

the
**COWBOY
WAY**

Tory
Richards

THE COWBOY WAY

by

Tory Richards

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Credits

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *WICKED DESIRE*

“...this tale starts us off with a bang and continues as a rollercoaster of mixed emotions, bringing with it suspense, comedy, and a tale of lovers with haunted pasts.”

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4 cups

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5 Angels

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Coffee Time Reviews

4 Cup

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My first book with Whiskey Creek Press and on their bestsellers list for two consecutive months.

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Dedication

Dedicated to my readers,
who motivate me to continue what I like doing best, write!

Chapter 1

Lacey didn't know what woke her. Perhaps it was the fact she'd spent the night in a strange bed after so many years away. But then she heard noises coming from outside her bedroom window and realized immediately what it was. The early morning sounds of the ranch gradually coming to life. Familiar sounds she'd grown up with. The neighing of several horses and the distant drone of voices as the men started out on their daily routines brought back memories of when she'd been a little girl waking up in that very room.

The room had changed since then, no longer one of a little girl in pink and white. Gone was the wall mural of children making sand castles on the beach with the sun and the waves behind them, their hair blowing in the wind. The walls had been painted over in muted shades of green and cream, the furniture replaced with something more suitable for adults.

With a throaty groan Lacey stretched lazily, pulling back the satin coverlet and swinging her bare legs to the floor. She sat for a moment, fighting dizziness, and glanced at the alarm clock she'd placed on the nightstand the evening before. She blinked several times before the time came into focus. No wonder she felt so tired, she hadn't even slept for five measly hours.

She ran her hands through her thick, honey-blond hair and reached for the robe at the foot of the bed, wondering if she'd catch her father before he headed out for the day. Standing, she slipped it on and tied the sash around her waist, then pulled her

hair out and left it to fall loosely against her shoulders. After sliding her feet into slippers she left the bedroom.

Halfway down the stairs Lacey caught the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee. She followed her nose to the dining room, where she found her father sitting at the table with his nose buried in his morning newspaper. Some things never changed.

“Good morning.” She gave him a peck on the cheek before taking a seat next to him. “Good, breakfast.” She reached for the coffeepot.

“Up early, aren’t we?” He peered at Lacey over his lowered newspaper.

“I’m always up early.” She took a sip and closed her eyes, swallowing it with a gratifying sound. “A habit from childhood I’ve been unable to break.”

“I remember,” he said with fondness in his tone.

Carl Owens was a man in his fifties, yet he didn’t look a day over forty-five. A big healthy man, his thick brown hair was just beginning to gray at the temples. Lacey opened her eyes to look into the ones she’d inherited. Only there were crow’s feet at the corners of his from years of squinting in the sun.

“It’s good to have you home, dear. You’ve been gone much too long.”

Lacey smiled and lifted the lid to a large platter of eggs and ham. “I hope you say that six months from now.” Both knew she’d never stay that long. Over the years when she could make it home it generally was only for a few days, but this time she planned on staying awhile. Her choice of profession allowed her the luxury of being able to pick up and go whenever she wanted, she just didn’t take advantage of it often enough.

She eyed the food with distaste, used to nothing but coffee and vitamins in the morning, and maybe an occasional bagel. The sight of all that food, which she knew would go to waste, turned her stomach. Tempted by nothing, she replaced the lid.

"You've been quiet too long, Dad. What are you cooking up?" She leaned back in her chair and eyed him reflectively. She sensed he was up to something; she could see it in his eyes, but what?

"I've missed you," was all he admitted.

"I was home—"

"Four years ago."

Lacey felt her cheeks grow warm and lowered her eyes against the hurt in his. Had it been that long? She couldn't believe she'd let that much time go by since her last visit. She opened her mouth to deny it, but then shut it again when it dawned on her that he was right. She'd met Paul after her last visit home and they'd been together four years.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I guess I kind of got wrapped up with my personal life and—"

"I didn't say that to make you feel bad. You're here now, and that's all that matters." He gently patted her hand, smiling, until she had no choice but to answer with a smile of her own. "You're not planning on working the whole time you're here, are you?"

Lacey thought about it for a moment. She hadn't said anything about working while she was home, so he must have assumed it. "I'll try not to." She knew work was the only thing that would keep her mind off Paul, and she planned on doing a lot of it. An illustrator for children's books, she loved her work. It was in her blood and had been since she discovered she had drawing talent at the age of eight.

The cook entered the room and began to clear the dishes and silverware off the table with the mechanical movements of a robot. Dressed in black and white and with a sour expression on her long face, she was nothing like the sweet-natured old woman Lacey remembered growing up with. A lot of things had changed when her father remarried. Her stepmother liked things done the traditional way when it came to the household staff.

Her father laid down his paper and rose to his feet. When he moved behind her chair, Lacey stood because she felt it was expected. She turned curious eyes on him. "Are we going somewhere?"

"I have a surprise for you." He took her by the arm and began leading her toward the front door.

She frowned and pulled back slightly when it dawned on her he was taking her outside. "Dad, I'm hardly dressed for going out. Your men—"

"Are all out to the pastures by now. Stop worrying. Besides, you're beautiful no matter what you look like."

"I am?" she said with pretended awe, her lips twitching with amusement.

"Haven't you looked in the mirror lately?" He led Lacey down the short roadway toward the stables.

"Only every day." Lacey knew she was attractive. She received her fair share of attention from the opposite sex. Paul had paraded her around town like an ornament on his arm when they went nightclubbing and she was dressed to the nines. But when it became apparent her looks were more important to him than her brain, their relationship started to crumble.

As they continued toward the barn, she glanced at her father for an explanation. Mud began to soak over her thin slippers. He only smiled and pulled her along.

"Can't you at least tell me why we're heading toward the stables?" Lacey didn't like surprises, especially when they were intended for her. And what's more, her father knew it. She was beginning to feel self-conscious, aware her thin silk robe covered nothing but a thin silk teddy. At least her father was right about his men not being around. As far as she could tell it was just the two of them.

"You'll see in good time. Be patient." They finally halted at the entranceway to the stables.

“Well?” Lacey inquired, raising a well-shaped brow. But her father only motioned to the stairs that led up to the foreman’s quarters directly above the stalls. With an impatient sigh, she put her hands on her hips. “Are you going to stand there all day with that cat-got-the-mouse grin or explain what’s going on?”

Lacey probably would have stood there for as long as it took if it hadn’t been for the man walking out of the cattle barn a short distance away. An impossibly tall, well-built man with the most piercing silver eyes she’d ever seen, set in a face that seemed carved from stone. He had the look of an experienced cowboy, from the top of his sweat-stained cowboy hat right down to his old leather boots. The leather chaps he was wearing over his jeans emphasized a certain part of his anatomy that didn’t appear to be lacking in size or length.

She tried to swallow, caught totally off-guard by the animal magnetism he exuded. He looked like a cowboy straight out of the 1800s, only twice as sexy. Was this her surprise? Who was he and when had he started working for her dad?

Lacey’s first instinct was to take her hands off her hips, aware her stance could be considered provocative to any man other than her father. She met the man’s gaze before his cool, slate-gray eyes dropped to take her in from head to foot to head again. Much in the same way she’d been ogling him. To her mortification, having his eyes on her produced an unexpected result. It suddenly felt like there was fire replacing the blood in her veins, and she felt her nipples become taut and tingle with intense awareness.

She had to remind herself to breathe.

Before she had a chance to see if he liked what he saw, she turned quickly and started up the stairs. “I guess I’ll just have to find out for myself, since you seem to have lost your tongue all of a sudden.”

She heard her father chuckle and knew he was right behind her. When they reached the top of the stairs she glanced down just

in time to see the cowboy with the piercing eyes disappear around the corner of the barn. She turned to her father, able to breathe easier now.

“Do we go in?”

He surprised her by reaching around and opening the door. Lacey’s eyes briefly scanned the room she entered, not missing the elegance, the expensive furniture, and the feminine decor. With a frown, she swung back to him. “Why are we in your foreman’s quarters?”

He laughed. “Does this look like your average foreman’s apartment, dear? Chase Saunders wouldn’t be caught dead living in a place like this.”

Lacey wouldn’t blame him. It wasn’t exactly her style either. It screamed of her stepmother’s overdone and expensive tastes. But she’d already assumed his foreman must have a wife, which would explain the decor.

“Then whose apartment is it?” she questioned, looking more closely about the room.

The walls were freshly painted, the smell still lingering in the air. She knew the cranberry Berber carpet was new, covering the old, scratched, and faded tile she remembered. The open floor plan let her see that most of the furniture was the same style she had in her bedroom. She imagined the small bedroom located in the back looked much the same way.

It wasn’t until Lacey noticed the picture on the wall above the overstuffed sofa that a warning sensation began to take form. It was a collage of pages from the first children’s book she’d ever illustrated, matted and framed simply in black-and-white to complement the simple black-and-white rough draft charcoal sketches. Where had Rita found those? She slowly turned to confront her father.

“It’s yours,” he said simply, a big smile beaming on his handsome face.

It was the last thing Lacey expected. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Chase bought a place of his own down the road. When you called and said you were coming home for a while, I got the brainstorm of remodeling this place for you so you could have some privacy. I know how important that is to you. Rita did the rest."

"Dad—"

"And," he interrupted before she had a chance to go on, "I won't lie by saying I didn't have ulterior motives. I thought if you had your own place while you were here that you might stay a little longer with us."

Put like that how could she hurt her father's feelings by turning down the apartment? Lacey hadn't really planned on how long she would be visiting, but the thought of having her own little place was very appealing. And since she was going to spend some of her time working, this would give her the privacy she needed.

Her gaze scanned the room again, seeing it in a different light. Her stepmother had decorated it in her own taste, but she had been thoughtful about hanging Lacey's first work over the sofa. Aware that her father was waiting for some sort of reply, she offered him a pleased smile. "Oh, Dad." She gave him a quick hug. "This was so thoughtful of both of you." She couldn't exactly exclude Rita without hurting his feelings.

"You don't mind that it's over the stables?"

"Of course not!" Lacey assured him sincerely. "I love the location. You know when I was a kid I spent more time here than I did in the house. I love the smell of horses, hay, and leather."

"I remember all too well. Come and I'll show you the bedroom. I have another little surprise for you." Taking her by the arm, he only took her as far as the doorway.

Lacey glanced over the small room briefly. Someone had left a window open, and the light breeze ruffled the sheer curtains hanging there. A window that she knew hadn't been there before.

"I had that added after Chase left, not that I didn't offer while he was living here. Since you're located right over the stables, I thought it might be nice for you to be able to open a window somewhere in here and get a decent breath of fresh air."

"You've thought of everything to make me comfortable." Lacey smiled. "But as I said, I love the smells from below. Apparently they didn't bother your foreman either."

"He's a tough old cowboy. And speaking of Chase," Carl glanced down at his watch, "I'm late for an appointment with him." They began to walk toward the front door. "Your suitcases are already here, so you don't need to come back to the house with me. But I do have one small request."

"What's that?" Lacey paused with him at the door, wondering vaguely how he'd managed to get her suitcases there without her knowledge.

"That you join us for dinner in the evenings."

That was easy. "I think I can manage that."

"Rita planned a special dinner for tonight." Lacey rolled her eyes and groaned. "You know she means well. She's invited a few guests so please, for my sake, be a good girl."

Lacey raised her brows mischievously. "Now, Dad, have I ever been anything but a good girl?" They laughed, and Lacey knew that, for her father's sake, she would do whatever he asked. It wouldn't be the first time she'd suffered through one of her stepmother's dinner parties.

After he left, Lacey spent some time unpacking her suitcases before taking a quick, eye-opening shower. She threw on some clothes leftover from her younger days, jeans she couldn't bear to part with because they were so old and comfortable. Paul had hated them, so she hadn't worn them in a while. But when packing to come home, and discovering them in a box at the back of her closet, she'd tossed them in her suitcase, knowing she would need them. She ignored the fact they were a little snug.

She twisted her hair into a loose knot and worked her feet into well-worn boots, knowing the long walk to the river would be muddy from recent rains. She intended to get a little sketching done, and she grabbed her pad and pencils before leaving her new apartment.

Lacey found her gaze roaming the grounds as she cut across the driveway, wondering if she'd see the man with the gray eyes again. There'd been something about him, a raw element that had attracted her, as brief as their encounter had been. But she didn't see anybody in the twenty minutes it took her to reach her destination.

Once she reached the river, she paused to look at its raging beauty and suck in a deep breath of fresh air before finding the perfect spot to settle down. Using a willow tree for a backrest, she sank to the ground, crossed her legs Indian-style, and opened her pad. Like most times when she began sketching, she became absorbed in her work, finding almost any object to work on that would warm her up for the real thing. She worked with a carelessness and speed that made the time pass quickly for her.

She'd been commissioned to illustrate the next Sue Cramer book, *Backyard Babies*. After the first rough drafts of several possible book covers were done, she dropped her pad and sank back against the tree with a sigh. Hunger pains and a stiff neck made Lacey wish she'd worn a watch, but she was more tired than anything else. The coffee she'd gulped down for breakfast had long ago worn off and her eyes were beginning to blur. She closed them. It was time to go home, but for now she was content to stay where she was, enjoying the peace and quiet that had become so foreign to her over the years. She let the sounds of nature lull her.

Lacey could only guess how much time had elapsed when she roused from her late-afternoon nap. It was clear that it would be dark soon. She gathered up her things, knowing she didn't have much time before dinner. She began the trek back and was halfway

home when the ground began to vibrate beneath her feet, indicating a horse approaching. Spinning around, the breath caught in her throat. Everything happened so fast after that. Her choices were few. She could either jump out of the way and pray she went one way and the horse another, or remain still and hope the rider pulled up on the reins in time to avoid hitting her.

She chose the latter and closed her eyes, steeling herself for whatever happened. When the horse didn't plow into her, Lacey opened her eyes in time to see the rider pulling up on the reins and coming to an abrupt halt. The horse neighed in obvious protest at the unexpected action.

"Whew, that was close." Relief washed through Lacey. The setting sun was behind the rider, preventing her from seeing his face. She used her hand to shield the glare and reached up with her other one to run it along the length of the horse's nose at the same time. "Hi."

He was a handsome man, with brown hair streaked blond in some places. His eyes squinted down at her and something in his expression seemed vaguely familiar. Only later would she know what that something was. Smiling, Lacey took in his muddy boots and dust-covered work clothes. He was obviously one of her father's hired hands.

"Howdy," he said in return, pushing his cowboy hat back from his forehead. He appeared friendly enough, but his next words took on a harder quality. "What the heck are you doing walking around out here? I almost ran you down."

"But you didn't."

"Only because I saw you in time. Aren't you aware the bulls are pastured out here?"

"No, I wasn't. I've been down at the river all day." Lacey continued to caress the horse's nose, feeling the animal quiver beneath her touch. "And I haven't seen one bull."

"Believe me, they're around, and very dangerous. Being that you're Owens' daughter you're probably aware of that." He grinned.

"What gave me away?" Lacey grinned in return.

"Everyone knows what you do for a living." He indicated the pad in her hands. "And we all knew you were coming home. Would you like a ride in? It will be dark soon."

"Sure." Lacey instantly offered him her hand so he could help her up, noticing his slight hesitation. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm a bit dirty," he apologized.

"I think I'll survive a little dirt." She put her hand in his gloved one. "What's your name?" Her hands held on to the sides of the saddle they were sharing.

"Brian."

"Nice to meet you Brian, I'm Lacey. How long have you worked for my father?"

She felt his slight shrug. "Guess about three years. How long have you known him?"

Lacey laughed. "Guess about twenty-nine years. Was that a trick question to find out how old I am?"

"No, ma'am. My wife taught me a long time ago that it's impolite to ask a lady her age."

"Sounds like you have a smart wife."

Lacey saw the house ahead of them, but instructed Brian to take her toward the stables instead. When he didn't question her, she came to the conclusion that her apartment wasn't a secret. He stopped directly in front of the steps and, with a helping hand, she slid to the ground.

"Thanks." Smiling up at him, she brushed a strand of hair away. Brian's eyes moved past Lacey and his grin vanished.

Lacey followed his gaze and saw the rugged cowboy from that morning. He'd just secured a large black stallion into one of the stalls and was now making his way toward them in tense, unhurried

strides. The look on his face revealed he was angry about something.

“What’s wrong?” She glanced back at Brian.

“Big brother is definitely unhappy about something.” Lacey’s gaze shot back to the big man nearing them.

Now she understood why Brian looked familiar to her. They had the same eyes. And though Brian was a big man, his brother was bigger. Standing well over six feet she guessed, his powerful physique was all muscle. He moved with the sureness of a stalking mountain cat, his eyes sharp and pinning them with a piercing directness that caused a shiver to run down Lacey’s spine. Something in his eyes, in the way they raked over her, turned her blood to fire. He was mad about something, but there was a hunger there, too.

His thick, too-long hair was jet black and unruly, and he took off his hat long enough to run a hand through it, his eyes never leaving them. Lacey couldn’t miss the tic working furiously in his jaw, the slightly flared nostrils. She looked back at Brian nervously, said good-bye, and made a cowardly exit up the stairs to her apartment. Whatever Brian had done to cause such a reaction from his brother, she didn’t want to be around to find out.

Realizing her father hadn’t given her a key, she was glad she hadn’t locked the door. But once Lacey was inside she didn’t hesitate in doing so. She glanced at the small clock in the kitchen. She had less than an hour to make herself presentable for dinner. Tossing her sketchpad on the table in front of the sofa, she continued to the bathroom and shed her clothes along the way.

Chapter 2

“Well! Is this my little girl all grown up?” There was pleasant surprise on her father’s face when Lacey entered the formal dining room and he saw her. “I hardly recognized you.”

Lacey knew what people saw when she entered the room. She’d checked her appearance before leaving the quiet security of her apartment. She wanted to be ready for Rita tonight and prove she was no longer the awkward teenage girl playing dress up. With four years of Paul’s tutoring, tonight she would be able to hold her own with her elegant stepmother.

The expensive black heels she wore gave Lacey the added height she needed to effectively carry off the chic black, body-hugging gown she’d chosen. Leaving one shoulder completely bare, the other side was cut daringly high, exposing all of one long, slender leg when she walked. It was bold, daring, and Lacey felt sexy and confident in it. She’d inherited her mother’s pearls, and they adorned the graceful column of her throat and earlobes.

Lacey’s smile was sincere, and meant only for her father. She wanted to remind him that she’d been grown-up for a long time. She offered him her cheek as he bent close to kiss it, letting her gaze scan over the people in the room, looking for familiar faces. Rita was in the corner talking to one of her guests and had yet to notice Lacey.

“I’m sorry if I’m late.” She was surprised at the amount of people already there.

“Fashionably so.” Her father assured her.

"Lacey, I didn't see you come in." Rita surprised Lacey by moving up behind her. She took Lacey by the hands, which was quite an affectionate gesture for her. "You look wonderful."

Rita's eyes didn't miss a thing as they moved over Lacey, and Lacey was surprised at the sincerity in her tone. Rita was dressed to the nines as usual, her makeup flawless and not a hair out of place. She had a 1940s glamour about her.

"How are you, Rita?"

"Fine, dear, and I can see you've quite grown up on us." She laughed, as if at a private joke and took Lacey by the arm. "Come, let me introduce you to our guests. Do you mind if I steal her away from you for a moment?" Her last comment was directed at Carl, but she hardly gave him a chance to respond before leading Lacey away.

Lacey was unwillingly dragged around the room as Rita introduced her to her friends. Very few turned out to be any of the long-standing family friends she'd known growing up, and as far as Lacey was concerned, dinner couldn't be served soon enough. She'd had enough of a social life when she'd been with Paul and couldn't wait to eat and get back to the quiet of her apartment. She looked to her father in the hope of being rescued, but found him in deep conversation with Brian.

Seeing Brian brought a smile to her face, until she noticed they seemed to be arguing about something. They were careful to keep their voices low, but the second she was able to break away from Rita and join them, the mood changed rapidly.

"You two look as though you've been having words."

Carl spoke first. "Nonsense, dear. I take it you and Brian have already met?"

Lacey confirmed with a slight nod. "Earlier today. At least I think it was you. You were wearing a lot more dirt," she teased.

"We've both made a startling transformation," he responded with a grin.

"Are you enjoying yourself, dear?"

"Yes. Rita's friends are, interesting," Lacey said tactfully, catching Brian's chuckle and throwing him a warning glance. "I don't recall meeting your foreman, though. Is he here tonight?"

"Chase might join us later; he's a very busy man."

"All work and no play," Brian added.

"And how did you come to be invited to this little dinner party?" Lacey turned amused eyes on Brian. "You, um, don't exactly fit in with Rita's circle of friends." Remembering her father's presence, she quickly added for his benefit, "What I mean is that you work here, when most of them are bankers and stockbrokers."

"Are you snubbing me?" Brian joked.

"No! I'm glad you're here. Where's your wife?" Her eyes searched the crowd in the hope of seeing a face she could pair with his.

"She's not here. She—"

Before Brian could continue, Rita announced that dinner was being served and proceeded to direct everyone to their assigned spots. The long mahogany table looked like it was set for a king, and Lacey shot her father a glance and rolled her eyes. How her stepmother loved to entertain in grand style. She was in her element now, and Lacey realized her father must truly love the woman to tolerate the elaborate dinner parties when he was just a plain old down-to-earth rancher.

When dinner was over and everyone was dispersing from the room, Lacey hurried over to Brian, upon noticing he seemed to linger back from the older crowd. Deciding it would be rude leaving too early she ignored her desire to go home. "Let's sneak away to the game room!" No one seemed to be paying any attention, and Lacey couldn't wait to get to some place where she could slip off her shoes and let her hair down. She felt comfortable with Brian and enjoyed his unthreatening presence.

"Sounds good to me. I need to unwind." He grabbed his drink as they left the room.

Lacey led the way to a large, masculine room. Rita had remodeled every room in the house, but this room had been left alone. The pool table was still in the same place it had always been, in the dead center of the room. Located off to one corner was a chess table already set up for use. One section of the room was arranged as an office complete with a wall of books, a working desk, and a bar.

"I take it that you and I shouldn't play chess," Lacey commented, looking down at the misplaced pieces. It was obvious there was a game in progress.

"Not unless you want your father and my brother coming down on us like a couple of bulls," Brian retorted with amusement. He swallowed half his drink in one gulp. "They've had this game going on for a long time."

"Chase must spend a good deal of time here." Lacey eyed the wood checkers table next to the cold fireplace. "How about checkers?"

"A little tame for me. How about pool?" He set his drink down on the edge of the pool table and went to the cue rack.

"Are you sure you want to? I've been told I'm pretty good." Lacey was about to kick her heels off when a deep voice made her pause.

"Good at what?"

Her gaze went to the open doorway and she caught her breath as she met the steely gaze of Brian's brother. Chase's blatant masculinity was apparent in every pore. It surprised her to see he was still wearing his work clothes, minus the sexy chaps, but it didn't keep her body from responding to him instantly. What was wrong with her?

A discreet cough drew Lacey's attention to her father. "Lacey, dear, this is my ranch foreman, Chase Saunders."

The tough old cowboy he'd referred to earlier that day? She gauged his age to be somewhere in his thirties. She should have made the ranch foreman connection earlier when Brian had commented on the chess game.

She didn't know what gave her the strength to finally acknowledge her father, who'd entered the room right behind Chase. She forced a smile for his benefit, already finding reasons not to like Chase. For one thing, she didn't like the boldness in his eyes, didn't like the way they seemed to brand her where they touched her, as if he were staking a claim. But what Lacey didn't like the most was the betraying tingle moving down her spine and the throbbing ache in the lower region of her body.

Though politeness demanded it, there was no way she was going to offer him her hand, because Lacey was afraid that once they touched, she wouldn't be able to hide how he affected her.

"Ma'am." He gave a curt nod of his head.

Lacey found herself watching his sensuous mouth form the word. She gave herself a mental shake. "We were discussing pool." Lacey felt compelled to explain, avoiding Chase's gaze again.

"So this is where you two disappeared to." Her father walked farther into the room, not realizing the sudden tension developing between her and Chase. "Rita was curious."

"Brian and I were about to play a game."

Lacey purposely left out pool, almost laughing when her father's eyes quickly flew to the chessboard. The relief on his face was apparent when he noticed none of the pieces were out of place.

"One of these days you're going to tease the wrong man, dear," he said good-naturedly.

For some reason Lacey's gaze returned to Chase. Heat filled her cheeks as his eyes held hers captive. The look in those intense orbs said he wasn't interested in playing games, or talking about them. She sensed a man like him would prefer action.

"Lacey says she's good at pool, Chase, but I didn't get a chance to find out."

"Perhaps sometime I'll find out how good she is for myself," Chase remarked, walking to the bar. "But tonight the lady's father and I have some business to discuss."

It was the way he said *lady* that caused Lacey to inhale sharply. And hadn't anyone else noticed the innuendo behind his words about finding out how good she was? Biting back a remark, Lacey went to Brian and linked her arm through his. It was the wrong thing to do; if Chase's stormy expression was any indication. He took a slow drink from his glass, his eyes narrowing at Lacey over the rim. If she didn't know better, she'd have sworn he was issuing a silent warning.

"Well, since you two will probably need privacy, we'll just wander off somewhere else."

Lacey was glad for the chance to escape. In the end, she talked Brian into walking her back to her apartment. As they made their way down the hallway, they could hear the remaining guests in the formal living room. They left through a back door in the kitchen and had walked quite a distance from the house when Lacey felt they were far enough away that their voices wouldn't carry.

"I never did get a complete answer about your wife."

There was an obvious smile in his tone. "Mary has a twin sister who's expecting her first baby, so she's in Kansas for a while."

"I see. Has she been gone long?"

"Too damn long. But Mary and Eva are close." A chuckle escaped him. "Twins about to have their first babies."

"Mary's pregnant, too?"

"Yep. Not as far along as Eva, so traveling was okay."

"Congratulations! I can picture you as a daddy, with a little blond-haired boy bouncing on your knee."

Brian laughed. "Thanks, I think."

They walked a little farther in silence. Lacey noticed the dark shadows ahead of them from the horses that had been left out in the corrals. After a few minutes of silence, she asked Brian what was really on her mind. "What has your brother got against me?"

"I don't understand."

"Come on, Brian. You're not going to tell me you didn't notice his not-so-friendly looks."

"That's not all I noticed."

"Now I don't understand." They'd almost reached the stables.

"Oh yes you do." He fired right back. "You and my brother were instantly attracted to each other and just didn't know how to handle it."

"Not hardly. I know when I'm attracted to a man." She was outright lying.

"Maybe it goes deeper than that."

"That's silly. We're strangers. And Chase hardly looked at me like..." Lacey caught herself.

"Go on," Brian prompted, with a note in his voice that told Lacey he already knew what she'd been about to say.

"You go on. I'm going to bed." She bolted ahead and rushed up the stairs to her apartment as fast as her heels would let her. She stopped outside her door at the top of the steps and looked down into the darkness, seeing nothing. It was quiet.

"Brian?"

"Yes?"

"Are you free to go riding in the morning?"

"It's my day off, but I'll be working out at Chase's place all day. Ride on out if you like. It's the old Cooper place."

"I know it; maybe I'll see you then."

They said good night. Lacey closed the door and locked herself in, then switched on the small table lamp by the door. She yawned as she slowly made her way to her bedroom, and pulled off shoes and pieces of jewelry along the way. When her head finally

hit the pillow and she was asleep, her dreams were filled with a big cowboy with haunting gray eyes.

* * * *

Lacey was humming softly to herself when she bounced down the stairs the next morning, anxious to get in an early-morning ride. She just might ride out to the old Cooper ranch and see what was going on. It had been abandoned for years.

She rounded a corner and was forced to come to an abrupt halt when she almost collided with a horse and the cowboy working over its bent leg. "Oops! Excuse me."

The cowboy straightened slowly and Lacey's stomach did a somersault. It was Chase.

They faced each other silently for a moment before his eyes dropped to her breasts. Lacey knew she must look like a twelve-year-old. After her shower that morning she'd thrown on the same jeans and boots from the day before. Yesterday's T-shirt was replaced with old denim that was missing some buttons, so she'd tied the loose ends beneath her breasts. She resisted the urge to reach up and pull the material together where it gaped.

"You're going riding like that?" His hawklike eyes traveled over her, stripping the clothes from her in much the same way he had the evening before.

Lacey's fingers curled, her nails cutting into her palms as she struggled to hold on to her temper. "I dress to suit myself and no one else, Mr. Saunders." She held her ground when he straightened to his full height. He thought to intimidate her? "I earned that right when I became an adult. And I'd say by the way you're looking at me that you like how I look."

"I like what you're wearing all right, ma'am." His arrogant gaze moved over her once again. His mouth twisted. "And so will my men."

They were so close Lacey could feel the heat from his body. Smell the familiar scents that branded him a cowboy, and unfortu-

nately made him appealing. "So?" She slapped her hands on her hips. "Do your men have such questionable reputations that a woman needs to fear for her safety? I met one of them yesterday and he was a perfect gentleman."

"I have at least thirty hands scattered all over this ranch. You're bound to meet up with one or two of them." His jaw was set in a hard, unyielding line. "I'm not worried about the men who have been here for a while, but we have a few new boys who might not care that you're the boss' daughter." His expression took on an even harder quality, his eyes crystallizing. "And that reminds me, stay away from my brother. He's married."

"I know Brian's married—"

"Is that what turns you on?"

Lacey's jaw dropped. "You have a colossal nerve, Mr. Saunders." She was mad enough to spit, or slap his face. Only she didn't give in to the urge because she wasn't sure how a man like him would retaliate. "Brian and I are both adults, or hadn't you noticed?" Lacey could tell by the way his eyes went over her, darkening, that he noticed all too much. "I suggest you remember that you work for my father and keep your opinions to yourself."

Lacey intended to stomp past Chase, but his large hand shot out and caught her around the upper arm. She was jerked back in place, and a shocked gasp escaped her parted lips. Her eyes grew round and shot up, seeking his.

"Take your—"

"If all you're looking for is a little action while you're home, I'll be glad to show you the cowboy way. If you go around here asking for trouble, you'll get it. You've been warned."

Shocked at his audacity, Lacey was about to demand he take his hand off her when one of the men walked into the barn and called out Chase's name. He reacted quickly, releasing Lacey's arm as if her touch suddenly burned him. Speechless, she watched him walk away and disappear around the corner of the stall.

Lacey could hear their voices but not what they were discussing. She was still shaking over what had just occurred between her and Chase.

Had she imagined his hot looks the day before? She made her way to the stall that harbored a little brown mare with a star on her nose that reminded her of Tilly, a little filly she'd had while growing up. Opening the gate, she moved in slowly, not wanting to spook the animal. Talking quietly to her, the little mare snickered softly when Lacey reached up to gently stroke her velvet nose. Her ears twitched at Lacey's friendly crooning. After realizing Lacey meant her no harm, the mare shook her head and moved her nose more firmly into Lacey's caressing hand.

"That's a girl," Lacey said softly, close to the mare's ear. "We're going to be friends, aren't we?" The name on the wall behind the horse said Misty.

Lacey just needed the reins. She'd often ridden bareback when she was growing up and preferred the freedom over a saddle. After slipping the reins over Misty's head and making sure the bit was properly arranged in her tender mouth, Lacey led her from the stall and out of the barn. She let out a soft chuckle when it became obvious the little mare was eager to be under way.

She mounted Misty with a quickness and proficiency born of years of riding. It wasn't until she was settling down on the horse's back and glanced up that she noticed Chase walking her way. Before she had a chance to jerk on the reins, Chase took control of them.

"Where are you riding?" His eyes were like silver shards of hard glass.

Lacey's eyes glared down at him. "That's none of your business."

Lacey jerked the reins out of his gloved hands and pulled on them sharply, sending Misty into sudden action. She expected Chase to try and stop her, but a quick glance back showed her he

was still standing exactly where she'd left him. She got the impression not too many people stood up to Chase. Well, he was about to find out that she did as she chose. Laughing out loud with triumph, Lacey kneed Misty on faster, heading toward the meadow that separated her father's land from the old Cooper ranch.

Half an hour later Lacey slowed Misty down to a leisurely trot when the meadow came to an end and they were forced to cross a country road. The field on the other side was knee-high with grass and wildflowers and marked the beginning of the old Cooper ranch.

It was beautiful land. Not as barren as most of her father's pastures, which were trampled over by herds of cattle and horses. Lacey wondered what the place looked like after all these years. The last time she'd seen it she was only fifteen, and that had been right after Will Cooper had been forced into a veteran's hospital to live out his last days. The family had moved out right after that, and no one had lived in the house since.

She expected to find it in a shambles, if still standing at all. But on first viewing the large, two-story structure, Lacey thought she'd somehow taken the wrong direction and ended up somewhere else. The house before her now was hardly what she'd been expecting. Standing sturdy enough, it was clearly in the process of being renovated.

Her eyes fell on the truck parked out front and she nudged Misty toward it. As they approached the house, the front door opened and Brian stepped out. She returned his wave and made her way to him.

"Hi! Taking a break?" Lacey slid from Misty's back and tied the reins to an old-fashioned hitching post in front of the house.

