



# The Ranger

*Holly  
Harte*

The Ranger

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Holly Harte

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

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*One bale of barb spelled more trouble in Texas than  
any other ten outfits of bad hombres.*

— Texas Ranger Ira Aten

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# One

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*Austin Texas, Summer 1886*

"Psst."

Texas Ranger Sergeant Blu Cahill came to a halt at the alley's entrance, his senses going on full alert.

"Psst." The sound came again, more persistent this time.

He turned slightly, narrowing his gaze to probe the alley's deep shadows. Catching a whisper of movement, he stared harder. The shadows shifted, finally separating to reveal the form of a human, but male or female, he couldn't be certain.

"I'd . . . um . . . like to talk to you." The voice identified the person as female.

Blu narrowed his gaze even more, every muscle tense with anticipation. As a Ranger, he never let down his guard for a situation to turn dangerous. He wouldn't be the first man lured into an alley by a woman only to be knocked senseless and robbed by a male accomplice. Inching his right hand closer to the butt of the Colt revolver strapped to his thigh, he watched the woman move toward him.

She left the shadows and stepped into a golden shaft of late-morning sunlight. Dropping a large valise at her feet, she lifted her chin and met his gaze. Blu's breath lodged in his throat. She had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen, their color an incredible lavender and surrounded by thick, dark lashes. Forcing himself to breathe, he pulled his gaze away from those mesmerizing eyes to the rest of her pale oval face. He noted her prominent slanted cheekbones, slightly upturned nose, and full, sultry mouth before shifting his perusal upward to the wealth of glossy dark-brown hair piled atop her head. One thick curl had worked loose, hanging down to brush the side of her neck. The

urge to finger that strand of hair took him by surprise. Summoning the willpower to keep his hands at his sides, he opened his mouth to speak, but found his vocal cords wouldn't cooperate.

Blu seldom had occasion to be in the company of a lady other than the type of "lady" who sold her favors, but none of those rare encounters had left him speechless. He swallowed, ran his tongue over his bone-dry lips, then finally managed to force out a croaking "Talk."

The young woman cleared her throat, then said, "My name is Delana Wyatt, and I have a proposition for you."

Blu's eyebrows lifted. "Really?" Shifting his weight to one leg, he placed his hands on his hips. "And what would that be, Miss Wyatt?"

"I . . . um . . ." She dropped her gaze, the soft pink of a blush creeping up her cheeks. "I need a man."

"Is that right?" he replied, using a thumb to push the brim of his hat off his forehead. Unaccountably, the notion of this young woman taking up the life of a prostitute irritated him, turning his voice gruff. "Well, I havta tell you, missy, if this is yer way of joining the ladies of the line, I think you'd better rethink your plan. There are better ways of attracting clients."

Her head snapped up. "I'm not trying to become a . . . a . . . one of those women," she replied in a quavering voice, her entire face turning a dull red. "That's not why I'm looking for a man. I need to find one who'll help me get out of Austin."

When he made no reply, she pulled herself up to her full height, which only brought the top of her head even with his chin. "I . . . um . . . don't have the money to pay you right now. But I promise I'll see that you're compensated for your time."

Blu studied her for several moments, wondering why she seemed so anxious to get out of town. He didn't like the answers that came to mind. Finally, he said, "You running from the law?"

She shook her head, a flicker of what looked like pain flashing in her beautiful eyes.

"I'd never expect to be paid for helping someone in need, Miss Wyatt. That is, if you truly are. So you'd better start talking."

She took a deep breath, giving Blu a glimpse of small, firm breasts pressed against the bodice of her dress. "It's a long story."

"I ain't going anywhere," he replied, jerking his gaze from her bosom.

She glanced around, switching the small leather satchel she held from one hand to the other. Leaning closer, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Could we go somewhere more private?"

Blu knew he should make up some excuse, then just walk away and not look back. But Delana Wyatt intrigued him too much to do that. "I was just headin' back to my hotel room." He nodded toward the brick building on the other side of the alley. "Care to join me?"

"I . . ." She swallowed hard, then stared up at him for a long moment. Apparently finding nothing in his expression to scare her off, she said, "Is there a rear entrance?"

For a second, Blu considered lying to see how she'd react. But he squashed the idea just as quickly. He recognized the look on her face, and he couldn't bring himself to add to her anxiety. "Yeah, there's a door in the back."

"Then, I'll join you, Mr . . ."

"Cahill. Blu Cahill," he replied, bending to pick up her valise. He tugged his hat brim back into place, took the satchel from her hand, then indicated she should precede him down the alley.

As he followed her to the hotel's rear entrance, he remained silent, wishing he didn't carry around the burden of wanting to help those in need. He scrunched his face into a scowl. *How do they always manage to find me? It's like I've got a goddamn sign that reads, "Easy Mark for the Helpless," hanging around my neck.* Though he knew the reason behind his willingness to be a champion of the unfortunate stemmed from his own past, he kept wishing the urge to help eventually would disappear. But it never did.

