. The horses didn’t need to be worked long, but Jake had insisted on trying out each one before they left tomorrow for Lexington. As if there wasn’t enough work to do to get ready. True to his word, Pop had procured the extra saddles and bridles and bits from some friends. Just because the equipment had to be packed in ugly wooden boxes instead of the purple and gold Royalty Farm tack trunks, well, at least they were going to the show—only three days after the worst stable fire the Saddlebred community had seen.

“Only one more to go,” Dave said. “Get Royalty’s Dreamer ready, and take her on up to the arena. Pop said to come along as quick as you can.”

“Right.”

Mel groomed the black mare. Brushing the calm and obedient horse soothed Mel’s nerves and settled her temper. If Jake wasn’t going to get to her, she had to stop feeling defensive. She had to mask her vulnerability. A best defense was always a good offence. Mel’s resolve strengthened as she slipped the bit into Royalty’s mouth and adjusted the straps on the bridle. The problem was, seeing Jake again destroyed her intense work. For ten years, even through her

difficult marriage, she'd struggled to become the woman she'd become. Now Jake's presence had thrown her into the past, back to the silly eighteen-year-old who'd been so in love. She felt out of control, not herself, and she didn't like that feeling.

Mumbling to avoid Dave overhearing, Mel vowed to do better. She would not slip again.

Leading Royalty out of the barn, she walked the horse the short distance to the training arena. It wasn't far, but having to leave the lower barn where the remaining show horses were now stabled to go outside, was annoying. She dreaded what it would be like in the cold Kentucky winter. *Be positive*, she told herself. *Be thankful the firemen were able to save the arena.*

A delicate plume of smoke drifted out of the ashes that had been the training barn. The mare snorted and shied when they neared the ruin. Yellow police tape blocked it off. Arson investigators were still there, poking around the wreckage and trying to discover the cause of the fire. As Mel firmed her hold on the lead, she scowled, another wave of anger washing over her. Who had done this? She wanted to hurt the person and make him pay for the carnage he had created.

Royalty's Dreamer danced sideways. Knowing the horse was afraid of the smoldering rubble, Mel hustled the Royalty out of the pounding sunlight and into the dim arena.

Inside Dreamcatcher was making a pass at the rack, a fast four-beat gait that left only one of the horse's hooves on the ground at a time. It was not a gait natural to most horses, and took patience and hours of training to accomplish. This big Saddlebred performed the difficult man-made gait to perfection. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness, Mel was able to take in more of the action. Her father stood in the center of the arena and barked out orders. Jake sat motionless on the back of the laboring horse, his shoulders erect, head high. She had forgotten the absolute magnetism of the man in the saddle, the strength it took to remain quiet. A slow knot tightened in her stomach.

When he came to stop right in front of her, Mel reminded herself of her new resolution. She clutched Royalty's reins. Stretching the stallion out, Jake shifted in the saddle and stared down at her with a hooded gaze. Dreamcatcher was hardly winded, but Mel was. She forced the air into her chest, unable to catch her breath or to speak.

"Well, what did you think?" Jake took the reins in one hand and stretched his other hand back to the horse's rump for an affectionate pat.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Sure.” Leaning back and relaxed in the saddle, Jake presented a quiet and confident image. Only his blue eyes moved, watching her, assessing her, and giving her an unwelcome jolt.

She reined in her galloping pulse and returned his look with what she hoped was a defiant one. “Why?”

Jake raised a reflective eyebrow. “Maybe because I care about your opinion.”

Flustered, Mel didn’t know what to say.

Pop was not at loss for words. “Damn good job, boy.” He came up from behind, nodding his head and chuckling. “Do we have a surprise for those folks who are countin’ us out. Won’t it be grand?”

Jake dismounted and began to unbuckle his saddle. “Think he stands a chance this week, Pop?”

“Damn right. He’ll blow ’em away.”

Always one to do the unexpected, Pop took Dreamcatcher’s reins.

“Don’t you want me to lead him back?” Mel asked, puzzled.

“No. He’s a handful. I’ll take ’im back. You stay with Jake.”

It was a setup. Jake settled his saddle onto Royalty’s back. “But Pop, I can handle Dreamcatcher. He’s not a problem.”

“You just do what I told you to, darlin’.” Pop led the big horse away without a backward glance.

Jake flashed another look her way, a speculative frown on his brow. He tightened the girth, and gathering up the reins, swung into the saddle.

Mel’s thoughts paced like a nervous mare. She watched Jake put the mare through her gaits. Jake and Pop were up to something. Was it that stupid idea about showing in the ladies’ classes? Or was it something more? Was Pop really playing matchmaker? Whatever it was, Mel didn’t like it. She didn’t like being plotted against behind her back.

And she didn’t like the way Jake was riding Royalty. He was too rough, demanding, forcing her into the gaits. From riding the mare last winter, she knew enough to know this horse wasn’t like Dreamcatcher. She needed to be asked gently, and she’d do it willingly. Jake’s method was sure to sour her.

"I'll tell you what I think now, Mr. Hendricks." Mel stepped into the center of the arena, forcing him to notice her.

Jake pulled to a stop in front of her. "Please? I didn't hear you."

"You said you cared about my opinion. I'm ready to give it to you now."

"Oh? Did I do something wrong?" Jake waited, gazing back at her mildly.

"You'll ruin Royalty riding her like that." Her own look challenged his.

A muscle clenched in his jaw. "And how's that?"

Firming her jaw, Mel stared back at him. Her bandaged hands curled at her side. "You've got to ask it of her. You can't push Royalty into the gaits. She's agreeable if you ask her right."

"So she's temperamental, like most females." Jake said with a faint, irritating smile.

An angry heat flushed Mel's cheeks. "I don't believe the horse's sex has anything to do with it. It's just her personality."

"I see. How do you know?"

"From observation *and* experience. The same way you know how to train a horse, or, let's say, *should* know if you were more flexible in your training methods."

In the murky light, Jake's eyes were mocking. He dismounted, and leading Royalty, came toward Mel. "Ah, there's the rub. You disapprove of my training methods."

Her throat constricted, but she took a deep breath before she retorted. "Where Royalty's concerned. You don't know how to handle her."

"And you're going to teach me?"

He was too alarmingly close. Mel backed a step. Words died in her throat. She'd forgotten how daunting the man could be with his blatantly sexy eyes, hard muscled body and infectious grin. The lopsided dimple under his eye gave his face a boyish quality, a quality she recalled so well from the past.

"You've piqued my curiosity," he said, offering her the horse's reins, his gloved hands strong and graceful.

"No thanks."

"What's the matter? Afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of anything." He was goading her. Mel snatched the reins from his hands.

"Here, let me give you a leg up."

“No thanks.” Mel turned her back on him, gathered the reins in her left hand, and grabbed the cantle with her right one.

“Oh, Mel, lighten up. I don’t bite.” With that, Jake grabbed the leg she was lifting to the stirrup and laid a possessive hand right smack on her jodhpur-clad derriere.

## *Chapter Four*

Mel's flesh tingled through her jodhpurs where Jake touched her. Her heart pounded like the beat of a trotting horse as she felt herself being lifted into the air and tossed aboard the saddle.

"Get your hands off of me."

He gazed up at her, an innocent look in his eyes.

"What did you want me to do? Say thanks?"

"I was just trying to be helpful." He gave a shrug.

"Helpful? You're arrogant and rude."

"And you're going to show me what a lousy trainer I am." Jake grinned.

"Oh!" He was so doggone sure of himself it made her sick. Mel turned her head away from Jake's impudence, and urged Royalty toward the rail.

The horse settled into an easy trot that propelled Mel out of the saddle in a rhythmic, up-and-down post. Using the curb rein, she positioned the mare's head into the familiar neck-bending curve of a Saddlebred with her nose tucked under and then raised Royalty's head. This gave her a springier, higher trot that Mel knew made the mare look regal, like a classical Greek statue. Breath shot through Mel's lungs. She lifted her chin, squared her shoulders and stared through the horse's ears as they circled and circled the arena.

Riding Royalty's Dreamer was exhilarating. Mel's total attention focused on the mare. At the slow gait, Mel relaxed—her hands stretched apart, knees pressed into the saddle, heels down. The horse was game and eager to please. A happy smile spread across Mel's face when she reversed and urged the mare again into a trot.

*Damn!* Jake watched the pair shoot down the straight-away, Royalty's show trot finer and

more animated than the one he had been able to achieve. Mel's signals were subtle. A slight press of her calves against Royalty's side, a negligible squeeze of the reins. Jake suddenly sensed a warm tightening below the belt. Once—just once—he'd felt those firm calves and thighs against his body. Jake switched his leg with his crop and turned in a circle to follow the horse and rider with his gaze.

He tried to concentrate. The old trainer was right about Royalty and Mel. The two were a great combination, a winning duo. Was Pop also right about Mel? Would she come around and help the farm? She had to. He now wanted more time with her, more time to make up for breaking her heart.

Mel cut the corner and angled into the center of the arena, stopping in front of him. She laughed down at him, her amber eyes wide, her face flushed.

"She's wonderful, Jake. I just love her."

Jake strolled forward, grinning. He took Royalty's reins and forced the horse to stretch out. Then he came around the left side and glanced up at Mel's charming face. Even though she wore her thick hair pulled back, she was dainty and feminine, very much a lady.

"You did a wonderful job. Better than I could do." There was a thickness in his voice he couldn't account for.

Her eyes glowed. "Thanks. It's Royalty. She makes it easy."

Mel dismounted, swinging her right leg over the saddle. Facing the horse, she held the saddle briefly while she kicked her left foot free of the stirrup, and then slipped to the ground right into Jake's open arms.

"You should smile more, Mel. You have such a lovely smile." A lovely and inviting smile. Jake couldn't stop himself. He bent forward and touched his lips to hers.

She smelled of perspiration and lavender perfume. She tasted like salt, earthy and basic. Her lips were warm and yielding, tempting him to ask for more and deepen his kiss. Another wave of desire rolled through his body. He lowered his lashes, caught up in a primitive longing.

After a moment of apparent surrender, Mel sucked in her breath and drew back. Jake's eyes opened in time to see Mel raise her hand.

"How dare you!"

The noise of the slap resounded through the cavernous arena. Mel shouldered past him,

grabbed Royalty's reins, and stalked toward the door of the arena with the horse in tow.

Surprised but fascinated, Jake touched his cheek. It barely stung. The bandages on her hands had blunted the blow. He ran to catch up, falling into step at Mel's side.

"Now tell me you want to show this mare," he said, hoping to defuse her anger.

Her face averted, Mel did not respond. The air between them reverberated with strained awareness.

He tried another tactic. "Pop was right, Mel. We do need a safety valve. We need two chances at the World's Grand Championship."

"Pop's judgment is sometimes faulty," she replied.

"Not when it comes to horseflesh," Jake pointed out. "He wants you to show Royalty, and after seeing you ride, I have to agree with him. You two are naturals."

"Flattery, Mr. Hendricks, will get you absolutely nowhere."

The hot sunshine was as scalding as Mel's ire. Her face bleak, jaw set, lips pursed, she walked quickly to the lower barn.

"Mel, Vanessa doesn't have much money. If we don't do well in August, she may be forced to sell some or part of Royalty Farm. Pop said you might not understand how desperate things really are. Those real estate agents are pretty persistent."

"I know, Pop told me."

"Someone may be threatening Royalty Farm. We can't rebuild the farm into a powerhouse stable without you. She wants your help. *I* want your help."

She hesitated and chewed her lower lip.

"Mel, will you show the horse for Vanessa?" He remembered now how stubborn she could be.

"No. I will not show Royalty." They reached the barn, and Mel took the horse to her stall.

"Why not? Give me a good reason."

"I don't have to explain myself to you," she snapped. "All you need to know is that I don't like to be used."

With quick efficiency, Mel began to strip the mare of her bridle. Draping it over her shoulder, she slipped the halter on Royalty and tied her to the sides of the stall. Jake went into the stall and removed the saddle.

“Used? Who’s using you?”

“You.”

“Oh, come on, Mel. I’m asking this for Vanessa and Pop.”

“And *your* fine career. That’s always come first with you.” Mel maneuvered out of the stall, and picked up the sweat scraper from the groom box. Back inside, she raked it over Royalty’s wet coat with strong and wrathful strokes.

“Sounds as if you’re confusing today with the past. That part of my life is over and done with.” Jake’s voice was firm.

“Yeah, really? Move, you’re in my way.” She elbowed around him.

Jake grinned and jumped aside. *So, that’s the way it is?* He leaned nonchalantly at the edge of the door. Mel work, her fury evident in every quick motion. Like a spirited filly, she was beautiful when she was angry.

“You’re upset because I kissed you,” he said placidly.

She tossed a sharp glance his way. “Of course I’m mad. What made you think I’d welcome your advances?”

Mel had always been so much fun to tease. She took things so seriously and looked so pretty when she was mad that he couldn’t help baiting her, just like he used to do when they were kids. However, the Mel he remembered would have never stood up for herself so directly. He liked the new woman she’d become.

“Oh, I didn’t expect my advances to be welcome.” He lifted an indifferent shoulder. “Your beauty just overwhelmed me and I got carried away.”

“Don’t mock me, Jake Hendricks,” she spat. “I don’t have to put up with your boorish, male behavior.”

“Whew!” He shook his hand as if he had been stung.

“Grow up! I’ve dealt with a man much more adept in harassing women than you can ever dream of being.”

She shoved past him, grabbed the cooler and threw it over the back of the horse. Jake didn’t have a retort. What had happened between Mel and her ex-husband?

Leaving Royalty to stand in the cross-ties while she cooled, Mel stomped out of the stall, picked up the saddle and marched down the aisle. Jake followed, getting a good view of her full,

swinging hips.

He had to admit Mel was right. He was acting like a lout. He didn't like himself much at that moment.

In the tack room, she struggled to lift his saddle onto the highest rack. Coming up from behind, he took it from her out-stretched hands and put it easily on the top bar.

"I don't need your help." She swung away from him in a huff.

"But I need yours," he said, following her again into the aisle. "Stop, Mel. Wait a minute." He grabbed her arm and spun her around.

"Take your hands off me." She fought him, squirming in his grasp.

"Cut it out, Mel. I'll let you go, if you hear me out." His fingers nipped her soft flesh.

She stopped and glared at him, descending into a hostile silence.

"You'll only have to put up with me for two months."

"Right. Then what?" Her eyes were hard and bitter.

"Then what? I don't know. It depends what happens at Louisville. If one of us wins, this farm will continue to need two trainers. If neither of us wins..." Jake shrugged his shoulders as he let the implication hang in the air. "There are no guarantees in this business."

"You're just finding that out?"

He let her jab go. "What about it, huh?"

Her gaze roved across his face. "No, I will not do it."

"Why did you come home, Mel? Why did you come back to Kentucky?" His voice rose with exasperation.

"I came home to take care of Pop after his heart attack." She almost added something else but stopped herself.

"If you care about your father's physical condition, why don't you care about his dream?"

"What do you mean?" Mel stiffened defensively and scowled at him.

"The World's Grand Championship. Your father knows he may not be around next year. He wants to win it now. One more time. For Vanessa and the farm, and for an old man's dream."

"Why do you care so much?"

He shrugged again. "This place is in my blood. My years in California taught me that.

And the Nobles were always good to me.” When she frowned, Jake went on, “I think I’ve always loved Pop.” *And you too*, he thought as he watched emotions play havoc with her face.

Mel turned from him, standing with her back away from him in the hot and dusky aisle, the horse behind her moving and snorting in his stall. Jake watched her bowed head. It was as if the weight of the world pressed on her shoulders.

“C’mon, Mel, make an old man’s dream come true.”

“That’s just it, dreams don’t come true.” She sounded as if she had voiced some inner conviction.

“Sure they do, Mel. If you make them come true.”

Jake thought she would deny him again. She was so cynical. He didn’t know what else to say to convince her. He didn’t like the frown he had seen earlier on her face or the sorrow in her eyes. His heart lurched in response to her pain.

Turning back to face him, a resigned look in her eyes, Mel surprised him when she said, “I’ll go with you to the show in Lexington. I’ll give you my time through the show in Louisville. I’ll try to win the World’s Grand Championship on Royalty. After that, who knows?”

Jake didn’t know what made her change her mind, but he wanted to hug her. Instead he grinned like a little boy caught with his hand in a cookie jar. “No, we’ll *win* the World’s Grand Championship. You won’t regret this, Mel, not at all!”

\* \* \* \*

Mel hoped she wouldn’t regret her decision. Tomorrow, when they left for the show in Lexington, she and Jake would be thrown together for a long, hard week.

Sitting at the kitchen table after dinner, Pop’s green eyes hardened. “I told you not to marry that scoundrel, darlin’.”

Mel tensed, not wanting to talk about it anymore. She had married Lenny Stephenson in good faith. A businessman with a passion for Saddlebred horses, he was ten years older. He’d seemed placid and safe, a shelter from the storm that had been her life after Cory’s birth and subsequent adoption.

Mel changed the subject, “It’s a good thing I was able to come home, Pop. You need someone to look after you.”

As soon as she said those words, Mel regretted them. A look of hurt shadowed Pop’s eyes

as he turned his gaze sadly away from her.

“Humph. Don’t need no help. Been takin’ care of myself for most of my seventy-five years, and don’t need to go an’ change that now.”

Pop’s unsteady movements, as he shoved himself away from the kitchen table and stood up, belied his assurances. He was once a tall man, but the recent heart attack had stooped his shoulders and slowed his movements.

Mel flinched inwardly while her father shuffled to the counter and pushed the button to open the door of the microwave. The resultant metallic ding had jarred the too quiet kitchen. Swallowing hard, she remembered other days—happy, childhood days—when Pop and her mother had laughed together during the nightly ritual of coffee and toast. Back then, the piercing whistle of the steaming tea kettle had announced the boiling of water. Now Pop used a box-like microwave and a plastic pitcher to heat water. Somehow it wasn’t the same.

She chewed her lower lip as Pop poured hot water into two ceramic mugs. He stirred in black instant coffee granules and brought the mugs, spoons and all, back to the table.

“Still fill yours with milk and sugar?”

“Yes.” She shook her head to remove a curl of hair from her eyes.

“Sissy way to drink coffee.” Muttering, Pop shuffled to the refrigerator and retrieved the plastic jug of milk.

Stirring sugar into her coffee, Mel watched his slow and deliberate movements. He poured milk into her mug, returned the jug to the counter, and then set a plateful of crusty, half-burnt toast on the table. The jam was store bought now, not mother’s familiar homemade strawberry preserves. The butter was corn oil margarine and came in a tub. But the hot toasted bread smelled the same—warm and comforting. Some things hadn’t changed.

Mel saw the sad look in Pop’s eyes, and knew he was thinking of her mother too. Sarah O’Shea had died thirteen years ago of a heart attack that hot August after Pop had won the World’s Grand Championship for the last time. Life had been different for Mel after that, like a raw wound, always open and festering. Then Jake Hendricks had come to Royalty Farm and taken her mind off her grief.

After they ate, Pop stood up to clear the table, drawing Mel’s focus away from her regrets. “Well, at least the boy won’t let this place be turned into a subdivision.”

“Who are you talking about, Pop?”

“Jake Hendricks, the one you’re so mad at me about,” Pop grunted.

Her father called everybody “boy,” but for all his boyish qualities it was hard thinking of Jake like that—not after seeing the strong, assured man he’d become. Not after he’d kissed her.

“Oh, surely that isn’t an option.” Mel kept up her end of the conversation.

With his back to her as he washed up the dishes, her father shrugged his stooped shoulders.

“Vanessa wouldn’t destroy her father’s dream,” Mel noted, hoping to convince herself.

Vanessa Noble had been Mel’s first playmate. They’d grown up together on the farm. The owner’s daughter and the daughter of the horse trainer had learned to ride on the same old spotted pony.

“Vanessa wouldn’t want to, but those real estate developers have been pestering the hell out of her lately.” Pop shook his head.

“Well, we won’t let that happen, will we?” Mel offered a grin and pushing back from the table, stood up. “Night, Pop.”

“Night, darlin’. Sleep tight. Don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

Suppressing a sigh, Mel climbed the narrow wooden steps to her attic bedroom. Pop was allowed the use of a small two bedroom house on the farm property. Mel had grown up there. It was home.

Pausing at the threshold of her room, she was overwhelmed by memories. She missed her mother. Her mother would have understood her ambivalence about Jake. She would have understood why she’d given up Cory. Maybe if her mother had lived, she wouldn’t have made as many mistakes—or gotten pregnant in the first place because she wouldn’t have been searching so hard for love.

Mel flicked the light switch revealing her tiny room. A jumble of stuffed animals waited for her on the patchwork quilt covering her Jenny Lind bed. A battered chest of drawers stood sentry in one corner next to a plain, straight-back chair. The braided, multicolored throw rug added a meager touch of warmth to the worn wooden floor.

What delighted Mel most were her ribbons. They hung on sagging strings tacked to the yellowed white walls—faded blues, reds, whites, yellows, pinks, greens, even purples. They

were all there, crowded together, from her first blue ones as a four-year-old in the lead line classes to her ribbon won on a borrowed horse in the World's Championship Five-Gaited Pony Stake.

Slowly pivoting, she gazed at her little-girl room, feeling a bit unnerved because it was the same as when she left. She wasn't the same little girl. She'd grown up. She'd had to.

Immense sorrow swelled in Mel's heart. She sat down on the bed and stared at the wall covered with ribbons. Why did she feel like a child hiding her head in her mother's skirts?

For twenty-eight years, Pop had told her scrapes and falls would make her tough. She had experienced plenty of them. Trouble was, she didn't feel very tough. Not now. Not since she'd finally signed the divorce papers and headed home. Pop needed her after his heart attack, sure, but she had other reasons for returning home. Reasons that had everything to do with her own past mistakes. She wondered if she could ever make amends. To Pop, to Cory...and to herself.

Mel roused herself from her reflections and went to the bedroom window, placing her clenched fists on the wooden sill. Those wisps of memory were cunning. For years, she'd promised herself not to think about Jake, to relegate the unhappy memory of their separation to her past—to forget.

She shuddered mentally as she thought of their argument before he left Kentucky. He wouldn't marry her. He didn't want her, so she hadn't told him the truth.

It had been selfish and cowardly of her, but in the end, she'd been glad to leave Royalty Farm before she began showing. Pop believed she was in college in Missouri, and she *had* been going to classes before Cory was born.

Even now an ache tightened around her heart when she remembered how kind the Nobles had been to her and how easy they'd made it for her to hide her pregnancy from her father. Cory's birth had not taken much time. It had been over and done with, so quickly. *So simple*. When the Nobles brought a new adopted daughter home, Mel had continued her schooling, forcing herself not to look back—not to regret the choices she'd made.

In the distant darkness, she saw the black shell of the training barn. For as long as she remembered, the O'Shea family had lived near the big barn at Royalty Farm. It had always been there—familiar and imposing—her touch with childhood. The present destruction filled Mel's soul with a cold ache. The barn symbolized her life—ashes, burnt wood, rubble and failure.

But the barn and Royalty Farm could be rebuilt. Just like her life.

“Jake may be right,” she whispered. Maybe she did have the power to make her dreams come true now that her horrible marriage was behind her. Maybe now she could start again.

Mel relaxed her grip, opened her palms, and stared at her bandaged hands. They were tiny, but in them there was strength. She could use these hands to control a thousand pound horse.

Slowly, so as not to hurt herself, she pulled the bandage from her left palm. Jake had held her hands in his larger ones. He had smiled at her, teased her and kissed her. Jake would be with her when they began to rebuild the stable.

What part would he play as she took her life in her own hands again?

## *Chapter Five*

Sunday evening. A massive bronze statue of the famous Saddlebred stallion Supreme Sultan dominated the parking lot in front of the American Saddle Horse Museum near Lexington, but Jake hardly gave it a look. His eyes were only for Mel, who looked totally different in her backless, black sheath dress and high heels. Her calves, muscled from so much time in the saddle, gave her legs a sexy shapeliness. She was small and lithe, everything a man wanted in a woman. His heart lurched in his chest.

Unfortunately she was still pouting and trying to ignore him. He'd see about that. He put two fingers to his lips and let out a long, wolf whistle.

Mel halted abruptly and turned back to glare at him, color creeping up her cheeks. "Did you whistle at me?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Who, me?"

"Don't play innocent, Mister Hendricks. You whistled at me yesterday."

"And I kissed you, too." Since he had her attention, he wanted to tease her out of her bad humor, just as he had done when they were kids.

In a huff she tossed her dark auburn hair away from her eyes. "Don't look at me like that either."

"Like what?"

"Like a bratty little boy," Mel shot back and walked ahead of him toward the museum.

"Whenever you walk away from me, I get a good view," Jake said, keeping his voice level.

"Can't you keep a civil tongue in your head?" She stopped again and glared at him.

"Just the facts, ma'am." Jake shrugged as he kept his gaze focused firmly on her face.

She clinched her teeth and narrowed her eyes. Her look of pure irritation hit him in the

funny bone. He grinned at her, which seemed to only anger her more.

“Look, I didn’t want to go to this charity thing. You can at least be civil,” Mel snapped.

“What’s the matter? Nerves?”

“Well, yes.” She turned away once more.

He had thought Mel feared nothing. This was a surprise. “Wait a minute.” He caught her arm, her bare flesh warm in his grasp. “You’re not afraid of a silly cocktail party, are you?”

“My customers were horse-crazy girls and their mothers. I never had to attend such fancy functions.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” He tried to encourage her. “You look lovely. Just grab a drink and stick near me. I’ll protect you.”

“You have a wonderful way with words,” Mel said and whipped around again.

Jake watched her walk away, regret settling in his gut. He’d meant to make her feel better, not rouse her anger. The way he was going he was no better than Pop, always putting his foot in his mouth. He supposed she didn’t want his protection. Well, he’d change her opinion. He hurried to catch up.

Mel’s heel caught on the curb, and as she tripped ungracefully forward, she felt the steady hand of her tormentor on her elbow.

“Thanks.” Her heart pounded because of her scare. Jake’s work-calloused thumb stroked her skin.

“Don’t mention it.”

Mel slowed her pace, allowing him to walk by her side, his hand on her arm. She remembered tripping the day of the fire. She remembered the sparks and the low, acrid smoke. Jake had supported her then as he did now.

“I’m not an invalid. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can,” he said. “But should you?” His whispered words were hot on her bare shoulders.

Mel stiffened in response to him. Jake was too close. His attention too intimate. After all, they were co-workers, dedicated to saving Royalty Farm. This party was a professional function, something she had to endure. So why did she feel anything but professional? Why did her heart

stay in her throat, its cadence pulsing in her neck?

Mel had no answer. She found solace in the anger she wrapped around herself like a shielding cloak. They reached the door, and a group of party-goers swept them up, separating Jake's grip on her arm. Mel let it happen, glad for the respite. With Jake so near, she felt flustered. First, she practically begged for his help, admitting crowds frightened her, and then she asserted her ability to take care of herself. He must think her crazy.

Picking up a long-stemmed glass of red wine from a white-coated waiter, Mel escaped into the museum itself and wandered anonymously among the exhibits, her thoughts pounding in her head like a trotting horse. Jake believed she was working for Vanessa solely out of loyalty to Pop, to make her father's dream come true. But she had a more elemental reason for trying to restore the fortunes of Royalty Farm. *Cory*. Her daughter. Royalty Farm was part of Corrine Noble's heritage.

She was sorry she'd made such a mess of her life. Had that hard-headed trainer thought more about her and not his stupid career, they might have been a family now. The three of them. Nonetheless, Cory was happy and healthy, and that's what mattered. Unaware of her birth parents, she had grown up the pampered child of Mary and Bert Noble. She had been given the monetary advantages Mel had lacked as a child, and so far Cory had turned out just fine. Mel was proud of her little daughter and the girl's love of horses, for Cory was as horse crazy as Mel had been at that age and rode just as well.

She spied Jake at the other end of the room surrounded by other trainers. He looked so handsome in a tuxedo. Her skin prickled as she remembered how his fingertips felt on her bare arm. When his gaze caught hers through the crowd, she held it until another trainer drew his attention away. Frowning, she turned to stare at a nineteenth century painting of a chestnut mare. The colors blurred before her eyes as she felt her face grow hot with an ever-familiar sense of guilt. Sometimes she regretted not telling Jake about his daughter. Touching the glass to her cheek, she hoped she survived this party without becoming sick.

"You look quite becoming, Melody, darling," a familiar voice said behind her.

Blood pounded in her ears, and a horrible pain shot through her stomach. When Pop called her *darling*, it was a term of affection. This rendition was curt and cutting, as if the speaker didn't believe what he said. Swift, wild resentment overwhelmed her.

“Aren’t you going to say hello?”

Mel turned slowly. “What are you doing here, Lenny?”

His expression coolly neutral, her ex-husband gave a polite nod. “I believe I’m attending a charity party.”

A shudder coursed through Mel’s whole body. Why had she once thought this man attractive? His salt and pepper hair now seemed dull and yellowed and his brown eyes, sardonic. He was a tall man, powerful—much like Pop had been in his prime. Somehow this very power only suggested control. His very presence reminded her of the years of manipulation and hurt.

“Why are you here?”

“As I said, I’m doing my part for charity.” He appraised her through half-closed eyes.

Mel felt her face grow hotter. Surrounded by so many people, she felt trapped. Gulping the wine, she looked for a place to set down the glass, feeling as if she might break the crystal between her fingertips if she held it a minute longer.

“Allow me.” Lenny removed the goblet from her hands, his fingers skimming hers, and placed it on the glass-covered exhibition case of old bridles and bits.

“You never could keep away from these functions,” Mel accused, trying to regain control.

“Yes, I find them stimulating. I am surprised to see you here, though.”

“It’s part of my new job.” She refused to justify her actions. She hadn’t owed him this much explanation, but old habits died hard. Mel lifted her chin and glared back at him.

Lenny’s look was cutting. “Royalty Farm. It didn’t take you long to find a prestigious job once you left me.”

Mel bristled. Her ex-husband knew Royalty Farm was her home. “Look, Lenny, I don’t know what you want. Please excuse me.”

“Melody, Melody, your feelings would have been hurt if I hadn’t spoken to you.” He blocked her path.

“Don’t delude yourself,” Mel scoffed.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be nice.” He smiled now, like a child very full of his own importance. “Tell me, have you seen any nice horses since you’ve been here? I’m thinking of going to the auction this week.”

“You can afford it?” She gazed at him incredulously. “What happened to the thirteen thousand you owed that bookie in Vegas?”

“That’s history, Melody, darling.”

“Well, if you can afford to buy another show horse, you can certainly pay me what you owe me. I’ll let my lawyer know you have money now.” She refused to stand there with Lenny any longer, and skirting him, began to walk away.

He dogged her as she weaved in and out among the guests. The noise was excruciating and so was the heat. Mel struggled to reach the door to the lobby.

“Who was that man making eyes at you?”

Even the lobby was crowded. Panicked, Mel pushed her way out the front door. “What man? What are you talking about?”

“The tall, blond-haired man. You came in with him.”

Had he been watching them? “That’s my boss. He took Pop’s place at the farm.”

“What’s his name?”

“What’s it to you? You aren’t my keeper.” Mel spun around to take a stand, the statue of Supreme Sultan at her back.

Lenny’s penetrating gaze somehow managed to look innocent, but Mel knew it was an act. He never indulged in idle curiosity. He always had reasons for his questions and those reasons usually boded ill for her.

“I just wondered,” he said with a smile.

“Keep wondering!”

“I thought perhaps it was Jake Hendricks.” Lenny’s tone was condescending.

Stiff with fearful anger, Mel glared at him. “What do you want?” She shouldn’t have let him drive her outside alone. She saw her mistake now. Her desire to escape the noise and the crowd had overridden her better judgment.

“Ah, so it *is* the famous Jake Hendricks.” His gaze left her a moment, and then settled back on her like a heavy cloak. “Will you have dinner with me this week?”

The evening heat suffocated her. Moisture glossed her upper lip. “Lenny, we’re divorced. Even if that doesn’t mean anything to you, it means something to me.”

“I have a business proposition to discuss with you.”

Mel drew a deep breath and expelled it slowly to prevent herself from screaming. Calmly she said, "I have no desire to discuss anything with you."

Thrusting her chin into the air, she shoved past him and stalked toward the building, just as Jake came out.

"There you are, Mel." He held the door open. "We got separated."

"I know." Mel slipped past him into the cool air of the museum.

"Who were you talking to?" Jake followed her inside.

Mel took an uneven breath before she answered. "Nobody. Nobody at all."

\* \* \* \*

On Monday morning, Mel led Dreamcatcher from the barn, hitched him to the two-wheeled jog cart, and led him to the outdoor practice arena. Dawn had broken quietly over Lexington's Red Mile. Part of the famous harness horse track had been transformed into an elegant show ring for the Junior League Horse Show. With the first class only hours away, caretakers and trainers were already at work, and the barn area reflected the hectic activity.

Mel's stomach ached as she climbed aboard the jog cart. Like a harness horse driver in a racing sulky, she sat with her boots lifted near the shafts of the cart, her butt tucked low in the seat. Picking up the reins, she clucked to the big stallion and started a slow, warm-up jog. She was glad to be away from the chaotic barn.

Lenny's appearance the night before had spooked her like she was a rank colt. A ghost from a not-so-distant past, her ex-husband's specter hung over her like a pall. What did he want? What was he doing in Lexington? Old emotions of inadequacy and frustration surfaced, twisting her gut and threatening her normal composure.

As horse and jog cart picked up speed, wheeling around the sharp turn of the race track, Mel welcomed the morning breeze after so much heat and humidity of the previous day. Down the hard straight-away, Dreamcatcher held his head high, stepping out proudly, his tail whipping in her face. She welcomed the sting of the horse's tail as something real and vital. After so much confused emotion, Mel thankfully blanked out all thought.

With a wrenching snap, the jog cart tilted perilously to the left. She fought to pull the stallion to a halt. She'd succeeded when the cart toppled over, slamming her to the ground beneath it.

Her brain spun, and her chest clamored for air as she was bounced roughly through the dirt. Still clutching the lines, Mel heard the terrified staccato of the stallion's hooves strike the hard surface of the track. Pain shot through her ankle, and she fought to keep her face up and out of harm.

"Mel!" Jake's voice echoed from somewhere far, far away. "Whoa, up there, boy. Whoa!"

Dreamcatcher reared, his sharp hooves striking out. Coming back down, he shied to the right, dragging Mel and the cart along with him.

"Easy now. Whoa there."

The cart came to rest. She was face down in the dirt.

"Mel! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Mel sputtered out dirt with her words. "Get this thing off of me, okay?"

"I can't just yet. Dreamcatcher is too agitated, but here comes Dave."

The little groom approached cautiously, making soothing sounds to the stallion, and then took him from Jake, who untangled the twisted leather lines and traces. Sweat trickled between Mel's breasts. She shut her eyes, her cheek pressed flat against the rough track.

"Mel, I've got the lines untangled. Give me a minute and I'll have this off."

"Hurry up." Mel was embarrassed to need his help.

When Dreamcatcher was unbuckled, Dave led him safely out of the shafts. Quick as a heartbeat, the cart lifted from her, and she was hoisted up by Jake's strong hands.

Setting her upright, he held her at arm's length. "Are you okay?"

Heat swept up her face. "Yes, thanks."

Mel put all of her weight on her left foot. "Ouch!"

She stumbled forward and Jake caught her, his warm and sturdy arms surrounding her. He was so big and safe, his heart beating close to her own, his musky male smell comforting. In an instinctive act, Mel relaxed for moment.