He chuckled. "I just started working." He went to the back of a pickup where he grabbed a five-gallon bucket of what Lacey assumed was paint.

"Do you live here, too?"

He nodded. "Temporarily, since I'm working for Chase on my days off."

She smiled, painfully reminded of the heated conversation she'd had earlier with Chase. Was he warning Brian away from her, too? "Do you have time to give me a tour? I used to play here when I was a kid."

"Then you're going to see a lot of changes." He opened the door and led Lacey inside the foyer.

Her eyes moved around the large entranceway, moving beyond to what would have been the parlor in olden times. There were all kinds of building supplies and cans of paint. And the house seemed strangely quiet.

"You're doing this all by yourself?" she questioned, astonished.

"Me and big brother," he corrected, smiling down at her.

Lacey's smile disappeared at the mention of his arrogant brother, but Brian only grinned more. She turned from him with a snort and started to walk around. It didn't take her long to see that most of the downstairs was completed.

"I like the colors you've chosen," she commented, pausing before a large stone fireplace. On the wall above it was an old portrait of a man and woman, obviously in love as they stared into each other's eyes.

"Our grandparents," Brian explained softly, seeing where Lacey's interest lay. "The only parents Chase and I knew when we were growing up. Our folks were killed shortly after I was born, in a train accident. Chase was only six at the time, but he barely remembers them."

"How sad," Lacey replied in a half-whisper. "Not to know at least one of your parents. My own mother died when I was twenty-two." She didn't feel the need to go into the details about her long, terminal illness.

She headed toward the stairs. "What's it like up there?"

"We've just started up there." Brian was right behind Lacey as she climbed the steps. "We'll need to be careful. Some of the floorboards have rotted."

Lacey's gaze moved all around them, taking in the cobwebs that hung from every corner. The paint was chipped and flaking off the walls; the wallpaper was peeling and dull, the design undistinguishable. The once-beautiful hardwood floors were lackluster, scratched, and covered with dust, squeaking loudly under their combined weight. Brian moved in front of Lacey to test each step before they took it.

"Did the downstairs look like this?" She kicked at an old-fashioned braided rug that took up most of the whole floor area of the room they were in. Dust fluffed up around her boots.

"Worse. It—"

They heard the front door slam shut an instant before Chase's voice bellowed out Brian's name. Lacey's eyes grew round with apprehension, and something akin to fear held her rooted to the spot. Her heart beat wildly in her chest, recalling his warning only an hour ago to stay away from his brother.

She had no intention of letting the man dictate to her, but getting caught with Brian so soon after his warning, and alone in his house of all places, sent a trickle of alarm down her spine. The only thing that kept her from falling apart was the calm look on Brian's face. At least Lacey didn't have to wonder about one thing anymore: If Brian had been told to stay away from her, he wouldn't be calmly telling Chase where they were now.

"We're in the master bedroom, Chase!"

Lacey heard Chase's heavy footfalls take the fragile stairs, picturing him taking them two at a time. And very quickly. He wasn't a man to waste actions. She mentally braced herself for the confrontation to come, and walked to the window. Glancing down, Lacey saw his black stallion was tethered next to her mare. It appeared he'd followed her.

His footsteps came closer, and Lacey turned just as he stepped through the doorway to the room. Their eyes met and clashed and she fought to remain calm. A tic appeared in Chase's tense jaw almost instantly and Lacey bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling. His gaze sought Brian's.

"You shouldn't have brought Miss Owens up here," he said, using the same maddeningly arrogant tone he'd used on her. "It's not safe."

Lacey spoke before Brian had a chance. "As you can see, Mr. Saunders, I haven't fallen through any loose floorboards yet. I didn't give Brian a chance to stop me before coming up here. So please don't blame him." The word *please* almost stuck in her throat.

Brian smirked at the exchange between them and Lacey wanted to ask him what he thought was so funny. When the phone began to ring in the kitchen below, he quickly offered to go answer it. He turned and exited the room with blinding speed. Lacey opened her mouth to demand he not leave her alone with his brother, but it was too late.

Her gaze went back to Chase. The room became smaller, and she all but flattened her back against the thin windowpane of the old glass. With her luck she'd probably go through it. She stiffened her back and raised her chin a little higher, determined not to let him see how nervous she was at being alone with him.

Lacey could see how angry he was and decided to make a hasty exit. "I have to be going." She was surprised he wasn't blowing smoke through his nose.

Lacey swallowed hard and took several steps toward the door, and danger, because that's where Chase was. His gaze followed her movements like a predator, watching and waiting for the right time to strike. What was he waiting for?

He surprised her by turning to lead the way. "Good idea. I'll go first. If this floor can hold my weight, it can hold anyone."

Lacey kept her distance behind him, unconsciously letting her eyes move over his broad back, down to the wide belt at his waist, before dropping lower to his... Her gaze flew to the floor, trying but failing miserably to skip over the tight denim covering his firm buttocks. She felt her cheeks grown warm with where her thoughts were taking her.

Someone chuckled. Lacey glanced to the side to see Brian had emerged from the kitchen and had caught her staring. Her face burned with embarrassment and she plowed right into Chase's back when he stopped abruptly and turned around. The impact almost knocked her to the floor.

"Something wrong?"

Lacey raised her brows in surprise. "No."

"I didn't get to the phone in time," Brian cut in, grinning like a schoolboy.

Lacey scowled at him. "I have to be going, Brian. Thanks for the tour."

"You haven't seen the barns."

"Some other time." Chase took hold of Lacey's arm. "Your father's waiting for you back at the ranch. I'll ride back with you."

His arrogant tone brooked no refusal, and his black look warned her that she didn't have a choice. Not when he was already pulling her along with him. Lacey could only look back at Brian helplessly. She made an attempt to pull her arm from Chase, but he only tightened his hold. She was fuming by the time they reached the horses.

She grabbed Misty's reins, mounted, and pulled on them sharply to gallop away, not sparing either man another word. Chase remained behind to say something to Brian, but it didn't take him long to catch up to her. Not on the big black monster he was riding. Lacey felt his presence behind her but ignored him. They crested a slight hill and rode out of sight of the house. Pretending

she was alone was a vain attempt, especially when Chase reached over and grabbed her reins. He brought both horses to a stop.

"I want to talk to you."

"Really? And here I thought you stopped to kiss me." What was she saying? Baiting a man like Chase was dangerous.

There was a long pause. Something flickered in Chase's eyes. His expression gave nothing away, though. Lacey began to feel nervous again, though for a different reason than the one back at the house.

"The cowboy way, ma'am?" His tone was soft, dangerous, carrying the subtle threat of an unspoken promise.

Lacey swallowed nervously. *The cowboy way? That was twice he'd used that expression.* She wondered what it meant. An explosion of heat swelled inside her belly as her imagination ran rampant. An image of the two of them locked in a hot, passionate embrace. No longer was Chase's mouth firm and unyielding, but soft and sensual. His eyes darkened with smoldering intent. Yet her instincts warned Lacey that Chase was just as dangerous now as he had been a moment ago. She tried to jerk the reins from his hands, suddenly afraid she was about to find out what the cowboy way was.

"Let go." Misty moved nervously beneath her, obviously sensing her growing panic.

In the blink of an eye, his expression changed. "Not until you listen to what I have to say."

"You can't bully me, Chase." The wind blew at her loose hair, and she reached up impatiently to wipe it out of her eyes. "I won't let you."

He reared back his head and laughed at her comment. "And how do you propose to stop me? I could do anything I want to you right now and you wouldn't be able to stop me."

Lacey tightened her lips in frustration, even while the thought of what that something could be caused a tingle of excitement to zing through her. As his hard mouth curved upward in a crooked

smile that was sexy as sin, she wished she could wipe that arrogant expression off his rugged face. He was so sure of himself. The look in his eyes told her to go ahead and try. Well, she'd taken self-defense lessons a few years back and wasn't as helpless as he thought.

"Then maybe you should have warned me about *you* this morning!" She jerked on the reins again, harder this time. When he wouldn't release them Lacey reached out and slapped him across the cheek. She caught her breath, realizing a man like Chase might strike back. He didn't look the type to turn the other cheek, or ignore a challenge. Their eyes clashed in silent battle.

Then, without warning, he reached forward and pulled her from her horse and into his arms. His gaze dropped to her mouth before returning to her eyes. "I think you need to be taught a lesson."

"No!"

"Yes!" he hissed. He crushed her to him and slammed his mouth down on hers, locking any protest deep in her throat. Lacey struggled, but it didn't seem to matter to Chase. He overpowered her easily while managing to control his stallion's nervous movements with expertise. Lacey brought up her hands and pushed against his massive, rock-hard chest, but it was like trying to move a mountain. She whimpered beneath his attack, becoming aware of things she didn't want to notice.

Her senses began to swim with desire and she ceased her movements, bringing her arms up to cling around Chase's neck. The action brought Lacey closer to him. He growled, forcing her mouth open until he could slip his tongue inside. Unwillingly, she began to melt under his rough kiss, returning the thrust of his tongue against hers. A sharp pang of hunger blossomed inside her belly, turning her blood hot. She was afraid of not being strong enough to deny him if he sought more than a kiss.

Lacey had never been handled so ruthlessly by any man before; no one had dared. And while she balked at his arrogance, she couldn't deny the feelings he roused. The thrill of his mouth on hers, the feel of his whiskers against her tender skin, and the taste of something sweet on his breath heightened her arousal. Her nostrils flared, greedily taking in the masculine scent of sweat, leather, and horse.

And, most of all, his arousal.

Lacey's breasts swelled against his chest; her nipples hardened into painful knots. When his hands traveled down her arms, he left a trail of tingles behind. But when his hand closed over her breast, Lacey knew real desire, and fear. Fear because she couldn't ignore what he was making her feel. Her betraying flesh swelled even more into his caress. She shivered violently and moaned as his thumb flicked across her nipple, and arched her back before she realized what she was doing.

Without warning Chase broke away, promptly ending the sizzling moment between them. Lacey's lungs screamed for air, and it gave her little pleasure to see that Chase was just as out of breath. His expression frightened her a little. Dark like polished stone, his eyes were glazed over with heated passion, his nostrils flaring like a wild animal's. Lacey could feel his heart beating in rhythm with her own.

She tried to turn away from the blazing fire in his eyes, but there was nowhere to go. His horse moved beneath them, but Chase kept him under control with the steady pressure of his solid thighs and knees. Realizing her arms were still locked around his neck, Lacey slowly broke her hold and lowered them, humiliated and angry.

"You're a bastard," she said softly, taking a deep breath and trembling with her emotions.

"You asked for it," Chase rasped indifferently, his breathing almost under control again. His smoldering look went over Lacey's hot face, a satisfied gleam with what he saw filling his eyes.

"You'd like to think so," she shot back, protecting herself with anger. Maybe he would think she was flushed with fury and not consuming desire. "You proved your point."

He shrugged indifferently. "It's one way to get a woman to listen."

He had an answer for everything. Lacey couldn't stand it anymore. For the second time she found herself aiming her open palm for his mocking, handsome face. But just as quickly Chase caught it in midair.

"Are you prepared to turn the other cheek?"

"Is that your way of saying you'd slap me back? Why doesn't that surprise me?" Lacey twisted free and rubbed her wrist. "I think my father will be very interested in finding out what kind of man his foreman is."

"Your father knows what kind of foreman he has." He nudged his horse closer to Misty and easily deposited Lacey back where she belonged. "Stay away from Brian."

"You have no right to tell me what to do." She couldn't believe his nerve. "And Brian is old enough to pick and choose his own friends."

"I'm warning you," he growled angrily, his eyes hardening into sharp splinters of cold frost.

The air crackled between them. Chase's expression was thunderous, a look that would probably have any man cowering before him. But Lacey met it head-on, squaring her shoulders and lifting her proud head. "What's the problem, Chase? Don't you think a married man and a single woman can be friends?"

"Friends?" He said the word like it was dirty. "Not with a woman like you."

What did he mean by a woman like her? This time Lacey's slap did reach its mark, leaving a bright red handprint on Chase's dark cheek. She'd put every ounce of strength she possessed into that slap, but he didn't move so much as an inch, taking her wrath fully and unflinchingly. She braced herself for retaliation, recalling his words about turning the other cheek.

For a moment Chase just glared at her. But a twitching muscle in his hard jaw revealed his true feelings. "I think you'd better get away from me before I toss you on the ground and give you what you really want." It was a dangerously soft command, but it had the same effect as if he'd shouted it at her.

What did she really want? Lacey didn't have the nerve to ask Chase because she already knew. And he knew it too. That's what scared her. The man infuriated her while at the same time making her want him. She had no doubt that were he to toss her to the ground and give her what she really wanted, it would be the best mind-blowing sex Lacey had ever experienced.

The reins to her mare had already slipped through his fingers, and without hesitation, Lacey drew them up and gave them a pull, gently nudging Misty in the ribs at the same time. In a flash they were off, heading in the direction of her father's ranch. She didn't look back.

Chapter 3

“Good afternoon.”

Lacey had just returned from her walk to the river and was on her way up to her apartment when her father’s voice halted her progress. She glanced down at him as he entered the stables, taking in the well-cut business suit he was wearing, then turned and started back down. He waited for her to join him.

“Hi.” She returned his smile. “I just got back from a walk.”

“So I gathered.” He glanced at the sketchpad in her hands. “Working, too?”

“Playing at working,” she admitted, sensing something was up. “Is something wrong?”

“Not really.” His gaze went over her briefly. “I just wanted to see if you were feeling better.”

“Oh.” Lacey was aware how hollow her voice sounded. She could hardly look him in the eye.

She’d hated lying to her father the night before when she’d phoned the house and made an excuse for not being able to join them for dinner. It was all Chase Saunders’ fault. He’d put her in such a foul mood. And she’d been in no shape to face her father and Rita. So what had she done? Spent the evening stewing over that impossible man and wondering what she was going to do about him.

“It was just a small headache.” Lacey reminded him, glad she didn’t have to lie about that. By the time she’d reached the ranch

after her confrontation with Chase, she did have a throbbing head. "You look like you're going to a business meeting."

"Actually I just came back from an appointment at the bank."

It suddenly seemed as though he was having a hard time meeting her eyes. His interest was in something happening outside the stables, something she couldn't see because of her position on the bottom step. But his actions were uncharacteristic enough to send warning signals through Lacey. She reached out to touch his arm and gain his attention, unprepared to see the worry in his eyes.

"Dad...what is it?"

He smiled down at her reassuringly. "Walk with me back to the house, dear."

Lacey didn't like the sound of his voice. She laid her sketchbook and pencils on the bottom step. They walked a couple of minutes in silence before her father began to speak.

"I hear you and Chase had a run-in."

That was the last thing Lacey expected to hear, and she turned surprised eyes on him, her mouth gaping. Only his expression was clearly amused over the situation. "What did he do, go running to you after I slapped him yesterday?"

"You slapped him?" Gray-sprinkled brows rose in disbelief. Lacey glanced away, her cheeks growing hot at her slip-up when it became obvious Chase hadn't mentioned the slap.

After a while she admitted, "The man just rubs me the wrong way, Dad. He's so arrogant and bossy." She finally looked at him. "Do you know he had the nerve to warn me to stay away from Brian?" There was no way she was going to divulge everything that had taken place between them. They continued walking toward the house. "How can you employ a man like him? He acts as if he owns the place."

Her father said nothing, only sighed deeply and looked past the large ranch house and beyond, toward the mountains. Lacey thought about the hunting cabin he had up there, wondering if it

was still standing after all the years of not being used. As a younger man he'd gone up there often, and he'd taken her and her mother there, too. It seemed like a hundred years ago since they'd been a complete family.

"Dad?"

She could tell by his gaze that he was miles away. He seemed so sad all of a sudden. She put her hand on his arm to get his attention. He blinked and looked down at her, then smiled.

"He does, kind of. I guess I can't go on without telling you the truth. You're going to find out soon enough, and I want to be the one to tell you."

Lacey remained quiet, sensing he was about to disclose something that would change everything.

"I need Chase. His ideas and changes have kept this ranch running and out of debt."

"Out of debt?" Lacey couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I was a rich man with money to invest, dear, sometimes it works out. Only I made a very unwise investment and it almost ruined me."

They climbed the porch steps of the house and sank down onto the wicker swing. "But where does Chase come into all of this?" She dreaded the answer she sensed was coming.

"He loaned me the money to keep this place and to get back on my feet."

Even though she'd been expecting it, Lacey's jaw still dropped at the news. "He has money?" Her father nodded. "But he works for you!"

He laughed out loud at her comment. "He doesn't work for me, dear. Like me, Chase made an investment with his money. He owns half of this ranch."

He owns half of the ranch? She shook her head with disbelief. Two riders approaching the stables caught her attention, and she

narrowed her eyes until they were close enough for her to make out that it was Chase and her stepmother. She forced her attention back to her father, still numb with the news.

"I don't know what to say."

"I'm glad you finally know. It's been a weight on my shoulders for a long time."

"How long has he owned half the ranch?"

"Almost four years." His smile wasn't meant for her, and Lacey turned to see Rita and Chase walking their way.

Four years! "Why didn't you come to me instead? I might have been able to help you out, financially. I have money."

"No, dear, I couldn't do that. I was embarrassed at the time. I never intended to tell you how badly I goofed." He reached down and patted her hand.

"Does Rita know any of this?"

"No. I couldn't tell her either. Some day I'll get up the nerve to tell her the only thing she'll inherit from this marriage is a healthy life insurance policy. You and Chase get the ranch and stock."

Lacey thought about her and Chase being partners some day. She couldn't fathom it. Her gaze went to the man who was closing the distance between them rapidly. His strides were wide and purposeful, and she became amused when she noticed Rita had to practically skip to keep up.

It suddenly occurred to Lacey that Chase didn't practice what he preached. He warned her away from Brian because he was married. So what made it okay for him to keep company with her stepmother?

The front door opened and the maid poked her head out. "Telephone, Mr. Owens."

Carl glanced up at her. "Please tell who..."

When it became clear he was about to forego taking the call on her account Lacey quickly jumped to her feet. "No, Dad, you go

get that. It might be important. Besides, I really need a shower. I'll see you later, okay?"

"If you're sure—"

"I'm positive."

Lacey was eager to make her escape. Chase and Rita were almost on them and she could already feel the heat of his eyes on her, running over her disheveled state. Rita looked so cool and put together, while Lacey was hot and sticky and knew she had dirt on her clothes. She hurried down the porch steps, wishing there was another way to get to her apartment besides walking past them.

"You don't have to rush off, Lacey."

There was no way Lacey could ignore Rita without seeming rude, and she'd bite off her tongue before letting Chase think she was running away because of him. The smile on her face didn't come close to reaching her eyes, but she figured it was better than nothing.

"I have some things to take care of. Did you enjoy your afternoon ride?"

"Oh yes! I enjoy an afternoon ride almost every day."

Lacey wondered what else she enjoyed every afternoon, with Chase. Try as she might, she couldn't ignore him. His presence was too forceful and vital. She met the silver splinter of his narrowed eyes, damning him to hell and back. He must have sensed how she felt, because his mouth twitched with amusement.

"Well, if you'll both excuse me." She didn't wait to hear if they excused her or not, she moved past them and didn't look back.

She was still fuming when she reached her apartment and slammed the door behind her. She kicked off her muddy sneakers and left them on the mat by the door. Her socks came off next. By the time she reached her bathroom she was almost naked.

The next time she got Chase alone she'd have a thing or two to say to him. She turned on the cold water, yelling when it hit her

heated body, then immediately turned on the hot until the two blended into a temperature Lacey could tolerate.

She was rinsing her hair free of shampoo when she heard a loud pounding on the outside door. Turning off the water, she pulled the shower curtain aside. Her worst fears came true when she heard the door to her apartment open and realized she'd left it unlocked. She stepped out of the tub onto the bath mat and reached for a towel. *Who could it be?* She wrapped the towel around her body, tucked the loose ends between her breasts, and then reached for the doorknob. Instinct warned her to lock it, but she jerked it open instead, coming face-to-face with Chase.

"Get dressed."

What? The man had gone too far in her opinion. She reached up to wipe the hair out of her eyes. "You have a lot of nerve coming in here uninvited, and then ordering me to dress. You might own half of my father's ranch, mister, but you don't own half of me!" She just managed to catch the towel as it started to slip.

"So he finally told you." Chase's smile made his handsome face even more striking, but Lacey was too incensed to appreciate it.

"Did you honestly think he wouldn't? I am his daughter."

Chase shrugged. "I told him it was his decision and none of my business. As for me coming in here uninvited, I knocked."

"You hardly gave me time to reach the door," Lacey pointed out. An uncontrollable heat spread over her body when the towel finally came undone between her breasts and slipped down. Chase got an eyeful before she caught it and pulled it back into place. There was that crooked grin again. And a look in his eyes that sent lust, instant and sharp, spiraling through Lacey's belly.

"I heard the water running and knew you wouldn't be able to hear me." His glance moved slowly down Lacey's body to her legs. She felt naked in the inadequate towel and Chase had a way of eating a woman up with just his eyes, making her want him. Did he know what he was doing to her?

"You could have waited." Her suggestion was met with a gleam of amusement in his eyes. She was beginning to shiver, and it wasn't from being wet. Her breath locked in her throat when the humor was rapidly replaced with wolfish intent.

Chase laughed, and she curled her fingers in an effort to keep from striking out at him. The action didn't go unnoticed. "So, you were worried about my intentions, were you? I can assure you, Lacey, we wouldn't be standing here wasting time if your delectable body was my intention."

"You're despicable! You knew I was taking a shower so you must have known I'd be naked. What else was I supposed to think? Any other man I know would have done the decent thing and waited in the other room for me."

"That was your first mistake," Chase said huskily, pulling Lacey to him roughly. "I'm not like any other man you know. Your second mistake was defying me."

His hand was rough against her naked shoulders, and he held Lacey so close that she could hardly take in air that wasn't spiked with his masculine scent. She could feel his hard-on throbbing against her and suddenly everything became clear. Chase was reacting to her the same way she was reacting to him, and he didn't like it any more than she did. It was obvious now that his actions toward her were to disguise what he was really feeling.

Her breasts were crushed against his muscular chest, and the next thing Lacey knew, Chase's hands were buried in her hair and he was snapping her head back. Then her mouth was being devoured by his. Lacey struggled weakly; her heart threatening to jump out of her chest. She'd never been kissed so masterfully before. Remembering that it had been a long time since she'd last made love, she responded immediately. Her breasts swelled against him and a liquid heat pooled between her thighs. She wanted his fingers there.

Chase's body grew taut against Lacey. His rough kiss gradually slackened into a sensual assault that caught her unaware. His arousal pounded against her body, filling her with fear and excitement at the same time. He was big. She wanted to deny the feelings he awakened in her, put out the fire rushing unchecked through her veins before it consumed her. And the only way to accomplish that was to mask his powerful effect on her with something else.

She pushed at him violently, instantly gaining her release. With it came the knowledge that if Chase hadn't wanted it that way, she'd still be in his arms and out of breath.

"Was that to punish me?" she gasped furiously, her face hot. "For a moment I was worried about rape."

Something leaped in Chase's eyes before he quickly masked his expression with a look Lacey was well familiar with. He sighed deeply. "You can use the word if it will make you feel better. But we both know that's not the word for what would have occurred between us had we gone on."

Lacey opened her mouth to deny his maddening observation when Chase turned away. "Get dressed, we've wasted enough time."

She followed close behind him, frowning. "Why? Is something wrong with my father?" There was no other reason for him to be there.

"No."

"Then what is it? You just can't come in here and order me around without an explanation. And if you're here to warn me away from Brian again, you can save your breath."

Chase jerked to a stop and whirled around to face Lacey, almost causing her to tumble over backward as she fought to keep from running into him. His expression clearly said she was trying his patience.

"Why the hell can't you just follow a simple request?"

"A simple request? It sounds more like an order to me."

“And you don’t take orders, is that it?”

“Not from you or any man.” She lifted her chin. “Unless I feel threatened. I happen to value my skin the way it is.” She knew as soon as the words were out she’d said too much.

“Then I suggest you get your shapely little body into some clothes and come to the house with me.” Chase paused for effect. “If you value your skin the way it is.”

Oh! He would use her words against her. “Not until—”

Chase released a bearlike growl and Lacey found herself hauled up against his unyielding body for a second time. “You’d drive a man to drink. Please, Lacey, get some clothes on and come with me.” He released her just as quickly. “Before I lose total control.”

Chase using the word please? For a moment Lacey was speechless. She stood her ground, hoping his bark was worse than his bite, before deciding she’d be a fool to keep baiting him the way she was. *Lose total control?* A delicious image of what that could mean flashed through Lacey’s mind.

Once in her bedroom she wiggled into clean jeans and threw on a red knit top in record time. The brush hardly had time to work out the tangles before she tossed it aside and sat on the edge of her bed to put on her socks and sneakers. The door opened and Chase stood in the threshold.

“Your timing is perfect.”

He shrugged indifferently. “I took it for granted that you were done dressing.”

“You take a lot for granted,” Lacey muttered, tying the first sneaker. “This had better be important, Chase, if I’m going to all this trouble for nothing.”

“You going to trouble?” He burst out laughing. “Hell, next time Owens can do his own dirty work.”

“My father asked you to come get me?” She stood up, running her hands through her still-damp tresses.

"We tossed a coin to be exact," he explained with a touch of humor. "Let's go."

"Wait just one minute." Lacey's comment halted him in his tracks. "I may be ready, but I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on." She felt much more in control now that she was dressed.

A deep sigh escaped Chase. "You're the most exasperating woman—"

"Look, I've done everything you asked. Now why can't you at least answer just one question?" She crossed her arms, seeing Chase's gaze drop to her breasts. A bra might have been a good idea but it was too late now.

Interestingly, a muscle appeared in his jaw and Lacey wondered if it was because of her stubbornness or something else. "Your father received a call that an escaped killer from Florida might be heading this way."

"What has that got to do with me going back to the house? I'm a big girl. And Texas is a big state."

Chase's mocking gaze narrowed on her. "A big girl who leaves her front door unlocked for uninvited men."

He had her on that one, damn him. Lacey chose to ignore his comment. "That doesn't answer my question."

Chase's walk was so casual that Lacey had no reason to fear anything from him. But when he reached her, he moved with the blinding speed of a striking snake. Before she knew what was happening she found herself picked up and flung over his broad shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She began to wiggle immediately until a hard slap on her tightly covered bottom stilled her into submission.

"Damn you, Chase...ouch!" He slapped her a second time.

"Now be a good girl and you'll be able to sit down when we reach the house. And that goes for curbing that venomous tongue of yours."

Lacey clenched her teeth. Surely he didn't intend to carry her all the way to the house. *Damn the man anyway, who does he think he is?* She felt the blood rushing to her head and wondered if she should tell him. It would serve him right if she passed out when he finally set her on her feet.

Chase didn't seem to have any trouble toting her all the way to the house. He was hardly breathing hard when they reached the front door and he finally put Lacey down. She glared up at him, ready to give him a piece of her mind, when the front door opened.

"There you two are. We were beginning to worry. What kept you so long?" Rita stood back so they could enter the foyer.

Lacey didn't feel the need to detail the abuse she'd suffered in Chase's hands. She half suspected Rita had seen them coming since she opened the door the minute they'd stepped up on the porch. Therefore, she must know the humiliating way Lacey had been brought to the house.

"Where's Dad?" Lacey inquired, moving past Rita.

"Where he usually is this time every day before dinner."

Lacey headed for the den, vaguely hearing Rita asking Chase something. She didn't bother knocking since the door was open, slipping in quietly. Her father was standing in front of the fireplace with his back to her. She could tell he was nursing a drink.

"Dad?" He whipped around so fast that some of his drink spilled over the side of the tumbler and onto the carpet. Lacey realized she'd startled him. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

He tried to laugh it off but Lacey could tell he had a lot on his mind. "I was deep in thought." He took a drink. "Chase took his sweet time in getting you here."

Lacey grinned in spite of herself. "That was my fault. I guess you can say I wasn't very cooperative. He had to convince me, and I don't mean verbally."

"You mean Chase managed to drag you here without even telling you why?" He chuckled.

"Yes, he forced me here if that's what you mean. He literally carried me here like a sack of potatoes!" Lacey's father was laughing now, and she stiffened. "I'm glad you can laugh about it, Dad."

The smile left Carl's face but there was no disguising the humor still twinkling in his eyes. "I sent Chase because I knew he could handle you."

Lacey couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I don't need handling. He as much as said you could do your own dirty work next time. Perhaps I was more than he counted on." She finally sank down onto one of the overstuffed leather chairs.

"You won't get an argument from me on that," Chase said from the doorway. He stepped into the room with Rita close behind him.

"Have you told her yet, dear?" Rita went to her husband, taking his drink from him when she noticed his glass was almost empty.

Lacey ignored Chase, who went to the bar to help himself. "Yes, please tell me what the big secret is. All Chase told me is that some man has escaped from prison and is coming this way."

"Might be heading this way. His name is John Johnson. I received a call from the sheriff warning me that he might be looking for revenge. So until he's captured, I'd sleep a lot better knowing you're here in the house with us."

"Revenge against whom, Dad?" Out of the corner of her eye, Lacey saw Chase walk to the French doors that led to the rose gardens.

"Against me. Johnson worked for me once. I caught him in some dirty business dealings and turned him in for it. You could say he's in prison because of me."

"Chase said he was an escaped murderer."

"The murder occurred while he was in prison."

Oh. Lacey absorbed the information silently, wondering what that could mean for them. For her father. Chase remained quiet,

leaning against the doorframe and nursing his scotch, letting Carl do all the talking. Rita sat like a frozen statue on the sofa, appearing every bit the damsel in distress.

"He gained quite a vicious reputation in prison, so I would say he's very dangerous and unpredictable. The police are looking for him, but they think he has someone on the outside helping him." Carl paused briefly. "Will you move back into your old room again until this is over?"

"Dad, I—"

"She'll stay." It was Chase's voice that sliced through what Lacey had been about to say. Her eyes flashed toward him, reading the determination in his gaze. He continued before she could open her mouth. "And I'll stay in the apartment over the stables. It might be better if I hang around here a few days." The look in his hard eyes all but dared her to defy him. He took a sip of his scotch, keeping his eyes on her over the rim of his glass.

The thought of Chase staying at her place, sliding his big, warm body between her sheets and sleeping in her bed, sent a sharp rush of need through Lacey. It spoke of a shared intimacy they hadn't shared yet. She blushed with the erotic thoughts of them together beneath those cool sheets.

As if he knew her secret thoughts, his eyes blazed with an unspoken promise, or challenge, and Lacey looked at her father to see if he noticed their silent exchange. She suddenly wished for her own drink, realizing she needed something to steady her nerves. Why did she come so unglued around him?

The answer was easy. She wanted him.

In the end, Lacey knew she didn't have much of a choice. She couldn't stand up against both Chase and her father. And they both seemed equally determined to keep her there in the house. She had no choice but to give in.

Chapter 4

Lacey was up with the crack of dawn the next day, having spent a surprisingly comfortable night considering she'd been forced to sleep in nothing but her panties. She hadn't bothered returning to her apartment to get the things she needed, so she had no choice but to slip back into the same jeans and knit shirt from the night before.

She looked like something the cat dragged in when she walked down to the breakfast table. She'd splashed water on her face and used her finger as a toothbrush, but her fingers were a poor substitute for a decent brush. Rita's clear disapproval of her untidy appearance was evident on her heavily made-up face.

Well, what did she expect? Even if Lacey had taken up her offer of a nightgown last night, she would hardly have come down in it. "I guess I should have gone back to my apartment last night for a few things."

She exchanged a knowing glance with her father before he hid his amusement behind his morning paper. Lacey noticed his plate was pushed to one side, indicating he was finished, yet there seemed to be a lot of food left on the dish.

"Not hungry this morning, Dad?" She sat down beside him, reaching for the coffeepot.

"I took more than I wanted." He rose from his chair, folding his newspaper. "I hate to leave you when you're just getting here, but I've got some business to take care of this morning. Rita and I are flying to Dallas later today, would you like to go with us?"

"Thanks, but not this time. I have work to do myself." Lacey sipped at her coffee, thinking about the project she was supposed to be working on and the impending deadline. "What about Johnson? Have you heard anything about him this morning?"

"No, thank God." It was Rita who answered Lacey's question. "At least not hearing anything might be a sign that he's not around."

Lacey knew that wasn't a sign of anything but decided not to enlighten her. Let Rita believe what she wanted if it eased her mind. "Dad, you be careful." She reached up and touched his arm.

"Don't worry, dear. If Johnson does show his face around here, he'll be picked up before he sets one foot on this property."

Lacey's eyes rounded with surprise at his remark. "Then why were you so insistent about me coming back to the house?"

He smiled down at her, a father's love evident on his face. "Now that's something you'll understand better after you have your own children." He stooped to kiss her forehead before doing the same to Rita.

An awkward silence followed after he left the room. Lacey pretended to become interested in the newspaper, slowly sipping her coffee while Rita finished off a boiled egg. Out of the corner of her eye, Lacey could see her gently dab at her mouth with the linen napkin before placing it down on the table.

