



Too Close

To

THE FIRE

Jaydyn Chelcee

Book Three of the Montana Men Series

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

**Eternal Press**

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Too Close to the Fire

Book Three of The Montana Men Series

\* \* \* \*

"Ha! I'm a damn good pilot."

"Give you a little power, and you're a petrifying terrorist behind the controls!"

"I have excellent piloting skills."

"Oh, yeah? What about all those rough patches, the plane shaking and dropping altitude?"

"Is it my fault there have been several stretches of turbulence? I can't control the weather, for Pete's sake. Besides, I owed you for the 'damnable incident.'"

"What damnable incident?"

"You know what damnable incident."

"I have no idea what you're jabbering about. Stop fooling around with the plane," he yelled. "You're going to kill us!"

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## **Praise for Jaydyn Chelcee's Montana Men Series**

\* \* \* \*

Rating: 4 of 5 Red Roses

*...In the Arms of Danger, Book One of the Series Montana Men...*"This book is set in modern times but gives you flavors of the old west. It is full of twist and turns that keeps you guessing what the next mishap will be. It is full of action and comedy and the story moves along at a fast pace. It is interesting to see the characters overcome their misunderstandings of each other and learn to trust one each another."

*~Larena, Red Roses for Authors Reviews*

Rating: 4.25 of 5

*...In the Arms of Danger, Book One of the Series Montana Men...*"This was a very steamy read with really likable characters and a sound plot line. The author used old western quotes to begin chapters which I liked. She also wove a good bit of Indian chief history into the witty repartee. This was an enjoyable read with more in the series to look forward to."

*~Martha Eskuchen, Posts reviews at Amazon, Romance Junkies Readers Chat Group and Goodreads.*

Rating: 5 of 5 cups

*...No Holds Barred, Book two of the Series Montana Men...*"This book had me spellbound from the very beginning. Ms. Chelcee has written an amazing story that will take you from Reno, Nevada, to Rimrock, Montana, and beyond. Filled

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with laughter, tears, horror, evil, vengeance, and much more, *No Holds Barred* is a thrill ride that will leave you speechless. Once I started, I could not put this book down and when the battery died on my computer, I threw a hissy fit I was so mad! This story will blow your socks off and I only wish I could give it more than a five-cup rating because it certainly deserves it!"

~Danielle, *Coffee Time Romance & More*

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## **Praise for Tabitha Shay's Winslow Witches of Salem series.**

\* \* \* \*

*Witch's Brew:* Love Romances and More Cafe 'Best of 2008' nominee in the Paranormal Romance Book category.

*Witch's Moon:* Nominated for a PEARL Award 2008 for Best All Around Paranormal.

*Witch's Heart:* Nominated for the Red Roses for Authors Christmas Award 2008.

Rating: 5 of 5 Cups

"...this sizzling new book from Tabitha Shay is the third installment in the Winslow witches series. *Witch's Moon* is a heart-stopping thrill a minute roller coaster ride of excitement, drama and suspense. Once again Tabitha Shay spins a story that sucks you up and keeps you on the edge of your seat until the very end."

~Lisa, *Coffee Time Romance*

*Witch's Heart:* A bouquet! That's more than 5 Red Roses

"...this is a powerful story on its own, but it is only a tiny part of the epic unfolding in this brilliant series. I recommend that you read this book only if you want to be hooked on something that is likely to become a craving. If you read one you will be gasping for the next. This author deserves a bouquet of red roses for the sheer scale and brilliance of something like this!"

~Linda, *Red Roses for Authors Reviews*

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Rating: 4 of 5 Hearts

"...the beginning of a wonderful series by author Tabitha Shay and one that is not your typical paranormal story. A wonderful blend of characters and a fast paced storyline keep the readers entertained from start to finish. Ms. Shay delves deep into the paranormal world and delivers a sparkling new twist on the genre with *Witch's Brew*."

~Dawn, Love's Romances and More Reviews

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*Jayden Chelcee*

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**Also by Jaydyn Chelcee:**

\* \* \* \*

The Montana Men Series...

\* \* \* \*

Book One: In the Arms of Danger

Book Two: No Holds Barred

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Jaydyn Chelcee as Tabitha Shay:

The Winslow Witches of Salem Series...

\* \* \* \*

Book One: Witch's Brew

Book Two: Witch's Heart

Book Three: Witch's Moon

Book Four: Witch's Magic

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## Acknowledgements:

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Thank you, Jo Jansen of Beerwah, Australia for your valuable help in answering numerous questions and patiently supplying me with tons of information about Western Australia and correcting my mistakes about your beautiful country as I went along.

Thank you, Lauren Gilbert, Senior Editor at Eternal Press and transplanted Aussie, for taking time away from your busy schedule to answer my questions about Oz. Any mistakes made are my own, and I apologize in advance to the wonderful folks of Australia.

Laura Herbertson, fellow author and my critique partner, thank you for answering my questions about planes and plane crashes. I know I drove you crazy; again, any mistakes are my own.

One final thing...A big hello to the *Out There Group* in Australia, who took Okie Connie under their wings a long time ago.

—Jaydyn Chelcee

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## *Dedication*

\* \* \* \*

Too Close To The Fire  
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This book is dedicated to Ginger Simpson, fellow Eternal Press author, confidant, friend, and one hell of a lady. My life was blessed the day we met online. Also, to Stephanie Parent, my wonderful editor, who works hard to make my writing sound like I intended.

And last, but far from least:

Thank you, Ally Robertson, owner and CEO of Eternal Press, for your continued faith in me as an author and for allowing me the creative freedom to take my stories beyond the usual boundaries, and for all the things you do to make your authors happy.

—Jaydyn Chelcee

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## Chapter One

\* \* \* \*

*There are only two kinds of men—the dead and the deadly.*  
~Helen Rowland

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*  
*The Kimberley*  
*Feb.7, Sat.*

It wasn't pleasant flying with Taylor Spencer.

Even for two people who detested each other, crowded like they were in the cockpit of the plane, a little small talk would certainly help pass the time on such a long flight.

Dianna Remington huffed. Chit-chat with Taylor? Not if she left it up to him. The man had the worst bedside manners. Not that he was a doctor or anything like that. He was the Dancing Star's accountant, but even an accountant needed a decent bedside manner, instead of the hostile, 'Don't-Tread-On-Me' attitude he heaped on her head all the time.

What the hell was wrong with a friendly chat? Ho! Taylor acted as if his jaw was locked in place and it'd take a jack to prize it apart. He had ominous silence down to perfection.

Why?

He loved tormenting her. It was that simple.

She slanted her gaze toward Taylor and sighed. In Dianna's opinion, there was nothing more menacing or more

mysterious than a dark, dangerous, brooding man, unless it was a dark, dangerous, *disgruntled* man. He fit the descriptions to a tee.

Taylor might be silent, but he was also the proverbial spur jabbed up her ass! Too bad she had to share the Cessna's cockpit with him. Dianna tightened her lips. *Thank you, Jace, for the stimulating company seated across from me.*

She really wished her elder brother hadn't insisted she take the accountant with her on the flight to Australia. She'd rather have her tonsils yanked out through her nostrils than have Taylor forced to come with her. But Jace hadn't given either of them a choice. If she flew to Australia to attend Aunt Marion's funeral, then she had to take Taylor with her. No ifs, ands or maybes.

Jace used the excuse that Taylor needed to check the station's books for Raider while they were on *Damnboola Station*, since Raider's own accountant had gone walkabout. She could just imagine her cousin's stern face when she told him she'd brought along the Dancing Star's accountant. Surprise!

Personally, she thought it was Jace's way of getting his irritating new brother-in-law out of his hair. She certainly understood why, she just didn't like being the one on the receiving end of all of Taylor's mute hostility.

"Jace and Raider owe me," she muttered. "Big time."

"What?"

"Ah-ha! He does have a tongue."

"Funny."

Dianna frowned. She didn't know all the details of why Jace and Taylor hadn't hit it off, but there were problems from the moment the two men met.

"Are you planning on looking at the clouds all day?" she asked.

The damn silence was driving her nuts!

"Yep."

He didn't even look at her as he answered, but stared out the window as if said clouds were the most interesting things he'd ever seen. He reminded her of a hot air balloon waiting to blow up in her face. Any minute now, *bang!* No telling how many nasty little pieces of Taylor would rain down on her head.

Why did he have to be so darkly handsome? So damn moody?

And why did he do things he knew annoyed her just for the hell of it? Like now. The way he ignored her got her dander up in a hurry. How anyone spent hours in total, brooding silence was beyond her comprehension. Taylor made misery look easy.

He turned his electric-blue gaze on her and quirked a sable brow. Damn him, he *knew* exactly what she was thinking. Yeah. Now she could add mindreading to the mental list she was keeping of his irritating faults.

Moody.

Brooding.

Silent.

Smug.

Mind reader.

Sonofabitch.

The list grew daily. Hour by hour. Minute by minute.

Did his lips have to twist with such smug satisfaction? She squirmed. Bastard. He knew what he did to her when he turned those piercing blue eyes on her. It was something he'd known from the first time he pulled her on his lap and kissed her—weeks ago now, but she still hadn't recovered from the humiliation he'd dumped on her after the kiss.

*Stupid!*

She'd melted in his arms and responded like some kind of desperate, Victorian old maid starved for a man's attention. He couldn't get rid of her fast enough! Not only had he dropped her on her butt onto the floor, but she'd had the misfortune to overhear his conversation later the same day with his sister. He'd belittled the size of her breasts to Kaycee.

Dianna had known the kiss meant nothing to him. He'd made it plain when he'd said she left him cold, but to poke fun at her figure—or rather lack of one—cut to the quick. Remembering what she'd privately dubbed the 'damnable incident' only hurt, so she tried to shove it from her memory and added "asshole" to her mental list.

Taylor turned away from her and settled deeper in his seat without uttering a word. Dianna sighed. Well, he'd given her a whole nanosecond of his attention. But hey, she gave him credit for staying busy. It was a tough job, but someone had to count the endless miles of fluffy white clouds that soared past the window.

She bet he never thought about the 'damnable incident,' and if he did, he laughed. Yeah, okay. So he didn't like her. She wasn't dense, but his loathing was a lot worse than she realized if he preferred counting clouds to conversation.

Anger and annoyance mingled with frustration. All right! He wanted the flight from Hell? There were ways to make damn certain he got it. She swallowed her hurt and clenched the yoke.

There was nothing she detested more than being treated as though she didn't exist. Dianna huffed, adjusted her headset and mouthpiece, and broke the silence. "It's not my fault Jace made you come with me. Can't you at least talk to me?"

He continued to stare out the window in sullen disregard. "I don't like to talk to you."

*He didn't like to talk to her?* Tough! Her temper shot up another notch. "How would you like it if I exploded into nasty assholes and shit on your head?"

*Yes, sir. Bet that got his attention!*

He turned to face her and cocked a brow. "Are all the assholes going to have a bowel movement at once? Or are we talking about a single little plop—"

"Diarrhea all over you," she snapped. "I believe in letting 'er rip."

He shrugged. "Been shit on by your family before, no virgin there, *babe*."

"Look, I know it's been a long flight," she said, deciding to try and soothe his ruffled feathers. Feathers that had been ruffled since Jace announced Taylor was taking this trip with

her. Since Taylor worked for her brother as the ranch accountant, he'd had little choice if he wanted to keep his job. "We'll land at *Damnboola* in a few hours."

No answer.

She gripped the yoke, imagining her fingers wrapped around Taylor's strong neck. "Say *something!*"

"I don't think strangling it to death will force words from it."

Dianna slanted a narrow-eyed look at him. She hadn't realized she was actually choking the yoke until his amused words. His lips twitched before he turned away. Oh, now he found his voice and a sense of humor after she made a ninny of herself. Miserable, horrible, man!

She curved her lips into a saccharine smile. Damn if she'd let him see how his attitude aggravated her. "You have anything else you'd like to share with me? Words of wisdom? Questions?" She batted her lashes.

Crap! He was coming back with something nasty, something worse than her diarrhea. She saw the way his eyes lit with pure glee. She'd left herself wide open. Wretched man!

"Is there a door nearby I can open and shove you out? No parachute, of course."

She gasped. "Well, really! Is the problem between us that serious?"

"I don't like you or any one of your three brothers. Yeah, it's a pretty big problem. The sooner I can boot you out the door the better."

"I'm your pilot. You might at least fake civility. I could crash us, you know."

*Ooh*, he knew how to rile her temper! She'd had it with him, starting all the way back to when he'd scorned her breasts. He was going to pay for every snide comment he'd ever made about her or to her. She didn't care if he liked her or not. None of her brothers had done anything to him, well, except for Jace marrying Taylor's sister, but jeez, it wasn't as if Jace had twisted Kaycee's arm.

Yeah, okay, she knew Jace had done some sorry-ass things to Kaycee, like hiring her to muck out the stables when she was a qualified horse trainer and making her pregnant, but that was their business. They were happy now.

The point was you *never* pissed off the pilot.

She dipped the wings, curling her lips with satisfaction when Taylor gripped the seat. Ha! That'd teach him to mess with the one in control.

His face turned pasty. He flung her a calculated look filled with steely-eyed retribution. Dianna smiled. She had his undivided attention now. "Oh, yes, sweet revenge is indeed sweet," she cooed.

"Revenge, my ass, lady. You're a winged terrorist! You're asking for it, and one day soon, I'm going to give you exactly what you've been after since the day we met."

"And that would be?" She gave him a toothy smile.

"Fuck you."

"Whau?" Dianna felt the color drain from her face. Her mouth worked, but for the life of her she couldn't get another word past her dry lips. Was he was saying he was going to

fuck her, or was he being his usual snotty self? Damn if she was going to ask for clarification.

Dianna licked her dry lips and swallowed hard. "On second thought, don't talk to me. I like you better silent."

She rocked the wings side to side for emphasis and lifted a finely arched brow. "I can't say I much like you, either. But we're stuck with each other. We could at least be civil to one another."

He snorted. "You call pranking with the aircraft civil?"

Her brows puckered. He'd spent half the flight with his fingers clamped onto the edge of the seat. Talk about paranoia. One might think he had no faith in her flying skills.

"Ha! I'm a damn good pilot."

"Give you a little power, and you're a petrifying terrorist behind the controls!"

"I have excellent piloting skills."

"Oh, yeah? What about all those rough patches, the plane shaking and dropping altitude?"

"Is it my fault there have been several stretches of turbulence? I can't control the weather, for Pete's sake. Besides, I owed you for the 'damnable incident.'"

"What damnable incident?"

"You know what damnable incident."

"I have no idea what you're jabbering about. Stop fooling around with the plane," he yelled. "You're going to kill us!"

She frowned as Taylor continued to grip the seat. His chest rose and fell in short, sporadic pants. Sweat trickled down the side of his stubborn jaw. A white ring circled his tight lips.

He'd gone from pasty-gray to puke-green in zero point three seconds flat.

Oh, good Lord, he looked like he was going to puke! For her own sake, she stopped rocking the plane's wings. "You aren't going to hyperventilate or hurl your cookies, are you? Because I'm warning you, I don't have a single barf bag aboard."

Taylor flung an odious glare her way. "I'm not so uncivilized as to hurl my cookies. *I'm* civil!" He choked the word past tightly drawn lips. "You *Remingtons* don't know the meaning of the word."

Dianna flinched. He bit off the name "Remington" like he was spitting bullets. The scorn on his dark face wounded. His eyes looked as frosty as the Antarctic landscape.

"Isn't it enough your brother forced me to take this damn trip with you? Do you have to try to kill me in this tin box, too?"

She bit her lip. He was right. She shouldn't have dipped the wings. It was irresponsible. Childish. Beneath her.

Bull! She owed him that one.

Still, it was a lousy thing to do to her passenger. Especially knowing the terrible automobile accident he'd been in a year ago with his sister. Dianna told herself she was above petty revenge. She should feel ashamed. She did feel ashamed.

"Sorry," she offered.

"Bitch!"

Huh! So much for civility.

The back of her eyelids stung. She tilted her chin. Stubborn pride kept her from tearing up and bawling. "It's

taken me years to become the perfect bitch. I practice every morning in the mirror to get this good. I'm rather proud of my accomplishment. But hey, don't talk to me."

"Wasn't planning on it."

Dianna sighed. She was happy Jace had met and married Kaycee. She adored her new sister-in-law, but Kaycee's brother lacked a lot in the charm department. No wonder Jace wanted Taylor's happy ass gone from Dancing Star. What a sourpuss!

When Taylor first arrived at Dancing Star Ranch, he'd been a paraplegic. Just because he'd been confined to a wheelchair hadn't lessened the fact he was drop-dead gorgeous or sexy as hell, with those dreamy blue eyes and that sensual mouth he knew how to use. He was the best kisser she'd ever known.

His body was rock hard. Months of physical therapy kept his muscles toned. His biceps bulged. His thighs looked as powerful as an oak. When he looked at her, something deep inside her recognized the sinister darkness in his soul. Like a moth drawn to a flame, she'd fluttered straight into the fire, attracted to him in spite of knowing she'd get her wings incinerated.

Unfortunately, he felt nothing for her except contempt and hatred, all because he didn't like Jace.

Taylor made it plain from the beginning he didn't want to be at the ranch, even though it had been necessary for Kaycee to get out of Reno fast to escape the wrath of the heinous serial killer, Smitt Davis.

But Jace and Taylor rubbed each other the wrong way from the beginning.

Dianna cut her gaze at him. Yep. No wonder he irritated her. Taylor was back to counting clouds. Busy man.

She looked around the small cockpit, desperate for something to occupy her mind. She fiddled with the controls, paid extra attention to the sweet hum of the engines, and silently approved their droning music. Time crawled by in degrees. It was enough to put her to sleep.

Dianna brooded like a sitting hen, until she couldn't stand the quiet any longer. *Silence* was the pits! "There's a thermos of coffee under your seat if you'd like a cup," she offered sweetly.

There. It hadn't hurt her to extend an olive branch. From now on, she'd kill him with kindness. She'd sugarcoat every word. She'd behave and not rock the aircraft's wings. Besides, she could use a shot of caffeine or she was going to fall asleep in all this wonderful silence.

Without a word, Taylor retrieved the travel mug that came with the thermos and filled it with the steaming brew. He blew on it, then took a slow sip. Smacking his lips, he took a second and third swallow and sighed. Dianna waited patiently for him to offer her a cup.

Fourth and fifth chug, smack, sigh.

And she waited....

Okay, waiting was as bad as non-talking silence. She squirmed. Blast it! She wanted a cup of coffee. Did she have to beg?

Six, seven, and eight, smack, sigh.

And he called her a terrorist? She really hated the man! "I could use a cup of that," she said between her teeth.

Kindness. Kindness. She must remember to be kind. No rocking the plane's wings, no loop-de-loops, no matter how much he incited her wrath.

He ignored her request.

*Grrr!*

"I said I could use a cup of coffee, too."

He shrugged. "You're driving." Turning his face, he stared out the side glass. "Stunning clouds," he observed, as though their heavenly beauty held him spellbound. "I don't think I've ever seen any lovelier, so crisp and white, nice and fluffy."

"Uh-huh. Anyone ever tell you you're an asshole?"

"Not lately. You plan to change it?"

Ninth and tenth, smack, sigh.

"This isn't a race car, Spencer. It's a frickin' plane! I'm not driving. I'm flying. I don't see a stop sign anywhere, don't see a danger zone. Pour me a damn cup of coffee, before I crash this thing...and I'll be picky." She sent him a look filled with spite. "I swear I'll crash it all on *your* side."

He shot her a look. "Don't make jokes about something like that."

"Who's joking?"

"Honestly, Dianna, you're becoming a bore."

She ground her teeth and muttered beneath her breath.

"Oops. Did you just call me 'asshole' again?"

She batted her lashes at him and bared her teeth like a shark. "If the shoe fits..."

He eyed her for so long she started to fidget. Slowly, his gaze drifted from her face and lingered on her chest. "You know, you'd be kinda cute if you weren't so mean and had a decent pair of boobs."

*She might be kinda cute? Jeez! What an ass!*

Dianna's temper soared up the chart and into the red zone. She tightened her grip on the yoke and battled to keep from reading him the riot act. Okay, so her breasts were small. He'd made it perfectly clear how he felt about them. That was just it; he had no feelings for them at all. "I might not have generous breasts—"

He snorted.

"—but what I have are real and not stuffed with silicone or whatever the hell surgeons are poking inside women's breasts these days."

"I like silicone."

"You would."

"What?"

"Never mind, Spencer. Forget the coffee, I don't want it anymore."

He gave her the same toothy grin she'd given him. "No problem. It's forgotten, kitten."

Dianna shot a glance at her breasts. She'd never worried much about their size until Taylor came along with his pointed remarks. She filled a thirty-four B cup nicely with a little left over. What did he want, for God's sake, a double E cup? "Men!" she blurted. "All you think about is a woman's tits!"

"It's not all I think about. You have other parts that snag my curiosity from time to time."

She gasped and flashed him an annoyed look. "I suppose when you were crippled and all, *thinking* about anything else was all you could do. I doubt even now certain parts of your anatomy function properly."

His top lip curled. He raked her with a look she could only describe as feral. Damn if he didn't remind her of a wolf, a hungry predator that had her pinned under his claws with every intention of relishing a slow meal.

"Anytime you want to put your theory to the test, kitten, I'll be happy to oblige." His hot gaze shifted to her bare legs. "Anytime."

She wished now she'd worn something else, instead of the short red skirt that kept crawling up to her thighs. The tiny thong rubbing her clit felt like soft velvet. She squirmed. Lord, she needed to get laid. Dianna darted a considering glance at Taylor. Uh-uh. No way. Wasn't happening. He'd gobble her up and spit out the pieces. Her heart would never survive a relationship with Taylor Spencer.

It was all she could do to keep from tugging on the hem and dragging it back to her knees, not that it would reach them, but she felt like trying.

Icy contempt replaced the feral heat in his eyes. "You have no worries," he snapped. "I'm sure most men are completely turned off by your face and your figure. Your legs aren't any more enticing than your boobs. Don't bother trying to pull down the skirt—I'm not remotely tempted."

Dianna stilled her nervous fingers. "Then stop looking," she said in a tiny voice. God, did he have to hammer home the

fact he couldn't stand anything about her? Talk about a punch below the belt. *Nice shot, Spencer. What's your encore?*

She couldn't look at him or else she'd burst into tears. He was King of 'slap-you-down-and-trample-on-you.' She should have known better than to try and fight him on his level.

Dianna kept her gaze pinned straight ahead on the fabulous clouds he found so fascinating.

*Don't cry! Don't give him the satisfaction of breaking you again. Just because he managed to make you cry once before with his cheap shots, don't let it happen a second time. You know he's a jerk.*

She blinked away the tears stinging her eyes and inhaled deeply. Well, score one for the no longer silent man. When he decided to crawl out of his shell, he knew how to punch a wallop. But then, he'd been slugging her with insults for weeks. He'd made her life a living hell in Montana. She should be used to his cutting words by now.

Defeated, Dianna allowed her shoulders to slump. She knew she was no raving beauty, but she wasn't an ugly witch, either. She squared her shoulders. All right. Let him have it his way. No more small talk. She wasn't a masochist.

The quiet bubbled and brewed until it grew into a monster. It ate away at the cramped space of the cockpit. Tension danced around them like streaks of jagged lightning.

Dianna drew a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Jesus, even the walls of the plane seemed to breathe with her, expand and shrink, expand and shrink. It was like waiting for a ticking bomb to go off. Any minute now, the cockpit would explode, and she'd be seated beneath a boiling mushroom

cloud, trapped in the fallout of the nuclear heat.

Claustrophobia in the cockpit was a new sensation, one that left her miserable.

She turned her attention to the instrument panel and double-checked everything. The only thing she wanted now was to land the plane and get as far away from Taylor as she could, before she shamed herself and burst into tears. She didn't think her ego could take much more bruising.

*Boom!*

Abruptly the tense quiet exploded with the bone-chilling blast. Dianna jerked. "Oh, shit," she screamed.

Taylor jumped, spilling hot coffee on his jeans. "What the hell was that?"

Brushing at the wetness spreading across his crotch, he sucked in a sharp breath. "Fuck, you think my dick is so useless you try to scald it off?"

"Jesus," Dianna muttered. That was a real blast, not one from her imagination. Flames burst from the left front wing. Black smoke boiled into the clouds. The left engine coughed and died.

Taylor's eyes flashed blue fire. "Stop pranking with the plane, Dianna. It's not funny. I didn't know planes backfired, but stop messing around. I mean it."

"Birds."

"What?"

"They flew into the propellers."

"You're kidding!"

"I would not kid about something like that, Spencer. Oh, God!" She whipped her head to her left and gasped. "Part of

the left propeller just flew off. And there goes the other half!" She dared a glance at Taylor. He was staring at her as if she'd suddenly grown a third eye.

Her nerves twisted into a sick knot. Her bowels loosened. She thought for sure she was going to discharge the explosive diarrhea she'd threatened Taylor with earlier. Her bladder screamed with sudden fullness. Her breath rose to the back of her throat and sealed off her airway like a wedge of cement.

This was so not good!

The 1985, twin-propeller Cessna she was flying was big enough to carry five passengers, plus her, and a passenger up front. They were at least six thousand feet. The inevitable crash was going to take several minutes—an eternity—but this was a small plane. What were their odds of survival? Not much.

*Boom!*

Taylor slanted a suspicious glance at her. "Are you going to tell me that was birds, too?"

"*That,*" she said faintly, clenching the yoke as wave after wave of terror washed over her, "is the 'voice' of trouble!"

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## Chapter Two

\* \* \* \*

*A divorce is like an amputation; you survive, but there's less of you.*

*~Margaret Atwood*

*(Time Magazine, Mar. 19, 1973)*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb. 5*

*Thurs. 10:00 a.m.*

Lacey Blackstone unfolded the legal document her attorney had presented to her the day before and tried to ignore the dull ache deep in her soul. She stared at the stamped letters: Divorce Granted. Final.

With those three little words, three years of marriage had ended. She blinked back the tears stinging her eyelids. Since December, her life had fallen apart. She felt like she'd been on a runaway train headed downhill all the way.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she wondered if she'd tried a little harder, if she could have made a bigger mess of things. Why had she ignored the signs Danger was unhappy? She should have seen, but she'd been too wrapped up in her career. Well, one paid the price for such ignorance.

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Folding the papers, she took time to make certain they were nice and neat and returned them to the envelope. She shoved it inside her purse with unsteady hands. There was a duplicate for Danger as well. He'd be happy now. He wanted his freedom. He had it.

She drew in a deep breath and looked around. Well. What to do? She glanced around the kitchen with the bright yellow walls she'd painted herself when she and Danger first married. She'd wanted warmth and sunshine to reflect in their home. Their life.

Not much left here but bitter memories. Boxes filled with the items she wanted were stacked in the hall and guest bedroom. Another day, and she'd have everything packed she intended to take with her. The big question was where the hell was she going?

*Guest bedroom.*

Pain slashed her heart. She'd been the only guest in that bedroom since Christmas. If anyone had ever told her that her marriage to Danger wouldn't last, she'd have laughed in their faces.

They had fallen in love so fast and out of love faster. She had no illusions left. This phase of her life was over. Done. Dead. The end!

"Might as well accept I can't make him love me."

It was a moot point anyway. The last year she and Danger were together, she'd struggled to keep their marriage intact. Ultimately, she'd lost the battle before it began. There had been too many unknown elements behind the destruction.

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Now, it no longer mattered because there were even stronger elements to keep them apart.

Lacey sighed and set a full box packed with her underwear to one side. The marriage was dead. Even if she wanted to, she wouldn't try to make it work anymore. She slid her palm across her stomach in a protective gesture. No. There was no going back. Not now. Not ever!

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## Chapter Three

\* \* \* \*

*Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you.*

*~Carl Gustav Jung*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 7, Sat.*

"Define trouble," Taylor said, panic rising in his voice inside the cockpit. "Trouble is my appendix rupturing or my asshole exploding. You know, diarrhea, something you're apparently fond of, but the front of the plane is on fire. That's more than a little 'trouble.'" He ripped her apart with his hateful gaze. "Dammit, I knew you were a winged terrorist! All you need are scales and you'd be a mean-ass dragon."

Dianna bit her lip. "Technically, the front of the plane isn't on fire, just my left engine."

"Technically, I don't give a shit! What's happening?"

"You're so smart, Spencer," Dianna cracked, clutching the yoke tighter, "you figure it out."

The aircraft bounced around, shaking violently as it hit pockets of air.

Taylor swore savagely. "Okay, the little thing you did with the wings wasn't funny, but this really is not funny. See? I'm not laughing. This is me being serious. So stop trying to scare

me. Please God, let this be another one of her mean pranks. Let the vicious witch be joking."

Dianna cut her eyes toward him. "Are you praying out loud? About me?"

"Yes. Something wrong with that?"

"It gives me the creeps, especially the part about the vicious witch. You gotta make up your mind. Am I a witch or a winged terrorist?"

"Both! You're a terrifying witch, part devil, part dragon!"

The plane's right engine coughed.

Taylor looked horrified, his eyes wild. Sweat poured down his face. "I can't face death again. The last time I was injured was a nightmare. So cut it out, Dianna! Your childish pranks are getting old, fast."

"I'm not doing this on purpose, Taylor."

"Please, God, You and I know she's rabid. She's just trying to scare me."

"*Pu...lease*. Do you really think I equipped the plane with fly-away parts and a free fireworks display?"

Taylor eyed her. "For God's sake, woman, you're panting like you're about to give birth."

"So are you!"

"I mean it," he snapped. "You've had your fun." He made a sharp motion with his hand toward the front of the plane. "Start the engine back. You don't have to crash us just to force me to talk to you. I'll talk to you. Hell, I'll burn your ears with twenty-four-hour-a-day conversation. I'll give you every cup of coffee you ask for. Start the friggin' motor!"

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Dianna rolled her eyes, took a slow, deep breath, and adjusted her mouthpiece. "Mayday! Mayday! This is C-flight eight-seven-five-three-one. Repeat. C-flight eight-seven-five-three-one. Mayday! Mayday! Anyone in the area, my location is," she hesitated, darted a glance at the nice, sturdy instrument panel and groaned. None of the dials were working.

Taylor traced her hopeful gaze to the instrument panel. "Shit! What does that mean? All those hands frozen, what does it mean?" He pointed at the dials.

"It means we're really screwed without benefit of pleasure."

He jumped as the plane's nose shot down, leveled off, and then the aircraft simply dropped into sailing mode. "That felt peculiar."

"Change in gravity, leaves you with that zero feeling in your gut, like speeding over a hill on a highway and suddenly dropping into a dip. As a rule, lightweight planes don't nosedive into a crash at hundreds of miles an hour, thank God, but the landing isn't going to be pretty. Fasten your seatbelt, Spencer."

Taylor snorted. "You really think it's going to make a difference?"

"It might."

"Not likely."

"Fasten your damn seatbelt!"

He ignored her.

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"Fine! Get your ass killed! Mayday! Mayday! This is Dianna Remington. I have two souls aboard. We're going down somewhere in the Kimberly."

Taylor gave a short laugh. "*Somewhere* in the Kimberly?"

Dianna ignored him and whispered a prayer as the aircraft lost altitude. It glided toward the wild terrain below. Closer. Closer. Even without power, the gradual descent was much faster than she wanted. Nothing was going to be easy about the crash when it came. Okay. Okay. She had to think. Think! Wheels up. Hold it steady. Keep it level. Level! Avoid trees.

There were trees, way too many trees. She frowned. Why were there trees? This wasn't right. Shit! She might have managed a half-assed decent landing in the desert, but not in this infestation of—of...*jungle*?

As her brothers were fond of saying, "It wasn't the flying that killed you, but the takeoff or landing."

If Taylor and she survived the impact, chances of rescue were going to be slim. She couldn't say with any degree of certainty where they were, but she knew damn well they shouldn't be crashing into a rainforest.

Fear surged through her and gripped her in its terrifying claws. Her heart skipped a beat, maybe several, she didn't know. Dizziness swept over her like the icy fingers of death.

Realizing she was holding her breath, Dianna exhaled slowly. Her voice cracked, "Last known location, Western Australia, five hun—hundred mi—miles southeast of Broome and ah—eight hundred miles so—south of Darwin."

Taylor shot her a look filled with incredulity. "That certainly narrowed it down."

"Don't be sarcastic. It's the best I can do, Spencer. Western Australia's big. I don't know where we are, but I don't think we're in the heart of it."

"Cut it out," he ordered. "It isn't funny." He held onto the dash with both hands.

"I know. I'm sorry I made the crack about crashing the plane. Ow!" She jerked the headphone off her head.

"What?"

Crackles and static filled the cockpit; then the radio went dead. Dianna stared at the headphone.

"No use staring at it as if you're holding a spitting cobra in your hands."

She shot Taylor a look she knew was bound to be filled with fear. From the whiteness etching his mouth, she figured he understood they were in a bad way. His remarks to her about it all being a joke was his way of denying they faced death. She gave a helpless shrug.

His entire body shook.

*Her* entire body shook.

Worse, the plane's tube-like body shook, which made them shake even worse.

Taylor yanked the small transmitter from her fingers with trembling hands. "Help! Help! Somebody help us! I'm being held prisoner by a lunatic pilot! She's going to crash the plane right after she shits all over me!"

Dianna burst into hysterical laughter. "That is so not funny."

"No? Then why are you laughing?"

She gaped at him, eyes wide with disbelief. "Because I'm crazier than you? For heaven's sake, this is not a joke! Give me the damn thing. It's dead."

"Who's joking? You're right. You're crazy as a brain-dead spider on a hot rock. I thought I might as well join you in your insanity."

"I'm crazy? You're way ahead of me, Spencer."

"I didn't threaten to crash the plane."

"Hang on!"

"To *what*?"

"Your ass, if you can reach it."

The cold look in his eyes said it all. If they survived the crash, he was going to kill her.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor didn't want to die. But the idea wasn't nearly as distasteful as the thought of pain. He'd had a year of pain. Surgery.

Pain.

Grueling physical therapy.

More pain. More physical therapy.

Hell, Dianna was right. His dick hadn't worked in over a year, at least not when it came to getting hard. Up until a few days ago, he'd had a tube shoved up his penis just so he could piss. He didn't have either worry now. He pissed without problem. The raging hard-on he got every time Dianna twitched her pretty little ass under his nose told him his cock worked just fine. His legs? Not so good, but getting better.

He'd barely regained the use of his legs when Jace ordered him to Australia with Dianna, all because of some aunt who'd suddenly died from a massive heart attack. So here he was, he thought glumly, stuck with the last female he ever wanted to be trapped with, and it looked like he'd die with her, too.

What if his legs were re-injured in the crash? Or, God forbid, what if he ended up with no legs at all? Shit! Why'd he have to go and think of something like that? Being crippled was bad enough. It hadn't just impinged his physical abilities. It had done a number on him mentally, too.

He'd treated his sister like crap for over a year, laying guilt trips on Kaycee for the car accident. Blaming her for their father committing suicide had been cruel and unjust.

Taylor sighed, disgusted with the things he'd said to his sister. He'd hear the asshole words pipe out of his mouth, and it was as if he turned into someone else, as if it wasn't him making accusations, him, angry all the time. Worse, he'd resented her and anyone else who tried to help him.

And now he was going to die before he got the chance to apologize to Kaycee.

Death. He couldn't escape the word.

Taylor blasted Dianna with a fierce glare. This was all her fault. She'd jinxed them with her threat to crash the plane. He slid his gaze over her hands. Her fingers were wrapped around the yoke so tight her knuckles looked like bleached bone. She had to be as terrified as he felt. They were losing altitude by slow degrees, a miserably long time to anticipate dying.

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

She alone struggled to keep the plane level so they'd land smoothly. No matter what she did, it was going to be a belly-flop. Without power and landing gear, there was no way she could manage a smooth landing, not with the rough terrain rushing toward them.

He drew a sharp breath. Why did she always bring out the worst in him? The woman rubbed him nine times to Sunday the wrong way. It was those exotic, cat-green eyes of hers. A man could drown in the vast ocean of her eyes. And her soft lips. He'd tasted them once, touched her breasts once, and suckled the tight, coral-tipped nipples. *Once*. Lord! Taylor wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. *Once* had only whetted his appetite.

Dammit, he didn't want to die, not until he'd thoroughly sampled her. Not until he'd had the opportunity to trace his tongue along the curve of her delicate, shell-like ears, taste every flawless inch of her smooth skin, and bury his cock between her thighs, at least once.

Sex hadn't been a part of his life for over a year—closer to two years, actually. If they somehow lived through this crash, by God he was going to fuck Dianna. Not only would it take the edge off his needs, he figured it was no more than he owed Jace for screwing Kaycee and making her pregnant.

A screw for a screw sounded good to him. Getting even with Jace was a bonus. Taylor refused to listen to his conscience. By no means was he looking for a relationship with Dianna; simple justice for the wrong done to his sister worked just fine.

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Getting emotionally involved with the Remington Princess would be tantamount to committing suicide. As far as he was concerned, she was a piranha, a onetime deal between the sheets, and a means to settle the score.

He looked at her, saw the terror on her pale face and swore softly. Hell, he didn't have to be a jerk at a time like this. She was scared. Shit, so was he. But he was a man, and as such, he could at least offer her comfort.

Taylor leaned across the cockpit and placed his shaking hands over hers. She gave him a wild look mingled with gratitude. Tears filled her lovely eyes. Her beautiful mouth trembled. "I'm sorry." She gripped his fingers. "We're going down," she said in a shaky voice.

"I know." He clenched his teeth. "All I ask is that you don't break both my legs in the landing, or my back—been there, done that."

She gave a watery laugh. "I swear I won't. Hold on to me. I don't want to die alone."

He leaned as close as possible and drew her face protectively against his chest. "Don't look, baby."

Dianna buried her face deeper against his chest. "No. I won't look. I don't want to see death coming at us."

\* \* \* \*

The plane glided so smoothly, Dianna could hardly believe what was about to happen, but she knew when they hit the trees and concealed rocks, the aircraft would shear apart.

Dianna held her breath. Her heart beat so frantically, it hurt. Her lungs ached for air. It would have been nice to

settle things with Taylor before they died. Too bad there was so little time left them. Too bad she wanted him, and he detested her.

*Wanted him?*

Shit, was she in love with the big jerk? How could she be in love with such an asshole?

"Here it comes," he whispered.

He tightened his hold on her, tilted her face to his. "Look at me, Dianna."

"Taylor."

She lifted her gaze to the window. Everything was such a blur rushing toward them. Her breath hitched.

"No, sweetheart, look only at me. Dianna, look at me!"

She turned her head, locked her gaze with his.

"That's my girl." Slowly, he settled his mouth on hers. Her breath caught. Oh, yeah. She was definitely a goner. She'd been a goner for months now. Why had he waited so long to kiss her again?

His lips felt feather soft, gentle, yet utterly ravaging. Never had she felt anything as good as his warm mouth possessing hers. Dianna sighed with contentment and surrendered her heart into his care. This kiss would have to last her a lifetime and beyond. She dug her fingers in the front of his shirt and hung on.

*BAM!*

Dianna felt the jolt in every muscle and bone. She was brutally wrenched from Taylor's arms. He grunted, hurled to his right and then back against his seat.

"Taylor!"

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"Here. I'm right here."

Metal crunched and screeched in agony. Everything about the plane snarled in protest, a wounded beast fighting to its last breath. The only thing they could do was ride the ride.

Glass imploded around them. Hundreds of shiny pieces shot through the air. Dianna flung her arms across her face. The plane jerked hard to the right. Luggage flipped toward them, tossing and tumbling like paper in the wind.

The blunt corner of a suitcase slammed into Taylor's left shoulder. She heard his moan and prayed it hadn't broken his collarbone or shoulder. White-hot pain pierced her left leg above her knee. Something sharp and lethal gouged her right shoulder.

Dianna screamed.

Taylor grabbed her, closed his arms tight around her shoulders, but still she felt every bone-snapping, teeth-jarring bite of pain.

The plane whipped into a wild tailspin, tossing them about like flotsam in a stormy sea. Torn from Taylor's arms a second time, Dianna tried desperately to get a hold on the yoke, but her fingers slipped off, too slick with sweat for her to latch on to it. "Oh, God. Oh, God."

The aircraft raced on in its destructive path, plowing through the underbelly of the rainforest. The wings *popped* and sheared off as the plane punched its way past a blur of huge red rocks. Tree limbs snapped and broke as easily as matchsticks.

It burrowed through the tangled underbrush on its jagged, crumpled belly. Gallons of scarlet dirt splattered on what was

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left of the windshield and body. Uprooted bushes, leaves, and vines sailed through the air like sombreros at fiesta time.

Dianna looked up in time to see a gigantic tree in their path, shocking in its majesty, deadly in its bearing. She braced herself for the inevitable impact. *Oh, my God! This is it! The end! God, forgive me my sins.*

The aircraft slammed head-on into the tree. Something hit her hard on the forehead. White-hot pain beat through her skull like a hammer crushing rock.

The nose of the plane groaned and crunched and crumpled toward her at warp speed. Then everything stilled, except for the incredible noise of squawking, exotic birds screeching their protests at the fact their peaceful homes were under attack.

Then there was nothing but an obscene sound of deadly silence...

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## Chapter Four

\* \* \* \*

*Build a man a fire, and he'll be warm for a day. Set a man on fire, and he'll be warm for the rest of his life.*

*~Terry Pratchett*

\* \* \* \*

*Prairie Dog, Montana*

*Feb. 6*

*Fri. 4:15 p. m.*

"I now pronounce you man and wife."

Sheriff Danger Blackstone of Rimrock, Montana grinned and kissed his new bride. The ink on his divorce papers from Lacey was barely dry, and here he was, marrying Karen. Not marrying, no. Married. Deed done.

She laughed as he grabbed her hand, and they hurried out of the little church to his Jeep. He paused a moment to kiss his bride again, then helped her inside the vehicle.

Danger settled in the driver's seat and groaned when he heard Gertie Mae Crossman, his dispatcher, key the mike. Not now! His radio dispatcher had the damndest timing.

"Sheriff Blackstone, you there?"

He grabbed the mike. "What is it, Gertie?"

"Uh, you sound breathless, Danger. What are you doing?"

*Breathless?*

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He glanced toward his bride. Yeah. He guessed he was a bit breathless. He had a hot date with a motel bed waiting less than half a mile down the road. He put the Jeep in drive and turned north.

Karen grinned at him, fumbled with his zipper and freed his straining cock. "Look what I found," she said softly and licked her lips.

He moaned and nearly ran off the road when she curled her fingers around his hard length and stroked it. God, he couldn't wait to get inside her. If he wasn't careful, he'd come before they ever reached their room.

"Go ahead, Gertie. What's up?" *Besides my aching dick.*

He thrust his fingers in Karen's soft, short golden curls and watched her lower her head to his lap. She licked and nibbled the broad head of his cock. He knew from experience it wouldn't take her long to get him off.

She glided her tongue up and down the hard length, teasing him before finally engulfing the head. Danger caught his breath on a sharp inhalation and slowly exhaled. "Jesus! Sweetheart, you're killing me."

"You say something, Sheriff?" Gertie Mae's voice sounded shaky.

Danger frowned. Karen muttered something about getting rid of the old hag and laughed. She toyed and teased and sucked his dick until he thought he'd explode with pleasure.

"Shit," he whispered. "Karen, stop before I—"

*Too late!*

Karen's soft groans of pleasure sent shafts of heat raging through his blood. His balls. She was like a kitten lapping at him. A sexy, hungry kitten.

"You there, Danger?"

"Uh—I'm a—little—bit busy, Gertie." His breath caught on a hitch as Karen moaned and sucked harder.

"Uh—Gertie? What's going on? Gertie?"

"Danger?" She sounded as breathless as he did. He'd bet it wasn't for the same reason. He clenched his teeth to keep from shouting his pleasure.

His radio dispatcher never dragged out news. If she was hesitant to give him the reason she'd radioed him, then it was serious. Shit!

Karen raised her head, her ice-blue eyes sparkling. She laughed softly and motioned for him to get off the radio. He shrugged.

"Come on, Gertie Mae. I don't have time for your games today."

Gertie keyed the radio again. "Are you very far from your ranch? How long ago did you leave there?"

"For God's sake, Gertie," Danger moaned, watching his bride tuck his cock out of sight and zip his pants. "I left Lacey around noon. I'm in the next county, at least an hour away. Why?"

"You'd better get home, Sheriff. There's been an apparent homicide."

"What!" For a moment, his heart leaped to his throat. "What's happened? Is Lacey all right?"

Lacey. Something had happened to Lacey.

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He pulled the Jeep over to the side of the road and inhaled deeply. No matter what went on with Lacey, it was no longer his business. He glanced at Karen, saw her frown at him. Fuck! She'd be pissed at him now.

"What is it, Gertie? What's happened?" Danger pushed his fingers through his hair and swore softly. As sheriff, he had to know what was going on in and around Rimrock.

"I don't know, Sheriff, something about Lacey. You need to get to your ranch as soon as possible."

"I'm on my way." He tossed the mike aside and swore beneath his breath.

"What's wrong?"

"Fuck! I don't know." Danger pounded the steering wheel. "Something about Lacey. Knowing her, she probably found a spider and wants it removed from the house."

"Do you think she knows about us getting married? Maybe it's her way to get you back to the ranch."

He pulled Karen closer and took his time kissing her. Whatever was going on with Lacey could wait a few more minutes. Hell, he'd just gotten married. He wanted to fuck his new wife. Slowly, reluctantly, he freed Karen's mouth. "It's a little late for that, don't you think?"

"What?" she asked. Her pale blue eyes were glazed with passion, her mouth swollen from his hungry kisses.

He rubbed her belly where his baby nestled snug and warm. Her stomach was already distended in her fifth month. "For Lacey to get me back. Besides, she and I are divorced. It's final. You're my wife now. I'm not a part of her life

anymore. She sure as hell isn't part of mine. I can't fucking stand the sight of her."

He started the Jeep and pulled back onto the highway.

"Then why are you hurrying toward Rimrock? Are you sure you don't still love her?"

"I detest her. I'm going because Gertie thinks there's been a crime committed. It's my job. I have to go. I figure Lacey called Gertie and was overdramatic about some silly something. I'll drop you off at the motel. I'll come back as soon as I can."

"No. If Lacey is being overdramatic, then take some time with me. We just got married. She can wait."

Danger grinned and pressed a kiss to her hand. "That sounds like a plan to me. I think we can take an hour."

She arched a brow.

"Or two." He laughed softly. "My days of running to Lacey's rescue to get her ass out of a jam are finished."

Karen nodded. "Good. When our two hours are up, I'm going with you to the ranch." She rubbed her swollen belly. "I think it's time she sees our baby is a fact. I intend to make it clear to her she no longer has a claim on you and has no business calling the Sheriff's Office to try and get your attention."

"What? No. I don't think it's a good idea for you to go to the ranch yet. Lace is still there. I don't want you and her having words. She's not exactly overjoyed I've been sleeping with you for over a year or that I got you pregnant."

"I'm coming with you. She has to face me sooner or later. She has no choice but to accept the fact *I'm* your wife, and I'm going to have your baby whether she likes it or not."

Danger caressed the shiny gold band he'd slipped on Karen's finger only minutes earlier. "She isn't going to like the fact I married you as soon as the divorce was final either."

"What do you care what she likes or dislikes anymore? I'm the one you have to please now. Not her."

"I *don't* care what Lacey thinks. I just don't want any trouble out of her. I don't want you hurt." He looped his fingers with hers and sighed. "Okay. You can come with me. Hopefully she'll be ready to leave by the time we get there, or already gone. She's supposed to be out of the house by six this evening."

"Where is she going?"

"Don't know. Don't care. She's leaving, and that's all that matters. I don't ever want to see her again. I just want her gone. You're all I care about, you and this baby."

"Good. I can't wait to move in with you."

He laughed softly. "If she isn't out by the time we get there, *she* can stay at a motel. You're moving in the house tonight with me. It's where you belong."

"Really? Oooh. I can't wait to redecorate the inside."

"Redecorate? Lacey has it fixed up nice inside."

"It's decorated to her tastes. I want to leave my own mark, erase her out of your life, period. I don't want any reminders of her between us. Ever."

"Honey, you cut her out of my life a year ago. I've been yours since the first time we made love. The only thing

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worthwhile between Lacey and me is Joseph. I'll have to deal with her when it comes to seeing him, but other than that, I shouldn't ever have any kind of personal contact with her again, and that's exactly the way I want it."

"Good. You belong to me. I don't intend to share you with her. I want her gone, out of our lives, permanently."

"Yeah, me, too, the sooner, the better..."

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## Chapter Five

\* \* \* \*

*If the "black box" flight recorder is never damaged during a plane crash, why isn't the whole damn airplane made out of the shit?*

~George Carlin

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 7, Sat.*

"Hey! Wake up. Move your ass, lady!"

Dianna swung her hand, batting at the annoying voice buzzing in her ear. "Leave me alone."

*The nerve of the man! Couldn't he leave her alone? Let her rest?*

"Come on, Dianna. Move your beautiful ass or we'll both die! I can't carry you, baby."

"Why not?" God, she sounded so whiny.

Sarcastic laughter penetrated the smog blanketing her brain.

"Because I'm a fucking cripple, remember?"

Dianna opened her eyes and blinked. "Maybe a bastard, but you aren't a cripple, so stop saying you are. You kissed me," she said in a soft, accusatory tone.

"Yeah, well, don't take it to heart. I thought we were going to die. I would have kissed an elephant's ass at that moment."

"You're such a jerk!"

"I'm the jerk who's trying to save your life. So move it!"

Pain stabbed every known part of her body and parts she hadn't known even existed. Her leg hurt. The top of her head throbbed. Her eyes stung as if they'd been lit by a torch. Every muscle and sinew felt like it had been stretched as thin as it'd stretch, then tied in a knot. Even the simple act of breathing hurt.

"Come on, Princess, haul ass!"

"Oooh, leave me alone. Let me die."

"No can do. Come on."

Dianna closed her eyes, willing him to go away. "I can't move. I'm pinned; besides, my hair hurts."

"Your hair?" Taylor laughed. "Come on, Dianna. You don't have a hangover. A person's hair only hurts when he's drunk himself crazy."

"Then why does my head hurt?"

She opened her eyes and winced. The yoke, and what was left of the dash, pressed against her chest. Her backbone was jammed against the seat, and it felt like the backside of her breastbone was fused to her backbone. "I'm pinned."

"There's room," he said in his usual disagreeable tone. "If there wasn't, you'd be dead." *Pop!* "Wake up, Dianna! Make an effort to get free, or else you're going to roast alive."

"You slapped me?" Covering her smarting cheek with her hand, she forced her eyes open again. "Why did you slap me?"

"To wake you up."

The stench of fuel seared her nostrils and coated the back of her throat. Worse, the keening moans she heard came from her. All she wanted was to close her eyes and shut out the world, shut out the pain, and shout at Taylor to go to hell. "Leave me alone. I wanna sleep."

"Stay awake! Look at me!" He slapped her again.

Dianna slowly opened her eyes and peered at Taylor. "If you slap me again, you'll be sorry."

His pale face hung over her. Tension lined his mouth. "Yeah? What are you going to do about it? You're too weak to even wiggle your ass."

Dianna struggled to get out of the seat. "I am not! Just give me a minute."

Blue fire blazed in his hot gaze. "That's better. And we don't have a minute. Now, come on! The plane's burning!"

He pulled on her arm, his legs wobbling as he half-dragged her out of the crumpled cockpit.

"Stop pulling on me. Your legs aren't strong enough yet to carry extra weight." Her navy blue tee-shirt caught on a jagged piece of metal, and she heard the sound of rending material. Dianna glanced down and saw half her shirt was missing. The cups of her royal blue lacy bra were fully exposed. Ooh, he'd have a field day making fun of her small breasts. "Now look what you've done." She clutched at him. "Stop it! You're hurting me."

"You're going to be in a lot more pain if you don't snap out of it."

He caught her by the hand and kept right on pulling her along behind him, forcing her to do the one thing she didn't want to do, until he had her safely out of the wreckage. Once her feet were on solid ground, he let go. "You're on your own, Princess."

Dianna took three lurching steps away from the pile of twisted and bent wreckage and stared at the heap of junk. Half-dazed, she felt like kissing the ground, grateful she was still alive. "Where's the other half of the plane?"

Taylor dropped to his knees beside her. Breathing hard, he gestured with his hand. "Choose the spot. It's scattered to hell and back," he said breathlessly.

She gaped at the half of the aircraft that was still somewhat jammed together. "Well, that just looks pitiful. It looks like some kind of fat-bellied bug has been torn apart and its guts ripped out through its ass. I don't think my insurance will cover this much damage."

"Ya think?"

She closed her eyes and rubbed the side of her head. "My head hurts. Leave me alone so I can crawl off somewhere and die in peace. *Stop* moving me! I'm going to puke all over you if you don't stop."

"I'm not touching you."

Dianna groaned and opened her eyes. Taylor was already up and staggering toward the burning junk pile. "What are you doing? You'll get yourself killed!"

Something warm and wet blurred her vision. She rocked unsteadily. Her head throbbed like a mother, and her stomach flip-flopped in a puddle of sour, green grease. Oh, God, she was going to make an absolute fool of herself and throw up.

She touched her forehead and stared at the red liquid on her fingers. "Whau?" She was bleeding? Why?

*What happened?*

Dianna decided her wits had taken a journey and were a bit slow making the return trip. She knew what was happening around her, yet everything was tumbling toward her in maddening rush. She couldn't keep all the pieces straight in her mind.

What had she been doing to get to this point? She tried to think, but her head pounded mercilessly when she did so. Dianna dropped to her hands and knees. Big mistake! The jar to her head was excruciating. Her body shook. Blinding pain stabbed her skull. The contents in her stomach rose greasily to the back of her throat and kept right on coming.

"Dianna?"

"What?" She opened her eyes and blinked, but Taylor's face remained out of focus. She was crying, and she didn't know why. "I think I'm bleeding."

"Yeah, you are a bit. Here, sweetheart." He squatted beside her, helped her to a sitting position, and pressed a bottle of water in her hands.

