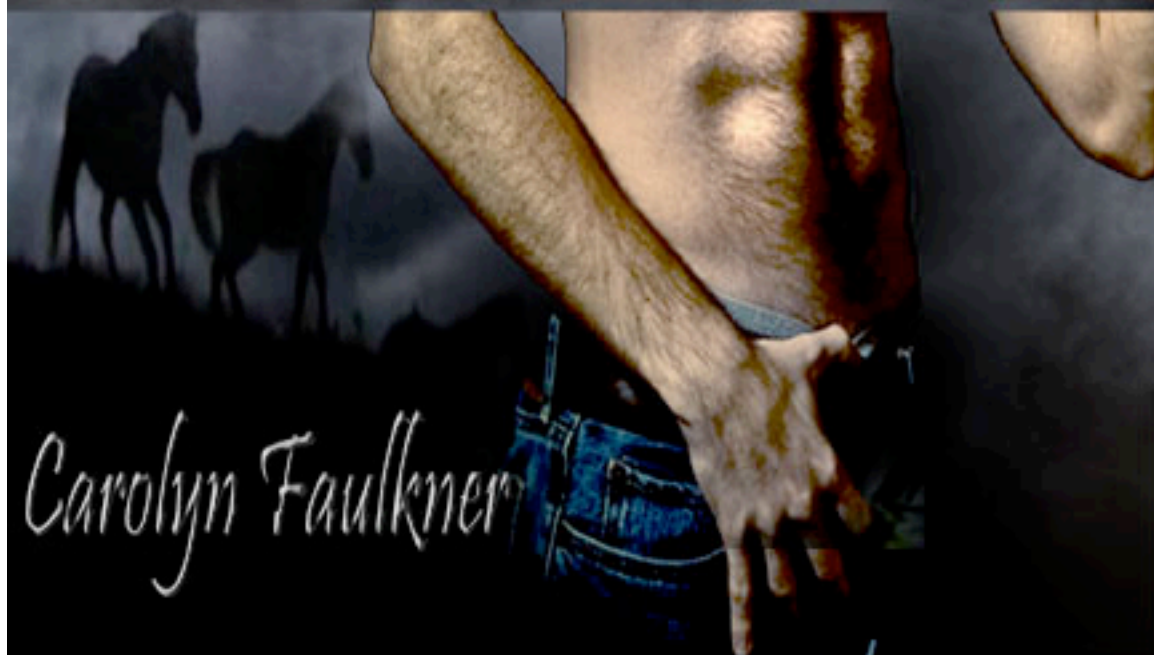




THE POWER OF LOVE



Carolyn Faulkner

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By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Prologue

Even in the dim lamplight, Nilla's blonde coat shone like the sun. Annie Cavanaugh smirked to herself. That's what two hours of grooming'll in the middle of the night'll do for you, she thought sarcastically as she ran the curry comb over the patient horse's haunches for the nine hundredth time that night. Her mane and tail were loosely plaited - hooves cleaned . . . she was ready for the show ring.

All dressed up and nowhere to go. I can sympathize with that, Annie thought, frowning immediately. Except for the dressed up part. She looked down at one of her two pair of half dead jeans - both were more holes than jeans at this point. Everything in life seemed to come down to money, and she was damned sick and tired of living, breathing, and eating money problems.

Annie could feel her stomach start to churn with the nausea that had become a constant companion of late. Bad thought. Bad, bad, bad thought, she chided herself. She had come out here to forget her woes. Animals had always had that magic ability to soothe her, even when she was a child. Now all grown up, she frankly preferred their company to that of most people beyond a select group of female friends.

Men were ranked somewhere down there next to money as bad business, as far as she was concerned, despite the fact that she was only thirty eight and hardly ready to be put out to pasture. It wasn't as if they were knocking down her door, anyway. Hugh had run out on her - choosing a piece of vapid, twenty five year old arm candy to someone who smelled like dirt and cows.

Annie wasn't at all sure she could blame him, but at times she did anyway. It had been over seven years, but the tears arrived on cue anyway. Not that she missed him, much, but ranch life was hard and largely isolate, and it had been nice to know that someone - who was supposed to be deeply committed to her - was lying just on the other side of grandma's handmade quilt.

But, in retrospect, she should never have married him. When her father died suddenly and she'd inherited the mortgaged to the hilt ranch where he'd barely been able to eek out a living, the ranch became the only thing she saw - it had always been one of the few things in life that meant anything to her, besides her myriad dogs, cats, and horses. It even meant more than her sister and her niece and nephew who lived back East. She certainly loved the Circle C more than she loved any johnny come lately husband. The C had been there for her during her parents' nasty fights, when the kids at school had teased her, and when there wasn't enough money to buy her a decent dress to wear to graduation.

It was her home, and it meant everything to her - apparently, even more than her husband did. Just before he'd walked out that crooked, squeaky screen door, Hugh said the most calculatedly hurtful thing he could as a parting shot, his face a mask of snide cruelty. "I ain't gonna miss you one bit, Annie. It was like making love to a corpse."

It had hurt that she hadn't been enough of a woman to keep him, but she'd thrown all of her energy into the ranch, and, as the pain of his desertion numbed over time, she was slowly, very slowly, working her way into the black.

But there was never enough money for anything. Never enough hands, never enough time. She was working herself into the ground, Regan - her ancient foreman - had been fond of telling her. "You should be sitting at home having babies," he'd wheeze, despite how many times she'd lectured him on his antiquated notions.

Now, even Regan was gone. He'd had to fly down to Florida to take care of his sister, who was even more ancient than he was. He'd hated to leave, Annie knew. He was more of a father to her than her own had been by a long shot, and they both had more than a tear in their eye when they hugged hard and parted.

So she'd had to put an ad in the local paper, but frankly didn't hold out much hope. If she was lucky, she might get a drifter to help out for a while, but Annie had no delusions that anyone could work the miracle she needed. She put the brush she'd switched to down, and almost swore she heard the horse give a sigh of relief. It was a wonder the poor thing wasn't bald by now.

Annie paused at the barn doors that were slightly askew, careful not to lean on them. They needed to be put back on track, but that little chore was so far down the list they were likely to fall off before she got to them. She took a deep breath, full of horse and hay and the ancient, acrid sweetness of an old barn, letting it fill her lungs like a form of organic aroma therapy, and all the money and time worries that had plagued her brain eased out of it to dissipate into the pre-dawn air.

She started back towards the house for a cup of coffee and a cigarette she wasn't supposed to have, according to her doctor and Regan and the Surgeon General. Inside the big, warm kitchen, Annie passed the blinking answering machine. She frowned, knowing that there had been no messages when she went to bed last night. So far a whopping zero candidates had responded to her ad, but a call a five in the morning?

A worrying niggling thought flashed into her head and she wondered if Regan was all right. Annie quickly pushed the play button and listened avidly for the sound of his voice.

But it certainly wasn't Regan. The man who owned that voice ought to be very gainfully employed at a phone sex operation. The deep, husky timbre reached out and slipped insidiously into her brain. She'd turned away from the phone when she'd realized who it wasn't, but as she got the stuff together to make a short pot for herself, his words seeped from her ears down over her breasts; her nipples blooming into stiff, painful peaks that chafed against the inside of her dingy white bra.

"You advertised for a ranch hand. I'm applying. Call me." He left his phone number.

It was one heavy breath away from being an obscene phone call, as far as she was concerned. Dear God, if that was what he sounded like, what must he look like? Annie snorted, leaning against the counter while the coffee perked. Probably an unflattering cross between Quasimodo and Dilbert, she thought unkindly.

She had to admit, though, she liked his spunk, calling at this ungodly hour. Of course, in ranch country, early was never early enough. Since she knew he was up by the timestamp on the message, she grabbed the phone and punched in his number. There was no sense putting it off. The sooner she could get some help, the better.

"Hullo?" It sounded like he'd fallen back asleep.

The blood he'd ignited with his innocently sexy phone message pooled in the warm cradle of her loins and lay there, tingling madly. She had to clear her throat and shake her head, trying to dispel those unfamiliar, and wholly unwanted, feelings. "I'm calling from the Circle C. You left a message that you're interested in working for me?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone that Annie didn't like, and she liked his response even less. "You?"

Her eyebrow rose reflexively. She was quite used to the chauvinistic prejudices that still existed regarding women running a ranch. It just wasn't done.

Except by her.

"Yes, me. Do you have a problem with the idea of working for a woman?" she asked, unable to keep the edge from her tone that clearly said he was a Neanderthal if he did.

"Don't think so. Just didn't expect a woman."

Annie decided to keep things on as businesslike a level as she could, despite her throbbing body. "Have you worked on a ranch before?"

"No."

Oh, lovely. He was going to be a big help. "What kind of work have you done?"

"Computers."

She revised her previous opinion. He was, apparently, a combination of Quasimodo and a ninety eight pound weakling geek. Marvelous. "Well, Mr. - Mr. -"

"Rideout."

"Mr. Rideout. This is a very physical position and it does require a certain amount of knowledge -"

"I'll learn."

This was like pulling teeth, and it really wasn't getting her anywhere. She couldn't hire him. He had no experience. She didn't need to continue to do the majority of the work around here and babysit a tenderfoot. That would be adding to her work load, not alleviating it.

He did sound quite sure of himself, very confident and downright uncomfortably masculine. But Annie needed someone who was going to dive right in and do a lot of heavy stuff that she simply couldn't do. She'd been relying on help from her neighbor, Kaz Ballentine, but he had his own huge and grossly successful spread. She couldn't continue to expect him to come over and do what she had to leave undone, scolding and chiding her all the way about what she was having to do.

Kaz was a throwback who made absolutely no apologies for his antiquated attitudes towards women. His wife, Callie, was one of the few people from her high school class that Annie still kept in contact with, and she was the first to roll her eyes at her husband when he attempted to lay down the law with her about something, until he got that look.

Their kind of love was something that, when she awoke in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep, Annie aspired to. They were blatantly, completely and totally in love with each other, and made no bones about it. Kaz, who was as macho and masculine as anyone would ever see, melted with each glance at his tiny wife, whom he did his darndest to overprotect. He thought the sun rose and set in Callie's smile, and he didn't much care who knew it.

"Well?"

His insistent tone jarred her out of her reverie. "Uh, I'm sorry, Mr. Rideout, but I really do need someone with experience."

"What I lack in experience I can make up for in determination. I learn quickly, and I'm very strong."

She could certainly use the very strong part of that description, but she didn't think it would be enough. "I'm sorry. If I were a little better off, I could take you on and train you -"

"I understand. Thank you."

Click.

And that was it. No more tingle, no more throbbing. Back to being dead.

She hung up the phone reluctantly, then drank a huge mug of coffee, donned a disreputable hat and holey gloves and set out for a day full o' bovine fun and frolick.

Yee haw.

Chapter One

Faith, Texas was everyone's picture of a small town – slowly dying Main Street, giant blight of a Wal-mart just on its outskirts, two greasy spoons and a post office, and half a volunteer fire department building that only got built in the squad's spare time.

Quinn Rideout lay flat on his back in the dingy room he'd rented at Sadie's Boarding House. He would have thought that boarding houses had gone out of style long ago, but apparently not a lot changed in small town Texas unless it absolutely had to, and he bet that Sadie had a hard time making the mortgage without taking in the occasional weary traveler.

It was all right, as such places go. He twitched a little, adjusting himself carefully. He didn't really fit on the tiny twin bed, and at first had had some concerns about whether or not it would even hold him, but despite the constant groaning from the ancient springs, it seemed to be surviving so far.

The rest of the small room was filled – literally, floor to ten foot crown molded ceiling – with computer innards: hard drives, empty shells of towers he'd already harvested from, cd-rw drives, and even the occasional five and a quarter floppy drive - the big ones that everyone had thought would be big enough to store anything anyone would ever need on a computer. As Bill Gates had once famously said, "640k ought to be big enough for anyone."

Not quite any more.

The nagging pain in his leg told him that he had to completely change his position, which wasn't easy. At any point during the process of arranging his broken parts he expected to become up close and person with Sadie's spotlessly clean floor. At least on his side, though, his shoulders wouldn't hang off the side of the bed.

The hinges held, and he finally settled onto his bad side. His left leg. It had been pretty much crumpled like so much tin foil in a horrific car accident when he was much younger, and no one seemed to be able to do much about it, despite the current conventional wisdom that preached about the miracles of modern medicine.

Said miracles had been few and far between for him, he thought absently, with an unusual degree of depression as his fingers absently rubbed another of the souvenirs from the accident – a long, unsightly scar that stretched raggedly from the corner of his right eye down just past his jaw. It had been created when a piece of the windshield had been sheered off and imbedded itself into the side of his face. He'd been lucky he hadn't lost that eye or any cognitive abilities.

Lucky. Yep. That was him. Lucky.

Even after years of physical therapy he still walked with a considerable limp, but he never let it hamper him in any way. He rock climbed, he skied, he had a black belt in karate, and he made horrible choices in women. There were no protections against that for gimps, apparently.

Hannah had gotten it all in the divorce – the house, the car . . . even their dog. Not that he'd wanted much. Quinn had never needed to have things – possessions – around him. As long as he had his computers and a car, he was good to go. That was one of the irreconcilable problems they'd had. The closer he came to success "tinkering" – as she'd derisively termed it – with his computers, the less attention he was able – no, willing, in Hannah's case, he admitted to himself – to spend on her.

The other problem – as far as Hannah saw it – was that he flatly refused to do anything about the scar on his face. She'd supposedly fallen in love with him – not his face – but the longer they were together

the more she nagged him incessantly to have plastic surgery. Apparently love was nowhere near as blind as it was purported to be.

But Quinn wasn't in the least bothered by the ruddy red scar, and he refused to go under the knife for a purely cosmetic reason. He was no Pierce Brosnan before the accident, and no amount of plastic surgery was going to make him into one. If others didn't like it – including his dear wife – they could kiss his butt.

Granted, it had been a long while since he'd wanted to be with Hannah. Hindsight being twenty-twenty, he should never have married her in the first place, but occasionally, even he, the quintessential loner, wanted some sort of human contact. But she was everything he wasn't – a social climber concerned with material possessions that he couldn't provide . . . yet.

If he was ever able to complete what he was working on and get it sold, he'd be able to buy and sell Hanna Mitchell Rideout.

But that was a big if.

He sat up suddenly, reaching for the folded and marked want ads, making a big red "x" through the Circle C's ad and moving on to the next one.

It was well past ten that night before Annie made it back to the house, dragging herself in to flop dejectedly onto a kitchen chair, tears nearly overcoming her. Regan had left a week ago, and she'd tried to do as much as she could herself, but the sheer volume of work – most of which she physically couldn't do – was starting to overwhelm her. She was beat, physically and emotionally. She'd spent all day moving cattle, and every muscle she owned hurt. She'd been stepped on, knocked down, and nearly dragged. If Nilla hadn't been so well trained, she would have ended up dead a thousand ways from Sunday today.

And this was just an average run of the mill day on a ranch.

Kaz had gotten her on her cell and begged off coming over tonight to help her with the fencing. All she could do was thank him profusely for what he'd already done for her. He had no obligation to keep coming over here, although she knew he would as much as he could.

She needed about five more hands, and about a half a million dollars.

She needed a miracle, and there were none in the offing, she knew.

Instead, she got up, her bones and muscles creaking almost as loudly as the chair, and looked at the answering machine. No light. No one else had responded to her ad. As she replayed the message that intriguing Mr. Rideout had left, Annie tapped her front tooth with a broken fingernail. Some help would be better than none at this point.

Sighing, she picked up the phone and called him back, hoping that he hadn't found something else in the meantime.

He hadn't, and agreed to come meet her very early tomorrow morning. If he was as strong as he implied, she intended to hire him on the spot.

Annie slept right through the shrieking of her alarm, probably because she'd been up half the night the night before. She stumbled down to the kitchen and put the pot on then turned to go back upstairs to dress as was her habit, but then a sound caught her eye. It was the unmistakable sound of a hammer meeting wood.

Without another thought beyond the concern that someone might be trying to destroy something on her property – despite how highly unlikely that was – Annie ran out into the yard. A strange man was on a ladder in front of the barn, fixing the doors.

Completely disregarding her state of undress, which was worse than it might have been considering the spots on her gown that were nearly see through, she marched up to stand at the bottom of the ladder. "Excuse me! Excuse me! Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

He went on, banging several more nails into the door without acknowledging her in the least.

"Come down here right now!"

He continued to futz with the door for another few minutes, then finally descended to tip his hat at her sharply without so much as looking at her, then collect the ladder and move it to the other side.

Annie attempted unsuccessfully to keep her temper at bay. "Mr. Rideout, I'd like you to come down here, please, so that I can speak to you."

"In a minute."

Annie nearly bit her tongue clean through before he deigned to join her on the ground again, but she had to admit that at least when he'd finished, the doors slid easily open and closed and it was going to be nice not to have to worry when one of them was going to come crashing down on her – or an animal's head.

When he finally stood in front of her, she almost wished he'd stayed on the ladder. He was a huge man whose shoulders completely blotted out every bit of the morning sun. He must've been at least six six or so, with bulging arms and thighs that were nearly as wide as her waist.

She hadn't counted on him being so big, or feeling so small because of it. Annie had worked around men most of her life, but she'd never seen one as big as he was. It served to remind her how vulnerable she was as a woman living alone, and made her more wary than she might have been.

Annie extended her hand to him. "I'm Annie Cavangaugh, Mr. Rideout - "

"Quinn." He gingerly shook just the ends of her fingers, as if he was afraid of hurting the rest of her small hand, his eyes nailing themselves to her as surely as he'd nailed the doors.

She couldn't help but wonder where he'd gotten that nasty scar. Even without it, though, he'd never have been handsome – he was too rough looking. "Quinn. Thank you for fixing them. They've been something I just couldn't get to."

"S'okay."

He moved back towards his truck, and she noticed his pronounced limp. Something had happened to him somewhere along the line that had taken quite a toll on his body. Annie wished she could ask him about it, but that would have been too impolite, especially on essentially no acquaintance. She wondered if that limp would hinder his job performance, and then, suddenly, for not particular reason, her mind conjured up the question of how that limp might effect his lovemaking, and she couldn't squelch the thought.

As a result, when he came to stand in front of her, his brow furrowed. "You all right? You're all red."

Annie tried to take herself firmly in hand, hoping it would make her blush dissipate more quickly. "I'm fine, thank you."

She showed him around the ranch and told him what she expected of the man she hired, and he had no problems keeping up with her – both legs were disgustingly long, and, in fact, she was the one who had to jog trot next to him, even with the limp. "Can you ride?"

He nodded, scanning the dilapidated buildings and corrals with a critical eye. "Well enough."

"I couldn't pay much at first, and as I mentioned in the ad, this is only a temporary position until my foreman gets back."

"Whatever you can pay is fine. But do you know of a place to stay? I'm in the boarding house right now, but I don't really have enough room."

She had been going to offer the new hand room and board in the house – after she'd had Kaz vet him.. But with this man she wasn't at all sure.

Annie didn't want to admit it, but he stirred something in her that had been long dormant. And she'd prefer that it stayed that way. There was a dichotomy about the way he made her feel – at once very vulnerable and soft, but also somehow cared for, as if she somehow knew that he'd only ever use all that strength to help her. But the truth was that she knew nothing of the sort about him, and it was patently ridiculous of her to feel this way. She was doing her best to fight it, but it was insidious.