She seemed to be waiting for something, and finally Lacey's curiosity got the better of her and she glanced up. "You know, you really are welcome to join us this evening. We could invite Chase and make it a foursome."

That was the wrong thing to say. The last thing Lacey wanted was to spend an evening out with Chase. "Thank you, but no. I really do have work to do." Lacey finished her now-cooled drink and scooted her chair back. "If I don't see you again before you leave, have a good time in Dallas."

It was overcast. One minute the sun was out; the next it was behind gray clouds. Rain was in the air and Lacey realized it

wouldn't be a good day for sketching. She was glad, because she wasn't in the mood for it anyway.

She made her way toward the stables, deciding at the last minute to go for a ride. The things she needed from her apartment could wait until later. She was just about to step through the doorway to the stables when she heard voices. She halted, uncertain if she should continue. From the sound of the conversation taking place, she would be interrupting a very intimate moment.

"Kiss me, darling," the woman purred in a thick, honeyed drawl. There was a pregnant pause, and Lacey could only assume that whoever the man was, he was obliging her. "Is that the best you can do?"

"Under the circumstances, yes."

It was Chase! And he sounded cold and indifferent. Lacey took a quick step back to hide in the shadows. The last thing she wanted was to be caught eavesdropping.

"You rode all the way out here for nothing. I have work to do."

"But you always have work to do, darling. If not here, then at your place. I'm tired of waiting for you to come to me. I thought we could spend the day together out at the old mill like we used to." Her husky tone was seductive, and Lacey could just imagine the half-closed eyes and parted mouth, all meant to persuade Chase to do her bidding.

"You remember how hot it was between us back then, don't you, Chase? It's been a long time since we've made love, too long. Let's take a ride out to the old mill, for old time's sake."

"Lacey."

Lacey nearly jumped out of her skin and whirled around to face Brian, quickly shushing him with a gesture. She dragged him back in the shadows with her, hoping they hadn't been seen or heard. He seemed to know what was expected of him and kept quiet, his eyes questioning her instead.

"That was a long time ago, Stella. Our relationship is over."

"That bitch!" Brian whispered down at Lacey. "I can't believe her nerve, coming back here after all these years and thinking Chase would take her back at the drop of a hat."

He was quiet after his furious outburst, and Lacey remained silent, not knowing what to say. She didn't know the full story, but by Brian's reaction, she guessed Stella had hurt Chase. *Had they been high school sweethearts?*

"Are you ever going to forgive me? Darling, I was still a child back then. Surely you—"

"I really don't have time for this. If you'll excuse me." Chase's tone brooked no argument, clearly stating that their discussion was over.

"What do we do?" Lacey whispered to Brian, realizing Chase would be coming out of the stables any minute, and with Stella most likely right behind him.

She could feel more than see Brian's shrug. "What do eavesdroppers do when they're about to get caught?"

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop! They caught me by surprise, and before I knew it I was..."

"Eavesdropping?"

"Yes, darn it! What are we going to do?" There was panic in her hushed tone, but Lacey couldn't help it. Visions of being skinned alive or dipped in boiling oil came to mind if Chase should discover them.

"We're going to stay here and hope to hell big brother doesn't notice us." Even as he spoke, he nudged Lacey deeper into the crevice they were hiding in.

Hiding from Chase was the easy part. He charged out of the stable on his big black horse as if the devil himself were after him. And he looked fit to be tied. It seemed a long time went by before Stella followed at a much slower pace, and Lacey was able to get a good look at her.

The woman was beautiful, in an old Victorian sort of way. Lacey felt dull in comparison. Not an auburn hair on Stella's head was out of place, and she was attired like royalty. Her complexion was milky white and flawless, and she was model thin. As soon as she was far enough away, they left their hiding place.

"That was close!" she breathed and walked into the stable. She went straight to Misty's stall and pulled the bridle off the wall.

"You going for a ride?" Brian was behind her until he disappeared into the stall of another horse.

"Yeah. Care to join me?" Lacey had already climbed on top of Misty and looked down at him while he saddled his horse.

"I'd love to, but that's not what I get paid for." He offered her a quick smile before turning back to his work. "Maybe some other time." He mounted and together they rode out of the stable. "Where you off to?"

"I might ride out to the old mill." Lacey wasn't even aware she was thinking about it until the words left her mouth. Brian didn't seem to think anything of it, though.

"See you later then."

Lacey pulled on the reins and let Misty gallop out of the yard in the direction of the old mill. It used to be a place for school kids to meet and hang out, and have innocent fun. Then later high school kids used it as a place for partying. Apparently it was a place for lovers too. For as long as she could remember it had been empty.

She was astonished when she saw it for the first time. It had been years since she'd last been there and she hadn't known what to expect. Finding it still standing in one piece made her happy. There was something about the old wood structure that had always drawn her to it.

Dismounting, she walked around the small building, wanting to make sure it looked sturdy enough before she ventured inside. Shrubs and other small trees had overrun it, almost hiding it from

view. Vines covered the walls and some of the windows. Some glass had been broken out and the building was tilting slightly to one side, but Lacey decided it looked safe enough.

She made her way to the door and found it nailed shut. Why would someone do that? Frowning, she gave the knob a good pull anyway, thinking she could force it open. After all, the wood was noticeably rotten. But her efforts were wasted. *Damn!* She almost fell to the ground, and glanced down at a broken nail.

Well, if she couldn't get in through the door, there had to be another way. She made her way to the nearest window, finding most of the glass broken out of it except for a few jagged pieces around the connecting frame. Gingerly, Lacey poked at the protruding shards until they broke loose and fell inside to the rotten floor.

That should do it. She carefully crawled through to the other side. Since the windows were covered with years of filth and outside growth, the inside of the mill was dark, damp, and musty. Lacey stood for a moment to let her eyes adjust, afraid to move because of what she might step on or what might be in the room with her. What a foolish thing she'd done.

It wasn't long before she could take in her surroundings. The outside of the place had fared a lot better than the inside. She moved silently around the room, afraid to touch anything. As her eyes fell on crude rotting furniture that showed evidence of being chewed on, Lacey wondered what small critters had made their homes in the building during the years. The small stone fireplace revealed it had provided a nest for something.

There was little furniture in the place that wasn't rotten or broken in some way by years of abuse. The floor was littered with garbage, beer cans, and cigarette butts. It was a wonder the place hadn't burned down long ago. In the corner was an iron bed with a stained, sagging mattress. Lacey shuddered. She couldn't imagine anyone making love on *that*.

Suddenly she heard the telltale sounds of a rider approaching. Lacey smiled. It had to be Brian because he was the only one who knew she was there. Her gaze went to the door until she remembered it was nailed shut. She opened her mouth to tell him when, without warning, a violent shudder shook the whole place. Her gaze flew to the roof with alarm, half expecting it to come crashing down at any second. She screamed and backed into an old wood table that had been left standing in the middle of the room.

She briefly thought about crawling under it for protection. Whoever was out there was trying to get in, and her dull mind finally registered that they were trying to kick the door in. It took them two tries before the rotten barrier gave way and the door flew back against the wall, half off its hinges, to hang crookedly. Then, silhouetted in the doorway was a giant, faceless shadow. Lacey couldn't help the second cry that escaped her when she realized it wasn't Brian.

The first thought that crossed her mind was that it was John Johnson; the second that she was alone. She would have backed up farther if it hadn't been for the table. The shadow detached itself from the doorway and moved farther into the room until Lacey was able to make out Chase's chiseled, unsmiling features. His eyes looked like volcanic rock.

In spite of the anger etched on his face, Lacey released a breath of relief. "You scared me half to death! Why didn't you come in through the window like I had to do?" She managed a shaky laugh.

Chase's splintery eyes moved to the window behind her. He seemed to be in the grip of some strong emotion. His fists were clenched at his sides, his nostrils flaring with every breath. And the whiteness of his pressed lips revealed he was clenching his jaw.

"Did it occur to you that the door was nailed shut for a reason?"

She shrugged, the action bringing his attention to the rip in her shirt. "I guess it was nailed shut because this place is unsafe?"

“And guessing that, you didn’t let it stop you from breaking a window and—”

“The window was already broken,” Lacey defended herself, her spirit returning now that she was no longer frightened. “And I doubt I’m the first person to ever make my way inside here. How did you and Stella sneak in?”

She knew instantly that she’d made a big mistake. It didn’t take the thunderous look on Chase’s face to tell her that. Lacey was appalled at herself for taunting him with something she really knew nothing about. Her heart rate accelerated when he began to move forward in unhurried, long-legged strides. There was a dangerous look in his eyes that Lacey was rapidly becoming familiar with. She had nowhere to retreat to, but dashed to the other side of the table just the same.

“Chase, I’m sorry. I don’t know what made me say that.” The table was violently shoved out of the way and crashed into pieces when it hit the wall. “Chase...”

For every step Lacey took back, Chase took one closer. Since he was blocking the only door to the place, she had no choice but to turn and flee toward the same window she’d gained admittance through earlier. She didn’t know what had happened between Chase and Stella, but by his reaction, she could only guess he wasn’t over it. For now, her only objective was in escaping in one piece.

Lacey didn’t have a chance, but the instinct to escape was strong. She felt Chase’s presence behind her but didn’t let it stop her from attempting to climb out the window.

“Going somewhere?”

A small cry escaped her. His arm encircled her waist and pulled her away from the window ledge she’d just hoisted herself up on. Then Lacey was brought up against the front of Chase’s hard body. She struggled wildly against him, kicking and twisting to get free. A grunt sounded in her ear.

“Lacey!”

She ignored the warning in his tone and continued to squirm against him. It wasn't until she felt Chase's erection against her bottom that she understood the reason for the huskiness in his voice. She was turning him on. She grew weak with the knowledge. And all at once what started out as a battle was rapidly turning into an awakening of other senses. When she felt the strength and hardness of him push against her, she closed her eyes and savored a moment of weakness.

Was that her soft sigh?

“Lacey...” Chase groaned again as though in agony, the sound filling the room above her gasps. His mouth moved against her ear, the heat of his breath sending a tingle down her spine. Then he shuddered. “Lady, if you don't stop wiggling against me, I'm going to toss you on the floor and screw the hell out of you.”

Lacey's eyes grew round at his threat, and the erotic sight his words conjured up. *Is that the cowboy way?* She stilled instantly, the breath rushing from her in tortured spurts, the urge to say, go ahead on the tip of her tongue. Yet it wasn't Chase's soft warning she was afraid of. Lacey was frightened of her own response to his words, and her senses were swimming with the fact that he desired her. It was a powerful aphrodisiac. And just what her wounded ego needed.

For a moment they were still, and silent. Only their breathing could be heard. Chase's hands roamed up her rib cage until they were cupping her breasts. A heavy breath escaped Lacey and her head rolled back onto his chest when he began to caress her roughly. His fingers manipulated her nipples until they were hard and aching.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” he whispered into her ear, his lips gently brushing against the delicate shell and causing Lacey to quiver against him. “But damn you feel good right now.”

It did feel good. "I wasn't afraid that you would," she admitted after a while. Warmth flowed through Lacey's body toward the core of her, where the pleasure built. Before she realized what she was doing she arched her back, forcing her bottom closer to his erection. He sucked in his breath.

"Then why were you running?" He whispered the words against her neck.

Why was she running? Because she was afraid of what he made her feel. Even when they were snapping at each other, part of her was drawn to him, woman to man. He radiated sex appeal. She tried to answer him, but the close proximity of his body and his strong arousal were slowly turning her into a mindless creature who could only feel, not think. Lacey knew she had to break the spell that bound them, and soon. Before it was too late and she begged Chase to do what he'd threatened.

"Chase." She started to pull away.

"Just relax." His voice sounded gruff. "Nothing's going to happen."

Lacey was allowed to pull away, realizing if Chase hadn't wanted her to she wouldn't have been able to. "I'm really sorry about the remark I made about you and Stella. I had no right."

"I shouldn't have overreacted to it. Just what did Brian tell you about it?"

She turned to face him. "Nothing." How could she ever admit to eavesdropping?

"Just gossip through the grapevine?"

"Something like that." Lacey swallowed hard for the small lie. "Did Brian tell you I'd ridden out here?"

"It's a damn good thing you had the insight to tell someone where you were riding. If anything had happened to you—"

"I didn't tell Brian on purpose," Lacey cut in heatedly, crossing her arms. "In case you haven't noticed, Chase, I'm not a child."

I've been coming and going on my own for the last ten years. What makes you think I need to inform anyone of anything?"

"John Johnson is what makes me think so," he snapped. "You're staying in the big house isn't enough. Didn't it occur to you that he could be out here somewhere this very minute, looking for the golden opportunity to present itself so he can get back at Owens? This is a huge ranch, Lacey. What if he'd found you before I came along?"

Lacey wasn't about to tell him it had already crossed her mind. When he'd kicked the door in and all she'd seen was a big, menacing shadow. He was right, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of telling him that.

"So what am I supposed to do, Chase? Take a babysitter with me everywhere I go? I'm used to freedom. And what about this evening? I don't see anyone worried about me being left alone while Dad and Rita go into Dallas."

"You won't be alone."

"Well, I refuse to be babysat either." Lacey's tone rose with each syllable.

"Who said anything about babysitting? Do you think I relish the thought of spending an evening alone with a mouthy, mean-tempered, hot-headed woman?" Lacey's eyes rounded when she realized he'd be there with her. And they'd be alone. "It's a big house, and I have some work to do. You stay in your half, and I'll stay in mine."

Lacey was too angry to say anything, still stinging from his uncomplimentary description of her. *Mouthy! Mean-tempered! Hot-headed!* She could accuse Chase of a lot more, but seriously doubted the words she'd choose would have any affect on him. They'd probably bounce right off that big, hard, insensitive chest. She turned abruptly away from him.

"Where are you going?"

“Back home. Anywhere away from you.” She went to the window.

Chase’s unfamiliar bark of laughter halted her in her tracks, and Lacey looked back at him suspiciously. “Have you forgotten the door is open?”

She had, damn him. Pressing her lips together, her cheeks burning from frustration, Lacey had a good mind to leave through the window anyway. It must have shown on her face because there was laughter in his gaze.

She stormed past him wordlessly. Home wasn’t going to be far enough away from the irritating man.

Chapter 5

Lacey was fully aware Chase followed her home, though he kept his distance. She refused to acknowledge him in any way, but she could feel his gaze burning a hole in her back. She rode directly into the stables and dismounted, instinctively knowing Chase would be gone when she emerged. If she came out.

She went straight to her apartment instead, where she decided to work on her sketches. It was the only thing that would take her mind off Chase. Aware her deadline was creeping closer, she worked without stopping until the persistent protest of her empty stomach demanded she give it some fuel. A glance at her watch revealed it was midafternoon.

No wonder she was famished. Lacey opened the refrigerator door and was just bending over the contents when someone knocked at her door. She jumped and bumped her head, calling for whoever it was to come in. If it was Chase, she would probably get a tongue lashing for not having the door locked. She rubbed the back of her head.

“You all right, dear?” her father asked.

“Yes, just looking for something to eat.” Lacey took in his casual traveling clothes. “Getting ready to leave?”

He nodded. “I wanted to stop by to see if you’d changed your mind about going with us.” Lacey shook her head. “You will be staying at the house tonight, right? Rita and I will be home late, and I don’t want to worry about you. I asked Chase,” Lacey made a

ticking sound with her tongue, but he ignored it, "to keep an eye out for, ah, trouble."

"You mean keep an eye out on me, don't you?" She walked into the living room and sank down on the sofa, her eyes taking in the twenty or so scrunched-up balls of paper that littered the floor around her. She'd missed the can every time.

"I want to know the truth, Dad. Why has your ranch foreman suddenly become my shadow? Has Johnson made any threats? You're the one who sent him to prison, but it seems I'm the one being watched like a hawk."

Was it her imagination or did he suddenly seem very uncomfortable? "I'm just being cautious, that's all, and maybe a little overprotective. The last we heard Johnson was nowhere near here. Do you think I'd leave if we knew that he was in the area?"

Lacey stared at her father for a long time, keeping her mouth shut. Maybe she was being overly sensitive about the whole thing. She'd been on her own for so many years, it went against the grain to have to explain her comings and goings. Yet she couldn't shake the feeling that her father was keeping something from her.

She finally forced a smile for his benefit, getting a much-relieved one from him in return. He actually sighed as though a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"I guess there's nothing to worry about then, so you can call Chase off." She got up to give him a hug. "You and Rita have a good evening out. I'll most likely be asleep by the time you get home."

It began to rain shortly after her father left. Lacey loved the sound of a good, heavy rainfall, and thunder and lightning had never bothered her. No longer hungry, she sank back down on the sofa, leaned her head back against the cushions and closed her eyes. Concentrating on the hypnotic sound of the pitter-patter and enjoying the peacefulness, it wasn't long before it lulled her to sleep.

* * * *

It was late when Lacey stirred. Realizing it would be dark soon, she didn't relish the thought of walking to the house alone in the dark. She quickly packed her smallest suitcase with just the necessities and managed to reach the front door before the sky opened up again. Lacey kept right on going up to her old room, where she grabbed a quick shower and slipped into her robe. Having skipped eating earlier in exchange for a nap, her growling stomach forced her back downstairs for something to eat.

The house was unusually quiet, so it came as quite a shock when Lacey pushed through the swinging kitchen door to find Hester, the cook, on the other side. The older woman was sitting at the kitchen bar eating her own dinner while watching the small television set on the counter. Both women startled each other.

"I thought I was alone."

"I didn't realize there was anyone else in the house."

They burst out laughing.

"I'm the only one about. The rest were dismissed for the day," Hester explained.

"But not you?" Lacey sat on a stool next to her. The kitchen smelled wonderful, and now she knew the reason why. There was a basket of homemade biscuits on the counter, and she reached for one.

"Miss Rita thought you might want some dinner." Hester picked up her plate and went to scrape the remnants down the disposal.

"I've been fixing myself dinner for a long time now, Hester. You finish what you need to and then get yourself home to your family."

Sinking her teeth into a warm biscuit, Lacey closed her eyes and moaned. "This tastes like heaven." She couldn't recall the last time she'd eaten anything so good.

"Made them this morning." The older woman beamed at the compliment. "Have another."

Lacey did. Before she knew it, she'd devoured three while watching Hester clean up her dishes. "I'm afraid I made a pig out of myself. I haven't had a homemade biscuit in years."

Hester only smiled and removed the now-empty basket. "Are you sure you don't want me to fix you any dinner before I go?"

"No, I'm stuffed now."

"Well then, I guess I'll be saying good night. Mind you, lock the door behind me."

Lacey smiled at her and did as she was told. Once she was gone, the house really did seem quiet. She switched off the kitchen light and went to her father's den to choose a book from his collection. With the storm raging outside, it would be a perfect night to spend in bed reading.

She pulled several books from the shelves to look them over and nearly threw them in the air when the phone began to ring. Laughing, Lacey reached for the receiver, surprised to see her hand was actually shaking.

"Hello?"

There was no answer. Lacey wondered if there was a bad connection when a crackle of thunder suddenly boomed, rattling the windows. She looked out the French door glass, seeing a jagged bolt of lightning flash across the sky. She knew someone was there, she could hear breathing. When there was no response, she put the phone down with a bang.

Lacey was a little more prepared when it rang the next time. "Hello!" she screamed into the receiver, her brows furrowing. She clutched the books to her breast with trembling hands.

There was a brief pause before Lacey heard her father's startled voice on the other end. "You don't have to yell my ear off, dear. Is something the matter?"

"I'm sorry, Dad, you startled me. Did you call a few seconds ago?"

"I did, but the line was busy. Anything I need to know?"

"No. It must have been a wrong number, or a bad connection or something. It's storming here." As if to back up her story, the air was split with another rumble of thunder. "Hear it?"

"Yes, that's why I'm calling. It's storming here as well. It looks like Rita and I won't make it home tonight after all. I don't like flying the plane in this kind of weather."

"Of course not." Lacey wouldn't want him to, either. "Don't worry about me. I'll be okay."

"Good girl. Now put Chase on, will you, dear?"

Her father obviously assumed Chase was there with her. If she remembered correctly, Chase was meeting Stella in town that night. She had no idea when he'd return. Lacey had to think quickly. She didn't want her father worrying, and he would if he knew she was there alone.

"I can't right now, Dad. He's...he's in the shower." Lacey knew it was a stupid thing to say as soon as the words left her mouth.

"While it's storming?"

"Well, you know how he is. Besides, lightning wouldn't dare strike him."

"Let him know I phoned and that I'll call back later. Good-bye, dear."

"Good-bye."

"Was that Owens?"

Lacey let out a shriek and spun around to face Chase. Heat spread to her cheeks when she noticed his half-dressed state. He apparently had just come from taking a shower, and his hair was still damp. A shirt was draped over one broad shoulder, and he hadn't even finished buckling his low-hung jeans. One word came to mind: sexy.

She looked away from his disturbing presence and pretended interest in the two books in her hands. "Yes, it was." She moved away from the desk and replaced one of the books on the shelf.

"I wanted to talk to him."

He moved farther into the room, his hawklike gaze making Lacey uncomfortable. She tightened her belt around her waist and made sure it was closed over her breasts. Without taking his eyes off her, Chase slipped into his shirt, but he didn't button it, leaving his muscular chest exposed. Lacey wet her suddenly dry lips, wondering what his damp skin would taste like. "Why didn't you pick up the extension upstairs?"

"I wasn't upstairs," he explained. "I was out at the pool."

"Oh," was all she could say, as that thought hadn't entered her mind. She hadn't had the chance to go swimming since her return. The sound of raindrops against the window reminded Lacey it was storming out. "Hasn't anyone ever told you it's not safe to go swimming when there's lightning out?"

"I've been told," Chase admitted, moving toward her in a slow, unhurried pace. "But if you'd bothered to count, you'd realize the lightning is miles away."

"I thought I was alone." Lacey hadn't meant it to come out sounding so soft and seductive, but Chase's close proximity was making her think of things she shouldn't be.

Like how handsome he was, and virile. And knowing Chase, he probably swam in the nude. She wished he'd button his shirt. He made it hard to concentrate, and her eyes constantly strayed to his muscular chest. His nipples were erect, and she felt hers tighten in response. *Damn*. She groaned loudly and brought the book to her chest.

"I've been here all along. I have a private office in one of the back rooms where I do my paperwork." Chase's voice was low and husky. *Is he aroused too?*

She made the mistake of lowering her eyes. "Oh."

There was no way she could ignore the bulge behind his zipper. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks and knew they would feel hot if she were to touch them. *Damn him*. He had no right to make

her feel this way. And why him of all people? Why did it have to be a rugged, arrogant Texas cowboy who stirred her blood so?

"Are you hungry?" Lacey could barely look Chase in the eye when she realized the double meaning behind her innocent question. But the silence that followed forced her to meet his gaze again. Chase's eyes revealed exactly what he was hungry for. He wanted her. It was in his smoldering look; it was in his body language. Most of all, Lacey could smell it.

She swallowed hard. "I could fix you some dinner."

"Hester usually leaves me something."

Lacey remembered the delicious biscuits she'd devoured less than an hour ago. Lord, she prayed they hadn't been meant for Chase's dinner and Hester hadn't said anything out of politeness. *Would he believe there was such a thing as a biscuit thief?* She couldn't help it; her lips turned up in a smile that reached her eyes.

"What's wrong? You look like the cat that just swallowed the canary."

His deep voice broke into Lacey's thoughts and brought her back to the present. She wasn't aware her expression had given her away and made an effort to wipe the grin off her face. But she couldn't disguise the laughter in her eyes.

"You might say this cat swallowed the biscuits."

"The biscuits?" Chase's brows drew together as he tried to decipher what Lacey meant. And then it dawned on him. "You ate my biscuits?" She nodded, a little too eagerly. "All of them?"

"Afraid so, Chase. I didn't realize they'd been left for your dinner, and Hester was too sweet to tell me." It was the closest Lacey could come to an apology.

"I wonder, would it have made any difference?"

The smile on Chase's face held Lacey mesmerized. It changed his usually stern features into those of a more relaxed, approachable man. Their gazes clung for a long moment until Lacey looked away first.

"Probably not. They were very good. Once I started, I couldn't stop until they were all gone."

"Is that how you keep your," Chase paused meaningfully, "luscious shape?" His gaze ran over her in a thorough inspection, apparently satisfied with her rounded curves.

Lacey wondered if he liked what he saw. "Are you implying that I'm fat?"

"Not at all." Amusement danced in his usually hard eyes. "I don't care for the broom-handle types."

Well, that certainly left Stella out. Lacey wanted to remind him of that but thought better of it. And that still didn't tell her what type that made her. She decided the best thing to do was change the subject.

"Would you like me to fix you something for dinner? I promise not to put poison in it." She turned to leave the room.

"I guess that's the least you can do, considering you ate my dinner." Chase was right behind her. "You can cook, can't you?"

"When I have to."

When they entered the kitchen, she headed straight for the fridge, and Chase sank down on one of the bar stools at the counter. Lacey's eyes scanned the contents before turning back to him. "I make a mean peanut butter sandwich," she teased.

Chase made a face. "Try and feed me that and you might as well poison me."

"Did you like it when you were a kid?"

"I liked a lot of things when I was a kid," he responded. "But in case you haven't noticed, those days are long gone"

Oh she noticed all right. That was the trouble. And with his eyes on her like that and the unusual rapport going on between them, it was getting harder and harder to remember that she didn't even like him.

"Then what would you like?" she asked after a moment.

"A plate of Hester's homemade biscuits."

Lacey liked the teasing going on between them. She hadn't thought Chase had it in him. He was nothing like Brian, who seemed easygoing and laughed at everything. A smile quivered on her lips as she sighed deeply. "Well, we can't have that. Think of something else be—" She was cut off by the ringing of the phone, but she ignored it and kept digging around in the fridge. "That will most likely be for you." It was probably her father calling back for him. Her eyes finally landed on a plate of leftover roast. A couple of thick, hearty sandwiches should do him, along with a glass of milk. Lacey chuckled at the thought.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh...nothing," she responded quickly. "Who was on the phone?"

She put the plate of meat on the counter in front of Chase and turned to the cupboard where the bread was kept.

"Owens. He wanted to make sure I was here and everything was okay." Chase pulled the wrapping off the meat and started to pick at it.

"I think my dad sometimes forgets that I'm all grown up."

"Sometimes it's the grown-up little girls who need the most looking after."

Lacey didn't say anything to that. She was praying their unspoken truce would last, especially since they were going to be cooped up alone for the evening. Keeping her eyes on her task, she quickly made two sandwiches, put them on a plate, and handed it to Chase. She also put a bowl of plums in front of him and fought to keep a straight face when she set a large glass of cold milk next to his plate. She reached for a plum.

He froze, a sandwich halfway to his mouth. His eyes went from the milk to her and back to the milk again. "Are you trying to be cute, or do you think I'll actually drink that stuff?"

"It's good for you." She wiped at the plum juice trickling down her chin. "How did you and Brian get to be such big, strong

men if you didn't drink your milk?" She shouldn't have mentioned Brian's name but it was too late now. "I suppose you'd rather have a beer."

"Try coffee." He pushed the milk her way.

"Coffee! You'll be up all night."

Lacey took the glass and drank the contents down, leaving a white mustache on her upper lip.

"It's just as well. I have some paperwork to catch up on."

"Oh."

His gaze moved over her slowly. "What are your plans?"

"I'm going to curl up in bed with a book."

"What about my coffee?"

"Oh! I'll make you a pot before I go."

It didn't take Lacey long to get a pot brewing. She turned back to Chase. "Well, that should do it. Good luck with your paperwork." She was thankful for the sudden ringing of the phone again.

It gave her the chance she needed to slip away while he answered it.

Chapter 6

Lacey guessed it was sometime after midnight when she awoke with a jolt. She'd fallen asleep reading and was still in a reclining position. The light was off now, when it had been on earlier. The book on her lap had apparently fallen to the floor.

That was it. The book hitting the floor must have wakened her. The room was suddenly ablaze from a streak of lightning, followed by a boom of thunder so loud it shook the windows. Lacey listened to the rain beating against the glass; she could hear the eerie sound of the whistling wind and branches scraping against the house. Thank goodness her father and Rita had decided to spend the night in Dallas.

She pulled back the covers and rushed to the window. The rain was coming down in blinding sheets. She was tempted to open it so she could feel the rush of fresh, damp air against her. It didn't occur to Lacey to turn on the lights. Lightning flashes illuminated the room.

Another crash sounded through the house, causing Lacey to jump. Her gaze flew to her bedroom door. Someone was in the house. That must have been the sound she'd heard earlier. She rushed to the door and opened it slightly, listening for any more signs.

A low grunt reached her ears. She did hear someone moving around downstairs, someone who obviously didn't know their way around the house and was bumping into furniture. Adrenaline began to rush through her veins, and her heart rate picked up speed.

She ran to the phone on her nightstand to call the police, dialing as fast as she could in the semidarkness. She didn't notice there was no dial tone until she tried it a second time. The storm must have knocked out the lines. She placed it carefully back in the cradle and glanced at her partially opened door.

Crash!

Lacey felt a scream rising in her throat and bit her bottom lip with indecision. She searched the room for anything she could use as a weapon. When she heard more movement coming from below, she grabbed a bottle of perfume from on top of her dresser, hoping it could substitute as mace. She moved quietly on bare feet, much quieter than the intruder below. She tiptoed down the hallway toward the carpeted stairway, barely breathing. Every once in a while a flash of lightning brightened everything around her and her eyes rounded in fright as she tried to take in everything at once.

Where is the intruder?

The noise was coming from the direction of the kitchen. Lacey headed that way, trembling in fear. Just as she put her hand on the swinging door to push it, someone pushed from the other side with such force that she found herself stumbling backward. An alarmed cry escaped her, but she was able to right herself by grasping the intruder by his shirt.

"What the..."

The sound of material ripping seemed as loud as the thunder outside. Screaming, Lacey wasted no time in spraying the man, aiming blindly in the darkness. She heard him swear harshly, and the air was suddenly filled with the heady fragrance of Obsession.

"Hell, Lacey. Give me that damn bottle before you blind me!"

Recognizing Chase's voice should have calmed her fear, but it had the opposite effect. There was no disguising the rage he was in. His powerful hands ripped the bottle from Lacey's fingers and threw it against the wall.

"What the hell are you trying to do, scare me to death?"

Lacey was furious too, now that the danger was over and she realized the intruder was Chase. She'd forgotten all about him being in the house. "Don't you believe in turning on lights? I thought you were an intruder." She tried to pull away from him.

"The electricity is out. And if you thought I was an intruder, you had no business coming down here and confronting me. Why didn't you check to see if I was in my room?"

"Why didn't you call out that you were down here?"

"Why should I do that when I had every reason to believe you were upstairs asleep in your bed?" Chase was still holding her wrists, and a flash of lightning revealed he was scowling down at her.

"I thought you might be...Johnson." Lacey was suddenly aware they were so close that her breath was intermingling with his, and aware of how skimpily attired she was. "I heard someone moving around down here, bumping into furniture."

"I bumped into the table and chair on my way to the kitchen to make sure the door was locked. Easy to do when the lights are out," he rasped. "You little fool. Only you would face an intruder with a bottle of perfume. This little stunt only proves to me how much you do need looking after."

"I can take care of myself." Lacey finally tugged away from him. "And you owe me for that bottle of perfume." So much for their truce. She turned abruptly to leave.

"You little hellcat." His tone was low; the words ground out between his teeth. Chase's hand encircled her arm, and he jerked her back to him. "You almost blind me with that stuff, and now you expect me to replace it?" He pulled Lacey even closer, until her breasts were crushed against his unyielding, naked chest. His hands were like steel bands around the flesh of her upper arms.

She caught her breath, her heart slamming in her chest. The heat from Chase's body seeped into hers, drawing an immediate response. Lacey felt her nipples harden and tingle with excitement.

Something hot flowed through her aroused body, pooling between her thighs. The palms of her hands flattened against his chest; the lower half of her body arched into his as lust took control of her emotions. Fear that Chase would realize what he was doing to her nearly crippled her.

"Let me go." *Oh God.* Was that her weak, pitiful voice?

Without warning, Chase's hand was at the back of her head, his fingers threading through her loose hair and twisting it into a knot. A soft cry escaped Lacey when she found her head jerked back. Lightning revealed the raw passion etched on Chase's chiseled face. The flaring nostrils, his prominent cheekbones, and tightly drawn lips left no doubts that he was as turned on as she was. The blaze in his eyes held Lacey's gaze captive. Filled with an unspoken promise of what was to come. She could barely take a breath when he began to lower his face.

"I've been hard since the first time I laid eyes on you." She felt his warm breath against her face.

"No..." Lacey's heart was about to pound out of her chest. She should fight him, assert herself, and knee him in the groin. Something! She didn't want this, did she? She opened her mouth to protest when he thrust his hips against her. *Oh God!*

"Yes!" His hoarse whisper held a hint of savageness to it, and before Lacey could do any of the things she was thinking, Chase's mouth swooped down to steal her breath away with a scorching kiss.

She stiffened, but it didn't last. He didn't fight fair. While one hand held her head so he could kiss her at will, the other glided down Lacey's back and over her bottom, squeezing a half-naked cheek while grinding his hard-on into her. A sob rose in her throat when she realized she was responding to his sexual attack and the forceful persuasion of his mouth.

