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# Wild Wyoming Nights

Sandy Sullivan

WILDER SERIES

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# **WILD WYOMING NIGHTS**

*Wilder Series 1*

**Sandy Sullivan**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

**WILD WYOMING NIGHTS**

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## DEDICATION

I need to dedicate this novel to my father, Jack Mauch. He was one of my biggest fans and a true believer in my writing. He left us the day after I received the first round of edits on this book. I love you, Dad, and may God keep you by His side until we meet again.

# WILD WYOMING NIGHTS

*Wilder Series 1*

SANDY SULLIVAN

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## Prologue

Snow fell silently in the shadows of the night sky. The streetlights reflected their glistening shapes before they hit the ground to be mixed with the rest of the blanket of white. The snow covered everything in its path, freezing to the cars, pavement and windows.

Winter blasted into the state in full force, but after all it was November. Abby closed her eyes and tears slid down her cheeks as she choked back a sob. The soft thermal sleeves of his shirt rested against her face and his scent filled her head.

*Josh. God, I miss you so much.*

Flashes of their last morning together ripped across her mind like a black and white movie, taking her back, letting her feel his love one last time.

The night surrounded them while he snuggled against her back, and his hand ran softly down her arm as his lips skimmed her shoulder.

“Mmm,” she moaned.

“Like that?”

“You know I do, brat.” She rolled over, and his lips continued their journey down her chest until his mouth found her already hard nipple.

“This isn’t fair.” She groaned and arched her back toward his mouth.

“Mmm...why?”

“Because you need to leave in a few minutes.”

He chuckled and said, “I want to make sure you still want me when I get back.”

“Only as long as forever.”

“Good answer, wife.”

“Do you have to go?” Her wishful murmur resounded through the room.

“You know I do. This is my last shift before we leave for Florida for ten whole days.”

“I can’t wait for the warmth of the sun on my face and for you to make love to me in the sand.”

“I like the way you think.” He kissed her hard on the mouth before he rolled out of the queen size bed and padded toward the bathroom. The sound of rushing water filled the room when he turned on the shower. Pulling his pillow to her face, she smiled. They were going to have so much fun. Their flight left the day after tomorrow—two long days away, but they were supposed to be gone for a ten days, just the two of them.

Several minutes later, the door opened and her gaze fixed on her husband’s chiseled chest, before it skimmed over his six-pack abs. A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth when she settled on the towel wrapped around his lean hips.

*Damn, he’s a sight.*

“You need to stop looking at me like that, Abigail,” he growled with pretend fierceness. He sauntered to her side and pulled her up in front of him on the bed.

“I can look all I want to.” She twirled the diamond on her left hand. “This says I can.”

His lips came down on her mouth, slanting across hers. She opened to him, allowing his tongue to dance with her own. He pulled

her tight against him and she wanted more, but she knew now wasn't the time. He had to be at the firehouse in fifteen minutes. When he finally lifted his head, a smile flashed across his lips.

"I love you, Abby."

"I love you, too. Be careful today, huh?"

"Of course. Aren't I always?"

A wistful smile curved her lips for a moment before she frowned and ran her palm down the hard muscles of his chest.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head trying to clear the nagging trepidation that filled her heart. "Nothing. I have a bad feeling, that's all. You know me, always worrying."

"Everything will be fine. I'll call you later when I get a few minutes."

"Okay—I love you, Josh."

"I love you, too." He kissed her hard before grabbing his clothes and heading out to the living room to finish dressing.

Later that morning, the phone rang while she packed for their trip.

"Abby, do you have the television on?"

"Caroline?" She tucked the phone receiver between her ear and her shoulder as she continued to fold clothes. "No, why?"

"Oh God, Abby, turn on the television. One of the Trade Center buildings has been hit. A plane."

Terror gripped her heart when she flipped on the large screen television across the room. The scene flashing across in front of her face could only be described as chaos. People ran and sirens blared while the news crew tried desperately to capture the scene on camera.

All Abby could focus on were several fire trucks lining the street and the men readying their gear. Tears filled her eyes while she watched, unable to tell if any of the trucks belonged to the firehouse where Josh worked.

"Caroline?" Terror filled her voice and she whispered into the phone.



“I’ll be right there.”

She dropped the receiver onto the hook, her eyes never leaving the screen. Out of nowhere, a second explosion rocked the street around the news crew. The camera angle tilted upward as a ball of fire spewed from the middle of the second tower.

“The second tower has been hit.”

Abby grabbed the remote and turned off the television. She couldn’t watch.

Five minutes later, Caroline burst through her door and wrapped her in a hug as they sank down on the couch to wait.

A choking sob wracked her frame when she came back to the present, the hard surface of the wall behind her biting into her back. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks and dropped to the material clutched in her hand. One year and two months he’d been gone and she couldn’t seem to move on without him. He was her world, her firefighter husband, her savior and the love of her life.

That September morning changed thousands, if not millions, of lives. Her world stopped that day. The day time stood still.

She’d waited and waited, but he never came home.

## Chapter One

Abby sat bolt upright in bed, her heart roaring in her ears until she focused on the early morning sunlight filtering through the window. The dream had come again. Josh called to her from the darkness, begging her, pulling her from what little sleep she got these days. The dream came less often since she'd moved, but it was no less terrifying than the first time it had invaded her dreams.

She slipped on her robe and ran her hands over her arms, trying desperately to calm the goose bumps on her flesh. "Damn it! It's cold!"

*A nice fire will chase away this chill.*

The large rock fireplace graced almost an entire wall and fit perfectly with the huge living space. She loved it. This house was her home now, but the cold dampness of Wyoming in the winter chilled her to the bone. She thought she'd gotten over cold winters a long time ago. After all, she was born and raised in the northeast. Cold shouldn't bother her.

"What the hell possessed me to move to Wyoming?" Before the words left her mouth, she knew the answer. Wyoming held everything opposite of her life in New York. After Josh's death on September 11<sup>th</sup>, she had to leave. It had taken just over a year and a lot of soul searching, but she made the decision to change everything about her life. Starting over without Joshua had to be the hardest thing she'd ever faced, but face it she would.

Stacking the dry kindling on the grate before she laid several logs on top, she struck a match. She held the flame next to the newspaper underneath and waited for it to catch, and illuminate the room.

She knew no one in Wyoming. She had actually never left New York except for her cousin's wedding once in the south, but at the time, it seemed like the thing to do. Now—she wasn't so sure.

Everyone in New York thought she had lost her mind, and maybe she had, but they didn't know the dream she held in her heart. Josh would forever be there, she knew, but it was time to live again. She just couldn't do that in New York, not with the memories. Everything there screamed of his presence and his love for her. Here, everything sang of freshness and new beginnings. Here, she could do what she had always longed to do, even when they lived in the city—breed horses. She and Josh always talked about moving somewhere and buying some land. Now she would fulfill their dream, her dream.

For months after that faithful day, she had always hoped, and until they finally called off the searches and changed to recovery, her hope had never waned. They never found his body, and she had nothing to bury, so for her, moving to Wyoming was a way to heal her heart. Giving away most of his things helped, but the only way for her to move on had to be moving away, far away from everyone and everything she knew.

Abby twisted the wedding ring she still wore as her thoughts returned to her new life. She stretched her hands toward the flames in front of her, hoping to absorb the warmth into her cold fingers. After a couple of moments, she turned so her back was to the flames as she let the heat penetrate the coldness that seemed to have infused her whole body.

*I need something, coffee—that's it.*

Leaving the warmth of the fire behind, she headed to the kitchen. She leaned against the counter after she set up the coffee and waited while the coffee pot sputtered. When it finished, she poured a cup and doused it with her standard hot chocolate and cream and headed back to the fireplace. The big leather chair beckoned her with his soft cushion and warm blanket lying across the back. It was her favorite spot in the house—in front of the fire, a good book in her hands.

Sipping from the cup, she let her mind wander while she turned the pages. It wasn't long before she drifted off to sleep.

Abby opened her eyes an hour later to find the fire in the grate had burned down to a few embers.

*I must have fallen asleep in the chair.*

Pulling herself up with a heavy sigh, she twisted sideways to loosen the muscles in her back. Falling asleep in the chair hadn't been a good idea.

*Abby.*

She spun around, as her gaze darted around the room, searching each corner and crevice. A frown pulled down the corners of her mouth and she shook her head.

*I'm not doing this again. He's not here. He's gone. He died in New York.*

Only one other time, in their apartment in New York, she was sure she'd heard her name whispered softly in her ear.

*Abby.*

The whisper came again, and fear clutched at her chest.

*I'm not crazy—he can't be here.*

The rustling sound came from the doorway to the spare bedroom. She blinked and squinted, trying to bring the shape into focus.

A terrified whimper left her mouth when the figure became clearer.

*“Josh?”*

He stood in front of her in his bunker gear, minus the helmet. His blue eyes seemed to look right through her. She blinked several times.  
*I know he's not really here, he can't be.*

*Abby.*

She took a tentative step in his direction when his hand reached for her. Her eyes filled with tears and a sob choked her throat.

*I love you, Abigail.*

He started to fade.

*“Wait! No! Joshua, don't you leave me again.”*

*You need to love again, Abby—here—in Wyoming.*

Chills pimpled the skin on her arms as she reached out to him. He faded from her sight, but the smell of his cologne lingered in the air. She sank to the floor as gut-wrenching sobs shook her shoulders.

She buried her face in her hands and whimpered, “I can’t love anyone but you Josh. I can’t.”

*Yes, you can, Abby. He’s here. Find him.* His voice faded on the whistle of the wind outside.

Abby sat on the floor in the doorway for what seemed like hours. She couldn’t move, didn’t want to. She wanted to embrace the fact that Josh had come to her and let it wrap itself around her heart.

*If I stay right here, maybe he’ll come back.*

The phone rang with a shrill jingle. She ignored it until the answering machine picked up and her mother’s voice met her ears.

“Abigail, answer the phone. I know you’re there. I need to talk to you.”

She wearily pulled herself up and shuffled to the phone.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Why?”

“I just had a feeling. You know how I get.”

“Yeah, Mom, I know. You’ve told me for years how sensitive you are.” She frowned when something tickled her brain until she shook her head trying to clear it.

“Did something happen, Abby? You sound strange.”

She couldn’t tell her mother she’d seen Josh, or maybe she could. No, her mother would think she’d lost her mind again.

“No, I’m okay. Listen, I need to go. I have to run into town and get some supplies before the snow gets any worse. We are supposed to have a blizzard in the next couple of days.”

“All right, Abby, but be careful.”

“I’ll be fine. Talk to you soon.”

“I love you, Abigail.”

Words stuck in her throat for a moment at her mother's expression, the same one Josh had whispered so many times. "I love you too, Mom."

She dropped the phone on the cradle and hung her head for a moment before she headed to her bedroom to change her clothes.

When she returned to the living room a short time later, she grabbed her parka and the keys to her Jeep. She pulled open the door as a blast of cold air swirled around her.

*No need to lock the doors around here. I'm the only idiot out in this weather.*

Abby forced the door of her Jeep open against the howling wind and slid inside. The engine rolled over with little trouble and she slowly pulled out onto the highway. She crept along slowly since the roads were slick, but she was used to that. New York sanded the roads very early in the morning, but not here.

The snow blew against the windshield, and she turned the wipers on high in a blind attempt to see more than fifty feet in front of her.

*The blizzard wasn't supposed to come in for a couple more days. You'd think it was here now with how hard it's snowing.*

Gripping the steering wheel tightly with her gloved hands, she squinted, trying to see. She muttered under her breath how stupid she felt for coming out in this weather in the first place.

A truck passed her moving in the other direction, splattering her windshield with mud, snow and ice. She flipped on the washer fluid, trying to clear away the smears. The windshield cleared long enough for terror to grip her chest when a huge, black truck veered into her lane.

"Oh my God!" She jerked the steering wheel to her right as a scream ripped from her throat.

The Jeep flipped twice before coming to a sickening stop, landing on its top in a snow bank.

\* \* \* \*

The radio at his waist crackled before he heard the voice say, “Roll over accident on highway 210, just off Telephone Road junction. Probable injuries.”

Chase Wilder grabbed his heavy jacket off the corral fence post. He’d been working with a mare, but with the radio dispatch, headed for his truck. The accident was close, too close, and he knew the area well enough to know it could be anything, even a fatality.

This time of year was bad, especially with more and more people moving into the area and buying up the land. Most didn’t know how to drive in the snow they had in Wyoming.

Born and raised in Laramie, he knew how many people lost their lives on the roads in the winter. They either would crash and not be found before they froze to death or just die in the accident. He had lost his wife in a similar fashion a couple of years ago. She was hit by a semi on the interstate in a snowstorm and died in the initial impact.

After that, he became a volunteer for the fire department and a first responder to the outlying areas. He did what he could when he got to the scene, stabilizing the patient before the paramedics could get there.

Pushing the talk button on his radio, his voice crackled to the dispatcher, “I’m on my way.”

“Thanks, Chase. The others are headed there, too.”

The snow came down hard in front of his truck making it difficult to go very fast. It still didn’t take long for him to reach the crash site, and what he found chilled him straight through his heart. A newer Jeep Cherokee with New York plates lay on its top in a snow bank about fifteen feet off the road. He scrambled out of his pickup truck and slipped on his coat and gloves. He trudged through the knee deep snow in a desperate race to see if the occupant was still alive.

Digging with his hands, he shoveled the snow away from the driver’s window so he could see inside. When he finally reached the glass, he wiped away the snow and peered in. Hanging upside down

by her seatbelt was a woman in her late twenties, he guessed. Her eyes were closed and a small trickle of blood oozed from the wound on her head. He couldn't be sure if she was breathing.

His gaze moved to the shattered window behind her.

Punching at the remaining glass with his gloved hands, he pulled the shards away in order to reach her. He slipped through the window and positioned himself behind her. The blare of sirens wailed in the distance telling him help was close.

She moaned softly.

*Thank God! At least she's alive.*

"Ma'am. Can you hear me?"

She moaned again and turned toward him.

Chase pulled his gloves off and slipped his hands around the back of her seat. Placing them along her neck, he spanned the warm flesh, stabilizing it as best he could until the others got there.

She shivered under his touch.

His arms began to ache and burn, but he could hear the rescuers coming closer.

"Chase?"

"Here!"

"So what do we have?"

"Not sure. I found her like this. There is a wound to her head and I've stabilized her neck the best I can from here."

The firefighter poked his head through the opening and said, "Damn man. You get yourself in most precarious positions."

"Just get her out, okay? Worry about me afterwards."

The rescuers started shoveling the snow away from the sides of the vehicle. The door was jammed shut, so even with the jaws of life it wouldn't budge. They were going to have to break the driver's window and slide her out.

Another rescuer slipped a blanket inside along Chase's side.

"I'm going to cover you and her so we can break the glass."



“Do it.” His arms trembled from holding them so stiff, but he wouldn’t let go—he couldn’t—even if his own life depended on it. He dropped his head under the blanket, and leaned close to her ear. “It’ll be okay. I’m right here.” He didn’t know whether she heard him or not, but the reassurance made him feel better.

Glass shattered around them, sending pieces flying in all directions, but only a few pieces hit his back. The men pulled out what remained and put another blanket across the shards littering the casing of her window.

“We are going to have to cut the seatbelt and turn her so we can slide her out. You with us, Chase?”

“I’ll hold her while you cut the belt.”

He moved with them to slide her onto the backboard and secure her neck with the c-collar once they had her out of the car. She still hadn’t regained consciousness that he knew of and it worried him.

Once the rescuers had her positioned on the gurney and strapped her down, he found a piece of gauze along with some saline and gently washed the cut on her head.

They were about to put her into the ambulance when she opened her bright green eyes. His heart slammed to a stop in his chest when she looked straight into his.

A frown wrinkled her brow for a moment before she whispered, “Josh?”

“Chase, ma’am.”

*What do I care if she knows my name?*

She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them again. “Thank you for saving me.”

He felt like a fool for standing there with his mouth hanging open when they slid her into the ambulance and shut the door.

## Chapter Two

Abby could see him standing outside through the rear doors as they pulled away. Their eyes met briefly, and then he was gone.

He'd been there with her the whole time in the car. She wasn't completely aware of everything around her, but she could feel him behind her. He had whispered in her ear, and she heard him. She could smell him too, the mixture of horse and man.

*Or was it Josh there with me? No, he didn't smell like horses.*

When she opened her eyes, the brightness of the stranger's blue eyes startled her. Then she saw him—Josh—standing beside the other man in the snow, white light surrounding him as he smiled. She whispered Josh's name, but the other man had answered. *Chase? Wasn't that what he said?* She wasn't sure anymore, and thinking made her head hurt.

"Ma'am? Are you in pain?" Her gaze found the paramedic sitting next to her. He hardly looked old enough to be out of high school, much less a paramedic. She frowned and tried to move a little to relieve the pressure on her shoulders.

"Yes. My head is killing me."

"Do you hurt anywhere else?"

"My neck a little. What happened?"

"You rolled your car. You were trapped inside, and we had to extract you. We're headed for the trauma center in Laramie."

"I don't remember."

"That's not surprising. You were unconscious when we found you." His gaze moved to the monitor next to him.

"Can I ask you a question?"

“Sure.”

“Who was the man out there with me? I mean in the car?”

He cocked his head to side. “There wasn’t anyone in the car with you.”

“No, he came later.”

“Oh—you must mean Chase.”

“Yes, I think that’s what he said.”

“Chase Wilder. He owns some land not far from where you wrecked. The Rocking W is his place. He trains horses and volunteers as a first responder for accidents.”

Their conversation ceased when the ambulance rolled into the parking bay and with perfect precision and they hustled her into the emergency room. Doctors and nurses swarmed around her, poking, prodding, sticking her with needles and doing test after test.

One nurse asked, “Is there anyone we need to call, a husband, maybe?”

Abby lifted her left hand and the diamond on her finger twinkled in the florescent light over her head. A tear slipped from her eye into her hair, as she whispered, “No—he died over a year ago.”

Her cell phone in her pocket rang, and she tried to reach it but couldn’t. “Can’t you reach that for me?”

“Sure.” The girl pulled it out of her pants pocket and said, “It says Mom.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Can I answer it?”

“Yeah—here.”

Abby brought the phone to her ear. “Mom?”

“Abigail—what’s happened?”

“Leave it to you.” Air rushed from between her lips in a frustrated sigh. “There was an accident, but I’m okay, I think. They haven’t said exactly.”

“I’ll fly there first thing tomorrow.”

“No, Mom, it’s okay. Let them figure out if there is anything wrong first, all right?”

“What aren’t you telling me, Abigail? I can hear it in your voice.”

“I can’t talk about it right now, Mom. I’ll call you when I know more.”

“Abigail...”

Abby shut the phone with a decisive click.

*She’ll be pissed I hung up on her, but I can’t tell her right now.*

The nurse returned to her side and said, “We need to take you to CAT Scan.”

“Okay. What exactly is that?”

“We will scan your head to make sure there isn’t any kind of bleed on your brain or swelling. You lost consciousness at the scene of the accident, so this is necessary to diagnose any problem.”

Once the test was completed, they wheeled her back into the trauma bay. “The doctor will be in here in a moment to talk to you about what’s going on.”

They left Abby alone for a couple of minutes, and her thoughts turned to the stranger who had helped rescue her. He appeared to be as tall as, if not a little taller, than Joshua, and the color of his eyes fascinated her the moment they stared into hers. She couldn’t really tell much about his build because of the bulky coat he’d worn, but she remembered the feel of his hands. The calluses on his palms rasped against her skin while he bracketed her neck. A shiver rolled down her back when a stray thought whipped across her mind.

*I wonder what they would feel like sliding along the skin of my thigh.*

The nurse returned a moment later, bringing her wandering mind back to her present predicament. “I can remove the c-collar. The CAT Scan of your head and neck are clear.”

“That’s good. That thing isn’t the most comfortable thing in the world.”

The girl laughed. “No, they aren’t. Here.” She helped her sit up and slip the collar off.

“Oh man! You don’t know how good that feels.”

The doctor walked between the curtains, and Abby took in his appearance. Blonde haired and brown eyed, at least six feet in height and gorgeous. He appeared to be in his early thirties and muscled in all the right places, and lord could the man smile.

"I'm Doctor Bridges, Christopher Bridges. Everything looks fine. You do have a concussion, but there isn't much can be done about that. Your neck will be sore. Mild whiplash went along with the concussion."

"Thanks, doctor. Anything else?"

"Um...no. I think that's it, Mrs. Carter. I'll call and check on you in a couple of days."

Abby smiled. He was very nice looking, but not necessarily her type. The muscles he had were from vigorous gym workouts, not carrying hundreds of pounds of gear up dozens of flights of steps to save a child from a burning building. A frown pulled down the corners of her mouth when Joshua skipped across her mind.

"Something wrong?" Christopher asked.

Her shoulder lifted in a shrug. "No, I guess not."

"The nurse will be back shortly with your discharge papers. You can call a cab to take you home although it may take them awhile to get here tonight with this weather."

"Thank you."

"Of course, that's what we're here for."

His gaze moved over her in a caress before he turned and left the room.

The nurse returned a moment later and went over her paperwork, pulled out the things in her arms, and walked her out to the admission desk.

"Take care, Mrs. Carter, and be careful out there. We don't want to see you back here any time soon."

Abby laughed. "I'll try."

After signing her paperwork, she turned toward the doors and reached into her purse for her cell phone. Once she found it, she lifted her head only to meet the startling blue gaze of the intriguing stranger.

\* \* \* \*

Chase buried his hands in his pockets as he slowly approached. Heat swept up his neck when their eyes met. *What the hell am I doing here? It's not like I know her or anything.*

For some reason, he felt compelled to make sure she was all right.

After following the ambulance to the hospital, he had parked his truck and moved inside the waiting room until he saw her come out.

*Damn, she's got pretty eyes.* "Hi."

"Hi." She cocked her head to the side and a smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

Pulling one hand out, he ran his fingers through his hair for a moment before he stuttered slightly, "I'm sorry. I guess I should tell you who I am so you don't think I'm some kind of weirdo."

Her green eyes sparkling in the dim light of the waiting room and one shoulder lifted in a shrug. "I'm from New York. I know all about weird people."

He dropped his gaze to the floor for a moment, and then smiled in return. "I'm Chase Wilder."

She stuck out her hand and answered, "I know. Abigail Carter, but my friends call me Abby. Nice to meet you, Mr. Wilder."

Startled, he took her hand in his for a moment, impressed with the firmness of her grasp. "You know?"

"Yeah, I remember you telling me outside the ambulance, but the paramedic in the back told me again."

She slipped her hand out of his and he had the insane urge wipe his now sweaty palm on the thigh of his jeans.

"Thank you again for helping me."

"My pleasure."

“Are you always so helpful and handy to have around as you were today, Mr. Wilder?”

“Chase—please.”

“All right, Chase. You can call me Abby.”

He let a small smile twitch at his lips. *Abby. Nice name.* “Can I give you a lift home? They towed your Jeep to the wrecking yard.”

She grimaced. “Was it bad?”

“Afraid so.”

“I would appreciate the ride, then. I’m sure the cabs aren’t running tonight with all this snow.”

He swept his arm to the left and settled the black Stetson back on his head. “Right this way. I’m parked out front.”

They walked together through the sliding glass doors and out into the snow. The biting, frigid wind hit him in the face, and he noticed her shivering next to him. Her coat and sweater had disappeared, and even though they had managed to save her long johns, she was probably freezing. He slipped his heavy coat off his shoulders and wrapped it around her.

She shrugged out of his coat and held it out to him. “I can’t take your jacket. You’ll freeze.”

He shook his head and helped her settle it back around her. “I’m used to these winters. I was born and raised here. I’ll be fine until we get the truck warmed up.”

Chase ushered her to his truck and pulled open the door. She slid inside, and he shut it behind her. Hurrying around to the driver’s side, he slipped in and pulled his door shut against the howling wind and blowing snow. The diesel engine growled like a cougar on the prowl when he started it and let it idle for a bit, cranking up the heat inside. “It should warm up in a minute. The truck hasn’t been off very long.”

She rubbed her hands together before she put them between her legs. “It’s not really that cold in here, anyway.”

After a few moments, he pulled slowly through the parking lot, plowing through the snow with the front of his vehicle until they made it out onto the street.

“So where are we headed?”

“I bought the ranch house about three miles up the road from where the accident happened.”

His startled gaze swung to her across the cab before returning to the road in front of them. “You bought the Miller place?”

Her shoulder lifted in a shrug. “I guess so, if that’s what you call it.”

“Big stone fireplace in the living room?”

“Yeah.”

“I love that house.”

“You’ve been inside?”

He shook his head and laughed. “Yeah, plenty of times. I grew up with their boys.”

“You must not live far from there, then.”

He chuckled. “You could say that. My land actually is adjacent to yours. The fence along the south end borders both properties.”

“My neighbor?”

He flashed a smile as he looked across the cab. “Yep.”

“Mmm...interesting.”

“So how did you end up in Wyoming, Mrs. Carter?” She scowled and shot him a glance. “Sorry—Abby.”

Abby’s eyes went misty as she turned them out the window. He didn’t think she would answer until she whispered, “I wanted to get away from New York.”

“I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories. I’m just curious how a beautiful woman like you ended up in this backwater town.”

She snorted at his off-handed compliment as her gaze rested on him a moment, then back out the windshield. The rest of the ride was made in silence.



As they pulled up to her house, a light burned in the window. She must have left one on when she headed to town earlier.

Abby shrugged the coat off her shoulders, but he stopped her. “Keep it until you get your own again. I’d feel terrible if you froze to death walking to the door.”

\* \* \* \*

Abby wasn’t sure what to make of the enigma of a man next to her. There was a sadness in his eyes that pulled at her heart strings, making her want to know more about him, tell him about Josh, but she held back. She wasn’t ready to talk about her husband to any one, much less a stranger, was she?

“Would you care for some coffee? I mean, it’s the least I could do for all your help today.”

Chase’s mouth lifted at the corners, and she saw a dimple peek out of his cheek. Her breath caught in her throat before she released it in a rush as her heart skipping a beat in her chest.

*Damn, I love dimples.*

“Sure.” He turned off the truck, and they slipped out into the snow, trudging toward the door in a hurry while the flakes continued to drop from the sky. Abby almost groaned when her muscles protested the exertion after her tumble in the Jeep.

Reaching the door, she pushed it open as he followed close on her heels.

“Have a seat if you’d like and I’ll warm up the coffee.”

“Okay.” He looked around her space, and she smiled before she headed for the kitchen. “It’s chilly in here. I’ll get a fire started if you like.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Abby grabbed two mugs out of the cupboard with a soft groan.

*I’m going to be really sore tomorrow.*

Pouring some cold coffee into the cups, she slipped them into the microwave and turned it on. When she turned back to face the living room, she saw him bent over the fireplace stoking the embers and adding more wood while the small flames licked up.

His brown hair curled slightly against the collar of his shirt, and her fingertips tingled with the insane itch to feel the texture between her fingers. He wore the typical garb of a cowboy, long-sleeve western shirt, Wranglers that hugged his lean hips, complete with a silver belt buckle and cowboy boots with a hint of mud on the heels.

The microwave beeped and she turned to retrieve the cups of coffee. "What would you like in your coffee, Chase?"

"A little cream and sugar is fine."

"Coming right up."

After dousing the two cups with the appropriate things, she headed into the living room as he rose from his spot in front of the hearth. The fire now burned bright, casting a warm glow about the room and taking away the chill. The flickering light bounced off the walls, casting shadows in each corner.

"Here you go."

"Thanks."

Their fingers brushed when she handed him the cup. The electric current that shot up her arm was enough to send her toes curling in her boots. Her gaze met his and she stood mesmerized by the color of his eyes. A frown pulled down the corners of her mouth as she studied the color closely.

*His eyes were very close to the color of Josh's.*

The fire popped and crackled behind the screen, bringing her focus back. She smiled and dropped her gaze to the floor as heat crawled up her neck. A little embarrassed by her reaction to the man in front of her, she pressed her lips together and then bit her lower lip. Deciding her best action would be to ignore the feelings he stirred, she moved toward the couch and sat down to toe off her boots. She tucked her legs underneath her as he took the other end of the sofa.

“So what were you doing out on a day like this?”

Long fingers, strong hands, no wedding ring, those were the things registering in her mind when he wrapped his hand around the mug.

*What do I care whether he's married or not?*

She shrugged, trying to bring her wandering thoughts back to his question. “I heard there was a blizzard coming, so I headed out for supplies.”

He blew on the hot liquid for a moment and then took a tentative sip. “I would think you would be used to driving in the snow, being from New York.”

“I am.”

“How did you end up flipping your Jeep?”

Abby frowned and stared into her cup for a moment before her gaze returned to his. “I don't remember.”

“I guess it doesn't matter. You're okay. That's all that's important.”

The crackling of the fire filled the silence for a moment as she tried to think of something else to say. She stared into the cup in her hand while thoughts swirled through her mind. She peeked at him through her eyelashes.

*He is handsome, that's for sure, but a different kind of good-looking—the hard working, calloused hands type guy.* He stood at least six feet, with a broad muscled chest that stretched his shirt across the expanse, showing the hard, sculpted pectorals beneath. Unlike the doctor at the hospital, she was sure his physique wasn't from any weight bench.

Curious about the man who had plowed into her life with such force, it took her breath away, she asked, “So what do you do on your land over there?”

She watched his mouth move, and the smooth timbre of his voice in her ears sent ripples of awareness along her arms. “I break and breed quarter horses.”

“Really?”

Chase smiled and she shifted in her seat.

*Damn! Why does he have to have dimples, too?*

“Yeah, really.”

“You said you were born and raised here?”

“Yep, right on the property I live on now.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They moved into town. They loved the place, but Dad couldn’t handle it anymore, so I bought it from them and they bought a house in town.”

“A real, down-home cowboy, then.”

He blushed and she smiled. She loved a man who could blush.

“You could say that.” He sipped from the cup, but his eyes never left her face. “What about you?”

“I’ve always wanted to breed horses.”

Surprise registered across his face as he asked, “Even in New York?”

She grinned and chuckled. “Yes, even in New York, though it’s a little hard there. Not much grazing to be had.”

“I’m sure.”

She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “Ever been there?”

“Nope. I’ve hardly been out of Wyoming. Only left the state once or twice in my whole lifetime, unless you count going across state lines to buy horses.”

“I know what you mean. Until I moved here, I’d only ever been out of New York once.”

Silence filled the air around them, and the fire crackled and popped. Attraction zinged through her almost illuminating the room with its power. She took a ragged breath and tried to calm her racing heart. His next question stopped the beating organ in her chest.

“So what happened to your husband, Abby?”

She sucked in a ragged breath as her eyes met his. A gut-wrenching sob shook her frame, and a tear silently slipped down her

cheek. She brought her shaking fingers to her lips while she fought the burn settling where her heart normally lay.

*Josh—why did he have to ask about Josh?*

Chase took the cup from her hands setting it next to his on the coffee table. He reached over and wrapped his arms around her, as he pulled her to his side. Choking back a sob, she buried her face in his neck. Tears rolled off her chin and dropped to the linen shirt beneath her cheek, soaking the material.