"You can start immediately, and I have rooms available here, but I have to do a bit of a background check -"

Being frowned down at like that was a truly fearsome sight. "Good. Investigate all you like. I'll answer anything you ask. A woman alone can't take any chances."

He followed her into the house and sat down at her kitchen table to fill out a small questionnaire she had, and even that big kitchen seemed too small for him. He dwarfed the chair he was sitting on, and Annie was sure it was going to break out from under him.

"I put down more than you asked." He handed her the form as she flitted about the kitchen, trying to do anything but notice the giant at the table, "and listed about ten references."

"Thank you."

Quinn turned the brim of his hat in his hands nervously. "I'll work hard for you, Ms. Cavanaugh. You'll never regret hiring me, I can assure you of that."

Annie nodded, her gaze settling anywhere but at him. "Thank you."

Quinn saw how she avoided looking at him and grimaced. With most people, he didn't give a damn what they thought. But this feisty little woman, who'd been valiantly trying to do a man's job for who knows how long, touched him somehow, and he'd hoped that she could look past his face. But if she couldn't, she couldn't. He was grateful that to have the job.

Annie watched him walk out into the yard, her hands clenched into fists at her side.

It was only then that she remembered she was still in her gown.

Chapter Two

Completely and utterly mortified at having practically exposed herself to a man she didn't know, Annie ran up the stairs to her room and threw on jeans and a shirt, wishing they were in better condition and then wishing she hadn't wished that. She didn't want to change anything about herself for this man. He was her employee, and that was it. That was all she wanted, she lied blithely to herself, shunting her budding attraction to him to the back of her mind, relegating him to a spot next to Hugh that he probably didn't deserve, but that would remain to be seen.

But the time she'd gotten back out to the yard he'd already fixed one of the rails in the corral and was busy bringing hay to the horses. The bales were practically bigger than she was, but she'd done it every morning since she could remember. He could practically carry two bales at once and accomplished the task in a quarter of the time it took her.

She saddled up Tawny this time and put Nilla out for a day of rest. Once she'd gotten Tawny ready, she turned to select a horse for him, but he was already astride Cash, her ornery palamino stallion, and they were both awaiting her impatiently.

Anne stood there for a moment, watching him easily control the antsy prancing Cash liked to do when he was raring to go. Any misgivings she'd had about whether or not he could ride well enough to do this job fell away immediately. He rode like a centaur – better than almost anyone she'd ever seen – completely seamlessly. He didn't get angry at the dancing horse, who was just exhibiting a good natured excitement since he didn't get out as much as he should have. Instead, Quinn used his body to let the horse know who was the boss, and didn't let his temper get the best of him.

How a man treated animals was an excellent reflection of how he was going to treat any creature that was dependant on him. And Quinn Rideout had just passed that test with flying colors.

And her opinion of him only increased throughout the day. He never shirked from anything she asked him to do, in fact he jumped in to do things she hadn't even gotten to yet. Everything he did was accomplished with quiet confidence, even though he was just learning how to do most of it. He was big and muscular, but he was able to temper his strength easily for more delicate jobs.

She worked him like a dog all morning – but no harder than she'd been working herself since she'd inherited the ranch. They broke for lunch while they were still out moving cattle, stopping to set a spell near a rain swollen stream.

Quinn was so tired he didn't know what end was up, but it felt damned good to extend himself physically like this again. It had been a while, and there would be hell to pay with his leg tonight until he got used to spending long hours clenching a horse's belly again, but overall he felt fantastic.

And she had matched him all the way, doing things that, if she was his, he'd never let her do like mending the occasional barbed wire fence they'd found that was down. If that wire had lashed back at her, she'd be sliced open all over, like a perch in a Cuisinart. That thought made him grimace and wish he had the right to tell her she couldn't do that kind of thing.

But he didn't.

Yet.

She was already getting under his skin, and he'd never been as attracted to a woman at first sight as he was to her. Of course, the fact that from the instance she'd appeared at his feet while he was on the ladder he could see nearly every detail of her naked body hadn't hurt. That was one of the reasons why he'd tried not to look at her . . . much. But every time he did, he caught enticing glimpses of what that gown was supposed to conceal, and his body enjoyed every stolen second of it. Maybe a little too much. He'd begun working outside without her because he was a conscientious employee, but he also because he'd needed something else to redirect his sexual energy into.

According to Hannah, he was insatiable. That had been another of their myriad points of incompatibility. He didn't know if he'd go that far. He liked sex, and he liked to have it on a more than on his birthday and Christmas. Hannah would have been quite content to have done it on a monthly basis, much less weekly, and he would have been more content to have done it once a day, or more, if she had been into it. But she wasn't, and as it became a bone of contention between them, he found his ardor for his wife cooling considerably. He had no taste for rape whatsoever, nor would he consider an extramarital affair, so he was stuck going pretty much without, and ended up sublimating his sexual drive as much as possible and channeling it into his work instead.

Quinn had come into the marriage with the mistaken notion that lovemaking would be a way for him to express his love to his wife. He wasn't the most demonstrative of men. He leaned towards the taciturn. But that didn't mean that he hadn't felt anything for Hannah. He'd loved her, and had wanted to show that love to her in the most intimate, caring fashion he could.

But she hadn't seen it that way at all. Early on, she'd accused him of always pawing at her for sex, as if he was some kind of clumsy oaf begging at her skirts. That – and their other differences – had helped him squelch his desire for her.

As a result, he found himself with a hair trigger around women. If he took the time to really look at Ms. – he was quite sure it would be “Ms.” and not “Miss” – Annie Cavanaugh, he could see that she wasn't ugly, but she wasn't Michelle Pfeiffer, either. Her face was oval and open, with big, black fringed hazel eyes. She had what appeared to be scads of shiny black hair that must've been downright gorgeous, but even when she'd confronted him this morning it had been wrestled back from her face and crumpled into a severe bun. What, did she sleep with it that way? he wondered.

Those big wide eyes and her small stature gave her an elfin air; she'd probably look ten years younger than she was for all of her life. She was small, but ample, as he well knew, all curves and dark shadows. The memory of how she'd looked with the morning sun as a backlight, etching her incredible figure beneath the worn cotton of her gown replayed unbidden in the back of his mind and had him uncomfortably erect as he watched her unloading her saddle bags and lay out a veritable feast.

“Good Lord, woman, where do you find the time to come up with all this food?” he asked, amazed at the variety of what she'd brought and that it seemed to be home made. There were four thick ham sandwiches, tart with Swiss cheese and a spicy mustard, a vinegary slaw with cabbage, carrots and raisins, two small bags of potato chips, celery and carrot sticks with a tangy ranch dressing for dipping, two big canteens of water, and four huge M & M cookies.

It was on the tip of her tongue to make a sarcastic comment about the fact that that was one of the few complete sentences she'd hear him utter, but she refrained. She didn't really know him well enough to pick on him like that, although it probably wouldn't take long for that to happen. Days and days spent on the open range fostered an intimacy between people that was hard to describe, and impossible to resist for those who loved it.

Her mouth full of the big bite of ham sandwich she'd taken, she mumbled back almost incoherently, “My momma taught me to take one day a month and cook everything.” She swallowed, knowing he probably hadn't gotten much from that. “My mom. I take one day a month and do all my cooking and baking – bread, cookies, hams, sometimes, turkeys other times, lasagna, beef stew, meatloaf,

whatever I think I might have a hankering for. Then I debone the bird or whatever and package it all up into meal sized portions and freeze it. There's a big chest freezer in the barn."

Quinn's mouth was watering even though it was full of food. He asked with comic haste, "Board does come with the room, right?"

Annie had to laugh at his blatant eagerness. "Yes, it does."

"You're never gonna get rid of me," he mumbled under his breath to his sandwich.

They sat and munched their way contentedly through the meal, Quinn downing the lion's share as she'd intended. He was eying the last cookie greedily, until she picked it up and handed it to him. "Here. I made three sandwiches for you and brought three cookies for you. You're bigger than I am and you need more food."

Quinn thought he had died and gone to gastronomic heaven. He gave a nearly orgasmic groan as he bit into the sweet cookie.

Annie gathered everything up except the canteens and loaded it up. When she returned to sit by him, she took out a cigarette, ignoring the glare she was getting from her new employee as he chomped down the last of his dessert.

"Not a word from you over there," she warned in mock anger.

Quinn cleared his throat. "I haven't said a word. Not my place," yet, he thought to himself. "But if you were mine, you'd be getting your butt tanned about now."

Annie snorted derisively but gave him a sharp look. "You believe in beating women?"

Quinn chose his words carefully. This was a topic that was too strewn with conversational land mines to have so early on, but apparently he couldn't curb his naturally dominant, caretaker tendencies now any better than he had when he was married. He could still hear Hannah bitching that he smothered her just because he wanted to know where she was going when she went out even though it was the same courtesy he extended to her. "Of course not. If I took my fists to a woman she'd be dead. But occasionally turning a woman over your lap for a judiciously applied spanking does her a world of good, in my experience, especially if she has as bad a habit as smoking."

Annie could feel every cell in her body flaming red. How had he managed to survive with such a chauvinistic attitude towards women? "You have got to be kidding me!"

"I do?"

"No man believes that in this day and age," she blustered.

"I do. I think society in general would be a lot better off if we went back to the way things used to be, where the man was the head of the house and the final authority on things." He chewed thoughtfully on a carrot stick he'd been able to hide away from her mad cleaning efforts, thoroughly enjoying how enraged she looked by his pontifications. "There'd be a lot fewer divorces."

"I don't know that that's a good thing. And not all men would rise to the occasion. And not all men want that kind of a burden, and even fewer women would be willing to submit anyone having that kind of authority over them." She looked at him closely. "I take it you feel that you would be the type of man who would be a benevolent despot? You know what they say about absolute power . . ."

"Yes, but I'm not suggesting absolute power. I'm talking about the man taking the natural lead within a family or a relationship. The woman is always free to walk away from it. It wouldn't work if she didn't submit willingly and completely." He was still glaring at her fiercely as they argued and she continued to smoke. "And not a despot at all. A loving, guiding hand -"

"Yeah, on her butt! That's not love, that's pain!"

"How many women would give nearly anything to have their husband's pay attention to them - even that kind? And it is love. It's a man loving his woman enough to correct her when and if she needs it - and entirely by her own agreement, and not under any sort of duress or in anger."

Annie ground the butt out then poured water over it and stretched. "Sounds like a recipe for abuse to me."

Quinn had to move one leg over the other in hopes of concealing his rampant erection, although she didn't seem to be paying that close attention to him, and that sparked the return of the deep ache that was only going to be worse by the end of the day. He rubbed it absently while he spoke. "And some women aren't being abused now?"

Annie glared back at him. "More would be abused if men were given some kind of carte blanche to lord over their wives."

"I'm not talking about carte blanche. I'm talking about a man taking responsibility for his wife's reckless, unhealthy behavior. Like speeding - " his eyebrow reached his hairline as he stared at her pointedly and said with slow deliberation, "or smoking . . . Like if I was your husband and I said that you weren't to touch that barbed wire ever again unless you wanted to have the seat of your pants warmed good. That would just be a loving warning because I was worried that you'd get seriously hurt. You're too small to mend fences."

"And I'd have to respond that I've been mending fences all by myself for quite some time," she responded, even though it wasn't quite true. Regan had done most of it, because he was just about as protective as Quinn was proving to be. "And I've never had an accident."

"Never the less, Annie. I don't want you to do that any more. There's no need to; that's why I'm here." It was a definite command.

"I know. But I'm not your wife, it's my ranch, and I'll do whatever needs to be done." She said it flatly, plainly, but without rancor. It was just a statement.

"Well, then, if you should decide to go against me, and I take you over my knee, then you won't be able to say that you weren't warned, will you?" he replied in a soft voice that still held a thread of steel beneath it.

"Do I need to remind you that I'm the boss here, Quinn Rideout?"

"No, Ma'am." There wasn't a trace of sarcasm in his reply, but somehow she knew that reiterating her status as his employer hadn't change a thing about his bold declaration.

It was on the tip of her tongue to fire him, but she didn't want to, just because he had some extremely antiquated notions about women and their place in the world. It didn't sound all that bad to be that treasured by a man, except for the spanking part. Hugh certainly had never paid that much attention to what she was doing, unless it annoyed him or cost him money.

Annie decided to let it go for now, drawing a deep breath and absently watching the way his hand rubbed his leg, then brought her eyes to his. "Do you mind if I ask?" gesturing towards his leg.

"Nope. It was a bad car accident."

"I'm sorry." What else could she say?

"Thank you, but it's alright." On impulse, he asked, "Does the scar bother you?"

Surprised, Annie moved a little closer, and Quinn couldn't think that that was a bad thing. Beneath the cow and dust, she smelled like lavender soap. She was taking a good long look at the second most vulnerable point on his body, but Quinn didn't flinch. He would never admit he was holding his breath for her answer, but he was. He didn't want to examine why it meant so much to him that she not flinch away, and she wasn't.

As a matter of fact, she reached up with those delicate fingers then hesitated, looking to him for permission, then touching him there, on that ridged, dead skin. He wanted to turn his lips into her palm but restrained himself, barely. It had been so long since anyone who wasn't medical had touched his face that he closed his eyes and reveled in it, and something deep inside him let go, some kind of last reservoir of pain and loathing, aimed directly at himself.

"Am I hurting you?"

Gruffly, "No, no you're not."

It was like petting a sleeping giant – one was never sure quite what might trigger him awake. She could feel the warmth from his big body and part of her wanted to nestle up against him and let him be the protector he was so obviously supposed to be for some lucky – if occasionally sore bottomed – woman.

But Tawny nickered loudly and broke the spell.

Scrambling back away from him, she said quietly, “No, your scar doesn’t bother me at all.”

In truth, she never saw his scar again. There was only him.

He worked hard, Annie had to give him that, above and beyond the things that she asked him to do. He got there before she got up, and fell into the habit of perking them a pot of coffee they both shared and fixing them a rudimentary breakfast. Quinn said it was only fair since she did all of the other cooking. One time he surprised her with lighter than air honey dipped doughnuts from the best bakery in town; the next morning it was bagels and cream cheese. He’d been with her for a week before Kaz had gotten back to her with word that he checked out squeaky clean.

“That was some accident he was in, though, huh?”

Annie had never questioned how or where Kaz got his information, but he was always dead on. “Yes, it was.”

“He was lucky to have lived through it. I take it he’s still able to do what needs to be done despite the limp?”

“Yep. He’s an incredible worker – up before me, out longer than me, he’s like a big boy scout. It’s like hiring one guy and getting three. And he sits a horse better than you do!”

“He does, does he?” Kaz was well known as one of the best horsemen in the county. “I think I’ll have to make it a point to come over and meet him. Maybe he can give me a few tips.”

Annie guffawed. “Definitely. Someday you’ll learn how to ride, and that’ll help you tremendously in your chosen profession . . .”

Kaz chuckled, but turned serious for a moment. “Now, I’ve learned everything I can. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be on your guard with him. He’s still a stranger, and you’ll be a woman living alone with him. I really wish you could afford to pay more and have him live elsewhere.”

“You’re sweet to be so concerned about me, but I’m fine, and he seems to be a really nice person.”

Kaz was unfazed. “Yeah, well, so did Ted Bundy, as long as you weren’t a lone woman.”

Annie took his caution to heart, but didn’t think that she’d have a problem with Quinn. If anything, the man could easily be accused of being too damned protective of her. He did as much for her as he could possibly get away with – her horse was always saddled by the time she got to it, breakfast was made, and he had taken to spending the evenings after they came in and before she got dinner ready working on fixing the smaller stuff around the barn and then, once they had been accomplished, he began on the house.

This morning, though, she’d gotten up extra early because she intended on tackling a line of fence they’d found in the north pasture that was completely down. It was a priority job because they needed to move the herd there as soon as possible and she left in her ancient Ford truck before Quinn appeared, before dawn, even, because the ride out there would take quite a while in and of itself, bumping across the land until her insides were completely scrambled.

And she did it with the full knowledge and remembrance of how he’d warned her against doing exactly what she was setting out to do. And just from knowing him this past week, she knew that he meant what he said when he said it. He may not have been born to ranching, but he’d taken to it like a duck to water. She’d only ever had to show him what to do once, and then he had it forever. He asked intelligent questions, and genuinely seemed to be interested in the welfare of the ranch, which was an extraordinary thing considering that he was just temporary help.

But it was a chore she'd done before, and she'd dressed for the job – covered head to toe in heavy clothes, with thick gloves that were more of a hindrance than a help. Although they would protect her hands from the razor sharp shards of wire, they were so thick they hampered her manual dexterity, so she usually ended up just throwing the gloves towards the truck not long after starting.

She'd been working for about an hour when he showed up on Cash. Annie tried not to pay him too much attention, but her nervousness only increased when he dismounted and advanced towards her without saying a word.

It might have been because she was so tense about this confrontation with him, she didn't know. But her grip on the barbed wire suddenly evaporated, and the tightly curved wire sprang back at her suddenly before it relaxed again, nicking her on the part of her body that had the least protection – her face.

"Annie!" Quinn yelled, grabbing for her and dragging her to the ground, throwing her away from the barbed wire and covering her completely with his body.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she rushed to assure him, although she wasn't at all sure she'd stay that way if he continued to lie on top of her. He was crushing her into the ground and she was having more than a little problem breathing.

"Are you sure? You're not hurt?" he asked anxiously, his hands running over her body, not that he could feel much through her heavy coat.

Annie nodded vigorously. "But could you get off me, you big lunk. I can't breathe."

Quinn rolled off her to one side, and when she sat up he caught her chin, turning her face towards him. Annie couldn't help but watch a muscle bulge in and out in his jaw. He looked like he was going to spit nails, and it surprised her when he fished a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed with incredible tenderness at her cheek. "You're cut, but it doesn't look deep," he fairly growled.

"I told you I was fine."

His next words made her heart stop dead in her chest. "Your face is fine. Your butt's gonna be another matter."

Chapter Three

It wasn't as if she hadn't been warned. Those words flashed through her mind as the uncompromising flat of his hand connected with the yielding, embarrassingly jiggly, flesh of her bared bottom.

She couldn't even begin to comprehend that he was actually doing this to her, that she was bare bottomed over his lap getting a worse spanking than she'd ever had in her life. It was God awful, and he wasn't showing any signs of stopping. If – When he finally did stop, she was going to fire him so completely that he was going to wish he was never born.

But right now, all she could do was try to endure. And most of all, try not to cry. That would be the coup de grace, if she lost total control of herself and bawled all over him like a baby just because he was smacking her fanny. Only it wasn't "just". He was lighting into her as if he meant business. Annie would swear she could feel the flesh of her backside – from the crest of her butt to just before the backs of her knees – swelling more and more with each application of that paddle like hand of his.

How could he have been so tender with her one moment, blotting her cut, then throw her over his legs and ruck her pants – and panties – down to mid thigh and start to whack away on her the next second?

All Quinn could see was that wire snapping back towards her once she'd let it loose, and he'd personally gotten to experience the physical sensations behind the saying "his heart was in his throat". He still didn't think he could swallow comfortably, and the offended organ was still beating so hard he wouldn't have been surprised if he'd keeled over from a heart attack in the midst of spanking her.

But it would all be worth it if she never touched another piece of the stuff, and he intended to be around to make very sure that she didn't – whether she wanted him here or not after this, and, when he looked down at the mottled redness of her bottom he began to think she might not.