"Chase," she whispered when his mouth left hers to rain kisses down her throat. She closed her eyes and moaned, growing weak in the knees. "No..."

"No, don't kiss you?" His lips brushed the curve of her jaw. "No, don't touch you?" His mouth moved on to tease the flesh of her neck. Lacey trembled wildly. "No, don't make love to you?"

Before Lacey realized his intention, he tugged at the spaghetti strap of her camisole and pulled it down until her breast was bare. The sound that escaped him left no doubt that he was close to the end of his limit. He cupped her flesh and pulled it up at the same time, lowering his head until his mouth was on her.

A mini explosion of pleasure caused Lacey's breath to catch. "Oh!" She'd never felt anything as pleasurable. A day's growth of beard added to the pleasure of Chase's mouth as it worked against her sensitive skin. Her hands began to move over his shoulders and back, relishing in the feel of his sculptured body. Lacey had no doubt their heated moment was going to end with them making love. It had been leading up to this. And she was shamelessly eager to feel his possession.

"Oh...Chase!"

His large hands cupped her buttocks, grinding her against the front of him. It was nearly her undoing. Moaning weakly, Lacey's hands clutched the front of his loose shirt, her head falling back. She arched her throat so he could put his mouth there, which he did without invitation or hesitation. She sucked in air, unconsciously rotating her hips against him, urging his hungry flesh to please her.

"Chase..."

Lacey trembled against him; her body close to exploding. He was hot, but she was hotter. The evidence of his need strained against the crevice between her legs, forcing her to ride out the growing storm. The pleasure was so intense, so exquisite, she was sure she was going to drop to the floor or faint. In a burst of over-

whelming passion, she put her mouth on Chase, biting a male nipple.

“Shit, Lacey! You want me to come right here?” His hands moved beneath the silky fabric over her bottom, and he lifted Lacey up and down against the swelling in the front of his jeans. “I want my cock buried deep inside you when that happens.”

His words inflamed her, and she almost lost the battle herself. Shuddering, her hand traveled down his body, smoothing over the large bulge behind his zipper. Chase’s response was a low groan. He arched into her caress, silently demanding more. And Lacey was more than willing to give it. There was an inferno inside her, and she was tired of fighting it.

He kissed her roughly, like a man starved from life-giving nourishment. Lacey answered the burning desire between them with a smoldering response of her own. Her tongue joined his in eager battle; her teeth gently savaged his lower lip in an erotic action that sent them both past the point of no return.

Chase’s hands, rough and gentle at the same time, moved the thin straps of her camisole down ever so slowly, bringing the wisp of material with it until it settled at her waist. Lightning revealed the raw look smoldering in his eyes as they feasted on her quivering breasts. Lacey caught her breath when he put his mouth against one passion-hard crest, tugging on her nipple. She arched her back, offering him the fullness of her flesh, thoughts of stopping him the furthest thing from her mind. It was too late for protesting now. She wanted his hands and mouth on her.

The storm outside raged on in full glory, while a different storm raged on inside. A sharp tug, and before Lacey knew it she was standing naked before Chase and his appreciative gaze was eating her up. The look on his fierce face almost frightened her. She felt the tips of her exposed breasts touch his hair-roughened chest, and she swayed against him, shuddering.

Without warning, Chase bent and scooped Lacey into his arms, then carried her upstairs. She was thankful for the darkness around them, feeling at a disadvantage by her nudity. She wrapped her arms around his neck, cuddling up against him. Her mouth kissed and teased at his flesh as they went along.

She had no idea where they were heading until Chase turned down the corridor and took them to the large bedroom at the end of it. *So, this is where his bedroom is.* She caught a quick glimpse of the room as Chase made his way to his bed and deposited her on it.

For the longest moment he stood above her, just staring into her eyes. Lacey had to wonder if he could see her in the darkness and was answered by the naked desire on his face when the room lit up briefly. She inhaled sharply, watching him as he slowly began to remove his clothes.

Lacey began to feel like a sacrificial virgin lying there before Chase. He took his clothes off slowly, giving her time to take in his magnificent body. And it was magnificent, masculine in every detail. Her interested gaze fastened on his hands when they moved to his jeans, her eyes following the material down as his hard flesh was slowly exposed to her.

No sooner were Lacey's eyes rising again than Chase lowered his body over her. He covered her much-smaller frame but was careful not to crush her with his weight. His arms moved to either side of her head; his eyes finding hers in the darkness.

Lacey was aware of so much at once that she didn't know what to enjoy first. The weight of his hot body where it touched her intimately, everywhere. The hard thrust of his arousal where it nestled against the curls between her legs, seeking entrance, or the beating of their hearts as one. And there was nothing more potent than the scent of heated bodies and unfulfilled desire. Their breaths mingled as they slowly moved toward each other for a kiss.

There was no turning back. Little mewling sounds escaped her as she twisted impatiently beneath Chase. She moved her hands

over his naked backside in an effort to convey her pleasure. Nails raked his back before clutching his firm buttocks, while her hips rocked into him. The sharp nip she gave his bottom lip was a warning, and Chase jerked his head back in order to meet her eyes.

"You're hungry," he growled. He tortured Lacey by running his penis over her clit again and again. The friction brought her close to climax. Only he seemed to sense it, halting at the crucial moment.

"Please...Chase!"

A slow smile spread across his features. He raised his hips and positioned himself as if to take her, to end the torment and satisfy the beast in both of them. Lacey parted her legs and shuddered; he was so close.

"Show me what you want, Lacey. Take my cock in your hands."

Lacey reached between their bodies and wrapped her fingers around the impressive tool of his arousal. She gasped at the size and heat of him, of the velvet softness surrounding unbending steel. Eyes glued to each other's, Lacey drew him close until the dripping head of him mixed with the wetness covering her clit. Moaning deeply, she closed her eyes and moved his hardness over the swollen nub again and again. Wanting, needing to come. It didn't take long for the pressure to erupt into a rolling climax.

"Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!"

It was that precise moment when Chase took matters into his own hands. Lacey's hands were nudged aside and he slammed his hips forward, entering the depths of her convulsing body with a throaty growl. She raised her face and accepted his rough kiss; fuel that only added to the pleasure coursing through her body. With a satisfied cry, she arched her body into his rapid thrusts, clenching her hands into his buttocks and holding him tightly. A mixture of pleasure and pain consumed her as his penis continued to rub against her ultrasensitive clit.

"Damn!" A great shudder racked Chase's body.

Sensing his turmoil, Lacey held her breath as he stilled his movements in an obvious attempt to gain control of the moment. Moisture beaded on his skin and threatened to run down into his eyes. She reached up to catch it, aware the salt would sting. Lacey knew there was nothing on earth that could compare to the exquisite feeling of Chase throbbing deeply inside her body.

She moved her hips. Chase tensed. Intuition warned Lacey he was on the edge of coming. Their gazes locked. He began to move again, slowly, but Lacey knew the power she wielded in her hands. She reached between their bodies until she was able to cup the heavy sac beneath Chase's penis. It was just a matter of time before he grunted, releasing his own orgasm. They collapsed against each other, exhausted and spent.

Gradually, the pounding of her heart began to slow to a more normal beat and Lacey became aware of other things. The sheen of moisture covering their clinging bodies, the wet hair clinging to her neck. A pleasant tingling covered her from head to toe. *What now?* Past experience, as little as that was, reminded Lacey how awkward it could be after making love with someone for the first time. However, she couldn't imagine a man like Chase being awkward about anything.

She wondered what he was thinking. His breathing was heavy against the side of her neck but slowed into a more normal rhythm. *Has he drifted off to sleep?* She ventured a glance, only to meet a pair of splintery silver eyes looking down at her. At some point during their lovemaking the electricity had come back on, and a lamp on the bedside table bathed the room in a soft, dim light. As usual, Chase's expression revealed nothing. The silence added to the awkwardness of the situation.

Lacey was suddenly embarrassed to be lying next to him; the soft glow of the lamp revealing her total nakedness to him. His gaze dropped to her breasts, which were half crushed by his chest. She

felt a hot blush spread over her body and wished they'd turned the covers down earlier so she'd have something to hide under. Chase certainly didn't seem bothered by his nudity.

"What do we do now, lady?"

Lacey started at his unexpected question. It seemed out of place in the quietness of the room. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"We can do one of three things." Lacey watched his mouth move when he spoke. "We can make love again; we can go to sleep; or you can go back to your own room." Her gaze flew to his. "But I warn you, if you choose to stay here in my bed, we'll wind up making love again."

Lacey wondered briefly what Chase's reaction would be if she said what she really wanted to say. But she knew it wouldn't do if they overslept in the morning and her father came home to find them in bed together.

"I think I should go back to my own room."

"I thought you would say that." Chase took a deep breath, releasing it in a sigh. "You're a coward, Lacey. We both know you want to stay."

She shook her head. "No." It sounded like a lie, even to her.

"A coward and a liar," he insisted.

His comment was like a slap in the face, but before Lacey could defend herself Chase's mouth slammed down on hers, cutting off anything she might try to say. She twisted her head back and forth in an effort to break contact.

The kiss ended only when Chase was ready for it to end. When he pulled away from her, she was breathless beneath his solid weight. "Let me go, Chase. Please." She was painfully conscious of the hardened tips of her breasts quivering against his hard chest.

Chase glanced down at the twin softness of those mounds, desire clouding his eyes almost instantly. He began to kiss the moist flesh of her exposed neck. "I happen to like the feel of you naked beneath me."

Lacey happened to like the feel of Chase naked on top of her, too, but she wasn't about to admit it. Just thinking about it made her body shamefully hot and aroused. She closed her eyes, afraid of what he would be able to see. She couldn't afford to give Chase that kind of power over her.

"Chase," Lacey whispered softly, her hands convulsing in his thick hair as his mouth feasted on her aching breasts. When had he released her hands? "This...isn't really...a good idea," she gasped, wanting to pull his head away but instead holding him to her. "What about protection?"

Chapter 7

It took a full minute for her revelation to sink in, and what the consequences meant. All at once Chase stiffened against Lacey. His mouth ceased its exploration of her body, and he slowly raised his head so he could meet her eyes. His expression was dark and fierce. His gaze narrowed. But in spite of the change, he couldn't disguise the fact that his body still wanted her.

"Did you just say what I think you said?" His words were clipped and to the point. He was in a dangerous mood, and Lacey felt a moment of true fright. She nodded reluctantly. "This is the twenty-first century. What kind of woman goes around making love with men and isn't on some kind of protection?" he demanded to know.

"The kind who stays in a relationship with the same man for four years," Lacey said.

If she'd been thinking clearly she wouldn't have let Chase make love to her in the first place, and certainly not without protection. But things between them had gotten out of hand so fast... She'd gotten out of the habit of having to worry about protection. It was a poor excuse, but the truth.

"Just what the hell kind of game are you playing?" It was spoken much too softly for a hard man like Chase, and revealed just how furious he really was.

"No game, Chase. The man I was involved with couldn't have children. We didn't have to worry about birth control. I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it until now."

She could tell he didn't like that answer. "You didn't think about it? You expect me to believe that?"

"It, ah, wasn't exactly on my mind at the time," she said lamely.

"And is it on your mind now?" Chase demanded.

"A little late, but yes."

"Exactly."

Put on the defensive, Lacey blurted out, "I'm not in the habit of sleeping around. Paul and I haven't been broken up long enough for me to start thinking about going back on the Pill yet. And it takes two to tango. You're not entirely without responsibility." She didn't add that she'd made up her mind not to get involved with another man for a while.

She was relieved when his weight was no longer pinning her down. She sat up, saw his carelessly discarded shirt lying at the foot of the bed, and snatched it up. Her gaze followed Chase as he continued to the half-opened closet, admiring his taut buttocks and solid thighs. In an angry movement he ripped a dark gray bathrobe off a hanger and donned it before turning back to her.

By the time he was facing her again, she'd managed to slip into his shirt and was clutching it closed over her breasts. She sat there in the center of his rumpled bed, unsure what to do or say. He scowled down at her, deftly securing the belt to his robe around his waist. "Did it occur to you that you might end up pregnant from tonight?"

She lowered her eyes, knowing he was right. "A girl has a lot of options these days."

Lacey knew that sounded cold and uncaring when the truth was she was feeling the exact opposite. She wanted children. Even if it was a child conceived out of a lustful coupling with Chase, she would welcome it.

"I think for your own safety you'd better leave my room." Chase swung around with a look of anger in his eyes. "But be fore-

warned, Lacey, if you did conceive my child tonight, I'll never let you abort it."

She didn't bother to correct his assumption of her reckless words. Yet she found herself wanting to go to him and offer comfort instead. Intuition warned her that he would reject her. She wrapped his shirt around her and left the bed, going back to her own room to spend the rest of the night alone.

* * * *

The house seemed extremely quiet when she awoke the next morning. Lacey guessed it was the delicious aroma of bacon cooking that really roused her. That and something else drifted up the stairs and through her door, beckoning her. She threw on some clothes and began to run a brush through her hair, pausing to squint at something in the mirror. *What is that?* Moving closer to her reflection, her fingers moved over the bruise on her neck, just below her ear. *Is that a hickey?*

Her thoughts drifted back to the night before. Warmth flooded through Lacey when she recalled Chase's mouth on her, everywhere. Following the path his hands carved out as they'd explored her body with forceful ardor. Once he'd set his mind to claiming her, there'd been no stopping him. His steely determination had easily overpowered her token utterance of resistance. She shivered. Chase's thorough loving had made her feel alive.

When she left her room she couldn't help glancing down the hallway toward Chase's closed door. Hopefully he was already up and gone for the day. She wasn't eager to face him so soon after their lovemaking. Bypassing the dining room, Lacey followed her nose straight to the kitchen and a plate of Hester's freshly baked biscuits.

"Good morning, Hester. Have Rita and my father returned from Dallas yet?" Lacey grabbed a roll and started picking at it.

"Not yet. If they spent the night, they most likely won't return until noon or so." She smiled, offering the butter dish to Lacey.

Lacey shook her head. "No, thanks. After last night, I can't afford butter too. Are we alone in the house?"

"Mrs. Richardson is here."

That wasn't the answer Lacey was looking for, but she could hardly be obvious and inquire about Chase. She picked off chunks of flaky biscuit and popped them in her mouth. Hester put a cup of coffee in front of her.

The kitchen door opened and Lacey felt the hairs at the back of her neck stand up, but she refused to turn around. She sensed Chase's presence long before she smelled him. Her nose turned up at the familiar scent, and when she recognized it as the perfume she'd sprayed on him the night before she couldn't help grinning. She decided the best plan of action was to pretend he wasn't there, so she lowered her eyes.

"What in the world is this?" Mrs. Richardson hustled into the kitchen, gaining their attention with her outraged attitude.

"What is it, Mrs. Richardson?" Hester frowned as she looked at the garment dangling in the other woman's hands.

It was Lacey's camisole from the night before. Mrs. Richardson must have found it on the floor where she and Chase had left it. She felt Chase's eyes on her but refused to acknowledge him. The events of the night before were still too raw. Yet she couldn't help but find the present situation amusing.

"That's mine. It's something I, ah, sleep in." Lacey reached for it, feeling the heat in her cheeks. "I, ah, sort of misplaced it." She could hardly look them in the eyes.

"I found it on the floor in the living room," Mrs. Richardson announced in a disapproving tone.

"So, that's where I left it." Lacey smiled, taking it from her hand.

“Along with this.”

She held up the unbroken bottle of Obsession, spraying some into the air as she held it out to Lacey. Both older women caught the scent at the same time, sniffing at the air like bloodhounds before glancing suspiciously at Chase. He remained silent and crossed his arms, the look in his eyes daring them to make a comment.

With an indignant snort Mrs. Richardson left the kitchen, obviously drawing her own conclusion. A smile broke out on Hester’s kind face, even though her cheeks turned pink. She moved back behind the kitchen counter and told Chase to eat his breakfast.

That was Lacey’s cue to leave, and she turned to exit through the kitchen door that led outside. She wanted to get out of there and away from Chase as fast as she could.

“Lacey?”

She halted at his soft command and turned around reluctantly to face him. Her eyes dropped to the bottle of perfume he was holding out to her. Their eyes met, and in an instant Lacey relived everything Chase had done to her body the night before. Desire flooded her, turning her knees weak. In faded jeans, stained leather chaps, and boots, he was the epitome of the rugged cowboy. *Why does he have to be so sexy?* She tried not to look at the triangle that outlined the slight bulge behind his zipper.

The phone rang, abruptly bringing Lacey back to reality. She snatched the bottle from Chase and left the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. What was wrong with her? She had to get a grip on her emotions. She cursed Chase the whole way to the stables, unwilling to admit that she was angrier at herself for being so captivated by him. Their making love had only complicated things.

Love, huh? Lust is more like it. She stormed into the stable and tossed the perfume bottle in a trash bin on her way to Misty’s stall. She jerked the door open and went to the gentle mare, but the animal sensed the turmoil inside Lacey and refused to stand still for her. She shied away with a neigh, and after several unsuccessful at-

tempts to get the bridle in place, Lacey gave up and threw it to the ground with a curse.

"You're spooking her with all that swearing you're doing."

Lacey spun around to face Chase, who was clearly amused over her frustration. "What do you want?" She crossed her arms.

"I had a feeling a ride would be your intention." His large presence filled the stall entranceway, his hands resting against either side of the opening so that he was blocking her escape.

"Is that against the law or something?" Once again Lacey found herself trying to ignore the triangle outlined by his chaps. When Chase's amused gaze dropped down her body in a slow sweep, she couldn't ignore how he made her feel. Like a desirable woman. And when their eyes met again, it was clear what his intentions were; he wanted her. Gone was the amusement, replaced with dark hunger.

A kaleidoscope of emotions raced through Lacey and she uncrossed her arms, taking a deep breath. *Is he thinking about last night?*

"No, but did you forget about Johnson?" Chase asked calmly.

"He's probably a thousand miles from here." Lacey stepped back because he stepped forward.

"You're not going riding," Chase said firmly, "until he's caught and back behind bars. It's too dangerous. And I don't have time to manage the ranch and babysit you."

Babysit? Lacey was too angry to speak at first. Anger took hold of her normally good common sense. She wanted to lash out at him, standing there so sure and smug, and so big. What made it worse was the look in his eyes challenged her, dared her to defy him.

Suddenly the noise of a small aircraft could be heard above them. Carl and Rita were returning early. "That will be Rita and Dad. Don't you have to ride out and meet them?" Lacey smiled

sweetly. She'd win this round. As soon as he was gone, she'd jump on Misty and ride out of there.

But Chase dashed her hopes before she even had a chance. "There's already a jeep waiting for them there. I think Owens is old enough to drive himself in." The gleam in his eyes revealed he'd known what Lacey had been thinking.

"Oh...go to hell!" she hissed, stalking toward him with the intention of going up to her apartment. Only when she tried to step around him, he grasped her by the upper arm and halted her progress.

"Let me go, Chase!" It was a halfhearted protest and they both knew it.

The minute he'd touched her Lacey felt the sexual pull envelop her body. She was torn between wanting him to kiss her and slapping his arrogant, handsome face. She felt her heart skip a beat as he slowly began to lower his face, his dark expression growing taut.

"Chase, darling, are you in here?"

Lacey felt Chase's body stiffen for just a fraction of a second, and then she was being pinned against the stall wall by his body. There was no way he could have failed to hear Stella's voice. His ruthless mouth closed over hers with bruising force, while his hands tangled in her hair.

Lacey's response was instant and powerful, in spite of the fact that Stella would soon be on them. A small part of her mind registered that Chase wanted Stella to see them for reasons only he was aware of. But Lacey was too caught up in his hungry kiss to pay any attention to what her brain was trying to tell her. She arched more fully into him, opening her mouth to his searching tongue, moaning softly when his hand found her aching breast.

Chase broke the kiss long enough to whisper against Lacey's swollen mouth. "That's it, baby." He had to be aware that his tone would carry to the approaching woman. "Give it to me." He

ground his mouth down on hers again, crushing his body against her.

“Chase, where are you?” Movements warned them Stella was getting closer. The tone of her voice told them her mood had changed, considerably.

Lacey was beginning to feel weak-kneed from Chase’s passionate kisses. Then she felt his hand move under her shirt and caress her naked breast. Fire coursed through her blood and she arched her back, thrusting her flesh further into his rough caress. She forgot where they were.

That was how Stella found them. Her audible gasp of outrage filled the barn, instantly separating Chase and Lacey.

“Dallying with the farmyard help, darling?” Stella’s crystal blue eyes were fixed on Lacey with open distaste. “Who’s the little tramp?”

Lacey gasped and opened her mouth to blast the woman for her insult, but Stella went on before she had a chance.

“Well, darling?” Her attention was on Chase, one finely plucked brow arching as she waited for an answer.

Chase shrugged indifferently. “Stella Barnes, meet Lacey Owens.”

Stella gasped; her gaze of surprise flew back to Lacey. “The owner’s daughter. I see.” She fixed her gaze back on Chase. “What’s going on, Chase? Trying to own the whole ranch or make me jealous?”

Lacey watched with interest as the other woman sashayed up to Chase. She placed her open palms against his chest. Her long scarlet nails looked like they could do some serious damage as they slowly moved upward like tiny daggers. He forced her arms down and away from his body. “What will it take to get it through your head that I don’t want you back?”

“A lot more than catching you in the hay with a rich little tramp.”

Suddenly Chase was angry, and Lacey couldn't believe she was still standing there. "You want the definition of a tramp, Stella? It's a woman who sells herself to the highest bidder. A woman, who chooses her husbands because of their wealth, then dumps them for a hefty settlement."

"You'll never forgive me for that, will you, Chase?" Stella's bright red mouth turned down in an obvious pout, and Lacey wondered if it was sincere. "I made a mistake, but I wanted you, darling. I still want you." Her eyes glistened with tears.

In spite of her impassioned plea, Chase's expression clearly revealed it didn't change his mind, or his heart. He looked like he hated Stella, and Lacey suspected there was a lot more to the story than the mere fact Stella had apparently jilted him for some rich man more than once.

"When will you learn that I'm immune to you after all these years?" His look was as hard as the tone of his voice.

"We had something good between us—"

"Yeah, one abortion and two husbands in twelve years," Chase cut in harshly. "Did you ever think that there might be someone else?"

Abortion! Was that the cause of his reaction after they'd made love? Stella had aborted his child?

His remark caught both of them off-guard, but Stella was the one who found her voice first. "Who, her?" Her flashing eyes indicated Lacey, her tone skeptical. "You must be desperate, darling." Her gaze went over Lacey again, reminding Lacey of her shabby attire. "Or is it..." She paused as if a thought suddenly came to her. "A plan to get back at me by choosing a rich woman over me, as I chose a rich man over you?"

Lacey thought Stella didn't know how wrong she was. Chase didn't even like her. And it was apparent now that he'd staged the little scene between them on purpose, knowing Stella would see

them. She didn't like being in the middle, and she didn't like being used.

"I'm tired of this whole conversation, Stella. I have work to do." Chase released a long sigh. "I suggest you go home."

For a moment, Stella's face showed indecision, like she couldn't believe Chase was dismissing her so easily. It was plain to see that Stella Barnes was a scheming, devious woman used to getting her own way, especially with men. She'd failed this time, and it was obvious by the fury in her eyes that she didn't know how to deal with it.

"Very well, darling. You win this time. But sooner or later I will convince you that we belong together. And no one," her sharp blue eyes narrowed menacingly on Lacey, "will come between us. Remember that."

In a dramatic gesture, she whirled away from them and made her exit from the stable. A thick, heavy cloud of perfume lingered in the air after her departure. Lacey finally released a long, pent-up breath and licked her overdried lips. "I just want to know one thing, Chase. Is she dangerous?" She had the right to know if she should watch her back.

He glanced down at her. "Stella is under the impression her money makes her attractive to me. With it comes the power and confidence that she can have anything she wants. What she isn't willing to accept is that I don't want her."

Lacey ignored all that and braved a step closer to Chase, tilting her head up so she could look him straight in the eye. She punctuated each word carefully. "Is...she...dangerous?" she queried between clenched teeth.

"I doubt it." His lips twitched with what Lacey could only guess was amusement.

Quick as lightning and with the force of her whole one-hundred-and-ten-pound body, Lacey delivered a loud, stinging slap to Chase's cheek. Her fingers stung, but she had the satisfaction of

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seeing her red handprint on his rugged face. Outside the stable, she heard the distinct sound of a truck door slamming shut. Let him explain that to her father.

“I don’t like being used, Chase. Remember that the next time you decide to use me to get rid of one of your girlfriends!”

Lacey was surprised Chase let her leave. She stormed out of the stall and up to her apartment. The man was infuriating.

If she couldn’t get away from him on horseback, then she’d use her car.

Chapter 8

An hour later, Lacey made her way into town, driving her little red sports car with a recklessness that was more sobering than pleasurable. The top was down and she relished the wind whipping through her unbound hair, uncaring that it would take forever to get all the knots out. The Texas sun felt warm against her skin. She didn't really need anything in town, but a good drive was just the thing to drive away the emotions simmering through her.

All because of one man.

Dropping to the required speed limit once she reached the town's city limits, Lacey took in her surroundings. Brandon was still a small town by today's standards but she did notice a new strip mall and grocery store as she drove down Main Street. She headed toward the grocery store to grab a few things.

It didn't take her long to gather up the few things she needed. On her way out of the store she noticed a florist shop next door and decided to go in. She was glad she did when she saw an old school friend behind the counter.

"Lacey Owens! I heard you were home for a visit."

"Just for a little while." Lacey smiled, walking up to the counter. "How are you, Tammy?" She set her bag of groceries down on the floor.

"Oh...so-so." She stepped back enough so Lacey could see her protruding belly. She rubbed it lovingly. "This is number three."

Lacey's eyes grew round with disbelief. Tammy had been model thin in high school and very hung up on her looks. She'd

made it very clear she was going to leave town the second she graduated to pursue a career in acting.

They'd been good friends while growing up, and both had tried to keep in touch for a while after Lacey left town. Gradually life got in the way and other things took precedence, and before long, the years had slipped away.

"Number three! Congratulations, I think." They laughed in unison. "You look great."

"Thanks. I have two boys at home. This one's a girl." She started laughing. "She's already spoiled! Do you have any brats yet?"

Lacey shook her head. "Someday. I haven't found Mr. Right yet." Chase's face flashed before her eyes for some reason. "I stopped in for a bouquet of wildflowers."

"Coming right up." Tammy put aside the green plant she'd been pruning and disappeared into the back room.

"Is this your place?" Lacey asked, hoping her voice carried to where Tammy had disappeared.

"Goodness no." Tammy returned carrying a huge bunch of colorful flowers. "I just work here between babies."

The bell rang over the door, indicating someone had entered the shop. Lacey turned briefly to see who it was, but it was no one she knew so she turned back to Tammy. Tammy also didn't pay the other customer any mind after the welcome smile she gave him when he first entered. She busied herself with trimming the flower stems.

"Those are beautiful."

"Yes. Wildflowers are my favorite too. They seem to last a long time." Every once in a while, she glanced up past Lacey to the other customer in the store. "Let me know if I can help you."

The man said nothing. Lacey's gaze went to him when she sensed he was beside her. He seemed content to just walk around and look at everything, but several times his gaze fell on her. They

were brief glances, but when she caught him looking at her a third time, she began to feel uncomfortable. Her hand moved to the back of her neck where the hairs were rising.

The feeling of unease became stronger. There was a wall of mirrors behind Tammy and Lacey couldn't help but notice the man's looks were becoming bolder, longer, until he was finally staring at her. She felt her cheeks heat. Normally she'd blast a man for staring at her so rudely, but something stronger held her back.

"Something wrong? You look like you're feeling sick all of a sudden," Tammy commented.

Something like that. Especially when she began to let her imagination run away with her. She suddenly wished she knew what Johnson looked like. But she doubted he'd be bold enough to walk up to her in broad daylight and try anything. She became aware that Tammy was waiting for her reply.

She forced a smile. "No, just tired, I suppose." She paid for the flowers and reached for her bag on the floor. "Let's try to get together sometime while I'm home."

"I'd love that. I'll have you over and you can meet the men in my life."

Lacey nodded and turned around. The man was blocking her way, and she met his eyes straight on and then dropped her gaze to take in the rest of him. He looked rough around the edges. Like he was living day by day and all he had were the clothes on his back. His mousy brown hair looked dirty, long, and as unkempt as his faded jeans and work shirt.

What struck Lacey as odd was the man's shoes looked brand-new and expensive. Her gaze flew back up to his face, quickly running over the craggy features and brown eyes. For the first time, she realized he was actually smiling at her, revealing a mouth of crooked yellow teeth.

Not wanting to encourage him, she didn't return his friendly smile. All she wanted to do was get out of there and head for

home. Lacey felt better once she was in her car and on the long road to the ranch. Her gaze kept darting nervously to the rearview mirror, expecting to see another vehicle following her. But the long road home was as isolated as the surrounding farmland.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she pulled onto the long driveway to the house and parked her car in one of the four garages. After grabbing her purchases, she went through the kitchen door, wanting to see her father before going on to her own place. Lacey knew she'd find him in his den and wasn't disappointed when she entered the room to find him busy at his desk. If anything, having a partner seemed to free him up from the physical activity of running a ranch.

"Dad?" Carl looked up from the papers he was bent over. "How was your trip?"

Warmth filled his eyes and he smiled, offering his cheek when Lacey bent to kiss it. "The same as usual. Rita got in some shopping before we met friends for dinner and dancing. Besides the phone lines going down, anything exciting happen here last night?"

Lacey felt a warm blush cover her cheeks and tried to force a nonchalant attitude that wouldn't give her away. "Nothing worth mentioning." *What an understatement.* She smiled and sat on the edge of the desk. "Didn't you see Chase when you came in this morning?"

"Yes. I'm glad he was here with you last night. With Johnson on the loose, I would have flown back in the storm rather than leave you alone."

Mentioning Johnson's name caused Lacey to think about the man she'd seen in the florist shop. A shiver traveled down her spine. "Any news about him?"

Carl shook his head. "It's as if he's dropped off the face of the Earth. Maybe it's a good sign that he's nowhere around here and has decided to enjoy his freedom over revenge. Course we still have to practice some caution until we know for sure."

Lacey knew why he added that. It was as close as he dared get to telling her not to go off on her own. "You wouldn't happen to have any pictures of this man, would you?" His eyebrows rose with surprise. "Just so I'll know what he looks like in case I, ah, run into him."

He shook his head. "Maybe the sheriff can send one out. It wouldn't hurt for you to know what Johnson looks like." The phone rang and he picked it up. "Yes?"

He was quiet a long while after that. Lacey could hear the murmur of a voice at the other end. She watched her father's expressions change several times while he silently listened to the caller, his gaze darting to her once or twice before glancing away. Lacey couldn't tell what was being said, but if her father's sudden pallor was anything to go by, it wasn't good news.

"Dad, what is it?" Without uttering a single word to the caller, he abruptly hung up. "Tell me."

He shook his head angrily, a scowl on his face. "I won't repeat the filth I heard on that phone."

Lacey's brows furrowed with confusion. "It was an obscene call?"

He stared at her for a long moment, as though with indecision, then sighed heavily. "It was Johnson."

"No!" she gasped, feeling the blood drain from her face. And because his own color didn't look so good, she added, "Want me to get Chase?"

"Can't. He took off for Ft. Worth this afternoon."

"How could he take off when he knows what's going on?"

"There's still work to get done around here, and it's not like we know what Johnson's intentions are. We still don't. Maybe that call was just an idle threat. He could still be thousands of miles away from here. Maybe this is how he gets his kicks, putting a scare into an old man."

Lacey remained silent for a moment, her worried gaze going over her father's face for a sign of what he really felt. Her father was a strong man; it wasn't like him to get rattled so easily, which made her wonder what Johnson had said. *Did he threaten Rita?* At least the color was returning to his cheeks, even if his tone didn't hold any conviction. She placed a hand against his cheek and gently smoothed it over the leathery skin.

"Lacey." His gaze held hers, as if willing her to grasp the importance of his next words. "I know you love your freedom, but promise me you won't go off on your own for a while." She opened her mouth to protest, and he held up a warning hand. "If I hadn't known you were in town this afternoon, I would have gone crazy looking for you."

"You knew where I was this afternoon?" She frowned. It was apparent she was being watched. "Am I being followed, Dad?"

"Not at all. Don't misunderstand me. The sheriff and his men are keeping their eyes open for Johnson, and some of the boys are patrolling the area around here."

"Then how did you know where I was?"

"One of the boys called to give me an update on Johnson and happened to mention he saw your car parked outside the new strip mall in town." His heavy brows drew together in a frown. "I'd better give them a call."

Carl put his hand on the receiver but hesitated from picking it up. His eyes held Lacey's. "Will you humor me and please do as I ask?"

Lacey sighed deeply and left the corner of the large oak desk. She'd come home for a peaceful vacation as well as to get some work done. Being followed around and accounted for took away the freedom she relished. Why was it men seemed to feel she needed protection the minute there was any kind of threat?

"Lacey?"