"You said you were okay," Jake said, his breath warm on the top of her hair.

Regretting her weakness, Mel pulled away. She balanced awkwardly on her foot. Her ankle throbbed, but not as much as her heart. Jake still held her steady, his fingers burning like brands upon the flesh of her upper arms. She was all too aware of their contact.

“Well, I guess I was a bit premature,” she spat back as she fought to keep her expression remote. She didn’t want his help, not if it created within her such a vigorous response.

“You’ll have to get a doctor to look at that foot. You may not be able to ride tonight.”

The anger Mel had tried to suppress bubbled into a rolling boil. Jake didn’t care about her injury, just the stupid horse show and his stupid career. It had been like that when they were kids. Jake hadn’t changed.

Shaking herself free from his grasp, she hobbled away. “Thanks for your concern. I’ll take your advice.”

“Oh, Mel, don’t be so stubborn. Let me help you.” Jake caught her arm again to steady her.

“I don’t need your help.”

Jake sighed. “Yes, I know, but you’ve got it anyway.”

Before Mel could reply, Pop shuffled up. “What in the hell’s goin’ on here?”

“Mel got a face full of dirt,” Jake remarked dryly, releasing her.

“I can see that for myself. Damn me, darlin’, your face looks like a cat scratched it.”

Flustered, Mel reached for her face, her fingers testing the skin on her cheek. Her father was right. She felt the scrapes. They were tender to touch.

“How’d Dreamcatcher do?” Pop’s attention shifted to the stallion. Dave held the horse’s bridle as he circled, snorted and tossed his head.

“I’ve already given him the once-over,” Dave spoke up. “He’s okay. Just full of himself as usual.”

“Won’t hurt to go over him again.” Seeming satisfied, Pop turned back to gaze calmly at his daughter. “Now, how’d this happen, darlin’?”

“I don’t know. One minute we were going down the straight away, and the next I was upside down in the dirt.”

With one wheel gone, the cart rested at an awkward angle. Pop knelt beside it.

“Can’t tell exactly what happened. Nut and bolt are gone, though.” He struggled to his feet. “Guess that’s what ya get with old equipment.”

Mel heard the irritation in his voice. Their newest jog cart had been burned in the fire. This one was old, but until now, serviceable. Putting her sore foot down to regain her balance,

Mel drew everyone's attention back to herself.

"Now what's happened to you, darlin'?" Pop asked.

"Nothing, just sprained my ankle or something." Mel's gaze went from her father to Jake, daring him to make a comment.

"Makes ya tough," her father said with a shrug of a shoulder. "But you need to get off your feet and have that looked after."

"My sentiments exactly." Before Mel had time to blink, Jake swept her into his arms.

"Put me down!"

"Hush, you stubborn, pig-headed woman." Jake strode toward the barn.

Mel squirmed in his arms, humiliated beyond belief. Other trainers in the practice area turned to watch. She thought she heard Pop chuckle.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she demanded.

"Because this is the fastest way to get you to the barn." His shameless grin deepened the furrows of his cheeks.

Mel fought her fury. She fought her sensual awareness of his lean, hard body. Her breath came in gulps, as if she were the one walking. She was too intensely conscious of his strong, musky aftershave, and the steady beat of his heart. His beard-roughened cheek chafed her own. Was she softening toward him?

"I can walk." Mel's protest sounded weak even to her ears.

"Sure you can, but we've got to get you ready to ride."

Mel stiffened in his arms. What made her think he was concerned about her?

"Don't worry," she said with as much dignity as she could muster. "I'll ride tonight, and I'll win that damn class."

\* \* \* \*

"Does it hurt much?" Seeming subdued by the accident, Cory stood beside Mel's chair in the hallway of the stable.

"Not much." Mel replied, her injured leg propped up on another chair, an ice bag covering her bare foot.

"How are you gonna put a boot on?"

Mel marveled at the child's perception. Her left ankle was swollen and painful, but the

doctor had proclaimed it only a mild sprain.

Glancing at Cory, Mel smiled and drawled, “Verrry carefully.”

Cory giggled. “Silly, I know that.”

Mel relented. “Seriously, Vanessa brought me her riding boots. I’ll wear them. See how they lace up, so the left one will fit over my swollen foot. I won’t have to pull it on.”

She held up the borrowed boot for Cory’s inspection, and then bent over to wrap her injured ankle.

“I still don’t know how you’re gonna ride.” Cory stood over her, watching intently.

Mel wondered herself, but she wasn’t going to let on. She was determined to ride, just as she was determined not to complain.

“It won’t hurt that much to ride.”

Mel relished the child’s presence and her real concern. That she cared for others was a good sign. That she cared for the woman who was her mother made Mel’s heart wrench. Cory’s curiosity and gumption also pleased her. Once again she was thankful that her gutsy decision years ago had paid off. Cory had turned into a bright, happy little girl.

“Need any help?” Jake walked down the shed row.

*I’ve had enough help from you.* Mel didn’t say anything. The memory of being carried in his arms was too fresh, her emotions too raw. She slanted a hard look at him.

His gaze seized hers and he grinned impudently. *He knows what he’s doing to me.* Mel’s cheeks grew hot, an all too common practice around Jake.

“Still going through with this?” he asked, his husky voice making her lightheaded. “You don’t have to, you know.”

“What do you think?”

Jake shrugged. “At least let me help you with the bandage.” Before she could protest, he knelt and took the bandage from her hands. “You’re sure making a mess of this.”

Mel was unable to speak. With his shoulders stooped and his head bent, Jake looked strangely vulnerable as he knelt before her. She longed to reach out and touch his bowed head, to tangle her fingers in his hair. She longed to kiss his misplaced dimple.

The feel of his powerful hands on her bare foot sent a wave of desire surging through her body. She fought these indecent sensations as he placed the end of the bandage on her instep and

rolled it three times around her foot. Already churning because of pre-show nerves, her stomach knotted. Slowly, Jake moved the bandage around the ankle and downward across the front of the foot in a figure eight pattern. Mel watched his experienced hands. Her eyelashes drifted across her eyes as she swayed ever so slightly, her imagination causing other violent waves of desire to track through her body. He touched her instep once more, and she drew in a sharp intake of breath.

“Did I hurt you?”

Mel’s eyes flew open. Jake’s gaze was level with hers, his expression unreadable.

“No, no. I’m fine.” She could barely talk.

Jake lowered his gaze and continued with his task. She had to face the way she felt about him. She realized she couldn’t react so physically toward him, or she’d never be able to work with him until the Louisville show. She had to toughen up. Try to avoid him and curb her unbridled responses to him.

“I think I can put on my own boot.” Mel snatched Vanessa’s boot from his hand and shoved it over the bandage.

Jake stood up and backed away. “Sure thing.”

Mel didn’t miss the wink he directed at Cory. The little girl’s face beamed, as if she had witnessed a wonderful secret. Mel wondered what she had failed to see, or was it that Cory had sensed her response to Jake? Mel frowned. When she finished lacing both boots, she straightened, placing her hands on the arms of the chair. Trying once more to fight down her awareness of the man nearby, Mel pushed herself out of the chair and tested her foot on the ground. It didn’t hurt too much. Not any more than she could tolerate.

Dave led Royalty’s Dreamer up and made him stretch out.

“Here’s your derby, Mel.” Cory handed her a black, wool hat and grinned up at her.

Mel settled it on her head and then pulled on black, leather gloves.

“I think you’ve forgotten something else, madam.”

Mel glanced up to see Jake holding a red rose in one hand and a long pin in another.

Her eyebrow arched. “What now?”

“I know you’ve about had all the help from me you can stomach, but I think this time it’s a must.” Jake said, suppressing a grin. “That is, if you want your boutonniere pinned on your

lapel. Cory's so small, she'd pin it to your knee."

"I would not!" Cory protested, kicking dirt at Jake.

*He wants to ruffle my feathers. Okay, just let him.* She thrust out her chin and took a steadying breath.

"Hurry up," she said, averting her eyes.

Jake stepped forward. He touched the lapel of her coat, overwhelming her with his nearness. Mel shut her eyes as he pinned on the red rose, but, as she stood motionless, she felt his warmth and heard the rhythm of his breath.

"See, that wasn't so bad." Jake's voice had changed, lowering an octave.

Mel glanced at him. His eyes glowed for a moment, and then raw sexual attraction vibrated once more between them. Her throat dry, she stared at him like a gawky teen stares at a movie idol.

"I'll give you a leg up," he offered, his voice thick with emotion.

"No, you won't. Dave can do it," Mel said and turned toward the little groom who looked as if he too was very pleased with something.

## *Chapter Six*

True to her word, Mel won the ladies' five gaited class on Royalty's Dreamer.

The next afternoon, Jake relaxed in a director's chair near their rented stalls. Resting his hands behind his head, his long legs stretched out in front of him, he had a good view of the woman who caused fierce tremors to his pulse. Perspiration beaded her upper lip. Dressed in a formal white shirt with sleeves rolled up to the elbow and wool Kentucky jods, Mel had to be hot. Her glorious auburn hair was severely pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck, emphasizing her high cheekbones and firm jaw line. *Stubborn jaw line*, he amended his drifting thoughts.

Her distracted gaze caught his and held until he winked. She stiffened, and he acknowledged her uneasiness with a nod. She presented him with her back, continuing to help Cory dress for her afternoon equitation class.

*Talk about mother hens.* Jake had never seen so many at one time. Pop, Mel and Vanessa crowded around the little girl, all of them getting into each other's way. He had never taught youngsters, so this whole process held his undivided interest.

"Quit wiggling," Vanessa scolded, her mouth full of bobby pins. She was trying to capture Cory's hair into a bun similar to Mel's. That hairstyle and traditional attire—black paddock boots, wool jodhpurs, matching saddle coat, vest, conservative tie, black gloves and topped by a derby—were requirements in the horse show ring. However, Cory's sandy hair was finer than Mel's and not a bit cooperative.

"Hold yer horses, darlin'," Pop joined in. "Yer almost done."

Mel sprayed the child's hair, the hiss of hair spray plastering every strand in place. Vanessa held out a hair net.

"Shoo. That stinks," Cory complained about the spray, but held still until Mel and

Vanessa finished putting the hair net on her head and adjusting her derby.

The three “mother hens” had slowly transformed the rambunctious nine-year-old into a mirror image of an adult rider. Mel pinned a fresh red rose on Cory’s lapel, much as he had done for Mel the night before. Standing side-by-side, the two of them were mirror images.

As Cory came up to Jake and stood for inspection, he felt a sudden twist of nerves in the pit of his stomach, something at odds with his nonchalant demeanor.

“Looking good,” he drawled. “Question is: can you ride?”

“Damn straight!” Cory responded, her chin high, a gleam of humor in her eyes.

“Cory!” Vanessa, Pop and Mel chided all at once.

Jake laughed. “You guys are insufferable. You’ll make this child a bundle of nerves. C’mon Cory, let’s go find your horse.”

Jake captured the little girl’s hand and then swung her onto his shoulders. The echo of her laughter sounded down the quiet barn shed row.

Vanessa and Pop followed them with Mel tagging along in the rear. Her ankle wasn’t so painful, but her awkward limp gave her an excuse to dawdle. Seeing Jake and Cory together tugged at her heart. Had she been wrong to separate them? For once, she felt regret, not just guilt. Had the decision she’d made as a frightened teenage girl been the right one?

Mel reached the make-up area in time to see Jake warm up Cory’s horse. Five minutes before the call to the class, Dave held the gelding’s head while Jake lifted Cory into the saddle. The little nine-year-old looked so grown up and beautiful. Having a hard time swallowing, Mel watched her from a distance.

“Chin up!” Jake called to Cory.

“Get those heels down, child,” Pop ordered.

“Hands up!” Vanessa added her instruction.

Although it was just a walk and trot class for her age group, the way the adults were acting, Mel thought, it might as well be the World’s Grand Championship. The class was called. Cory asked the horse to pick up his trot and rode into the arena. Mel followed everyone, and as the gate was shut, nuzzled in on the rail for a good view.

“You’re mighty quiet,” Jake commented, coming to stand by her side.

Mel shrugged. "Not much to say."

"Just nerves. I know how it is." Jake's arm brushed hers, but he didn't seem to notice. "Change diagonals and show that horse!" Jake shouted as Cory passed by their spot on the rail. "She's doing great," he said under his breath.

Mel's stomach was in knots. Literally sick, she clutched the wooden rail, her gaze fixed on one horse and one small rider. She'd taught youngsters all during her career. She'd worked at horse shows with many little girls and anxious mothers. This one was different. This time she was the nervous mother, and it was a petrifying experience.

As the thought crossed her mind, Mel glanced up at Jake. He watched the riders intently, a small movement in the muscle of his jaw. Suddenly she felt very sad. They could have been a family. Her heart seemed to collapse within her breast and she fought back tears.

Everyone thought the tears she shed were tears of happiness when Cory won her first blue ribbon.

\* \* \* \*

Mel couldn't sleep. Pop's snoring was one reason. To save money, they shared a motel room at the Campbell House near the horse show facilities. Yet the second more pressing reason for her wakefulness had to do with Jake and Cory and the mess Mel realized she'd made of her life. *We could have been a family*. Her mind replayed those words like a child repeated a favorite song.

She slipped on a t-shirt, light-weight jumper and sandals. The clothing barely touched her skin, a great relief from the wool riding suit and tight-fitting boots she wore while showing. Letting her breath out in a long sigh, Mel picked up the door key and fled the sonorous confines of her room.

The long hallways were dim and quiet. With only a slight limp, she padded down her hall and turned the corner, the lobby a bright beacon in the distance.

"Mel!"

Glancing back, she saw Vanessa coming up quickly behind her. *Great*. She wanted a little solitude.

"Hi, Vanessa," she said as her childhood friend and employer joined her. They continued toward the lobby.

“I just got Cory to sleep. Now I can get that drink I need,” Vanessa announced. “Join me?”

It was more of a command than a question. “Sure. Pop’s snoring was keeping me awake.”

Vanessa cast a sympathetic look her way. “Wondered what you were doing out so late. You and Pop keep early hours.” They went into the motel bar. “We need to celebrate anyway. Cory’s blue ribbon thrilled me to death.”

“She sure did a great job.” Mel climbed onto the bar stool.

“What will it be?” a glum-looking waiter asked.

“Give me a Maker’s and water.” Vanessa turned to Mel. A diamond ring on her finger sparkled in the garish light of the bar. “This is on me.”

“Just a Coke, please.”

“Be right up.”

“She was so excited,” Vanessa said, the scent of her perfume almost overpowering.

Mel knew Vanessa was talking about Cory. If it hadn’t been for the heaviness of her heart, she would have been excited too. Her daughter had ridden almost perfectly. Cory had talent. It ran in the family.

“I put the ribbon on the pillow beside her head or she wouldn’t go to sleep.”

The waiter brought their drinks. Removing the paper from the straw, Mel toyed with it a moment before putting the straw into the glass. *I should have been the one to put Cory’s ribbon on her pillow.* She lowered her head and sipped the cold, effervescent liquid.

“Remember your first blue ribbon?” Vanessa picked up her drink.

“Yes,” Mel murmured, her gaze far away. “We were mighty young.”

Mel briefly considered her childhood, but her thoughts returned like a boomerang to her later screw ups and blunders. Her heart lurched in her chest. *We could have been a family.* Mel’s gaze fell on the soft drink glass, wet with condensation. Her languid fingertip trailed a droplet of water.

Vanessa spoke again, catching Mel’s attention. “I was so upset when my mother and father adopted Cory.” She glanced at Mel. “Being an only child too, you know how it is. I’d been the center of their life for so long.” Mel heard a trace of self-deprecating humor in her voice. “You get used to being spoiled.”

“Mm, I know,” Mel mumbled to keep up her end of the conversation, her mind numb.

“Now I am grateful for that child. She’s filled such a void in my life after my parents’ deaths.” Vanessa sipped her drink again.

The fuzziness in Mel’s brain focused. She straightened up and drew a deep breath. She realized now that she had never gotten over giving up Cory. *Never*. It had been like an irritating gnat, always there, always annoying. There was a void in her life as well, and it had nothing to do with her failed marriage or disappointment in love.

As she sat in the over-crowded bar on a rigid stool, she wanted Cory back.

Going still, hardly breathing, Mel felt the texture of her skin prickle with a strange heat. She felt her face flush. Why now? She’d never wanted her daughter back before. It had been so tough, and all these years she’d been so filled with guilt. Guilt for getting pregnant in the first place, guilt for not telling Jake, guilt for lying to Pop. Mel thought she’d come to terms with her emotions, but here they were, bubbling up into her present like an unwatched pot.

What had changed? With slow reflection, Mel understood one big difference. *She had changed*. She’d finally gotten up enough gumption to get rid of Lenny. Pop had scared her with his heart attack. It frightened her to think she might have lost him. Finally, Jake Hendricks had slipped back into her life like some insidious serpent.

Jake—with his burning blue eyes and strange, appealing dimple. Jake—exasperating but exciting, a splendid figure on the back of Dreamcatcher, athletic and sexy. Mel’s body responded even though the man was not there. Warmth shoved its way upward, suffusing her whole being with a curious glow. She remembered the roughened palms of his hands and the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he carried her. She remembered all of him and longed for him like a woman should long for her husband.

The thought stopped Mel’s breath. She confronted the idea of Jake as a husband, and her breathing started again, coming in slow, strained jerks.

“Why, how do you do, Miss Noble?” a jarring voice snapped Mel back to her surroundings.

She turned to find a large man with a ponderous belly hovering by Vanessa’s side.

“Mr. Bishop.” Vanessa remarked politely.

“Fancy meeting you here. May I sit down?”

Vanessa nodded her head, and the man lumbered onto the empty bar stool. Mel noticed Vanessa's fingers tighten on her glass.

Vanessa turned to her right to acknowledge Mel. "Mr. Bishop," she said, "may I introduce Melody O'Shea. Mel, this is Kyle Bishop, owner of Bishopgate Realty."

"Melody O'Shea? Any relation to the famous horse trainer?"

"Yes," Mel replied. "My father."

"Mel works for me now and she's one of my best trainers."

"Vanessa, you flatter me," Mel said with a laugh.

"Not at all." Vanessa glanced her way. "You saved several of my horses from that horrible fire."

"Ah, yes. I heard about that. I'm so sorry," Bishop murmured politely, and then turned to the waiter to order a Bud Lite.

"Mel, Mr. Bishop has offered me a considerable sum of money for Royalty Farm," Vanessa remarked dryly, and then lifted her glass to her lips.

Mel glanced at her employer. She felt an odd tension. Something was going on between Bishop and Vanessa, but it was hidden just under the surface. This must be the realtor Jake and Pop were so worried about, the guy with his sights set on building another subdivision.

"I didn't think the farm was for sale," Mel said.

"Ah, that's what Miss Noble tells me," Bishop answered with a grin. "I can't convince her running a horse farm alone is not the job for a beautiful woman."

"Well, what kind of job is a *beautiful woman* supposed to have?" Vanessa asked, her words dripping sarcasm.

Mel tried not to smile. Vanessa was on the warpath, and she silently cheered her on.

"Any job a beautiful woman wants," Bishop said with a gleam in his eyes and an ingratiating smile on his face.

Mel stopped her mouth from dropping open. The guy had not realized his error. As she settled onto her stool and eyed Vanessa, waiting for her next move, fate saved Bishop.

"Ah, my drink is here, and so are my dinner companions." With a nod to the waiter to keep the change, he scooped up his bottle and climbed to his feet. "Do we still have an appointment next Thursday, Miss Noble?"

“Yes, but it’s a waste of your time, Mr. Bishop.”

“Ah, we shall see, now won’t we? Just give me a chance to explain my proposition,” Bishop said and turned to Mel. “Nice to meet you *Miss* O’Shea, or is it *Miz*?”

“It’s Mel.”

“Good night to you, Mel.” He nodded. “Miss Noble.”

Mel watched his exit with relief. “What a weasel. He makes my skin crawl.”

“Mine too.” Vanessa shook her head in apparent disbelief. “Kyle Bishop doesn’t know what century he’s living in.”

“That’s for sure. You’re not thinking of selling Royalty Farm, are you?”

“No!”

Vanessa’s reaction was a little too quick and sharp for Mel’s comfort. They remained quiet for a time, and Mel toyed with her straw.

“Had you heard that Jake was working at a farm in Altadena when the training barn burned?” Vanessa asked as she swirled the ice in her glass.

“If memory serves, Jake’s first job in California was in Altadena. That was ten years ago. What does that have to do with the fire at Royalty Farm?”

Vanessa shot Mel a look. “A few owners were talking about it last night at the show. I overheard them.”

“What are you suggesting?” Mel’s gaze never left the gleam of Vanessa’s diamond ring. “That Jake had something to do with our barn fire?”

“I think it’s interesting Jake was at another farm that had a barn fire.”

“I don’t think Jake had anything to do with the fire,” Mel replied, beginning to grow angry. “What would his motive be?”

“To make himself look good when he wins the World’s Grand Championship.”

“Oh, give me a break.” Mel rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. “Competing in the championship was Pop’s idea. The thought never crossed Jake’s mind.”

“Are you privy to his thinking?” Vanessa asked, and took another sip of her drink.

“No.” Mel shook her head. “I made that assumption from the way he behaved afterwards.”

“You know what they say about people who assume?”

Mel caught the catty implication and frowned. She was reminded of their childhood. When they had played together too long, they had gotten tired and started throwing their toys at each other. That's when their mothers had stepped in and separated them.

Not having a mother to do the honors, Mel pushed her glass back and stood. "I don't think your speculations are worthy of comment," she said. "Unless you have firm facts, you shouldn't gossip about your own trainer. For one thing, it's bad for business. Thanks for the drink, but I need to get some sleep."

As she left Vanessa with her mouth open, Mel's pulse began to gallop. She'd never talked to Vanessa that way. It felt really good. Letting out the anger instead of allowing it to simmer was something she'd learned to do only recently. Chin jutting forward, shoulders back, she stalked through the bar and sought sanctuary in the darkness beside the motel swimming pool.

The night air was close and damp. The heat sucked the breath from her lungs, but Mel welcomed it after the coldness in the bar. Flopping down in a lounge chair, she stretched out her legs, pulling the skirt up to her thighs. In the distance, thunder grumbled. Lightening flickered all around—sharp sparks darting here and there like a dog on a scent.

Really, Vanessa was amazing. To think Jake was somehow involved in the barn fire, after all he had done to save those horses. Vanessa hadn't been there. She hadn't seen his horrified eyes or felt his strong hand that had propelled her out of the inferno.

"It's going to rain."

Mel wrenched upward when she heard Jake's voice. She glanced over her shoulder to see him approach and tugged down her skirt. As he sat in the lounge chair beside her, Mel slumped back and said, "It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that one."

"Testy tonight, aren't we?" Jake stretched out and put his hands behind his head. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to find a little peace and quiet."

"With a thunderstorm coming? You have a strange sense of peace and quiet."

"And you have a strange sense of what it means to mind your own business," Mel shot back.

Jake just grinned which angered her more. Thankfully, he had the grace to remain silent.

The only noise was the distant thunder and the remote sound of music and laughter from the bar. Overhead, the erratic natural light show played its frenzied game.

“I can’t seem to get that fire out of my mind,” Jake said after a while. “Who thought we’d make it to Lexington after what happened?”

“We’ve got Pop to thank for that,” Mel murmured, fighting her physical awareness of the man by her side.

“You’ve got to admit, Pop’s a cagey old cuss.” Jake dropped his hands down and folded his arms over his muscular chest.

Mel glanced his way, envisioning the many times they had stretched out together in the hay loft, talking, touching and kissing. She frowned at her line of thinking and at the overt response of her body as she felt herself grow hot. It was easier to allow her anger to flow—less threatening, easier to contend with than emotions she had no business feeling.

“I still can’t believe someone deliberately set that fire.” Jake turned his gaze to her, and they connected for one intense moment.

“The police are trying to find out who did it.” Mel had trouble dragging her gaze away.

“The police,” Jake growled. “Just a bunch of country bumpkins if you ask me.”

“My, you’re testy tonight,” Mel echoed.

He glared at her. “Besides destroying some fine horses, the fire has devastated Vanessa financially and Pop emotionally, not to mention almost ruining my career.”

“Ah, the sacred career. I forgot about it for a moment.” Mel’s words were heavy with scorn.

“My career is my life. It’s who I am and what I do. You never understood that about me,” Jake said, scowling.

“But I *have* understood that about you. All too well.”

The direction of this conversation was making Mel uneasy, for it hit too close to home. It had been at the core of her disagreement with Jake ten years earlier, a disagreement that caused her to give up Cory and lose the family she now so desperately wanted. Jake had refused to marry her. Not that she’d told him the most pressing reason they needed to marry. She had wanted to be wanted for herself. To be loved for herself. But Jake had said they were too young. He had a great career opportunity in California.

“Well, if you’ve understood that about me, you also know I take responsibility for everything that happens when I’m in charge. Therefore, it’s my duty to salvage something from the barn fire.”

“Yeah, I know. For Pop’s dream.” Mel was curt.

“What’s so wrong with having a dream? What’s eating at you anyway, Mel?”

“Oh, don’t act so high and mighty with me, not after I just defended you with Vanessa.”

Jake sat up and shifted to sit on the side of the lounge chair, his eyes wary. “Defended me? What for?”

“Our boss has heard rumors *you* set the fire.” Mel coolly informed him.

“What!”

“Apparently it’s the gossip of the show. Jake Hendricks, arsonist personified,” she said, derision in her voice.

Jake leaned forward and grasped Mel’s chin in his fingertips. She couldn’t turn away. Her heart churned in her chest as she swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

His jaw line hard, his eyes glittering and dangerous like the approaching storm, Jake asked, “What do *you* think?”

“I told you I defended you,” Mel said in a bare whisper.

“But do you believe it of me?”

Something important rode on her answer. Something like trust which she didn’t think she had where Jake was concerned. She felt her pulse quicken as he watched her intently.

“I don’t think you would deliberately set a fire that would kill horses,” Mel said taking a steadying breath. “No, I don’t believe you did it.”

“Good.” He released her. Standing up, he walked to the edge of the pool.

Mel stared after him, fascinated by his broad shoulders, trim hips and long, muscular legs. Her face hurt where Jake had held her. Absently, as she gazed at him, she rubbed her jaw. Had she really said she trusted him?

Turning around, Jake came back. “You know what’s ironic?” When Mel didn’t answer, he went on, “I’ve been thinking Vanessa has a pretty good motive for wanting to burn down the barn.”

“What?” It was Mel’s turn to scoff. “Why would Vanessa do that?”

“Money.”

“Money?”

“Yes. Insurance money,” Jake said. “And if she sells the farm without rebuilding the barn, she’ll have more of it.”

“Jake, that’s ridiculous.” Mel stared up at him, her breath catching in her chest.

“What’s ridiculous about it? People do crazy things for money.” He took a step closer.

“But Vanessa has plenty. Why should she want more? Why should she destroy her farm for it?”

Their conversation was only secondary. They communicated with their eyes. Jake stared at her with a peculiar intensity that held her heart inactive, suspended. Her face felt flush, not just with heat but with strange warmth that permeated through her motionless body.

“Vanessa doesn’t have all the money you think she does. Her father had debts,” Jake said, his voice suddenly hushed. “Vanessa has added her own.”

He moved closer and pulled her upright into his arms. Mel’s heart now galloped forward in her chest, just as thunder shattered the stillness. She could feel the warmth radiating from his skin. Smell that earthy male aroma, so basic and elemental. His work-roughened fingers chafed the soft flesh of her upper arms. This time, he didn’t hurt her, but held her gently, reverently.

Her gaze skimmed his face and held his. She shuddered with desire, making her hotter, making her lean toward him, almost begging, almost pleading.

Jake’s kiss was like soft rain drops. He misted her mouth and her chin and her closed eyelids and her mouth again with tiny offerings. She returned them, capturing his mouth, his beard-rough jaw line, his nose, showering him with all the desire that thundered through her body. Then his kiss caught hers and held her mouth captured, his tongue testing the softness between her lips. Mel responded once more, leaning into him, aching for him as never before.

As the first raindrops began to fall, he held her away from him. “Nothing like a shower of reason to help us cool off,” Jake said, his voice thick with passion. “This is stupid for us to do.”

Mel couldn’t respond. She opened her eyes, wanting to scream at him that it wasn’t stupid. That it was right. Perfect. Beautiful. But she couldn’t speak. And he left her standing in the rain, wanting him, wanting more, with no more adequate explanation than when he had left ten years earlier.

## *Chapter Seven*

Jake stood in the middle of the make-up area while Mel warmed up Royalty. *Damn!* He'd been stupid. He should have known kissing her would lead to his wanting more. Craving it, like a man dying of thirst craves cool water. Jake had been so aroused, had wanted Mel so much last night, that he had forced himself to leave her alone. It had been the hardest thing he'd ever done.

*No.* Leaving Mel ten years ago had been the hardest. Jake switched a riding crop against his leg thinking about what he had done then. He'd been right to leave her. If he hadn't, Mel would have skipped college and not gotten a degree as Pop had planned.

Thing was, he hadn't figured on her getting married. That hadn't been part of *the* plan. He had intended to marry her after she got that degree, after they'd both grown up a bit. But it wasn't meant to be.

What was he doing now? Jake cracked the crop even harder against his leg, almost relishing its sting as Pop give Mel last minute instructions, and Sam, the assistant groom, checked her girth.

Last night he'd felt her response, and it had only quickened his own desire. Even remembering it, the throbbing in his groin made him uncomfortable. He recalled how her breasts, covered only by the thin cloth of a t-shirt and jumper, touched his chest—the honey flavor of her lips and the aroma of her lavender perfume.

Breaking into a cold sweat, Jake shifted in his stance and frowned. He couldn't go on like this. The championship in Louisville seemed a lifetime away. He'd be a walking maniac if he didn't get some relief before then.

But it was more than his physical reaction to the woman who now sat calmly on the back of the black mare. His leaving Kentucky had left emptiness in his life. He'd filled that hole with hard work. He was older now. Mel was wrong. He wanted more from life than just a great career. If he succeeded at Louisville, if his career at Royalty Farm took off, he wanted someone to share

it with. The thought of being alone for the rest of his life caused a sharp twinge in his chest.

His scheme to have Mel react to his male charm had backfired big time. Except for her obvious sexual reaction to him, Mel had not shown any inclination to consider him anything more than a bothersome jerk. Another dumb male, like her ex-husband. Jake clinched his teeth, causing the muscles in his jaw to tighten. What if they lost at Louisville? What if Mel left the farm? He had to think about how he would cope if she vanished from his life again.

He must be realistic. He'd hurt her once. From the things she'd said, her marriage had hurt her badly. Why would she want to trust another man? Why would she trust him?

The announcer called the class. Jake drew himself out of his musings.

"Mel!" he shouted and walked to where she sat aboard the horse.

She glanced at him, warily, but didn't speak.

"Here's your crop," he said, offering it to her.

She took the end, and for a moment they were connected by the leather stick. He held his breath, wondering what she was thinking.

Mel nodded to him. "Thanks."

Jake stepped back. She straightened in the saddle, stretching down her heels and pulling her chest up. He watched her lift her chin as if to gain confidence. Shortening her reins, she nudged the horse slightly with her legs and said "Trot." Royalty's Dreamer responded like a finely tuned car. The horse picked up her trot and carried Mel into the competition.

Sadness settled inside him. He hated that her conversation was always guarded and awkward, that Mel could no longer be free with him, like she'd been as a teenager. Stepping up to the rail, Jake put his hands on the wood, enjoying the rough feel of it. He needed the roughness as a reminder of his fate. Once, just once, he and Mel had consummated the love they shared. Granted, it had been a puppy love, a young love, but he'd found over the years that nothing else had equaled it.

Back then, his cooler head had prevailed. He'd done the noble thing, only to have fortune intervene when Mel married. Now that she was divorced and he had another chance, would some other cruel fate keep them apart?

Jake took a long breath and expelled it. *Better get my mind back to business.* Quickly assessing the circling horses and riders, he decided Mel was definitely wining the ladies' five-

gaited championship. She had Royalty set up nicely, going down straight-away at a fast, five-beat rack. One judge marked his score card as she passed.

Mel rounded the sharp corner, handling it perfectly. That's when it happened—quickly without warning. Her saddle slipped to the left and she fell hard against the tanbark surface of the track. Royalty reared and galloped away.

Jake didn't remember climbing over the railing. He heard the collective gasp from the crowd, but then he heard nothing but the pounding of his own heart as he ran the length of the track. He thought he heard Mel cry out.

"Mel!" Jake knelt beside her just as she gulped. Her eyes were wide with fright. He gently removed the derby from her head and tossed it aside.

Others quickly joined him, hovering over Mel, poking at her, probing. He wanted to protect her, shove them all back, and say she belonged to him.

"Jake, we've halted the class," the ring master said, "and called for the ambulance."

"Thanks, Don."

"I don't need an ambulance. It was just...my breath...knocked out." Mel's chest heaved with her effort to speak.

"Shut up! This is one time you'll do as you're told."

Mel pushed up on an elbow. "Let me up. I can finish the class."

"Damn it, Mel, you don't have to prove how tough you are. You've had a hard fall. The medics are going to look at you."

"You're not my keeper, Jake Hendricks," Mel snapped.

She struggled to move her feet under her, to get momentum to stand. A look of pain shot across her face.

"That's it. You lie back. Flat," he ordered. "You may have a head injury."

Jake took Mel's shoulders in his hands and gently but forcefully pressed her back down. The wool fabric of her coat was coarse to his touch. He was hot. She must be sweltering. He longed to remove the constricting garment, but he knew it best not to move her any more than necessary. Already the ambulance rumbled toward them. Mel threw him a look of exasperation. A feeling of despair clutching at his heart, Jake compressed his lips together and returned her gaze, not backing down.

Then the paramedics were there, and Jake was pushed aside. He stood, immobile, impotent, while Mel's vital signs were checked, her neck was wrapped into a cervical collar and her body was stretched onto a backboard. At one point, he realized Pop stood beside him, the old man's face like white paste. For once, Pop kept his mouth shut and didn't remark about "makin' you tough."

"Someone going with her?" a paramedic asked.

Jake hesitated. He was nothing to Mel. She wouldn't want him along for the ride. It was Pop's place, not his. Making up his mind, he guided Pop toward the ambulance and helped him climb in.

As the ambulance left and the group of people began to disperse, Jake remained stationary, his gaze on his boots. The shock of the sudden accident began to seep into his consciousness. He took a deep breath, hoping to relieve the nerves that cramped his stomach. Nothing worked. He plowed a hand through his hair.

"C'mon, Jake, let's go." Dave's familiar voice was forceful.

Jake glanced up. The little groom stood beside him, Mel's saddle in his arms.

"They want to finish the class," Dave said. "Pick up Mel's hat, and let's go."

Walking in a nightmare, Jake followed Dave out of the arena.

"I want you to take a look at this girth," Dave said when they arrived at their stall area. "Something's wrong with it."

"What is it?"

"I think it's been cut."

\* \* \* \*

Mel's eyes flickered open. She was cold. Only a thin sheet covered her. She pulled the white, hospital sheet up to her chin, wishing she was back in the motel room listening to Pop's snores.

Instead, the emergency room doctor had decided to admit her overnight. Now she lay flat on her back, disgusted with herself and her situation. She'd been winning the class. Royalty would have been the stake champion and positioned very nicely for the World's Grand Championship in August. Not now. Not since Mel had lost her balance and toppled off the horse's back.