## Chapter Three

*What an ass! Big mistake on your part, Chase. Send her into tears. Smooth move.*

He rubbed his hands down her back, soothing, stroking, doing anything he could think of to calm the racking sobs and the flow of tears. “Sshh. It’ll be all right. I’m right here,” he whispered softly, his chin resting on the top of her head.

After several minutes, her sobs changed to an occasional hiccup and her warm breath skimmed across the skin exposed at his neck, sending shivers of desire racing down his spine. When she finally lifted her head, he swiped at the remaining tears on her cheeks with his thumb.

*Damn it! I hate it when women cry.*

“I’m sorry,” Abby whispered and pulled away.

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

A watery smile flittered across her lips. “Yes, there is. I just met you not more than a few hours ago and here I am, blubbering all over your shirt.”

The wetness of her tears on his skin made him shiver. He let a smile lift the corners of his mouth. “I guess I shouldn’t have brought up the subject.”

Abby wiped the remaining tears from her cheeks as she said, “It’s okay. It still hurts some.”

Chase frowned when he remembered his wife. “I know the feeling.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I lost my wife about two years ago. I don’t think that kind of pain ever goes away.”

“I’m sorry, too, then.”

He shifted in the seat, and Abby moved away from his side. “Don’t be.”

“What happened?”

“Car accident on the interstate. I still miss her, too, but...” He lifted his shoulders in a shrug and sighed as his voice trailed off.

He wasn’t sure why, but he wanted to find out about Abby—her life, her husband, what brought her to Wyoming. “Do you want to tell me what happened to your husband? Sometimes it helps to let it out.”

She moved farther away and stood. He didn’t think she’d answer as he watched her pace the room like a caged animal, rubbing her arms, her eyes never meeting his. Abby stopped in front of the fire, and stared into the flames before she took a long, deep breath.

The words flowed from her mouth in a rush. “Joshua and I were married three years ago. He was a firefighter. The last time I saw him was the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> before the towers were hit.”

*Oh God!*

“Shit! Abby, I’m sorry.”

She turned and met his gaze, finally. The tears came again, but she continued to talk and he did nothing but listen. He didn’t know this woman, didn’t know much about her at all, but he knew deep in his heart she needed to heal, just like he did.

“We were supposed to go to Florida for vacation two days after that. It was his last shift before we were to leave. He went to work that morning and later, while I packed, I heard the news about the towers. I knew in my heart he was there.” She rubbed her arms. “If only I could have stopped him from going to work that morning, he would still be with me. I had a bad feeling, but I didn’t listen to it, I didn’t make him listen to me and stay home.”

Guilt riddled her body. He could see it in her eyes. “It’s not your fault, Abby.”

“Yes, it is! You don’t understand! I should have made him stay home with me!”

Chase got up from the couch, walked to her side, and pulled her against his chest. He knew guilt. It riddled him with holes for a year after Krista died. He was the one who had insisted she drive into town for feed. They were running low, and he couldn’t pull himself away from the horse he worked with. If he had gone instead of her, it would have been him who died that day on the side of the road. He had finally come to grips with his feelings, and he felt the need to help the woman in his arms come to grips with hers.

As he stood in front of the fire rubbing Abby’s back, he felt like an ass when desire rushed through his veins and the blood began to roar in his ears. He hadn’t been attracted to anyone since his wife died, but he felt the stirrings of desire now as her hands rested against his back and her warm breath fluttered across his neck. He cleared his throat and stepped back, as his gaze moved to her lips. They parted slightly, and he had the insane urge to kiss her until they were both breathless.

“I’m glad you told me,” he whispered, letting his fingers caress her jaw.

With a sigh, she moved away, taking her heat with her.

\* \* \* \*

Scrubbing her hands across her eyelids to wipe the tears, Abby saw his stare move to her lips, and her breath hitched in her throat at the desire reflected in his eyes. “I haven’t told anyone those things,” she murmured and rubbed her arms, trying desperately to calm the goose bumps as she crossed the room. He stood too close and being held against his chest did funny things to her heart. No one had held her since Joshua died, and she realized how much she missed contact with a man.



The squeak of leather reached her where she stood next to the window, watching the snow. It came down harder now, the blanket of white starting to cover the windshield of his truck.

Her gaze met his across the room. “You’re probably going to have to head home soon, or you won’t be able to get out.”

The dimple flashed in his cheek. “Trying to get rid of me?”

A dry chuckle left her mouth. “No—the snow is coming down pretty hard out there, that’s all. You can certainly stay as long as you like. I don’t mind the company. It gets kind of lonely without someone to talk to.”

“Yeah—I know. I think my horses are getting tired of me talking to them.” Chase stood and grabbed his coat from where she’d left it on the arm of the couch before putting his cowboy hat on his head. “I better go, then. If it continues to snow like it is now, we might get stuck here together for about three months. Besides, I need to check the animals.”

“I’d like to see them sometime, but maybe after the snow lets up some.”

“That might be about May.”

“That’s probably true.” She followed him to the door while he slipped on his coat. “Be careful.”

He smiled, reaching for the doorknob. “I will.”

Before he pulled the door open, she said, “Wait a second.” Grabbing a piece of paper off the dining room table, she jotted down her number and handed it to him. “Call me when you get home.” Questions reflected in his eyes. “I don’t want to have to worry about my savior making it home okay.”

“It’s not that far, Abby.”

“I know—humor me, all right?”

“Sure.”

When he finally pulled open the door, a blast of frigid air hit her in the face. She shivered as she watched him dip his head and walk toward his truck. Abby pushed the door shut against the swirling

wind, slipping the deadbolt into place before she moved to the window. He forced the door open on the vehicle, slipped inside, and pulled it shut behind him. The engine roared to life with a growl, and the headlights came on, reflecting against the side of the house. She watched until the taillights disappeared from sight as he pulled out onto the highway.

Rubbing her arms, she moved in front of the fire, and stretched her hands out toward the flames.

*What a day.*

A moment later, her gaze turned to the doorway where she'd seen Josh earlier, but nothing except darkness lingered. She sighed before she turned and headed toward her bedroom. Flipping on the light, she found her warm pajamas, slipped them on, and slid beneath the heating blanket on her bed. Reaching over, she turned off the lamp on the bedside table before snuggling back down. She really wasn't that tired, and it was still rather early, but the softly falling snow and the early nightfall lulled her into a peaceful state of mind.

Abby jumped when the phone rang. She reached over and grabbed the receiver. The caller ID said Chase Wilder, and she smiled. "Hello?"

"Hi."

"Are you home?"

"Yeah, safe and sound."

"Good. I won't have to worry about you for the rest of the night, then."

Silence.

"Chase, listen." She paused, not quite sure how to say thank you.

"Yeah?"

She cleared her throat. "Thanks for being there tonight, and I don't just mean the accident, either."

"You're welcome. That's what friends are for."

She frowned.

*Is that what we are?*

Twisting the phone cord around her finger, she wasn't sure what else to say.

"I'll come by and check on you in a couple of days, if that's all right with you?"

"Sure—without a car, it's going to be difficult for me to go anywhere, even if it isn't snowing like an inch a minute. Of course, there is always the old truck in the barn."

Chase's chuckle echoed in her ear. "They should have warned you before you moved here. This is a typical winter storm in Wyoming and don't try to drive that old thing. It probably wouldn't start, anyway, but the brakes are more than likely bad, and you would end up in another ditch."

"It's okay. I don't mind the snow. I just hope they find me come spring."

A soft laugh met her ear, and she shivered. "I'll make sure they do."

"I wouldn't drive the old truck unless it was an emergency, anyway." Air rushed from between her lips in a sigh. "Well, I should let you go. You probably need to check on the horses yet."

"Yeah, I do." He exhaled. "Night, Abby."

"Night, Chase."

\* \* \* \*

Morning light peeked through the blinds on her window when the sun came up. Abby peeled her eyelids open, and looked around the room.

*It can't be morning already. I haven't slept like that for over a year.*

Pushing the heavy blanket off, she shivered in the morning air. She was just going to have to suck up the heating bill. *It's too damned cold not to have the heat up more.*

Padding out into the living room, she reached for the thermostat and turned it up. The blast of the furnace kicking on helped to dispel the cold, and she headed for the kitchen to make coffee. Once the coffee maker started to drip, she walked toward the fireplace to start a fire.

*It will warm up faster in here with the fire going until the furnace could run long enough.*

The fire crackled and pop in the grate and the coffee maker sputtered. Her gaze found the two cups sitting on the table as her thoughts drifted to the intriguing man next door, the same one who held her last night while she cried.

A flash of a scene crossed her mind and she closed her eyes. Chase lay on the ground, grimacing in pain, and her heart clenched. Her eyes flew open as fear rippled along her spine. She shook her head, attempting to dispel the disturbing thoughts.

“Stupid, Abby! What the hell were you thinking telling him all about Josh?”

The shrill of her phone echoed through the silent room. She knew it was her mother without even looking.

“You hung up on me last night, Abigail.”

Abby chewed her bottom lip. She hated hiding anything from her mother, but she didn’t want to go into seeing Josh and the accident with at the time. “I’m sorry. I just couldn’t talk right then. I was still in the emergency room.”

“Why didn’t you call me back? I was worried about you.”

“I know. Chase gave me a ride home and then we sat here and talked for a bit before he went home.”

“Chase?”

She shook her head. *Damn! I didn’t need to tell her that.*

A forced sigh rushed from her lips. “Yeah—Chase. He’s my neighbor. He helped them pull me out of the car and then he gave me a ride home since my Jeep is totaled.”

“Ah.”

“Stop it, Mom. Right now—just stop.” She threw up her arm in frustration and paced back and forth in front of the fireplace.

“What?”

“I can hear those gears turning clear from here.”

“I’m not doing anything, Abigail. I’m just glad you’ve found a friend.”

“Yeah—right,” she grumbled.

“Abby?”

“Yes, Mom?”

“Care to tell me about seeing Joshua the other day?”

She froze. “How...” her voiced trailed off in amazement.

“Abigail, you know better than to keep things from me.”

“I’m not crazy, Mom,” Abby whispered as tears threatened behind her eyelids.

“I didn’t say you were, dear.”

“But he couldn’t have been here. He’s gone.”

“Abby, we both know that you are as sensitive as I am, more so sometimes, even though you choose to ignore it on many occasions.”

“If I hadn’t ignored it the day he died, he would still be here.” Tears choked her words and rolled down her cheeks.

“No, he wouldn’t and you know that. I’ve tried telling you so for a while now. It was his time. God called him home, and no matter what you tried to do or say, he still would have died that day, Abigail. He died doing what he loved.”

“But I love him, Mom.” She sniffed and wiped her face with her sleeve.

“I know sweetheart—I know, but you’ll find someone else. Isn’t that what he said? Something like, ‘you’ll find love again—here in Wyoming?’”

“Damn it, Mom, you give me the creeps sometimes.” Abby shivered. Her mother’s abilities freaked her out at times, but right now she didn’t want to think about what Joshua’s words meant. *What if Josh is right? What if I’m supposed to find someone to love again?* “I

should go. I need to make some breakfast and see if I can at least dig some of the snow from around the windows while the sun is out.”

“All right. I wanted to make sure you were okay.” Silence. “Oh, and Abigail? You might want to call and check on your new friend.”

“Why?”

“Just a feeling.”

Abby groaned, and her heart clenched when she remembered her own feeling earlier.

*Shit!*

“All right, Mom. I’ll call him right now.”

“Talk to you soon. Be careful.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart. Tell Chase ‘hi’ for me.”

“Of course. Bye.”

Several minutes later, she returned to the living room dressed in warmer clothes. She grabbed the phone and flipped through the caller ID until she found his number and hit redial. She paced in front of the fireplace, chewing her fingernail as she listened to the phone ring.

*Maybe he’s outside and can’t hear the phone? The only number I have is this one.*

Back and forth she moved, getting more nervous by the second when he didn’t answer.

*Come on! Answer the phone.*

It just kept ringing until finally the answering machine picked up.

Abby hung up and grabbed her spare coat from the closet by the door. She walked outside before she remembered she didn’t have a car. Grumbling under her breath, she moved back into the house, picked up the phone and hit redial again.

“Damn it Chase—pick up the phone.”

The answering machine picked up, and she almost slammed the receiver down on the cradle in her frustration.

*I could call 911, but what do I say? My mom had a bad feeling about him and you need to check it out.*

Yeah right, they would think she's crazy just like the folks back in New York.

*Okay. I need to figure out how to get over there and make sure he's okay, that's all, but how?*

The barn. The old truck was there. The one she had mentioned to Chase yesterday. She never had a chance to check it out, but now, she had no choice. She just hoped like hell it would run.

Ripping the door open, Abby braced against the wind and pulled it closed behind her as she headed toward the big building in the distance. The drifts of snow were almost to her knees, making it more difficult to walk.

When she reached the barn, she saw that the wind had pushed most of the snow away from the big doors. She grabbed the rusty handle and pulled, praying they would slide open without trouble. She smiled in triumph when the doors slid along the tracks and banged against the edge of the barn.

The antique fifties Ford truck sat in the middle of the barn with its rusted doors and no headlights, only a shadow of its former glory days.

"The keys—where are the keys?" She searched in the dim light on the workman's bench, but saw nothing.

*Think, Abby.*

She grabbed the rusty handle on the door and tugged. It hardly moved. Bracing her foot on the side, praying it wouldn't go through the metal barely holding the truck together, she pulled. The door groaned—resisting, but finally gave way. Sliding inside, she searched the inside. Under the seat—nothing—along the dashboard—nothing.

*Damn it! Where are those keys?*

She reached her hand up to the old visor above her head and flipped it down. A grimy, oily keychain fell into her lap.

"Yes!" Slipping them into the ignition, she pumped on the gas pedal several times and then turned the key. The truck groaned and sputtered, but didn't start.

“Come on, you old piece of crap! You need to start for me.” She turned the key again as she pumped the gas pedal and prayed. The old truck groaned louder, but it finally turned over with a sputter of the engine. Abby wasn’t quite sure how to drive the truck since it was a manual transmission, and she ended up grinding the gears before getting it into first and slowly pulling out of the barn.

“Okay, baby. I know you can do this. We just need to make it to Chase.”

She made her way out of her driveway and onto the road. They passed his place on the way to hers the night before, but she wasn’t exactly sure how far the two houses were apart. The gas gauge didn’t work and neither did the speedometer, but at this pace, it didn’t matter. If she had to walk the last little bit, she would.

It seemed like an eternity before the gate to his place came into view.

*Thank goodness the main gate is already open.*

She was afraid if she stopped driving, she’d never get the old bucket of rust to move again.

Abby could see the house from the road, so she knew it wasn’t that much farther. The truck rolled to a stop in front of his house and died.

*Oh well, at least we made it here.*

She jumped out and ran up to the door, pounding a few times and calling his name. No answer. She tried the doorknob and found it unlocked, so she pushed it open calling his name again, but silence met her ears. She came back outside and walked around the back of the house. His truck stood near the back door.

*He has to be here somewhere.*

A light burned in the window of the big barn in the distance.

*He’s got to be in there if there is a light on, right?*

Abby finally reached the door after trudging through the snow that seemed much deeper here than at her house. Leaning against the side for a moment, she tried to catch her breath as it puffed white in the air



around her. When she finally managed to breathe a little more normally, she pushed open the small door. “Chase?”

Not hearing anything, she walked inside and closed it behind her. A horse in the enclosure to her left pranced nervously and rolled its eyes. She reached out and patted the mare’s nose as she whispered, “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’m just trying to check on your owner.”

The horse calmed, and Abby started to make her way farther back inside the barn, while her gaze darted around.

A much larger arena sat to her right with another horse, much bigger than the first, running back and forth along the fence. Peering closer, she could see drag marks in the dirt, and her heart clenched in her chest.

*God, please don’t let him be dead. I couldn’t handle that again.*

She followed the markings until she reached a small office. Pushing open the door, her terrified voice called again, “Chase?”

“Abby?”

## Chapter Four

Chase hadn't heard her until she pushed open the door to his office. He managed to drag himself inside after the accident, but couldn't reach the phone, and now his leg burned like fire.

Next thing he knew, she was at his side.

"Oh my God, Chase. What happened?"

*What is she doing here?*

"Damned horse kicked me. I think my leg is broken."

"I'll call an ambulance." Abby grabbed the phone, trying to dial with hands trembling so badly, he could see it. "Yes—hello? I need an ambulance at—what's your address?"

"Just tell them the Rocking W. They know." He mumbled, closing his eyes. Sharp, stabbing pain ricocheted up his leg every time he tried to move.

"What do you mean you aren't sure when you can get here? He needs an ambulance, damn it!"

He chuckled and opened his eyes as her gaze swung back to him for a moment.

*She's a spitfire, that's for sure. Nice temper to go with those bright green eyes.*

"All right, fine. I'll see if I can get him there some other way." Abby hung up the phone with more force than was probably necessary. "They can't get here for a while. They are tied up with an accident."

"It's fine. If I don't try to move too much, it will be okay until they get here." The blood seeped through his jeans near the bulge at

his shin. He wasn't a doctor, but he knew a compound fracture when he saw one. He'd seen way too many not to know.

\* \* \* \*

Abby chewed on her fingernail and tried to think of something, anything to help him.

*Something to splint it with, that's what I need.*

"I can see those gears turning, Abby. What are you up to?"

"I need to find something to splint your leg with so we can get you to the hospital. Do you have some loose boards around here and some twine?"

"But..."

"No buts, Chase. You need a doctor and now, not whenever they can get here."

He hesitated for a split second before giving her directions. "In the storeroom. Out the door and to your right."

She returned a moment later with two boards she thought would be long enough and a long piece of twine. The boards would fit fine, but the twine would have to be cut.

"Do you have a knife somewhere? I'm going to need to cut this."

"Yeah—in my jeans pocket."

Their eyes met when she bent down in front of him and murmured, "Which pocket?"

Chase exhaled. "The front right." Her fingers met his when they both reached for the knife. "I can get it," he whispered, his warm breath fluttered across her cheek, making her realize just how close he was as her gaze shot up to meet his. The heat in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine when it shifted to her lips.

She sat back on her heels. "Oh—yeah right."

Chase handed her the knife, and his warm fingers brushed against hers as the same jolt of electricity shot up her arm. Grabbing the

boards, she set them on either side of the apparent break, but his hiss of pain brought her eyes back to his.

“Am I hurting you?”

“No—just do it.” He was lying, but there wasn’t anything she could do about that now.

Abby cut the twine and fed it underneath, tying it tight. His skin had a pasty pale tinge and she saw him work the muscles his jaw. He wasn’t about to let her know how much pain he felt.

*Men. They can be so damned stubborn.*

“I think that should hold it until we can get you to the hospital. Where are your keys?”

“In the house on the dining room table, but Abby, how did you get here? You don’t have a car.”

“The old truck from my barn,” she shot over her shoulder before she raced to the house to find his keys. She parked it as close to the barn door as possible and ran back inside.

She squatted close to his side and said, “Wrap your arm around me and I’ll lift you.”

“You can’t lift me.”

“Don’t you dare tell me I can’t do something—now, come on and help me.”

The surprise written all over his face changed to admiration before he pulled his good leg under his body. Chase wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled himself to his feet. He tried to catch his breath once they stood as he closed his eyes to the pain. She settled her arm around his waist as she sucked in a ragged breath when her position pressed her intimately against his side. The warmth of his body penetrated her shirt and sent a shiver rippling through her.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine, Chase. Let’s get you out to the truck.”

They slowly moved toward the door of the barn to where she parked. Once they were beside the vehicle, he reached out and pulled

the door open and she helped him turn his body and slide inside. She shut the door and raced racing around to the driver side.

“Be careful. The roads are bad.”

“I know. Trust me, okay?”

“I do, Abby.” Their eyes met across the expanse of the cab and her heart skipped a beat in her chest. With a sigh, she turned back to the road in front of them and maneuvered the big truck down the driveway.

They drove past the old truck and he said, “You came in that thing?”

“Yes.”

“You’re braver than I thought.” He tried to joke, but she could see the tightness around his lips and the furrow between his eyebrows.

She shrugged and returned her gaze to the road in front of them. “I had to do something. I couldn’t reach you by phone.”

His voice sounded rough and gravelly as he asked, “That was you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I kept hearing the phone ring, but I couldn’t reach it.”

“Yeah, it was me.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” Her hands gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, and she squinted out the windshield.

“Why did you call?”

She shook her head and said, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Sure I would.”

Abby rolled her eyes and murmured, “My mother told me to check on you.”

“Your mother? I don’t understand.”

She exhaled in a frustrated rush of air. “My mother is sensitive, as they call it. She can see things some times, know things. You know

what I mean? Anyway, she told me to check on you.” A frown rippled across his face. “I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see it on your face. Don’t worry. Most people don’t believe me when I tell them. It doesn’t bother me anymore.”

*Except that his disbelief does.*

Luckily, it wasn’t that far to the hospital. She kept an eye on Chase while she drove, trying desperately not to hurt him as he leaned against the seat of the truck, his lips white and his eyes closed.

She pulled right up to the door and put the truck in park. “Stay here. I’ll go get someone to help.”

He tried to smile, but it came out more like a grimace. “I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere.”

After scrambling out of the truck, she rushed inside. When Abby told the receptionist what was going on and that it was Chase Wilder, they quickly grabbed two men from the rear side of the emergency room with a stretcher. The snow stopped, but it was still bitterly cold as she turned up the collar of the coat she wore and pulled the stocking cap down around her ears.

Everything happened so fast, Abby could do nothing more than stand by when the men maneuvered Chase onto the stretcher and wheeled him inside, leaving her in the waiting room.

\* \* \* \*

“Is it bad, Chris?” Chase asked as he grimaced with pain.

“You did a good job of taking yourself out for a while, Chase. What happened, anyway?”

“I got kicked.”

“Damn good thing Mrs. Carter found you. That’s a bad break.”

Chase frowned when he thought of Abby. She had said her mom told her to check on him. That kind of freaked him out, but he liked

the face that she was worried enough to come over and with this weather, no less. A smile flittered across his face when he remembered the old rusty truck of the Millers' sitting in his driveway. He couldn't believe the thing actually started, much less made it to his house. It was a good three miles between his place and hers.

Christopher wrote something on the paper in his hands. "You'll probably have to have your leg pinned."

He frowned. "What are you telling me?"

"Surgery, probably tomorrow, which means you'll be a resident here for a bit."

"Shit! I can't stay here. I've got animals to take care of."

"You don't have much choice, Chase. You can't get around with that leg, even on crutches, for the time being."

Chase groaned and closed his eyes.

*Now what the hell am I gonna do?*

"Listen, can I tell Mrs. Carter how you are doing? She's pacing the waiting room."

*Abby.*

"Can she come back here?"

Christopher frowned a moment before he answered, "Sure. I'll go get her myself."

A few moments later, he opened his eyes to find Abby nervously chewing her lip and standing next to the gurney.

He smiled. "Hi."

Frown lines appeared between her eyebrows. "Are you okay?"

A dry chuckle left his lips. "Yeah—thanks to you."

Her gaze shifted away. "I didn't do anything, Chase."

Now it was his turn to frown. "Yes, you did. How many other women would drive through a blizzard in a rusty old truck to make sure their neighbor, whom they just met, is okay because he wasn't answering the phone?"

Abby's shoulders lifted in a shrug.

He reached out and took her hand, as she brought her gaze back to his. Her hand trembled slightly before she pulled it back and rubbed her palm across the thigh of her jeans.

“So what happens now?”

“I’m not sure. Christopher is saying I have to stay and have surgery tomorrow to pin the break.”

He wasn’t sure what he saw in Abby’s eyes when the emotions rippled across her face. “Surgery?”

“Yeah, which means I’ll be laid up a while from what it sounds like.”

“What about your house—your horses?”

“I’ll just have to find someone to take care of them for me while I’m in here. I’ll have one of my friends go by and feed them. Once I get home, I’m sure I’ll be able to get around enough to take care of them.”

In the space of a heartbeat Abby said, “I’ll do it.”

Surprised by her suggestion and her willingness to help him, he asked, “You?”

“Don’t look so surprised, Chase. Even though I lived in New York City for the last several years, I know horses. My parents have property near Albany. I grew up around horses.”

The warm rugged sound of his laughter filled the space and he let his gaze roam her face. “Nothing you do surprises me anymore, Abby. I guess it just makes me realize I don’t know that much about you.”

“Well, I guess since we are neighbors now, you’ll learn more about me over time.” Abby smiled for the first time since she had come in the emergency room. “I’m not the fragile female I’m sure you expected.”

“No, ma’am. That you aren’t.” He let his gaze skim down her frame. When he returned to her face, he watched color splash across her cheeks in a pretty blush.



Christopher came in behind her with a frown wrinkling his brow.

“We should be moving you upstairs shortly, Chase.”

“Good—the pain medication you gave me is making me tired.”

“I better go, then.” Abby turned to leave, but he grabbed her hand again before she could turn away.

“Don’t leave yet.”

Her gaze met his.

“Okay.” She pulled up a chair and sat down next to him and he let his eyes drift shut with her hand still cradled in his.

## Chapter Five

When they finally came to move Chase upstairs, Abby met his sleepy smile with one of her own and an ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’

She walked outside to his truck, and slid inside. Her head dropped softly against the steering wheel for a moment as she tried to come to terms with her emotions.

A soft knock on the window next to her startled her and she turned to meet the brown eyes of the doctor from the emergency room.

*Christopher Bridges? I think that’s what he said the other day.*

She rolled the window down.

“Hi—Abby isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and shuffled his feet. “How are you feeling? You know, after your accident the other day.”

“Fine, just a little sore.”

“Good. I’m glad there weren’t any serious injuries.”

“Yeah—me, too.”

“Um...I wanted to ask you if you’d like to have dinner with me.”

Abby’s gaze shifted to the hospital doors for a moment as thoughts of Chase rippled across her mind.

“You know—that is if there isn’t anything between you and Chase.”

“No, there’s nothing between Chase and me. We’re just friends—neighbors.” Memories of the night before flashed across her mind. He’d held her so tenderly while she cried. Never once did Chase take things beyond friendship when her tears wet his shirt, understanding

her need to talk about Josh without judging or trying to tell her it was time to move on.

“So what do you say? Dinner tomorrow?”

“Uh...yeah sure.”

Christopher smiled and a small crescent shaped indentation peeked out of his cheek. “Shall I pick you up at your place about six?”

“Make it six thirty. I need to feed Chase’s horses first.”

His smile turned into frown for a moment. “No problem. See you, then.”

She rolled the window back up as he stepped back and walked inside.

The drive back to Chase’s house made her feel kind of weird, almost like coming home, and the sensation bothered her.

When she went around the back to feed the animals, she talked to each one in the stalls while she dropped hay into their feeders. He had some beautiful animals, sleek, well-muscled with broad chests and excellent markings. Even though she didn’t know quarter horses very well, she knew these were some expensive and well-bred animals.

Once she finished, Abby wandered back toward his house. She chewed her lip when her gaze rested on the beat up truck sitting in front. She would have to take Chase’s truck home, she realized.

*I need to lock up at least,* she thought as she pushed open the door.

When she rushed through the house earlier, she really hadn’t looked around. At the time, worry about where he was took precedence, but now she noticed everything about his space. *What kind of man is Chase Wilder anyway?*

Just inside the front door, the small hallway opened into a much larger living room. The front room was decorated in a similar fashion to hers with big, stuffed leather furniture that looked so soft a person could sink in and never come out. A fireplace graced one wall. It wasn’t quite as big as the one in her house, but impressive just the same. The kitchen sat off to her left with knotted pine cabinets and

granite countertops that gleamed when the light from the ceiling fixtures hit them. A hallway disappeared to her right, which she assumed probably led to the bedrooms, but she wasn't going to go there. That would be too invasive.

*That's enough, Abby.*

She shook her head, flipped off the lights, and locked the door, shutting it firmly behind her. Walking back out to his truck with his keys clutched firmly in her hand, she slid inside and started it. She pulled out of his driveway, and headed for home.

Finally reaching her own place, she unlocked the door, and pushed it open, just as she heard the phone ring.

Abby grabbed the receiver and said, "Hi, Mom."

"How is your friend, Abigail?"

"He's fine, but he has a broken leg. One of his horses kicked him." She slipped off her coat and hung it up in the closet.

"Oh! I'm sorry to hear that, but I'm glad he's all right."

"He'll be fine, eventually. I'm going to have to help him with the horses, though." She poured a cup of cold coffee and set it in the microwave to heat.

"You are such a good neighbor."

She shook her head when she heard the tone in her mother's voice. It was the same one she used when Abby and Josh had started dating. "Don't get any ideas, Mom. Chase and I are just friends. In fact, I have a date with a doctor from the hospital tomorrow night for dinner."

"That's nice, Abigail."

She rolled her eyes. "I need to go, Mom. I've got to fix myself something to eat. I was at the hospital a while with Chase, and I'm starving. I'll talk to you later."

"Of course, sweetheart. Let me know how the date goes, all right?"

"Sure, Mom. Talk to you later."

Abby fixed herself some food and sat down in her favorite chair with a book and warm blanket. Her eyes started to droop as the warmth and full stomach took their toll. Giving up the fight, she slipped on her pajamas, snuggled beneath the covers on her bed, and quickly drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Chase awoke from surgery to find Abby sitting at his bedside. She laughed when he tried to smile. *Damn, I must really look like shit.*

“Hey there.”

“Hi. They must have given you some good drugs. How are you feeling?”

He frowned for a moment. “Like I’ve been hit by a truck or kicked by a horse. I’m not sure which.”

Her rich, almost girlish giggle filled the room and he attempted to smile again. He liked her laugh.

“The latter, I’m afraid.”

“Is the surgery over?”

“Yeah.”

Doctor Bridges came in and stood behind Abby’s chair. “Hi, Abby. Hey, Chase, how are you doing?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Good. I just thought I’d stop and check on you since I had to see another patient up here, and I saw Abby sitting with you.”

Chase frowned.

*Since when were Bridges and Abby on a first name basis?*

Christopher laid his hand on Abby’s shoulder and said, “Listen, Abby, I’ll see you later tonight, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. What should I wear?”

“Casual is fine.”

Chase watched the two exchange words and something akin to jealousy rippled across his heart.

"I'll see you at six-thirty, then."

Abby watched the other man walk away as Chase watched her. When her gaze moved back to him, he carefully masked his feelings.

"So, did they say how long you had to stay in here?"

"Not really. I was hoping the surgeon would come by so I could find out. I don't want you to have to take care of my animals for too long."

"I don't mind, Chase, really. They are beautiful animals, by the way."

"Thanks."

"You'll have to let me know your feeding schedule, though. I just gave them hay last night, but I don't want to mess with your stuff, you know?"

"I usually fed them twice a day. Hay in the morning and grain at night."

He frowned when thoughts of Abby and Christopher going out later flashed across his mind.

"Something wrong?"

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug as he dropped his gaze to the sheet under his hand. "No."