She recognized his fatherly tone and smiled against her will. If he spent his time worrying needlessly about her, he might possibly let his own guard down at the moment when he would need it most.

"I guess I can stay close for a few days. But right now I have some things to pick up from my apartment. I'll be back for dinner tonight."

"I'll see you then." He was dialing the phone as Lacey left the den.

She headed for the kitchen to pick up her groceries. It was getting late. As she walked toward the stables, her gaze fell on the men riding in for the day. Their dirty, tired looks attested to the hard work they'd put in, and a sympathetic smile spread over her features. Some of them nodded her way; others tipped their hats. She shifted the bag of food from one arm to the other and almost dropped the whole thing when one of the horses backed up and hit her.

"Easy there!" a familiar voice chided the nervous animal. Brian grinned at Lacey as he watched her catch her balance. "Need help?"

"Looks like you need help," she responded good-naturedly. "I bet you were hoping to see me sprawled on the ground with groceries everywhere."

He didn't deny it. "Come on. I'll help you with these bags." He took them from Lacey and waited for her to start up the stairs before him.

She opened the door to her apartment, and he followed her inside and placed the bag on the counter while peering inside at the contents. The look on Brian's face caused her to laugh.

"Nothing but rabbit food!"

"You were expecting thick, juicy steaks?" She reached inside the bag and pulled out a stalk of celery.

"What is it with you women today? Mary's the same way. She doesn't understand that I didn't get to be the big, strong, macho man I am today by eating nothing but veggies."

"I have meat in here." Lacey grinned, pulling out a bag of carrots. She didn't bother explaining that during the day she liked to snack on raw vegetables.

"Where?" Brian wanted to know, trying to see to the bottom of the bag. Lacey brushed him aside.

"You're just like a little boy looking for something good." She held up a can of tuna. "Mary must be a saint for putting up with you."

"She is. And tuna isn't meat. I'm not even sure it's a fish." Brian leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms and legs. "You'll get to meet Mary on Saturday. She's coming home a few days early."

"Hey, Brian!" The door had been left open, and the man's voice reached them from below.

"What is it?" Brian walked to the entranceway and glanced down.

"You'd better get down here and see this. It's one of the horses."

Brian didn't hesitate, bounding down the stairs two at a time. Lacey also decided to go, curious. The few men who remained behind were gathered in a semicircle in one of the stalls located near the back of the barn. Lacey felt a premonition that something bad had happened and picked up her pace, but Brian blocked her way. Fear filled her that something might have happened to Misty, and she was relieved to see the gentle mare's head poking over her stall, curious too at what was happening.

Since Brian was in front of Lacey, he saw what there was to see first. Instinctively he held his arm out to prevent her from going any farther. "Lacey, no!" he said sharply.

"Jesus!"

"Holy Mother of God!"

"What happened?"

"Well, it's obvious what happened!" Brian barked sharply. "The question is who did this and why. These aren't animal marks."

He bent forward and that gave Lacey the chance to take the scene in. Nothing prepared her for the sight of the bleeding mass that had once been a beautiful horse. There was no doubt that someone had taken a machete to the animal. The deep neck wound would have been enough to kill the filly, but whoever had killed her had been hell-bent on mutilation as well. She cried out, her hand flying to her mouth while tears filled her eyes. She whirled around sharply, unable to look any longer without being sick.

"Willy, call the sheriff." Brian stood up. "Tell him I'll wait for here for him. Joe, you go to the house and tell Mr. Owens. The rest of you go on home; there's nothing you can do."

Lacey turned when she sensed Brian approaching her. "You shouldn't have seen that, Lacey."

"Do you think Johnson did this? He called the house earlier. Dad talked to him."

Brian took in the information silently and began steering her toward the steps to her apartment. "I don't know. We'll find out, though. Right now I want you to go upstairs and lie down. You've had a shock."

She nodded quietly and let him lead her upstairs. The horrible sight of the dead horse kept flashing before her eyes and she shuddered violently against him. She barely reached the sofa before her shaking legs gave out.

"I'll be back after the sheriff leaves. You'll be all right?" Lacey nodded, watching him walk around; after seeming to give the place a thorough search, he was gone.

She didn't know how long her eyes had been closed when she heard the siren of Sheriff Tucker's car, followed by voices soon after. Brian must have left her door open. When she recognized her

father's voice she went and sat on the top of the steps right outside the door. She only caught bits and pieces of conversation, but nothing registered until they began to walk closer.

"Brian, I want you to see that the men take shifts keeping watch here during the nights. Two men at a time so they can keep each other awake. George, I want police protection for my daughter."

They obviously hadn't noticed Lacey sitting above them. But she wasn't about to let that last comment go without questioning it. She rose and walked down the steps. "Why would I need police protection?" she questioned, her gaze taking in all three men.

Carl and the sheriff exchanged looks, and Lacey wondered if she would get an honest answer. She was beginning to suspect her father was keeping something from her. Her gaze moved to Brian, trying to read the truth in his eyes. He glanced somewhere else.

"It's just an added precaution, dear." Her father looked uncomfortable.

"Why, Dad? I just overheard you tell Brian about assigning men to watch the place around the clock. And since I'm staying at the main house at night, what more needs to be done?"

There was an awkward silence, the sheriff cleared his throat and seemed to be trying to communicate something to Carl without having to say the words. But Lacey's father only furrowed his brows with irritation. Lacey was getting angry.

"I want to know what's going on, gentlemen. I'm not a child, and I resent being treated like one." She crossed her arms. "I have all day." She wasn't going to budge until she got some answers.

It was the sheriff who tried to smooth her ruffled feathers. "Your father's only worried about you, Lacey. And if this is Johnson's work, he's getting pretty damn close without anyone's notice." He paused and exchanged a glance with her father. "The girl deserves to know, Carl. I'll take care of what needs to get done. Want me to notify Chase?"

Carl sighed deeply. "No use doing that. He's already flying back and should be here shortly." He focused his attention on Brian. "Will you please see to the horse?"

"Will do, and I'll keep first watch tonight."

When the sheriff and Brian left, Lacey walked with her father back to the house. "You all right?"

There was concern in the eyes that met hers. Lacey nodded. "It was a horrible sight."

"I want you to stay close to the house, where it's safe."

"Do you think whoever did this is still around?"

He remained quiet. Halfway to the house, Rita came running out the front door. She was clearly distressed about something and couldn't reach them fast enough. She rushed right into Carl's arms.

"Oh God! I saw the sheriff's car leaving and thought something terrible had happened to one of you!"

There were unshed tears in her overbright eyes and pallor underneath her makeup. Carl's arms closed around his distraught wife, his gaze meeting Lacey's over Rita's head.

"What happened?"

"Don't worry yourself, honey." He gave Lacey a look that warned her not to say anything. "I've taken care of everything."

When they reached the house, Lacey excused herself and went up to her room. She knew she wouldn't be able to concentrate on any work now, and a walk down to the river would probably be out unless she wanted a bodyguard to tag along. Besides, it was getting late. What she needed right now was to find a place where she could be alone to relax. *Some place safe.*

Unable to leave the house, she knew the perfect place.

Chapter 9

Lacey opened the trunk that was stored in the large walk-in closet and rummaged through her old things. Clothes she'd left behind in case she'd visit and forgot to bring something. She was glad she'd decided to do that when her search turned up an old swimsuit. But her smile at anticipating a swim soon fell when she held up the tiny black scraps.

She went to the floor-length mirror and held the pieces up in front of her, trying to gauge if it was going to fit. It was hard to tell, and there was only one way to find out. Lacey quickly stripped and put the suit on.

She blushed when she dared to look at herself in the mirror. She'd gained a few pounds since buying the bikini. Her curves were fuller now, overflowing the triangle cups of the black cloth, and the bottom piece was as close as she'd ever come to wearing a thong. She chuckled, doubting anyone would see her. The pool was enclosed by a twelve-foot-high stone wall, and connected to that was another two feet of wrought iron. There were only two ways to access the pool, and Lacey knew that unless there was a party or some sort of celebration going on that the main outside gate would be locked. She'd have to go by way of the outside door in her father's den.

She slipped into the black mesh wrap that went with it and grabbed a towel from the connecting bath. Going the back way, Lacey knew she'd have less of a chance of running into anyone. She pushed open the heavy gate, thankful to find no one there.

The crystal clear water looked inviting. Lacey splashed it with her foot on the way to a lounge and found it warm. She slipped off her wrap and laid it over the back of a chair. On the table was a basket filled with lotions and oils and extra sunglasses for guests. A radio sat on a smaller table located between two of the loungers.

With a sigh of contented bliss, Lacey sank down on one of the loungers, turned the radio on low, and began to rub lotion over her body. Then, slipping on a pair of sunglasses, she relaxed back against the padded cushions and closed her eyes.

The music by her side was low and soft, easing Lacey into a dreamy, relaxed state that had her fighting sleep. She knew the danger of falling asleep in the sun and tried to concentrate on the low, sexy voice of bad boy Russell Tyler, a country singer with a body that wouldn't quit. She'd seen him in concert once and he was as sexy in person as he was on the cover of his albums.

Lacey's mouth curved upward, unconsciously comparing Chase with the handsome superstar. Thoughts of Chase made her hot, and she knew it wasn't just the sun shining down on her. Their lovemaking had been intense and thorough, and Chase had stirred feelings inside her that she'd never felt with anyone before. It surprised Lacey that as much as they rubbed each other the wrong way they were so well matched in bed. Russell's voice was replaced with another singer and another song, and she let her body relax, raising her arms above her head.

"You might as well be naked."

Lacey's eyes bolted open. *Where had Chase come from?* She looked up into his unfriendly face before taking in the rest of him. A towel was flung carelessly over one broad shoulder, and the boxer trunks covering the lower half of his powerful torso reminded Lacey she was by the pool and alone. She abruptly brought her arms down and sat up, glancing down at herself to make sure the bikini hadn't shifted. She didn't care how obvious she was about it either. She'd rather make sure everything was covered than sit

there under his silent scrutiny and expose herself. The look in his eyes revealed his hunger, and the bulge in his shorts backed it up.

How long had he been standing there, watching her? Apparently long enough to become aroused.

"Don't worry. It covers what it needs to, barely." His gaze raked over Lacey with a boldness that spoke volumes. "Tell me, do you go out in public in that little bit of nothing?"

"I thought I was going to be alone." Lacey nervously reached for her wrap and brought it up to cover the front of her. "When did you get back?"

Amusement filled Chase's rugged features. "Do you think that little see-through wrap is going to protect you from me?" He draped his towel over the back of the lounge next to Lacey's.

"Do I need protection from you?" She shouldn't have asked, but it was too late now. The image of his mouth and hands on her the night before caused Lacey to drop her eyes. She didn't want Chase to see how he affected her, or how fast.

Chase's laugh was low and sexy. "Maybe you should answer that question yourself."

Lacey heard a splash and glanced to see Chase in the water. She let out a sigh of relief when it appeared he was going to leave her alone. He swam a few laps before standing in the shallow end and brushing his wet hair back from his face. Lacey's mouth went dry. He looked like a god emerging from the sea, naked and powerful. Her body responded, and she squeezed her legs together to appease the tingle there.

The clear water lapped gently against him and she felt a heat spread over her cheeks when she couldn't take her eyes off his exposed, extremely well-built chest. Swallowing didn't come easy, especially when Lacey recalled how it felt to rake her nails down that hard, unyielding muscle. She could still make out faint scratches.

“Well? Are you brave enough to come in, or are you just content to sit there and enjoy the view?”

Lacey’s gaze shot up to meet his at the arrogant remark. She opened her mouth to make a scathing comment but the second their eyes clashed she forgot what she’d been about to say. Her heart pounded sharply in her chest at the blatant look of naked desire etched on Chase’s handsome face. She wondered what his reaction would be if she joined him after all.

Did she dare? That would certainly not be the response he was expecting. But in the end, Lacey didn’t. Chase frightened her. And what alarmed her more was the hunger of her own body where he was concerned. The best course of action was to distance herself from him.

It was only by sheer willpower that Lacey was able to draw herself up and act coolly toward Chase. She was in no hurry, instead taking her time and purposely letting him glimpse the near-naked perfection of her body. She fought the urge to rip off her skimpy top and pretended not to notice when she heard him suck in a sharp breath.

“You’re a tease, sweetheart. I didn’t realize how much until now. I only hope you’re prepared to back up your invitation.”

Invitation? Lacey didn’t realize Chase was wading toward the steps at the end of the pool. She was intent on slipping into her mesh robe and escaping. His words stung because she knew they weren’t true. Yet why had she deliberately set out to entice him? She knew why. Because she wanted him as hungry for her as she was for him.

When Lacey reached down to turn off the radio, Chase’s hands suddenly fell on her shoulders and whirled her around. A startled squeak escaped her before her mouth was captured by Chase’s in a hard and forceful kiss. She raised her hands to push him away.

"What do you think you're doing?" Her heart slammed against her chest.

"You won't need this." Chase roughly ripped the wrap off her body. "If you're going to tease a man, Lacey, be prepared for the consequences."

"I wasn't..."

Chase pulled her sharply against him, his hands digging painfully into her naked buttocks. "You were!" Their breaths mingled, then he was stealing hers away with the demanding pressure of his lips in another kiss.

Lacey was helpless against Chase. Whimpering noises of pleasure sounded deep in her throat as she responded to his rough possession. When she felt the heavy pounding of his arousal against her, she felt an answering response deep inside her body. Before she knew what she was doing, she rotated her hips against him, moaning at the surge of damp heat between her legs.

"You little witch. Do you know what you're doing?" His words were hoarse and rough.

Lacey knew what she was doing and was in no condition to answer Chase. She had to save her strength just to breathe, and she leaned into him, letting his rock-hard body support her from falling to the deck. Chase's hands were no longer squeezing her buttocks in punishment, but were gentle now, caressing over her in tender exploration. The rough calluses of his palms added an extra element of stimulation as his hands smoothed down her thighs and back up to her bottom, lifting her at the same time and holding her against him.

"Damn, you feel good against my cock." He leaned forward and sank his teeth into the side of Lacey's neck, then soothed the slight pain he'd inflicted by sucking it tenderly. "Sorry, baby, but you bring out the savage in me."

Trembling wildly, Lacey's hands went to the waistband of his boxers and slipped inside. It was a bold act that was so unlike her,

yet she couldn't seem to stop her fingers from encircling his hard length to test her power over him. His shudder revealed more than words what her touch was doing to him. A low groan vibrated through his chest as Chase thrust his hips toward her caress.

"That's it, milk me, baby!"

His hands began to roam into places just as intimate, slipping between Lacey's thighs. She was powerless to stop him when a finger slipped beneath her suit and flicked across her throbbing clit. She sucked in air when she realized what Chase was doing. Growling, his hands went to her hips and he held her against him. Her hand was still around his hard-on, but his movement made Lacey aware that she was also touching herself in the most secret of places as he rocked her back and forth. Her mouth parted to take in more air, her eyes half-closed with forbidden passion. If he kept it up much longer she was going to bring them both to fulfillment.

"Chase..." She was at the very pinnacle of release.

He shuddered, holding her tighter. "What, baby?" His mouth breathed against hers. "Do you plan to call a halt at the most crucial moment?" His breathing was ragged.

Lacey barely had enough energy left to shake her head. She was beyond rational thought. She felt an explosion of moist heat soak her bikini panties. She was so close, but she wanted him inside her. "Chase, I..." She couldn't put her thoughts into words.

"Hold your breath."

Maybe he wanted the same thing too, because without warning he forced them over the side and into the water. When they surfaced, Lacey was facing the side of the pool deck with Chase behind her. There was no time for questions. He took her by the hips and moved her poolside. Lacey gasped sharply when she felt the water jets against her mound, hitting the very spot Chase had manipulated with his finger. A shiver escaped her. And as pleasure consumed her, Chase moved her bikini bottom aside and penetrated her from behind.

He groaned low and savage against her ear. Lacey let out a soft, satisfied cry. She arched so he would have easier access, the action causing his cock to slide deeper into her body.

“Shit! You’re so damn tight!”

As he thrust in and out, his finger played with the sensitive nub of her desire. *Oh God!* She felt the spiraling heat of pleasure traveling through her body at an uncontrollable speed. She felt Chase’s iron-hard flesh become bigger and harder, his balls tight as they slapped against her fanny. His breathing indicated he was close too.

“Chase...”

He grunted, and then clamped his teeth down on Lacey’s shoulder in a rough love bite. His hands traveled up to cup her breasts, then let go to hold the side of the pool as he began to move faster and harder behind her. His body convulsed behind Lacey. In spite of being in the water, she felt the fire of Chase’s orgasm flood her womb. Her own climax followed almost instantly. Crying out softly, her body jerked with completion, and for a moment they moved against each other out of control.

“Damn,” Chase gasped against her neck as he gradually relaxed against her. “You drain a man.”

Lacey collapsed against the pool, too exhausted to respond to his comment. She felt pretty spent herself. When she was able to move, she turned her head to peer at Chase out of the corner of her eye. His mouth swooped down, and he kissed her hotly. She opened her mouth, accepting the thrust of his tongue.

“I think we better get out of the water.” Lacey’s ears picked up the noise of the gate latch being opened and felt his body tense.

“We’re about to have company.” As they moved toward the steps, Chase seemed to deliberately put himself between Lacey and the gate door. His consideration warmed her.

“Chase...”

Lacey glanced around Chase to see Brian come to a dead halt halfway through the door, twirling a key on a ring around with his finger. His face registered surprise at seeing them together, and he seemed at a loss for words.

"Well, are you going to stand there gawking all afternoon, or are you going to tell me what you want?" Chase demanded, reaching for his towel and handing it to Lacey.

"I haven't gawked since I got married," Brian admitted, smiling. "Are you okay, Lacey? Chase wasn't forcing himself on you, was..." He didn't seem to know when to shut up.

Chase took a threatening step toward Brian, and Lacey quickly grabbed his arm. A burst of laughter escaped her before she got it under control. She knew Brian was joking, but Chase apparently wasn't in the mood for jokes.

"I'm all right, Brian." She smiled, receiving a scowl from Chase. "You have great timing." She avoided his direct gaze, but there was no avoiding the heat of embarrassment creeping up her neck.

"Has anyone informed you what's been going on around here?" Brian questioned Chase.

Chase glanced at Lacey. "I know about most of it. I saw the horse."

"The sheriff's set up some roadblocks two miles in every direction and he has men on horseback riding the perimeter of the ranch. It's difficult considering no one has actually seen Johnson in the area yet."

"And the phone calls?" Chase growled.

Brian shrugged. "Carl can't be certain it was Johnson's voice." He glanced Lacey's way. It was apparent he wanted to say more, but not in her presence.

"I get the message." She gave them each a scowl. "And don't think by leaving that you're getting away with anything. I just prefer doing battle with more clothes on." She shouldn't have men-

tioned her lack of clothing. Chase's gaze slowly traveled down her body and back up again, in a look designed to heat her blood. Lacey could hardly look him in the eyes after what they'd just shared. A glance at Brian revealed he was amused at the whole thing.

She moved around both men, grateful for the chance to escape.

Chapter 10

“Dear, where’s your head?”

Lacey blinked back to the present, meeting Rita’s kind smile across the table from her. They’d just finished dinner, and her father and Chase had already taken off for the den to discuss business. Lacey knew it was the second glass of wine making her feel lazy and sleepy, and for a minute she must have gotten lost in the fog. Apparently Rita had been talking to her and only now realized she hadn’t been listening.

Lacey offered the other woman an apologetic smile. She wouldn’t purposely be rude to Rita. “That was a wonderful dinner, but I’m afraid I shouldn’t have indulged in a second glass of wine. I’m sorry for getting lost in thought.”

Rita beamed as if she’d prepared the swordfish herself. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. Would you like some coffee to clear away the cobwebs?”

Lacey shook her head and pushed her dinner plate away. “No, thank you.” She placed her linen napkin on the table next to it.

“I hope you’re not worried about that Johnson character. We’re well protected here.”

It was a man on Lacey’s mind, only not the one who was on everyone else’s. A sexy cowboy was monopolizing her thoughts, which then turned into arousal. A flashback of their lovemaking in the pool caused her to glance away from Rita, afraid she would recognize and question the guilt in her eyes. She’d never liked being taken from behind, but Chase’s rough possession had pleased

her immensely. The pleasant ache inside her womb reminded Lacey how his flesh had filled her to capacity, satisfying her hunger.

"I think some fresh air will do me good." She rose, hesitating before saying, "I think I'll go for a walk in the garden. Would you like to join me?"

Now it was Rita's turn to shake her head. "I'm sorry, Lacey, but I feel one of my headaches coming on." Lacey knew Rita suffered with migraines. Closer inspection revealed the older woman's eyes were slightly glazed, the pallor of her skin showing through her skillfully made-up face. "If I go to bed now, I just might stop it from turning into a bad one."

"Would you like me to tell Dad you're turning in?"

"No need. I'll stop in and see him on my way." Rita got to her feet, reaching up to massage her temple. "I'm sorry to desert you so early."

They left the dining room together, Rita through the doorway to the hallway that led to the den, and Lacey went out through the French glass doors leading to the garden. She made her way straight to the vine-covered gazebo and sank down on a bench against one of the walls.

The sweet smell of jasmine assaulted her senses, and Lacey leaned back and closed her eyes. She inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with fresh, sweet air. She'd love to go for a ride, but it would be dark soon. And just the thought of running into Johnson made her nervous. *Who else could have killed the horse?* She heard a rustle in the bushes next to her and turned to see a small brown bunny poke its head out. As soon as they made eye contact, it turned and scampered away. Lacey laughed softly.

"So this is where you're hiding."

Lacey flinched again, glancing up to see Chase standing in the entranceway. He'd changed back into jeans, dusty boots and a denim workshirt. Half the buttons were undone, and the sleeves rolled back to expose his muscular forearms. At dinner he'd looked

like a handsome pirate in a white collared shirt and black pants. Every lock of hair in place, unlike now when it looked like he'd been running his fingers through it. Lacey knew the Chase she was seeing now was the one she wanted. He was the one who turned her inside out.

From where she sat, she caught the faintest hint of his after-shave, something hot and spicy. Tantalizing her senses and imagination.

"What would I be hiding from?"

Chase didn't answer her but his look said it all. He didn't move from his spot. Silver mercury moved slowly over Lacey. She became self-conscious about what she was wearing. She'd dressed for dinner. Perhaps the slinky black sheath exposed a little too much skin, because the look in his eyes said he'd like nothing better than to peel it off her. She'd caught that same dark hunger in his gaze while they'd been dining. Lacey swallowed apprehensively when Chase ignored her question. There was no disguising the naked desire in his eyes, or her nipples hardening beneath his bold stare.

"How did you find me?" She wet her lips nervously.

"I followed your scent."

Lacey knew he was serious. She'd smoothed on Obsession body lotion after her shower earlier. Had she worn that particular fragrance on purpose? As a subtle reminder of last night?

"Are you and Dad done with business?"

"For now. I thought you might like to do something."

Lacey eyed him suspiciously, a grin twitching her lips. "Like what?" *Another round of hot sex?*

Chase shrugged. "Go for a ride. I know where there's a nice little lake for swimming."

"We have a nice little pool right here," she pointed out.

"We can go skinny-dipping there."

His words sent a heated flush through her. The thought stimulated her. To go skinny-dipping with Chase under the moonlight, their bodies naked and gliding over each other while swimming. Caressing and arousing each other until they linked together as one beneath the surface. She squirmed in her seat, trying to ignore the flood of wetness soaking her thong.

She was crazy for even contemplating it. "It will be dark soon."

"You'll be safe with me," he insisted.

"I wonder," Lacey breathed softly, seriously doubting it. "You'll most likely take me off somewhere and ravish me."

The white of Chase's teeth was barely visible in the approaching darkness. He might be smiling, but his words were low and serious. "I can ravish you anywhere. And if you don't come with me now, it will be here."

Lacey inhaled sharply at his bold implication. He might as well come right out and say he planned to make love to her. She wondered if this was his way of giving her the chance to back out, knowing what his intentions were beforehand. Well, she was going to surprise Chase and wipe that smile right off his handsome face.

She rose slowly. "I'll need to change first."

On her way past him, Chase reached out and stopped her. "You can ride in that."

Their gazes met briefly before Lacey glanced down at the dress she was wearing. It had two long slits up both sides, almost to her thighs. It would most likely be ruined afterwards but she supposed she could ride in it.

It didn't take them long to reach the lake. It was only half a mile from the ranch. Darkness settled in but there was enough moonlight to see the glistening surface of the water. Lacey started to dismount. Chase was there to catch her around the waist. He purposely let her slide down the length of him, letting her know he was already hard for her.

Lacey shivered, her body growing warm and her breath catching in response. She knew what was going to happen. She wanted it to happen. In an unexpected move, Chase reached down, caught the hem of her dress, and brought it up and over her head. He wasn't wasting any time. He flung it over the saddle of his horse. Then his fingers grazed her breasts and nipples. Air whistled through his teeth and he pulled Lacey to him with a growl.

"Damn! I'm addicted to you."

His head dipped and his lips began to ravish the side of her neck and collarbone. As he worked his way up to her waiting mouth Lacey's hands went to his shirt, her fingers trembling with crippling arousal. She undid the few remaining buttons and then smoothed the material away from his hardened flesh. His mouth continued to tease her, giving her pleasure by closing over a swollen breast. He sucked hard and then nipped at her nipple. Lacey cried out and arched her back, silently begging him to continue.

"Chase!"

While he nibbled and suckled at her nipples, Lacey's impatient hands fumbled with his belt buckle and quickly unzipped his pants. She pulled away from him. Their gazes locked in the darkness, their breathing rushed. Lacey slowly sank to her knees, her hands ever-so-slowly lowering his pants over his lean hips and down his muscular thighs. Like a powerful stallion, his hard flesh quivered beneath her teasing fingers.

Lacey wasn't surprised or disappointed to see he wasn't wearing any briefs. Sighing with pleasure, she buried her face against him and breathed in his musky scent. Chase groaned and thrust his hips forward. She accepted his invitation by taking him into her mouth.

A deep, savage growl split the air. "Hell, Lacey!" It was clear he hadn't been expecting her action. "I'm already close to coming!"

His hands went to her silky hair, clutching her to him as she loved him with her mouth.

She swirled her tongue around his strong shaft, exploring every inch, seeking out the spots that brought him pleasure, sucking the evidence of his arousal off the tip of his penis. She caressed the tight sac beneath his penis, and was rewarded with the shudder of his aroused body. Her mouth was drawing him out. Unbelievably, he grew bigger and harder, his hips moving faster. When her hands glided around to clutch his buttocks, Chase groaned low and lost the battle for control.

“Oh God!”

The force of his orgasm seemed to sap his strength, and when he was spent, he sank to the ground in front of Lacey. He leaned weakly against her, sucking in gulps of air, twitching as tremors continued to rock his body.

Lacey took Chase’s face in her hands and kissed him. And when she would have pulled away, he clutched her to him, refusing to let her go. He gently lowered her to the ground, following her with his body. For a while he was content to lay full length on her, loving her with his mouth and hands, kissing her. She began to twist beneath him, urging him to do so much more. To satisfy the hunger in her.

His hands began a leisurely path over her body, caressing her breasts and belly, her hips, and lower. It wasn’t long before his mouth was following the same course, loving Lacey tenderly yet driving her wild. She thought she was going to lose her mind when his tongue came into play, lapping at her hard nipples, leaving a trail of fire down her twisting torso. Tickling her belly and then finally, the hair covering her mound. It seemed an eternity before he finally reached his destination, and by that time she was a quivering, breathless mass beneath him. He halted, but she felt his warm breath against her.

Her soft whimpers filled the night around them. Lacey all but begged Chase to take her all the way. *What is he waiting for?* She arched into him, straining toward fulfillment. Finally he nuzzled

the triangle of hair between her thighs, and then his tongue dived deeply into the cavern, tasting her passion. Drawing out a cry of pleasure from her lips. *Ohmigod!* He knew exactly where to touch her with his roaming tongue, where to torture a sweet response from her body. The pleasure was so unbearable that Lacey tried to pull away from it, unable to take any more.

“No!”

“Yes!”

His hands gripped her hips, and Lacey had no choice but to suffer the sweet torment his tongue inflicted on her body. Chase easily held her in place while his tongue stabbed into the very core of her. When the pleasure became too intense Lacey cried for him to stop, but what she was really crying for was release.

Her head moved back and forth in mindless pleasure, her body arched into his mouth as she strained for the ultimate gratification. Chase brought her close to the edge, then pulled back, as though knowing she'd been about to come. Her shriek of frustration pierced the night as he gently moved over her body. He brought her knees up to rest against his chest.

“Another time, baby!” He gasped roughly. “This time I want to feel your climax around my cock.”

He slammed into her, making sure his hard flesh grazed over her throbbing clit. Lacey cried out, the friction and his words sending her over the edge. Her muscles tensed and closed around his pounding flesh, and she exploded in mindless ecstasy. “Chase!”

He grunted. And in the next moment Lacey felt his orgasm against her womb as he followed her into that world where nothing else mattered but the mind-blowing pleasure racking their bodies.

As they slowly returned to the here and now Chase lowered Lacey's legs to the ground and moved beside her, keeping his arm around her. “I think a dip will do me good.” Her words were barely audible. She searched out his gaze in the darkness.

After the first time it didn't seem to bother him that they'd made love without protection. And protection wasn't on her mind either when she was twisting with mindless pleasure beneath him. By her calculations, she was safe from becoming pregnant, for a little while at least. But Chase didn't know that. And she wasn't foolish enough to bring it up. She'd have to put a call in to her doctor as soon as possible for a birth control prescription.

"That sounds like a good idea." Chase got to his feet, pulling Lacey up with him. "I think we both need cooling down."

Lacey sensed more than saw his smile. She could hear it in his voice when he spoke. She turned and walked down to the water's edge, gasping out loud at the unexpected coldness of it. She shrieked when she was suddenly picked up and held against Chase's naked chest. "What are you doing?"

"That's not the way to do it." He laughed, walking briskly into the lake.

"Chase. No!" She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. When she began to feel the cold water slap against her bottom, she pulled her body up against him, fighting the inevitable. "It's cold!"

"I thought we came here for a dip," he argued innocently.

"But not like this! It's freezing!" Lacey screamed, struggling wildly against him. "Let me go, Chase! Please!"

Chase halted and glanced down at Lacey. "I aim to please, ma'am."

Lacey sensed what he was about to do too late. Before she could utter another word, she was lifted in his arms and thrown into the lake. She came up sputtering and fuming at Chase for his insensitivity.

"You...you..." She might as well save her breath because he was nowhere in sight, but she could hear him.

Her gaze skimmed over the surface of the water until she found him. He played as hard as he worked. He was swimming with long, rapid strokes as if working out his frustrations. She

smiled. A swim would do her some good, too. Now that she had adjusted to the cold water, it felt soothing against her naked flesh. She began to swim, momentarily forgetting about Chase until he appeared in front of her and cut her off.

Lacey's breath caught in her throat. She found footing on the lake's sandy bottom. The water just covered her breasts. All she had to do was reach forward and she could touch him. His quiet searching gaze unnerved her. *What is he thinking?*

She couldn't take the silence any longer. "Is something wrong?"

For a moment it appeared Chase wasn't going to answer her. When he did it was in a tone that revealed mild surprise. As though just discovering something for himself. "You're the first woman I've ever wanted to keep for myself."

What does that mean? His admission startled Lacey. Chase wasn't the kind of man who revealed his weaknesses. And needing someone was a problem for him. His tone indicated he wasn't happy about it. Lacey kept quiet, digesting the power he'd just handed her. But she wasn't going to confuse his wanting her with love. She'd done that enough times in her life.

Chase seemed to be waiting for something. A sign from her perhaps? She lifted her hand and cupped the side of his face. A brief touch before he reached up and wrapped his fingers around her wrist firmly and removed it.

"I'm not looking for tenderness from you, Lacey. I'm not looking for emotions."

"Then what—"

His hand left her wrist and moved to the back of her head. He jerked her close. Then Chase was kissing Lacey with a fierceness that took her breath away. She trembled beneath his masterful touch, awareness unfurling in her belly. Her breasts were smashed against his chest, his renewed arousal wedged between her thighs. She arched slightly, forcing him against her swollen clit.

He tore his mouth away, his hand clenching in Lacey's hair. "I want to consume you," he growled. "Open your legs to me, Lacey. Let me in."

She did as he asked, reaching down at the same time to grasp his penis. She positioned him, and he thrust forward until he was buried to the hilt. The breath hissed through his teeth. Lacey moaned softly. Her hands went to his shoulders as he began to move against her. She wrapped her legs around his waist, forcing him even deeper into her body. Their lips met for another rough kiss.

They weren't making love. What they were doing now was meant to feed the uncontrollable hunger spiraling through them, as fast as they could. Chase took Lacey fast and furiously. As their breathing escalated, so did their rapid movements. Lacey clenched her muscles around Chase's dick, squeezing as hard as she could. He repaid her by reaching between them until he was able to manipulate her throbbing clit. They ended their kiss and sucked in air.

"That's it, baby, milk me!" He said the words against her neck, slamming into her body over and over again. Lacey shuddered, unable to slow down the orgasm racing through her body. The pleasure was too intense. Chase's actions revealed he was about to come too. She sank her teeth into his neck as a powerful climax exploded through her.