By the time he opened the door to his room and waved Delana toward the only chair, he'd managed to force his thoughts back to the present. Closing and locking the door behind him, he dropped her valise on the floor, set her satchel on top of it, then turned to face her.

"Now," he said, removing his hat and tossing it onto the table beside her chair, "what's this about?" He leaned a shoulder against the door frame, staring at her from beneath partially lowered eyelids.

Delana plucked at the fabric of her skirt. "I need to get out of town before Henry Lawton, my stepfather, forces me to marry the man he's selected to be my husband."

"You look like you're of age, so how can he force you to get married?"



"Because I'm totally dependent on him. I live in his house, he pays for the food I eat, the clothes I wear. If I refuse, he could toss me out into the street with nothing."

"You think he'd actually do that?" When she nodded, he said, "Have you met the man he's chosen?"

"We haven't been formally introduced, but I know who he is. Cyrus Townsend. He . . ." She squeezed her eyes closed for a second. "He must be close to seventy years old."

A knot formed in Blu's gut. "How do you know he's your stepfather's choice?"

"I overheard a conversation he had with Cyrus." She lifted a shaking hand to brush a wisp of hair off her temple. "Henry gave him instructions on how to court me, telling him what I like to do, what I like to read. Everything Cyrus needs to know to, as Henry put it, sweep me off my feet." She frowned, shifting restlessly on the chair, then lifted her chin. "But I have no intention of marrying Cyrus Townsend, or any other man."

He studied her in silence for a moment, then said, "How come you've got such a low opinion of marriage?"

She swallowed, dropping her gaze to where she held her hands clenched in her lap. "My mother was the only child of a sickly mother and an extremely strict father. After my grandmother's death, my grandfather became even more controlling. Mama finally rebelled by running away with a man her father had forbidden her to see. When she became pregnant with me, they went to Grandfather and asked for his blessing, but he refused. He sent my father away with threats of what would happen if he ever returned, but he allowed my mother to move back into his house. Back under his control."

She glanced up at him, her lavender eyes shiny with tears, her lips trembling. Blu had the sudden urge to go to her, to take her in his arms, to offer the comfort of his embrace. But he forced himself to stay put.

She sniffled, gave her cheeks a quick swipe with the back of one hand, then said, "Life wasn't pleasant for my mother or me while I was growing up. I had just turned sixteen when Grandfather suffered a fatal stroke. Mama met Henry Lawton shortly after the funeral." Her mouth curved in a tremulous smile. "She became a different person under Henry's fawning attention, falling in love with him almost immediately. When they married a month later, Mama thought she'd finally have the

life she always wanted." She made a sound in her throat, something between a shaky laugh and a snort. "He certainly had Mama fooled. She thought he loved her, too. When she found out he'd married her to get his hands on Grandfather's estate, it broke her heart, and worse, crushed her spirit. Not long after that her health started to fail." She drew a shaky breath, clenching her fingers so tightly her knuckles turned white. "She died two years later."

Blu's chest tightened at the pain she'd suffered. But he remained silent, waiting for her to continue.

"Anyway," she said, unclenching her hands and smoothing the fabric of her skirt. "After witnessing what both my grandfather and Henry Lawton did to my mother, I decided I never want to end up like her." Stiffening her spine, she lifted her chin and met his gaze. "I want to be free to make my own choices. To live my life as I see fit, and not have someone constantly telling me what I can and cannot do."

Blu heard the bitterness in her voice, saw the determination come into her beautiful eyes, and the way she hardened her delicate jaw.

He stared at her for several seconds, then said, "I happen to share your views on marriage, Miss Wyatt." Dropping his voice, he added, "Though our reasons aren't the same." Pulling himself a second time from memories he didn't want to unearth, he said, "Does your stepfather know how you feel?"

"Henry knows I never encouraged the men who came to call on me." Her full mouth turned down in a frown. "Now that I think about it, maybe he did something to make sure they didn't come back. Maybe he'd already begun his plan to handpick my husband and wanted to chase off the competition." Her eyes suddenly went wide. "I just realized why he told Cyrus so much about me. Henry asked me about marriage once, specifically, what I considered to be the most important factor when choosing a husband. I told him I would marry only if the man and I were head over heels in love."

"Given your feelings about marriage, I'm guessing you don't believe that can happen." When she shook her head, he said, "Then why'd you feed him that line about only marrying for love?"

"I had to say something," she replied with a sigh. "Something that sounded believable."

After another long pause while he digested everything she'd told him, he said, "So if it's independence you want, why bother trying

to find someone to get you out of town? Why not just get on a train and leave?"

"My stepfather is an extremely influential businessman in town. He knows nearly everyone, and if I left by stage or train, he'd certainly know about it before I was a mile out of town."

"How do you know I'm not an acquaintance of your stepfather?"