"Then why the frown?" He shifted in the bed, avoiding her eyes. "I thought we were friends." Abby laid her hand on top of his, sending a shiver racing up his arm to settle where his heart lay in his chest. Her touch brought his attention back to her.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Then what's the problem? I didn't do anything wrong, did I?" She gaze searched his face and it made him just a tad bit uncomfortable in her scrutiny.

"No."

"Okay, then tell me what's bugging you. I can see it in your face."

"Nothing. I just...um."

“What, for crying out loud?” The exasperation was clear in her voice, and she threw up her hands in frustration.

After a moment he finally blurted out, “I guess I didn’t realize you were dating Doctor Bridges.”

“I’m not.”

Chase scowled and asked, “You’re having dinner with him tonight, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s dating him, then.”

Abby exhaled with a rush of air. “It’s one dinner date, Chase, no big deal.”

He wouldn’t look at her as feelings he didn’t want to put a name to zipped through his heart.

*I don’t care that much, do I?*

“Oh, come on, Chase. It’s not like we are sleeping together for God’s sake. It’s dinner, nothing more.”

He shrugged, trying to be nonchalant about the whole thing. “Okay, if you say so.”

*What do I care if she’s dating Chris?*

Abby finally stood with a heavy sigh. “I should go. I need to get the animals fed. Let me know what they say about when you can go home. That way I can make sure I’m here to take you.”

“You don’t need to do that. I’ll have one of my friends...”

Abby held up her hand to interrupt his flow of words. “I am your friend, Chase.” She returned the chair to its proper place and moved toward the door. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sure. Have fun on your date.”

Abby shot him a frown and a look that told him she wanted to give him a dressing down, but she just turned and walked away instead.

*Damn, she’s beautiful when she’s pissed off.*

\* \* \* \*

Abby grumbled to herself while she walked out to his truck and slammed the door before she started it.

*Damn infuriating man!*

Shaking her head, she pulled out of the hospital parking lot and headed for his house. When she pulled into the driveway to feed the animals, she had the same sensation as yesterday. From some reason, driving his truck into his driveway felt like home. It wasn't supposed to feel like that, but it did.

She took her time feeding the horses and even brushed a couple of them, losing herself in her task until she realized how late it was getting. Finishing up, she put the brushes away in the tack room before she drove back to her house to get ready for her date.

*Maybe it is a date, but it doesn't feel like that to me. I mean, Christopher is gorgeous and super nice, but...* Her heart whispered, "He's not Chase."

Dragging her thoughts back the task at hand, Abby quickly showered and dressed in jeans and a white blouse only moments before she heard Christopher pull into the driveway. She peered outside through the window to see him walking up to the door.

When the doorbell rang, she pulled open the front entrance and said, "Hi."

"Wow. You look great."

She looked down at her clothes and blushed. "Thanks, but it's nothing special."

"Here. These are for you," he said, handing her a bouquet of mixed flowers that smelled heavenly. Abby looked at them a moment with a frown. Josh used to buy her flowers all the time and he always seemed to pick the mixed bouquets.

*I can never make up my mind what kind to buy, so this fits everything,* he used to say.

"Something wrong?"



Christopher's voice brought her back and she raised her eyes to his. "No. They're beautiful, thank you."

"You're welcome. Shall we go?"

"Sure, just let me grab my coat."

As they drove toward town, they went by the gate to the Rocking W, and her eyes found the front of Chase's house. Pulling her gaze away, she wondered why the place always seemed to call to her like a lost soul waiting, wanting her to come home.

"Did you see Chase this afternoon?" Abby knew she shouldn't ask, but she had to. Thoughts of her frustrating neighbor kept flashing across her mind on a too regular basis these days. "How's he doing?"

"I did stop by his room, and the surgeon had already been there this evening, but I didn't get a chance to ask him anything. They were talking at that point, and I was running late to pick you up."

"Oh." Her gaze found a snow bank outside the windshield and disappointment rushed across her heart. Christopher's frown made her realize she shouldn't be talking about Chase with him. He would think there was more than friendship between them if she wasn't careful and that wasn't the case.

*Was it?*

At the restaurant, they found a nice private table in the corner away from most of the other patrons. Talk centered around her life in New York although she avoided talking about Josh except to reiterate that he'd died over a year before.

"You still wear your wedding ring, though."

"Yes, I do." She didn't elaborate. The comfort level she shared with Chase wasn't there with this man, and she didn't want to explain Joshua to him.

Christopher frowned and murmured, "I see."

Her cell phone rang and she pulled it from her purse. "Sorry," she whispered as she looked at the screen before she answered with a tentative "Hello?"

"Abby?"

Her eyes met the man across the table.

“Chase?”

A shiver rolled down her arms when his voice caressed her ear.  
“Yeah. You said you wanted me to let you know when they’ll be releasing me.”

“Of course. What did they say?”

“They’re going to let me out tomorrow.”

“That’s great. Did they say what time?”

“Not exactly. I’ll have to call you in the morning and let you know once they discharge me, I guess.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be at your house first thing to feed the horses. You can try me there first if you want. Do you need me to exercise any of them?” She pushed a piece of hair behind her ear and dropped her gaze to the tablecloth. Abby felt a little funny talking to one man with another sitting across the table from her while he watched her with undisguised interest.

“No, it’s okay. They’ll be fine for a while a yet. I’ll worry about that later.”

Silence.

“What can I get you two?” The waitress stood at the end of the table with her tablet eyeing her speculatively while she held the phone to her ear.

“What would you like, Abby?”

“I’m sorry. I forgot you were going out tonight. I’ll let you go. Talk to you tomorrow,” Chase said in her ear.

“Okay. Night, Chase.”

“Have fun.”

“Um...sure. Sleep well.”

\* \* \* \*

Chase dropped the receiver onto the cradle on the table, and unmistakable urge to punch something surged through him.

His heart whispered, “You are such a liar, Chase. You knew damned well she was out with Christopher tonight.”

He grumbled out loud to the silence surrounding him. “What do I care? It’s not like we have anything going on. We’re just friends, just like she wants.”

Rubbing his hands across his eyes, he tried to get the thought of Abby off his mind, especially thoughts of her with Christopher.

*What if he tries to kiss her goodnight? Will she let him?*

Finally giving up, he hit the button for the nurse and when she came in he asked for something for pain and something to sleep. He needed the dreamless state tonight. He would see her again tomorrow and worry about his troublesome thoughts later.

He finally drifted off to sleep an hour later, picturing Abby kissing Christopher on the front steps of her house.

## Chapter Six

The next morning Chase called bright and early. The sun was barely over the horizon, but the doctor had already been in and signed his discharge papers. He really didn't expect her to pick up the phone at his house, but he tried there first anyway.

"Good morning," Abby answered when he heard the phone pick up.

Silence.

"Chase?"

"Abby. Sorry, I really didn't expect you to be there already this morning." It felt so weird hearing her voice answering his phone.

The tinkle of her laughter sent shivers down his back. "Then why did you call here?"

"I don't know. I just thought I'd get it out of the way, I guess. Why *are* you there so early?"

"Well, duh—feeding your horses. What else would I be doing here?"

"God, woman, I don't even feed them that early."

Abby laughed again. "Well, I do. I'm an early riser, always have been. Have they released you already?"

"They are doing the discharge papers right now."

"Good. Let me finish up what I'm doing and I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"That should be fine. Be careful. The roads still aren't that great from what I hear."

"Of course. I'll see you in a little bit."

Exactly fifteen minutes later, Abby sailed through the door of his room like a breath of fresh air. She'd tied her hair back in a ponytail with little wisps that escaped at her neck, making his fingers itch to touch them.

He could feel the desire start to rush through his veins at the sight of her, and it soured his mood even more.

*Damn it! Why does she have to be so beautiful even without makeup and all that?*

"How are you feeling?" Her bright, sunny disposition just put him that much more on edge.

"Fine. Can we get out of here, please?"

She frowned. "Okay, Mr. Grumpy. Can you wheel yourself out if I carry the crutches and your things?"

"Yeah. Let's go."

Abby followed behind and he managed to make it out the front door of the hospital to his truck parked near the curb. She pulled open the door before she handed him the crutches so he could work his way inside. They had placed a hard cast on his leg, but he wasn't going to be able to walk on it for a bit yet.

She put the crutches behind the seat with his bag and shut the door once he was settled. Walking around the other side, Abby climbed in, started the truck, and in a moment they were picking their way along the highway.

"Go a little slower, Abby. You'll put us in a ditch."

"Excuse me, but I know how to drive. I realize this is your truck and I'm sure you, like every other man I've been around, hate the thought of *anyone* driving your vehicle. If you would like to do it, just let me know and I'll pull over."

He glared and grumbled under his breath, and her smile got even bigger.

She tone dripped with undisguised, over exaggerated sweetness that made his teeth hurt. "Oh gosh, I forgot. It's your *right* leg that's broken. I guess you'll just have to shut up and let me drive."

When they pulled into his driveway and Abby parked the truck next to the house she said, "See. Safe and sound, not a scratch."

"Insufferable female," he growled, popped the door open and reached for the crutches.

She gave him that sickly sweet smile again as she said, "I heard that."

Walking around the front of the truck, she held the door while he fumbled with the crutches a little before he got them under his arms and managed to hobble to the porch. She moved around him to hold the front door open as he worked his way into the house.

When he saw the living room, his anger disappeared. Abby had cleaned the house, dusted all the tables, scrubbed the kitchen, washed all of his dirty dishes and even did his laundry.

"I'll put this in your room if you tell me where it is," she said, holding up his bag.

"Down the hall, second door on the left."

She walked down the hallway without another word while his eyes followed her. Chase tipped his head back against his shoulders, and sighed.

\* \* \* \*

Slipping through the doorway to Chase's room, Abby dropped the bag on the bed as tears gathered on her lashes. His angry temperament upset her, and she didn't know why.

*All I'm trying to do is help and he's chewing my head off.*

Swiping at the tears angrily, she sniffed and headed back out into the living room. She found him sitting on the couch, the crutches by his side.

"Would you like some coffee? I made some right before I came to get you."

"Yeah, thanks. The coffee at the hospital sucked."

Abby chuckled softly before she made her way to the kitchen. After she had made his cup and one for herself, she brought it to his side, and set it on the table in front of him.

As she started to move away, Chase reached over and grabbed her hand, pulling her down next to him on the couch.

“Abby, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m snapping at you. None of this is your fault and all you’ve tried to do is help. You cleaned my house...” His voice trailed off and waved his hand to indicate her handy work.

“Yeah. It wasn’t that bad for a man who lives alone, but it gave me something to do after I fed the animals.” Chase smiled for the first time since she’d see him at the hospital, and she smiled in return.

His thumb skimmed across her wrist and a shiver rolled down her back. “Thanks again for taking care of them.”

“No problem. Like I said before, I love horses and animals in general.”

“However did you survive in New York City?”

“I had a cat, but I left her with my mother when I moved here. I didn’t think it was fair to make her stay in a cage all the way to Wyoming.”

He really laughed then, a full, gut rolling laughter that showed off the dimples in his cheeks to perfection. It left her slightly breathless with anticipation until she saw them again.

When Chase was finally able to control his laughter except for an occasional chuckle, he said, “I don’t think you ever told me why you moved here.”

The smile slid from her face. She closed her eyes for a moment as the conversation her and Josh had about moving somewhere and buying some property flashed across her mind, only this time, it didn’t hurt. Not like it had before.

“You don’t have to tell me, Abby. I’m just curious about you, that’s all.”

She opened her eyes again as she let a small smile ripple across her lips. "It's okay. It doesn't hurt as much anymore." She took a deep breath before she continued. "Josh and I had always planned on moving out of New York. I wanted a farm with horses and animals to raise our kids. I didn't like the city, even when we lived there. Living somewhere like here in Wyoming was our dream. When he was...gone, I took the money from his life insurance policy and bought the property next door. And here I am."

"You don't have horses or any other animals yet, though."

"No, not yet. I will eventually. I want to find the right ones to start with, kind of like yours. You have some magnificent animals out there."

Chase shook his head as a smile rippled across his mouth again.

"What?"

"You. Every time I learn something new about you, you amaze me."

"Yeah, well, I'm an amazing woman," she replied with a small, flirty smile.

"You sure are," he murmured when their eyes met.

Abby cleared her throat and pulled her gaze away as she stood. "I need to put these clothes away. I'll be back in a minute."

Taking the clothes into his room, she laid them on the bed and methodically put them away. His jeans in one drawer, t-shirts in another, long sleeved shirts hung up in the closet, each one smelling just like him, that musky, male, sexy-as-sin scent. When she put the last shirt in the closet, she brought it to her nose before hanging it up. *I love his smell.*

Once everything was put in its proper place, she returned to the living room to find him trying to get up off the couch.

"Here, let me help you." She moved to take him under the arm and help him to his feet.



Once he was up, he moved to hobble down the hall but almost tripped over a rug on the floor. “Damn it! This is going to be impossible!”

*Great! We’re back to that again.*

“I’ll help you if you tell me where you are trying to go.”

“I’m going to the bathroom, Abby. I really don’t think you want to help me take a leak—or do you?”

Heat rushed up her neck and splashed across her cheeks when she looked up at him and stammered, “Well, I...” Her voice trailed off and the heat on her cheeks deepened.

“I didn’t think so.” He moved off down the hall the rest of the way, slamming the bathroom door behind him.

Abby sighed heavily before she went around the house picking up throw rugs and folding them so they could be put somewhere until he could get around better.

*I should have thought of this in the first place.*

When he finally returned, she could tell he noticed the rugs missing and folded in a neat pile next to the couch under the end table.

“Would you like something to eat?”

“You don’t have to cook for me, too.”

“All right, Chase.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Let’s get something straight here, okay? I’m trying to be tolerable of your grouchy mood since I know you are probably in pain. You aren’t going to run me off by grumbling and yelling at me, so forget it. I’ve heard it all before.”

He ran his hands across his eyes. When they met hers again, a sheepish smile crossed his lips. “I’m sorry. Yes, I’d like something to eat. Thank you.”

“That’s better.”

Chase hobbled to the dining room table, and she pulled out a chair. He slid onto the seat with a groan. “You have to understand something about me. I haven’t had anyone around to take care of me

in a couple of years. I've become pretty independent in my own right."

She nodded and said, "Independent. Got it." Abby pulled out lunchmeat, bread and mayonnaise from the refrigerator and set them down to make sandwiches for both of them. He shot her a glance when he saw the food on the counter. "Yes, I went shopping, too, so don't start with me."

He just shook his head. "What am I going to do when you go home later?"

She walked to his side with the sandwich and some chips on a plate, setting it down in front of him along with a glass of milk. "Let's talk about that, shall we? I had an idea. I don't have anything holding me at my house at the moment, so why don't I just stay here with you?"

## Chapter Seven

A pin drop would have been loud in the silence enveloping them. When Chase's gaze shot up to meet hers, and he thought for sure his jaw just about hit the table. He shook his head. "That's impossible. You can't stay here with me."

"Why-ever not? You have more than one bedroom, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"But nothing. You can't get around without the crutches until they put the walking cast on in a few days. It's impossible for you to cook, clean, do laundry and feed the animals twice a day on crutches. It's the logical thing to do."

Abby's take-charge attitude fascinated him, but at the same time infuriated him. She had taken over his life and his house in the few days that he had known her, making him wonder how he managed without her for the last two years.

*She's lost her mind. Stay here? No way!* She just didn't get it. Didn't she understand his attraction to her bordered on insane and if he had the chance, he would have her in his bed in a heartbeat?

"You can't stay here, Abby."

"I don't understand." She walked back into the kitchen to make her own sandwich as she continued to try to convince him. "I can stay in the other bedroom and make sure the animals are fed, keep the house picked up, no big deal. We can be like roommates."

Chase rose from his chair. Roommates? She can't be serious? *Friends with benefits, maybe, but roommates, not in this lifetime.*

Her back was to him when he hobbled up behind her. He had to convince her that staying here with him was a completely insane idea.

Abby turned when he reached her with a surprised look in her eyes and a soft, “Oh”.

He pinned her against the counter with his body and his lips hovered a mere hairsbreadth away. “You can’t stay here.”

Giving into the roar of desire in his ears, his mouth touched hers light as a feather, until he felt the softness of her lips. He hadn’t been with anyone since Krista died, and his body screamed for release. With a tortured groan, he increased the pressure and a soft moan rose to her lips as she yielded to him. His thumb slid along her jaw until he could tangle his hand in the hair at the nape of her neck. Their mouths fit together like two puzzle pieces and when she accepted the kiss, he was lost.

Her hands slid up his chest and around his neck as she pushed her breasts against him. He couldn’t stop the desire rushing between them with increasing speed, even if he wanted to. His body craved her touch. He needed her like he had to have air to survive.

Wrapping his arms around her back, he pulled her closer, and pushed his rock hard erection against her belly. She moaned softly into his mouth while his tongue danced with hers.

He finally lifted his mouth and opened his eyes. He pressed his forehead against hers and framed her face with his palms as their ragged breaths mingled in the air between them. The look on her face screamed of unreleased passion. Her eyelids had that heavy look and her pupils were dilated. With every unsteady breath, her pebble hard nipples poked against his chest and he almost threw caution to the wind and fucked her right there on the kitchen counter. A shudder rolled down his back as he fought for control.

“Now you know why you can’t stay here. I wouldn’t be able to keep from taking you to my bed if you did. I can hardly keep my hands off you as it is.”

“I...”

His thumb swept across her lips, effectively silencing her words. “You can use my truck, come and go as you need to so the animals are fed, but you can’t stay here.”

Chase sighed and stepped back, breaking the contact of their bodies.

She sucked in an unsteady breath and slipped away from his side. He didn’t turn around, but the jingle of keys sounded loud in the silence when she grabbed her purse. A moment later, the truck started in the driveway. With a heavy heart, he raked his finger through his hair, and returned to the cold lunch waiting for him.

\* \* \* \*

When Abby reached her house, she climbed out of the truck and ran inside, slamming the door behind her. Tears rolled down her cheeks when she thought of the man she’d just left behind. She threw herself down in her favorite chair, her head dropping almost to her knees as she sobbed.

*Why did I let him kiss me? I didn’t even let Christopher kiss me last night when he brought me home, so why Chase? Her head snapped up. Good God! Not only did I let him kiss me, but I kissed him back, tongue and all!*

“Shit!”

The phone rang and she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She grabbed the receiver without checking the caller ID, but she wasn’t the least bit surprised to hear her mother’s voice on the other end.

“Abigail? Are you all right?”

Abby sniffed and wiped the tears with her fingertips. “Yeah, Mom, I’m fine.”

“You’ve been crying. Why?”

The tears came again in a heavy sob. “I’ve betrayed Josh, Mom.”

“How could you betray Joshua, Abby? He’s not there anymore.”

"I know that, but Chase...I let him kiss me and...I kissed him back. I feel like such a slut. I still have on Joshua's ring and I let another man kiss me." She curled her feet under her and wiped at the tears lingering on her cheeks.

"Maybe it's time to take the ring off."

She shook her head. "No! I can't."

"Abigail, listen to me. You loved Joshua and a small part of your heart will always belong to him, but that doesn't mean you can't love someone else, too. You have to open your heart, sweetheart. There is room for more than one man there. Trust me, I know."

Twisting the phone cord around her finger, she said, "I don't know. I don't think that's what Chase wants, either. He was married, too, and lost his wife in a car accident two years ago."

"Well, then, you have something in common, sweetie. You both need to learn to love again."

Her mother always sounded so sure of what should happen, but she didn't think she could move on with anyone besides Josh. Abby inhaled with a shaky breath. "I just don't think I can."

"Give it time. If he's the right one, you'll know."

She sniffed again and wiped the remaining tears. "Thanks, Mom."

"You're welcome sweetie. Tell Chase 'hi' for me."

Abby laughed. "Of course. He already thinks I'm crazy because I told him about you warning me to check on him the other day."

"Well, he'll learn about me as time goes along. I'm not worried about it. You haven't told him about your gift, have you?"

"No. I can't do that. Not now, anyway. He would think I'd really lost my mind." She paused and shifted in the chair. "I'll talk to you later. I have some things to do around the house."

"All right. I love you, Abigail."

"I love you, too, Mom. Talk to you soon."

For the rest of the day, she puttered around her house cleaning, doing her own laundry, and fixing herself something to eat.

When she completed her list of chores, she stood in her kitchen pressing her fingers to her lips when she remembered the pressure of Chase's mouth on hers. No one had kissed her since Joshua did the last morning they'd been together and it felt strange. The two men were so different yet so very similar. Thoughts of her sexy neighbor raced across her mind more every hour, and the dream of Joshua hadn't returned since she had met Chase. She didn't think she was prepared to move on with someone else, not yet. Besides, he obviously didn't want anything more than a physical relationship and that just wasn't an option.

The diamond on her left hand sparkled in the light when she lifted her hand.

*I'm just not ready.*

She sighed before she tucked a strand of her behind her ear and set about making dinner. A soft smile played on her mouth a moment. *I'll just fix dinner and take it over there. I need to feed the animals, anyway.*

Abby whipped up some lasagna, garlic bread, and salad, packed it in his truck and drove to his house. She went to the barn first and fed the animals, but she knew he watched. She was sure he expected her to leave once the feeding was done, but that wasn't her plan. She wasn't about to let him bully her into leaving him alone. He needed her after all, right?

After driving the truck back to the house and parking it in the rear, she slid out of the driver's side door, and grabbed the food from the seat. She almost dropped it when she turned and met Chase's penetrating blue eyes as he stood in the doorway. Plastering a smile on her face, she shut the door with her hip and walked toward him.

"Dinner?" She reached his side and waited for him to make room so she could pass by. He moved aside, and she slid between him and doorframe.

Once she passed him, she headed for the kitchen and set everything on the counter. She felt the warmth of his body behind her even if she hadn't heard him shuffle into the room and she shivered.

"Abby, what are you doing?"

"Feeding a friend." She dished up the food as she heard his stomach growl behind her. "Will you quit scowling at me and sit down? You are obviously hungry if your stomach has any say in the matter."

\* \* \* \*

Air rushed from between his lip when he exhaled. "I was just getting ready to make myself something. You know, I've taken pretty good care of myself for a few years now."

Her gaze raked him from head to toe and a slow smile spread across her mouth. "Independent. I remember."

*What am I going to do with her? She just doesn't get it! Just seeing her, being in the same room with her is driving me insane! She's not ready for any kind of relationship, strictly physical or otherwise. Hell, she's still wearing her wedding ring.*

Abby set the plate down in front of him when he sat in the chair at the table and his stomach growled again. A smirk lifted the corners her lips and he frowned.

The smell of her skin, the green of her eyes, the softness of her hair, it was all driving him crazy and she didn't care. It had to be her plan to slowly drive him insane.

"If that frown stays on your face much longer, it's going to stick that way. Didn't your mother ever tell you that?"

She set her own plate on the table, and returned to kitchen for the glasses and silverware before she sat in the chair across from him.

They ate in silence for several minutes before he got the nerve to speak. "This is really good. I didn't realize you could cook."



One perfectly arched eyebrow rose over her stunning green eyes. “You would be surprised at what you *don’t* know about me, Chase, or don’t care to find out.”

*Is she flirting with me? Well, hell! After I kissed the crap out of her earlier, who knows?*

“I care way too much, that’s the problem,” he grumbled under his breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.”

Abby set her fork down and tented her fingers under her chin. “You know, this persona you have taken on isn’t going to send me screaming into the next county. I’m trying to be your friend, if that’s what you want, especially since I don’t have many here yet.”

“What about Christopher Bridges?” Chase grimaced when the words left his mouth.

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “What about him?”

“You went out last night, didn’t you?”

“You know we did, Chase. You called me while we were at the restaurant.”

“Isn’t he your friend or whatever, too?”

*Do I really want to know what they are? But if they are more than friends, why did she kiss me back earlier?*

Abby frowned and shrugged. “I can have male friends. I had them in New York, and I can have them here, too. Believe it or not, you can have friends of the opposite sex without anything else involved.” She took a bite of her garlic bread. Once she swallowed, she said, “Besides, I need you to teach me some things.”

She hadn’t answered his question, but he would let it slide for now. The teach her thing had him intrigued.

*I know some things I could probably teach her, but I’m sure that’s not what she had in mind.*

“Like what?”

“About horses. I don’t know enough to be able to do what I want with them. You’ve probably been doing it your entire life.”

“That’s true.” He shrugged and stuck a fork full of lasagna in his mouth.

Abby’s eyes danced with excitement. “See! Then you can teach me what you know.”

“That could take a while.”

“I have nothing but time on my hands. The only commitment I have at the moment is to feed your horses since you don’t seem to want me around for anything else.”

*Oh, if you only knew, Abigail.*

“I never said I didn’t want you around, Abby.”

Her gaze dropped to the food in front of her and she put the last bit in her mouth. “That’s not the impression I get.”

She pushed back her chair, picked up their plates and took them into the kitchen. After she had rinsed them off, she slid them into the dishwasher, put in some soap and shut the door with a decisive snap.

He struggled to his feet, tucked the crutches under his arms, and followed her. When he stopped behind her, he stood close enough to smell her scent as he let it wrapped itself around his senses.

“That’s the problem. I want you around—I want you here.”

She turned and faced him with the question clear in her eyes. “I don’t understand, then.”

“I want you. Period,” he whispered as he let his fingers caress her arm. The goose bumps rose on her skin, following the trail of his fingertips. His hand reached her shoulder, and slid across the top until he was able to grasp a piece of hair between his fingers.

“You’re the type of woman who wants a man on a permanent basis. I can’t give you that.”

“I don’t, Chase. I won’t give my heart away again. I can’t. It hurts too much.” Her fevered whispered declaration sent bells ringing in his head.

“Are you saying you would be satisfied with only a physical relationship, Abby?”

## Chapter Eight

“I...uh.”

Letting his hand drop, he turned away and murmured, “That’s what I thought.”

Abby sighed. “Can’t we just be friends?”

“Fine. If that’s what you want,” he said hobbling toward the sofa.

*I don’t know what I want, that’s the problem.*

“Would you like some coffee? I can make some.”

“Sure.”

In no time, the machine sputtered when the coffee finished. Abby poured them both a cup before moving into the living room and setting a cup near him on the table.

She curled up on his couch across from him, tucking her feet under her. “Tell me about the horses.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Chase rubbed his thigh, drawing her attention to his hand. Her thoughts scattered for a moment when she thought about his hand on her arm. Just his touch seemed to send her heart into overdrive, and she wasn’t sure she liked how her body reacted to his.

“They are quarter horses and bred to be strong—barrel racers, cutting horses, calf roping—the work horse of a ranch. I sell them all over.” He picked up the coffee cup and sipped the steaming liquid before setting it back on the table.

“Well, maybe after your leg heals, we can go riding. I haven’t been horseback riding in forever. That’s why I asked if you needed any exercised.” Her gaze fixed on the cup in her hand for a moment.

“You can ride any time you want. Just stay away from the stallion. He’s an ornery shit.”

“The one that was prancing in the arena?”

He nodded and said, “Yeah. He’s the one who kicked me.”

She chuckled softly as she asked, “What were you trying to do, keep him away from the mare in the stall?”

A rueful smile rippled across his lips. “I know, stupid move on my part. Even though she’s not in season this time of year, he didn’t like me keeping them apart. Those two are running mates.”

“I wasn’t going to say a word.” She laughed and held up her hands in surrender.

For the next couple of hours, they sat on the couch and he told her about growing up on the Rocking W with his parents, two brothers, and younger sister.

“Are they older than you?” Her fascination with the man, who plowed into her life with the force of a hurricane, held her spellbound.

“I’m the middle brat. My brother, Justin is the eldest and he lives in Nevada. My younger brother is Cole. He doesn’t have a place yet, just bums around a lot. Then there is Jamie, our sister. She’s the youngest.”

“Does Justin have property, too?”

“He has a place where he runs cattle, and Cole rides rodeo a lot right now. He hasn’t figured out what he wants to do yet, I think. Jamie lives with our parents in town.” A dry laugh trickled from his lips, drawing her attention like a moth to flame. His dimples peeked out, teasing her, taunting her as they whispered to her to caress them with her tongue. Abby shook her head in a vain attempt to clear the tantalizing temptation.

“What about you?”

“My parents live in Albany, New York. They have property there and dabble in horses, but not like you—not on a serious, sell for profit kind of basis. I’m an only child. Dad is an architect by trade, and Mom is a stay at home mom.”

“That’s right, your mom told you to check on me.”

Abby blushed, and dropped her gaze from his face. Her vision fixed on his broad chest and the hair peeking out at the top of his shirt. Her palms itched to touch the curls. She shifted her gaze elsewhere, only to find them resting on his hands again. “Yeah, she did.”

“You said your mom is sensitive. What do you mean?”

“How do I explain?” Shifting around on the seat of the couch, she drew one knee up, looping her arm around it and cocked her head to one side. “She creeps me out sometimes. She has feelings. Not that she’s psychic or anything, she just has these feelings when something isn’t right. Like my car accident. She called when I was in the emergency room.”

“So she had a feeling you were hurt?” Skepticism was written all over his face, but at least it wasn’t out right disbelief.

“Yeah. I guess that’s one way to put it. Then when she and I were talking, I told her you had brought me home the night before. As our conversation wound down, she said to check on you. That’s why I tried to call. I’ve learned over the years to listen to her.”

He chuckled and she giggled. “I bet it was hard to sneak out when you were a teenager.”

“Yeah. Try impossible.”

Chase cocked a questioning eyebrow and asked, “You were a rebel girl, weren’t you?”

She let her eyes widen in pretend shock. “Not me!”

Those dimples peeked out again and her heart thumped in her chest.

“Why can I imagine you on the back of a Harley, hair blowing in the wind?”

“Um...never been on a Harley.” She smiled and peeked at him through her eyelashes. “I used to try to get past her, though. Sometimes, just to see if she would figure it out.”

“Did it ever work?”

“Nope.”

“Not once?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Never. I finally gave up.”

Giving her a secretive smile, he said, “Well, we’ll have to fix the Harley thing.”

\* \* \* \*

Chase liked it much better when they seemed to be joking and laughing than the seriousness of their kiss earlier.

*I just have to figure out how to keep my hands to myself.*

“And just how do you propose to do that? Are you hiding one somewhere?”

“Actually, yeah. Well, not hiding one. It’s in the garage out back.”

Real shock rippled across her face. “You, wearing a leather jacket?” She shook her head and grinned. “I can’t imagine that at all.”

He struggled to his feet and her eyes widened. “I’ll be right back.”

Her hot gaze settled on his back as he approached the closet by the door. Pulling out the thick leather jacket he always wore when he rode, Chase held it up for her inspection. Abby’s laughter was contagious when it reached his ears, and he joined her.

“If I could make it to the garage, I’d show it to you.”

“We may just have to wait for the snow to melt some.”

He slid the coat back in closet and hobbled back to the couch when her cell phone rang.

Abby stood and walked to the countertop where her purse rested. She pulled out her cell phone and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. His fingers itched to do the simple task for her, and he frowned.

“Hello?”

Chase settled himself back down on the couch and picked up his coffee cup.

“Oh, hi.”

Murmurs of words met his ear, but he couldn't make out the actual words.

"Um...sure. I guess that would be okay."

Abby turned her back to him.