"Oh God!"

"Let it go, baby." He groaned next, the jerking movements of his body indicating he was coming.

Lacey clutched Chase to her in weakness. If he let her go now she'd sink beneath the surface and drown. Once in a while his body twitched and jerked, but other than that no other sound or movement came from him. Their breathing gradually slowed. After a few moments, he pulled away.

"I'd better get you back before they think I've kidnapped you."

"Does Dad know I'm with you?"

"I told him we might go for a ride."

Lacey wondered what her father thought of that. "He won't be worried if he knows I'm with you."

She moved first, turning for shore. Chase was right behind her; she could hear him. She gingerly picked her way back to where their horses waited and reached for her dress, surprised at the shakiness of her legs. As she struggled into the clinging sheath, she dimly heard Chase zip up his pants and turned to see him doing up the buckle. His shirt was on but unbuttoned. Then her gaze moved past him in the direction of the ranch.

"Chase...my God!"

He whipped around to see what she was looking at. A towering inferno of flames licked at the blackened sky. "Let's go!"

He grabbed Lacey and practically threw her on top of Misty, then mounted his own stallion. Together they raced blindly in the direction of the house. The fire was large and out of control. Lacey feared the whole place was going up. It was a small relief when they were close enough to see that the blaze was contained to the stables.

Chaos greeted them when they finally reined in their horses. Chase jumped off his mount before the animal came to a complete stop. He turned and put Lacey on the ground. "Head back to the house!" He left her then, joining in the commotion around them. She stood in mindless shock, her eyes on the fire, trying to comprehend what she was seeing. Where was her father?

"Lacey, go back to the house!" someone yelled out.

Frightened horses were running everywhere as they charged out of the stable in fear. Loud sirens could be heard from approaching fire trucks. The area was filled with men who worked for her father and some from nearby ranches. They had water hoses in their hands and worked diligently to keep the fire from spreading to the other barns.

Lacey dodged several screaming horses as she searched frantically for her father. Knowing him, he would be in the thick of things. She wasn't consciously aware of placing herself in danger just by being there. Her heart was racing with fear as she tried to recognize the faces covered with soot and grime. She made her way toward the burning building.

"Dad!" She thought she recognized him.

An unbearable heat enveloped the area around her. Amid the sounds of terrified horses and hollering men, the night was filled with the sound of crackling wood as the stable succumbed to the raging fire. Soon the structure was falling to the ground, collapsing in several sections.

"Lacey, get the hell out of here!"

This time she registered the command, and her eyes searched out the voice, finding Brian at the other end of it. His clothes were dirty and covered with soot. His face was smudged with the stuff. Sweat from the intense heat ran rivers down his face and Lacey saw him wipe at his eyes.

"Where's my dad?" she screamed above the noise, beginning to make her way toward him. The loud splintering sound that followed indicated another section of the barn was about to come down. She ran toward Brian.

"Lacey! Get back!"

It was at that moment that Lacey realized the wall was falling on top of her. She let out a terrified scream and switched directions. Only it was too late. Pieces of smoldering wood were already floating down about her. Brian reached her just as the wall collapsed. Lacey felt herself shoved out of the way with a force that promised broken bones were she to collide with anything solid. Chase caught her in his arms and whipped her out of the way. She grunted in pain, and the force of his actions sent them stumbling and rolling into the dirt. At the same time Lacey was helplessly

aware that the wall had crashed to the ground, pinning Brian beneath it.

Chase left Lacey in the dirt and rushed back to help his brother. Some of the other men had witnessed what happened and were also trying to help Brian. The wall was smoldering and half burning on top of him, but they managed to lift it off and drag Brian away from the heat of the flames. He was unconscious.

“Brian...”

Lacey knelt by his body, tears quickly filling her eyes. She reached out to touch his brow, only to be halted by a steely grip that threatened to break her bones. Her gaze flew to Chase, seeing an expression of such utter condemnation that she caught her breath. She would have lost her balance if he hadn't been holding her wrist.

“You've done enough!” he grated out savagely, the pain in his voice matching that in his eyes. “You should have gone back to the house when you were told...”

Lacey fell back from the look in Chase's clouded eyes and pulled her wrist away. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She watched in stunned silence as Brian was suddenly encircled by firefighters and medical personnel. She shook her head slowly, numb with pain and confusion.

Was Chase blaming her for this? She stumbled back from the group, her eyes moving back and forth from Chase to Brian. *Oh God!* If this was her fault...

“Lacey, Lacey...” She glanced up to see her father's concerned face. “Come away, dear. There's nothing you can do here.”

Lacey let her father lead her away. She was too numb to even feel relieved he was okay. Rita was waiting for them back at the house, nervous and wringing her hands. Lacey vaguely heard her mention the sheriff was on his way.

"Was the fire not an accident then?" Lacey wiped the last remains of tears from her eyes. But she couldn't do anything about the pain twisting in her heart.

"There will have to be an investigation to determine that," her father explained. "I'm going back to see about Brian."

Lacey didn't bother arguing with him. She was still feeling the effect of Chase's hostile gaze on her after they'd rescued Brian. She mumbled something unimportant to Rita and turned in the direction of the stairs.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in her room. She was a mess. Her silk dress was singed and torn; her hair was covered with dirt and soot. Most of her exposed skin was caked with dirt. She glanced down in the yard at the commotion, her gaze searching for some sign of what happened to Brian, praying he wasn't hurt too badly. *Lord, let him be okay.*

The stable was completely gone now. The fire was out, but the wood on the ground was still smoldering with red embers. A couple of firefighters stood around the mess, spraying it down with water, and even from where she was, Lacey could hear the hiss of steam. One by one she noticed the neighboring ranchers who had come to help were leaving. A few remaining men were gathering up the horses and putting them into the corrals. She turned from the window just as there was a knock at her door.

"You okay, dear?" Her father opened the door just enough to peek in.

Lacey ignored his concern. "How's Brian?"

"He's on his way to the hospital, I'm afraid. He did regain consciousness, though. That's a good sign. Chase went with him."

Lacey nodded silently, then covered her face with her hands and broke down. She welcomed her father's arms around her and had no idea how long she stood in his embrace sobbing quietly against him.

“It’s late, dear. Why don’t you turn in? I’ll let you know if we hear anything about Brian.”

He was right. Lacey reluctantly agreed and stepped away from him. She was suddenly exhausted. Before going to bed she’d have to bathe. She was filthy. It suddenly occurred to her that except for a few things, she’d lost most of her clothes in the fire. Not to mention some of her work. Sighing deeply, she walked to the bathroom. Nothing seemed to matter right then.

Chapter 11

The first thing Lacey checked on after waking the next morning was Brian's condition. She phoned the hospital but the nurse on duty wouldn't give her any information other than to say that he was awake and eating breakfast. That was certainly good news. The nurse asked her if she wanted to speak to Brian's wife, but Lacey declined. She didn't want their first meeting to be an awkward phone conversation. Lacey thanked the nurse and hung up, relief flooding her.

"What did the hospital have to say?" her father asked her the second she got off the phone.

"The nurse couldn't reveal any personal information. She did say he was awake and eating breakfast, so that's good news. And his wife is with him." She left the corner of the desk where she'd been resting her hip and walked to the open French doors.

"Thank God. You see, I told you he'd be all right. Chase phoned during the night to give me an update, but I knew you'd have to hear it for yourself."

"I imagine he stayed there all night." Lacey leaned against the doorframe, crossed her arms, and peered out into the garden. "I'm glad Mary is with Brian now."

"She's a sweet girl, that one. Brian will be well looked after. I suppose you'll be going in to visit later?"

"I'm going now. I need to pick up some things while I'm in town, too. Practically everything I had was burned in the fire."

What are the damages, by the way?" She turned her head to look him in the eyes.

He sighed deeply. "Besides losing the stables and everything inside, we were damn lucky in saving the horses. Someone from the insurance company will be out later to look at the damages and determine the replacement costs."

"How did the fire start, Dad?" Lacey frowned slightly. "Do you think it was Johnson? I thought guards were posted to prevent this sort of thing from happening." He glanced away, but not before Lacey noticed the look of guilt in his eyes. "Dad? You're taking an awfully long time to answer my question."

Lacey sensed when he met her eyes it was with great reluctance. "I guess the time of keeping things from you are past. But remember, I only wanted to protect you."

"Keep what from me?"

He took a deep breath. "The guards posted around the house are for your protection, not mine. The two on duty last night were found unconscious and bound. It's beginning to look like Johnson has an accomplice."

"And you kept this from me?" Lacey crossed the room to him, anger building inside. "Didn't it occur to you that I had a right to know this?" She began pacing back and forth in front of his desk. "When will you realize that I'm an adult?"

"I made a mistake, dear, I admit it. I'm not proud of keeping the truth from you."

"I'm not a child anymore, Dad. I've been on my own for quite some time now. And I resent you for forgetting that."

He had the grace to look remorseful. "You'll understand my reasoning when you have your own children someday. It doesn't make any difference how old they get, you still worry about them and want to take care of them. Mark my words."

Lacey's anger softened at his admission, yet she knew she had to make him understand how she felt or nothing would change.

"From now on, if it concerns me I want to know about it. I mean it, Dad. I'm not going to let you treat me like a child."

He met her frank look and sighed deeply. "Fair enough, dear."

"Let's start now by you telling me about Johnson. How did he manage to get so close?"

"If it is Johnson," he said cautiously. "This could all be a coincidence." Lacey didn't buy that for a minute, and what's more, she didn't think her father did either. "Johnson has been behind bars a few years and has had time to think about things. Revenge and the best ways to go about it."

"What did he say on the phone the other day?"

He hesitated, the look in his eyes turning hard. "That if he can't get to me, he'll get to someone I love. He means to hurt me, honey, anyway he can."

The man sounded dangerous and unscrupulous to her. *Any man who could easily mutilate a beautiful horse as he'd done...* She shuddered just thinking about him. Then a thought occurred to Lacey and she caught her father's gaze. *What about Rita?* "Did he specifically mention me?"

She sensed the answer before he responded. His expression became set, his mouth pressing until it became white. When a tic appeared in his square jaw, Lacey recognized the signs well. He was holding back from answering her. She was about to remind him of the promise he made when a curt, "Yes," passed through his lips.

She recalled the phone call he'd received and how angry it had made him. What had Johnson said to her father? If it had something to do with her, she had a right to know. One thing was certain, though, if he managed to get close enough to start fire to the stable, what was to stop him from moving on to the house?

Nothing...

* * * *

"Brian Saunders' room, please."

Before the nurse could answer, Lacey felt a hand on her shoulder. She whirled around half expecting to come face-to-face with Chase. Instead it was a petite young woman who looked about seven months pregnant. She knew immediately who the woman was.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. I couldn't help overhear you ask where Brian's room is. I'm his wife, Mary." She held out her small hand.

Lacey was grateful for the smile on Mary's face. She took her hand, still feeling terribly guilty over Brian's accident. But the welcome in the other woman's powder blue eyes calmed her fears about meeting Brian's wife for the first time. There wasn't an ounce of blame in her tired, friendly expression.

"I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances," Lacey began, her gaze moving over Mary's slight figure. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and there wasn't an ounce of makeup on her face. She didn't need any either. Her skin was flawlessly beautiful.

"Brian told me you were coming home," Lacey continued as they began to walk slowly toward what she could only assume was his room. "He's been missing you."

"I was gone longer than expected," Mary admitted with a smile still on her lips. "Brian's mentioned you a few times too. If I didn't know that man loves me..." She let her sentence trail off. "I guess it helped that every time he mentioned your name, Chase's was right behind it."

Lacey didn't know how to respond to that. After last night, she wasn't sure where things stood between her and Chase. They halted outside a room. Without knocking on the partially closed door, Mary pushed it open and went in. Lacey hesitated at the doorway.

"Come on in, Lacey. I'm decent."

The strength of his voice brought a rush of tears to Lacey's eyes, and she moved into the room with a trembling smile. Mary sat on the edge of the bed, taking Brian's bandaged hand. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and Lacey could see his ribs were wrapped and his hair singed.

Overwhelming guilt choked her, and she began to apologize immediately. "Brian...I'm so sorry! I..."

"Not another word, Lacey. I mean it. No one in this room holds you to blame. It was an accident and nothing else. I'm only glad I managed to reach you in time or you'd be the one with the new hairdo."

"Yes, I can't thank you enough for that." She couldn't help smiling at what he said.

"Were we able to save the horses?"

Lacey nodded. "Thank God, yes."

"Brian said the stable went up so fast that they hardly had time to sound an alarm," Mary added, her gaze resting on Lacey. "Did you lose everything in the fire as well?"

She smiled a bittersweet smile and indicated her attire. "Well, not everything, as you can see. I'm just glad I had some clothes at the main house, even if they are a little outdated."

"I'm sorry I can't loan you something."

Lacey returned Mary's smile. "I appreciate the offer, but what better excuse to go out and buy a new wardrobe then losing everything in a fire?"

Brian groaned, and she and Mary looked anxiously at him. "Please, don't give Mary ideas!"

"Oh you!" Mary smiled affectionately. She bent to give him a peck on the cheek, but Brian turned his head and caught her lips. When Mary made to pull away, he grabbed her by the arm and held her securely to him.

Lacey cleared her throat, and Mary pulled back with a deep blush on her young face. Brian looked like a naughty schoolboy. He winked at Lacey.

"So, where's the, ah, tyrant brother?"

"Tyrant?" A chuckle escaped Brian. "After the way I found you two at the pool yesterday? You looked pretty..."

"You *would* bring that up."

"Bring what up?" Mary questioned, glancing back and forth between them.

"I told you about Lacey and Chase," Brian explained with a smiling wink at his wife.

"Well, that was yesterday," Lacey said with a twist to her lips. "Things change. Right now, I doubt he'd be glad to see me anytime soon." She thought about the fire and the look on his face after Brian's accident.

"Chase is hotheaded and went with his emotions in the heat of the moment. He doesn't blame you for Brian's accident. He'd react the same way with Brian, had the situation been reversed."

Lacey smiled at Mary's attempt to keep the peace. She'd obviously been filled in on what occurred. "Don't defend your brother-in-law; he's the last person who needs it. What Chase needs is a good, swift kick where it counts!"

Mary laughed softly. "Now that I'd like to see, someone putting Chase in his place."

"I know where you can find him if you want to put your actions where your mouth is," Brian teased, adjusting his pillows to get comfortable. "I made him go home to get some rest when they were through with me this morning."

Lacey declined Brian's suggestion at the hospital, but then found herself turning down the dirt road to Chase's house on her way home, some four hours later. Her gaze took in the changes since she was last there. Some landscaping had been added. The second thing she noticed was the expensive sports car parked in the

circular driveway in front of the house. Frowning, Lacey parked behind the fire red Corvette and wondered who it belonged to.

She walked up the porch steps and raised her hand to knock when she noticed the door was ajar. Calling out as she pushed the door open farther, Lacey stepped into the house. She hated walking in uninvited, but after there was no response she decided Chase must still be asleep. She walked quietly to the stairs. The faint noises she heard coming from a room at the top of the stairs decided it for her.

Instincts guided Lacey to Chase's bedroom. The door was half closed. She slowly pushed it open, calling his name out softly. "Chase?" She was braver then she thought, venturing into the lion's den. A low groan responded to her call, but nothing prepared Lacey for what she saw on the other side of the door.

She came to a shocked halt in the doorway, sucking in her breath. Her eyes took in the two bodies on Chase's oversize, masculine bed. It didn't matter that he was beneath the heavy quilt because Stella was sprawled out on top of it and on top of him. And, she was completely naked.

Lacey couldn't believe what she was seeing, and until that moment, hadn't realized the true extent of her feelings for Chase. *How could he?* Watching with heartache, Stella began squirming suggestively against Chase, planting her painted red lips on his. He groaned, his arm moving from beneath the covers to wrap around Stella's slim waist.

"What the..." He made an effort to move, but he was hampered by the heavy quilt and Stella's splayed body.

A sound of betrayal escaped Lacey before she could stop it. She couldn't move she was in such a state of unexpected pain. Tears sprang to her eyes, and the breath left her body in short, tortured gasps. A muscle squeezed in her chest, and she put her hand over her mouth to hold back further sobs. For the first time, she understood what the meaning of true heartbreak was. And it hit her

then that she actually loved Chase Saunders. *When had that happened?* It had sneaked up on her, and seeing someone she loved in the arms of another was the ultimate punishment.

Chase raised his head and looked over Stella's shoulder, catching Lacey's gaze before she turned and fled the room without a word. She ignored his harsh demand for her to stop. Running as fast as she could, Lacey knew she had to get out of the house and away from there. She slammed her car door and tore out of the driveway with a screech of spinning tires, leaving a spray of flying rocks behind her. Her car skidded dangerously, but she was able to right it before continuing on.

Tears ran unchecked down her hot cheeks, and she wiped at them furiously. Had making love to her meant nothing to him? Chase didn't strike her as the kind of man who'd have more than one woman in his bed. Maybe she hadn't satisfied him. Lacey realized she couldn't go home like this. She'd be damned if she let anyone see how much that man had hurt her.

"Damn you, Chase Saunders!"

Sobbing, nearly blinded by tears, Lacey stopped the car and pulled sharply over to the side of the road, skidding slightly on the grass. She pounded the innocent steering wheel and swore how much she hated him, over and over until she almost believed it. All the while tears burned hot trails down her cheeks, making her a liar.

Chapter 12

After a while, Lacey crossed her arms over the steering wheel and lowered her head. She was drained and didn't know how long she'd sat there. She closed her eyes. It would be so easy to fall asleep, but a loud clap of thunder jolted her from the numb fog that enveloped her. She sat up and leaned back against the seat.

She ran her hands through her hair and wiped the wetness from her cheeks one last time. Her gaze took in the darkening sky, the tiny drops of rain on the windshield. The horizon looked more like night was approaching instead of early afternoon. She moved to start her car when a movement in her rearview mirror drew her attention.

Stella's red Corvette was speeding down the road toward her, leaving in its wake a trail of swirling brown dust. The woman was driving at a dangerous speed; her car swerving slightly on the gravel road, but it didn't seem to matter. Lacey wondered if Chase was with her and purposely glanced down as the car sped by so she wouldn't know. She stared down at nothing for a long time, making certain when she glanced back up again that the sports car would be out of sight.

Her mistake had been in lingering.

Now it was Chase's truck barreling down the road toward her. Before Lacey had time to act, he swerved around her car and stopped his vehicle with a squeal, just missing her. Lacey caught her breath at his recklessness and then fumbled with the key in the ignition when she saw the expression on his face. It didn't occur to her

that all she had to do was lock her door. Her fingers were shaking so badly that, in the end, all she succeeded in doing was dropping the keys at her feet. Chase practically ripped the car door off when he opened it to get to her.

"Don't touch me!" she whispered sharply, shrinking away from his hand.

An angry muscle twitched in Chase's clenched jaw, and he pulled Lacey out of the car anyway. "If you don't behave, I'll do more than just touch you."

A threat if she'd ever heard one.

In his haste to catch up to her, he'd obviously donned his clothes in a hurry. Only one button was buttoned on his shirt, the loose ends flapping against the stormy wind. And his jeans were unsnapped and half unzipped, revealing that he wasn't wearing underwear. Reminding her all over again of the intimate scene she'd walked in on.

"Me behave?" she hissed, pulling against his powerful hold. "I wasn't the one caught in bed with my pants down!"

"If you'd looked with your eyes and not with your heart, you would have seen it was a one-sided affair," Chase rasped down at her, breathing heavy from his efforts to subdue her. "What will it take to get it through both your heads that I don't want Stella?" He jerked Lacey to him roughly, his hands hurting her shoulders unintentionally. "It's you I want, lady! And only you!"

His gaze was fierce on Lacey. The wind of the oncoming storm whipped over them, bringing with it a cool sprinkle of rain. The sky was one black cloud and thunder vibrated the ground beneath their feet. Lacey wanted to believe Chase, but he didn't say the words she really wanted to hear. Wanting her wasn't enough. She wanted him too, but she also wanted marriage and a family someday. And so far, none of that had been mentioned between them. What would happen once he tired of her?

"There's nothing to discuss." She managed to jerk away from him and started to turn back toward her car.

"That's what you think." Chase's big body pushed Lacey against her car, pinning her there. His hands went to her neck, circling it in a subtle warning. "I have a lot to say."

"Well, I'm not interested," Lacey fired back, struggling slightly. She was painfully aware of the strong length of Chase's body pressed intimately against her. "I saw everything I needed to see."

He chuckled mercilessly down at her. "I thought I told you that I wasn't participating in Stella's little game."

The light sprinkle of rain was quickly turning into a full-fledged rainstorm. Lacey shivered against Chase, blinking the rain out of her eyes, but he ignored the storm and her movements. Lacey felt herself blush hotly when the front of her shirt quickly became plastered to her, revealing her braless state. Her nipples became hard the second Chase lowered his hot gaze to her breasts.

He took a deep breath and captured Lacey's gaze with his smoldering stare. "Let us get a few things straight between us, baby. First, I dislike Stella immensely. No, *hate* is a more appropriate word for what I feel for her. And what's more, she knows how I feel."

Lacey opened her mouth, and Chase gave her a threatening squeeze. It didn't hurt, but the message was clear for her not to interrupt. "I could never want Stella."

He whispered the words down at Lacey, moving so close that she could feel the warmth of his breath against her lips. They parted, eager for his kiss, wanting it. They were both soaked now, but the rain didn't seem to bother her anymore. An inner heat kept her warm.

Only Chase didn't kiss Lacey. "Second, I'm sorry for the way I treated you last night. I nearly lost my mind when I saw that wall of

fire crumbling down behind you and knew I'd never reach you in time. Then, when I saw Brian pinned beneath it..."

"You blamed me."

"I blamed you for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, not for the accident. I was elated you were safe, but crazy out of my mind that Brian was injured and not knowing how badly."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. I won't lie and say I wasn't mad as hell at you at the time." His hot gaze drifted lazily down the front of her, taking in the pointed peaks of her full breasts as they strained against the clinging knit shirt. "I've never wanted any woman the way I want you."

Lacey's heartbeat accelerated, and she suddenly grew unbearably hot. She was vaguely surprised that the rain pouring down on them wasn't producing steam. She couldn't believe they were still standing along the side of the road. Given their intimate position, she was thankful it was an old country road and had little to no traffic.

Instincts told her that Chase was struggling with himself. She could almost visualize him mentally counting to ten. She smiled seductively, even though his eyes were shut, and brought her hips closer into the circle of his. She felt the tight muscles in his thighs and knew her power over him when he gritted out, "Lacey, I'm not done talking to you."

"So talk." She knew if Chase had been looking at her she wouldn't be nearly so brave. Before she was aware of what she was doing, she began to rotate her hips gently into him. She lost a little of her own sanity when she felt the hardness of his desire push impatiently against her.

His hands moved to Lacey's hips, and he held her in place while slowly torturing them both. It was Lacey who lost control first and moaned with pleasure, caught in her own web of desire.

Her knees turned to jelly and she rolled her head back lifelessly, offering Chase her exposed throat.

He didn't need a verbal invitation to put his mouth on her. "You started this, sweetheart." His lips moved against her damp flesh. Lacey shivered uncontrollably as Chase's teeth roughly grazed her skin, bringing a mixture of pleasure and pain. He slanted his mouth over hers for a hard, quick kiss. Then, without warning, he grabbed her hand and pulled her behind him.

"Come on, you're going back to the house with me." He opened the door to his truck.

"I thought you wanted to talk," Lacey reminded him, pausing at the opened door to meet his smoky eyes. Her breasts were rising and falling rapidly, and his eyes narrowed on the deep cleavage exposed by the buttons undone.

He gritted his teeth. "Get in, unless you want to do this here and now."

Lacey didn't have to ask Chase what he meant. She glanced around them, taking in the lonely countryside and quiet road, seriously doubting they had to worry about anyone coming by. But the look on Chase's face worried her. He was barely in control now. His arousal was quite evident, and she felt the answering weakness invade her limbs. Without another word, Lacey ducked her head and slid across the soft leather seat.

She didn't have to ask Chase what home he'd been referring to when he made a reckless U-turn on the narrow dirt road. With a speed that had Lacey gasping and grasping for the door handle to keep from flying to his side of the truck, they were racing down the wet, muddy road.

"Who taught you how to drive?" she questioned, throwing him a concerned look.

Chase chuckled. "No one. I taught myself when I was about fourteen." His silver gaze moved over Lacey, smoldering with un-

spoken intentions. "That's not all I learned how to do when I was fourteen."

Lacey caught her breath, coloring. "I don't doubt it. And I bet that was in a car too."

Chase laughed, pulling his truck up in front of his house and bringing it to a screeching halt. But before he opened the door, he turned to Lacey and put his arm on the seat behind her. Lacey met the fire in the deep depths of his eyes, feeling an intense heat engulf her senses from the promise she saw there. Her nipples tingled in response.

"One more thing, lady." His voice became deep and husky, and his fingers toyed with the damp hair curling behind her ear. He stared deeply into her eyes, as if trying to find something there. He hesitated only briefly before shocking Lacey. "I want you for my wife."

Lacey sucked in air, almost swallowing her tongue. It was the last thing she'd expected from Chase. She tried to break eye contact but couldn't. No soft words of endearing love or passionate promises from his mouth, just "I want you." No beating around the bush for Chase. Like the man, straight and to the point. And knowing him, Lacey realized he was admitting a lot more than he knew.

Still, she couldn't help herself from saying, "That's not how you ask a woman to marry you, Chase."

"Maybe I'm afraid of what your answer would be if I asked."

Chase, afraid? Lacey couldn't imagine him afraid of anything. His large hand wrapped around her neck and gently tugged Lacey nearer, until their lips meshed. He kissed her passionately, forcing her to open to the hot thrust of his tongue.

Lacey lost herself in his kiss for as long as she dared. Until she could no longer breathe and it felt like she was about to go up in flames. Her hands went to his chest and she pushed him away gasping for air. "Why?" she whispered.

His eyes trapped hers, his suddenly turning hard and flinty. "Because I want you in my bed and I want you in my life. And I'll be damned if there are going to be any more abortions in this world because of me."

His blunt words surprised Lacey and frightened her a little. Her heart ached with the knowledge that Stella had destroyed Chase's child. Something she would never do. She wanted a family. She wanted his baby. Before she could respond, he dragged her halfway on his lap and let his hands roam over her wet body with a definite purpose. Their mouths meshed; tongues dueling against each other. They were breathing hard when Chase finally released Lacey.

He chuckled. "It's been a long time since I sat in a truck with a beautiful woman long enough to fog up the windows."

Lacey glanced quietly around them. She couldn't even see outside the windows were so steamed up. "It's been even longer for me," she admitted huskily.

"Are you saying you've never made love in the backseat of a car?" he teased, nuzzling her neck.

Lacey pulled away from Chase to look him in the eyes. "No. I was a good girl growing up."

His rough laugh made her ridiculously happy. "Come on; let's get you out of those wet clothes." It was a short distance to the front door. They found it slightly ajar and exchanged glances. "I was sort of in a hurry when I left," he explained unnecessarily.

Lacey went in before Chase, pausing long enough in the foyer entrance to remove her wet shoes and socks. She ran her hands through her hair and turned back to him. He was so quiet, and just stood there watching her. An expression she couldn't read was etched on his rugged face.

"What?"

He smiled wickedly. "If you know what's good for you, you won't bend over like that too many more times while I'm in this condition. I have a weakness for cute little asses."

She knew that. "You're a sex fiend!" Lacey laughed in spite of herself. "Chase, I'm freezing!" She began to rub her arms vigorously.

"Let's get you into a hot shower." He moved toward her.

A hot shower sounded like heaven, and Lacey didn't think of protesting when Chase dragged her upstairs behind him. He led her directly to his room. She tried not to look at his bed, but her gaze was pulled there like a magnet. The covers were on the floor and only one pillow had an indentation, revealing only one person had slept there. Yet she couldn't get the image of Chase and Stella in that bed together out of her head. Jealousy threatened to rise to the surface. She fought it down.

He obviously noticed where Lacey's gaze had wandered and with a low curse went to his bed. He stripped the sheet and pillowcases off and tossed them to the floor in the corner.

"The bathroom is that way." He put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her in the direction. "I'll find you a robe."

Lacey shut the door against Chase and leaned against it. She took several steadying breaths. Once again she had entered the lion's den. And the lion was impatient. She stepped away from the door and began to undress, leaving her wet clothes in a heap on the tiled floor.

She reached to turn on the shower only to have a change of heart and turned on the tap instead. A hot bath sounded nice, and after adjusting the temperature, she lowered herself into the shiny cobalt tub. The water felt great against Lacey's cold, clammy skin and the first thing she did was submerge her whole body under its steamy warmth.

She sat up, smoothing her hair back from her face, reaching to turn off the water when it was high enough to cover her. The bathroom door opened.

“Here’s a robe you can—”

Lacey caught her breath and turned to Chase. For a second, he seemed undecided. His silver gaze narrowed on the upward tilt of her exposed breasts as they bobbed above the water. It was too late to cover herself, and Lacey found she didn’t want to. She sat perfectly still, barely able to breathe. A warm flush spread over her body.

Finally Chase moved, laying the white terry robe aside. He reached for the one button that was done up on his wet shirt and gave it a flick. His eyes were on Lacey the whole time, eating her up.

“Chase—”

“Save your breath, honey.” There was a predatory gleam in his wintry gaze. “We both knew it was leading to this.” His hands dropped to his jeans.

Lacey couldn’t take her eyes off him. His naked body was magnificent. And his penis was already hard for her. She felt an inner heat spread through her body, pooling in the warm darkness between her legs. She watched him walk to the tub without shame or embarrassment.

Chase’s gaze was hot enough to melt her where it touched and lingered. He stepped into the tub and lowered himself across from her.

Lacey was thankful it was an oversized tub. Chase was a big man. His added weight forced the half-filled tub to overflow onto the small area rug. Before she knew what he was about, he reached for her and pulled her effortlessly onto his lap.

“Come here, baby.”

She gasped at the contact of his naked male body and the heat that radiated from it. Chase adjusted Lacey so that she laid full

length against him. Her breasts were flattened against his hard chest, and there was no mistaking his obvious erection as it beat furiously against the soft triangle of hair between her thighs, wanting entry.

"Oh, Chase..." Lacey melted against him. "You're so hard. I want you inside my body."

Lacey's hands went to his hair, and she forced his head down to her. Her lips lightly ran back and forth over his slightly parted ones, and she teased him with her thrusting tongue. A deep shudder racked Chase and he crushed Lacey to him. His fingers sank into her buttocks, grinding her into his pulsing cock. He seemed content to rub his shaft up and down the slit of her pussy.

Her cry of pleasure echoed through the room, and Lacey let her teeth sink into his bottom lip before sucking on it tenderly. "Please." She lifted her head to plead with Chase to take her. Her body quivered uncontrollably, the breath left her body in rapid spurts. The water was cooling, but they were making their own heat.

"Please...stop?" Chase asked in a half tease, his gaze hot and steady on hers.

"Don't you dare!" she gasped, before tugging his lower lip with her teeth for even suggesting it. "I want you, Chase." Her words were warm and husky in his ear, her tongue teasing him. "I want you now!"

"You're a witch!" he rasped, losing his fingers in her hair to pull her head back and ravish her mouth. "What kind of spell have you put on me?" He arched his hips, growling.

Their eyes met and held, and Chase's hands moved to Lacey's hips. With practiced skill, he lifted her slightly so he could lower her onto his throbbing dick. She closed her eyes at the intense pleasure that washed over her and let out a long, deep sigh. She couldn't remember anything feeling half as good.

"Is this what you want, baby?"

His hands glided up Lacey's sides to cup her full breasts while she braced herself against his chest. The smile on his face and the smoldering passion reflected in his gaze was Lacey's undoing. She moved slowly at first, in a gentle up-and-down rhythm, letting the walls of her femininity close around him as Chase gradually sheathed himself in her depths. The pleasure was exquisite enough to make her lose control.

Apparently him too. "Lacey." He sucked in his breath. "I can't hold out much longer." A husky chuckle escaped her. "You have a knack for halting at the most crucial moment, taking me to the very edge but refusing to let me go over. You're playing with fire," he grated out, sounding as if he was in pain.

"So burn me!" Lacey cried, arching her back and wiggling her bottom against the tops of his tensed thighs and balls. The tips of her hardened breasts begged to have his mouth on them, and that's exactly what he did. His teeth gently savaged the protruding nubs, spending equal time between the two until Lacey thought she couldn't take it anymore. She released a feline purr and began to work her hips more fiercely against him, ready to end the ache burning between her thighs.

"Oh God!" she cried.

She was intent on riding out the furious storm that consumed them. Chase's animal growl drowned out her feminine cry as they reached the peak of fulfillment simultaneously.

Lacey collapsed panting against Chase, her body quivering in the aftermath of their fierce coupling. His muscular arm wrapped around her waist to hold her to him while he struggled to regain his own control. His breath was hot as it fanned her temple. His heart pounded violently against her breast. They remained like that for a long time.

Chapter 13

“Lacey?”