"Henry's office is in his home, so I see the men he deals with every day. And since my mother's death, I've served as his hostess for the many social functions he gives, so I'm familiar with both his business associates and personal friends." She fixed her gaze on his face for several seconds, then said, "No, I'm sure my stepfather doesn't know you. Am I wrong?"

"No, I've never met the man," Blu replied, glad he hadn't, since he felt certain he'd find nothing to like about Henry Lawton.

"Don't you have any lady friends who'd help you?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose, then exhaled with a sigh. "Most of the women I know are married and think I should be, too, so they'd have no sympathy for my situation. I considered trying to find a woman I don't know and ask for her help. But since I haven't met the wives of all my stepfather's acquaintances, I was afraid I'd unwittingly approach one of them. I wasn't willing to take that risk."

Blu nodded but didn't respond.

The silence in the room stretched on for a minute or two; then finally, she said, "Will you . . ." Her words came out in a shaky croak. She cleared her throat, then began again. "Will you help me get out of town?"

"You got some place to go?"

Delana shook her head. "I don't have any other family, and I don't care where I go. I just want to get out of Austin."

Blu lifted a hand and rubbed the backs of his knuckles along the side of his jaw. "Give me a minute to think this through." Pushing away from the door frame, he moved to the second-floor room's narrow window and looked down at the street. He watched wagons rolling past the hotel, and people walking down the boardwalk, but was not really seeing any of the street scene below. Instead, his thoughts were filled with the woman sitting just a few feet away and the story she'd told him.

When Delana hailed him in the alley, he'd been thinking about his meeting the previous afternoon with the state adjutant general,

the commander of the Texas Rangers, a meeting in which he'd been given his latest assignment. As a nine-year veteran of the force and an experienced Ranger detective, he'd been selected for a special secret mission to stop a ring of wire cutters — the latest round in the fence-cutting wars plaguing the state. After leaving his commander's office, he'd spent the evening forming a plan for going undercover in a county where previous Ranger detectives had failed. He finally decided posing as a footloose, out-of-work cowhand would be the best approach. So the last thing he needed was the albatross of a woman-in-need. But after hearing what Delana Wyatt had to say, he had to rethink his plan.

For several minutes, he went back over everything she'd told him, then contemplated his options. Finally, he stepped away from the window and turned to face her. "Something still bothers me about your story."

She looked up at him with wide eyes. "What?"

"Why's your stepfather trying so hard to marry you off? What's in it for him?"

"I told you, I'm totally dependent on him. If I marry and move out of his house, he'll no longer have to pay for my maid, the food I eat, or my clothes."

Blu thought about her response, then shook his head. "Nope, I'm not buying that. What it costs him to support you isn't reason enough to put so much effort into finding a husband for you. And even if it was, why would he pick Cyrus Townsend, a man old enough to be your grandfather?" He paused to let his words sink in, then said, "What's his real reason for wanting to marry you off, Miss Wyatt?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it with a snap. After inhaling a deep breath and releasing it slowly, she said, "When my grandfather died, he didn't leave his entire estate to my mother. At the reading of his will, I learned he'd set up a trust fund for me not long after I was born. The fund transfers to me when I turn twenty-one. Three months from now."

"That's how you meant to pay me?"

She nodded. "After I collect the money, I plan to go somewhere, buy a house, and" — she shot a quick glance in his direction — "that is, provided there's enough in the trust fund to pay for a house."

His gaze narrowed. "You don't know what it's worth?"

"I . . . uh . . . well, no. I don't know the exact amount."

Blu studied her silently for a moment, then said, "If the trust fund is payable to you, how would Henry Lawton get his hands on it? If anyone had a right to claim anything of yours, it would be your hus — " He scowled. "Damn, now I see what he's up to. Lawton needs you to marry a man he can control. Someone he can keep under his thumb."

"Yes," she replied. "Henry likes to manipulate people, so I'm sure he tried to find someone who will dance to his tune."

"But why would he want your trust fund when he already has control of the larger share of your grandfather's estate?"

She rubbed her temples with her fingertips. "Though I don't know for sure, I wouldn't be surprised if he's lost everything Grandfather left my mother. I do know he's made some bad investments during the past year, and he's probably deep in debt. That's why he wants my inheritance."

"If there isn't much in your trust fund, it won't go very far."

"Um . . . yes, that's true. But even a small amount would get his creditors off his back for a while."

Blu mulled over her statement, then said, "If he's desperate for money, I reckon he'd settle for whatever he can get."

"Does that mean you'll help me?"

He stared at her for a few more seconds, then exhaled heavily. "Yeah, I'll get you out of town, but you have to do something for me in return." Her brow furrowed, she eyed him warily. "What?"

"I'm supposed to leave town today and head northwest, up to Brownwood in Brown County. I can't give you the details, but I'm going up there on a job. I'll be working as a rancher, and I need you to pose as my wife."

"Your . . ." Her throat worked with a swallow. "Your wife?"