"Yeah, six-thirty is fine. I'll see you then."

The click of her cell phone brought his gaze up to hers as she slipped it back inside her purse. The green of her eyes made his heart hammer in his chest and slam against his ribs.

He wasn't going to ask, didn't want to. Who she went out with or who she slept with, for that matter, had nothing to do with him.

*It's none of my business.*

Uncomfortable silence filled the space between them that was filled with laughter just a few moments before.

Abby cleared her throat. "You told me your wife died in a car accident on the interstate."

Chase rubbed his hands over his eyes. "Yeah."

"How long were you married?"

Air rushed from between his lips as he sighed. "Five years."

"You never had any kids?"

"No, we were too busy, I guess." He shifted on the couch, uneasy with her line of questioning. "I was too busy. She wanted kids, but I kept telling her it wasn't the right time."

"How did you meet?"

"We went to school together. We never dated during that time. In fact, she dated Cole for a while. We met at our five-year reunion and started seeing each other. Things just happened from there." He didn't know why, but it was so easy to talk to her. Avoiding talking about Krista had become a habit since her death, but with Abby, he felt like he could tell her anything. Abby didn't know any of the same people, didn't grow up in Laramie, so they were all strangers to her. "What about you?"

A rueful smile drifted across her mouth. "Nope. I didn't date Krista."



Her teasing words lightened the mood and he shot her a questioning look.

“Joshua and I met through a friend. One of my girlfriends dated his best friend. She played matchmaker for a blind date.” She twisted the diamond on her finger in what he decided had to be a nervous gesture. “We dated about a year before he proposed one night at the firehouse.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“It’s okay. It still hurts some times.” Abby sniffed and rubbed her nose. A watery smile drifted over her lips. “It’s just hard.”

“Come here.” He opened his arms and she slid across the couch into his embrace.

*Why does it feel so right to hold her?*

Abby didn’t cry like he thought she would, not this time. Her head resting on his shoulder and her warm hand lying against his chest sent desire racing through him. He prayed he wouldn’t get an obvious erection from her touch, but he knew it was inevitable as the blood rush between his legs. He closed his eyes, trying desperately to get control of himself before he did something stupid, like kiss her again. Trying to control the groan that rumbled in his chest, he felt her tip her head back and her warm breath fluttered across his neck.

*Big mistake! Good Lord, this was a big mistake!*

He couldn’t help himself. When he looked down into her eyes, he was lost. The green depths turned dark with a mixture of gold, and her pupils dilated. Her lips were so close, looked so soft, and when she parted them slightly, he couldn’t stop himself even if he wanted to. With a tortured groan, his mouth met hers as he slipped his hand along her jaw, into her hair, and grasped the back of her head to fit her mouth better against his. She tasted so good, so right, he couldn’t stop. He let his tongue caress along her lips, wanting her to accept him because she wanted to, not because he pushed. Her lips parted, and he heard her moan as the tip of her tongue met his.

\* \* \* \*

Abby heard an ear piercing screech in her ear. Pulling her mouth from his, she looked into his eyes, but from the desire shining there, she could tell he hadn't heard it. His mouth moved closer in an attempt to take her lips again, but when they brushed against hers, she heard the sound again.

*What the hell?*

She pushed against his shoulders until he lifted his head. "Did you hear something?"

A ragged breath shook his frame. "No."

Closing her eyes, she shook her head, trying to shake the terrified feeling that gripped her heart.

*I'm losing my mind.*

Chase tugged her close again, but she had a bad feeling she shouldn't allow it. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest as he nibbled her ear with his teeth. His mouth trailed down to the sensitive spot below it, and shivers raced down her spine.

Abby opened her eyes, looked over his shoulder, and saw a shadow standing against the wall. Stiffening in his embrace, she squinted, trying to bring the shape into focus.

He sighed and cupped her face with his hands. "I'm sorry. I should never have let things get so far out of control. I know you aren't ready for anything and I shouldn't be taking advantage of you like I did."

She scooted back and shot a glance back over his shoulder. The shadow had come into focus and she shivered when the features of a dark haired woman with brown eyes stared right at her.

"Abby?" Her gaze returned to his face. "Are you all right? You look white as a sheet."

"I...uh."

Chase turned and looked behind him to where her eyes were pinned. “What’s wrong?”

“Chase, what did Krista look like?”

Frown lines appeared between his eyes. “Why?”

Abby tried to be nonchalant as she shrugged, but fear gripped in insides and her stomach turned into one huge knot. “Just curious.”

“What’s gotten into you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Please just tell me what she looked like.”

“Dark hair, brown eyes.” He grabbed a photo album from under the coffee table and flipped it open. “This is one of the last pictures I have of her.”

She looked down to see the smiling face of Krista Wilder, Chase’s wife, the same face she’d seen against the wall over his shoulder. Abby closed her eyes and rubbed her hand over them before she looked back to the spot where the figure had appeared. The spot stood empty.

“I’m sorry, Chase. I need to go home.” She jumped up from the couch and grabbed her coat and purse. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Abby bolted for the door even though he called her name. Terror raced down her back as she ran to his truck. She slipped the key in the ignition, started the truck and almost spun the tires in the snow as she headed for home.

When she reached her front door, she rushed inside and slammed it, placing her back against the solid surface. Her fists clenched and unclenched by her sides while she tried to calm her racing heart.

*Damn it! First Josh and now Krista? I really am going nuts!*

Abby grabbed the phone off the receiver and hit redial to call her mother. The only person she knew who could help her find out what the hell was going on lived several thousands of miles away.

## Chapter Nine

“Abigail, what’s wrong?” Her mother’s voice calmed her like no one could, but the worry she heard now chilled her to the bone.

“Mom, I scared.” She rubbed her arms as she stood there shaking with fear.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I was over at Chase’s. I fixed him dinner since he can’t get around and everything. We were sitting on his couch talking. I asked him about his wife and we talked about Josh.” She closed her eyes and rubbed her temple for a moment. “You know it’s funny because I seemed to be able to tell him about Josh and talk about things like that when I couldn’t talk to anyone before.”

“And?”

“You know me. I got teary eyed and he held me, but it didn’t stop there. We kissed. It felt so right, Mom. I just don’t understand. I feel like I’m betraying Josh, but I can’t seemed to help myself.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Abigail?”

*Leave it to her to know there’s more.*

“After we kissed, he held me and nibbled on my ear. I opened my eyes and looked over his shoulder.”

“His wife?”

“Damn, Mom! You are just too creepy.” She sighed and a shiver rolled down her back. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure, Abby. What else happened?”

Abby walked back and forth in front of the fireplace and chewed her fingernail. “When he kissed me, I heard a screech in my ear.”

“Oh, Abigail.” Her mother exhaled forcibly, and the sound of trepidation in her mother’s voice sent her terror into overdrive.

“What?”

“It sounds like you may have a fight on your hands, sweetie, if you want Chase beyond friendship. It doesn’t sound like his wife wants him to move on without her.”

“This is crazy! She’s dead, just like Josh.” Dropping into the leather chair, she tucked her feet under her and gripped the phone with white knuckles. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“You need to decide what you want. If you want Chase as more than a friend, then you need to be prepared to fight for him.”

Tears slid down her cheeks. “I’m not sure what I want. I know his touch and his kiss do wonderful things to me, but I don’t think he wants anything like a relationship, either. He already told me so.”

“You won’t win this battle unless he is willing to fight for you, too. Joshua wants you to move on. He won’t stand in your way, but it doesn’t sound like she wants the same thing.”

Abby rubbed her arms as she tried to calm the chills. “Well for now, I’m not going to do anything. I have a date with the doctor from the hospital again tomorrow.”

“He’s not right for you, Abigail.”

“It doesn’t matter, Mom. I’m not looking for Mr. Right. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Be careful.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Abby hung up the phone and headed for the kitchen. Without thinking, she poured some coffee in a cup and slipped it into the microwave to warm it. Several deeps breaths later, she sat down in her chair in front of the cold fireplace.

Her thoughts drifted back to Chase and his kiss. She hadn’t felt the stirrings of desire in a long time, but his kisses were driving her nuts. She longed to have his hands on her, his mouth on hers, craved

his touch like she hadn't in a very long time. She shook her head to clear her thoughts. Grabbing the book next to her, she decided to read for a while and get her mind off of everything—Chase, Krista, Josh, and whatever else lurked in the shadows these days.

Moments after she started reading a warm, loving feeling washed over her. A warm breath caressed the back of her neck, and her heart calmed.

*Abby.*

*“Josh.”*

*She didn't have to see him to know he stood behind her.*

*Be careful Abby...*

*“But ...”*

*She means to harm you.*

*“Why?”*

*She doesn't want you with him.*

*“I don't understand. There isn't anything between us.”*

His doubtful laugh echoed in the room, bouncing off the walls. Tears sparkled on her lashes. She loved his laugh. It faded away like a whisper on the air around her.

*This is getting way to weird.* She grabbed her book again and forced herself to focus on the words.

When she finally went to bed a few hours later her eyes darted around her empty bedroom, searching, watching and waiting.

\* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, Abby drove to Chase's house and headed for the barn. Pulling out flakes of hay, she went from stall to stall feeding the horses, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the stallion still prancing in the arena. His wild eyes followed her from a distance, not daring to approach. Chase said to stay away from him, and that's exactly what she intended to do, but he had to be fed just like the rest.

She threw some hay on the ground, and when he approached, she backed away from the railing.

Once they were all fed, she headed for the house to check on Chase. She'd left in a pretty big hurry the night before, and he probably thought she was crazy now.

Abby knocked on the kitchen door. Nothing. She peeked in through the window, but didn't see him moving around in the kitchen.

*Maybe he's not up yet.*

Trying the doorknob, she found it unlocked, so she pushed it open and walked into the kitchen. The coffee pot was on and the liquid inside was hot. Two cups sat on the counter nearby. When she poured some into both cups, she heard shuffling behind her and turned to see him hobbling toward her.

His hair hung wet and curling at the nape of his neck, his chest was bare, drawing her attention to the hair smattered across it and the line down his belly. The towel wrapped around his lean hips threatened to fall at any moment. Her lips parted slightly and she ran her tongue across the now parched surface.

Temperature in the room rose thirty degrees when their eyes met across the room, and a slow, sexy smile rippled across his face, showing off his dimples to perfection.

Abby cleared her throat, but the words still came out in a squeak when she said, "Good morning."

"Mornin'. How did you sleep?"

Turning back toward the counter so she wouldn't have to imagine what was under his towel or lack thereof, she answered, "Fine. I've already been out and fed the horses."

"I heard you pull in."

"You did?" She fiddled with a towel on the counter, folding and unfolding it while she tried to calm her shaking hands.

Chase's warm chuckle met her ears, and she smiled. "Kind of hard not to with a diesel truck."

His laughter lightened the mood, and she laughed in return, but she still couldn't turn and face him knowing he still stood there in nothing more than a towel. "Yeah, I guess that's true."

"I'll be back out in a minute."

"Okay, I'll see what's here for breakfast."

She could hear him shuffle down the hall, and once she heard the door of his bedroom close behind him, she bent her head and forced the breath from her lungs.

*I guess I can't say I'm not attracted to the man.*

A frown rippled across her face when she remembered Josh's words. *She means to harm you.*

*Great! Not only do I have Joshua telling me to find someone else to love, but also a jealous DEAD wife wanting me to leave the one man I'm attracted to alone.*

Pulling open the refrigerator, she grabbed the eggs and bacon she found and placed them on the counter. She grabbed the handle on the cupboard below to find two pans. Once the bacon was added to the pan and turned on, she heard him hobble back down the hall toward the kitchen.

Chase pulled out a chair at the table and settled in with a groan.

Two eggs were cracked open and now sizzled in the pan. "How do you like your eggs?"

"Over medium is fine."

"Ah, a slightly running yolk kind of guy."

With his cup of coffee in her hands, she approached the table and set it in front of him. Before she could turn away, he took her hand in his and frowned.

"Is there something wrong Abby?"

She pulled her hand back. "No, why?"

"You seem kind of jumpy, that's all."

Moving back toward the kitchen, she turned the bacon over. "I'm fine, Chase." Turning the subject to something safer, like horses, she



asked, “Do you want me to move the stallion somewhere besides the arena?”

“He’s okay there until I can get out there myself to move him.”

“I fed him in the arena this morning since I wasn’t sure.”

“Is he still acting skittish?”

“Yeah, all jumpy and stuff. Why?”

“It’s a bit weird, that’s all. He’s usually very calm.”

Several minutes later, she set the food down in front of him and he whispered, “Thanks.”

“Sure.”

Even though he refused to let her stay there, they had still established this almost domestic routine. He didn’t even balk at her fixing breakfast this morning, and he obviously wasn’t surprised to see her in his kitchen when he came out of the bathroom.

Heat flushed up her body from her toes and settled between her thighs as she remembered the towel wrapped around his lean hips when he’d come out. His bare chest sent her heart racing and her fingertips itching to touch him. She wanted to feel the hard muscles, to smooth her palms across the bulging pecs, and to feel the soft curling hair against her hand. When he flashed his sexy grin, her heart dropped to the floor, and her toes curled in her boots as her mouth went dry.

Standing at the stove now, she shifted her thighs attempting to relieve some of the pressure in her pussy. The satin between her legs rubbed against her clit, sending more moisture to her already soaked underwear and she fought the moan rising in her throat.

\* \* \* \*

Lifting the fork to his mouth, Chase watched her shift her stance. Her ass cheeks begged to be touched and caressed. He wanted nothing more than to grasp them in both hands and feel the flesh mold to his fingers as he lifted her flush against him. It’s not like he could do

anything to relieve the pressure in his groin right now, anyway, with his leg, but *damn* he wanted to.

He shifted in his own chair when he felt blood rush to his cock, forcing his jeans to tighten against his groin. Pain shot up his leg when he moved. He groaned out loud, and she turned to face him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Blood whooshed in his ears with every beat of his heart. “I think I probably did too much this morning with the shower or sponge bath as it was. My leg is killing me.”

A concerned frown pulled down the corners of her mouth as she asked, “Didn’t they give you something for pain when you left the hospital?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to be unconscious all the time so I haven’t taken any.”

“Stubborn man,” Abby grumbled and he laughed.

“Oh, you are one to talk, miss.”

Plate in hand, she walked toward him with a smile and took the chair across from him. “I’m not stubborn.”

“Yeah, right. I bet if I asked your mother she would say something totally different.”

Abby’s tinkling laughter sent chills down his arms as she said, “Probably.”

The compatible banter was much easier to handle than the sexual tension that seeped between them when they were in the same room. Chase wasn’t quite sure how she managed to infiltrate his life so quickly and so thoroughly in such a short time. He hadn’t brought any woman into his home since his wife died and here was Abby. Having her here was so comfortable, he didn’t even think about it.

“Do you have anything planned for today?”

“Not until this evening.”

He shot her a questioning look, but she avoided looking at him.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

He wasn't going to ask. It really wasn't any of his business what Abby had planned.

"Why?"

Abby finally looked him in the eyes, but he didn't know whether he wanted to interpret what he saw or not. "I just thought maybe we could do something. Play cards, watch a movie, you know, just hang out, but if you're busy..." his voice trailed off while thoughts of her being with anyone else sent disturbing emotions across his heart.

"Not until later." She didn't elaborate. "I imagine it's driving you crazy being idle."

He dropped his gaze to the food in front of him. "Yeah. I'm used to being active. You know, out with the horses all day, cleaning stalls, working with one or another. This sitting in the house is going to drive me up a wall before it's over."

"I'm sure we can find something to keep you busy."

His head snapped up. Her playful words couldn't mean the same thing to her they meant to him, could they? Making love to her would be the best way to spend the afternoon he could think of, but he knew that was impossible.

"Let me get the dishes washed up, and then we can find something to keep you entertained."

*Get it together, man! That's not what she meant.*

For the rest of the day they sat on his couch and watched several movies. Her laughter was contagious. He'd already seen all the movies in his collection, but there were several she hadn't seen, so he just watched her.

As the sun started to set, she went out to the barn to feed the horses while he stood on the porch. The sway of her hips, the smile gracing her face, the swell of her breasts—all of it was driving him crazy, and if he didn't make love to her soon, he would be a pile of ashes on the floor. The inferno raging inside his body had him on slow burn and being near her all the time, made it worse than anything he could imagine.

When Abby came back to the house, they moved inside together and she set about making dinner. Her cell phone rang and a frown crinkled her brow. Pulling it from her purse, she looked at the screen and murmured, “Shit. What time is it?”

“Six thirty-five, why?”

She flipped the phone open. “Hello?”

He could hear the murmurs of whoever was on the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry, Christopher. I didn’t realize what time it was.”

The name of the person on the other end made him feel like he’d been gut punched.

*Christopher Bridges.*

“I’m at Chase’s. If you want to, you can come over here and pick me up.” More murmurs. “All right. I’ll see you in a minute.”

Abby hung up and slipped the phone back inside her purse before her eyes met his. “Do you want me to fix you something?”

He knew a frown pulled at the corners of his mouth. “No. That’s fine, Abby. I’ll make a sandwich or something.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

“Can I use your bathroom to wash up a little? I smell like horses.”

“Down the hall there.”

“Thanks.”

He watched her walk into the bathroom and shut the door behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Abby washed her hands in the sink and scrubbed her face with a washcloth. Losing track of time wasn’t normal for her, but being around Chase made it seem like the time just flew by. After splashing water on her face to rinse the soap off, she grabbed the towel next to her and patted it dry.

She opened her eyes only to meet Krista Wilder's penetrating stare in the mirror. She spun around and a chill raced up her back. Standing next to the tub was Chase's wife.

*I know you can hear me. Stay away from my husband.*

Abby shook from head to toe as the words flittered to her ear and the woman stared like she could see right into her soul.

"We're just friends."

Chase knocked on the door, and her eyes swung to the piece of wood that separated them. "Abby? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Chase, I'm fine. I'll be out in a second."

When her gaze swung back to where the woman was standing, the spot held nothing.

"Damn," she grumbled.

She opened the door to find Chase standing on the other side leaning against the wall behind him.

"Who were you talking to?"

"No one, why?"

"I thought I heard you say something."

She couldn't tell him she was talking to his dead wife. "I talk to myself sometimes, that's all."

He cocked a questioning eyebrow. "Trying to convince yourself of something?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

The doorbell rang. "That must be Christopher. I'll get it."

As she scurried off down the hall toward the front door, she could feel his eyes on her back. When she reached the door, she heard him shuffle into the room behind her. Sucking in a fortifying breath, she pulled open the door to meet the eyes of her date.

"Hi. I'm really sorry. I lost track of time."

"It's okay." Christopher stepped inside and his attention focused on the other man in the room. "Hi, Chase. How's the leg?"

"Fine," Chase growled low in his throat, drawing her gaze to his face.

Christopher frowned a moment, but returned his attention to her.  
“Are you ready?”

“Yes, just let me grab my coat.”

“Where are you two headed tonight?” Chase’s question hung in the air around them and she frowned for a second.

“Dinner and a movie probably,” she answered before Christopher could.

Frown lines settled between Chase’s eyebrows and she sighed.  
*What’s gotten into him?*

“Shall we go?” Looping her hand through the crook of Christopher’s elbow, she looked at Chase for a moment before she said, “I’ll have Christopher drop me off here to pick up the truck.”

“No problem.”

“See you later, then.”

She walked outside and got into Christopher’s car. When they pulled away from the front of the house, she could see Chase watching from the window.

\* \* \* \*

Later that evening, when her date pulled into the yard to drop her off, she could see a light still burning in the front living room window. He turned off the car and they sat in the dark for a moment.

She really did like Christopher. He was gorgeous, nice, a gentleman and all that but... Her heart tripped over in her chest when she admitted to herself, *he’s not Chase*.

“Can I see you again?”

The attraction he had for her sparkled bright in his eyes, but the only feelings she held for him bordered on friendship and nothing more. “I suppose that’s all right.”

“What is it, Abby? If you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

“It’s not that.” She twisted the diamond on her hand, and her eyes met his. “I’m just not ready for any kind of relationship.”

“I understand. I know it hasn’t been that long since your husband died. We can go as slow as you want.” His fingers caressed the hair at her shoulder, but it did nothing, no tingling, and no goose bumps—nothing.

“That’s fine.”

*Why am I even agreeing to continue to see him? I don’t want to be with him.*

“I have to work the next several days, but I’ll call you and we can set something up.” His hand dropped away, and he pushed open the door. Walking around to her side, he opened the passenger side for her, but when she stepped out, he didn’t move.

Abby’s gaze ricocheted up to his, as his hand caressed her cheek. His fingers moved along the soft surface before he let it slide down her neck. He bent his head toward her, and she let him kiss her. She wanted to feel something, anything, but his lips on hers just weren’t the same. Not like Josh—not like Chase, and she pulled away.

“Thanks for dinner and the movie.”

He smiled. “You’re welcome.” He brought his hand up to her face again to skim along her jaw.

The porch light flipped on. She closed her eyes as a smile flittered on her lips.

*Chase.*

She stepped back. “I guess I’ll talk to you later. I should get going. I have to be up early to feed the horses.”

“Yeah. I’ve got an early shift at the hospital, too. I’ll call you in a few days.”

“Sure. Talk to you soon.”

He walked back around to the driver’s side of his car, as she moved toward the porch of the house. She watched as her date backed out and pulled down the driveway. When she turned back toward the door, she wasn’t the least bit surprised to see Chase standing at the screen.

## Chapter Ten

“How was your date?” Chase brought the bottle of beer to his lips, but his eyes never left hers.

“Good.” She stepped up to the screen, and he pushed it open, allowing her to move inside.

The silence between them was deafening.

“Did you get something to eat?”

“Yeah.”

He held the bottle up, and she wondered what his lips would taste like with the malty substance clinging to it. “Care for one?”

“Um...no thanks. I still need to drive back to my place.”

“True.”

Abby rocked back on her heels and stuffed her hands into the pocket of her coat.

*I feel so guilty, like I've cheated on him.*

“I guess I should go. I'll be back in the morning.”

His shoulders lifted in a shrug. “I'll be here.”

“I'll say good night, then.”

“Sweet dreams.”

The next morning, Abby pulled into the driveway and headed straight for the barn. She didn't want to examine her feelings too closely. She liked Christopher, but he didn't make her feel like Chase did.

*Christopher doesn't make my heart race or my toes curl with nothing more than a look.*

Chase didn't want a relationship, though, with anyone. He said as much, and she couldn't do a strictly physical relationship. Christopher



was looking for a mate. Even if he didn't say it, she was sure of his intention. Chase—she didn't know what he wanted. Then she had to think about Krista. Chase's wife obviously didn't want any woman taking her place in his life and that was terrifying.

When she finished feeding the horse, she headed for the house. Abby paused at the kitchen door before knocking soundly. A moment later, he pulled it open and his bare chest met her gaze. She sucked in a ragged breath when desire zipped through her.

"You don't have to knock, Abby."

She shrugged with a little smile when her heart started beating again. "It's not my house."

Chase stepped back, allowing her to enter.

"Have you eaten?" She looked at his sleepy eyes and mussed hair, her fingers itching to comb it back into place.

"Nope. Just got up when I heard the truck pull in."

She laughed. "It's kind of hard to be quiet with all that noise."

"Yeah, I guess so. I never thought of it that way."

"I'll make coffee." She moved into the kitchen as she heard Chase hobble toward the dining room table.

"Isn't today when they said you could get the walking cast on?"

"Yeah, thank goodness. This being in the house is driving me nuts."

"Well, hopefully after you get that on, you can at least go out to the barn and do a few things so you aren't going stir crazy."

"Good Lord, I hope so."

She laughed as she pulled out some pans and ingredients. "How about an omelet?"

Chase cocked his eyebrow in surprise. "I haven't had an omelet in years."

"Well, today is your lucky day, cowboy," she teased.

"Mmm...sounds promising."

Her gaze swung up to meet his, and she was startled to see how dark his eyes had become. She knew the look. It was the same one

he'd gotten when they kissed on his couch, the same one that promised untold pleasure if she so chose. She turned back to the cooking, doing her best to ignore it as shivers rolled down her spine.

"Did they tell you what time?"

"They said come by the office any time. It wouldn't take long."

"Shall we go after we eat, then?"

"Sounds like a plan to me. The sooner I can walk on this thing, the better."

\* \* \* \*

Abby and Chase talked about the horses, his ranch, his family, her family, and anything else they could think of while they ate. Avoiding any kind of talk concerning what happened between them on the couch and her date with Christopher became second nature. He didn't want to know *anything* about her date. He'd seen the other man kiss her by the car, and he felt like he wanted to punch the wall.

Once they finished, Abby cleared the table while he went into the bedroom and put on a shirt. He slid his coat on, and she followed when he hobbled out to the truck. She was right. He hated anyone driving his vehicle. Krista never drove it. Now he had to sit back and let some woman he barely knew drive. It just didn't sit right with him at all.

"You aren't going to give me crap this morning about driving are you?"

"Nope. My lips are sealed."

Abby gave him a skeptical frown before she started it and headed down the driveway.

Reaching the hospital, he directed her to the physician's office where she pulled into an empty spot and turned off the truck.

He slid off the seat, balancing himself on the crutches as she walked around and helped him shut the door. They walked into the

office building, not completely oblivious to the curious stares that followed.

An hour or so later, he came back out with the crutches, hobbling to the truck as he grumbled under his breath.

Abby rolled her eyes. "Will you quit already? It's only another day until the cast dries."

"That's not what they said originally."

"Are you always this impatient? Gotta have it now kind of guy?" His eyes shot up to hers when the words hit him square in the jaw.

*If she only knew how patient I'm being. I want nothing more to bury myself in her hot, wet warmth and rock her world.*

"Yeah, I guess so." Chase slid into the cab of the truck while she went around the other side.

They drove back to his house in silence while thoughts of making love to her had his cock straining against the fly of his jeans.

Once they managed to get him inside without too much difficulty, she headed for the kitchen. "I'll fix you a nice lunch so you can forget about the cast. Then we can figure out some way to get your mind off it for the rest of the evening."

*Damn it! Does she have any idea what she's doing to me?*

"Chase?"

"Huh? Sorry. I was thinking."

"What would you like for lunch?"

*You on the dining room table.*

He cleared his throat. "Whatever is fine. I'm not a picky eater."

"Well, let's see what's in the fridge, then."

He watched her putter around his kitchen in awe. The curve of her hips, the sumptuous cheeks of her ass, the swell of her breasts as they pushed against her shirt, held nothing if not his attention. He had been so wrapped up in his musings; he was surprised when she set a plate down in front of him.

"Thanks."

"Sure. What would you like to drink?"

“Milk is fine.”

“Coming right up.”

He managed to get his mind off how soft her lips looked long enough to eat his lunch without grabbing her and devouring them under his own. That is until she cleared the dishes before she returned to his side and said, “What shall we do now?”

*Oh shit! I know what I want to do, but I’m sure she has something else in mind.*

He cleared his throat and shifted in the chair. “How about cards? I think I have a couple of decks in the drawer over there in the kitchen.”

“Okay.”

Abby was back in moments with the cards in her hand as she slid onto the seat across from him and started shuffling. “Poker?”

Surprised, he laughed at her suggestion. “Poker? Sure. You have money?”

“Mmm...maybe.” A playful smile flittered across her mouth, and his blood shunted to his groin. “Of course I have money.”

Abby reached for her purse, pulling out her wallet and dumping the change on the table. He always kept a jar of spare change on the table near the door so he asked her to retrieve it for him.

“Sure.”

Returning with the jar clutched in her hand she asked, “Penny ante?”

“Works for me. That way you won’t lose too much.”

A what-you-don’t-know-won’t-hurt-you look rippled across her face, and he was afraid he’d just gotten in way over his head.

“Do you want to deal first or me?”

“Ladies first.”

Abby expertly shuffled the cards and cut them with deft precision. He had a gut feeling he was in trouble when she started to deal.

They played for a couple of hours, laughing hysterically as they talked, and told stories about growing up. He relayed more about the horses he bred and promised her she could help him next time he had

one to break. They broke out a wine bottled he had stashed in one of the cabinets and toasted to everything and anything they could think of.

A half-drunken smile lifted the corners of her mouth and she giggled. *She's cute when she's drunk. Of course, I'm feeling pretty good myself right now.*

The pile in front of him grew and hers dwindled to nothing.

"I'm out of money it looks like."

He started to put the cards away, but caught the twinkle in her eye across the table.

"Do you want me to loan you some?"

"No, I don't want to owe you." Her flirty smile was back.

*Damn! I just got my raging lust under control.*

He felt his cock swell, pressing insistently against his fly, and he fought a tortured groan from reaching his lips.

"What do you propose, then?"

Abby cocked a perfectly arched eyebrow at him before her gaze shifted to his shirt.

He allowed his own flirtatious smile to flutter across his lips. "Strip?"

She shrugged, but he could tell she was uneasy, so it shocked him even further when she said, "Sure."

\* \* \* \*

Abby couldn't believe she'd just agreed to play strip poker with him.

*What the hell am I thinking? I need to just get in his truck and go home, right now—right this minute before something happens I'm going to regret later.*

"Are you sure about that?" A frown pulled the corners of his mouth down. She was sure he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

That was the last thing a man like him would do, but her comfort level with him bordered on insane.

“What’s wrong, Chase, afraid you’ll lose?”

*Good lord, what am I doing?*

He looked at the pile in front of him and the non-existent pile in front of her before his dimples peeked out as he grinned. “I don’t think so.”

“Mmm...let’s see what you got, cowboy.”

More wine found its way into her glass when he dealt the cards. She picked up her hand without even a smirk resting on her lips.

*My luck is definitely turning around.*

“Two cards, please,” she said, sliding two cards into the middle of the table.

Chase dealt her two.

“I’ll take two as well.” He gave himself two cards and set the deck on the table.

She studied her cards before she let herself sneer just a little.

“I’ll bet one sock,” he said and gave her a half smile.

“One sock?” she asked with more confidence than she actually felt.

“Yep.”

“I’ll raise you a shoe.”

He grinned in return and asked, “You think you have something, huh?”

“You’ll never know unless you fess up the shoe.”

His dimples peeked out, and her heart thumped in her chest, slamming against her ribs. She took a shaky breath.

“Okay.” Chase leaned over and pulled off his sock and shoe, dropping them in the middle of the table. “Let’s see.”

She turned over her hand face up and flashed him a triumphant smile. He groaned before he flipped his over. Her three of a kind beat his two pair.

Several hands later, she was minus her shoes and socks, but he had lost his as well, and now they were in a stare down.

“What are you going to bet now?” she teased.

There were those dimples again.

*Damn! He needs to quit that before I melt in a puddle on this chair.*

“My shirt. What about you?”

Inhaling on a shaky breath, she said, “I’ll bet my bra.”

Air whooshed from between his lips, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, they had dilated to the point where his blue iris had almost disappeared. He cocked an eyebrow in her direction. “Let’s see it.”

Abby reached inside her shirt, unsnapping her bra from the back and slipped it out from underneath, holding it between her fingers as she shot him a challenging look. She watched in undisguised anticipation as his fingers worked the buttons on his shirt, slowly undoing them, revealing the hard muscles beneath.