She stared at it. "What do you want me to do with it?"

He took it back, twisted off the lid, and held the bottle to her mouth. "Come on, baby, rinse out your mouth. I know that left a bad taste."

Taylor scooted her back from the awful mess on the ground and kicked dirt over it.

"I—I think—I need to call home. Tell them—what's happened, but I—I, can't think of the number." She looked around. "Where's my cell phone?"

Gently, he cupped the back of her head. "It's okay, sweetheart. They'll know soon enough."

She wondered why he was talking kindly to her, handling her so gently all of a sudden. He always spoke harshly to her and never treated her with kid gloves, except for the night she'd found Jillian. Slipping and falling in her stepmother's blood and discovering Jillian's mutilated body in the stables...well, it had not been the highlight of her life.

"Come on, baby. I know you probably have a concussion—that's a hell of a gash on your forehead. It needs stitches. I hope you have a sewing kit stashed somewhere. Please, Dianna, you have to try to stay awake. I need your help."

"Help you?" She barely managed to croak a response. She took a sip from the bottle he held to her lips and rinsed her mouth. Leaning to one side, she spat it out and moaned. Any movement caused the top of her head to feel as if it was on the verge of explosion. Dull pain throbbed through her skull and settled between her eyes, but her memory started to clear.

*The plane!*

She'd been piloting her cousin Raider's twin engine Cessna. It was waiting for them at Sydney. His plane. Oh, God. Taylor and she were on their way to *Damnboola*, Raider's station, located on the western end of the Kimberly. She was going to attend her Aunt Marion's funeral near Broome. Something went wrong. Something bad. No. No. Birds flew into the propellers, and the engines simply shut down. Maybe the birds tore up more than the propeller blades. She didn't know. Dear God, they'd crashed! She'd crashed Raider's plane.

Taylor! Where was Taylor?

She turned her head and winced. He was busy scooping handfuls of dirt and tossing it on the fire. The reeking odor of fuel tainted the air.

Dianna pushed herself up. Sharp pain tore through her upper left thigh. Her leg buckled, and she fell back to the ground. Gingerly, she tugged her skirt up mid-thigh and stared at her injured leg.

A chunk of metal as big around as the handle of a hammer stuck out of her leg. Funny, it didn't hurt. Her head hurt much worse. Tears streamed down her face. Dear Lord, she had to get up from here and help Taylor. They'd need whatever they could salvage from the plane to survive. They had mere minutes to collect whatever they could.

She pushed herself up again. This time she remained upright. Dianna hobbled to Taylor. Her vision blurred in and out. She paused, waiting for her stomach to stop rolling like a giant tidal wave, and then she lurched closer to Taylor, determined to help him.

He slanted a gaze at her. "*Get back!* When it explodes, I don't want you anywhere near it."

"We need whatever water and supplies we can gather out of the wreckage."

"I'll get them. You stay back."

She grabbed his arm. "You can't go in there. I'm the pilot. It's my responsibility."

"For God's sake, Dianna, you can barely stand. Let go!" He jerked away from her feeble hold on his arm. "You're not going back in the damn thing."

\* \* \* \*

Taylor worked his way inside the crumpled fuselage. God, his legs hurt. They trembled with weakness. They were nowhere near ready for a trek across Australia. For Pete's sake, he was still in physical therapy.

Dodging a gush of smoke and flames from the front of the aircraft, he tossed luggage willy-nilly out the broken hull. Heat stabbed his eyes and seared the exposed flesh on his arms. Churning, black smoke drenched his lungs. He couldn't see through the thick haze. His lungs chugged, demanding fresh air.

Taylor swiveled around, looking for anything they could use. Mere seconds. *Hurry. Hurry. Get everything you can gather before what's left of the aircraft explodes.*

He remembered an ice chest. He didn't know what was in it or even if it had survived the crash, but whatever he found might mean the difference between living and dying.

"Get my bag!" Dianna yelled from the jagged opening at the rear of the plane.

Taylor dug her white shoulder bag from beneath a broken seat and hooked it over his arm. "Anything else, Princess?" he snapped. "A bottle of wine? Theatre tickets?"

"My fur coat—I want it, and get out of there. Now!"

Flames exploded in an orange-red burst from the cockpit.

He staggered, grabbed a discarded blanket off what was left of a seat, a rolled-up sleeping bag, and there was the fur coat she wanted, and the ice chest underneath it. Flinging the sleeping bag and coat toward Dianna, he tossed the blanket over his head and shoulders and yanked up the ice chest.

Taylor pushed into the roiling black smoke and worked his way toward the rear section. He toppled out at Dianna's feet and sprawled on top of the fur coat. Groaning, he sucked fresh air into his oxygen-hungry lungs. "Jesus! We have to get back!"

She helped him up, grabbed the handle of the ice chest, the fur coat, the sleeping bag and together, they staggered several feet from the wreckage.

*Whoosh!*

The fierce roar of the fire blasted its way toward them, sounding like a ravenous beast hot on their trail.

"Get down!" Taylor shoved Dianna to the ground and crawled on top of her. He covered their heads with the blanket, shielding them as best he could.

*Boom!*

The second explosion shook the ground like the mighty rumble of an earthquake. Hot shards of jagged metal erupted

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

into the sky and rained down onto Taylor's back. Dianna lay on her belly beneath him, arms and legs spread awkwardly.

He tucked her tighter against his chest and pressed his face close to the back of her neck. "Roll with me!"

Dianna nodded her understanding before he tightened his hold on her waist and rolled twice to their right. He settled them into a depression in the soil. Taylor hovered above her protectively and hugged her close.

The small valley helped shield them from some of the intense heat generated by the fire. Smaller, erratic explosions continued. Glowing chunks of fused parts exploded into the sky and peppered them. Taylor grunted as something sharp impacted his shoulder. "Shit!"

Liquid warmth spilled down his arm, and still, pieces of hot rubble fell upon them like fire and brimstone—but the main show was over.

Then everything quieted, except for the low, hungry rumble of the fire burning itself out.

Taylor raised his head and stared into Dianna's brilliant green eyes. She stared back at him, half-dazed. A smudge of black stained one cheek, along with streaks of blood. Her lips trembled. Swear to God, if she cried, that would be it. He'd lose what little control he had left—and neither of them was in any shape for what he wanted. He laughed softly. Hell, might as well laugh as cuss. "Well, so much for the plane providing us shelter. I hope this isn't the wet season, Princess."

Taylor eyed the horrible gash on her forehead. It would leave an ugly scar. "You're going to have to wear bangs for the rest of your life."

"Why?"

"Trust me, sweetheart, don't ask why."

"Okay," she said faintly. "I hate bangs. I kinda like the rain." Her lips quivered.

"Don't do it."

"What?"

"Cry."

Tears filled her eyes and spilled over.

His heart clenched, and he smothered a groan. "Dammit, didn't I tell you not to do that?"

He'd seen her cry once, and once was enough. She cried, he melted, simple as that. Nope, no waterworks, not right now, not when all he wanted to do was tug her closer, hold her tight, and celebrate the fact they were both still alive in the most elemental of ways.

Instead, he clenched his jaw and glared at her. "Great! Of all the people to get stuck with, I get you for the prize, a female with acorns for breasts, scrawny chicken legs, and tear ducts that drip like a leaky faucet. You can't even do a decent job of crashing a plane, and you like the wet."

Dianna bucked beneath him. "Get off me," she yelled, then grimaced. "Ouch! See what you made me do? I hurt my head. I said, *get off me!*"

He stood up. "You're such a pain in the—"

Taylor jerked as another explosion jarred the ground from the burning wreckage. A single chunk of red-hot metal belched from the wreckage and hurled through the air straight at him.

He grunted and rubbed his chest. "Ouch! Shit!"

Quickly, Taylor tore off his shirt and tossed both the chunk of glowing metal and shirt aside. He eyed the red area above his heart. "Holy hell! It's bad enough you tried to kill me. I should have known better than to fly with you. You're like a one-woman hit-and-fly killer, but now your damn plane attacks me, too."

She blinked, pushed herself up, and wobbled toward him. "Let me see."

"Leave me alone!"

"Don't be such a baby. Let me look." Dianna eyed the blisters already starting to form. "You aren't dead...yet." She sighed. "I did not try to kill you, although the things you've said to me are enough to rile any woman's desire to commit murder." Her eyes suddenly widened. "Oh my God! This is priceless."

"What?" Taylor cut his eyes at the rows of blisters. "Hell, Dianna, it hurts. There isn't a damn thing funny about a circle of blisters on my chest."

"Yes, there is. It isn't a circle."

"What? Would you mind sharing what you find so funny about me getting burned by a piece of red-hot...whatever, because I fail to see the humor in it?"

"Oh, Spencer, there are stronger forces at work here than even you or I can imagine. That's what's funny. It wasn't a piece of the plane. It's the buckle off my belt. 'D' for Dianna. You're wearing my brand."

"Oh, hell no! It will heal without leaving a scar."

"Nope. You might have to wear bangs." She grinned.

"Funny. I'm not wearing some woman's brand," he yelled.

"You are now." She quirked a brow. "And you always will." Her lips twitched.

"You did this on purpose!"

"How could I do something like that deliberately? Don't touch it! You'll make it worse. Those are some pretty whopping-sized blisters. I think I have a tube of ointment in my overnight bag."

"You aren't touching me. You, your brothers, you've all done enough to me and my sister to last a lifetime. Get away from me," he snapped.

Dianna shrugged. "You don't have to be so mean. It isn't my fault you're wearing my brand."

"I-am-not-wearing-your-brand," he enunciated through clenched teeth.

She snickered. "Says you."

"Just—*stay the fuck away from me!*"

"I'd love to do just that, but unfortunately, we're stuck with each other." Dianna suddenly screamed and ran past him toward the burning wreckage. Taylor whipped around in time to see her drop to the ground on her knees. "No! Oh, no!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"My coat," she said, lifting it in her arms like a baby and cooing. "My beautiful fur coat. It's—it's holey."

"What?"

She held up the coat, dismay on her face.

He laughed. "Put it down, Dianna. It's still smoking. Guess some of the hot chunks of metal landed on it."

"It isn't funny. It's genuine mink."

"Now it's cooked mink. The coat was useless anyway. We're in the tropics. Why did you bring something so ridiculous?"

"It isn't ridiculous. You never know when a cold front might move in."

Taylor helped her to her feet. "I didn't know birds could cause a crash. Are you sure that's what happened? That's why we crashed?"

Frowning, Dianna caught a movement from the corner of her eye and stilled. "Uh...yeah, birds can cause major crashes."

"Would you at least give me the courtesy of looking at me when I'm talking to you?" he snapped. "I want to know why we crashed. Are you sure there were birds?"

"Reasonably sure. Why else would we crash?"

"Reasonably sure? Did you see birds or not?"

"Not really, no."

"You tried to kill me. You were playing around with the plane and caused it to crash. That's what really happened. Isn't it?"

"I'm not sure what happened. I don't think you have to worry about me killing you, though," she said quietly.

"What?"

She locked her fingers around his chin and twisted his head in the direction she stared. "Look!"

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## Chapter Six

\* \* \* \*

*There is no happiness without tears; no life without death.  
Beware, I will give you cause to weep.*

*~Lucian Staniak  
(Serial Killer)*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana  
Blackstone Ranch  
Feb.6  
Fri. 7:00 p.m.*

Sheriff Danger Blackstone pulled the Jeep into the drive at his ranch and killed the engine. "What the fuck?"

An ambulance and two Rimrock County deputy cars were lined up in front of the house, lights flashing. He turned a shocked eye on his new bride. "What the hell kind of trouble has that woman gotten herself into now?" Danger climbed out of the Jeep. "Stay here."

"No way." Karen jumped out of the vehicle and fell in step beside him. "I think Lacey and I need a little heart to heart chat. What a show! She is *not* going to ruin our wedding night!"

Blake Hardesty, Danger's brother-in-law and deputy, stepped off the long front porch. The man looked pale as death, and that was saying a lot, since Blake was full-blood

Native American and very dark skinned. Danger thought Blake moved a bit like a zombie toward him, or as if he was shell-shocked.

Danger's stomach dropped. Something was bad wrong here. The only other time he'd seen Blake look like this was when his brother, Hank, was murdered three years earlier.

Danger moved around Blake and stepped upon the porch. The urgency he felt to get inside the house and check on Lacey and his son was like being sucked up by a giant vacuum. The thought, *too little, too late*, slammed into his mind with the force of a stampede.

Blake grabbed his arm and halted him. "Don't go in there, Danger. It isn't pretty."

In the flashing lights, Danger saw splotches of red on Blake's uniform shirt. "What's going on? What's the ambulance doing here?"

Blake swung a dark glare on Karen and back at Danger. "Jesus, Danger, where the hell have you been? Why didn't you answer my calls? Gertie called you over two hours ago. She didn't want to give the details over the air. It's bad. Smitt Davis attacked Lacey, shot her twice. Joseph is in the ambulance."

"What? What's wrong with him? Where's Lacey? How is she?"

"Lacey is gone."

Danger reeled under that announcement. "What do you mean, gone? Dead?" He felt the color drain from his face. His heart felt as if a knife had slashed it in half and left him bleeding to death. "Jesus."

"We don't know if she's dead or alive. Smitt took her when he left, but there's a lot of Lacey's blood in the kitchen, and other...evidence."

"You're sure it's Lacey's?"

"Christ, yes! I'm fucking certain it's Lacey's blood. You know what an animal Davis is."

Danger rubbed an unsteady hand across his mouth, whirled and headed to the ambulance. "That's not all, Danger."

He turned back and waited for Blake to give him the rest of the grizzly details.

"Your sister, Anna Leigh, was here, too." Blake's voice cracked. "Smitt shot her. She's been air lifted to Havre, but it doesn't look good. I have to go. She needs me. My wife needs me."

Danger nodded and opened the ambulance door. An EMT stuck his head out. "I'm sorry, sir. You can't come in here."

"That's my son."

"I'm sorry, but we're working on him."

"I want to see him. What did that bastard do to him?"

The EMT took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "His skull has been crushed. I'm sorry. We're taking him to Havre. You can follow us and meet us there."

The EMT slammed the door. The driver took off down the long driveway, siren blaring.

Blake jerked Danger around to face him. "I asked you where you were. And what is *she* doing here? Have you lost your mind? She has no business here."

Danger stiffened. "Karen has every right to be here. She's my wife. We'd just got married when Gertie called. I wasn't in a hurry to get here. I thought Lacey was trying to delay my marriage to Karen."

"You told Lacey you were getting married today?"

"Yes. She had to know sooner or later. Why wait? I wasn't about to keep it a secret."

"You should have been here, where you belong! Then maybe my wife wouldn't have gotten shot." Blake turned away, then slowly turned back. "Oh, yeah, congratulations on your new marriage. I hope the two of you are very happy. In case you're interested, we have no idea if Lacey's dead or alive, but she's gone. That's what you both wanted. Right?" Blake nodded at Karen. "My advice, don't take her inside. If you thought Jace's stable was bad when Jillian's body was discovered there, well, that's nothing compared to your kitchen."

Danger stared at Blake's stiff back. "I'll meet you in Havre as soon as I take a look inside."

Blake threw up a hand and turned around. "A little late with your concern, but yeah, go ahead. I think you deserve to see what's inside, both of you."

Danger clasped Karen's hand. "Wait for me in the Jeep."

"I think Blake doesn't like me. He's lying. I want to see for myself."

"Karen, Blake doesn't tell lies."

"Everyone tells lies, darling. Let's take a quick look and get out of here."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Danger nodded and opened the front door. Only a few hours earlier, he and Lacey had stood on this front porch. She'd given him his copy of the divorce papers. He'd never forget the look on her face when he told her he was meeting Karen, and they were getting married that afternoon. She hadn't said a word, but she'd looked at him as if he'd broken a knife off in her heart.

He'd spent the last two hours making love to his new wife when his son and ex-wife had needed him. His stomach clenched. He knew his life with Lacey was over, but hell, what a way to begin a new marriage.

Karen had a way of sweeping him into passion until all he thought about was getting her into bed. She'd done that to him from the moment he laid eyes on her in the Blue Goose Diner over a year ago.

Lacey had been away on a shoot in some country he'd never heard of, and cell phone service was non-existent. Maybe it would have made a difference if he could have heard Lacey's voice in that four months she was away.

He only knew he was fed up with her being gone all the time, angry over the fact that she left him and Joseph and took off with men to spend weeks alone in their company.

His jealousy and doubts of Lacey's faithfulness began to eat at him. Then one of the men confirmed he'd slept with Lacey while they were in Alaska. Danger hadn't doubted Jared's word. The man had known intimate details about Lacey's body that only a lover could know.

He'd gone a little crazy then. When Karen invited him to her house for a drink, he accepted, realizing full well she'd

invited him for a lot more than a drink. The hours he spent making love to her that first night left him shaken. He'd never imagined he could be unfaithful to Lacey.

But Karen stirred a dark hunger in him and a means for revenge against Lacey. He returned to Karen's house the next night, and the next, and every night after that, until Lacey returned home.

By then, he was deeply involved with Karen, but meeting her while Lacey was at home was difficult. He found ways, made excuses to Lacey for working late. The hardest part had been not touching his wife. He resented the fact he still wanted her and spent more and more time away from home and more hours in Karen's bed. It hadn't helped.

He'd decided the best way to cure any leftover feelings for Lacey was to get her involved with another man, get her out of his life, permanently.

His plan had worked a little too well...

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## Chapter Seven

\* \* \* \*

*The light at the end of the tunnel is just the light of an oncoming train.*

*~Robert Lowell*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb.7, Sat.*

"What?" Taylor narrowed his eyes but didn't see anything. "What is it? What do you see?"

Jesus. His chest hurt like hell. New blisters popped up every few seconds until the center of the 'D' was completely filled and surrounded. He didn't feel up to playing games.

He steadied Dianna, but his mind was on gathering shit together so they'd survive the damnable mess they were in. God knew they were in the middle of No Where, Australia. He figured rescue was slim-to-none, with odds in favor of none. Survival was going to be based on luck, not skill.

Taylor took a moment to study the terrain. He thought their luck might have been a lot worse. They could have crashed in the desert, where they'd have died quickly from lack of water and bone-drying temperatures. Here, they could take a lot longer to die, unless something unforeseen happened. "I didn't know Australia has rainforests."

Dianna frowned. "Yes. There are a few. Daintree Rainforest is the big one and best known, but it's in northern Queensland. We're nowhere near it. We need to be careful."

"What?"

"Simple things, like the blisters on your chest could get infected, turn septic. It's the little things that get a person killed in the rainforests."

Taylor scowled. Shit. Little things his ass—there was nothing little about Australia. He figured the rainforest was teeming with all kinds of hazards for the unwary. One wrong step and they'd be in a whole heap of trouble. Knowing nothing about the country didn't help matters, either.

The only thing he knew was Australia had a variety of venomous snakes—of which he wouldn't recognize a single one—and he figured some of them dwelled in the rainforest, were even now probably right under his nose or overhead. That thought popping in his head immediately had him looking up at the canopy overhead. Uh...yeah, snakes plopping out of a tree and landing on him —?with his luck? It was a given. Would they come bailing out in attack mode? Sure...why not? Taylor shook his head, feeling a bit foolish at his paranoia.

But there were some equally nasty spiders, salt and fresh water crocs—and who knew what other beastly things waited to devour them alive?

Even if he was in great physical shape, which he wasn't, he'd watched enough television programs hosted by Steve Irwin to know the wild terrain in Australia and everything about it was way out of his league. He admired and respected

the man, the legend, his wonderful humor and love of all species of animals and reptiles, but if an expert like Irwin couldn't survive nature in this country, how could *he* possibly expect to?

Regardless, he needed to gather firewood, build a fire, because they weren't going anywhere today. They needed time to let their bodies rest for the ordeals ahead, mend their wounds, see what food, water, and medical supplies they had, and he needed to check Dianna for other injuries.

She limped when she walked. He knew damn well she'd taken a hard blow to the head, so most likely she had a concussion. The gash on her forehead looked messy and no doubt needed suturing. She looked awful. The part of her clothing that wasn't covered in blood was ripped and hanging in rags. Her clothes looked rather moth eaten, kind of like her mink coat.

He wondered if she had any idea most of the top half of her shirt hung around her waist. Princess Remington, who always looked fashionably turned out, looked like shit. He'd never seen Dianna any way but immaculate, except for the time she slipped and fell in Jillian's blood. She'd looked like a refugee from *Friday the Thirteenth* that night.

He slid his gaze over her. The thin, lacy cups of her bra and the tempting shadow of her areolas and peach-tinted nipples were plainly visible.

*Stop licking your chops. She isn't your private eye candy.*

So what if her tits were half exposed? She had no breasts to speak of. He didn't know why she bothered with a bra

when she had so little to fill the cups. He'd much rather see her go braless.

Taylor frowned. And what did that say about him? If he was honest, he'd admit to himself he liked her tits just fine. His palms itched to explore them, to tease the nipples into a tight response. His mouth watered just thinking about wrapping his tongue around the sweet buds and sucking on them until he had her squirming with need.

No. Taylor mentally shook his head. He couldn't go there. Remembering he didn't like Dianna was important. He needed to keep that frame of mind. He *did not* like her, *did not* like her tits. All he wanted was to fuck her, once. One time. Get her out of his system. Scratch the itch, be done with her.

For sure, he *did not* like her brothers. Once he fucked Dianna, he'd have to be ready for a fight, probably with every one of them.

Impatiently, he allowed his gaze to follow the direction she'd turned him.

"There, on the ridge," she said, pointing. "I thought I saw a—a wolf."

Shading his eyes with his hand, he searched the distant ridge, but all he saw was green trees, greener vegetation, and shimmering heat waves. He slapped at an annoying fly that nibbled at the blood on his arm. "I doubt it's a wolf. Are there wolves in Australia? No, I doubt there was anything there at all. You have a concussion. You're probably seeing things."

"Maybe." She sounded doubtful. "My vision is a little weird. I see two of you, and that's a freakin' nightmare."

Taylor laughed. "It'll be a nightmare if we don't get rescued. You have any idea where we are?"

"Sure, I do." She flopped down on the ground and immediately pressed fingers to her temples. "Oooh. I have a miserable headache. There are flies and mosquitoes. They think I'm a delicacy. I'm bleeding like a pig, and there's an iron pole sticking out of my leg."

"What? What's sticking out of your leg?" He squatted beside her and started working her skirt up her thigh.

She slapped his hands and jerked her skirt down as far as it would reach, which wasn't far considering how short it was. "What are you doing? I'm practically naked under there."

Taylor sucked in a sharp breath. "Yeah, I saw that."

He swallowed hard. Lord almighty. He'd caught a delicious glimpse of the tiny, dark blue thong *barely* hiding the treasure under there. He didn't think he'd ever seen anything that looked as yummy as Dianna's crotch hidden behind blue silk. His dick stirred and rose. Oh. Crap. That was all he needed, a woody tenting his jeans. "I need to see what's poking—er, what's in your leg."

"I'll do it." Dianna gingerly pushed the hem of her skirt up past the injury. "See it?"

"Yeah." Taylor rubbed a hand down his face. Another inch and he'd see 'it,' all right. "Shit. Sweetheart?"

Dianna lifted her gaze. "Bad, huh?"

"It's going to hurt like hell when I pull it out."

"Do you think you could kiss me while you remove it?"

"No." He shook his head and very slowly lowered his mouth to hers. "Uh-uh."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

\* \* \* \*

Dianna sighed against his mouth and parted her lips. His lips felt as soft as butterfly wings against hers. If he kissed her this tenderly, she knew she was in serious trouble.

She felt his hand stroke her leg, glide up her thigh. Oh, God. If only he was touching her to seduce her. Moisture pooled between her thighs, dampening the thong. His fingers splayed on top of her thigh, mere inches from her hoo-ha. Dianna tightened her fingers in his hair and took control of the kiss.

His fingers closed around the piece of iron.

She concentrated on his kiss, let him own her mouth. Gingerly, she traced the tip of her tongue along the edge of his bottom lip, then slid between just as he yanked the piece of metal from her thigh. She cried out and tore free of his mouth. Her body shook. Nausea curdled through her belly. "Oh, God. I'm going to be sick." She looked at the blood flowing over her skin and onto the ground in a small puddle. Tears wet her cheeks. "Damn, that hurt!"

"I know, baby." Taylor flung the piece of iron aside.

Dianna rested her head against his shoulder. Her body trembled uncontrollably.

Taylor smoothed her hair with unsteady hands. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Come on. Sit up straight. Why don't you give me the rest of your shirt so I can wrap it around your leg?"

Dianna ripped what was left of her shirt and folded a piece of it into a thick pad. She pressed it tightly over the wound while Taylor tied a strip around it to secure it in place.

"You need to stay off it as much as possible. You don't need to lose more blood. I'll find something for it in a minute, for your forehead, too." Taylor busied himself untying the string on the sleeping roll and spread it under a nearby tree. He came back to her, leaned down, and lifted her into his arms.

"What are you doing? Put me down! Your legs."

He slanted his hot gaze at her. "If I can kiss you, I can damn sure carry you a short distance." Gently, he placed her on the sleeping bag. "Sooner or later, we're going to finish what's between us, Dianna."

She squirmed on the sleeping bag. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know. I'm going to fuck you, maybe more than once."

Dianna flinched. "Well, guess that leaves little doubt what you meant in the plane when you said 'Fuck you.'"

"I didn't realize you weren't clear on my meaning. In case there's any more doubt. I'm going to fuck you, soon."

"No you aren't. It takes two. And I'm not willing to be the other half of your tango party."

"Sure you are. You know how I know?"

She shook her head.

"Because you had your tongue rammed down my throat like you were searching for my tonsils. A woman kisses a man like that, she wants him like crazy."

"You flatter yourself."

He grinned. "Lie back. I want to look at that cut on your head."

She swayed toward him. He grabbed her by the arm to steady her. "Careful. Ouch. Don't touch the blisters!"

"Sorry. You need to put a shirt on. The flies will drive you crazy if you don't."

"I will in a minute. Now lie back."

"I don't want to lie down," she said fussily. "I'll get blood all over it. We have to sleep on it."

\* \* \* \*

Taylor froze. *Sleep on it? As in, sleep on it together? Side by side? Oh, yeah, he'd screw her all right, so fast she wouldn't know what happened.*

He glanced around, feeling that much more desperate. There was no way he'd be able to sleep beside her and not touch her. Nope, wasn't happening. He'd—he'd—well, it wouldn't work. He lurched to his feet, cleared his throat, and grabbed her bag from where he'd slung it earlier.

"What are you doing?"

Taylor looked up from pawing through her oversized purse. "I'm looking to see if you have a small sewing kit or maybe a tube of ointment of some kind."

"Back outside flap," she said sweetly and grabbed the bag from his hands. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't prowl through my things."

"Fine. You wanna stitch up yourself?"

She snorted and pressed the tiny sewing kit into his hands. "No. I'll get my turn doing you."

He choked. *Doing him? Damn, did she have to make it sound so sexual?* Why did this one female have the power to

reduce him to a pile of useless ashes? Wanting her left a sour taste in his mouth. He resented the fact she managed to burrow under his skin, that she aroused him without trying.

Dianna dug out a travel pack of moistened wipes and handed them to him.

"Okay, let's get you cleaned up." Taylor squatted down in front of her and carefully wiped away the caked blood and black smudges of smoke on her face. "You're a mess."

Dianna's gaze flickered over his face. He wondered if the goose egg over his left eye was as big as felt. She touched it gently. "Do you have a headache as bad as mine?"

Taylor glanced up. "I don't know how bad your headache is, but yes, my skull feels like it's going to explode any second."

"You shouldn't be taking care of me. You're hurt, too. You look awful."

Crimson ribbons slid down his arm. "You don't look so hot yourself."

"How are your legs? You shouldn't have carried me."

He snorted and dabbed at the edges of the cut on her forehead. "Like you give a shit how my legs are? I'm fine. You don't weigh as much as a mouse. Be still! You'll cause me to hurt you, jerking like that."

"You did hurt me. Ouch! I said that hurts."

Annoyance flickered in his eyes. "You think you can stand up long enough for me to stitch you up, or are you going to be a sissy about this? If you don't let me sew that gash, you're gonna have one big ugly-ass scar. You'll look like Frankenstein's bride."

She drew a deep breath. "Help me up and hand me back my bag."

Taylor helped her to her feet. "Why do you want your bag?"

"I have painkillers."

"No."

"What?"

"No painkillers."

"Bastard."

"Probably so, but I don't want you to fall into a drug-induced sleep. I'll have to wake you every hour or so once you go to sleep naturally anyway. No painkillers."

He snatched the bottle from her hands, read the prescription label. "Hydrocodone/Apap, five/five-hundred. Hmm, I'm certainly familiar with that one." He twisted open the lid and swallowed one dry.

"What are you doing? You said no painkillers."

"None for you. Do you know what drugs can do to you? What are you doing with this shit anyway?"

"Menstrual cramps."

"Oh. I'm not familiar with that kind of pain."

"Ha ha. You can have something for pain, but I can't?"

"Uh-huh." He threaded a needle and frowned. "Be still. This is going to hurt like hell."

"So do menstrual cramps."

He arched a brow. "You got 'em now?"

"What?"

"You know? The 'M' thing?"

"No. Not for a few days."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

\* \* \* \*

He coughed and looked totally embarrassed discussing her womanly functions. What would he look like if he discovered the tampons in her bag? Maybe she'd put it to the test. "You know, if you need some cotton balls, I have tampons you can rip apart, make some nice little pads."

He looked at her as if she'd suddenly grown two heads and a forked tongue. "I'm not tearing up tampons. You might need them to...er, plug a leak or something."

She shifted from one foot to the other. "Why do *you* rate a pain pill, and I don't?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, a pain pill, why do you rate one, and I don't?"

"I don't have a concussion."

"You have a big lump over your eye."

"I do? Huh."

"You might be concussed."

"Hmm." He shrugged. "Too late now, done took it."

"Ow!"

"Told you it was gonna hurt. Keep still. Jeez, you're antsy."

"Let me stab you over the eye with a needle and see how antsy you are!"

He grinned. "You'll get your turn."

"What?"

"Yep. I'm gonna need you to take a look at my shoulder and back."

"When?"

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

"Later. I want to get you took care of first and settled, then I'll take a look at the supplies, see what we have on hand."

"Then what?"

"Then I'm gonna pray we get rescued soon. You said you think you know where we are?"

"Yes."

She lowered her gaze, stared at her hands, and flinched every time he took a stitch.

"Well, where the fuck are we?"

She lifted her head. "Australia? You don't have to snap at me."

"Don't move! Shit! I know we're in Australia. Where in the name of God are we precisely in the land of wonder Down Under?"

"The Kimberly. Yeah, we're somewhere in the Kimberly, but I don't think we're where we should be."

"No shit."

"I'm not kidding. We're in a rainforest. I think maybe we should be in more of a desert region."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because we were supposed to be flying west, and the rainforest is north. We had to be way off course to be here."

"So we're not in the Kimberly?"

"Oh, we're in it, just...just not in the right part of it. I think."

"You know a lot about the Kimberly?"

"Sure."

He locked his eyes with hers. "Jesus, am I gonna have to drag every single bit of information out of you?"

"I'm thinking. It's sparsely populated and harsh—the last frontier."

"Great. We're freakin' pioneers."

"It's big. I read somewhere vacationers need to plan well, some don't, and they pay the ultimate price."

"Uh-huh. We're not on a fuckin' vacation."

"It's big."

"You said that."

"Vast."

"Same thing as big."

"It's big. You have no concept of the size it is."

"How fuckin' big can it be?"

"Over four hundred thousand square kilometers."

"How much in miles? I don't know one damn thing about kilometers."

"Hmm. Something like a hundred sixty-four thousand square miles, not an exact figure, but close. I told you, it's big."

"So is my dick! Jeez! Can you stop saying 'it's big' for one damn minute, and tell me something I don't know?"

"You know the wolf you said I didn't see?"

"Yeah?"

"You were right. It isn't a wolf."

"I knew that. So?"

"It's a dingo." She winced as he stabbed the needle into her flesh again.

"Dingo?"

"Your hands aren't very steady."

He flashed her a look, then jabbed the needle in her flesh and drew the edges of the torn flesh together. "Dingo?" he repeated, ignoring her comment about his unsteady hands.

"Yeah. You know, wild dog...or, yeah, wild dog is a pretty good description. Uh, you aren't taking great big stitches, are you?"

"Naw. You have a nice, neat row of tiny black stitches. Maybe there won't be such a bad scar, after all."

"Good, I'd really hate to look like Frankenstein's bride. I wouldn't look good with those lightning streaks of white in my hair."

"You're rambling. How do you know what you think you saw is a dingo?"

"Well, uh...it's right behind you...has very large sharp teeth...and...it's big."

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## Chapter Eight

\* \* \* \*

*Don't say it's a fine morning or I'll shoot ya.*

*~John Wayne*

*(McClintock)*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb.6*

*Fri.7:30 p.m.*

When ex-Special Agent Rafe McCord entered the ranch house, he hesitated in the kitchen doorway and swallowed hard. "Jesus."

He'd been warned at the front door by a deputy, but Rafe didn't think he'd ever seen a more macabre sight, and he'd seen plenty of murder scenes. He glanced at Danger, a little wary. He hadn't seen him since Christmas, not since he'd. . .

"Rafe," Danger said in an unsteady voice. "I'm glad you're here."

"Are you? I hear you got married today. Congratulations."

Danger nodded. "Yes. This is Karen. Karen, this is Sheriff Rafe McCord from Triangle, Texas...my...friend."

Karen gave him a cool smile, one to match his own. Danger might have fallen out of love with Lacey and fallen into this woman's clutches, but it was plain to see Danger

Blackstone was a broken man. The man stood at the kitchen counter, a solitary figure in a room full of crime scene officials. Karen clung to him, and she didn't look like a happy bride.

All Danger's attention was focused on the blood on the floor.

Rafe worked his way around the edge of the room. "I'm sorry to hear about Joseph and Anna Leigh."

Danger looked up. Bleak shadows filled the sheriff's gray eyes. "I wish you'd gotten here sooner."

Rafe nodded. There was no life, no spark in the silver depths of Danger's eyes. "Yeah. Me, too."

"He took her," Danger whispered. "He took my wife. I don't know how to find her, where to start looking. I told her I never wanted to see her again. I think I might never get to."

"We'll find her."

Rafe glanced at the floor and wondered if Danger realized he'd called Lacey his wife. From the tight look on the woman's face beside him, she did, and she damn sure wasn't pleased about it.

Lord, what a mess. He closed his eyes for a brief second. This wasn't a good place for Danger to be right now. The man had to know what he was looking at, the evidence on the floor. Blood. Semen. And the writing and symbols on the walls, all written with blood.

"She's pregnant, Rafe. Two months."

Rafe swallowed hard. "I'm sorry."

Danger shook his head. "No, you don't understand. I haven't touched Lacey in months. It's not my baby."

Rafe froze. "Christ." He rubbed the side of his forehead. "Oh, Jesus."

"I told her at Christmas I wanted a divorce. I told her I wanted her out of my life, permanently. She gave me my freedom today, but I don't feel free."

Rafe drew a deep breath, slowly exhaled. Pain slashed his heart as if he'd been cut by a knife. "Maybe we should go outside, get some fresh air while the scene is being worked."

"No. I'm afraid they'll miss something. A clue. A sign of where he might have taken her. I owe her that much. I know she's probably dead. Smitt Davis is a careful bastard. He'd not leave her alive. Jesus, there's so much blood. Even if she's alive, she might not be for long if she lost the baby."

"Don't say that! She's alive. The baby is alive! We'll find her."

Danger nodded. "I want my wife back. I know I can't have her back, but if she's dead, I want her body brought home. I want to bury her where she belongs, on Blackstone land. I don't want her left somewhere he chose. She's my wife."

Rafe saw the young woman's lips tighten.

"I'm your wife, Danger. Lacey is in the past, exactly where she belongs."

Rafe squelched his anger. They were all tense and upset. Now was not the time to shout accusations. He ignored her icy words. "I understand, Danger." Rafe hesitated, wary of asking questions, but he had to know what all had happened if he was going to help. "How's your sister? I was told she's the one who made the nine-one-one call?"

Danger stared at him. "Yes, she barely had the strength left to make the call." He shook his head. "I...she...uh...she died in flight to Havre." Tears swam in his eyes. "Blake's on his way there now. I have to go, too. My son Joseph's hanging on. I need to be there with him, and I need to be here."

Rafe swore beneath his breath. "I'm here. Go to the hospital. You know for sure your son is still alive. He's the one who needs you the most right now."

Danger nodded, glanced around at the scene and swallowed hard. "I lost my wife six months ago. I pushed her away, pushed her into doing what she did."

"No. You didn't push her away. You gave her away. I watched you give her away."

"I want my wife back in my arms."

Karen gasped.

"Jesus, Danger!" Rafe shook his head. "You know it's too late for that."

"No matter what Smitt did to her, if she's alive, I want her back where she belongs. You know what I'm saying?"

Rafe nodded. "I understand all of it, but what does Lacey want?"

Danger gave a choked laugh. "The father of her baby."

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## Chapter Nine

\* \* \* \*

*And verily, a woman need know but one man well, in order to understand all men; whereas a man may know all women and understand not one of them.*

*~Helen Rowland*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 7, Sat.*

"You aren't funny, Dianna. I'm not falling for a trick that old. I'm not looking behind me only to find nothing there."

Dianna blinked. "Why do you never take me seriously? I'm telling you, there's a dingo behind you. It has large ears, sort of yellowish-tan fur and a long, bushy tail. It's wild. You know how I can tell it's wild?"

"How?" Taylor was totally absorbed in putting the last few stitches in the gash over her eye and barely listened to her ramblings.

"It looks hungry."

"Oh, Grandma, what sharp teeth you have!"

"It has those too, large, sharp canines, I told you that already."

"Huh. You wouldn't know a dingo from a dingbat, which I'm beginning to think you are."

"You're such a horse turd."

"Horse turd?" He snickered.

"Yeah. You're just a big pile of brain-dead horse shit."

He paused with the needle in mid-air. "*Brain-dead* horse shit? What is it with you and your fixation with manure?"

"I don't have a fixation with shit. You know what?"

"I'm sure I don't want to know." He sighed and applied the needle. She bit her lip. She acted tough, but he knew damn well he was hurting her with each jab of the needle.

"I hope the dingo bites you on the ass and gives you lockjaw!"

"That's called tetanus, sweetheart, and you're out of luck. I've had my shots."

"Bully for you! You should trust me. I'm all you have out here in this"—she waved her hand—"little green forest."

"I trusted you to fly the plane—that's why I'm stuck here in this *little* green forest with you."

"Are we back to that?"

"Maybe I don't believe you because you have that monthly thing that gives you cramps. It obviously impairs your judgment."

"Taylor?"

"Hmm?" He stabbed her flesh with the needle, looped the thread and made a tiny knot.

"It's coming closer. It looks kind of sick. Its mouth is all wet and drooling."

"Sick, huh?"

"Well, yeah. It's curling its upper lip and slobbering like mad. Maybe it's rabid."

"Jesus, Dianna. I'm almost finished sewing the wound. If you don't shut up, I'm going to stitch your lips together, too."

Dianna tore away from him, snatched up her bag, and rummaged through the contents like a wild woman.

"Don't jerk away like that," he shouted. "I might have rammed the needle in your eye or in your face. What the fuck are you doing?"

"I'm looking for my gun."

"Your *gun*? Sweetheart, you don't have a gun."

He froze when she whipped around with a Glock, a nice hefty one, gripped between her hands and leveled at him like a freakin' professional.

"Whoa!" He backed up a step and threw up his hands in surrender. "Okay. I was wrong. You do have a gun. Shit! Put the thing down before you hurt somebody. *Me.*"

"Move." She motioned for him to step to one side. "And make it fast."

He wasn't fool enough not to. He obeyed her and took a step to his right, moving out of her line of fire. She lowered the gun a notch and squeezed the trigger. Taylor felt the heat of the bullet whiz past his right hip like a streak of lightning, heard a dull thud, and flinched at the sound of a sharp *yelp*!

He jumped. His jaw gaped. Taylor clenched his fists at his sides. "*Shit!* Fuck! Shit! Are you crazy? What the *hell* are you doing?" He spun around and stared at the animal twitching on the ground a few feet behind him. It looked like a dog, not all that big, medium-sized, but she was right, it had large, sharp teeth and foam around its mouth.

"Whau!"

Dianna flopped onto her ass and sighed. "It was going for an attack. It had already crouched to leap. I didn't have time to argue with you." She blinked. "I'm glad I hit the right one, 'cause I was seeing two of them."

Taylor gaped at her. "Fuck me! You are completely insane. You nearly killed me! I felt the bullet zip by my hip. You could have shot me, you gun totin' harpy! I swear you have it in for me, just because I kissed you and said your tits are small as acorns!"

"I didn't come anywhere close to hitting you. I don't remember any of your kisses. They must not have been very impressive. You've never said my breasts were the size of acorns, but if you do, I'm warning you, I know how to shoot rather well. If I'd wanted to hit you, believe me, I could."

He squinted at her. "You remember my kisses, all right. Hell, you practically fell into my arms and begged me to kiss you. I curl your socks, all right."

"Bullsnark! You dragged me into your arms!"

"*Bullsnark*? What the hell kind of word is that?"

"My kind!"

"I don't recall dragging you into my arms. It didn't happen that way. What the hell are you doing with a gun?"

"It did happen that way. And it goes with the badge."

"What badge?"

She dug in her bag and laid a gold badge in his hand. "*This* badge."

He gawked at it. "New York City Detective? Where'd you get this, out of a *Cracker Jack's* box?"

"It's the real deal, Spencer. I'm a cop." She dragged it out of his hand and tossed the shield back in the bag. "I even come with a pair of handcuffs. Wanna get kinky sometime?"

He snorted. "You're joking."

"About which part, getting kinky or being a cop?"

"Being a cop. You can't be a cop."

"I can. I am. What, you don't think I have the brains to be a detective?"

"I *know* you don't have the brains."

"Careful, Spencer, I might not have the brains to aim the gun properly next time."

His mouth worked. "Well, hell. No one at the ranch ever said anything about you being a cop."

"That's because no one knows, except Duel, and he'd never betray me."

"Wait a minute, if you're a cop, why did you get so upset, sick, and scared when you found Jillian's body? You must be used to seeing things like that."

"I'm hardly used to stumbling over a body in the Star's stables, wallowing in the victim's blood or seeing someone I know skinned and mutilated. Do you think you could finish sewing me up now, minus the lip job?"

"Yeah." Taylor took the gun from her hands and jammed it in the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back. "Let me finish this last stitch, then I'll get rid of the body. It'll draw flies, and who knows what else."

"Sure. Just don't go too far. I really don't feel well."

Taylor eyed her a moment. She was pale and shocky. He snipped off the thread and put the needle back inside the sewing kit. "Come on." He held out his hand to her.

"What?" She looked suspicious.

"Get on the sleeping bag and relax. Rest a bit. I'll wake you in about thirty minutes."

"I'll get blood on it."

"Then we'll wash the damn thing."

She flashed him a feeble grin. "There are crocs in the water. If we're lucky enough to even find water."

"All of it?"

"Rule of thumb in the Land of Oz, if there's water, you can bet your ass, there's crocs. Just because you don't see them doesn't mean they aren't there waiting to make you their next meal."

"How do you know this trivia crap?"

"I used to spend summer vacations here with Uncle Rufus and Aunt Marion when I was a child. I picked up a few things along the way. Besides, running around with my cousins here, it was survival of the fittest or eat shit and die."

Taylor laughed. "I'll be right back." He stilled. "Uh—don't move."

She snorted. "Yeah, right, you already said that little trick doesn't work. You're right, it doesn't."

"I swear, Dianna. Don't move. There's a spider on you."

She froze. "What *kind*?" Her voice rose in a squeak.

"How should I know? It sort of looks like a black widow, it's a little different."

She froze. "Redback."

"Yeah. It has a red back."

"No, I mean it's a Redback. It's related to the black widow. Its bite is poisonous. Where is it?"

"I don't know."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean, I can't see it anymore."

"Well *find it!*"

"Ah, there it is."

"*Where?* Where the hell is it? I'm freaking out here!"

"Don't move, Dianna. It's on your shoulder, headed straight to your...throat."

Dianna groaned. "Do you have to make it sound like a freakin' bloodsucker or something?"

"I said don't move. I'm not kidding. It's right at your jugular. If it bites you there...well, I figure you know what will happen..."

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## Chapter Ten

\* \* \* \*

*Love is like a spider web, the harder you struggle, the more tangled up you become and the harder it is to escape.*  
~Unknown

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*  
*Blackstone Ranch*  
*Feb.6*  
*Fri.7:45 p.m.*

Sheriff Rafe McCord of Triangle, Texas stood in the kitchen of the home of Sheriff Danger Blackstone, his best friend, and wished he was anywhere but here. At least Danger had taken Karen and left for the hospital to be with Joseph.

He figured it was just as well Lacey wasn't here to meet the woman who'd stolen her husband. God, he didn't understand how Danger got himself involved with the scheming bitch.

Rafe hadn't known for certain Danger was having an affair, but the way things had fallen, he'd strongly suspected it. He hadn't known Lacey had sought a divorce either, or that she was pregnant.

Jesus, this entire thing was a frigging nightmare, and one step from a major catastrophe. He needed a few minutes to

clear his head. There was so much to take in, he couldn't concentrate on the crime scene.

In his callused hands, he held a Colt .45 and the strong desire to use it on one man.

At the moment, it was the only comfort he had.

He studied the gun and knew if he had to, he'd put a bullet between Smitt Davis' eyes, but dammit, he also knew if it came right down to it, he'd do it legally. Legal was a whole lot more than the rat bastard serial killer deserved.

Rafe stared at the antique gun and realized he must be a bit in shock over all the events he'd walked head-on into tonight. Danger's new marriage. Lacey divorced. Lacey pregnant, and the baby wasn't Danger's. Smitt's attack on Lacey, Joseph and Anna Leigh was a nightmare, but Danger calling Lacey his wife while his new bride stood beside him was unbelievable.

Rafe had met Karen a time or two when he'd come to visit the Blackstone's and Danger and he'd go to town for coffee. He'd never liked her. She'd always been too flirty for his tastes.

He never would have guessed she was the woman Danger was seeing. To say Karen was a little upset with her new husband would be putting it mildly. Danger might not have witnessed her displeasure, but *he* damn sure had, and the woman hated Lacey.

It was a bit much to take in, or he wouldn't be standing here eyeing something as mundane as the gun in his hand. However, it was as much a part of his personal history as

history itself. It let his mind escape from what was all around him—Lacey's blood. Her last moments inside the ranch house.

*Think about something else! Think about the gun.*

The Colt had been passed down through generations of Texas Rangers, of McCord males, to his grandpa, and finally to him. Men who'd upheld the law, not taken it in their own hands.

He couldn't dishonor those men by cold-bloodedly murdering a man who deserved killing in the worst way. It would make him no better than the animal he was going to hunt down, but in his heart, Rafe knew the way *he'd* dealt with Lacey Blackstone had stained a part of him, put a blot on his honor.

Rafe had always been a straight-shooter, honest to a fault, and upfront with the women in his life—an honorable man, except for...

*No, that was personal, not professional.*

He returned the gun to the specially made holster he'd designed for it and wore inside his jacket. The pistol had seen him through many ordeals. It was an old and necessary friend. His love for law and justice had started at an early age. A former Texas Ranger, he still used the Colt .45.

Even though he'd gone on to become a federal agent and was issued a Glock, he trusted his old friend more. He was merciless when it came to dealing with bastards like Smitt Davis; still, he'd always followed the letter of the law.

And that was the problem. This time was different. This time he was torn between what was right and what he

wanted to do, because this time, there was a woman involved...and he owed her.

Not knowing if Lacey Blackstone was dead or alive was ripping his guts out, one pearly strand at a time. Everyone assumed she was dead, even her ex-husband, Sheriff Danger Blackstone. Rafe figured the odds of her still being alive were pretty slim. Smitt Davis didn't leave survivors. His profile listed him as a ruthless killer who was known to take his victims' bodies away from the original crime scene and dump them somewhere else.

But he wouldn't give up or stop searching for Lacey until he found her body, until he was proven wrong and she was still alive. Oh, God. He couldn't bear the thought of what she must have suffered at the hands of a butcher like Davis.

"Shit!" He couldn't think about it. He couldn't think about what Smitt had done to her. If he did, he'd go mad. Hell, he couldn't think about what *he'd* done to her.

Shoving a small spiral notebook and gold-capped ink pen in the pocket of his plain white shirt, he leaned back against the kitchen counter and rubbed a thumb over his bottom lip.

*An honorable man?* Nothing he'd done concerning Lacey had been honorable. He'd known it, and still he'd...Rafe broke off his thoughts. "Jesus, what the hell am I doing here?"

He had to be completely insane coming back to Danger's home, insane, or a total glutton for punishment. And why did Danger welcome him, when he had to suspect—?

*Fuck!* Suspect hell! The man set his own wife up for a fall. What man did that to the woman he loved? Supposedly loved? And why? That was the clinker.

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Rafe rubbed a spot between his eyes and tried to block out the ache his memories brought on. The last time he'd stood in this kitchen, in this exact spot, he'd made an absolute fool of himself. He winced. Hell, he didn't even want to think about the things he'd said to Lacey, words he never should have voiced.

At the time, he'd only known an opportunity had presented itself, and he'd grabbed it. No doubt he'd do it again, because nothing about the way he'd felt then had changed now. If anything, his emotions were more involved.

Just because Lacey Blackstone made him promise to leave her home and never come back, didn't change anything that happened or make the fact he was in love with her go away.

"It's never going away." He knew it, and if he knew it, so had Lacey.

What happened couldn't be fixed. He hadn't realized until much, much later it was what broke her emotionally. Why she'd cried like her heart was shattered in a million pieces after the first time he made love to her. She'd known immediately nothing could be mended, and still she'd stayed. She'd tried to 'fix' it.

To him, it had seemed there were no choices, but he hadn't allowed for the fact she had a son to consider.

Had he had the same realizations Lacey had, instead of walking away, certain she'd come to him, he'd have pressed his advantage, hammered away at her defenses, persisted in his seduction, and he'd have won...then, when he'd left the Blackstone Ranch that last morning, he would have taken her

with him. And Smitt Davis would never have had the opportunity to do the things he did to her.

Too late! Lacey was gone, most likely dead. Rafe scrubbed a hand across his furrowed brow and stared at the bloody scrawling on the kitchen wall. They were all so damn late in their care of her.

The bastard had used Lacey's blood to finger-paint symbols on the walls.

Swallowing hard, Rafe fought to gain control of the anguish running rampant inside him. If she was still alive, then he wouldn't do Lacey any good if he couldn't keep a clear head.

And he had to find her.

He was as anxious about Lacey as Danger. The difference: Danger was the only man with the right to be concerned. Rafe frowned. No. That wasn't true any longer. Danger had thrown away his rights. Rafe figured the sheriff had cast away any privileges he'd had when he'd walked away and left Lacey to the wolves. It didn't matter that *he* was the wolf waiting to devour her. What mattered now was finding Lacey. And by the grace of God, finding her alive!

No matter how difficult it was, Rafe knew he had to keep his feelings under wraps. Reigning in his emotions had never been easy, especially when anger was involved. He was plenty pissed at Danger.

He wanted to beat the man to a bloody pulp. Danger had held a prize in his hands and hadn't taken care of her, hadn't protected his own son, or the baby Lacey carried. The sheriff had failed her in so many other ways, too. Jesus. Rafe

dragged fingers through his dark hair. He was still fuming over the fact Danger brought his new bride to the ranch.

What if Lacey had been here? How cruel would that have been?

Where Lacey's feelings were concerned, Danger had developed a callous heart toward her. Not that Lacey had been here to witness Danger bringing his new wife into her home, but still, how could he do that to her?

If Lacey had been home, Rafe thought she would have been devastated.

No doubt Smitt Davis had done a number on her, too.

Rafe's gut clenched. "Damn it!"

No matter the circumstances, it wasn't his place to judge. He didn't have any rights where Lacey was concerned, not yet, except for one. It didn't change the fact it was wrong for him to be here, and certainly Lacey had not encouraged him to return to her home. The entire situation was explosive, and when it came down to it, he knew damn well he couldn't remain impersonal.

Smitt Davis was a merciless butcher who'd killed time and time again. He'd critically injured Lacey and Danger's two-year-old son Joseph and left Anna Leigh, Danger's sister, dying on the living room floor here in this house.

Maybe because Rimrock was where Smitt grew up, and he was familiar with the territory, he'd stashed the bodies of several women he'd murdered in a cave at the back of Jace Remington's property. Smitt seated them in chairs around a large stone table and set it with dinner plates, wine glasses and cutlery, as if they were all dining in a fancy restaurant.

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Three years ago, Lacey and Danger had stumbled onto Smitt's cache of bodies. The chilling factor had been the fact that each woman was in a different month of pregnancy, as if Smitt Davis planned to have nine women ringed around that table. The serial killer had disappeared after the bodies were discovered, but now he was back with a vengeance.

And he'd included Lacey on his list of targets.

Rafe sighed and hooked his thumbs inside the waistband of his jeans and pondered the situation. He had a feeling before it was all said and done, all hell was going to rain down. On him. On Danger. On Rimrock.

But no matter what Smitt had done or would do in the future, he wasn't the one who'd caused all these problems or the ones Rafe now faced. When the dust finally settled, he and Danger would no longer be friends, because when it was all over, when tempers settled, and shouted accusations stopped, and all the guilt reared its ugly head and finally died, he intended to walk away with Lacey Blackstone and make her his wife.

Hell, who was he kidding? His and Danger's friendship had ended months ago. He didn't regret it. Sooner or later, it would have ended anyway. What he regretted was the fact he'd left Lacey behind. He should have taken her with him.

Rafe threaded fingers through his dark hair and blew out a puff of air. A monumental task there—taking Lacey from Danger, making her his—but not an impossible one, just a perilous one.

His heart raced. That was then. She was free now. He already had a hold on her, one he had no plans to change.