“Hmm?”

Had she really fallen asleep? The water was cold now, but she was so comfortable lying against Chase. Then she realized there was a noise coming from the outer room.

“Lacey.” He gently nudged her, whispering her name against her ear. “The phone’s ringing, and we need to get out of this cold water.”

Lacey sighed deeply and unwillingly rose with Chase’s help. Not bothering with a towel or robe, he pushed her toward his bedroom.

“Go crawl into bed, honey. I have some things to take care of.”

Lacey wasn’t going to argue with him. The bath and their lovemaking had made her drowsy in a delicious way. She waited for him to toss a quilt over the bare mattress before sinking on it. Lying on her side, she smiled and closed her eyes when another, lighter blanket was placed over her.

Hugging a pillow to her, her last thoughts were that she could get used to this.

* * * *

Lacey had no way of knowing how much time had passed before she finally stirred to life. She was lying on her stomach and had long ago kicked off the covers. A cool draft blanketed her naked body, but it didn’t bother her enough to reach for the covers. As

she gradually became more aware of her surroundings, she sensed a presence in the room. Turning slightly, she saw Chase standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, staring at her. How long had he been watching her? Her gaze moved over him, pausing to examine the bulge behind his zipper.

She smiled. "Are we going to spend all day in bed?" She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost four o'clock.

"It's beginning to look like it." Chase moved toward the bed in lazy strides.

Lacey caught her breath. Everywhere his eyes touched her left a tingle of awareness on her flesh. She was a quivering mass by the time he reached her bed. "I need to call my father."

Chase sat on the edge of the bed. "I called him earlier. He knows you're safe here with me." His hand smoothed over her backside.

"Safe?" She let out a husky laugh. "How can you say I'm safe with you when you jump my bones every chance you get?" She was teasing, but the look in Chase's eyes spoke volumes. He was hungry again.

"I've warned you about flashing this sexy little bottom at me." His hand followed his words. "I walk into the room to wake you for lunch, and here it is waving at me like a red flag. You're lucky you're not flat on your back right now."

"Lunch? What kind of lunch?"

"Hungry?" He smiled.

"Starved."

Chase left the bed and walked to the closet. He yanked one of his shirts off a hanger and turned back to her. "Your clothes are down in the washer, so you'll have to put this on until they're dry."

Lacey caught the garment to her breast as she was sitting up. She stood and slipped it on quickly, suddenly shy at the sexy gleam in Chase's gaze. She looked everywhere but at him until the shirt was buttoned up.

"I guess I'm safe enough in this," she teased, rolling up the sleeves. The shirt more than adequately covered her to her thighs.

"About as safe as a naked virgin in a room full of lusty men." Chase grinned like a wolf with something devious on his mind. "You're sexy as hell in my shirt, with that wild hair. Knowing you're naked beneath it will keep my cock hard."

His words sent a little thrill through Lacey. She fought to control the need spiraling through her and then wondered why she bothered. He didn't attempt to disguise his own wants. "I hope lunch isn't ruined."

Chase jerked Lacey to him by the collar of his shirt. She inhaled sharply. "I'll worry about lunch." He slowly lowered his head. "You worry about supplying the cook with dessert." He kissed her hungrily, thoroughly, making Lacey squirm for something more satisfying. She arched against him and thought she was getting her wish when Chase's hands moved to the edge of her shirt. His fingers trailed lightly up her thighs until his hands cupped her buttocks. He squeezed hard, growled, let her go, and turned to leave the room. Lacey was left with no choice but to follow him.

Downstairs, the kitchen was filled with a mouthwatering aroma. Lacey's empty stomach immediately began to grumble. A thick, meaty stew was simmering in a Crock -Pot by the sink. Next to it was a box of crackers.

"Homemade?" She lifted the lid and took a deep, appreciative sniff, peering down at the contents. Her empty stomach growled loudly.

"Yes, Mrs. Campbell and I made it."

She shot him a smile, then filled a bowl and handed it to him. Amusement flickered in his eyes when she sat down at the table with him. Her bowl was clearly fuller than his, topped off with a mountain of crushed crackers. "I'm hungry."

Chase remained quiet. For a while they were content to eat in silence, enjoying each other's company. Twice Chase rose to refill

his bowl, and Lacey guessed a hardworking cowboy like him needed something more substantial than what Mrs. Campbell had to offer. In fact, Chase's appetite in everything seemed enormous.

"Do you mind if I find something to drink?" Without waiting for his response, Lacey tossed him a smile on the way to the fridge. Her gaze fell on the carton of milk, wondering what Chase's reaction would be if she put a glass of it in front of him. She liked pushing his buttons.

As if guessing her intentions, he threatened, "If you pour me a glass of that awful white stuff, I'll turn you over my knee."

"Is that a promise?" She turned her tone down a notch and parted her legs slightly so that her shirt parted, revealing a good amount of thigh to Chase.

His gaze fell to the exposed flesh and turned lazy as he let his eyes slowly roam over Lacey. By the time their gazes met, she was the one squirming and squeezing her thighs together to trap the flow of desire flooding there.

"Are you teasing me, sweetheart?"

"I wouldn't dream of it." Hiding a satisfied grin, Lacey turned back to the fridge and bent to examine the contents for something to drink.

Before she was able to turn back to ask Chase if he wanted juice she felt his presence behind her. Gasping at his unexpected move, Lacey turned into the imprisonment of his strong arms. He had her thoroughly trapped, using the refrigerator to his advantage.

"I warned you about flashing your backside to me."

"I wasn't!" Lacey gasped, her eyes rounding up at him.

She leaned farther into the fridge, feeling the cool air against her backside. She'd been teasing Chase, but his expression clearly revealed he wasn't in the teasing mood.

"You were." His words were husky, his eyes flashing hot fire at Lacey.

His nostrils flared like an animal catching the scent of something in the air. Before she knew what he was about, she felt her waist seized and she was hoisted up onto the countertop. The refrigerator door slammed shut with a shove from his elbow.

"What are you going to do?" Lacey whispered, wincing from the coldness of the counter against her bare legs. She tried to smooth Chase's shirt down over her thighs but his hands prevented her from getting very far.

"I'm going to show you what teasing a man gets you."

"Chase—" He slanted his mouth over hers and effectively silenced her with his kiss, and it was no gentle attack.

He moved into the circle of her parted legs and when Lacey tried to move her head away he tangled his hand in her hair to hold her still. His tongue forced her mouth open, as his hands trailed beneath her shirt. His fingertip flicked across her clit, and just when she began to return his lusty embrace, Chase broke away.

Lacey started to protest until she felt the hand in her hair pull her head back so he could put his mouth against the beating pulse in her throat. She closed her eyes, sighing in total bliss. Her hands fell on Chase's naked shoulders and smoothed over them lovingly, encouraging him to continue his assault. *Is he going to make love to me on the countertop?*

His mouth went to the open part of her shirt, his lips and tongue tasting her as they moved. She thrust forward offering Chase whatever he wanted. She was so caught up in the moment that she wasn't aware of anything but him and his intoxicating lovemaking.

Lacey sensed it was for a different reason when he pulled away a second time. She felt his body tensing. Confused, she met his eyes, not expecting to see the desire ebbing away. She was frustrated as hell and about to rake her nails down his back when she suddenly heard what he obviously had. They were no longer alone.

"It seems we're about to have company," Chase breathed against her neck, nuzzling her with his nose.

"Chase...put me down!" She'd die if someone walked in on them.

"Why?" Lacey felt his smile against her skin. At the same time his hands took hold of her hips and jerked her forward even closer. "It's only Mary."

Her eyes rounded at his admission, and she began to squirm in earnest. But Chase was like an immovable rock. The harder she pushed against him the tighter he pressed himself to her.

"You monster!" Lacey's face grew hot with her embarrassment, and she glared in the face of his amusement. She would have said more if Mary hadn't chosen that time to enter the kitchen.

"Ooops!" Mary came to an abrupt halt right inside the kitchen door, her lovely face a mixture of shock and surprise. And it was obvious she didn't know what to do. "Should I turn around and go back the way I came?" She grinned.

"Unless you want to watch..."

Lacey gasped. "Don't you dare leave me alone with this...sex fiend." She gave Chase a shove with a mock scowl. Then turned from him before he could see the smile she couldn't keep from covering her face.

"This sounds serious." Mary smiled, and walked over to the coffeemaker.

"How's Brian?"

"He must be fine or Mary wouldn't be here," Chase answered for his sister-in-law, running a hand through his thick hair. His eyes fell on the empty bowls on the table. "There's some stew left."

Mary shook her head as she prepared the contents to make coffee. "I had something at the hospital. But their coffee was horrible! I told Brian I had to come home just so I could get a decent cup."

"I'll bet." Chase put the dirty dishes in the sink.

"I think I'd better get dressed." Lacey turned to leave the room.

"Sweetheart, you don't have any clothes to put on. They're in the washer, remember?" Chase's eyes held a devilish glint as they rested on her.

She had forgotten. "Then would you please be a," Lacey batted her eyelashes at him, "sweetheart and put them in the dryer, since I don't know where the laundry room is?"

"You might as well sit down and have a cup of coffee with me. Don't be shy about your attire. I've come down many a morning with nothing on but Brian's shirt."

With Chase in the house? Lacey wasn't sure if she liked that bit of news. She wanted to be the only woman he saw with a man's shirt on. In fact, she wanted to be the only woman he saw in the mornings, period. She knew the feeling racing through her was jealousy and squelched it immediately. Mary presented no threat to her whatsoever.

Lacey looked at the other woman. At the hospital there'd been a sparkle in her pretty blue eyes, but that sparkle was gone now. The dark shadows beneath her eyes revealed how much sleep she must have lost the last two days. The worry etched on her pale young face made her appear older than her twenty or so years.

"Mary, when was the last time you slept?"

"I know I look like hell, but I do intend to go to bed after I've had at least one cup of coffee, even if it is decaf." She smiled tiredly, joining Lacey at the table. "Normally I hold up pretty good. But I guess the stress of my sister's emergency cesarean and learning about Brian and being pregnant myself has finally caught up with me."

"What's caught up with you?"

Chase entered the room catching the tail end of their conversation. Lacey jumped. But it wasn't from the unexpected sound of his deep voice. It was the hands on her shoulders, gently massaging. She tilted her head back and was rewarded with a very thorough kiss.

Mary cleared her throat. Another few seconds slipped past before Chase broke the kiss. By that time, Lacey was weak-kneed and breathing heavily. Her gaze went to Mary, who was watching them with interest.

"I think I'll go up to bed." Her humor over the situation reached her eyes.

"Good idea." Chase's gruff voice revealed the state he was in.

Lacey used the brief interlude to slip from his embrace. It unnerved her that even with someone else in the room she responded so eagerly to him. What she needed now was a little breathing space. She headed for the door that he'd disappeared through, knowing now that it led to the laundry room.

"I'm going to check on my clothes." Chase might not feel self-conscious, but she sure did. She'd watched the direction he went and the sound of the running dryer took care of the rest.

Even though the dryer was still running, Lacey opened the door and reached for her clothes, glad to find them dry. She shook them out and proceeded to slip into her panties when someone grabbed her from behind.

Chapter 14

Lacey's muffled shriek was stifled by the hand over her mouth.

"Now, where were we?"

The husky timbre of Chase's voice aroused deep feelings of desire in Lacey. He breathed the words against her neck; his arms moving around her and pulling her against him. The breath caught in her throat when his hands roamed up to cup the weight of her unencumbered breasts. She felt her nipples harden against the material of his shirt, begging for attention he was more than willing to give.

"We shouldn't..." she breathed, closing her eyes as her head rolled back against his shoulder. A purr left her throat when his hands closed fully over her breast, kneading them.

"Want me to stop?" His slightly amused tone said he would if she wanted him to, only Lacey knew better. His tongue snaked out to lick a path from her exposed collarbone where her shirt had fallen away, traveling to the delicate shape of her ear.

"I really should get dressed and go home," she insisted lightly, unable to keep from rubbing her bottom against his erection.

Chase hands moved from her swollen breasts to the hem of his shirt where it fell to her thighs. Ever-so-slowly, he began to move his hands under the material, bringing the shirt up as his caresses neared the apex of her legs. Lacey moaned and parted her thighs, silently encouraging him to do what he wanted. She was burning up inside, and when he slipped a finger inside her pussy, she knew he

would have proof of her desire for him. She was hot and wet, more than ready for the intimate invasion of her body. It no longer mattered where they were.

“Chase.” Lacey tried to turn around.

“No more protests, honey.” With his finger buried deeply inside her, his thumb worked the protuberance nestled in her hair.

Lacey wasn’t about to protest. But the deep sound of his voice in the too-quiet room brought back a brief sense of sanity to her raging emotions, reminding her that they weren’t alone in the house. She tried to close her legs against the hand covering her mound, afraid if Chase drew an orgasm from her she wouldn’t be able to control her cries of pleasure.

“Mary...” She started to pull away.

“Is probably dead to the world right now.” Chase pulled Lacey back, turning her in his arms at the same time. “I’m going to have you, Lacey.”

His kiss was the kind that curled a woman’s toes. And Lacey wasn’t immune. She doubted she could ever be immune to his particular brand of lovemaking. She wrapped herself around him and moved gently against the finger still pleasuring her. They kissed long and deep, their tongues exploring the inside of each other’s mouths. Sounds of pleasure echoed through the small room. Chase moved on to new ground, kissing her cheeks, eyes, chin, and nose before moving on to her ears and neck and lower. Then, dipping his tongue into the deep cleavage between her breasts, he slowly drove her mindless with pleasure.

If she had the strength, Lacey would have reached up to undo the buttons to her shirt, but it was all she could do to keep from falling to the floor. Her hands clung to the bulging muscles in Chase’s arms and she arched her back, giving him easy access to whatever he wanted. He didn’t let her shirt get in the way. His mouth moved to the crest of one breast, covering it and soaking the material as he suckled at her nipple. He drew so hard on the nub

that Lacey felt the pull all the way to her womb. She swayed, crying out softly.

“Am I hurting you?”

“God no!” Lacey trembled with a need that couldn’t be denied. Her eyes became heavy-lidded with passion, beseeching the desire she saw in Chase’s gaze. “Chase, love me! Now!”

Lacey felt first one, then two fingers enter her. She began to ride Chase’s hand in a frenzy, realizing she was close to climaxing. But it wasn’t enough. She wanted more than his fingers inside her. Her hand moved to the belt on his jeans.

She couldn’t seem to control the movements of her lower body even though she tried to pull away. “No!” Lacey cried, trying to get her meaning across with as few words as possible.

“I need this!” She palmed his heavy arousal and squeezed.

Chase jerked uncontrollably when she ran her fingers up and down the length of the zipper with impatience. He brushed her hand aside and undid the zipper himself. No sooner was that done than her eager hand returned to him, this time taking the hot, smooth velvet erection in her palm.

Lacey’s gaze returned to his. “Chase.” She wanted to cry she was so frustrated. *Why isn’t he taking me? Is this just part of the teasing game he’d started earlier in the kitchen?* She squeezed him with barely restrained force, before moving her hand up and down his shaft in a rhythm that quickly escalated.

Lacey found herself backed against the still-warm dryer. Effortlessly, Chase lifted her body until the core of her was even with his penis. She instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist and forced him to ram his hard-on all the way into her womb.

Mutual sounds of satisfaction came together in a blistering kiss. Lacey opened her mouth, sucking his tongue inside, letting it mate with hers in much the same way his body possessed hers. Her fingers tangled in his hair holding him to her, relishing in her power over him when he groaned deeply.

She was at his mercy, but it was a tender mercy. Each powerful thrust of his body forced Lacey farther onto the smooth, hard surface of the appliance behind her. But because it was there, it enabled Chase to embed himself even more deeply inside her. Lacey felt every splendid inch of him filling her completely and thought she just might faint from the pleasure of it. Just in case, she reached around and gripped his buttocks, not certain if she was supporting herself or holding Chase inside her.

The pressure built. "Chase...I'm close." She bit down on her bottom lip. "*Oh God!*" She peaked, caught her breath and shivered wildly when a violent release came.

With a savage growl, Chase stiffened, holding Lacey tightly against the dryer, and emptied himself into her with a series of quick, hard thrusts. Lacey screamed once and then clamped her teeth into his naked shoulder to keep the second one from being heard. Even in the throes of their passionate completion, she remembered they weren't alone in the house. Chase's throaty moan against her neck produced her own, and she clung to him as spasms racked her trembling body.

Pinned against the dryer, Lacey was patient, giving Chase the time he needed to gain control of his body once again. They were both panting heavily. Lacey realized she needed him.

Finally Chase moved and pulled his head back until their eyes met. Their gazes clung, each searching for the answers to questions not yet asked. Surprisingly, Lacey felt her eyes fill with tears. A feeling so intense washed through her that it deserved to be voiced. Her hands moved up to cup Chase's face.

"I love you."

A deep emotion flared in Chase's eyes at her softly spoken admission, but he remained silent.

Lacey was beginning to feel self-conscious waiting for his response. She didn't know what she was waiting for except more than this god-awful silence greeting her now. She didn't expect

him to say he loved her too, but she had hoped for some reaction. Aside from the brief flicker of acknowledgment in his eyes.

She turned her head and focused her eyes elsewhere. Only Chase would have none of that. His hand was gentle but firm beneath her chin, and he forced Lacey to look at him again. Her betraying emotion spilled over, and his thumb caught the tear before it could travel to the corner of her quivering mouth. He stared into her eyes with something close to amazement.

"I don't deserve you."

It was all Chase said and Lacey realized it was probably the closest he'd come to admitting how he felt about her. He lowered his head and nibbled at her lips tenderly.

"Probably not," she agreed, gasping between nibbles. She couldn't keep her legs wrapped around his hips any longer and slowly lowered them. He helped by taking a step away.

"Another woman told me she loved me once and then aborted my child." Chase said it without feeling, turning away to rearrange his jeans.

"Chase...she was such a fool!" Lacey placed her hand on his arm and forced him to turn back to her. "She didn't deserve you."

Her comment brought a grin to his firm lips. "Probably not."

They both jumped when the phone began to ring. Lacey turned back to the dryer to dress while Chase went into the kitchen to answer it. Even with a wall and door between them, she could make out the low, rumbling sound of his deep voice. There was no denying that he was arguing with whoever was on the other end.

Lacey entered the room just as he slammed down the receiver. Their gazes met and clung and she wondered if he was going to tell her what the call had been about. He'd been unsuccessful in hiding the scowl covering his face when she entered the kitchen. She finished doing up the tiny buttons on her knit shirt, then crossed her arms and waited patiently.

Chase sighed deeply running a hand through his hair. Hair that was disheveled because Lacey had just recently run her hands through it. His sensuous mouth turned down at the corners, and his eyes were practically glaring.

"That was Owens. The fire inspector's there, and he wants to see me. I'll drop you by your car on the way."

He'd been arguing with her father? Lacey had forgotten they'd left her car parked on the side of the road. It seemed like ages ago when she'd left Chase's house heartbroken and madder than hell at finding Stella in his bed. She'd hardly been in the mood to listen to any explanations. Thank heavens Chase had forced her to, or this day would have had a completely different ending.

It didn't take long to reach the ranch from Chase's place. And he was right behind her when they pulled into the yard and parked next to the blackened remains of the stables. Standing in the middle of the rubble were her father and a man Lacey didn't know. The sign on the side of his vehicle told her he was the fire inspector.

"Dear, why don't you go on up to the house and get some rest? You look completely exhausted."

Lacey blushed. Her father couldn't possibly know what she was completely exhausted from. She was aware he didn't want her around. Protecting her again? The thought should have made her furious. Didn't he realize she'd find out what was going on sooner or later? The inspector had yet to acknowledge Lacey, writing without pause on the clipboard in his hands.

"Dad," she said with frustration. But he was already leading her away from the site, a gentle arm around her shoulders. Lacey glanced back to see Chase remained behind with the inspector.

"Now don't get your dander up, I'm not being overprotective again. I really am concerned about your state. And I promise to fill you in during dinner." The whole time he was leading her toward the house. "Is Brian okay?"

As if he didn't already know. Now Lacey knew for certain she was being snowballed. She already suspected Johnson had something to do with the fire. *Why didn't her father just admit it?* She opened her mouth, determined not to let him get away with it, but unfortunately that was the moment Rita chose to open the door and join them.

"Carl, is the inspector gone? Have you heard anything?"

"It's too soon to tell yet. Chase's down with him now and I want to make sure..."

"...Lacey isn't around," Lacey finished for him, shooting her father a scolding look. "You didn't get away with anything, Dad."

He had the grace to look embarrassed but refused to back down from the look Lacey directed at him.

"How's Brian doing, dear?"

"He's going to be okay," she answered Rita, pulling away from her father's arm. "He has a very understanding and forgiving wife."

"If that means what I think it does, no one is blaming you for what happened to him," her father insisted, looking at his wife for support.

Rita was anything but dense. She picked up on Carl's look and was quick to add, "Yes. It's certainly a good thing that wall fell on a full-grown man. It would surely have crushed you to death, or at the very least burned you badly, dear."

A deep chuckle burst from Carl before he quickly masked it by clearing his throat. Lacey just as quickly turned her face to hide the inappropriate smile. Her gaze fell back on Chase, watching him while he talked to the inspector. As if something passed between them, he looked up and met her gaze.

For a breathless moment, the world stood still as they stared at each other. Lacey's heart swelled with love. He was a rugged cowboy. Gruff, moody, impossible. Yet he excited her beyond words. Even now her breath was quickening and her blood was

warming. And she couldn't help wondering if they would have a future together.

Chapter 15

"I don't need a wheelchair."

"Let us spoil you this once."

"Are you sure he's ready to be released?"

"I can't spend another night in this place!"

"You would if the doctor wanted you to!"

The last two heated comments were from Brian and Chase. Mary and Lacey glanced at each other and rolled their eyes. There were times during the last five days that the two of them sounded just like little boys. And certainly like brothers. She and Mary exchanged amused, tolerant smiles.

Only released from the hospital ten minutes ago, Chase was pushing Brian down the long hallway toward the elevator, with Mary and Lacey trailing behind them.

"I still don't think a wheelchair is necessary," Brian grumbled. "I feel like I should have a baby in my arms or something."

"It's hospital policy," Mary informed her husband sweetly. "Just be glad they bent the rules a little by letting Chase push you out of here."

"And think of how foolish you'll look if I dump you out of this," Chase threatened. He pushed the elevator button to go down.

He gave Lacey a long, hard look and she wisely glanced away. She knew she was just one of the many reasons he was such a grouch lately. In the five days since the fire, they'd found several mutilated cows and one of the water holes had been poisoned,

which accounted for the deaths of at least twenty more. Fences at various locations had been torn down, causing a lot of lost time and aggravation.

She knew Chase knew about the phone threats and letters, but that was something he couldn't do anything about. The police were working on that. Not only were the phone lines tapped now, but there was an officer staying at the ranch house twenty-four hours a day. Lacey supposed his presence was to put her and Rita at ease about the whole situation but it only managed to remind them of the danger they were in.

To make matters worse, she and Chase hadn't been able to spend any time alone together. And with his sexual appetite, Lacey knew he was like a keg of dynamite ready to explode. If the searing looks he was directing her way now were anything to go by, she realized she'd better do something about him, and soon.

"As soon as the elevator door is shut, I'm out of this chair."

"Stop grumbling, honey." Mary caressed Brian's smooth-shaven jaw.

Brian met her smile and smiled in spite of himself. "If you sit on my lap, I'll stay put." He raised his eyebrows in a Groucho Marx imitation.

"Maybe just for the ride down." She grinned and settled herself on his lap carefully.

"Damn right just for the ride down if you two think I'm about to push you both around the hospital."

"Once Chase wheels you out of the hospital doors, you'll be able to leave this chair." Mary kissed Brian softly on the lips, trying to keep a straight face.

Brian closed his eyes and nibbled at her ear. "You keep that up and you won't be able to sit down for a week," he threatened quietly, uncaring who might hear. He placed his hand on her abdomen.

"Promise?" Mary whispered back.

The elevator doors opened and Mary slipped off of Brian's lap before Chase could bark at her. No sooner were they out of the exit doors then Brian jumped out of the chair. Luckily the car was already at the curb because he was unprepared for the dizziness that washed over him.

"That's what you get for showing off," Chase barked, taking his brother by the arm and leading him to the large Suburban.

"Well, I've been confined to a bed for almost a week!" Brian snapped, like most men disgusted by something he had no control over. He bent his head as they helped him into the backseat.

"And that's where you'll be the next couple of days too." Mary scooted in beside him. "Remember what the doctor said."

"There's no way I'm spending two more days in bed. Not with everything that's been going on at the ranch. They need me..."

"We need you in good shape." Chase closed the door and turned to Lacey. She waited patiently for him to unlock the front door. Their gazes clung, and a silent message passed between them. Lacey leaned toward Chase as his hand curled around her neck to slowly draw her against him.

"This won't satisfy me," he warned, a second before his mouth covered hers. She parted her lips beneath his, inviting him inside for a more thorough taste. Chase broke away with a curse. "A second longer and we'll become a spectacle right here in front of the hospital."

A persistent tapping on the back window broke the spell, and Chase unlocked the door and opened it for her. After sliding in behind the wheel, he reached over and pulled Lacey next to him. "If they're getting comfy, we are too."

Lacey glanced over her shoulder to the couple in the backseat. They were already comfy. There was a definite tint of color on Mary's cheeks, and Brian gave her a wink before she turned around.

"You two behave back there. It won't be long before we're home." Lacey smiled, settling herself against Chase's hard length. "Will you drop me off at the ranch first?"

"No."

His simple answer revealed a lot to Lacey. His husky response grated over her senses like fine sandpaper, starting a fire deep in her belly. Since Chase had both hands on the steering wheel, she felt safe taking one off and placing it on her bare knee.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lacey could see him look at her. But he didn't remove his hand, and she ignored him by keeping her gaze trained on the lonely stretch of road before them. It wasn't long before his hand began to move, slowly at first, gently caressing her knee before moving up her thigh.

Lacey wished she were wearing a skirt. Chase's hand was firm against the soft material of her shorts, his caress rough one minute and his fingertips tickling the next when they slipped beneath the cloth. Several times she caught her breath as his hand gradually roamed up her thigh. She parted her legs so he had easier access beneath the wide flare of her baggy shorts.

When his fingertips came in contact with the silky material covering her crotch, Lacey's hands clutched at the seat to keep from leaving it. Her teeth clamped down on her bottom lip to keep from crying out with pleasure, and she squeezed her eyes shut, making a conscious effort to keep her breathing under control. She forced herself not to move against his intimate caress. Only she couldn't stop the wetness soaking her panties.

"Oh!"

Eyes flying open, Lacey glanced up at Chase at the same time he looked at her. Had she said that out loud? Her cheeks flushed with warm desire that didn't stop there. But the heavy breathing was coming from the backseat. Chase looked into the rearview mirror and Lacey turned to see what was going on.

So that explained it. She was relieved to see Mary and Brian locked together in a passionate embrace. It had even been longer for them, and she quickly turned back around to mind her own business. Lacey laid her head back against the seat, aware Chase's hand had returned to her knee. But that was as far as it went.

"Is it safe to look back there now?" Lacey joked the minute Chase pulled up in front of his house and cut the engine. They'd been careful not to let things get out of control, but when she turned to look Mary's lovely face was full of color. Brian looked a little overheated himself. "It looks like we might have to carry Brian in." Brian gave Lacey a wink. "He looks positively worn-out."

"I hope not too worn-out." The teasing light in Mary's eyes was directed at her husband.

"I think I'd better get right up to bed," Brian agreed a little eagerly.

His comment produced a deep chuckle from Chase as he helped Brian from the backseat. "Sounds like a good idea to me." His gaze sought out Lacey's. There was no denying the double meaning behind his softly spoken words.

"Would you like some lunch first?" Mary unlocked the door and held it open.

"I'm not hungry for food."

"Will you make some coffee while we get him settled upstairs?"

Lacey nodded at Chase's inquiry and veered off toward the kitchen. It didn't take her long to get the requested pot brewing and she reached for the phone to call her father. She should at least notify him that they'd reached Chase's ranch safe and sound.

"Hello?"

It was Hester. "Hi, Hester, it's me. Is Dad around?"

"He's in the den doing paperwork. I'm surprised he didn't answer the phone."

"Don't disturb him; it's not important. But could you please let him know that we picked Brian up from the hospital and are home at Chase's?"

"Of course, dear. Anything else?"

"I don't..." She caught her breath when Chase slipped his arms around her from behind.

"Is everything okay?"

The concern was evident in Hester's tone. "Yes, ah, everything is good." Chase pulled Lacey back against him and began to nuzzle her neck. "I'll be home late." Quivering beneath his sensual attack, Lacey blindly reached out to hang the phone back up. It took her several tries before she got it in the cradle. She learned her head back with a sigh.

"Your five o'clock shadow is a little early today."

"Is it too rough? I'll go shave."

"No, no!" Lacey held his arms where they were crossed at her waist. "I like the feel of it against my neck. It makes me tingle all over."

Before she had a chance to draw another breath, she was turned around and forced against the wall and Chase was kissing her like a starved man. He ground his body into hers, as he growled deep in his throat; his hands rough in their exploration of her curves. But Lacey welcomed his possession, having been denied the feel of his hands and mouth on her for much too long.

She willingly parted her mouth beneath his hard lips, enjoying the fact that he was kissing her out of control. That he was just as starved for the taste of her. His tongue battled with hers, then explored every corner of her mouth before he pulled away slightly and gently nibbled her bottom lip with his teeth.

By that time, they were both breathing heavily. And while Lacey tried to draw Chase into another kiss, he seemed content to roam her face and neck with his mouth, causing her to inhale sharply more than once as he sucked his way over her sensitive flesh. La-

cey arched against him and began to move her hands over him just as eagerly.

She knew by heart the path she was traveling, but it never ceased to amaze her how wide Chase's strong shoulders were, or how muscular. She would never tire of feeling his powerful arms or the muscles flexing in his back when she caressed him. Next Lacey moved on to lean hips and taut buttocks and the powerful thighs that even now were straining against her. She squeezed the firm cheeks of his bottom in a silent invitation to take her, urging him on. His response was a growl and he broke away, taking her by the hand.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace where I won't have to worry about being interrupted. I plan to make love to you several times, and I don't want the possibility of Mary knocking on my bedroom door or finding us on the kitchen table."

Lacey inhaled sharply at the picture Chase's words conjured. He hadn't been worried about that the day in the laundry room, but then he hadn't planned on making love to her either. They practically ran out of the house and through the yard, and she realized their destination was the barn.

Chase swung the door wide and pulled Lacey inside, leaving it open just enough so sunshine could filter into the room, lighting the dim interior. Then he let go of her hand and stood looking at her, panting for breath the same as she was. Their eyes glittered in the semidarkness. The strong smell of hay and horses and something else assaulted their nostrils, something primitive, the perfect element to add to the already-volatile situation. For a moment they stood there staring at each other. The passion etched on Chase's expression warned Lacey that she wouldn't come away unscathed.

"Remove your clothes, or I won't be responsible for ripping them off you."

Oh! Lacey's eyes rounded at Chase's hoarse remark. *He isn't kidding.* There was something in his voice, something dark and dangerous, and it was turning her on as much as any physical caress. He'd ignited a fire in her blood. Now that her eyes had become adjusted to the dimness she could see just how fierce his expression was. His nostrils flared like a wild stallion's, taking in the scent of their excitement.

A powerful emotion rushed through Lacey. To know a man wanted and desired her so much that he was close to losing control did a lot for her wounded ego. She'd never driven a man to such lengths before. It made her throw caution to the wind as a feeling of recklessness washed over her.

"Maybe I've changed my mind." She was playing with fire testing Chase. Slowly she stepped backward, ignoring the fierce pounding of her heart.

Chase raised an arrogant brow and slowly began to stalk her. "The hell you have," he rasped in a voice that revealed his arousal. He reached up to undo the buttons on his shirt.

"It's a woman's prerogative to change her mind," Lacey insisted, swallowing with difficulty when Chase gave up on the buttons and simply grasped the edges of his shirt and ripped it apart. Her gaze ate him up when he shrugged out of it and let it fall to the plank floor.

"You can play your little games, sweetheart, but I will have you in the end." His eyes remained on her like a hawk zeroing in on tasty prey. His hands dropped to his belt and he began to undo the buckle.

Lacey's steps carried her farther into the darkness of the barn. Chase's long strides would soon have him on her. She nearly gave herself away by licking her lips in anticipation of what he was going to do. He whipped his belt off and threw it to the ground. She gasped, but it was because her back came up against the barn wall.

She was trapped. The grin on Chase's face held wicked intent. He placed both his hands flat against the wall on either side of Lacey's head, leaning in close. "You think it's that simple, sweetheart? Even if you weren't going to become my wife, there's no way to ignore the signals you've been sending."

Lacey swallowed with difficulty, mesmerized by the gleam in his eyes. "I don't know what you mean."