*Shit! I almost forgot how nice his chest is.*

Moisture gathered in her mouth, and she was sure she was about to drool all over the table.

*Oh hell!*

He slipped it off his shoulders and she swallowed, *hard*.

“Whatcha got?”

“Two pair,” she replied, flipping over her cards.

“You lose. I’ve got a full house.” He turned his cards over and the thought rippling through her mind was that she’d won as she stared at his bare chest. After all, she now had his gorgeous muscled chest to stare at.

He laid his shirt across his lap, and she dropped her bra in the middle of the table. He swooped up his winnings as a devilish grin graced his mouth, and he fingered the lacey piece of material.

“Nice.”

She blushed, chewing her bottom lip as she watched his fingers caress the lace that was against her skin not two minutes before. Heat pooled between her thighs, robbing her brain of the blood needed to keep her mind working on all cylinders.

“My deal.” She shuffled the cards, deftly dealing them both five. Setting the deck down, Abby picked up her cards. A pair of aces stared her in the face.

“My shirt is up again. What are you bettin’ this time?”

“My shirt, too.”

She could have sworn she heard a groan come from across the table.

He slid three cards across the table and said, “I’ll take three.”

She sighed as he picked up his cards. She dealt three to herself and laid the deck on the table again.

*Two pair—not bad.*

“Are you raising?”

“Uh-huh...my jeans,” he said, in what sounded suspiciously like a growl and a challenge in his eyes she couldn’t refuse.

She closed hers for a moment. *Oh God!* “I’ll call.”

A smirk settled on his lips.

“My jeans, too.”

“Let see your cards, then.”

She flipped hers over and held her breath. That oh-so-sexy grin, dimples and all, rippled across his mouth. He turned his over to reveal three kings as he cocked an eyebrow, leaned against the back of the chair and waited.

Anticipation rolled down her arms and goose bumps flittered across the surface. She stood as her hands went to her waist, and slipped the button of her jeans free. Shimmying the pants off her hips, she dropped the stiff material to her feet and kicked them off. Her hands went to the bottom of her t-shirt as one arm snaked inside to work the shirt loose and then the other. The look in his eyes sent



shivers down her body, and she closed her own, took a deep breath and lifted it over her head.

\* \* \* \*

Air whooshed from his lungs in a rasping sound when her breasts were revealed to his gaze. He sat forward in his chair as her pink areolas beckoned for his touch. Reaching toward her, he cupped her breast in his palm, as she moaned low in her throat. Her head tipped back, exposing her neck to his hungry eyes. Struggling to his feet, he stepped closer, and his lips found the rapidly beating pulse at the base of her throat. His tongue lapped at the soft skin beneath his mouth, until he found a path to her ear.

“God, Abby,” he whispered. “I want you so bad.” He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger until she gasped and pushed against his palm.

With one arm around her waist, he pulled her tight to his chest before his mouth swooped down, capturing her lips in a desperate kiss. His tongue dove inside the warm cavern of her mouth, dueling with her own, and she moaned softly.

His free hand slipped slowly down her flat stomach and then dove beneath the waistband of her panties to find her wet and swollen, waiting for his touch. Her pelvis rocked toward him, and he let his finger slide past her tightly filled pussy lips to rasp against her clit. He swallowed her moan as he continued the assault on her mouth with his. His fingers slipped inside her hot pussy, and her vagina clamped down, sucking his fingers as he slid them in and out.

He lifted his head and whispered, “You are so hot—so wet.”

She whimpered and rocked her hips toward his hand.

“Let me love you, Abby.”

“Oh. God. Yes.”

She groaned when he removed his fingers from inside her.

He pushed her back onto the dining room table, while his mouth captured her lips in a mind-altering kiss as she reclined on the hard surface. One hand found her breast, molding the soft mound to his touch. His fingers pinch the hardened nipple slightly, and she arched toward him with a tortured groan.

“Chase, please.”

His mouth worked its way from her throat to her breast, taking the pebble hardened nipple in his mouth. He sucked and licked as she wiggled beneath him, moaning her needs in soft sighs and whimpered words. His hand skimmed down her belly to slip beneath the silk of her panties and worked them off her hips. Once they were free, he let them drop to the floor under their feet. His hand skimmed softly up her leg before he drove two fingers knuckle deep inside her waiting pussy.

“Oh, God,” she whimpered when he slid his fingers in and out, finger fucking her until her pussy wept with need.

Removing his hand, he stepped between her spread thighs. He kissed down her chest and across her flat stomach until his lips found the inside of her legs, nipping at the soft skin before soothing it with his tongue.

Her hands grasped his head as she lifted her hips, silently begging for his mouth. With one long stroke, his tongue licked from vagina to clit, and her head whipped back and forth on the table top. After several sweeps with the pad of his tongue, she whimpered and moaned as sweet, hot cum slipped from her inside her. He didn’t stop, couldn’t stop until he had tasted every last drop.

He kissed his way back up her stomach as his fingers worked at the belt buckle and button at his waist. Reaching into his back pocket and grabbing his wallet, he pulled out a condom and stuck the foil package between his teeth. He dropped his pants to his ankles, and then slid the latex over his hard cock.

Abby’s heavy eyes peered at him from under her lashes when he moved between her thighs.

“Are you sure? If you don’t want this, tell me now and I’ll stop. Once I’m inside you, there is no turning back,” he whispered as he pressed his cock against her opening with a slow rock of his hips.

“Don’t stop, please don’t stop.”

With a hefty groan, he slipped inside her. His eyes met hers and the astonishment in her gaze reflected exactly what he held in his heart.

*How could she feel so perfect, so right?*

After a moment, he let his hips rock while her pelvis cradled his. He pulled back until the head of his penis barely stayed within her warmth. Chase clenched his jaw tight while he fought for control. He hadn’t made love to a woman in a very long time, and he didn’t know if he could forestall the inevitable. His thumb found her clit, toggling against the hard bud of her sex, wanting, demanding, she submit to the pleasure he knew crawled up her body.

“Move—now. God, Chase, fuck me, please!”

As her desperate plea met his ears, he released the strangle hold he held on his desire. He drove his cock into her as deep as he could while she whimpered beneath him, and begged him with her eyes. Her fingernails raked along his back, urging him on as her heels dug into his buttocks, forcing his hips harder against her own. Her pussy quivered as her climax rose to the surface, and she exploded in his arms with a scream of his name on her lips.

His own release followed quickly behind hers, and he moaned softly in her ear when the flood of his seed rushed into the condom.

He lifted his weight from her after a moment to stare into her eyes while his fingers caressed her face. They stared at each other for several moments until he shifted again and they both moaned when he pulled his semi-erect cock from her warmth.

He struggled to pull the forgotten jeans from around his ankles back over his hips. Red streaks of embarrassment flushed her skin as she pulled her legs together and sat up on the table. She reached for her bra still resting a few feet away, pulling to her chest. Her eyes

darted around before they located her discarded underwear, shirt, and jeans. She slipped off the table, grabbed her clothes and wiggled into her underwear and jeans while he let his eyes move over her enticing form. Just when she managed to get her pants over her hips, he vaguely heard a truck pull into the driveway and he frowned.

“I wonder who that is.” Chase turned toward the door as heavy footsteps hit the boards on the porch and the door burst open.

\* \* \* \*

Cole pushed the front door of his boyhood home open, calling his brother’s name. He hadn’t been home in a long time, and he was anxious to see how Chase was doing. What he wasn’t prepared for was to see his staunch, upstanding citizen brother hobbling on crutches toward him with no shirt and his pants barely hugging his lean hips.

His astonishment grew when he spotted the gorgeous brown haired woman just to Chase’s right with her shirt held to her bare chest.

*When had Chase hooked up with that pretty little thing?*

“Did I interrupt something?” He smiled when his eyes met hers across the room, but it turned to a frown when her face lost all color and she whispered, “Josh?” right before she slipped to the floor.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Chase watched Abby slide to the floor. He hadn't heard what she said, but he didn't like the deathly pale color to her face or the fact that she was now completely bare from the waist up as his brother stood over the top of her.

"Cole, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Can't I come by and see my big brother?" Cole bent down and scooped Abby up in his arms, walking quickly to the couch and softly laying her down. His eyes caressed the pert breasts revealed to his gaze and a silly grin lifted the corners of his mouth.

"Of course you can, but you should have called." Chase hobbled to Abby's side, pulled a blanket over her, and bent down as well as he could. Ignoring Cole's questioning stare, he tenderly brushed a piece of hair from her face. "I thought you were at Justin's place?"

"I was until a couple of days ago." Cole eyed him with a smirk and one of those care-to-explain looks as his gaze swept over Abby. "You know it's the down season for ridin', so I figured I'd come visit you and keep you company in this snow bound existence, but I guess you already have company. I didn't interrupt anything, did I?" He gaze shot down to the cast encasing Chase's leg and then ricocheted back to his face. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Stallion kicked me. Broke my leg, so I'll be in a cast for several weeks."

Abby moaned softly and opened her eyes. "Chase?"

"Are you all right?" She tried to sit up, but he pushed her back down, almost groaning out loud when his fingers brushed against her unbound breasts. "Rest for a minute. You took a bit of a tumble."

“I don’t understand.”

“You passed out.”

“That’s crazy. I’ve never fainted in my life.”

Cole stepped into her line of sight and approached Chase’s side. Terror flashed across her face, and her hand fluttered to her throat as she gasped.

Chase frowned when the emotions ripple across her eyes.

*Something’s not right.*

“Abby, this is Cole, my younger brother.” He introduced the two of them before she could pass out again. “Cole, this is Abby Carter. She bought the Miller place next door. She’s been helping me around here since I broke my leg.”

Cole crouched next to Chase at Abby’s feet and said, “Nice to meet you, Abby.”

In a strangled voice she replied, “Nice to meet you, too.”

“Is there something wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

\* \* \* \*

Abby blinked twice as she focused on the face of the man in front of her. Shifting her gaze back and forth between the two of them, she could see the resemblance, but she also saw how much Chase’s brother looked like her dead husband. The two men could have been twins, *almost*.

She sighed and rubbed her eyes for a moment until she realized she was almost naked under the blanket. Grabbing it to her chest, she wrapped it around her as heat flushed her cheeks, and she dropped her gaze to her hands.

“I—I’m sorry.”

“Nothin’ to be sorry for, ma’am.”

*Damn!*

He even sounded like Josh, except her husband had a New England accent.

“Abby, are you sure you are all right?”

“I’m fine, Chase.”

“Then what’s got you so worked up?”

Abby shoved herself to the edge of the couch and wrapped the blanket around her before pushing to her feet. “Let me show you something and you tell me.”

Grabbing her purse from the dining room table, she pulled out her wallet and retrieved a picture—her wedding picture. Silently, she handed it to Chase.

“My God, Abby. Is this your husband?”

“Yeah. Now you understand my shock.”

Chase handed the picture to his brother. “Damn, Cole. You could be his twin.”

“I’m sorry, Abby. If I would have known...” his voice trailed off as Cole took the chair opposite the couch in shock.

“How could you? Chase has never seen a picture of Joshua, either.” She sat back down on the couch, and Chase took her hand in his, gently caressing the top with his fingers.

“That’s just a bit eerie,” Cole whispered.

“You could say that again.”

Silence permeated the room while each of them contemplated this latest discovery. A moment later, she pulled her hand from Chase’s grasp, a little uncomfortable with Cole watching. It gave her the willies.

“I...um...need to get dressed,” she whispered, trying to keep her voice low. She only wanted Chase to hear her, but when her gaze shot to the other man across the room, heat flushed her cheeks when she noticed the twinkle in his eyes.

Abby stood and moved to the table, grabbed her clothes and headed down the hall to the bathroom. *This couldn’t have turned out any worse unless Cole had caught us in bed together.* She hung her head for a moment. *Well, there is nothing I can do about it now.*

She quickly donned her clothes and padded back into the living room to retrieve her shoes and socks. Once they were in place, she stood and bushed her palms down the thighs of her jeans.

"I should probably get going, Chase. Now that Cole is here, I'm sure he can keep you company for the rest of the evening."

Chase's smiled looked a little whimsical. "I was just beginning to enjoy our poker game."

She cocked one eyebrow at his words. "Um...I'm sure you were. Maybe we'll finish some other time."

"I'm counting on it."

Grabbing her coat and purse, she turned and looked at Cole, shocked again at just how much he looked like Joshua. She shivered when goose bumps rose on her arms. "It was nice to meet you. I'm sure I'll be seeing you again."

"Nice to meet you, too."

"Chase. I'll uh...call you tomorrow or something."

He climbed to his feet, stuffing the crutches under his arms as he hobbled toward her, prepared to walk her to the door. Once they were out of earshot of his brother, he took her hand in his.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"It's fine Chase, really. I'm just kind of shocked, that's all."

*Not to mention how embarrassed I am. How could I let him fuck me? Shit! I hardly know the man!*

"I can imagine."

She shrugged. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Be careful going home, okay?"

"Of course."

He leaned closer and brushed his lips lightly against hers before he stepped back. She pulled open the door and slipped out, pulling it closed behind her.

\* \* \* \*



Chase turned back toward his brother when he heard the truck start and pull out of the driveway.

“So.” Cole gave him an all-knowing smile.

“What?”

“I didn’t know you were seeing anyone.”

“I’m not—not really.”

“Didn’t look that way to me. She’s beautiful, Chase, I’ll give you that.”

“Smart, funny...” He shook his head.

“Oh man, you’ve got it bad already.” Cole chuckled.

“...and very much still in love with her husband.”

“I saw the wedding ring. What happened?”

Chase wearily slipped down onto the couch cushion. “He died in the attacks on the towers in New York.”

“Damn!”

“Yeah. He was a firefighter.” Chase raked his fingers through his hair.

“I thought I caught a hint of a northern accent.”

“Plus, she’s also dating Chris Bridges.”

Shock rippled across Cole’s face. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Nope. They went out last night, in fact.”

Cole smiled and shook his head. “Now, wait, she went out with Chris last night yet she was sitting here with you playing strip poker?”

Chase’s mouth opened and closed. He couldn’t believe Cole had guessed at least partially what he and Abby were up to.

A warm chuckle spilled from Cole’s mouth. “Come on, Chase, the cards are on the table, I walked in and you had no shirt on and no socks or shoes. She stood there almost naked with not much left to the imagination I must say.”

He grinned as he replied, “Yeah.”

“I sure can’t picture her playing poker with Chris, much less strip poker.”

He joined Cole's chuckle and they laughed together at the thought. "No, somehow I don't think that's come up in their conversations."

"Well then, what's between the two of you?"

"That's just it, I don't have a clue. I'm attracted to her, but."

"But what?"

"Hell, I don't know, Cole. She isn't ready to move on. She's said as much."

"What about you? Are you ready to move on without Krista?"

Chase looked at his brother across the room and a frown pulled down the corners of his mouth when the question ripped through his heart.

*Am I ready?*

"Don't give me that look, Chase. You've been burying yourself in this ranch since she died hoping it will take away the pain. Now you've been handed a beautiful woman who you obviously care about already, if the exchange earlier was any indication."

"I do care about her."

"Well then, what's the problem?"

He shrugged, not wanting to put what was zinging across his heart into words, not yet.

"I'll tell you what. If you aren't going to go for it, I will."

Chase snarled, "Like hell you will."

Cole laughed. "Me thinks you protest too much for someone who isn't interested in the lady."

"I never said I wasn't interested."

"You haven't slept together, have you?"

His eyes narrowed into slits. He couldn't tell his brother what he almost interrupted. If Cole had shown up ten minutes earlier, he would have seen exactly what happened between them, right there on the kitchen table. "No, not yet." The picture next to him on the table rattled slightly.

Cole leaned back, lacing his fingers over his chest. “Well then, I guess that means she’s fair game.”

“Leave her alone, Cole.”

“Why, Chase? Why should I leave her alone?”

He didn’t answer right away, he couldn’t. He closed his eyes, and pictures of Abby flashed across his mind, especially the smidgen of a glimpse of the seductress she could be when she wanted to. When he finally opened them again, he growled, “Because she’s mine.”

Both men were startled when the picture on the end table flew across the room. The glass inside the frame shattering against the wall as it fell to the floor.

“What the hell?”

Chase shook his head and said, “Must have been the wind.”

“There isn’t any wind in here.” Cole’s startled gaze met his.

“That’s just too weird.”

“You could say that, bro.”

\* \* \* \*

Abby crawled between the clean sheets on her bed, sighing when the warmth wrapped itself around her. She hadn’t realized until she got home and got ready for bed that she’d left her bra at Chase’s.

*Great! Cole probably thinks...what? That Chase and I are sleeping together?*

“That’s great, just perfect,” she grumbled.

*Cole. What the hell? Why does he have to look just like Josh?*

It was like looking into her husband’s eyes when she saw him. “He’s not Joshua. Josh is gone,” she whispered to the darkness around her.

Her heavy sigh filled the darkness.

*Mom will never believe this one.*

“She probably will. I’m surprised she didn’t call before I even got home.”

Grumbling, she rolled over, plumped the pillow beneath her head and shut her eyes. She was determined to go to sleep even though thoughts of both men on the neighboring ranch zipped across her mind. Only one sent her heart racing in her chest with nothing more than a smile.

The sun crested the hill when she pulled the truck into the yard the next morning and headed for the barn. Today would be the last day she would be needed over here to feed the horses. Actually, she wasn't really required to today, she figured, since Cole had arrived, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

She walked into the barn, surprised to hear whistling coming from one of the stalls. Following the sound, she found Cole with a wheelbarrow and shovel cleaning out one of the nine-by-nine enclosures.

"Well, good morning."

He spun around and her heart took a dive to her toes. A smile rippled across his face and dimples exactly like Chase's peeked out of his cheeks.

*One more difference between him and Josh, Joshua didn't have dimples, but man! It was unnerving how much they looked alike.*

"Mornin'. I'm surprised to see you."

"Why?"

"It's mighty early for a city girl, isn't it?"

She laughed. "Not for me. I'm always up early. Besides, feeding the horses every day has forced me to be up before the chickens."

"You don't have to do that anymore. I'll take care of them until Chase can get up and around."

Her gaze dropped to the dirt floor and she shrugged. "I'm sure you will."

He walked to her side, propping the shovel against the wall. "What's wrong, Abby?"

"Sorry. It just gave me something to do for awhile, that's all."

“You can certainly still come over if you wish. I’m sure Chase doesn’t mind, and I know I don’t.” Her eyes met his and she watched when his gaze moved to her lips. He placed his hand on the wall next to her head, bringing his body that much closer to hers. She could feel the whisper of his breath on her mouth when he asked, “What’s between you and Chase?”

Before she could answer, the door of the barn creaked open behind her, and she turned to see Chase making his way up the aisle toward them with a frown on his face.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing, why?” Cole stepped back. “I was cleaning out some stalls when Abby came in.”

“You don’t have to feed the horses anymore, Abby. I can do it now,” Chase grumbled.

He was dismissing her. She could see it in his eyes. “Fine,” she whispered, hurt lacing her words before she could stop them. She turned to leave before she remembered she drove his truck. “Cole, can I ask you a favor?”

“Of course.”

“Can you take me home?”

“No problem. Let me just grab my keys in the house.” He shot Chase a look she didn’t want to try to interrupt before he slammed the barn door behind him, leaving the two of them alone.

A heavy sigh slipped from between her lips as she reached into her coat pocket and pulled out Chase’s keys, handing them to him without a word. He didn’t say anything when she turned away and walked to the door, but when she pushed it open, she heard, “Abby.”

Looking over her shoulder, she said, “Let it be, Chase. It doesn’t matter.”

\* \* \* \*

Chase watched her walk out before he tipped his head back on his shoulders and sighed, as the desire to punch something whipped through him. He raised his hand to hit the stall board, but stopped before he did, knowing if he tried it, he'd probably break his hand, too. The rattle of Cole's truck pulling out of the driveway just pissed him off more. A moment later, he headed for the storage room to feed the horses.

When Cole returned an hour later, Chase watched from the porch with a scowl. "What the hell took you so long?"

Cole cocked an eyebrow at his brother as a slow smile spread across his face. "I didn't realize I had a curfew, Dad."

*Anger, protectiveness, jealousy ... is that what this is? I'm jealous of Cole?*

They had always competed to some degree over women during their teenage years and even into adulthood, but usually their tastes were very opposite. He preferred dark haired, dark eyed women, and Cole preferred blonde, blue eyed. So why did they both seem attracted to Abby?

"It's not far to the Miller place. It shouldn't have taken you this long," he grumbled.

Cole's smile grew. "It's not the Miller place anymore, Chase, it's Abby's. She showed me around the house and the changes she's made since she's been there. The place looks a lot better than I remembered. She had some contractors take out the wall between the master bedroom and Gary's room. Her bedroom is huge now."

His head snapped around and his eyes narrowed. "She showed you her bedroom?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Nothin'," Chase growled and then swung around, doing his best to stomp back into the house as he heard his brother's rolling laughter from the yard.

*She hasn't even shown me her bedroom, but she's shown Cole? Damn it!*

He raked his fingers through his hair before he headed for his bathroom to take a cold shower. He was going to need it to take away the steam rising off his skin at the thought of Cole holding Abby. Rage zipped through him when thoughts of his brother kissing her, caressing her back, and fucking her like he did last night, settled in his brain.

Stripping off his clothes, Chase wrapped his leg with a plastic bag to keep the cast dry, slid onto the seat, grabbed the hand held showerhead and turned it on. The needles of ice-cold water hit his chest, making him gasp. Bending his head, he let the water cascade over it and down his chest, sluicing in rivulets between his legs.

Before he had a chance to stop it, his thoughts drifted to his sexy-as-sin neighbor. The soft taste of her lips under his drove him nuts. Her smile melted the iceberg around his heart the moment their eyes met outside the ambulance window. Her sassy teasing when they played strip poker last night had heat pooling between his legs, making his cock rock hard and pulsing with need. He wanted nothing more than to take her to his bed and bury it in her warmth until neither of them could breathe anymore without the other. The tryst on the kitchen table had done nothing except whet his appetite for more.

Chase frowned when the scene from the barn flashed across his mind. The proximity of Abby and Cole when he walked in was too close for comfort, his comfort. Cole looked like he'd just kissed her or was about to, and that just made his bad mood worse.

She said she'd call today, but he wasn't surprised when he'd heard his truck pull into the driveway first thing this morning. Now, because of his macho attitude, he'd pushed her away. Her visits here would probably be non-existent after today. She had no reason to come to his home anymore, except to see Cole.

Pain zip across his heart at the thought.

*Would she want to be with Cole because he resembled her dead husband so much?*

There was some resemblance between the brothers, but their features were very different, too. They both had blue eyes, but Cole's were more of a sky blue, lighter in color than his own. His could only be called blue sometimes, like when he was laughing and having a good time. Most of the time, they were closer to grey in color. Cole's hair was lighter, too, more of a darker blonde where his was dark, almost black.

His brother also wasn't nearly as cynical. Cole hadn't been in love, at least that he knew of, and liked to play the field. He was a woman magnet with his looks, muscular build and rodeo rough guy persona. He, on the other hand, had loved and lost. He didn't think he would ever love again unless one could call his need for Abby love. No, he wasn't in love, he was sure of it. He wanted her, he knew that, but she wouldn't go for a strictly physical relationship.

What would happen now? He'd made love to her—no, more like fucked her good—but where things would go from here, he didn't know. He knew by the look in her eyes that she wanted to fall in love again, wanted to feel the love of a man wrapped around her for the rest of her life.

*Maybe I should step aside and let Cole pursue her if that's what she wants.*

The thought sent his heart to his toes. He would never be able to accept Abby and Cole together.

Chase shut off the water and stepped out, toweling off before he hobbled off to his room. The shower did nothing for his sour mood or his out of control libido. The only thing that would cure his malady was a warm bed and a warmer woman. Unfortunately for him, the warm bed was available, but the warmer woman, or at least the one he wanted, wasn't. After last night, he didn't know for sure anymore.



## **Chapter Twelve**

For the last couple of weeks, Abby had been out with Christopher on several occasions. Chase ignored her, never called, never came by, and she avoided him at all costs. Being near him did things to her heart she wasn't ready to explore, and he obviously didn't want to be around her, either. Things between them screamed uncomfortable even though they had made love.

Christopher pulled into her driveway and shut the car off. He reached across the seat to caress her shoulder. She closed her eyes to the sensation and tried desperately not to shiver at his touch.

"What is it, Abby?"

She turned to look at the blond, dangerously gorgeous man next to her with a small smile, a tear slipping down her cheek.

"I'm sorry, Chris. I wish I could feel for you what you think you feel for me."

"Give it time."

She shook her head. "It wouldn't matter."

"It's Chase, isn't it?"

She dropped her eyes to her hands.

He wrapped his hand in her hair, forcing her to raise her eyes back to him.

"This isn't over. I'll show you." He slanted his mouth across hers as he gripped her head from behind. She whimpered under his lip grinding assault on her mouth for a moment, and then pushed against his chest until he let her go.

"I'm sorry, Abby. I didn't mean to do that. I just want you so bad, it's driving me crazy." He smoothed his hand across her cheek.

"I...uh...I need to go inside."

"All right. I'll call you in a few days."

She didn't answer, just slipped out of the car and almost ran to the door, opening it with shaking hands. She shut it behind her, sliding the dead bolt into place. Holding her breath for a moment, she finally let out it when his car left the driveway. Raising her hand to her bruised lips, she shivered. She never would have thought Chris would do something like that.

*I'm just glad he didn't do something else.*

Shutting the lights off, she headed toward her bedroom and a bath. All of the sudden she felt dirty and used. Turning the light on in her bathroom, she plugged the tub and twisted the handles until the water was the perfect temperature. She dribbled some of her favorite bath bubbles in, and then went back into her room for her pajamas.

Her phone rang and she sighed heavily. *I really don't want to talk to anyone*, she thought until she looked at the caller ID. Her heart skipped a beat in her chest. She picked it up and hit the talk button and said, "Hello?"

"Hi."

"Oh, hi, Cole."

"You sound so thrilled to talk to me." His warm chuckle met her ear, and she wished she could be attracted to him instead of his difficult brother.

"Sorry. I wasn't sure who it was, that's all."

"Sure, Abby. You thought it was Chase."

She sighed, refusing to let Cole bait her into admitting her growing feelings for his brother and the disappointment she felt at his refusal to communicate with her. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to see if you would go out with me."

"You mean like on a date?" Her steps moved across the carpeted floor and she chewed her fingernail.

"Yeah, dinner and a movie or something."

*I don't want to encourage him, but how do I say no without hurting his feelings?*

"Sure. I guess that would be all right."

"How about tomorrow night?"

"That's fine."

"Great. I'll pick you up about six."

"Six it is. I'll talk to you later, then. I'm getting ready for bed."

"Okay. See you tomorrow."

"Bye."

Abby hung up the phone and moved back toward the bathroom. The tub she had in her bathroom was huge, and she loved to soak. She really needed it tonight.

Stripping off her clothes, she pinned her hair up on her head and started to step in when the phone rang again.

*Damn.*

Rolling her eyes, she picked it up and looked at the screen.

Hitting the talk button, she said in an exasperated tone. "What is it now Cole?" There was silence for a couple of seconds before she heard, "It's Chase."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Did you just talk to Cole?"

"Yes, he called a few minutes ago from your home phone."

"What did he want?"

The indignation in his voice made her mad. "What difference does it make?" The flippant nature of her words let him know she didn't care what he thought.

"What did he want, Abby?" His voice was almost a snarl when it reached her ear.

She exhaled on a rush and said, "He asked me out to dinner tomorrow night. Satisfied?"

*A growl? Is that what I just heard?*

"Chase?"

"Yeah."

“Is that all you wanted? I’m getting ready to get into the bath tub.”

The silence stretched on for a moment and then she heard him groan. “God, Abby. I really didn’t need that picture in my head.”

*Maybe he’s not so immune to me. Mmm...let’s see...*

“What picture is that?”

His whispered words met her ear. “You are a witch.”

She chuckled softly. “What’s wrong, Chase? The mental image getting to you? Are you remembering making love to me on the kitchen table? I remember, too, you know.”

She didn’t hear anything and she almost thought he’d hung up except for the rapid breathing in the phone.

“What are you wearing?” The soft, low timbre of his voice made her wish he was there with her, as her pussy started to throb with every beat of her heart.

“Nothing.”

“Shit!” His tortured curse made her smile.

Chase was getting hot just thinking about it. She could hear it in his voice, and the thought sent shivers down her arms. She squirmed slightly as her own desire spiraled out of control.

*I think I’ll make him squirm, just a little.*

“Mmm...the water is so warm.” She slipped beneath the bubbles with a soft sigh. “Smells like lavender. Do you like the smell of lavender, Chase?”

The only thing she heard was a growl through the phone line.

“The bubbles make my skin so slick,” she whispered with a smile on her lips as she tipped her head back on the tub rim.

“Abby.”

“Mmm...too bad you aren’t here to wash my back.”

“God, Abby. Stop.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Chase. Sweet dreams.” Abby hung up the phone with a wicked smile on her lips. She almost half expected him to break down her door, but it never came.

\* \* \* \*

Cole pulled into her driveway at precisely six o'clock. He knew Abby's attraction for Chase ran deep. Her desire for his brother burned bright in her eyes whenever she looked at him.

As he reached her door, he knocked softly, and when she opened it, she took his breath away.

Her smile lit up the cold winter night brighter than any street lamp. "Hi."

"Hi—wow! You look beautiful."

"Thanks. Ready?"

"Yeah."

She pulled the door shut behind her and locked it. He rested his hand at the small of her back, as he walked her to his truck and opened the door.

"Thanks."

Once he was settled and they were on the highway, he asked, "Where would you like to go for dinner?"

"Whatever is fine with me."

"Come on, Abby. What would you like?"

She rolled her eyes and smiled. "Fine. How about the steak house on Chestnut?"

"Perfect."

During the ride, they chatted about his rodeo riding, her life in New York, why she moved to Wyoming, everything but Chase. After he'd parked the truck and they were sitting at a small table, he let his gaze wander over her features. Her brown hair shone with red highlights in the light overhead and her green eyes sparkled. Everything about her fascinated him. He had never been immediately attracted to anyone the way Abby piqued his interest, but he knew Chase was halfway in love with her already just by the way he looked at her. He didn't know if he wanted to try to take her away from his brother or not.

*Hell! I don't even know if there is anything between them for sure.*

"Can I ask you a question?" he asked, dying to know what she wanted.

"Sure."

"What's between you and Chase?"

Abby closed her eyes before she pushed the air from her lungs in a rush. When she opened them again, he wasn't sure if there tears sparkling at the corners. "I don't know what's between me and Chase, Cole. I thought we were friends—you know neighbors helping each other out, that kind of thing—but now he just ignores me and doesn't want me around."

He chuckled and leaned back against his chair.

"What?"

"Oh, he wants you around all right. Trust me."

"What is that suppose to mean?"

"Put it this way, Abby, Chase has been alone since Krista died. He's buried himself in the Rocking W for two years. You are the first woman he's shown an interest in since then."

"He's not interested."

He frowned and stared.