"I thought about asking you to pretend to be my sister, but I . . . uh . . . think having you pose as my wife makes more sense." Blu refused to acknowledge why he hadn't even seriously considered having them pose as siblings, his mind jumping immediately to the idea of making her his pretend bride. Though he still agreed with his original conclusion — a married couple arriving in Brown County would draw less attention and therefore raise fewer suspicions — he wouldn't allow himself to dig any deeper into the reasons behind his decision.

"What kind of job requires you to pretend you're married?"

"The less you know, the better. All I'll say is that I need to fit in, need to look like one of the locals."

"You'll be playing a role to cover your real reason for being there?"

"Yeah."

"Are you a Pinkerton?"

"No, and I can't tell you any more."

She stared at him, her lavender eyes doing funny things to his insides — things he didn't want to think about. He watched her draw another deep breath, his heart rate accelerating. Though he recalled the outline of her breasts in vivid detail, he kept his eyes focused above her neck.

Finally, she said, "How long will I have to pretend to be your wife?"

He shrugged. "Can't say for sure. A few weeks. A few months. Just depends on how fast I finish my job." Before she could respond, he said, "You should also know, work like this always has some risk of danger. And in this case, that might extend to you. I'll protect you in every way I can, but it's only right you know about the risk, in case you want to change your mind."

He saw her shoulders quiver — from fear or some other emotion, he couldn't tell. He wanted to assure her that he meant her no harm, but he held back the words. Keeping her wary, even afraid of him, would be better — for both of them.

At last she said, "No, Mr. Cahill, I don't want to change my mind. I will agree to your terms. You get me out of Austin and I'll pose as your wife for as long as this *job* of yours lasts." She rose, moved closer to him, then stuck out her right hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Blu's gaze narrowed on her small hand, noting the slight tremble. Though he didn't think touching her would be a good idea, he had no choice. As he carefully wrapped his much larger hand around hers, a ripple of blistering need washed over him. By sheer determination, he kept his facial expression bland, his muscles relaxed, while giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

"Deal," he replied, studying her face. Other than her slightly widened eyes and the flare of her nostrils, he saw nothing to indicate whether she'd experienced the same intense reaction to their first physical contact. He released her hand, then turned away, idly rubbing his still tingling palm on his trousers.

"I need to buy supplies and a wagon," he said. "You can stay here until I have everything ready for our trip."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Not more than a couple hours." He pivoted to face her again. "Is that a problem? Do you think your stepfather is already looking for you?"

She shook her head. "He thinks I'm with Madame Bouvier, my dressmaker, and he knows how long that takes." Her sudden smile and the sparkle in her eyes made Blu's breath catch. "He always fussed about how much my dresses cost, until a few months ago when he decided to go with me. With Madame Bouvier's cooperation, I took steps to make sure his first visit also became his last. I made the process of ordering several new dresses an extremely lengthy and complicated production, mulling over each minute facet of the process, as if it were the most important decision I'd ever have to make." She chuckled, the sound sending a strange warmth through Blu's veins. He needed all his powers of concentration to keep his mind focused on what she was saying.

"I insisted on looking at every pattern Madame Bouvier had in her shop, examining every bolt of fabric and every piece of trim, until he couldn't take any more and stormed out." She smiled again, this one making her face glow. "He still grumbles about the cost of my clothes, but he's never offered to accompany me again." Her smile slowly faded. "Anyway, my absence shouldn't be noticed until morning. He's having supper at his club tonight and won't get home until late."

"But when you don't show up at the breakfast table, won't he think something's happened to you?"

"He might," she replied with a shrug. "But I also took steps to prevent that. I sent a letter to my attorney outlining my plans, along with a note I asked him to deliver to my stepfather tomorrow morning. I told Henry I know what he's up to, that I won't have any part in his plans, and that I won't return until I'm . . ." Her eyes went round for a moment. She blinked once, then snapped her mouth closed.

Blu frowned. "You won't return until you're . . . what?"

"I . . . uh . . . won't return until . . ." She sucked in a quick breath, then finished her statement in a rush. "Until I'm damn good and ready."

Blu blinked, her sudden display of humor taking him by surprise. In spite of his efforts to halt his amusement, a chuckle rumbled in his

chest. "Well put, Miss Wyatt," he said, moving to the table and picking up his hat. "Very well put."

After settling his hat on his head, he started toward the door. "I'd best see about getting those supplies. Since we're going to be setting up a house as a married couple, guess I'd better pick up some things to make us look the part. Any suggestions?"

"Most women have a trunk filled with items they've made or received as gifts."

Blu nodded. "Good point. I'll see what I can find."

He glanced down at her custom-made dress and the toes of her high-heeled kid walking boots peeking beneath the hem. "Are all the clothes you brought as fancy as what yer wearing?" She glanced down at her dress and frowned. "I didn't bring anything fancy, just simple day dresses like this one."