He'd been so scared his mind hadn't considered just exactly the situation he was in – out in the open air with his boss pants down over his lap, her luscious, blushing bottom bare to his eyes and, repeatedly, his hand, but his body knew it. His body had sat up and saluted the moment he'd fallen on top of her, and having her writhing and wiggling over his enormous erection wasn't helping matters any.

Eventually, his heart and hand slowed some. She was crying, and he knew that a woman as proud as she was wouldn't soon forgive the man who had been the cause of said tears. But Quinn knew he'd done the right thing, and he wouldn't hesitate to do it again if the need presented itself. And somehow, even knowing her just this short time, he knew that that need would, indeed, present itself occasionally, since she was a stubborn, bullheaded woman who would do whatever she deemed necessary to make this ranch a success. She loved it, and she would make it work however she needed to.

He could completely understand her on that level – he felt the same way about his work with computers. But she needed to come to grips with her physical limitations. Quinn's lips thinned into a hard line. And if it took a spanking to help her realize that as a hundred and five pound woman she couldn't do everything single handedly, then he would be there to deliver it. Unfailingly. Every time.

Annie knew that she had lost her mind – she'd certainly relinquished every thread of dignity she'd ever possessed. He'd reduced her – in a matter of minutes – to a blubbering, squealing, squirming thing

whose only thought was to avoid the next swat before it descended. At first, when she still had her faculties, she'd worried about moving around too much and aggravating his sore leg.

But not after they were about a quarter of the way into it. By then, it was every woman for herself – the man in this equation didn't need any help. She was bucking and writhing for all she was worth and she couldn't so much as budge herself an inch. She'd never felt so helpless in her life, and she didn't like it. Not one bit.

As soon as he stopped spanking, she scrambled to her feet, dragging her clothes back into place, trying to button and zip things through tears that continued to fall onto her shirt. Quinn reached out to help her, but she slapped his hands away almost hysterically.

"Annie - " he began, still reaching out to her, his only purpose to comfort, but she was already halfway to the truck, walking stiffly, not unlike his own gait but for entirely different reason. He wanted to yell at her to come back, but knew by the ramrod straightness of her stubborn spine that that would get him exactly nowhere.

So, instead, he rolled up the wire and fastened it as best he could so that no unsuspecting man or beast would get hurt by it, and galloped after her. It had waited this long, it could wait a while longer. Since she had to cut cross pastures and bump along slowly in that ancient Ford she held together by sheer determination, spit, and baling wire, it was pretty much a tie as to who was going to get back to the house first.

Quinn watched her as closely as he could; crying women rarely made the best drivers. He winced for poor bottom – it must've been hell to be incessantly bounced up and down on that freshly tenderized flesh.

She ended up beating him there, just because once they made it to the road she was able to gun it – as a matter of fact, he thought with a frown, he should probably have a talk with her about speeding . . . if she was still speaking to him by the time he got back to the house.

When Annie pulled into the yard, she saw Kaz's beautiful new truck sitting to the side of the house. He'd apparently just arrived and got out as she was pulling in. There was no disguising her tear ravaged face so she didn't even try.

Kaz's faced went white when he saw her crying and what looked like a small but fresh cut on her face. Annie wasn't a woman who was easily given to tears, so her appearance was that much more alarming. His expression became outright murderous, assuming the new man had hit her, or made some sort of sexual move, or a combination of the two. "Was it that drifter you hired?"

Annie continued to cry and walk to the house. "Yes, he – he - "

"Annie! Annie!" Quinn called as he galloped into the yard and dismounted, all in one motion.

Kaz quickly stepped between the big man and Annie, who had realized that the two highly protective, testosterone laden men were only going to make a bad situation worse and turned back towards Kaz.

Quinn hadn't stopped walking just because Kaz was in front of him. They were extremely well matched, and not that different in size. Quinn might have had a couple of pounds of muscle on him, but Kaz was every bit as tough and equally as determined to make sure that Annie was safe.

The two were butting chests like rams butted heads during rutting season, despite the fact that Kaz was married and Quinn was distinctly not her boyfriend. "Did he hurt you, Annie?" Kaz asked, somewhat out of breath trying to keep the bulldozer in front of him from getting to her. He wished fervently that he'd brought his gun, but since their daughter was born he'd kept all of his guns securely locked up unless he was hunting.

"S-stand down, Kaz. He didn't hurt me in the way you're thinking," she said quietly, practically yelling the next sentence, "And I was going to tell him to get his stuff and move in today, but he's so incredibly fired!"

Surprised, but still confused, Kaz didn't move an inch, and wouldn't let Quinn move, either, when Annie turned and walked towards the house.

"What happened?" he called back to Annie, and got no help there. So he targeted Quinn next, glaring at him fiercely. "What the hell'd you do to her, buddy? Whatever it is, you made her cry, and you can figure you're going to get your ass kicked, regardless."

"If you want a piece of me, man, you got it. But she got exactly what she deserved."

Those were fighting words, as far as Kaz was concerned, and he grabbed Quinn's lapels to shake him, but the man was still talking.

"I told her not to touch another piece of barbed wire – that's what she hired me to do, and she could get hurt so easily – she did get hurt. She got cut. When she let go, it sliced her cheek. I told her that if she tried to mend fence again, I'd spank her, and that's just what I did."

He wasn't even talking to Kaz; he was talking past him, to Annie.

"There was no reason for you to do that, Annie. You knew the consequences."

Kaz' eyebrows rose at the other man's words, and he couldn't help but smile a little at first as they soaked into his disbelieving brain, until a full on grin spread across his face. "You spanked her?"

"You had no right, Quinn. None at all."

Even Kaz could see that Quinn's next words were heartfelt. "I don't want to see you get hurt, Annie. Admit it. There are some things that are too dangerous for you to do, and yes, you've had to do them in the past, but you don't have to any more. Lean on me. I'll do it for you."

Annie had stopped, one foot on the bottom stair. "No, you won't, because you're not going to be here. You've been fired."

Kaz had turned Quinn loose, not that he'd had much effect on the mountain of a man anyway. And Quinn's eyes were only for Annie.

"You were repairing fences all alone again?" Kaz asked, his tone sounded depressingly like Quinn's.

This was not good. Apparently having decided that Quinn was no threat, Kaz was rapidly defecting to the enemy camp.

"Isn't that what you hired him for?"

"Yes, well, now I'm firing him because he took liberties he shouldn't have," she replied as casually as was possible, considering the subject everyone was discussing. She was still climbing the stairs, albeit a little more slowly than she had been before Kaz's betrayal.

"Quinn is it?" Kaz offered his hand to the man he'd threatened moments before. "Kaz Ballentine. Annie's neighbor to the west." They shook, but Kaz could tell that Quinn's heart wasn't in it. "I'm glad someone's around to finally take her in hand. I've been trying to get her to stop doing that since her parents died and she decided that she was superwoman."

"Kaz!" Annie interjected firmly.

"He's just what you need, Annie. A man you can't mow over. Someone who'll watch out for you as carefully as you watch out for the ranch. You can't possibly fire him – you need him too much."

The sad thing was that he was right.

"You were the one who raved to me about him over the phone, about how hard he works, and the fact that he was doing the work of three men. Do you really think you're going to find anyone else like that? No," he answered his own question, "you're not. So he spanked you for putting your life – or at very least your skin – in danger. Don't put yourself into stupid situations like that and he won't have to spank you again, right, Quinn?"

Quinn didn't answer. He was too intent on Annie where she stood at the top of the steps facing the screen door, head down, looking impossibly small and forlorn.

Annie sighed. Kaz was right. Quinn was an incredible worker and a tremendous help around the ranch. If she wanted to keep the place going – and she most certainly did – she was going to have to relent. “I might be able to reconsider my decision if I have Quinn's word that he won't . . .” she choked on the word “spank”. “do that to me ever again.”

Kaz knew what Quinn's response was going to be to that, and he'd only known the man for five minutes. “No deal, Annie. I want to help you as much as I can, but you've got to agree to back off and let me do what I can do. You don't have to be a superwoman with me around.”

Her fingernails were digging into her palms. It was just temporary, anyway, until Regan came back. Just till Regan came back, she chanted softly under her breath. Besides, she didn't intend to do anything that would give him any possible reason to spank her. “Whatever.” She slammed the door behind her for good measure, just so the men knew that she'd acquiesced under duress.

As soon as Annie disappeared, Quinn turned away from Kaz and high tailed it as fast as he could towards his car. “Hey, where're you going?”

“I'm going to go get my stuff and get moved in before she changes her mind.”

Kaz laughed, then offered, “Need a truck?”

The two men bonded while moving Quinn's stuff in, and although Annie did her best to ignore them it was hard to concentrate on the bills she was trying not to pay when they were grunting and laughing and slapping each other on the back as if they'd known each other years.

Kaz liked what he'd seen of Quinn, especially that he'd had the cajones to take Annie Cavanaugh to task without backing down. Not many men could – or would – do that. Kaz had known that that was exactly what Annie needed from a man, but he wasn't the one to do it – he had his hands full to overflowing with Callie. But he was glad to see that someone was going to ride herd on her, and Quinn looked more than equal to the job.

But she hadn't said a word to either one of them since the confrontation in the yard. Not a single syllable.

It got to be lunch time, and she was still so angry she hadn't written out one bill. This was getting her nowhere. Finally, Annie stood up and walked out to her truck. She was going to fill it with hay and go out to the herd, but there was still a big roll of barbed wire back there.

So she tromped back into the house, where the men were contentedly munching on meatloaf sandwiches. “Could someone please remove the wire from the back of the truck?”

Almost before she got the words out of her mouth, Quinn was on his way outside. Before he lifted it single handedly out of the truck bed, he said quietly, “Thank you.”

But Annie wouldn't look at him, and didn't acknowledge what he'd said in any way. She'd changed her mind suddenly, and decided to head into town and get some supplies she'd needed for a while but had put off getting.

Minard's Diner was the classier of the two eating establishments in Faith, and it also had the best desserts in the state. Annie was in the mood to drown her sorrows in something rich and sinful. She parked her truck in front and wandered in, the tiny bell above the door tinkling that she'd arrived.

There was no hostess at Minards. You sat where you could find room, and since it was lunch time there wasn't a lot of choice until she heard someone calling her. “Hey, Annie-Fannie! Over here!”

It was Kaz' wife, Callie, who was lunching with Brenda Furnell. Callie, Annie, and Brenda had all gone to school together, which was where she'd somehow been slapped with that depressing nickname that her now grown up friends refused to let die a natural death. Brenda and Callie were happily married, and always on the lookout to add Annie back into their club with a happier result than her marriage to Hugh had rendered.

Annie wiggled and squeezed her way over to them, dodging a waitress here and a hug from an overzealous friend there until she was able to slip into the fifties style chrome trimmed, vinyl upholstered chair very gingerly.

Nothing ever got past Callie. "Uh oh. I know that look and those moves all too well. Who spanked you?"

Annie gave Callie a withering look. "A little louder, please, they had to strain to hear you in Maine."

"Bite me. Now, dish. Who was it? Was it that hunky gimp you just hired? What's his name? Finn? Quinn? Winn? Mmphg?"

Without missing a beat, Brenda had calmly reached out and put her hand over her friend's mouth while Callie was still talking. She used her other hand to pat Annie's forearm comfortingly. "There, there, Fannie - I mean, Annie. Tell Brenda all about it."

The waitress appeared and gave her a menu, but Annie gave it back. "All I want to see is the dessert list."

Her two friends leaned back in their chairs with a chorus of knowing "ahhhhhhs" while she gave her drink order and tried to peruse the comprehensive list of delights. It was a veritable cornucopia of nearly every dessert imaginable - ten different pies, three kinds of cakes, brownie sundaes, ice cream sundaes, cream puffs and crème brûlées. There were also sampler plates, where one could ask for small slices of a little bit of everything, and the price was based on how many samples were requested. And even the sample portions were huge enough to warrant doggie bags on their own.

In her current mood, it was halfway off her tongue to order one of everything. But instead she settled for a Heart Attack on a Plate - a piece of fried cheesecake that came smothered in vanilla ice cream, hot fudge sauce, and homemade whipped cream.

If she was gonna go, she was gonna go with a smile on her face!

She knew her friends were not going to let her leave the restaurant alive without having filled them in on every juicy detail, so she decided to give in somewhat gracefully. "Quinn. Quinn Rideout."

"Where's he from?" Brenda asked, leaning forward eagerly. It seemed like everyone in the world was having a more exciting life than she was.

Annie looked uncomfortable as she was trying desperately to remember what he'd answered on that questionnaire she'd given to Kaz without really reading. "Uhh, Albuquerque?"

Callie was growing impatient. "Let's skip the unimportant parts for now," she waved away Brenda's namby pamby questions and dove right into the meat of the matter. "So, how'd you get yourself spanked?"

"I had the audacity to try to put up a fence on my own property. Who knew it was a spankable offense?" Well, she had, but her friends didn't need to know that she'd ignored the giant's warning.

Callie was just nodding and sinking back into her seat. "Kaz's been complaining about you doing that forever. I'm surprised he didn't spank you." It took her a minute to realize what she'd said, then she finished vehemently, "Of course, then I'd be a widow and in jail . . ."

"So? What happened?" Brenda prompted.

"He caught me out there and, I don't know, I got kinda nervous, I guess, and let go of the wire and got myself a new reason for plastic surgery here," she patted her cheek absently. "He threw himself at me and knocked me down or it might have been worse, I guess."

"Ooooooh," Brenda squealed. "How gallant!" She put the emphasis on the last syllable as if she was British aristocracy and not an American mutt.

Come to think of it, it was pretty nice of him, Annie had to agree, although she shoved the mutinous thought to the back of her mind. She didn't want to have good thoughts about him. She intended to nurse her grudge against him until Regan came back and beyond, until he was long, long gone.

"Yeah, gallant," Annie agreed, her eyes rolling violently. "So we were already on the ground, and he just kind of . . . flipped me over and," she lowered her voice considerably, "took my pants down -"

Exactly what she had intended not to happen happened, of course. They both repeated what she'd whispered at the top of their lungs. "He took your pants down?"

Everyone in the restaurant now knew that some unnamed person had disrobed her lower half. "Thank you, thank you very much, guys," Annie growled, leaning forward with her hand over her face, trying to shield herself from prying eyes.

The waitress arrived at just that moment with her dessert, and she felt better from the first bite. There was little in this life that a huge, sugar laden, chocolate intensive, carbo load couldn't cure, she thought, letting a huge, blissful bite dissolve in her mouth. Except perhaps cardio vascular disease . . . her mind helpfully supplied.

"Yes, he took my pants down. And I swear he was whacking me with something other than a human hand. Maybe he's bionic or organic or something, but his hand was like a board or something. It was horrid."

Callie nodded in complete sympathy. Kaz had laid down the law to her even before they were married. They'd gone to the same high school, but Kaz was several years ahead of Callie and her friends, so they'd never met. It wasn't until she'd come home from college one summer that they found themselves at the same party and that was all she wrote.

But Kaz had always been completely up front with Callie - kind of like Quinn had been with Annie - about the fact that there were some behaviors he would not tolerate from the woman he loved. Of course, Callie being Callie had had to test the waters, and had gotten herself spanked several times before it sank in that this man wasn't kidding.

He was also nicer, more courteous and respectful, and more supportive and protective than anyone else she'd ever dated. She was lost, and, if anyone had asked her, she would have said that Annie was about to find herself in much the same boat.

"What does he look like?"

Annie scooped up some ice cream and cheesecake and plenty of hot fudge sauce and sighed long and low as it dissolved over every taste bud she owned. "He's at least as big as Kaz is, if not bigger. Broad as a barn, legs like tree trunks. Short red hair, and bright blue eyes."

She wasn't paying any attention, so she didn't notice that the girls weren't looking at her any more.

"So, kinda like that?" Callie asked, gesturing with her spoon to a spot behind Annie as she took her life in her hands and stole some of her friend's dessert.

Annie sat straight up in her chair, almost choking on her mouthful of melted sweet when she turned around and saw Quinn standing in the doorway of the diner, with eyes only for her.

Chapter Four

There really wasn't anywhere she could go when he started to walk over to the table, although slinking under the table had occurred to her. Instead she just sat where she was and waited for the apocalypse.

When Quinn arrived he nodded at Brenda and Callie, who giggled like schoolgirls and nodded back, then pasted their eyes on the friend. They were dying to see what she was going to do.

"I just came in to town to make sure that you're okay." That low, rustling velvet tone had the other women sighing audibly.

"I'm fine." She didn't feel any need to explain herself any further to him.

"I'd like to talk to you."

Annie stood and dug into her pocket, putting a couple of bills on the table, then turned to leave. "I really don't have anything I want to talk to you about. I'll see you later, guys."

He let her go ahead of him, then excused himself to the ladies and followed her.

Callie and Brenda exchanged glances as the two left. The sparks between them were bright enough to catch the whole place on fire, and they each would have given everything they owned to be a fly on the wall during that conversation.

Annie was busy heading for the truck and doing her darndest to avoid and equally determined Quinn who managed to catch up to her just as she slid behind the wheel. "You can't avoid me forever, you know. We're living in the same house."

She just sighed, as if he was alternating somewhere between boring and annoying her.

Quinn didn't want to push himself on her. He really had come into town because he was worried about her, even though Kaz had assured him she'd be fine. He'd had to make sure. "I'll see you this evening, then."

He pushed himself away and got into his own car, folding himself behind the wheel of the compact car in an amazing act of self contortion. Annie gunned the truck into reverse and backed out into traffic, causing a commotion of horns and expletives on her way to the Feed and Seed.

Annie's attitude towards Quinn didn't melt one iota over the next week or two. He had to give her an "A" for effort. She had the cold shoulder down pat. But he could be patient, and, despite the frosty air that surrounded her, the more he saw of her, the more intrigued he became. She was the strongest woman he'd ever seen, both physically and mentally, even though he tried his best to alleviate any need for her to over exert herself physically.

She was magic with animals – any kind of animals. The barn cats worshipped her, and the horses would follow her around in the pasture even if she didn't have a bucket of sweet mash, trying to include her in their horsie games.

Annie might not like him much right now, but she sure saw that he got fed. If he wasn't careful, he was going to start to bust out of his jeans in more ways than the constant, burgeoning erection he sported around her.

It wasn't until they had a particularly long day that she started to forgive him - not that they all weren't horridly long and tiring, but this one was worse than usual; it had rained all day while they were trying to cull out the yearlings in preparation for round up. He followed her into the house that night as usual - he always checked that everything had been battened down and completed before he came in for dinner - but tonight he was so wiped out that he didn't feel like eating, and that was a first for him.

Not only was he exhausted, but the overwork made his leg throb so badly he began to seriously question whether he should have just let the surgeons take it when they'd wanted to all those years ago. At this point, he wished they'd just come and get it. Every muscle was rebelling against all the stops and starts and muddy slips he'd made all day. They were visibly knotting beneath the skin of his thigh and calf and cramping badly as he almost collapsed down onto his chair.

Annie couldn't help but notice that he wasn't eating. It was the same lasagna and garlic bread with cheese that he'd had four helpings of two days ago, so she didn't know what the problem was - not that it mattered to her, of course. Even at this late point, she wouldn't have thrown him a rope if he was drowning. Not her, no Sir. Whenever her resolve about giving him the cold shoulder began to fade, her bottom began to tingle and remind her exactly what he'd had the gall to do, and she became the Ice Maiden again immediately.

But she'd also heard his deep groan when he'd sat down, and he hadn't stopped rubbing that leg since then.