She could kick herself. She'd never fallen off like that. Why now, just going around a sharp turn? It didn't make sense.

Nothing made much sense any more. Not her physical reaction to Jake, not her longing for the daughter she'd given up, not the overriding guilt she felt for things long done and gone.

Mel glanced at the pale light seeping through the curtains at the window. It must be early. She sighed and shut her eyes. The doctor wouldn't discharge her until mid-morning.

"Good morning, Melody."

Mel's eyes flew open. *Lenny!* Her ex-husband stood next to her bed. Fear, as cold and frosty as a winter's day, seeped through her body. She stared at him, eyes wide, breathing quickly.

"What are you doing here, Lenny?"

"I thought I should offer you my support. I saw that horrible accident last night." Lenny peered at her with eyes that didn't register his concern.

"I don't need your support." She turned her head from his sharp stare.

He came nearer and touched the side of the bed. Mel's flesh crawled. Pushing up on her elbow, and wincing at the effort, Mel tried to remove some of the disadvantage she felt lying flat in the bed. Her efforts simply put her at eye level with the man she'd grown to hate.

"You were doing so well, too," he said with a sweet tone of irony in his voice.

Mel felt her stomach tighten. Sweat broke out on her body, causing her flesh to chill even more. She drew a deep breath.

"Get out of my room."

"Now, Mel, is that the way to act?"

"Get out of my room! I'll push the button for the nurse." Flinching as a pain shot through her hips, Mel fumbled for the button.

"I wouldn't do that. This is just a friendly little visit."

"Come off it. You and I haven't been friends for a very long time." Mel fought a rising panic. "I said get out!"

As she grabbed the button, Lenny caught her hand in his flaccid fingers. "You wouldn't want me to tell Jake Hendricks, would you?"

Mel went very still. "Tell him what?"

“About Cory.”

Her senses spun. She’d never told him about Cory. *What did this man know?* “Take your hands off me!”

“Then say you’ll have dinner with me.” Lenny spoke softly, but the menace was plain.

“Don’t threaten me. I don’t like your games.”

“But you won’t listen to me otherwise.”

Mel’s gaze held his for one endless moment and then she broke eye contact, glancing away. Her breathing was shallow. Lenny meant what he said. Whatever he knew or thought he knew, he would use it against her. She had to do what he asked. Once. Just once. If for nothing else, but to discover what he knew.

Maybe when she had some clothes on and wasn’t half naked in a hospital gown, she would not be at such a disadvantage. With advance warning, she might be able to cope with her ex-husband. It was a chance she had to take.

“When?”

“In two weeks. Before Shelbyville. I’ll take you to the Old Stone Inn. You always enjoyed eating there.”

“Whatever,” she said, dismissing him and looking away. “Just let me know.”

“That’s my girl.”

Mel heard the triumph in his voice. She gritted her teeth. She’d lost again. Why hadn’t the divorce ended it all?

“I’m not your *girl*,” Mel said, but when she looked back, he was gone.

She let the tension seep away from her like the air from a balloon. Slowly, she slid under the thin sheet, her body shaking from shock. She clutched the edge of it. Lenny was blackmailing her, using whatever knowledge he had to make her do what he wanted.

But what did he want? Sickening fear blossomed again in her belly.

If Lenny knew about Jake, she must keep the news from Cory. It served no purpose for the little girl to know. Not now. Not when she was so happy.

What was Lenny going to tell Jake? What would Jake think when he learned he had a daughter?

Mel had never dreamed she’d face the day when Jake found out about Cory. For a

teenager, tomorrow never comes. Consequences are overlooked.

Soon she might have to pay for the mistake she'd made. This time, two other people might have to pay with her.

\* \* \* \*

"Damn me, darlin', the doctor said bed rest, and that's just what you're gonna do," Pop ordered.

Mel frowned. "But, Pop, tonight's the championship."

"An' we don't need you there."

"Pop's right, Mel," Vanessa said. "We can take care of everything. Your health is the most important thing you have to worry about. You gave us quite a scare."

Mel sighed. She didn't like this fuss. She must be Pop's daughter after all. "I've only got a bruise," she offered, but knew her battle was lost.

"Yeah, a bruised tail bone. C'n hardly walk." Pop shuffled around the bed and glared at her. "Could've been a damned lot worse."

Mel had to admit the two of them were right. Her pain had been so great she'd expected something worse too. Nothing as simple as "take your prescription and you'll be fine in about ten days." Putting on her blue jeans a few moments ago had been agonizing, so she hoped the promised ten days flew by quickly.

An orderly brought a wheel chair to the door and announced Mel's ride had arrived. She crawled out of bed, barely able to walk without grimacing. A bruised tail bone was embarrassing. Good grief. She'd fallen off horses before and never bruised a tail bone. Gingerly, she slipped into the wheel chair for the ride to the hospital entrance. Vanessa lowered the feet rests.

"Jake's got it all under control," Pop said from behind.

"I bet he does," Mel murmured.

"We're only showing Dreamcatcher tonight."

Pop wasn't telling her anything she didn't know, but Mel bit back a barbed retort. After all, he was her dad, and he was only keeping up conversation.

"Did I tell you Cory won the walk and trot championship?" Vanessa asked from behind.

"No!" Mel twisted to look at her and felt a sharp twinge of pain.

Vanessa hurried up to the wheelchair. "Don't turn. I know it hurts."

Mel wrinkled up her nose and drew her brows together. She hated admitting weakness.

“Cory was first on all three judges’ cards.” Vanessa had a delighted look on her face.

“That’s great!” Mel said as she clutched the arms of the wheelchair. She puffed up with pride. “Cory will put the farm on the map faster than the rest of us.”

Vanessa nodded. “I’m already planning my advertising spread in the *Show Horse Report*. It should be grand.”

They reached the lobby. A bank of glass windows allowed the summer sun to thrust its way into the waiting area. In the glare, a single figure waited by the sliding glass door. Jake! A shiver skittered down her spine.

“What’s he doing here?” she said too quickly.

“Takin’ you home,” Pop answered.

“Shouldn’t he be at the show?”

“I said he had it all under control.” Pop nodded at Jake, who came toward them. “Sides, he volunteered.”

“It figures.”

“Mel, let me help you.” Jake offered his hand.

Feeling a flush creep up her face, Mel simply gave him a blank look. For a tense moment, he stared at her, and then stooped over to move the feet rests up. Mel climbed to her feet, wincing as the pain shot down her back. When he took her elbow, she was glad for his support.

“Y’all drive careful,” Pop said after Mel had clambered ungracefully into the cab of Jake’s truck.

Looking down at her father, at his thinning white hair, and his gnarled hand resting on the open window, Mel smiled. “I’ll be okay, Pop. Don’t worry about me.”

“Damn straight, you’ll be okay. Just wanted to warn that boy, there.” He backed away from the truck.

“See ya!” Mel said with a slight wave.

“Take care of yourself, Mel. We’ll look after the horses,” Vanessa called as they pulled away.

And then she was alone with Jake.

Mel pushed the button to shut the window. A thin stream of cool air from the dash board

hit her face. She was hot, the summer sun beating through the passenger side window. The air conditioning barely made a dent in the uncomfortable cab. Or maybe it wasn't the temperature. Maybe it was the tension that tightened between them as the truck darted through traffic.

She glanced at Jake, only to discover his eyes glued to the road. Minutes dragged by, and neither one of them spoke. Mel's uneasiness increased. She needed to break the silence. She needed to thank him for the ride and tell him she was sorry. Sorry for what? So many things. Her list was long and rambling. Yet she dared not broach the subject that lay near her heart, the subject of the child they shared.

"I'm sorry about screwing up the class," Mel said instead. "I think I had a good shot at winning."

She saw him chance a glance at her before his gaze returned to the road. "You *were* winning."

"I don't know how I lost my balance." She shook her head. "It isn't like me."

Mel noticed Jake's grip tighten on the steering wheel. "It's easy to fall off if your girth is cut."

## *Chapter Eight*

“What!”

Jake stopped at a light and looked at her. “The girth had been sliced so that motion and the rider’s weight finally severed it. That’s why you fell, Mel. Someone wanted you to fall.”

She let his words sink in. “Why?” Her gaze locked with his.

Jake held her gaze, his eyes moving as they searched her face. The light turned. He looked away and stepped on the gas. “I don’t know if someone was out to hurt the farm or to hurt you.”

“Me?” Mel frowned at the thought.

“Yes, remember the jog cart? I’m not so sure that was an accident.”

Suddenly the truck cab was too cold. Mel shivered and glanced out the passenger side window. The heat from the sun pummeled her face, just as a spike of fear speared her heart. *Lenny*. Was this “someone” Lenny? He was blackmailing her. Could he be trying to kill her too?

“That’s one reason I wanted to take you home,” Jake said.

Mel glanced back at him. “What did you say?”

“I wanted to take you home to get you away from the show. I’m not sure if you’re safe there,” Jake remarked without looking at her.

“But what if this person is the same one who set the barn fire?” Mel asked. “I might not be safe at the farm either.”

Jake took a deep breath. “You may be right. I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Maybe we should tell the police,” Mel suggested as she rubbed her temple. She didn’t need this added complication. Not when she felt like a broken doll. Not when she wasn’t focused enough to contend with this sinister possibility.

“They’ll want suspects,” Jake said.

Mel knew what he was thinking. Vanessa and her ugly rumor. But Vanessa had a motive too. Money. Greed. Mel sighed before she said, "Well, what suspects do we have beside you and Vanessa? We can rule you two out."

"Are you so sure?" Jake's voice was controlled.

"Yes," she replied firmly.

Mel glanced at him once more, noticing the slight movement in his jaw. She studied the line of his brow and the upturn of his lashes. His sandy hair seemed lighter, as if the sun had bleached it blond. She longed to run her fingers through it and see his dimpled smile directed at her. She longed to feel his arms around her, warm and secure.

Mel turned away, remembering the night of the rain storm and the desire that was overwhelming still. As the same hot desire swept over her, she realized something else. Jake was concerned about her well-being. He was taking her home to keep her from harm.

"Okay, who else do we suspect?" Jake wanted to know. "I don't have a clue."

Mel chewed her lip. She couldn't mention Lenny. Not until she learned what he wanted. Slanting another look at Jake, she said, "There's that realtor. He's a real slime ball."

"What realtor?"

"The one who wants to buy Royalty Farm," Mel answered. "I met him the other night, but wasn't impressed."

"In that case, the motive would be ruining Royalty Farm so Vanessa will sell it. Doesn't sound as if you'd be involved in that one." Jake tapped a thumb on the wheel.

"Maybe I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," Mel reflected.

"It could be a disgruntled employee."

"Do we have a disgruntled employee?"

Jake glanced over his left shoulder as he pulled onto the interstate highway. When he faced front again, Mel saw the tenseness in his jaw. "I don't know, but it's something we need to find out."

\* \* \* \*

Mel was sick and tired of being sick and tired. She had literally been on her butt for five days. Bed rest. She hated it. Pushing the controller button, she flipped off the television and sat staring at the darkened screen. Pop's living room was dim, cool and confining. Mel frowned. She

hadn't been this inactive in ages.

Not anymore. She was done with being an invalid, no matter what Pop and Jake said. Mel forced herself up from the cluster of pillows propped at her back and sat up. After pulling on her paddock boots, she stood and with only a twinge of pain in her hips, she started for the barn.

Late July in Kentucky, and it was hot with no break in the weather. Red clay dust swirled around her boots as she walked slowly. The sun beating upon her bare head was a welcome change from Pop's cool house. Mel squinted to adjust to the bright glare.

She spotted Jake in the outside riding ring near the now leveled training barn giving Cory a lesson. Controlling the emotion that surged in her heart, she strolled up to the railing and leaned against the wooden fence.

"Hup there! Show that horse, Cory!" Jake called, his words coming to Mel as if in a dream.

The little girl spurred the big gelding into a faster trot and headed down a straight-away.

"Keep those hands up!"

Cory responded immediately. After raising her hands, she squared her shoulders and pulled her body upright. She lifted her little chin. Her sandy hair bounced up and down with each post as she rode into the turn. If she saw Mel standing at the rail, Cory didn't acknowledge her. Her concentration was complete, a look of pride and confidence in her carriage.

Mel's stomach turned, for she recognized herself in her little girl's demeanor. She recognized the same stubborn determination, the same desire for excellence she had shown at that age. She also identified Cory's willingness to seek approval, to please the man who was giving her a lesson, and it bothered her. Mel remembered how it had felt to want to please Jake. Once he had wanted to please her. Cory was a by-product of their desire to please each other. She regretted again her mistake. Maybe if she'd been stronger, she would never have given in to the passion that had consumed her good sense.

"Okay, walk and come on in and line up," Jake instructed.

He stood in the center of the ring, tall and proud. He tilted his head and switched a crop on his jodhpurs, his thigh muscles defined beneath the jean-like fabric. Cory rode over to him and nudged the back of her horse's front legs with the toe of her boot. The gelding stretched out and Cory poised herself for inspection. Jake circled around Cory like a judge. Once, he

positioned her left leg and heel. Another time, he moved her hands higher.

Mel clutched the rough rail to control a sudden trembling. *Oh, my gosh!* The two mirrored each other. They had the same shape face and the same texture of sandy hair. The only difference was Jake's misplaced dimple, high under his left eye. Cory's dimples were more normally placed next to her mouth, and when she smiled at her father, her dimples seemed to light up her whole face.

Would Jake see it too? Would he perceive the child sitting on the back of the bay horse was a miniature of himself? Mel swallowed hard, regretting for the hundredth time they weren't a family. Couldn't be a family.

Again an emptiness as deep and wide as a rocky gorge gripped her soul. She'd made a mistake, and now she fathomed how big a mistake it had been.

"Mel!"

Startled, Mel glanced up to see Vanessa approach.

"Glad to see you up and around." Her friend came to stand beside her.

"I couldn't take it anymore," Mel said, shifting uneasily.

"You stayed at home longer than I thought you would." Vanessa didn't look at her, but gazed across the riding ring.

"I suppose I was trying to be cautious." Mel wondered if she had been trying to avoid Jake.

Cory turned the horse and headed toward them. "Hi, Vanessa! Mel!" she called with a wave of her hand. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you." Mel felt a flush of pleasure at Cory's concern.

"Hey, that's good. Did you see me ride? Isn't Tia spectacular?" Cory reached down and hugged the neck of her horse.

"I think you're both wonderful," Mel said, a wistful note to her voice.

"Hop down, Cory. We need to go to the dentist." Vanessa opened the gate and took hold of the horse's bridle.

"I need to put Tia away."

Jake came up from behind. "I'll put your horse away, kiddo."

"Thanks, Jake." Cory dismounted and gave the gelding a final pat. She followed Vanessa

to the car, but turned before she opened the door. “Hey, Mel, I hope you don’t mind Jake giving me a lesson. You can give me the next one.”

Love surged, love tinged with regret. Mel smiled. “I’d like that, Cory.”

Cory waved again and climbed into the car.

“Cute kid,” Jake said casually.

“Yes, she’s a charmer.”

Jake led Royal Tiara to the barn. Mel joined him.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Thanks.”

They were quiet as they walked. A deep yearning burned and throbbed inside her. She felt hot, not from the summer sun, but from wanting...needing. She looked askance at Jake. His tan face was set, jaw immobile. Glancing down at her boots, she wished she didn’t feel this swell of desire and was able to remain distant, uncaring.

Maybe that had been part of her problem. She had never gotten over losing Jake. He’d been a third person in her marriage, even though she had tried hard. Now, it was even harder to pretend an aloofness, not when she’d seen him once more with his daughter—the daughter they should be parenting together.

“I haven’t made much progress,” Jake remarked.

“At what?”

“Finding a disgruntled employee,” he said. “I’ve watched all of our caretakers, Sam, Jose, and even Dave. I still don’t have a clue.” He grunted with disgust.

Mel hesitated a second, and then continued walking on. No, she wouldn’t think about Lenny. Not until she had dinner with him.

“It might be me or you,” she added.

“Or Pop. But it all just doesn’t add up.” Jake shook his head. “I must find out what’s going on. I don’t want to see anyone hurt again.”

“You care?” Mel’s remark was sarcastic. She couldn’t help it.

“Of course, I care.” Jake halted the horse and faced her. “What kind of comment was that?”

Mel stopped too. “Well, you say you care, but I seem to remember a time when you

didn't care enough about us here at Royalty Farm. You cared more about your career."

Anger flared in his eyes. "Damn it all, Mel. You're talking about us, not this farm. You know I've always had your well-being at heart."

He clucked to the horse and walked on...fast. Mel couldn't keep up. When she got to the barn, Jake had already stripped Royal Tiara and put him in the cross-ties. She peered at Jake through the metal bars of the stall.

Her pulse was racing. Her jaw set. His betrayal had bothered her for years, eaten away at her. In the past, she'd always side-stepped it, never confronting Jake. Not now. She felt an overpowering need to get her hurt and anger out in the open. Maybe it had something to do with the daughter she'd given away.

"I don't know how you claim to care about me," Mel said quietly through the bars.

Jake glanced up from where he brushed the bay horse. He took a deep breath before he answered, "Mel, you think I left this farm because of my job offer in California."

"Well, didn't you? That's what you told me at the time."

Jake sighed. "I know that's what I said, but that's not the total reason."

"What is it?" Mel's face was flushed with bewildered anger. "Isn't it about time you explain?"

Jake threw down the hard brush and confronted her at the stall door, his hand gripping the metal chain of the cross-tie. "I told you I had a new job because you wouldn't accept the real reason. You had marriage on your mind."

Mel bit her lip. Her eyes narrowed. When she answered, her voice was low and soft. "I thought we had a good relationship. I believed we were in love. I didn't know you didn't feel the same way until you walked out on me."

Jake heard the derision in her voice. He lifted his hand from the cross-tie and ran it through his hair in a gesture of frustration. "Damn it, Mel. We did love each other, but we were too young. You were just eighteen and I had just turned twenty-one. Neither one of us needed to be married. You had college to get through. Pop had already paid for your first semester, remember? We would have ruined our lives if we had married that young."

"What? Our lives are a raging success right now?" Mel snapped.

“You *are* a success. I’ve kept up with your career. You’re a well-respected trainer.” He shrugged and turned back to the horse. “The only thing I’d consider ruined is the mess the fire made out of Royalty Farm.” His voice trailed off.

“But that is out of our control.”

“Precisely.” Jake turned to look at her. Why couldn’t she understand? He wanted her approval. “We were too young, Mel. *Too young*. I did what I thought was best for you, for us. Can’t you see I was thinking of you?”

“Sure.” Her voice was like a cold winter’s day. “Thinking *for* me is more like it.”

“You just wanted to get married. You weren’t thinking about the consequences. If I had married you then, you wouldn’t have gotten your college degree.”

Mel’s eyes were blank. “I married Lenny before I got my college degree. I finished college. I did both, Jake. I did *both*. When you left, you took the options away from me. You didn’t let me choose what I wanted.”

What did she want from him? It was all said and done. *History*. Neither one of them could change a thing.

He came over to where she looked at him through the bars of the stall. He gripped the hard metal and searched her eyes. “Mel, I wanted to marry you. When I came back to Kentucky two years later, I was going to ask you. You were a sophomore then, but *you* had taken that option away from *me*. You were already married.”

His palms grew wet. He hated to hurt her. Unfortunately, he’d hurt her before, so that was nothing new to their relationship. “Mel, I did what I did ten years ago because I cared about you. I didn’t expect you to get married. I’m sorry.”

“I might not have gotten married then if you’d said what you’re saying now.” She turned away from him.

Did he imagine the shake of her shoulders? Was that the sound of a sob when she reached the barn door?

\* \* \* \*

By the time she’d reached Pop’s white frame house, Mel had controlled her tears. She had not controlled the abject misery in her heart. If she’d only waited. It was a mighty big if. *I was such a fool!*

At twenty, when she had married Lenny, she'd been under so much pressure from him. Lenny was convenient and persistent. She felt life was passing her by, leaving her in a rut. Now she was angry at herself for being so needy and naive.

If Jake had spoken up, this could have been avoided. If she'd known he wanted to marry her, eventually, some day, she would have told him about the baby. Maybe they could have been a family.

A cold ache settled around Mel's heart. Her gut ached. Her mind was numb. Those bends in the road, those choices. She had not taken the right one.

When Pop came home, Mel was still sitting in the darkened living room, facing a blank television. The old man flipped on the light, and grumbled, "It is as dark as sin in here, darlin'."

"I like it like that." Mel lifted her chin out of the palm of her hand and gazed at her father.

His face did not visibly change, but he came toward her with his shuffling gait. "Weight of the world on them shoulders, huh?"

How did he know? He always knew. Just like the time she and a sixth grade classmate had stolen a candy bar from the drug store. Pop had known then. Maybe her face reflected guilt too easily. Whatever it was, she had to own up to something because Pop would not let it rest.

"I had an argument with Jake," she said, hoping that would satisfy him.

"Ah, good boy, that one." Pop eyed her before going on, "Too bad you never forgave him."

Mel straightened up. "Forgave him for what?"

"Goin' off to California. Makin' a name for himself."

"That was a long time ago, Pop," she said and settled back with her chin in her hand.

"Some things never forgiven stay with us a long time. We often live to regret it."

That was all Pop said. That was all he had to say. He left the living room, turning out the light and thrusting Mel back into the darkness she'd created in her own soul.

## *Chapter Nine*

It was Mel's first day back on the job. Jake found her cleaning Dreamcatcher's hooves in his stall. With the stallion's bent leg balanced against her hip and his hoof cupped in her hands, Mel's derriere presented a pretty, provocative picture.

Swallowing hard, he collected his physical craving, much as he would control a horse before changing gaits. Once he'd flirted with Mel by whistling. This was not the time to play games, not after he'd hurt her again. Mel needed his support, and for once in his life, he was prepared to give it to her.

"Glad to see you're back," he said quietly.

She dropped the hoof, stood up, and looked at him, her auburn hair tucked behind her ears and tied with a ribbon. Jake shifted under her appraisal. She appeared so solemn, with dark smudges under her big, hazel eyes. Her face was pale.

"I hope you're feeling better." He kept his voice soothing, almost calming as he would speak to a skittish horse.

"Yes, thank you. My butt is fine."

Jake heard the anger and hurt. He gazed back, assessing her demeanor. Her expression altered as he continued his regard. She became uneasy, almost embarrassed. Slanting him an irritated look, she turned back to her task.

Mel picked up Dreamcatcher's rear hoof, presenting him with another fine display, her jodhpurs taut against her backside. Was she deliberately insulting him? He made the sound of amusement deep in his throat. Being supportive may be harder than he'd thought.

"Look, Mel, I'm sorry I upset you."

"Upset me? What you did changed my life."

"I'm talking about a few days ago, when I told you my real reason for going to

California. I didn't want you to continue thinking it was because of my career." Jake glanced at his boots. "You'd thrown that up to me one time too many."

Mel dropped the horse's hoof, tossed the hoof pick into the grooming box, and came over to him. "I don't understand why you never told me."

"I tried to explain it to you," he said, his gaze now caressing her face.

"But if I'd known..." Mel didn't finish her sentence and turned away.

Jake felt stupid. What had he been thinking so many years ago? He should have explained himself better. Unfortunately, it couldn't be undone. He had to go on from here and try to establish a new future with Mel.

She picked up the cotton blanket and lifted it onto Dreamcatcher's back. Jake helped her pull the light sheet into the place. He hooked the front buckles as she tugged the strap beneath the horse's barrel.

"We can't change what happened, Mel, and I'm sorry. I don't want you to have the wrong impression of me. Now that I'm back, I find I'm still attracted to you. I don't want to push you, but maybe we can be friends again."

He'd said what was on his mind, and a weight had lifted off his mind. Jake stepped out of the stall to assess her reaction.

Mel unbuckled the horse's halter, stripped it off, and unhooked the cross-ties. Picking up the box, she also left the stall and hung the halter on the stall door. Pulling it shut, she turned and elevated her gaze to him. The green and brown flecks of her hazel eyes held him enthralled. The lift of her small chin and the squaring of her shoulders enticed him.

He wanted to kiss her. He couldn't help it. She had that kind of effect on him, on his mind and his body. His blood raced like a horse first turned out to pasture.

"I still consider you my friend, Jake," Mel said with quiet dignity. "I suppose we could try being friends."

Her agreement startled him. He wanted more than friendship. Surely she knew that. Yet this was a good start. Jake smiled at her. The unexpected turn of events now sent his heart galloping.

Mel watched the misplaced dimple pop out under Jake's left eye when he grinned big and

wide. His eyes lit with delight. She couldn't believe her simple statement had such an effect on him. Disconcerted, she turned toward the tack room with Jake at her heels. He was trying. He had admitted a mistake. He said he cared for her. The thought warmed her as a stab of remorse reminded her of her own lie.

No, it wasn't a lie. She hadn't lied to anyone about Cory. She just hadn't admitted the truth. Her stomach churning with sorrow, she tried to justify her actions to herself. She had good reasons for giving up Cory. What kind of life could she, a single teenage parent, have provided for the child? Her mistake wasn't going to ruin her daughter's life. Cory had been blessed with a mom and a dad for the first eight years of her life.

Maybe she shouldn't judge herself too harshly. After all, she'd only been eighteen and had done what was right at the time, given the circumstances.

All these thoughts swirled in her mind as she hung up the cross-ties. Jake took the box from her and placed it on the floor. Her daily tasks done, she glanced at Jake. He was quietly watching her. She didn't know what to say to him. She felt tongue-tied, like a student giving her first speech.

She looked up at him with a tentative smile. "Now what?"

"Good question." He grinned at her. She wished he would cut it out. His smiles disarmed her, melting her heart and her pain. "We could clean tack," he said.

That's not what she'd meant. She had been wondering about their relationship. But if he wanted to help clean their borrowed tack, maybe it was just as well.

One step at a time.

"Okay, sir, grab a sponge and a saddle. I'll get the new bottle of Neatsfoot Oil from the truck."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied as she went out the door.

Mel didn't realize how the murky stable shielded them from the early August sunshine. It was still unbearably hot. A slow drop of perspiration dripped between her breasts. She heard the low rumble of thunder in the distance and glanced at the sky. Ominous clouds were forming in the west. For the first time in a long time, she felt good, hopeful. She wanted to enjoy Jake's company and the tiny bit of truce they had called.

\* \* \* \*

They worked together for an hour—sitting on stools in the tack room, cleaning the bridles, bits and saddles and chatting about horses and shows and the heat. Jake wanted this kind of conversation with Mel, one that was normal and easy and mirrored the comfortable companionship they used to have, back when they were in love.

Jake finished with the bridle and set it aside. He glanced at Mel. A bead of perspiration lined her upper lip. Her hands were slick and wet from the Neatsfoot Oil that she had applied to a saddle. She lifted her hand to scratch her nose.

She was so cute with a streak of oil across her nose and a smudge of dirt on her brow.

“Here,” he said and leaned forward with his towel. “This is fairly clean. Let me repair your make-up.”

Mel scowled, but he ignored her and dabbed the blotch on her forehead.

“I can do that myself.” She snatched away the towel.

“A little to the right,” he directed, as she tried to remove the oil from her face. Her efforts only made the smudge worse. “Oh, here,” Jake grumbled.

Scooting his stool nearer, he took the towel from Mel’s hand. Gently he rubbed the smear along her nose, and the one on her forehead. Then he took her wrist, holding up her right hand, and began to wipe each oily finger with the towel, slowly, one at a time. Her hazel eyes darkened with desire. Feeling the throb of arousal, Jake sucked in his breath. His gaze searched her face, almost desperate for confirmation. Did she feel it too? This pull, this attraction? As if they had never been apart.

“I like truces,” he murmured as his grip tightened on her wrist.

Jake pulled Mel forward. When she didn’t resist, he touched his lips to hers. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her lips parted under his pressure. Her response sent his stomach diving. He let go of her wrist and grabbed her shoulders. Tugging Mel toward him, he put her on his lap, and she coiled her arms around his neck. Deepening his kiss, he tasted the saltiness of her lip and darted his tongue into the depths of her mouth. Light-headed and excited, he clutched her to his chest.

Mel found it hard to breath. Jake consumed her senses. Just the feel of him beneath her, around her, caused her stomach to plummet and her heart to soar. He was so insistent, ardent,

and his urgency increased hers. She kissed him back unable to get enough of him. Her mouth opened to his slashing tongue, and she took it in greedily, coveting every part of him.

Jake moved slightly, and she felt his hardness beneath his jodhpurs. He moved again, and slipped his hand up her t-shirt. His fingers scorched her damp skin, sending flames of desire downward through her body. She gasped against his lips. He drew a quick breath and assaulted her mouth again. When he touched her bra, running a finger underneath it to massage her suddenly hard nipple, Mel squirmed with a pulsing, driving need.

“Oh, Jake,” she moaned into his mouth.

He clutched her whole breast then, his breathing pounding in her ear. “God, Mel,” he murmured. “I can’t believe this. It’s so good.”

It was good. Mel knew it. Just as she knew that if they didn’t stop, they’d end up on the tack room floor. But she didn’t care. She was older now, wiser. She could handle him, and she felt surprisingly feminine and desirable.

In a heartbeat, he held her mouth with his, and then released it. Almost sitting her away from him, although she still had her arms secure around his neck, he searched her eyes. Mel looked back at him, at the sky blue of his eyes, wanting to see into his soul, wanting to read what was in his mind. He swallowed hard, his breathing still coming quickly.

“Mel, I...”

Dave interrupted by running into the tack room. “Jake!”

Mel jumped out of Jake’s lap and stared guiltily at the little groom. Fortunately, he didn’t notice their compromising position.

“The sheriff phoned,” he said out of breath. “A horse was struck by a train near the railroad crossing. He thinks it was one of ours,” Dave explained, his voice raising an octave.

Jake stood up. “What?”

“The sheriff said the horse must have jumped a fence.”

“If he’s talking about one of the mares in the north pasture, that doesn’t make sense,” Jake said, and looked at Mel for confirmation “Those horses don’t jump fences.”

“With all that’s been happening around here, I wonder if someone turned them out,” Mel thought out loud. She didn’t say her ex-husband’s name, but a familiar uneasiness clutched her.

“Damn.” Jake glanced at Dave. “You go out to the crossing. Take Pop with you. He’ll

know if it's one of ours. Mel and I will ride up to the north pasture and see what we can find out."

As a boom of thunder rattled the barn, Dave turned to leave. "With this rain coming on, better take Mel's four-wheel drive," he suggested.

Mel agreed with a quick nod. "Dave, take your cell phone and call me," Jake said.

Mel grabbed the keys from her purse and tossed a rain poncho over her head. Jake picked up his and followed her to the Jeep.

"Want to drive?" Mel asked, ready to toss him the keys.

Jake shook his head. "You know the way better than I do."

They climbed into the four-wheel drive as the first drops of rain began to fall. By the time they'd reached the north pasture, the wind had risen, and driving rain hit against the windshield. The wipers clacked, clacked back and forth, not offering much help, Mel straining to see. The vehicle bumped over the bluegrass field.

Driving slowly along the perimeter of the fence, she considered the situation. Royalty Farm could not continue suffering such losses. Too much was at stake. Although Vanessa had never said anything, Mel felt her friend was close to giving in to that scummy realtor. Bert Noble's eldest daughter didn't have the love of the farm like her father or his adopted daughter, Cory. Mel wanted to preserve the farm for the little girl. She gripped the steering wheel and peered through the windshield, fear grinding in the pit of her stomach.

"There's the break," Jake said in a low voice.

Mel pulled to a stop, put the truck in park, and stared at the opening in the weather-beaten, white rail fence.

"Damn. Someone's removed the boards."

Even in the darkness caused by the downpour, Mel saw tenseness in the way Jake's mouth was set. Her knuckles were white as she continued to grip the wheel. She imagined how he felt, and she wanted to reach out and comfort him.

Looking away, she wished he would reach out and give her comfort, tell her everything would be okay—that they'd find this evil person who was ruining Royalty Farm—that somehow, some day, they would be a couple again, even a family.

"I'll see what I can do to fix the break," Jake said. "You stay here."

Mel opened her mouth to protest, but he was already gone. Watching through the rain-clobbered windshield, she saw him lift the railing in place. When he struggled to hold the railing and swing the hammer at the same time, Mel threw open the door and went to help.

“I told you to stay inside,” he yelled above the noise of the rain.

“Oh, shut up,” she growled. “I’ll hold the board. You hammer.”

Jake cast a surprised look, but allowed her to take the railing from him. In a few minutes, the fence was back in some sort of repair, and they retreated to the truck.

“Thanks,” he said, pushing back the hood of his poncho. Water dripped from his face and hair.

“No problem,” she muttered.

His gaze was bothersome. Her pulse leaped in response. To cover her reaction, she turned on the ignition and put her hand on the stick.

“Really.” His voice was like warm wine. “I appreciate your help. I’m glad we’re a team again.”

Jake covered her hand with his. Mel trembled at his touch. Maybe it was the cold rain, she tried to tell herself, knowing full well it was the feel of his fingers on hers. She didn’t know what to say to him. What did he want from her? What did she want from him? Before she could overcome her uneasiness, the cell phone rang, and Jake lifted his hand to answer it.

“Yes,” he acknowledged, not removing his gaze from her face.

Mel barely heard his responses to the person on the phone, because she was so focused on his eyes. They seemed to bore a hole through the mask of antagonism she wore to cover her hurt. They worked on her heart, melting its icy cold and replacing it with a bubbling cauldron of desire.

“Okay, we’ll go by the shed and see how many we can find.” Jake put down the receiver. Shifting in his seat, and looking away, he ran his hand through his hair. “That was Dave.”

“Yeah?”

Jake looked back at her. “He said Pop identified the mare as one in foal to Royalty’s Reverie.”

Mel cursed inwardly and shut her eyes. This was a double tragedy. A prize mare in foal. She swallowed hard and opened her eyes to find Jake’s gaze still on hers.

“Pop said we had twenty-five mares in this pasture, twenty-one with foals by their sides. Four mares and foals have been rounded up on the Neely property. Let’s go by the run-in shed and take a count,” Jake suggested. “We may have to go out on horseback and locate the rest.”

“Okay, let’s go.” Mel threw the truck into gear, glad for the action.

The run-in shed was a quarter mile away. Through the rain and the haze, it was hard to see, so they climbed out of the Jeep to count the horses. Only nine mares and six foals had sought shelter in the three-sided building. Frustrated by the low count, Mel climbed into the truck. Jake joined her, and she drove back to the farm.

As they entered the tack room, they caught the end of a heated discussion.

“It’s them bums at Neely Hills!” Pop hollered, arms gesturing.

“Now, hold on, Pop,” Vanessa cautioned. “Jim Neely has his men out now searching his property.” Cory stood behind her big sister, eyes wide with the fright and excitement of the moment.

“How many did you find?” Dave asked looking glumly up at Jake.

“Nine mares and six foals.” Jake went over to Cory and tousled her hair.

“Cut it out! You’re wet!”

“You would be too, kiddo, if you’d been outside in the rain like me,” he told Cory.

Mel’s heart turned over at their easy banter.

“Fourteen damn horses, countin’ the dead un, and ten foals,” Pop ticked off the number.

“This is too much like the fire,” Vanessa murmured, her eyes dark and troubled.

Mel felt it too, that same sense of déjà vu. She’d been powerless during the barn fire, and felt powerless now. It was like her marriage to Lenny. She had been totally out of control at times, and she loathed that feeling. Sucking in a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders. *Not again.* Not if she could do something about it.