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Two months ago, he'd backed off, willing to give her some time to think things over, but he'd always intended to come back and take her away from here. He would have already done so if he'd known she was divorcing Danger. If he'd known she was...

Swearing, he deliberately closed off his thoughts and reached for the cup of coffee near his hand—another commonality he and Danger shared. They were caffeine addicts. He chugged down the liquid gold that had grown cold, wiped his mouth with a paper napkin, and eyed the crime scene.

"Shit. What a fucking mess!"

And what a perverted fuck Smitt Davis was.

Rafe moved closer to the wall and concentrated on the pictures Smitt had left behind. They resembled little more than chicken scratches. He closed his eyes, no longer able to focus his attention on the impossible scrawls.

Lacey's blood. So much blood. How could she still be alive?

Memories haunted him and tugged at his heartstrings.

Three years ago, he'd given up his job as a Special Agent and settled in Triangle, Texas. Shortly after, he'd bought a fair-sized ranch on the outskirts of Triangle with hopes of meeting the right woman and starting a family.

Instead, he took on the responsibilities of sheriff and, to his utter horror, fell in love with another man's wife. He'd never been the kind to poach from another's preserve, especially when the man was a good friend.

Too Close To The Fire  
by Jaydyn Chelcee

Rafe didn't believe in adultery. Just love—a strong love, like the kind that had smacked him cold upside the head and knocked him to his knees.

To put it bluntly, when it came to Lacey Blackstone, his dick was dragging in the dirt.

Just like then, he still had no idea how to handle the situation with Lacey. The best solution he'd come up with was to stay away, but it had been doomed to fail.

Yes, that was then, and this was now, and a bad situation had taken a turn for the worse and was about to get even worse—and he knew it.

Danger might be the ex-husband.

He might be married to another woman, but Rafe knew, as sure as there were stars in the sky, new bride or no new bride, the man was still in love with Lacey, and Rafe stood squarely between.

And he wasn't budging.

Damn. Rafe shook his head.

The tightrope he'd walked to keep a lid on his feelings for Lacey had stretched so thin after three years of holding everything in, he'd finally let go.

Once he'd hit bottom, he'd tossed all consideration of remaining friends with Danger aside. How could they possibly remain friends?

\* \* \* \*

*Triangle, Texas*  
*Six Months Earlier*  
*Aug.18*

*Mon. 6:00 a.m.*

"Hey Rafe, why don't you come on up to Montana and spend the last two weeks of your summer vacation with us? Lacey would be glad to see you. You haven't seen Joseph in months. He's into everything."

Rafe frowned, knuckled his eyes, and sat up on the side of the bed. The phone's incessant ringing had dragged him out of a deep sleep, the first he'd slept for any length of time in months. "I don't know, Danger. I have plans."

He tried to ignore the way his heart skipped beats at the mention of Lacey's name, ignore the way his belly clenched and his cock jumped.

"Plans? Ah, you finally got a woman?"

Rafe smiled into the phone and ran fingers through his sleep-tousled hair. "No. No woman, just—"

"What?"

The thread of impatience he heard in Danger's voice surprised him. Rafe frowned. He'd never known Danger to be anything but laidback. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I thought I heard you groan."

"Uh, yeah, you're giving my headache a headache by hem-hawing around about coming here."

"The weather's starting to cool off some here. I thought I'd get some hiking in."

"You can hike here. Besides, it's much prettier scenery. I won't take no for an answer. Lacey and you can go horseback riding on the days I'm too busy to entertain you. There's plenty to do, horseshoes, cookouts. We'll grill some fresh

trout. You won't have time to get bored. You can help me break a couple of the Pintos I'm having trouble with."

"Hell no, I'll be on vacation. I'm not about to bust my ass breaking green horses."

"Then you'll come? Great. I'll tell Lacey to get the guestroom ready."

"Wait, Danger, I don't know—"

"Oh, no, you're already committed. We'll expect you tomorrow."

Rafe sighed. He knew he was going to cave in. He wanted to see Lacey too badly. *Weak bastard*. "Do I need to bring anything? Wine? Steaks?"

"Yourself. We have plenty of everything else. Oh, you might pick Lacey up some flowers or something nice, since she'll be doing most of the hostessing."

Rafe's brows furrowed. "Okay. Flowers it is. White daisies, those are her favorite, right?"

"That's right. She'll love you for bringing them to her."

*Love him?* His heart skipped a beat. If only—

Rafe hung up the phone. Odd request. Bring Lacey flowers? He would have done so anyway. He always did. Rafe ran his fingers through his hair and swore softly. He'd tried hard to stay away from the Blackstone Ranch, stay away from Lacey, but Danger wasn't helping matters one whit. His constant invitations only shredded Rafe's good intentions.

*Bring her flowers?*

How could Danger make such a request? Couldn't the man see he wanted to fuck his wife? Shit! It wasn't like he was good at acting or hiding how he felt. Danger had to suspect...

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Jesus. He was in trouble here, but staying away from Lacey any longer was impossible. He'd be content just to see her, hear her laughter, and see her smile. Rafe picked up the phone and booked a flight to Havre, Montana for the next afternoon.

\* \* \* \*

Lacey waited for him at the airport the next day. She grinned when he handed her the bouquet of white daisies. "My favorite. Thank you, Rafe. You didn't have to do it, but I love them."

"Yes, I did. Danger threatened to shoot me if I didn't."

She laughed. "He did? I don't know what's gotten into him lately. He's always so busy. He's tired all the time. He's been having bad headaches. I keep telling him he needs to take some time off, but he won't." She smiled and hugged him. "Welcome back. We're always glad to see you. With you here, maybe Danger will slow down a bit and relax."

Rafe grabbed a black duffel off the luggage carousel and paused to hug her back. He loved the clean smell of her skin, the hint of country flowers in her hair. The innocent press of her soft breasts against his chest nearly undid him.

She didn't come on to him, and the hug she gave him was strictly impersonal, but he pulled her a little closer, and she let him. He knew she thought nothing of it, but he needed every bit of the closeness.

Rafe laughed, released her, and stepped back. "Wow, I swear you get prettier every time I see you."

Bright color stained her cheeks. "Aw shucks, sugar, I bet you say that to all the ladies."

"Maybe." He let his carry-on slide down to conceal the thick bulge in the front of his jeans. He hadn't been around her two minutes, and already he had the beginnings of a hard-on. Every time he got near her, everything in his body tightened.

His gut clenched. His balls ached, and his dick throbbed like a fucking toothache.

He didn't tell every female she got prettier every time he saw her, either, only Lacey, with her sexy, sultry Southern drawl that wrapped around him like sin and good sex. Her voice drove him to madness with images of the two of them tangled together on hot afternoons.

"Danger has so many plans for you. Hunting, fishing, camping, you name it."

Smiling, he fell into step beside her. "How can I resist all those lures? Hunting, fishing, camping?"

She laughed. "You can't. Come on, I'm parked in a no-parking zone. If we don't hurry, they'll tow away the Jeep, then we'll have to spend the night in Havre."

He choked and glanced at the front of his jeans. Nothing could be better than spending the night alone with Lacey Blackstone. He might not be able to resist the lure to return to the Blackstone Ranch, but it had nothing to do with all the activities Danger had planned for him.

Damn. He was crazy in love with her, and after so long, he didn't think it was going away. Lacey was it for him, the one

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he wanted to spend his life with. An impossible dream. She belonged to Danger.

As Lacey settled behind the wheel, she slid her sunglasses in place and grinned at him. "So what have you been doing since you were here last? Gosh, what's it been? Six months?" She adjusted the rearview mirror, stuck the key in the ignition, and fastened her seatbelt.

"Eight," he replied quietly. *Ten days. Twelve hours. Thirty minutes.*

Eight miserable, fucking months in which he'd counted off every single day, hour, and minute. Eight months since he'd heard her voice, listened to the sound of her laughter. Eight months of imagining Danger touching her and doing all the things to her he yearned to do, months of walking the floor at night, his dick hard as a rock, and the only relief, his fisted hand.

His body burned with the need to simply hold her in his arms.

"You shouldn't wait so long between visits." She steered the Jeep into the proper lane and left the airport and the city of Havre behind, then hit highway two and headed east toward Chinook. "What have you been up to these past months? You haven't even called."

He shrugged. "You know, shooting bad guys. I joined in on a rattlesnake roundup, captured several and managed not to get bitten. Cooked those babies up and had a real Texas feast."

"Really?" She wrinkled her nose, laughed, and patted his hand where it rested on his thigh. "Please don't say it tastes just like chicken."

Rafe laughed. "Never. I wouldn't dream of comparing rattlesnake to chicken. It's a delicacy, but an acquired taste, I'm sure. You'll have to try it sometime."

"Rattlesnake?" She shuddered. "You and Danger are a pair. I can picture him doing something like that."

She didn't notice he flinched beneath her touch. And didn't notice when his thumb grazed her wrist. His cock was a glutton for attention. It noticed everything she did. Rafe shifted in the seat and eased the pressure inside his jeans. Dammit, he should have stayed in Texas. This was never going to work. He couldn't be around her or touch her without his body responding.

Last time he'd left Montana, he'd sworn never to come back. When he'd arrived home, he'd ripped his phone out of the wall so he wouldn't be tempted to call Danger in hopes Lacey would be the one to answer the phone.

Of course, it had been a stupid thing to do. In his line of work, he had to have a phone. He'd forced his mind to accept she was another man's wife and ignored the phone. It was too hard on his heart to love Lacey and know he couldn't have her. A little more of him died every time he had to leave and return to Texas. But here he was, back again, and he knew when he left, he'd be shredded inside just like all the other times, his heart in pieces, a bleeding wreck.

"No girlfriend?" she teased and brushed a strand of hair out of her mouth.

The movement and rush of wind flowing around them in the open-top Jeep plastered the soft material of her white tee-shirt against her rounded breasts. His eyes fastened on the fine curves and lingered on the impression of her baby-pink areolas and firm nipples stabbing the material.

*Jesus. I need a little help here.*

Rafe glanced at his lap. *And you behave! You can't have her.*

"Did you say something?"

He swallowed hard. "Nah, just spitting in the wind."

The full shape and size of her breasts delineated against the soft material left nothing to the imagination. His fingers twitched with the urgent need to stroke what he knew lay bare underneath the shirt, what he knew he had no right to lay a hand on. His mouth watered. Sweet. He knew she'd taste like an aphrodisiac on his tongue.

Rafe smothered a groan. Damn, he was a dying man here. The pressure behind his zipper was beginning to feel in urgent need of action. Shit! This was going to be a long, miserable two weeks, just like the last time. He squirmed and tore his gaze from her breasts.

"You never did say if you have a girlfriend or not."

He was an utter fool for listening to his heart and coming to Montana. Nothing could come of it. Nothing. Lacey was his best friend's wife. Out of reach. Untouchable.

"Rafe?"

"No. No girlfriend," he said in a strangled tone. "I don't have time for a girlfriend."

"You'd better make time before you grow too old to father children."

He forced a grin to his mouth and wiped a drop of sweat from his brow with his thumb. "At thirty-four, I have plenty of time yet."

She laughed and turned her attention to the winding, mountainous curves, flipped on the blinker, turned right at Chinook, then headed south on county highway two thirty-six to Rimrock.

His gaze dropped to her flat stomach, and he visualized it rounded with his baby. Jesus. It was something he'd pictured many times. A man had to be a goner if all he thought about was making another man's wife pregnant.

He'd never given much thought to having children. He risked his life daily on the job, but when he had sex, protecting a woman against pregnancy was something he took care with. He never accepted a woman's word she was on the pill.

But with Lacey, the thought of having a baby with her never went away. The smart thing to do would be to tell her to turn around and take him back to the airport, make up some excuse about urgent paperwork he'd forgotten to send off. Something. *Anything*. But he didn't...

"Are you hungry?"

Rafe jerked at her question. *Hungry*? He was as starved for her as a man could possibly be. "Yeah. I didn't eat breakfast or lunch, and they didn't serve a meal on the plane." He glanced at his watch. Four-thirty. No wonder his stomach rumbled.

"There's a little cafe in the next town that serves the best buffalo burgers around, maybe not as good as Texas rattlesnake, but damn good. You wanna stop?"

"Sure. Sounds delicious."

And it gave him extra time alone with Lacey, time before he had to face Danger and pretend he didn't have the hots for his wife. Time he decided to spend wisely. She was right—if he was going to have a wife and family, he needed to get started.

Lacey was the one he wanted.

Right then, he made up his mind to start a campaign to seduce Lacey Blackstone away from her husband. As soon as he wooed her away from Danger, he intended to marry her. If she agreed, he wanted to start a family right away.

While she sucked on a straw from her iced tea at the cafe, he imagined her plump lips warm and wet around his dick. He squirmed in his seat. Damn, he could almost feel the heat of her mouth taking his shaft. Oh, Jesus. He was so ready to explode. His body ached. He had the maddening urge to thrust his hips beneath their booth. And keep thrusting until he came.

Rafe castigated himself for his thoughts, but he was starved for her. Everything she did was erotic and turned him on. She set his imagination on fire. The way her lips surrounded the straw, the way she bit into her burger, chewed and swallowed. When she threw back her head and laughed, he saw his fingers in her hair, holding her head just so and kissing her long and slow over and over. He imagined stroking the delicate tissues between her legs and making her

wet, making her come, hearing her whisper his name in the throes of passion.

The wonder was that he didn't come from all the hot pictures floating around in his head of them in bed together. Hell, he couldn't remember when he'd last had sex, but he knew it had been at least three years. From the moment he met Lacey, that was it for him.

He hadn't touched another woman since, and dammit, he'd tried. The truth was he just couldn't work up any enthusiasm for other women.

"Are you ready?"

Lacey's soft words startled him and brought him back from his wild imaginings.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he mumbled.

When they slid out of the booth to leave, Rafe rested his palm in the small of Lacey's back and guided her through the door. The stage was set. Today was the beginning of her seduction. Touch. It was a powerful thing. He didn't remove his hand until he walked her to her side of the Jeep and helped her inside. He looped back around, got in, and tugged the seatbelt in place.

"I'm glad you came, Rafe." She started the Jeep, looked over her shoulder, and backed out of the graveled drive.

He swallowed hard and thought about the way he'd nearly come in the cafe watching her eat. Rafe squeezed her hand on the steering wheel. "Me, too."

She curled her fingers around his and smiled. "I'm serious when I say you need to visit us more often. Eight months is just too long."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Yeah, gentling her to his touch was everything. "You're right. I'll make the effort to visit you more often from here on." He wondered if she noticed the subtle difference in his words. He'd gladly visit her more often in the future, but he had little desire to see Danger.

He brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. Touch.

Once she was used to his frequent touches, she wouldn't think anything about it. It would seem natural.

For the two weeks he spent at the Blackstone Ranch, he intended to use it in some small way every chance he got.

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## Chapter Eleven

\* \* \* \*

*You will never win if you never begin.*

*~Helen Rowland*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 7, Sat.*

Dianna sat perfectly still and watched the Redback spider traipse across her partially exposed breasts in slow, awkward, delicate-legged steps. *Oh, God. Please don't let it drop inside my bra.*

Her palms felt hot and sweaty. On the verge of hyperventilating, she tried to pace her breathing by taking slow, deep breaths and just as slowly exhaling.

"Do something. Can't you get it off me?"

"You said it's poisonous," Taylor replied. "I don't want to cause it to bite you. Keep still." He picked up a skinny twig. "Don't move, sweetheart. Don't breathe so fast."

"Easy for you to say, you don't have an ugly-ass, long-legged black spider crawling on your breasts."

"I don't have breasts. Neither do you. Stop breathing so hard or it's going to fall inside your thingamajig."

"What? My what?"

Taylor held the twig across her breasts in the spider's path. "That thing."

"You mean my bra?" Dianna tried to cut her gaze to see what he was doing.

"Bra? Is that what you call it? I thought it was some kind of training thing for titless females."

"Training?" Dianna fumed. "You're such an asshole, Spencer."

"Stop wiggling! God, you are the antsiest female."

The arachnid made good use of the twig and walked onto it as if it knew exactly what they wanted it to do. As soon as it was off Dianna, Taylor tossed the stick away. "There now, that wasn't so bad."

Dianna bounced off the sleeping roll and flung herself in his arms. Taylor automatically closed his arms around her waist. "It's okay. You're okay."

"I *hate* bugs! I hate spiders! I hate snakes! I hate the freakin' rainforest! I wanna go home."

He gave her a gentle squeeze, couldn't resist pulling her closer. "You're a woman. You're supposed to dislike those things, but I agree with every word you just said."

She leaned back. "You do?"

"Uh-huh."

"Give me back my gun. I swear to God if another spider gets on me, I'll shoot it."

"Uh-uh." Taylor laughed, his eyes crinkling with amusement. "We need the bullets, baby. You can't waste them on something as stupid as a spider. Calm down. It's gone."

She was still in his arms, her arms around his neck. Hell, he wasn't complaining. She felt utterly delicious. Her breasts were flattened against his chest. It dawned on him she was pressed tight against the blisters, and damn, they hurt. He thrust her away and glanced at the ugly red area where several of the blisters had ruptured. The skin underneath was raw and stung like hell. "Shit. Look what you did."

Her green eyes widened with dismay. "I'm so sorry. I forgot. I have a tube of ointment in my bag."

"Forget it. Just stay away from me. God, you're a walking catastrophe!"

Dianna bit her lip. "I said I was sorry. What are we going to do? What if—what if things get in bed with us? Bite us? We're in a lot of trouble."

"Oh, you just now recognized that little fact?"

"What if one of us gets killed?"

"Dianna."

"I'm serious. What if a poisonous snake gets in bed with us and bites one of us or both of us?"

"Stop it, Dianna! That isn't going to happen. Don't create problems that aren't there. What are the odds of a snake getting in bed with us? Probably not all that great. You need to rest and stop borrowing trouble."

"I am not getting back on that bedroll. It could have hundreds of spiders on it by now, or—or any kind of creepy-legged thing that's mean-tempered. You put it under a tree. What if something falls off the tree and bites us?"

"Jesus. I'll move it away from the fucking tree. Right now, I need to check our supplies. We need to build a shelter before night falls. It's going to rain."

"Now? It's going to rain now? What are you, the local weather forecaster?"

"For Christ's sake, Dianna, calm down. I can't think when you're hysterical."

"I am not hysterical. I'm scared!"

"Well, so the hell am I!"

"I want my gun."

"Why?"

"I figure I'm a better shot than you. If something comes close, and it looks mean, I'll shoot it, so don't be looking mean at me."

"The hell you say. Are you still seeing double?"

"Sometimes."

"Then hell no, you aren't getting back the gun. You have another clip?"

"Not with me."

"You have any idea how many bullets you have left in the clip?"

"About six. Eject the clip and check."

Taylor did exactly that. "Three. There are three shells left in the clip. Shit! And you wasted one on a wild dog we could probably have beaten away with a stick."

Dianna snorted. "That 'wild' dog had foam around its mouth. I wasn't taking any chances of you getting bit by a rabid animal."

"Jesus, Dianna. It was probably only slobbering."

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

"Yeah, well what if it wasn't? What if it was infected?"

"And what if one of us gets bitten by a snake? Jesus, you are so fucking paranoid!"

"Maybe I am paranoid, but if that's true, what is that crawling on the ground by your foot?"

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## Chapter Twelve

\* \* \* \*

*I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*

*~Maya Angelou*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb.6*

*Fri. 8:00 p.m.*

Rafe sighed, nibbled at his bottom lip, and studied the terrible scrawling on Lacey's kitchen wall. No matter how long he worried with it, his mind refused to focus. He had men scouring the countryside, local ranchers, friends of Danger's, but it was a waste of time and manpower.

The message Smitt Davis left behind had a purpose, but it simply didn't process. None of it made sense, but he knew in his heart it was significant. It was the key to finding Lacey, or at least to locating her body. The crazy fucker was so certain of himself, he'd blatantly told them exactly where he'd put her, and challenged them to break his bloody code.

"Hang in there, sweetheart. I promise I'll find you."

His conscience ate at him. Just like Smitt and Danger, he'd taken choices away from Lacey. Maybe he hadn't injured

her—*of course you did*—like Davis, or hurt her—*you did, you know you did*—but like a thief, he'd stolen minutes with her, stolen hours, and he'd taken a part of her from Danger and kept it for himself. No matter what happened in the future, he'd always feel a bit to blame for the breakup of Danger and Lacey's marriage.

Rafe sighed. Even so, there was a part of her that would always belong only to him. He knew—God forgive him—he'd take more, steal more, and without a single doubt, a brutal showdown with Danger waited on the horizon...

\* \* \* \*

*Two Months Earlier*

*Dec. 24*

*Wed. 7:00 p.m.*

The sad thing was, Rafe thought as he grabbed his two pieces of luggage and hurried to where Danger waited, he hadn't simply fallen hard for Lacey Blackstone, he was obsessed with her, to the point he'd grown reckless. Or desperate.

He wasn't sure which. He didn't care. But it was one or the other, or he wouldn't be back in Montana after being away for only two months. Like an idiot, here he was, ready to be a guest in Danger's home, back to spend what was essentially a family-time holiday. He had no business intruding, just like he'd had no business being here the weekend of Halloween.

On that trip, he'd found himself alone with Lacey most of the entire weekend, except for her son being present. Rafe hadn't minded having her to himself, but Lacey had definitely

been uncomfortable and nervous. He was still trying to figure out how Danger could have so much paperwork to catch up that he'd spent practically every minute at the Sheriff's Office in Rimrock the entire Halloween weekend.

Rafe clenched his jaw. Damn it. He'd refused several invitations from Danger to return for Christmas, once again deciding Lacey was off-limits. He made every excuse he could think of, but when Danger called last night and threatened to come get him, he gave up and stopped making excuses.

His need to see Lacey was, of course, the real culprit. It outweighed his sense of caution, his sense of decency and fair play. He could have kept on refusing, but he'd reached a critical decision.

He wanted the entire mess to end.

For some reason, Danger was dangling Lacey in front of him like the proverbial carrot. No more. No more keeping how he felt about her under wraps. There were three days ahead of him. In those three days, he planned to make it clear to Lacey how he felt, tell Danger, and let the shit fall where it fell. No matter what happened, this was his last trip to Montana.

As soon as they entered the house, Lacey jumped up from a low stool in front of the fireplace, where she held a pan of popcorn over the crackling blaze. She set the pan to one side, got up and hugged him. "Oh, Rafe, it's so good you could come. Danger's had fits thinking your flight might be delayed or cancelled because of this ice and snow moving in."

She looped her arm around her husband's waist and snuggled against him. Danger pressed an absent kiss to the

top of her head, stepped away from her embrace, grabbed Rafe's duffle and tore off down the hall.

"You're at home, Rafe," he flung over his shoulder. "What's mine is yours. I'll be right back."

Rafe frowned as he saw Lacey's lips tighten. Her eyes clouded with hurt. She turned to face him, her mouth tremulous. It was obvious to him her smile was forced. "Well, you heard the man. Take off your coat," she said. "You want a beer? Danger brought home a case for the holidays earlier today."

He smiled and removed his heavy denim jacket and hung it in the front entry closet. What the hell? The tension between Danger and Lacey was so thick, he could cut it with a knife, and it wasn't caused by anything he'd said or done. Returning, he nodded. "Beer sounds good." He rubbed his hands together and blew on them. "The snow's really starting to come down out there."

Lacey grinned. "Yeah. I watched it earlier. It'll be fun to ride the horses in it tomorrow."

"We're going riding tomorrow?"

She looked good in the tight white jeans that fit her nicely. A dark green sweater hugged her firm breasts. Festive reindeer pranced across the middle of the sweater, along with white-bearded Santas in red. He wondered if she was wearing a bra and felt the familiar ache settle in his groin.

"Too bad Joseph isn't here, but he's spending the night at Anna Leigh's so he and Gidget can get in some playtime. He'll be back tomorrow night before we open gifts."

She chattered on while Danger returned, grabbed the last bag and lugged it to the guest bedroom where Rafe always stayed.

"I have gifts to add beneath the tree."

Lacey dumped popcorn in a bowl and pressed it into his hands, along with a bottle of ice cold beer she produced from the mini-refrigerator behind the horseshoe-shaped bar to their right. "That's the last beer from there. The next has to come from the kitchen. You can put the gifts under the tree anytime you're ready. We have a gift for you, too. I hope you'll like it. I picked it out. Sit down. Tell me how things are in Texas."

Rafe lowered himself onto the manly leather sofa in front of the fireplace and crossed his long legs at the ankles. If Lacey had chosen his Christmas gift, then he'd cherish it forever, no matter what the hell it was.

He watched her put on another thing of popcorn. He liked watching her. Her movements were graceful and economical, the careful walk of a photographer who was used to sneaking up on wildlife and taking close-up shots. It worried him that she made trips into danger zones and wilderness for her shots.

"Well, there's no snow in the forecast for Texas," he said and chugged down a mouthful of beer.

She laughed and glanced over her shoulder at him. "Hungry? I can offer you more than popcorn."

His body heated. What would she say if he told her he was hungry only for her?

She turned back and shook the pan. The *pop, pop, pop* sounded homey. The buttery smell teased his nostrils. He wanted this. A home with the woman he loved. Babies around his feet and on his lap. A fire to cozy up to on a winter's night, good sex, long, slow kisses and his woman's belly softly rounded with their next child. Six. He'd always wanted six kids.

"We rented some DVDs, but if we lose power, we can forget about watching them."

"You have a generator?"

"I forgot to buy gas for it." She laughed. "Danger hasn't forgiven me for that little mistake." There was a hint of pain in her voice that she tried to cover with laughter. "As you know, there's only one station in Rimrock, and it's closed until after New Year's."

"They wouldn't open long enough for you to get some fuel?"

"Yeah, except the owners have gone to Florida for two weeks."

"Ah, I see. Candlelight is more romantic anyway."

"That's what I told Danger. He wasn't convinced."

"His loss," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. We'll get by if the power goes."

The white jeans clung to her ass as she leaned closer to the fire. Her long hair reminded him of a rippling waterfall. It tumbled down her back in a wealth of thick honey-colored curls. She angled forward and her hair slipped over her shoulders, dangerously close to the flames.

"Watch it!" Rafe leaped up and grabbed her round the waist. He slid her heavy tresses aside, pulling them behind her. His hand lingered momentarily in the silken strands.

"What?" Her fingers dug in the arm he had underneath her breasts. Her sweater had ridden up when he'd grabbed her so that a smooth expanse of silky skin was exposed. His fingers splayed across her lower stomach—another quarter-inch, and he could slide them inside her waistband, touch the nest of soft curls he knew had to be there. He could tease her clit, explore the sleek, honeyed depths of her sweet channel. Fuck! Rafe thought he'd die. His cock leapt instantly to life and throbbed against her butt. Jesus. There was no way she didn't feel what had just happened to his body. His balls squeezed so tightly he almost dropped to his knees from the sheer spasm of pain.

Lacey had a one-handed death grip on the popcorn handle. He thought he felt her press her butt against his cock and groan. His imagination. It had to be. There was no way she'd ever do such a thing. She gazed over her shoulder at him, her eyes startled and wide with alarm. Red stained her cheeks, but he didn't know if it was caused by the flames she'd been bent over or the fact his cock was jammed against her ass like a branding iron.

She drew a sharp breath, her lips parted in surprise. "Rafe," she whispered on a choked voice. "Please."

Rafe froze. He wasn't sure what she was begging him for, to release her or draw her closer, to grind his hard cock against her or step back, put decent space between their bodies. He did neither.

"Your hair's too close to the flames," he said huskily. "You need to braid it or something."

"Yes. I know." Her voice sounded unsteady. "I—er, I haven't had time," she said breathlessly.

He brushed a gold curl behind her ear and still made no attempt to put space between them. Neither did she. He slid his gaze to the pulse pounding madly at her throat. "Take time," he said quietly. "I'd hate to have to visit you in a burn unit."

She licked her lips. His gaze flicked from her throat and zeroed in on the dampness glazing her lips. God, her mouth looked entirely too inviting. There was something so sexy about the plumpness of her lips. It was all he could do not to lower his head and steal her mouth, mold it to his, and linger an infinite amount of time to nibble on that sexy lower lip.

The soft swell of her firm breasts rested on the arm he had around her, and the sudden awareness she wasn't wearing a bra sent a spasm of urgent need to his gut.

Slowly, he released her, dragging his arm across the soft underside of her breasts. He cleared his throat and stepped back. "I'll finish popping the corn. You go do something with your hair."

She nodded and moved quickly around him. "Thanks. If you want a sandwich, there's a baked ham, help yourself, or there's leftover pot roast I cooked yesterday. I have a turkey in the oven, but I'm baking it all night on a low setting. There's an extra pecan or pumpkin pie, whichever you prefer."

She was nervous, chattering on and on about food. "Or there's—"

"Pecan definitely sounds enticing," he interrupted. Jesus, he needed a minute to calm his runaway heart, a minute for his dick to soften and settle behind his zipper. "You made them?"

Lacey blinked and licked her lips again. Her gaze flickered to his crotch and bounced away, as if she was desperate to look anywhere but at the bulge behind his zipper. She shot her gaze to his face. "What?"

"The pies? You made them?" He fought to keep from readjusting the front of his pants. If he went anywhere near that thing, he'd explode. Damn, he had to do something soon, give himself five-fingered relief, howl at the moon, something, anything. God, he needed to fuck! When he got back to Triangle, he had to find a woman. He needed hours in the willing arms of a female.

"Yes. I made four pecans and three pumpkins, but I sent one of each to Danger's grandparents. Anna Leigh took a pecan pie home with her when she picked up Joseph. Get whatever you like."

"Pot roast sounds good. Go." He shooed her out and quickly adjusted the front of his jeans. He stared at the flames and wondered what the fuck he was thinking grinding his cock against her ass like that, and Danger right here in the house. The wonder was that Lacey hadn't slapped his face. She had to have been too stunned to react. He knew he'd embarrassed her. Her face had been redder than the devil's jumpsuit.

"Was it good?" Danger stood there with six beers in his hand.

Rafe jumped, his gaze leaping to Danger's face. "Was what good?"

"The beer and popcorn. Where's Lace?" He placed four beers in the mini-fridge and handed him one.

"Doing something with her hair. It worried me the way it fell so close to the fire. That's dangerous."

Danger nodded. "I've told her a hundred times to keep it up when she's fiddling around the fireplace."

Rafe frowned at the hint of criticism in Danger's tone. "I need to talk to you. Alone."

"It isn't necessary." Danger's gaze leveled with his and held a wealth of silent communication.

"Danger, I—"

"I set the fire in your room," he interrupted. "There's plenty of wood in the box near the fireside to run you for the night. It'll be warm in there by the time you're ready for bed. Hopefully the power won't go in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, Lacey said she forgot to buy gas for the generator."

"I reminded her *three* fucking times. She still forgot. She was too busy developing film in her darkroom." He sounded irritable.

"Careful, man, you sound like an unhappily married man."

"Do I?" Danger shrugged. "Guess the honeymoon wore off. I'm looking for someone to take her off my hands."

Rafe swallowed hard. Jesus. What the hell was wrong with the man? Couldn't he see he had the love of a wonderful woman?

Had Danger just given him the green light? If so, why?  
"Danger—"

"Relax, Rafe. It was a joke."

Rafe nodded, but he didn't think Danger had been joking. "What are we doing tomorrow?" He twisted the cap off his second beer and tossed the lid in the fireplace. He'd never in his life had a man give him permission to fuck his wife. Maybe he was wrong—maybe he was reading more into Danger's words than was there, because it was what *he* wanted to hear.

The image of Lacey sitting there in front of the grate, all that glorious hair falling around her shoulders, lingered in his mind. It had felt so soft and alive between his fingers. Jesus, he'd never get enough of touching her.

He pictured her seated in front of the fireplace on his ranch in Texas, brushing her long hair, heavy with his baby, her breasts full and ready for the birth of their first child. If he was lucky enough to win Lacey's love, he didn't think the honeymoon for him would ever wear off.

"We aren't doing anything. Sorry." Danger took a swallow of beer, frowned, and set it aside.

"What?" Rafe blinked, jerked out of the mental image of Lacey heavily pregnant with his child. He rubbed a hand down his face. God. He was going crazy.

"I planned for the three of us to go riding tomorrow, thought we might spot a cougar or bear, something interesting."

"But?" Rafe turned up his beer and took another deep pull on it.

"I received a call from the Havre Sheriff's Office just before I arrived at the airport to meet you. I have to pick up a prisoner there tomorrow and take him to Missoula. It's going to be an all day trip there and back, possibly longer. You'll have plenty of time..."

Shit! Rafe scowled as Danger's words trailed away. *Plenty of time?* His brows furrowed with confusion. Danger planned to leave Lacey alone in the house with him? What the hell was the matter with the man? "Tomorrow's Christmas," he said sharply. "And it's snowing. Don't you have deputies who can do it?"

Danger flicked steel-gray eyes on him. "Half my deputies are off sick. The other half have already left to join families for the holidays in other states. The prisoner has to be in Missoula in Federal Court in time for his trial first thing Monday morning. The Feds want him there tomorrow."

"But isn't he Havre's responsibility?" Rafe grabbed a handful of popcorn and chewed on it. "Lacey's pot roast sounds more inviting and filling than this popcorn."

Danger laughed. "Come on, I'll dig out the roast and heat it up. Thank God for microwaves." They headed toward the kitchen laughing.

"Actually," Danger continued, "the prisoner is Rimrock's responsibility. Havre is just holding him for me because Rimrock's Sheriff's Department is getting a much needed facelift. I'm sorry about the change of plans, but Lacey and you can ride anyway. No reason why you shouldn't. Take a rifle. You never know what's out there."

Rafe grabbed the plate of roast and assorted vegetables Danger handed him, shoved it in the microwave and set the timer. "I can go with you in the morning. Ride along."

"It's the holidays. I don't want you to spend your off-time riding around with me, hauling a prisoner from one end of the state to the other. Besides, I have a deputy riding shotgun. No room for you."

"I don't mind. I can ride shotgun. Let the deputy stay home." The timer dinged on the microwave. Rafe opened the door and snatched a bite of roast and groaned. "This is good." He slipped the plate out and slid in the next one.

"Yeah, Lacey's a great cook. You two go have fun tomorrow."

Rafe swallowed his food and sliced off another chunk of the roast. If he didn't know better, he'd swear Danger was handing Lacey over to him, no muss, no fuss.

Dammit, he knew the man loved her. He'd seen how Danger looked at her, like he was mentally stripping her every time she walked into a room. His eyes always softened when he saw her. So why the hell was Danger willing to go off for an unspecified amount of time and leave her with another man and actually encourage the other man to sleep with his wife?

He had to be mistaken. It was his imagination. *Slow down. Think before you do something you'll regret the rest of your life.*

Rafe knew he'd been very discreet with the way he felt about Lacey, but even so, if she was his wife, he'd never leave her alone with another man for an indeterminate

number of hours. If it was him, he'd never abandon her on a holiday or leave her to open presents with someone who wasn't family. It was crazy. *His* good luck, but crazy all the same.

Lacey joined them in the kitchen. Grinning, she grabbed a slice of roast from the platter, smeared a generous dab of mayonnaise across the wheat bread and made a sandwich. "So, from the scowl on your face, I guess Danger told you you're stuck with me tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Rafe chugged down another hit from his bottle and finished off his plate of food. He couldn't think of another woman he'd rather be stuck alone with than Lacey Blackstone.

"The roast is too salty, Lacey," Danger snapped. He set his plate of food aside, barely touched. "It's overcooked and too damn dry. I hope you manage to get the turkey right and not ruin Christmas dinner for Rafe."

Lacey glanced uncertainly at Rafe, then back to Danger, and swallowed hard. "I—yes, of course, it should be fine." She turned a watery smile on Rafe. "If the roast tastes bad, you don't have to eat it, Rafe, just to be polite. I'm so sorry. I haven't tasted it before now, so I didn't know it was too salty or dry."

"The roast is delicious, Lacey."

"Thanks. We don't have to go riding tomorrow if you don't want to. We can hang around here, play checkers, drink hot chocolate, and roast marshmallows. Danger should be back before dark tomorrow night, then we can open gifts. Won't you, hon?"

Danger shrugged and offered Rafe a slab of pecan pie. "Lacey was stingy with the pecans, but it's almost as good as store bought."

Rafe eyed Danger carefully. Danger had to know he was embarrassing her. Rafe clenched his jaw to keep from taking a swing at the man. "It looks good to me, plenty of pecans." He took a bite of the pie and moaned. "Delicious. You will be back by tomorrow night?"

Danger locked eyes with him. "Depends on the highways and how clear they are. I might have to stop off and get a room."

"Oh, sweetheart." Lacey looked stunned. "It's Christmas. I thought you said you'd be back before dark tomorrow night."

"Don't nag, Lacey," he said sharply. "It's just another fucking day. You and Rafe can go ahead and open presents. I'll open mine when I get back. No big deal."

Rafe swallowed hard. What the fuck? Danger locked eyes with him again, gave a slight nod toward Lacey, and he knew then, nothing had been his imagination. Danger was making it clear he had no intention of coming home tomorrow night.

Lacey and he would have the day together and the night.

What the hell—he decided to push forward phase two of his campaign to seduce her. Not much seduction required when the husband simply handed her to him on a silver platter. By this time tomorrow night, she'd be his...

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## Chapter Thirteen

\* \* \* \*

*The woman who appeals to a man's vanity may stimulate him, the woman who appeals to his heart may attract him, but it is the woman who appeals to his imagination who gets him.*

*~Helen Rowland*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 7, Sat.*

Taylor knew before he looked, Dianna was toying with him. There was too much sparkle in her green eyes. The only snake anywhere near him was her. Long before the crash, he'd had his fill of the Remington family. The one good thing about Jace ordering him to accompany Dianna to Australia was the fact he was now alone and isolated with her.

Not only would it piss Jace off that his only sister was stranded with a man he detested, but she was at that man's mercy. Where Dianna was concerned, if he got the opportunity to screw her, Taylor had no intention of showing her a drop of clemency.

It would have been difficult to seduce her at the ranch. For one thing, she lived in New York and visited the ranch

infrequently, even though lately, the entire Remington clan had made it their goal to hang out at the Star.

Here, she needed him. Maybe not in a sexual way, not yet, but she needed him in order to survive. Whether she realized it or not or wanted to or not, she was dependant on him for protection. He had a feeling rescue wasn't coming any time soon. It meant long days and longer nights in each other's company. People bonded when it came to survival. Dianna would cling to him, connect with him, and through that connection, her fate would be sealed. Eventually, she'd need him to satisfy other needs.

However, bonding time wasn't happening right this moment.

He eyed her, frustration and anger slapping him hard. Did she honestly think they had time to play games? He saw the laughter in her green eyes, the amusement twitching around her lips, and still, he couldn't resist glancing at the ground, just in case there was a snake. "Don't kid around about crap like snakes. Not here! Do you have any idea how many different species of poisonous snakes there are in Australia?"

Dianna shook her head. "No. Do you?"

"I don't care. I have no desire to meet a single one of the beasts."

"We have to be careful, watch where we're stepping."

"Dianna, some snakes strike so fast, they aren't even seen until after they hit. You might not even see it then."

"For Pete's sake, do you always have to be such a grouchy stick-in-the-mud? Do you ever relax and just have fun?"

"Fuck, no! We don't have time for fun. And this is not the place to have fun. In a few minutes we're going to be drenched. Why the hell would I want to have fun with you? You aren't amusing. You're a pain in my ass!"

Dianna sobered instantly. The teasing light faded from her eyes. "Fine! But I don't see anywhere to shelter. We'll get wet."

"No. I'm going to rig us a temporary shelter with pieces of the plane. It will have to do for tonight. Tomorrow we'll leave."

"We should stay by the plane."

"We can't stay by the plane. There's no water here. We have to find water and better shelter."

"We should remain by the plane. That's what the rules say. Remain by the aircraft. It'll be spotted from the air, and we'll be rescued. I'm staying by the plane."

Taylor clenched his fists to keep from reaching out and shaking her. "You'll go where I go."

"No, I won't."

"Dianna, I'm not going to spend every moment arguing with you. I don't give a damn if you're a female Dick Tracy or not. Where I go, you go. End of discussion."

He turned on his heel and headed toward the pile of burned rubble, all that was left of the wreckage.

"Don't you want me to look at the wounds on your shoulder and treat those blisters on your chest?"

Taylor paused and turned to face her. "How many of me do you see?"

"Two?" She licked her lips. "Yeah, both of you look grumpy."

"Then how the hell would you know which grump to doctor?"

"Oh." She grinned. "I suppose I could treat both of you."

Taylor muttered and went back to examining the ragged and tangled body of the aircraft. "It's still too hot. I can't get close enough to drag anything out." He glanced at the darkening sky. "Not yet. Wait a little longer."

"Are you talking to the sky?"

"The clouds."

"So what are they saying back to you?"

He flung her a fulminating glare. "You aren't funny, you know."

"What are we going to do now?"

Taylor whipped around. "Jesus, don't creep up behind me like that! I have a buck knife in one of my duffle bags. I'm going to cut some vines and broad leaves and build us a shelter for the night."

"Oh. You hunt?"

Taylor curled his top lip. "Believe it or not, sweetheart, I wasn't always a cripple. I had a life before the accident. A normal one. I jogged, hunted, fished, camped, and fucked, all the things males do as a rule."

Dianna's face turned red. "That's a little more information than I want to know, Spencer, but hey, when you start talking, you really let go."

"As I recall, you wanted conversation."

"Not anymore."

"Tough. I'm in a talking mood. And don't act so damn innocent. I have little doubt you've had plenty of men revolving through your life. You're far from virginal."

"I never claimed I was a virgin, Spencer. There haven't been men, but there was a man, once, yes, one I loved and lived with for three years."

"Oh, he left your ass high and dry, huh? I can understand that. What I'm surprised about is it took him three years to decide to leave you."

Dianna swallowed hard and twisted her hands. "He didn't decide to leave me. He made a choice. He stepped in front of me and took the bullet in the heart meant for me." She turned and left him standing there.

Taylor watched her walk away. Shit! Inside, he felt like a hideous monster. Anger and frustration chewed at him. He always said the wrong thing. One of these days, he'd learn to keep his mouth shut. But today wasn't that day. "Where are you going?"

She kept walking, a little unsteady, toward a stand of bushes. "If it's okay with you, I need a few minutes alone. Nature calls."

"Well, nature will bite you on the ass if you aren't careful. So, no, it's not okay with me for you to just take off. Get back here. I don't want you wandering off alone."

She turned to face him, her face pale. "I have to pee."

"Yeah, well, do it over there by that tree."

"I'm not a dog. I can't just hike a leg and let 'er rip. Neither do I have a penis."

"Lucky me. Over by the tree. Within sight. And make it fast."

"Why do you always have to be contrary?"

He shrugged. "When you get finished, go lie down before you fall down. You're swaying like a sway-backed mule."

She gasped. "Don't order me around. I'm not one of your little bimbos you take camping."

Taylor grinned. "Who said I took women camping with me?"

"You did!"

"No, I said I fucked them. You wanna give it a whirl?"

She blinked. Her mouth worked like a fish gasping for air. "I'm going to lie down. That is *not* an invitation, Spencer."

"Aw, too bad." He clutched his heart. "And I had such high hopes."

She snorted and waved him away. "Go cut brush or something. Play on the freeway. Play dodge the cars."

He turned away, muttering.

"Hey, Spencer!"

He turned back. "What?"

"You're right about one thing. Watch out for snakes. There are some deadly fellows here."

"Yeah, well, as far as I can tell, I'm looking at the deadliest one."

Dianna swallowed hard and watched him walk away. "Right, Spencer, but you happen to be the one with the longest fangs!"

He turned back and grinned. "Remember that, sweetheart. When I take a bite out of you, I'll bite deep."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

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## Chapter Fourteen

\* \* \* \*

*We may encounter many defeats but we must not be defeated.*

*~Maya Angelou*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb. 6*

*Fri. 8:15 p.m.*

Rafe frowned, studied another one of the illogical symbols on the kitchen wall and sighed. None of it made sense—to *him*. To Smitt Davis, he was aware it had significant meaning. Logic. Rafe wished he knew the implications behind the drawings. It was vital he did. Time rolled by. Wasted minutes turned into wasted hours.

If Lacey wasn't already dead, then every minute lost was one more moment she faced certain death from her injuries, exposure to the elements, or possibly even Smitt.

Rafe's mind rebelled. His concentration wasn't worth shit. Lacey was all he thought about when he needed to figure out this insane mess. He was too close. Too emotionally involved, but he couldn't back off.

The not knowing if she was dead or alive drove him nuts. And not knowing if Smitt had somehow survived the fall over

the cliff on Jace Remington's property and had returned to wherever he'd stashed Lacey, and was even now torturing her.

No matter if Lacey was alive or dead, Rafe knew he'd never get her off his mind or out of his heart. She was wrapped snugly around his soul. Lacey owned him.

Rafe glared at the offending symbols. There had to be a key, a way to figure out what they meant.

*Lacey. Sweetheart. Hold on for me. Hold on.*  
He had to find her...

\* \* \* \*

*Two Months Earlier*

*Dec. 25*

*Thurs. 4:30 p.m.*

Danger wasn't coming home.

As soon as Rafe knew for certain the sheriff had no intention of returning home Christmas night, he should have left, no matter how bad the weather, no matter that Danger practically gave him a green light to sleep with Lacey.

The entire picture stank. His nerves jangled. On the one hand, he knew he should go, leave Lacey alone and not force his way into her life any more than he already had. It wasn't too late to back off.

On the other hand, he wanted to fuck her so damned badly, he'd never walk away. Never leave her untouched.

Rafe knew in his heart he should have insisted Lacey drive him to the airport, remove him from temptation's path, but

he'd never been the kind of man who gave up what he wanted or surrendered whatever small advantage he had.

Besides, allowing Lacey to take the risk of sliding off a steep mountain pass in this icy weather wasn't something he'd even consider. There were too many perils on an icy mountain highway in this part of the country. Besides the ice and snow, herds of deer stood on narrow curves at the edge of the highways. Longhorn mountain sheep lumbered down from the higher elevations to the lower ones in search of food. It wasn't uncommon for them to be on the highways along the passes.

Too many things could go wrong.

And he had a toehold on Lacey, a small one, but he was so in....

"Look!" Lacey pulled back on the reins of the black-and-white spotted mare she rode and pointed to the snow-laden tree limb several yards ahead of them. She grabbed the binoculars hanging around her neck and raised them to her eyes. "Do you see it?"

Rafe smiled. He saw only her, but he didn't say it. The snow had stopped earlier in the day but was beginning to drift down again. Big flakes peppered them in utter silence. A veil of quiet surrounded them. Crystal snowflakes fell lightly on her hair as if it were powdered by fairy dust.

Her hair lay tousled and tangled about her shoulders in wild disarray. Her nose glowed like Rudolph's, and her cheeks looked as if they were kissed by red roses. To him, she looked like an angel.

He wanted her so badly he could hardly stand the knot twisting in his gut.

They'd been riding for at least three hours, but Lacey had been his exclusive property all day. The intimacy of being alone in the house with her had played hell with his libido. His body raged with need, worse than if he was a hormonal teenage boy, but he wouldn't trade a single second of their time spent together. He'd been granted a few hours of learning what it'd be like to live under the same roof with Lacey, and he liked it.

Now he wanted to know what it would feel like to have the right to touch her as a man touches his woman, the rights of a husband. He wanted to know what it would be like to kiss her all over, to suckle her breasts, taste her intimately, to plant his cock in her silken channel and ride her until they were both spent and breathless.

Laughing together and playing checkers and rummy all morning, he'd savored the sound of her girlish giggles every time she shamelessly beat him at both games. They squabbled over who got the fattest marshmallows; then they roasted them, pressed them onto squares of chocolate and squashed it all together on graham crackers.

Cups of hot chocolate passed between them. His fingers brushed hers each time he pressed one of the squares in her hand. Eyes met, but her gaze quickly flickered away. They'd had a pillow fight. She'd beaten him mercilessly until he tackled her and took her to the floor; there, he'd fallen on top of her and paid her back by tickling her until she begged him to stop.

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

He'd held her as close as he dared and danced with her to slow Christmas tunes he couldn't recall the names of. Touching. He'd done a lot of touching, but it had all been subtle, in fun, a brush of his thumb along her wrist when he handed her back a mug of cocoa, his lips against her temple while they danced, his hard thighs cradled against hers, light airy brushes to her shoulders, spine and throat.

He'd rested his hands at the base of her spine, and they'd swayed slowly to the music—a long, slow seduction that made his dick hard and kept him so horny he could hardly breathe. He held her close and savored the feel of her full breasts against his chest, and the occasional bump of his hard cock against the slender notch of her feminine cradle.

She hadn't pulled away from his touches; neither had she acknowledged them. But he knew she was aware of the hardness of his body by the way her breathing increased, by her soft gasps every time his cock brushed against her. Quality seduction at its finest—there was nothing better to heighten the senses or titillate the nerves than a slow tease of the senses. She was his. It was just a matter of wearing her down and knowing the right moment to claim her.

When she suggested they get out of the house awhile, saddle up, and go for a ride, he was itching with cabin fever and more than ready to escape. It had been something of a relief to get out in the open air. He'd needed the breather. The foreplay was killing him. Another thirty minutes in the house alone with her, and he knew he was going to blow everything—including his load.

Rafe leaned close to her now, his hair touching her face and throat, and took the binoculars from her.

She looked around at him, surprised.

"You mind? I left mine in Texas." He hadn't. He had a pair in his duffle, but she didn't know that. He had a new box of condoms, too, but she didn't need to know that either—yet—or know that within the next twenty-four hours, he intended to make a damn big dent in the box of two dozen.

"Sure. Help yourself."

He leaned closer, allowing his warm breath to feather her cheek, and lifted the binoculars to his eyes. Rafe nudged his horse closer to hers. Yeah. He'd help himself...very soon.

In the meantime, he wasn't about to let up hammering her senses with the feel of his body against hers. His left thigh rested against the side of her right hip. He slid one arm around her waist as though to steady himself and leaned just that much closer. His fingers touched the soft underside of her left breast. In spite of the cold, his cock swelled and pressed tautly against his zipper. He shifted in the saddle and eased the pressure.

"Do you see it?" she whispered.

Rafe swallowed hard. If she turned her head a quarter-inch, their lips would touch. If she did that, he didn't know if he could stop from taking her mouth completely and owning it. His body vibrated like a tuning fork. He couldn't wait much longer. The hunt was almost over. Soon, he'd make his play. Let the chips fall where they fell. There had to be a loser. A winner. He intended to win.

Her fresh scent filled his nostrils. She smelled like the forest, the snow, and all things clean. His gut clenched. Rafe wanted to drag her into his arms, tilt back her face, and bury his mouth against hers. Show her how he felt, how he wanted her.

Given the chance, he'd lift her off the mare she was astride, set her on his lap, impale her with his hard cock, and let her ride him until they were both sated.

"Look! Look!" She pointed, laughing.

Her excitement captured his heart. The sound of her soft, melodious laughter held his attention like nothing ever had.

"There's an elk a hundred yards past that large boulder. See it?"

He caught the sweet scent of her breath. It smelled like the chocolate they'd shared at the house, chocolate, and the sweetness of melted marshmallows. God, he wanted to taste her. The need was so urgent he had to clench his fists to keep from reaching out and pulling her against him, to keep from molding her mouth to his and never letting her go.

"Jee-sus." He knew the groaned word had nothing to do with the cougar she'd spotted or the elk, and everything to do with the tight ache in his groin.

"Rafe?"

"Yeah," he choked. "The cougar's a beauty." He lowered the binoculars and eased back from her. Hell, at this point, he didn't know any longer who was seducing whom. "I—uh, missed the elk, though. It probably caught a whiff of the lion and took off. Big cougar, though. Glad he's not hungry."

"He?"

"Or she."

Lacey smiled and glanced at her watch. "It's getting late. We'd better head back. The turkey's waiting. I need to heat the dressing." She looked at the sky and frowned. "Looks like more snow. Maybe Danger will make it back before it starts to get heavy."

"Yeah. Maybe."

He didn't have the heart to tell her Danger wasn't returning. Not tonight, maybe not even tomorrow night. Rafe suspected he and Danger were turned enough alike that one of them would get hurt, physically hurt, before this was all finished. They were both strong, dangerous males, both territorial, both alpha, and both held what they claimed.

He also suspected Danger wasn't spending the night alone, but he didn't know it for certain. Rafe frowned. He didn't want to know. He might suspect that for some crazy reason, Danger was pushing Lacey away and into the arms of another man, but when the final showdown came, the man would fight for her. It wasn't going to be pretty.

Rafe kneed his horse and rode a little ahead of her, giving Lacey a breather from his close proximity. He'd backed off, simply because she'd looked flustered and a little wary when he took the binoculars from her, but he hadn't given up. He *wasn't* giving up. The seduction scene was set. Now it was just a matter of action.

He couldn't stop loving Lacey with every breath he drew just because it wasn't moral. He'd tried to remain honorable, tried to do the right thing and stay away, leave her

untouched. He'd argued with his conscience that what he planned, what he wanted, was wrong.

God help him, he loved her, and in matters of the heart, sometimes honor crumbled to dust. When it came right down to it, he was human. Humans made mistakes. *He* made mistakes.

But he'd never convince himself loving Lacey was a mistake. Even though he knew he was too close to the fire, and he fully expected to get burned, he couldn't wait to taste her passion, couldn't stop pursuing her even if he wanted to.

And he didn't want to.

Not touching her would be like trying to rope a lightning bolt. If he didn't win Lacey, there was only one finale, and it all ended in heartache. He couldn't breathe when he was near her. His lungs froze. His heart stuttered to a standstill. Hell, he could barely string two words together and make a sentence. He adjusted the front of his jeans for at least the hundredth time, but nothing was going to ease the pressure until he sank deep inside Lacey and rode her to fulfillment.

His thoughts circled back to Danger.

Danger loved her. No matter what the man said or did, he knew in his heart Danger was crazy in love with Lacey, too. Someone had to lose. Rafe couldn't help that fact, and he had a strong dislike of losing.