He grunted. "Well, it's too fancy for where we're going. You can save what you brought for Sunday best. I'll see if I can find a couple of ready-made dresses. Then, once we get to Brownwood, we'll go to a store where you can pick out a pair of serviceable shoes and a few more dresses." He gave her a crooked smile. "Hope you won't mind wearing ready-made clothes, but that's what the wife of a rancher who's just starting out will be expected to wear."

She fingered the fabric of her dress, then lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I'll need to fit in, too. So of course I won't mind."

He tugged the brim of his hat lower. "Is there anything else I can get you before we leave town?"

She shifted her gaze to where her luggage sat near the door. "I think I have everything I — " Another flush crept up her neck and cheeks. "Well, there is one thing. I just realized I . . . um . . . forgot to pack a nightgown."

"A nightgown," Blu said in a strained voice. He rubbed the side of his jaw. Hell, he hadn't considered the possibility that he'd have to buy a lady's nightgown. Realizing her request could have been for something a whole lot more embarrassing, he cleared his throat, then said, "Yeah, okay. I'll see what I can do."

As he reached for the doorknob, he kept his gaze averted from hers. "Lock the door after I leave and don't open it for anyone but me." Not giving her a chance to reply, he made a hurried exit.



# Two

---

After Blu's departure, Delana stared at the door for a long time, trying to come to grips with what had happened during the past few minutes. *I must have lost my mind. Agreeing to pose as that man's wife?*

She swallowed a groan, then turned and began pacing the length of the small room. What had she been thinking? Asking a total stranger to help get her out of Austin had been bold enough. But then accompanying the man to his hotel room! She bit back another groan, absolutely certain she must have taken leave of her senses. Was she that desperate to get out of town?

Pressing a hand to her stomach in an effort to ward off another round of gut-clenching anxiety, she stopped her nervous pacing. Yes, she admitted to herself, desperation had driven her to do almost anything to get away from Henry Lawton and his nefarious plans. Even trusting herself to a stranger. Squeezing her eyes closed, she waited for her nerves to settle.

But no sooner had she begun to relax, then another worry niggled its way into her mind. What if Blu hadn't told her the truth? What if he'd lied about working on some sort of secret mission? Maybe that wasn't his reason for going to Brownwood — if in fact, that was his destination. Panic fluttering in her chest, she considered leaving the hotel before he returned. Yes, that might be best, she decided, turning toward where her luggage sat.

She took two steps, then stopped in midstride. No, there was no other way, she realized with a sinking heart. She'd already gone over the few options she had. With only a few dollars in her handbag, her choices had been reduced to just one: solicit the help of a stranger, a man who did not know her stepfather. And since Blu Cahill met those

requirements and, more important, had agreed to help, she'd willfully ignored all the lessons she'd been taught about the behavior of proper young ladies.

Just thinking about the risk of placing herself in the care of a man she didn't know — especially one as tall and powerfully built as Blu Cahill — made her pulse race. A quick analysis of her reaction produced a startling conclusion. She wasn't afraid of the man. What she felt was more like anticipation and something else, something she couldn't name. Thinking back to the moment she'd decided to ask for Blu's help, she wondered how she'd had the courage to approach a man of such intimidating size. The memory of how his shirt emphasized his broad shoulders and wide chest, how his snug trousers hugged long, muscular legs, caused an odd warmth to unfurl in the pit of her stomach — a sensation she'd never experienced. Dismissing her reaction as merely another case of her wildly fluctuating nerves, she tried to concentrate on something other than the man she hoped would be her salvation.

After going over her conversation with Blu one more time, she felt certain he would keep his word and get her out of Austin. Then, once they were safely away from town, if he did or said anything to make her doubt her decision, she promised herself to take whatever measures were necessary to ensure she didn't end up back in Austin and, more important, not back under Henry Lawton's control.

She just wished Blu had been a little more forthcoming about his plans. Knowing a few additional details about his reason for going to Brownwood might have lessened her uneasiness. But then, she couldn't fault him for withholding information. After all, they'd just met, and he wouldn't completely trust a stranger with the entire truth. Just as she hadn't made a full disclosure about her circumstances.

She stifled a yawn, eyeing the bed with longing. She hadn't slept well the past several nights, tossing and turning while trying to figure out how to escape her stepfather's plans. Lifting a hand to cover another yawn, she decided that since she had nothing to occupy her time until Blu's return, she would lie down. Even if she didn't sleep, a couple hours of rest would do her good.

As soon as she settled on the bed and closed her eyes, the first glimpse she'd had of Blu's face popped into her head. He was younger than she'd first imaged, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with hair several

shades lighter than her own brushing his collar, a long straight nose, and thick eyebrows over deep-set eyes, their color an unusual golden-brown. Recalling the twin dimples his brief smile had revealed on either side of his wide mouth, her heart rate kicked up again. With a groan, she rolled over, determined to force thoughts of Blu from her mind. She succeeded by concentrating on the reason she'd had to seek his help in the first place. Her stepfather's greed.