“I imagine the rest of the horses escaped from the break in the fence. We’d better get out there and look for the rest,” she said to the assembled group.

“We need to find those horses before something else happens to them,” Jake agreed.

If they are off our property, we can’t round them up with the Jeep. We need to be on horseback. I’ll saddle that old gelding in the near paddock.” Mel grabbed a lead line, knowing she couldn’t take a chance on riding a valuable show horse.

While Dave helped Mel bring in and saddle the old gelding, Jake saddled one of Cory's lesson horses.

"Take this cell phone with you." Dave thrust it into Mel's hands. "You might need it."

Mel tucked the small, flip phone into the pocket of her t-shirt and tugged down the poncho. Dave held the horse steady as she mounted. Jake was already on the back of Cory's horse. He glanced at Mel and smiled grimly.

She didn't smile back. "After you," she said with a nod.

"No, ladies first." He tipped his head toward the open barn door.

Mel looked away, and laying a leg into the side of the horse, rode out into the steady downpour.

## *Chapter Ten*

Lightning seared the late afternoon sky. Alarmed at its nearness, Mel trembled, involuntarily, pressing her legs against the sides of the old gelding. The horse snorted and lunged forward as a thunderclap shook the earth beneath his hooves. She steadied the animal while the hammering rain continued to soak her to the skin. Ineffectual as her poncho was, it did provide some protection from the pounding wind that seemed to force them backward with each step they took.

Yet the poncho didn't provide any protection from the fear that rumbled through Mel's heart. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the past, of how it might be encroaching on her present.

Sucking up her anxiety the best she could, Mel led the way along the gravel road and turned onto a little used, country back-road. It bisected the Noble property with that of the Neely's. About a mile away, she halted in front of a gate, leaned down, and pulled it open.

"This pasture is parallel to ours," she called over her shoulder.

"I remember," Jake shouted back. "Go ahead. I'll get the gate."

Mel saw the determined look on his face. It was wet, just as hers, and his jaw was set in its familiar manner. His hands barely protruded from the folds of the poncho. For a moment, Mel glanced at his fingers, remembering the affect they had on her as they had stroked her breast. In her mind, she felt again his hot arousal. She recalled her own awakening, deep within her being.

To subdue it, she rubbed herself against the saddle. Slow. Like the movement of love. But it only made her burn harder. Even in the midst of the thunderstorm, there was a need inside of her that had not been quenched in years. A need that was so primal and immense it threatened to consume her.

Turning quickly, Mel rode on, forcing the skittish gelding into a slow jog. She had something more worrisome to think about than her reaction to Jake Hendricks. He couldn't get to

her. She wouldn't let him.

Skirting the fence, with Jake close behind, Mel urged the gelding forward. She was glad Jake was with her. Whoever had damaged the fence could be lurking in the rain and the haze. He could be out there somewhere, ready to strike again. Mel didn't want to dwell on it, just as she didn't want to dwell on her hunger for Jake. She didn't want to reflect too deeply on who could be responsible for the vandalism at Royalty Farm. If it was Lenny, as she suspected, Mel didn't want to believe her ex-husband may have some perverse reason to hurt the farm and people she loved.

Soon they came to a crest of a hill. Pausing, Mel let the horse's head drop while she waited for Jake to catch up.

"Damn! This storm is nasty!" he said when he rode up beside her. He was so near that his knee brushed against hers. "Thanks for coming along, Mel. I'm glad for your help."

She thought he was going to reach out and touch her hand as he had done in the Jeep. Taking a long, shuddering breath of control, Mel lifted her chin and stared boldly back into his eyes.

"Just doing my job," she said.

"I think it's more than that," he replied, "but I'm not going to argue with you now. We've got to find those horses."

They started again, heading for a clump of trees on the horizon. The whistling wind whipped the poncho taut against Mel's body. The wet reins slipped through her palms, and she gripped the leather tighter, her fingers aching from the effort. Her heart ached too, with an overwhelming sense of dread. Maybe after things settled down, after the World's Grand Championship, she and Jake could concentrate on their relationship. Maybe they could sort out the muddle they'd made of what they once had together.

As suddenly as lightning lit the sky, the wide-eyed face of Cory flashed through Mel's mind. Her mood darkened like the brooding sky. Try as she would, she knew she couldn't avoid the facts any longer. If she and Jake were to ever have a relationship based on truth and trust, she had to tell him about Cory. She squeezed her eyes together and bit her lip in resignation. Just as she knew the rain had soaked her to the bone, Mel knew what she had to do to make it right between her and Jake.

And she was even more afraid.

Jake ducked his head in a futile attempt to shield his eyes from the rain. He admired Mel. No other woman he knew would ride out into a storm. They took a chance of being struck by lightning, he knew, but there was no choice. They had to gather up those horses. Royalty Farm couldn't absorb much more hard luck. He'd seen Vanessa's books. Jake locked his jaws even tighter as lightning shattered the sky.

"Jake!" Mel shouted. She stood in her stirrups and pointed over her horse's head.

Sheltered under the knot of trees were five mares and five foals. A hurrah emerged from Mel as she spurred the gelding forward. Jake laid his calves into the side of his horse and galloped after her.

Pulling back to a halt several yards from the trees, Mel waited for him. "I don't want to spook them," she said. "How should we go about this?"

Jake considered for a moment. "They're ours, I assume."

"Yeah, Pop said the Neelys didn't have horses in this field," Mel answered, looking away.

Jake observed the line of her jaw, the slope of her nose and the lay of her lashes. Although wet from the torrent of rain, she presented a perfect profile. Jake longed to touch her cheek, to wipe the water from her lashes. He longed to shield her from the rain—to wrap her up into his arms and protect her—to love her and never let her be hurt again.

"Call Dave, and tell him we've found more horses."

Mel nodded and fumbled for the cell phone beneath her poncho. She pulled it out, opened it and punched the number. Jake couldn't hear the conversation above the noise of the rain, so urged his mount closer.

"Got Sam, his assistant," she told him as she flipped the phone shut. "He said Dave and Pop have gone down the highway where the folks at Carter's farm found five more on their property."

"That leaves one more mare and foal," Jake said after doing the calculations. "Damn it! Where can they be?"

Mel looked back at him, her eyes wide and serious. She reminded him of little Cory when

she looked at him that way. Jake smiled inwardly at the thought, and turned to consider the group of mares.

“We have two ropes. The best thing is for you to lead two mares. The rest should follow. I’ll continue looking for the other horses.” Jake rode slowly toward the herd, assessing them with a practiced eye.

He selected the one he thought to be the dominant mare and grabbed its halter with his hand, leaning sideways and letting his own reins drop. Expertly, he threaded the lead line over the horse’s nose, through the loops of the halter, and buckled it. Grabbing his reins, he angled his horse, and gave the rope to Mel. Cutting out another mare, he buckled on the last lead line and led the horse over to Mel.

“I’ll follow you a ways to get them going,” he offered.

“Will you be okay?” She was reluctant to leave him.

It pleased him that she was concerned. “Sure.”

“Maybe you ought to take the phone.”

“No, I’ll be all right. Go on. Get out of here.”

Mel grasped the two leads in one hand and gripped her reins in her right one. Without comment, she rode away. Jake followed up the crest of the hill, herding the horses and making sure the mares and foals were going along with her.

“I’ll take them to the paddock by our barn,” she shouted, “and come back for you.”

“No, don’t. I’ll be along shortly. One mare can’t be hard to find.”

Jake watched them go until the haze and the lengthening twilight surrounded them up.

\* \* \* \*

*Stupid, stubborn man!* Jake hadn’t returned and it was almost nine o’clock. He should have taken the cell phone.

She sat on the top of the battered desk in the old barn’s office and kicked her boots against the metal. The noise made an irritating clank in the too quiet room. Pop sat on a shabby sofa, silently drubbing his fingers on the arm. Dave had left, saying he couldn’t sit still, and had gone out to join Sam to smoke.

Dave came back in. “Rain’s stopped.”

Pop looked up. “Something’s wrong.”

*Brilliant.* Mel had assumed that two hours ago. She hated this inactivity.

She jumped up and fumbled for her keys. “Well, let’s go find him.”

“Not so fast, darlin’,” Pop came back. “I don’t want you goin’ alone.”

“I’m taking the Jeep this time. Dave can take the farm truck and cover our side of the north field,” she reasoned.

“Still don’t want you goin’ alone. Take Sam.”

When Pop was in that mood, Mel knew an elephant couldn’t move him. “Okay,” she said, even though she considered the assistant groom shiftless.

But taking Sam satisfied Pop.

Soon Mel and the groom were bouncing toward the Neely property, the headlights of the four wheel drive cutting bright swatches through the drenched pasture.

“Keep your eyes open, and let me know if you see anything,” Mel ordered.

She concentrated on the left side of the Jeep, scanning the white fence line that looked like a translucent ribbon against the dark, rolling field. Ahead lay the same clump of trees where she and Jake had found the mares and foals. Seeing it deserted sharpened Mel’s fear. She clenched the steering wheel tighter, until her nails bit into the palms of her hands, and she wrestled with an overpowering sense of urgency.

Ahead the fence ended abruptly, turning in a perpendicular line to the east. Mel pressed the brakes, and the Jeep lurched to a halt. Staring at the edge of the Neely property, worry tightened her stomach. Somehow they had missed Jake. *Damn!*

“What do we do now?” Sam asked, hunching low in his seat. His voice was thick and surly.

Mel allowed his question to meet a long silence. Turning the Jeep and heading back the way they’d come, she finally blurted, “We keep on looking.”

Several minutes later, driving up a slope, Mel spotted Jake’s horse standing rider-less near several trees. Her heart spiraled.

“Look, Sam!” Mel gunned the Jeep. “How did you miss that horse?”

He shrugged indifferently. “Easy in the dark.”

She was furious at Sam’s nonchalant attitude, the passive, dumb look on his face, and at the impotent fear that clogged her throat.

As the Jeep jerked to a halt, the horse bolted a few yards away. Fighting a rush of panic, Mel threw the vehicle into park, opened the door, slid out, and followed the gelding.

"It's okay. Easy, boy. Easy." Expertly, she lifted her arms, spread eagle, urging the animal to trust her. "I can use your help," Mel screamed at Sam.

Reluctantly, she thought, the groom left the vehicle and circled to the right. After a few minutes of working together, they had surrounded the horse, cutting him off, Mel easily catching his reins.

"We got another problem, miss," Sam said in his monotone.

Mel struggled to see him in the darkness. *Now what?* The groom was pointing toward the side of the hill. "Damn! I thought I put it in park!"

Tossing the reins to Sam, she stumbled over the rugged terrain to reach her Jeep. To her horror, it had sunk up to its fenders in mud.

"How could this happen?"

Her throat aching with unshed tears of frustration, Mel stared blankly at the vehicle. It was as if some invisible hand toyed with her, wrecking havoc on everything she'd tried to do tonight. First, there was the accident at the railroad crossing killing the expensive mare, then the thunderstorm, and perilous search for the horses. Now Jake was missing and she was no closer to finding him now than she'd been an hour ago when she set out on this wild goose chase.

And that sorry excuse for a groom was no help at all.

Jerking open the door, Mel grasped the powerful Halogen flashlight from the floorboard. After she pushed it on, she flicked off the ignition and pocketed the keys. By the beam of the flashlight, she confirmed that the gear shift was in neutral. She could have sworn she'd set the shift in park.

*Okay. All is not lost.* She still had the cell phone. Taking a deep breath to stifle her last misgivings, Mel flipped it up and tried to dial. No dial tone. It was the last straw. Tears of helpless rage slipped down her cheeks. Backhanding them, Mel stomped up the hill to where Sam held the horse.

"This phone won't work." She held it up as if he could see it in the black night around them.

"You got it wet today," he offered. "Maybe it shorted out."

That sounded too logical, something a mechanical thing would do, and Mel didn't know much about mechanical things. Fighting the punch drunk fear and anger in her stomach, she considered what to do. Sam wasn't much help. He seemed, in fact, to be throwing up barriers. Maybe not in reality, but his very passivity bothered her.

"You ride back to the farm," she said in a choking whisper. "Have Dave call the sheriff. Tell Dave to come back here with the truck. I'll keep looking for Jake. "

"Don't know about that," Sam answered. "Pop wouldn't like you being out here alone."

"Pop's not here," she shouted. "I'm in charge. You do what I say!"

"Right." He tossed her a look of hostility, mounted the horse, and loped away.

Motionless, she let anger and fear wash over her. Features taut, breath coming in shallow gasps, she sorted out the two emotions, pushing the fear aside and hanging on to the sharper anger. For with the anger, she knew how to cope. She could use it to navigate this darkness surrounding her. Like the fury that had been her skipper during the long months of her divorce, Mel knew how to manipulate it, and how to turn it into a constructive force.

The sound of the horse had long ago died away. Mel walked toward the shadowy trees that stood like watchmen in the distance. Other night sounds masked the absolute silence of the night—the ratchet of crickets, and the low-pitched rumble of bull frogs. Slowly, the after-rain mugginess that rose in a mist from the pasture seeped into her awareness.

She was hot. Sweat tickled her breast. She touched her tongue to the saltiness that also laced her lip. Balling her left hand into a fist, she swiped off the wetness from her lip. With her other hand raised, she shot the beam from the flashlight into the gloom like a guileless child would throw a ball.

*Where could he be? Where in this deserted pasture could Jake be?* Throwing light around the field, Mel paused a moment. Shifting in her stance, she shut her eyes. Now she focused on her raspy breathing, the motion of her chest rising and falling. And then she heard it. In the distance, Mel picked up a subtle cadence of a creek.

Opening her eyes, Mel began to walk and then trot toward the cluster of trees. She knew instinctively Jake was in there. Like a mare knows her own foal, Mel perceived his nearness, his danger.

"Jake!" She stopped, wishing her breath didn't echo in her ears.

Tangled in the brush somewhere had to be an opening, a trail of some kind. Her heart pushed up in her throat, and her blood galloped like an out-of-control colt. As the lengths of flashlight stabbed the snarled undergrowth, panic slammed through her. She'd crept only a few steps when the light revealed a path plunging into the darkness. Without hesitation, she followed it into the blackness below.

"Jake!" she shouted again, flashing the light ahead of her.

"Mel!"

"I'm coming!"

Now she remembered this ravine from trail rides as a kid. It had been a scary ride back then—down the slippery path, over fallen trees, across the shallow creek and up the steep side, the horse's neck and withers next to her nose as she leaned forward to give him his head. In the dark, the trail seemed even more treacherous.

Mel saw the frantic mare first. She pawed and tossed her head as she balanced on a firm ledge several feet above the creek. Was Mel just imagining it or was the water rising?

She fanned the light out away from the mare, searching for Jake.

"Mel! Damn, I'm glad you got here! Are you alone?"

"Yes. Sam's gone for help. Where are you?"

"Down here!"

Taking a few more steps, Mel pulled up short. There in the creek with water up to his waist, Jake stood with his arms outstretched, stabilizing the head and neck of a small foal. The gangly colt was contorted with its fore leg stuck in the fork of a buckeye tree precariously perched over the creek. Without Jake's support, the horse would drown in the rising water.

"Oh, my God!" Mel scooted on her haunches down the loose embankment. "How long have you been in that water?"

"Not long really," he said. "You'd be surprised how cold it is, though."

In the flashlight beam, Mel saw his heartening smile. He was trying to ease her fear.

"Couldn't you free his leg?"

"That trunk is too shaky. With my weight, I couldn't chance it." He shook his head. "This is, unfortunately, all I could muster in the time I had. I was praying the cavalry would save the day before I had to abandon the colt."

“Cavalry, huh? I’m afraid all you’ve got is one small, female horse trainer that you almost refused to hire.” Mel couldn’t resist the barb. It lightened the mood, causing her to ignore the thud of dread that sounded like a cannon in her ears.

“Mel, don’t try it. It’s too dangerous.”

“You’ve done it now, man,” Mel bantered. “Them’s fightin’ words.” She positioned the flashlight on the bank to shine on the tree.

“Be careful,” Jake warned. “That colt is spooked and his hooves are sharp.”

Mel knew that. She concentrated on the thrashing foal. He was a delicate creature with a fine head and well-shaped legs—legs that could easily be broken. Jake was right, the little horse had hooves like razors, and if she wasn’t careful, they would cut her to shreds.

“Easy. Easy.” Mel crooned while she slowly straddled the tree trunk.

Too bad she didn’t have her poncho. She could throw it over the hind legs of the colt. There wasn’t anything else. *Except my t-shirt.*

Not considering her modesty, Mel pulled her shirt over her head. Holding it by the sleeves, she stretched it out. Without looking at Jake and trying not to think about what kind of picture she presented in her bra and jeans, she flung the shirt over the spindly legs.

It worked long enough for Mel to crawl out on the trunk over the colt. He squirmed beneath her like a fiend.

“Easy, darlin’,” she used Pop’s endearment. “Easy, boy.”

Carefully, she extended her right hand to grab his slim fore leg, and at the same time, tried to keep the free hoof from flailing her face. Moving slightly, she stretched out with her left hand, pressing her face against the slim neck. Steam rose from the warm horseflesh.

“Be careful!”

Inwardly cringing with fear, outwardly refusing to show it, Mel gripped the left leg, and loosened it from the rough wood. When she freed the leg, the colt thrashed trying to stand. It was impossible, and in a sudden whoosh, they both plunged into the icy water of the creek.

Jake broke her fall. He fell back under the water.

Mel and the colt struggled together. She found her footing, and somehow righted the foal. With all the effort she could muster, she shoved the wriggling horse toward the bank. He scrambled out of the creek onto the bank and was greeted by his mother.

“Jake!” The cold and the force of the water sucked her breath away.

“I’m okay!” Jake’s head popped up right in front of her face.

As he gained his balance, his hands closed around her arms and steadied her. The meager light of the flashlight cast weird shadows across Jake’s face. She couldn’t see him as much as feel him—the ripple of his muscles beneath his soaked shirt rubbing against her bare shoulders, the solid rock of his chest pressing against her cheek. He held her there with the water surging around them. She let him hold her, soaking in all his masculine strength.

“You were magnificent,” he said, stroking her dripping hair.

A drop from his hand rolled down her nose. She blinked up at him, and shook her head no. She didn’t feel magnificent. She felt scared and silly like a child.

“I couldn’t find you.” Her voice sounded plaintive even to her own ears.

Jake anchored her tightly against him. “But you did. That’s all that matters,” he said as he touched his lips to her hair. “Now let’s get out of this water before we drown!”

## *Chapter Eleven*

Jake stood at the paddock gate, his gaze fastened on the rescued colt and its mother, but in his mind, he saw the top of Mel's bowed head and mound of breast against his chest, her athletic bra straps crossing in the back where he placed his hands. Locked in his arms, water swirling around them, she'd turned to him for support. He liked that. Jake smiled at nothing in particular, his thoughts of Mel blinding him to the fierce August sun. He had never been much of a day dreamer. Not until Mel came back into his life.

The desire that now knifed through him and hardened his flesh was not a daydream. It was real and uncomfortable. Jake shifted his stance and placed a booted foot on the lower rail of the fence. He rested his arms against the upper rail and leaned forward. Mel had been worried about him. She'd searched alone through the darkness to find him. He grinned again. Her concern was like a warm caress. It stimulated his heart, causing it to march in double time.

Mel had needed him too. Needed him to carry the little colt up the sloppy bank and lower him into the truck Dave had brought. He'd freed her Jeep from the mud, an easy thing to do just by putting it into four wheel drive and rocking it back and forth. Mel had not thought of that. After all, she was a *typical* female. He smirked at the idea of Mel being typical. He'd better never say that to her face. She'd never let him live it down, for Mel was far from average. When he'd needed her, she'd come to his rescue. She'd taken a big risk and released the colt. She was as brave and courageous as she was good-hearted and beautiful.

"Must be thinking about Mel," a sharp little voice said.

Jake glanced down to find Cory staring up at him, a dimpled grin spreading across her face.

Moving his foot off the rail and facing her, only an elbow resting on the fence, Jake asked, "What makes you say that, kiddo?"

“Oh, you’ve got that silly look on your face,” she bantered back.

He pulled his elbow down and crossed his arms in a defensive move. “What look?”

“That look you have on your face whenever you think of Mel!”

Satisfaction blazed in Cory’s eyes as if she knew she’d hit her mark. Flipping her blond braid, she twirled around and took off toward the barn.

“Am I that obvious?” Jake asked, catching up with her.

She slowed and sauntered along, trying to hide a smile. “Like a love-sick cat.”

“That’s bad.”

“Yeah, when my cat got like that, my mom got her fixed.” Cory was serious.

“Stop that!” Jake laughed. He snatched her up, swung her around and set her on his shoulders.

Laughing too, Cory pounded gently on his head. “Put me down, you meany.”

“I’m not mean! I’m a five-gaited horse and this is the World’s Grand Championship. You’re the world’s best female rider and this is your very first time to ride in Freedom Hall.”

Cory fell into the play acting. “Okay, trot. Pick up those hooves!”

Jake trotted in a circle around the dusty parking lot of the barn.

“Now canter!” Cory ordered, whipping the air with a pretend riding crop.

Jake changed his gait into a skipping lope. This was getting to be more like work than play, but he was having fun.

“Stop,” she said. “Now reverse.”

Jake stopped and changed directions. “Slow gait,” he said through his huffs and puffs, and started ambling around in a circle.

“Rack on!” Cory yelled, whooping like a cowboy at a rodeo.

Jake tried valiantly to comply, but it was too much. He racked into the dusky barn and tumbled the little girl over his head onto a bale of straw.

“Silly!” She succumbed to a spasm of giggles.

“Silly? I’m not silly.” He collapsed onto the sawdust of the barn floor with his back against the straw.

Cory snickered and tackled him around his neck. Through his fit of laughter, Jake regretted not having a daughter like Cory.

\* \* \* \*

It was seven o'clock when Mel paused on the threshold of The Old Stone Inn in Simpsonville and scanned the tables. Her fists clenched to control a shudder that filtered through her body. She wasn't ready for this encounter. She had barely recovered from the panic and trauma of the previous day. Being unable to find Jake had affected her more than she realized. Then Lenny's call in the aftermath of that gut-wrenching fear had made her physically sick.

She had to find out what Lenny knew.

"May I help you?" the hostess asked.

With a faint smile of acknowledgment, Mel turned to the woman. "Yes, I'm to meet someone." Her voice sounded as thin as a badly played clarinet.

"Ah, the gentleman is already here." The hostess gave Mel a speculative look. "Follow me, dear."

Mel fumbled with a ball of rising anger rising. The woman's assumption she and Lenny were having a romantic rendezvous irritated her. Yet maybe the anger was a good thing to hold on to. It was better than fear.

Lenny sat in an isolated corner with his back against the wall. It was so like him to have a commanding view of the area, to already have the upper hand. Mel drew a deep breath and lifted her chin. The palms of her hands grew slick. *What does he know about Cory?* With anger and hatred in her heart, she crossed the floor.

"Here you are. Enjoy your dinner." The hostess placed a menu on the table and turned away.

"Melody, so good to see you," Lenny said as if she were a long-lost lover, not an ex-wife. He stood and pulled out her chair.

Letting him seat her, Mel ignored his enthusiasm. Her skin crawled when his hand grazed her back.

Lenny returned to his seat and favored Mel with a look of dark amusement. "I'm glad you accepted my invitation."

"Don't play games with me, Lenny. What do you want?"

"Want? I just want to have dinner with you." He handed her silverware wrapped in a white cloth napkin. "Here, relax. You used to love this place."

Mel snatched the silverware from him and opened the napkin, laying it in her lap. He was doing it to her again. Like an intangible shadow, Lenny had a way of skittering away from an issue. She'd never been able to pin him down in their marriage. How could she hope to do so now?

"You're up to something. I want to know what it is," Mel stated and realized she'd fallen back into the same old defensive patterns.

His smile was slow and ingratiating. "Why do you ask?"

Catching her breath, Mel realized he was putting down another trap. She was too afraid to ask Lenny the real question. What did he know about Cory?

"I ask because I'm just a little curious about someone who threatens me. You've been following me around, showing up in the strangest places," she said instead.

"A cocktail party is strange?"

"Coming all the way from Missouri is strange," Mel snapped.

"Melody, darling, The Lexington Junior League Horse Show is a very prestigious event," he replied, his voice oily. "It coincides with the Saddlebred auction at Tattersalls."

Mel made a sound of bitter amusement. "I thought you gambled away all your money. You can't afford the auction."

She opened the menu, hoping to buy herself some time to regain control. Lenny enjoyed giving her a hard time. Being contrary was one of his games.

The waitress arrived to take their drink order. "We'll take iced tea," Lenny said, winking at Mel as if they shared a deep, dark secret.

A shard of ice-like alarm plunged through her veins. She didn't have to buy into that any more. "I'll have a Coke instead," she told the waitress.

Touché. She'd made her point. She saw it in the smugness of Lenny's gaze. He was entertained. Like a cat with a mouse. And like that hapless mouse, Mel felt cornered. Inwardly sucking up her courage, she returned Lenny's steely gaze and tried to keep her expression bland.

"I suppose you'll want the baked chicken," he reflected, turning his eyes to the menu, "or will you contradict me on that too?"

"I don't know what I want. I'm not very hungry."

The tea and Coke arrived, and while Lenny squeezed his lemon into his glass and added

his customary dose of sugar, Mel stirred the ice in her drink with her straw. If she actually ate or drank anything, she knew she would hurl.

“I worry about you, Melody.”

“That’s nice.”

“You’re getting in over your head at Royalty Farm,” Lenny remarked. He sipped from his glass, his eyes boring into her over the rim.

“What do you mean by that?” Mel stiffened as a stray thought hit her. “You’re not responsible for those *accidents*, are you Lenny?”

“Melody, Melody. Do you mean that horrible barn fire? What a thing to accuse me of.” He flicked off her charge as if it were a pesky fly. “I know you don’t mean it.”

“You don’t know anything about me, Lenny.” Her voice was hard.

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong, darling.” He smiled. “I know about you and that trainer, that Jake Hendricks. I made inquiries about him.”

Mel’s hackles began to rise like a frightened dog. She sat forward. “Why? What business is he of yours?”

“You might say he’s been my business for many years.”

The waitress came again. Mel sat back, subconsciously taking a hold of the cuff of her long-sleeved blouse, her gaze skittering to the table.

“I don’t dare order for my lovely wife,” Lenny said in an ingratiating whine.

“Ex-wife,” Mel growled, her gaze snapping up and confronting his.

The waitress turned to her. “Ma’am?”

Mel glanced at the woman. “I’m not hungry.”

“Oh, come on. I’m buying.”

“Very generous of you.” Mel thought of the many times during their marriage when she’d urged him not to spend so much money.

“Darling, you can be rude to me all you want, but you shouldn’t be rude to the nice lady, should you?”

She wanted to scream. She wanted to pick up the menu and slap him across his face with it. At the same time, she wanted to kick herself up and down for having fallen in with this man in the first place. What had ever possessed her? Lenny had come into her life at a terribly

vulnerable moment. He'd acted as though he knew how to take care of her, and she had wanted to be cared for. She'd wanted to be protected and cherished and loved.

*Fat chance.* She had gotten precious little of that from Lenny after the first glorious months of courtship. In fact, after the rush of sex early on in their marriage, there had been little of that as well. Lenny had been traditional, cautious, dependable, but he had also been boring and distant. For the life of her, Mel wondered what had attracted her to the man. It was almost as if she had endowed him with greater depth of character than he'd ever possessed.

When he refused to start a family, the fingers of doubt about her husband grew. Then he had pressured her to take a job at a more celebrated stable which would mean leaving the kids she loved to teach. When she'd refused, their relationship had soured. Lenny didn't like not getting his way. About a year later, the insurance scam rumors had circulated among the show horse crowd in Missouri. By then Mel was only enduring the marriage in a vain attempt to prevent another failure. The gambling debts were the last straw.

"You order for me, Lenny. You always knew what was best for me," Mel said, sarcasm dripping like the condensation on her glass.

"I'm glad you recognize that." He smiled and then turned to the waitress and placed the order.

When the woman left, Lenny smiled again. "Where were we?"

"I don't know, because I don't know the purpose of this whole charade."

"Ah, yes." He looked away and then back like a snake ready to strike. "You know I always have your best interests at heart, don't you, Melody?"

"No, I don't know that. You used to say a lot of cruel things to me."

"Oh, please." He rolled his eyes.

"You hurt my feelings all the time," she accused. Her heart kerthumped in her chest.

"You sound like a spoiled child."

Mel glared at him. This was a senseless argument. One she never won. She didn't answer him.

"If I ever criticized you, it was only to make you a better person. Sometimes you were too passive. I was just trying to give you spunk, make you stand up and fight for what you wanted," he said. "You deserved a better job than the one you had at that pathetic stable."

“I was doing what I wanted,” Mel shot back. “Teaching children.”

“But your career was stagnant.”

“In your viewpoint. But it was my career. You just wanted me at a fancy stable to make yourself look better among your horse show friends,” Mel accused. “In fact, that’s probably the very reason you didn’t want us to have children. It would postpone my *illustrious* career.”

He leveled his gaze at her once more, almost pinning her to the back of her chair with his penetrating stare. “I never wanted children.”

Chilled by his hard look and words, Mel drew a deep breath. Her hands felt as cold as his cold heart. She hid them under the table, clutching them together.

“You’ve made that clear.”

His voice was icy, bitter, unforgiving. “Besides, you already had a child.”

“What do you mean?” Mel’s mind buckled at his words. Had he really said what she thought he’d said? She had never told him about Cory. How did he know?

“You know who I mean. Cory Noble.” His words were hushed and carefully measured.

The restaurant noise sounded far away as if she were at the far end of a tunnel. Fear spiraled through her, twisting and turning in her stomach. Totally focused on her ex-husband, Mel tried not to cower under his hostile stare. She felt her face grow hot.

He released his piercing stare for one moment, his gaze dropping to his glass of tea. Picking it up, he drank. His eyes came back up to capture hers once again, and he set down his glass.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she hissed.

“Come, dear. You were never good at lying,” he said. “I’ve known about that bastard child since we married.”

The earth seemed to open up and swallow Mel into a black void. Her vision blurred, obscured by the overwhelming darkness. Her breath became forced, as if clods of dirt obstructed her nose. Why would he call Cory that horrible word? *Bastard*. Her child was *not* a bastard. Her child had a name and a home and a sister who loved her. Mel struggled to respond. She struggled to understand. She felt as if she climbed the edge of a slippery chasm.

“How did you find out?”

“Does it matter?” Lenny shrugged and continued to appraise her. “As I’ve said before,

you don't lie well. You have a very honest face."

When she could reclaim her breath, Mel lifted her chin and replied to his intense scrutiny with what she hoped was a cold look. "You continue to surprise me."

He looked pleased with himself. "I thought I might."

Underneath the table, Mel absently plucked at her napkin. It wasn't important how Lenny knew about Cory. Maybe he'd heard it from that lawyer he'd been tight with once, maybe from a business contact, or a friend of the Nobles. It didn't matter. What mattered was what he planned to do with the information, and why he was bringing it up now.

When she didn't say anything, Lenny took another sip of his tea, letting her fret longer, like the cat with the mouse.

He set down his glass, and continued to look quite content. "Aren't you going to ask how I found out about her father?"

Fear spiraled through Mel's heart. "I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"Yes, you know me well." Lenny sat forward. "Like I said, you're very transparent. I knew you carried the torch for Hendricks from the beginning of our relationship. Remember all those heart-to-heart talks we used to have? How I held your hand and told you everything would be okay? Broken hearts mend, I told you." His eyes hardened. "I fault myself for believing you'd get over him. But you never did. When I found out about the child, well, it was easy to put two and two together."

Terror curved downward into Mel's gut. Her mouth was dry as she saw again in her mind's eye the naive teenage girl gaining comfort from the older, wiser man. He'd been so understanding. So sympathetic.

"That's what you meant about telling Jake Hendricks?" Mel asked. Her hands beneath the table trembled, her voice wavered.

"I think Mr. Hendricks would like to know about his daughter, don't you?"

"No, I don't, or I would have told him long ago." Mel drew her mouth into a firm line. She glared at the predator before her. "But it's more than that. Cory is a happy child. It would serve no purpose to tell Jake, for there's risk of hurting her."

"It would serve *my* purpose, and frankly I don't care about your child," Lenny said.

"I've known you to be cruel to me." Mel's eyes narrowed. "And you probably did have

that horse killed for the insurance money, but I don't understand why you want to hurt an innocent child."

Lenny's expression was void of emotion. "I don't want to hurt the child."

Mel squared her shoulders. "Then what do you want?"

"I want your help with a little business proposition." He put his palm flat on the table and leaned toward her.

Lenny was so sure of himself. Mel had hated that self-assurance during their marriage. For most of their time together, Mel had lacked confidence. It wasn't that way now. She'd used her newfound courage to leave him. She certainly could stand up to him now.

"No one gets everything he wants, Lenny."

"Yes, I found that out." He curled his hand into a fist. "I didn't want the divorce. You got what *you* wanted. Since you destroyed our marriage, I think I should have a little compensation."

Mel barely restrained her anger. "If anything affected our marriage, Lenny, it was your distance, your lack of ability to open up, to really care about another human being," she stated. "And your lies."

Lenny's eyes hardened. "So, it's my fault. Our divorce was *my* fault. I don't think so. What about *your* lies?"

His indictment slammed Mel in the gut. She had not lied. She'd just never told him about Cory. She felt that same old frustration, that lack of control. Her marriage had been a roller coaster ride, and once she had stepped off, she'd regained some sense of respect for herself.

"I think two people are at fault in a divorce," Mel reflected. "I was wrong to marry you in the first place. I was too young, but I tried to make it work. I just didn't have much help from you." She looked up at him.

Lenny made a sound of derision. "You made a fool of me when you married me." His gaze hammered her and an odd expression marked his features. "What's done is done, though. Right now I'm going to tell you a little about my business proposal."

"What's that?"

"Remember the money I owe you for the sale of our house? I need it. You don't. Turn your portion of the house over to me, my dear, and I won't tell Hendricks everything."

When she didn't speak, Lenny went on, "He'll be angry with you, you know. He won't

forgive what you've done to him."

"Jake isn't like that," Mel assured him, hoping to convince herself.

"He's a man isn't he? You lied to him, just as you lied to me."

"I never lied to Jake. "

"Ah, there's a fine line. Let's say, you didn't tell him the truth."

Mel stared. It was as if he had read her silent thoughts.

"Hendricks won't buy your silly explanations. He won't trust you. You took his daughter away from him." Lenny continued to torment her, his voice like a distant roar of water. It was as if she was in a run-away canoe spiraling toward that terrifying water fall.

"How do you know he even cares about having a child?" Mel shot back, and tightened her grip on the fabric of her napkin. "His career is all important to him."

"Grasping at straws, darling? I've seen him with Cory. For whatever inane reason, the man adores the child." He smiled then, and Mel could not control a shiver.

"You've been spying on us."

"At a horse show, it is so easy to watch what's going on. I didn't spy on you." Lenny shrugged his shoulders. "I observed from afar."

"There's a fine line there too," Mel charged, not concealing her anger.

"Maybe so, but you might say I don't care." Lenny grinned. "I need the money. Now sign this release or I'll tell Hendricks." He pulled a piece of paper from his coat pocket and shoved it at her.

His threat was not lost on Mel. "I don't like blackmail."