By the time the house came into sight, giant snowflakes bombarded them and the ground. They rode inside the barn side by side, laughing.

"You let me beat you," Lacey proclaimed.

Rafe slid off his mount and helped her off the mare. "Yeah, I did, but it was still a fun race."

Lacey giggled as her feet touched the barn floor. Immediately her boots slipped on a patch of ice. She stumbled straight into his arms.

"Watch it!" Rafe locked his arms around her waist and toppled back in the pile of fresh hay he'd scattered for the horses before they left for their ride. She sprawled helplessly on top of him, her laughter soft against his skin.

Rafe twined his long legs with hers. Face to face, eye to eye, mouths scant inches apart, breasts to chest, and thigh to thigh, he locked his gaze with hers, and he knew there wasn't one damn thing he could do to prevent her from feeling the full hard-on behind his zipper. It was the second time in less than twenty-four hours his straining cock had betrayed him. And had been pressed intimate against her body.

He heard her sharp intake of air, felt the full softness of her breasts as she inhaled and exhaled against his mouth. He locked his arms around her a little tighter. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She laughed nervously. "That was graceful. I bombed like a stork with a broken leg."

His hands rested above the sweet curve of her butt in the small of her back. Rafe clenched his fists to keep from dragging her tighter against him. "You bombed just fine, sweetheart." He brushed the damp curls back from her face. "Lacey."

It was all he said, her name a sigh on the wind, but a wealth of emotion in that one whispered word.

Her gaze shot to his mouth. She trembled. "Rafe, I—uh—"

He held her against his erection. There was no mistaking he was hard as a branding iron. For an infinitesimal second, she responded and arched against his ridged cock. Her eyes widened with shock at her action. She scrambled off him. Her breasts rose and fell with agitated breaths. She stood staring down at him as if he'd suddenly grown another appendage. Her mouth worked. Her eyes welled with tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Then she whirled and headed toward the front of the barn.

Rafe jumped up and took off after her. He caught her near the entrance.

"Lacey," he yelled. Grabbing her by the arm, he turned her to face him. "Lace! Wait!" He squeezed her upper arms gently. "Lace, you've done nothing wrong. You have nothing to be sorry about. Please, don't be afraid of me. I swear to God I'd never hurt you."

She shook her head. "Let go of me, Rafe. Please."

Shit! She was terrified of him. He should have better control of his body. He shouldn't have thrust his dick against her like he did. Dammit! He should never have let her realize how much he wanted her. They were here alone. Isolated. She had to be frightened to death of him.

"Lace, I'd cut off my right arm before I'd ever hurt you. I'm a man, sweetheart. Getting hard, well, fuck! It happens to me every time I'm near you. It isn't your fault or anyone's fault. It's nature, and the fact I'm so far gone in love with you, I'll never breathe normal again."

Lacey placed a trembling hand over his mouth. "Sssh. You shouldn't say such things to me."

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Rafe touched his tongue to her palm. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. He didn't move. She didn't move. Lacey opened her eyes, and he saw the raw need there in the gold shadows of her eyes. Slowly, she lowered her hand to her side.

"I love you, Lacey. I tried to stay away from you. I swear to God, I did. Every time I left I swore I wouldn't come back here. I never meant for you to know how I feel about you, but I came back because I couldn't stay away from you. I can't hide how much I love you anymore."

"Don't. I'm begging you. Don't ever say you love me again. I'm not free, Rafe. I'm married."

"I don't care! If you'll just allow me to touch you sometimes, let me kiss you, hold you, pretend you're mine. Lacey, you don't have to be afraid of me."

Lacey licked her lips. "Rafe." She choked out his name on a strangled note and laid a trembling hand along his cheek. "You don't understand. It isn't you I'm frightened of."

His brows furrowed. His breath slipped away on a ragged sound. "Then who?"

"Me."

Rafe shuddered. He didn't need any more words from her. He needed her. His chest heaved with a ragged breath. Gently, he pulled her away from the opening and deeper into the shadows of the barn. Their gazes locked. Without saying anything, he backed her against the rough hewn slats of the barn wall and cupped the sides of her face with his big hands.

"Jesus, Lacey, why did you make me wait so long?" Slowly, he dipped his head and covered her lips with his. She didn't

resist, but laid her palms on his chest and sighed gently into his mouth.

So soft, God, she felt so damn soft in his arms. Sweet. All woman. His woman. He couldn't get her close enough. He wanted to feel them skin to naked skin, his body covering hers, his shaft buried deep inside the velvet channel of her womanhood.

His heart pounded. Rafe shuddered when she touched the tip of her tongue to his lips. The burning ache spread through his body until he thought he'd die. He slid his arms around her slender waist, crushed her closer, and deepened the kiss.

Rafe eased his tongue between her lips and tasted what he'd longed for so many years to taste. The pure sweetness of her flavor on his tongue was manna from heaven to him. He moaned, unbuttoned the top button at her waist and slipped his hands inside the back of her jeans, inside her panties, cupped her bare ass, and lifted her against his erection.

She sobbed and wiggled urgently against the straining length of his cock until he thought he'd explode with need.

Lacey groaned and bucked against him. He let her ride the hard length behind his zipper, encouraged her by lifting her hips and giving her freer access to the hard ridge. Tiny, kittenish whimpers tore from her throat and sent heat washing over him like a flash fire. She dug her fingers into the denim of his coat, then clung to him and shuddered.

Her breath sounded raspy in his ears. He held her tight, let her body slowly cool and relax against his.

"Aw, God...I—" Lacey opened her eyes. Her breaths escaped in short bursts that matched his. Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her face. "Oh, Rafe. Oh, my God! What are we doing?"

"I don't know, but it feels damn good."

He saw the utter shock and embarrassment on her face over the fact she'd climaxed so quickly with very little stimulation from him. He trapped her mouth with his, swirled his tongue between her lips and battled for the right to love her, to win her love. He tore off his gloves and slid his hand under her shirt. No bra. The woman drove him insane. She never wore a bra.

He squeezed her firm breasts and impatiently tore her denim coat off her, ripped her shirt down the middle and tossed it aside. With an urgency that quaked through his entire body, he claimed the candy-pink nipples for his own.

Sliding one hand to the front of her panties, he traced his fingers through the nest of soft curls hidden there. She whimpered as he held her against the barn wall and started to work her jeans down her slender hips. "No, Rafe. No. We can't do this!"

Rafe swore softly. "I've wanted to make love to you for so long," he whispered. "Let me in you, baby. Let me love you."

"I can't." She pushed him away and crossed her arms over her bare breasts. Her nipples were tight, tiny buds and a tempting ice-pink. She looked around a little wildly. Her hair was mussed, her lips swollen from his kisses. Her cheeks were flushed. Tears spilled freely. "I can't," she whispered brokenly.

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Rafe nodded, unable to speak. He swallowed back his need. She wasn't ready to accept him. He'd rushed her. He inhaled deeply. Slowly exhaled. "Here." He slid her arms inside her denim jacket and pulled the edges together. Her blouse was hopeless. He left it on the barn floor and pulled her close. "Lacey, I'm not up for games, honey. We're both adults, consenting adults. I want to fuck you, yes, but not just once. I love you. I don't want to use you just to get off, so don't think once I've had you, it's done, finished."

She shook her head. "I used you, Rafe. I needed to feel a man's mouth on mine, a man's hands on my body. I needed what you gave me. I'm sorry."

"You didn't use me. I meant for you to take what you needed. Hell, I couldn't wait to pleasure you, honey." He saw it in her eyes. Rejection. She wasn't ready to face what was happening between them or what had just happened. "Lace, I—"

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "This is my fault. I shouldn't have let you kiss me. Touch me. Oh, God." Her lips quivered. "*Let you kiss me.*" She laughed hysterically. "I did a little more than that. Didn't I? I practically attacked you like a wild animal in heat. I didn't mean to lead you on or cause you to—to—" She broke off and glanced in the direction of his zipper. "Cause *that* to happen. You got nothing out of this, and I'm leaving you aching, I know. I'm not a tease. Oh, God, I'm so sorry."

"I'm fine. I might hurt, but I'll be fine, and sweetheart, I know you aren't a tease. You aren't to blame for any of this. This didn't happen because I kissed you or you fell on top of

me." Rafe dropped his hands to his sides. "It's not going to stop or go away, either. It's here between us, Lace, this feeling, this need. I want you. I think you want me, too."

Lacey shook her head in denial. "No. This is insane." She tried to pull free of his arms. He tightened his hold about her waist. "Rafe, I need to go. Someone could come. I need time to think."

"Not yet, Lace. I'm dying to taste you again."

Panic flared in her eyes. "Rafe," she whispered his name. "No. Please. Let me go. This can't go any further."

Reluctantly, he dropped his arms to his sides, but he knew beyond doubt she was now screamingly conscious of him as a man. The sexual desire between them wasn't something she could continue to ignore or deny any longer. He'd taken the edge off her need, but she was far from satisfied, and he knew it. She'd had a taste of him. It wasn't going to be enough for her. He'd had a taste of her. He wanted more.

Lacey stared at him with both wide-eyed innocence and utter devastation. The look in her gold eyes said plainly she was stunned by what had taken place between them, shocked that she'd let him touch her so intimately. Kiss her.

Wild color stained her cheeks.

Her hand trembled as she swiped back a swath of hair from her face. "I'm sorry," she said again in a shaky voice.

"I'm not."

"Rafe. I love Danger. Please. I don't want to have to choose between you."

"Honey, you just did."

"No!" She shook her head in denial. "I can't do this!"

Rafe watched her beat a hasty retreat. "*Fuck!*"

He punched the barn wall, then moaned and shook his hand.

*Choose between them?*

He took some deep breaths, ordered himself to calm down. Lacey didn't accept it yet, but she would never have let him kiss or touch her just now if she hadn't already subconsciously made a choice. She hadn't hurried to escape him, not at first, and she'd definitely savored the feel of his hands cupping her ass and stroking her breasts. Hell, she'd climaxed! Fast. So fast, it had even stunned him.

Lacey Blackstone might love her husband, but she'd responded to *his* touch. She hadn't meant to, but obviously Danger wasn't doing his homework. She was starved for sex. He'd felt it clear to his toes by the immediacy of her response. Yeah, she might love Danger, or think she still did, but the woman in her needed *him*.

Rafe shook his head and cursed himself for moving too fast. He wanted to fuck her so badly he'd rushed things. When the opportunity presented itself again, he knew he'd do the same thing again. He wouldn't hesitate to take full advantage.

He wouldn't give her time to think about what was happening between them. He'd screw her every single chance he got, and he intended to see he got plenty of chances in the following hours.

Lacey thought to deny what had just happened, deny what was growing between them. He'd let her get by with fooling herself for a little longer, another two or three hours. But

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when it came down to it, she had no choices left. Danger had thrown her away. When she realized it, Rafe intended to be there to pick up the pieces of her shattered heart and put them together again.

Right now, she was in a state of denial. Lacey believed she was safe there in her house. He'd let her run, but she could only run so far. So fast. He had her scent, and he was in hot pursuit.

Lacey would soon realize she was never going to be safe from him again...

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## Chapter Fifteen

\* \* \* \*

*It's better to be unhappy alone than unhappy with  
someone— so far.*

*~Marilyn Monroe*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 7, Sat.*

Dianna gave the makeshift shelter Taylor had thrown together a woeful eye. She slanted her gaze at him, careful to keep her expression neutral when she looked at him. He stood off to one side eyeing his handiwork, a big dopey grin plastered on his face. From his silly expression, one would think he'd just given birth.

"Well?" he huffed. "Whadda ya think?"

She tilted her head from side to side, giving it close scrutiny. "Pretty sad."

"Whadda ya mean, 'pretty sad'?"

"It won't hold when the monsoon wind and rain gets here."

"Yes, it will. I braided the vines and knotted them together and tied them across the broad leaves over the plane wings, and we're sheltered from the wind by that rock wall. We should be snug and dry."

"It's a piece of shit!" She winced, realizing her lack of praise sounded ungrateful. He'd worked hard to build the hut for them before night set in.

Taylor blew out a puff of air and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. He threw his knife toward her. It landed tip down in the dirt at her toes. "If you can do better, go for it."

Dianna screeched and danced back. "What do you think you're doing tossing a knife at me like that?"

"I can throw a knife as good as you can shoot, and I'm not seeing double. I owed you."

Her mouth worked, but she could hardly argue the point when she'd fired her gun at such close range to him.

"Now, any further comments about the shelter I built?"

"I said it was pretty good."

"The word 'good' never once came out of your mouth. Jesus, Dianna, cut me a little slack. I have nothing to work with but my bare hands and a knife." He held up his palms, and Dianna felt like crying. His hands were a web of bleeding cuts from yanking on vines. He'd padded the makeshift shelter with layers of leaves and vines, and here she stood, belittling what he'd accomplished barehanded.

She grabbed a bottle of water, tore off the cap, and took his hands in hers. "Here, let me clean them for you." Slowly, she tilted the bottle and poured water over them.

Taylor jerked away. "Stop it. What are you doing?"

"I'm cleaning your hands. I thought maybe I'd wrap some cloth around them to protect them."

He stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. His chest heaved with harsh, raspy breaths. Sweat saturated his jeans. He hadn't bothered to put on a shirt. The blisters on his chest looked uglier by the hour. More had ruptured, but others popped up in their place. The redness had spread to the width of her palm and then some. His face was streaked with dirt and blood. He looked exhausted and out of patience. "Don't waste the water on my hands," he snapped.

"I'm not wasting it. If we don't keep wounds clean, even tiny ones, they could get infected. You need to let me wash them and stitch the cut on your back. Those blisters need treating. You could get sick, and then what will I do?"

Taylor snorted. "I should have realized it was all about you and no concern for my injuries or me."

Dianna clenched her teeth. "That's not fair, Taylor, and you know it. I am concerned about you."

"I said save the water! And save your concern for someone who needs it. I don't need you fawning all over me, pretending you care. We both know neither of us can stand the other."

She ignored his short temper and said instead, "I found six energy bars, two sacks of jerky, a package of gum, two apples, three oranges and the latest novel by Tabitha Shay in my carryon bag. I divided it all out equally."

"You divided the novel?"

"A Taylor Spencer joke? I didn't think you possessed a sense of humor." Her eyes widened at the sound of her laughter. She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed. It seemed like years to her.

"I have a sense of humor, when you aren't stepping on my last nerve. It's okay to laugh. It sounded pretty good."

"Pretty good? As in as 'pretty good' as the hut you built?"

"No. As in great, wonderful, and I'd like to hear you laugh again."

She smiled. "Oh."

"So, did you?"

"What?"

"Divide the book?"

"No, silly, the food. You can't have my novel. I'd kill for her books."

"Romance novels?" He gagged. "Woman stuff, sort of like that monthly crisis thing."

"There's nothing wrong with romance or romance novels."

"Women like to label everything." He sounded disgusted, yet she saw the teasing light in his blue eyes. "The word 'romance' simply changes what is ultimately a term for sex."

Dianna gasped. "That is not true!"

"True."

"Jerk!"

"Ah, yes. You did say there was some jerky? That stuff's loaded with salt. It will only make us thirsty."

"We have eight bottles of water from the ice chest. Well, four now."

"Is there any water in the ice chest from melted ice?"

"No. The ice all sloshed out during the crash. Why?"

"It doesn't matter now, but I was going to suggest you fill the empty bottles from the melted ice."

"Eww!"

"Don't be picky. We'll have to use whatever we have or can scrounge to survive. If that means catching rain in a leaf and drinking it, we will. We'll leave the top up on the ice chest and let it fill with rainwater, then refill all the empty bottles. It might be the only water we have to drink for a long time." Taylor eyed the sky and frowned. "Get inside. The rain's going to hit any second."

Dianna squirmed her way inside the small hut. "Please, God, don't let there be anything that stings, bites or has dozens of hairy legs in my new home."

Taylor snorted and crawled inside the makeshift shelter beside her.

"Don't laugh," she said. "You don't know what we might be sleeping with in here."

Since she'd spread all their clothes from their luggage for bedding, it was pretty comfy inside.

Three hours later, she scowled into the dark as she tried to get comfortable. They'd shared an orange at dark, took two swallows of water from the same bottle, and that was the limit of their food and fluid intake.

Dianna squeezed her thighs together. How could she possibly have the urge to pee? God help her, she was soo not going to wake Taylor and ask him to escort her outside in the pouring rain just so she could add more water to the already wet ground.

The man had turned into a tyrant, not that he hadn't always been a bit of a bully. He had, even from his wheelchair, been a lot of male. Still, she was plenty ticked

that he refused to give her back her gun. He'd taken charge of the food and water, too, and divided the rations his way.

"What's wrong, Dianna?"

She jumped, his sleepy voice catching her by surprise.

"Nothing."

"Then go to sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a rough day."

She sat up and stared into the dark. "I can't sleep just because you command it."

He rolled toward her, grabbed her by the arm and tugged her down beside him. "What are you doing?" she gasped.

"Making you comfortable."

Taylor settled her close until her head rested on his chest. "How's that?"

*How's that?*

Dianna inched closer and wondered what he'd say or do if she said she'd love to be on top of him, his body surging into hers. Would he take her up on the offer of her body? She didn't think so. He didn't like her, so therefore he wouldn't have any interest in her body.

She sighed and snuggled closer.

"Stop wiggling," he growled. "You're rubbing my blisters."

She froze. "Sorry. Maybe I should move back to my spot."

His arms tightened about her waist fractionally. "Go to sleep."

She lay there and fumed. He made decisions for her, ordered her around, and expected her to obey mindlessly. The thing was she couldn't stay mad because he was right in the way he took charge of the food and water and divided it between them. She supposed, albeit grudgingly, that he was

right to hold the gun, since she was still having fierce headaches and trouble focusing at times.

What she was really pissed off about was the fact he'd yanked her book from her hands just before total darkness closed in. He'd settled near the opening of the small shelter he'd built and began reading it. Taylor used what precious minutes of daylight there were left reading *her* book! There was just something wrong with that picture.

"I thought you didn't like romance novels."

"I don't."

"Then why did you read *my* book?"

"So I wouldn't have to talk to you. Go to sleep."

Dianna's brows furrowed. "You lost my place," she complained.

"How many times have you read that book, *Witch's Brew*?"

"I don't know, three maybe. Four?"

He snorted. "You'll find your place when I'm finished with it."

When it got too dark to see the words, he'd slapped the book together and handed it to her. "Do not lose my place."

"Huh!"

Dianna lay there in the dark, listening to the cry of birds and wild animals.

*Don't freak. It's just bird calls and animals. They can't hurt you. Ha!*

Inside the hut they were dry, but it felt claustrophobic. How could Taylor sleep with all that screeching going on outside? But his soft snores assured her he was in fact asleep.

Dianna wiggled in the dark, squeezed her thighs a little tighter and tried not to rub Taylor's chest.

Still, she couldn't keep from touching him. She sifted her fingers through the light furring of hair on his chest. She loved his wide chest, the sculpted muscles, the perfect pecs. Slowly, she walked her fingers down his solid midriff, awed at the ridged, six-pack abs. She slid her fingers a little lower and paused at the edge of the elastic band of his boxers.

Should she? Or shouldn't she? Dianna toyed with the elastic band. Toyed with temptation. Slowly, she slipped her fingers a bare inch beneath the elastic. Her heart hammered. Her pulse pounded. Oh my God! Had all her blood rushed to her head? Her fingers curled with the hot need to stroke his cock, cup his balls and gently squeeze the manly nuggets.

Dianna held her breath and glided her fingers through the top edge of the nest of soft hair. A little more and she'd be able to touch 'it.' Her fingertips were right there at the tip of the treasure she sought. She released a long breath. God, it was hot inside the hut! Why, it was downright steamy.

Her breath caught in her lungs. Her palms felt sweaty. She eased her fingers from under the elastic and instead walked them up and down the hard length behind the thin cotton material of his shorts. Holy cow! Dare she invade the Land of the Jolly Green Giant?

Damn, she wished Taylor didn't dislike her so much. Right now, she could stand a little tender, loving care. She wiggled closer. Daringly, she slipped her fingers beneath the elastic once more. Glory be, the head of his cock was right there! She was pretty sure she hadn't slid her fingers any further

down than from the first time. That meant...oh yes, that's exactly what it meant.

She couldn't resist running a fingertip around the smooth skin. Oh my God. She was right. It had grown. It was nice and firm and yeah—a perfect length. It couldn't be better if she'd ordered it her way. She explored the tiny slit, felt a drop of moisture and rubbed the lubricant onto the plum-shaped head. She pumped the engorged shaft a few times. This could get interesting. Mmmm!

Dianna stopped pumping and frowned in the dark. What should she do now that she had her hand inside his shorts and around the broad tip of his spear? Should she continue pumping until she got the full works?

"Hell, don't fucking stop now. It was just getting good."

Dianna squeaked and jerked her hand free of his underwear. "I—I—was asleep. I didn't know what I was doing."

He snorted.

"I thought you were asleep."

"How can I sleep with your hot little hands playing find the rope?" He rolled with her and settled his big body on top of her. "Is this what you want? Or maybe *this* is what you really crave." He nudged her with his powerful thighs.

*Holy hell!* Did he have a tube sock filled with sand in his underwear? She'd gotten past the top of his cock to discover there was plenty more to follow. "Uh—" Dianna licked her lips. "Uh—"

She sucked in air. For Pete's sake, she sounded like she was going to sneeze! Uh. Uh.

"Is it?" he asked again. His voice sounded hard as flint. "Tell me you want me. I'll be in you so fast you won't have time to think about it." He dragged her hand inside his shorts and wrapped her fingers around his hard cock. "If you want it, it's yours. I promise you, it's better than warm milk. Just say the word, and it's done."

She could hardly deny she wanted him. God, her fingers were wrapped around his dick. She stroked the long length, once, twice. Taylor shuddered and grabbed her hand, breaking her strokes. "Uh-uh. Not like that. When I go off, it's going off inside you. When you climax, you're going to be riding my dick hell for leather."

He pressed the long length of his cock against her one last time, then rolled off her. "Now for God's sake, go to sleep or next time, I get to cop a feel of what's underneath that short, little-bit-of-nothing skirt you've been prancing around in all damn day."

"I haven't been prancing around!" God, she'd been more like falling down, stumbling around.

"Go to sleep, Dianna," he said sharply. "Or I'm going to rip that nothing thong off your ass and bury my dick in you!"

*"Go to sleep, Dianna! Stop wiggling, Dianna! Give me, ooomph—"*

Taylor rolled on top of her, pinned her shoulders against the bedding, and cut off her speech with his mouth. Ah, now *this* was better than warm milk, better than a sleeping pill. The hard, wet pressure of his mouth on hers was heaven. She couldn't get close enough to him or get enough of his mouth.

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Dianna parted her lips and invited him inside. Their tongues tangled and battled for supremacy. God, she wanted to be surrounded by his lean body, to be inside his skin.

Taylor grunted when she nipped his tongue with her teeth. He released her shoulders and gripped her chin, then deepened the kiss, but not before biting her bottom lip. She tasted her blood on his tongue and didn't care.

With his free hand, he finished shredding the rag of a shirt off her. Impatiently, he removed her bra and clasped one breast in his big hand. He bunched her skirt around her waist, yanked off her thong and shoved his shorts off. His cock throbbed urgently between her thighs.

She bucked beneath him, pushed against his cock, encouraged him to take her. Oh, God, she wanted. Wanted so badly. Taylor freed her mouth, only to take her breast prisoner. His tongue on her nipple felt good. He kneaded her other breast, licked the firm slope and traced his tongue beneath the tender underside of both breasts. All the while, he teased the opening of her channel with little nudges of his cock.

"Do it," she pleaded, scratching his back.

"Open for me."

Dianna groaned and parted her thighs. "In me. Now! I want you in me."

"You're certain this is what you want?"

"Yes!"

He parted her nether lips and guided the broad head of his cock to her sleek entrance. Slowly, he rubbed it up and down the length of her clit, teasing, torturing. He pushed inside her,

a scant amount, then wiggled his hips, pushed in another scant amount. She groaned and clawed his shoulders. "God. Do it! I want to feel all of you."

Slowly, he pulled out of her. "Uh-uh. No way."

"What?" She arched against his thighs. "Please! Do it," she screamed. "Oh, God. Stop torturing me and fuck me!"

He laughed. "I don't think so."

Dianna blinked. "What?"

Taylor tugged up his shorts and tucked his cock inside. "I like to be the hunter, the aggressor. I don't want you, Dianna."

"What?" Dianna sucked deeps breaths inside her chugging lungs. That was her third 'what' in less than a minute. Surely one of them deserved an answer. "It sure as hell felt like you want me."

"A natural reaction to a man waking up with a woman's fingers wrapped around his cock and pumping it for all it's worth."

"Get off me!"

"I'll fuck you, Dianna, if that's what you want. But you say it when we're not in the heat of the moment. When we're both in control and not wanting it because we survived a crash. Say it when it's real and means something to you. Say you want me to fuck you and mean it, or this goes no farther."

"I don't understand," she choked.

"Yes, you do," he breathed. "I'm not shouldering all the blame for whatever happens between us. I'm not having you say I took advantage of you."

God, she was dying here.

"Say it," he gritted. "Say you want me to fuck you."

"Why?"

"Because when your brothers get pissed over the fact I screwed you, I want to be able to tell them you begged me for it, and you knew what you were doing and saying." He bumped his hips against her. "If you wanna be fucked, say it with meaning. Say it when you aren't concussed."

Dianna felt tears burn behind her eyelids. "You don't want me?"

"This isn't about me." He laughed shortly. "If you want my cock, say it. Never doubt for a moment I'll take what is freely offered, but want you? No. You're a means to an end, a mercy fucking. You mean nothing to me. If you accept that, say you want me to fuck you."

"Get the hell off me!"

He rolled off her and turned his back to her. His harsh breaths sounded ragged in the dark. "You let me know if you change your mind, sweetheart. I'll be happy to give you all I got, every inch. Now go to sleep!"

"Don't hold your breath, Spencer." God, if the only reason he wanted to make love to her was so he could tell her brothers she asked for it, she'd die before she ever let him touch her again.

Dianna turned onto her side away from him and let the tears silently fall. "You are the biggest asshole I've ever had the misfortune to meet."

"And you're a spoiled bitch. You wanna be fucked, but you don't want to shoulder responsibility. You'd throw me to your

brothers without a word and walk away. You'd tell them I took advantage of you while you were injured. It's not going to be like that, Dianna."

Dianna sniffed. He was wrong. She wasn't the one who'd walk away. He would. Anything between them was a recipe for a total disaster.

But how could he be so ruthless? Leave her wanting like this? How could he taunt her, stuff his dick inside her, then pull it out like he had no feelings at all? Did he have ice water in his veins?

She curled into a knot of misery and stayed well away from him, on her side of the hut, so the whole two feet spanned between them like a yawning black hole. Dianna swallowed hard. She knew he'd ditched his shorts when he'd turned his back to her, so he was lying there stark naked. She could still hear his ragged breaths.

He'd tossed both her thong and her bra aside. There was no way she could locate them in the dark, but at least her skirt offered her a small amount of modesty. She patted the clothes until she found a tee-shirt and jerked it on. Like him, she wanted to rip off her clothing. She wondered if it was for the same reasons.

Dianna sniffed and ignored the heat pulsing between her thighs, the scalding need, the way her skin felt so sensitive she could barely tolerate her clothes. She tried to forget the precious moment of him filling her. The bastard. He'd deliberately worked her into a heated frenzy, then left her wanting. She still felt the solid touch of the thick head of his

cock inside her. Felt the inner muscles stretching to accommodate his size.

How could he have such rigid control?

Her nether lips felt swollen and sensitive. Her body throbbed, urgent and wild. She clenched her fingers. What she really wanted to do was choke him.

Dianna deliberately forced her thoughts to what was happening outside their shelter. She was so ready for it to stop raining. The ice chest was full and spilling over for the time being. Water! Yep. They had more than their share for now. The poorly constructed shelter had held together so far.

Even though she was dry, the tropical downpour made everything feel damp. She wondered if they were going to survive their first night in the Kimberly, their first night alone, together.

Even the birds complained. Dianna huffed and wiggled. The gulf between Taylor and her irritated her. She jumped as a cockatoo let out a particularly hair-raising screech. It sounded as if they'd camped in the middle of a freaking zoo! She didn't think she'd ever heard such loud parrots, cockatiels or so many assorted bird sounds.

Everything was bigger, louder, and closer. The continuous downpour and noisy squawks deafened. Damn, couldn't the flippin' birds find a nest to shelter in somewhere else? The dark grew deeper, murkier. It smothered with its complete denseness. She pressed her hands over her ears and let her tears slide soundlessly down her face. Camping in the rainforest sucked almost as much as liver.

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Suddenly realization punched her in the gut. Her blood chilled. Terror crept through every blood vessel and vein like a slow-moving, slimy snail. She gasped back the horror, but it filled her insides, twisting into something ugly. They weren't going to survive. How could they?

Too many unknowns factored into everything, food, shelter, most importantly, water, and treating their cuts and wounds. No antibiotics, except for a half empty tube of antibiotic ointment.

Earlier, she'd taken a look at the gash on Taylor's back. It had finally stopped bleeding once he allowed her to clean and stitch it, but it had looked awful, red and swollen. The burn on his chest was an ugly cluster of blisters and broken blisters. She'd used over half of the ointment. He had to feel as miserable as she did, but he'd refused another pain pill when they'd turned in for the night. He was still on his kick about not letting let her take one.

She must have dozed, because the next thing Dianna knew Taylor was shaking her.

"Wake up!"

"I'm awake," she snapped.

"Good. Now go back to sleep."

"I really, strongly dislike you," she grouched.

"Yeah, well, the feeling's mutual, honey."

Dianna huffed and drifted into a deep sleep.

An hour later, he shook her. "Wake up."

"Dammit, Taylor. Leave me alone and let me sleep."

"Are you always a grouch when you first wake up?"

"I am when someone repeatedly disturbs my sleep. Leave me alone."

"No can do, sweetheart."

Swear to God, he possessed some kind of freaking internal alarm clock. He slept for an hour, woke up just to wake her up, then he closed his eyes and fell instantly to sleep.

She, on the other hand, couldn't go back to sleep that fast. By the time she did, the hour was up, and Taylor woke her again. He was driving her crazy! She was tired, hungry, and sleep deprived. She needed to pee, and the rain, the damn rain, beat down, beat down, and beat down. Her temper grew shorter every time Taylor shook her awake.

"Leave me alone!"

"No. Go to sleep."

"I swear to God if you tell me to go sleep just once more, I'll—"

"You'll what?"

"I'll wait until you're good and asleep, and I'll break your dick!"

His soft snickers filled the darkness, filled the hut with an intimacy only the two of them shared.

"Hell, that's about the only thing I haven't had broken, Princess."

Dianna fumed. How could he make a joke about it?

"Jesus, Dianna." He dragged her into his arms and settled her head on his chest for the second time that night. "I'm a light sleeper, so keep your hands out of my shorts or else, sweetheart, be ready to say the magic words."

"Ha, like you're wearing them."

She heard his grin.

"I didn't think you noticed, but since you did, no touching the merchandise. You break, you buy."

Like she had an interest in touching his dick again? Never! "Put on your undies."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Just leave 'it' be, Dianna, and it will leave you be."

Taylor was snoring in seconds. She slid her arms around his lean waist and closed her eyes.

"No touching my ass." He snickered.

Dianna fumed. He hadn't even noticed her breasts were pressed against skin. She was careful to keep her hands above his waist. Taylor grunted and turned onto his side.

Dianna sighed and spooned against his back. Then the rain came! It beat on their tiny roof like a wild drummer. Her eyes popped open. Dear God, she'd only thought it was raining hard before. Rain. Rain. Rain. An endless deluge.

She hadn't known so much water could pour from the sky. It surged on top of the makeshift roof like a waterfall from heaven, pounding on the little canopy of plane wings. It sounded like hail beating on an old tin roof.

Taylor twisted around to face her. "We're safe in here," he said gently. He slid his arm around her waist and held her close. "At the risk of getting my dick broken, go to sleep."

She laughed and closed her eyes. "My head hurts. Can I—"

"No, you can't have one."

Chills racked her body. She moaned. Taylor grunted with annoyance. She wiggled closer. He squirmed away.

"Christ, Dianna, would you keep still and get off me? I'm as far back as I can go." Irritation threaded his voice.

"I'm cold."

"I'm hot!"

"How can you be hot? It's raining."

"Hell, I don't know, honey, maybe I'm hot because you keep rubbing your breasts against my chest, my back, then you crawl into my space and spoon your ass against my crotch."

"I do not! Besides, how can you feel my breasts when according to you I don't have any?"

"You don't, but I have blisters, and you keep rubbing against them. It hurts. You do have a fine ass though."

"You're such a—a—I can't even think of a name bad enough to call you!"

"Yeah, well you're a worm. A wiggle worm! Come here."

He tugged her close, settled his mouth on top of hers and took his time kissing her. Taylor lingered, nibbled, sucked on her bottom lip. He traced his tongue along the rim of her upper lip, suckled on her lower lip.

Dianna moaned as he slowly released her. She licked her tongue along his rough jaw, toyed with his hard nipples buried in his chest hair. Taylor turned her gently away from him, hiked up her skirt, nudged her thighs apart, and in an instant, he was there.

Not inside her, but simply nestled between her legs—and God it felt good. He moved, rubbing his cock along her clit. She clenched her thighs when she felt his arms glide around

her waist and his fingers part her throbbing channel. "Open wider for me," he whispered.

She was helpless to do anything but what he commanded. He slid two fingers inside, worked them deeper and rubbed her aching channel. He toyed and teased her clit, and the entire time, he slid his cock back and forth between her legs. The dragging pressure along her wet channel from his swollen cock made her squirm with urgent need.

Dianna pumped her hips desperately. She moaned and clawed her fingers into his wrist. He thrust his fingers faster and faster, paused to toy with her clit. Dianna screamed with pleasure, bucked harder. Her body shook like a giant oak about to be felled. She shuddered and rode out every aftershock of her orgasm. "Oh, God," she cried breathlessly.

Tiny explosions rippled through her again and again until finally she relaxed in his arms. Her breasts rose and fell with each ragged breath she drew.

"Now then," he said hoarsely, "go to sleep. If you wiggle again, you get no more warnings. I'll be inside you, and I won't leave until I'm good and ready."

Dianna stilled. "What about you?" she whispered. "I could—I could—uh, you know, use my hands?" *My mouth?*

He didn't answer. Dianna blew out a long, relieved sigh and relaxed. He'd fallen asleep in that sudden way he had of dropping off. She lay there with her eyes open, her breath lodged in her throat and his cock shoved tight between her thighs. The blunt tip occasionally bumped her thigh, as if seeking the path inside her.

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Oh, God, sooner or later, he was going to stop fooling around and take her. She had a feeling she'd welcome him with open arms. She also knew he wasn't seriously interested in her.

He'd use her and leave her.

What was it about this man that ground her pride into dirt? She blinked back the tears that stung her eyelids, lay there and listened to the pounding rain and his soft snores for the rest of the night.

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## Chapter Sixteen

\* \* \* \*

*Falling in love consists merely in uncorking the imagination  
and bottling the common sense.*

*~Helen Rowland*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb. 6*

*Fri. 8:30 p.m.*

Rafe topped his cup with fresh coffee and turned away from the horrible scrawling on Lacey's kitchen wall. He couldn't bear to look at it another minute. The thing was he desperately needed a break.

But blood, especially dried blood, wouldn't hold its shape long. It would start to flake, or someone careless would bump into the wall and scrape parts of it off by accident.

Even though the crime scene had been well documented and photographed, and he'd taken pictures to have on hand at all times himself, things happened. Looking at pictures didn't give him the same feel for the scene as standing here in front of it, but he knew it was not only important to photograph it, but a necessity.

A picture was better than memory.

At the same time, this was personal. He was too involved to think straight. Remember straight. He needed Danger's help, but the sheriff was at the hospital in Havre with little Joseph. And God knew Danger wasn't handling any of this very well. Certainly, it was even more personal for the sheriff.

Rafe sighed. Danger was where he needed to be. His son needed him, too, but he felt as if Danger had somehow deserted Lacey, that he was letting her down by not being here.

Hell, what was he thinking? Danger was married to another woman. He'd been letting Lacey down for over a year.

Honestly, Rafe wondered if he could resist taking a swing at the sheriff if he did return to the ranch. He'd held back earlier, but he didn't think he could again. Deep inside, he was still pissed that Danger had brought Karen into Lacey's home before Lace could move out.

For hours now, Rafe had been studying the drawings off and on, trying to interpret their meaning, but soon, he wanted to join the search for Lacey's body and the hunt for Smitt Davis. And yet, his heart was here. He needed to remain close to the scene, continue studying the symbols, until he solved their meaning.

Plus, he felt closer to Lacey here.

What tormented him was the fact that Smitt Davis, the bastard, took her out of her home, away from her safety zone. She was injured, naked, and it was still plenty cold out, especially at night.

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He prayed if she was alive, she wasn't exposed to the mercy of the inclement weather. "Please, God, let her be alive. Keep her safe for me until I can find her."

Rafe bowed his head. His mind wondered, snared by the memories of the time he was here, the last day, the last night...

\* \* \* \*

*Two Months Earlier*

*Dec.25*

*Thurs.6:30 p.m.*

Rafe turned off the hot water, stepped out of the shower, and wrapped a navy blue towel around his hips. After Lacey left him standing in the cold, he'd remained in the barn for over an hour. He'd been determined to give her some time alone, time to think, time to decide if she wanted him.

He'd have remained there forever if that was what it took to reassure her he wasn't a sex maniac on the verge of attacking her, but damn, the temperature started to drop. The snow fell harder and harder, until finally, the cold drove him inside.

What if he'd pushed her too fast? What if she told him to leave?

He held out his hands, amazed at how they shook.

Fumbling with the towel, he finally managed to knot it at his waist and sighed. The heat from the water cleansed the chill from his bones, but it hadn't done a damn thing to wash away his desire for Lacey.

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Hell, all he had to do was see her and his cock was instant wood. Rafe ran a comb through his wet hair, quickly shaved and brushed his teeth. His reflection looked grim. The determined glitter in his dark blue eyes told him he was done waiting. Rafe drew a deep breath and slowly released it. This was it. No changing his mind. No turning back. Lacey and he were at a crossroads. He knew very well where he intended it to end.

Lacey belonged to him. Now he had to convince her of the truth of it.

He'd slipped past her defenses without her realizing it. She was vulnerable. Danger had left her susceptible to him. The naked helplessness he saw glinting in the depths of her gold eyes when she fell on top of him in the barn, when their gazes locked, then the way her lovely mouth trembled when he felt every inch of her body locked to his, and she felt every hard inch of him, told him she was on the brink of surrender.

He could have taken her there in the barn, crumbled what defenses she had left to dust, but he'd known she wasn't quite ready to accept him. She needed time to allow him into her heart, her mind, to cast aside her reservations and acknowledge the truth and the inevitable. There was something powerful between them. Lacey had to understand it and agree her life was headed in a brand new direction.

When she'd been lying on top of him, he hadn't taken the kisses he wanted, or torn off her jeans as he'd yearned to do. Instead, he'd arched his hips, a subtle movement that put him right there against the notch of her sweet mound. He'd done it slowly, casually, without a hint he'd done it purposely.

But she knew what he'd done.

Before she scrambled away from him, she'd responded to his hardness, had uncontrollably rubbed her lower body against his hard cock like a kitten in heat. She made the sexiest little mewling sounds in the back of her throat.

And that's why she ran.

She responded that little bit, rode his shaft for those infinite seconds, and she'd liked it. But worse, so much worse in her mind was the fact she'd had an orgasm, and with little trying on his part. She was starved for sex. No woman climaxed that quickly unless she was hungry.

Well, she could run, but she couldn't hide.

There was no way in hell he was giving up the upper hand he'd worked so hard and surreptitiously to gain.

In her heart, Lacey might think she still belonged to Danger, but she belonged to *him* too, in ways she didn't know, in ways she no longer belonged to Danger—and never would again. He didn't understand why the man had left her in a weak position, utterly handing her over to him with his blessing like he no longer loved her.

By God, he wasn't questioning his good luck or Danger's idiocy any more.

Rafe gargled and spat out the spearmint-flavored mouth rinse.

Six months earlier he'd set out on a campaign. He'd done things to Lacey he should never have done, but the opportunities had been there, and he'd grabbed them with both hands each and every time. He'd started a crusade to

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wear down her defenses. He was so close now to bringing it to culmination, he wasn't about to back off.

Rafe had taken his time seducing Lacey. Winning her was too important to rush. Long hours on stakeouts had taught him patience. Taking his time was something he did well, but the sample he'd had of Lacey in the barn had whetted his appetite.

His patience dangled by a thread. Months of foreplay had destroyed his nerves and left them strung as tight as a barbed wire fence. His body ached, but he'd known his use of touch had always been his key to winning Lacey.

He used it ruthlessly. Every chance he got, he tucked a stray curl behind her ear, plucked an eyelash off her cheek, rubbed a smudge of dirt off her chin. A non-threatening caress of her shoulder, a brush of his thumb across her wrist; he used everything he could think of to his advantage. Touch. It was always about touch, and the ultimate recipe for her seduction.

Shamelessly, he'd listened for Danger to leave that morning to go collect the prisoner in Havre. The sheriff hit the road around four-thirty, long before daylight. Rafe made a point of rising right after Danger left.

Instead of Lacey's husband sharing breakfast with her, he had. He was still stunned over the fact that Danger had taken off and left them alone. They had the house to themselves, and he knew well that Danger had no intention of coming home any time soon. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Rafe wondered if Danger planned to ever return, period.

He'd seen something in his stark gray eyes the night before when Danger said he might have to get a room. Rafe had sensed the sheriff had other plans, and he'd had them for quite awhile.

Danger's early departure set the final phase of Rafe's plans in motion. Rafe didn't hesitate to start the day off spending every available minute with Lacey. "Morning, Lace."

She turned with a cup of coffee in her hands, a faint smile on her face that slowly faded when she took in his drowsy appearance. He'd purposely left his shirt unbuttoned. His hair was tousled with that just-got-out-of-bed look, his eyes heavy-lidded. Deliberately, he'd left the top button of his jeans unfastened and let them ride low on his hips.

He saw her eyes trace the arrow of dark hair that worked its way into the waistband of his jeans.

"Morning." She turned her back on him, but he knew she hadn't missed a single detail about his appearance. "You want coffee?"

Even after clearing her throat, her voice still sounded husky. Sexy. Nervous.

He reached above her head for a coffee cup, nudging her rear with hard thighs. "Oops, sorry. Yeah, I'd kill for a cup of your coffee. So, Danger took off for Havre?" He filled his cup, took a sip, and headed to the table, never letting on he'd bumped her deliberately.

"Mmm," she replied around a swallow of coffee. "He just left." She busied herself with making breakfast for them. All the little things throughout the day had slowly awakened her to his masculinity.

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Yet he'd spread his attack on her senses far enough apart over the six-month campaign, and except for the incident in front of the fireplace the night before, nothing could possibly have struck her as out of kilter, until it was too late and it all came together, maybe added up in the barn when she lay sprawled on top of him.

Even then, he didn't think she realized he'd made her body acutely sensitive to his, that he'd patiently taught her to accept his innocent caresses, but in doing so, he'd created a raging fire in his balls.

Rafe heard her now, hurrying down the hall. She probably thought she'd make it to her bedroom before she had to face him again. Maybe hide out there for the rest of the night. It wasn't going to work. He had no intention of allowing her to escape so easily.

Stepping out of the guest bathroom at the end of the hall, he halted, as though surprised to see her there. "Oh, Lace, I'm sorry, I thought you were in the kitchen putting the finishing touches on the turkey."

She froze. Her gaze racked over him, first meeting his eyes, then shying away, only to settle briefly on his mouth as if she was remembering his kisses. She licked her lips. Her gaze flickered across the width of his chest, then landed on the towel knotted at his waist. She didn't go past the knot, but swallowed hard and lifted her head to meet his steady gaze. "No, I uh—"she cleared her throat, "yes, I—I mean yes, I'm finished. Everything's on the table, but uh, Danger called, and he uh, definitely isn't—he isn't coming home. He's, uh, icy roads, and he—got a room. I—made a salad and was—

just—" She exhaled a long breath. "And—and Anna Leigh isn't bringing Joseph. Their drive is solid ice. She—she can't make it up their drive."

Rafe hid a smile. Nervous. She was so damned nervous. He saw the uncertainty in her eyes, the certain knowledge it was just him and her, alone for hours.

Unfortunately, he was about to make her even more edgy. He folded his arms across his chest. "That so?"

He deliberately glanced toward his crotch, drawing her gaze with his. Rafe quickly looked up and acted as embarrassed as she did over the fact the front of the towel he wore poked out with an obvious tent. "Yeah, I'll—just hurry to my room and get dressed. I'll meet you in the kitchen in a few minutes." He hadn't left her a choice about returning to the kitchen to join him.

She flattened herself against the wall as he started past her, but still, he was in her space, up close and personal, and he knew, even though he didn't touch her, she was aware of his bare chest and the hard-on he sported.

Slipping inside his room, he pushed the door closed, but made certain it didn't catch. While he pretended to rummage through his bag for clothes, he dropped the towel, turned, and acted as if he wasn't aware she still hugged the wall in the hallway.

He flashed her a full frontal, and he was in high form, so fucking hard he was about ready to drop to his knees and beg her to sleep with him. Not daring to look up, he slowly pushed the door shut in an absent-minded way, and had no clue she stood there staring at his dick.

But he heard her sharp intake of air, listened to her hurried footsteps turn toward the kitchen. He'd given her an eyeful and something to think about. Rafe smiled and glanced at his throbbing cock. Without being conceited, he knew he was hung. Even when soft, his dick hung heavy over his balls, thick and broad at the tip.

Sometimes women flat-out refused him sex because of his generous size. There were some females who couldn't take what God blessed him with.

Rafe finished dressing, at least as much as he planned to dress, and went in search of Lacey. He found her in the kitchen. Rafe smiled. He could honestly say Lacey was one of the few women he'd ever known whose heart was in her kitchen. She'd set the table for the two of them. A richly browned turkey rested on a decorative platter. The delicious aroma of spicy dressing teased his nostrils. Although he didn't think it was deliberate on her part, Lacey had made the dressing the way he liked it, with lots of fragrant sage. A bowl of mashed potatoes, brown gravy and a Frito salad rounded off the meal. Two pies set to one side, a pumpkin and a pecan. And Jesus, she'd baked two cakes, too, an orange slice and a Mississippi mud.

It all looked wonderful and smelled heavenly, but who the hell did she think was going to eat all this food?

None of the holiday dinner appealed to him the way she did. His gut clenched. He rubbed an unsteady hand over his heart, a heart that ached with love for her. There was no way he could sit down at the table and pretend nothing had

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happened between them. He couldn't go back to being just a friend.

Rafe sighed. This was it. Tonight. Now.

He should have stayed in his room, let her escape. He should never have gone looking for her, but he had....

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## Chapter Seventeen

\* \* \* \*

*Love is the answer-but while you're waiting for the answer  
sex raises some pretty good questions.*

*~Woody Allen*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 8, Sun.*

Taylor opened his eyes and huffed a resigned sound of impatience into the damp, murky darkness surrounding them. Dianna was wrapped around him like a limp kitten—again. He'd never spent such a long, miserable, wonderful night, and it was still at least three hours until dawn.

Swear to God, if she pressed her lips against his chest, touched her tongue to his nipples or curled her hot fingers around his cock once more, he'd explode in her hand.

How a female could be so aggressively sexual in her sleep was beyond him. He'd slept with a few women in his time, even took one or two camping as Dianna had accused, but he'd never had a woman who plastered herself like a wet noodle all over him the entire night or one who wouldn't stop touching him.

It didn't matter he'd been the one to initiate the foreplay earlier. He'd done it for her, but dammit, he couldn't take

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much more of Dianna's limpet routine. He hurt. His cock was so damn hard it throbbed intermittently between his thighs, a restless beast ready to howl. His balls had surely turned blue by now, they were so damned tight.

He clenched his teeth. Dammit, his dick just did another tango toward Dianna's glory hole.

*Hell yes, bop away little fellow! Go ahead, get us in trouble.*

And it did. It headed straight for trouble. It danced, jumped and did its best to penetrate, because it was smarter than he was. It knew what it wanted, knew where heaven's portal lay.

Actually, he knew where it lay, and what he wanted, too. He growled low in his throat. "You aren't getting any until she says 'Fuck me,' without slurring the words and looking half dazed. So settle down and suffer quietly and stop that damn dance!"

When they first went to bed, Dianna had been as restless as a cat coming into heat. She'd driven him nutty with her constant wiggling and rubbing against his dick. She needed sex. He'd known exactly what was wrong.

Surviving the crash left them with the need to reaffirm they were alive. Besides, the scene was a magnet for sex. Alone together. Steamy rainforest. Intimate sleeping arrangements. Two sexually healthy people. Male. Female. Neither wearing much. Neither had had sex in a long time.

Who could ask for a better setting?

Giving her temporary relief had satisfied her enough so she'd fallen asleep, but then he'd lain awake, his cock jabbed

between her legs and her sweet ass flush against his balls. He was a glutton for punishment—he hadn't changed positions all night. Hell, his cock was still crammed between her thighs. Every time it began to soften, she moved, and back it swelled, rising like some kind of majestic dragon ready to plunder and burn paradise.

Jesus, he had to have some relief.

Gently, he tweaked her nipples until they poked up like little soldiers ready to march. He squeezed her plump breasts. God, he loved her tits. He'd die before he told her that, but they were firm as peaches, nicely rounded, and they filled his palms to perfection. He rubbed his fingertips over her extended nipples. She moaned with pleasure and wiggled her ass against his crotch.

"Sssh. Don't move," he whispered. "Just lie there and let me touch you."

God, he wanted inside her so badly. Instead, he kissed her nape, licked the side of her neck and whispered her name.

"Dianna. You feel good, sweetheart. I want to gobble you up."

"Taylor?" she said in a drowsy voice.

"Yes?"

"Touch me again. Like before?"

"You mean like this?" He slid a finger inside her, teased her clit with long, soft strokes.

"Yes," she said breathlessly. "Like that, only faster. Inside me. Deeper." She drew a sharp breath. "Yesss! Mmmm. Like that." She sounded sexy. Breathless. Drowsy.

Taylor worked his hips, rubbing his cock back and forth while he tormented her clit with tender tweaks. He didn't stop

the sweet torment until she climaxed twice. Slowly, he slid his finger nearly out of her, then plunged deeply.

"I can't do it again," she said breathlessly.

"Do what?" he whispered.

"Climax."

"We'll see," Taylor grunted and started all over again.

Gently, he inserted two fingers inside her. The velvet pull of her inner muscles clamped snug around his fingers. Inside she felt as soft, wet and warm as a freshly baked chocolate cookie. He liked the heat that surrounded his fingers. Her body quivered. His cock jumped like crazy, desperate to penetrate her silken channel. When she screamed her release, Taylor eased out of her, content that he'd pleased her.

He would have gone back to sleep again, but she wasn't having any of it. Dianna crawled on top of him. He didn't know how he kept his cock out of her with her astride it and him wanting in her so desperately. She leaned over him. Her curtain of thick, black hair fell around them.

"My turn," she whispered and slid her tongue down his throat.

"No. I'm fine."

Dianna ignored him, searched for and captured his nipples. "You aren't fine. This isn't going to be only about my needs, Taylor."

She lapped at the hard, flat discs, swiped her tongue around them, nipped gently, then moved down his chest, pausing to nibble at his hard midriff. She kissed the blunt tip of his cock. Slowly, Dianna closed her lips around the smooth

head and nibbled. She laved it with her tongue, tormenting it the way he'd tormented her clit.

Taylor bucked beneath her and groaned. Fine. If she wanted to suck him off, who was he to argue? God knew he needed the release. "Jesus, Dianna. Stop teasing me and do it!"

His stomach muscles clenched as she glided her tongue up and down the solid length of his shaft. Her fingers fluttered around his balls, and she gently squeezed the spongy sacs.

He moaned. "You're killing me, baby."

She laughed softly. "I intend to."

Dianna teased the tip of his cock with tiny, kittenish licks and nips until he was squirming like something wild and bucking madly. At long last, she settled her mouth hungrily around the broad head and sucked it like it was an all-day sucker.

Taylor dug his fingers in the bedding, thrust urgently, and let her have her wicked way with him. In seconds, he groaned, thrust hard and erupted like a geyser filled with hot steam.

"Oh, Jesus." He didn't think he was going to stop coming. It had been so long since a woman had touched him intimately, since he'd climaxed. His balls tightened painfully. His seed gushed in long, hard bursts. When it was over, Dianna sighed and curled up against him.

"There, now," she said drowsily and fell asleep against him.

Taylor frowned.

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He hadn't meant for that to happen, not when he'd first set out to pleasure her. He'd wanted things to remain clinical. But what had just happened between them wasn't clinical. It was hot. Dianna was hot. Hell, she'd practically roasted him alive with her tongue, teeth and mouth. "Shit. I am not in love with her. I'm not!"

Taylor clenched his fingers into fists. He was very much afraid he was lying to himself. The question was: What the hell did he do about it?

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## Chapter Eighteen

\* \* \* \*

*Yes...It became clear that the marriage had irretrievably broken down.*

*~Prince Charles*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb.6*

*Fri.8:45 p.m.*

Rafe filled the coffeemaker with water, dumped fresh grounds in the filter, shoved the round holder into its slot and flipped the switch. Drumming his fingers on the kitchen counter, he waited impatiently for the coffee to brew. He'd studied the symbols on Lacey's kitchen wall until he thought he'd go insane. He was no closer to solving the riddle now than when he'd first arrived.

He glanced around, hoping to find some new clue the crime scene crew had missed, but there was nothing. It was useless trying to solve Smitt's bloody challenge, and it was way past time he got someone in to clean up the mess. No one should have to witness such a gruesome sight.

Rafe shook his head with disgust and poured a fresh cup of coffee. The last time he'd seen Lacey Blackstone here in her

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home, she'd been crying. Crying. And he'd been the reason for her tears. He'd never forgive himself for that. Never...