It would be the first time she'd voluntarily spoken to him in almost two weeks, but she could not tolerate the idea that he was in so much pain. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Quinn should have known that something like this would bring her out of her shell - as much as he hated his infirmities, he had to appreciate the irony of the fact that they made her reach out to him when nothing else short of a nuclear bomb would have, he was sure. She was one stubborn lady!

"No, thanks. There really isn't anything you can do. I have some meds I'll take when I go to bed that'll even it out to its usual a dull roar eventually and help me get to sleep."

She looked like he'd slapped her across the face. "You mean you're always in pain?"

Quinn shrugged. "Nothing that I can't handle." He thought for a moment that she was going to cry that pronouncement, but thankfully she didn't. He didn't know what he would have done if she'd burst into tears on his account when it didn't involve a spanking. He could no more stand the thought of her crying than she could apparently handle the idea of his pain.

"Is there something else I can make you that would appeal better, or are you just not hungry because you're so tired and uncomfortable?"

Quinn shook his head. "I think I'm going to go upstairs and lie down - that'll help." He rose, but not easily, and his limp was considerably more pronounced than it usually was as he made his way to his room.

Annie cleaned up the dinner dishes and put his meal back into the fridge in case he got hungry later. She tried to answer her email and catch up on a couple of episodes of "24" she'd stored on her TIVO, but she ended up falling asleep in front of the television for an hour or so. She logged off and headed upstairs, jumping when she heard Quinn moaning as she passed his room on her way to her own.

She stopped in front of his bedroom door, laying her hand on it as gently as if she was touching his leg and it came again, that low, agonized groan. There was no way she could avoid the compulsion and she didn't even really try. "Quinn? Are you all right?"

It took him a while to respond, and when he did it sounded like the words were wrestled from his throat, and that only served to alarm her that much more. "I'm - I'm fine, Annie. Go to sleep."

But she couldn't do as he asked. She simply . . . couldn't. Instead, she opened the door slowly and saw him lying on the double bed, naked but for the sheet that slashed across his lower body, something moving rapidly up and down beneath it as if it was alive. She could see how his fists gripped the edge of the sheet for dear life, and his body glistened with sweat in the pale moonlight.

"Oh, Quinn!" she whispered under her breath as she darted to his side, tears flooding her eyes. "Please, what can I do?"

He stared at her as if he'd never seen her before, as if he was in the grips of some agonized delirium, then his expression cleared. "Annie, get out of here. I don't want you to see me like this," he growled, turning his head away from her. He couldn't bear the idea of being this vulnerable in front of her. When his leg was like this, he was downright animalistic. He could handle it and compartmentalize the pain, but it took all his concentration and right now, it wasn't a pretty sight. He wasn't winning the battle, and he was so raw and agonized that he wasn't really in control of himself yet, and he didn't want her seeing or hearing him in this condition.

"Not on a bet," Annie replied fervently. She looked around for something, anything she could use to help him. She hadn't been in his room since he and Kaz had moved his stuff into it. It was packed to the teeth with computer innards and not much else. She made a mental note to tell him that he could use any other room he wanted for storage while he was here, then shoved that thought to the back of her mind and ran into her room, gathering up several towels, some baby powder and oil, and a heating pad she used on her own back when it gave her fits.

She wet one towel in the bathroom with water that was as hot as she could stand it, keeping the other one carefully dry. Then she ventured back to his room and lay her accoutrement on the floor beside the bed. She had to move some stuff off the straight backed chair next to the bed, then sat down in it as close to the edge of the bed as her own legs would allow.

He hadn't even acknowledged her return, but when she folded back the sheet – careful not to fold it too far back lest she end up seeing something she would have to leave a fifty on the dresser for – he turned back to her and growled deep in his throat like a hurt bear.

"Annie," he groaned through clenched teeth, reaching for the sheet. "I told you to go away."

Annie grimaced as she watched the muscles beneath his skin roil and dance painfully. "Yeah, well, we both know how well I obey, don't we?"

She reached down and grabbed the steaming hot towel, folding it lengthwise and laying it on his leg. Quinn jackknifed in the bed, then sank back down again, moaning constantly.

Annie had no idea if the steps she was taking were going to help him, but she figured that any help was better than none. She worked quickly, very, very gently pressing the warmth into his skin, and hopefully down to his rebelling muscles, slowly moving her hands up and down the length of the towel with feather light touches.

"Annie, stop!"

She continued as if he hadn't spoken, drying his leg carefully once the towel had cooled, then spreading fine powder all over it and warming her hands on the heating pad before laying them on his flesh. She'd never done this before, but she remembered what Brenda had mentioned when she had been taking classes – which she'd since quit – to become a professional masseuse: the slower the better. And Annie knew from her own experiences with back pain to start as lightly as possible at first.

So that's what she did, operation completely on instinct. She started with just her fingertips, running them all over his leg very gently and carefully, graduating very slowly to more of a massaging motion with her entire hand, not applying distinct pressure anywhere, hoping instead to distribute the pain she knew she was going to be causing in his muscles over the broader area of her hand rather than a pinpointed spot. But she noticed that as she gradually increased the pressure in her hands, his muscles would rebel violently for a short time, then, as if they had worn themselves out, they would relax beneath her hands, allowing her to gradually increase the level of pressure she applied.

She worked slowly and methodically up and down his leg, concentrating mostly on his thigh where she could see a veritable road map of surgically straight scars, until the involuntary jumping had completely stopped. Any time there was any sign of rebellion from his muscles, she put it down with

military precision, applying a bit of considerable pressure and riding out the spasm, then rubbing in what she hoped was a soothing circular motion that seemed to calm things down very quickly.

Quinn's agonized groans became more frequent for a time at the beginning of her ministrations, but died down to almost blissful sighs as she worked the kinks out of every one of his muscles.

At the end, she took small amounts of baby oil that had been warmed on the heating pad and massaged with a combination of vigorous and smooth, gentle rhythms until she'd converted his moans to complete pleasure . . . and then, surprisingly, sleepy snores.

Annie had to smile. His face looked so peaceful, relaxed in sleep, and she knew she'd helped him get there. She was well on her way there herself; she just had to pick up the stuff she'd brought in and scamper to her bedroom.

Quinn awoke the next morning with that groggy feeling and awful cotton mouth his pain meds always left him with. He hated taking them, and only did so in the most dire of situations – such as last night. But he had to admit, it wasn't the meds that had worked wonders for him – it was Annie's full out massage that had persuaded his muscles to relax.

He couldn't believe all the wonderful things she'd done for him – the hot towel, the warm oil, the baby powder, and probably an hour and a half of massage before it was all said and done. All done when she was exhausted herself. She'd worked just as hard as he had out there, and must have been about ready to drop, but instead she'd come in here to help him despite the fact that she still steaming mad about the spanking he'd given her.

Beyond the fact that it felt curiously heavy, he could barely feel his leg at all this morning, and that was unheard of. It always made its presence known. There was always that slight ache that was all too ready and willing to become a full blown problem any time he exerted himself too much.

Quinn reached down to massage it out of habit, and instead encountered a head full of soft hair. Startled, but careful not to move too rapidly, he opened his eyes and craned his neck to look down at a very beautiful, interesting sight: Annie had fallen asleep on him, and it was her head on his thigh that was making it feel so heavy.

Lord knows, he didn't want to disturb her, but it was about time for them to be getting up. He wasn't above indulging himself a bit, letting his hand stroke her hair. Why not? She'd certainly gotten to see - and touch - quite a bit of him last night. "Annie?" he whispered softly, not trying anywhere near as hard as he should have been to wake her. He was enjoying the sight and feel of her too much.

She stirred and snuggled closer to an area of his body that was craving her touch – any touch at all would have been fine. It was the same area that would have made its existence known last night if he hadn't been in so much pain, and now that he was feeling so much better, those parts of him were responding quite blatantly to the intimate presence of her face near his hip.

"Annie?" A little louder, but not too. He didn't want to startle her. "Annie, honey, it's time to get up."

She began to rub her face against his leg sleepily, and if she didn't stop that soon he didn't think he'd be able to stand it.

"I'm up, I'm up," Annie yawned, opening her eyes for the first time and finding her face inches from a plainly outlined crest under the sheet, and she knew exactly what was creating it.

Quinn leaned up and rolled towards her with nary a peep from his leg, cupping her cheek with his hand and not letting her draw away from him as he could see she wanted to. "I want to thank you for what you did for me last night."

Annie tried to look down, but he wouldn't let her. She shrugged. "It wasn't anything. I just wanted to help make you more comfortable."

She was beautiful in the morning, but then he was thinking lately that she was pretty much beautiful any time he got a look at her. He couldn't stop himself from leaning down and blending those pale rose lips with his, and once he got a taste, he wanted much, much more.

Annie was as startled by his kiss as she had been by his spanking weeks earlier. And it felt good – too good. The impulse to melt against him, to let things take their natural course when a woman was alone in naked man's bedroom, nearly overwhelmed her – and it was enough to startle her away from him and onto her feet. She gathered the things she'd fallen asleep gathering last night and brought them down to her room where she dressed automatically, lost in thought.

He wanted her. She would've had to have been a blind fool to have missed it – and she was neither. And she wanted him. Annie pressed her hands down over her tight tipped breasts, trying to will them into submission. His hands on her – even just as platonically as on her hair – had been enough to stir a desire in her that she would have sworn was long gone. In fact, if she let herself dwell on it, she had to admit that it had been smoldering since they'd met – and she would have preferred that it go on smoldering, or, even better, die out altogether.

She didn't need or want him complicating her life. Annie could just see the scenario – they become involved and she falls in love with him. Just thinking that thought made her shiver all over. Then Regan comes back and he leaves, never to be heard from again.

Nope. She'd been that root once already with Hugh, and she didn't intend to repeat the same mistake twice.

So when Annie appeared in the kitchen a short while later, she was all prepared to be polite and friendly to Quinn, but not too friendly.

What she found was a mountain of living flour and a kitchen that looked like the wreck of the Hesperus.

"What the heck have you been doing?" she asked. She was wondering how one man could possibly have made such a mess in so short a time.

He turned to her rather sheepishly, which was a downright hilarious look on a man his size. "I was . . . uh . . . trying to make us some pancakes."

"With all this flour you could have made pancakes for the whole town!" Annie shook her head and tried to make headway getting the mess under control.

"Well, I wanted to continue our tradition of me making breakfast -"

Annie glared up at him, brandishing the dishrag she was using to scrape the remnants of pancake batter off the counter, "Don't help me." When she'd made a cursory path through the muck, she took a bunch of homemade muffins out of the freezer and thawed them in the microwave, then continued her excavations until the kitchen was clean, shaking her head the whole time.

They ate in a cool, but companionable silence and Quinn cleared the table. But just as she was going to escape out the door to bury herself in work, he caught her arm and tugged her back into the kitchen . . . and right up against him.

He kept her there without hurting her one bit, but also without letting her budge an inch. Then he tipped her head back and kissed her. Without so much as a by your leave, he pressed his lips down onto hers, carefully at first, as if he was feeling his way, then more passionately, coaxing her playfully to join him, enticing her, teasing her, until she could no longer deny him.

Although he was moving with deliberate slowness, Annie felt swept up in a maelstrom of passion that stubbornly resisted any form of control she tried to exert. She could feel him against her from breast to thigh, feel how small she was in his arms, how powerless she was against his strength. Yet she'd never felt more cosseted or protected in her life than in his arms, right now. Those blue eyes twinkled down at her, and he was characteristically silent as he kissed her, not talking or pushing or pressing, just kissing and nibble and cajoling until she kissed him back, and lost herself to him and in him.

It was he who ended the kisses several minutes later, never having demanded any more than she was willing to give at this point, and reigning in his tremendous strength to hold her as if a heavy sigh from him would break her in two.

Annie was glad that one of them still had their wits about them. She certainly didn't. All he would have had to do was lead and she would have followed him right up to his room without a thought to the consequences. That man was very quickly and easily building a path to parts of her that were only too eager for his passion, as well as her heart, which was none too eager. Nothing in her life had prepared her for the way she felt when their lips met. Any and all kisses between herself and her ex husband faded into nonexistence once Quinn's mouth covered hers.

He set her back from him just a bit, not far enough that she couldn't still feel the heat radiating from him, and looking down at her with a small smile on his face at her bemused, smoldering expression. Then he leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose, saying, "I'd best get to work."

He left her there, still half trying to lean into him and feeling bereft at the abrupt loss of his bulk surrounding her and supporting her. Leaning on him was a habit that would be so easy for her to adopt. Too easy. Annie stayed in that same spot for the longest time, holding herself exactly still, just as she'd been when his arms were around her, replaying the kiss like a fresh faced schoolgirl who'd just gotten bussted for the first time.

But she wasn't a young slip of a thing any more. She'd lived through a disaster of a marriage, and was working hard to make a success of a ranch that was just barely treading water. She didn't need or want the heartache he represented, she tried to tell herself, not quite able to harsh the buzz he'd given her. She didn't have enough time for him, and she wasn't going to make time. She was the boss, he was the employee. That was it. There was no more to it.

Despite her fears, though, despite the fact that she knew better intellectually, despite the fact that he was probably going to be gone in a few weeks, Annie recognized the fact that she was falling in love with him.

And it felt too damned good to live through.

Chapter Five

Regardless of Annie's resolve to keep things strictly on the up and up, things had changed between them, subtly. He was more relaxed around her, but she was more on guard around him. Nothing would ever be the same as it had been before that night, but Quinn didn't rush in and try to paw her at every given opportunity. He did touch her more often, and in a rather possessive manner, if she did say so herself. Even though they both knew she didn't need it, he helped her onto her horse every morning. He toted and lifted anything he could see that she was even sort of thinking of moving that was heavier than a piece of paper, and when they walked anywhere together, his hand just seemed to naturally rest on her lower back.

They settled into a comfortable, easy routine that might have looked to an outsider as if they'd been married for years – except for the fact that they parted company at bed time. She eventually did remember to tell him that he could move his computer stuff anywhere he wanted, and was surprised when he asked if he could put it in the living room. The house – interior or exterior was hardly a candidate for “House Beautiful” and Annie didn't much care if there were computer guts all over the living room floor, as long as it didn't block the television or her path to her comfy recliner.

Little did she know that he had an ulterior motive in wanting to move his stuff there rather than stay holed up in another room – he wanted to be near her. They had been talking some at dinner, getting to know each other and getting into some good conversations. But it ended there, when she disappeared into the living room and he headed upstairs to work on his obsession, and they didn't see each other again until the next morning.

The more he got to know her – the hard nosed rancher, the soft side of her that melted when he showed her a nest of newborn kittens in the barn, and the hopeless computer-challenged person who nevertheless had forced herself to learn how to get online and collect her emails, but not much more than that – the more he liked her, the more intrigued he was about her.

They'd both eventually commiserated about their first marriages, and right then and there Quinn called Hugh a thousand kinds of a fool to have let this woman slip through his fingers. But he was no kind of a fool, and didn't intend to let her get away from him that easily.

There was more to what she was saying about Hugh, though, and even though she'd gotten up and taken a cup of coffee into the living room, which usually signaled the end of their conversations, Quinn followed her in and sank down onto the ancient living room couch. “What is it you're not telling me?” he asked quietly.

His question belayed her usual television routine. Eyebrow aloft, she turned to him as she claimed the recliner. “When did you get to be so perceptive?”

Quinn had to snort at that notion. “Not likely.” His eyes narrowed on her. “Except when it comes to you, apparently.”

Annie shrugged her shoulders, surprised that thinking about Hugh wasn't nearly as painful as it had been; that seeking out that particular sore tooth with her mind's tongue didn't evoke all of those nauseous, self-doubting thoughts it always had.

And she knew it was because of him and his blatantly non-platonic interest in her. No doubt about it.

So, she drew a breath and plunged in. It didn't matter if he knew, anyway. Trying to sound as off hand as she could, Annie said in a nonetheless small voice, "As he left me, he said that having sex with me was like making love to a corpse." She was proud of how steady and strong her voice sounded, but she wasn't able to meet his eyes.

A rage flooded through Quinn the likes of which he hadn't felt in years. That someone would treat this woman that way, with such callousness and malicious intent. Hugh had better never show his face around the Circle C or Quinn would have the great pleasure of taking him apart limb from limb.

If Annie had had any problems in the bedroom, which he frankly doubted, Quinn would bet that they could be chalked up as a problem that stemmed from Hugh himself. From what Annie had said about him, he was a self centered person, and that would easily translate to a selfish lover, which was one thing Quinn consciously was not.

He loved to revel in his partner – to make love all day long, when they had the chance, not that he ever turned down an opportunity for a quickie, either. He liked sex, and refused to apologize for it, and lately it was practically the only thing he could think about when he was around her.

Having admitted that to him, Annie was looking like someone had just kicked her in the stomach. She had crumpled in on herself and was looking even smaller than usual, and he just couldn't stand that. She was so vital and full of life that her subdued demeanor was painful to him. He hated that she was still so hurt by a man who was obviously a jerk.

So he crossed to her chair and leaned down, drawing her into his arms and moving them both back to the couch. Annie tried to move away once he'd sat them down, but Quinn wouldn't let her, and she honestly didn't try that hard. She knew that if she really wanted to get away, he would let her go. She had absolutely no physical fears of him at all . . . unless it came to something that she thought might get her spanked. And so far, the only thing that had done that was something she never intended to do again.

But she did worry about whether or not she was hurting him, since her fat butt was lying right on the thigh that gave him so much trouble. "You're fine," Quinn reassured her when she mentioned it. He didn't tell her that she could have weighed three hundred pounds and jumped up and down on his leg, as long as she let him hold her like this.

He didn't kiss her right away, just held her in his arms, enjoying the feel of her in them, and the fact that she seemed pretty relaxed and hadn't protested the way he'd commandeered her into them. In fact, she surprised the heck out of him by actually snuggling against him, laying her cheek on his chest.

"I hope you don't put any stock in what he said," Quinn whispered against the top of her head. "He was just trying to get in a parting shot."

He didn't want her falling asleep on him, so he tipped her chin back and waited until her eyes opened and focused on him before he very slowly pressed his lips to her forehead, leaving a butterfly kiss here and there as he worked his way down towards her mouth. Annie's eyes had closed again, and he caught her contented sigh as he nibbled her bottom lip, running his tongue over it to moisten it, then gently tugging with his teeth.

Annie looked up at him, eyes wide and soul bare, then threaded her fingers through his short red hair, enjoying the way it fanned through her fingers like a very fine brush. With the slightest of pressures, he lowered his head and deepened the kiss. She didn't know what it was about him – she'd probably never know – but whenever he kissed her he lit fires in so many places in her body that she was almost overwhelmed by it. Annie wanted him to touch her everywhere – everywhere she hadn't been touched in years. But she also wanted to take it slowly – to treasure these moments for as long as possible.

She'd come to a decision within the last few blissful minutes, that even though he was probably going to be gone shortly, she wanted to have an affair with him. It wasn't like her to do something like that, but he was the first man in a very long while to spark any sort of interest from her, and she wanted to

ride that wave as long as she could. She was more alive around him than she could ever remember being, and Annie wanted that feeling to last forever.

But she was a realist, and she'd settle for however long she could get.

When Anne began to kiss him back eagerly, it was nearly all over for Quinn right then and there. He hadn't expected such an ardent response from her so quickly. Usually it took her a little while to warm up to him, to put down the guard she had up against every one and every thing – most especially men – and realize that he wasn't out to hurt her.