She hadn't told Blu the entire truth about Henry Lawton's financial state. She didn't suspect, she *knew* he'd already spent the inheritance her grandfather had left her mother, squandering the money through a series of bad investments and a penchant for expensive cigars, liquor and gaudy presents for his string of "lady" companions. Truth be told, Delana knew those women were after Henry for more than the trinkets he showered on them — his money. She smiled. Wouldn't they be shocked to learn he was nearly penniless? Remembering Henry's plan to rectify that situation, her smile faded. He wanted to refill his coffers and pay off his debts with her trust fund — money she had no intention of letting him touch.

Thank goodness she'd learned the truth when she overheard Henry's conversation with Cyrus Townsend. She might have walked right past his office as she'd done countless times, but hearing her name mentioned had brought her to a halt. From her shadowed hiding place in the hall, she'd listened to Henry conducting an interview for — it sickened her to realize — the position of her husband. Though she'd never been close to her stepfather, she hadn't thought him capable of such underhanded scheming. Not until she'd heard him discuss the terms of a deal he proposed, calmly and methodically as he'd conducted numerous other business transactions.

He agreed to help Cyrus — the man he'd selected to be his partner in crime — get her to the altar, in exchange for Cyrus agreeing to turn over sixty-five percent of her inheritance to Henry once the marriage took place. She could still hear Cyrus cackling with laughter, and his words still made her skin crawl. "I'm most anxious," he'd told Henry, "for the young, healthy Delana to warm my bed."

In that instant, she'd discovered not only Henry's plans but also another, even more disturbing truth. Her stepfather was truly the most despicable, self-serving man she'd ever known. He meant to have the lion's share of her trust fund, no matter what. Even if she refused to

marry Cyrus, she knew her stepfather would find a way to force her into that marriage or another one she didn't want — all for his own financial gain. That was when she realized it was imperative for her to get out of his house as soon as possible.

Just thinking about how close she'd come to falling prey to her stepfather's plan formed a painful knot in her stomach. Then Blu's face swam in front of her mind's eye, loosening the knot. Knowing he would help her released the last of her tension. In a few minutes, her breathing slowed, her muscles relaxing more with each breath. Sinking deeper into the soft mattress, she remembered his statement about sharing her feelings regarding marriage. She wondered what had brought about his aversion. And whether that was the reason for the harshness that had flashed in his topaz eyes.

Then she recalled another emotion she'd seen in his eyes, a look of sheer terror when she mentioned needing a nightgown. The truth was, she had packed several, but the thought of him seeing her in a nightgown made of the finest lawn — fabric so sheer it was nearly transparent — had sent her into a panic. So, she'd told him a fib. Remembering his reaction caused a smile to tease the corners of her mouth. The expression on his face clearly said he'd never shopped for a lady's nightgown before — a thought she found oddly satisfying.

In the moments before she slipped into the sweet oblivion of sleep, she realized Blu Cahill certainly was an interesting puzzle — one she would enjoy solving, piece by piece.

\* \* \*

Blu's first order of business was to head for the State Capitol on Congress Street. He needed to inform the commander of the Texas Rangers about his change of plans. Adjutant General King probably wouldn't like Blu dragging a woman into the situation, but there was no help for that now. Delana needed to get out of town, and Blu fully intended to be the one to see that she did. He'd deal with whatever objections his commander might voice, by coming up with reasons to discount each one. But if push came to shove, and Adjutant General King wouldn't relent, he'd tell the man to find someone else to go to Brownwood.

Nearly an hour later, Blu left the State Capitol, relieved he hadn't been forced to take the drastic step that might have cost him his job.

Though he'd had to do a lot of fast talking, he finally convinced his commander that taking Delana with him to Brownwood would work to their benefit — that a married couple would appear to be less of a threat than a single man looking for work.

With that piece of business concluded, he went to the livery where he boarded his horse, a grullo gelding, whenever he was in Austin. He retrieved Mouse — named for his mouse-colored coat — from his stall, then approached the livery owner. As soon as he completed the deal for a wagon and team of horses, he tied Mouse to the back of the wagon, climbed up to the seat and headed down the street to a mercantile.

After giving the store clerk a list of supplies, including a large trunk, and instructing him to pack the trunk with cooking utensils, linens, and whatever other items were required to set up a household, he left the man to fill the order while he moved to the clothing at the rear of the store. Picking out several dresses for Delana hadn't proved as difficult as he'd thought. He selected one in a pretty shade of blue and another in a floral pattern of small purple flowers because he thought the colors would look good with her eyes. Realizing the reason for his decision, he chastised himself for such foolishness. Any time spent thinking about a woman's eyes was time taken away from the job he had to do.