Lenny disregarded her agony. He ignored her anger. With a vicious smile on his lips, he captured her with a self-satisfied gaze. "It really matters little what you like, my dear ex-wife. Your secret will be safe with me, as long as you do what I say."

Mel rose and tossed her napkin on the table. "You do what you have to do, Lenny, and I'll handle it."

Her senses reeled as she turned her back on him and strode out of the restaurant.

## *Chapter Twelve*

In the half-light of the August night, Mel entered the dim barn. Her senses had all but shut down. She was numb. Staring straight ahead, she drifted down the aisle. On either side of her, horses stirred in their stalls. Their quiet rustling and a distant train whistle were the only noises. Even her steps were muffled by the soft shavings under her feet.

Not bothering to flip on a light, Mel was guided by her need for comfort. She entered the darkened stall of Royalty's Dreamer. The mare lifted her head and moved toward her. Mel held out her palm as a token of greeting.

The mare's breath warmed her hand. "Good girl."

That cozy, horsey smell surrounded Mel, soothing her.

"No, I didn't bring a carrot," she said to the insistent horse.

Mel slipped her arms around the animal's neck, resting her cheek against the soft, warm flesh. Shutting her eyes, she nuzzled Royalty's neck. It felt so good, so homelike, so complete.

Why did life have to be complicated? Maybe that's why she loved the simplicity of the horse business. Feed, groom, exercise, muck the stalls, feed again. Get up the next day and do it all over again. Day in and day out.

Mel shifted her stance, but continued to hug the willing mare. Lenny's revelation still held her in a deathlike grip. He knew about Cory, *had* known about her for most of their marriage. She'd lived a lie with him. As she had struggled to put Jake and Cory behind her, to be a good wife, Lenny had known her deepest secret. He'd known, but never forgiven her. Or forgotten. He'd held that information, waiting for his chance to use it. To blackmail her.

Mel rubbed her cheek against Royalty's neck. What she didn't understand was why Lenny hadn't used his knowledge to block their divorce. It didn't make sense. He had let her go.

Yet she believed him. He would tell Jake about Cory if Mel didn't sign that stupid paper.

Cold fingers of dread slithered down her spine. She swallowed hard and grasped the horse tighter. Lenny would tell Jake, but hadn't she decided to do that herself? Hadn't she concluded that their relationship must be based upon trust? She must tell Jake and do it before Lenny got a chance.

"Who's there?"

A spray of light burst across Mel's face. Alarmed, she opened her eyes to see a dark shadow behind a large flashlight.

"It's me," she called out as she dropped her arms from the horse's neck.

"Me, is it?" Jake lowered the light from her face so she could see his features in the dusk. "Well, me, what are you doing here?"

Mel thought she heard amusement in his voice and automatically stiffened. Why did she have that reaction to Jake? Why was she defensive with him? The arms of rejection had a long reach. They had messed up her life for many years. She shook herself mentally. It was time to forgive. She needed to make the effort.

"I'm just visiting Royalty," Mel countered. "What are you doing, spying?"

"I resemble that remark!"

He was laughing at her. Mel had often heard him use *resemble* for the word *resent*. She saw the humor in his eyes as he came nearer, and his dimple, high under his left eye.

"You're so cute," Mel said with sarcasm.

"Not as cute as you, sweetheart," he replied, coming nearer.

"Oh, cool it. What *are* you doing here?" Although she acted angry, Mel didn't mind his banter. She left the stall, pulling the door shut.

When she turned around, Jake was standing almost on top of her. She looked up into his eyes, and their gazes held. The light was fading fast with only the shaft from the flashlight providing illumination. But in that muted environment, Mel sensed a sudden tension. As she quietly gazed at Jake, the warm buds of passion burst into bloom within her very core. She licked her dry lips, feeling herself go warm and then hot. He continued to stare, his empty hand opening and closing into a fist.

It was as if their visual connection sobered him. Jake glanced away. When he looked back, his expression was almost tender.

“Actually, I’ve moved into the office and set up a cot,” he said. “Thought it wouldn’t hurt for someone to keep a better eye on this place.”

“Sounds like a good idea.” Mel’s eyes faltered under his disconcerting scrutiny. She began to walk down the aisle. “You’re spending the night?”

“And every night until things are settled around here.” He fell into step by her side. “I thought you went out to dinner.”

Mel avoided his leading statement. “I did. I’m back.”

“I see.”

She felt the question in his response, as if he wanted to know more. Uneasy, her nerves drawing taut, Mel fumbled to change the subject.

“Let me see your humble abode,” she said, turning her eyes up to his.

It was a mistake to look at him. His gaze caught hers again, his eyes soft. The barn was growing darker by the second. At the end of the aisle, a horse kicked at the wooden wall of the stall. Mel felt her heart almost hit the wall of her chest. She swallowed hard, not daring to look away for fear he’d think her afraid.

“Come right on in. You won’t recognize the place,” Jake said with boyish eagerness.

Passing within a hand’s-breath of Jake as he ushered her into the brightly lit office, Mel caught the faintly spicy scent of him. She paused on the threshold to try to regain her composure and adjusted to the brightness within the room. The air conditioning was on, and the room was uncomfortably cold. She shivered from the temperature *or* Jake’s nearness.

Jake crossed the room to turn down the air conditioning unit. Given time to recover, Mel glanced around the room. The old desk and sofa had been pushed into a corner to make way for a hard-looking army-like, canvas cot. A bundle of blankets was folded at the foot, and a pillow was tossed on top.

“It may be primitive, but it is home for as long as necessary,” Jake said, the deep timbre of his voice holding a note of amusement. “Come on in. We don’t want to air condition the whole stable.”

Mel moved into the room, and Jake shut the door. When he turned to look at her, she felt like a rabbit in a snare. This wasn’t a good idea. Too intimate.

His gaze moved across her face like a soft breeze. As she stood, returning his expectant

look, she realized she longed for him, for his simple touch, for the natural feel of him.

“So, why did you stop by?” Jake asked, the gentle roughness of his voice beckoning Mel.

How could she admit she’d needed the contact and the warmth of another living creature? His eyes were too intense, stripping her too bare with a passion Mel recognized even across the room.

She turned away and off-handedly picked up his pillow. “I have a habit of hugging horses,” she joked, hugging his pillow to her breast.

“And why is that?” Jake walked nearer.

She felt him behind her. Felt the bewildering closeness of him. Swallowing hard, she turned to him again.

“I’ve always thought that with a good horse to hug,” words tumbled inanely from her lips, “you have no need for a man.”

Jake tossed the flashlight onto that sofa. “Maybe you never had the right man,” he said, the implication of his words hanging like destiny between them.

Desire knifed through Mel. She drew a sharp breath. Jake watched her as she struggled with this new, but familiar, sensation. She gripped the pillow tighter, hoping it would protect her. From what?

*Herself.*

For as surely as she knew this growing ache would never be assuaged without its natural outcome, she knew Jake would not make the first move.

Clutching the pillow, she raised her right hand and lightly stroked his cheek. His skin was warm to the touch, and rough with a day’s growth of beard. He sucked in his breath. Reaching up, he grasped her hand, and held it tightly against his cheek.

“Mel.” He spoke her name almost sighing with relief.

She should tell him about Cory before things got out of control. She should bare her soul, just as she longed to bare her body to the man who held her hand in his. She should speak...*now*.

Jake removed the pillow from her grasp and tossed it on the cot. Still holding her hand, he drew her forward. Mesmerized by the scent of him, his very presence, his touch and feel—Mel was unable to speak. He caught her other hand and drew them both up to his chest, tucking them into his larger grasp.

“I won’t pretend I don’t want you.” His words were almost a groan.

“I know,” she whispered.

His gaze held her hostage, drawing her captive into his ardent mood. She lowered her eyes, snuggling closer to him. He kissed the top of her head, and she shivered. He caressed her cheek with his lips and her skin leapt. A strange urgency surged through Mel’s blood, blocking out all other thoughts.

Her eyes drifted shut. He lifted her chin with a fingertip and his lips grazed her lashes. She felt their warmth, their slight wetness. He pulled her hands up around his neck, forcing her to rise on tiptoe to meet his now incessant kisses. He smothered her whole face with tender offerings of love, finally seizing her mouth with his, his tongue thrusting inside. Mel responded. Her whole mind was awash with sensation, just as her body was alive with a throbbing, a hurting, and a desperate need.

His kisses grew deeper, more insistent. It was as if he had a goal—to draw her out of herself, to make her one with him.

Finally, he broke off his ambitious attack, and hugged her tightly to him. Mel thought her ribs would break. Yet she hugged him back, wishing he would never leave, hoping they would never be apart.

“I have protection,” he said against her hair. “We were stupid to do it that one time before without it. It’s lucky for us you didn’t get pregnant.”

*But I did.* Mel loosened her grip on his neck to look at him. Jake’s face was contorted with indecision. Fine lines tracked out from his eyes. Shadows softened the fine skin beneath them. Mel reached out and with one finger, touched the place that would be his dimple when he smiled.

“We were too young back then,” he said. When he smiled, Mel felt the indentation in his cheek. “Maybe things have worked out for the best. At least we found each other again.”

Mel withdrew her hand and tried to pull away from him. Jake wouldn’t let her. She fought to keep the fear from reaching her eyes.

“What’s the matter, Mel?” he asked in a quiet voice. “Don’t you feel it too? This strange pull that draws us together?”

“Yes.” She was breathless. “But there are things I need to tell you about my past.”

“I don’t want to know what happened in your marriage. If I find out that bastard mistreated you, I’ll kill him.”

Mel’s heart froze. He was talking about Lenny, of course, but he had used that disgusting word that her ex-husband had used today. It sickened her. What she’d done sickened her.

“It’s not about Lenny,” she told him, trying once more to pull away.

“Don’t, Mel. Let me hold you. It’s been so long.”

She allowed him to draw her once more into his arms. He cradled her head under his chin. She couldn’t talk. Could barely think. The rise and fall of his chest was the very comfort she had been seeking. For ten years, she’d searched for a fulfillment that she’d never found. But here it was in Jake’s arms—the contentment and peace, she’d always longed for.

“I’m hoping there may be a future for us,” he admitted in a low voice.

“What I have to tell you might affect our future.” Mel shut her eyes, knowing the solace of his arms would soon be gone.

Jake just held her tighter. “Tell me later. Right now, all I want to do is love you.”

Mel was silent. The rhythm of his beating heart and the increased cadence of his breathing lulled her into submission.

“Please.”

His mouth came down upon hers again, hard and incessant. His urgency fueled hers, and drove her to return his kisses with a ferocity she hardly expected.

Jake maneuvered her toward the cot. “Let me see you,” he said, and unbuttoned her blouse.

She stood there like a little girl letting him undress her. She was pliant, in a fog of swirling desire. She allowed him to remove her blouse. He dropped his mouth to the mound of her breast, nuzzling the bra aside, and tickling her nipple with his tongue.

“Oh, Jake,” she moaned, putting her hands on his own shirt.

Frantic, she tore through the buttons. Reaching up, she tried to take off his shirt, but he was too tall. He helped her then, dropping it into a heap on the dusty floor. Mel reveled in the hair on his chest. Kissing the soft curls, wrapping her tongue around his hard nipples, she felt him thrust up to meet her, seeking her in a ritual as old as time.

“Take off your jods.”

“You take off your slacks.” Jake grinned. His eyes glazed over with a deep yearning, and sat down on the sofa to pull off his boots.

Mel kicked off her flats and fumbled with the button on her jeans. Jake was there in front of her, dressed only in striped boxer shorts and socks. He helped her zip down her zipper. She stepped out of her jeans, leaving her panties on.

He was too hard, muscled handsome, with his boyish grin and eager blue eyes. When her gaze traveled downward, Mel saw his arousal beneath the fabric of his boxers. She knew his gaze mimicked hers and subconsciously sucked in her stomach.

“You’re beautiful,” he gasped. “Every part of you is just right.”

Mel smiled shyly. The throbbing within her was unrelenting.

“Come here,” he said in a husky voice.

He tugged her toward him, running his hands up and down her bare arms. Her skin shouted at his touch. Mel stepped closer to him, feeling the coarse hair on his thighs. As she wrapped her arms once again around his neck, Jake pulled her upward, so that her feet left the floor. He supported her buttocks with his hand. Automatically, Mel folded her legs around his waist. His love-filled gaze stroked her face, beseeching. She responded to his desire with a kiss that deepened and lingered, its very force rushing through her body to the tip of her toes.

“This won’t be perfect,” he murmured into her mouth.

“Yes it will,” she sighed in reply.

With that, he angled himself toward the canvas cot. Her arms were tight around his neck, and he used a free hand to quickly position the pillow. Then he sat down with Mel riding easily with him.

There wasn’t much room. Mel’s legs dangled over Jake’s hips and thighs onto the chilly floor. But she didn’t mind. Her senses were focused on the hard length of him. Only the cotton of her panties and the fabric of his shorts separated them. It was frustrating, but only for a moment, because they shed them. Then Jake fitted on a condom.

Mel balanced herself with her hands near his head. Using her lower body, Mel began to rub against him. She circled him, her stomach pressed hard against his. Jake sought her mouth once more and seized it fervently. Then he drove deeply into her.

Mel accepted him willingly. Concentrating on her own pleasure, the wild sensations

swelling and cascading through her, she was savage in her response to his kisses.

“Mel.” Jake moaned her name, his face contorted with his own pleasure.

She lifted her lips from his, finding it hard to breathe. Half-closing her eyes, she threw her head back, focusing on his hardness and her own yielding softness.

“Yes!” he cried.

“Oh,” she groaned in union with him. “Oh!”

The torrent of her satisfaction astonished her. She melded to his body, and dropped down on his chest, turning her cheek to rest under his chin. His arms slipped around her, limp with his own release.

As his heartbeat slowed, Mel wondered at their closeness, their ability to please each other so completely.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

The soft strands of Mel's auburn hair brushed Jake's nose, tantalizing him with its lavender scent. He tightened his arms around her slim shoulders. She felt so good to hold. Barely feeling her weight, he reveled in the firm curves of her hips as he dropped a possessive hand on her backside. Relaxed, she shifted position slightly and sighed. Mel was almost asleep.

In the afterglow of their lovemaking, Jake wondered how it had happened. He'd resolved not to touch her, to control himself. Her presence in the stall had bested his resolve. Mel had looked so lost, so alone. He'd wanted to comfort her and ease whatever pain that caused her eyes to grow wide with grief.

His good intentions had backfired. When he'd felt his arousal, he'd acted on impulse. When she'd responded, he had rejoiced in their passion.

Mel had been an exquisite sight, standing in the dusty office wearing only her panties. Her ivory skin had looked even paler in the bad lighting. Her small breasts, rising and falling, had charmed him. Jake remembered how her nipples had gone hard against his tongue.

Mel was so different from other women he had known. Her thighs, straddling his body, were firm, and her stomach taut from constant exercise on horseback. He smiled into her sweet-smelling hair. Like most women, Mel was self-conscious about her appearance, reacting to his look by sucking in her stomach, as if she was afraid he'd think her fat. She was wrong. His hand lightly roamed the soft skin on her compact derriere.

Desire, long denied, flared within him once again. He felt himself harden. As he was shattered by his climax, Mel had made tiny, desperate sounds of culmination too. Jake smiled. Her enjoyment had been his triumph. Jake ran a gentle hand along Mel's back, the love he felt for her swelling within his heart.

He wanted to lose himself in her, really lose himself forever. Only when he had truly

made her his own, would their lovemaking reach perfection. That would come. They had time.

Holding her in his arms was like heaven, something he'd longed to do for ten years. She stirred. He eased her to his side, and turned slightly. With his arms wrapped around her as if he never wanted to let go, Jake suppressed his yearning and shut his eyes. Sleeping with Mel would almost be as good as a long, slow lovemaking, and certainly more intimate because of its ultimate vulnerability.

As he drifted off to sleep, he realized from now on nothing would be the same between them again.

\* \* \* \*

Jake's features were grimly set. "I suggest Professor Plum, in the conservatory, with a knife," he said and glanced around Vanessa's dining room table at those playing the board game.

Mel checked her detective's notebook, discovered she had Professor Plum, and lifted the Clue card so only Jake could see it. The provocative look he thanked her with sent shivers sliding through her body. The card shook in her hand as she returned it to her pile of suspects, rooms and weapons.

"Thank you." Jake checked off the suspect. "Your turn."

Mel took the die from him and tossed it. She moved her Miss Scarlet playing piece two spaces toward the lounge.

It was Pop's turn. Mel absently watched as he picked up the die with his gnarled fingers. She was very much aware of Jake sitting beside her. The renewed sense of intimacy she felt whenever she was around him was disconcerting. Unsettled, she tried to keep her gaze from his, but it was difficult. Every time she looked his way, he would glance back, giving her that "we've got a secret" look.

"I suggest Mrs. White, in the ball room, with a revolver," Pop said and turned to Cory.

The little girl shook her blond braid, and everyone looked expectantly at Vanessa.

"Here's one." Vanessa slid the card across the table. Pop made a big show out of picking it up and concealing it as he looked. Then he passed it back to Vanessa.

Spending last night with Jake was not the only secret she kept from everyone, Mel thought with a guilty gaze around the table. Cory, the love child she'd given up so long ago. Vanessa, her friend, who didn't know the truth about the baby her mother and father had

adopted. Pop, who would never really know his only grandchild. And Jake. *What can I say to Jake?*

She'd better find a way to tell him soon if she didn't want her vengeful ex-husband to do it for her.

Yet her agonizing secret wasn't the only misgiving Mel pondered as she watched Cory make her move. What *about* last night? What had it meant? Had it been a simple matter of easing their sexual tensions? Or did it signify more?

Mel glanced again at Jake. His light brown hair was slightly ruffled as if the wind had caught it. His blue eyes held a devil-may-care look. Was he pleased with himself? When he grinned at Cory, his dimples enhanced the boyish quality of his features. She looked away, suppressing the urge to reach out and touch the misplaced dimple high under his left eye.

Whatever might become of their relationship, Jake had wanted her last night. He'd made her feel womanly and desirable. But more than that, he'd protected her, as he had not protected her ten years earlier. Sure, times had changed, but Jake had changed too. He was more mature, more caring. Mel smiled to herself, remembering how Jake had kept her warm and secure on that hard and awkward cot all night long. She'd awakened with a stiff neck and a foot that had fallen asleep.

Jake might be more mature, Mel reflected, but he still possessed that odd sense of humor. He still loved to tease her and hear her fuss. Funny, it didn't bother her liked it once had. They'd fallen into a comfortable habit that was becoming part of their relationship. Nevertheless, he could still be annoying. Holding her this morning, his breath in her ear, Jake had not been a bit concerned that Dave would arrive to find them naked in each others arms. She'd fumed, and Jake had made fun of her. Of course, Dave hadn't shown up until they were dressed and at work.

Cory scooped up Mel's playing piece, drawing her attention back to the game. "I suggest Miss Scarlet." She thought for a moment toying with the piece. "In the hall with a candlestick."

Cory put Miss Scarlet and the candlestick in the hall, and turned to Vanessa. Her sister shook her head.

"Jake, got a clue?" Cory asked since he was the next player.

"Not me, kiddo."

After both Mel and Pop also failed to show a Clue card, Cory burst into an impertinent

grin. “Well, let me see,” she said, drawing out her words dramatically. “I suppose I’m just going to have to accuse Miss Scarlet in the hall with a candlestick.”

“No, not a candlestick!” Jake exclaimed in mock shock. “Mel, how could you?”

“You don’t know I did it,” she retorted. “Cory hasn’t proven a thing.”

Cory snatched up the envelope marked “Confidential” and stole a furtive look inside. Thrilled with herself, she plopped all three winning cards on the table.

“You did it,” Jake accused Mel.

“With a candlestick.” Nodding her head, Mel cast him a knowing glance, and tried to ignore the flutter of sensation filtering down toward her toes.

“You’re a very dangerous woman.” Jake raised his brows in a meaningful look.

“Well, damn me, not as dangerous as Miss Noble here,” Pop said to Cory. “You won again, darlin’.”

“Maybe she has a career as a detective,” Jake suggested.

“Not me. I’m gonna be a horse trainer.” Cory was animated by the amount of attention she received. “Let’s play again.”

“No, it’s my bedtime,” Pop grumbled and climbed to his feet. “Being shut out twice by a little tike like you just doesn’t sit right with me.”

Cory pulled a face. “You’re just jealous, isn’t he, Mel?”

“Pop is very competitive,” Mel agreed with a smile.

Vanessa had been picking up the playing pieces and turned a motherly look at Cory. “Bedtime. Sounds as if Pop has just the idea for you.”

“Ah, sis,” Cory complained. “It’s not dark yet.”

“No whining, child,” Pop said. “Get on up to bed with you.”

Cory grimaced, but said, “Okay, Pop. Will you take Major home with you?”

“Sure, I’ll take the mutt. C’mon Major.” Pop motioned to the white setter.

“Mel and Jake, will you stay for coffee?” Vanessa asked as she put the top on the Clue game. “I have a new espresso machine I want to try out.”

Mel glanced at Jake who nodded in agreement.

“Want any help?” Mel asked Vanessa.

“No. Let’s take it in the library, though.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be along in a while, Pop,” Mel told her father who ambled to the door with Cory and Major in tow.

“Take your time.” His gaze drifted between the two of them. “Take *all* the time you want.”

“I wonder what that look was supposed to mean,” Mel muttered as she and Jake walked into the library.

“Probably that Pop would like to see us get together.” Jake rested his hand on the back of her neck.

Mel controlled her breathing and faced him. “My father always liked you better than the man I married.”

His left hand had moved to her shoulder, tying them together with an assured intimacy. He lifted his right forefinger and touched the tip of her nose. “I’m better looking, I’m sure.”

“You were always an arrogant S.O.B.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Hey, the truth hurts.”

*Truth.* Yes, the truth would hurt. A fierce guilt stabbed at her heart. With her eyes turned up at his, she measured Jake’s droll expression. His gaze roved across her face, as if he were trying to read her. Jake moved his hand to cup her cheek in his palm. She leaned into it, drawing comfort from its rough warmth.

“Do you get the distinct impression this whole thing was a set up?”

Mel straightened, fighting down an unexpected fear. “What do you mean?”

“You and me showing up at Royalty Farm.” Jake’s eyes lightened. “I have a feeling Pop planned it all along.”

The feathery touch of Jake’s fingertips tied Mel to him. She searched his eyes. “What are you saying?”

“Pop O’Shea, matchmaker,” Jake said with a laugh. “Did he tell you he hired me as a trainer?”

“No.”

“And he failed to tell me you were divorced and coming home.” He nodded his head. “I rest my case.”

Mortified that Pop might have manipulated them like that, Mel turned from him as

Vanessa came in the room with a tray. Jake rushed forward and lifted the tray from her hands.

“Here, let me help you,” he said and set the tray on the coffee table.

“I tried out some new Irish cream flavored beans for this cappuccino,” Vanessa explained, and sat down on the sofa. “There’s no alcohol in it, but I can get some Bailey’s if you want.”

“No, this is fine.” Mel took up a cup and sipped the frothy coffee as she settled beside Vanessa.

Jake joined them. “This is good.”

“Umm,” Vanessa acknowledged while she cradled her cup close to her lips.

For a few minutes, they savored their drinks. The hot liquid was soothing. A slow, rosy warmth settled over Mel causing her to feel drowsy. She watched Jake from over the rim of her cup.

“Cory is the funniest child,” Jake remarked after a bit. He sat down his cup. “She’s such an expert at Clue.”

“I wish she could solve our mystery,” Vanessa said with sudden bitterness.

“Yeah, the sheriff and the state police could use some help,” Jake scoffed. “They’re as slow as Christmas.”

Vanessa placed her cup on the coffee table. “The sheriff did tell me the results of the state fire marshal’s arson report.”

Mel watched her employer’s tense features. How did she remain calm under the circumstances?

“I’m afraid the arsonist may be in my employ,” Vanessa reported.

Jake sat forward. “How’s that?”

“They believe the fire was started in the bedding straw of that empty stall. Liniment was used as an accelerant. All it took was a match.”

Jake cursed. “What’s more common in a horse barn but straw and liniment?” He stood up and strode to the picture window looking out toward the burned rubble.

Mel scrutinized Jake’s slumped shoulders. This thing with the fire was getting to him. She wanted to go to him, to drape her arms around him and comfort him. At the same time, she was relieved the arsonist couldn’t have been Lenny. He didn’t have access to anything at Royalty

Farm. Anything but her, she thought gravely. He'd gotten to her for sure. Her cozy drowsiness ebbed to be replaced by a nagging fear that pawed at her like a skittish horse.

"Jake and I have been afraid the perpetrator was someone at the barn," Mel commented.

His mouth was rigid when he turned around. "Whoever this guy is, he's good," Jake told Vanessa. "I've been keeping my eyes open for a few weeks, but haven't noticed anything strange."

Vanessa nodded. "I wanted you both to be aware of this. No one else needs to know."

"Good idea," Jake conceded.

Thirty minutes later, Jake and Mel said their good-byes and left the main house. Outside, darkness had fallen and the night was black with summer heat. Mel was quiet, her mind a jumble of confused thoughts. Jake caught her hand as they started down the gravel road toward the barn.

"You don't mind me seeing you home?" he asked with boyish eagerness.

"You're going my way, aren't you?" Mel's voice was light and teasing. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how the feel of his warm grasp disarmed her.

"Yes, and I hope we continue to go the same way." He gave her hand a squeeze.

"And what does that mean?"

"It means..." He stopped and turned to her.

She lifted her gaze to him, the night air heavy around them. He ruffled his hair with his free hand and looked away from her.

"I don't know how to say it without just saying it." His gaze dropped to hers, his expression tender. "I want to get to know you again. I want us to be like we were."

"As if nothing ever happened between us?"

"I know it can't be like before." Jake's voice was gentle. "We had something special. I'd just like to try and recapture that same feeling, but I'd like to make it work this time."

"Yes, we *had* something special," Mel avoided a direct answer. She was glumly aware Jake didn't know her words held another meaning.

Mel turned from him and dropped his hand. She started once more down the road.

"I know things came between us." Catching up he placed his hand on her shoulder as they walked.

"Yeah, marriage."

“You wanted to tell me something last night. Was it about your marriage, Mel?”

Breathing hard, Mel continued to walk. Anxiety, raw and cutting, severed her concentration. *I have to tell him.* The feel of his fingers, now absently caressing her skin, spurred her desire to confess. Overhead the stars winked and grinned at her, almost daring her not to yield to her fears.

“No, not my marriage. Something more. Something more important to both of us.”

She stopped once more and looked up at him. Unbidden, tears of anguish pooled in her eyes. In the darkness, she didn’t think Jake saw them. He was looking over her head anyway.

“When I went to college, I failed to tell you about something that had happened to me. I should have told you, but I was scared. I was stubborn too. I thought you didn’t want me, so I wasn’t about to beg you to marry me,” Mel rambled on, trying to find the right words.

“I’m sorry, Mel.” Jake glanced back at her. “I haven’t been paying attention.” He inclined his head toward the barn. “I turned the lights out before I left for dinner.”

Mel followed his gaze. “Maybe Pop turned them on,” she suggested, not understanding the sharp edge to Jake’s voice.

“But Pop would have turned them off before he went home to bed.” Jake dropped her hand.

The absence of his touch alarmed her. Jake’s logic was plain, and an ugly panic twisted deep inside her stomach.

“I have a bad feeling about this one.” Jake took off toward the barn at a run.

Mel ran after him. They entered the bright, but quiet aisle of the barn. “Things look okay,” Mel said out of breath.

To be sure, she walked quickly between the stalls, searching each one and counting the horses. She turned back to face Jake who stood at the end of the aisle, the garish overhead light emphasizing the concern on his face.

Jake shook his head. “I don’t know.” He crossed the aisle and pulled open the door to the tack room. “Oh, God.”

Mel sprinted the length of the corridor and followed him into the tack room.

“Oh, no,” Mel moaned heartbroken by what she saw.

Lengths of leather reins were slashed in half and dumped like so much garbage on the

floor. Each saddle was ripped from pommel to cantle, its back split wide open.

“What kind of sick jackal did this?” Jake smashed his fist into the wall.

She felt like a vulnerable kitten facing a pack of dogs. “We’ve got to have this tack for the show tomorrow. What are we going to do?”

Jake turned to the door. “Call the sheriff, for starters. Damn it, Mel, why is this happening?”

He paused beside her, cupping her chin in his hand and raking her face with his gaze. Mel swallowed, her heart in her throat. She wanted to comfort him. To ease his grief, to make things better. She wanted to erase his tormented thoughts.

“We’ll get through this,” he said to her, offering her the solace she sought to give.

“Yes,” she whispered, her breath caught in her chest.

“Together,” he added with a pointed look in his eyes.

“Yes.”

Jake lowered his mouth to hers, plundering her lips just as deliberately as someone had ransacked the room. It wasn’t a gentle kiss, but one full of heartsick passion and despair. Mel answered him, shutting her eyes, losing herself in the taste of his lips and the force of his hunger.

“Oh, Mel,” Jake took her in his arms. “Why is life so tough? Unfair?”

“I don’t know.” She was breathless.

It felt good to be wrapped in his arms. The solid strength of his chest, its rise and fall in a steady rhythm, gave Mel a sense of security, false as it may be. He kissed the top of her head, nuzzling a moment in her hair.

“We’d better make that phone call. Maybe the sheriff can catch this creep.” Jake crushed her to him as they left the tack room.

The door to the office stood slightly ajar. Jake pushed it open and stood aside for her to enter the air conditioned room. A low, threatening growl greeted them.

“Major?” She flipped on the light by the door. “No!”

Major lay loyally beside Pop, who was crumpled on the floor, the cot upended beneath him.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Even at midnight, the ER waiting room was hot and crowded. A baby wailed and a man leaned against the admissions desk shaking his fist at the harassed nurse behind it.

With taut nerves, set jaw, and a permanent scowl on his face, Jake roamed the stuffy room. Hardly able to control his rage, he felt like a nervous horse poised for flight but held in check by the rider.

Raking a hand through his hair, he glanced at Mel, who sat in one of the dozen impersonal chairs lining the wall. Her beautiful features were punctured by worry and fatigue, her arms crossed defensively in front of her and her eyes cast downward. Jake wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know how.

What could he say? *Pop will be okay. He'll make it.* Right. Pop was an old man with a heart condition. Based upon the time he'd left Vanessa's house, he'd been unconscious for at least an hour. *We'll get through this, Mel. Don't worry.* Jake had said those empty and useless words to her in the tack room before discovering Pop.

Jake didn't know what had gone awry between Mel and her ex, but being unable to help her endure that time troubled him. He drew a deep breath, his heart tightening in his chest.

Conscious of a deep need to find solace, he sat down beside Mel. She didn't move. He slipped his arm around her shoulders, drawing what warmth he could from her. She looked up at him and smiled slightly, and then looked away again. A cold knot of anguish settled in Jake's gut. Silently, he pulled her toward him, hugging her, a gesture that seemed natural and right. He never wanted to release her. He never wanted to let her go through life alone again.

"Mel! Jake!" Vanessa rushed across the waiting room toward them "What happened?"

Jake stood up. "We don't know." He shook his head. "Mel and I found him unconscious in the office. Someone had vandalized the tack room."

“Yes, I saw it before I came over here.” Vanessa nodded. “It took me more than an hour to find a sitter for Cory. How’s Pop?”

Jake drew her aside. “We don’t know that either. The doctors are working on him.” He tipped his head toward the swinging doors at the end of the corridor.

“Oh poor Mel,” Vanessa said with a sigh.

“Tell me about it.”

Jake couldn’t believe they’d found Pop lying on the hard office floor. The old man’s face had been turned, so that he’d been able to breathe. That had been the only blessing. Pop’s face had looked like bloody pulp. He’d never seen such a mess. Fortunately, Mel had acted like a pro until the paramedics arrived. Sure, she’d been full of anxiety, but she’d known not to move him in case he had a neck injury. That from the same stubborn woman who’d insisted on sitting up after falling from the horse in Lexington.

Now they waited for word. Jake hated his inactivity and the uncertainty.

“I know this isn’t the time to talk about it, but what about the show in Shelbyville? It starts tomorrow. Without the tack...” Vanessa didn’t finish her sentence.

“We’re going,” Mel spoke up. A hard, determined expression in her eyes had replaced her earlier blank stare. “It’s what Pop would do. You know that.”

“But Mel, we don’t even know how Pop is doing.” Vanessa walked over and sat down.

“He’d want us to go.”

Vanessa breathed deeply. “This horse show business seems unimportant in the face of all that’s happened.”

“That’s just what someone wants you to think.” Mel’s brow furrowed. “The same someone who set the barn on fire may have tried to kill Pop.”

Vanessa shifted uneasily. “I see your point.”

“Miss O’Shea?” The ER doctor entered the waiting area. Dressed in green, he looked like someone’s kid brother.

Mel stood. Uneasiness twisted in Jake’s gut. He crossed the floor to stand beside her, placing a light hand on the back of her neck. With that gentle touch, he tried to link himself to her, hoping he conveyed his concern and caring.

“Your father is awake,” the doctor said.

“How is he?”

“Uh, he suffered not only a concussion, but a fracture of his zygomatic arch, his nose, and possibly his superior orbit. We’re going to do an MRI to be sure on that. Afterwards, the plastic surgeon will evaluate that. Right now, Dr. James is sewing up his scalp laceration.”

“Laceration? Is that where all the blood came from?” Mel asked.

“Yes and from his broken nose.”

Mel paled. Her somber gaze searched the young physician’s face. Jake allowed his hand to caress her shoulders. “Just what do all those fancy words mean, doctor?” he asked.

“Uh, yes. Let’s see.” The young man rubbed his chin. “The zygomatic arch is the cheekbone. The orbit is the rim around the eye. These bones and nose serve as a cushion to protect the brain from frontal injury. It’s kind of like the impact system in an expensive car.”

Jake felt sick. “So, all those fractures probably saved his life?”

The doctor nodded. “Yes.”

“Will he need surgery?” Mel wanted to know.

“Uh, we don’t know the answer to that right now. That’s why we’re doing an MRI. It’s more detailed than regular x-rays or CAT scans.”

Vanessa came forward. “What could have caused those injuries?”

The doctor looked at her. “I don’t know, ma’am. Had to be a large flat object though, something able to make that kind of severe impact.”

“Something like a shovel,” Jake suggested.

“Yes, like a shovel.” The doctor nodded his head once more.

Mel took a deep breath. “When can I see him?”

“Uh, you can see him just a moment before we take him up for the MRI.”

“I’ll wait here,” Vanessa said.

As the doctor led the way into the examination room, he turned to Mel and Jake. “There may be some retrograde amnesia. He seems pretty foggy about what happened to him.”

Mel approached the bed cautiously, like a horse approached a place where he had once been frightened. Against the sterile surroundings of the ER, Pop was a shrunken shadow of the great trainer he’d once been. Several tubes protruded from his body leading to various bags and monitors.

Horror engulfed Jake as he glanced at the old man's face. One of his eyes was swollen shut, the other one closed. Pop's face looked like a deflating basketball, his cheek mushy and big, and his nose caked with dried blood. Clutching his hands into fists, he vowed to find the monster that had done this.

Mel stroked Pop's forehead, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Hey, Pop."

The trainer cracked open an eye. "Hi, darlin'."

"Jake is here, too, and Vanessa is waiting for you outside. We're all worried about you."

"Yeah, this damn dizziness," he complained. "If it would just go away,"

"The doctor said you were to have more tests. They'll fix you up."