He couldn't help it; she was driving him crazy. She was everything he wanted in a woman – strong, independent about the right things – her work – but laid back and relaxed about most other things – like whether or not he picked up his sox, or got plastic surgery on his face. She seemed to accept him exactly as he was, and there was little else that was sexier, especially to him. To say nothing of the fact that she fit perfectly into his arms and had a body he'd craved from the moment they'd met.

As they kissed, his hands began to wander down her neck to her shoulders and lower, tracing the gentle rise of her breasts with the barest touch of his fingertips, arousing her enough to make her whimper and teasing him with promises of more a more complete exploration to come.

His hand slipped expertly between the buttons of her shirt, popping them open without much effort. Annie didn't even notice; she was too involved in anticipating the feel of those work roughened hands on the delicate skin of her breasts. She flamed a bright red on two counts when she realized he was looking down at her breasts – because it was such an intimate moment, and also because she knew he was seeing what a horrid condition her underwear was in.

Luckily, he was too much of a gentleman to say anything about it. In fact, he just sighed one word, reverently. "Beautiful."

Annie's heart nearly burst, but something within her compelled her to downplay his compliment. "Nahh –"

Quinn put one finger over her lips, never taking his eyes off her breasts, saying, "Shhhh. Don't argue with a sincere compliment. You – and they – are both gorgeous. Deal with it."

He trailed his fingertips over each swelling mound, just above her bra. "You have the softest skin I've ever felt. Something happens to me when we touch – I don't know what it is, but I know I want more of it."

The thought flashed into Annie's mind that he spoke more in intimate situations than he did in the regular course of a day, but she loved it. He was saying all the right things – all the things that Hugh would never have thought of saying.

His arm was already behind her back, and it was an easy reach for him to unclasp her bra, which he did very slowly and easily. He was not a groping teenager, and Quinn wanted to make sure that Annie knew that he treasured her, and the intimacies she was allowing him to take with her body. He knew that it wasn't easy for any woman to trust a man with her body – and he also knew that in the case of his size, it was even more of a vulnerability.

"Please," she breathed up at him, biting her lip and tugging on his shoulders.

When his lips finally closed over her aching nipple, after he'd teased her mercilessly by kissing the firm flesh all around it, Annie sighed loudly in relief. She held him against her as if she was never going to let him go, clenching her fingers at the back of his head as he flicked the tip of his tongue against her, then dragged the flat of it over the very pointed end until he finally tugged the whole of that delicious morsel into his mouth and suckled lightly, delighting in the mewling sounds Annie was making.

He adored her like this – her head was back, eyes slightly out of focus, face and neck flushed with a passion that he was creating within her. He could do this to her all night, and he intended to get that opportunity one of these days.

For now, he contented himself with driving her into a frenzy by treating her as delicately as possible, as if she was made of spun glass, when he knew he'd already brought her to the point where he

could have been a little less careful with her, where she, in fact, craved just that from her. He didn't pinch her nipples, he barely plucked at them. He never kneaded her breasts, instead he cupped them and tickled their sensitive skin.

Annie was about two seconds from turning him over onto his back on the couch and mounting him right then and there. He had her aroused to a fever pitch without really trying – she wanted him so badly by now that she could taste him.

But, after a few more minutes of teasing foreplay, he hooked her bra and sat her up on his lap.

Annie was outraged. “Hey, why are we stopping?” she asked indignantly, practically panting for him.

Quinn nearly laughed at her eagerness. “Because we should. I don't want to rush this.”

“But!” she squealed, clenching her thighs together as her body throbbed and thrummed. “But I don't want to stop!”

“I know, but we're going to anyway.” He watched her lower lip poof out in a full blown pout, and she began to try to get up, but he wouldn't allow it. “Annie, I want to take my time with you – not have some hurried grope session on the couch.”

“But we don't know how long you'll be here – Regan could call to say he's coming back any day now.”

Quinn sighed. “Yes, he could, but he hasn't. And even when he does, I don't have to move to Timbuktu, you know. I'll just move right back into the boarding house and keep working on my computers. Eventually, I intend to have enough money to keep you in the style to which I'd like you to become accustomed.”

It was hard to be mad at him when he put it that way, even though her body felt like it was going to burst if his hands didn't cup her breasts immediately. Annie sighed impatiently and tried again to get off his lap. This time he let her up.

There was no sleeping for either of them that night – they both tossed and turned, hot and steamy visions of what might have happened playing through each of their heads.

The call from Regan didn't come for another week, and when it did, Annie let loose with a full blown scream that had Quinn running in from the living room, ready to do battle on her behalf. He'd been concentrating so hard on the code on his monitor that he hadn't even hear the phone ring. “It's Regan!” she stage whispered at him.

“Hey, girlie girl, I sure do miss you!”

That was some admission from the crusty, taciturn old cowpoke. “I miss you, too, Regan! How's your sister?”

“Not doin' too good, I'm afraid.”

Annie could hear the reluctance in his voice and her heart began to thump wildly in her chest. “Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that! Is there anything I can do?”

“No, Annie-girl, but thanks for the offer,” he took a deep breath and plunged on. “Honey, I think I'm going to have to stay here indefinitely to take care of her. I don't want you to hold my job open at all – I want you to promise me that you'll find someone who'll help you with the place, and if you can't do that, then sell it. Ballentine'll give you a good price for it.”

“I'm not selling out and I'm not replacing you, Regan!” Annie returned vehemently, biting her lip in a futile effort to stem the tide of her tears.

“You got to, Annie. You can't run that place all by yourself, girl. You need help, and lots of it.”

Quinn watched Annie slowly crumple onto a chair as she dissolved into sobs. He took the phone from her hand and introduced himself to the man on the other end of the line. They had a good talk – kind

of took each other's measure as much as they could and discovered that they each had Annie's best interests at heart.

When the conversation began to wind down, Annie perked up enough to say, "Tell him that his job here is always open whenever he can come home."

Quinn repeated exactly what she'd said, word for word, then exchanged a few more words with Regan and hung up, turning back to Annie immediately and pulling her into his arms where he was surprised and pleased to feel her burrow her face into his chest. "He sends his love," Quinn whispered, kissing the crown of her head. "Everything will be all right, I promise," he soothed, rocking them both back and forth slowly.

"I know," she sobbed, "but I miss him! He's been like a second father to me."

He didn't quite know what to say, but just held her until she'd cried it out, then tugged her outside with him, knowing that work would help soothe the hurt.

That evening, he refused to let her cook for them, and instead he set her down in her chair and made the only meal he knew he could – pizza – and, if he did say so himself, he was pretty darned good at it. Annie, whose eyes had had been varying degrees of redness all day, just kind of sat there quietly until he brought her a huge slice of pizza, made to her specific tastes: extra sauce, extra cheese, tons of pepperoni, sausage, onions, and black olives, on a wonderfully thick but crunchy crust.

Despite her sadness, she had to exclaim over the pizza. "This is wonderful! You should give up tinkering with computers and go into the pizza business – you've got 'em all beat!" She amazed herself by eating the entire slab and wishing for more, but her stomach wasn't going to cooperate with that idea.

He had eaten with her in the living room while they watched "CSI", but then he'd disappeared upstairs for a short time before reappearing and holding out his hand to her imperiously. "Your bath awaits, my lady," he pronounced dramatically.

Annie's eyes widened, but she allowed herself to be led upstairs to the small bathroom with the same claw foot tub she'd been bathed in as a kid. But somehow, Quinn had transformed the tiny space into a private spa. Soft, familiar power ballads floated in the air from a boom box he'd tucked into one corner. There were lavender candles on the shelves her father had constructed around the tub that reflected off the chrome and the big bathroom mirror. There was a small, fanlike blow up pillow suctioned to the back of the tub, and so many lavender scented bubbles that she couldn't see the water.

Two big, fluffy pillows were stacked on the *étagère*, and a glass of the light white wine she favored was perched within easy reach.

"Oh, wow! This is wonderful!" Annie exclaimed as she found herself surrounded by the soothing, steamy scents. "Thank you!"

Quinn kissed her once loudly. "I know you've had a hard day, and I wanted you to have some time to relax before bed."

"It's gorgeous. Thank you so much!" Tears that came so easily now that she'd had such bad news began to flow freely down her cheeks as Annie threw her arms around Quinn, already used to the fact that they wouldn't make it around his broad shoulders.

He held her tight and rubbed her shoulders and back gently. "Shh-shh-shh. It's okay. We'll be okay, and Regan'll come back when he can. He will."

Annie nodded against his shoulder for a long minute, then deliberately pulled away, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Well, I don't want to let the bathwater get cold."

"Would you like some help?" Quinn offered, pulling a comically eager, slobbering face.

She shot him a quelling glare. "No, thank you. I think I'll be fine all by myself."

His shoulders slumped to the floor, and he turned dejectedly turned to leave. "Okay, I guess, if you're sure you don't need someone to wash your back?" he asked hopefully, looking back at her over his shoulder.

"No, I don't," Annie replied firmly, her thumbs hooked in her jeans, waiting for him to leave before she disrobed.

"All right. Call me if you need me."

It was pure, unadulterated Heaven. The water was the perfect temperature – just a shade or two below uncomfortably hot as it engulfed every sore muscle and soothed the ache right out of her while she lay back and closed her eyes, drifting off somewhere where there were no ornery cows, no long lost ranch foremen, and no bills.

She refused to get out of that tub even when the water began to chill. It was just too wonderful for words, and she didn't want to give it up.

"Hey – are you in there or have you morphed into a prune by now?" She heard him lean his weight against the door and was glad she'd made sure it was firmly latched.

"I'm doing fine, thank you."

"Well, come on out. I don't want to have to come in there and use a chisel to scrape you off the bathtub."

"Oh, that's a lovely image," she shot back, rubbing a loofa over her leg.

"Yeah, well. Come on out, Annie. There's more where that came from."

Annie was intrigued. More of what? She wondered.

Piquing her curiosity was wholly unfair. Now she had to get out of the tub to see what he had done. She hoped it wasn't anything too permanent . . .

"Hey – you didn't give me a nightgown to change into!" she complained as she wrapped a towel as securely as possible around herself.

She had kind of expected that he would be right there when she opened the door, but he was nowhere in sight. Instead she found a path of pink rose petals leading her back to her bedroom. Annie followed the path carefully, not caring that the petals were sticking to the damp bottoms of her feet. When she got to her room, there were more rose petals leading to and strewn on and around her bed, along with several dozen bouquets placed strategically around the room, more lavender candlelight, and a huge box of expensive chocolates leaning against her pillow.

Chapter Six

Quinn came up behind her, snaking one arm around her waist while the other reached up to snatch the pins from her hair, letting that long, wavy curtain fall down between them. He buried his face into its softness at the back of her neck, whispering inches from her ear, "I've been dying to do that for weeks now."

Annie made an automatic grab for the towel, but needn't have. It wasn't going anywhere – right now, anyway. His lips found the curve of her neck, making her shiver violently. Her nipples peaked against the roughness of the terrycloth, and in their excited state it felt good. They ached for any and all kinds of attention.

He knew he should try to phrase things as romantically as he could, but he felt like he'd used up his small store of romanticism on the decorations. What he was feeling now wasn't as delicate as that – it was urgent and greedy and basic. He wanted her desperately, needed to feel all of her skin against his, needed to put his lips to every crest and tip and valley she owned until she lost herself and any last shred of control.

"Annie?" Quinn turned her in his arms and framed her face with his hands. "Normally, we'd've dated several times by now and I'd've taken you out for a really nice meal. But we haven't been like that. We spend all our time together on the ranch, and neither of us is really restaurant people anyway." He nibbled her lips, then pulled back again, pressing his forehead to hers. "I want you, and I think you want me, too. I want to make love with you. I want to hear those little mewls you make when I suckle at your breasts. I want to make you arch and writhe and buck and squirm because the two of us together feels almost too good to bear. I want to make you scream with pleasure so much and so loud that you're hoarse the next day."

His fervent, growling whispers and his wandering hands that had slowly reached up to tug the towel away from her body made her body light up. Her toes curled in the rag rug as those big hands roved up and down her bare back, then settled lower, cupping her bottom and lifting her against him, rubbing her toweled front against that ever present ridge of his, enjoying the feel of its unyielding hardness against her most hidden, most vulnerable area.

Annie had no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck when he lifted her and walked with great aplomb over to the bed, laying her down onto a sea of pink petals and disposing of the towel in a heap on the floor. She was immediately cool, but he just reached over and grabbed a corner of the comforter, and scooted up closer to her, swaddling them both beneath it. "Better?" he asked, watching her carefully. He loved the way her rich, black hair looked against the light comforter with the pink petals strewn into the mix.

She nodded. This was not something she'd anticipated – hopping into bed with him this evening. But somehow, it felt right anyway. It wasn't as if she didn't know that this was what they'd been slowly crawling towards since they'd met. And it wasn't as if she didn't want him – her body dissolved into a puddle in her jeans every time she was around him. She had spent the past few months on the edge of fulfillment, aroused beyond her experience and he'd barely touched her.

Annie was afraid that all it would take would be for him to breathe on her and she'd explode into a thousand suns. She looked up into his eyes and reached her hand out to touch his cheek. He had become very dear to her in a short amount of time. She could barely imagine the ranch – the one she'd so jealously

kept to herself for so long, insisting on doing everything herself – or her life without him anymore. Annie honestly didn't know what she would have done if Regan had actually been calling to say he was coming home.

Thoughts of not seeing the old codger again made tears spill down into her hair. Quinn's face almost dissolved at the sight of them.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked, trying to move away.

"No, no. I'm just thinking of Regan," Annie confessed on a sob.

Quinn's grin was somewhat evil in intent. "Let me see if I can help you keep your mind off him."

He was as good as his word. From the moment he said it, she could think of nothing but the wonderful things he was doing to her body. Everywhere his knowing fingertips lit, he raised goose bumps, and it wasn't from a chill. Her nipples sat at attention, begging to be tweaked, but he refused to acknowledge them at first. Instead, he took a lazy inventory of almost everywhere but those places that were most in need of him. He suckled the tips of her fingers, and massaged her palms, then nibbled and tickled his way up her arm, pausing to lick the sensitive insides of her elbow, then tracing slowly across her collarbone and down the other arm.

Annie couldn't help the way her legs moved restlessly against him, parting slightly, tentatively, as he had his way with her. Until he leaned over her to get to her other arm, she hadn't paid any attention to the fact that he was still dressed. Then his rough jeans and shirt scraped against her tender flesh, pointing out to her just how vulnerable she was to him, naked and practically begging for him to do what he pleased, while he remained a little aloof and untouched.

She didn't like that idea at all. She wanted to touch him as badly as he wanted to touch her. Annie reached up and began to undo the buttons of his shirt, but Quinn put his hands over hers, stopping her. "No, sweetie. I want this to be for you."

"But I want to touch you!" she whined softly, pouting.

Quinn kissed the tip of her nose. "Yes, but if I let you touch me, this will all be for naught. I've wanted you since I first saw you, and I'm not sure I could control myself if I was naked, Annie." The truth of his words rang in her ears. His face was as open and vulnerable to her as her body was to his.

Soon enough he had her to a point where the only thing she could think about was where and how he was going to touch her next. When he leaned back on his side and lazily plucked at her wet, ultra sensitized nipples, Annie tried to turn towards him and boldly arched her hips against his. Quinn smiled softly, "No, no, no. That'll get you a spanking, Annie love. We're going to do this in my own good time."

His own good time was taking much too long as far as she was concerned. She was sure there was a big wet spot beneath her on the comforter – she was dripping wet for him, and he hadn't even touched her there yet.

But his mention of a spanking – now! – made her frown and withdraw, however reluctantly.

Quinn chuckled at her face as he let his fingers trail down over her tummy. He heard her draw in a breath and hold it, but he continued on past the area he knew she was dying to have him concentrate on. Instead he massaged and explored her thighs, tickled the backs of her knees, and massaged and kissed the soles of her feet, then worked his way back up again with excruciating attention to detail.

"Quinn!" Annie growled, glaring at him.

"Annie!" he mocked back, his hand settling over that wild nest of hair, but just settling. Not exploring or delving into, just sitting there, cupping the sexual heart of her as if he owned it.

And right now he most definitely did.

"How badly do you want me to touch you there, Annie?"

Her eyes flared. She wondered why he was playing twenty questions in the middle of lovemaking. Annie swallowed, sensing a trap of some sort, but he fluttered his fingers and she moaned. "Please, please!"

Quinn touched one thigh and they both parted eagerly, but he just moved his hand down a little more and left it there.

Annie was quite sure that if he didn't do something very soon, her body was going to go ahead without him.

"How much? What would agree to do if I agreed to slip my fingers inside you, then bring them out, glistening with your butter, and glide them over that swollen clit of yours?"

"Grrrrrrrrrrr!" she growled at him, but he just started back at her, fluttering those teasing fingers every once in a while. It was almost worse that he was talking about it – describing what he intended to do. "Anything. I'll do anything." She knew she might have been committing herself to some heinous sexual act, but she didn't think so.

He proceeded to do exactly what he said he was going to do – he slowly pressed one thick finger inside her, watching her carefully for any signs of discomfort. She was so tight she clung to that one digit, and he had to stop for a moment and take a few deep breaths, reciting the Declaration of Independence in his mind to try to calm himself down.

She was wonderfully, achingly tight. Quinn only moved his finger in and out a few times, collecting as much dew as he could before backtracking until he found that pulsating bud of hers. Once, twice, three times he ran his fingertip over it – around the sides and then back up and then down again. Three complete circuits that had her sounding like she was knocking on the door to Heaven already.

But then he stopped, and Annie shrieked, grabbing his wrist and trying to get him to finish what he'd started. But he staunchly refused. "I'm not going to do anything until you agree to do as I ask."

"Okay. Okay. Anything. Please. Whatever you want, I'll do. I don't care how perverted it is," she panted, letting go of his wrist because she knew nothing she did physically was going to get him to budge. She flopped back down onto the bed and waited.

He was smiling down at her like some benevolent God. "It's not perverted at all. I just want you to stop smoking. It's going to kill you eventually, and I won't have you actively doing something that's detrimental to your health like that."

He should have asked her to cut off her right arm. She could more easily do that. But this wasn't a time for quibbling. She was two or three strokes away from the orgasm of a lifetime. "Yes," she answered confidently.

"Yes? You'll quit?" His finger twitched against her clit.

"Yes, yes, yes, dammit, I'll quit!"

Quinn bent down and flicked a nipple with his tongue. "You realize that this means that if I catch you smoking you're going to go over my lap?"

She hadn't thought of that, but it didn't matter. "Yes, yes!" She would have agreed to tap dance on a land mine if it would get him to pick up where he'd left off.

"Good. I'll do everything I can to help you," he promised solemnly. "Including this."

His fingers were quickly and easily replaced by his mouth, but they found a home inside her, stretching her gently to accommodate two of them. Quinn placed his whole mouth over her, letting the flat of his tongue rest against the peak of her hard bud while he plunged his fingers in and out of her in an inexorable rhythm.

Annie arched up into his mouth, mewling and keening and writhing beneath his tender ministrations. On a whim, he reached up and clamped her wrists to the mattress near her hips, tethering her, keeping her captive until she gave him the ultimate tribute of her pleasure.

He'd never made a woman scream before, but when paradise hit Annie, she let go with a full throated yell that made him happy they didn't have any close neighbors. And he didn't let her get away with just one taste of pleasure – he brought her to three in a row, one right after the other, until she finally reached down and grabbed his hair, pulling him away from that oversensitive spot before she died from a surfeit of ecstasy.