*Was she kidding?*

Reaching across the table, he took her hand in his. "You can't be serious?"

\* \* \* \*

"Of course I'm serious." Abby's thoughts ricocheted back to the night before and the intimate conversation on the phone with Chase. A moment later, her eyes focused on Cole's face again across the table. "Okay, maybe he's interested physically, but not for anything more and I can't just do a physical relationship. If there isn't an emotional attachment of some kind, I can't do it."

Cole's face took on a seriousness she wasn't sure she liked. The more time she spent with the man across from her, the more she realized he wasn't like Joshua at all. Cole had a carefree, player type attitude around women. He was in no way ready to settle down with one woman. His face was so much like Josh's, it hurt her heart to see him sometimes, but his personality rang totally different.

"What did you two talk about on the phone last night?"

Her heart skipped a beat in her chest and she let a wistful smile ripple across her mouth. "Nothing, really."

"That's not the impression I got."

Abby frowned. "Why?"

"Because Chase was like a wounded bear for the rest of the night, walking around growling and pacing." She let a small teasing smile flitter across her lips and he said, "Ah! I knew it!"

"What?"

"What did you do to him, Abby?"

"Me? I didn't do anything."

Cole laughed. "Sure, that's why he went into the bathroom and probably took a cold shower for about thirty minutes."

*What was it? Men always knew when one of their kind was horny and wound tighter than a spring.*

Her shoulder lifted in a shrug and her gaze focused on the tabletop while she traced the pattern with her finger. "He wanted to know what you called about. I told him I was getting ready to get into the bath tub, that's all."

His laughter rolled across her and made her smile when her gaze returned to his. "I like you, Abigail Carter. You'll give Chase a run for his money, that's for sure. He'll be lucky to have you in his life in whatever capacity."

"Whatever is right."

His tone turned serious as his gaze bored into hers. "Do you love him, Abby?"

She frowned and said, “I haven’t known him long enough to be in love with him, Cole.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Staring at the ceiling above her for a moment, she asked herself the same question. When she looked at him again, she said, “I wish I knew what was there, I really do. I care about him—I’m attracted to him.” *Good grief! I’m not having this conversation with his brother.* “Other than that, I can’t give you an answer.”

“I’ll tell you what I think.” His hand caressed her palm as he spoke.

“What’s that?”

“I think you are in love with my brother and he’s in love with you, too, but you’re both too stubborn to try to find out.”

Cocking one eyebrow at him and pulling her hand out of his grasp, she replied, “Do you now.”

“Yes and you know what else?”

“What?”

“I’m going to step aside and let you two find your way together because I think that’s the best thing for you both.”

She chuckled softly. “Aren’t you the benevolent one?”

He flashed his dimples that were so much like his brother’s. “Besides, you need a man in your life on a permanent basis.”

*Didn’t I hear those same words from Chase?*

“Your brother isn’t interested in anything permanent, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Oh, yes, he is. He loved having a wife at home. Me—I don’t need a permanent fixture. I’m a wanderer.”

“Uh-huh...until you run into your perfect match.”

Cole’s laughter warmed her heart. “That will never happen. I’m not in one place long enough.”

“Oh, it will happen. Sooner rather than later, I think.”

“Are you a prophet now?”



“No, just a feeling.” *Oh, if you only knew, Cole Wilder.* When he had taken her hand earlier, images had flashed across her mind. She didn’t like being sensitive except if it was something good, and the man across the table from her didn’t have a clue that his life was about to be turned upside down. She smiled and almost rubbed her hands together gleefully. It would do him good to be put in his place by a woman.

They spent the rest of their evening teasing each other, and by the time he took her home she counted him among her friends.

\* \* \* \*

Several days later, Chris called and asked her out. “Please, Abby. I want to see you.”

“I don’t know, Chris.” She paced, uncomfortable with his presence in her life. Lately, every time they were together, she got a bad feeling, a bad vibration from him.

“It’s just dinner. No big deal. I promise.”

Ignoring the prickling of her skin at his words, she finally agreed.

“Great! I’ll pick you up about six.”

“That’s fine. I’ll see you then.”

During dinner he was the perfect gentleman, never pushing. He didn’t even touch her, or even try to hold her hand and she began to relax.

*I’m just overreacting.*

When he finally took her home, she actually had started to enjoy his company, his laughter, and his stories. They pulled into her driveway and when he stopped the car, he smiled that devilishly handsome smile.

“Would you like to come in for some coffee?”

“Sure. I’d like that.”

Once he was settled on her couch and she handed him the cup, she sat beside him. He continued to tell her stories of the emergency room

and some of the crazy things that went on there. When he brought up his family, she listened intently, hoping she could learn to like him beyond friendship since Chase wasn't interested in her for anything permanent.

After several moments, he placed his empty cup on the table and he reached over, brushing her hair off her shoulder. His other hand took her chin in his grasp, turning her face toward him.

"Christopher, I..."

His lips found hers; effectively cutting off her words as he softly caressed her lips with his. He pressed further when she didn't push him away. She wanted to feel something, anything. Feeling his tongue run along the crease of her mouth, she opened to him, letting her tongue entwine with his for a moment before she pulled away.

"God, I want you, Abby." His hand found her breast, sliding across her nipple.

She stood and moved across the room, rubbing her arms. "I'm sorry. I wish I could feel something, anything, Chris, but I don't."

Before she had a chance to react, he was in front of her, pulling her tight against his chest as his lips took hers. The heat of his mouth seared her as he tried to push her into accepting him by making her body react to his. Abby pushed against him until he lifted his lips, but he continued to hold her arms.

"Stop teasing me. I know you want this as much as I do."

"No, Christopher, I don't."

"I know you do. I can feel your body react to mine even if you don't want to admit it to yourself." His fevered whisper sent chills down her spine when he took her lips again. She pushed against his chest, wedging her arms between them until she could push him away. His rapid breaths against her cheek terrified her. She was alone in her house with him and he could do anything he wanted.

"Please..."

"That's it, baby, beg," he whispered against her neck as he bit the soft flesh.

She whimpered and managed to push him back until he lost his balance slightly. “You need to leave—now!”

He panted with exertion as he stepped back. He must have realized he’d pushed too hard, and he opened his mouth to apologize but she stopped him.

“Get out of my house, and if you come near me again, you’ll be sorry.”

His face took on an angry hue and he spat, “I know you want this, too, but I’ll give you time, Abby. You’ll call me begging for me to take you.”

“Not in this lifetime. Get out!”

His satisfied smile sent shivers down her arms. When he turned and left, he slammed the door behind him. She heard him peel out of her driveway as she sank down on the couch. Tears brimmed on her lashes, rolling down her cheeks in hot streaks, and she let the sobs rack her body.

Her mind screamed, *Joshua—no, not Josh. God, Chase, I need you.*

She didn’t know how, but in what seemed like the space of a heartbeat, he was on her porch calling her name. Without waiting for her to answer, he pushed open the door and moved to her side, pulling her into his arms.

“It’s okay. I’m right here.”

She sobbed against his chest like she’d done so many times before, wetting his t-shirt under her cheek while he rubbed her back. When her tears finally subsided, she lifted her face to his.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He wiped the remaining tears from her cheeks with his thumb, murmuring, “Nothin’ to be sorry for.”

She cleared her throat and pushed against him to put a little more space between them. Letting him hold her like that sent her heart into overdrive and she wasn’t sure what she wanted at the moment. “What are you doing here?”

"I heard you."

She frowned and her eyes met his. "You heard me?"

Chase ran his fingers down her cheek. "Yeah, don't ask me. I don't understand it, either. I was sitting in front of the television watching something and it was like you stood behind me, I heard it so clearly."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard you say you needed me."

The silence was deafening as their eyes locked until she pushed away from him and stood to pace the floor.

*This can't be happening. I can't have that kind of connection with him. I've never had that with anyone, not even Joshua.*

"Holy fuck!"

She spun back around, startled by the angry tone and harsh words coming from his mouth. She'd never heard anything more than a few curse words from him, but this was different. The livid look on his face was enough to shrink the strongest man to a mere puddle and it sent her heart to her toes.

"What the hell happened to your neck?"

Her hand went to the spot where Christopher bit her. He stopped in front of her, took her chin in his hand as he turned her face, and pulled her hand down.

"Who did this to you?"

Abby shook her head. She couldn't tell him, not if she didn't want something to happen. The controlled rage on his face was enough to let her know he would probably kill Christopher if he knew. His body shook with the rage simmering just under his skin.

"God, Abby." He pulled her to his chest, rubbing her back and she wrapped hers around him. "Baby, tell me who did this to you. No one has the right to hurt you like that."

All the anger, shame, and lack of control spilled out in tears that wracked her body as he whispered sweet nothings in her ear. She could feel the anger in him by the tight knot of muscles beneath her

cheek, the hard ridges of his back, and she held on for dear life. The tenderness in his embrace, the way he moved his hands over her back softly, soothed away the hurt and confusion, even if he didn't realize it.

"Cole?"

Abby shook her head again.

"Bridges." It wasn't a question. It was a statement. Hesitating just long enough with her answer, she knew he figured it out when he murmured, "I'll kill him."

She pulled back in his arms so she could look into his eyes. The slate grey color mesmerized her for a moment. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts long enough to stop him from doing anything stupid. "Chase, no. It's okay. Let me handle this."

His eyes softened when he looked at her. "He had no right to do this."

Running his fingers along the mark softly, he bent his head and kissed the spot, running his tongue along it, soothing the hurt, taking away the pain. Moaning under his tender ministrations, she gave into the sensations he caused. "Mmm."

He pulled away from her, searched her eyes for what, she wasn't sure, until a frown rippled across his face. He sighed and murmured, "I'm not the man you need."

Shaking his head, he turned and walked away, softly closing the door behind him, leaving her standing in the middle of the living room with her mouth hanging open.

"Damn you!" She screamed in frustration before she grabbed a glass from the table and threw it against the door. It shattered when it hit, and shards flew in several directions. Wrapping her arms around her waist, a tortured sob rippled from her mouth as she sank down on the couch.

The phone rang and she groaned. She rubbed her sleeves across her face and picked up the phone.

"Abigail. What's wrong?"

“Hi, Mom.”

“I haven’t talked to you for a while, but I know you are upset.”

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “I’m just confused. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Chase was there, but he’s confused, too. The other man didn’t hurt you, did he?”

She sighed and stared at the ceiling.

*I should have known.*

“No. He didn’t really hurt me, but God, Mom. How come things can’t be easier?”

Her mother laughed. “If life was easy, Abigail, it wouldn’t be near as much fun. Why don’t you tell me about Cole?”

A small chuckle escaped her lips. “I can’t keep anything from you, can I?”

“You should know better, Abigail.”

“I know. Cole is Chase’s brother. He looks so much like Josh, Mom, it’s eerie.”

“But he’s not Joshua.”

“I know, and the more I get to know him, the more I realize he may look like Josh to some extent, but they are completely different people.”

She heard her mother sigh. “I’m glad you understand.”

“Why?”

“You are meant to be with Chase, sweetheart. That’s why God led you to Wyoming.”

“I wish I could be so sure.”

“Trust me.”

“Well, he doesn’t seem to believe like you do. I don’t know what’s between us, and I’m getting so frustrated, it’s driving me crazy.”

“Give it time. He needs to come to terms with what fate has planned for you two. He’s a stubborn, independent man.”

Abby laughed for the first time in a while. “You can believe that. So what’s been happening at home?”

Their conversation turned to other topics, relieving her of the intensity of their conversation. She didn’t want to discuss Chase with her mother, nor did she wish to talk about the feelings she wasn’t sure were her own these days.

\* \* \* \*

Saturday night at a cowboy bar in Laramie, Wyoming was everything she expected it to be, loud and crowded. Abby didn’t frequent bars necessarily, but Cole volunteered to take her out to get her mind off his brother. She knew she could trust him. He wanted Chase and her to find their way together, but she didn’t think that would ever happen. Chase didn’t think he was the man for her.

“Come on,” he laughed, grabbing her hand and pulling her out on the dance floor with him. He slipped his hand around her waist while she placed hers on his shoulder. “Lighten up, Abby. We are here to have fun, remember?”

“Sorry, Cole. I’ll try.”

“Don’t try—do or do not.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes. *Star Wars* fan she was, and his feigned attempt to imitate Yoda was just stupid.

Trying to lighten the conversation, she asked, “So how many of the women in this bar do you know?”

Cole’s eyes wandered around the room for a couple of minutes before he shrugged. “Most.”

“Why am I not surprised? That would probably be why I’m getting all kinds of dirty looks from every woman in here.”

“They are just jealous because you are the most beautiful woman in this place.”

She giggled. “I might have to keep you around, Cole Wilder. You are great for my ego.”

His face sobered a little before he grinned. “You know, if I didn’t know you were already in love with Chase, I’d be the first one sniffing at your door.”

“Then every woman in here would hate me.” She tossed her hair off her shoulder flippantly.

A playboy grin rippled across his mouth, and his dimples peeked out before he looked over her shoulder and frowned.

“What?” Abby tried to turn to see what he was looking at, but he kept her turned in his direction while they swayed to the music.

“Nothing.” He released her hand, placing it up around his neck as his hands slid down to her hips.

“Cole?”

“Trust me, okay? Just go with it and at least act like you are enjoying what I’m doing.”

“Okay.” He was making her nervous and she knew it showed on her face. He bent his head, and his lips brushed her neck as his hands found her ass cheeks and he slipped his hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

She hissed in his ear, “What are you doing?”

He lifted his head to stare into her eyes. “Chase just walked in. Do you want him to finally admit he wants you?”

A tortured whisper slipped from her lips. “Yes.”

“Then trust me. I know my brother. This will drive him nuts.” She felt uncomfortable with his hands on her ass. It just didn’t feel right, and she almost grabbed his hands to bring them back to her waist. “We are going to turn around so you can see him and he knows it’s you I’m holding. Mask your face, darlin’. If he sees the look you have right now, he’ll never believe this.”

She took a deep breath before she nodded and he turned them so she could see Chase sitting at the bar. The shirt was stretched across the muscles of his back and each one rippled when he moved, almost making her groan out loud.



Their eyes met in the mirrored glass over the bar. Pain reflected brightly in his gaze a moment before he masked it and rage took its place. He swung around on the stool, and drained the beer in his hand. Cole let his lips caress her neck, and she closed her eyes, pretending it was the man across the room.

\* \* \* \*

“Looks like your pretty neighbor made her choice between you two, eh?”

Chase shot a look at the man next to him with a scowl. “Mind your own business, Rogers.”

The other man laughed. “What’s the matter, Chase? Jealous?”

“Son of a bitch,” he growled as he watched Cole practically making love to Abby on the dance floor. His hands were in her pockets, caressing her ass, holding her tight against him, his lips moving tenderly over the bite mark on her neck that Bridges had left. God, she was killing him.

He spun back around toward the bar as another beer slid down and stopped in front of him.

“Thought you might need it,” Jackie said with a nod of her head. He had known her since they were in high school together. She was a good friend over the years, but the look she shot him now said she knew what his trouble was, and it started with a capital A.

He grabbed the mug and tipped it back, swallowing almost half in one gulp. It didn’t make him feel any better, and the scene playing out on the dance floor reflected bright and clear in the mirror above the bar.

Swallowing the second half, he whirled around and pushed away from the bar as he headed toward them. He needed to set Abby and Cole straight, once and for all.

Her eyes opened and widened like saucers as he moved toward her. She pushed against Cole’s shoulders, and he loosened his grasp

as he stepped back. By the time her gaze returned to his face he'd stopped behind them, and her sensuous voice met his ear as she said, "Fancy seeing you here."

"I'm cuttin' in," he growled.

Frown lines appeared between her eyebrows, and her mouth turned down at the corners, begging for his kiss. "Excuse me?"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward him as he repeated, "I'm cuttin' in."

Wrapping his hand around her waist, he tugged until her breasts brushed against him. He almost groaned out loud as his hand wandered to the small of her back.

"This caveman behavior is not becoming on you, Chase."

"What are you doing here with Cole?"

Abby cocked an eyebrow. "None of your business."

He pulled her closer—close enough his lips were a mere hairsbreadth from hers. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, and his thigh slid between hers. "Have you let him make love to you?"

"N-no," Abby stammered and color rose on her cheeks.

"Who do you want, Abby?" His lips nibbled the corners of her mouth and her eyes closed. "Who do you really want to make love to you?"

Her rapid breaths fluttered across his cheek. His cock stiffened in his jeans and he rubbed against her.

*Damn it! I want her so badly it hurts.*

His mouth moved from her lips to her ear and down her neck. She moaned under his assault on her senses, and he smiled against her skin. "Tell me," he whispered when she shivered.

"*You*, damn it. I want you."

Her ragged answer satisfied him and he stepped back, letting her go, watching as she almost stumbled.

He turned and left the bar without a backward glance.

When he walked out by his truck, he noticed Christopher's car sitting nearby with the other man inside. Remembering the mark left on Abby's neck, anger built in his chest. He stopped next to the car and tapped on the window.

Christopher opened it as Chase stood nearby. "Hey, Chase."

"Can I talk to you out here, please?"

"Uh. Sure." Chris opened the door and stepped out, shutting it behind him. "How's the leg? Got the cast off, I see."

"Fine." He kept his hands at his sides, clenched into fists, attempting to control his anger.

"Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yeah, stay away from Abby."

"Pardon?" Christopher's face took on a look of surprise as Chase faced him.

"You heard me, I'm sure, but I'll repeat it anyway. Stay away from Abby, and if you ever, and I mean *ever*, hurt her again, you won't be walking the next day because I'll break both your legs."

A sinister smile rippled across the other man's mouth. "Trust me. She likes it rough. Try tying her up. She really squirmed with that. Got her nice and hot, let me tell you."

Chase saw red. Thoughts of this animal putting his hands on the woman he wanted made bile rise in his throat and anger build in his chest like nothing he'd ever felt before. He pulled back his fist and hit Christopher square in the jaw, knocking him to the ground. Chase stood over him while Christopher lay sprawled on his butt, massaging the bruise already rising on his face.

"Last warning, Bridges, don't go near her again."

He stomped back to his truck, slid inside and slammed the door, as he gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles, and growled in frustration.

*Hell! First I have to watch Cole while he practically made love to her on the dance floor, then to run into the man who attempted to*

*mark her as his own. I should have just killed them both and been done with it.*

Stomping on the gas, he sprayed enough gravel behind the truck to pepper the paint on the nearby vehicles when he tore out of the parking lot.

## Chapter Thirteen

The warm air hit her face when Abby opened the door. Spring had arrived in Laramie, or early spring, anyway. It was still cold at night, but the days had begun to warm up.

She had an errand to run today. Picking up a stallion from one of the neighboring ranches was her first priority, and then she could think of other things, like Chase. Unfortunately, she couldn't keep her thoughts off of him for very long, and he was avoiding her, *again*. After the scene at the bar, he obviously didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore. If he had asked her to go home with him, she would gladly have at that point. His lips, his touch, everything about him had her body on high alert, and she'd given into those feelings that night, wanting him with everything inside of her, but he walked away. That hurt. She thought he wanted her as much as she wanted him, but when he left her standing on the dance floor at the bar, she got angry.

Two weeks after their encounter, she decided to approach him about a horse she wanted to look at. She wanted his advice on a stallion she was contemplating purchasing to start her breeding program and drove over to his place to ask him to go with her. He brushed her off just like he always did these days.

Her thoughts drifted back to their conversation in his barn a few months ago. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"I suppose." He didn't even turn around, just continued to brush the mare under his hand. The virile, sexy as hell cowboy she remembered from their first encounter stood proudly in front of her, and this persona played havoc with her libido.

*Good lord, I want him,* she thought as she shifted her stance, trying to relieve the insistent pressure between her thighs.

“I want to look at a stallion at a place over in Laramie County. Will you go with me?”

“I can’t, Abby. I’ve got too much to do around here. Why don’t you take Cole?”

Her frustrated exhale did nothing to help her mood or his dismissal.

*I don’t want to take Cole, you jackass! I want you.*

“You’re the expert. I wanted your opinion.”

“He knows a good stallion, too.” He continued to brush the horse, not looking at her at all.

“Never mind, Chase.” She turned to leave, her shoulders sagging in defeat.

“Abby.” Their eyes locked in silent battle, but she didn’t want to try to interpret the look in his gaze. She shook her head as she walked back to her truck and drove home.

She was so upset she threw herself across her bed and cried.

*Why is he being so pig-headed?*

Her heart clenched in her chest as her focus returned to the bright, sunlit yard. Their paths hadn’t crossed since, and she missed him terribly. The shared kisses and the memory of him making love to her on the table just made her want him more, but she finally came to terms with the fact that he obviously didn’t want her like she wanted him.

She saw Cole on several occasions, but Chase avoided any contact with her. His brother had become a welcome port in the stormy existence of her life, trying his best to help her forget Josh and move on. Cole’s attempts at matchmaking between her and Chase started to grate on her nerves, but his brother managed to sidestep any and all efforts.

*Damn it! I just need to forget him.*

Agitated with herself for thinking about the stubborn man, she checked the trailer hitched to her truck before climbing into the cab, starting it and pulling out onto the highway. Some of the snow melted off in the daytime warmer temperatures, but snow was still piled fairly high on the sides of the road. It would take her about an hour to get to the other ranch. She decided to relax by flipping on the radio and trying to get her mind off the ruggedly gorgeous cowboy who made her heart sing but didn't want anything to do with her.

As she pulled into the ranch where she had an appointment to pick up the horse she had bought, she found a familiar truck parked nearby.

*What the hell is he doing here?*

She sighed deeply, rubbing her forehead to relieve the tension building.

*I really don't need this right now.*

\* \* \* \*

Chase stood next to Bud and watched her pull in.

*I guess I just enjoy torturing myself. Why else would I be here, knowing she was coming this morning to pick up the horse?*

He spoke to his good friend a week or so ago, and Bud mentioned a lady from his neck of the woods picking up a stallion today. He wasn't even positive it was Abby, but he had a good hunch when Cole mentioned her running an errand into Laramie County.

"There she is."

His eyes followed as she pulled in, parked her rig and stepped out. The familiar roar of desire hit him like a ton of bricks when she sauntered toward them with a sassy sway of her hips.

"Chase? What are you doing here?" she asked as she shaded her eyes from the sun.

"I came by to visit Bud."

“You just happened to be in the neighborhood?” Her eyebrow rose in question as a smirk rippled across her pouty lips.

*Shit, she’s beautiful and I’m so busted!*

“Yeah—something like that.” He could tell by the doubt in her eyes that she knew exactly what he was up to. Wanting to see her again was driving him insane, but he didn’t want to just go by her house. That would have been too obvious.

*That’s pretty dumb. She’s obviously figured out that I didn’t drive into the next county over for nothing.*

“Okay.” Her gaze shifted to the man next to him. “Mr. Olsen, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Howdy, Mrs. Carter.”

He frowned. He didn’t like thinking about her being married to someone else, anyone else. It already drove him crazy to be reminded so often about her late husband.

The wedding ring on her finger twinkled in the light, reflecting the sun brilliantly.

“Abby, please.”

“All right, Ms. Abby.”

She shook her head and laughed.

*God, I miss that laugh.*

He hadn’t seen her in several weeks, and seeing her now just made him remember how much he missed her. Their last encounter left nothing but desire running through him, burning him from the inside out.

“Is he ready?”

“Yep. I’m sure you’ll be right pleased.”

“I’m sure I will.”

The two of them moved toward the barn while he followed in their wake. Watching her backside sway beneath her jeans made things that much worse, but he couldn’t seem to keep his eyes of her shapely figure.



*God I want to fuck her ass so badly, my balls feel like they are going to bust!*

The other two approached the stall where a beautiful palomino stallion snorted and pawed at the dirt under his feet. He'd never seen the animal before, but when he approached his appreciation for her taste grew. The stallion was magnificent! His golden colored coat glistened in the stable light from overhead when he shook his head, his pale blonde mane whipping in the air.

"You bought him?"

Her eyes flashed with a little triumphant sparkle and she replied, "Yep. Gorgeous isn't he?"

He was duly impressed by her choice. The stallion would produce some top of the line colts if bred with the right mare.

"You made a good choice, Abby."

Her chin notched up as she pulled her shoulders back with pride. "Thanks."

The palm of her hand slid over the animal's nose, and Chase watched in amazement when the stallion calmed under her hand. She murmured softly, words he couldn't hear, but the gentleness in her voice sent his heart slamming against his ribs, and he could almost imagined her whispers in his own ear.

He needed to get her out of his system or fuck her again fast or he would lose his mind.

"Chase? You want to help me load him for Ms. Abby?" Bud's voice brought him back to the present, away from the alluring pictures in his mind.

"Sure."

Bud slipped the halter over the animal's head, slid the bolt on the gate, and Abby stepped back. The stallion pranced, his hooves dancing in the dirt, bringing up a small cloud of dust in the morning light. Abby walked out of the barn in front of the two men and the horse to unlatch the gate on the trailer. The horse balked slightly

before stepping into the trailer without difficulty and she latched the gate behind him.

“You might want someone around when you unload him, Ms. Abby. He can be a feisty one.”

Her eyes ricocheted between the two men as frown lines settled between her eyebrows. “Thanks for the suggestion. I’m sure I can find someone to help me unload him.”

Chase volunteered quickly. “I’ll do it. I’m headed back that way anyway.”

She cocked her head as a small smile flittered across her lips, and his dick twitched in his jeans.

*What I wouldn’t give to feel those lips wrapped around me.*

“That would be nice. Thanks, Chase.”

“I’ll just follow you home if that’s all right with you.”

Shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly, she replied, “Okay.” She turned to address the older man. “Thanks so much, Bud. He’s going to make some pretty babies, I’m sure. I’ll make sure I send you pictures.”

“You do that, missy.” The other man nodded to him. “Take care, Chase, and I’ll see you later.”

“Sure, Bud. Thanks for the coffee and the visit.”

He watched Abby walk around the front of her truck before he headed for his own, and he groaned in frustration. Every minute around her reminded him more and more of how much he wanted her.

\* \* \* \*

Abby pulled into the yard, bouncing along until she got close to the barn. Seeing Chase at Bud’s sent her heart skipping through her chest at the mere sight of him. She could feel his hot gaze running over her several times while they were at the other man’s ranch.

*Get over it! He’s obviously not interested. He’s been literally ignoring me for months now.*

Shaking her head, she popped open the door and slid out, her boots crunching on the gravel under her feet. The stallion eyed her nervously through the slit in the side of the trailer. She stopped to whisper to him, hoping he would calm before she tried to unload him. She scratched him on the nose before she moved toward the back.

Chase pulled in behind her, and when he stepped out of his truck, she sucked in a ragged breath.

*Damn!*

Her eyes wandered over his rugged form in appreciation. His long-sleeved, button-down shirt stretched across his broad chest, making her want to follow the line of buttons with her mouth. She wanted to undo each one, slowly—very slowly. Shifting her stance, she tried to relieve some of the pressure building between her legs when he approached.

*My vibrator will get a work out tonight if I don't stop this insanity soon.*

Chase sent her blood zinging through her veins like the rapids of a river, rolling and rippling as it rushed through her body before it settled between her thighs. Not even Josh sent her body into overdrive that quickly. With him, it was a slow burn brought to the climax when he touched her.

“Abby?” His voice brought her back to his presence in front of her—with his clothes on, not off.

She cleared her throat and turned to unhitch the door on the trailer.

*Thank goodness I'm wearing sunglasses; otherwise he would have been able to see everything in my face.*

“If you get the door, I'll go around front and release the rope.”

“Okay.”

She moved toward the front and untied the stallion, holding the rope firmly in her hand while the horse stepped back.

“Give him a little more head, Abby.”

*Shit!*

She almost groaned at the words that fell from his mouth. Pictures flashed across her mind—her kneeling in front of him, running her tongue up his proud cock, his hands fisted in her hair as she caressed his... Her wandering thoughts were abruptly brought back to the present when the animal began to baulk at the tight rein she held, shifting nervously when he tried to back out of the trailer. His hind legs slipped off the edge of the ramp, pulling against her arms, almost ripping the rope out of her hands.

“Let up, Abby, or he’s going to rip your arms out of their sockets,” Chase growled from the back. She didn’t let up fast enough for him, evidently. It wasn’t half a second before he raced around to her side and pulled the rope out of her hand with a scowl.

Once the stallion was out, he stood quivering as his eyes rolled. Chase stood next to him, stroking his neck and whispering to him and the horse finally calmed. Without a word, he led the horse into the barn and she followed close behind. The stiffness of his shoulders should have given her a clue at his anger, but the desire racing through her had her oblivious.

Chase led the animal inside the stall she’d left open, unhooked the rope from his halter before he walked out and latched the gate. He spun around, ripping his sunglasses off his face as he shouted, “What the hell were you doing?”

Stunned by his angry, snarled words; her eyes widened as he stomped toward her, until his chest almost touched hers. She sucked in a ragged breath and whispered, “Wha...”

He took another step toward her as she stepped back, and he pinned her against the side of the stall with his body. His gaze snapped angrily, turning the soft blue of his eyes to a dark grey, the color of the sky right before a thunderstorm.

With a tortured growl, his head came down and his lips captured hers, slanting across her mouth. It wasn’t the soft brush of a kiss like before, or even the coaxing kiss like when he had made love to her. This was lip-grinding assault that made panties wet with need, setting

her on fire. Her pussy filled and throbbed, sending liquid heat between her thighs, as she moaned in his mouth. Her hands reached for his chest, slipping up around his neck as she pushed against him, her pebble hard nipples rubbing against his chest.

*It's been so long. I want this so bad.*

A groan rumbled inside him, and he softened the kiss, his tongue sliding along her lips asking for permission and receiving it when she opened for him. She whimpered when his hand found her breast, sliding along her nipple, the roughness of her shirt and bra making it ache beneath his palm. The other hand wrapped around her back, grabbing her ass and pulling her tight against his groin, his obvious desire pressed intimately against her belly. He trailed kisses across her cheek until he found the shell of her ear, and nibbled the lobe. His tongue twirled her earring before he worked his way down her neck. He pushed aside her shirt with his nose as his hand made quick work of the buttons down the front.

“God, Abby. I need you.” His soft words flittered to her ear, and she felt his tongue find the spot between her collarbone and shoulder. Lost in the sensations ricocheting through her, all she could do was moan in return.

His hand found the button at her waist, flicking it open with deft fingers before he pulled the zipper down. Tugging at the waistband, he slid both hands around to her ass, and cupped the cheeks as she brought her legs up around his waist. He chuckled softly in her ear when his hands slid across her bare butt.

He fit her snugly against his groin. When his rock hard cock pushed against her clit, more hot liquid spilled from inside her. She knew her pussy had to be sopping wet already.

“God, Chase, please.” Her agonized murmur slipped from her lips when one of his hands reached between them to slide through the curls. She shuttered as he slid one finger inside and began to stroke.

He groaned softly in her ear, “You’re so wet, so hot.”

Whimpering as he moved his fingers, she rocked her hips against his hand, grasping at his shoulders, trying desperately to get closer. Leaning into him, she pushed her breasts against his chest and her mouth found his neck. She nipped softly at the skin she found as a groan rumbled in his chest.