"What happened to me anyway?"

"We hoped you could tell us," Jake said, gazing over her shoulder at Pop's pale face.

"I'm sure the police are going to ask you."

"Don't remember a thing. Are the horses okay? The horses weren't hurt, were they?"

"No, Pop. The horses are fine. Nobody touched them," Mel whispered and glanced uncertainly at Jake.

The old man really didn't know what hit him, quite literally. Jake found it gut-wrenching.

"Don't worry 'bout me. As long as them horses are okay, I'll be okay. Did you say someone hit me? Why aren't you at Shelbyville? We got to show them two young uns."

"We're going tomorrow," Jake said, hoping to allay some of Pop's fears.

A nurse motioned for them to leave. An unsure look crossed Mel's face. "Can't I stay?"

The nurse nodded. "As long as he doesn't talk."

"Do you hear that, Pop?" Mel bent near him. "You're not supposed to talk."

"Damn hard thing to expect from me, ain't it darlin'?"

Jake had to grin. "I'll step out." He placed his hand against the small of Mel's back. "Will you be all right?"

She turned to him and raised her eyes. The sadness that etched her features rubbed his heart. Jake lifted a fingertip and stroked the softness of her cheek. When she nodded, yes, he placed his finger lightly on her lips and made a kissing motion with his. Her eyes brightened a moment. Jake smiled encouragement and walked out of the room.

Vanessa waited for him at the door. Jake shook his head. "He looks bad."

His boss touched his sleeve. "Oh poor Pop."

"Will you stay with her, Vanessa? I want to go back to the barn and take a look around."

Jake fought down an urgency that was like a sudden storm within his mind.

"The sheriff has already checked the place over."

"Right," Jake acknowledged, "but he wasn't looking for anything particular. I'm looking for a shovel."

"Suppose there would be fingerprints?"

"If the guy who attacked Pop is one of your employees, I doubt if the sheriff will find strange fingerprints on the shovel," Jake speculated. "I just thought it might help if I located it. There may be other clues on it. Besides, I'm doing no good here. I really need to get out of this place awhile."

"I see. Well, you take care."

"Will do," Jake agreed. He made it to the door before Vanessa called him back.

"Oh, Jake! I forgot to give you this." She hurried toward him. "This letter was delivered to my house by mistake, I guess. I forgot to give it to you at dinner."

"Thanks." Jake took the white business envelope and turned it over. It had been mailed from Lexington, but there was no return address.

Shrugging, he tucked it into his shirt pocket, tossed a farewell wave at Vanessa, and escaped the chaos of the emergency room.

\* \* \* \*

Pop had been taken into surgery. Now Mel and Vanessa sat in another waiting room. Yet she still couldn't relax.

With a great weariness, Mel rested her head on the back of a cushioned chair, slouched down in the seat, and closed her eyes. Her insides were doing double-time to some obscene, demanding drill sergeant. Her head throbbed to the relentless cadence of her troubled thoughts. Somehow, Lenny's hand had written this scenario. He was involved with the barn fire and Pop's attack.

But how? He was nowhere near the barn. The only way into the property was past Vanessa's house. The gravel drive made a passing car very obvious. If a vehicle had somehow

slipped by in the darkness, it certainly would have been heard by someone. The only other way into the farm was through the fields, past the Neelys' property. Lenny wouldn't have known how to come that way. Walking wasn't part of her ex-husband's repertoire, and he didn't know how to ride a horse.

Just the same, Mel knew he was implicated. A nagging voice inside her head told her so. Lenny had a habit of getting what he wanted. Just like the insurance scam of which she had no proof.

Mel took a deep breath, remembering. Jake's work-worn hand upon the back of her neck had been like a caress of rough velvet. Amidst the chaos of her emotions, he'd been like a steady rock—her support, her friend, and now, she thought with a smile, her lover. Yet there would be no future for them if Lenny had his way. To prevent it, she had to speak up. She had remained silent long enough.

"Vanessa." She opened her eyes and sat up.

"I thought you were asleep."

Mel sighed. "No, just thinking."

"I know. I can't stop beating myself up over this. I feel I'm somehow to blame."

"I don't think you are. It's more likely me," Mel said.

"If I had told the sheriff sooner about Kyle Bishop's fabulous offer for the farm, if I hadn't given the man the benefit of the doubt, this may not have happened."

"Don't do that to yourself." Mel leaned forward and grasped her hands. "You said the state police investigated the realtor and found nothing."

"Well, somebody has got to be behind this." A look of anger crossed Vanessa's face. "I hate not knowing. It's just like when I lose something. I can't stop looking for it until I find it again."

Keeping her gaze averted, Mel took a fierce breath. "I don't think Bishop was involved. I think it was my ex-husband."

"Your ex-husband?"

She felt Vanessa watching her. "I don't know for sure. It's just a feeling."

"What gives you that feeling?"

Mel glanced at her longtime friend. It was time to tell her. She couldn't have Vanessa

blaming herself because she'd kept too many secrets for too long. "I had dinner with him two nights ago. He wants me to sign a release so he can have all the money from the sale of our house. I refused and he threatened me."

A wave of shock passed over Vanessa's features. "What makes him think you'll do what he says?"

"I don't know," Mel hedged. "He seems desperate for money, and I just got the feeling he might do something to hurt the people I love to get his way."

"Could be involved with the fire or Pop's attack?"

"I don't know."

Vanessa shrugged. "Right now, I don't know what to think or who to be suspicious of."

"I just wanted someone else to know," Mel said. "In case."

Vanessa stood up. "Want some coffee?"

"No thanks, I couldn't drink it."

"Okay. I'll be back in a minute."

Mel watched the other woman leave the waiting room, and then hunkered down in the chair once more. She had done it. Spoken her fears. It was a relief to share at least one of her secrets with her friend. Sure, she hadn't told everything she knew. How could she do that? How could she tell Vanessa her beloved little sister was really Mel's daughter?

She didn't want to disrupt Cory's life, even though an ache as wide as a chasm split her heart when she thought about her daughter—even though she wanted Jake and Cory to be part of her family.

The same sense of responsibility to do what was best for her daughter she'd held years ago, was strong today. Cory was happy and healthy. The little girl didn't need Mel to come into her life and disrupt it.

Maybe when she was grown. But not now. No, not now.

\* \* \* \*

Dawn was fast approaching when Jake pulled up to the remaining barn of Royalty Farm. The early morning gray sky matched his mood, for his mind had been churning continuously during his drive from Louisville. Had he missed something? What obvious clue had he overlooked?

Was he such a poor judge of character that he couldn't pick out the criminal among the farm's employees? Dave had been with Pop for years, but he had had just as much opportunity to vandalize the farm as Sam or any of the other caretakers.

The stable was the same—dark and quiet, with the familiar scents of sawdust, manure and horseflesh that he had smelled most of his life. Although he didn't turn on the overhead lights, the horses heard him and began to come awake in their stalls—circling, snorting and pawing. Morning meant feeding time and demanding, hungry horses. Dave and Sam would soon be here to do the honors, so Jake just walked quickly down the aisle, his footsteps muffled in the sawdust of the barn floor.

If his footsteps were muffled, so would have been those of Pop's attacker. Jake pulled up short and took a deep breath. The old guy hadn't had a chance. Even with Major to warn him, Pop probably had little premonition of an attack. Jake gritted his teeth. *The bastard.*

Flipping on the light switch, Jake glanced around the tack room. With the saddles and bridles a muddle of destruction, the room remained as he had seen it last. The sheriff hadn't disturbed a thing, but he hadn't been looking for a shovel. Stepping over the slashed saddles and bridles, Jake moved to the end of the room where the grain bin was full of a honeyed mixture of rolled oats and corn. It smelled sweet and delicious. Jake eyed the grain bin, the torment in his heart sounding loud in his ears.

The shovel was gone from the bin.

The sheriff's men hadn't moved the vandalized tack. Did that mean they had found the shovel and removed it? Jake didn't think it likely. Only he had talked to the doctor and knew what to look for.

Rubbing his chin, Jake considered the attacker's plight. Suppose he'd heard Pop come into the barn and go into the office. He must have been afraid the old man might step into the tack room to flip off the light left burning. Terrified of discovery, the attacker must have picked up the shovel, followed Pop to the office, smashed him in the face and fled carrying the weapon. Where?

Leaving the tack room, Jake glanced down the darkened aisle. He narrowed his eyes. A manure spreader was parked at the far end of it right by the door.

The flat bed of the wagon was filled with the previous day's work—manure, wet straw

and sawdust. This a perfect place to hide a large tool. Picking up the fork used to scoop manure, Jake reached over the side of the wagon and jabbed into the waste material. He circled the machine, poking and prodding the waste with the fork.

He was rewarded for his efforts. Jake lifted the tool out of the manure with the tines of the fork. If he touched any part of the shovel, he could disturb the fingerprints or other evidence. He didn't want to do that so he left the shovel on top of the manure. In the meager light, he could see dark stains on the back of blade.

Had the person who used this shovel had been an employee of Royalty Farm? How else would he have known where to find it and where to hide it?

Maybe now the police would have something to work on. Going into the office, Jake turned on the lights. Blood discolored the concrete floor. The sofa and cot had been pushed aside to accommodate the paramedics. Fingerprint powder dusted the furniture where the sheriff's deputies had been busy. His stomach felt queasy as he yanked the phone book out of a desk drawer and searched for the sheriff's number.

No doubt the sheriff or the state police would interview all the farm's employees one more time. Maybe one would slip up and admit something. Maybe the authorities could finally find out who had wreaked havoc on the farm and people he loved. He pulled a pencil out of his pocket to write down the number. As he did so, the long white envelope Vanessa had given him flopped onto the desk top.

Curious, he switched on the desk lamp. His name was printed in block letters on the front with the address of Royalty Farm beneath it. It had no return address. Turning it over, Jake examined the back. Whatever was in it didn't take up the whole space inside. Jake tapped the end of the envelope on the desk, shifting the object to the bottom. Next he tore the opposite end and shook out a glossy photograph. When nothing else fell out after he shook the envelope again, he picked up the photo.

Only the name of the film maker was on the back and a very faint date stamped into the paper. It was ten years old. As he turned it over and held it under the light, Jake thought the lone figure looked vaguely familiar.

It couldn't be. But it was.

A picture of a very young and pregnant Melody O'Shea.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Five minutes away from the call of the final class at the Shelbyville Horse Show, Mel rubbed a trace of mud from Jake's black boot. Spine rigid, head erect, he sat unmoving aboard the back of Dreamcatcher like some medieval warrior upon an armored horse. His blue eyes hooded by the brim of his black felt Homburg, Jake stared straight toward the show ring activity. His only hint of emotion was the tic of his jaw muscle. It moved in a rhythmic manner—slowly and deliberately.

"Are you okay?" Mel asked, sensing his tenseness. It wasn't a typical tenseness, the kind she would expect on the night of the five-gaited championship. There was trouble behind it. Trouble she didn't understand.

"Sure."

"I'm glad you decided to show only three horses this week," she said aloud, hoping to draw him out. "I don't think we could have handled any more." She looked up at him expectantly. When he didn't respond, she went on, "I didn't count on Royalty winning so easily tonight. Now it's Dreamcatcher's turn."

Nothing. Mel frowned as she stepped back from Jake's motionless side and traced a hand over Dreamcatcher's well-defined flank. The stallion's skin twitched at her touch. As she ran her hand along the animal's muscled hip, up to the dock of his tail, she realized something had changed between them.

Jake hadn't talked to her since the night of Pop's attack, five days earlier. Oh sure, he'd spoken to her briefly about the daily, mundane aspects of life around a show barn. But he hadn't talked with her in the same intimate way—his hand straying to her back, his finger touching her lip in a make believe kiss.

Untying the string that held Dreamcatcher's tail looped up to keep it from collecting dirt,

Mel began to comb the coarse black strands. The week had been crazy, flying by in a blur of activity. From waiting for Pop to awaken from his operation, to sitting by his bedside, to juggling her duties at the farm, and preparing the horses for the show in Shelbyville, Mel had hardly had time to think. Now was the first time she perceived the difference in Jake. She no longer had his undivided attention and support, and a tremor of uneasiness swept through her heart.

“Ready back there?” Jake asked with barely a glance downward.

“Yes.” Mel spread the black tail out so that it flowed to the ground like a fan.

“Okay, let’s go.”

As Jake pressed his legs into the stallion’s side urging him forward, Mel flicked her comb through the tail once more. Dreamcatcher started his trot, heading up the incline into the lighted arena, and Mel scrambled to find a spot on the rail.

Sounds and smells of the horse show carried well on the cool breeze. The scent of cooking corn dogs reminded Mel she hadn’t eaten supper, and she scowled at her absentmindedness as she put her hands on the rough railing. Laughter from the catered dining tent to her right mixed with the rhythmic organ music that changed beats with every change in gait.

The crowd had picked a favorite horse and whooped and hollered with every pass. To Mel, so near the action of the circling horses, the thud of the hooves on the tanbark and the clucks and hups of the riders were like familiar echoes from her childhood.

She leaned against the white railing. Her thoughts were tumbling in disarray as she watched Jake make pass after perfect pass. Yesterday Cory had won her equitation age group in walk and trot. Next show season, the little girl would graduate to the canter classes. Walk, trot and canter, a horse’s three natural gaits. Maybe someday Vanessa would buy her a five-gaited pony, and Cory would also be able to show the two manmade gaits—the slow-gait and the faster rack.

Cory was instinctive in the saddle. Like her parents. Like her grandfather. Mel smiled slightly at the thought. The little girl had loved horses from the very first. Pop had bragged about her, not knowing she was his grandchild. Mrs. Noble had always been good about sending Mel Christmas snapshots of the little girl. Cory at eighteen months being held on the back of a pony. Cory at two and a half, being led down the aisle of a barn. Her first blue ribbon at age three on

the back of an ancient, but safe white pony.

A pang of guilt tore at Mel's soul. She hadn't found time to tell Jake about his child. Things had been too hectic. It had slipped her mind. In other words, she had used every convenient excuse. Uneasy, Mel glanced at the crowd, wondering if Lenny was there. Was he watching her even now as he'd done in Lexington?

Drawing a deep breath, she realized it might be too late. Lenny might have already told Jake. Mel's blood ran cold in her veins. Maybe that's why Jake was so distant.

Her throat felt strangely dry as she picked Jake out of the circling horses and riders. He was decidedly the most handsome trainer in the class. Erect, not stoop-shouldered like some of the taller men, Jake had an aristocratic air about him. He carried his natural grace well, his athletic ability allowing him to make the most of a big horse like Dreamcatcher.

*I love him so much.* The wayward thought drew Mel upright. She pressed the rough wood with her hands, sucking in her breath as her heart skipped the required number of beats for someone in love. Lowering her lids, she allowed the sights and sounds and smells of the horse show to meander around her unnoticed while she dove inward to search her soul.

She loved Jake Hendricks. Always would. She was sorry his career and her secret had gotten in the way. She was sorry they still did. Whatever happened between them, she could never erase the markings of love he had etched on the blackboard of her heart.

"Come in and line up now and face the ring master," the announcer's voice directed.

Bumped back to reality, Mel watched the riders and horses whiz by, many of them showing off for the last time before the judge. When most were safely parked out in front of the ring master, Mel angled along the railing to stand across from Dreamcatcher.

"You looked great!" she called to Jake.

He acknowledged her praise with a mere nod of his head and settled himself deeper into the saddle, checking to see if the stallion was properly stretched out on four legs.

Mel sighed. She bit back another comment, dismayed by his lack of response. A grim expression marred his attractive face. Mel longed for the laughing Jake, the guy with the quick wit and practical joke. She longed to see the misplaced dimple high under his left eye. Biting her lip, she sucked in her breath one more time.

The judge came down the row, taking a last look at each horse. As he approached, Mel

raised her towel and flicked it into the air to catch Dreamcatcher's attention. The moment the judge walked by, the stallion pointed his ears forward and stared at Mel. The horse was the picture of the classic American Saddlebred, and Mel's heart burst with pride.

It wasn't a surprise when Dreamcatcher's name was called for the blue ribbon. Mel whooped and scrambled over the railing, meeting horse and rider at the trophy presentation. After the winning photo was snapped, she pinned the long blue ribbon on the Dreamcatcher's brow band and collected the silver plate.

Another trophy for Royalty Farm.

"Pop should have been here to see this." Mel glanced up at Jake as they made their way back to the barn after the victory pass.

Jake looked down from the back of the stallion. "He'll be there for Louisville."

Something about his face, its passivity and indifference caused Mel to snap. "I'm glad you've allowed yourself to speak more than three words to me."

"What do you mean by that remark?" His voice was hard.

"You've been giving me the silent treatment and I don't know why."

They arrived at the stabling area before Jake had time to reply. Vanessa was there and Cory, and when Jake dismounted, the little girl leapt into his arms.

"You won! You won! You won!" She put her arms around his neck.

"That I did, sweetheart."

At the head of the horse, Mel saw Jake's dimple pop out under his eye and a grin spread wide across his face. For a moment, jealousy twisted in her gut, but she tucked the silver plate under her arm and busied herself by removing the blue ribbon from the brow band. Dave came and led the stallion away.

"Here, get down from there," Vanessa admonished.

Cory pulled a face. "Oh sis."

Vanessa shook her head. "It's not very ladylike."

Blond braid swaying, Cory slid out of Jake's arms. "Oh, okay," she grumbled and pushed down the skirt of her party dress.

"You look mighty fetching, Miss Noble," Jake complimented.

He took the ribbon from Mel's hand and offered it to Cory. Intense anguish knifed Mel's

heart. Contrite, she turned away.

“To the mistress of Royalty Farm, our championship ribbon.”

Mel heard the tenderness rumble in Jake’s voice. She put the plate on a table and turned back to see Cory presenting a little curtsy to Jake’s formal bow.

“Congratulations on your win, Hendricks, Miss Noble.” The voice of Sheriff Vickers interrupted.

Jake straightened. “Sheriff.” He offered the officer his hand.

“I wanted to talk with you folks.” The man nodded to acknowledge all of them. “Thought you’d have some time now.”

“Cory, go help Dave put Dreamcatcher away,” Vanessa ordered.

Cory held the ribbon tightly in her hands. “In my best dress?”

“In your best dress.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of me,” she said with a pout.

“Do what your sister says.” Jake sounded firm.

Cory’s brows drew together. “I know when you’re going to talk about something important. I may be little, but I’m not dumb.”

“Go on and get out of here.” Vanessa laughed and shook her head as Cory scooted away. “Sheriff.” She offered him a seat.

He settled down in one of the director’s chairs that clustered near the entrance to the barn where their horses were stabled. Vanessa sat down with him.

“Mel?” Jake looked at her, offering her the last seat.

“No, I’ll stand.” Her nerves were like brittle ice. She couldn’t have remained seated if she had tried.

“How’s your father, Miss O’Shea?” Sheriff Vickers asked.

“He’ll be home tomorrow. Thank you for asking.” Mel leaned back against the wooden side of the barn and propped a booted foot against it.

“Sorry thing to happen to old Pop. To all of you folks.” The sheriff shook his head. “This business at the farm is bad news. Bad news.”

“Have you found out anything more?” Vanessa wanted to know.

“That’s why I’ve come to talk to you folks. As you know, my office has been working

with the state police on this case.” He nodded at Jake. “That shovel you found, Mr. Hendricks, may have been the weapon. Unfortunately, we are unable to know for sure. With the chemical and bacterial interaction of the manure, we were unable to identify the stains as blood stains. Then of course, the latent prints on the handle belonged to several of your grooms. No conclusive evidence there.”

“What a shame,” Vanessa mumbled.

“Seems like it’s time for us to consider the motives for these crimes.” Vickers rubbed his chin. “Now, the motive for arson usually falls into three categories. First we take a look at arson for profit. Did someone commit the crime to collect the insurance?”

Vanessa shifted uneasily. “I know you considered me.”

“Mighty logical.” He nodded. “But you know we ruled you out right away. Although you have some money difficulties, your insurance won’t even cover the cost of your reconstruction, so burning down the barn with all the horses in it would have been a stupid thing for you to do.”

“I’m glad you realized that, Sheriff,” Vanessa said dryly.

Mel swallowed hard. She hadn’t understood Vanessa was that bad off financially. It made the win at Louisville doubly important for the future of the farm.

“And we checked out that realtor you told us about. He could profit from your bad luck, but he has an alibi. He may not be the most popular guy in these parts, but he’s clean, Miss Noble. Come to find out he’s bought the property on your other side. He can build his subdivision without buying Royalty Farm.”

The sheriff leaned forward. “Now, the second thing we’ve got to think about is them nut cases. No logic here. These are the folks that burn down the place because they like to see a fire.”

“But other things were done here. Not just the fire,” Mel brought out.

“I’m getting to that,” the sheriff said. “The third motive we have to consider is revenge.”

Mel’s breath caught. Could Lenny be involved? Revenge seemed too complex a motive for her ex-husband. She glanced at Vanessa. She’d come to the farm to make sure Pop and Cory were happy and healthy. Instead, problems seemed to have come with her, problems that threatened the existence of the way of life she loved.

“You folks think someone on your staff done the deed.” The sheriff fiddled with his fingers. “Now, let’s count what happened. First the fire, then the slashed saddle girth.”

“Someone tampered with the jog cart,” Mel reminded.

“We couldn’t prove that, though.” Jake glanced at her.

Mel held his gaze for a split second before he looked away. “But we couldn’t *not* prove it.”

“Then someone turned them mares out,” the sheriff continued. “And vandalized your-all’s tack. It’s our guess Pop surprised that person and the guy attacked him.”

“It’s too bad Pop hasn’t been able to remember anything about it,” Vanessa reflected.

“Now, all these things that have happened leads us to believe that someone has easy access to your all’s place. Someone’s familiar with your movements, knows just what to do to cause a little trouble.”

“But he’s caused more than a little trouble.” Mel put her foot down from the wall and began to pace. “He could have killed my father.”

“What have you done, Sheriff, to interview my employees?” Vanessa asked.

“Well, we talked to all of them. Your man Dave, there, is clean. All the others. But there’s something strange about Sam Samson.”

“Like what?” Mel stood behind Vanessa’s chair and gripped the cloth back.

“Found to have been spending a bit more money than usual at the local bar. Checked out his bank records. Come to find out he’s put a lot of money in his checking account recently. Drew some of it out to buy a new car.”

“He had enough money to buy a new car?” Jake asked.

“Yep. Brand spanking new car.”

“Oh, my gosh.” Mel’s throat was dry.

“The fellows from the state police are heading out to your place right now to pick him up. We want to talk to the boy one more time.”

“Well, thank goodness.” Vanessa rolled her eyes in relief.

“Question is, ma’am, where did he get that money? Was somebody paying him to do what he did, supposing he did it—which we haven’t proven, by the way.”

“So, you’re saying that you may have found the person who set the barn on fire and attacked Pop, but there may have been someone behind him?” Jake tried to clarify the situation.

“That’s the look of it. And we ain’t tied this to Sam. He’s just mighty damn suspicious.”

Sheriff Vickers nodded his head and climbed to his feet. “Just wanted you folks to know. And I’d keep an eye on old Pop when he gets home. Wouldn’t want someone surprising him again, thinking he can identify his attacker.”

A chill coursed through Mel’s veins. She hadn’t thought of that possibility. Was Pop still in danger? She glanced at Jake, who had risen to shake the sheriff’s hand one more time. She longed for his hand to stray to hers. She longed for the comforting connection of her hand in his. She needed him now. She needed his support and his caring. The very essence of him was what she wanted. A look of love. A smile of happiness. She yearned to see the affection in his eyes as he watched her mere movements.

She had taken them for granted this past month, thinking he didn’t care for her, never had cared for her. His leaving ten years earlier had been a festering wound, staining her life and influencing her actions. Now she knew he’d cared about her and left Royalty Farm because he cared about her. He hadn’t known about the baby. It had been her fault Jake had left, because she hadn’t told him.

“Well, at least we know something,” Vanessa said and stood up to look at Mel.

“Do you think I should have told the sheriff about Lenny?” Mel felt guilty, as if she had kept another secret.

Vanessa’s gaze roamed over her. “Let’s see what they find out from Sam. We can always tell him tomorrow.”

Jake joined them. “What about Lenny?”

Mel couldn’t answer him, could hardly look at him.

Vanessa answered instead. “Mel’s ex wants her to sign over property in Missouri.”

“Has he done something to you?” Jake demanded.

Mel met his gaze. “Not really. I had dinner with him and he wanted me to give up my share of the house we owned. He said he needed the money.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this dinner?”

“We were busy. It slipped my mind.”

“Seems like a lot of things slip your mind.” Jake swung away from them and headed into the barn. “We’ve got to get the horses loaded.”

“Well.” Vanessa lifted her brows.

Mel could tell she was curious about Jake's manner. "I guess I'd better help out."

"And I guess I better take Cory home to bed," Vanessa said.

Together they headed into the barn. "Don't worry, Mel." Vanessa patted her arm.

"Things have a way of working out."

How? Things had never worked out for her. Although she'd fought to get her college degree and build her reputation as a trainer, her personal life had always been a shambles. She'd given up her baby and her only love. She'd married a selfish liar. Now Pop had been attacked, and his dream of the world's best show stable at Royalty Farm was in jeopardy. And it might be her fault.

The "poor me" voice in her head drilled and drilled the scenarios of her life over and over again. She fought the immobility of self-pity. How could she make things turn out happily ever after? How could she make her dreams come true?

"Come on, sweetheart, we've got to go home," Vanessa said to the perky Cory, who had come out of a stall with a bridle in hand.

"Now? I'm helping Dave."

"I'm sure your absence will help him too," Vanessa said with a smile.

"Meany." Cory lifted her nose in air. "I think I'll get myself another mother."

Breath caught in Mel's throat. Absolutely motionless with dread, she watched the little girl until she realized Cory was just kidding.

"You scamp! Give that bridle to Dave and get going."

"Okay, Vanessa." Cory grinned. "Thanks, Dave. See ya, Jake and Mel." With a wave of her hand, the little girl pulled Vanessa away from the stalls.

The next hour was busy. Mel, Jake and Dave packed away all the equipment and then loaded the three horses onto the Royalty Farm truck.

"I think I'll ride with Dave," Jake said as the little groom climbed into the truck cab.

"No, ride with me." Mel reached a hand out and touched his sleeve. "I'd like to talk to you."

He didn't say a word but slammed the door of the truck, and followed Mel to her Jeep. The fairgrounds had cleared out quickly. Only workers from barns like theirs were left, packing up and loading horses. The lights in the arena blazed in the distance. Yet in the field where Mel

had parked, it was quiet and dark.

“Why have you been giving me the silent treatment?” Mel asked when she reached her side of the Jeep. She wanted to get it over with. Her nerves were too jumbled to wait any longer.

Jake looked at her across the roof. She couldn’t see his eyes or read his mood.

“Something has happened, and I don’t know what it is.” Her breathing sounded like pounding horses’ hooves. She swallowed once. Thinking he wouldn’t answer, Mel reached for the door handle.

“I can’t figure you out.”

Mel paused. “What do you mean?” Her question was hushed.

“I don’t think you tell me the truth.”

She held her breath.

“It makes me wonder if you’ve ever been honest with me.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Get in the car and I’ll show you.” His order sounded ominous.

Mel slid into the driver’s seat and Jake entered the opposite side. He left his door open so the overhead light cast a cruel glow around them. Grim-faced, Jake fumbled in the pocket of his white dress shirt and pulled out a folded piece of paper. His gaze fastened on hers. Mel could see the question and hurt in his eyes, but she didn’t understand.

“Someone sent this picture to me in the mail.”

“Who?” She was breathless.

“There was nothing in the envelope but this photograph.”

Mel didn’t have to guess who had sent whatever was in Jake’s hands. *Lenny*.

“Take a look at this and tell me who this is.” Jake unfolded the rumpled picture and thrust it at her.

She took it in her trembling hands. There was a crease obscuring the face. She slanted the photograph to better catch the light. When she did, her heart stopped in her chest. How had Lenny gotten this picture? She’d even forgotten it existed, because she’d lost it years ago. Or maybe, Lenny had stolen it years ago.

Mel didn’t know how to answer Jake. She couldn’t speak, even if she knew what to say, because her mouth felt full of cotton balls. Her worst nightmare had come true.

Jake grabbed her wrists and shook them once. His features hardened with anger. “Tell me that’s not a picture of you! Tell me you were never pregnant!”

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Mel's face paled. With her wide hazel eyes, she stared at him as if he were a monster. Jake felt the pulse points of her wrists, the steady *ta-dum, ta-dum* seeming to mingle with the throbbing pulse in his fingertips.

"Take your hands off me."

"Gladly." He dropped her wrists.

Her gaze didn't drop. She held his with a defiant look, and even lifted her chin aggressively. Jake wanted to shake more than her wrists. He wanted to shake her whole body so the truth would tumble out of her reluctant mouth.

Gripping his hands into fists, he fought back the urge to hurt her, just as he had been hurting all week. The thought that she'd been pregnant and not told him was a festering wound.

"Are you going to answer me?" He controlled his voice with effort.

"I think you know the answer."

"No, I don't know the answer," he snapped. "Why do you suppose I've been so distant this week? I *don't* know the answer."

Her eyes grew wary, but Mel continued to resist him with her silence.

"I believe *you* know the answer, and I want the truth from you." Jake looked away, a crushing sense of defeat in his heart.

"That's me."

He hardly heard her. She'd put the photograph on the seat between them. The narrow space separating them was like a vast gulf. Intense agony in his soul, Jake picked up the crumpled picture and held it under the overhead light as if seeing it one more time would make the truth go away.

"Where was it taken?"

“At college.”

“How old were you?” He was afraid to hear the answer.

“I had just turned nineteen,” she said in a weary voice.

“You weren’t married until you were twenty. You and Lenny didn’t have any children, did you? So did you abort this child?” Jake glared at her and placed the photo once more between them, hesitant to touch it any longer.

“No.”

“Then what happened to the child?” Her reluctance to give him any information irritated him. If he had to drag it out of her question by question, he would.

“I gave the baby up for adoption.”

“Adoption?”

“Well, my options were few because I wasn’t married. I refused to have an abortion. What else was I to do with the child?” Mel turned the questions on him, her voice rigid with a growing anger.

“You could have raised the child yourself,” Jake said, his eyes narrow.

“How could I do that? I had to go to college, remember? You told me I had to get my degree. You said I was too young to be married, remember? So, I was certainly too young to raise a child alone. Besides, I didn’t want to deprive the child of a complete, two parent family.”

“You thought solely of yourself and gave up the child?” Jake’s breath came in irate gasps. He would never give up his own child. “You put your own selfish welfare ahead of the child?”

“Selfish? Like *you* were selfish, I guess, to go off to California and pursue your great career,” she spat out.

A wind of realization blew through Jake’s clouded brain. He was the father. Somehow he’d known it from the moment he’d seen the photograph. Mel’s anger made sense. Years ago she’d thought he didn’t love her, and so she’d kept quiet about the child. *His child.*

“It’s my child, isn’t it?” he asked.

She glanced away. Jake grabbed her chin and drew her back to look at him. The delicate bones of her jaw were like putty in his grip. Her skin was soft as new sunshine on a quiet spring day. Her eyes were wide with an unspoken fear, but he sensed something more. A raw hurt...a

determined defiance...a shattered love.

“Isn’t it?”

Her gaze never left his face, searching it, caressing it. “Yes.”

“Was it a boy or a girl?”

Mel tried to drag her eyes away. He wouldn’t let her. In fact, he pinched her so hard, she winced. He was almost glad. Glad to hurt her as he had hurt, as he *was* hurting.

“It is a girl.”

“Damn.” His curse was almost a prayer. Jake removed his hand from her face, the contact between them severed once more.

“Don’t worry, she’s all right.”

Jake’s head snapped up, and he glared at Mel. “How do you know?”

She looked out the window. “I just know.”

“You know who adopted her. Where is she?” he demanded.

Mel’s silence stretched forever. His heart began to harden toward her. She didn’t care about his feelings. He’d lost a chance to know his daughter, and it didn’t seem to bother her.

“You know but you won’t tell me.”

“No, I won’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t need to know.”

Jake was furious. He’d never felt such fire running through his blood as he felt now. He wanted to put his fist through a wooden board. He wanted to smash a thousand Halloween pumpkins. He wanted to shout to the top of his lungs so the whole world would know his frustration and his fury.

“What makes you believe I don’t need to know?” He curbed his voice to a moderate tenor.

“Because she is healthy and happy, and she’s got a family, and we’re not going to mess that up.”

“Why would seeing for myself mess things up?”

“You might be tempted to tell her who you are,” Mel said, her gaze uneasy.

“I suppose you don’t trust me to do the best for the child? You *hurt* my feelings, Mel.”

“So? You don’t think I haven’t been hurt?” she shot back.

“You run off and have my baby and don’t even tell me.”

“You were in California.”

“I was in California because you didn’t tell me the truth.”

“You wouldn’t marry me. *We were too young.*” It was Mel’s turn to repeat his words. “If we were too young to get married, we were too young to parent a child.”

“But you didn’t give me a choice. You didn’t let me decide.”

“It seems we’ve had this argument before,” Mel said quietly.

Jake took a deep breath and looked away. She was right. They argued about his decision to go to California. He hadn’t told her the truth then. He’d been afraid she’d talk him into doing something stupid like getting married while they were both too young and before she’d gotten her college degree.

But he’d had her best interests at heart. This wasn’t the same. Mel had taken away something precious from him. His own daughter. This was something that could never be replaced. Mel’s actions were out of spite, because he wouldn’t marry her. She’d taken out her anger and hurt on him in the worst way imaginable.

He took another tactic. “How was it that you didn’t have to tell them the name of the father?”

“I told them I didn’t know.”

The answer was too simple. “So, you acted as if you’d slept around, and didn’t know who the father was? You labeled yourself a slut. Mighty clever of you, Mel.”

“It wasn’t like that, because the father was never an issue. His name wasn’t required.” She was quiet, subdued.

Jake’s anger grew. “Seems as if they would want to know the paternity of the child.”

“Not if the state had no stake in raising her. I put her up for private adoption. Her records are sealed.”

His daughter’s records were sealed, just like his heart. “Let’s go home,” he said, and slammed the passenger side door, throwing them into deep darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Things weren’t settled between them. It was like calling a baseball game at the fourth

inning because of rain. Jake was in limbo. His mood was as ugly as the rain-soaked Sunday afternoon. Crossing the short span of grass between the barn and Pop's white clapboard cottage, he wondered how Mel felt. Last night they'd driven home in silence, helped Dave put away the horses, and gone their separate ways.

Jake didn't like it. He didn't like their rift, but there was nothing he could do. She had wronged him. Wronged their child. He refused to let her remain in control. Now that he knew the truth, he wanted a say-so in this part of his life.

"I came to see Pop," Jake said when Mel opened the door.

She glanced warily at him and stood aside to let him pass. Her hair was loose, not bound in a braid or a formal bun for showing. The auburn strands, curlier because of the humidity, framed her pale face. Her hazel eyes seemed wider, the circles under her eyes darker. The lift of her chin told him nothing had changed between them. For a moment, he longed to cup her face in his hands and smother it with repentant kisses. But it was a fleeting urge. He entered the darkened living room in annoyed silence. He had nothing to repent.

"No, Pop, don't stand." Jake went forward to the sofa and took the old man's hand. "How are you doing?"

"Damn terrible. Like warmed horse shit."

Jake couldn't suppress a grin at his simile. "That's terrible."