Quinn reached down quickly and made arrangements to free himself and protect her, then crawled back up to her, knowing Annie hadn't even noticed he was gone. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing low and deep, in that blissful zone of completion that he hoped to join her in shortly.

But when he began to press his considerable self into her, though, Annie's eyes opened and she looked a little frightened.

Quinn lay fully on top of her, leaning on his elbows. "Shh, sweetie. Relax. We'll fit fine. Tightly," he groaned, "but fine."

And he was right, but Annie wasn't at all sure she was going to live through his possession. Every inch of him scraped along her delicate insides, forcing her to stretch, making her even more raw and sensitive than she'd been before, making her want him to stop but knowing she would die if he did. It felt so good to be filled like this, to yield herself to him in the most ultimate manner . . . to take him into herself.

He couldn't be still – couldn't take the time to enjoy being engulfed in her to the hilt. His body wouldn't wait, wouldn't allow any sort of a delay. So he began to plunge, less gently than he might have wanted to, but his body was a hard taskmaster.

To his complete embarrassment, he exploded after only about five or six strokes – not his usual careful, drawn out, pleasure laden tendency. Not the way he wanted to be with her, but it was early on and his need overrode everything else.

Quinn drove himself into her hard one last time, burying himself within her, forcing her legs back so that he could claim every inch of her as his own and throwing his head back with a loud growl that matched the one she'd issued a few minutes earlier.

Even in his frenzy, though, when he collapsed he did it to one side, so that she didn't bear the full brunt of his weight.

He groaned as he sank into the pillow and reached out to mold her to his side. "Marry me," he said, his eyes closed in utter and complete bliss.

Annie didn't have the energy to be startled, and she didn't think that he was serious. He was just blinded by his sated lust. So she didn't answer him.

But Quinn wasn't kidding, and when she didn't respond, he opened his eyes and leaned up on his elbow to look down at her. "Well? I just proposed. Are you going to leave me hanging?"

Annie's eyes popped wide open. "Proposed? You mean you meant it?"

Quinn frowned fiercely down at her. "You thought I was kidding? Think about it. How often do I kid?"

Her mouth twisted in thought. He was right. "But – but you can't – we haven't – we've just barely –"

He framed her face with his hands and took a giant leap of faith, laying his heart on the line. "I can. Annie, I think I fell in love with you when I first saw you frowning up at me from the bottom of the ladder, and it's only gotten deeper the more I've gotten to know you – how proud and stubborn and strong you are."

"I am not stubborn!" she stated firmly.

"Oh, no, not you! Did I say stubborn? I meant . . . uh . . . pushover. You're a pushover."

Her frown deepened. "You're digging yourself deeper, you realize . . ."

"Regardless," Quinn stroked his huge hand over her face as gently as a gossamer wing. "I've come to love you more every day, despite your hard headedness, and I'm traditional enough that I want us to get married."

She tried to get up, but all he had to do was tighten his arms a little and she wasn't going anywhere.

"Oh, no you don't. I want you right here, next to me." Quinn wasn't above asking for what he needed in the way of reassurance. "Am I wrong that you might feel something the same for me?"

Annie bit her lip. She knew what she should answer, and she knew what she wanted to answer, and they were two different things. "No, you're not wrong. I'm more than halfway in love with you, Quinn Rideout. But it's too new for me right now, and I have too much baggage about my first marriage . . . and about the ranch . . . to just jump into anything. I'll give you an answer, but not right now. I want some time to think about it."

It wasn't really what he wanted to hear, but at least she hadn't shut him down completely. He'd take what he could get, for now, and spend the rest of the night – and his life, if necessary – trying to convert her over to his side.

Annie spent the next few days drowning in disbelief – about the fact that he'd proposed as well as the fact that he spent all night every night sating himself and her, indulging them both in the most completely fulfilling and totally involving nights of passion she'd ever had.

He was an open and inventive lover who encouraged her to have his way with him as often as he took his way with her. She was a little shy in that area, not having had a lot of success either arousing or holding Hugh's attention, but that was not so with Quinn. It seemed she could do no wrong with him, and, after several nights, she even grew comfortable – and bold – enough to push him over on his back while he was naked in her bed, which was rapidly becoming their bed. He took up two thirds of it, Annie thought with a secret smile, loving the fact that he was curled himself around her at night.

He had rolled onto his back easily enough when she'd pushed, throwing one arm above his head, but keeping the other around her to hold her close. "What are you up to, woman?" he asked in a lazy growl, his eyes mere slits.

He was a feast for to her eyes – just exactly what she wanted physically in a man, and she completely discounted his scar and limp. They had no bearing on her attraction to him whatsoever. He was so much more than just those two things. His arms were thick and curved with muscles and his chest was broad as a barn, tapering nicely to a trim but thick waist. He had the perfect "Y" shape, and it made her mouth water.

"Just markin' my territory," she replied, just as lazily, as she dragged her nails up and down his sides.

His answering groan was music to her ears and her long shattered ego. She grazed her fingertips over his small erect nipples, making his breath sizzle audibly into his lungs. His responses were as sharp to her as hers were to him, as if he had his hand on her clit and stroked it slickly with each masculine twitch or growl.

Quinn reached down and wound his hand into her hair, holding her head still, millimeters above his skin. "I would never do what he did to you, Annie. Never. I'm either a no woman man, or a one woman man, but I have no need for a harem." His voice rang strong and true, and somehow, even through the hurt that Hugh had inflicted, she'd heard his sincerity.

"I know," she answered after a thoughtful pause. "At least, deep down I know. I can't promise that I won't be a little extra paranoid but I'll get over it." Annie let her lips settle into his auburn chest hair just enough to tickle them, and him. She dragged her moist, pointed little tongue over to first one tiny tip, then the other, circling and flicking and gently nipping while he arched and whimpered as much as a man of his size – and macho tendencies – could.

Annie left one set of fingers to worry one wet bud while her mouth moved on to more interesting territory, skimming down his flat belly to look up at him and catch his eye as her mouth found him for the first time, devouring his full length eagerly to the hilt while holding his gaze.

Quinn almost lost it right there. It took every bit of his concentration not to grab her head and hold it there tightly. His hands clenched into tight fists, and he couldn't prevent his hips from bucking up,

seeking to retain her warmth as she drew her mouth slowly up and away from him, only to plunge it back down, establishing a rhythm that brought him very quickly to the edge of no return.

"Sweetie," he panted, reaching down to grab her hair, but stopping himself just short to let his hand drop onto the mattress beside his hip. "I - I can't take much - of - this -"

Annie stopped immediately and grinned up at him as her hand reached below his stiff rod to cup him with the gentlest of touches, rolling him just ever so slightly, drawing a low, agonized moan from his lips that washed over her, strengthening her heart and stoking the already blazing fire in her loins.

"You don't have to take much of it," Annie whispered, returning to her delightful task, again taking all of him at once, then suckling hard as she rose again and drew herself away from him.

Quinn's continuous moan began then and continued until she'd brought him to a roaring, shuddering, convulsing end. Quinn let down every guard and just let himself go, which made the experience even that much more intense. He wanted Annie to be his wife - he didn't want to hold anything back from her. If she could accept him with all his physical flaws, then she could certainly deal with the rawness of an orgasm that she'd provoked.

She felt a distinct sense of pride that she could bring him such pleasure. In fact, she was generally feeling happier with him than she'd felt in a very long time, and she was pretty sure she loved him. Besides the fact that he could be an autocratic pain in the neck who had the tendency to spank her on occasion, he was darned close to perfect as far as she was concerned, and he certainly did turn her on, to within an inch of her life. Sometimes she didn't think she was going to live through the night with him - he was absolutely insatiable, but then so was she.

Chapter Seven

She poured herself a second cup of coffee, mulling things over in her mind.

Marriage! It was such a big step. She'd never expected to be married again. Once burned was quite enough for her. But she had to admit having him around had been wonderful – beyond the fact that he very happily assumed the role of donkey labor, he was great to talk to while they were working together, and he was incredibly appreciative of her culinary efforts. Even though he spent most of their evenings working on his computer stuff, he was always there with her during the evenings. He made her feel safer just with his presence, although it wasn't as if Faith, Texas was a hotbed of gang activity or anything, living out on a ranch by herself still left her somewhat vulnerable.

Quinn gave her peace of mind in a lot of ways merely by his presence beside her, and they shared quite a lot working together all day. But the one thing that Annie wasn't at all sure she really wanted to share was the ranch itself.

She'd inherited it when her parents died within months of each other. Mom had gone first, slowly, of emphysema, and Dad had followed suddenly only a couple of months later. They hadn't given it to her sister, because Reena had moved away and made a life for herself and her two kids. Annie had gotten it all – such as it was. Her father had never really been able to make it pay much, but Annie was determined to make a success of it, and she had, slowly, very slowly, been able to get it almost into the black, but it was a struggle each and every month. She had years of blood, sweat, tears, and other disgusting bodily fluids invested in this chunk of land, and she was loathe to share it with anyone. It was bad enough that she had to share it with the bank.

She'd been lucky with Hugh – he'd had no interest in the place when they'd divorced – couldn't get away from it fast enough and had signed a quit claim deed renouncing any right to it. But Annie wasn't at all sure that she wanted to take the chance that someone else might have a claim to it – even if it was her husband. It was all she had in this world, and even if it wasn't much, it was all hers.

She was still rolling things around in her head as she was halfway out the door, but the phone rang and drew her back in. Not that many people called her, and she was worried it was Regan with bad news about his sister. "Hello?"

"Annie-bananie!"

Reena. The last person she expected to hear from, and of course the first to use yet another God awful nickname from her childhood. Someday, she swore she was going to change her name to something that couldn't be so easily corrupted. "Hey! How are you?"

"Oh, we've been better. How are you? How's the ranch?"

Annie was immediately suspicious. Reena never asked about the ranch. She'd hated it and sworn she'd never set foot on it again when she'd left at eighteen to marry her high school sweetheart. And she

hadn't. When she'd come for their parents' funerals, she expressly hadn't come back to the ranch for their wakes. "We're fine, thanks. How are you?" she responded automatically.

She and Reena had never been all that close, especially since Reena had decided to shun the ranch and everything about it so completely— as far as Annie was concerned, her sister was actively rejecting her, too.

Reena had never been one to mince words. "Well, really, we're not too good. Mike's job got downsized, and we - well, we kinda need a place to stay until we can get our feet under us again."

Annie should have seen it coming from the instant she'd picked up the phone, but she hadn't. She figured it would be a plea for money, which she could quite honestly say she didn't have. But shelter? At the ranch she hated? Reena must've been at the end of her rope to just ask.

Annie had to smile sadly. With the bills coming in like they were, and the money not coming in like it should to keep pace, she was facing the reality that she might not be able to offer her sister shelter for very long. The bank had no sense of humor about late mortgage payments whatsoever.

Of course, there was nothing she could do. She had to say yes. If there was one thing their mother had drilled into both girls, it was that family helped family. They hadn't had much while they were growing up, but when a relative needed a place or a handout of any sort, Mom had always obliged however she could. Annie had shelter when her sister had none, and of course she would offer what she had . . . for as long as she had it. "Uh, yeah, that's fine, but how are you going to get out here?"

"We have a minivan that's older but almost paid for, and then we'll rent a U-haul." Annie heard Reena heave a relieved sigh. "I'm sorry, Annie. For laying this on you, and for knocking the ranch all the time. I just . . . it just wasn't my thing, but I knew you loved it and I shouldn't have been so nasty about it. I just don't love it like you do, and I never will. But here I am, crawling back to it anyway."

And for that Annie was eternally grateful. "That's okay. You always were more cosmopolitan than I was."

They worked out the details, and Annie hung up the phone in a daze, realizing that her quiet, happy home was going to be invaded in less than a week. She hoped she could keep from killing Reena, for a short time at least. Long enough for her to find another place to move her brood to.

She was so frazzled that she absently grabbed her cigarettes and stepped out onto the small porch, stopping to tuck a cigarette between her lips and reach for her lighter. She'd been doing pretty well with the stopping smoking thing, and Quinn had been wonderful about trying to help her. The first day he had gone into town and gotten her every patch, gum, and pill in existence to help with nicotine cravings. He kept her busy – which wasn't hard – and praised her when she didn't reach for a smoke when she usually would have.

It wasn't like she smoked three packs a day, anyway. She had a cigarette after a meal, and occasionally in the evenings before going to bed – more if she was feeling particularly stressed, and that was usually once a week, when she was facing a stack of bills she wasn't sure she could pay. That was, maybe, five or so a day, and one weekly binge on Sunday evening when she wrote out checks for the week.

She would have said it was more of a habit than a craving, until she had spent a couple of days without them. And this morning's call and joyful news just pushed the pack right into her hand.

She bent her head, moving the cigarette into the flame and taking a deep puff.

"What did I say about you smoking, Annie Cavanaugh?" came a deep rumble from across the yard.

Dammit! She thought he was long gone by now. She should have made absolutely sure.

Well, she was caught. Annie took another deep drag. Might as well be hanged for a wolf as a sheep.

But when she saw the look on his face, she wished she'd never lit up. "You're already going to get it bad, right now. Are you that eager to get spanked every night for a week?" he asked in a flat, downright frightening tone.

Annie frowned, but dropped the cigarette and ground it beneath her foot.

"Good girl. Now turn around and get back in the house," he ordered grimly. "I'm going to make you wish you'd never picked up that pack, especially once you've spent the day riding on your bottom once I get through with it."

And he wasn't just making an idle threat, Annie found out. By the end of that day, she wished her bottom would just fall off.

Quinn had escorted her into the house to the dining room – a room Annie was quite sure she'd never be able to look at again without recalling this morning's events.

She wasn't idle, either. She was trying to weasel her way out of a punishment by telling him about the phone call she'd just received and hoping to get his sympathy vote. She'd forgotten that when it came to something like this, that was dangerous to her health, he didn't have any sympathy.

Quinn didn't hesitate one bit as she relayed her tale of woe about her sister and her family coming to stay with them. When they reached the dining room, he pulled out a straight backed chair and sat down, prompting Annie to make a mental note to replace all of the straight backed chairs in the house with captain's chairs of some sort or other. Having eight chairs in the dining room and another few strewn around the house that were ready made to be spanked over made things way too easy for him. Boldly dragging her feet and then, finally planting them at the doorway to the dining room hadn't accomplished a thing.

"I'm very sorry that you're stressed about your sister coming here to live with us," Quinn was saying calmly as he pulled her over to stand next to him, one quick bend away from being over those muscular legs. "But there are other things you can do to handle your stress – you can come talk to me, you can go groom Nilla to a nub, I don't care what you substitute for the cigarettes," he worked the button on her fly then tugged the zipper down, hooking his fingers into the waistband of her jeans and panties at once, and lowering them to her knees in one quick motion.

He had noticed that she'd been doing exactly that – the grooming Nilla to a nub part. She was worried about the ranch, worried about money, and she turned to both the cigarettes and the horse too soothe those fears. Quinn hoped to get her to turn to him, instead, in the future.

"No! I don't want to be spanked!" Annie reared back when he started to move her over his lap, but his muscular arm around the small of her back ensured that she complied, no matter how much she disliked the idea.

Quinn was completely without remorse. He lay his hand over her now relatively cool bottom. "But mark my words, you will learn to choose something healthier by the time I get through with you." He reached across her waist with his left hand and grabbed a hold of her far side, knowing he was going to need a good hold to keep her in place through this.

And he was right, because he gave it to her full throttle from the beginning. This was no slow build up, let's start with a warm up spanking. He swatted her hard and fast from the beginning, working her poor cringing bottom over methodically, and doing his best to ignore her cries of indignation at first that quickly graduated to moans and sobs of searing pain.

It was those mournful cries that Quinn had to steel himself against. Despite the fact that he firmly believed in spanking the woman he loved when she needed it, that didn't make it easy to do, especially for a man like himself whose basic tenet towards women was to protect and comfort, which was a good thing considering his size.

But it took an incredible amount of will to go through with inflicting pain on the woman he loved. So Quinn kept his goal in sight – to make her think twice the next time she reached for that pack.

He could have destroyed all her cigarettes, or had her do it. As far as he knew, the only ones she had in the house were in a carton at the back of the fridge, and as long as he'd known her, it had been the

same carton, he thought. But Quinn felt strongly that she had to face the fact that cigarettes would be in a lot of stores she'd go into, and maybe even some of her friends smoked, too. He didn't want to remove the temptation, he just wanted to help her learn to resist it.

And spanking her was definitely a part of it, no matter how hard it was on him to cause her pain like this. She had started crying almost immediately, and the sounds of her sobs as his hand rose and fell relentlessly ripped his heart to shreds within his chest, but he would not let his resolve waver.

When he'd spanked her longer and harder than he'd ever spanked any woman in his life, Quinn stopped. Annie didn't even move – she was just lying there over his lap, her hair spilling down around her head, sobbing pitifully.

But he knew it wasn't over. It couldn't be over this quickly. She'd forget this in a matter of minutes, maybe an hour, unforgiving saddle or no unforgiving saddle.

Quinn helped Annie up, but cautioned her firmly to stay where she was put. He rose from the chair quickly, knowing he needed to do this and get it over with before he thought about it too much. He pulled her up to the heavy oak pedastaled table and bent her over it, keeping his hand firmly at the small of her back.

With one hand, he reached for the buckle of his leather belt, and Annie couldn't help but hear it jangle a bit – enough to make her realize what was coming. "No, Quinn, please – don't!" she begged frantically.

Her bottom was already sizzling hot and painfully sore. The idea of that thick leather belt of his crashing down on her already tenderized flesh didn't bear thinking of.

But that was exactly what happened.

Annie heard leather rubbing against denim, then snicking loose. She turned her head towards him, eyes pleading, as she watched him fold it once, then grab the two ends together. Annie felt him place the leather against her bottom and let out a scream of protest even before he drew his arm back.

Nothing in her experience could have prepared her for the line of unadulterated fire he drew across her butt with that awful thing. The agony exploded in her mind seconds before it settled in that three inch swath on the defenseless skin of her rear and burned there, branding her body and mind with the seriousness of his discipline.

And then he brought it down again, and again and again. More times than she cared to – or could – count after the first few or so, although it probably wasn't any more than ten or twelve in all, blazing red trails criss crossing over her tail and the backs of her thighs.

When he stopped, Quinn dropped his belt out of his hand like it was a snake and dragged her into his arms, holding her tight against him and rocking her as she cried it out on his drip dry shoulder. The last time he'd spanked her, he hadn't had the right to comfort her, and to him, the comforting afterwards was at least as important as the spanking itself. He didn't want her to fear him in any way – to think that his hands were only there to cause her pain.

Quinn lifted her into his arms and strode over to her recliner, rocking back in it with her cradled on his lap, supporting her scored bottom as best he could so that as little of her own weight as possible rested on it . . . for now. Riding wasn't going to be much fun for her today, but then he hoped it helped her think twice before she lit up again.

He curled her head under his chin and just held her as she sobbed fit to make his heart stop dead in his chest. Quinn rubbed his hand up and down her back and occasionally dropped a kiss onto that shiny black hair while her sobs tore at his gut. "There, there, sweetie." He sat and rocked them both for a long time, not hurrying her through her recuperation.

"I can't believe you did that to me!"

Quinn sighed, holding her tightly to him, feeling every ounce of blood pumping through his heart. "I have to do what you need. I have to help you live, because, even though we haven't known each other that long, I don't want to live without you."