\* \* \* \*

*Two Months Earlier*

*Dec.25*

*Thurs.6:45 p.m.*

Lacey tensed when she heard Rafe's footsteps fall on the kitchen tile behind her. Aware he'd come in search of her, she didn't acknowledge his presence but remained where she was, standing at the kitchen sink.

She sipped hot chocolate and stared out the window. There wasn't much to see through the rivulets of condensation dribbling down the pane, except a watery blur of her own reflection, but still she kept her back to him and stared into the dark, frozen night. Tears trickled down her face, and she wondered if she looked as sad as the windowpane. Oh, God, she was in so much trouble.

How had she reached this critical level in her life?

When had it happened?

She was married to a good man. Wasn't she? What had happened to the love she and Danger once shared? She didn't know. The one thing she did know was Danger had pulled away from her months ago. He'd left her vulnerable to another man, a man who'd shared more of her life in the last six months than her husband had in over a year.

Her heart thundered. Her pulse pounded. Between her thighs a wild hunger pulsed. Moisture pooled. Her fingers curled around the cup. It took all her will to keep from turning

around, leaping on Rafe, and tugging his zipper down, freeing his cock and riding it until she was limp with exhaustion. She hadn't felt this out of control in such a long time.

She wondered if this day was ever going to end. The hours crawled by. Christmas day had lasted forever. The aroma of roast turkey permeated the kitchen. Holiday scents. Holiday foods. Family time. No family to share the wonders of the season with.

A husband who preferred the cold, clinical atmosphere of a stuffy motel room to spending Christmas with her. Her heart filled with pain. Deep in her soul, she knew Danger had never planned to come home tonight. So that meant he'd deliberately left her alone with a man who wanted to have sex with her.

Her husband had deliberately left her needy for months. What did he think would happen? What did he want to happen? More importantly, why had he done this to her?

She didn't fear Rafe. The idea he'd hurt her was totally foreign to her. She didn't believe that at all, but had Danger been aware of how Rafe felt about her?

Lacey frowned. She didn't know the truth of the matter, but her womanly intuition told her Danger knew exactly how Rafe felt, and her husband didn't care enough about her to give a shit if she slept with his friend or not.

Inside, her stomach clenched. Somewhere, she'd done something terribly wrong and lost Danger's love and respect. Oh, God. Yes. She'd done something terribly wrong that very afternoon.

She'd let Rafe kiss her. Touch her intimately. She still felt his hands on her ass, his mouth on her breasts.

Deep inside, her heart quivered like a mass of jelly. The horrible thing was, she'd loved his kisses, wanted his touches. She was starved for the feel of a man's arms around her, a man's body thrusting inside her. It had been months since Danger had even bothered to kiss her, let alone make love to her.

She straightened her shoulders. One thing her husband had made absolutely clear, he didn't want or love her anymore. Acceptance of what she couldn't change settled on her shoulders. Dammit, she was no different than any other human. She needed love, needed to be loved. She needed to touch and be touched. Tears welled into her eyes and spilled down her face. She needed the words softly spoken between lovers. She needed...

"It's still snowing." Slowly, Lacey swiped away the evidence of her crying. Damned if she was shedding anymore tears over Danger. He'd literally thrown her away. "I can see the flakes falling underneath the light out by the barn."

"I know."

\* \* \* \*

Lacey's shoulders tensed. Her back stiffened. Rafe knew she saw his reflection in the window. He remained in the doorway between the living room and kitchen, hesitant to approach her. He'd heard the tears in her voice. His heart squeezed. He didn't think he could bear to see her cry. He should back away.

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Rafe ordered himself to turn around, pack his bags, and no matter the weather, get the hell outta here.

But he couldn't take the first step away from her. Instead, he moved closer. Halfway across the kitchen, he hesitated. He stood there shirtless, barefoot, his jeans riding low on his hips, and he waited for her to make up her mind if she wanted him.

The hunger grew in him, a tight knot in his belly that clenched and unclenched in raw spasms. He watched her for the longest time, so hungry for a taste of her he started to shake. Hell, he wasn't seducing her. She'd seduced him a long time ago.

He'd never been nervous when it came to sex. This time was different. This woman meant everything to him. When he touched her, he wanted it to feel perfect to her. Rafe held out a hand and watched it shake. Jesus. He was scared. Scared of saying the wrong thing, terrified he wouldn't please her or he'd frighten her away.

He dropped his arm to his side. Seeing how pale her reflection looked in the window, he thought he might die of a broken heart if she rejected him.

Rafe had never been the type of man who tiptoed around on eggshells, afraid they'd smash to smithereens if he stepped on them too hard. With Lacey, he was already shattered inside, a hopeless wreck of twisted nerves. The fear of losing her felt like his soul had been cut through and through with a sharp knife.

He inhaled. Exhaled slowly. He tried to gain control of his roiling emotions. If he didn't slow down, it would all be over

before it started. Rafe studied the way her jeans tightened when she stretched to put something in the cabinet. Busy. She kept herself busy avoiding the truth. Avoiding him.

His burning gaze studied her heart-shaped ass, the ass he'd cupped in his hands a few hours ago. No wonder he stayed hard when he was around her. She had the most delicious rear he'd ever seen in a pair of tight-fitting jeans.

Every time he was a guest in Lacey and Danger's home, he stayed semi-erect and restless as a jungle cat in search of a mate. Worse, he knew Lacey had thought of him as a friend, up until last night, up until the moment he'd let her know he was aroused, up until he'd kissed her and touched her in the barn...

He'd rubbed the illusion from her head. Until then, she hadn't fully comprehended the depth of his feelings for her or how vulnerable she was to him. Rafe frowned. Hell, he was still trying to understand why Danger left his wife to him to do whatever he willed. If *he* was having trouble understanding, he could only imagine the hurt and confusion in her mind.

Rafe clenched his fingers. God, he just wanted to hold her. Pet her. Comfort her. Rock her in his arms and tell her everything was going to be all right, when he knew perfectly well it was never going to be all right again.

Dammit to hell, he was in such deep shit here. He'd done some stupid things in his life, but falling in love with a woman who belonged to another man was at the top of his list of idiot acts for the single white male.

Rubbing a hand down his face, Rafe swore softly. He was under no illusions. He knew if he ever made love to Lacey, he

was feral enough to fight Danger for her when the time came. He would not relinquish an inch of ground.

For now, he and Lacey were alone. They were going to be alone for many hours. He was damn glad, and he couldn't find it in his heart to feel any regrets for what he knew was going to happen between them. Soon.

"Lacey?"

Turning round to face him, she eyed him, clearly skittish. Soft color stained her cheeks. She stared back at him. Tears welled in her eyes. Her lips quivered. "Rafe."

Her gaze slid away from his bare chest. He saw her breasts rise and fall in agitation. He made her nervous. She made him hungry.

"You know?"

She shook her head in denial. "Please. Don't. You're Danger's friend."

"No. I stopped being his friend months ago."

"Don't."

"Don't what? Tell you I love you? I'm never going to stop telling you that. I love you. I do, but then you know it already. Don't you?"

"Yes." She was all gold eyes and hair that hung to her hips in variegated streaks of sunshine and honey. She held onto the cup as if it was a lifeline. "I know."

She didn't speak another word. He wasn't certain if she was acknowledging the fact he loved her, or acknowledging the fact she was about to break her wedding vows and let him fuck her, or both. She stood there, her breasts heaving with ragged breaths, and she waited for him to make his move.

Rafe crossed the short distance between them, until he was right in front of her. She took a step back and came up against the sink behind her. There was no place left for her to run. No more time to deny what had built over the months between them. He wasn't giving her more time. She'd bolt like a runaway mare.

Sliding his hand down her shoulder, he paused at the soft curve of her right breast, rubbed his palm across her tight nipple, then slowly took the cup of hot chocolate from her hands and set it aside. "I'm in love with you, Lacey. I'm so damn in love with you I can't think straight. I can't eat. I can't sleep. Hell, I walk around with an erection nearly all the time. I haven't touched another woman in three years." He cupped the sides of her face. "I haven't wanted any woman but you for so long. You don't have to be afraid—I won't hurt you. I won't touch you if you don't want me to, but you need to know that, know how I feel."

"Rafe, I—" She swallowed hard and rested her palms against his bare chest. Her fingers curled in his chest hair.

His nipples tightened. His balls squeezed and throbbed.

"I don't think I can do this. I—"

"Ssh." He took her hands, pressed his mouth to her fingers and slowly pushed his arousal against her mound. They fit together. Male. Female. Perfect alignment. "You aren't doing this. I am."

*And Danger was.*

Danger had set the scene like a director on a movie set. In a way, the man had set up both of them. Rafe didn't care. He'd take what he could get any way he could get it. "Give

me this night," he whispered. "That's all I ask of you. One night. I'll leave in the morning. I promise I'll never come back, if that's what you want."

She stared at him. Her lovely gold eyes lost their luster. She looked down, refusing to meet his steady gaze. "I can't, Rafe. Please don't ask me to be unfaithful. Please," she whispered. "I've already done enough to Danger. I—I—let you kiss me, touch me. In my heart, I've been unfaithful. I—"

"I know you're married, sweetheart. I know wanting you is wrong. But it doesn't prevent me from getting a hard-on every time I'm near you. It doesn't stop me wanting to kiss you or wanting to sleep with you." He lifted her chin, forced her to look at him. Slowly, he traced her eyebrows with a trembling fingertip. So soft. Silky. "Would you give yourself to me...just this once? I'll never ask you again. No one will ever know I touched you. I need you. I need the memory of you in my arms just once in my life."

"I can't do what you ask of me." Tears welled in her eyes and spilled down her face.

The ache he felt at his loss twisted his guts. "I envy Danger your love. I do." He brushed a tiny gold curl behind her ear. "I wish he deserved it. I'm not asking you to leave him. I'm not asking for your love. I'm asking for one night in your arms."

"Rafe."

"Please? I've never begged before, but I'm begging you for tonight."

"Rafe."

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

"You don't have to worry. I swear I won't tell Danger. One night, Lacey. Give me one night."

"Please, let me go."

He inhaled deeply, dropped his hands to his sides. His heart hurt. His mind shattered, but he couldn't deny he'd known her answer all along. Rafe lowered his head, raked trembling fingers through his hair. "All right, I'll leave, sweetheart. I'll wait for you for as long as it takes. I'll wait."

He should have left then, gone to his room, packed his bags, and asked her to drive him to the airport.

But he hadn't voiced the words. He couldn't...

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## Chapter Nineteen

\* \* \* \*

*I'm not cheap, but I am on special this week.*

*~Author Unknown*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb.8, Sun.*

In the end, Taylor decided to do nothing about his feelings for Dianna. He lay there and stared into the darkness, in the shelter, his gut twisted in knots.

Shit. So what if the woman had somehow wiggled her way right into his heart? He sure as hell wasn't going to admit to her he'd fallen for her like some lovesick calf.

He wasn't about to change his mind about using her as revenge against Jace, either. He owed Jace. The bastard had seduced his sister. The least *he* could do was return the favor.

Damn, he wished morning would hurry up and arrive, but dawn was at least another hour away. It was still dark. It was still raining. He shifted and suddenly realized Dianna's fingers were splayed around his cock.

Christ, the woman acted as if his dick was her own personal toy or exclusive property. His cock twitched with the memory of Dianna getting him off. Damn, it had felt good. Touching her intimately was incredible, too.

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

The long night had been filled with soft sighs, tender touches, wet kisses, tongue and teeth. Slow titillation at its supreme best. They were primed and ready. Sooner or later, the overload would short-circuit. The major meltdown would be more powerful than an explosion at a nuclear plant.

The night had been spent teasing the senses. They'd done everything to each other except consummate the final act. Their needs were temporarily satisfied, but they were nowhere near to being sated. Tension, desire and need still surrounded them, and this wild, crazy connection that kept drawing them together wasn't going away.

Although he'd put his own needs on the back burner after the first time he brought her to climax, he'd enjoyed giving her pleasure. Dianna had returned the favor by giving his cock plenty of sweet, wet love and lots of tongue.

He knew very well, before too many more hours crept by, he'd be exactly where he wanted to be—shaft deep inside her hot little pussy. Shit. He needed to get out of this hut and cool off before he gave in and shoved his cock inside her. Anger at needing, wanting her so much flooded his soul. He wanted her to beg him to fuck her. He wanted to look Jace in the eye and lay all the blame for her seduction on her.

Taylor shook her awake. "Let me up."

"I'm not holding you down," she grumbled.

"The hell you aren't. You have one arm wrapped around my neck tight enough to choke me, and the other has claimed my dick."

Her fingers tightened about his shaft as if she was reluctant to let go.

"Come on, Dianna, set it free. It isn't going to run away. I promise you it's attached to me and always has been. Where I go, it goes. I need to take a walk."

Slowly, she uncurled her fingers from around his aching shaft. Hell, he'd gotten used to the feel of her fingers around him; now his cock felt as naked as a stripped banana.

He crawled over her to the side closest to the entry.

"Where are you going?"

"I told you, I need to take a walk."

"In the rain?"

"Hell, yes, in the rain. Maybe it will cool...things down."

"Oh, jeez, Taylor, I didn't realize you had a little problem. It *is* a little problem...right?"

"You tell me—you're the one who had it throat deep awhile ago," he snapped.

"What is your problem this morning?"

"I don't have a problem, big or small, except for you, and you're the wild hair on my ass!"

"For heaven's sake, you act as if you've never slept beside a woman before."

"I haven't slept beside a woman who can't keep her hands off my dick all night."

"I wasn't touching it all night, just once in awhile. I can't help what I do in my sleep."

"You weren't asleep. Don't pretend you were."

"Don't pretend you haven't slept with a woman before."

"I'm usually fucking the woman who shares my bed."

Taylor tore her arms from around his neck and scooted out of

the makeshift shelter. "If you aren't up to following through with all that rubbing, squirming, purring and handling of my cock and ask me to fuck you, then you need to find somewhere else to sleep."

Dianna's mouth snapped shut. Crap. Where else did he think she could sleep except with him? She couldn't help it if she was a wiggler or her fingers naturally sought his cock. She was a 'touchy, feely' sort of woman. Worse, she knew she was like a snake, she needed heat, and Taylor's body was like a combination steam and sauna, nice and hot and ooh...she didn't know. She only knew he drew her like a magnet. Keeping her hands or body away from his was impossible.

She sighed and listened to Taylor stirring around and mumbling. Even after what they'd shared in the night, the most awesome foreplay, then oral sex, he really didn't much like her. She knew damn well he'd enjoyed the blowjob she gave him, but she supposed in the long run, she'd been a means to an end for him and nothing more. How pitiful.

Dianna blinked back tears and sat up. Ahh. The rain was letting up. Thank God! Abruptly, it switched from a monsoon downpour to a slow, steady drizzle. Maybe now they could at least escape the hut for awhile.

Shaking her head, she watched Taylor disappear into the darkness. A smile played on her lips. He might not like her, but he was attracted to her as much as she was to him. He must be, or his dick wouldn't rise like a cobra every time she was near him.

And wow, he'd kept his arm around her waist, kept her close to his body. His fingers cupped her breasts all night, not to mention his shaft jammed between her legs. He might not realize it, but every single time she'd tried to move and put a little distance between them, his arm tightened, and he held her in place against his body.

For some reason, he refused to admit he wanted her. Given enough time, she'd win his heart.

She lay back down, curled into a ball, and closed her eyes. She might as well try to get a little more sleep before they faced the problems of daylight.

"Ouch!"

Dianna's eyes popped open. Quickly, she poked her head through the opening. "Where are you? What is it? Why did you yell?"

"I'm over here. Dammit! Something stung me."

"What? What bit you? Oh God, you didn't get snake bit, did you?"

"I don't know. I don't think it was a snake. Didn't I see a small flashlight in your bag?"

"Yeah." Dianna fished out the flashlight and crawled out of the hut. Rising to her feet, she flipped on the switch and shined the light on the rocks where he'd been sitting.

"There it is," she said as the small circle of light captured the creepy-crawly. "A scorpion." She raised the light to Taylor's face. "Where'd it get you?"

"My hand. I sat down on that rock and braced myself with my hand. It got me."

"Well, the good news is, it probably isn't poisonous."

"I don't care. It hurts like hell."

"Yeah, they hurt. I got stung by one once when I was visiting my aunt and uncle at *Damnboola*."

Taylor wiped a hand over his face. "Where'd it get you?"

"Oh, I did the wrong thing that night. I crawled into bed without checking it first. The minute I stretched out, it popped me twice on the thigh. I didn't know what had happened. I jumped out of bed and screamed. Silver, my cousin, turned on the lamp and started jumping around and screaming, too."

Taylor rubbed the back of his neck. "Why did she scream? Did it sting her as well?"

Dianna laughed. "No, but she knew something got me, and she was afraid it would get her too. She hopped around the room shrieking like a banshee. Uncle Rufus came running in with an old elephant gun he owned. Scared the heck outta me when he slammed open the door and stood there glaring at us like a wild man."

"What happened then?"

"I screamed louder and ran round and round my bed. Silver joined me in the race. We made several circles round the bed. Uncle Rufus yelled, 'What the hell is the matter with you girls?'"

Taylor shook his hand and winced. "Damn, it feels like my fingers are going numb. Keep talking. Tell me the rest."

"I paused in my race to escape the varmint, pointed at Silver's bed, and said, 'There's a bloody critter in the bed with big teeth and claws.'"

"Uncle Rufus was so gallant. He blasted Silver's bed with the elephant gun."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. Aunt Marion came running down the hall screaming, 'What in the world? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, you've killed the bed, Rufus.'"

Taylor laughed softly. "What did he say?"

"Nothing. I was busy telling Aunt Marion how Uncle Rufus had shot the wrong bed, because it was my bed the beastie was in."

"Oh, my God, what did she do?"

"Well, she marched over to my bed and yanked back the covers. There was nothing there. But my leg felt as if a coal of fire had been set on it. Aunt Marion moved the pillow and there it was, parked there with its tail reared over its back, just waiting to pop me again. It still gives me goose bumps to think about it hiding under my pillow."

"Oh, Jesus, I'm gonna be sick."

Dianna traced the light over his face again. He was pale and sweaty. "We'd better get you inside the shelter before you pass out."

"I'm not going to pass out from a little scorpion sting."

He took one step and promptly collapsed at her feet.

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## Chapter Twenty

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*Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.*

*~Maya Angelou*

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*Havre, Montana  
Regional Health Care Center  
Feb.7  
Sat. 3:00 a.m.*

Rafe McCord hesitated outside the doors of the ICU waiting room. Trouble darkened his face, and he knew it. He wished he were here to bring good news. Good news to Danger. Good news to Duel and Wild Remington.

He wondered when the tragedies were going to stop, because he sure as hell wasn't here with good news for any of them. He pushed through the door and saw Wild and Duel Remington both crashed in recliners.

It had been a tough night for all of them and for the men who'd hunted for both Lacey and Smitt Davis' body. They'd had to halt the search a little after midnight. Freezing air masses sliding in from the Arctic had dumped a foot of fresh snow. It made it too dangerous for men and horses to keep up the search. They'd begin again at daylight.

Rafe sighed and tugged off his black Stetson before approaching Duel and Wild. He knew it had been touch and go for Jace, their eldest brother. Smitt Davis had shot him shortly after his attack on Lacey. Jace had spent hours in surgery.

Things were about to get a lot tougher for the Remington family. Life was like that, he thought. It never rained without dumping a heap of shit onto one's head. And here he was, caught squarely in the middle of an endless nightmare and wondering how he got there.

He paused in the center of the doorway to the waiting room. The room was large, but looked small since it was filled with people waiting to visit their loved ones or simply waiting for them to die. Most were asleep or trying to sleep, curled up on sleeping bags, in the recliners the hospital provided or leaning against a family member on a sofa.

He whistled softly. Duel opened his eyes, glanced around, and spotted him

standing there. The two of them had worked together a few times undercover. Duel was a good man to have at his back. Rafe drew closer and hunkered down beside the recliner. "How's Jace?" he asked quietly.

Duel gave a faint smile. "He came out of surgery with a bunch of tubes in him, minus his spleen and part of his liver. That bullet bounced around inside him like you wouldn't believe. Doctor Hadley was here a couple of hours ago. He thinks Jace will be outta ICU in a few days. It was close, Rafe. He almost died. I thought for sure I'd lose him before I could get him here in the chopper."

Rafe nodded. "How's Kaycee? I know this had to be tough for her."

Duel's lips twisted into a ghost of a smile. "She's okay. That little gal's a whole lot stronger than she looks. Can you imagine how tough those sweet little triplets are going to be when they arrive with her and Jace's genes? I can't believe she carried a damn gun crammed in her boot."

"How's Joseph? I know Danger must be going insane with worry."

Duel shook his head. "He's pretty shattered. Joseph took a turn for the worse about fifteen minutes ago."

"Oh, Jesus. Where is Danger now?"

"He and his new bride stepped outside for a few minutes. Seems they needed some alone time. Christ, I can't believe he married someone else."

"His loss," Rafe said quietly.

"Yeah, it is." Duel scooted to the edge of the recliner and stretched. "I don't have anything against Karen personally, but she's not the woman for Danger. She's not Lacey. He'll be bored to death in no time with Karen."

"She's going to have his baby."

"Yeah, I saw that. Fast work on her part. She isn't a fool. It puts a whole new light on things. Lacey must have been devastated. Christ, I hope the search and rescue team finds her alive. Any clues as to where she might be?"

Rafe shook his head. "I've been studying the pictures Smitt drew on the wall."

"The wall?"

"Yeah. He painted the Blackstone's kitchen wall with all kinds of symbolic drawings, but they aren't in any kind of order. I have no clue what he's trying to say. I'm not sure he did."

"Maybe if I took a look at them, they'd make sense to me. Smitt was always a bit off, but he grew up in Rimrock. I might understand what some of the symbols mean to him. You know, his grandmother was as loony as Smitt and scary as hell."

Rafe nodded. "That so? Maybe his condition is hereditary then."

"Or she just did so many mean things to Smitt when he was a kid, he lost it."

"Possibly. Thanks for your offer to help. I can use it."

Wild jerked awake and glanced sleepily at Duel; then his attention focused on Rafe. "Lawman," he greeted.

His deep-set blue eyes were distant and cool.

Rafe frowned. He knew from Duel that Wild had been in serious trouble with the law and spent time in prison. Wild was always respectful, but very, very icy.

"Wild. I'm glad I caught both of you here. I have bad news, and then I have real bad news. Which do you two want first?"

Duel snorted. "Let me guess the bad news. You didn't find Smitt Davis' body, either."

Rafe nodded. "We didn't find him. We searched up and down the creek for miles. There was blood, plenty of it. Kaycee got him good, but there wasn't a body."

"Dammit," Duel snapped. "How could he survive the fall over the cliff?"

"Stranger things have happened," Rafe replied. "If he slid down the rock wall, then yes. I think he would have been bruised and scraped raw, but he could have survived easily enough. But he's injured, Duel, and it's wild country out there. It's cold and snowing. He might crawl off, die, and the animals—well, you know what happens to a body."

Duel stood up and stretched. "Animals like Smitt Davis don't crawl off and die. They crawl away, burrow in a hole, lick their wounds, and live to fight another day. He'll be back. The sonofabitch will come back. It's the last thing Danger needs to hear right now, or Jace and Kaycee."

Rafe rose to his feet and stood beside Duel. "The real bad news?" He hesitated, sucked in a sharp breath and blew it out. "Well, shit," he said bluntly. "The airport in Broome, Australia contacted your cousin, Raider. They lost radio contact with Dianna and Taylor hours ago. They believe the plane went down somewhere between Broome and Derby, or somewhere a little higher in the Kimberley region."

"What!" The explosive response came from Wild. He jumped to his feet, thrust fingers through his dark hair. "What happened? When?"

Rafe shook his head. "I can only repeat what your cousin said. A few hours after takeoff yesterday, the airport lost radio contact with her. Air traffic spotted a large blimp on the radar. They believe the plane hit a flock of birds."

Duel rubbed his face tiredly. "So she might still be in the air, but flying without radio or an accurate flight direction?"

"No. An Outback station reported hearing a static Mayday, something that sounded like a crash, and then he lost the signal. Raider called me since he'd been given my cell number as a point of contact with you. He said to tell you they're on standby, waiting to hear from the rescue crews, and waiting to hear from the airline officials.

"But I tell you, there are no international airports out in that area. Word from search and rescue is going to filter in slowly, if at all. And you have to consider the time differences. What's daytime for us in the States is night for them. It will be hours waiting for word to trickle back. Raider said he'd call you, Duel, just as soon as he received some kind of confirmation. I'm sorry. I know this couldn't have happened at a worse time."

Duel shook Rafe's hand. "I'll let Kaycee know. Jace is still pretty much out of it, but she'll want to know about Taylor."

Rafe jammed his hat back on his head. "I have to go. I'm returning to Danger's house to catch an hour or so of sleep, then I'll try to figure out what those fucking symbols mean. Tomorrow, I'm joining in the search for Lacey's body. Dammit, Duel, I'm truly sorry about all this. Everything."

Duel nodded. "I appreciate you coming all the way to Havre to tell us. I don't have my cell phone with me, and Wild doesn't have his charger—that's why we gave Raider your number."

"Not a problem. If he calls me again, I'll call the nurse's station. I just didn't want to tell you about Dianna over the fucking phone."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Duel shook his hand. "Thank you. I appreciate that. I know Danger is glad to have you on the case."

Rafe's lips tightened. "Tell him I'm sorry about Joseph. Keep me posted if you can."

"I will. One of the ranch hands is bringing my phone at about eight and a charger. I'll be able to call you if anything changes."

"The men will restart the search at daylight for a sign of Davis' body, too, but if they don't find him by dark, I'll have to let them go. They all have families, too and need to get back to their regular jobs."

"I understand. Thanks."

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Wild stared at Rafe's back as he walked away. "I'm going to Australia," he said, turning to face Duel. "I'll be at Raider's or with one of the rescue crews."

Duel nodded. "I'll stay here with Jace and Kaycee."

Wild turned to leave.

"Give Dianna and Taylor my love," Duel said huskily.

For a moment, Wild froze. Slowly, he turned to face Duel. Grief shimmered in his blue-green eyes. "What if they're—?"

"No." Duel held up a hand and shook his head. "Give them my love."

"I'll do that." Wild turned away again, then whipped back around. "I'll call, as soon as I know something."

Duel nodded. "Take care of yourself, Wildman."

Wild nodded. "I'll be careful. I have to come back, just so I can kick your ass." He turned on his heel and left without looking back.

"You do that," Duel whispered to Wild's back. "You come back, safe. Hopefully, I will, too..."

\* \* \* \*

*Two Months Earlier*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Dec. 25*

*Thurs. 7:00 p.m.*

Lacey Blackstone stared at Rafe McCord and knew in her heart she'd lost all honor. Not that Rafe wasn't a good man—he was. It was just that her marriage vows, something she'd always considered sacred had lost their meaning to her soul. It wasn't Rafe's fault he'd been caught in the middle of her and Danger's crumbling marriage or the fact her life had fallen apart.

Her palms felt damp, but not as damp as she was between her legs. Oh, God. Once she'd loved Danger with everything inside her, but...he'd slowly stifled her feelings for him, choked the life out of every bit of love she felt for him. He hadn't loved her back for such a long time. She didn't know where she'd gone wrong with him, but she knew in her heart he no longer wanted her for his wife.

She'd always love him, he was the father of her son, but she was no longer *in* love with him, and there was a difference. Danger had chosen to push her out of his life. He hadn't just pushed her, he'd shoved her out so fast and

slammed the door in her face, she was still trying to catch up and figure out what she'd done to kill his love.

Lacey sighed. It didn't matter anymore. She could only bear so much loneliness, so much coldness. She could only stand up under so much criticism, so much hunger for a man's touch before her body demanded satisfaction.

Rafe. For a moment, she studied him. This man was here, now, and he wanted her. Loved her. He made her feel wanted. Somewhere over the last few months—or maybe it was during the culmination of the three years she'd known him—but at some point, she'd fallen in love with Rafe McCord. Maybe that was what was wrong between Danger and her. Maybe he'd sensed she'd fallen out of love with him and in love with another man.

She hadn't seen it coming, but maybe Danger had.

Oh, God. The guilt she felt for wanting Rafe ate at her insides. No matter how wrong she knew it was, she couldn't stop the aching desire. She wanted him.

No! No. She couldn't want him. If she admitted it, she *was* lost. She looked at Rafe, saw his heart and soul in his deep blue eyes, and she knew it didn't matter, she was lost anyway.

Lacey rubbed her hands along the seams of her jeans. Her heart skipped a beat. If she let this happen, she'd destroy everything. Could she live with that? Was there anything left of her marriage to destroy? The answer to that was simple. No. When Danger left her alone with Rafe, he'd silently told her he didn't care. The only thing left of her marriage was the bitter taste of ashes in her mouth.

"Rafe, please." And she wasn't sure anymore what she was pleading for from him.

"I'm asking for one night, Lace. That's all. One night. A single night that you and I share, beautiful memories that only the two of us will ever know."

Oh, God. She wanted this night. Wanted this man, but...her mind balked.

"Rafe."

"Sssh." He slid his arms around her and held her close. "You aren't doing this. I am. Let me kiss you again. I'm dying for a taste of you."

"Rafe."

"One kiss, Lace. What's one kiss going to hurt? I already have the taste of you on my tongue. You're in my blood. What's another kiss going to change?"

"Everything." And nothing, she thought. Danger was already gone.

But she knew, even as Rafe tugged her closer, cupped her face, and lowered his head, she knew if he kissed her again, *she'd* be gone, too. Lost. There would be no turning back. Yes. It would change everything. Change their lives. Change them.

Rafe brushed her hair from her face and wiped away the tears wetting her cheeks with the tips of his thumbs.

"Shh...Lace, oh, God, honey, don't cry. I only want to kiss you."

No. It wouldn't be anything as simple as a mere kiss.

"Rafe, I—"

"Please?"

She stood there, her soul aching. "Dear, God," she whispered helplessly. "Don't you see, Rafe, a kiss isn't going to be enough. It isn't going to be all there is between us. Not now. Not ever again."

"I know the things you say are true, but I—please, Lace. Don't shut me out. Let me in your life, your heart. Let me love you." He pulled her hand to his zipper. "Feel how much I want you."

She drew a shaky breath. "I know how much I want you. The ache never goes away. Not anymore. I can't deny what's between us. I can't deny you any longer."

Her heart felt as if it were breaking in half. Her mind screamed a denial. On one hand, she'd lost the love of a wonderful man she adored. On the other hand, she held the heart of another man who loved her, a man she'd fallen hopelessly in love with, too. She hadn't meant for it to happen. But the more Danger had pushed her away, the more she'd opened her heart to Rafe.

Slowly, Lacey bowed her head. "Don't say 'Please' again. If you want me, I'm yours."

Rafe tilted her chin. "Then don't hang your head in shame. You have nothing to be ashamed of, and God, woman, I've wanted you for so long, I'm nearly crazy with the need to be inside you."

Lacey searched his eyes, saw nothing but love there for her. Her body clung to his in surrender. She needed him, needed to feel his mouth on hers. Needed to feel his body joined with hers.

"I love you, Lace," Rafe whispered softly. "I fell in love with you the first time I saw you. I've been going slowly insane with the need to touch you, to love you. I swear I never meant for any of it to happen. I didn't mean to fall in love with you. If I could, I'd go, leave you untouched. I've walked away from you so many times, but I—I just can't walk away from you again." He drew in a deep breath, slowly exhaled. "I swear to God, I've never touched another man's wife before. I swear it."

"Rafe." Lacey stroked the sides of his face with unsteady hands.

"You don't have to love me back, Lace, I'm not asking that of you; just let me love you. I'll be happy just loving you."

She laid a trembling hand over his mouth. "I do, Rafe. I do love you back."

He stilled. His chest heaved with the release of a long breath. "Oh, God, Lace. I never expected to hear you say those words. Say them again."

"I love you, Rafe. God forgive me, I love you." Her lips quivered. "I don't know when I fell in love with you, but—"

"I don't care when, just that you did." He locked his arms around her waist and twirled around with her. Laughing, he set her back on her feet. "I thank God you did." Slowly, he lowered his head, set his mouth on hers, and gently parted her lips.

Lacey caught her breath at the exquisite softness of his lips, at the deep hunger and tenderness. It had been a long time since Danger had kissed her with hunger. A long time since he'd kissed her, period, or shown her tenderness.

Somewhere along the way, he'd stopped needing her, stopped wanting her.

But this man held her as if she were a precious jewel. Rafe slid an arm around the curve of her hips and lifted her against his erection. It was all he did. He simply held her there and deepened the kiss. Her body suffused with heat. She rubbed against the hardness pressed tautly against her.

His fingers slid up, fumbled with the buttons on her rust-colored blouse. Easing the pressure off her mouth, Rafe glared hatefully at the long row of tiny buttons. "You wore this on purpose."

"I did. Yes. I thought to save myself from you."

"The hell with that shit!" he grunted, and ripped the front of her blouse open. Buttons scattered through the air and bounced as they hit the tiled floor, scattering in myriad directions.

"That's the second blouse today you've destroyed. Keep this up, and I'll have nothing to wear."

"Good." He frowned. "You're wearing a bra? You never wear a bra."

"I know."

"Never wear a bra again."

"I won't."

The front clasp of the bra gave beneath the expert flick of his fingers. He slid both articles of clothing off her shoulders and dropped them at their feet.

"I've waited an eternity for you, Lace. I thought I was going to die with the wanting." His gaze settled on her breasts. "God, you're so beautiful. I dreamed so many times

of touching your breasts, tasting them. You have no idea how often I've pictured you in my mind, erotic pictures of you naked, riding me. Out there, in the barn awhile ago? It was like a miracle seeing your breasts for the first time, touching you, tasting your nipples. I'll never get enough of you, Lace."

Lacey drew in a sharp breath when he palmed her right breast and rubbed his thumb across her tingling nipple. It tightened instantly beneath his slow touch. Rafe groaned, lowered his head, and took the tight bud inside his mouth, wrapped his tongue around it and suckled strongly.

She arched her back in supplication. Lacey loved the feel of his mouth on her, the wetness of his tongue, the hunger in his hesitant touches, the slow suction as he drew on her nipple. She cast aside the last of her doubts, the last of her feelings of right or wrong and clasped him close. Nothing that felt this good could be wrong. This was surrender at its sweetest.

Threading her fingers through his thick, dark hair, she said huskily, "I saw you naked in your room today."

He moved to the other breast and gave it equal treatment before lifting his head. His blue eyes glittered. "Did you?"

"You're magnificent, Rafe. I wanted you so badly in that moment. You have no idea how difficult it was for me to walk away."

"I wanted you in the barn and again in the hall when I came out of the bathroom. I wanted you desperately when you stared at my dick like it was a gold bar."

"You knew I saw you?"

He grinned. "I made sure you did."

She laughed. "You devil."

"When it comes to you, yes, I'm horny. I wanted to take you then and there. And in the barn. Jesus, I almost came when you did that little kittenish mew thing in the back of your throat and slid up and down my cock."

"Oh, God, Rafe." Heat pooled between her thighs. Her stomach tingled. Her heart fluttered like something wild and untamed. "I'm burning up. Touch my breasts. Touch me...everywhere."

He cupped both her breasts and rubbed them back and forth across his chest. He tweaked her nipples until they stood stiff and ready for his mouth.

Rafe fumbled with the button on her jeans, eased down the zipper, and, suddenly impatient with the barriers between them, yanked jeans and panties down her sleek hips. Already barefoot, she stepped out of the clothes pooled at her feet. In seconds, he'd stripped off his jeans and dropped them on top of hers.

Her gaze slid to his straining cock. A drop of clear liquid stood at the tip of the broad, blunt head. Her eyes widened. Lacey licked her dry lips. "Oh, Jesus. I realized you're hung like a mountain stallion, but I hadn't taken in quite how thick and broad it...is...until just now. It's big. I mean...yeah, that's the word. Big."

"I'll go easy with you," he said, understanding the look of doubt on her face. "Don't worry. I'll go slow and easy. I swear it."

Rafe lifted her into his arms and hesitated. He looked around like a man who'd lost his way.

Lacey giggled and pointed. "The bedroom's that way."

"Fuck the bedroom—I can't wait that long."

He carried her over to the long, sturdy dining table loaded down with Christmas dinner. Holding her with one arm, he swept the bowls of mashed potatoes and gravy to the floor, along with the turkey, dressing, and the pies, all in one single sweep of his arm. He stretched her out on top of the now bared table. "You're my Christmas present."

Lacey lifted her head and eyed the broken dishes and food on the floor. "If you get hungry, I don't know what you'll eat."

"There's only one thing I'm interested in eating tonight."

He spread her thighs wide, lifted her hips and licked her. Oh, God. Lacey tangled her fingers in his hair and arched her hips against his mouth. He was...he was...he *did*! His tongue stabbed the wet inner flesh of her opening. No. Oh, no. She couldn't take this. She twisted beneath him. No, she couldn't bear...this. Slowly, he slid his tongue along her clitoris. Lacey nearly came off the table. Oh, Jesus. She screamed. The instant orgasm slammed into her with unexpected force.

Rafe scraped the sensitive tissue with his teeth, applied gentle bites that left her gasping. She clawed his shoulders. "Don't...stop. *Ooh*, don't stop. Mmmm. That's good. That's...good."

Oh, Jesus. She couldn't climax again. Not this soon. But her body was no longer her own. The second orgasm ripped through her, as hot and violent as the first. Lacey couldn't hold back the explosions of pleasure. She felt out of control.

Slowly, Rafe raised his head and locked his gaze with hers. His eyes glowed with forbidden heat. The hue darkened to

intense blue flames that promised her pleasure and delivered on the promise. His hard hands pushed her thighs wider as he bent down and pushed his tongue inside her. Rafe took his time, tasting, licking, nibbling. Lacey screamed with each volatile climax. Her body vibrated from the intense orgasms slamming inside her one after another. When Rafe lifted his head again, his lips glistened with her juices. Her breasts heaved with ragged breaths.

"I have no intention of stopping anytime soon," he said, licking his lips. "Hold onto me and enjoy."

Lacey bucked wildly beneath the expert licks. His tongue penetrated her steamy channel and explored each silken crevice. He captured her clit and sucked gently. Like a wild, tumultuous river, she rode the rapids into one violent orgasm after another. Lacey met the hard stabs of his tongue, clawed wildly at his shoulders while her body came alive for the first time in months.

Electrical bolts of sensation shot through her. It was like riding a live wire over the edge of a cliff. Her nerves jolted. Something elemental shot in her, filled her, until she was too weak to move.

She lay there stretched out before him like a banquet, too limp and exhausted to draw the next breath. Her pulse pounded. Her heart slammed violently. All she could do was sob with the intense pleasure he gave her.

When he crawled on top of her, she circled his hard waist with her legs. His gaze settled on the concave of her belly, where a tattoo of a tiny red and blue butterfly rested near her right hipbone.

Rafe traced an unsteady fingertip along the butterfly's delicate wings. "These are the kind of secrets I want to discover about you, Lacey. I want to learn what you like when I touch you. I want to know what it takes to make you tremble in my arms."

"I think you've just spent the last half hour discovering something I like," she said breathlessly.

He laughed softly. His eyes sparkled with amusement. "I want to know all your secrets, feel you shudder beneath me as I surge deep inside you." He pressed his face against her belly and licked the tattoo. "I never thought I'd ever get to love you."

Lacey trembled. "You love me well," she said on a breathless note.

"I intend to." He touched his tongue to her belly button, dipped inside, then slowly cupped her mound. Gently, he parted her slick nether lips, nudged her thighs apart. Rafe closed a meaty fist around his cock and guided the broad head to the mouth of her hot, inviting channel. "I intend to love you so damn well you'll never want me to go away."

Her inner muscles clamped around the sleek, thick knob of his cock like velvet steel. He pushed deeper, then stopped and moaned. "Jesus, you're a tight fit, sweetheart." He pulled out of her, wiped the moisture off the sleek head of his cock with his fingertip and rubbed it inside her. "Open a little wider for me."

Lacey dug her fingers in his hair. His eyes, such a piercing blue, blazed with wicked fire. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "You aren't wet enough. I don't want to hurt you."

"We'll do it," she whispered huskily.

His cheekbones were stretched tight. His chest heaved with short, ragged bursts. Rafe pushed the head of his cock inside the opening of her channel again. He was shaking, and she knew his control had to be stretched to the limit.

Lacey licked her lips. "I—" She glanced down and bit her bottom lip when she saw how far he had yet to go to be fully inside her. "Oh, God, I...just go easy."

Rafe lifted his head. "We don't have to do this."

"I want you to make love to me. I want to feel all of you inside me."

His eyes darkened with emotion, he nodded. Rafe cupped her hips and with exquisite slowness worked his shaft deeper inside her.

"Rafe," she said breathlessly. Her inner muscles parted layer by layer, stretched beyond their limit. Lacey twisted her head from side to side as he slid in a little deeper. "Oh, Jesus. I can't—"

"Sssh. Sssh. Relax. Don't tense so much. There. A little more." He wiggled his hips. "A little more. More."

Lacey groaned and clawed his shoulders. "I can't—"

"Shit! Okay." Rafe took a deep breath and shuddered. "God, I can't believe you're so small."

Reluctantly, he eased nearly all the way out of her, then pushed gradually, working a bit deeper, stretching her slowly until she thought she was torn asunder.

Lacey lifted her hips to ease his entry, but still, he wasn't inside her.

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Rafe's body shook. He withdrew a third time. He locked his fingers around her upper legs and spread her thighs wider. "Hold on." He drove into her, hard, fast, deep, and buried to the hilt.

Lacey gasped at the depth of his penetration. "Ahh!"

Dear God, her inner muscles quivered with the strain. Her body jerked. Tears seeped down the corners of her eyes.

Rafe kissed her eyelids. "I'm sorry. I thought it might be easier for you if I did it faster, rather than slower." He rested his forehead against hers. "Jesus, that took some doing. Are you okay?"

She nodded and wiggled her hips. "Do you always have this much trouble fitting inside a woman?"

Rafe groaned. "Yes. Sometimes. You're exceptionally small, a petite woman in every way." He pumped his hips, moved slowly, then shuddered. "God, you feel good. Soft. Warm."

He set a slow, lazy rhythm. Rafe captured her nipples and treated them to the pleasures of his mouth. Nuzzling her throat, he suckled the tender flesh there. Lacey sighed. It had been so long...so long since she'd been this loved. Rafe trailed a string of butterfly kisses across her face until he reached the other side of the tender flesh just below her left ear; once there, he nuzzled and licked and kissed her until she was thrashing beneath him.

"God, Lace." He shuddered with each deep penetration. "I can't hold on much longer."

"Then don't," she said breathlessly, arching her hips to meet the deep drive of his cock. "Don't."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Rafe drove into her. He was rock hard inside her. The table was rock hard beneath her, and she felt as if she'd crashed through heaven's gate on the tail of a comet. He took her higher and higher, lifted her to the stars, and slowly brought her to earth again.

Lacey gasped, amazed at the exquisite torture of his loving—he was both rough and gentle, and his deep penetrations were hot and powerful. He took care that she was limp with satisfaction before he drove deep inside her one last time, threw back his head, ground his teeth together, and groaned with the powerful release that shook his body.

She locked her legs tighter around his hips and held him close, held him tight, and took the warm, wet pulses of his semen jetting inside her. She thought they must have dozed for a few minutes, because the next thing she knew, Rafe was carrying her down the hall toward the guest bathroom.

Slowly, he lowered her to her feet, leaned around her, and twisted the faucet. He set the controls to ultra warm and guided her into the shower.

There, he shoved her urgently against the wall, lifted her and impaled her in one deep thrust. "Ride me," he whispered. "Fast. Hard. Jesus! Like that, honey. Exactly like that. Don't stop."

There was nothing gentle about his loving this time. He bit her nipples, then soothed the sharp stings with his tongue. He held her head against the wall and buried his tongue in her mouth like he buried his cock over and over in her hot channel. He touched her everywhere. His fingers slid along her clit, teasing. Tormenting. A harsh groan ripped past his

lips. Rafe thrust faster. Deeper. His need for her was overwhelming, a bit rough, and oh, so incredible.

Lacey screamed as a violent climax rippled through her body. In seconds, Rafe unleashed what small control he had left, pumped his hips savagely, stiffened and poured his scorching seed inside her. His chest heaved as he remained buried deep inside her. Lacey thought her knees might buckle if he pulled out of her. He squeezed her breasts, ignoring the fact the water had turned icy.

"I'm not finished here," he whispered against her mouth. "I'm nowhere near finished here."

Lacey locked her fingers in the hair at his nape. "Neither am I."

"Good." He anchored his mouth to hers and started over.

Sometime after ten, Rafe dried her off and carried her to the guest bedroom, to his bed, the one he always slept in when he was here. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"It's Christmas. I have a present for you under the tree."

Lacey bit her lip. "Bring back the one I wrapped for you. It's toward the back of the tree. A rectangular package in green and white paper."

Rafe nodded and headed out the door.

Lacey eyed his ass and sighed. A fine ass it was, too, but not nearly as delicious as the package up front. She moaned and eyed the reddish bruises popping up on her thighs and breasts. God, she ached all over. The marathon of sex they'd had in the shower had been rough and wildly satisfying...she wanted more.

"Here." Rafe handed her a small package wrapped in red paper. A delicate white bow perched on top of it. "Open it," he said softly.

Lacey nodded, tore off the wrapping and flipped open the top of the dark blue velvet box. Her breath caught in her throat. Inside the box lay an exquisite diamond-studded heart suspended from a fine gold chain. Inside the heart, a smaller one dangled. It was outlined in rubies and the center filled with sapphires.

"Oh, my God, Rafe." Tears filled her eyes. "It's stunning. I can't accept something this expensive. You shouldn't have bought something so..."

"Perfect for you?" He fastened the chain around her throat. The heart fell flawlessly between her breasts. "Our hearts joined as one," he said quietly and traced the outer edge of the larger heart with an unsteady fingertip. "I knew it would fall right here, between your breasts...always. Promise me you'll never take it off."

Lacey could barely see him through the blur of her tears. "I swear." She cleared her throat. "Open your gift. I spent weeks searching for it."

Rafe ripped off the big green bow and, laughing, stuck it to the top of her head. He shredded the paper and tore open the box. "Sonofabitch!" He lifted the Colt .45 and stared at it. "Where on earth did you find this? It's the—I knew there was a twin...." His voice trailed away. "You heard me tell Danger I'd been searching for it for years?"

She nodded. "I have a friend who has a friend. We tracked it down..." She grinned. "Do you like it?"

"Like it? Sweetheart, I'll treasure it always. You have no idea how happy you've made me." He settled her onto his lap and kissed her. "This has been the best Christmas I've ever had." He cupped her breasts, lowered his head and suckled the tight nipples. Slowly, he raised his head and searched her eyes. "I love you, Lace. Thank you for making me so happy tonight, so complete."

Kissing led to more touching and exploring each other's bodies. Lacey didn't know how much time passed, hours or minutes. It didn't matter. Rafe took his time loving her.

He helped her onto her hands and knees and covered her from behind. Plunging a finger inside her, he eased back and teased her clit, toyed with the aching nub until she bucked wildly against his straining cock. He entered her, a long, slow filling of her sensitive channel, and rocked them both to a swift climax.

Lacey collapsed on her stomach, her breaths labored. Exhausted, her body felt replete. Every muscle felt limp and loose, as if she'd been too long inside a sauna or hot tub. Rafe fell down beside her on his back, his dark head on a pillow, his own breathing as ragged as hers. "I'm not finished," he said, repeating the words he'd said to her in the shower earlier.

She giggled, something she hadn't done in many months. "Are you going to get finished with me tonight?"

"Not even close," he said, pushing her hair behind her ears. "I'll never get finished with you, Lace. If my damn dick will stay hard, I plan on being inside you until dawn."

"I need to rest. My muscles feel like mushy noodles."

"Sleep on top of me," he said quietly. "I want to feel you on top of me all night."

Lacey crawled onto him and rested her head on his wide chest.

"No," he said softly, "like this." He lifted her enough to slide his cock inside her, then let her body settle on top of his. "From now on, this is where Junior goes. When you're near, he gets to soak inside you."

Lacey snickered. "You're crazy."

"Crazy about you. God, Lacey, I'm so in love with you. I wanted to fuck you, true, but that's not all I wanted from you. I want to own your heart." Rafe ran his fingers through her tangled hair. "Will you give it to me?"

Lacey smiled through her tears. "It's kind of bruised and battered, not worth much, but if you want it, it's yours."

"I want it," he said quietly. Rafe relaxed. He didn't think he'd ever felt so content. The constant ache that had consumed his body for months was gone. "I love you, Lace. I've always loved you."

But she was already asleep, her soft breath kissing his chest. He closed his eyes, content that she was at long last in his arms, exactly where she belonged, and was going to stay. He wasn't giving her up. Ever.

Daylight filtered softly through the window when he woke her. He coaxed her fully awake with long, slow, drugging kisses. He bit her throat gently, suckled the flesh, then soothed the bruised skin with tender kisses.

Lacey gasped, coming fully awake. Rafe suckled hard on her throat, then slowly released it. "Rafe," she whispered. "You shouldn't have—"

"Yes, I should have," he said. "I don't care. You belong to me. I don't care who knows. Besides, look at your breasts, sweetheart. Your belly. Your thighs. My marks of possession are all over you. I don't want to hide my love for you."

He trailed a soft chain of kisses and caresses over her breasts, stopped to suckle her nipples and left more love bites in his wake. Her stomach carried the dark reddish bruises he'd added to the ones already there. He eyed his handiwork and grinned. "I like my marks of possession on you."

Gently, he nudged her thighs apart and buried his face between her legs. He licked her clit, parted her slick lips and pushed his tongue inside her. Lacey hammered his shoulders and screamed her multiple climaxes.

Rafe grinned, eased back and guided his cock inside her. When she came this time, he erupted inside her at the same moment.

Lacey cried his name and brought his mouth to hers. Rafe melted with the hard release that shook his body. Reluctantly, he pulled out of her and tugged her tightly against his chest. His arms spread around her, and he held her close. "I have to leave soon, Lace," he whispered. "Go to Texas with me. Don't stay here."

Lacey searched his face, knew she couldn't do what he asked. "I can't just leave, Rafe. I have a son."

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

"I want you in my life, sweetheart, both of you. I don't want to leave you behind. For me, this is it. You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. Will you marry me?"

"Rafe," she whispered. "Rafe...."

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## Chapter Twenty-One

\* \* \* \*

*I can be changed by what happens to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it.*

*~Maya Angelou*

\* \* \* \*

*Rimrock, Montana*

*Backside of Davis Property*

*Feb.7*

*Sat.4:00 a.m.*

"Rafe! Rafe!" Lacey Blackstone opened her eyes and slowly escaped the nightmare world of smothering darkness she'd been held prisoner in for hours. Panic closed in, more suffocating than the blackness crowding her mind.

Dear God, she'd called the wrong man's name. Hadn't she?  
*Wrong man?*

She frowned. Yes. Her first thoughts should have been of her husband. Danger. She needed Danger. Where was he? Why didn't he come? Lacey blinked, trying to gather the splintered pieces of her memory. *Husband?* No. No. That wasn't right. She didn't have a husband, didn't have a home. She'd lost both to another woman.

Lacey lay there in the cold, trying to solve the puzzle of what had happened to her. She shivered. She was so cold.

Why was she this cold? Nothing made sense. She couldn't think. Where was she?

She blinked. At last, the rubble around her began to take shape. Life was strange. Somehow she was changed. Like a derailed train, somewhere, she'd run off the tracks and crashed. Lacey marveled at just how much of a mangled wreck her life had become.

After Rafe left, she'd tortured herself with the guilt she felt at sleeping with him. At the time, it had seemed right, felt right, but when she was alone, her thoughts and emotions became a jumbled mess. The one thought that kept eating at her: she'd betrayed Danger. She'd been ready to get down on her knees and beg his forgiveness.

And all along, he'd been sleeping with Karen.

The truth slammed into her, scorching her soul. Danger was no longer her husband, no longer the *right* man. His choice. After three years of marriage to her, he'd wanted a divorce.

She'd granted him what he wanted.

After he'd told her he was in love with another woman, there hadn't been much starch left in her, certainly not enough to fight for him. She couldn't fight for a man who had no trust or faith in her, a man who believed lies over her truth. He'd made it plain he detested her.

Everything inside her had curled up and died.

The only sure thing she knew anymore was that Rafe wasn't the wrong man. Not for her. He loved her. Wanted her. More, he needed her. That was a whole hell of a lot more feelings than she could say her husband had for her. The sad

thing was, her basic yearning to be loved, her desire to be held, and her need for Rafe had all contributed to the destruction of her marriage.

Consumed with guilt, she couldn't shake the feelings of responsibility for the breakup of her marriage. The fact she'd broken her wedding vows haunted her. She alone had failed to make Danger happy, failed to satisfy him. Shame ate at her, swallowed her whole. Her failure. She'd failed her husband in every possible way a woman could fail—sexually, as a wife, as the mother of his son.

Bleakness settled around her. Yes. Her failures. Rafe wanted to marry her. A failure. Why would he want to marry her when she obviously couldn't make a marriage work, couldn't make a man happy, and couldn't keep him satisfied in bed so he wouldn't cheat on her?

She'd failed. There must be something lacking in her or Danger would never have stopped loving her, never turned to another woman.

Failed. She'd deserved everything Smitt Davis did to her. God had sought his punishment for her sins. She'd die here, cold, naked, and alone. In her mind, justice was served. A tear slipped to the corner of her right eye and slid into the hair above her ear.

Lacey closed her eyes and shivered. The icy fingers of death crawled over her skin and buried deep. They plucked at the very marrow frozen in her bones, scraping and scraping until the will to live slowly drained out of her. Let death come. She welcomed the ethereal visitor. Let it take her. She didn't mind paying the ultimate price for what she'd done.

Curling into a tight fetal ball, Lacey let her tears fall unheeded. Cold. So cold. Her blood felt as if it had turned to slush in her veins. Joseph's sweet and trusting face swam before her eyes. His eyes, the pewter gray of his father's. His cries as Smitt tortured her.