"Sit down, boy. Take the weight off your mind." Pop waved a gnarled hand toward a worn easy chair.

Jake settled into the seat and leaned forward, clasping his hands. Pop looked like a bruised basketball. His face was red and purple and swollen, especially under his eyes.

"Can't eat a damn thing either except this soft baby food stuff." Pop pulled a face. "Soup and mashed potatoes and pudding."

"Well, I'm sure you'll soon regain your strength," Jake said.

"Damn dizzy still." Pop frowned.

"Some of that is from the effects of the anesthesia, not just the concussion," Mel explained. "The doctor told you you'd be dizzy and exhausted for a while."

Jake glanced at her where she stood behind the sofa, as if the heavy piece of furniture protected her from him.

“I thought I’d report on the call from the sheriff this morning.” He hauled his gaze back to focus on Pop.

“Yeah, what’s goin’ on? I feel like a horse put out to pasture. Can’t remember bein’ attacked so folks treat me as if my whole mind is blank.”

“I told you what the sheriff told us last night at the show,” Mel protested.

Jake smiled. “Well, that’s why I wanted to fill you in. When the sheriff’s men got here last night, Sam was gone. Now the state police are looking for him.”

“Damn coward,” Pop grumbled. “Sounds guilty to me.”

“That’s what Vickers thought.”

“I can’t believe that scalawag Samson was strong enough to knock me out.”

“He surprised you,” Mel said, her hand lingering on the back of the sofa.

Jake watched her fingers grip the old fabric, her eyes shrouded, her features closed. “I don’t understand his motive.”

“I’d say greed,” Pop declared. “It’s one of the oldest motives in the world,”

“But who paid him? The realtor?” Mel’s gaze shifted across the room.

“Strange things happen in life,” Pop said.

Jake focused his stare at Mel. “Yeah, I know.”

She flushed and returned his gaze look for look.

Pop glanced up at Mel. “Well, seems as if it’s my nap time. Doc said to get plenty of rest.” He grappled for a handhold on the arm of the sofa. Jake sprang forward to help him stand.

“Don’t like bein’ puny,” the old man grumbled.

Jake supported his arm as they turned toward his bedroom door. “I agree with you, Pop.”

“Nothin’ worse than bein’ beholdin’, that’s for sure. I haven’t been the best patient. Mel has been a real trooper, though.” Pop paused at the threshold of his room. “You ease up on her, boy. Give her some more rope. Things’ll work out.”

Jake wondered what he meant. Did the old trainer know about his fight with Mel? Did he know about the child?

Pop went into his bedroom and shut the door behind him. Jake turned to find Mel had gone to the window. Her back to him, she looked out at the rain.

“His spirits are good.” Jake walked toward her. “You can gauge it on the amount of

complaining he does.”

“His bark is worse than his bite,” Mel murmured.

“At least he’s predictable. There’s no guess work where Pop’s concerned.”

Mel swung around to glare at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Jake shrugged. “Just what I said.”

She turned from him and crossed to the sofa, picking up the pillow that had fallen to the floor and placing it against the cushion.

“Sounds as if that’s guilt talking,” he jabbed at her from across the room. “Must have been carrying around a lot of guilt for a lot of years.”

Mel twirled, her eyes flashing. “I have nothing to feel guilty about.”

“In your opinion.”

“I did what I thought was best at the time. I had no choice.”

“Are you trying to convince yourself?” Jake didn’t recognize the spitefulness in his voice. It was hard for him to acknowledge the depth of his anger. Troubled, he turned from her, breaking off the confrontation and staring at the barn in the distant haze.

Mel didn’t break it off. She came at him, her voice raised. “I don’t need to convince myself. I did what I had to do for the child. She was my first concern.”

Jake didn’t believe her. He didn’t believe his child was better off with some stranger. Without him. Without her real mother. Without her real family.

He took a deep breath, and faced Mel. “Besides wondering why you never told me, I’m wondering who else is involved. Who sent me that picture? Do you know?”

Mel lifted her chin and swallowed. He saw the fear shift across her face. “It was my ex-husband.”

Jake cocked his head. “That doesn’t make sense. Why would that man get involved?”

“Blackmail.”

The word was ugly but precise. Jake frowned. “Are you going to tell me why?”

Mel swallowed hard once more, but she didn’t back down. “I told you Lenny said he wanted me to give him the money from our house.”

He took a step toward her. “But if he sent the picture, he’s ruined his little blackmail scheme. Why would he do that?”

"I refused," Mel said. "He had no control over me. He was angry so he sent it to you."

"So he has nothing to hold over you?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Unless he tells me the name and location of the child." Jake dropped the truth between them like a dog dropping a ball.

She looked away. He saw the uncertainty race through her eyes. He knew she hadn't thought of it that way.

For a moment, Jake felt sympathy for the petite woman across from him. He wanted to go to her and crush her into his arms. He wanted to kiss the top of her curly auburn hair, and dribble kisses down her neck to the base of her throat. He wanted to rub against her, letting the sharp bones of her pelvis ignite him to flames. He wanted to be hot inside her.

Sucking in his breath, he understood he couldn't take pity on Mel. Too much was at stake. "If you tell me the name of the child, your ex-husband will have nothing to hold over you. You'll be free."

"I can't." Her voice was small, like a child's.

His anger flared again. "Why can't you?"

She lifted her eyes to him, their hazel depths ablaze with new determination. "I hate it when the birth parents change their minds and show up to take an innocent child away from what she knows. From her family, her school, her friends, her life. I won't let you do it. It's not fair."

"But I can't *change* my mind. I didn't have a choice, remember?"

"I didn't either." Her words were like venom. "It wasn't my choice to get pregnant. It wasn't my choice for you to run off to California. I *chose* not to abort the baby. I *chose* to give her up for adoption. But they weren't real choices. If I had my way, you would have married me. We would have been a family. But I wouldn't harm an innocent child because of our mistakes."

"You had another choice. You could have told me you were pregnant."

"I didn't want it that way. I wanted you to want me for myself. I didn't want to force you into something you didn't want."

Jake saw the tears pool in her eyes. At the same time, he recognized the hard set of her jaw. She wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know. They were at an impasse.

"There's nothing I can say to convince you?" His heart was heavy.

“Pop said something to me once about forgiveness.” Mel sounded as if she were in a far off tunnel.

“Forgiveness? That’s pretty pathetic when so much is at stake.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Long moments of silence shouted through the room. Outside the rain splashed haphazardly on the steps of the porch. The gutters, crammed with debris, spilled like a waterfall near the multi-pane window. Jake noticed a spider had made a home in the corner of the window sill.

“Maybe it has more to do with trust,” Jake offered after the silence had intensified even more painfully.

“You didn’t trust me when I was eighteen.”

“And you don’t trust me now.” Jake looked at her ashen face.

“How can I?”

“I’m the one who was betrayed,” he reminded her.

“I’m the one thinking about what’s best for a precious little girl.”

“Neither one of us will compromise?”

“I can’t,” she whispered. “It should be her *choice*, when she is older. When she is more mature.”

He looked at her, his heart twisting with anguish. “You’ve never wanted her to know you?”

Mel glanced at the floor. He saw the suffering shift across her face. “All the time. I’ve ached for her to know me. I’ve cried at night because we will never be a real family, the three of us, like it should have been.” She lifted her gaze.

“How does your ex-husband know the truth? Did you tell him?”

“No. I never told him. Somehow he figured it out, and kept it secret from me.”

“That’s a strange thing to do,” Jake commented.

“You have to know Lenny. He has his agenda. He tries to accomplish his goals no matter what stands in his way.”

Jake wondered if Mel’s words were prophetic. “I suppose I could ask him for the name. You seem sure he plans to use it against you. Maybe he’ll tell me.”

“Maybe he will.”

Silence settled around them once more as they appraised each other. Mel didn't look away. She glared at him sadly, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Jake gritted his teeth. His heart in turmoil, he felt like a battered football player after a losing game.

Her eyes were grim. Walking to the door, she opened it. Outside the rain had intensified.

“I guess we have nothing more to discuss,” she said.

“I guess not.” Jake stepped out the door and into the storm.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

The water from Sunday's rain had drained enough from the sandy outdoor arena by Monday afternoon to allow Mel to give Cory's riding lesson outside. The summer sunshine felt good after the dismal weather the day before. Mel welcomed the heat on her face, just as she welcomed the opportunity to interact with her daughter.

"Push with your left leg as you're going around the corner," she directed.

Cory followed the instruction, laying her leg into Royal Tiara's side. At the trot, the gelding responded by sticking near the corner rail instead of swerving outward as he had been doing.

"Now tickle your reins a little. Get the horse's head up." Mel watched from the center of the arena as Cory circled around her. "Use tiny bumps. Like this." She raised her hands to demonstrate. "Yes, that's right. When you raise the horse's head up, he'll pick up his hooves higher."

Cory came around the corner and headed into the straight-away. "Now use that whip on him, once. Push him into the bridle."

The child responded with the correct signals and the huge horse reacted with a springier, more animated trot. It was fine to see how well Cory took instruction and how well she was able to follow it. Cory and Royal Tiara presented an elegant picture at the trot. Mel bit her lip. Would she win her equitation class at the World's Championship in Louisville? Cory wanted it so much and had worked so hard for it this summer.

"Walk," Mel drawled to let horse and rider catch their breaths.

Jake and Vanessa watched from the outer rail. Mel turned her back on them while she followed Cory with her eyes. Was she wrong not to tell Jake about Cory? A familiar tightness gripped her stomach. What was best for Cory? After all, she no longer had a typical family. Both

her adopted parents were dead. Her new “mother” was single. Just as Mel would have been if she’d kept her daughter.

Had she done the right thing? Suppose she’d kept Cory but still married Lenny? At that time and in that same state of mind, she could have made the same unfortunate mistake. Living with Lenny would have been bad for Cory. Mel frowned. Maybe Lenny wouldn’t have wanted her with the extra baggage. After all, he’d always been possessive of her time and her attention. He didn’t want a family.

Funny thing, these *what if* games. What if Jake had wanted to marry her? Her whole life would have changed, Mel realized with an aching heart. She shouldn’t do this to herself. She’d beaten herself up over what could have been for far too long. She had to deal with the reality of today.

“Go ahead and pick up your trot,” Mel said.

“Trot, Tia.” Cory’s tiny voice carried in the hot breeze.

What was best for Cory now? Fists clenched to control a sudden trembling, Mel turned to watch her child circle the arena. The girl was happy. She loved her older sister, and Vanessa loved her. Cory loved Royalty Farm and the horses. She was bright and pert, but respectful of her elders. Because she felt loved. Because she *gave* love.

Mel’s heart wrenched painfully. She had her answer in the smile and the lift of the chin of a very confident and content little girl.

Cory was fortunate. What kind of life could Mel have given her? At age eighteen she’d had no money. Pop had never been well off. It wouldn’t have been fair to put the burden on him. She’d been fighting her own demons then, and how long had it taken her to overcome them? Ten years? Ten years and a divorce from a man who had wanted to control her thoughts and her actions.

Mel squeezed her eyes shut. It was all the more important to solve the mystery of who was trying to ruin Royalty Farm. Winning the World’s Grand Championship became critical as well. If Royalty Farm went under, the shine might disappear from Cory’s face. Mel could not control the former problem, but she had some say over the latter.

She opened her eyes. “Come on in and line up.”

Cory trotted over to Mel and stretched out the horse. Strolling forward, Jake smiled up at

the little girl. Mel's heart stumbled at his sudden closeness.

"I'll be the judge," he said and walked around horse and rider.

Suppressing a small grin, Cory raised her chin.

"Keep your hands even." Jake came up to Cory and took hold of her wrists. "Arch your wrists over like this." He positioned her hands. "Nice, very nice."

Cory retained her composure, but Mel saw by the light in her eyes. She was pleased by Jake's attention.

"Good job, Cory. Now go put your horse away." Mel dismissed her.

"Walk, Tia." The girl kicked her horse out of the stretch and walked toward the gate Vanessa held open.

"Changed your mind?" Jake asked.

"No."

He made a sound of bitter amusement and started toward the gate. His bronzed body was lean and athletic. With a pang of regret, Mel's gaze lingered on his indecently tight jodhpurs as he walked away from her.

So, that's the way it was going to be. *Stalemate*. She knew she'd made the right decision then. But what about now? She wasn't so sure. She regretted what could have been between them. Maybe she should tell Jake. Maybe she should trust him.

"Jake!" Dave ran from the barn.

By the time Mel had joined Jake and Vanessa at the gate, Dave had reached them, panting. "The sheriff called. Sam is dead."

Vanessa's hand went to her mouth. "My God!"

"What happened?"

"Vickers doesn't know. All he knows is the state police found Sam's body floating in the Salt River in Bullitt County. Appears he was murdered."

"How can they know?" Vanessa asked.

"He had a gunshot wound right between his eyes."

Mel felt her pulse quicken. She took a steadying breath wondering who would have killed the pitiful little groom. More importantly, *why* would someone kill him?

\* \* \* \*

After supper Jake found time to catch up on his chores in the tack room, but his mind drifted elsewhere. Now that he knew about his daughter, he couldn't remove her phantom-like image from his mind. Where did she live? Was she happy and well?

Cory was adopted, Jake remembered while he applied Glycerin soap to Cory's child-size saddle. The old leather of the borrowed saddle was like the state of his recent temperament—dried out by a rage that had spread deep within his chest and cracked his usual good humor. As he rubbed the soap into the leather, Jake wondered about this well-adjusted child who was so eager to please and happy with her life. Even though her adopted mother and father were gone, Cory seemed perfectly content with Vanessa as her only parent.

What if Cory's biological parents showed up? How would that affect the child's life? Jake hadn't looked at it that way. He buffed the saddle in a circular motion, applying pressure and making his arm hurt with the effort.

Suppose someone took Cory away from Royalty Farm? Vanessa would be crushed. Pop and Dave and Mel, all the people who loved the child, would be crushed too. Jake had to admit he wouldn't like the idea. Maybe Mel was right. Maybe he should view the problem from the eyes of the child. As much as he wanted to see his own daughter, what would his sudden appearance do to her and the people who loved her?

Unlike the borrowed saddle, it wasn't as if his child's adoptive parents had ever planned to give her back. Back to whom? Him? A single man with a job that was transient at best.

He paused a moment to massage the pain in his temple. Jake wanted the finest in life for his own flesh and blood. Ultimately, he wanted the child happy and safe and secure. Who was he to disturb his child's life? What arrogance made him think he could do more for the child than her adoptive parents?

Mel said his daughter was happy. He only wanted to know for sure.

Jake's heart did a flip-flop in his chest. "Cory!"

Like the sudden, swift kick of a horse, he knew the identity of his daughter. In that instant he saw the resemblance, between himself and Cory, between Mel and the little girl.

How could he have been so blind?

Jake felt like laughing at himself. Until last weekend, he hadn't even known his daughter existed. Now with an intense insight that tightened his stomach and compressed his heart, he

knew who she was. Cory was *his* child.

With a grunt, Jake dropped the rag and picked up the oily sponge used for Neatsfoot Oil. The slick liquid coated his fingers as he rubbed the sponge on the saddle. He watched the dry leather soak up the oil. The last time he'd cleaned saddles, Mel had helped him. He recalled the smudges of dirt on her translucent skin and how he'd wiped a blotch from her nose. Desire flared as it had then. For an instant, he wanted to yank Mel into his arms and kiss the stubbornness from her heart and soul.

It all made sense now. Although he was still angry at Mel's lack of trust and her deception, he understood now the care she'd taken by placing Cory with the Nobles. Where she could watch over her. Where she could judge her well-being.

How it must hurt her to come home for visits and see her daughter. For the first time in a week, Jake fully appreciated Mel's sacrifice, the great depth of her character, and the abundance of her love for their child.

"Oh, I didn't know you were here." Mel interrupted his thoughts. He looked up to see her turning to leave.

"No, don't go away."

She paused on the threshold and stared at him with an exhaustion that was easy to see. Their disagreement had taken a bitter toll on her. The natural circles under her eyes were darkened. Her mouth was set in a solemn line, and the marks of a frown blemished her forehead.

"I don't want to bother you," she said.

"You just want to avoid me."

Her chin came up.

He was sorry he'd picked a fight. "Actually, I could use the help." He tossed the rag at her.

Mel snatched it out of the air. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take care of the reins there." He eyed the bridle hanging by a hook from the ceiling.

Stroking the leather with the soapy rag, Mel began cleaning the long reins. They were silent. Jake cast interested glances her way—watching how her slender fingers moved, how her eyelashes curled against her cheek so that they would beguile any man. Her hair was pulled back with a ribbon. The profile of her cheek distracted him, just as the soft pout of her lips charmed

him. He repressed the surge of desire that knifed through him. He suppressed the feelings of tenderness that stabbed his heart just as harshly.

Would she ever tell him? He had a stubborn streak too. He wanted her to be the one to open up.

“Have you heard any more about Sam’s murder?” he asked after a moment.

“No, have you?” She glanced his way.

Jake shrugged. “Vanessa called Sheriff Vickers after supper. He doesn’t know anything more. The investigation is progressing, though.”

“Investigation? It sounds so ominous.”

“Yes, they think Sam was killed to shut him up.”

Mel stopped working and looked at him. “I suppose that makes sense if someone else was behind the vandalism here.”

“That’s the thinking.” Jake searched her concerned face, fighting down a disturbing, jodhpur-tightening hardness.

*Why does he look at me that way?* Mel turned her back on him in self-defense. The strange light in his eyes plagued her. She didn’t want there to be anger between them. She wanted closure to their problem. As long as Cory existed and as long as Jake didn’t know who she was, their disagreement would split them like competing political parties.

“After the World’s Grand Championship, I think I’ll find another job,” she observed off-handedly.

“Skipping out, huh?”

“It’s not that. I just feel it would be better for us not to work together.”

Jake didn’t answer her. She looked at him to find that his face and eyes had taken on a guarded and distant expression. Mel fought an aching need to run to him, throw her arms around his neck and kiss the distance from his heart and mind. To hide her discomfort, she turned around once more.

“Suppose we win?”

“Then you’ll have new customers and more money to hire someone to replace me,” she answered him.

“It’s not like you to give up.”

“I’m not giving up. I’m just dealing with reality.”

“What is reality?”

“The truth.”

“Yours or mine?”

Suddenly his voice was near to her ear. Mel turned quickly into his embrace. The heat of a flush crept into her face as his slick fingertips squeezed her bare arms.

“Let go of me.”

“No.”

A startling huskiness in his voice made Mel dizzy. She opened her mouth to speak just as his mouth came down and silenced her. His lips were probing, full of passion and need. His tongue interrogated hers. A shudder rippled through her whole body as she responded to his cross examination.

His lips parted from hers just as abruptly. It left Mel reeling. Only his slippery grip on her arms kept her steady.

“That’s my reality,” Jake said. “I loved you enough to let you go. It’s as simple as that. You owe me the truth.”

Mel’s heart swelled with a painful remorse. His breath was hot on her face, his eyes unwavering. She felt the steady cadence of his heart, his pulse tugging at the flesh of her arms through his fingertips. She owed it to him. He’d done nothing wrong. Pop was right. She needed to forgive. To trust.

“It’s Cory.”

The gift of her trust revealed itself in his eyes. Their blue heightened into a brilliant sparkle. In one whoosh, Jake swept Mel into a startling, bone-crushing embrace.

“Oh, Mel, I’m so glad you told me,” he whispered into her hair.

Something about the relief in his voice made her pull away. “You knew.”

“I just figured it out before you walked in.”

Mel didn’t know how to handle the triumph in his face. She moved away from him.

“Now you understand why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Not really.”

“I don’t want her hurt, Jake. She’s done nothing wrong. We were the ones who were wrong. Not to trust, not to open up. To have made her the way we did.” Mel shrugged and turned away from him, throwing down the rag.

“I would die before I let anything happen to Cory,” Jake said as he approached her. “Surely you know that?”

“I didn’t want to chance it.” Pain throbbed in Mel’s heart.

“You told me anyway.”

Mel turned to gaze into his eyes, the love within them a living thing. Was it love for her? Or for her child?

“Yes, I told you.” For some reason she felt defeated. All the years she’d kept her secret to herself stretched behind her like a treacherous trail. “I need to go home and see about Pop.”

He let her go without comment. Outside the day had drifted into night. Hot as usual in August, the night creatures had just started their ritual calls.

As Mel headed toward home, her footfalls sounded rough in the comparative silence of the darkness surrounding her. In the similar darkness that enveloped her heart, she wondered why she wasn’t happy that the truth had finally been told.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

“Roll the dice, Mel,” Cory said.

“My turn?” Mel picked up the die and cupped it in her hand. She blew on it for good luck, her gaze filled with humor.

Jake watched the two of them, Mel on the sofa and Cory sitting cross-legged on the floor. They huddled over a game of Clue spread out on the coffee table, Cory’s blond head a stark contrast to the auburn curls of her mother.

*Her mother.* Jake’s heart took a nose dive. He was still not used to the idea of having a child, let alone knowing her, and like her mother, being unable to acknowledge her. He knew how Mel had suffered through the years, but she’d never let on. Never done anything to harm the child.

The injustice of the whole situation gnawed at him. Shoving a hand through his own blond hair, he scowled. Whoever said life was fair?

As Mel tossed the die and jumped her squares, Pop’s soft snoring erupted into a snort. Cory covered her mouth and eyed Jake with amusement. He winked at her as she took her turn, slipping through the secret passage into the kitchen.

“Let me see.” Cory became all business while she shuffled through her cards and consulted her notes. “I’ll suggest Professor Plum, in the kitchen with the revolver.”

*A revolver.* Ironic, Jake thought, that they should be playing this game after what happened to Sam.

“Jake?”

“Huh?”

Cory sighed. “You’re not paying attention.” She frowned and put her hand on her hip.

“I’m sorry.” He flipped through his own cards. “Plum, revolver, kitchen? I have this

one.” He tipped the card with the revolver on it so that only Cory could see.

“Your turn,” Cory said after making a mark in her notes.

“Sure.” Jake picked up the die and tossed it onto the board. He moved two spaces.

Cory scooped up the playing piece and handed it to Mel. As she did, Jake fought the urge to sweep the little girl up into his arms and hug the stuffing out of her. He wanted to hold her as if the physical connection would miraculously undo all the wrongs and hurt they had suffered. God help him, he wanted the three of them to be a family as it should have been if Mel had trusted him and his love.

He glanced away. To be fair, he hadn’t given Mel a reason to trust him. Not with that self-serving story about his own career. He better understood what she’d done, but somehow with knowledge, their relationship had taken a turn for the worse. And he didn’t understand why.

“You all just aren’t into this game,” Cory complained, causing Jake to settle his attention back on her.

“I’m sorry, kiddo.”

Cory glanced at Mel and then at Jake. She shook her head and began putting the playing pieces away.

“What are you doing?” Mel asked.

“You all are not interested in playing. I’m not really either.”

Jake sat back. “I’m afraid you’re right.”

“That’s okay.” Cory nodded her head. “I’ll go keep Pop company until Vanessa finishes dinner.”

When the game was safely put away, Cory went over to Pop, poked him awake and crawled into his lap. Jake’s heart turned one more time. This was all so sad. Cory might never know her mother or father. She might never know that the man who was giving her a big bear hug was her own grandfather.

“I think I’ll go outside a minute.” Mel stood up.

She must have felt the futility too. He climbed to his feet and went with her, unable to remain cooped up a moment longer.

Lightening bugs winked a welcome as Jake leaned against the porch railing. It was hot and muggy even in the dark of night. Mel sat down on the steps.

“It was nice of Vanessa to make her famous spaghetti for Pop. It’s a nice send off before the championship,” she said into the darkness.

Jake made a low noise in his throat. “I’ll lose ten pounds before it’s ready.”

“Remember Vanessa’s basically an only child. She wants everything to be perfect.”

“You sound like a radio psychologist,” Jake grunted.

Mel shrugged and fell silent. He wondered if she had been thinking of herself. An only child too. Did Mel want everything to be perfect? Was that one reason she refused to tell him the truth about her pregnancy that August night so long ago? Was that why she’d avoided him this past week? Jake’s mouth tightened. His heart aching, he longed to touch the woman who sat so quietly at his feet.

Something held him back. A perverse quality within himself kept his hand idle on the old white porch railing.

“Tell me again what the sheriff said,” Mel broke the silence.

Jake took a breath, wondering if hearing it again would make it less real, less grave. “Vickers said they tested the bullet. Your ex has a gun registered in his name like the one that probably killed Sam.”

“He bought it from a German dealer.” Mel’s quiet words made Jake’s skin tingled. “A Walther, something or other. He was obsessive about the gun, because it was like James Bond’s.”

He found it hard to breathe as he watched the shadows of fear play across her face. He clutched the railing, his fingernails digging into the wood. “I hate inactivity. They have to find out who’s been doing this.”

Mel cast a quick, anxious glance at him. “No telling who will be hurt next.”

Her words hung in the night air like a prophet. Jake felt the urge to grab her into his arms, just as he had wanted to grab his daughter earlier. He wanted to hug Mel and tell her he loved her. His heart hurt when he thought of all the wasted years.

“It was a lifetime ago,” he said, not knowing where he was going. She looked up at him as if perplexed by the turn of the conversation. “I wish we could start again, wipe the slate clean.”

She glanced away. “That’s like wishing for a winning lottery ticket.”

Flinging his hand off the railing in disgust, Jake dropped down on the stairs beside Mel. A thread of moonlight laid a ribbon of light across her eyes which were hooded by her long eyelashes. He sensed wariness within her. His jaw clenched. Carefully, he lifted her chin with a fingertip. As she raised her eyes, she turned her gaze on him full force and his heart caught in his chest.

“You’re beautiful.” It didn’t seem enough to say.

Mel’s gaze became a challenge and her lips slightly parted. He accepted the invitation, and touched his mouth to hers—softly. Not demanding, just asking, his tongue teased her until her lips parted some more and allowed his slow exploration. Jake’s heartbeat, strong and steady, meshed with hers. He felt the lift of his chest as emotion surged within him like the final notes of a symphony.

The screen door suddenly banged behind them. Dragging his mouth from Mel’s, Jake turned to see Cory standing on the porch, hands on her hips, head cocked to the side.

“Vanessa said to tell you all it’s time to eat.”

She giggled and ran back into the house.

\* \* \* \*

“Don’t bite me!” Mel swatted Dreamcatcher across the nose with her towel. The big bay stallion snorted and pawed the cedar shavings with a polished black hoof.

Poor guy. Mel didn’t really blame the horse for acting out. He was as nervous as the rest of them. She didn’t know if the horse understood this was the biggest Saturday night of his life, or if he’d just picked up on the tension that severed the air like lightening.

Mel’s own stomach cramped with nerves. The World’s Grand Championship. Freedom Hall. Louisville, Kentucky.

It was a big night for her too. For all of them—Royalty Farm, Pop, Vanessa, Jake and most of all for Cory. The little girl’s future rode with her two parents.

“I’m becoming too melodramatic,” she told the horse. But there was a certain firm truth about her thoughts.

As Pop had planned, Dreamcatcher and Royalty’s Dreamer had qualified in earlier events. Tonight they would face eight other horses, the best American Saddlebreds in the country. Tonight Mel and Jake would also face each other as well as other riders in hopes of

bringing the prestige of the World's Grand Championship back to Royalty Farm.

Mel raked a hard brush over the stallion's coat. Competing with Jake was the hard part. His mere presence—his strong, muscled body and slow, dimpled smile—sent shivers of longing throughout her wayward heart. The memory of last Saturday night's kiss, filled with its dreamy intensity, cast a glow of pleasure inside her soul.

Dreamcatcher stood patiently between the cross-ties, seeming resigned—just as Mel had resigned herself to the fact she and Jake were at an impasse. He loved her. She knew it from the way he acted.

But what sort of future did they have? Her failure to tell him the truth about her pregnancy had created a barrier that might never be scaled. Mel's hand and brush paused at the horse's withers. With her free hand, she grabbed a chunk of black mane and leaned her forehead against Dreamcatcher's damp shoulder. His skin twitched beneath her weight. Mel knew as well as she knew the contours of the stallion's broad back that she had created the barrier simply because she was finding it hard to forgive herself.

Sultry August heat radiated like the pulsing barrage of Mel's bitterness. She was tired of being out of control. Tired of not having what she wanted in life. Tired of never having a dream come true.

Her underarms were already wet, and perspiration trickled between her breasts. Hot air blew from the rattling box fan strapped to the bars of the stall. Dressed for the show, except for her wool coat and hat, her face pulsed with heat. Mel lifted her head and gave herself a mental shake.

Jake and Dave were down at the end of the aisle helping the farrier who was shoeing Royalty's Dreamer. Mel's job was to ready this big brute of a stallion. Pop, Vanessa and Cory were already inside Freedom Hall watching the other classes.

She sighed and gave Dreamcatcher an affectionate pat. Trouble seemed to follow them. Royalty had loosened a shoe less than an hour before the championship. What could happen next?

Mel stepped out of the stall and into the dark shed row. At the far end, three men and the mare were illuminated by a yellow glow, almost like actors in front of a spotlight. Concentrating on the horse, they didn't see her come into the aisle. Mel sighed again. Could she ever forgive

herself for Cory?

Thoughts of Cory brought a smile to Mel's lips. She wandered to the tack room where three long blue ribbons were proudly displayed. The little girl had won her age group championship aboard Royal Tiara on Tuesday. Mel fingered her smooth ribbon, remembering how Cory had taken her victory pass along the rail like a pro. Grinning from ear-to-ear, her chin held high, her posture erect, her hands up, Cory had thrilled the crowd as well as her family.

*Family.* She wished she was part of Cory's family. Choking back a tear, Mel wouldn't cry. Not now. This wasn't the place. She tried to stifle the pangs of longing and regret that had been eating her alive these past weeks.

The stallion snorted. Mel glanced back at his stall and saw him try to toss his head. Although she had left the door open, the cross ties held him securely.

"Easy, boy," she said, drifting back toward the horse.

Through the metal bars above the wooden stall, she noticed the whites of his eyes roll with fear, and then he tossed his head as if one of the cross ties had become unhooked. Mel's heart jumped to her throat.

"What's going on?" She began to run.

In the darkened stall, Lenny half turned, giving her a scathing look. His left hand flat on Dreamcatcher's neck, he held a hypodermic needle in his right.

"What are you doing?" Charging him, Mel knocked the needle free.

"Bitch!" Eyes filled with loathing, Lenny grabbed her arms.

"No!" she screamed in helpless rage.

Suddenly Lenny's fingers were wrapped around her throat, his fetid breath hot on her face. Intense pain overwhelmed her. Mel brought her hands up to his wrists, clutching them, trying to drag his fingers from her throat. The ligaments of his arms bulged beneath her hands.

In that split second, Dreamcatcher reared. Lenny pivoted to get out of the way and thrust her toward the horse as he fled. Mel fell back under the hooves of the frightened creature and hit the sawdust with a thud.

"Mel?" Jake's voice, filled with fear and confusion, sounded far away.

Mel threw her arm across her eyes, shielding her face from the dangerous hooves. The stallion's front legs came down right beside her. A left hoof glanced a blow off her arm. She

flinched in pain.

“You bastard!” Lenny shrieked.

She heard the sounds of flesh hitting flesh. Someone howled. Fear clawing at her heart, Mel pushed herself up on her elbow, rolled out of the way of Dreamcatcher’s hooves, and then struggled to her feet. Stumbling into the shadowed aisle, she saw two obscure forms clash in a death-like embrace.

“Dave! Get the police! Lenny tried to kill me,” Mel shouted to the groom.

With a muffled oath Dave darted away just as Lenny threw a mighty right hook that caught Jake squarely in the face and dropped him to the ground. Flinging a disgusted glance at her, Lenny escaped down the shed row.

“Jake!” She ran to him, kneeling by his side, and threw her arms around his neck.

He folded her into his arms, his breath coming in heavy gulps. He smelled of sweat, spicy aftershave and defeat.

“God, I let him get away,” Jake muttered fiercely. “What was he doing here?”

“He was in with Dreamcatcher and he had a needle. I surprised him and he tried to kill me.”

Jake set her away from him at arm’s length and studied her eyes. “Did he hurt you?”

“No. You and Dreamcatcher saved the day.” She grinned, trying to ease the tension.

Jake assessed her critically. “There’s dirt on your collar.”

“From where he tried to choke me.”

“And dirt and hoof polish on your sleeve.” Jake began to unbutton the long white sleeve. Slowly he rolled it upward revealing a deep purplish bruise on the flesh of her upper arm. His fingers were gentle. “That’s going to hurt.”

“It already does,” Mel told him, her emotions beginning to tumble in wild disarray. “What about her face?”

Jake pulled her toward him once more as if he didn’t want to let her go. “It’s nothing,” he said into her ear, his voice sounding tremulous.

Mel wanted to believe him. She wanted a happy ending. She wanted closure. Her nerves, strung so tightly, began to relax and she started to shiver as if it were a January day.

“Cold?” he murmured into her hair.

“No, just reacting to all that’s happened. Shouldn’t we do something?”

“Dreamcatcher.” Jake rose and hauled her to her feet.

With a quiver in her stomach, Mel followed him to the stallion’s stall.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

Thirty minutes later Mel sat quietly on the back of Royalty's Dreamer in the dim make-up area behind Freedom Hall. The palms of her hands inside her black leather gloves were wet. Her face was grim.

"Do you see him?" she asked Dave, who held Dreamcatcher's bridle.

Mel twisted in her saddle and searched the covered walkway that lead from the stables to the entrance of Freedom Hall. Jake had gone with the police and hadn't returned. It was almost time for the championship. The knots in her stomach twisted tighter.

All around her, other trainers sat motionless on the backs of sleek show horses. Many of the men had been rivals of Pop, and three had already won the World's Grand Championship. Their lined faces spoke of experience. Their hands, resting on their reins, were calm and confident. Mel felt young and green beside them.

"What are we going to do if he doesn't show up?" Mel was sick.

"You go give 'em what for!" Dave said with a grin as if he were trying to boost her confidence.

Mel smiled in response, for she was all of a sudden incapable of speech. Suppose Jake didn't make it back in time? Suppose the future of Royalty Farm was hers alone to salvage? Mel squared her shoulders and sat straighter in the saddle. This was something she could handle. She'd handled a lot worse lately.

"Where's my number 25 horse?" The paddock master's voice blared from the loudspeaker.

Perched on a high platform, the man had a bird's-eye view of the makeup area, and it was his responsibility to make sure all the horses entered Freedom Hall. "Get on your horse, Jake. We haven't got all day."

Mel felt, rather than saw, Jake come up to stand beside her. She swallowed slowly, and looked down at him.

“You made it,” she said, her breathing raspy.

Jake put his hand on her lower leg, connecting with her in a moment of pure intimacy. “The police are searching for Lenny. I can’t believe he tried to tranquilize Dreamcatcher.”

“I can.” Her eyes explored his face.

“Thank heavens the horse is okay.”

“Thank heavens *you’re* okay,” she echoed him.

What if in his desperation to escape, Lenny had harmed Jake?

“Now lady and gentlemen, we’re going to do this right. We’re going to enter the arena one at a time when I call your number,” the paddock master instructed.

With his expensive riding habit and fresh red rose pinned to his lapel, Jake looked as handsome as always. His blue eyes held a deep yearning, a simple look of sadness, and yes—love. Mel’s heart lurched. Flecks of memory pricked her soul. She remembered him as a young man, eager to learn from Pop. She saw him instructing Cory and swinging her into his arms. She saw him staggered by Lenny’s fist. Mel reached out and softly touched his cheek with her fingertips.