Annie could feel the naked truth of what he was saying. This big lug of a man loved her enough to correct her – and probably, eventually, save her life . . . if she could keep herself away from smoking. And after a spanking like that, just the thought of putting a cigarette to her lips made her bottom sting just that much worse. Wild horses would never be able to drag it out of her, but she thought that this form of aversion therapy of his might actually work. And she knew her doctor, who had been after her for years to give up smoking even though she really didn't smoke that much, would be ecstatic.

She didn't realize that the spanking wasn't the worst of it this time. The worst was having to climb into a hard leather saddle and ride on that poor abused bottom for the next ten or so hours. When she finally dismounted at the end of the day, she thought her bottom was going to fall off and hit the ground right next to her, and Quinn was no help. All he could do was snicker at her as she walked bow legged towards the house. In fact, he had the audacity to pat her bottom as they went up the stairs, easily dodging the flailing hand she tried to wave him off with.

"Cut that out!"

"Nope," he replied. "I just want to make sure you remember what you're supposed to remember. I don't want to have to do that again any time soon." He tilted his chin down and raised his eyebrow at her. "Understand?"

She glared back at him, feeling ornery and sore and out of sorts, and mumbling, "Bite me," under her breath.

Quinn stopped in the act of going upstairs to their room and turned back to her. "What did you just say?"

His tone let her know that he had better not have heard what he thought he heard. Annie had no interest in getting a second spanking on top of this morning's, so she crossed her fingers and fibbed with a syrupy sweet, patently innocent smile, "I said 'might be'. What do you want for dinner?"

He paused for a moment, as if trying to discern whether or not she was telling him the truth, but mentioning food when they'd just come in was the perfect tack to take. Annie heaved a sigh of relief when he was so easily diverted into peering into the freezer with her, mulling over the neatly labeled plastic containers. "Beef stew, lasagna, ham, stuffed peppers . . . what suits your fancy?" she asked, pleasantly surprised when his arms wrapped around her from behind.

"You, a la mode." His eyebrows waggled outrageous.

"Sounds interesting, but cold!"

"Hmmmmmm," he gave the contents of the freezer almost as much consideration as he did his computer stuff, smacking his lips loudly and experimentally. "I have a taste forrrrrrr . . . beef stew."

"Yum. I've got some biscuits I can thaw, too." Annie always made extra whenever she made biscuits, so she always had homemade in the freezer.

As she reached in to grab a block of stew, Quinn turned away from her to head towards the bedroom again, but not before delivering a very hard, sharp swat to her tender butt.

"Hey!" Annie arched against the fridge, trying to avoid any more precipitous slaps, but he was already halfway across the room.

He didn't even break stride when he answered her outraged cry. "Don't even think about fibbing to me again, Annie Cavanaugh, or you won't sit comfortably for a week."

Annie grimaced as she heard his boots clunking unevenly up the stairs. Knowing he was out of earshot, she muttered, "I've already got a good start on that, thank you very much," as she absently rubbed the twice offended part.

It ended up being more than a week later when they lost their tranquil idyll, because the minivan had acted up on its way across country. But eventually Reena had descended on them in all her glory, bag and baggage, husband and two kids in tow. It took most of the day to get everything settled – Reena and

Mike in what had been Quinn's old bedroom, and the kids into each of the other two bedrooms. They had a full house for the first time ever. When she and Reena had been growing up, the fourth bedroom had always been a spare for guests – not that they'd had many, but it was kept untouchably clean, anyway.

Mike and Quinn had found immediate common ground in Quinn's computer set up, and they became lost in a conversation that Annie would have sworn was not being conducted in English. She and Reena ended up in the kitchen, getting dinner ready.

If there was one skill that their mother had imparted to the both of them, it was the ability to cook. They had grown up in the kitchen with their mother – Reena even more so than Annie, who liked to tag along after their father about the ranch as much as possible. They fell into the same routines they'd had as kids and young adults fixing dinner for the family, moving smoothly about the big old kitchen in the familiar dance of reaching arms and tasting fingers stuck in pots.

Annie had taken a roast out for just this purpose – a big family meal together on their first night under the same roof, and it was cooking low and slow in the upper wall oven. She and Reena kept themselves thankfully busy making the side dishes – working on the second rising of the homemade yeast rolls, washing and cutting the fresh green beans, and roasted garlic smashed potatoes, with just a touch of sour cream, along with a gooey butter cake for dessert, that was a wonderful, decadent diabetic coma on a plate.

"Where'd you find him?" Reena asked, jerking her head towards where Quinn and Mike were cloistered in front of the computer in the living room.

Annie gave Reena a look that clearly announced that she didn't think her sister had a right to question anything about her life, but she took great satisfaction in replying casually, "I advertised." Let her mull on that little tidbit, she thought with a smile.

Chapter Eight

"You took out a personal ad?" Reena was nearly apoplectic, and stopped in the act of smashing the potatoes. "And got him?"

Annie wasn't sure whether that was a slur or a compliment to Quinn, but she gave Reena the benefit of the doubt because she didn't want to have to be smacking her sister upside the head the first day she was there. "No, I advertised for help – Regan's sister isn't doing very well so he had to go to Florida to take care of her, and I needed a hand around here. Quinn applied, and he's been fantastic."

Reena grinned slyly. "But you got a lot more out of him than you're paying for, it looks like. Good for you! We were wondering if you were going to let Hugh put you off men for life."

Absently wondering who Reena's "we" was, Annie threw out purely for the shock value, "He asked me to marry him."

Her sister's squeals were enough to shatter glass. "That's wonderful!" Reena hugged Annie tight, but then the first thing she did, of course, was grab Annie's left hand and look for the ring. "Are you going into town later and getting it?"

"No," Annie answered, turning to take the rolls out of the lower oven.

"Well, why don't you have a ring yet?"

"Because I haven't given him an answer yet."

"Are you crazy? If he's willing to put up with you and your unnatural attachment to the ranch - "

Annie glared at her sister, and Reena relented a little. "Well, you have to admit you're pretty married to this place." As if she'd stumbled onto some sort of revelation, Reena glared back at her sister. "That's not why you're hesitating, is it? That you don't want to share the ranch with him?"

"Don't be silly," Annie huffed, annoyed that Reena had very casually hit the nail on the head. "Why don't you call everyone to dinner? I think we're ready."

The dinner table was like it had been during the infrequent good times when they were growing up – lots of talk and laughter and tons of good food that changed hands around the table in a balletic juggle of pots, pans, and plates. Quinn sat at the head of the table, with Annie to his right, and she began to notice that his table manners left a lot to be desired. That muscular, lightly hairy brown arm invaded the space above her plate more than once as he reached for the salt or the potatoes instead of asking for them, so the next time he crowded her plate with his offending appendage, she casually applied a light layer of salt to it, then leaned down and sank her teeth into him, just hard enough to get his attention.

The kids thought this was hilarious. Quinn didn't look particularly amused, but he had to admit to himself that the rebuke was warranted, he supposed. He retracted his arm and perseverated seriously over the distinct tooth marks he found carved into it. "It's not so much the bite," he drawled, "I just don't think she's had her shots."

Later that night, he got a little of his own back for the chunk she'd taken out of him by nibbling every inch of her – some places twice over – and bringing her to what might have been a screaming orgasm, but what ended up being more of a smothered one since they were no longer alone in Paradise.

Afterwards, they snuggled for a while, and Quinn told her about the very interesting conversation he'd had with Mike, who had contacts in the computer business and might even want to partner up with Quinn on his project.

Annie reared back a little and looked at his profile in the darkness. "Would you want to take on a partner? And is it close enough to being done for that?"

Quinn squirmed a little, pausing before he replied. "Well, it's closer than I thought it might be. And a partner with his connections could really only do me good. Probably."

"Don't feel any sort of obligation to partner with Mike just because he's my brother in law, Quinn -"

"I don't, I don't," he soothed, curling her against his side. "This is my life's work, and I don't share it easily or with just anyone."

Annie nodded sleepily against his chest. "I know, and I know what you mean."

There were some small advantages to having Reena at home, Annie had to admit. She no longer had to even nuke dinner after a long day wrestling – and dodging, some times more successfully than others – cattle. Dinner was always on the table or well on its way there when they came in. The rambunctious kids were quickly enrolled in school, and Mike went on constant rounds of interviews for a new job.

Unfortunately, no one much was hiring. So he and Quinn had time to indulge their hobby together, and it sounded like they might have come to some agreement regarding a tentative partnership that would benefit the both of them to the tune of quite a bit of money, if it worked out the way they were planning.

Annie, on the other hand, was barely able to make ends meet. She was twenty days late on the mortgage, which was always the first thing she paid every month. That meant that she was over thirty days late on what she considered to be less essential bills – credit cards, cable, etc. The dunning calls had begun a while ago, but she'd been successfully able to hide them from Quinn because they were gone all day, and she was always the first person to get into the house. She made darned sure about that.

But now that Reena was home all day, she got those calls. Luckily, she was discreet enough to catch Annie when they were alone to grill her about it.

Annie didn't pull any punches – she told Reena that she was having a hard time right now, but that she hoped things would be better the next month when she sold off some of the herd. Reena looked a little doubtful, but headed off to bed anyway.

What she didn't say was that, by that time, she would already be almost three months behind by that point, and the bank wasn't likely to be quite that patient about receiving something in payment of the mortgage.

But there as nothing she could do. She had nowhere to go, short of trying to sell the place, and even that would be at a tremendous loss so that she'd still owe money on a place she didn't own any more.

Thinking about it made her crazy, so she tried not to. And although she compulsively reached for the pack of cigarettes she had left on the edge of the counter just next to the back door, she remembered how much her rear end had hurt – and for how long – after Quinn got through with it the last time, and sighed. Neither Nilla nor Tawny would want to see her coming, either, so she settled for sitting in the kitchen in the moonlight, biting her fingernails to the nub.

She snorted at herself. At least that didn't cause cancer. Yet.

Quinn, who had been in the living room lost in the world contained in his monitor and CPU, had inadvertently overheard enough of Annie's conversation with her sister – words like “mortgage” and “calls” and “bank” were quite enough for him to put two and two together, especially considering that Annie had been so down and stressed lately.

So he resolved to put a plan in motion to sell what he had completed of his project, and get investors to help him finish the final phases. That way, even with Mike as a partner, he would get a huge amount upfront, with even more where that came from when the product was finished. Mike was turning out to be quite an asset.

It took a couple of weeks to set things up for the sale of the project, and Quinn wasn't sure he could make it. Watching Annie fall apart like this was incredibly painful. He did as much for her as he could – he was already doing that before she started having money problems.

He had to go to Seattle with Mike to see some people, and it killed him to go when she was so depressed. He apologized all night the night before – audibly and with his mouth and hands, making her promise that she wouldn't try to do too much while he was gone. But Annie had become almost fatalistic about losing the ranch and told him to take whatever time he needed.

Quinn had swallowed hard at her words and clutched her tightly to him, then leaned over the side of the bed suddenly and got something out of his nightstand drawer. He turned the bedside light on, and Annie could clearly see that it was a ring box.

Quinn had maxed out his only credit card buying her what he thought was a pretty nice ring – it was a one carat marquis cut solitaire in white gold, and it looked spectacular on her finger. He put his finger over her mouth as she started to protest. “I know you haven't given me your answer yet, but since you're keeping me waiting, I want you to wear it. It gives me the illusion that you're going to say yes.”

Annie dissolved into tears, which was not quite the reaction he'd been hoping for, although he just chalked it up to stresses that he hoped he could have a hand in relieving very soon. If all went right, he'd come home from Seattle with a very large check in his pocket, and he intended to use a chunk of it to pay off as many of her bills as he could find.

For once in life, that was exactly how things went. His software innovation was hailed as nothing short of a miracle, and he and Mike were handed a check with so many zeros he had to read the written line to figure out how much it was for.

The company they'd sold his project to wanted them to complete it as soon as possible, so they turned around and came home only five days later. Mike went home ahead of Quinn, because Quinn needed to stay in town and get several errands done – he headed to the bank that held Annie's mortgage first and paid it and her two ancillary mortgages completely off. The deed to the property would be sent to Annie in the mail in a couple of days, but he had receipts marked “paid in full” for each account. While he was there, he deposited the check that had been burning a hole in his wallet, and also got the paperwork to add Annie to his existing accounts.

He also hit the gas, electric, water, and cable companies and brought her – them – up to date. Then he went a little wild and hopped over to Abilene and bought himself a Jaguar XK convertible, and stopped in to a Ford dealership and ordered her the best and newest truck he could find, to be delivered tomorrow with a big red bow. As a last minute thought, he grabbed two dozen red roses and a hideously expensive bottle of wine, and drove home with a huge, shit eating grin on his face.

It was the same one he was wearing when he blew into the kitchen and swept Annie up off her feet, twirling her madly about the room like a rag doll in his arms. “We are filthy ri-ich. We are filthy ri-ich,” he sang, managing to squeeze her and kiss her and smother her all at once, then set her down and bow low, presenting her with the roses then kissing the life out of her.

"How much champagne have you had already?" Annie laughed, but her heart wasn't in it. But he knew she was entirely sincere when she said, "I am so glad for you! You've been working so hard on this for so long . . ."

Quinn tilted her chin up to him. "And now we can reap the benefits." He guided her over to the kitchen table and reached into his sport coat inside pocket to bring out all of the receipts, which he listed to her as he dropped them onto the table with a flourish. "Mortgage – paid. Equity mortgage – paid. Line of credit – paid. We can have a mortgage burning party!" Quinn was so caught up in feeling good and like he'd accomplished something good for her – for the two of them – that he wasn't paying any attention to Annie's reactions.

"I also paid the cable, the electric, and all the other mundane crap that's been driving you crazy for the past couple of months." He pulled her back into his arms, wanting to dance her around again, but he didn't think his leg would agree with that.

But Annie was stiff as a board, and he let her go as soon as he realized it. There were tears in her eyes when he looked down at her. "What? What is it?" Quinn reached out to stroke her hair back from her face, but she stepped back, out of his reach.

"You paid off my mortgage." It was a strangled whisper.

Quinn frowned down at her fiercely. That would have been enough to make a weaker woman reconsider her stance, but not Annie. "Yes. The bank didn't care that I wasn't on the loan – they were happy to take money from anyone. You don't have to worry any more. The ranch is yours, free and clear."

"No." It was the absolute steel behind the softness of that word that put him on alert.

"Honey –" Quinn took a step towards her, but she mirrored it backwards.

"You own the ranch."

His eyebrow quirked towards his hairline. "No, you do. Eventually, when we're married," he reached out for her left hand, but she put it behind her, "we – both – will." The wish ended lamely as he watched her close herself off from him, almost systematically.

She brought that hand around and took the ring off, placing it carefully on the stack of paid bills. "I've been working this ranch for years and years and years. I've agonized and gone without and saved and scrimped, but I've done it myself. I've never needed or wanted any kind of a handout, and I don't want one now."

"Even if you'd only made one payment towards it, you would have had a claim to my property that was unacceptable. But it's a done deal. One big check, one fell swoop, and you wiped it all out. You've paid it off, so you own it." She turned away from him, grabbing her keys from the hook by the door. "I don't live here any more." Her tone was dead flat. Completely unemotional, and she didn't so much as look at him as she walked out the door.

Quinn was torn as to whether or not he should go after her. On the one hand – his dominant side was demanding that he catch up to her before she got to her truck, pick her up, spank her until she came to her senses and love her till she couldn't see straight. But with the way she was obviously feeling, he wasn't at all sure that that was the best thing to do, and he didn't want to screw this up any more than he obviously already had.

"Hey, where's Annie?" Reena asked, already half in the bag from the champagne Mike had brought home.

Quinn drew a deep breath, still staring at the door she'd gone out of. He could hear the truck rev – people ten miles away in Faith could hear that truck rev – and then heard her drive out of the yard. And the further away she got, the more he knew he should have listened to his dominant side and gone and gotten her, even if he had to drag her into the house kicking and screaming. At least she'd be here.

With that thought, he reached out and grabbed the ring she'd left and tucked it into his pocket, walking determinedly to the door without even so much as an acknowledgement of Reena's existence.

It wasn't like Faith was a huge town or anything, and she didn't have any more than a five or ten minute start on him. How could one small woman in beat up old truck manage to disappear so quickly? Quinn asked himself for the nine trillionth time as he road up and down the streets. The longer the delay before he found her, the more indignant – and angrier – he got about her reaction.

He wasn't trying to take the ranch away from her. He never would. He was just trying to do something nice for the woman he loved, and he was going to get her to see that if he had to spank her every day for the rest of their lives.

If he could just find her . . .

What Quinn didn't realize was that he was closer to her when he'd been at the Circle C than he was in town. Annie had driven less than a mile away from home to a place where she knew she'd always be accepted – to Callie Ballentine's house.

Kaz had opened the door when she'd run the bell, his broad grin of welcome dissolving immediately at the look on her face. "What's wrong?"

Annie dissolved into tears before she even made over the threshold, and that was when Kaz yelled for Callie. Crying women – who weren't crying from a freshly delivered spanking – gave him hives. He had a hard enough time dealing with his wife's occasional bouts; there was no way he'd be able to work his way through the land mines of another woman's sobbing implosion.

But he was smart enough not to back away from her with his hands in the air. He was trainable, Callie had said, but barely. Instead he hugged her gently while screaming over his shoulder for Callie, who was putting the baby to bed.

"What? What are you bellowing about – I just got the baby to sleep – Oh my God, what happened?" The transfer of the crying woman from uncomfortable masculine shoulder to sympathetic friend shoulder was accomplished with a minimum of fuss. Kaz left and put on a pot of coffee, then disappeared into his den to cleanse himself with an action hero movie fest.

Callie helped Annie to the comfy sectional in the family room and let her cry it out for a while, after asking short "yes" or "no" questions that Annie could just nod or shake her head in to answer. "Is anyone dead?"

Shake. Annie seemed to be trying to get herself together, but was only somewhat successful.

"Is anyone badly hurt?"

Shake. Sniffle. Callie produced a Kleenex, and Annie blew her nose noisily.

"Is anyone seriously ill?"

Shake.

"Is the ranch still standing?" That question was enough to start the waterworks all over again. Callie held her friend again, waiting for the storm to pass, then put the box of tissues next to her friend's leg in anticipation of another one. "So it's about the ranch."

A loud, watery nod.

Callie brushed the hair back from Annie's eyes. She was really worried about her friend. Annie was the least likely to cry of anyone she knew besides Kaz. In fact, except for when her parents had died and the very occasional chick flick, she had never seen Annie cry. It must be something really, really big.

"Did he withdraw the proposal?"

More gut wrenching sobs.

Callie was amazed. What she knew of Quinn – which granted wasn't that much beyond having met him that one time in the diner and what she heard from Annie when they chatted online – he seemed like a rock solid type of guy, not the kind to blow hot and cold like that at all. He and Kaz were cut from the same cloth – Kaz thought he was darned near perfect because he'd taken Annie to task about putting up fence the exact same way he would have done for Callie, if she'd had any designs on messing around with barbed wire, which she thankfully did not.

She looked down at Annie's left hand, at her bare ring finger. "He said he didn't want to marry you any more and took the ring back?"

Annie leaned back on the couch and grabbed a handful of tissues, shaking her head the whole time. "No," she croaked, pressing the Kleenexes to her eyes. "He paid off the mortgage on the ranch."

"That's great!" Callie cried, bouncing up and down on the couch in glee. "Now you don't . . . have . . . to . . ." Annie was still shaking her head. "That was a horrid thing he did paying off your mortgage like that without so much as a by your leave! That animal!" She wasn't trying to sound sarcastic, necessarily, but it came out that way anyway.