Chase pushed her jeans and thong down around her thighs when she dropped her legs. The pants slipped down around her feet, and she worked one foot out of the pant leg before she wrapped her legs back around his hips. The roughness of the denim material he still wore abraded her sensitive thighs and rasped against her clit. He reached between them, and worked the belt buckle loose before he quickly shucked his own jeans.

He grabbed her hips and lifted her against the wall behind her, fitting her perfectly against his hips. He reached for her bra and pushed it up. His fingers rasped across her nipple, and she moaned into his mouth.

*Good lord the man knows how to make my body sing.*

All coherent thought disappeared when his lips found her sensitive peak. He nipped it with his teeth as she grasped the back of his head and thread her fingers through his hair. His fingers slid back inside her aching pussy, stretching her while his thumb worked her clit and she whimpered her need. She bucked beneath him when he curled his fingers, reaching the spot that almost sent her through the ceiling. Her thighs tightened, and she lifted her hips that much higher when she felt his cock between them, pushing against her stomach.

“Now, Chase—fuck me!”

Pulling his fingers out, he rocked his hips, slipping inside her with a tortured groan. Her vaginal walls stretched, grasping him tightly as she moaned, “Oh God, yes!”

“You feel so good,” he murmured in her ear, and his rasping breath caressed the side of her face.

“Don’t stop. Please, don’t stop.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to, baby.” His chuckle turned into a moan when he started to move.

The wall behind her was rough against her back when he shifted. His hips were hard between hers, and her legs were locked behind him. He reached behind her and grabbed her ass, lifting and spreading her, allowing him to slide that much deeper inside as the walls of her vagina started to contract around him.

Heat curled up from her toes when his hips ground against hers, his hair roughed skin rasping along her own, sending her desire spiraling out of control, and she cried out. Her climax burst behind her eyelids just before she heard him groan in her ear and surge against her hips. His soft, “Oh God” was ragged in her ear as she felt his seed coat the inside of her.

As his movements slowed, her lips caressed his neck, her tongue running over the soft skin. Smoothing his hands over her hips, he slid from inside her, and she slipped her legs from around his back. She didn’t want to let go, didn’t want the closeness they shared to end, but she knew it would as soon as she felt him stiffen in her embrace.

“Abby, I...”

She pushed against his chest until he stepped back. “Don’t say anything, Chase. I don’t want to hear it.”

“But.”

She looked into the stormy grey of his eyes. “Please don’t say you’re sorry. I’m not.”

Grabbing her pants from around her leg, she wouldn’t meet his gaze as she tried desperately to keep from crying while she straightened her clothes.

She heard him sigh before he turned away and slipped his own jeans back up. Tears burned behind her eyes as the jingle of his belt buckle slipping back into place echoed loudly in the quiet, dusty space around them.

Once his clothes were where they belonged, he looked at her but didn't say anything. A second later, he turned his back and walked out of the barn.



## Chapter Fourteen

*Ah hell! What was I thinking?*

Chase slammed his hand against the hood of his truck before he hung his head and sighed. Lifting it again, he grabbed the door and slid onto the driver's seat. He jabbed the key into the ignition before he started it and pulled out of her driveway, spraying gravel as the tires spun. The last thing he saw in his rearview mirror was her standing in the doorway of the barn.

When he reached his house, the red haze of anger still clouded his vision at his lack of control where she was concerned. Wrapped up in his anger, he didn't see Cole standing on the porch.

"Where have you been?"

"Abby's," he growled.

"What happened?" Cole followed him into the house.

"None of your business."

He went into the kitchen and grabbed a beer out of the refrigerator. Twisting off the cap, he lifted it to his lips, taking a long draw off the long neck in his hand.

Cole's eyes met his as he cocked an eyebrow in question.

"What?"

"You're drinking at ten o'clock in the morning, that's what."

"I'm a grown man, Cole. If I want to drink at ten, then I will." He walked out of the kitchen and headed for the back door. *I need to work off some of this anger before it swallows me whole*, he thought while he walked toward the barn. Once he reached it, he set the empty beer bottle on the side of the stall and hung his head.

*How had things gotten so out of control with Abby so fast? One minute I'm pissed off because she was daydreaming and almost got hurt with that stallion, and the next we're...*

“Shit! Nice one, Chase. Fuck the woman against the stall in her barn. Way to go.” His words echoed in the empty space and he shook his head in disgust. It was bad enough their first time together was on the kitchen table, but now the only other time they had made love happened to be in the barn. “Great! She probably won’t come anywhere near me now,” he grumbled before he walked into the tack room and pulled out the things he needed to work with one of the mares.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, and when the sun began to set in the evening sky, he headed back toward the house. He heard Cole leave early in the day, so he expected the house to be quiet when he walked in, but not the deathly quiet that surrounded him. A note on the refrigerator told him Cole wouldn’t be home until later, much later.

He walked down the hall to his bedroom. *I need a shower—maybe a cold one, no—definitely a cold one.* He pulled off his shirt and tossed it into the dirty clothes basket near the wall in the laundry room.

Thoughts of Abby and their tryst against the stall plagued his mind all day, but now when he headed for the cold water, he could see everything in his mind’s eye. Her breasts when he grazed them with his tongue, making her nipples hard and wanting, her soft skin, and her legs wrapped around his back as he drove into her... He rubbed his hand across his eyes, and sighed in frustration.

*Damn it!*

Pressing his hand against the bulge in his jeans, he swore again. He reached his bedroom just as the phone rang.

A frown rippled across his face until he saw the caller ID. “Hello?”

“Chase? It’s Abby. Can you come over here, please? I need your help with something.”

“I was just about to jump in the shower. I’ve been in the barn all day and...”

“It will only take a few minutes. Please?” Her voice sounded raspy, like she was out of breath.

“Can’t it wait ten minutes so I can shower?”

“No, I need you now.”

His groin tightened further when her words met his ear. He knew she didn’t mean what he thought, but the sound sent heat spiraling through his veins like molten lava and he almost groaned into the phone.

He cleared his throat before he answered, afraid it would come out in a squeak. “Okay. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Thanks.”

He hung up the phone, slipped a t-shirt over his head and grabbed his keys.

\* \* \* \*

Abby hung up the phone and rubbed her arms.

*What am I thinking, inviting him over here?* Invite hell. Demanded was more like it.

She sighed, but her heart thumped in her chest in anticipation. Their love making in the barn earlier and the session in his kitchen did nothing but whet her appetite for more, and more was what she wanted. She was tired of waiting for him to make up his mind.

Licking her lips, she waited by the window until she saw the lights of his truck pull into her yard. She wasn’t a seductress, never had been, but standing in her living room, waiting for her oh-so-sexy neighbor, she felt her skin tingle. Heat pooled between her thighs, and her pussy throbbed with a heartbeat of its own when she thought about how she was going to get him to make love to her again. Fire

licked at her insides already just thinking about him smelling like sweat and horses, wanting to lick every inch of his skin as she revealed it to her seeking lips.

He knocked on her door, and she took a shaky breath to steady her nerves before she pulled it open.

“Abby, what’s the problem?” He moved inside and shut the door behind him before he turned back to meet her eyes.

“This.” She stepped closer and wrapped her hand behind his head as her lips met his. She pushed her breasts against his chest, her nipples hard and aching. He needed to caress them with his tongue before she went insane from need. She purposely left her bra off, wanting to feel the heat of his skin against her.

His arms hung at his sides, stiff as a board.

*He’s not responding.*

Her heart clenched in her chest and she felt the tears burn behind her eyelids. With a sob, her mouth left his, but when she looked into his eyes, the heat of his gaze burned clear to her soul.

With the growl of a wounded animal, he wrapped his arms around her, his hands finding her ass while he lifted her in his arms, and she slid her legs around his waist. His hard cock pressed intimately against the juncture of her thighs even through both their clothing, and she almost came just anticipating his cock deep within her pussy.

“Where?” His ragged whispered in her ear told her he wanted this too.

“Down the hall to the right,” she murmured against his neck. She knew what he asked without him actually having to say the words. With her legs still locked around him, he walked quickly toward her bedroom.

Once inside, he kicked the door shut with his foot before he softly laid her down on the down comforter spread across her bed. She propped herself on her elbows as he reached for the hem of his t-shirt, pulling it over his head. Her mouth watered when his tan skin, dark chest hair, and six-pack abs were revealed to her gaze.

*God he's gorgeous!*

His hands reached for the belt buckle at his waist, but she stopped him with a soft, "Let me."

She crawled onto her knees, and her hands reached for his chest. Her lips touched him, and she heard a low growl rumble beneath her mouth. Sliding her tongue across his skin, she could taste the salt of his sweat mixed with tantalizing smell of his unique male scent. Her teeth grazed the flat disk of his nipple, and she smiled when she felt him shudder. His hands weaved through her hair, holding her head against him. After a moment, she could feel the pressure of his hands guiding her to what he wanted, and saliva filled her mouth at the thought of tasting him. As she continued to kiss the skin beneath her lips, her hands worked at the belt buckle at his waist until it was free and she could reach the button. Her hands slid inside the waistband of his jeans, working them off his hips while her lips trailed down his flat belly, following the line of hair until it disappeared at his groin. His skin quivered under her touch. A soft moan reached her ears when her tongue flicked out tasting the pre-cum on the tip of the proud shaft bobbing against his stomach, begging for her mouth.

"Abby," he whispered as her tongue slid from base to tip before taking him into her mouth. He moaned softly and his hips rocked toward her, setting the rhythm that gave him the most pleasure.

After only a few minutes, he let the jeans slide down his legs and he grabbed her shoulders, bringing her back up in front of him. The small straps of her chemise top gave way to his seeking fingers when he slipped them off and his lips followed their path. He pulled them down her arms, and the top slipped down her chest. His hot gaze feasted on her before his head dipped and he took one hard nipple in his mouth.

He found the button at her waist, slipped it free and pushed her jeans off her hips. Leaving her thong in place, his hands went around to her buttocks, and he kneaded the soft flesh with his fingers while he growled low in his throat.

His mouth found hers again, and he swallowed the groan that rose to her lips. Pushing her back on the bed, he followed her down and pulled the jeans off. He tossed them across the room and she smiled at his impatience.

She wrapped her fingers in his hair while his warm breath fluttered across her cheek. The skin of his shoulder tantalized her and she nipped at it with her teeth, smiling as a groan rumbled in his chest.

His mouth worked its way down, taking her nipple and sucking—*hard*—as she arched against him. After playing there for a few moments, he continued his downward journey, nipping at her stomach before soothing the sting with his tongue. She wiggled beneath him, wanting more, *needing* his mouth on her most sensitive spot. Her legs fell apart, and he settled himself between them, his wide shoulders spreading her that much further when he brought her calves up on his shoulders. The wet tip of his tongue found her clit through her thong, licking, stroking and making her almost come at the sensation of the wet material against her sensitive core. He slid this thumbs under the edges of her panties and slipped them down and off her buttocks. Then he was back, sliding his wet tongue over her. He blew warm air across her clit, just about sending her body into spasms.

“Oh.” Her head whipped restlessly across the comforter, and she grasped at the fabric beneath her in her fists. Several minutes of his careful ministrations and she was shooting over the edge of the abyss into the most earth-shattering climax she’d ever experienced.

He continued to lick until she stopped shuddering and lay completely drained.

Kissing his way back up her stomach, he took her nipple in his mouth again, and she felt her passion stir anew. She threaded her fingers through his hair, groaning under his onslaught. He finally lifted his head and stared into her eyes.

“Are you sure?”

She couldn’t answer as tears choked her throat and she could only nod.

He murmured, "I can't promise ..."

She shook her head and placed her finger over his lips to silence his words. "Let's not talk about tomorrow. For now, this is what I want."

He grasped her hand, removed it from his lips. "What about Cole?"

She could see the doubt on his face. "I don't want Cole, I want you."

"But..."

"Make love to me, Chase. I want you to fuck me 'til I scream."

With a growl, he took her lips again, his tongue sweeping inside the cavern of her mouth, their tongues dancing to that age-old rhythm. He left her lips as she whimpered, and a soft smile flittered on his lips. He worked his way down her chest again to her stomach, his tongue lapping at her belly button, playing with the dangling earring hooked there.

*Damn! I had no idea that was an erogenous zone,* she thought as she moaned softly.

After a moment, he lifted his head before he reached for his pants. She watched with a hooded expression, wondering vaguely what he was doing.

*He isn't leaving, is he?*

She almost said something until he returned to her side, a foil package in his fingers. Ripping it open with his teeth, he sheathed his cock before he slipped between her thighs, pressing intimately against the folds of her pussy. She lifted her hips, resting her legs around his back as he slid inside, and they both groaned together.

"You feel so good."

She pressed her heels into his buttocks encouraging him to move. With a moan, his hips ground into hers and she gasped.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"Oh God, no," she moaned. "Move—now!"

He chuckled, placing his forehead against hers as he closed his eyes and rocked his hips. Raising his head, he braced himself on his arms, one on each side of her shoulders, and lifted his chest. She could feel the entire length of his stroke inside her, filling, bringing her to the brink before he slowed his movements and she whimpered. Their rasping breaths filled the silence in the room.

“Chase,” she whispered before she opened her eyes. The concentration on his face fascinated her. She could tell he held himself in tight check, doing his best to not finish this too quickly, but she wanted him to lose control.

She traced his chest with her hands, finding his nipples with her fingers, twirling the hard tip. He shuddered above her and growled, “Leave those alone.”

“Nope.” She found one with her lips, licking and nipping until he groaned, and his hips began to pound against her. He grabbed her buttocks and lifted her hips higher, hammering into her with almost frantic movements. The heat built from her toes, curling up her legs to center between her thighs, and she climaxed again, screaming his name in abandon.

“Abby,” he groaned as she felt him swell and push against her when he came with a violent shudder.

He rested his weight on her chest, his face buried in her neck while she stroked his back with her hands. His lips grazed along her skin, sending shivers down her spine. He shifted slightly, but she held him in place, not wanting to let him go—not yet.

“If you don’t let me up, I’m going to squish you.” His warm chuckle brought a smile to her lips.

“I don’t mind.” This time they didn’t seem to have the uncomfortable air around them as they did in the barn until he sighed and pulled away. He slipped the used condom off and tossed it in the trashcan next to her bed.



He stood up, all proud male in his naked glory, while she rose up on her elbows, admiring his form. A frown rippled across his face when he looked into her eyes.

She stood up in front of him, her hands sliding up his chest to reach around his neck and pressed her lips to his shoulder. Her sensitive nipples rasped against the soft hair sprinkled across the expanse and they both groaned. Her tongue slid along his shoulder, tasting the salt of his skin, and his hands came up to rest on her hips.

She pulled far enough away that she could look into his eyes. "I'm not expecting promises you can't give. I don't even know if I can promise anything, but I know one thing—I want you, I want this between us for however long it lasts."

She stepped back, taking his hand in hers as she led him into the bathroom with a smile and the expectation of more. Turning on the warm water, she stepped inside the shower, bringing him with her.

"I don't have another condom with me."

Smiling, she said, "I trust you, unless you've slept with half the town since Krista died."

"I haven't been with anyone," he whispered.

"Good—neither have I."

Tipping her head back so the liquid cascaded over her in rivulets, she offered herself to him in the most primal way. "Touch me," she whispered.

A tortured groan rumbled in his chest as his hand cupped her, sliding his calloused palms across her nipple, bringing it to a harden bud under his touch.

He grabbed the bar of soap and lathered it in his hands before he murmured, "Turn around."

She smiled before she turned and presented him with her back. He hissed behind her and a soft groan spilled from his mouth.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just surprised, that's all. I guess I didn't expect this." His fingers traced the butterfly on her shoulder blade.

She flashed him a smile over her shoulder. “Just one more facet of my personality you didn’t know.”

His ran his tongue over the tattoo and over the top of her shoulder, reaching her neck before he murmured in her ear, “I want to know more.”

She sighed when she felt his warm breath move away from her ear. Lifting her wet hair over her shoulder, he ran his soapy hands over her skin, sliding them along the muscles while he kneaded the ridges beneath his palms.

“You have no idea how good that feels.”

His warm chuckle met her ear before his lips returned to nibble the lobe between his teeth. His hands worked their way down her back, over her hips, sliding along her buttocks to knead and lift the soft globes, parting them as he stepped closer. Her head rolled back, and she leaned against his chest. He softly cupped her breasts, sliding his hands around them before he rolled her nipples between his fingers.

“Mmm.”

“You are so beautiful.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Nope.” His hands continued their exploration while the water sluiced over them, washing away the soap. Down her flat belly, across her hips, around her buttocks his hands moved before coming back to the front and slipping between her thighs. One finger slid across her clit, eliciting a groan from her mouth the moment before he slipped it inside her pussy. She lifted her leg and propped her foot on the side of the shower, giving him more access.

Her hips shifted and wiggled against the erection pushing against her buttocks while his groan matched hers. The feeling of his fingers inside her and his hard cock behind her sent her senses into overdrive. Shuddering as she felt liquid heat spill from her folds, she whimpered when he removed his fingers and bent her over at the waist before nibbling down her spine with his lips.

She couldn't believe the sounds coming from her own mouth when he pounded into her from behind; surprised they weren't setting the house on fire with their passion.

Holding her hips in place, he pushed against her. She could feel her climax building as he hammered against her backside. His tongue licked up her spine while he rocked his hips until they both exploded, their mixed roar of completion loud in the bathroom silence.

He finally pulled himself out of her warmth with a soft moan before he grabbed the soap again and gave her a sinful smile.

"Uh-uh. My turn." Taking the soap from his hands, she ran the slippery substance over his chest, loving the feel of his muscles under her palms.

## Chapter Fourteen

The water had long since turned cold when Abby and Chase finally left the shower. He took his time drying her off, taking full advantage of running the fluffy blue towel over her curves. Her nipples begged for his touch as they stood proud and hard, tantalizing him to caress them with his mouth with every rise and fall of her chest. She moaned softly and tipped her head back when his tongue slid over her pert nub. By the time they reached her room, they were both panting with every breath as they fell across the bed in a tangle of arms and legs.

He knew he would have a hard time walking when he left her house. *I haven't made love to a woman that many times in one day in a long time. Not that I'm complaining.*

A soft smile rippled across his mouth while his hand caressed her arm where it lay across his stomach. She slept contently on his chest, her soft breasts pressed against his side. He didn't think he'd ever get enough of her, and that could prove to be a problem.

He wasn't sure he was ready for another serious relationship and he knew she wasn't. The diamond on her left hand twinkled in the dim light of her room, mocking him.

His heart whispered, "Then what do you call what happened between the two of you this afternoon?" He frowned. "Lust. Pure and simple," his head answered.

It sure hadn't felt like only lust. She was able to get him hard and ready mere minutes after they had made love with only a simple look, but the softness in her eyes spoke of feelings she hadn't expressed.

“It’s not only lust if you are calling it making love,” his heart whispered and the frown deepened.

She was so responsive, so passionate, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do with her now. Their lovemaking took their relationship to a whole new level, one he wasn’t sure he wanted to explore yet.

*Having sex with her on the table at my house didn’t change things—not really—so why should this?*

He wasn’t aware she was awake until she said, “What’s the frown for?”

“I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Obviously, it wasn’t something pleasant if the look was any indicator.”

He shook his head in denial. “Actually, my thoughts were about you.”

She propped herself up on her elbow and cocked her head to the side. “Oh, that makes me feel better. You had a scowl on your face.”

Her watchfulness made him uncomfortable, almost as if she could see into his soul and read the torment going on in his heart.

“We should probably talk about this,” he whispered trying to read her expression.

A scared look surfaced in her eyes when they met his. “I don’t think there is anything to talk about.” She rolled away from him, and grabbed her bathrobe off the end of the bed.

“Abby...Abby wait.”

“Don’t.” She wrapped the robe around her shoulders and stood on the side of the bed, pulling the belt tight, like a shield.

“We need to talk. We can’t just go on like this never happened.” He stood on the other side of the bed and slipped his jeans on.

She stiffened before she blurted out, “It was just physical need, Chase, nothing more. I haven’t been with anyone since Joshua died. I had a need, you fulfilled it. Nothing changed between us after you fucked me on your kitchen table—this shouldn’t change anything, either.”

*How could she be so cold, so uncaring?*

Wasn't he supposed to be the one who shut down anything between them?

"You could have fulfilled that need with at least two other men I'm aware of."

Her face tightened and her gaze snapped with rage. The pain that flashed across her eyes made him feel like an ass. He walked around the other side of the bed and pulled her against his chest. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

She pushed against him until he let her go. Her body trembled with anger and she spat, "Get out!"

\* \* \* \*

Chase slammed the door when he left. She managed to hold herself together until he was gone, but as soon as she heard his truck leave the yard, the tears came. Scalding rivulets rolled down her cheeks as she sank down on the bed.

*Damn him! What we shared was special, or at least I thought it was.*

She couldn't talk about it, not right then anyway. The feelings were still too raw, too close to the surface to be explored, but having him throw it back in her face was just more than she could handle.

When the tears finally stopped, Abby sat on the bed with her legs folded under her. He had made such sweet love to her she couldn't understand how he could be so cold. She dabbed at the tears on her cheeks with a tissue from the box next to her, and then dropped her hands in her lap.

Her wedding ring twinkled in the moonlight that filtered in through the window, and she groaned. No wonder he was so cold and uncaring. She made love with a man she really had only known for six months or so with her wedding ring from her dead husband on her hand.

“How could I be so stupid?” *What a mess I’ve made of this whole thing.* She hung her head as the tears threatening to fall again.

She hadn’t seen Josh in several weeks, but she wanted to now. Closing her eyes, she thought about his smiling face, the love in his eyes when he looked at her, and she realized the pain she carried for so long wasn’t there anymore.

*I wonder if I call to him, if he’ll come.*

“Joshua,” she whispered to the darkness around her.

*Abby.*

“Josh, I need you.” She opened her eyes and searched the room around her when she heard his soft voice whisper her name. Out of the shadows in the corner, she could see him and the tears caught in her throat.

*It’s time, Abby. You need to move on.*

A choking sob racked her body.

*I’ll always be there in your heart, you know that. I love you, but he’s your future.*

Her gaze found the diamond ring before her eyes met his again as he began to fade back into the darkness of the room. “I love you, Josh.”

*I know, Abby. I’ll always love you.*

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she worked the ring off her finger, rose from the bed, and slipped it inside her jewelry box, softly closing the lid. The part of her life with Josh was over; the life she wanted with Chase had just begun. The hard part would be convincing Chase they belonged together.

Bright and early the next morning, she stood in his front yard. He would be up, he always was. She knocked on the door and then realized there were sounds coming from the barn. Walking briskly in the direction of the sound, she found him in the arena with the stallion, the same one who had kicked him and broke his leg. Climbing up on the split rail fencing, she sat to watch. His mastery of the animal, his confidence in his abilities, the commanding stance of

his strong legs all took her breath away. She couldn't tell if he knew she studied him. He never acknowledged her presence until he was finished and walked the big horse toward her. Their eyes met across the arena and even from a distance, she could feel the heat of his gaze.

When he finally reached her side he said, "What are you doing here?"

"Nice to see you, too, Chase."

*Nothing like a warm welcome, but what did I expect after last night.*

The frown that marred his face sent her heart slamming against her ribs. She was terrified she'd done irreparable damage to their relationship, such as it was.

The stallion danced nervously while he held the rope tight in his hands. He searched her face for a moment before he slid the bolt on the gate and swung the door open. Leading the skittish animal out, he walked him back to his stall and she followed.

She stood in the middle of the dirt aisle while he put the horse inside his pen and shut the door.

Chase went to walk past her, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Can we talk?" Her mouth went dry when he brought his eyes back to hers. The warmth of his skin through his shirt curled up her arm and settled in the pit of her stomach. "Please?"

"About?"

"Last night—what happened between us."

He cocked a questioning eyebrow. "You didn't want to talk about it then, what changed your mind?"

Exhaling with more force than necessary, she said, "I'm trying here, Chase, work with me, okay?"

"What do you want from me?"

She dropped her hand. "I don't necessarily want anything *from* you. I only want you." Her gaze focused on the toes of her boots. "I'm sorry about how things ended last night. That's not how I wanted it."

"How did you want it to end?"



Bringing her gaze back to his, she murmured, “Curled up in your arms until the sun woke us up.”

The stallion let out a squeal and pawed at the ground around his feet. A hoof hit the door with a bang and Chase shot a glance over his shoulder at the animal before his attention returned to her.

His frustrated sigh met her ears, and he raked his fingers through his hair. “Why did you call me to come over?”

“Because making love with you in your kitchen months ago wasn’t enough, and making love with you in my barn yesterday wasn’t enough. I wanted more, a lot more.”

Another high-pitched squeal echoed in the barn, drawing their attention to the animal in the pen. She moved closer and peered through the metal gate, watching him while he danced around the small enclosure.

“I wonder what’s gotten into him? He never acts that way.”

Abby’s eyes focused on the corner where a shadowy figure appeared. Krista Wilder’s angry glare met hers, and she stepped back. She covered her ears as the other woman’s voice reverberated through her mind. *Stay away from my husband, or I’ll kill you.*

In a split second, Chase stood beside her. “Abby?” He took her wrists in his hands and tried to pull them away from her ears. “What’s wrong?”

Terror gripped her soul when Krista’s words echoed in her head. She sobbed and threw herself against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. Running his hands down her back, he whispered softly in her ear—words she didn’t understand, but comforting just the same.

The horse continued to squeal and paw at the dirt, and when she looked over Chase’s shoulder into the pen, she could no longer see Krista’s figure.

“Come on.” Chase wrapped an arm around her and led her out of the barn and back toward the house. He took her inside and pulled her down on the couch with him as he held her against his side.

When she finally stopped shaking, he asked, “Do you want to tell me what happened out there?”

She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“You wouldn’t believe me,” she whispered against his neck.

“Sure I would.”

A dry laugh warbled from her mouth. “No, trust me, you wouldn’t.”

He pushed her back far enough so he could look into her eyes. “I thought you trusted me.”

“I do, Chase, but this is just a bit weird.”

His lips lifted at the corners in a small smile. “I don’t mind weird.”

Air rushed from between her lips when she exhaled with a sigh. “Promise you won’t interrupt until I’m finished.”

“Sure.”

“Remember I told you my mom is sensitive.”

“Yes.”

“What I didn’t tell you is I am, too, to some degree, anyway. I’m really not sure.”

Frown lines settled between his eyebrows as he stared at her.

“Over the years I’ve felt things, knew things, but most of the time I ignored it, or tried to, anyway. The day Joshua left for work, the day he died, I knew something bad was going to happen. I even told him to be careful. He shrugged it off, and I let him. I tried to think I was just being paranoid.” She shuddered. “Then he never came home.”

Chase pulled her back against him, and she laid her head on his chest while she continued to talk. “I told you my mom warned me about you the day the horse kicked you.”

“I remember.”

“What I didn’t tell you is that I felt it, too. I had a vision not long before my mom warned me. I could see you on the ground, pain etched across your face, and it made me frantic to get here. Why do

you think I drove the rusty old truck over? I would have walked if I had to.”

He chuckled and rubbed her arm.

She punched his chest playfully. “Quit laughing.”

“No more laughing, I promise.”

Pausing for a moment, she let the visions of Josh, Krista, and Chase on the ground when he got hurt, play across her mind. “This is the weird part. Over at my house, I’ve seen Joshua. A few times, actually, and he’s talked to me.”

His hand stopped moving.

“I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

“That’s the problem, Abby, I do.”

“The first time I saw him, he told me I needed to find love again and that the person I was meant to fall in love with was here—in Wyoming.” She sighed and shook her head. “I saw him outside the ambulance, too, after I wrecked my Jeep. He was standing next to you when we pulled away. That’s why before you told me your name, I said Josh.”

His hand rubbed the goose bumps from her arm. She sat up and looked into his eyes. “I’ve seen Krista, too.”

His eyes shone bright with sympathy.

*He thinks I’ve lost my mind.*

She stood up and began to pace his living room. She had to tell him. “Remember when I asked you what Krista looked like?”

“Yes.”

“I asked because when you were holding me on the couch and we had kissed...” she shuddered. “I saw her over your shoulder, right there against the wall. I didn’t know for sure it was her until you showed me the picture in your photo album.”

“You’ve seen Krista?”

She nodded. “A couple of times.”

“When?”

“Like I said, here in the living room, once in the bathroom, and earlier in the barn.”

“You saw her today, just a little bit ago?”

She dropped her gaze and murmured, “Yes.”

“Where in the barn?”

“The stallion’s stall when he was making all that noise.”

He got to his feet and began to pace, back and forth. She nervously chewed her lip. She hadn’t wanted to tell him.

He turned to face her again. “Have you talked to her as well?”

“Sort of.”

“What do you mean sort of?”

“It’s not like we’ve had a meaningful conversation, Chase.”

“What did she say?”

“All she’s really said is to stay away from you.”

“Okay, this is a little too weird.”

“I told you. I knew you wouldn’t believe me.”

He shook his head. “I do believe you, Abby. She was very possessive, even when she was alive. I could never even have a conversation with another woman or she would go ballistic.”

“Well, she certainly doesn’t like us being anywhere near each other.” The knives on the kitchen counter began to rattle and Abby’s gaze swung to them momentarily.

“I don’t understand,” Chase said, bringing her attention back to him.

“One of my visions, or whatever you want to call it, with Josh—he told me to be careful.”

“Why?”

“He said she wanted to hurt me.”

“How can someone who isn’t here hurt you?”

The knives rattled louder.

“I’m not sure, Chase. When I saw her in your bathroom, she told me to stay away from you. I told her we were just friends, but that

was before we made love. Earlier in the barn, I could hear her in my head. She told me to stay away from you or she would kill me.”

In the next instant, a large butcher knife flew across the room with a zing, sticking into the wall next to Abby’s head.

\* \* \* \*

“What the...”

Terror rippled across Abby’s face when he approached and pulled the knife out of the wall.

“I—I think I better go.”

“No, wait. Don’t go. We need to figure this out.”

“There isn’t anything to figure out, Chase. Krista doesn’t want me here.”

Abby headed for the door and he followed. “Are you giving up? You are going to walk away from us because of this?” He still held the knife in his hand as he spun her around to face him. “Aren’t you willing to fight?”

“Fight for what? I didn’t know there was an *us*.”

“Do you want there to be or not? You came over here this morning for a reason. What was it?”

She dropped her eyes, but he put a finger under her chin, forcing her to bring her face back up.

“I wanted to...” her voice trailed off and she swallowed, *hard*. “I wanted to find out if there could be anything between us—something more permanent—but I don’t know if I can fight her for you.”

He trailed his finger down her cheek, back to her ear, cupping the back of her head as his head dropped and his lips were mere inches from hers. “If there has to be a fight, we’ll do it together, and I want there to be an *us*, but you aren’t ready. I’ll protect you from Krista if that’s what needs to happen. I’ll keep you safe.”