“Will they find him?”

Jake shrugged. “I hope so.” His misplaced dimple appeared as he smiled in encouragement.

She removed her fingers reluctantly. “You’d better climb aboard.”

Jake nodded. Mel watched him take the reins from Dave and swing into the saddle. He pivoted the stallion and urged him forward until they were face to face. Mel searched his eyes, the roguish dimples now in repose, the line of his mouth drawn tight, his brow furrowed.

“Tonight is an important night for us both.”

He didn’t need to say he was thinking of Cory. One of them had to win for their daughter. A renewed sense of urgency raced through her blood.

Slowly Jake stretched his hand forward and cupped her cheek in his palm. Even through his gloves, she could feel the warmth of his hand.

“Good luck, Mel.”

“Good luck, Jake.”

The paddock master’s voice blared again. “When the music starts, we go. You’re in first, 292.”

A crusty old trainer on a horse called Movie Maker broke away from the others and stood poised at the head of the ramp.

Jake smiled once more and putting on his game face, removed his hand. Her heart throbbed with an intense ache of loss.

Inside Freedom Hall, the organ began to play the first notes of “My Old Kentucky Home,” and ten thousand spectators rose to their feet. On cue, the first horse and rider started down the long ramp into the arena, followed by a cortege of running grooms.

Mel shifted in the saddle and straightened her back. With effort, she set her mind on the business at hand. To make a good ride, she needed all her concentration. Shortening her reins and pressing with her legs, she asked the mare to walk. They made several circles as other horses and riders entered the arena. Then it was Jake’s turn. He spurred his horse into action and disappeared down the ramp, the bay stallion’s black tail billowing dramatically. She heard the crowd roar as the favorite entered the arena.

“Number 640, you’re next.”

Mel took a deep breath. “Come on, Royalty, it’s show time.” She clucked to the mare. “Trot, girl.”

Royalty’s Dreamer didn’t need to be urged. Lifting her proud head and stepping out at a lively trot, the horse flew down the ramp and burst into the bright lights. All around her the crowd cheered, but the mare didn’t flinch. Royalty knew her job and set out to do it with the heart of a champion.

The competition was already taking shape as Mel made her first pass down the long straightaway. The eight horses circled and circled the arena, vying for the favor of the three judges who stood like little monarchs in the middle.

Coming around the first turn, a horse and rider from Missouri rudely sheared in front of her. Stifling a curse, Mel pulled up just in time and swung Royalty around the upstart. Once settled against the rail again, Mel saw other riders challenging Dreamcatcher, cutting in front of him so the three judges could compare their horses with the favorite.

As she pounded down the second straightaway, Mel decided to save her horse because the competition looked like a long one. Since the show at Lexington, she'd schooled the mare for endurance. If she made the final workout, Mel hoped her effort would pay off, and only then would she challenge Jake.

The striking of the horses' hooves on the green tanbark sounded like muted cannons.

"Waalkk. Everyone bring 'em on down to the walk." The announcer's voice was a Southern drawl.

Royalty's walk was what the judges looked for in a five-gaited horse, more of a prance. The black mare picked up her dainty fore legs and snapped them out in front of her body. Her lovely, long neck, which came straight out of her beautiful laid-back shoulders, was arched. Her head was high and her ears were alert and pointed forward. The animal's eyes were expressive. She had that show horse attitude that said, "Hey, look at me! I'm something special!"

"Okay, everybody, let's set 'em up and slow gait."

Mel knew Royalty probably had the best slow gait of the whole class. The mare performed the four beat gait as it was meant to be—slow. Mel sat motionless on her back, gliding around the arena.

"Rack on! Let's see 'em rack!" The announcer's instruction was accompanied by a shout from the crowd.

The rack, a faster version of a slow gait, was the most exciting part of the five-gaited class and the most difficult.

She turned Royalty loose and let her go on. Mel's heart surged as the mare skimmed across the tanbark as if her hooves hardly touched the ground.

The class was called back down to the walk, but several riders kept racking past the judges. Saving Royalty's stamina for later, Mel simply returned to the walk and found a good place along the rail for the canter.

After the canter, the competitors reversed, striking a trot as they circled the arena again and again. With every step, Mel urged Royalty forward, pushing her up into her bridle and keeping her head set and neck arched. All the gaits were repeated one more time, and then the announcer called everyone in to line up.

Once more Mel sent Royalty into a brisk trot past the judges. Then hopping off the

mare's back in the line up, she stretched her out into the classic Saddlebred stance.

"Good ride," Jake said, halting beside her and sliding off Dreamcatcher.

Mel glanced at him. His smile was like an invisible hand stroking her face.

"Thanks." She dared return his smile, her heart pulsing with the excitement of the competition and his compliment.

As Mel held the reins high and kept the horse's attention, Dave removed the saddle, and wiped off sweat with a scraper and a towel. Hurriedly, he pulled a comb through Royalty's long raven tail and spread it out to touch the green-colored tanbark of the arena floor. Jake busily mirrored Dave while his own groom handled Dreamcatcher. As the judges approached, Jake tossed the comb and towel to the groom and took his place at the head of the stallion.

Soon after that, the three judges were upon them, walking around Dreamcatcher and inspecting his conformation. The crowd cheered.

When the judges toured Royalty, the audience whooped and hollered louder. Jake caught Mel's gaze and winked. Disconcerted, she tried to retain her composure, knowing the grand show mare, ridden by the only woman in the ring was the sentimental favorite of all the ladies in the crowd.

It was kind of ironic, after all, to be competing with Jake but having the same ultimate goal. The irony went even further when she thought of herself in this position. She'd shunned the big championships, being content with her career training horses for young riders. Jake was the one with the fancy career, the desire for greatness in the Saddlebred world. Now she and Royalty were one of the favorites in the World's Grand Championship. It was awesome.

After everyone was back in the saddle, the announcer called for a four horse work out, and, to Mel's wonder, she was part of it. Sultan's Starcross and Movie Maker had made the cut, and to no one's surprise, Dreamcatcher.

Her nerves on edge like a cat getting ready to pounce, Mel pushed Royalty into a fast trot. She set her lips in a grim line of determination. Now was the time to show the judges and the world that this little mare had the heart as well as the ability to be the World's Grand Champion. Now was her chance to save Royalty Farm for Cory.

Angling behind Jake and his horse, Mel followed them around the ring. The bay stallion's body glistened in the bright lights. His black mane tossed with every springy step and his black

tail cascaded behind him. The crowd loved the rivalry between the two or them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you’re watching a brother and sister duel out there,” the announcer revealed. “Royalty’s Reverie, two time Five-Gaited World’s Grand Champion, was the sire of both Dreamcatcher and Royalty’s Dreamer. Earlier this summer, both horses were rescued from the barn fire that took their sire’s life.”

The four horses were asked to trot, slow gait and rack, and then reverse and do the three gaits again. Once Mel saw Sultan’s Starcross falter and break from the rack. His rider got him going again quickly. The contenders challenged Dreamcatcher, and Jake answered challenge with challenge. During the reverse, Mel backed off, and let the males go after each other. She put Royalty on the rail and worked her hard, hoping that her mare’s quality and stamina would show through.

“All right, everybody. Let’s come on back in and line up facing the ring master.”

Mel used the opportunity to make one more pass in front of the judges. She sent Royalty sailing along the rail to the delight of everyone in the crowd. Although winded, the little mare kept going as spiritedly as if she had just stepped into the ring.

The final line up went quickly. The judges stood behind the contestants, checking the numbers pinned to their backs and writing them down on score sheets. Then the whole class retired to the end of the ring by the entrance ramp. As she regained her breath, Mel was comforted that she could do no worse than fourth.

“You did a great job, Mel.” Jake rode up beside her.

She turned to meet his eyes, their blue reflecting the brilliant lights of the arena. “Thanks, but this class belongs to you.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. You never know what the judges will decide.” In an old-fashioned gesture, Jake touched the brim of his homburg, a look of respect in his eyes.

At that moment, Mel knew she loved him more than life itself. It didn’t matter who won, just as long as one of them did.

Overwhelmed by emotion, she raised her gaze overhead, ignoring the sounds of the crowd around her and the feeling of tension in the air. The massive scoreboard proclaimed in shining yellow lights “5-Gaited Grand Championship.”

If Dreamcatcher or Royalty didn’t win tonight, Royalty Farm was in jeopardy. Tears

blurred in Mel's eyes as she thought about failing the people she loved.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have the results of the class." The announcer paused deliberately to drag out the suspense.

Mel dropped her gaze to find Jake watching her, a look of love in his eyes. She nervously rubbed the warmth of Royalty's neck.

"The new Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion is...number 640, Royalty's Dreamer, owned by Royalty Farm of Simpsonville, Kentucky, and ridden by Melody O'Shea!"

\* \* \* \*

Watching the whirlwind of activity surrounding Royalty Farm's stable, Jake slouched in the shadows against a vacant stall some distance away. The lights and noise from the midway on the west side of the fairgrounds filtered over the mammoth exhibition buildings to the horse barn complex, even as a strange mixture of manure and corn dogs wafted in the air.

Almost midnight, the air was hot and sticky. Even with the sleeves of his white dress shirt rolled, Jake felt warm. Yet the agitation within his stomach made the palms of his hands sweat.

Mel had won. She deserved it.

Jake shoved a nervous hand into his tousled hair. In fact, both horses had won, Dreamcatcher being called out as reserve champion. One and two. A clean sweep. Hopefully now Royalty Farm was saved and his daughter and Vanessa had a future there.

Thoughtfully, Jake scuffed the red dirt with his boot. From his vantage point, he sensed the excitement around Mel and Pop. Camera bulbs flashed and several reporters scribbled on pads of paper. Well-wishers shook hands and slapped high-fives.

Because of the commotion, Jake avoided the post-show celebration. He needed time to think. And after all, this was Mel's time in the spotlight. He didn't want his presence to overshadow her.

He planned to ask Mel to marry him. Would she listen? As he pushed himself away from the stall and walked to join the party at the stable, Jake clenched his fists.

"Where have you been?" Mel asked, coming to welcome him.

"Just cooling off."

Her eyes were wide and glowing. She had accomplished a lot, and she had to know it. Her career was made. Mel had entered the ranks of famous Saddlebred trainers, something he'd

once dreamed of accomplishing but something that didn't mean much to him any longer.

He reached out a finger and touched the tip of her nose.

She smiled up at him. "Everyone's been asking for you. Come talk to Pop."

Jake allowed himself to be drawn to where Pop sat like a reigning king in front of the championship trophies and ribbons.

"Damn me, boy, we did it!" Pop exclaimed and raised his hand in salute.

Jake grabbed the old man's gnarled fingers and shook his hand. "We sure did," he said with a grin. "We blew them away."

Pop squeezed his hand before he let it go, and Jake knew he was saying thanks.

Vanessa broke away from a group of friends. "I've already been offered enough money for Royalty's Dreamer that will pay for a new barn," she announced to them, "and three people are shipping their horses to us tomorrow instead of sending them home. They want Jake and Mel to train them."

"A team," Pop said with a knowing look. "What did I tell you? And you thought it was just the prattle of an old man."

Jake glanced at Mel who had flushed becomingly.

"I even had an offer for Royal Tiara, but I told them he wasn't for sale. Cory would kill me if I sold her horse."

"Where is Cory?" Jake looked around. He wanted to share the celebration with her.

"I don't know. She was here a minute ago," Vanessa said.

"Probably went to get something to eat," Pop suggested.

Vanessa looked exasperated. "But I told her not to leave."

"I'll check the stalls," Dave offered.

An unfamiliar pain shot through Jake's stomach. He stared at Mel, who stood quietly beside him. The look of triumph had left her eyes and the blush had paled in her cheeks. She reached out and touched his forearm, her fingers cold on his bare skin. In some immutable way, her touch communicated her fear. He knew what she was thinking.

The way things had been going lately Jake wasn't surprised when Dave returned, puffing from exertion. "I can't find her anywhere."

"Lenny!"

The name of her ex-husband slipped like a curse from Mel's lips.

## *Chapter Twenty*

She was tumbling from the back of a galloping horse. Tumbling and tumbling, Mel spiraled into an open abyss, never seeming to hit the bottom.

With a start she opened her eyes to find the glare from the picture window throwing a cadence of light across her face. Blinking, she adjusted her gaze. The remnant of the old training barn showed through the window, its charred wood and ash a grim reminder of the summer tragedies.

In the bottomless pit of her heart, she wondered again if she'd caused Cory's abduction because of her divorce from Lenny.

"Four days without a word." Mel turned to see Vanessa circle the walnut desk and sit down. "I can't believe it."

"What? That Lenny took Cory or that the FBI hasn't found her yet?" Mel couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

Vanessa glanced at her wiped away tears with a tissue. "Both."

Hands clenched, throat aching from unshed tears, Mel watched the movement of fear and anger shift across Vanessa's face. She wondered if her own terror was as blatantly exposed. Did she look as haggard and disheveled as her friend?

"They'll find her," Jake spoke softly from where he sat facing the desk.

"I'm glad you're confident," Mel snapped.

"How else should I be?" he retorted. "It's hard enough as it is."

Their gazes caught and held. Unspoken emotions of guilt and blame and fear passed between them. Mel longed to snuggle safely into his arms. Like a child seeking a parent's comfort, she wanted to be held and cuddled and told it all would be better.

But the adult part of her knew it wasn't to be. No manner of cajoling and positive words

would cover the truth. Cory was gone and she was in the clutches of a man who had already killed another human being.

“Arguing won’t help,” Vanessa cautioned.

“I’m sorry.” Mel’s shoulders sagged, and she turned back to the window.

Hours of interviews with the authorities had drained them all. After this length of time, it was not surprising they found themselves at each other’s throats. Throughout the interrogation, Jake had kept the secret of Cory’s parentage. Mel was proud of him for that, but it didn’t matter in the large scope of things. What mattered was Lenny’s crazed attack on her and Dreamcatcher, and the alarming fact her ex had a gun just like the one that killed Sam.

Mel rubbed a fingertip across her temple. Lenny was crazed. It was senseless of her to feel any sort of guilt when she had done nothing wrong. Lenny had done it all. Lenny with his sick view of the world and reality.

“At least we know who’s got Cory,” Jake commented as if he wanted something more to say.

“At least we think we know.” Vanessa’s voice was weary.

“Who else could it be? Lenny’s missing and his behavior the night of the show was criminal.” Jake paused a moment, and then went on. “It’s better to know something, however intangible. I’d hate to be like some poor families whose kids disappear without a clue.”

“But Cory *did* disappear without a clue,” Vanessa said, unable to suppress a sob.

Mel’s heart ached. At the same time, the uselessness she felt sat in her soul like a dead weight.

“Why would Lenny do it?”

“Revenge,” Jake speculated.

Mel turned once more to find his gaze on hers. Her heart erupted with anger.

“Lenny didn’t care about our divorce,” she said coming forward, a new certainty awakening in her. “About losing me, at least. He only cared that the divorce hurt his pocket book.” She took a labored breath and glared at Jake. “All I was to him was an entrance to the Saddlebred community. A window dressing.”

Mel knew what they were thinking—blaming her arrival for bringing this horror down on the farm, on Cory. Heck, she blamed herself. Mel clutched the back of a chair to keep from

toppling headlong into the chasm of her fear.

“Why would he take Cory?” Vanessa asked once more in a weak voice.

Mel cast Jake a defensive glance. “My best guess is that it has something to do with his gambling debts. As Pop once said, greed causes people to do funny things.”

The two of them looked at her as if she’d said it all. Mel’s glance shifted between them. Jake’s gaze seemed to be a confirmation of the love and respect he felt for her. He wasn’t blaming her. She lowered her eyes in confusion. Things were so complex. She wished the slate could be wiped clean. She wished for a new start and for a happy ending.

The ringing phone jarred them all. Vanessa pounced on it. Her hopeful look said she expected news from the police. Mel watched with mixed emotions as Vanessa’s face spiked with apprehension. She touched a button and a low voice came across the speaker phone.

“You owe me.”

“Lenny,” Mel mouthed. Jake stood up. They both converged on the desk and the phone.

“Bitch, if you’d just sold the property to Bishop none of this would have happened.”

“What does the realtor have to do with it?” Vanessa asked.

“You had your chance. Now I’ll take mine. Tell Mel to bring five hundred thousand dollars and come alone. No cops. If you bring the cops, the kid is dead.”

“Where?” Jake shouted, lunging toward the speaker.

Lenny must have heard him because he laughed. “She’ll know. And she’d like hell better come alone.”

The click that severed the connection boomed like artillery across the room. They stared at each other.

“My God, what next?” Still holding the receiver, Vanessa sat down hard in the chair behind the desk.

Hope slipped wordlessly into Mel’s heart. “We know where Cory is now.”

“Where?” Jake touched her arm, the blue of his eyes filled with questions.

“The only secluded place Lenny knows. His father’s fishing cabin near Branson.”

“I’ll call the police.” Vanessa began to dial.

“No!” Jake warned. “Do you want to sign Cory’s death sentence?” His fingers left Mel’s arm as he placed both hands on the desk and glared across it at Vanessa.

“Jake’s right,” Mel said. “Lenny has killed once.”

“But what do we do?” Vanessa laid the receiver back into its cradle.

“Like Lenny said, you give me the money and I’ll take it to him.”

“He will kill you too,” Vanessa whispered.

“I’ll have to chance it.” Mel couldn’t explain to Vanessa that it would be a mother bear protecting her cub. She’d do anything to get Cory away from that monster.

Vanessa searched Mel’s face. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s something I have to do and it’s better than waiting here,” Mel assured her.

“And she won’t be alone.”

Mel glanced up into Jake’s eyes to see a look of determination there.

“I’m going with her,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

Mel swallowed hard. Her head throbbed and her eyes were dry and scratchy. Somewhere in the darkness of the night lay Lenny’s cabin. She waited alone in her Jeep, searching the shadows for any sign of Jake, who had gone on foot to take a look.

Her mind seesawed with mirthless abandon. What control did she have over the future? Surely not of her emotions. They vacillated like a squirrel trying to cross the road between hope and abject fear. Like that hapless squirrel, she had zigged when she should have zagged and felt as if she lay flat dead on the pavement. A road kill. A victim of some large, looming vehicle that was Lenny’s madness.

Dispirited, her mind plunged toward thoughts of Cory. Had Lenny hurt her? Was she afraid? Mel took a careful breath. Nothing mattered now, not until they rescued their daughter.

Her future with Jake was something Mel didn’t want to think about. She didn’t want to think about his boyish smile, wayward dimple and clear blue eyes. A sudden flush of heat rippled through her as she tried not to recall the way his arms felt. Secure and loving, not controlling and loathsome like Lenny’s arms had been.

A tiny prick of light gave Mel her first indication that Jake was back. Her hands curled in her lap as she tried to quiet the fear throbbing in her heart.

“Someone’s there.” Jake opened the passenger side door and looked at her, his eyes bright with excitement. He flicked off the flashlight. “It’s about a half mile away. I didn’t get

close enough to look inside, but the lights are on and there's a car in the driveway."

Mel nodded. "It has to be Lenny."

Jake covered her hands with his. Their warmth somehow conveyed concern as well as a deep, abiding trust. Unsettled, Mel sought confirmation in his eyes, but the darkness surrounded them like an enveloping blanket.

"I hate to let you go," he whispered.

"I have to. You know that."

"But I'll still worry."

Mel felt like that squirrel not knowing which way to turn. Part of her wanted to free Cory but the other part was afraid. She'd have to trust herself—trust the person she'd become, the one who saved horses from a burning barn and rescued a foal from a swollen creek. If Jake trusted her after all they had been through, she certainly could embrace his faith.

"Lenny wants the money. I'll give it too him and take Cory. It will be simple," Mel told him, her voice hushed.

Jake squeezed her linked hands. "I'll hide in the woods."

"Yes." Mel clutched the thoughts of his trust and her strength like a rider gripped the saddle with her knees.

"I wish you'd take this gun," he urged, holding up the weapon.

She shook her head. "I don't know how to use it. I'd shoot myself or Cory. Let me do it my way."

"Okay." He sighed. "You know how I hate this."

"I know." What more could she say? Do? With a rush of carelessness, she kissed his forehead. "Remember, I never stopped loving you." The admission swelled her heart with trepidation as she wondered what he would think.

"And I never stopped loving you," he repeated as he shut the door.

Even in the darkness, she read the truth of his confession in his eyes.

And felt a sense of peace.

Gathering up her courage, Mel slid into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition. That's all she had—her confidence in herself and their love. She had to use that to get Cory away from Lenny and get back to Jake.

Mel stopped in front of the cabin, her heart pounding and her stomach churning. A yellow rectangle of light from the open door fell heavily into the black Missouri night. To her dismay, the dark shadow of a man blocked the doorway.

“You took your sweet time,” Lenny growled as she opened the door and turned off the head lights.

“It’s a long way from Louisville.” She tried to bolster her courage with loud bravado.

“Did you bring the money?”

Mel left her keys in the ignition and climbed out. “Do you have Cory?”

“What do you think?” His tone was surly.

“I think you’d better have her.”

Mel shrank from him as she entered the cramped log cabin that smelled of cedar and dead fish and someone’s wet socks. There wasn’t much to the cabin. Just an open area that combined as a kitchen, living room and bedroom. Cory sat cross-legged on the double bed, her eyes wide with delight at Mel’s entrance.

As Lenny closed the door, Mel smiled at the little girl, sending a message of courage and silence.

Trying to play it cool, she turned back to Lenny. “Here’s your money.” She tugged a packet from her jacket and tossed it on the coffee table.

Lenny came slowly into the room. His face was grim. Lines Mel had never seen before assailed the corners of his eyes. Lips drawn, he settled onto the well-worn sofa. Glancing up at her, his gaze stabbed her with so much loathing that it alarmed her.

“I’m going to count it first.”

“Sure, but you’ll find it all there.” Mel shrugged. She remembered where the bathroom was and walked toward it.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to pee. Do you mind? It was a long drive.”

She saw that her crude words disturbed him. She’d never talked like that to him before, but right now she felt vulgar and bitchy. He’d done too much to her. Mel’s stomach turned as she shut the bathroom door.

Five minutes later when she pulled it open, Lenny blocked her exit. "It's all there," he said with a gleam in his eyes.

Mel frowned and pushed past him, knocking her shoulder against his. "I told you it was."

She kept moving, avoiding him like a horse avoided a loud noise. "I'd like some coffee before the drive home."

Lenny grunted something akin to assent as she went to the makeshift kitchen and pulled an aluminum pan from a cabinet shelf. After running tepid water into it from the faucet, she set the pan on one of the two burners.

The water boiled quickly. Mel watched the rolling water and the film of slowly rising steam. Her heart twitched like the tail of a squirrel. Something was wrong here. She could feel him look at her. Just from the edgy way he was behaving, Mel knew Lenny wasn't going to let Cory leave.

Struggling to remain calm, she brought out a jar of instant coffee and two mugs. Filling two mugs with dark granules, Mel took a mug to Lenny. "Want some?"

With narrowed, malevolent eyes, he stared at her. Her breathing shallow, she thrust the mug into his hands.

"Thanks," he said. "Too bad you weren't more domestic when we were married."

Turning from him, Mel went back to the stove. "You didn't want a domestic. You wanted to be married to a trainer who could win the World's Grand Championship."

Glancing around, she flashed him a sickly sweet smile, letting him know that he hadn't gotten everything he wanted.

"You bitch," Lenny growled.

Mel smiled once more. "You always told me I was too nice. That I should be more aggressive in regard to my career," she baited him. "You must be a good teacher, huh, Lenny?"

"It seems so." His tone was embittered.

"We wondered why you did it, Lenny." Her wild need for revenge made her grow bolder. "Why did you burn the barn and kill poor, pathetic Sam."

"Sam had it coming," Lenny growled. "He botched everything."

"You mean you didn't tell him to burn the barn and beat Pop in the face?"

"I told him to make things a little harder, to encourage the Noble woman to sell. Those

horses weren't supposed to die."

"And Pop wasn't supposed to get hurt?" Using a dishtowel, Mel lifted the pan from the burner. "Here's the hot water for the coffee." She came toward her ex-husband.

"I was sorry about that," Lenny acknowledged. He held up his mug for her to pour water into it.

"I bet you were." In the instant of a breath, Mel tossed the scalding water into Lenny's face. He howled in rage and pain as she dropped the pan.

"Cory, run!"

The little girl sprang from the bed and scurried to the door. It was locked. Mel hadn't thought that far ahead.

Terror seized her. Frantic, Mel ran to the window and tried to jerk it open. It was stuck. She tried to think. The lock was a dead bolt, she remembered. Lenny had to have the key. She turned to confront him. To her shock, he came at her like he was playing blind man's bluff, his hands reminding her of the talons of a bird of prey. She dodged him.

"Give me the key, Lenny."

"If you've disfigured me, I'll kill you." He let the threat hang in the air as he advanced toward her again, reacting to her voice, changing direction slowly as if he had trouble seeing.

God help her, she *had* disfigured him. His face was bright red as if he was sunburn. Blood and some clear fluid seeped from the surface of his skin.

Mel's heart strained at her chest. Her breath now came in vicious gulps as she tried to avoid him. There was a horrible odor in the room. Like the smell of burning flesh. Like the smell of the eight horses burned in the barn fire.

"Mel!" Cory held up a key. "It was on the table."

"Good girl!" She jumped out of Lenny's way and joined Cory at the door.

Her fingers felt like they were encased in gloves. She fumbled with the key, finally inserting it into the lock and giving it a quick turn.

"Get into the Jeep."

Cory needed no urging. Together they ran. Mel flung open passenger side door, and helped Cory climb in.

"Mel, look!"

Her head jerking up, Mel turned to see Lenny. Staggering like a drunk, he stood in the doorway with his gun in his right hand. Overcome by blind fear, she slammed the passenger side door and ran around the back of the Jeep to get into the driver's side.

She'd reached the door just as a sharp crack of a gunshot slit the darkness. Lenny was too incapacitated to hit her or she was out of his range.

But Jake wouldn't know that. A sickening feel of terror threatened to gag her. What if?

The question barely surfaced in her mind before Jake emerged from the undergrowth beside the house, his own gun drawn.

"No, Jake!" she shouted, but it was too late.

In a surrealistic display like actors in a two-bit theater, Jake rushed forward. Stunned, Mel heard the pop, pop of Jake's gun and then Lenny's answering crack. Jake fell backward, clutching his head.

"Jake!" Cory's scream mirrored Mel's own.

In a wild move of desperation, Mel raced from the Jeep and flung herself at Lenny, hoping to catch him off guard. It didn't work. But somehow she knocked the gun out of his hand. He grabbed her around the throat.

Lenny was so tall and strong. So vile. So evil. His crushing fingers cut off her air. Mel fought him, twisting and turning. Gurgling noises escaped from her open mouth. She couldn't breathe. She stared at his dreadfully scalded face. Lenny forced his eyes open a crack, as if to enjoy the moment.

That's when her final burst of adrenalin kicked in. With only one hope left and her last remaining strength, Mel lifted a silent prayer at the same time as she shoved her knee upward catching him in the groin.

In that split second, she saw the look of surprise in his eyes, and then he doubled over in pain. Cursing her as he fell to one knee, Lenny lost control at last. Mel sucked in a quick breath and took her booted foot and shoved him hard in the chest. He collapsed onto the gravel.

Nothing mattered but Jake. Cory was cradling his head in her lap, his lifeblood from the wound in his head covering her clothes and hands.

"Oh, my God."

Nerves taut, heart pulsating, Mel stumbled toward them. "Is he dead?"

“No, but he’s bleeding bad.” Cory’s voice was tiny and afraid.

Relief flooded over Mel like a fresh breeze. She stripped of her jacket and knelt beside him, using the jacket to bind up the wound.

“There’s hope,” she murmured. “Let’s get him into the Jeep.”

Somehow the two of them hauled Jake into the back seat. Cory let his head rest once more on her lap and held him in her arms.

Mel looked at them, her hand on the door. “It will be okay,” she said.

Cory nodded. *What a little trooper*, Mel thought as she carefully shut the door, and then climbed into the driver’s side. She backed the Jeep out of the driveway, and the headlights skimmed the crumpled form of Lenny. Stifling a few choice words at the sight of him, she turned the vehicle around and gunned it.

Her only focus right now was to reach a hospital and help. All she heard was the hammering in her ears of her own heart, and Jake’s words—“I never stopped loving you.”

\* \* \* \*

The August sun was unrelenting. It scorched Mel’s face like an angry god. Perched on the paddock fence, her hands gripping the rugged railing, Mel concentrated on the grazing horses and tried to forget the commotion going on behind her back.

A giant horse trailer had rambled onto Royalty Farm property an hour earlier. Bound for California, it had one more passenger to pick up—Royalty’s Dreamer. The World’s Five-gaited Grand Champion had been sold to pay a sizable debt. Customers were already sending horses to them to be trained, and Dreamchaser had bookings for the breeding season. Pop’s plan had worked like a dream. Royalty Farm had been saved.

For Mel, her win at Louisville was bittersweet. She’d done what she’d set out to do—save the farm for Cory. Once again, she had put her child first. Ahead of Jake. The pattern of her life played out in her mind like the staccato beat of a trotting horse. She swallowed the tears of regret that sprang to her eyes as she heard the engine of the big rig start up.

“She’s gone,” Jake said, coming up by her side to lean his tanned arms on the railing.

Mel had said her good-byes to Royalty earlier, but the finality of the horse’s leaving for some reason hit her hard. The tears she had tried to suppress suddenly blurred her vision, and she back-handed her eyes. “She loaded well?”

“Like a champion,” Jake said with a nod.

“She is such a good girl.”

Mel knew her comment sounded silly, but she loved that horse. Royalty was the last one saved from the fire. Her leaving was another loss in a lifetime of losses. Anguish clogged Mel’s throat. She swiped her hand over her eyes again fighting valiantly to hide her sorrow.

At least she hadn’t lost Jake.

She glanced down at him. His head was still bandaged from the scalp wound that had bled like crazy. He’d spent a few days in the hospital, mending fast. The police had found Lenny wandering down the dirt road. The murderer was now sitting in jail where Mel hoped he’d rot.

Jake gripped his hands together and continued to lean into the railing as if he needed the support. “Cory is a bright girl. She beats us all at Clue,” he said. “We’re either going to have to tell her the truth, or leave the farm.”

“I know.” The reality was like a weighted ball, pulling Mel down. “But if we leave, Vanessa won’t have trainers for her new customers.”

“Seems as if we’ve been in this place before. Damned if we do and damned if we don’t.”

Mel’s heart contracted. This wasn’t easy for Jake either. She bit her lip as silence lingered between them.

“Perhaps it’s not our decision to make,” she offered.

He cocked his head, his gaze caressing hers. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not our place to tell Cory because we aren’t her guardians.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“We need to tell Vanessa. Cory is her responsibility.”

Jake frowned. “Isn’t that a cop-out?”

“It is,” Mel said with a shrug. She climbed down from the fence. “We can’t make a happy ending out of this.”

Looking thoughtful, Jake put a fingertip under her chin and lifted it. “I don’t know about that. I’m all for happy endings, remember? Dreams do come true.”

“If you make them come true,” Mel finished for him and walked away from him toward the barn.

He hurried to catch up. “I think we can begin to make this turn into a happy ending if

you'll say you'll marry me."

She stopped and turned to face him. "This is not time for one of your jokes, Mr. Hendricks."

"I'm not joking," he told her.

"You can't say that to me in the middle of the driveway."

"I can ask you to marry me anywhere I please."

"But you haven't said anything about loving me."

Jake laughed. He cupped her face into his hands. His lips descended upon hers in a liquefying kiss. "I love you," Jake murmured into her mouth.

"Oh," Mel sputtered, hardly able to think.

Jake lifted his head. "I'm assuming you love me too."

"Of course." Mel's response was breathless.

"And I'm assuming you'll marry me."

"Of course, silly." Mel threw her arms around his neck.

"Terrific!" Laughing, Jake scooped her off her feet in a powerful embrace and performed an awkward pirouette.

Her blood rushing in her ears, Mel savored his exhilaration, the safety of his arms, the very thrill of the moment. When she came down to earth, she pushed away ever so slightly and turned her gaze up to touch his.

"We still haven't solved our problem," she told him seriously.

Jake took a deep breath. "Yes, I know. You're right about talking with Vanessa first, but I think someday Cory has to be told the truth. Besides, whatever happens from now on is *our* problem, one we work on together." He hugged her near. "Bargain?"

"Bargain." Mel nodded her head.

With his arm around her, Jake drew Mel the few paces toward the wide entrance of the barn only to be brought up short. Cory sat on the second floor hay loft with her legs dangling over the side and an irrepressible smile on her face. Fear jolted through Mel. Had she heard them talking?

Jake squeezed her shoulder and grinned up at Cory. "What are you doing up there, kiddo?"

“Watching you guys.”

“Did you hear what we said?” Mel’s heart seemed to stop.

Cory’s face fell. “No. You all were too far away. But I saw you kissing.” She brightened.

“Are you going to get married?”

Mel and Jake exchanged glances. “Yes,” he admitted.

“It’s about time,” Cory said with a matter-of-fact little nod.

Mel felt the relief in Jake’s posture. “So, why would do you want us to get married?”

“Because you’re part of my family,” she told them.

Mel’s mouth went dry, and she really thought her heart would crumble. Once more Jake squeezed her shoulder for support.

“How do you figure that?”

“You’re part of my family at the farm. You know, Vanessa and Pop and Major.”

“I see.” Jake nodded his head.

Her blue eyes were serious. “If you get married, maybe you’ll stick around.”

“You’d like that?”

“Yep.”

“We’d like that too, wouldn’t we, Mel?” His gaze rested on Mel like a blessing.

She looked up at him. “Yes, we would.”

Jake turned back to Cory. “Well, kiddo, if you plan to show in Kansas City this November, you’ve got a lot of work to do. Hop down and the two of us will give you a riding lesson.”

As Cory scrambled down from the hay loft, Jake kissed the top of Mel’s hair. “It’s going to work out,” he said in a hushed voice so Cory wouldn’t hear. “Thank you so much for giving me my daughter.”

Tears clouded Mel’s eyes and joy caressed her heart. Whispering close to his ear, her response was like a kiss. “You’re right. Sometimes dreams do come true.”

## *About the Author*

Jan Scarbrough lives in Louisville, Kentucky, along with two dogs and four cats. Dreams do come true! On January 2, 2000, she married Bill, her soul mate. When she's not writing, Jan takes riding lessons every week on her favorite horse, the American Saddlebred. She also volunteers at The Luci Center, a therapeutic riding center.

Jan says, "The process of becoming a published author has been fun. My best friends are fellow writers. Who else will check a point plot for me or understand GMC and POV?"

Jan Scarbrough is a member of Novelists, Inc., Romance Writers of America and the Kentucky Romance Writers, where she served as president, secretary, and newsletter editor. Jan is currently the web mistress of the KYRW chapter's award-winning web site.

To learn more about Jan Scarbrough, please visit her at:

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A man, Patti Jo keeps telling her.

Sent to Kate's classroom on an investigation, ATF Special Agent Mike Lehmann uses his drug prevention training as his cover. His mission? To find out what Kate knows, about her husband's "death." Recent reports indicate he is alive and that he faked his death because of his involvement in a drug-running operation. Mike's task is to expose Carpenter, and if she's involved, Kate.

And he'll stop at nothing to get the answers he seeks.

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