"Thanks for the support," Annie said dejectedly, only half kidding.

This time Callie grabbed Annie's arms and turned her friend towards her. "He loves you. And he didn't do anything wrong, Annie. He did something wonderful. Do you know how many men – especially nowadays – would have kept the money to themselves and let the ranch go under no matter how much it meant to you, because it was their money?"

Annie hated it when Callie was right, but her friend was far from done. "Did you do anything to help Quinn with his computer project?"

Annie snorted. "I didn't touch his computer or it never would have booted again. You know I know less than nothing about computers."

"I do know. But Quinn – who, by the way, came to the ranch knowing nothing and learned everything in a short amount of time – helped you keep that place from going under twelve ways from Sunday before he selflessly laid out his hard earned money – that you had nothing to do with his earning – to make sure that the bank wouldn't take your ranch. And, for all intents and purposes, you guys are engaged – although you're stringing him along about it because you have this paranoia about anyone taking the ranch away from you – and I would bet that Quinn thought that he was paying off the mortgage on a property that you would both own jointly very shortly."

If there was one thing she could always count on from Callie, it was that she would tell her straight exactly what she thought. They'd been friends too long for either of them to go dancing around stuff.

And the more she listened to Callie, the worse she felt about how she'd treated Quinn. Callie had termed it perfectly – paranoia. Quinn was hardly after the ranch – heck, no one with half a brain would want the place. Every building was on the verge of collapse, the market for beef stunk unless you were a big time operator, every bit mortgaged to the hilt.

Correction. It was mortgaged to the hilt.

For the first time since he'd come home, Annie drew a deep breath and allowed herself to feel the wonderful relief of knowing that she would never have to dread the fifteenth of the month ever again in her life, never have to sneak past the bank when she was downtown because she was late yet again, never have to choose between paying the credit cards and the mortgage again.

All because of Quinn, the man she'd walked out on, whose ring she'd torn off her finger. The man she'd wounded to the core, she was sure, who right now had no idea whether she was alive or dead.

Chapter Nine

Annie stood, wiping her face with the backs of her hands. "I gotta go home." She only hoped he was still there.

"Good girl!" Callie patted her on the back and walked her to the door, but just as they both got there, the doorbell rang.

It was Quinn, and he wasn't looking any too happy. Annie's visions of throwing herself at his mercy dried up on the spot. He looked like he wanted to tear her apart limb from limb.

"Quinn, come on in. Annie was just leaving."

"Damn straight," he growled, reaching past Callie for Annie's hand and tugging her out the door.

"It was nice to see you again!" Callie called at their backs. "Congratulations!" She shivered, thanking God she wasn't Annie at this particular moment.

Neither of them heard her. All Annie could see or hear or feel was Quinn. How she could ever have doubted him, have thought that he was capable of being the type of person that would sneak into someone's life and take advantage of them like that? He just wouldn't.

Quinn tucked her into the plush front seat of his new Jag, then went around to the driver's side. He didn't say one word to her all the way home. Nothing. Nada. Zero.

Apparently, he was going to go into the dark house without having said a word to her either, but before he could get out of the car, Annie put her hand on his arm. "I want to apologize for my behavior in the kitchen - before."

He crossed his massive arms across his chest, leaning back in his seat and saying, "Go ahead."

Suddenly, Annie's mouth was dry as the Sahara, but her already swollen eyes were overflowing with tears. She wanted to look away from him, but she didn't. "I'm so sorry for what I said. I overreacted and I shouldn't have. I should have trusted you. Callie helped me see that I was just being blatantly paranoid. You've never been anything but good to me - well," she reconsidered, "except the spankings." She'd expected at least a small smile, but none was forthcoming. Annie hurried on nervously. "What I should have said is thank you. You're a wonderful, generous man, and I love you."

He hadn't moved a muscle, his defensive stance hadn't relaxed one bit. She felt like she was going to be living under "the look" for the rest of her life.

Drastic times called for drastic actions, though, so Annie did what she thought she should do. She reached for the waistband of her jeans and unbuttoned then unzipped them, tugging them down past her hips.

At least she was getting some reaction out of him, finally. At first he just looked amazed, but that quickly turned to a more salacious interest. But she managed to swing that back firmly into the amazed category when she tried to drape herself over his lap. With the steering wheel in the way, it didn't work so well, and she thought she was going to get away with just making a brave attempt at offering herself as a sacrifice, until she felt Quinn's hand at the small of her back, adjusting her just a little, so that she was only over one of his knees, with the steering wheel helping him keep her in place.

"I take it you want me to spank you." They were the first words he'd said to her since he'd found her.

Annie sighed, feeling a bit ridiculous, but she forged ahead anyway. "Yes, I do." Her mind had turned against her body, though, and she was openly wondering what the heck she thought she was doing, giving him the opportunity to spank her. She didn't need to give him any extra help in this area. He had found reasons – depressingly valid reasons, she had to admit but only to herself – enough to do just that whenever he deemed fit, and she knew from experience that it was no fun at all.

But Annie felt almost like her bottom was an olive branch. She had wronged him – badly – by jumping to wild conclusions about his motives for paying off her bills, instead of realizing how wonderful he was to even think of doing that for her in the first place. He would have no obligation to do that even if they were married, but it had been the first thing he did, apparently, the minute he came into town, because he loved her and he'd wanted to ease her mind. Nothing more sinister than that.

Annie drew a deep breath, and told him exactly what she'd just been thinking. She laid it all on the line, and didn't spare herself, despite the fact that she was bare bottomed over his lap – voluntarily. She did stress the voluntary part; she wasn't above trying to eke some sympathy out of him. "I'm very, very sorry, and I should have loved you enough to know that you wouldn't do anything to hurt me like that."

Quinn's hand rubbed automatically all over her bottom without his having to think about it, while his mind was preoccupied by even more heady stuff. He'd been devastated when she'd taken off his ring and walked out. Getting into the car and trying to find her – however frustrating that had been – gave him something to do, and a way to defer his hurt and anger. When he'd finally found her at Callie's – which should have been the first place he tried – he had been sincerely considering spanking her right then and there, in front of God and everyone – he didn't much care, and he knew that Kaz would probably applaud his efforts.

But he didn't, because he wasn't at all sure that he could control himself, and he would never let himself touch her in anger. So he kept his mouth shut. He figured that when they got home, he'd let himself go a little Neanderthal and carry her up to the bedroom to work off some of the steam he'd built up, waiting and worrying and wondering about her. Wondering if he'd truly lost her, and how the hell he was ever going to get along without her.

Instead, here she was, sexy, bare bottom up over his knee, practically begging her to spank him. There was a God.

But he wasn't going to spank her. Fondle, yes. Spank, no. He decided when she did something that warranted a spanking. Not Annie. His fingers followed her natural crease, delving between them to discover something he'd wondered about – whether or not a spanking – or the prospect of receiving one – turned her on. He had his answer very quickly when his probing middle finger became drenched in her juices as he slipped it up inside her.

Annie tried to buck off his lap – this wasn't what she'd signed on for. She expected him to leave her skin tattooed with the imprint of his hand, but not to explore her intimately in her – their, she corrected herself immediately – front yard. But that damned steering wheel kept her right where he wanted her. "Quinn! Let me up!"

He didn't acknowledge her order in any way that she could see. He did wear a surprised look, that someone in her position who was just asking to be disciplined would then turn around and try to tell him what to do. But she wasn't going anywhere. He let a second finger join the first, making Annie draw in a sudden breath and try to wiggle away. "Nope, sweetie, you're going to stay right here and take your punishment."

"Punishment?" she could barely catch her breath. He was inside her, stretching her open, plunging those two impossibly big fingers in and out of her in an unstoppable rhythm.

"Yes, punishment. Because I'm going to bring you right to the edge, but I'm not going to let you come."

"Wha - !" His fingers pulled out of her to move slowly downward, until they encountered her stiff, swollen little nub. Slick, callused fingers surrounded her, playing over and over the very tip then down around the sides all at once very, very slowly, making her want to buck her hips against them and somehow ride them to completion, but he knew her too well for that, and he immediately withdrew his hand completely.

Annie squealed with the ache of unfulfilled desire and clenched her legs together, her hands automatically reaching down to complete what he'd started. That earned her a sharp swat on the bottom. "No. Move your hands right now or I'll give you the spanking I was going to at Kaz and Callie's."

Mortified at the thought but dying for completion, she reluctantly complied. She was all too familiar with that tone of his voice.

Quinn reclined back and turned her towards him, so that she essentially straddled him, with the steering wheel at her back. Annie looked down at him, biting her lip, her eyes filling with tears for the umpteenth time that evening. "I'm so sorry, Quinn. I am."

"I know you are, sweetie. And I couldn't spank you for something like that. You've been fighting for this place all your life, trying to make it a success and slaving and sweating over it, and it was a natural reaction. I should have thought about that and talked to you and helped you through it before I did it. I just wanted to take what stresses I could off you as soon as possible. I should have thought about how I would feel if you had suddenly swooped in and made the deal for my computer stuff without consulting me." He cupped her cheek and wiped away her tears with his thumb. "No more crying, honey, unless it's from happiness. You'll never have to worry about money again, I promise. We can have a passel of kids once we're married, if you like, and we'll be able to afford to send them to the best schools in the world. We can have a huge spectacle of a wedding, too, if you like." The idea of a big wedding made him want to cringe - he had absolutely no interest in being the center of attention of a crowd of people - but he would do it for Annie in a heartbeat, if that's what she wanted.

She collapsed onto his chest, rubbing her face against his shirt and wrapping her arms around him - as far as she could - and hugging him tight. Annie knew how loathe he would be to have a wedding like that, and neither would she choose that style of wedding.

"No," she sobbed, shaking her head. "I don't want that. I want to get married in a small ceremony here." Annie paused for a second, then added, "On our ranch."

Quinn smiled and kissed her gently when he heard the pronoun she so carefully chose. "We can afford to buy any house we want, Annie, but we'll always have the ranch. Always."

The wedding march was beginning to play, and Annie arranged the long skirt of her dress around her as she saw first her nephew, who was a little old but nevertheless played the ring bearer role with unusual aplomb, then her niece, who had been ecstatic to be a junior bridesmaid, and then her sister, then Callie Ballentine - her matron of honor - drift down the stairs into the living room, where the ceremony was to be held. She tried to avoid the usual bridal tendency to dress her attendants hideously in order to make herself look better. She and Callie and Reena had shopped for their dresses together, and Annie had refused to look at anything that Callie wouldn't wear again sometime, to a Cattleman's Association dinner or something, anything. Annie and Quinn were paying for the whole event, including everyone's dresses and tuxes, but Annie was too practical to want to buy anything other than a wedding dress that wasn't going to get at least one more wear out of it.

Although they could have afforded to have gone to L.A. or New York to find a dress, they patronized as many local businesses as they could as they planned the event. The downtown bakery where Quinn used to get her morning doughnuts made their three tier, pink marble wedding cake, complete with waterfall and stairs between tiers. The intricacy of the cake was a testament to the fact that he had been with her when she picked it out - she'd had to talk him down from five tiers as it was, and

there were only going to be a handful of people at the wedding. They were going to be eating this cake until their golden anniversary, she swore.

Annie descended the staircase alone, down to an eagerly waiting Quinn, who was wearing a cutaway tux that somehow made him look like an outlaw from the eighteen nineties. He held his arms out to her as she got closer so that when she stepped off the last stair, she stepped into his arms, where, he'd said when they'd had an informal rehearsal last night, she belonged.

Together, they moved toward the minister who was standing in front of the fireplace. The house looked a bit different than it had, but not as much as it might have. Quinn and Annie were too basically conservative to do a wild makeover. All of Quinn's computer stuff had been moved to an office downtown, and Annie's dilapidated old recliner had been replaced with a top of the line LaZBoy, but other than that and a fresh coat of paint that they'd applied themselves, they hadn't changed a thing.

Their guests were a small select group of friends and family – and friends who were family. Regan had made it back for the wedding, but there was a poignancy about that because it meant that his sister had passed on and no longer needed him. He would be taking over his foreman position again, hiring people and running the ranch without having to worry where the money was going to come from to do so any more, and with a new foreman's house that he was helping build and a yearly salary that was more than he'd made combined in his lifetime so far.

Brenda and her husband and Kaz was there, of course, as well as a few other carefully chosen friends.

The couple had written their own vows, so before the minister got a chance to do the more traditional ceremony – in which Quinn had insisted that they retain the word "obey" in his wife's vows – he turned to Annie.

She turned towards Quinn and took both of his hands in hers. When she spoke, the only person she saw in the room was him. "I love you. You've brought more joy and happiness into my world than I ever expected to have. You're my best friend, my lover, and my true partner." Quinn smiled down at her with such love that the tears just began to roll down her face. There was no denying them, but they didn't stop her. "I want to wake up with you in the morning, and crawl into bed with you every night. I promise to always put up with you, to always be honest with you, and to always love you." She leaned forward and kissed him gently, reverently, on the lips.

Holding her hands wasn't enough for Quinn. He pulled her up against him and wrapped his arms around her waist. Everyone in their small audience "awwwwwed" at how romantic he was being. "I love you, Annie Cavanaugh Rideout, and I have to say that I really feel a little like we're playing out Beauty and the Beast here, but I'm amazed and honored that you love me. I promise to always take care of you, and make sure that you never smoke again." He winked at her, and Callie clapped loudly. She'd always hated that her friend smoked. "I want your face to be the first thing I see in the morning, and the last thing I see at night. I want to raise babies and travel and see everything the world has to offer with you. I never thought I'd ever be this happy, either, but I know you're the reason for it, and I never intend to let you go. I love you."

He bent her back over his arm and kissed her like Rhett kissed Scarlett, while their friends and family whooped and hollered.

When he finally let her up for air, they continued with the ceremony, until the minister finally said those magic words, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Then he did it again, only this time to raucous applause and cat calls.

Everyone crowded in to offer their congratulations as the champagne flowed freely. Their wedding dinner was an informal barbeque catered by Junior's, the best place for ribs in Faith. Everyone ate themselves into oblivion, including the bride and groom, who were having such a good time they practically had to be pushed out the door by their guests so that they could make their plane in time to leave for their honeymoon.

Since Quinn was essentially just starting a new job, of sorts, they didn't want to take too much time right now, but they didn't want to skip the honeymoon entirely, either. So they compromised, and headed for a place that Quinn said he'd fallen in love with during one of his trips out to the West coast before he'd struck it rich – the Oregon coast – for about five days. They landed in Eugene and drove west to Florence, where they had rented a small but well outfitted cottage that sat out on a bluff, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, with windows on three sides, so that the ocean was practically a part of the room, which included a DVD player, a huge, canopied king sized bed, a Jacuzzi tub incorporated into the porch, and hot and cold running gourmet room service.

The proprietors were two wonderful, friendly people who doted on all of their guests, and knew Quinn and Annie were only going to be there for a short honeymoon, so they kept up a steady flow of tempting aphrodisiacs to the small cottage, gratis, as well as chocolates, champagne, and clean, hot towels.

Annie didn't think that she could get any happier than she was. If anyone had asked her a year ago about what she would be doing the next year, she would have been able to say with a depressing surety that she would be working the ranch. But she would have been dead wrong.

They intended to keep the ranch as their base, but they both wanted to travel, so Quinn would be taking as much time away from the roll out of his product as he dared to so that they could go to the places they'd only dreamed about – Hawaii, Scotland, and Italy being three of their first goals.

Annie got up from their completely wrecked bed and stood in front of the huge front window, watching the sun set in all its brilliant color. A shiver ran through her, but she didn't know why. She wasn't cold – Quinn was quite adept at keeping her toasty warm, one way or the other. The only problem she ever had with that was when he wanted to apply that principle to her bottom.

He came up behind her and pulled her back against him. His erection nuzzled against her back, but she knew it was false advertising. They'd barely been out of bed since they got there, and tomorrow it was going to be time to leave. Even as insatiable as they were for each other, four times in as many hours was too much for any man.

"Cold?" he asked, feeling the bumps along her arms.

"No, just felt a goose walk over my grave or something."

Quinn frowned, not liking that idea at all. He reached behind him and dragged the snugly flowered quilt off the bed to wrap it around them as they gazed out over the magnificence of sun meeting ocean. "We are so lucky," she sighed rocking them back and forth as his chin rested on the top of her head.

"Yes, we are. In more ways than one. And what's more, we've both been unlucky – in love and in life, and we won't forget what that's like. We'll appreciate what we've got more than some people might."

Annie nodded vigorously, but that was about the extent of her energy at this point.

Quinn turned her around in his arms, frowning slightly. "I think it's been entirely too long since I've kissed you, Mrs. Rideout," he stated in all seriousness.

"Oh, I believe you're entirely correct about that!" Annie agreed eagerly.

Nine months later, almost to the hour, Quinn was supporting Annie's back and brushing her hair away from her face while she rode out the contractions. She'd wanted to do this without any drugs, but he'd vetoed that thought immediately, knowing he would never be able to live through the idea of her being in so much pain, and he wanted to be able to help her as much as possible without having to watch her in agony.

She'd acquiesced and had the epidural, and things were progressing right on schedule. Annie's requirements were not so much a natural birth, necessarily, but one that involved as little trauma to the baby as possible. He'd spent almost a month trying to convince her not to have the child in a tub at home, and finally he'd just put his foot down and said no.

They'd found a wonderful birthing center, though, and Annie seemed to be okay with that, although she had some very particular specifications – she wanted to deliver in a bedroom like setting, not a sterile delivery room. The lights were to be kept dimmed as much as possible at all times. Annie said she couldn't think of anything worse than to be dragged from some place warm and comfy and cozy and into a place with glaringly bright lights and hard metal and that it was no wonder some newborns emerged screaming in protest.

"I can see the head," her O.B. said, "One more slow, steady push and you'll be welcoming a new member into your family."

Annie took a deep breath, and everyone in the room pushed with her, including Quinn, who was also counting for her, bathing her forehead, and feeding her ice chips. He would have done anything to help her get through this.

"Here we are!" Quinn watched the baby emerge from his wife's body with a rush of blood and other fluids. The doctor did exactly as Annie had requested, and once he'd cleared the baby's nose and mouth, he placed the child directly onto Annie's stomach. "You have a beautiful baby girl."

The nurses cleaned the baby around them, as much as possible, but eventually they had to take her away to footprint her and do all of their tests. While their daughter was screaming and fussing and giving the staff what for, Quinn bent over his wife and kissed her. "She's beautiful. You're beautiful. Thank you."

Annie threw her arms around his neck and cried, for the first time during the entire birth experience. What she felt for this man – and now for her little daughter – nearly made her heart burst.

Quinn was concerned. "Honey, are you okay?"

Annie nodded. "Yeah, I'm just very much in love with my husband and my little girl."

"What are we going to call her?"

Elizabeth Callie Rideout weighed a healthy eight pounds, five ounces, and didn't stop screaming until she was put to her mother's breast. "She's already just like her father," Annie quipped in a watery tone. "Bossy as all get out."

Quinn smiled, tears of joy spilling unashamedly down his cheeks. "That's my little girl."

But he was already looking ahead to when Elizabeth was a teenager, and having to beat boys out of the bushes with a stick. That thought nearly stopped his heart, but then, he didn't have to worry about that for a while.

He sat back and watched his daughter nurse as he held the two of them in his arms, thinking it was amazing what could happen to you when you answered a want ad.