The two dresses draped over one arm, he turned his attention to finding a nightgown. Taking a deep breath, then exhaling slowly, he reached toward one of the choices available. As he fingered the soft fabric, visions of Delana wearing the gown popped into his head. The thin cotton clung to her petite body, outlining her breasts and hips and revealing the dark triangle between her thighs. As if his skin had been stroked by a lick of flame, he jerked his hand away from the nightgown. *Damn it all to hell.*

During the years he'd served as a Texas Ranger, his concentration had never been a problem. But if he couldn't figure out how to stop his mind from wandering to thoughts of Delana, the coming weeks or months might prove to be a disaster. Disgusted with himself, he rubbed his still-tingling hand on his trouser leg before snatching up another nightgown — one made from a heavier material — then stomping toward the counter at the front of the store.

Though the storekeeper attempted to draw him into conversation, he refused by keeping his responses to nothing more than an

occasional nod or grunt. Yet when the man made some comment about Blu's fine taste in female attire, a flush crept up his neck and made his ears burn. Mortified by his reaction, somehow he managed a weak smile.

When his purchases had been loaded into the wagon a short time later, he finally could make his exit. He drew a deep, relieved breath, grateful to have that embarrassing scene behind him. But as he settled onto the wagon seat and picked up the reins, he realized with a sinking sensation in his gut that his recent experience buying lady's clothes might well be only the first of many embarrassing situations. As long as Delana was with him, there was no telling what he'd have to do. Releasing the wagon's brake, he bit back a groan. What had he got himself into?

He gave the team of horses a light slap with the reins, then directed the animals toward the hotel. He passed another wagon on the street, and several men on horseback, acknowledging each with a quick bob of his head. To the citizens of Austin, he gave the outward appearance of calm and total control, yet inside, a maelstrom continued to swirl. He'd known Delana Wyatt barely two hours and already she had turned his world upside down.

After bringing the wagon to a halt behind the hotel, he jumped to the ground, then hurried into the building and turned toward the staircase. At the bottom of the stairs, a sudden bout of indecision brought him to a halt. Maybe he should tell Delana he'd changed his mind. Or he could say his boss had nixed the idea of their posing as a married couple. But then he remembered the pleading in her eyes, the slight quaver in her voice when she'd related learning her stepfather had struck a deal for her to marry a man more than three times her age. Just the thought of her being used that way roused both his protective nature and his temper.

Teeth set and his jaw rigid, he started up the staircase. No way in hell would he allow Henry Lawton to get what he wanted. The man was lower than a snake's belly, in Blu's estimation, for what he'd tried to do to Delana, and he deserved to be tarred and feathered. If such punishment were legal, Blu would be the first in line to volunteer to wield the tar brush.

Outside the door to his room, he paused, trying to reverse his foul mood before going inside. No need to let Delana see him with his

hackles raised. She was a delicate little thing, who already had enough on her plate and surely didn't need the added burden of having to deal with his show of temper.

He drew several deep breaths, willing the ire thundering in his veins to cool. A full minute passed before he got himself back in control. He flexed his fingers several times, schooled his features into what he hoped would pass for a collected expression, then reached for the doorknob.

He opened the door a crack. "Miss Wyatt," he said through the narrow opening, "it's me. Blu."

When he received no response, his heart kicked hard against his ribs. In one swift movement, he shoved the door inward and stepped over the threshold. Fear clutching at his gut, his gaze scoured the room for confirmation of his suspicion. Spotting the object of his search stretched out on the bed, a rush of relief washed over him.

Suddenly angry at himself for his unexpected reaction when he thought she'd turned tail and bolted, he strode to the side of the bed. Grabbing her shoulder in a gentle but firm grip, he gave her a shake.

"Miss Wyatt," he said in a gruff voice, "wake up."

She awoke with a gasp. Staring up at him with eyes still heavy with sleep, she jerked away from his hand, opening her mouth for what Blu assumed would be a blood-curdling scream. But recognition quickly replaced the fear in her lavender eyes and ended any notion she had to yell for help.

She shifted so she sat on the edge of the bed, then said, "Is something wrong?" She smoothed the wrinkled fabric of her dress with a less-than-steady hand. "You haven't" — she swallowed hard — "changed your mind about taking me with you, have you?"

He tossed a package wrapped in brown paper onto the foot of the bed. "No, but it's time to leave. Change into one of the dresses in there," he said, indicating the package. "We've got a long trip ahead of us, and I've already spent enough time dillydallying."

Delana glanced at the package, wondering at the reason for the coldness in his voice, then lifted her gaze to meet his icy glare. Resisting the urge to shiver, she nodded, then slid off the bed.

Though she didn't want to risk increasing his already roused anger, she managed to say, "I could change faster if you weren't watching me."

He blinked several times; then his eyes went wide. A dull flush staining his cheeks, he turned with a jerky motion and moved to look out the window.

She pulled one end of the string tied around the package, frowning when a knot formed. After several attempts, she loosened the knot, then pushed the string aside and opened the brown wrapping paper. She didn't take the time to examine the contents, but simply selected the first dress she found. Shaking out the garment, she laid it on the bed, trying not to think about how harsh the calico felt compared to the silk dress she wore.