The baby, the innocent child Rafe and she had created, ripped from her womb. Her body shook with sobs. "Mommy's sorry, baby. I failed to protect you. I'm sorry."

Her son. Her baby. Both lost to her forever. She didn't know how she knew it, but she knew Joseph was gone. Smitt Davis had beaten him mercilessly, and she hadn't been able to lift a finger to save either of her children. Yeah, she deserved to die. She didn't want to live. She'd failed her husband, failed her babies. Something cut into her palm. Puzzled, she opened her hand. A heart-shaped necklace. Diamonds, rubies and sapphires. Rafe's Christmas gift to her. Lacey curled her fingers around the heart. It was the only thing she had to connect her to the man she loved. "Rafe," she whispered. "Come for me."

An icy chill seeped deeper into her skin. Would she ever feel warm again? No. She didn't think so. A silent scream filled her heart. Let death take her, because she knew her soul would never feel whole, warm or alive again.

A faint mewling sound reached her ears. It reminded her of a tiny kitten, lost, alone and starving. It took her a moment to realize she was making the faint noise. Oh, God. She hurt. Everywhere pain stabbed her bruised and battered body like a battering ram. Her breasts throbbed. So did her nipples. The two bullet wounds burned as if someone had jabbed a red hot

poker into her flesh. Her stomach felt as if it had been ripped wide apart.

Lower down, her feminine sheath ached.

Lacey coughed. Her mouth filled with blood and clotted particles that coated the back of her throat and mouth, choking her. She coughed again, spraying dark red droplets in several directions. Pain clouded her mind. She couldn't remember everything Smitt did to her, but she didn't think he'd sexually assaulted her, not with his body. So why did she ache there as if she'd been penetrated over and over again?

Memory crawled back inside her head, and she sealed it away. She shuddered. He'd done things to her. Terrible things, things she never wanted to remember. She didn't know what he'd used, but he'd invaded her body repeatedly with it.

Tears slid down her face, ice cold tears that felt like a frozen river. Smitt loved inflicting pain. He savored it. His pig-like eyes had glittered with malice each time he'd ejaculated on her. His squeals of satisfaction at causing her pain was a sound she'd never forget.

Lacey shivered and tried to turn her thoughts away from the memory of him standing over her, his semen spurting onto her breasts.

She thought of Rafe, and the way his body warmed hers. He was her only hope. God knew Danger wouldn't waste his precious time searching for her. He didn't love her anymore.

She should have told Rafe about their baby. She should have answered his phone calls, told him they'd made a baby that night. The opportunity to share the news with him had

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come and gone. Too late. Too late to change anything, too late to pick up the phone and hear his voice, tell him she was pregnant with his child, tell him she loved him, and she was coming to him, if he'd still have her.

Lacey drew her legs up tighter and shivered. The cold closed around her like an icy crypt. She drifted in and out of consciousness, awakening each time to a world that became more and more surreal. When she opened her eyes, the walls spun around her. The cold, wet snow cushioned her like a warm featherbed. She smiled. Ah. She didn't feel the cold anymore. Warmth kissed her face. Her body floated weightlessly. Floated. Was she really drifting on a bed of heaven's fleece-lined clouds?

When she was awake, she couldn't keep her thoughts in any kind of order. Her mind wandered. The one thing she was certain of was her life had irrefutably changed. She was changed. She'd taken a winding, up and downhill path she'd never expected to travel. The carefree, feisty Southern woman she'd once been was gone, replaced with a stranger she hardly recognized, a stranger who'd slept with another man one night, a single night, and conceived that man's child.

"I want to go home," she whispered. "I want my life back. My children. Please, God. I want to go home."

Why she'd thought, believed, she might work things out with Danger when she carried proof of her infidelity was beyond her. Still, they had a son. She couldn't bring herself not to try and hold their marriage together.

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by Jaydyn Chelcee

She should have left the moment she'd discovered she was pregnant. Hell, she should have left the moment she'd let Rafe touch her.

After Christmas, the weeks crawled by. Danger had even less to do with Joseph, just like he had less and less to do with her.

Why had she stayed?

What had she been thinking? That was the problem. She hadn't been thinking. She hadn't been thinking when she'd let Rafe make love to her. And damn, she should have told him she wasn't on the pill, but the thought never crossed her mind.

There had been too many other things crashing around her, and becoming pregnant simply hadn't been at the top of her mind as something to worry about...not until Rafe brought it up....

\* \* \* \*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Dec. 26*

*Fri.10:00 a.m.*

Mid-morning arrived much too fast. Rafe served her breakfast in bed, and after she ate, he dribbled honey across her breasts and made a long, slow feast of them. He explored and tasted every inch of her body.

Rafe had spent hours the night before simply tracing his fingers over her skin, touching. He was always touching her. It seemed to her the minute he stroked his fingertips along her skin, need exploded inside her. Her body jolted in

response. It was like she'd been licked by electricity. She didn't know her own skin anymore, her own body.

To say Rafe was a good lover would have shortchanged him greatly. He made certain each time he entered her body she was ready for him. He was just as considerate about her pleasure before he withdrew. She marveled at his determination to discover every single freckle she possessed, he explored her body so thoroughly.

He'd discovered the tiny mole below her right ear and kissed it over and over. He'd found the raspberry-colored birthmark on her forearm and licked it like it was an ice-cream cone. He'd rooted his way between her thighs and made a meal of her aching channel, stabbing the tender depths with his tongue until she writhed beneath him and moaned her orgasms.

While she showered, he cleaned the mess in the kitchen, then joked with her, telling her he'd washed the turkey and put it back in the refrigerator.

It was almost time for her to take him to the airport. She hadn't given any thought to how she'd feel the morning after or when the time came for him to leave. Certainly she hadn't expected this numbness crawling inside her, this sense of loss. She had a terrible feeling that once Rafe left her sight, whatever normalcy was left in her life would simply turn to dust, or she might never see him again.

How had he suddenly become her entire world? When?

When had her skin become so attuned to his touch, to the point she needed to feel his fingers on her? She didn't know when she'd become so dependent on him or so needy. Lacey

sat on the foot of the bed and watched him stuff another shirt inside the duffle. The room smelled like sex, hot, musky sex. And why not? For sure, Rafe hadn't let her sleep much. He was a dynamo when it came to making love to her.

He turned in time to see her wince when she shifted her weight.

Rafe hunkered down in front of her, clasped her hands, and searched her face. "Sore?" he asked tenderly.

"Mmm, yes. You have a bit of a manly package and the will to use it numerous times."

He laughed softly. "Trust me when I say I've never stayed so hard, so randy, in all my life. I didn't think Junior was ever going to be happy and settle down."

Lacey giggled. Rafe had that effect on her. When she was with him, she laughed. "How 'bout now? Has he finally gone to sleep?"

"He's resting, but he's not asleep."

She moaned, knowing if they had the time, he'd take her again.

"Your body will adjust and get used to it." He leaned into her and kissed her. "I intend to give it plenty of opportunity."

She clung to him, her heart beating fast. He cupped her breasts, plucking at the nipples through her shirt. "You don't have time," she whispered as he lifted her shirt and leaned in to take a nipple inside his mouth.

"I could take a later flight, spend the day fucking you." He sucked hard on her nipple before releasing it. "Tell me not to go."

"Danger will be home after a while." She glanced at the bruises on her breasts and knew they weren't the only telling marks Rafe had left behind on her body. He'd loved her well and often through the night. There were plenty of signs of his possession. He wasn't a gentle lover. His fingerprints darkened her inner thighs, her arms, her waist. Her breasts bore numerous tiny love bites. She could still smell his scent on her skin.

He leaned in and kissed her. "I don't want to go. I want to stay here and kiss you and make love to you until neither of us can breathe."

Lacey ran her fingers through his dark hair. "I don't want you to go, either. But you have to. I don't want a confrontation between the two of you."

"Lace, sooner or later there will be a confrontation." Rafe released the hard nipple he'd been rubbing with his thumb and sighed. "Fuck! I don't want to leave you. I don't like it."

She fought the tears that burned behind her eyelids. "I know."

"Tell me not to go, Lace, and I won't. I'll remain here, face Danger with you, and tell him about us. Hell, I didn't know it was going to be this damn hard to leave you behind." His gaze shot to the marks he'd branded on her throat. Lacey laid her palm over them, three of them actually, all three utterly impossible to miss. "There's no way he'll miss them, sweetheart. I don't care if he knows I branded you, but I don't like leaving you to face him alone."

"He won't hurt me, Rafe."

His lips flattened. "He already has."

Lacey swallowed hard. "Yes, but not physically."

She watched him return to jamming clothes in his bag. His skin was tight across his high cheekbones. "You don't know how he'll react when the reality hits him that I touched you." He whipped around to face her, his face dark with rage. "Come with me, Lace. Don't stay here."

Silent tears slipped down her face. She grieved, not only because he had to return to Texas, but also because she knew, deep in her heart, when she let Rafe touch her that was the end of everything between Danger and her. She'd accepted the fact in her mind, but her heart was a little slower to catch up and accept it. "I can't just leave. I have a son. I'll have to work out some kind of arrangements with Danger for us to share him."

Rafe zipped the duffle and dropped it on the floor. "I know. I know. It just tears me apart leaving you here." He grabbed his carry-on, jerked it open, and stilled. She heard him say, "Shit." Then he lifted his head and locked his gaze with hers. He held a small box in his hands. "Oh, Jesus, Lace."

"What?" she asked.

He swallowed hard and rubbed a hand down his face. "I didn't use—I never even thought."

Lacey eyed the red letters written in bold script on the side of the unopened box. Condoms. Size: Triple-X, for the endowed male. "Oh," she said faintly. "Shit."

She lifted her gaze to meet his. She hadn't thought, either. From the pole-axed expression on his face, it was obvious he didn't want a child with her. She slid a palm across her belly in a protective gesture. A baby? She didn't know if Rafe had

left a life growing inside her or not, but she figured as many times as he'd taken her and the various positions, some where her hips were tilted in a very receptive position to take a male's seed deep, the odds were pretty high he had.

"By chance, are you on the pill? Say yes."

Lacey shook her head. "There's been no reason. I stopped taking them five months ago. I've had no need to worry about it, until now. You don't want a baby?"

"No. Of course not! Not—God, Lace, I've never done that before. I *always* wear a condom. I don't take stupid, unnecessary risks. The last thing we need is a baby." He squatted down in front of her and brushed her hair behind her eyes. "Call me, as soon as you know, either way."

"Right." Stupid, *unnecessary risks? You bet!*

He sounded so enthused about them having a child, she'd be sure and pick up the phone and let him know immediately. She didn't consider the creation of a baby a stupid, unnecessary risk. It was a life. A precious life.

How could she have been such a blind fool?

Oh, yeah. He'd wanted her, but now that he'd had his fun, it was time for him to move on to the next playground.

Lacey clenched her fists in her lap and fought to keep from bursting into tears. Well, here was her wake-up call. Her reality check. Fun and games over. She'd given herself to him so easily. No challenge there. Deep inside, he must be laughing at what an easy conquest she'd been.

*He loved her?* Doubtful. Men tended to say they loved a woman in the heat of the moment, but when it came right down to it, it was all about the sex.

Pain twisted her heart. Lacey swallowed hard. Of a sudden, she felt as fragile as spun glass. If she made one more step in the wrong direction, she'd crumble into thousands of grains of sand and never be whole again.

More fool her! She'd put all her trust and faith in Rafe, and he didn't want a child with her. He wanted to walk away without complications.

No, she wouldn't call him.

Maybe lately, she'd been doing a piss-poor job of it, but she could damn well take care of herself.

After that, Lacey couldn't bring herself to carry on polite conversation with Rafe on their way to Havre. The drive to the airport was fraught with silent tension. Once inside the terminal, she thought his flight would never come up so she could leave. She desperately needed time alone, time to think and plan.

"I don't know when I'll make it back here again, Lace. Perhaps it's best if I stay away, not come back at all. I think maybe you need some time?"

Shock coursed through her veins. He was utterly deserting her? "Yes, you're right. That would be best," she agreed numbly. "I do need some time."

"They're calling my flight. I'd love to kiss you, but—" he looked around. "There might be someone here who knows you. I have to go."

She watched him disappear in the throng of the holiday crowd. People going home. People coming back home. He was right. It was best he hadn't kissed her, but oh, she'd needed to feel his mouth on hers one last time, needed the

reassurance of his arms around her, his body pressed tight to hers, his cock at full attention. She needed to be held.

What was she going to do now?

The question tumbled over and over in her mind. Should she confess to Danger what she'd done? Beg his forgiveness? No. He wasn't the forgiving kind. The one thing she knew for certain was she could no longer pretend everything was all right or remain Danger's wife.

When she'd given herself to Rafe, she'd done so with the full realization her marriage was already dead. There was no going back. No need to confess her sins. The marks on her throat would tell their own story. The only option she had was to leave.

Her heart felt as if it were coated with layers of ice. Numbness and guilt ate at her soul. She felt like an orphan standing there, silently waiting for Rafe to turn around and wave goodbye or blow her a kiss.

Rafe didn't bother to look back, not once. He hadn't said he'd call. She felt like dropping to her knees and bawling like a baby. Turning, she headed out the doors, back to the Jeep.

"Lacey!"

She whipped around at the sound of her name. "Coe!" She stared blankly at Danger's identical twin. Oh, my God! Thank God, Rafe hadn't kissed her goodbye.

She forced a smile on her lips and hugged her brother-in-law. "What are you doing here?"

Coe laughed and patted her shoulder. "I see Danger's been doing his homework."

"What?" Lacey blinked.

"It's okay, Lacey. You're a married woman, honey, you're allowed to sport a hickey or two or three."

She swallowed hard. If her brother-in-law spotted the marks that fast, Danger would see them a whole hell of a lot quicker. She couldn't let her guard down once he got home. She'd have to dig up some darker makeup.

Coe laughed. "I just flew in from L.A. I spent the holiday with Mom's parents. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I had to bring Rafe to catch his flight." She hoped she sounded as casual as she tried to.

"Where's Danger?"

"Missoula."

Coe frowned. "What the hell is he doing there?"

Lacey stepped away from the doorway to let departing travelers escape the crowd. "He had to deliver a prisoner there. You need a lift home?"

"Yeah, sure. I was going to rent a car, but I'll gladly ride with you. What prisoner, Lace? We haven't had any prisoners in Rimrock since the facelift started over a month ago."

"I don't know. He said it was someone the Feds wanted there before Monday's trial began."

"That would be Luke Peterson's trial. Sweetheart, we transferred him to Missoula last month."

"Yeah, that's the name. Luke Peterson. No, he was being held right here in Havre."

"No, he wasn't. I'm one of the deputies who took him to Missoula. I know when he was transferred. You must have misunderstood."

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Lacey nodded. "Yeah. I think I've been misunderstanding a lot of things lately. You have everything, all your luggage?"

Coe grinned, his usual charming self. "Sure do. I'm driving!" He snatched her keys out of her hands.

Lacey didn't argue. The last thing she wanted to do was drive when she had so many other things on her mind...

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

\* \* \* \*

*Life is pain, Princess...anyone who says differently is selling something.*

*~Wesley*

*(The Princess Bride)*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 8, Sun.*

*Dawn*

Dianna gasped and leaned over Taylor's prone body. A watery sun crawled across the sky. Streaks of orange, purple and faded blue forced their way through the mountain of clouds churning across the sky.

There would be more rain, and soon.

She dragged the flashlight over Taylor from head to toe, but she couldn't see anything wrong. He hadn't pulled on his boxers when he'd left the shelter. Her gaze settled on the soft package lying between his thighs. What she'd held in her hands at times last night was reaffirmed in the dawn's early light. Even soft, there was plenty there.

She tore her gaze away from the tempting sight and picked up his hand, eyeing the red dot where the scorpion

had popped him. There was a little swelling and redness, but nothing major.

"Taylor?"

He groaned a response.

"I need to get you inside the shelter before the rain starts again. Can you help me?"

"I'll...try." Dianna frowned. He opened his eyes and gazed around. "What...happened?" Confusion clouded his blue eyes. "Where am I?"

Her heart fisted with fear. What was wrong with him?

"You're here, Taylor, with me."

"Oh," he said, plainly not understanding at all.

Did scorpion's stings cause confusion? Dianna bit her lip and wrestled him to his feet, but he was heavy. She stumbled toward the hut, nearly buckling under the strain of his weight. "Don't stop. If you stop, I'll drop you. Keep walking. Yes. That's it. One more step. Another."

Once inside the shelter, he collapsed at her feet. "Can't—breathe," he moaned. Taylor struggled to sit up but fell back. "Throat—closing—" He sucked in a deep, rough breath. "Bee stings—allergic."

"It wasn't a bee that stung you." Fear raced through Dianna. Oh, God. What should she do? What *could* she do? Airway! She needed to keep his airway clear. For God's sake, how did she do that if his throat swelled shut?

She grabbed a shirt and draped it across his groin.

A faint grin ghosted his lips. "You—hiding it? Not—much use—seen it all."

"I didn't look."

He grinned. "Held it—too."

"I didn't know what I was doing."

"Like—hell."

"Shut up. You need to concentrate on breathing."

He grasped the front of the shirt she'd tugged over her breasts and pulled her down to him. "Take—it—off."

"What? Take what off?"

"Shirt. Love—your—tits."

Dianna felt tears burn her eyelids. "You do?"

"Yeah. Lovely. Take—off."

She tore her shirt over her head and flung it aside. Hell, if he wanted her stark naked, she'd strip. "Better?"

He stroked an unsteady hand over her right breast.  
"Better."

"You need to concentrate on breathing."

"Need to—concentrate on—fucking you. Soon." He tugged her down to him, captured her mouth, a faint rub of his lips against hers, then set her free. "Can't—right—now."

"Can't?"

"Concentrate—fuck—you."

"For God's sake, Taylor, have you suddenly developed a one-track mind?"

The ghostly smile flashed across his lips. "Not—sudden."

"You could die! I don't know what to do for you."

"Allergic—wasp stings, too."

"Shit! Anything else?"

"Hornets—like you."

She laughed, a watery sound that lodged in her throat.  
"Don't you dare die on me, Taylor Spencer."

He shivered and closed his eyes. "Won't," he rasped. "Promise."

Daylight brought heat, mosquitoes, flies, and terror to Dianna's soul. An hour after being stung, Taylor's hand was so swollen it looked ready to split in half.

Dianna packed wet cloths around his hand and throat, but it didn't seem to help. His breaths were faint and raspy. She wondered if his throat was as swollen as his hand. She dipped two tee-shirts in the ice chest of rainwater and washed his face and chest. She alternated the wet shirts, sponging his body over and over. Nothing helped. His skin remained hot and dry, his breaths raspy and labored.

She trickled water past his dry lips and down the back of his throat. She spent time agonizing over 'what ifs.'

What if his throat swelled closed? What if he choked to death? What if he stopped breathing? What if his tongue blocked his airway? What did she do if any of those things happened?

She eyed his swollen hand. Blisters had popped up near the sting site, ruptured and were now weeping. She tore a shirt into bandages and wrapped it around his hand. At least his chest wasn't as red as it had been, and the ruptured blisters there from the burn had begun to scab and no new blisters had formed.

Dianna peeled one of the oranges and squeezed juice down his throat. He moaned and twisted on the bedding. His temperature raged, his body hot and dry. She'd never known anyone who was allergic to stings or had a bad reaction to a scorpion's sting. Then she saw his tongue! Dear God, it was

so swollen it filled his mouth and was beginning to push out of it. His lungs heaved.

Quickly, she turned him on his side, praying that would somehow ease his breathing, maybe keep his tongue from blocking his airway. "Oh, Taylor. I'm so sorry," she whispered and brushed his damp hair back from his face.

He moaned and pushed her hand away. "Thirsty."

She gasped and grabbed a bottle of water. "You're awake!" She lifted his head. "Do you think you can swallow some water?"

Most of it trickled back out, but he managed to get a little down. He closed his eyes and dragged in a deep breath.

"Cold. I'm freezing."

"Freezing? But it's—"

His sudden shaking cut off her words. She piled clothes on top of him, but still he shook and thrashed restlessly. "Don't do this to me, you stubborn man."

"What? Don't—do—what?" His teeth clicked together. "I'm...hot." He shifted restlessly, kicking at the clothes she'd piled on top of him.

Dianna leaned over him, felt his face. "God, you're burning up!" Tears filled her eyes. "Damn you, Taylor Spencer, you're scaring me! Don't think to escape me by dying. I'll come after you! I swear I will. I love you, you hateful man!"

"No...you...don't...just want...my cock...."

Dianna laughed. "I do. I do want it, but I love you."

"Knew—you—loved...." His words trailed away. He closed his eyes and shivered. "Cold."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Dianna wiped the tears away and piled clothes on top of him again. The day passed slowly, with Taylor thrashing restlessly and groaning. On and on through the endless day she struggled to keep him hydrated, made certain he could breathe and was breathing. The rain stopped for about an hour, then returned with a vengeance. Dark settled in and closed around them like a shroud.

Her heart sank as Taylor's chest rose and fell with labored breaths. She shivered and wondered if they'd survive their second night in the rainforest.

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

\* \* \* \*

*The naked truth is always better than the best-dressed lie.*

*~Ann Landers*

\* \* \* \*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Dec. 26*

*Fri. 7:00 p.m.*

By the time Danger returned home late that evening, Lacey was frantic. Not just with worry because the highways were still slick and icy, but also because he wasn't answering his cell phone.

The overwhelming sense of guilt she felt for sleeping with Rafe was making her insane. What if something happened to Danger before she could confess her sins? Beg his forgiveness?

Not only had Rafe left obvious signs of his possession on her, but she knew the guilt she felt showed on her face. Her betrayal made her feel ugly inside. She'd never been a person who lied very well or hid the things she did.

Lacey nibbled her thumb. How could she face her husband? How did she tell him what she'd let happen?

Pacing the length of the living room, she froze in front of the fireplace when the flash of headlights through the front window warned her Danger was home, at last. Her heart

raced. She chewed her thumbnail to the quick. Would her face give her away? Yes! Absolutely. A total wreck, she knew her hair was wild, her eyes red from crying, and she simply couldn't find the energy to do anything about any of it.

Quickly, she raced over to her purse and turned off her cell phone. Rafe had called at least fifty times since he'd left, and she kept ignoring his calls. She didn't want him calling. There was no way she could talk to him, not right now.

Danger entered the house and headed straight down the hall with his suitcase. Well, she needn't have worried about him reading guilt on her face, seeing the three hickeys or anything else where she was concerned. He hadn't bothered to even glance her way or speak.

She returned to pacing and nibbling her thumbnail and waited for him to join her. He didn't get in a hurry. When he did return, he stopped at the end of the hall, flashed a look of impatience toward her, then frowned. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Lacey stilled. Danger never spoke to her like she mattered to him anymore. His voice always carried a distant chill, a harshness, as if he despised her. She didn't understand what she'd done that made him talk to her so mean.

*I slept with Rafe!* She wanted to scream the confession at him.

He shifted his gaze away from her, as if he lacked interest enough to bother to look her way for very long.

Instead, Danger opted for a cold beer and plopped down on the sofa in front of the television. "God, I'm tired." He took a chug of beer and stared at the picture on the screen.

Lacey stood there, silently screaming words through her head. *I slept with Rafe! I might be pregnant by him!* The confession hammered away at her conscience. *Tell him! Tell him!*

She opened her mouth. "Danger, I—"

"Do you mind? I'm watching TV."

Danger picked up the remote and flicked through the channels. Silent. Another swallow of beer. Click. Click. Click. Three more channels. Click. Click. Click.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

God, she hoped not. Everything she'd cooked for Christmas dinner had either been scraped down the garbage disposal or fed to the dogs.

Danger snorted. "Hungry for your cooking? Hell, no. I already ate."

Another gulp of beer. Click-click-click. Channel after channel popped up on the television screen.

*Look at me! I slept with another man. I might be pregnant by him. Can't you tell I've cheated on you? Would you care?*

The words filled her head, but she didn't say them. "I think I'm coming down with the flu," she said, choking back her confession.

"Stay the fuck away from me!"

"Yeah, I'll make sure I do." Tears stung the back of her eyelids. Nausea bubbled in her stomach. Oh, God, she was going to be sick. She couldn't live with this guilt. She had to tell him. "Danger, I—"

"Not now, Lacey." He rose from the sofa, clicked off the television and tossed down the remote. Still not looking at

her, he killed the bottle of beer and dropped it in a trashcan by the fireplace. "My head is killing me. I'm exhausted. I'm going to bed."

He started past her, but she halted him with her words. "Why did you really go to Missoula?"

Danger paused. His eyes narrowed. He settled his gaze on the hickeys for a brief second, then looked annoyed. "I told you. I took a prisoner there for trial."

"What is his name?"

"Whose?"

"The prisoner you escorted to Missoula. What's his name?"

"Lacey, I'm not in the mood for games. I'm tired. My head feels like it's going to explode."

"Too damn bad! Answer me. What is his name?"

"Luke Peterson."

"Wrong answer."

He lifted his head. "Ah. So, my secret is out. You caught me in a lie. I didn't take Luke to Missoula."

"I know that. What I don't know is why you preferred to spend a day and a night alone in a motel room in Missoula?"

His gray eyes turned to steel. "You wanna do this now?"

"Yes. I want to know why you preferred to spend Christmas away from me, spend a day and a night alone in a motel room."

Danger's lips twisted into an icy curve of a smile. Flint hardened his eyes. "God, Lacey, you are so stupid. Who the fuck said I was alone?"

Lacey's heart plummeted. "I see. You were with someone?"

"Yeah. I was with someone."

"Another woman?" She barely managed to squeeze out the words.

Danger threaded fingers through his dark hair and swore softly. "What? You're so dense you want me to paint a picture? Yes. Another woman. Did I fuck her? Yes. I spent last night and most of today fucking her. Did I like it? You're damn right. She felt good. Am I going to fuck her again? Ohh, yes, just as soon as I can. Do I give a fuck if you know about her or not? Not really. Do I care that you spent the time I was away fucking Rafe? Not particularly."

"I don't understand."

"It's not that difficult."

"Maybe not for you, but I'm playing catch up here."

"You aren't playing catch up. I'm the one playing catch up. You've been going away for months at a time with men into the wilderness. Men I don't know, part of a *team*. Whose fucking team? Not mine!"

"What?"

"Yeah. You haul ass out of here at every opportunity on your fucking *photo shoots*. I'm sick of it! But here you are, preparing to leave again in a couple of months, and I notice the number of men scheduled to go on this shoot to Alaska has increased to six. Are you fucking every one of them?"

Lacey stood there, too stunned to respond. He thought she'd been cheating on him? Dear God, she might be guilty now, but she'd never been unfaithful before Rafe. "How long have you believed I've been sleeping with other men?"

"Ever since Jared told me he shared his tent with you, and he sure liked what you have between your legs."

"*What?* I've never slept with Jared. I swear to God, I've never—"

"Don't lie, Lacey. Don't you fucking lie to me!" He grabbed her by the shoulders. His fingers bit into her skin.

"I'm not lying. I've never cheated on you."

He shook her, and an ugly snarl tightened on his lips. "I said, don't lie to me! Hell, at least be honest, you fucking whore."

"Get your hands off me."

Danger slowly released her and stepped back. Lacey rubbed the reddened areas on her arms. "Don't you ever, *ever* call me a name like that again. I've never lied to you about anything. Ever. I've loved you with all my heart."

He snorted. "Right. While you were 'loving' me with all your heart, you were screwing the men on your little expeditions to God knows where."

"I told you—"

"Shut the fuck up! He showed me the pair of panties you were wearing he stripped off you."

"Jared Davis showed you a pair of women's panties and you took it for granted they were mine? You never questioned the fact *he* might be lying, stirring up trouble? There were two other women on that shoot."

"He didn't lie about anything."

"He lied to you!"

"No, he didn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because the panties he showed me were the ones I bought for you last Christmas, the pair with your initials, L.B."

"He stole them out of my tent!"

"How do you explain he knew about your tattoo?"

"My tattoo?"

"Yeah, you know, that perfect butterfly with the pretty red and blue wings on your right hipbone? Only a man who's been between your legs would know of its existence. How do you explain him knowing about it?"

"I don't know. God, maybe he spied on me while I was bathing."

He sneered. "You might be a whore, but you aren't that tempting to look at. Why would he sneak a peek when you were giving it to him anytime he wanted?"

Lacey gritted her teeth. "For the last time, I did not sleep with Jared Davis, and if you call me a whore once more, I'll deck you with something."

"For God's sake, Lacey, I'm tired of your lies, just give me a damn divorce and get the hell out of my life!"

Lacey reeled. "Divorce?" She'd known it was coming, but the word still sent a shaft of pain through her soul.

"I want free of you as soon as possible."

"You slept with another woman to get even with me for sleeping with Jared Davis?"

"That's right. I got even plenty of times. Hell, once you even showed up unexpected at the jail and Karen was in the bathroom. I'd just fucked her, and you didn't have a clue. As soon as you left, I fucked her again. It felt even better the second time round."

Lacey swallowed hard. "Well, I'm happy for you. I'm glad you got even for all the wrongs you think I've done. But I wonder, Danger, is it me you were punishing or your mother for all the times she left your father for other men?"

Inside, Lacey wept. She couldn't remember Danger ever being deliberately cruel or crude.

"Don't act so self-righteous and innocent. I know Jared wasn't the only man in the expeditions you slept with."

"You do?"

"I know about Marcus Ryan and Jack Miller. Jared told me how the three of them shared you one night. Marcus confirmed what Jared told me."

"Marcus and Jared are buddies. He'd say whatever Jared wanted him to say, and Jack is dead. He can't confirm their lies, but he'd tell you the truth."

"I know the truth. Oh, for Pete's sake, you have nothing to complain about, Lacey. I made sure you were taken care of before I left for Missoula. From the marks on your throat, I'd say Rafe did a fair job of fucking you. Or are you going to stand there and tell me you didn't sleep with him, too? He's had the hots for you for so long, I figured since you were putting out I'd do him a favor and give him the night alone with you. I knew you'd grab the opportunity to fuck him. I see I was right—looks like he nailed you good."

"What?" Lacey's throat tightened. Her stomach dropped to her knees. Nausea curled its way through her gut. She staggered back from him, reaching blindly for the wall behind her to brace herself. "Why would you do such a thing?"

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Danger smiled, but his eyes looked as cold and deadly as the blade of a knife. "I gave you to him, Lacey. Hell, I hoped you'd get the fuck out of my life and leave with him when he returned to Texas."

Lacey stared at him. Her body trembled. A numbing chill iced her mind. "You gave me to him? Did he know?"

"Yeah, he knew. I didn't come right out and say, 'Here, take the cheating bitch off my hands,' but he got the message I wasn't going to get in his way or give a shit if he fucked you."

"You bastard!" Lacey slapped him across the face as hard as she could. His head snapped back. A trickle of blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. "What gives you the right to 'give' me to anyone? You aren't God. I'm not a piece of property you can pass around to another man! I'm your wife."

"My *wife*? You haven't been my wife for a long, long time. At least not to me. Besides, you liked it, didn't you? Liked Rafe fucking you?" He wiped the blood away with his thumb. "Yeah, I can see it in your eyes—you liked it a lot. Was he as good as Jared in the sack?"

"When did you stop loving me, Danger?"

"You sure you wanna know that?"

Lacey nodded. She didn't think it was possible for him to hurt her more. Inside, her soul ached. She felt totally destroyed. Totally devastated. She couldn't summon any more anger. Maybe later, when the ice around her heart melted, when the numbness left her body, maybe then she'd

feel again. "Yes. When did you stop loving me? I want to know."

"I've never loved you. I wanted you. You gave me what I wanted. I was too stupid to realize then it was only lust. I might have stayed married to you, but let's see, I stopped wanting you long before Jared told me he screwed you. So, for at least a year, maybe longer, I've tolerated you, Lacey, but I'm so ready for you to leave. You make me sick! I can't believe it took you so long to catch on. Are you such a fool not to realize if I'm not fucking you, then I'm fucking another woman?"

Everything inside her curled up and died. The light, the warmth fled from her soul and left an empty shell behind. Up until now, even with making the mistake of sleeping with Rafe, she'd fooled herself into thinking there might be a way to save her marriage, but it was dead, cold and shriveled as the winter landscape outside. "How long?"

"What?" Danger frowned. "How long what?"

"How long have you been...had someone else?"

"Since way before your last trip to Alaska with Jared."

"I didn't go with Jared."

"It sure looked that way to me. As I recall, he was waiting in Havre at the airport for you."

"Yes, but—"

"Don't, Lacey. Don't try to explain. I don't want to hear your miserable excuses. You sound just like my mother and all the lies and excuses she made to Dad every time she took off with another man. I'm not my father. I don't believe a word you say. It's over. Don't try to hang on to something

that's dead and ready for the grave. I can't stand the sight of you. I sure don't want to hear anymore of your fucking lies."

Lacey swallowed back the pain. The hurt. She'd have to concentrate on the dull ache that had settled around her heart later. She refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing how his words cut her. She needn't have worried about sleeping with Rafe. It wasn't what had destroyed her marriage. No. Danger's lack of faith and trust in her had been the culprit. That, and his determination to make her pay for something she'd never done.

She wondered if there had been the tiniest niggles of doubt in his mind about her innocence. Was that why he'd set her up with Rafe? His own conscience would be in the clear if she slept with Rafe? Was that the way he saw it? Sleeping with Rafe was proof of her guilt in his eyes and wiped away any traces of doubt. Boy, she'd fallen right into the web.

Lacey fought to keep from doubling over with the pain he'd dealt to her heart. She refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing how much he'd hurt her.

Almost a year he'd been seeing another woman, sleeping with her, having sex. No wonder he hadn't been interested in touching *her*. Danger was right—she was stupid. But she'd trusted him. Loved him. She hadn't known about the lies Jared had told, hadn't suspected. She felt like an utter fool. Why hadn't she seen the signs? Realized Danger was cheating on her?

"I want a divorce, Lacey. The only thing that kept me from asking for one before now was Joseph, but things have

changed. Karen's three months pregnant. I love her. I want to marry her as soon as possible."

Oh, God. This mortal blow to her heart nearly knocked her to her knees. Lacey stared at him dry-eyed, but inside, the tears were drowning her soul. "I see. Well...I hope you'll be very happy, Danger. I do." She pushed her way past him in the hall.

"Where are you going? Don't you want to know who she is?"

She turned to face him. There was something spiteful in his eyes, a triumphant gloat on his face. He wasn't finished piling the hurt on her yet. He wasn't satisfied with his victory. He wanted more. "You said Karen. The only Karen I know around here is Karen Monroe, the new waitress at the diner in Rimrock who moved here about a year ago, the diner where you spend a lot of time. Her?"

"Yeah. Her. She's a lot more woman than you. Hell, she's a far better fuck than you'll ever be. Rafe is welcome to you. Maybe he'll get more pleasure from you than I ever did."

"You're disgusting."

He shrugged.

Lacey quietly closed Rafe's bedroom door behind her. Later that night, she moved her things out of the bedroom she'd shared with Danger for three years and moved into the guest room. They didn't talk. What was left for either of them to say? She'd been accused, charged, tried and found guilty of a crime she'd never committed. Danger hadn't bothered to ask her if she'd slept with Jared. He'd simply believed and punished her accordingly.

It didn't matter; she was guilty now, and nothing would ever change that fact or the fact her husband had been sleeping with another woman for a long time. Her husband *loved* another woman and had loved her for quite awhile.

Danger had deliberately led her into Rafe's arms, then sat back and waited for her to fall. Well, he could have his divorce. He'd earned it. She wouldn't stand in his way, but she wasn't leaving the ranch until she was damn good and ready.

Lacey tried to forget all the cruel things Danger had said, words that had hammered the final nails in their marriage. She couldn't drag her thoughts together and make sense out of any of it. She had no clue how Jared knew about her tattoo or why he'd told Danger such horrible lies. Of a sudden, she felt very old, cast aside like a worn-out shoe, good for nothing or nobody.

The weeks that followed Christmas passed in a blur. Lacey spent each day in a daze. Danger and she lived like strangers. He left early and came home late, if he bothered to come home at all. He didn't take meals with her or speak when they did see each other.

Joseph was the only thing that kept her going. Nothing made sense to her anymore. Except for two things; Danger wasn't the man she'd always thought him to be. And he'd trampled the love she'd once felt for him into the dirt. He'd ground it and her spirit into dust as surely as if he'd pounded her bones to powder.

In light of Danger's confession that he had someone else in his life, she needed Rafe more than ever, but she simply

couldn't summon the energy to pick up the phone and call him. She couldn't bring herself to answer his frequent calls either.

She curled into a tight ball on the bed she and Rafe had slept in together and spent hours sleeping. When the divorce papers were signed and filed, her mind shut down. She felt useless, as limp as a rag, and too numb to cope with making the decision to pack her things and leave. Rafe stopped calling. She couldn't bring herself to contact him or go to him.

He'd known what Danger was doing, known her husband had simply handed her to him. Rafe hadn't hesitated to take advantage of the situation. She'd been an easy target, easy and stupid.

*God, Lacey, you are so stupid!*

Danger's words slashed at her mind, cutting it to ribbons. Yes, she was stupid. Her husband had passed her to another man like she was a sack of potatoes or something not worthy of his time.

*I can't believe it took you so long to catch on. Are you such a fool not to realize if I'm not fucking you, then I'm fucking another woman?*

Yeah. She'd been too stupid to realize the trust she'd placed in her husband had been foolish. His cruel words echoed in her head time and time again. They lingered in her mind, and they remained there, until the day she realized she was pregnant with Rafe's baby...

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

\* \* \* \*

*Sometimes the act of courage is a small one.*

*~Lauren Raffo*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb.8, Sun.*

Dianna woke to the deafening calls of a variety of parrots and cockatiels and Taylor's distinctive moans. Late evening shadows settled in around them. Inside the shelter, it remained semi-dark and humid. God, she was sick of the rain, sick of being trapped inside a little bitty hut with barely enough room to turn in her sleep.

The rain beat down relentlessly. She didn't think it had stopped all day. It was enough to drive anyone nuts! She propped herself on one elbow and checked on Taylor. He'd thrown off her fur coat. Dammit! He was shivering. Diana traced her gaze down his bruised and blistered chest. Goose bumps stood up like tiny soldiers marching across a desert. "Taylor?"

Other than a brief flicker of his eyelids, he gave no other response. Getting water down him through the night had proved hopeless. She'd spilled more on him than she'd poured

in him. She wished she had something to help reduce the swelling of his tongue.

She grabbed one of the oranges, peeled it, and dribbled juice between his lips. His eyes popped open. He locked his fingers around her wrist and jerked her closer. "You bitch! I told you to slow down. You'll get us killed driving like that!"

"What?" Dianna blinked. It took her a moment to realize he wasn't talking to her but to someone who walked across his feverish mind. "It's okay," she soothed. "I'll slow down. I won't drive fast again."

He laughed. "You always say that." He moved so suddenly, Dianna squeaked. Caught off guard by the way he rolled her beneath him, she gasped. "Taylor! Stop it. What are you doing?"

"You want fast. I'll give you fast. I've wanted to do you for a long time."

"Shit! Taylor, get off me."

He flipped up her skirt. "I need to get off. You can help me with that."

"Taylor, stop it! Stop!" She pushed against his heavy body. There was no budging him, no dislodging him off her.

"I wanna fuck you," he said feverishly. "My God, I've wanted you for so long." He lowered his head, crushed her mouth beneath his.

His lips felt hot and dry and tasted of orange. Oh, God. She didn't care how hot or dry his lips were, he had the tang of heaven on his mouth. His body felt rock hard and solid on top of her. And oh, so delicious.

Oh, Lordy, she so wanted to cave in, wanted to stop resisting and let him have his way with her. His big body felt hard and sexy. His wide chest flattened her breasts. Yeah, silly her, she'd kept her shirt off as he'd requested. She'd started several times to slip on a clean shirt, but then she'd remembered how he'd said he loved her tits, and she just couldn't find it in herself to pull on the damn shirt. If he wanted to look at her breasts, then he could look his fill.

The firm length of his hard cock nestled against the damp heat between her thighs. She needed this. It seemed she'd waited for this moment forever. Finally, he was going to make love to her.

She stopped struggling and surrendered to the demand in his kiss, willingly parted her lips and allowed him in. Why fight the inevitable? Why fight what she wanted?

Rubbing her nipples, he coaxed a heated response from her. She melted beneath him, dragged her fingers through his thick hair. "I've always wanted you, Taylor. I love you."

"Yeah? You've always wanted this." He slid a finger inside her and groaned against her mouth. "You feel good, wet, warm and ready for me."

Dianna sighed and wiggled her hips. "I'm so ready for you."

He grinned, his eyes glinting feverishly. "I know."

Taylor held his cock, stroked the hard length.

Dianna groaned. "Maybe we should wait. You're ill."

"Honey, I've waited long enough. No more waiting. I'm hard. You're willing. Open for me."

He didn't wait for her response but nudged her thighs roughly apart. Without saying another word, he guided the thick head toward her wet channel and sank inside her in one hard thrust.

Dianna flinched. She hadn't expected him to be quite so rough in his penetration of her.

"Mmm," he whispered. "God, you're as hot and tight as I imagined you would be." He worked his hips like a runaway piston. His cock moved in and out, in and out, fast, faster, hard, harder, deep, and deeper.

Dianna heard his ragged breaths, felt his body shudder. He buried his cock deep, clenched his teeth and growled low in his throat. The warmth of his release wet her inside and spilled onto her inner thighs when he pulled out of her. It was over in a matter of seconds. She blinked. What the hell had just happened? "No. Wait!" Her body felt incomplete and still needy.

Taylor gave a dry, feverish laugh from the back of his throat. "Too late. Sorry, honey, but I needed you too much to go slow. I'll make it up to you next time." He dropped beside her and pulled her into his arms. "Your turn next time, Amy, I promise." He closed his eyes and sighed. "You felt good. Hot. Tight. Just like every time we fuck. Mmm. Delicious. Night, Amy."

Dianna blinked. "What? Who am I?"

"Amy?" Taylor shivered. "Damn, it's freezing in here. You need to reset the controls on the air."

Dianna's mouth worked, but no words came out. She'd just been fucked by the man she loved, and he had no clue he'd

screwed her. Worse, she hadn't even enjoyed it. Tears welled in her eyes. She sniffed. "Shit! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" When was she ever going to learn?

She squirmed away from him and wrinkled her nose at the sticky wetness between her thighs. "Oh, shit!"

Dianna grabbed her bag and dug out the little round case of pills. Her heart sank. She'd missed several doses. Had she missed enough to jeopardize her protection? Quickly, she counted the missed days. Twelve pills. She'd skipped the last twelve doses. That was nearly half a month. How could she miss so many pills? Sonofabitch!

She stared at Taylor. His cheeks were flushed. His breathing rapid. Sure it was. He'd just had a rowdy round of sex where he was the only participant. She felt his forehead. It was hot. God, he was burning up.

"Amy," he whispered her name. "I love you, sweetheart."

Dianna ignored the tears that burned her eyelids. It wasn't his fault he didn't love her. No, he didn't love her. He loved some faceless bitch named Amy. She glanced at the pills, closed the lid on the compact and tossed the container in her bag. If he didn't know whom he'd screwed, maybe he wouldn't remember how easily she'd given into him.

What if he'd just made her pregnant? Her brothers would kill Taylor! Hell, her brothers would kill her!

"Amy? I'm cold. Come here and get me warm."

"Not in this lifetime," she snapped.

He frowned, slowly opened his eyes, but it wasn't her he saw. His blue eyes were glazed with heat, fever hot, and unseeing. "Are you mad at me? I don't understand."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Dianna swiped a tear off her cheek. "I'll explain it to you when you're feeling better."

That seemed to satisfy him. He closed his eyes. "I'm still cold," he mumbled. Soon, she heard his soft snores.

Sleep, as usual, didn't come easy for her.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

\* \* \* \*

*Courage is being afraid but going on anyhow.*

*~Dan Rather*

\* \* \* \*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb. 7*

*Sat. 5:00 a.m.*

Rafe set his coffee cup aside and fumbled for his cell phone. Earlier, he'd set it on vibrate. The soft buzz pulled his attention from the scrawling on Lacey's kitchen wall.

Distracted from the gruesome scene, he glanced at the screen. Duel.

Duel wouldn't call, except with bad news.

"Duel?"

"Rafe." Duel's voice sounded shaky.

Rafe's heart plummeted. "What's wrong? Is it Jace? Is he okay?"

He heard Duel's hard swallow and sharp intake of breath. "It's Joseph. He died a few minutes ago."

"Oh, dear God." Rafe felt his stomach clench. He couldn't breathe for the knot in his lungs. "Oh, my God." His heart felt as if it had just been ripped from his chest. Lacey's son. Jesus. Tears stung his eyes. He blinked, trying desperately to

keep control. He couldn't do anyone any good if he shattered. "Jesus. Where's Danger?"

"He left out of here like a madman. God, Rafe. I think he might have gone a little insane. He blames Lacey for their son's death."

"What? How can he blame Lace? Jesus. She couldn't stop Smitt from what he did."

"I know that. You know that. I don't think Danger is thinking straight. Hell, he left his new wife here. She's fuming."

"Well, we wouldn't want her upset. Shit." Rafe dragged fingers through his hair. "Forget I said that. It's none of my business who Danger chooses to marry."

Duel sighed. "I offered her a way back to Rimrock. I told her one of the ranch hands would fly her in the chopper. She agreed to the chopper ride, but declared she's coming there. She said Blackstone Ranch was her home now, and everyone better get used to her being Danger's wife, including Danger."

Rafe bit off an epitaph. In his opinion, Danger deserved Karen Monroe in large doses. He thrust unsteady fingers through his hair. "How can Danger possibly put the blame on Lacey?"

"I don't know, Rafe. I don't understand what happened between Lacey and Danger."

"They fell out of love."

Duel snorted. "Man, love sucks. I am never falling into the mouse trap."

Rafe grunted. "Don't say never, Duel. Love has a way of sneaking up on a man. It hits you smack in the heart before

you know what's happened." His breath caught on a hitch. "I'm very sorry about Joseph. This has to be extremely difficult for Danger."

"I'm sure."

Rafe frowned. He couldn't think about Lacey and how all of it was going to damage her, and there was no point dragging Duel into the mess of Lacey and Danger's turbulent relationship. "This whole thing has been a nightmare for Danger, losing his sister, now Joseph."

"And Lacey. Where the hell was Danger when all this happened?"

Rafe hesitated. "I'm not sure; at work, I guess."

*Getting married!* Rafe bit his tongue to keep from shouting the words and placing the blame squarely onto Danger.

*Danger was getting married when Lacey was attacked.* Rafe swore softly. If *he'd* taken Lacey with him in December, none of this would have happened.

He couldn't lay all the blame at Danger's feet. The man had every right to marry if that was what he wanted. *He* sure as hell wasn't going to complain that Lacey was free. He prayed she was alive. That was what mattered now.

As if reading Rafe's thoughts, Duel echoed, "I suppose it isn't important where he was. What matters is that we find Lacey. I don't think Danger's going to be much use in the search."

"No." Rafe barely got the word past his lips. "I'm sure he won't be. Are you on your way here?"

"I'll be there in about thirty minutes."

"Good. I need your help solving this damn riddle."

Too Close To The Fire  
by Jaydyn Chelcee

\* \* \* \*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*6:00 a.m.*

Duel Remington entered Lacey's kitchen less than an hour later. Rafe looked up and gave a sigh of relief. He desperately needed the agent's help, but at the same time, he felt dread, acutely aware that Duel was a neighbor of Danger's, and a lifelong friend.

*He was the intruder here.*

But Smitt Davis' brain was like a sinkhole, dark and deep and empty, except for the dirt in it. Rafe realized he didn't know the man well enough to play in the mud with him. He couldn't solve the riddles of his insane mind without Duel's input. Shit. This had turned into such a frigging nightmare.

Duel froze halfway across the room and looked around, his gaze settling on the wall. "Jesus. The bastard has a lot to answer for. Has Danger seen all this?"

"Unfortunately."

"Have you seen him? Did he come here from the hospital?"

"Yeah. He showered and changed clothes."

"Where is he now?"

"He's gone to town, says he wants to be there early to make funeral arrangements for Joseph. He and Anna Leigh's husband left here a few minutes ago."

"So, he's calmed down some?"

"Like he has ice water in his veins. Calm. Collected. Angry."

Duel moved closer to the wall and eyed the strange symbols. "The fucker used her blood to paint the wall?"

"Yeah. When he was here, everything was about Lacey. He could have raped Anna Leigh if he wanted or tortured her. Instead, he gut-shot her and left her where she lay."

"What else did Davis do?"

"It's what he didn't do that's important. He didn't touch Anna Leigh in any other way. He left her lying on the floor hanging onto life by a thread while he went on with his cold-blooded plans and tortured Lacey. All his rage was directed on Lacey, except...something about Joseph made him angry."

"The baby must have done something to enrage him. What?"

"I don't know. Maybe he was crying? Screaming? He might have been sleeping when the attack on Lacey started. Maybe the sound of the gunshots woke him. Mom didn't come to him, so he starts crying. Then Anna Leigh shows up and *pow!* Another gunshot sets the kid to screaming. Smitt's already enraged at Lacey. He loses all control and attacks Joseph, then he returns to Lacey and finishes what he came here to do."

"That sounds like Smitt. All his time and attention is focused on what he's doing at the time."

"He wasn't in a hurry," Rafe said.

"Did he rape Lacey?"

"No. I don't know. I don't think he did, not in the conventional way you mean. He—uh, shit! He used a fucking broom handle on her."

"Jesus," Duel said quietly. "He was always a perverted fuck."

"She's pregnant."

"What? Who? *Lacey*? How do you know?"

"Danger told me, but I already suspected." Rafe figured it was best to have everything out in the open.

"Why would you already—?" Duel held up his hand. "Aw, shit. No. I don't want to know, Rafe. Don't tell me anymore."

"I'm not going to hide what's between Lacey and me. I love her. It's not something I can conceal anymore. I don't want to even if I could."

"It's your baby?"

Rafe stared at him tightlipped.

"You don't have to answer. I can see it on your face. Sonofabitch!"

"Don't." Rafe raked fingers through his hair. "Don't judge her. You don't know what happened between us."

"The hell I don't! You fucked her. She fucked you. You both fucked over Danger. No wonder he wanted a divorce."

"It wasn't like that."

"You're saying you forced her to have sex with you?"

"No. Of course I didn't rape her. I love her, for Christ's sake. It's just that our relationship isn't a typical relationship. We didn't jump into an affair. I spent one night with her. Before you say anything more, I plan to marry Lacey. I want her for my wife. I want this baby we made together, more than I can say."

"Don't you think we have to find her first?"

"Yes. And find her alive."

Duel held up a hand. "Okay. What's between you and Lacey is your business, but you need to know, I've known Danger for years. This is his home."

"I know that."

"Just so you know. It's going to get awful uncomfortable if you and Lacey decide to settle in Rimrock."

"We won't live here. There's nothing left here for Lacey. If she'll have me, I'll take her away from here. We'll live in Texas."

"Yeah. I think it would be the best thing to do."

"Unless she *wants* to live here. Since I plan on spoiling her, I guess I'll have to let her have her way. Wherever she wants to live, it's her choice. Just so you know."

"Shit. Fuck. Okay. Now that we've cleared the air, let's see if we can figure out what this mess on the wall means and nail this fucker."

"I hope you have better luck at deciphering this crap than I've had."

"Well, hmm, that looks like a pig." Duel pointed to one of the drawings. "A pig in a pen."

"Yup. That's what I thought, too, but it's just plain crazy. Do you have any idea of the significance of a pig to Smitt Davis? What it means?"

"I have no idea, except, hmm...." Duel rubbed his chin. "Smitt's grandma kept a big hog in a pen behind their house when Smitt was a kid. She used to threaten to feed him to it when he misbehaved."

"Good God. Can you imagine a little kid with that kind of threat hanging over his head? He'd be scared shitless."

"Yeah." Duel frowned. "As I recall, Smitt was terrified of that big old hog. The hog must have some importance to him. It looks as if the figure outside the pen is a young boy carrying a bucket of scraps to feed to the pig, only the scraps...are human parts, legs, arms, feet, hands. Jesus. You got a magnifying glass?"

"Yeah. Hang on." Rafe rummaged through a kit he always carried for crime scenes and handed Duel the glass. "What is it?"

"Did you see the writing on the legs and arms?"

Rafe stepped closer. "No. I didn't. I thought it was blood running down the body parts."

"Hell, no. He's written 'Mommy' on them."

"What? Jesus Christ. What a warped mind."

Duel handed the glass to Rafe. "Take a look, but I'm pretty sure that's what he wrote."

"Why would he write 'Mommy' on the body parts?"

"I have no idea, but—shit!"

"What? Did you think of something?"

Duel nodded. "I'd all but forgotten, but Smitt's mother disappeared years ago. The old lady always said she took off with some rodeo cowboy and never came back home. What if—"

"What?" Rafe frowned. "What if...what?"

Duel paced. "I don't know. I'm thinking and my thoughts are crazy, way out there. What if the old woman murdered her daughter and...."

Duel's voice trailed away at the gruesome thought.

"And?"

"I don't know. Something's niggling at my mind." Duel snatched up the stack of pictures off the table of the crime scene and held one up. "Have you looked at these?"

"No, not yet."

"'Mommy.' There's the word plain as anything. See here?"

"This is the first time I've looked at these new photos. They were dropped off a few minutes before you arrived."

Duel returned to the wall. "Here, the boy is walking, but as he walks, he's growing, becoming an adult. There, he's carrying a woman in his arms. Oh, shit! That's it! He tossed her into a well. Sonofabitch! He threw Lacey into the well."

"The well?"

"Yes. There's an old open well on the backside of the Davis property. Smitt used to kill small animals and throw them in it to hide his crimes. That's what he did with Lacey. She's nothing better than an animal to him. Trash to get rid of once he finished with her."

"Fucking bastard! Do you know where the well is?"