"You can quit with the innocent act." He calmly reached out to the neckline of her silk blouse and gave it a sharp tug, tearing it all the way down the front. Lacey's full breasts spilled free, directly into the hands waiting to capture them. Chase put his mouth on them, loving them with his teeth and tongue. Her cry of pleasure echoed through the barn when he moved his head back and forth, nuzzling her flesh. Lacey felt her knees buckle but his body kept her pinned between him and the wall.

"Chase..."

Her hands roamed eagerly over his naked shoulders. She raked her nails down his back like a cat; a hoarse sound traveling up her throat. She was powerless to do anything but lean her head against the wall and enjoy what he was doing as he moved down her body.

He fell to his knees. When he came to the waistband of her shorts he slowly lowered them over Lacey's hips, leaving on the ultrathin wisp of nothing beneath them. She felt her shorts around her ankles and stepped out of them, but couldn't move to do anything else because Chase's mouth was still loving her. Lacey was barely aware of tangling her fingers into the thickness of his hair. Before she knew it she began to rock her hips back and forth, searching for more.

He stopped his ministrations and looked up at her. The desire etched on his rugged face only mirrored the emotions running rampant through her veins. The sound of their ragged breaths filled the quiet barn. Lacey bit down on her bottom lip and reached

down to the waistband of her bikini panties. She'd rolled them down an inch.

"Allow me." Chase's hands lowered the blue scrap of nothing, replacing it with his open mouth. The heat of his breath scorched Lacey where it touched her.

The breath caught in her throat when his mouth moved lower, teasing the wet curls between her legs. *If he... "Ohmigod!" He did.* Lacey's nails bit into his shoulders when his tongue snaked out and darted between her pussy lips, applying just enough pressure on her throbbing clit to cause a mini-orgasm.

"Chase!" Her startled cry echoed around them. Lacey's knees buckled as she climaxed but Chase refused to let her slip to the floor. He easily held her against the barn wall, with his hands at her hips, manipulating her response by continuing to lick at her clit.

Then it was Chase's turn. Lacey pushed his shoulders back until he was flat on the floor. She followed him down, attacking him in the most delightful ways. He sucked in his breath when her hand went to the snap on his jeans. With both hands, she took the edges of the material to his pants and pulled it apart savagely. Then her overeager hands yanked at the denim covering his lean hips until she managed to get his pants down, with a little help from Chase when he raised his hips off the floor.

Lacey sat back and surveyed her prize. The part of his body that was the source of so much pleasure and fulfillment for her. She watched his arousal throb and swell as though it had a mind of its own. Suddenly she bent forward and kissed him. First once, then twice, followed by sticking her tongue out to lick him like a lollipop. She was rewarded with his low groan of weakness.

A long, drawn-out sigh came from Lacey as she slowly lowered herself down the powerful length of his arousal. She'd never get used to the pleasure of being filled so completely by him. Her hands flattened over the hard planes of his chest and rib cage as she

began to ride him, first slowly, and then more rapidly when the pleasure built to a feverish pitch.

Chase's hands went to her hips to aid her. Sweat glistened on their flesh and the smell of sex was pungent in the air. Her nostrils flared at the erotic scent. The climatic convulsions of Chase's body as he lost control were all it took to send her spiraling down the same path of completion.

For long, quiet minutes they continued to lie against each other, both laboring to bring their breathing under control and calm the fierce pounding of their hearts. Lacey smiled against Chase's damp neck, too exhausted to move. Sure she didn't want to.

Chapter 16

“We have an audience.”

Lacey stiffened against Chase and pulled away far enough to meet the look in his eyes. There was a grin on his face. “Up there.” He motioned with a nod.

Lacey glanced up, uncertain at what she was going to see and praying it wasn’t going to be Mary’s smiling face. She chuckled when she saw the horse staring down at them over the top of the stall. Relieved, she lowered her face to kiss Chase on the chin.

“I’ve never made love in a barn before.” She mouthed against the rough stubble on his chin. “My experiences have been contained to...” She started to say bedroom, but that wasn’t entirely true. With Chase it didn’t matter where they were.

“You were going to say?”

Lacey felt her cheeks grow warm. “Nothing.”

Chase remained quiet for a moment and Lacey wondered what was going through his mind. She didn’t have to wonder for long.

“And just how many, ah, experiences might you be talking about?”

She smiled, detecting the mild jealousy in his words, even if he was masking it with curiosity. She began to wiggle against him as his fingers lightly grazed over the sensitive skin on the back of her thighs. Should she tease him with a lie? She was certain his experiences were a lot more than hers.

She decided on the truth. "One." His fingers stilled instantly and she felt the change in his body. "You'll never have to worry about me being faithful, Chase. When I love someone, I love them all the way."

"I'd already guessed that."

Is that pleasure in his voice?

"I'd better get you back to the house before Mary comes looking for us."

Lacey began to wiggle her bottom against his lap and smiled at him seductively. "What happened to wanting to make love to me several times?" she reminded him saucily, batting her lashes at him shamelessly.

"Honey, the way I felt an hour ago you're lucky to get a break. Don't knock it." When Lacey continued to move against him and bring her breasts into play against the hairs on his chest he laughed and growled at the same time. "Behave yourself!"

"I can't help it if I like making love with you." Lacey immediately lowered her eyes with telltale embarrassment the moment the words left her mouth.

"Sweetheart, there's nothing more I'd like then making love to you again here and now..."

"But?"

"But I can visualize other ways and places to make love to you than on a hard barn floor."

Lacey smiled. "You forgot to mention the scratchy straw."

"That too." Chase grinned.

Before she could guess his intentions, Chase nudged her off his lap and brought them both to their feet. Something caught Lacey's attention out of the corner of her eye. She reached for the floral creation that had once been her blouse.

"One of us is going to make quite an impression."

Chase had just slipped into his jeans and was zipping them when their gazes locked. Lacey had yet to put anything on and his

eyes dropped slowly, taking in her nudity. He located his own shirt on the floor and scooped it up. "There's no buttons, but at least it will cover you."

Lacey clutched it to her breasts. It was strange, but at the oddest times shyness overcame her in his presence. She knew it was silly, but it was during those times that she felt insecure about their relationship. Everything was happening so fast. Acting on her emotions, she turned her back to slip into Chase's shirt. The next thing she knew strong arms closed around her and pulled her close to a hard male body.

"Your face is an open book to me, baby." His breath was hot against Lacey's ear, causing a shiver to run down her spine. "Don't ever feel embarrassed or shy with me. Understand?" Lacey nodded and was released.

She turned around to see Chase bending to get her shorts for her, and she quickly slipped into them.

"Ready?"

Gray eyes moved over her with warm appreciation. He looked so long and hard at her that Lacey glanced down to make sure nothing was hanging out. "Is something wrong?"

With a rough laugh, Chase reached forward, hooked his hand around the back of her neck, and pulled her against him for a hard kiss. "Not a thing. Come on. I'm ready for something to eat."

Lacey laughed softly. "Those sandwiches will be dried out by now." She didn't complain about the heavy arm Chase draped over her shoulders as they began to walk back to the house, as though staking his claim that she was his. She liked the feel of his possessiveness. He made her feel safe and protected.

Loved.

They were halfway there when a scream pierced the air. They stopped abruptly and looked at each other, but when a second and then a third cry split the air, followed by the sound of gunfire, Chase was galvanized into action. Lacey was right behind him as

they raced the rest of the way. He issued a warning for her to stay back as he threw open the kitchen door. But Lacey didn't even consider it.

The hair on the back of her neck stood straight up when she heard Mary's fourth bloodcurdling scream. Chase had already disappeared up the stairs, taking them three at a time. His thundering footfalls took him down the hallway to Brian's room, and she reached the top of the stairs in time to see him enter without hesitation. Lacey rushed into the bedroom in time to hear Mary's frightened apology to Chase.

"Chase, I'm sorry! But he made me scream!" Mary was cowering on the bed next to Brian. There was a bullet hole in the wall directly above Brian's head.

Lacey stopped and gasped, seeing what Chase hadn't. A man, the same one she'd seen in the florist's shop that day, stepped quietly from the closet behind Chase. Before she could warn him a gun was jammed into his naked back, causing him to freeze. They'd walked directly into a trap.

"That's right, cowboy. You're wise not to move."

The gunman's gaze landed on Lacey. Before she knew what he was about, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her farther into the room. "Join the party, pretty lady."

"What do you want, Johnson?" Chase's deep voice echoed off the walls in the room, sounding so much stronger and surer than the man's who suddenly held all their lives in his hands.

Lacey sucked in a terrified breath, her eyes growing round as realization dawned on her who the man was. She shuddered when the man's eyes fastened on her, moving over her the same way they'd done that day in the florist shop. She'd guessed the truth that day and cursed herself for not having voiced her concerns. Now they were all in danger.

Johnson's laugh was cruel, as he looked Lacey up and down. "Your girlfriend knows what I want," he replied, keeping his gun jammed into Chase's back.

"What are you going to do? Kill us all?" Brian sneered from the bed, frustration over the situation evident on his pale face.

"I don't intend to kill nobody."

"Then what are you going to do?" Lacey asked in a terrified whisper. His insulting look said more than words what his intentions were concerning her anyway. Only she was more concerned with the gun in Chase's back, praying he didn't try to be a hero.

"Ask your cowboy, sugar. He knows what I'm going to do. I've even thought about taking him along so he can watch what I'm going to do to Carl Owens' daughter."

"You monster!" Mary almost jumped from the bed, but Brian held her back.

Johnson ignored her, brushing her off as nonthreatening. His cruel laugh was meant for Lacey, and it sent a shiver of alarm down her spine. "I've been watching you, waiting to get to you. Your men guard you well."

"You're going to kill me?" Lacey asked with a calm she was far from feeling.

"Course not, sugar. You'd be dead now if that was my intention. There's no fun killing someone for revenge. You've got to make them suffer so the person you want to get even with suffers too."

"Is that how it works?" Chase grated out between clenched teeth. The hands at his sides tightened into tight fists.

"That's how it works, big man." Johnson grinned, feeling superior. "I think I'm going to enjoy my particular brand of revenge against Owens."

Lacey watched Chase's body grow taut and knew that meant danger for Johnson.

Johnson obviously saw his reaction too. "Easy, big man. If you make me use this gun, I'll use it on all of you." His words were cold and calculated, leaving no doubt he meant what he said.

He gave Chase a hearty shove and pulled Lacey in front of him to use as a shield, placing the gun at her temple. "Owens will get her back when I'm done with her. Until then, my revenge will be in knowing he'll be sick with worry over what I'm doing to his precious daughter." He laughed mercilessly against Lacey's ear and she shuddered repulsively, straining away from him. "You might be a little used-up, sugar, but he'll get you back alive."

Lacey suffered his rough hand on her breast. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out, but she couldn't stop the tears from filling her eyes. His message was clear to everyone in the room. She avoided Chase's eyes, afraid if she revealed how truly terrified she was that he'd make a move toward Johnson. Her humiliation was complete when Johnson lowered the gun from her temple long enough to caress her with the barrel, moving it along the opening of her shirt.

Lacey's eyes locked on Brian, and she saw the whitening of his knuckles as he fisted his hands in silent frustration. Mary's pale, frightened expression revealed the toll the situation was having on her frail state. Chase looked like he had murder on his mind. Lacey offered them a small smile to set their minds at ease.

"You like that, sugar?"

For the first time since he'd grabbed her, Lacey looked into Johnson's mean face. Of course a man like him would misinterpret her smile. She trembled with revulsion and slapped his ugly face before she could stop herself. He backhanded her right back.

A savage sound exploded from Chase, and he lunged toward Johnson with rage in his eyes. Lacey screamed and tried to grab the hand Johnson was holding the gun with, but it was too late. Everything happened so fast. A shot rang out, echoing through the room.

She glanced up and watched Chase stagger back from the force of the bullet ripping into him.

“Chase!”

Mary and Brian both cried out. This time it was Mary holding Brian back when he struggled to get to his feet. Lacey screamed and fought against Johnson with all her strength, locking her hands around the wrist that held the smoking gun. But he was too strong for her. With a strength that was surprising for a man with his thin build he quickly overpowered her.

“No one else move!” he demanded, keeping his eyes on the struggling couple on the bed. He’d managed to lock one arm around Lacey, pinning both her arms to her sides until she was helpless.

“Please, let me go to him!” Lacey begged, tears flowing down her cheeks. Her eyes were glued to where Chase had come to rest after slamming against the wall. He was in a sitting position, his head hanging down. Her stomach churned at the sight of the crimson blood pouring from a wound at his head.

“You’re going with me!”

“He needs help!” Lacey insisted, straining against his hold. “Please!” she sobbed brokenly. Her heart was breaking. She had to get to Chase and help him.

“He’ll be okay,” Johnson grated out at her. “Least now I won’t have to worry about him following us.” His eyes went to Brian. “Or him either, for that matter.” He laughed cruelly.

“You’re a bastard!” Mary screeched from her position on the bed.

Johnson’s hateful gaze narrowed on her. “Just be glad, pretty girl, that you’re not the one who’s going to find out what a real bastard I can be.”

Lacey’s silent agony as she wept helplessly in his arms added fuel to Johnson’s vindictiveness, and he squeezed her painfully. “I can hardly wait to get a taste of you,” he whispered brutally.

Lacey's eyes remained on Chase's still form as she was dragged from the room. She vaguely acknowledged Mary calling her name or Brian's low, frustrated curse. She couldn't think of anything but Chase and what his not moving meant. She was numb with grief. She stumbled after Johnson, nearly falling down the stairs in his haste to get away.

Once they were outside, Lacey was forced into the passenger side of the rusty old truck she'd seen him in earlier. Mud was splattered halfway up the windowless doors and when Johnson opened the door she saw it dotted the torn seats as well. Lacey was literally thrown into the truck and the door was slammed shut, just missing her foot. She shakily righted herself on the ragged seat, wiping the moisture from her cheeks. Her bright eyes went to the doorway to the house. *Is Chase still alive?*

"Thinking about lover boy?" Johnson sneered.

Lacey fought down an angry remark and ignored the man. She'd already seen firsthand how cruel and vicious he was. She would save her strength for later. She tried to get her trembling under control so he wouldn't see how really frightened of him she was.

After two tries and a lot of swearing, Johnson managed to finally get the truck started. He tore out of the driveway with a loud grinding of gears and sped down the road. They didn't go far before he swung the wheel sharply veering off to the left and taking a small dirt road that separated two pastures.

Lacey held onto the door handle tightly to keep from being thrown against him. She considered jumping out, but realized with his nasty little weapon, she wouldn't get very far. She didn't kid herself that he wouldn't use it. He'd already proven he had no qualms about doing so.

Without warning, he turned where a section of the fence was down and they were bouncing over rough pastureland dotted with old cow patties and watering holes. It was clear the land wasn't be-

ing used for anything, unlike the other side where the landscape was dotted with cattle.

Lacey couldn't help but wonder what lay ahead. Only knowing, that without Chase in her life, nothing else mattered.

Chapter 17

“You’re awful quiet, sugar.”

Lacey ignored him, only to have her cheeks squeezed painfully when he forced her to look at him. She cried out, glaring at him with hate.

“Being nice to me will determine how much I hurt you. Owens is going to pay for what he did to me. And I can’t think of a better way than by using his little girl.” He released Lacey and looked back at his makeshift road, narrowly missing a tree stump. He swore colorfully and turned the wheel, then reached into his shirt pocket for something. It was a cigarette.

As loath as she was to converse with the man, Lacey knew there might be an advantage to it, possibly getting him to drop his guard. She had to escape somehow. Her only thought was getting back to Chase. “Are you holding me for ransom?”

He snorted. “That’s just a small part of my plan.” He talked around the cigarette he’d just lit. “I’ve been in prison for a long time because of your daddy.” He glanced at Lacey meaningfully. “Besides, getting money from a rich man don’t hurt him all that much. You have to hurt someone he loves to really hit him where it matters.”

Lacey glanced away with fear. The man was sick and bent on revenge. But if he thought she was calmly going to accept her fate, he was in for a rude awakening. The only reason she’d come this far with him without putting up more of a fight was because she

didn't want him using Mary and Brian against her. She'd scratch his eyes out before she let him touch her in any degrading way.

"Where are you taking me?" She didn't really care. Escape was on her mind and she searched the area around them, looking for an opportunity. They were in the pasture behind Chase's ranch, heading toward a thicket of trees that divided his property from her father's.

"Getting a little worried?"

Bastard! Lacey clenched her teeth. She wouldn't give Johnson the satisfaction of showing him any weakness. But the further they drove the more panic-stricken she felt. If they made it to the trees, they'd disappear before anyone would know which direction they took. She knew she'd get no mercy from the monster sitting across from her. She had to escape somehow, but how?

Her mind was a jumble of mixed thoughts of escape, coupled with her fears and feelings about Chase. Had she found love only to have it taken away so unfairly? Overwhelmed, tears swelled in her eyes again. She didn't want to think the worse, but... Lacey's quiet musings were broken abruptly by the hand on her knee. "Don't touch me!" With a shudder, she threw Johnson's hand back at him.

Johnson slammed on the brakes and Lacey hit the dashboard with the unexpected force of the stop. He tossed his half-smoked cigarette out and reached for her, obviously goaded by her repulsed attitude toward him. With a cry, she pulled away, but his hand curled in the collar of her shirt to haul her back. The material ripped under his clawlike hold and Lacey saw a button fly off and hit him in the eye.

An ugly swear word left his thin lips and his free hand went to his injured eye while the other one jerked Lacey toward him. He muttered more obscenities when she brought her hands up to keep distance between them. As Johnson pulled forward, Lacey pushed back, and she brought her knees up on the seat to keep him from getting to her.

"You bitch!"

Johnson slapped her, and Lacey knew she was fighting a losing battle. She sucked in a heavy breath, an adrenaline rush shooting through her veins. She fought against Johnson with all her strength, knowing that if she lost against him this time, it would be over. He wouldn't give her a second chance.

Throwing her full weight into one final desperate heave, she unfolded her legs and kicked out, catching Johnson in the chest. He grunted and fell back against the door. Taking advantage of her sudden freedom, Lacey grabbed the door handle. She fell onto the ground and was on her feet in a second, running away from the truck.

"Stop, bitch, or I swear I'll kill you here!"

The sound of gunfire nearly deafened Lacey. She'd forgotten about the gun! She became paralyzed with fear when the second shot whizzed past her ear. Fear and the realization Johnson meant business caused her to halt. Tears of frustration slipping down her cheeks, she turned to face him. She lowered her gaze to the weapon in his hand.

"Come here." Lacey shook her head and took a step back. Johnson lowered his gun to the hood of his truck, an evil grin spreading over his mean face. "If you make me come after you, I'll use this. And I know how to use it in ways that won't kill you."

He pulled something long and narrow from his back pocket. With a flick of his wrist, the switchblade opened to reveal a pointed, lethal blade. Lacey felt herself sway. The fear in her eyes must have given her away because Johnson laughed sadistically. Visions of the dead horse flashed through her mind. *Is that how he killed it?* He motioned for her to come to him with his free hand, moving the one with the knife in a way that had the sun glistening off the blade. Unwillingness to give in kept Lacey from responding at first, until reality set in and she realized he had won.

Biting her lip to hold back a sob, she slowly made her way back to him. She was shaking so badly she was surprised she could walk. "You won't get away with this!" she cried in a choked voice.

She halted a foot away from Johnson. But he would have none of that. His hand snaked out to grab her. Lacey leaned away, but he easily jerked her against him and placed the knife tip at her vulnerable throat.

"No matter what you do to me, I won't tell my father," Lacey said in a desperate tone, realizing time was running out. "I won't let you hurt him by using me."

"Don't worry, sugar," Johnson said, not sounding the least bit upset over her impassioned statement. "He'll see all he needs to after I've carved my name on your beautiful face." He laughed cruelly. "It's not important for him to know I screwed his little girl first."

Lacey shook her head in mindless disbelief at his cold, calculated words, feeling sick. She could feel her heart hammering in her chest and feel the blood pounding in her ears. She'd never known such brutal hatred before. She'd almost forgotten about the knife at her throat until she felt a tiny prick and knew Johnson had drawn blood. The incident should have her cowering, but instead Lacey chose a much different tactic. As the warm trickle of blood ran down her neck she decided Johnson would get a few cuts and bruises himself. She'd be damned if she'd go down without a fight.

"You're a pretty brave talker with a knife in your hands." She decided she had nothing to lose by trying. "What's the matter, Johnson? Not man enough to handle a woman without a little help?"

Lacey knew she was crazy for egging a man like Johnson on. When he snapped, she'd have to be ready for him. Her taunting got the response she wanted. Almost at once he tossed the knife aside, and with a growl, he grabbed Lacey around the neck with both hands.

He was swift and violent and Lacey cried out from the unexpected abruptness of his actions. Her eyes flared with wild alarm as she looked into the face of death, realizing by the pressure of his hold that he might very well strangle her without meaning to. Before her strength gave out, she brought her leg up and kned him in the groin.

Johnson howled in pain and released Lacey immediately, before doubling over and falling to the ground. Lacey staggered back, almost losing her balance before she was able to right herself. The reflection of the knife where it had come to rest on the ground drew her attention, and she snatched it up without thinking.

"I'll kill you!"

Lacey kept her gaze trained on the wounded man as he squirmed in agony. She heard the truth in his threat but wasn't planning on waiting around for him to recover. Clutching the knife, she turned to flee in the opposite direction.

"Going somewhere?"

"Stella!"

Lacey stumbled to a stop, her eyes rounding up at the woman sitting atop a beautiful white stallion. It was clear the animal was nervous, stomping at the ground and rearing slightly until Stella brought him under control with her whip. Lacey wasn't going to fool herself into believing Stella was her there as her savior. The expression on her beautiful face was twisted; her eyes glittering like sharp glass. It was clear by the venom in her voice that she'd gone stark raving mad. The gun in her hand backed up her silent threat.

"Stella, you stupid bitch, now we'll have to kill her!"

"That's the plan, you fool!" Her screeching sent the birds in the trees flying in fright. "When you didn't show up at the arranged time I came looking for you. You can't do anything right!"

Lacey looked for a weak spot, finding none.

"I didn't want to kill her!" Johnson barked, getting to his feet.

His ugly expression revealed to Lacey that she was still going to pay for what she'd done to him. He came to her and grabbed her arm forcing it behind her back in a painful hold. She gasped and clamped down on her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

Stella's wicked laugh chilled Lacey to the bone. "That's too bad because that was my intention all along." Stella's vindictive eyes moved over Lacey. "But rest assured, cousin, you can do what you want with her first. As long as I have the satisfaction of making sure she's not around to take Chase from me." She dismounted and slid to the ground.

"I feel sorry for you." Lacey looked Stella in the eyes, her tone surprisingly calm.

Johnson forced her to her knees. He laughed viciously when Stella drew back her hand and gave Lacey a stinging slap. Lacey turned her head from the force of the blow but soon found Johnson's other hand in her hair. He nearly snapped her neck as he jerked her head back until she was facing Stella once again.

"Don't feel sorry for me," Stella hissed maliciously, drawing back her hand to slap Lacey a second time. Her thin body quaked visibly from her raging emotions. "I'll have Chase."

Lacey's cheeks were on fire. Her lips were numb, and the hot, metallic taste in her mouth was blood where her teeth had cut into her cheeks. Stella's hand rose a third time. "Chase is dead!" Lacey sobbed, praying it wasn't so, but realizing that pitting Johnson and Stella against each other might be her only salvation. "Your cousin shot him."

For a moment Stella seemed startled, as though she couldn't comprehend what Lacey was saying. A moment of silence surrounded them. She slowly lowered her hand. Then madness filled her eyes, and she turned her gaze on Johnson.

"It's just a flesh wound!" he cried, his grip on Lacey slackening somewhat. "I didn't mean to shoot him, but he charged me!"

"You stupid fool!" Stella spoke between her teeth, her lips turning white with anger. "I should have known you'd screw it up! That's why I took care of everything else, because I knew I couldn't count on you! Now you've ruined everything!"

Without blinking or saying another word, Stella pulled the trigger. Lacey watched horrified, as a small, neat hole appeared in the center of Johnson's forehead before the force of the bullet catapulted him backward to the ground. She screamed and turned her face away.

"I should have done that a long time ago," Stella said without remorse. "But I needed him to get you here for me. He wanted revenge against your father but he wasn't man enough to do anything about it. I'm the one who gave him the idea to use you. I'm the one who thought up all those little incidents that have been plaguing your ranch the last few weeks. He helped me set the barn on fire and took care of the cattle, but I took care of the rest. No one gave me a second thought as they saw me riding the grounds or stopping by the ranch to see Chase."

Lacey shook her head, disbelieving what she was hearing, but knowing Stella was speaking the truth.

Stella smiled maliciously. "When my cousin first escaped from prison, he hunted me down, thinking I'd help him. He wanted a place to hide for a while, some money to get him to Mexico. I knew what his association was with your father and convinced him we could help each other. Revenge never entered the fool's head until I put it there. That's how stupid he was!"

"You're insane," Lacey breathed softly.

Stella moved behind her, keeping close enough so that Lacey was aware she was there. At one point she was certain she felt the gun brush against the back of her head.

"Yes, maybe I am a little crazy. But you see, I'm used to getting what I want. With you out of the way, Chase will turn to me. We used to be lovers. It won't be long before he sees that we be-

long together again.” There was a long pause. “We’ll get married, have children, and...”

As her voice drifted away Lacey realized Stella’s mind had wandered off into her own little world, dreaming about things that would never be. Tears rolled down Lacey’s face as she realized that her dreams were lost forever, too. She loved Chase, and if he was dead, she would soon be with him. All at once there was a hand in her hair.

“Good-bye, Miss Owens.”

Lacey braced herself and squeezed her eyes shut. A shot rang out, and it took a second for her to realize that she was still alive. Her eyes flew open. Shocked surprise rushed through her when she turned her head and found Stella lying on the ground next to Johnson, her eyes staring lifelessly up at the sky. A large, not-so-neat hole over her heart, which rapidly spread into a circle of scarlet.

Lacey screamed, and got to her feet, moving away from the gruesome sight. She glanced about the area searching for something, not sure what. Then her gaze landed on Chase. A cry of sheer joy left her lips and she ran toward what she prayed wasn’t a figment of her imagination.

“Chase!” she sobbed.

He dropped his rifle and caught Lacey to him, staggering slightly under the momentum of her weight. “God, Lacey, I almost lost you!” he said roughly, crushing her to him. “Another second and Stella would have...” He didn’t finish, kissing her forehead with trembling lips.

“Chase...” She was never going to let him go. She cried with happiness against his chest. “I thought I’d lost you! When Johnson shot you and I saw the blood...” She couldn’t go on.

“It’s all over, honey, for both of us.”

“I wanted to die when Johnson shot you. I love you!” Her hands clutched at his shirt, willing his protective body to absorb hers.

"It's just a flesh wound, baby."

"But all the blood—"

"Head wounds are like that." He spoke above her head. "That crack I got on the head when I hit the wall hurts a lot more." Pulling away slightly, Lacey glanced at him with a liquid gaze, taking in the handkerchief wrapped around his head. His shirt was soaked from her tears.

Her hands were shaking badly when they moved up to touch his pale face with a gentleness that revealed her love for him. She was careful not to dislodge the blood-soaked bandage. Her gaze touched Chase everywhere her fingers did. *He is alive! I am alive!* As his warmth seeped into her cold numb body Lacey found it easier to accept the reality that the nightmare was behind them. They were going to be all right.

"I love you," Chase admitted on a husky note of emotion. His cool lips moved over Lacey's eyes, forehead, and wet cheeks, revealing the depth of his feelings. Her big cowboy was actually trembling.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"I was out for about five minutes. While Mary revived me, Brian was smart enough to look out the bedroom window to see what direction Johnson took. He saw Johnson turn off the main road and take the old road between the pastures; it leads to a hunter's shack in the woods. We guessed he might be taking you there. The sheriff should be on his way, too."

Lacey glanced in the direction they'd come, seeing Chase's truck half-hidden behind a clump of bushes farther down the trail. He followed her gaze. "When I heard the first gunshot I realized I was closer than I thought, and that you'd apparently stopped."

His hands cupped her face tenderly. "My heart nearly stopped when I heard that shot."

The raw emotion in his hoarse voice caused Lacey's heart to swell with emotion. "You took an awful risk." She could barely talk

above a whisper. She looked Chase squarely in the eyes. "I didn't want to live without you."

His big body shuddered against her. "Let's not talk about what almost happened." He wrapped his arm across her shoulder. "Come on, sweetheart, let's get out of here. I think I hear the sheriff coming."

He was right. Lacey could hear the distant siren moving closer. She snuggled deeper against Chase's side. They were alive and safe, and the love they shared secured the promise of a future together.

A future that promised a lot.

Chapter 18

One year later...

Lacey was sleeping peacefully on her side when she felt something light brush against her cheek. She slapped at it in annoyance, and when it continued she turned on her back with a low groan. Still, something continued to torment her, only now it was a featherlight caress that drew a sigh of pleasure from her parted lips.

"Do you have any idea how tempting you are in the mornings, Mrs. Saunders?"

Lacey smiled reluctantly at the gravelly voice of her husband as his mouth moved against her ear. She attempted to open her eyes, but found she couldn't. With a soft sigh of happiness, she arched her neck as Chase's lips and tongue began a slow trek down her sensitive skin. How many times during the past year had she awakened to the pleasant demands of her husband?

"Even with stretch marks?" she whispered huskily, her hands going to Chase's head; her fingers becoming lost in the thick, overgrown mane. She felt him smile against her chest briefly.

"Even with stretch marks," he responded between love bites. "How can I fault the minor imperfections of your body when it's brought me so much joy and pleasure?"

His hands slowly began to work the nightgown down to expose her flesh. Normally he was content to love and arouse Lacey through the ultrathin wisps of nothing she liked to wear to bed, but this morning Chase obviously wanted her naked beneath him.

Lacey caught her breath when his early morning stubble slightly grazed the beginning swell of her breasts. "Even when my breasts are swollen with milk?" she gasped.

"Most especially when your breasts are swollen with milk," he ground out.

His impatient hands tugged at the material there until he bared one pink tipped crest. Without hesitation, Chase lowered his mouth and started to suckle, drawing the sweet, warm taste of milk into his mouth.

Lacey shuddered with intense delight. "Chase..."

Her eyes bolted open; a pleasurable shock going through her at what he was doing. Until now he'd always avoided her nipples, conscious of how sensitive they were. She felt the persistent pull of his powerful mouth all the way down to her curled toes before the feeling moved back up and settled in a warm pool at the juncture of her legs.

"Chase..."

He easily held her twisting body in place taking advantage and enjoying his power over her. His hands made quick work of tearing her nightgown the rest of the way off her body. While his eager mouth moved onto her second breast. Her nails raked him when his hot mouth closed over her and began to suckle.

"Oh!"

Chase's hands moved over her with intimate detail. Lacey whimpered helplessly, and with pleasure, revealing without words what he was doing to her. And when she parted her soft thighs he needed no further invitation to bury his shaft there. She nearly lost it when she felt his powerful erection glide against her clit.

"Lacey." He shuddered when her hands clenched into his muscular buttocks. He thrust into her like there was no tomorrow, bringing them both quick release on a heat wave of desire.

"I wanted to take my time with you this morning," he admitted sometime later, after having gained control of his rapid breath-

ing. He moved to the side and brought her into the circle of his arm so she could lay her head on his chest.

"I'm not complaining."

Lacey's hand toyed with the thick hair on his chest, smiling happily. The power she had over him secretly pleased her. Even after a year they'd managed to keep the fires burning as though it was their first time every time they made love.

A noise coming from the room across the hall caught their attention. The faint sound soon became a loud squall. "I think our son is hungry." Lacey glanced up, catching Chase's proud grin.

"He has an appetite like his father." Lacey kissed his chin. "But I think that's our daughter."

They each grabbed a robe and went into the nursery to look down at their children. At three months old, their twins already looked as different as night and day. Melanie was definitely going to follow after the softer feminine looks of her mother while Nathan had inherited his father's fierce dark looks. They were beautiful babies.

"I told you." Lacey shot Chase a smug look and reached for her unhappy daughter.

Even though Nathan wasn't crying Chase reached for him. He never passed up an opportunity to hold one of his children.

Every time Lacey looked at them, every time she thought about them, her heart swelled with love and pride to near bursting. The emotion almost equaled the intense feeling she felt for their father.

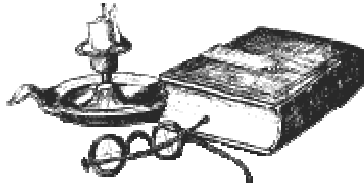
Holding his son to his chest, Chase watched her settle herself into one of the rockers as she prepared to feed Melanie. She heard his breath catch when she bared a breast. She met his look, a soft smile forming on her lips while a fierce fire burned in his eyes. And she knew, every day for them was just the beginning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tory has been writing since she was a kid, but life always seemed to get in the way of doing anything about it. She didn't get serious until a few years ago, when encouragement from her family prompted her into submitting to a publisher. It surprised and thrilled her when a couple months after submitting to Whiskey Creek Press she received her first contract offer. Originally from Maine, Tory resides in sunny and *always* hot Florida, with her three crazy cats.

Writing is a hobby for Tory. It thrills her to be able to share her stories. And she loves seeing her characters come to life with each new book cover.

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