He had come to the conclusion last night he wanted Abby, wanted her in his life, in his bed, in whatever capacity she would go for. After

he'd left her side the night before, even as angry as they both were, he knew jealousy spurned his words. It would tear his heart out if he knew Cole or Chris had made love to her. She'd told him she hadn't been with anyone since her husband died, but that hadn't stopped the hurtful words from leaving his lips. His heart ceased to beat when she made it sound like it only physical need drove her into his arms.

His lips caressed hers; softly sliding along the crease. He wanted her to accept him, accept what flowed between them for what it was. She moaned and opened her mouth before her hands went up around his neck. Pulling her tight against his chest, he let his hands wander down her back after he dropped the knife to the floor.

When he lifted his mouth from hers, their rasping breaths filled the air. "God, I want you. I'll never get enough of you. Tell me you want this, too."

She shivered against him. "Oh yeah."

He bent down and lifted her up in his arms, swiftly carrying her toward his bedroom, ravishing her mouth with his while he walked.

Laying her softly on the bed, he returned a moment later after he pushed the door shut, and slowly undid the buttons down her shirt. Once her breasts were free, he caressed each one in turn until she gasped under him and moan his name. He took his sweet time bringing her to the brink before he slowed his assault, and let her slide back down to almost calm before lifting her to the peak again.

"Stop teasing me, Chase. You're driving me crazy."

He let a wicked smile grace his lips before they brushed against hers. "I know."

"What do you want? I'll do anything...please."

"Just you baby, just you." His mouth moved to her neck, working his way down her chest to take her nipple in his mouth.

She gasped and pushed his head harder against her. "You already have me."

He chuckled before he licked the hard nub with the pad of his tongue. "No, I don't. I want all of you."

She whimpered when he sat up to remove the rest of her clothes and his before his hand slid down her belly and through the curls at the juncture of her sex. He caressed her clit in a slow, rhythmic motion until she wiggled and begged for him to take her.

They both groaned when he slid inside, awed by the power of their coupling. He stared into her eyes and grasped her hands with his own while he seated himself inside her as far as he could. A frown rippled across his face when their hands met. He stopped his movements before he took the hand clasped in his and turned it over.

*Her wedding ring is gone.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Abby saw his gaze fix on her hand where her wedding ring used to rest and then move back to her face.

“The gloves are off, Chase. Nothing stands between us now except what you put there,” she whispered as the tears gathered in her eyes.

“What are you saying, Abby?”

“I’m here because I want to be. I love Josh, I always will. He’ll be in my heart forever, but there is room for more than just him. There is room for you, too, if you want there to be.”

“What about Cole?”

She could feel the heat climb up her body as her anger built. *Damn him!* “How many times do I have to tell you, I don’t want Cole. I want you.”

If he didn’t still have her pinned to the bed, his hard cock filling her completely, she would have kicked his ass.

“But I thought because he looked like Josh...”

“Been there, done that. He’s not Joshua, he’s Cole. I don’t want to go back there, Chase. My heart is healing from losing him, and I don’t want to revisit the pain. I’m ready to move on with my life. Are you ready to move on with yours?”

She waited on bated breath.

He pressed his forehead against hers and their eyes locked. “I want you in my life, in my bed.”

She wiggled beneath him, flexing the muscles of her vagina around the hard cock resting deep inside her, squeezing him until he moaned.



“Yes—oh God yes.”

She gasped when he rotated his hips. “Can we finish this conversation after you’re done making love to me?”

His chuckle turned to a tortured groan when he started to move, filling her to the brim with each stroke.

After several minutes, he flipped them both over so she was on top, straddling his hips, and she whimpered.

“Too deep?”

“No—perfect.” She was surprised at the purr in her voice when the words left her mouth.

Her lips met his chest, and she smiled as she heard a growl rattle deep beneath her mouth. She flicked her tongue over his muscles, awed by the power he held in check while his hands gripped her hips softly, letting her take control of their love making, at least for the moment. She raised her hips until he was almost completely unsheathed before she slowly slid down him again. Opening her eyes at the sounds coming from his lips as she continued her ride, she was taken by surprise when she heard what sounded like a whimper. The concentration that pulled at his brows made her feel powerful, in control. He opened his eyes to stare into hers, the stormy grey of his gaze, holding her hostage.

“Now who is torturing whom?”

“But you feel so good inside me. I want it to last forever.”

“Mmm...me, too, but there is no way in hell I’ll last that long. I’m dying here.”

She let out a soft giggle as she moved, riding his hips, letting his cock slid in and out, rocking against him. The pleasure bordered on pain. The sensations ricocheting through her drove her to the brink of insanity, but she knew he was right there with her and it should have been a sin to continue.

“That’s it.” He lifted her and flipped her over onto her back. Bracing himself on his arms, he brought her calves up to his shoulders

and slid inside her until his balls slapped against her and he pounded his hips into hers.

“Oh God, Chase.” Her head thrashed on the bed as he filled her until she could swear he touched her heart.

“Come with me, Abby. Ride the wave with me,” he whispered, and she climaxed, screaming his name. He groaned his pleasure when he spilled hot cum inside her, filling her until she felt it seep between them.

When their breathing finally returned to normal, he slipped from insider her and pulled her to his side as he softly caressed her arm. They fell asleep in each other’s arms, her head resting on his chest.

\* \* \* \*

Chase awoke two hours later, surprised he’d even slept. He wasn’t one to take naps during the day, but making love with Abby had a way of draining his energy until they both lay sedated on the bed. He rolled over and watched her sleep, her long lashes resting peacefully against her cheeks while her chest rose and fell in peaceful slumber. The sheet had slipped down off her chest, the swell of her breast showing above it, one nipple peeking out, begging for his mouth. Almost giving into the temptation, he rolled out of the bed on the other side, careful not to wake her.

He reached over, slipped on his jeans and quietly left the room. It was almost lunchtime and he was starving. He hadn’t eaten breakfast and he figured Abby was probably hungry, too, with all the activity. A silly grin rippled across his mouth, and his heart swelled in his chest when he thought about the last several hours of lovemaking.

*God, she’s perfect.*

She met him thrust for thrust, kiss for kiss, and touch for touch, and he couldn’t ask for a better compliment to himself.

He headed for the kitchen, whistling softly as he grabbed sandwich makings from the refrigerator. Peering out the kitchen

window, he could see the daffodils blooming along the fence outside. With a smile, he pushed open the kitchen door and quickly hurried out, picked a couple and rushed back inside. “Damn, it’s still cold out there.” He found a vase on the top shelf of one of the cabinets, poured in some water and set the flowers inside. He grabbed a tray and set two plates with the sandwiches and some chips on it, along with a couple of glasses of milk. Once he was finished, he took the tray and headed back for his room. It wasn’t breakfast in bed, but it would have to do. He pushed the door open with his foot and the sight that met his eyes made him drop both plates to the floor with a crash.

\* \* \* \*

Abby was sound asleep when she felt hands on her arm. Smiling in her half slumber, her eyes opened sleepily, expecting to find Chase running his hands up her arm before he took her mouth with his again.

What she saw terrified her.

Hovering over her was the figure of Krista Wilder, her enraged eyes glowed bright, and Abby felt cold hands slip around her neck. Her throat closed as if someone choked her. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, and couldn’t yell. Then she heard the crash of plates on the floor. Unable to turn her head to see, she tried to remove the feeling of someone strangling her.

“Krista, no!”

Chase’s terror filled voice distracted the apparition above her long enough for her to take a deep breath and cough.

Abby grabbed the sheet and pulled it with her as she crouched against the headboard, watching the other woman’s figure move away from her and slide closer to Chase. Krista’s face softened when she looked at him, and by his look of astonishment, Abby knew he could see her, too.

*I love you Chase.*

A tear slid down Abby's face. She could hear the words clearly, just like Krista stood there in body as well as spirit. The words vibrated throughout the room, filling every corner and crevice, sending goose bumps along her arms.

"Krista, you can't do this. You can't hurt her. I won't let you."

*She can't have you. You're mine.* The figure moved back toward Abby, but Chase got between them.

"I loved you, Krista, but you have to listen to me. You died, two years ago. The car accident—the interstate."

A frown appeared on Krista's face as if she was trying to remember. Her whispered words rippled on the air around them. "I don't remember."

"It's true."

Abby peeked at the figure from behind Chase's shoulder. "Don't you want me to find someone to love again? Don't you want me to be happy?"

*But you're mine, Chase.*

"You will always have a place in my heart, but I don't want to be alone anymore, and we can't be together, you know that. She makes me happy again."

Abby's heart thumped loudly at his words.

"I need to move on. You need to move on."

*Why? I want to stay here with you.*

"You can't. You need to go and be at peace. My life is with Abby now. I love her."

Abby heard his words and her heart opened wide at the thought. She couldn't have stopped what happened between them if she tried. Fate brought them together, brought her to Wyoming so she could heal and find love again.

The figure moved closer.

*No, Chase. Please, don't send me away.*

“I’m sorry, Krista, but you aren’t welcome here anymore. I loved you. You were my everything, but you can’t stay here anymore. You tried to hurt Abby, and I can’t have that.”

*Please.*

“This is my home and you need to go.”

*It’s ours...our home.*

“Not anymore.”

He turned to look at Abby with love shining in his gaze as he bent his head and took her lips with his. When their mouths fused, all thoughts of Krista were gone. Desire curled in her belly, radiating up from her toes, as she moaned and leaned into the kiss. He traced the crease of her lips with his tongue, wanting permission to deepen the kiss. Opening her mouth, she accepted everything from him, his heart, his soul and his love.

When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were bright with love when he stared into hers. “I love you, Abby.”

Choking back a sob, she murmured, “I love you, too.”

A howl reached their ears, almost like there was a wounded animal in the room. Chase turned to face the tortured apparition of Krista as Abby peeked over his shoulder.

They watched, as she stepped back and tears slid down her cheeks.

*I love you, Chase, but I’ll go now. Your happiness means more to me than you’ll ever know. I’m happy you found someone to love.*

Her figure began to fade in the afternoon sunlight that streamed through the window.

The room was quiet. Not even their breathing could be heard in the dim silence while they waited.

Chase turned back around to face her. “Do you think she’s gone for good?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He ran his fingers over her cheek, and she snuggled into his palm.

“Did you mean it?” she asked, hoping he hadn’t said ‘I love you’ only to keep Krista from hurting her.

“Every word—all three. Did you?”

She could see the uncertainty on his face. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it. I told you before, there was room for you if you wanted there to be.”

He smiled, flashing his dimples, and she reached up, running her tongue along the ridge of one as he groaned. “I’ve wanted to do that since I first saw you. Do you have idea how sexy dimples are?”

“Any dimples? I mean, Justin and Cole both have them, too.” He moaned softly.

“Mmm...nope—just yours.” Her words whispered against his cheek and she moved toward his ear. “Make love to me, Chase.”

“Your pleasure is my command.”

She sat propped against the headboard of the bed, as he slipped the sheet down her chest to reveal her dark nipple to his mouth. She grasped his head when he licked her nipple, swirling it with his tongue before he pulled it deep into his mouth.

“We really should eat, you know,” he murmured, running his tongue across her chest.

“Mmm. You can eat all you want to.”

He chuckled while his mouth continued its journey down her belly. “Is that a request, ma’am?”

“Oh yeah, you have no idea what your tongue...Oh God!” He slid his wet mouth across her clit, sucking it between his lips, and she squealed her delight above him before her whole body shuttered in release. She felt him lap up the juices running from her pussy until she ceased to quiver.

He kissed his way back up her stomach, until he stopped at her belly button. She giggled as his tongue twirled the dangling bellybutton ring. “What are doing?”

“It’s like a cat toy. I’m playing. Let me be.” Laughter rumbled in his chest resting against her thigh. “You have no idea how sexy this is.”

“Mmm...” she purred. “I never thought of it that way.”

He continued up her stomach until he reached her nipple, nipping it with his teeth and she moaned.

“Open for me, baby.”

She spread her thighs and he settled between them, slipping inside her warmth with a tortured groan.

“God, you have no idea how good this feels.”

“Oh, yes, I do.” she murmured. She wiggled her butt and he moaned as he started to move.

He rode her hips, murmuring, “I love you” in her ear as he caressed her shoulder with his tongue. When another climax hit her, she surged against him, lifting her buttocks off the bed, feeling him coat her inside while he growled above her.

“Chase?”

They heard Cole’s voice yell from the front room before he burst into the bedroom and stopped dead in his tracks.

“I...uh...sorry.” He backed out of the bedroom, pulling it closed behind him.

“Shit.” He groaned before he slipped from inside her, rolled off and picked up his pants from the floor. “Let me find out what’s going on.”

As Chase slipped on his jeans, she flipped the sheet off and grabbed her own clothes. He shot her a glance over his shoulder and nodded before he opened the door and headed for the living room.

She quickly finished buttoning her shirt and followed Chase as their conversation reached her ears.

“Sorry, Chase. I didn’t realize...” Cole’s voice drifted away and embarrassment flushed his cheeks when their eyes met across the room.

“It’s fine.”

The ashen color of Cole's complexion sent bells ringing in her head. *Something's wrong.*

"What's wrong, what's happened?"



## Chapter Sixteen

When Chase asked the question they needed to know, Abby felt a stabbing pain to her chest, and she doubled over, moaning softly.

Chase was by her side in a moment. “Abby? What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

She panted with the pain and flattened her palm over her heart until the pain subsided. “I’m okay. It’s not me—it’s your mom.”

“That’s what I came to tell you. Mom is at the hospital in town. We need to go.” Cole’s terror filled eyes ricocheted between them after she could stand upright.

“Get your shoes.” Her startled gaze met Chase’s and he asked, “What?”

“I...you want me to go?”

“Of course. I need you with me.”

She nodded and slipped her shoes on, grabbed her coat and purse as they hurried to his truck.

It seemed to take forever for them to reach the hospital emergency room, but when they moved toward the doors, her heart calmed.

He grabbed her hand and folded their fingers together, so they lay palm to palm. He had staked his claim to her heart for all to see and she had to fight the urge to grin from ear to ear.

She sighed and whispered, “She’ll be all right.”

He pulled her to a stop and looked into her eyes. “How do you know?”

Her brow wrinkled for a second and then she smiled. “I can feel it.”

“I’m not going to ask.”

When they reached the receptionist, he asked where Bonnie Wilder was located. The woman directed the threesome into one of the emergency room bays, and Abby got her first look at Chase and Cole's mother.

The stunning dark haired woman lay on the stretcher with wires running every direction. She grumbled to the man next to her and Abby had to smile. "I'm all right. Stop worrying."

The two grown men reverted to little boy's in front of Abby's eyes. She watched the faces of both Chase and Cole as their worried gazes flew over their mother.

Bonnie rolled her eyes and sighed. "Did you have to call them, Charles?"

"Of course I did, darling. They are your children, after all."

"I'm fine, you two. Your father overreacted." Bonnie's gaze moved to Chase, registering a surprised look when she noticed Abby standing by his side, his hand cradling hers. "Chase? Who might this pretty young lady be?"

He ignored her question and asked, "Are you sure you are all right, Mom?"

"Everything will be fine." She took his other hand in hers and she patted it reassuringly before she held out her hand for Abby to take. "Since my son doesn't seem to be inclined to introduce us, I'm Bonnie Wilder."

Abby smiled before she grasped the other woman's warm hand in her own. She could tell by the heat of Bonnie's grasp, nothing serious was wrong. "Abigail Carter. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Wilder."

"Oh poo. It's Bonnie."

She laughed. "All right, Bonnie. I'm Abby to my friends."

"Sooo—how do you and my Chase know each other?"

"Mother!" Chase exclaimed, an embarrassed flush creeping up his neck.

"Don't start with me, young man. You've been cooped up on that property for far too long."

Abby giggled and watched the strong man next to her bow to his mother's reprimand. "We're neighbors, actually."

"Oh?"

"I bought property next door."

"The Miller place, I assume."

"Yes—I moved here from New York."

"I thought I heard a northern accent."

The doctor came in behind them and cleared his throat before he said, "We should be releasing you in a few minutes, Mrs. Wilder. All the tests are negative. You'll just need to follow up with your doctor in a few days."

"Wonderful! I hate hospitals."

The three men standing next to the bed laughed, obviously knowing that the strong woman in the bed wouldn't take this lying down.

"We'll wait in the waiting room for you," Chase said, pulling Abby to his side and wrapping his arm around her.

"All right, son. We'll see you in a few minutes."

When they reached the main lobby, Chase stopped next to the window and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her close. She inhaled his scent when she rested her head on his shoulder and buried her nose in his neck. After a few moments, she stepped back as he framed her face with his palms.

"I'm sorry things got interrupted."

She put her fingers to his lips, and looked into his eyes. "Don't be. She's your mother."

He kissed her fingertips before he smiled. "Somehow I knew you would understand."

Cole slapped him on the back. "Hey—care to bring me into the loop here, you two?"

She laughed at the scowl on Chase's face.

"I shouldn't tell you anything," Chase grumbled with pretend fierceness.

“What did I do?” Cole’s innocent look beguiled the humor in his eyes.

“You’ve been a thorn in my side ever since you came home.”

“Me?”

“Yes you. Don’t think I didn’t notice your attempts at matchmaker, little brother.”

“Looks like you’ve finally figured out what you were letting get away.”

Chase snuggled her closer to his side as he agreed with a dimpled smile and a nuzzle to her neck. A few minutes, his mother and father walked out of the emergency room doors, and joined them by the window.

“Now—how about some dinner?” Bonnie asked a quick smile to her lips.

“Are you sure you are up to it, Mom?”

“Most definitely. I have one young lady to get to know since it seems you’ve become rather fond of her from the look on your face, Chase.”

He blushed even though a smile radiated from his face and his dimples peeked out.

Abby sighed and snuggled to his side. *God, I love those dimples.*

Leaning over to whisper in her ear when they headed out toward his truck, he said, “You’d better stop looking at me like that, or we’ll be heading home right now.”

Heat flushed her cheeks and she tried to hide her embarrassment against his shirt.

“I love it when you blush. I wonder, though, if the pretty pink extends to other places.”

She poked him in the side and he laughed.

Several hours later, they returned to his house after a wonderful dinner with his parents. She loved his mother already, and now she knew where Chase got his wicked sense of humor. Charles had cracked jokes the whole time.

They walked up on the porch together, arms wrapped around each other, but when he pushed the door open, she pulled away.

“Just where do you think you’re going, ma’am?”

She playfully pulled against his hands and backed away while she whispered, “I should probably go home. I mean...you couldn’t possibly be interested in making love again, could you?”

A wicked gleam sparkled in his eyes and he growled low in his throat. Not giving her an answer, he scooped her up and slung her over his shoulder as he walked in the house and shut the door behind them. Her giggles echoed through the room as he headed toward the bedroom and threw her across the bed.

She laughed as she scrambled to her knees and put her hands up. “Chase.”

“Huh?” He crawled across the bed while she backed up, his eyes sparkling with challenge.

“What are you planning?”

“Me? Nothing you won’t like—I promise.”

He reached for her hands, pulling her toward him, wrapping one large one around her wrists. The other worked the edge of her shirt up her belly until he could reach her breast. Her breath hitched in her throat on a soft moan when his calloused palm rasped against her nipple. Capturing her lips with his, his tongue delved into her mouth, catching the next whimper she released. He let go of her wrists and she wound her fingers in his hair as she pushed against him. He worked the button on her jeans free and slipped his hands around the back to cup her bottom, lifting her tight against him. His mouth moved across her cheek until it reached her ear, nibbling softly on the lobe before moving down her neck. His fingers slipped across the crack of her ass under her thong and she gasped when one found her untried hole.

“Ever had a man in your ass, darlin’?” His hot breath whispered across her neck, sending shivers down her spine at the thought.

She groaned at the tantalizing thought. A man's cock in that almost forbidden place intrigued her. "No."

"Do you want to?"

"Oh God, yes!"

He chuckled against her skin, nipping at her neck and soothing the bites with his tongue as he pushed her backward against the comforter beneath them. His hands worked the pants off her hips and down her thighs while his mouth followed. Pulling them completely off, he tossed them across the room before his tongue played with her bellybutton ring. "Chase...please," she begged with a desperate whimper.

His hot mouth worked his way down until he found her clit, pulled the skin back and swiped his tongue from vagina to clit in one long stroke. He speared his tongue deep inside her vagina while this thumb toggled her clit until she thought she would fly apart into a hundred pieces. Her pussy clenched and quivered when he slowed his assault and slipped two fingers insider her pussy and one in her ass.

"Oh. My. God." She squealed as hot cum spilled from her, wetting the comforter beneath them. His pace never stopped until she couldn't move.

Crawling back up, he licked her stomach, her breasts, and her neck until; finally, he kissed her mouth and then waited silently above her on his elbows. Her eyes opened to small slits to find his satisfied smile.

"That wasn't fair, you know," she whispered.

"No? Why not?"

"Because you haven't been satisfied and I could take a nap right now."

"I'm sure I can help you get motivated again." His hand slid along her breast until his fingers reached her nipple and rolled it between his fingers.

Her back arched and desired zipped along her nerves. "You live to torture me."

“You bet. I love having you at my mercy, screaming my name, mewling like a kitten when you are about to come. It’s sexy as hell.”

“Typical man,” she whispered.

He chuckled and then kissed her as he slid his tongue inside her mouth, stroking along hers until she spread her thighs, and cradled his hips. When they were both breathing hard, he lifted his head and looked into her eyes while he slid his length into her waiting warmth with a soft groan. He rocked his hips, stroking her vaginal walls, as she whimpered softly.

“I love you, Abby,” he whispered in her ear.

“I love you.”

After several moments of his torturous strokes, he murmured, “Roll over on your stomach.” Doing as he instructed, she stretched out on the bed on her belly. His hands grasped her hips and lifted so her ass stuck in the air.

“God, you can’t know how unbelievably sexy this is.” One hand smoothed across her buttocks while the fingers of the other delved into her hot pussy. “Will you let me take your ass, honey?”

She peered over her shoulder, and her breath caught in her throat with the heat reflected in his eyes. “If you’ll help me.”

He kissed her butt cheek and licked his way up her spine while he bent over her back until he reached her ear. “I don’t want to hurt you. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

“Tell me what I need to do.”

“Stay right there—just like that. Good Lord that’s hot!”

He left her side for a moment and retrieved something from the night stand drawer. At her questioning look, he said, “Lubricant.”

She nodded in understanding, and when the first dollop of liquid hit her warm skin, she gasped. “Damn, that’s cold.”

His warm chuckle tickled her ear until his lips blazed a trail down her back. His finger spread the lube between her ass cheeks and then one slid inside her back hole.

Abby moaned softly when he penetrated the tight ring of muscles with two fingers, spreading her and preparing her for his cock. He continued the movements of his fingers until she rocked her hips and moaned at the sensations he caused.

Finally, he positioned himself behind her, and she pressed back against his hand. His fingers slipped out, and she felt the pressure of the head of his penis slowly sliding inside. She hissed with the burn, and he stopped his forward movement.

With his lips near her ear, he whispered, "You okay?"

"Yeah. It burns a little."

"I know, but the sting will stop in a few seconds." He slid in a little more. "You have no idea how good this feels."

"God, Chase, do it. Fuck me. I want you all the way inside." She moaned and pushed back so that her butt lay flush against his groin. "That feels incredible."

He chuckled softly near her ear before he groaned and pushed all the way inside. She wanted all of him, everything he had to offer, but she didn't like not being able to run her hands over his hard muscles. "Only one problem this way."

His movements slowed. "What's that?"

"I can't touch you."

He exhaled with a forced breath before he answered with a laugh. "I know." His hands came around to her breasts, lifting and massaging each mound and then he twirled the nipples between his finger and thumb. "But I can touch you."

"Oh God. Chase, please. I want..." her voice trailed off on a moan.

"What, Abby? What do you want?"

"Harder—oh, God—harder, please."

His pelvis rode her ass hard and fast, his balls slapping against her pussy lips, and she felt her climax hit her like a wave, rolling over her until she whimpered his name. Finally, she heard him roar his own completion behind her.



After several moments, he groaned when he pulled his semi-soft cock from her ass. “I’ll be right back. I need to wash up.” He disappeared into the bathroom for a few minutes and returned with a warm wet washcloth. “Let me wash you.”

“Mmm. That’s kind of sexy, you know.”

His dimples creased his cheeks as he smiled and ran the warm washcloth between her legs. “Be careful.”

“Why?” she whispered, almost purring under his ministrations.

“You’ll probably be sore tomorrow already, and I don’t know if I’ll be able to walk tomorrow with all this activity.” He tossed the scrap of material into the laundry hamper against the wall. “Stay tonight.”

His whispered words sent a shiver across her arms as a smile played on her lips. “I couldn’t move if I wanted to.” She snuggled up to his side, his hand moving softly over her arm while she drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Seventeen

“You’re leaving?”

“I have to, Abby. Riding season has started, and I’m missing all the action.” She watched with sadness in her heart while Cole packed his truck. Shaking her head, she knew it was a matter of time before he ran into his match. She wasn’t sure when or where it would happen yet, but it would.

“I’m going to miss you.”

He pulled her into his embrace, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders while he squeezed her tight. “I’m gonna miss you, too. Keep that brother of mine out of trouble, will you?”

“I’ll do my best.” Chase frowned from the porch as Cole stepped back and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Be careful, okay?”

“One of your feelings again?” Cole asked perplexed.

She smiled. “No. I just know you a little too well to believe you wouldn’t try something even if I was having one of my feelings.”

He laughed and tweaked her nose. “I’ll let you know where I am, trust me.”

“Okay.”

Sliding into the truck, he pulled the door shut and started the engine before he waved and headed down the driveway. Chase walked up behind her and wrapped his arm around her waist. He nuzzled his nose against her ear.

“He’ll be okay.”

“I know.”

Once the truck was out of sight, he took her hand and they walked back inside the house.

“So what’s on the agenda tonight?”

“I thought we could go out for dinner. My parents wanted to join us.”

“Okay.”

A frown settled on her face as he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her chin with his fingers. “Something wrong?”

“No, it’s fine. I love your parents, but I thought we might spend a quiet night here, just the two of us. We haven’t had much time alone unless we go to my house with Cole being here.”

“I know darlin’, but its just dinner. We’ll have the rest of the night.” His eyes held a twinkle that she started to question. He was up to something. She could see it in his face.

“Where are we going to dinner then so I know what to wear?”

“It’s a surprise, but you might want to wear that little black dress I like so much.”

Her eyebrow rose and she cocked her head to the side. “What are you up to?”

“Me? Nothing.”

She put her hands on her hips with a pretend fierceness as she said, “Yeah right, Chase Robert Wilder.”

“Don’t ruin the surprise, just go with the flow, and I promise I’ll make it up to you later. We still need to find out how you like...” he whispered in her ear and she blushed to the roots of her hair.

“Okay—all right.” She pulled away and headed toward the bathroom with her cheeks pink while he laughed behind her.

An hour later they sat across from his parents at one of the ritziest hotels in Laramie. It was a good thing she did dress up; otherwise she would have been completely out done by the gorgeous man next to her. Chase had dressed to the hilt with his tux shirt, tie, jacket and black Stetson, drawing every female eye in the place, including hers.

They sat at an intimate corner table in a private area of the dining room. The stark white tablecloth, the roses on the top and soft candlelight illuminating the room made her think of romance and

getting him back home in bed with her. It was a totally randy thought with his parents sitting across the table from them. She shifted in her chair as he reached over and nuzzled her ear with his nose.

“I’m thinking the same thing, baby—soon.” His whispered words sent shivers down her arms and a wistful smile across her lips.

Champagne arrived at their table, and she shifted a surprised look at Chase, but he just smiled with those dimples she loved so much. Once their dinner order was placed and they sat talking while they sipped the bubbly liquid, she started to relax. The alcohol and the attention of her escort lulled her into a peaceful state as his fingers caressed her bare arm.

Their meal finally arrived, but they continued to chat and she told his parents about her family and her life in New York.

“I supposed your parents will be visiting you out here,” Bonnie said.

“I’m sure they will. My mom has been anxious to come out anyway and meet Chase.”

“My son said you were married before?”

Her eyes swung around to meet his and she thought she heard him growl, “Mom.” She put her hand on his with a soft “it’s okay” as she turned around and met his mother’s questioning stare. “Yes, I was. My husband was a firefighter in New York. He was killed when the towers were hit.”

“Oh my gosh, Abby. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. It was a while ago and your son has shown me you can love more than one person in your lifetime.” She entwined their fingers together and their eyes met.

He leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. “I think this is a good time. What do you think, Mom?”

Bonnie smiled and nodded her head *yes*.

Abby saw him reach into the breast pocket of his coat and pull out something. Holding it between his fingers, he dropped to one knee at

her feet. She gasped as the diamond solitaire twinkled in the light and her gaze swept up to meet his.

“Abigail, will you marry me?”

Tears filled her eyes and one slipped down her cheek as her heart swelled with love for the handsome man in front of her. Wiping the tear with his thumb, he caressed her cheek with his palm and she choked out a whispered, “Yes.”

## Epilogue

Fall in Wyoming. The bright hues of orange, yellow and red graced the aspen trees brushing against the steeple that reached for the bright blue sky above. Soft organ music echoed through the hall and drifted on the wind outside as the large crowd gathered inside, spilling on the lawn around the front.

It wasn't every day a Wilder got married. It was the social event of the season in these parts. Of course, they didn't need a reason to celebrate in Laramie.

Everyone found a place in the pews while Chase took his spot at the front with Cole and Justin next to him, his proud parents sitting in the first row.

The music started and the doors at the back of the church stood wide and a pretty blonde took her spot and began to slowly walk up the aisle toward them.

Justin jabbed Cole with his elbow as they watched the bridesmaid and maid of honor make their way up the aisle, taking their places across from them. Chase scowled at the two and then turned his gaze back to the rear of the church in anticipation when the bridal march began.

He held his breath for a moment before he exhaled slowly when Abby stepped into the doorway.

*God! She's absolutely beautiful.*

She wrapped her hand into the crook of her father's elbow, and they made their way to his side.

Her eyes met his and he could see the tears sparkling on her lashes as sweet smile curved her lips.

Flashing his dimpled smile, he tucked her hand into his and they stepped up to meet the preacher.

\* \* \* \*

The vows were read while the crowd behind them quietly listened and Abby cradled Chase's hand in hers. They had grown so much closer in the last several months. She almost couldn't remember a time in her life that he wasn't a part of it.

His love surrounded her, healing her broken heart until she could finally feel at peace with the loss of Joshua.

When the preacher finally said, "You may kiss your bride," Chase lifted her filmy veil over her face, slipped his strong arm around her waist and pulled her tight against his chest.

Dimples graced his face when his eyes full of love met hers. Bending his head he whispered, "I love you," before he took her lips softly with his and she whimpered slightly at the tears choking her throat.

When he released her lips, she whispered, "I love you," before they turned to be greeted by the well-wishers in the pews.

Her heart clenched in her chest the moment her eyes met those of the man standing at the back of the church. His soft words met her ears, calming her like nothing else could, and a sad smile graced her lips.

*Be happy Abby,* she heard as he slowly faded from her sight.

# THE END

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She would love to hear from you, so please visit her website at [www.romancestorytime.com](http://www.romancestorytime.com), and feel free to leave feedback about any of her novels that have been released to date.

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