"Yes. Are we gonna wait on Danger to get back?"

"Hell no! It could be hours. Lacey might not have that much time. Will you show me where the well is?"

"Of course. Let's go."

"We'll need rope."

"No problem. There's plenty of rope in my Jeep. We'll stop by Dancing Star and get the chopper. It will be faster, and I can fly her to Havre to the hospital."

"Good. Blankets. If Lacey's alive, we'll need blankets."

"I know where she keeps them. I'll get some from the hall closet. I think we should call Danger."

Rafe hesitated. "Call him, but I don't think he'll join us."

"Why not?"

"Like you said, he blames Lacey for Joseph's death. He hates her, Duel. He won't help us rescue her or help search for her body, whichever the case may be."

"I'm calling him. He knows Lacey isn't to blame for Joseph's death. It's crazy he'd even think it."

"Come on. You can call from the Jeep. Every minute counts for Lacey. She's the one I'm concerned about, not Danger."

Duel gathered blankets and shoved them into Rafe's arms. He yanked his cell phone from the leather case hooked to the waistband of his jeans and hit speed dial as he followed closely behind Rafe. "I'm concerned about both of them."

"He won't come, Duel."

"We'll see. Yes. Hey, Danger, I wanted to let you know Rafe and I have figured out the drawings. We know where Smitt put Lacey. What? Oh. I, uh, see. Okay. We'll meet you in Havre at the hospital."

Duel snapped the phone closed and shoved it back in its holder.

"Well?" Rafe arched a brow in question.

"He's too busy to be bothered with Lacey right now."

"What's he doing?"

"Having breakfast with Karen, and then he has some other things more important to do. He'll meet us at the hospital in Havre when he has time."

Rafe clenched his jaw. "Let's go."

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## Chapter Twenty-Six

\* \* \* \*

*If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.*

*~George Bernard Shaw*

\* \* \* \*

*Western Australia*

*Damnboola Station*

*Feb.8, Sun.*

"How rough is the area where they crashed?"

Raider Remington, owner of *Damnboola Station*, opened the door to the guestroom his American cousin, Wildorado, used whenever he visited Australia. It had been at least seven years since Wild had set foot on *Damnboola*—too long, as far as Raider was concerned.

Raider wiped a hand across his mouth for lack of something better to do.

It was bad enough Dianna had been on her way here to attend his mother's funeral, and now there might very well be two more funerals. Inside, his body trembled. It had been years since he'd felt such a loss of control with his emotions. He sure as hell hated to give Wild more bad news. Raider hesitated, chewing on his bottom lip.

"It's all right, Raider. I know it can't be good. I'm sorry about Aunt Marion."

"Thanks. At least she didn't suffer."

"So how bad is this Kimberly region?"

"It's bad, Wild. The Kimberly is the hottest part of Australia. We don't know how far off course Dianna flew. Radar in Broome noted she changed direction several times without informing them. She was all over the screen. They couldn't raise her on the radio to find out what was happening."

"How long did she fly off course?"

"At least two hours. Maybe longer."

"Survival?"

"It will depend on where they crashed. If she strayed very far south or east, they might have gone down in the Great Sandy Desert. It's hot, dry, uninhabited, and it's big, over a hundred thousand miles big."

"Jesus."

"The Tanami Desert is to the east, and the Gibson Desert is to the south. It's a narrow window that they might have missed the deserts and crashed north. But it's not just the deserts. Worst case scenario, other parts of The Kimberly have a lot of steep-sided mountain ranges. If the plane hit one of those..." His voice trailed off. "You know."

Wild nodded and swallowed hard. "Yeah. I know."

"Best case scenario, if they survived the crash, you can't possibly imagine the problems they'll face—snakes, spiders, flies, mosquitoes, no food, no water, the heat, the rain. It's the wet here, monsoons to the north if they crashed there." Raider paused as Wild's face paled. "I don't want to paint a picture of pure gloom and doom. As long as they aren't

seriously injured, depending on where they crashed, they can survive a few days."

"A few days? How few?"

"Temperatures can reach up to a one hundred and eight."

"How few?"

"A couple of days without water; with it, I don't know, a week, maybe, but not long. They aren't prepared for a hike in the Outback or a track through the rainforest. Anything from flash floods to God knows what can catch them unawares. There are hundreds of ways to die in the Outback, and believe me, it's a death sentence out there for those who have no knowledge how to survive in the wilderness."

"Dianna spent summers here—"

"Yes. She was a young girl, Wild. Colton and Silver taught her a few basic survival skills, but that was years ago and nothing near the scale of what she'll need. Who knows what she'll even remember?"

"Colton and Silver are with the rescue parties?"

"Yes, until the sun goes down. They're both flying a plane and searching in the northwestern area, which is where her plane should have gone down according to radar. Still, we're talking thousands of miles. If they spot them, they'll drop them water and give the location so a chopper can fly in and rescue them, but they have to return tonight for Mom's funeral tomorrow."

Wild nodded. "I understand, Raider."

Wild knew in his heart that Colt and Silver, Raider's younger brother and sister, would search for as long as they had daylight. They didn't live at *Damnboola*. They each had

their own stations, but those stations were still part of *Damnboola*.

"Kissy's here at the ranch?"

Raider grinned and nodded. "Yeah, she's pissed at me for not letting her go with Silver, but I—you know." He shrugged. "She's a baby yet. I couldn't bring myself to let her get on the plane."

"I suppose she's stubborn as a mule?"

Raider laughed. "For a ten-year-old, she's about as bullheaded as any Remington ever born and twice as ornery, but I love her. She's my baby."

Wild nodded. Raider had never denied Kissy was his daughter. He'd raised her from birth when Kissy's mother, Kate Griffith, showed up one day and shoved the baby in Raider's arms a week after the infant's birth.

"You take her. She's yours. I don't ever want to see her or you again." Those were the only words Kate said to Raider before she turned and walked away. She'd never returned to the station. There was no doubt Kissy was pure Remington. She had the Remington's lanky frame and lazy walk and Raider's deep blue eyes.

The child sounded like Silver when she laughed and talked. She adored the man she called 'Dad,' but Wild had his doubts Raider was her father. He leaned more in the direction of Raider's father having an affair with Kate.

Rufus Remington had cheated on Marion plenty of times over the years, right up until he was killed by a wild bull nine years earlier. Wild figured Raider claimed Kissy as his

daughter to keep his mother from being hurt and embarrassed once again.

Wild admired his cousin for his sense of duty and closed-mouth approach to the situation.

"You wanna talk about it?" Raider parked his lanky frame on the side of the bed and watched his cousin's face close up. Shit. It didn't take a genius to know that a man with Wild's looks would catch hell in prison. He figured the convicts did a number on him.

Wild eyed him with the same regard he gave most lawmen—respectful, but aloof. No emotion. He slid his gaze away and shrugged. "I figure if you had any more information about the crash and rescue, you'd tell me."

"Wasn't talking 'bout Dianna and that man she has with her. Nothing new 'bout the plane crash I can tell you. Officials are searching. They'll let us know as soon as they have something. I meant do you wanna talk 'bout your time in prison?"

"Nope." Wild tossed his two duffle bags on the bed and scowled. "The only thing I'm willing to discuss is how the rescue search for Dianna and Taylor is proceeding. I don't do polite conversation. Not anymore. I sure as hell don't want to share the misery of life behind bars."

Raider settled his icy blue gaze on him. "Prison was hell, huh?"

Wild shifted uncomfortably. "Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I'm not here to discuss what happened to me there. It's done. Can't be undone. I lived through it. Time to move on."

"Done, maybe, but not finished."

"It's finished...for now."

"Yep. Thought so. You look for trouble, you'll find it."

Raider had a habit of talking about as slow as he walked. A tall, lean man made of long bone and tough sinew, he rarely lost his temper, hardly ever smiled, and he tended to be about as wary of females as Wild was of conversation.

"Don't think I don't know that little gal lied 'bout what happened. I knew it from the moment she opened her pretty little mouth and started talking. That gal was damned jealous of you paying attention to Pam Summers and not to her."

Wild smothered a groan. He really didn't want to discuss the lies Jayla Ross told that day in court. "I hear you have a problem with a new neighbor. Some female named Sabrina Holden, who happens to hold the best water rights around, and her property sets smack in the middle of *Damnboola*? This gonna be a problem for you?"

Wild figured he'd neatly turned the table on Raider. Raider was a lot like him. He didn't usually invite words and had less to say.

Raider coughed and scratched his chin. "Different kind of trouble. Let's just say I have her lined up in the crosshairs. I'm gonna bring that lady down before this battle between us is finished."

Wild's lips twitched. "Spoken like a true Remington."

Raider snorted. "True Remington or not, you got a lot of rage churning inside you, cousin. Those skeletons rattling round inside you are gonna keep right on dancing until you turn them loose."

"The only day I'll ever let go will be the day after I make Jayla Ross pay for her lies."

"Have you seen her since getting out of prison?"

"Nope. Her family moved away right after I was sentenced."

"She came forward and finally told the truth, though, got you out of the prison she got you sent to."

Wild nodded. "You think that makes up for the loss of my good name or for the five years I lost or for what happened in prison?"

"I didn't say that, Wild, just that she tried to make things right for you."

"She'll never make things right."

"Not until you get her in your crosshairs?"

"Like you, I'm bringing her down."

"Just be sure of what you do, Wild. I know you feel you owe her."

"Yeah, I owe her. She was a spoiled, selfish, homely little brat back then, and since her daddy is now a senator from Virginia, she's likely worse."

"Step-daddy."

"What?"

"Yeah. Hamilton Ross isn't her real dad. He adopted her when he married Jayla's mother. Jayla was twelve."

"How the hell do you know all this?"

"When you were on trial, I hired a private investigator to check out the Ross family."

"Jesus. I had no idea. Why did you do such a thing?"

"Because I knew she was lying. I wanted to know her motivations. Know her better."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Not anything I could prove."

"But?"

"I don't know. I didn't like the smell, you know? Hamilton came off as squeaky clean, but I don't care much for tidy white. It stinks. We all have dancing skeletons. Her mother died in a very mysterious accident about a year ago."

"Jayla's mother?"

"Yeah. Her car went over a cliff."

"Jesus Christ."

"Jayla was in the car with her. She was flung clear, but the girl nearly died. Her spleen was torn and her skull fractured. She was in a coma for weeks."

"So you're telling me she's paid for her crimes against me already?"

"No. I'm just saying be sure of what you want."

"Why?"

"I just never saw where that little girl was ugly. Spoiled? Maybe. Ugly? Uh-uh."

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## Chapter Twenty-Seven

\* \* \* \*

*Killing someone is just like walking outdoors. If I wanted a victim, I'd just go get one...I didn't even consider a person a human being.*

*Henry Lee Lucas  
(Serial Killer)*

\* \* \* \*

*Davis Property  
Feb.7  
Sat.6:00 a.m.*

"You still alive down there, bitch?"

The voice! She knew that voice. Lacey's eyelids fluttered open. The voice from her nightmares. Was she dreaming? Maybe her imagination was playing tricks on her. As she dragged her mind out of the nightmare fog she found comforting, her heart raced with terror.

Oh, God. Where was she? Where had he put her?

Gray shadows twisted around her, silent and threatening. It wasn't quite as dark as it had been when she'd awoken before.

Imagination was a crazy thing. Lacey whimpered. "Please don't let him be real," she whispered. "Let it all be a dream. A dream—"

"So, they haven't found your rotting corpse yet? How do you like it down there in my well?"

Lacey stifled a moan. Oh, God! No! He was back! He was real. Real. She held her breath, afraid to breathe, afraid to betray signs of life.

"I know you're still alive down there, cunt. I know you're breathin'. I can see those pretty tits I sucked heaving like a smoke stack. Did you miss me? Are you lonely? Maybe I should come down there and fuck you. Would you like that? Yeah, I think you'd like it."

Lacey choked back a cry. What did he want?

"Or maybe I'll just climb down there and bash in your brains, should have done that before I kicked your ass into this rotten hole anyway, made certain you were dead."

Lacey mouthed a silent prayer. "Please God, make him go away. Please. Let me die in peace. Let me die—"

"You won't be lonely much longer, Lacey, darling. That bitch, Kaycee, shot me, but I ain't done with her. No sir. Got plenty of life left in me. Plenty. I'm going to get her good, toss her stinking bones down there with yours. Soon, Lacey, darling, very soon. By the time I come back here again, there won't be any life left in you. You'll be a pile of bones no one will ever find. Die, bitch. Die slow. Die alone!"

Lacey shivered and closed her eyes. Why was it taking so long for her to die? A faint smile flickered across her lips.

"Welcome, Death. I welcome you."

Smitt slid the boards in place over the well, shutting her in total darkness. Tears slid down her face. She curled into a fetal ball and tried to ignore the chill in her bones, but the

memory of what Smitt had done to her came back in full force....

\* \* \* \*

*Blackstone Ranch*

*Feb.6*

*Fri.12:00 p.m.*

Lacey grabbed Danger's empty coffee cup off the kitchen table and set it in the sink. She stood there over the sink, her tears falling unheeded into the basin. She swore her heart wobbled. No more tears for herself. She refused to feel sorry for herself, but she cried for her son's loss, because inevitably, Joseph was the one who'd pay for his parent's decisions and mistakes.

Sniffing, she rubbed away the tears, but it didn't relieve the desolate pain. So, it was over. Divorce filed, granted, final, all nice and tidy, just the way Danger wanted it. A shaft of pain cut her deep. He hated her. He'd made that very clear. Yes, she was guilty of adultery. She'd slept with Rafe McCord, not only slept with him, but conceived his baby, but she wasn't guilty of sleeping with Jared Davis, which was the beginning of her failed marriage. Or was it?

What role had Karen Monroe played in breaking up her marriage? Why? Maybe it was all mutual attraction between Danger and Karen. She could hardly fault Karen for wanting Danger. The first time she saw him, she'd been bowled over by his good looks, the pure sex in the way he walked, talked and looked at her.

What she didn't understand was why Jared had told Danger such lies. What did he have to gain by breaking up her marriage? Lacey heaved a deep sigh. It didn't matter now. Danger was in love with Karen, and Karen was five months pregnant with his baby.

Oh, God. Lacey's hands shook. The sob lodged in her throat. She couldn't breathe. She'd bumped into Karen the day before in Rimrock's General Store. The woman smirked at her, rubbed her distended belly, and sauntered from the store as if she'd won a major victory.

Lacey winced. She stood there, too numb to turn and walk away herself. Seeing the reality of Karen's pregnancy sucked what emotions she had left right out of her body. She trembled like a leaf in the wind, and everything simply went dark in her soul. She felt like an empty shell, and she didn't think she'd ever feel normal again.

In a way, she guessed Karen *had* won a major victory. She'd stolen her husband from right under her nose.

Bewildered, Lacey looked around the kitchen. The present. Now. And the truth she faced: she was now a single woman. A pregnant, single woman who might not be able to turn to the baby's father for help, a woman who was nearly thirty and should know better than to get herself in such an idiotic mess. She brushed away another tear.

Facing the future was unbearable. How could she wreck things like this in three short years?

Danger had wanted their marriage dissolved. In her opinion, he'd dissolved it in August, maybe sooner than that.

She just hadn't realized what he was doing or how determined he was to cut her out of his life.

Even after she knew, after she learned the extent of his deception, she'd stayed and tried to make things work between them, but it had been too late, and she couldn't do it by herself.

Lacey squared her shoulders. She had to accept it was over. Too much had happened. Too many hurtful words spoken, too many things that couldn't be forgiven. Ever.

A soft shuffling sound on the front porch snared her attention. She heard the front door open and close and swiped at the last of the tears wetting her face. Danger's sister, Anna Leigh, had arrived to take Joseph home with her while Lacey packed the last of the belongings she wanted to take with her when she left.

"I'm in the kitchen, Anna. Come on in." Lord, she hoped Anna wouldn't be able to tell she'd been crying.

"Oh, I'm in, honey. I'm so in."

Lacey spun around at the creepy intonation.

Oh, God. Oh, God. She knew that voice. Even after three years, she'd never forgotten the tone. How had she ever thought he sounded anything like Danger?

She jerked open a drawer, closed her fingers around a butcher knife. "You come near me, you sonofabitch, I'll kill you!"

"I don't have to come near you, cunt. Not yet."

Smitt leveled a pistol at her. Lacey froze. The gun, God, he aimed it between her eyes. Her heart hammered. "What do you want?"

*Pow!*

The punch of the bullet knocked her back against the kitchen cabinets. Her breath exploded in her lungs. The report of the gun wasn't nearly as loud as the explosive pain that ripped through muscle and bone in her right shoulder.

*Pow!*

Or the second one that plowed through the upper portion of the right side of her chest. The impact knocked her to the floor.

Lacey lay where she fell. Baffled by the white-hot pain ripping her apart, she groaned. Something was in her mouth, something warm and wet that tasted like rust. Blood? Why did she have so much blood in her mouth? It filled the back of her throat, gagging her. It gurgled inside her chest, hot as boiling water. Drowning. God, she felt like she was drowning in her own blood.

She tried to breathe, but couldn't get past the pain. Why did she hurt?

Lacey coughed and spewed crimson droplets across her face and the front of her shirt. Oh, God, her lungs felt as if acid had been doused on them. Nausea bubbled like green foam in her stomach. She swallowed back the urge to vomit and slid a protective hand across her belly.

*Her baby. Dear God, please, don't let anything happen to my baby.*

A shadow, dark and menacing and obscene, fell across her.

Lacey stared at the man who'd invaded her home. Unable to form words, she coughed and felt the warmth of her blood trickle down her chin. She caught the bright, shiny glint of the

knife she'd grabbed from the drawer in his hands. *Oh, God. Oh, God. Please!*

"Aww, you don't have to say anything. I can see it in your eyes. You're not having fun." His hand went to his zipper, and he tugged it down. Slowly. Slowly. All the while, a smile played on his mouth. "Don't you worry none, Lacey, darling, don't you worry 'bout havin' fun, cause me and my buddy here, well, we're going to have all kinds of fun." He freed his cock and stroked his fingers up and down the hard length of it. "Oh, yeah, me and my buddy, we're gonna have a party. And guess what, Lacey, darling? We got all afternoon."

Smitt leaned down with the knife in hand, grabbed the top of her blue tee-shirt and cut it down the middle from top to bottom; then, smiling, he sliced her bra in half and folded back the sides. "Whoo hoo, would you lookie there? Course, I already knew you had a nice set of tits."

He squeezed her breasts with both hands, pulled hard on the nipples. Lacey pushed at his hands, struggled to get up.

"Stay down."

"What?" Her voice sounded distant. She tried to get up again, but for some reason, she didn't have any strength in her right arm. Lacey held up her hand, puzzled as to why her arm wouldn't cooperate. Blood streamed off her fingertips and dripped onto her neck.

"Stay down or the next bullet goes between your eyes."

She fell back. Not because he ordered her to, but because she couldn't do anything else.

"That's my girl," he said softly and laid the blade of the knife along her cheek. "Now, we got us a few rules here, Lacey, darling. I like rules. I like obedience."

The entire time he talked, he finished cutting away her shirt and bra, until there was nothing left.

"I like to suck titties," he said casually. "Sometimes, I even like to bite and chew on the nipples. What I don't like is screams. Screaming messes with my concentration. Makes it harder for me to get my load off, you know what I mean? I hear screams, I go a little crazy and do real bad things, like bite off your nipples, or I might do a little carving on your belly. So, rule number one, no screaming."

He leveled his gaze on her breasts. "You got a pair of beautiful tits there, Lacey. I'm partial to pretty tits." He squeezed her breasts. "Yeah, nice and firm. Sweet."

She bit her lip, but couldn't hold back the groan.

"Uh-uh. No moaning. Remember rule number one."

Lacey flinched when he pulled on her nipples. They were already tender from her pregnancy. What he did made them ache worse.

She frowned. What was he doing now?

Oh, Jesus. Oh, God. He was sucking her right nipple, but the way he did it, pulling on it with his teeth, gnawing at it, hurt like hell. She chewed on the inside of her cheek to keep from crying aloud. Sharp pain jolted through her nipple and spread through her breast. Then he sucked harder, deeper. He wrapped his tongue around the tender bud and moaned. Slowly, very slowly, he released it and reared back.

"Aww. What's this shit? Woman, you making milk?"

"No...no."

"You got a baby in you?" He rubbed his hand across her belly, tightened his fingers on her flesh. Enraged, Smitt snarled and slapped her across her face. "Don't lie to me! You gotta kid in you? Answer me!"

"No. No baby." She had to protect her unborn child.

Smitt smashed a fist into the side of her face. "Tell me the truth or I'll hurt you so bad, you'll wish you were dead. I'll cut open your belly and look for myself. Now, is there a kid in you?"

"Yes, yes....baby."

Smitt punched her in the face again. She felt her cheek bone crack. Lacey blinked. What happened? She couldn't concentrate for all the pain. "Oh, God. Oh, God." He was unbuttoning her pants, fumbling with the zipper. He was going to rape her on her kitchen floor?

"Don't—don't touch—me!"

Smitt snickered. "Honey, I already touched you in more ways than you can imagine. I want a little feel of your sweet pussy. I might even stick my cock in you for a bit of fun." He laughed. "My afternoon delight."

"Please—please. Don't hurt me. I'm pregnant."

He laughed. "I know you got a baby in you. I've fucked pregnant women before. How far gone are you?"

"What?" Lacey blinked. "What—tal—king 'bout?" Shock spread through her. Cold. So cold. Why couldn't she pay attention to his words? Focus? Nothing he said made sense to her. A strange buzzing filled her ears. Boiling black clouds

swirled above her, darkening the room. She struggled not to give in to the awful shadows smothering her mind.

"Answer me, bitch! How many months you knocked up?"

"I—uh, two...months." Her voiced sounded so far away, a distant echo in her mind. "Hell, woman, you ain't very far gone at all. It can't be much bigger than a tadpole. Too bad your ole' man already put his kid in you, but it don't matter none to me you got a brat in you. I got plans for you. Big plans."

Smitt yanked off her shoes and socks, then jerked off her jeans and panties. Lacey groaned. Her chest burned. Her shoulder throbbed. Blood covered her breasts and belly. She couldn't move. She couldn't think. Why was it so hard to think? "Please! I'm—begging—you! Don't hurt my baby!"

"Shut the fuck up, bitch! See this knife? You make another sound, I'll scalp you alive! Don't fuck with me. Keep your mouth shut and open your legs. Wide."

Lacey closed her eyes. She ordered herself to pay no heed to his crude touches, to ignore his fingers gliding over her breasts, but she couldn't. His every caress chilled her to the bone and turned the blood in her veins to slush. He dragged the cold edge of the knife across her vulnerable midriff. The wintry bite of icy steel cut through the tender layers of her skin. Her body jerked in reaction to the slow drag of the knife across her belly. "Please! Oh, God. Stop!"

Lacey felt out of control, like a puppet whose string had been cut so its arms and legs flopped uselessly.

Smitt popped her across the mouth with the back of his hand. "Open your fucking legs or I'll cut you deeper next time!"

Sobbing, Lacey obeyed. Her body shook with tiny convulsions. He jerked her legs wider apart and stared. "Oooooweeee, girl, you got one sweet looking pussy. I can't wait to stick my buddy in it, give him his share of the fun."

She retched when she saw the shiny, wet head of his cock. He rubbed the purple knob with his thumb tip. "Will you look at that? See that? See how you done got me all excited here? Girl, I done got me some love juice rising to the top of my dick."

Lacey bucked, then tried to wriggle away from him. The hard punch to her face stunned her. She lay there gasping, too numb to move. Her ears rang. Her vision blurred, and her lips felt as if they'd been stung by bees. She thought he punched her again just for the pleasure it gave him to inflict pain. She felt her lower lip split. Tasted blood.

"I told you no screaming! You best be still, missy, and keep quiet. I ain't gonna stick it in you right this minute. No, I wanna play first, maybe titty fuck you once or twice. I just wanna good feel of your pussy first, stick my finger in you, get the hot, wet feel of you, so relax."

He jabbed his finger deep inside her. Lacey screamed. The sound came out faint and mewling. He jabbed his finger deeper and laughed. "Oooh, you sweet, sweet angel. That's the hottest snatch I've felt in a long time. Jesus, it makes a man wanna fuck you all right. Open your legs wider, girl. Wider!"

Smitt placed one hand flat on her belly, right at her pubic bone, and pressed hard; then he pushed two fingers inside her. What was he doing? It felt as if he were scraping her womb raw. It hurt. Oh, how it hurt, and it hurt worse than either gunshot wound or the blows to her face.

Cramps tore through her stomach. She tried to lift her head, but simply couldn't find the energy. He removed his fingers and slowly inserted something else inside her. She whimpered as he worked it deep inside her, then pulled it out, only to shove it deeper inside her again and again.

Dear God, what was he using on her? Something solid and hard. He kept thrusting it inside her. The more he did it, the more ragged his breaths became. He pressed harder on her belly, shoved the instrument harder and deeper over and over.

Lacey cried out as pain crawled through her belly. She wasn't sure he could accomplish what he'd set out to do, but the blood in her veins froze as it suddenly dawned on her what he was doing.

This wasn't a sex game he was playing with her. This was something much, much worse. "Oh, God, don't! What are you trying to do?"

"I'm not *trying*, Lacey, darling. I'm doing it. Gotta get this kid outta you. It ain't my brat," he said in a merciless tone.

"No," she protested weakly. "Don't hurt my baby."

Smitt wiped a bloody hand across her belly. "It's done. No more baby, sweet angel. You're bleeding, girlie. Oooooooweee, you're bloody as a cut pig."

Tears tracked down the corners of her eyes. Splinters of ice settled deep in her bones. Chills crawled down her spine and around into her gut. She felt herself drifting away as wave after wave of cramps seized her.

Nothing stopped him. He defiled her with his touch—wholly destroyed her soul. He grunted and probed inside her, then set a rhythm with whatever it was he was using on her. She wanted to fight him, struggled to get away, but she knew there was no escape. Lacey felt the bite of the knife across her stomach again and again.

"Mmm. Relax. Relax, Lacey, darling. Those are just little cuts. I ain't got to the good stuff, yet. I like taking my time, and this is going to take awhile."

*Think of something else. It's only your body. Only your body.* Lacey sobbed. *He can't destroy what you have with Rafe.* Hot tears slid down her face and into her mouth. *Yes, he could. And he would. He'd take everything.* Her strength waned. Pain closed around her until there was nothing else. *Don't let him see you cry. Don't cry. You're tough, Lacey. You can bear the pain. Fight. Fight!* Tired. So tired. She tried to focus on other things as he grunted over her. Then the oddest sound penetrated the fog in her head. A squeal? Then several high-pitched grunts, ragged breaths, wheezes, and another high-pitched wail.

*He was squealing?*

Why would he squeal like a pig? What?

Something warm dripped onto her breasts and slithered across her throat. Dear God, what—he was—she gagged. His semen jetted in several warm bursts onto her breasts. It slid

across her nipples and oozed toward her neck. She retched and retched again.

"I'm coming for you, Lacey, feel me coming for you, Lacey?"

Abruptly he fell on top of her, his chest heaving with the harsh breaths he sucked into his lungs. "Ahh, that felt good, Lacey, darling, real good. The head of my cock went off like a fucking geyser. I shot a big load on your belly and tits. Mmmm. Mmmm. It eased the pressure on my balls a little. Now we can relax and take our time."

Lacey felt the tip of his wet cock straining against her belly. Then higher.

"Ooooweee. I'm still hard, Lacey, darling. There's something about doing the sheriff's wife that makes me rock hard." He mashed her breasts together, slid his cock between them and thrust back and forth. "Gonna give you the titty fucking I promised you. I'll be coming for you again real soon."

She didn't know how many hours he grunted and sweated over her. Time stood still. Her mind blurred, and she drifted in and out of consciousness.

His harsh breathing and choked words penetrated the haze in her head. "I smell my scent on you." He lifted his head, curled his fingers around one of her breasts and squeezed it. "Mmm. Not much fight left in you, woman. Once I do a little whittlin', it always takes the fight out of the bitch. It won't take me long to get bored with you, Lacey, darling, and then I'll kill you."

Lacey closed her eyes. Shut out his voice. She focused her attention on the sounds around her. Was that Joseph crying? Screaming?

*Please, God. Don't let him hurt my son. Please. Please. He's all I have left. Don't let him hurt my baby.*

"Lacey? Why is Joseph screaming? Where are you?"

Lacey swallowed back the utter dryness that coated her throat, the pain, the fear. She didn't have enough spit to dampen her tongue. Her mouth worked, but she couldn't form the words to scream, to tell Anna Leigh to run.

The monster tormenting her pressed his palm over her mouth. "Ssh. Make a sound, I'll slit your throat." He punished her left breast in warning.

Smitt rose to his feet, grabbed the gun off the table and waited for Danger's sister to make her appearance. "Aw, this just isn't the sheriff's lucky day," he whispered.

"Lacey? Are you here?"

"Run, Anna!" Lacey screamed, but it was already too late. Anna Leigh stepped into the kitchen. Smitt's mouth split into a wide grin, macabre and evil, and then he squeezed the trigger.

The startled look on Anna's face froze in place. She gasped, staggered back, crashed into the wall and slid to the floor. Smitt stood over her, ready to pull the trigger again, but she didn't move.

He stared at the crimson stain blooming across her midriff and lifted a brow. "Gut shot. Perfect. The bitch will lie there for hours before she dies."

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

He walked to Lacey and picked up the knife. "You're gonna pay for screaming a warning to her, bitch! I told you plain, no screaming. I know how to make you bleed and bleed and take forever to die, Lacey, darling." He grinned. "Fun time. Fun time. Yeah, me and my buddy, we're gonna have lots of fun..."

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## Chapter Twenty-Eight

\* \* \* \*

*If I could be any part of you, I'd be your tears. To be conceived in your heart, born in your eyes, live on your cheeks, and die on your lips.*

*~Unknown*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb.10, Tues.*

Dianna laid her hand across Taylor's brows. His skin felt clammy, but at least it was cool. "Thank God, your fever's finally breaking." She lifted his injured hand, studied it with the thoroughness of a laboratory technician studying a slide under a microscope. "The swelling's almost gone. Your hand no longer looks ready to split."

Taylor stared at her as if she'd sprouted hair out of her nose. "What are you doing?" He jerked his hand out of hers. "I could have told you I'm better without the 'feely-touchy' nurse routine. You don't speak to me for two days and nights, now suddenly you're all over me?"

"I'm not all over you. I was checking to see if you're fever broke. I want to get the hell out of here. It's driving me crazy being cooped up with you like this."

"Oh, now you wanna leave, when I told you before we needed to try and walk out of this damnable jungle. What's your hurry? You act like I'm the worst thing since insect spray. Did I do something to upset you?"

"Like you'd give a rat's ass?"

"I might not care, but I'd feel better knowing why you look as if you want to jab a spear up my ass."

"All right!" She bared her teeth. "You...uh, you..."

"What, for Christ's sake?"

"You mistook me someone else."

"And that pissed you off?"

"No. That isn't what pissed me off...well, yeah, it's sort of part of what pissed me off."

"Jesus. Are you going to tell me what happened or not?"

"You...touched me."

"Touched you? What did I do? Cop a feel of your tits?"

"Yes. And more. You did everything."

"Everything? What the hell is that supposed to mean?" His blue eyes widened. "Oh, shit. By everything, you mean I screwed you?"

"Yes."

"For God's sake, Dianna, couldn't you fight me off? Did I hurt you?"

"No, I couldn't fight you off. It happened too fast."

"Well, I don't know if it will make you feel any better, but I don't remember any of it."

"It doesn't make me feel a whit better, but I can live with what happened. You didn't know what you were doing. The thing is...I'm not on birth control, and you...uh, you..."

"I came in you? Fuck!" Taylor clenched his teeth. "Shit!"

"Thanks for making it so obvious you don't relish the thought of my being pregnant."

"Don't be an idiot. Of course I don't want a baby with you." He held up a hand. "Wait a minute. Whoa. Just wait. I can't make you pregnant, Dianna. I'm sterile."

"That's a famous last line."

"I'm serious. I was injured in the car accident. It left me sterile. You don't have to worry about being pregnant."

Dianna swallowed hard. "Funny. I think you were the only one worried about it. You win, you know? I just wanna get out of here."

Taylor pushed himself up. "I'm not trying to score points off you, Dianna. You're right. We need to leave here as soon as possible."

"Can you travel? How do you feel?"

"Like hammered shit. How do you think I feel? A friggin' scorpion nearly killed me, and the damn thing wasn't even poisonous. But you know what? If you can walk, so can I. I hate being cooped up here with you."

Dianna clenched her jaw to keep her chin from trembling. "Well, trust me, the feeling's mutual. If you're able to complain, I think you're well on the road to recovery. Hungry?"

"Thirsty."

She grabbed a bottle of water, twisted off the cap and handed the bottlesh to him. "It's warm, certainly not very refreshing, but it'll quench the thirst."

Taylor took several deep swallows before giving out and falling back on the pile of clothes. Even though his breathing still sounded a little rough, Dianna figured she could stop worrying about him choking to death on his tongue or his throat swelling shut. The worst of the crisis had passed. Thank God. "I've never known anyone to have such a dangerous reaction to a scorpion sting. Is your reaction to bee and wasp stings the same?"

"I've always had bad reactions to insect stings or bites. It's like I've been bitten by a poisonous snake. Hell, I'm even allergic to tick bites. It's just something in my system that overreacts."

The relief she felt knowing he was going to live didn't alter the fact she felt like strangling him. Yeah, she was happy he was better. She had it in her to be kind, and she'd been worried about him. He was weak and had nearly died. It didn't mean she wasn't pissed at him.

"I'm hungry," he croaked and rubbed a hand across his belly. He scowled at her. "Why are you looking at me as if you'd like to run a knife through my gut?"

"If you don't know, I'm sure not telling you," she said sharply. She threw an apple at him. "Breakfast. Enjoy."

"Your bedside manner is decidedly lacking," he grumbled. "Is it something I said when...you know?"

"Who's Amy?"

"Amy? Amy, who?"

"How should I know who Amy *who* is? She's your girlfriend," she snapped.

"What? For God's sake, Dianna, I don't have a girlfriend."

"Ex-girlfriend, then."

"I don't have an ex-girlfriend named Amy, either. The only Amy I ever knew was—"

He broke off, frowning.

"Well, don't stop now. Amy who?"

"Shit, I don't remember her last name."

"You slept with her."

"No! Yes. Okay." He thrust fingers through his shaggy hair.

"Stop glaring. Yeah, I guess maybe I did sleep with her."

Taylor hesitated, eyeing her. "Once."

Dianna snorted.

"Okay. Maybe more than once. Twice."

She lifted a brow.

"All right. So we lived together for a year. It was straight out of high school. Years ago. We agreed to go our separate ways. I haven't seen her since."

Dianna folded her arms across her breasts, breasts she'd covered with a red tee-shirt since he'd called her Amy. No free peeks for a man who didn't know whom he screwed in his sleep.

"Dammit! I've met with her a couple of times—*several* times over the years. We rent a motel room and catch up on old times—fuck! Don't look at me like that, it's just sex."

"Just sex? *Good* sex?"

"The worst I ever had was great."

"You're an asshole, Taylor Spencer."

"Why are you so mad at me? It's none of your business, anyway. Hell, you've slept with men."

"Man. One man, until—just leave me alone, Taylor."

"I didn't know I was bothering you."

"You aren't. You never will."

"For God's sake!" Taylor pushed himself to his feet and swayed. "We need to pack whatever we're taking with us and get the hell out of here. Is that my shirt you're wearing?"

Dianna crawled out of the hut. "Yes, it is. It stays on, no matter how much you beg me to take it off."

Taylor rubbed his eyes, then blinked. "What? Don't worry about it, Princess. I think I can resist the urge to ogle your teeny-tiny acorns."

"Uh-huh."

"Where are you going?"

Dianna squatted in front of the opening. "While you pack what you think we'll need, I'm going to find a rock or a tree to get behind, then I'm going to piss a river, one that flows downhill straight to here. Hope you know how to swim."

She rose to her feet and stalked toward the dense jungle.

\* \* \* \*

Taylor poked his head out of the tiny hut and watched Dianna charge into the denser maze of the rain forest. "Jesus Christ," he shouted. "Don't tromp through the jungle like that. Watch for snakes!"

Dianna paused and flipped around to glare at him. "Yeah, well, the only snake I know of anywhere near me is you!" She stormed away like a maddened heifer on loco weed.

Taylor frowned. What the hell had he done that she was so livid at him? He expelled a disgusted breath and began

gathering their meager supplies. "Women! Who can figure them out?"

Dianna returned a few minutes later. "I want to take my fur coat."

"No. It's too hot to lug that thing around. Besides, it has holes in it. Remember?"

"I don't care. It makes soft bedding. I want it."

"Then you carry it."

"Fine. I will."

"Strip out of that short-ass skirt and put on some jeans."

"Don't order me around, Taylor Spencer. I don't like it. And I want my gun back."

"Hell, no. You might shoot me."

"Yeah, I might. Give it to me."

Taylor straightened from the small pack he'd bound together. He stalked toward her, slow as a jungle cat until he had her backed in a corner with no route of escape. He locked his hard fingers in her upper arms and jerked her closer. "I'm going to give it to you, okay? Dammit, Dianna. Do you always have to be such a bitch? Can't we get along for five minutes? Can't you just shut up and not talk?"

"I have a lot I want to say to you," she snapped.

"I have a lot I wanna do to you, starting with this." Taylor lowered his head and crushed her mouth beneath his.

\* \* \* \*

She didn't want to respond. She swore she detested him, but oh, he knew how to kiss. His mouth feathered softly

against hers. He slid his tongue along the seam of her lips until she gave him what he wanted.

Dianna opened beneath his mouth like a flower spreading its petals to the kiss of the sun. Taylor bunched her skirt around her ass, glided a thumb along the seam of her butt until he found what he sought. She gasped against his mouth. His thick finger probed deeper inside her warm channel. Dianna didn't know when or how he did it, but when he lifted her to anchor her against him, his cock slid inside her, hard, thick and endless.

"Oh, God," she whimpered, feeling herself stretched as he impaled her.

Somehow, they ended up outside the hut, on the wet jungle floor. Taylor rolled with her, rose above her, thrust deeper inside her. His eyes were furious, fierce and boldly brilliant. His mouth was swollen from the carnal kisses they'd shared. "Lock your legs around me, Princess," he growled deep in his throat. "This is going to be a wild ride."

Dianna stared into his blazing eyes and knew he meant exactly what he'd said. His gaze promised her hell. She thought she'd died and gone to heaven instead. Even as he drove into her over and over, he buried his face against her throat, nibbled at the wildly pounding pulse there. The rhythm he set was fast and killing and sent fierce heat scalding through her body. His lips grazed her breasts, teased her nipples. He paused to suckle her nipples, then pulled out of her and trailed a path of butterfly kisses down her stomach, past her pubic bone and along her clit.

Dianna bucked like a wild mare when he licked her. Soft whimpers stole past her throat when he lifted her ass and buried his face between her thighs. He stabbed deep with his tongue, swirled and twirled until she twisted and turned and clawed her fingers into his shoulders.

When he plunged his cock inside her again, she rose to meet every hard thrust. Dianna whimpered, her orgasms hard and powerful. Taylor hissed, gripped her hipbones and thrust deeper. His body shuddered violently. His release flowed hot and wet inside her.

His chest heaved against her bare breasts. She couldn't remember him removing her shirt. Taylor pulled out of her and rolled to his back. He flung an arm over his eyes and drew several ragged breaths. "Well," he mumbled. "That was something."

Dianna bit her lip. He didn't sound all that pleased. She wasn't sure just how happy she was about their most recent intimacy, because no matter what, this time they both knew exactly what had just happened. Tears welled into her eyes.

Taylor lifted his head, stared at her. "Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?"

She snorted. "We've got to do something about your lousy bedside manner."

"What?"

"After you screw a woman, are you always so—so, what...like it doesn't matter?"

"Matter?" He propped himself up on one elbow and glared at her. "Listen, Princess, I'll grant you, you're hot to look at and hotter to fuck, but don't go tying up what just happened

between us into a sweet little package bound in ribbons, bows and hearts. We fucked. You want more, I'm willing—just give me a minute to catch my breath—but don't make it into something it wasn't."

Dianna swallowed hard. "Don't worry about it, Spencer. I know very well you have no feelings for me. I think I'll survive." She got up and scrambled inside the hut. He started in after her. "If you don't mind, I'd like a minute of privacy."

"I do mind. I need some clothes." He followed in behind her, grabbed clean jeans, boxers and a white tee-shirt and bounded back outside. "Take your time. No need to get in a hurry this late in the day."

Dianna hissed. "You're a bastard. You know that?"

He turned back, lifted a brow. "Why? Because I can fuck you and walk away? It's easy, Princess, since the only reason I screwed you was to get even with your brother for what he did to Kaycee."

Nausea swirled in Dianna's gut. "What?"

Taylor smirked. "You didn't honestly think I fucked you because I had the hots for you. Did you? I've accomplished exactly what I set out to do. Revenge is sweet with a little added spice on the side. Good pussy, by the way, just not a keeper." He turned and sauntered into the jungle. "Don't leave without me, Princess," he flung over his shoulder. "I wouldn't want you to get gobbled up by some hungry creature."

Dianna clenched her trembling hands. She pressed one against her mouth to keep from crying. Pain slashed her heart. Well, like he'd said, she'd gotten exactly what she'd

asked for—and then some. Oh, God. Her period was due in a couple of days. She never skipped or was ever late. He'd taken her twice in the last twenty-four hours. He said there was no risk...but could she trust his word?

Then what? He had no feelings for her. Bile rose to the back of her throat. Dammit, she was not going to be sick.

On all fours, she scrambled to a corner and lost the meager contents of her belly. Shit! Hurrying to clean up and dress, she waited for Taylor to return from the edge of the jungle.

As he drew near, he stopped and eyed her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're pale as death."

"I'm fine. I'm not your problem, Taylor. Can we just leave?" She picked up the pack and took off through the jungle.

"Where are you going?"

She didn't answer, just kept on walking. She had no plans to talk to him for the rest of the day, or ever again. This was so not going to be a good day.

"Shit." Taylor grabbed the second pack and took off after her.

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## Chapter Twenty-nine

\* \* \* \*

*No cord or cable can draw so forcibly, or bind so fast, as  
love can do with a single thread.*

*~Robert Burton*

\* \* \* \*

*Davis Property*

*Feb. 7*

*Sat. 8:00 a.m.*

Duel had barely landed the helicopter before Rafe unbuckled his safety belt and leaped out. He took off, his long legs eating up the snow-covered ground.

Duel killed the engine and grabbed the coil of rope off the backseat. "Be careful, Rafe," he said, joining him at the well site. "Don't step on the boards. They're rotted."

Rafe squatted down and started yanking the boards off the top of the old well. "Lacey! Sweetheart! Are you down there? Jesus, I can't fucking see down there."

No reply.

"God dammit!" Rafe flung another board out of the way. "She has to be here. Please, God. Let her be here. Let her be alive. Lacey! Sweetheart. Answer me."

Duel hunkered down beside him. "Rafe. Slow down."

"I don't have time to slow down. If she's down there and..."

"I know. Don't you think I know? If she's...dead, we need to preserve the scene. If she's alive, we don't need you falling apart, falling in, or getting hurt. So, slow down. If she's down there, man, she needs you."

Rafe nodded and peeled board by board off until the last one was finally tossed out of the way. They peered over the edge.

"Oh, Jesus," Rafe whispered. "She's here! Thank God. Thank God. Lacey!"

"She isn't moving."

"Give me the rope, Duel."

Duel helped knot the rope around Rafe's waist. "Take it slow and easy. I don't want to have to rescue you because of a cave-in."

Rafe nodded and started scaling down the side of the steep wall. "It's slick. The walls have thawed just enough to be muddy." He glanced down to judge the distance. "Lacey! Honey, answer me!"

His heart grabbed. He couldn't see her now, not at the angle he was descending. Her silence scared him to death. "Please," he whispered. "Please. Please, be alive."

Rafe swore it took forever to reach the bottom, and when his boots touched ground, he fell to his knees beside Lacey's curled body. His gloved hands shook as he reached for her. God. She was so still. He couldn't hear her breathing. He didn't think she was breathing. He tore off his leather gloves and touched her bare shoulder. Her skin was pale and icy. "Lacey?" he whispered her name. "I'm here, baby."

He turned her gently in his arms. Her head lolled to one side against his chest. Her left palm opened, and he saw the heart and chain, the necklace he'd given her for Christmas. He swallowed hard. Her lifeline. Thank God he'd given her something to hold on to. "Aw, sweetheart." He gently eased it from her hand and slipped it inside his shirt pocket. His heart squeezed tightly. "Baby, please. I don't think I told you—I don't remember—" He ignored the tears blinding his vision. "I love you, Lace. I want you to know that. I love you. I've always loved you. Please, sweetheart, open your eyes."

She was covered in dried blood from her head to her bare toes. Quickly he jerked off his denim jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Lacey? Sweetheart. Open your eyes, baby. Dammit, you can't die. I'm not finished with you yet." He heard her feeble sigh, felt her delicate shudder. A frail gasp. "Oh, God, baby. Can you talk to me?"

Her eyelids fluttered, then opened. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She reached for him, slid an icy hand down his cheek. "What—took—you—so—long?" Her hand dropped to her side. "So—cold."

"Duel," Rafe yelled. "Drop me a blanket. Hurry."

Lacey shuddered. "Lost—our—baby."

Rafe openly wept. He cleared his throat. "I know, sweetheart." He busied himself wrapping a blanket around her.

"Didn't—think—you wanted—our baby."

Rafe froze. "Oh, God, Lace, as hard as I worked to make sure you got pregnant, how could you think I didn't want our baby? I could have protected you. I bought the fucking box of

rubbers, but I—hell, I couldn't think about anything other than putting my baby in you. I wanted to bind you to me forever." He tucked the blanket around her shoulders and under her chin. "It wasn't until you refused to go to Texas with me I realized you weren't ready for a baby with me. I decided you needed time, but don't for a minute think I didn't want our child or you. I want you in my life, and any babies we might make in the future."

"I'm—sorry."

Rafe stilled. "For what, honey?"

"Losing—baby. Tried—fight him. Too—strong. Wanted—our baby."

Rafe held her close in his arms and brushed her hair from her face. "Me, too, Lace. I'm going to get you outta here, sweetheart. Get help. Hold on. Don't give up. I want to make lots of babies with you. Will you marry me? I love you, Lace. Marry me?"

"I'll—marry—you." Her breath escaped in a soft sigh. Her head lolled lifelessly against his chest, and her eyelids fluttered closed.

"I'm holding you to that, Lace," he whispered. "Just as soon as I can arrange it, I'm holding you to your word."

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## Chapter Thirty

\* \* \* \*

*Sex is one of my downfalls. I get sex any way I can get it. If I have to force somebody to do it, I do...I rape them; I've done that. I've killed animals to have sex with them, and I've had sex while they're alive.*

*Henry Lee Lucas  
(Serial Killer)*

\* \* \* \*

*Davis Property  
Feb.7  
Sat.8:20 a.m.*

Smitt Davis watched the chopper lift into the air from his hiding place and cursed beneath his breath. "Fucking, nosy, interfering bastards. They'll be sorry they took her. She's mine!"

He coughed. The gunshot wound to his chest hurt like hell. The bullet was still lodged inside him, but the bleeding had finally slugged to a stop and the site had scabbed. Kaycee Remington had got him good, but by God, he wasn't dead. He was bruised and battered from going over that damn cliff, and he'd broken his left wrist and three of his fingers.

Everyone probably believed he was dead, believed the animals would take care of his carcass, but he'd show them.

He'd be back. His job wasn't finished, yet, but who the fuck was this new man in Lacey darling's life?

He didn't like him. He carried himself like a lawman, and God knew Smitt had little use for the law. He grinned. "No use for the law, none at all."

He needed time to heal. Time to make new plans. Time to regain his strength. He wanted his property back. He wanted Lacey darling back. She belonged to him now. No one took what he'd claimed.

Smitt crawled out of the brush pile he'd burrowed in, stumbled over to the well and stared into the empty black hole. "Fucking cunt," he shouted. "Why couldn't you just die? I should have fucked you! I should have fucked you and then cut out your heart!"

He could have done it down there in the well. Yeah. He could have done her good. What he should have done was climb down there, fucked her, then slit her throat. He'd planned to. He was on his way to do exactly that when he'd heard the chopper.

"Damn, fucking, interfering Remingtons. Just wait. I'm coming for you. All of you."

Where was Sheriff Blackstone? He rubbed his aching head. Ah, but Danger Blackstone didn't matter anymore. He wasn't the man in Lacey darling's life. So who the hell was the big man who'd carried Lacey up from her grave? He didn't know, but he'd make a point of finding out. He'd kill the fucker.

Smitt limped away and headed toward the woods. For now, he had to hide. Heal. Sharpen his knives. He wasn't finished with Kaycee Remington, either. She had his babies in

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

her belly, and he damn well wanted them. He wanted her. And Lacey...oh, Lacey, darling, well, she had more fight in her than he'd given her credit for. He rubbed his hard cock and grinned. A worthy opponent was Lacey darling. Yeah, tough gal, a strong will to live, worthy of his seed. Their kid would be tough, fearless, a survivor. "I'm coming for you, Lacey darling, and next time, you get the honor of my seed. I'll put my baby in your belly. You only think you've escaped me."

When he finished with her, she'd wish she'd died the first time round. He was going to carve her up good. Real good. "Carve you good, Lacey darling, and you'll be number one at my new table. Number one. You can run. Run, Lacey darling. I'll find you. I'll always find you."

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## Chapter Thirty-One

\* \* \* \*

*The greatest weakness of most humans is their hesitancy to tell others how much they love them while they're still alive.*

*~ O.A. Battista*

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 10, Tues.*

Taylor eyed Dianna's jean-clad ass with appreciative regard. She marched ahead, an angry soldier determined to get as far away from him as fast as she could. He clenched his jaws. Too damn bad—she was stuck with him, and he had a feeling they were going to be stuck with each other for quite some time.

That is, if she didn't get herself killed first. She was determined not to listen to him when he told her to slow down and conserve energy, to watch where she placed her feet. He felt like grabbing her and shaking some sense into her head.

No matter what he said, she ignored him.

Worse, she was not speaking to him. It drove him mad when she stopped talking to him. Hell, the woman was a holy terror whether she talked to him or not. He watched her

delicious ass sway from side to side and felt his dick stir. She got under his skin without trying. She always had.

Why did this one woman have the power to make his fucking cock brick hard? He followed behind her, his fists clenched with frustration. She'd worried he might have made her pregnant. An ache settled in the region of his heart. He wished to hell he could. He'd have her knocked up in a heartbeat, but then she'd have to...he stumbled.

Whoa...back up a minute. Where on earth had that thought come from?

Make her pregnant in a heartbeat?

Was he a total idiot? He'd be stuck with her for the rest of his life.

*And what's wrong with that?*

*Everything! She's a spoiled rich bitch.*

*She's beautiful. Sexy. And she flips your switch.*

*I could never make her happy, never give her what she wants...needs. Besides, she'd make a lousy mother and...fuck!*

*She'd make a beautiful mother.*

He wanted that with her. Wanted her. A child with her. Dammit, he wanted her with every fiber of his being. He wanted to bury his cock in her hot channel again and just soak inside her. Most of all, he wanted to plant his kid in her. Yeah. He wanted to chain her to his side for the rest of their lives. Jesus Christ, when the hell had he fallen in love with her?

*I'm not in love with her!*

*Oh, you are so far gone, you sap. You're head over ass in love with her.*

"No, I'm not!"

"Sorry? Did you say something?" Dianna paused and looked at him over her shoulder. She was breathing hard, her breasts heaving underneath *his* tee-shirt. By God, he wanted to tear that red shirt off her.

He licked his lips. "Oh, you're speaking again. I said you need to slow down."

Taylor tightened his lips. He'd fucked her twice. Big deal. Once he didn't remember. The second had happened so damn fast, he'd exploded inside her before he knew it. Dammit, he wanted to do her again. This time, he'd take his time and taste every inch of her flesh, savor her passion. He'd bury his face between her thighs and not come up for air until she was a puddle of weakness from orgasmic pleasure.

He ached to feel her beautiful mouth wrapped around his hard cock again, sucking him dry. Shit, he was such a goner. "Dianna! Stop. We need to rest. At this rate, we'll use up our water."

She stopped, flopped down on the thick green of the jungle floor and turned to glare at him. "The sooner I escape you, the better."

"Then you'll go on alone. I'm resting."

"You always have to have your way."

"Look, what are you so peeved about? Because I fucked you or because I'm not in love with you?"

"You're such a bastard. I don't want or need your love."

"Ah, so you're mad because I fucked you."

"I'm not mad because of that."

"What then? You want me to do you again? I'm sure as hell willing." He fumbled with his zipper. "Come and get it, sweetheart."

"You're a jerk."

"I am, but I'm a jerk you want."

"Keep your zipper zipped. I'm not interested in a quick tumble."

Taylor grinned and looked around, noting the next rain clouds headed toward them. "We need to find shelter for the night. Once the rain reaches us, it'll get dark fast."

Fifteen minutes later, Taylor halted and pointed. "Look up there? That looks like some sort of an abandoned jungle house."

"What? No." Dianna narrowed her eyes. "It's a big tree with vines wrapped around it. It looks bigger and house-like because of all the thick vegetation."

"Oh. Well, crap."

"But I see what looks like a cave, over there." She pointed to her left.

"Where?" Taylor stepped beside her. "Ah, you're right." He took off in the direction of the questionable shelter.

"Taylor, wait! Don't just charge in there. There might be an animal in it, or snakes."

Taylor ignored her, shoved the vines aside that nearly concealed the entry, ducked and took a long look. "Wait here while I check it out."

"No. I'm coming with you."

He grabbed her upper arms, squeezed her shoulders. "Are you insane? There could be a wild animal in there, or snakes." He wagged his brows. "Maybe a Redback spider or two."

"Yeah, and there might be scorpions."

He sobered instantly. "You had to say that? You're waiting here. Give me the flashlight."

Dianna shoved the flashlight into his hands. "Fine. I'll wait here. Go get bitten by something."

"Shut up." Taylor entered the opening and shined the light around. "It's nice and dry," he shouted. "We'll be comfortable in here."

"Can I come in?"

"No. I'm still looking around." A few minutes later he yelled, "Hey! Holy hell!"

"What?" Dianna charged inside, breathless. Terror gripped her heart. "What is it? Did you see something?"

"See? No. But I hear something."

"What?"

"Listen. I think it's a waterfall. You hear it?"

Dianna grinned. "It is a waterfall." She grabbed his hand. "Come on. We can take a bath."

"Wait. Wait!" He jerked her to a halt. "Let's make camp first; then we'll hunt down the waterfall."

They set up a makeshift camp, spreading out the sleeping bag and the fur coat. Dianna looked around. For temporary shelter, it wasn't bad. The rain pounded outside, but inside the cave, they'd remain dry. The floor was loose, reddish, sandy dirt. With the ground so soft, Dianna figured they'd actually get some rest for a change.

The walls of the cave were bumpy, but at some point in time, Aborigines had left their mark. Centuries of culture and art had splattered the bumpy stone walls, leaving a trail of colorful, vivid history behind. She eyed the white handprints in assorted sizes, the drawings of kangaroos in exaggerated shapes and warriors with spears, dark-skinned people settled around campfires.

Dianna wondered how many centuries ago they'd left their drawings behind.

"Interesting, huh?"

She nodded at Taylor and returned to straightening the fur coat. Tonight, she intended to bask in sleep.

Thirty minutes later, they'd tracked down the waterfall.

Dianna eyed the cascading falls. The inviting pool was clear. "Where do you suppose the water comes from?"

"Don't know. Maybe from an over-flooded stream from all the rain." Taylor dropped his bundle of clean clothes. "When we're finished bathing, we can wash our clothes and stretch them out to dry on the big rocks over there." He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it aside, then stripped to his boxers.

"Whoa. Wait. What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm not showering in my clothes." He dropped his boxers and stepped to the edge of the pool.

Dianna stared, her jaw gaping. "It isn't very big."

Taylor cut his gaze to where her eyes were fastened. "You have to give it a reason to—shit, it's big enough when it needs to be."

She jerked her eyes away from his cock and met his fierce gaze head on. "I wasn't talking about...*that*."

"*That* is what you were looking at."

"I meant the waterfall isn't very big."

"Uh-huh."

Dianna licked her lips. In spite of her determination not to lower her gaze, it fell back to his shaft and soft sac. She looked up quickly. "We can't just strip?"

Taylor wagged a brow. "What's a matter? Never been skinny dipping?"

"Not since I was a kid."

"Why not?"

"It isn't civilized."

"Jesus, Dianna, who the hell wants to be civilized? Live a little. Come on, Princess, strip. No one's going to see but me."

"No."

"Shy? You've had a good look at me. I want a better look at you. Besides, I've pretty much seen and touched all there is to see and touch. I swear I'll control my impulse to pounce. Come on, fraidy cat."

"I'm not afraid." Dianna reached for the hem of her shirt. "Stop staring and turn around."

Taylor folded his arms across his wide chest and shook his head. "Nope. I wanna see every inch of your skin." His eyes blazed with lustful intent. "I wanna taste you all over, Princess."

Speechless, Dianna tugged her shirt over her head and flung it aside. She was acutely aware of Taylor's burning gaze

on her breasts. His attention had latched on to them like a starving infant.

"You know, you have the most incredible nipples. I love the rich coral color."

"I thought you didn't like my breasts."

"I said nipples, not the same thing as breasts; however, I'm getting used to the sight of your breasts...they'll do."

"*They'll do?* What? Because nothing else is available?"

He gave her a cocky grin. "A starving man never complains about the meal in front of him."

"Or what the cook uses to heat up his meal?"

He frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ah, well." She dropped her thong on the ground and spread her legs wide. "If I had a blow dryer, I'd heat up your snack."

"Shit, leftovers again?"

Dianna blinked. "Bastard."

Taylor lunged toward her, and before she could make an attempt to escape, he picked her up and tossed her into the pool. She rose out of the water spluttering and slinging wet hair out of her face. "No fair! You cheated."

"Uh-huh. I intend to cheat again."

Dianna swallowed hard. Her breath caught in her throat when he stepped into the pool and stalked slowly toward her. She couldn't help staring at his cock. It stood up straight as a flagpole. She wondered ridiculously what he'd do if she saluted it.

"Taylor," she whispered. "I don't think this is wise. You don't even like me."

"My cock likes you." He glanced down, then lifted his gaze to her face. "It likes you very much. And it's hungry. Are you going to refuse to feed Harry?"

She giggled. "Harry?"

He locked his hard fingers onto her shoulders and dragged her closer. "Make Harry happy. Harry hungry."

Dianna giggled. "You're an idiot."

She knew very well Taylor would probably turn back into the ass he was, but right at this moment, she didn't care. She needed him. More, she wanted him.

He pulled her into his arms and placed her hand around his throbbing cock. "It's burning for you, Princess."

"Just one thing—is this time for revenge or a mercy fucking?"

"Fuck revenge. Fuck mercy. I'm not giving you any clemency, and I've had my taste of revenge. This time is all about you and me." He rubbed his mouth against hers, then deepened the kiss.

Dianna caught her breath as his tongue tangled with hers. She never knew when he lowered her to the soft bank of the pool. She felt only his body surrounding hers. The touch of his fingers on her breasts, her nipples. The drag of his damp mouth on her skin as he kissed his way to her aching channel.

She dug her fingers in his sleek shoulders when he entered her in a single thrust. Locking her legs around his lean waist, she moaned and moved her hips to meet each slow thrust. "Ride me hard," she urged.

Taylor nodded and set a fierce rhythm that took their breath away. Dianna didn't know how much time passed or

how long they stayed in the pool. Hours later, Taylor carried her to their bed. She knew it was nearly dawn before he pulled out of her for the last time and rolled onto his back.

He turned, spooned his body around hers, and wrapped a sinewy arm around her waist. "Sleep," he whispered against her nape. "I'll wake you when it's time to leave."

Dianna was too limp and exhausted to reply. She wondered what morning would bring, if Taylor would still treat her as his lover or his enemy.

She didn't want to think about it.

Instead, she closed her eyes and surrendered to the weightiness of sleep pressing down on her.

\* \* \* \*

Sleep didn't come so easily for Taylor. Touching Dianna, loving her was a big mistake. Making love to Dianna for the last several hours made him wonder just what kind of fool he was.

Okay, surely she wasn't expecting a proposal. It was just sex. Granted, it was great sex, but...she edged closer against him. Her sweet ass was flush against his soft dick and balls. Oh yeah, right, like his cock was going to stay soft. Already the idiot rope was swelling, stretching toward her. Right. It knew a good thing when it got close. "Stay down, boy."

Dianna wiggled her butt. *Boing!*

Yep, full stretch out the gate. His cock throbbed against the crease of her butt. Hell's bells. He slid his fingers down her belly, past the sweet nest of curls covering her feminine sheath, and dipped right inside.

Dianna moaned and opened wider for him. Hell, did she have to be so damned cooperative? She wasn't making it any easier for him. Well, yeah, she was making it real easy, but, fuck....okay, he wasn't about to miss an opportunity to roll her beneath him and play hide the sausage. He shoved his dick inside her and moaned. She opened her eyes, a dreamy smile on her lips. "Still haven't had enough yet?"

"Does it feel like I've had enough?" He thrust hard, riding her fast and furious. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of you, Princess. You make my balls ache."

Dianna bucked beneath him, her hips rising to meet his pounding invasion. "I love you, Taylor Spencer. You make everything inside me ache."

Taylor captured her mouth and, with one last penetrating thrust, exploded inside her hot, sleek channel. Slowly, he released her mouth and looked into her eyes. "Dianna." Breathing hard, he buried his face against her neck. "Dianna," he whispered her name again, his voice as ragged as his breathing. "This has nothing to do with love. I don't love you. It wouldn't work between us." Reluctantly he pulled out of her. "It's morning. We need to get dressed and get the hell out of here."

Dianna rose, her face pale and tight.

He saw the strain in her eyes, the hint of tears. "Don't cry. It was just sex."

"Just sex?" Her voice wobbled. "I thought it was a little more than 'just' sex." She jerked on her clothes and started packing their meager supplies.

Taylor fastened his jeans and yanked up the zipper. "It's just like a woman to want more than a man is willing to give. Why can't you be satisfied with plain, simple sex?"

Her eyes flashed with temper.

"Okay, it was great sex. Hell, Dianna, you're hot. Any red-blooded male would want to fuck you. I wanted to screw you; the thing is, you wanted me to fuck you, too. We've scratched our itch. Now, it's over. I would think you'd be happy I'm letting you off the hook without emotional complications. You don't have to worry about this lower-class male wanting more than he's entitled to."

Dianna blinked. Grabbing her small bundle of clothes, she rushed out of the cave. Taylor raced behind her, hot on her heels. "Slow down, Dianna. It rained hard all night. The ground might be unstable in places."

"What you aren't entitled to is giving me orders," she flung over her shoulder. "Just leave me alone, Taylor. You don't want me, fine!"

"I didn't say I didn't want you."

She whipped around. "You don't get one without the other!"

"What does that mean, for Christ's sake?"

She backed up. "It means no more free pussy, you jerk."

"Bullshit!" He stalked toward her.

Dianna backed up another step. "Stay away from me."

He grinned, a savage twist to his lips. "Stay away from you? Hell, Dianna, you're the one who can't keep her hot little hands off my dick. Don't act like you care so damn much."

Hell, honey, you get an itch, come on over, I'll fuck you anytime you want me to."

"What, I'm just another Amy? Come to you, we rent a cheap motel, spend a couple of hours rolling on the bed?"

"Sure. Why not? You can slip into the bed right after Amy leaves."

"I hate you," she snapped. "You're right, you're a loser. But you know what? The best thing you ever lost is standing right here in front of you." Tears streamed down her face. "If I have any itches in the future, don't you worry, I'm sure I can find someone to do the scratching for me. You don't know a good thing when you have it."

"I told you, the worst piece I ever got was great. You were okay, honey, but not the best."

Dianna stared at him helplessly. "Yeah. I get the picture."

The ground trembled beneath their feet. Her gaze shot to his. Dianna lurched unsteadily. Her eyes widened.

"Shit! Run, Dianna!"

"Oh, Taylor, I don't think that's going to work." Dianna took two steps. The ground moaned, shook and rumbled as violently as an earthquake, then simply crumbled from beneath her feet.

Taylor leaped toward her, but he was too far away to grab her flailing arms. She toppled over the side, caught in the violent mudslide. One minute she was there, and the next, she was gone.

Taylor scrambled to the edge of the landslide, rubbed an unsteady hand over his face and looked down. Nothing. Nothing but a ton of mud and rocks, broken and splintered

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*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

trees, an endless spillway he couldn't see to the bottom of.  
"Dianna! Answer me!"

The absolute silence ripped at his guts. His heart pounded. A knot twisted in his belly. "Dianna," he whispered, but there was no one to hear or answer him.

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## Chapter Thirty-Two

\* \* \* \*

*The way to love anything is to realize that it might be lost.*  
~ G. K. Chesterton

\* \* \* \*

*Havre, Montana*  
*Regional Health Care Center*  
*ICU Waiting Room*  
*Feb. 8*  
*Sun. 5 p.m.*

Rafe stood, stretched, drained the Styrofoam cup of the last dregs of coffee and tossed it in the trash receptacle by the table. The way his stomach burned and his nerves jittered he knew he'd had way too much caffeine and not enough carbs, but he needed to keep his hands busy, and his mind too.

The steady drone of voices in the waiting room got under his skin. Some people silently prayed. A few hours earlier, he'd been among the crowd who quietly sought God's mercy. Every hour Lacey had spent in surgery, he'd prayed. And by that mercy, she'd lived. By no means was she out of the woods yet, but the odds had risen in her favor.

Now...he wanted to see his lady, be with her, hold her in his arms, and dammit, none of it would be happening for a very long time, at least the holding her in his arms part.

Mere hours ago, Lacey's life hung by a thread. Things could still go critical, but she was strong and brave. He told her so every time he saw her. She had to fight to live.

Rafe glanced at his Rolex. Three more minutes, and he could see Lacey again. Smitt Davis hadn't merely destroyed their baby; he'd done other, terrible things to Lacey. Rafe regretted everything the monster had put her through, and he grieved deeply for the loss of his and Lacey's baby.

Sonofabitch Smitt Davis had a lot to answer for...one day.

He looked up at the scuffed drag of Duel's boots. Duel had to be as exhausted as he was, but neither of them wanted to leave the hospital. "How's Jace?"

Duel shook his head. "He's sleeping. Kaycee's taking a nap. The doctor said Jace can be moved from ICU tomorrow."

"Have you talked to your cousin, Raider? Have they heard anything about Dianna and Taylor?"

"No." Duel poured a cup of coffee and eased into a recliner. "He said a great part of the desert region has been searched, but it's so vast. He said Silver is going to fly north tomorrow. She has a hunch."

"A hunch? What's to the north?"

"A rainforest."

"But Dianna was flying west. Right?"

"Supposed to have been. Silver's hunches, well...sometimes they're dead on. She has the power...you know?"

"The power?"

Duel ginned. "Old family legend, something about the Remingtons descending from an ancient line of witches who could foresee the future."

"You believe that?"

Duel shrugged. "I never took the time to research our family tree, but Silver has. She swears she can trace the family all the way to Salem Village."

"Wow." Rafe knew he sounded incredulous. Why wouldn't he? He had the feeling Duel had just spoon-fed him a tale to take his mind off everything.

"I swear I'm telling you the truth."

"I didn't say you weren't."

"No, but I share psychic abilities with Silver. I read your expression."

"Bullshit. What was the name of the witches in Salem?"

"Don't know." Duel laughed. "I sort of tune Silver out when she starts saying we're descended from demons and witches. Have you heard anything more about Lacey?"

"I'm going to see her right now. Maybe she's awake."

Duel nodded. "I'll be here when you get back."

Rafe buzzed to be allowed through the double doors of the ICU. He stopped by the nurse's station to let Lacey's nurse know he was visiting, and to check on Lacey's progress. Then he approached the tiny room. He paused in the doorway, his heart thumping wildly. God, she looked so small and lifeless, lying there with the sheet folded back so neatly and a dozen different tubes keeping her alive.

He settled in a chair by the bed and lifted her icy hand. "Lacey?" he whispered her name. "I'm here, sweetheart. I've

been right here. I won't leave you alone unless they run me out again. I spent last night right here with you. If you can hear me, squeeze my hand."

Nothing. God, she was so pale. She'd lost a lot of blood. If it hadn't been for the icy cold slowing everything down inside her, she would have bled to death. He didn't know how many units of blood had been given to her, but he knew it had been several. "Lacey, squeeze my hand, baby."

A faint touch. Her fingers curled around his, feebly, a light squeeze. "Rafe," she said in a scratchy voice and opened her eyes.

"Yes! Oh, God, Lace. You're awake. I've been terrified."

"Me—too..."

"How do you feel? Don't answer that. I know you must feel like hell. Are you in pain? Do you need something?"

"I—want—to—" She broke off, moaning as a coughing spasm hit her.

Lacey splayed her hands on top of the thin sheet, across her flat stomach. Tears welled in her eyes. Rafe followed the path of her hand as she patted the top of the sheet. He tried to distract her. "Don't try to talk, sweetheart."

"Baby?"

Shit. She wasn't going to let him avoid the subject. "Our baby?"

Lacey squeezed his fingers. "Our baby...yes."

"We lost it, sweetheart. I'm so sorry."

Tears trailed down her face. "Wanted—your—baby."

Rafe swallowed hard. "Me, too."

"Joseph? Anna Leigh?"

Rafe swallowed hard. Dammit. He was not going to be the one to tell her about her son and sister-in-law. "Do you remember me asking you to marry me, Lace?"

Her eyes swept over his face, large and tragic. He saw the pain-filled shadows and realized she understood what he'd tried to do. She let him get by with changing the subject, but he saw the anguish on her face, the quiver of her lower lip. She knew. In her heart, she knew her son was gone.

A tear spilled over and slid silently down her cheek. "Never—forget."

"Did you mean it when you said you would?" He lifted her hand, pressed a kiss to the top of it.

"Yes."

His heart bounded. "Thank God. I was afraid—"

"Where is she? I wanna see her!"

Rafe looked up, startled at the sound of shouting near the nurse's station.

Lacey flinched. "Danger," she whispered. "Don't want—to—see—him."

"I'll see what's—"

"There you are!" Danger charged inside the tiny room and to the opposite side of the bed, where Rafe sat holding Lacey's hand. "You murdering bitch! You killed my son and sister! Because of you, Joseph's dead! You let him die!"

"Danger! For God's sake. Are you crazy?" Rafe jumped up from the chair and started round the foot of the bed. "Get away from her. You can't barge in here and shout at her like this."

"The hell I can't!"

Rafe grabbed Danger by the front of his shirt. "Get out!"

"She's my wife. I don't have to get out." Danger jerked free of Rafe's grip and stood there glaring at Lacey.

"She isn't you wife. You're not going to say such cruel things to her, man. She isn't to blame for what happened. She's in no shape to take—"

Danger lunged toward Lacey. "You let my son die!"

Lacey burst into tears. Her slender shoulders shook. Deep sobs broke from her throat. "Please. Please. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. He was my son, too. I would never let anything happen to him. Not if I could prevent it."

"You didn't try to prevent it! You let Smitt Davis walk inside our home."

"I didn't let him inside." Lacey screamed as Danger locked his fingers around her wrists and tried to drag her out of the bed.

"You let him in. How else did he get in if you didn't open the door for him?"

Lacey's IV ripped from her vein. Blood trickled down her arm and dripped off her fingertips. Clear fluid poured from the open end of the IV catheter, wetting the bedding. "Please, I didn't let him in. He was just there. I don't know how he got in. I locked the door behind me when you left." Lacey's eyes widened with pain at Danger's accusations.

"Jesus. Are you insane? Leave her alone!" Rafe tackled Danger, wrapping his arms around Danger's lean waist. He tried to drag him from the small cell-like room, but both of them stumbled and fell against the IV pole. The pump, hooked to the pole that fed fluids in her drip by drip, hit the

floor with a loud *pop*. Chunky pieces of dark blue and black plastic bounced across the floor, skittering in several directions.

Both men's legs tangled in the tubing. They tripped and hit the hard tile, rolling and swinging wild punches.

Lacey struggled onto the side of the bed, but fell to one side, too weak to hold herself up straight. "Stop it! Oh, God, please, someone make them stop." Sharp pain cut across her abdomen. She flinched and stared at the blood staining the front of her gown. Some of the staples must have torn free. "Joseph's dead!" she cried. "Nothing will bring him back. My babies are gone, and I'm alive. Isn't that enough punishment for you? I should be dead. Someone please, just let me die. Oh, God. Oh, God. Let me die!"

An older nurse rushed in with two security guards. The two men tackled Danger, holding his arms behind his back. "Which one do you want in here with you, miss?" one of the security guards asked, winded.

Lacey shook her head. She looked up, and her gaze met Rafe's sharp blue eyes. "Him."

Danger growled low in his throat. He jerked free of the two security guards. "You murdered our son!"

Lacey wept, her deep sobs hard and heartbreaking. She looked at Danger through a blur of tears. What could she say to him? In her heart, she knew she was guilty. She'd failed her babies, failed Danger.

"Now, now, honey," the nurse said, wrapping her arms around Lacey's shaking shoulders. "Let's get your bandages changed and a clean gown."

Rafe hurried to Lacey's side. "Get him out of here," he said to the security guards. "He's not allowed back in here."

"I didn't let Smitt Davis in," Lacey cried. "I didn't."

"He picked the lock, Lacey," Rafe said. "Danger knows that. He's the one who told me. He's not thinking straight."

Both the nurse and Rafe jerked at the awful moan that wrenched from Danger. He staggered into the wall. He took three unsteady steps; then, suddenly, he collapsed on the floor. Rafe jumped up and ran to Danger. "Jesus Christ."

The nurse dropped to her knees beside Rafe. "He's having a seizure. See that tongue blade taped to the wall over the bed?"

Rafe looked across the room and nodded.

"Get it!" The nurse tore the wrapper off the blade and gently forced it between Danger's teeth.

"What can I do to help?" Rafe asked.

"Help me turn him to his side. He's vomiting. I need somebody in here, now," she yelled. "Help! I need help!"

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## Epilogue

\* \* \* \*

*Some people say the worst way to miss someone is when they are right next to you and you know you can't have them, but it's worse when you thought you didn't want them anymore and then all of a sudden you realize you can't live without them.*

*~ Unknown*

\* \* \* \*

*Havre, Montana*

*Regional Health Care Center*

*Feb. 15*

*Sun. 10:00 a.m.*

Lacey walked slowly down the corridor of the third floor. When the door to room three-twelve opened, she hesitated. Karen stepped into the hall and faced her, and Lacey's heart sank. The last thing she wanted to do was talk to Danger's wife.

For a moment, the other woman looked uncertain; then she moved away from the door, her angry strides bringing Lacey face to face with the enemy.

Lacey tilted her chin in the way that said, to anyone who knew her well, no one was getting in her way.

"What do you want?" Karen snapped, rubbing her protruding belly.

Lacey didn't fall for the trick. She had no desire to eye Karen's distended stomach, and the woman had a way of always bringing attention to it. Lacey ignored her and started around her.

Karen grabbed her arm and jerked her around. "You aren't wanted here," she said in a tone that would freeze air.

"Yeah? Well, I didn't want you sleeping with my husband and tearing up my marriage, but it didn't stop you."

A smirk settled on Karen's glossy red lips. "It wasn't difficult to steal Danger from you. He fell into my bed like a starving man. He kept coming back for more. Where were you when I was screwing your husband?"

"Let go of my arm, or I'll break every finger on your hand."

Karen hesitated, then slowly released Lacey's arm. "You have two minutes. Then I'm calling security."

Lacey pushed past her through Danger's door. "Call them. It's not your decision how long I stay—it's Danger's. He called my room and asked me here; otherwise I'd never set foot near either of you."

"You're a liar!"

"No, that's your game." Lacey raked her gaze up and down Karen's body, lingering on her rounded belly. "Is the baby even Danger's?"

Karen paled. "Of course it's Danger's."

"I doubt it. But that's his problem. He'll wise up to you. You might have played him for a fool, but you're in for a rude awakening. Danger's nobody's fool."

Lacey gently closed the door behind her. She leaned against the inside of the door and drew a shaky breath. She

turned her attention to Danger. The head of his bed was up at a forty-five degree angle. Bandages swaddled his head. She couldn't remember ever seeing him so pale or vulnerable. He'd always been such a strong figure in her life, since the moment she first saw him.

She moved closer to the bed. His dark lashes fluttered, and he opened his eyes. "You came."

"Yes. Karen wasn't too happy to seeing me here."

"None of her business."

"She's your wife."

"Lacey—"

"Look, I didn't come here to discuss your marriage to Karen. I wanted to ask your permission to return to the ranch and get my boxes."

"Of course. Get anything you want." Danger held out his hand to her.

Lacey moved to the edge of the bed and grasped his hand.

"I'm sorry, Lace, for all the things I said to you, did to you."

Lacey's eyes stung with unshed tears. "It's over. You didn't know what you were saying or doing."

She pulled her hand free and turned to go.

"Lace!" He sounded desperate. Lost. Afraid.

She hesitated, turned back.

"Come back home, Lace. Marry me? I know I made a lot of mistakes. My biggest was losing you."

"You didn't lose me, Danger. You shoved me out of your life."

"I know. I know all the things I did wrong. I'd like a chance to do things right."

"You have a wife. She's going to have your baby."

"I don't love her. Stay with me. Please. Let me make up for the things I did to you, the awful things I said to you."

"Danger—"

"I know I messed up. I did things, said things that hurt and humiliated you. I'm so sorry for everything. Please. Give me another chance."

"It's too late." Lacey bit her lower lip, but still the tears slipped down her face.

"It's never too late. We'll start over. I don't want to lose you, Lacey. Marry me."

"I married Rafe yesterday." Lacey toyed with the diamond on her ring finger. "As I said, it's too late." She quietly closed the door behind her.

Rafe waited for her in the hall. She went into his arms.

"You're crying. What did he say to you? If he asked you here just to say hurtful things to you, sick or no sick, I'll drag him out of his bed."

Lacey shook her head. "No. He was very nice. It's me. Everything makes me cry."

"You've been through a lot, sweetheart. Is he okay?"

"Yes. The brain tumor, you know? It changed him. He's more like his old self."

"That's good." Rafe rubbed her back. "You ready to get out of here? I loaded everything in the car."

"Yes. I'm ready. He asked me to marry him, Rafe."

Rafe paused. "What did you say?" He searched her face, unease in his eyes.

"That you and I were married yesterday."

Rafe cupped the sides of her face. "I'll set you free, Lace. If you still love him, want him, I won't stand in your way. It might kill me to let you go, but above all else, I want you to be happy."

"There's no going back, Rafe. He has a wife, a baby on the way. I love Danger. I always will. There's a part of me that aches for what we lost, but I'm not *in* love with him, anymore. I love you. I know when I fell in love with you."

"You do? When?"

"When you handed me the white daisies at the airport last August and tried so hard to conceal your erection."

"You never said a word."

"No. But I realized you wanted me. My heart did a little flip, and I knew I was in trouble. I knew my marriage to Danger was crumbling, and suddenly, there you were and I needed someone to talk to, to lean on. I tried not to lean too much, but I wanted you, Rafe. I did everything I could to save my marriage, but I couldn't do it alone. I love you."

"Thank God."

"Let's go home. My life in Montana is finished. I want kids, Rafe. Babies. At least three. I want a home and children with you."

Rafe pulled her close and pressed a light kiss to her mouth. "We'll work on all those things. I promise."

\* \* \* \*

*North Western Australia*

*The Kimberly*

*Feb. 10, Tues.*

Taylor stared blankly into the steep ravine. It was a long slide of rocks and tons of red mud. "Dianna!"

He slipped and slid his way down the endless path. His heart hammered. His pulse beat fiercely. His stomach churned. *Dead! Dead!* Every heartbeat throbbed out the message to his brain. Dianna was dead.

"Please. Please, be alive."

He reached the end of the mudslide and paused to look around. His chest heaved with ragged breaths. Where was she? She wasn't at the bottom. So where the fuck was she?

Taylor looked around, desperation beating frantically in his pulse. Then he saw her. At least, he saw her arm sticking up out of thick mud halfway up the mudslide. Somehow he'd missed it on his way down. "Oh, God. No!"

He climbed up the steep slide, slipping and falling so many times, he began to wonder if he'd ever get back up it. Finally, he reached the top and fell to his knees. Breathing raggedly, Taylor clawed at the thick, red mud. He dug and dug until he could pull Dianna free. He swiped her nose and mouth clean as much as he could. He felt for the pulse in her throat. Nothing. Quickly, he stretched her out on the ground, pinched her nostrils tight, and breathed life into her lungs.

The sound of her ragged cough sent a shaft of pure joy through his heart. "Dianna."

She blinked and moaned. "I can't breathe."

Taylor laughed softly. "You're breathing, baby. Your mouth and nose has mud in it. Do you think you can stand?"

"No. My leg hurts."

"Which one?"

"Left."

Taylor unfastened her jeans and gently pulled them to her ankles. "Jesus Christ."

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I'll carry you back up to the cave. We'll be staying for a few more days."

"You don't have to carry me. Give me a few minutes to get my breath—"

"Dianna. Your leg is broken. The bone is...it's, uh, it's bad, honey."

Tears slipped down her face and left streaks on the mud caking her face. "My side hurts."

Taylor lifted her shirt and swore harshly at the sight of the large, darkening bruise on her right side.

"What? God, I hurt all over."

"I think it might be your spleen or liver. It's not good, sweetheart. I've got to get you up this incline."

Dianna closed her fingers around his wrist. "We'll make it."

"It's going to hurt like hell when I move you."

"Pain pills—in my— pack. Think— this time —I might have—one or two?"

"I'd give you the entire fucking bottle...but your pack's under the mud, somewhere."

Dianna swallowed hard. "Oh." She sounded tiny and fragile, and he was terrified he'd lose her. Her injuries were

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

serious, and he had nothing with which to help her, "Well, we might as well get up the mountain, then," she said faintly.

Taylor nodded grimly. "We'll make it to the top."

"How?"

"One step at a time."

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## About the Author

Jaydyn Chelcee is a native of Oklahoma who gives credit for her love for the western states her desire to write contemporary western romances.

She is the author of the popular Montana Men Series. Book One: In the Arms of Danger and Book Two: No Holds Barred.

As Tabitha Shay she is the author of the hit paranormal Winslow Witches of Salem Series, a set of romances containing *Witch's Brew*, *Witch's Heart*, *Witch's Moon* and *Witch's Magic*. *Witch's Heart* won first place in the Oklahoma Writer's Federation, Inc. in 2007. *Witch's Brew* won second honorable mention in 2006, and *Witch's Heart* won first honorable mention in 2009.

Jaydyn/Tabitha loves traveling, writing, collecting coins, and hearing from her readers. So please visit her website or email her at...

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Now Available from Eternal Press:

In the Arms of Danger

Book One of The Montana Men Series

*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

\* \* \* \*

Hands fisted on her hips, Lacey flung back her head in challenge. "Well, sugar, we seem to have a teeny little problem here. A stalemate."

A dark brow arched.

"The way I see it, I want through the door you're standing in front of, and you obviously aren't happy with the idea." She grinned. "I believe what we have here, is what you cowboys deem a 'Mexican stand-off'."

The predatory gleam in his eyes darkened. A wicked grin split his lips. He folded his arms across his broad chest and cocked one hip against the doorframe. "Nah. What we have here, sugar," he drawled in mock imitation of her Southern accent, "is Custer's Last Stand, and I'm Chief Sitting Bull." He moved toward her with a slow, lethal walk. "Guess who won that battle, bright eyes? Sheath your claws little cat, because this is another battle where the pale-face loses."

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Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Now Available from Eternal Press:

No Holds Barred

Book Two of The Montana Men Series

*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

\* \* \* \*

Kaycee forgot to be cautious, ignored the warning bells ringing in her head. There was only action and reaction and both were hot as the fires of Hades. Whoever thought passion wasn't damning clearly had never looked into the piercing eyes of this man, never been kissed by this cowboy, or felt the uncontrolled heat slashing into the both of them.

Her knees trembled.

She curled her fingers into the soft hair at his nape and cuddled closer.

Jace released her, took a moment to tug off his boots, and then he pulled her closer. "I want you," he said quietly. "I need you."

He unfastened the narrow ties at the back of her neck and released them. She caught the dress to her waist and gasped.

\* \* \* \*

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Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Brew

Book One of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

*by Tabitha Shay*

\* \* \* \*

The hairbrush in Saylym Winslow's hand came alive, wiggling worse than a worm on a hook. With an earsplitting scream, she flung the brush across the bathroom and pressed a hand against her run-away heart. Unfortunately, the brush landed in the commode with a distinctive plop. Water slapped over the sides of the porcelain rim, splattering onto the worn tiled floor.

Biting her lip, Saylym tiptoed to the toilet bowl and peered over the edge, then jumped back. Her breathing rattled to a dead stop in her chest. "Ohmigod! I don't believe it!"

The brush had inched its way up the side of the white porcelain as if it had suddenly sprouted hands and feet to pull itself up the wet surface. It reached the top, tottered for a second, then toppled over onto the floor and flopped like a fish out of water. "No more," Saylym moaned. "Please. I can't stand one more inanimate thing coming to life."

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Too Close To The Fire  
by Jaydyn Chelcee

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Heart

Book Two of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

by Tabitha Shay

\* \* \* \*

"*Illumrof* is you, female. You're human."

Sage reluctantly lowered Hannah to the floor. He allowed her body to slide slowly down the hard length of his. He never thought he'd see the day when he could summon the least trace of interest in an *illumrof*.

How odd. Life had a way of becoming strange and unpredictable. Faced with the woman standing before him now, he discovered he could muster a hell of a lot of interest. Samhain! If this woman was an example of human females, then dammit, his race needed to figure out a way males could successfully mate with them and produce offspring. No matter they would breed a race of *Impures*. As he saw it, half-breeds were better than extinction!

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Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Moon

Book Three of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

*by Tabitha Shay*

\* \* \* \*

Koran froze. "What are you talking about? I'm not mating with Kali. You think I'm insane? You think I exaggerate? If Princess Kali wants my dick on a platter, King Darak will order it severed and served, along with my balls. I dare not touch her."

"If not you, then who will you find to—?"

"I don't know!" Koran raked hands through his hair. "*No one*. Could we please just not talk about it?"

"You'd allow the Princess to suffer?"

"*Allow*? What choice do I have, Banjo?"

"I'm sure you know all the ways, Captain, to pleasure a witch. If you don't want to risk breeding the Princess, then you play, but don't consummate, then—"

"I'm not made of stone, Banjo." Koran swore softly beneath his breath. "I'm not immune to Beltane. If I touch Kali, I don't know if I can hold back. Hell, I don't know if I *want* to hold back. Please, no more discussion about Kali's needs."

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Banjo blinked innocently. "Yes, Captain."

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Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Magic

Book Four of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

*by Tabitha Shay*

\* \* \* \*

Val stood there beside Shasta's bed and watched her breathe. By the gods, she was beautiful. His gaze took in the neat row of stakes lined up on her bedside table. Beautiful, but deadly. She had every intention of killing him and any other vampire she happened upon. A flask of holy water stood beside the stakes and a tiny, gold cross on a chain. He shook his head. She was all set to slay any vampire she came across. He wondered if she truly believed she was prepared.

She might succeed in an attempt to kill him, but vampires weren't easily disposed of. Long before she figured that out, he'd already have made her his in every sense of the word.

Valerian settled his long frame beside her on the side of the bed...glided a fingertip up one smooth thigh to the edge of the wispy bikini bottom. The black silk fell away at his command. His throat went dry at the sight of the nest of auburn curls.

Her musky scent teased his nostrils. His cock rose instantly, ready to play. He desperately wanted to sex her.

"It isn't your fault, Kirrah, " Hannah stated matter-of-factly. "You didn't know you could do weird things like that."

Of course Hannah supported her in this hour of tragedy. Kirrah's entire life had just shifted around her in a whirling, twirling, crazy out-of-control spin that left her feeling a bit lightheaded.

Dramatically, Kirrah laid the back of her hand across her forehead and declared, "I'll never live this down, Han. I'll be an outcast at school."

"You're already an outcast."

"Did you see her face, Han? I think I killed her." Kirrah ignored Hanna's blunt statement about her being an outcast. Another truth she could hardly deny, so why bother?

Hannah snorted. "You didn't kill her. Clarice took off like a ghost was hot on her fat as—er, heels."

Kirrah sniffed. The second truth glared her in the face: Hannah was right—*she* never knew she could do such odious things, but there it was, glaringly obvious...*she was different*.

With hands shaking, she prowled through their Halloween booty, tore the wrapper off a piece of gum and popped it in her mouth. She needed sugar. Fast. Or she was going to have a meltdown.

A horrible thought jetted its way into her brain. "Oh my God, Han," she cried. "What if I'm allergic to water? What if Clarice tosses a bucket of water on me at school Monday and I melt?" She narrowed her eyes. "It would be just like her to do something like that."

Hannah giggled. "Good grief, Kirrah, you aren't the Wicked Witch of the East...or—or is it West?"

"West," Kirrah snapped. "Stop laughing. I'm serious. I could melt here. You don't know I won't."

"Yes, I do. You take showers all the time. Long ones."

Kirrah gasped as her wad of *Bubble-Delicious* jammed the back of her throat. "Oh, shit! I dare not take another shower."

"You dare not *not* take one."

"You want me to melt?" Kirrah felt her eyes bug out as the gum refused to slide on down. She coughed, gagged and finally managed to dislodge the bubble gum. She spit it out and busied herself prowling through the pumpkin Hannah held out to her. "The other kids knew, Hannah. They've always called me names—weirdo, fruit-loop and spastic, just to name a few—but I've never been called a witch...until tonight."

Hannah paused and grabbed a miniature Snickers bar out of their plastic pumpkin and ripped apart the wrapper. She shoved the candy bar in her mouth and chewed. "Shit, this doesn't have a number either," she said past a hunk of chocolate, eyeing the wrapper. "I think those candy companies just say there's a winning number. Have you ever known anyone who actually won?"

"I don't know, Han," Kirrah said curtly. "The Snickers contest isn't important. I have a serious problem here. I'm a witch!"

Pausing to catch her breath, Kirrah swiped away the tears streaming down her face and mulled the tragic truths over in her mind. She kicked a small pebble across the street.

"Poop!"

Hannah froze beside her, doubled over and braced her hands on her knees. "Is that another word for dunghill?"

Kirrah nodded and sniffed. "Yes. I prefer poop over dunghill." Although she knew she shouldn't have said any bad words, they'd slipped out of her mouth anyway.

Hannah wrinkled her nose. "I don't like either word or the big nasty word. Come on, Kirrah, don't cry. It was funny."

"No, it wasn't."

"Would I lie to you?"

"No, but I didn't mean to do it. It was an accident." Kirrah sniffed and swiped her face with the back of her hand, leaving a smear of chocolate on one cheek.

Hannah giggled and wiped the smudge off her friend's face. "It was still funny. Give me another Snickers bar."

Kirrah fished out two Snickers bars. She passed one to Hannah and held the other to her scrawny girlish chest. It wasn't fair. Some of the other girls in her class were already growing boobs, but not her. Even Hannah was wearing a training bra.

Dang it! Her life was just miserable, and tonight topped everything. She turned her gaze to the stars dotting the sky. "I wish I had nice boobs, just the right size to—to please...me. I wish for the lucky number to be on my Snickers bar, and if it can't be on one of mine, please let it be on one of Hannah's."

Hannah gave her a curious look. "Who are you talking to?"

"No one."

"Yes you were. You were talking to a goddess. Weren't you?"

Kirrah shook her head adamantly, her eyes bugging out once more. "I don't know any goddesses, Han, honestly. I was thinking out loud."

"Oh. Well, how big do your boobs have to be to please you?"

"Bigger than yours." Kirrah giggled and tore the wrapper off her candy bar. "Poop! I must not be a witch after all, or I would have the winning number."

"You're a witch." Hannah patted her on the shoulder. "You just didn't cast the right spell. You should say something like, 'Eye of newt and lizards' tongues.'"

Kirrah shrugged halfheartedly. "I don't wanna be a witch. I wanna be normal, like you."

Hannah Miller had been Kirrah's best friend since kindergarten. At the senior age of ten and in fourth grade, their friendship was sealed, especially after tonight. Nothing could destroy the sisterly bond between them—not even the probability that Kirrah was, indeed, a witch.

Trick-or-treating together was something they'd done since kindergarten and was just one of the things they had spit in the palm of their hands and shook on to do together forever, even when they were old grown-ups, like Hannah's mom and dad and Kirrah's aunt Penell.

Kirrah sighed and eyed her friend. She and Hannah were complete opposites in coloring and personality. Hannah's hair fell in a tangled mass of gypsy-black curls that bounced to her hips like coiled springs. Her eyes, surrounded by thick dark lashes, were the color of rain-washed violets in spring. She

always looked fresh scrubbed, her clothes neat and clean, the perfect little lady.

*She*, on the other hand, was completely hoydenish, as her aunt Penell was fond of saying. A petite daredevil, Kirrah's jeans always sported a rip. Her red tennis shoes bore ancient scuffmarks. The frayed laces never remained tied.

Her wealth of long, honey-gold hair was straight and refused to stay in place.

Right now, the two girls were racing for Kirrah's home as fast as their skinny legs would carry them. Or they had been, until they'd paused to catch their breath and mull over what had happened earlier. Huffing and puffing, Kirrah looked around to see if they'd lost the girls giving chase.

Only moments ago—before Kirrah's world crashed around her head—she and Hannah had been chattering on and on about finding the Snickers bar with the winning number. Tonight was the night. Halloween! The odds of winning upped. They'd collect tons of candy. Lots and lots of sweet, sugary, melt-in-your-mouth treats—but it was the Snickers they sought more than anything.

And ghosts.

Ghosts were a must on All Hallows' Eve—at least that's what her aunt Penell said. Goblins and ghosties, trolls and gnomes, witches and warlocks, demons and vampires— an absolute must.

So they'd also kept their eyes peeled for the things that went bump in the night, but all they'd seen were several little green goblins who raced past them, shouting and wailing as they tried to out-scare each other.

Kirrah and Hannah weaved in and out of the older kids who tended to group together and pick on the smaller ones. They walked up and down the sidewalks of their small town that bordered the Mojave Desert. Then, once they'd filled their pumpkins, they glanced at one another, laughed, and took off in a dead run for Kirrah's house.

They screamed and jumped at every little shadow. They giggled till their sides hurt.

Their pumpkins were brimming. They wanted to escape the crowd, get home, dump the candy on Kirrah's bedroom floor, and pick out the best pieces. They planned to rip the wrappers off every Snickers bar they had and find the winning number.

Then they were going to watch the scariest movie they could find and gorge on the rich bounty that filled their glow-in-the-dark orange plastic pumpkins.

Kirrah couldn't wait to sink her teeth into one of the chewy caramel-covered apples Aunt Penell had fixed that morning.

The night should have been perfect. It *had* been perfect, until they'd rounded a dark corner and ran smack into Clarice Yates and two of her friends—Linda Sue and Carmen Louise Butler—all three unholy terrors of the fourth grade class.

It was the end of their fun for the night and the beginning of Kirrah's doomed life.

Clarice was huge. She'd started growing in kindergarten, but her rise in monumental girth hadn't been upward. Instead, she was as rotund as the Pillsbury Doughboy, though she had spirals of vivid orange curls sticking up all over her head. Pale blue eyes bugged out from behind round wire-

frame glasses that constantly slid down her sweaty nose. Her chipmunk cheeks grew rounder with each passing year. Tons of super-sized freckles dotted her chubby face.

What Clarice did best was bully. She wanted Hannah and Kirrah's candy, especially the Snickers bars. They weren't inclined to hand anything over to her yet another year.

"Give it to me," Clarice demanded, holding out her pudgy hands for the treasures they'd worked so hard to collect.

Clarice, dressed in a hot pink angel costume, grinned evilly, displaying her new silver braces and the overbite that would most likely never correct itself even with braces.

Kirrah frowned. She fully believed one day Clarice would be possessed by the demon from *The Exorcist*, and Clarice's head would spin around like a top out of control, while all the while she'd yell in a deep, ghoulish voice, *Candy! I want more candy!*

In her opinion, it would be much more fitting if Clarice wore a devil costume and carried a pitchfork.

Kirrah scrunched her tiny nose. Enough was enough! She was fed up with Clarice's bullying tactics. "If you keep stealing everyone's candy, Clarice, one of these days you're going to be so huge, your freckles will stretch from side to side and become one big blob. Your face is liable to explode like a punctured balloon."

Always protective of her friend, Kirrah pulled Hannah behind her because she knew Hannah was a little afraid of Clarice. She stepped forward, because *she* wasn't—not that much, anyway. "Go away, Clarice. You're not taking our candy this year."

"Yes, I am," Clarice sneered as she adjusted the pink feathery wings on her back and stuck out her tongue. "I take your candy every year. It's tradition. Now, give it to me."

The Butler sisters stood beside Clarice, chanting like cheerleaders, "Give it to her, Kirrah. Give it to her, Kirrah."

That was the exact moment when all of Kirrah's troubles started.

Why did she have to be determined to keep her candy?

She should have simply handed it over, but no, she'd wiggled her fingers at Clarice. "Clarice Yates, you're nothing but a bully, and I wish a bunch of—of spiders and snakes would cover your head!"

Sparks flew from her fingertips and danced around Clarice's head. Kirrah gasped, jumping back as little bitty crawly snakes wiggled all over Clarice's thick red curls. And spiders, hundreds of teeny-tiny, black furry spiders with glowing red eyes, crept in and out of her tight ringlets.

Clarice opened her mouth, and a mind-numbing screech filled the air. She dropped her plastic pumpkin stuffed to overflowing with Snickers and wet her pants. For a moment, Clarice's friends stood there wide-eyed; then they belted out matching shrieks that vibrated with Clarice's. In their haste to escape, they stumbled over each other before digging their feet into the sidewalk and hauling butt.

Hannah bent over, holding her belly. She laughed so hard Kirrah thought she just might wet her pants, too. "Hey, Clarice, Kirrah really gave it to you!" Hannah quipped, giggling.

"Stop it, Hannah," Kirrah cried. "It's not funny!"

Hannah slapped her leg while laughing hysterically, paused long enough to point at Clarice's wet pink pants, then doubled over, laughing some more. "It is so. It's funny! She—she—peed her pants." Hannah snorted. "Look at her face."

Kirrah stared at her fingers instead. "I barely wiggled them. Did you see the sparks fly from my fingertips? I didn't mean to do it."

She knew she sounded pitiful. If she didn't stop making such a fuss, Hannah would nail her for sounding like a weenie.

Clarice screeched louder and backed away. "Stay away from me, Kirrah Walker. You're a witch! Just like that crazy old aunt of yours. A witch! Witch—witch—witch!" Clarice whipped around and tore off down the street after her friends, her angel wings flapping wildly behind her.

Kirrah grabbed Hannah by the hand and whirled in the opposite direction from Clarice. "Stop laughing, Hannah."

But she kept right on snorting and hooting with laughter. Hannah jerked free just long enough to run back and grab Clarice's bulging pumpkin. Then the two of them took off, running as fast as they could, until they had to stop to breathe.

"Come on," Kirrah said. "Let's go. I want to tell my aunt what happened."

They ran the rest of the way to her house, sure that Clarice and pals would turn around and give chase. Kirrah's aunt Penell waited and watched for them from the front porch.

Kirrah skidded to a stop. Sweat dampened her face, and her heart felt like it was going to explode right out of her chest. Her mouth worked, but she couldn't get the words out as she stared at her aunt.

Her aunt stood there beneath the porch light, decked out in a long, flowing black gown. A tall, pointy hat stood on top of the red and gold hair that flowed across her narrow shoulders and down the middle of her back. She held a broom in her hands, and glory be! A black cat sat on its haunches right beside her, licking its paws.

Her aunt *was* a witch!

Kirrah sucked in a deep breath. If her aunt was a witch, that had to mean it was okay if she was a witch, too.

Didn't it?

Feeling suddenly lighthearted, Kirrah raced up the three steps and threw her arms around her aunt's skinny waist.

Slender arms closed around her, holding her close. "And what's this, child? What have you been up to on this All Hallows' Eve?"

Kirrah grinned, sucking air between the gaps where she'd recently lost two top teeth. "I just used magic, Aunt Penell. I covered Clarice Yates' hair with snakes. I pointed my fingers at her, and little sparkles flew out and snakes jumped all over her. Spiders, too. I especially wished for the big red eyeballs on the tips of my fingers, but I didn't know they'd look so scary." She paused to catch her breath. "Clarice screamed and wet her pants! I—I think she broke one of her wings."

Kirrah expected her aunt to smile and be pleased, since—well—since her aunt was so obviously a witch.

But Aunt Penell didn't smile. Her russet brows drew together in a deep frown, and her icy blue eyes glittered with anger—or were they filled with fear?

"We shall discuss this tomorrow, Kirrah. Come along, girls. I do believe you have a movie to watch and candy to eat until you're sick." Aunt Penell held the door open for them and shooed them inside.

The girls stepped inside the house ahead of Kirrah's aunt. Kirrah looked back over her shoulder in time to see her aunt draw several glittering green symbols in the air; then Kirrah and Hannah sighed and toppled into a black void.

Aunt Penell chanted softly over the girls, knowing neither of them heard her low whispers or saw the green symbols dancing around their heads as they lay sprawled on the floor. She also knew neither of them would remember Kirrah's use of magic this All Hallows' Eve, nor would they remember for many years to come. Not until the time was right.

They'd wonder for years where the extra pumpkin filled to overflowing with Snickers bars came from.

Aunt Penell settled the girls in their beds for the night, summoned her broom and took to the sky. Now, to make certain those three little bullies learned to play nice and never recalled Kirrah's use of magic either.

\* \* \* \*

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## About the Author

Jaydyn Chelcee is a native of Oklahoma who gives credit for her love for the western states her desire to write contemporary western romances.

She is the author of the popular Montana Men Series. Book One: In the Arms of Danger and Book Two: No Holds Barred.

As Tabitha Shay she is the author of the hit paranormal Winslow Witches of Salem Series, a set of romances containing *Witch's Brew*, *Witch's Heart*, *Witch's Moon* and *Witch's Magic*. *Witch's Heart* won first place in the Oklahoma Writer's Federation, Inc. in 2007. *Witch's Brew* won second honorable mention in 2006, and *Witch's Heart* won first honorable mention in 2009.

Jaydyn/Tabitha loves traveling, writing, collecting coins, and hearing from her readers. So please visit her website or email her at...

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Now Available from Eternal Press:

In the Arms of Danger

Book One of The Montana Men Series

*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

\* \* \* \*

Hands fisted on her hips, Lacey flung back her head in challenge. "Well, sugar, we seem to have a teeny little problem here. A stalemate."

A dark brow arched.

"The way I see it, I want through the door you're standing in front of, and you obviously aren't happy with the idea." She grinned. "I believe what we have here, is what you cowboys deem a 'Mexican stand-off'."

The predatory gleam in his eyes darkened. A wicked grin split his lips. He folded his arms across his broad chest and cocked one hip against the doorframe. "Nah. What we have here, sugar," he drawled in mock imitation of her Southern accent, "is Custer's Last Stand, and I'm Chief Sitting Bull." He moved toward her with a slow, lethal walk. "Guess who won that battle, bright eyes? Sheath your claws little cat, because this is another battle where the pale-face loses."

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Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Now Available from Eternal Press:

No Holds Barred

Book Two of The Montana Men Series

*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

\* \* \* \*

Kaycee forgot to be cautious, ignored the warning bells ringing in her head. There was only action and reaction and both were hot as the fires of Hades. Whoever thought passion wasn't damning clearly had never looked into the piercing eyes of this man, never been kissed by this cowboy, or felt the uncontrolled heat slashing into the both of them.

Her knees trembled.

She curled her fingers into the soft hair at his nape and cuddled closer.

Jace released her, took a moment to tug off his boots, and then he pulled her closer. "I want you," he said quietly. "I need you."

He unfastened the narrow ties at the back of her neck and released them. She caught the dress to her waist and gasped.

\* \* \* \*

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Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Brew

Book One of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

*by Tabitha Shay*

\* \* \* \*

The hairbrush in Saylym Winslow's hand came alive, wiggling worse than a worm on a hook. With an earsplitting scream, she flung the brush across the bathroom and pressed a hand against her run-away heart. Unfortunately, the brush landed in the commode with a distinctive plop. Water slapped over the sides of the porcelain rim, splattering onto the worn tiled floor.

Biting her lip, Saylym tiptoed to the toilet bowl and peered over the edge, then jumped back. Her breathing rattled to a dead stop in her chest. "Ohmigod! I don't believe it!"

The brush had inched its way up the side of the white porcelain as if it had suddenly sprouted hands and feet to pull itself up the wet surface. It reached the top, tottered for a second, then toppled over onto the floor and flopped like a fish out of water. "No more," Saylym moaned. "Please. I can't stand one more inanimate thing coming to life."

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Too Close To The Fire  
by Jaydyn Chelcee

Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Heart

Book Two of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

by Tabitha Shay

\* \* \* \*

"*Illumrof* is you, female. You're human."

Sage reluctantly lowered Hannah to the floor. He allowed her body to slide slowly down the hard length of his. He never thought he'd see the day when he could summon the least trace of interest in an *illumrof*.

How odd. Life had a way of becoming strange and unpredictable. Faced with the woman standing before him now, he discovered he could muster a hell of a lot of interest. Samhain! If this woman was an example of human females, then dammit, his race needed to figure out a way males could successfully mate with them and produce offspring. No matter they would breed a race of *Impures*. As he saw it, half-breeds were better than extinction!

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Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Moon

Book Three of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

*by Tabitha Shay*

\* \* \* \*

Koran froze. "What are you talking about? I'm not mating with Kali. You think I'm insane? You think I exaggerate? If Princess Kali wants my dick on a platter, King Darak will order it severed and served, along with my balls. I dare not touch her."

"If not you, then who will you find to—?"

"I don't know!" Koran raked hands through his hair. "*No one*. Could we please just not talk about it?"

"You'd allow the Princess to suffer?"

"*Allow*? What choice do I have, Banjo?"

"I'm sure you know all the ways, Captain, to pleasure a witch. If you don't want to risk breeding the Princess, then you play, but don't consummate, then—"

"I'm not made of stone, Banjo." Koran swore softly beneath his breath. "I'm not immune to Beltane. If I touch Kali, I don't know if I can hold back. Hell, I don't know if I *want* to hold back. Please, no more discussion about Kali's needs."

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Banjo blinked innocently. "Yes, Captain."

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Now Available from Eternal Press:

Witch's Magic

Book Four of the Winslow Witches of Salem Series

*by Tabitha Shay*

\* \* \* \*

Val stood there beside Shasta's bed and watched her breathe. By the gods, she was beautiful. His gaze took in the neat row of stakes lined up on her bedside table. Beautiful, but deadly. She had every intention of killing him and any other vampire she happened upon. A flask of holy water stood beside the stakes and a tiny, gold cross on a chain. He shook his head. She was all set to slay any vampire she came across. He wondered if she truly believed she was prepared.

She might succeed in an attempt to kill him, but vampires weren't easily disposed of. Long before she figured that out, he'd already have made her his in every sense of the word.

Valerian settled his long frame beside her on the side of the bed...glided a fingertip up one smooth thigh to the edge of the wispy bikini bottom. The black silk fell away at his command. His throat went dry at the sight of the nest of auburn curls.

Her musky scent teased his nostrils. His cock rose instantly, ready to play. He desperately wanted to sex her.

Too Close To The Fire  
*by Jaydyn Chelcee*

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