She'd grown up in the home of her grandfather, a wealthy man, and her clothing had always been made from the finest of materials. Though she didn't believe she'd taken anything for granted in her life, she now realized she hadn't fully appreciated the luxury of her clothing. The dresses Blu Cahill had purchased for her were the first tangible proof of how her life was about to change. But as long as she got out of Austin and away from her stepfather, she'd wear a dress made of flour sacks if necessary.

As she started to unbutton the bodice of her dress, her fingers suddenly stilled and her heart skipped a beat. There was no way she could change her clothes without assistance. Chewing on her bottom lip, she pondered the situation for a moment, then sighed. She had only one choice. Her face burning with a blush, she looked over her shoulder at Blu.

She drew a steadying breath, then said, "Um, I'm going to need your help."

He turned slowly to face her, his expression revealing his confusion. Staring at her through narrowed eyes, he said, "Just what, exactly, do you need help with?"

"My corset."

Blu stared at her for several more seconds, his brain slow to comprehend her statement. Finally, he said, "You need help getting out of your cor — " No matter how he tried, he couldn't force the word through the tightness in his throat.

"Yes, please," she responded, slipping her dress off her shoulders and presenting her back to him.

He stared at the corset, an odd contraption cinched around her middle from armpits to just below her waist. The mere thought of touching



the intimate garment caused a sheen of sweat to pop out on his forehead. Not even when he'd faced the deadliest of criminals had he experienced the same level of nervousness.

As he moved closer, he removed his hat, tossed it aside, then wiped his forehead on his sleeve. *Come on, Cahill, pull yourself together.* Taking a deep breath, then exhaling slowly, he reached for the laces at the bottom of the corset.

His fingers suddenly clumsy and slow to respond to his mental commands, he finally succeeded in pulling the bow free. He needed several attempts before he'd loosened the lacing enough to release Delana from the constricting undergarment.

"Why do women put themselves through this kinda torture?" he muttered.

She turned toward him, her gaze seeking his. "Having a narrow waist is the fashion."

"To hell with fashion," he responded. "Wearing one of those contraptions can't be healthy."

"Maybe you're right," she said, flashing him a quick smile. "The stays do dig into my ribs after a while." She absently rubbed the tender spots through the soft fabric of her camisole, then shrugged. "Part of the price of being a woman."

"The price is too high," he said in a soft voice, struck with the sudden urge to pull the rest of her underclothes over her head and see for himself what damage the corset had done to the delicate skin of her midriff.

As if reading his mind, Delana turned away from him, another blush creeping across her cheeks. "Thank you for helping me. I can do the rest myself."

Peeved at the abrupt dismissal as lady's maid, Blu moved back to the window. Hands braced on his hips, he stared at the street below through the cloudy pane of glass. Once again he told himself what a fool he'd been for agreeing to help Delana Wyatt. Yet he couldn't — he wouldn't — go back on his word. He knew firsthand what being under someone's constant control was like, and he damn sure didn't intend to let Delana suffer the same fate. But heaven help him, if the past two hours were any indication, the next few months might well prove to be the longest of his life.

\* \* \*

As Blu helped Delana climb up onto the wagon a few minutes later, she said, "Maybe we should have waited until dark to leave."

"Why?"

"To make sure no one recognizes me."

He watched her sit down on the wagon seat, the corners of his mouth twitching with the urge to smile. "Don't worry, darlin'; nobody's gonna recognize you."

She looked down at the plain calico dress, then reached up to touch the poke bonnet she wore, glad Blu had thought to add the hat to his purchases. Her eyes flashing with humor, she said, "I guess you're right. Who would mistake a plain little rancher's wife for the privileged stepdaughter of Henry Lawton?"

This time he couldn't stop his smile. "Exactly. Now, scoot over to make room for your husband."

Delana moved to the far side of the wagon seat, but when Blu sat down, she was reminded again of his imposing size. His thigh pressed against hers, and even through the layers of her skirt and petticoat she could feel the powerful muscles beneath his trousers. And as he flicked the reins against the horses' backs, his arm brushed hers, sending a jolt of heat skittering through her veins. One hand curled around the edge of the seat, the other clenched in her lap, she tried to hold herself away from the man beside her. But no matter how rigid she kept her spine, even the slightest jostle of the wagon caused her thigh to press more firmly against his.

Filled with anxiety that, in spite of her clothing, someone would recognize her, while trying to calm the wild pounding of her heart each time she brushed against Blu, the trip through town was pure torture. Though her bonnet had a wide brim, she kept her head bowed, praying her face was totally hidden from view.

Lost in her thoughts, Blu's voice startled her back to the present.

She lifted her head and turned to look at him. "What?"

"I said, you can relax now."

She started to shake her head, but his broad smile and the dimples flashing in his cheeks stopped her.

He pulled the horses to a halt. "Delana, look around," he said in a soft voice.

She followed his instructions, her eyes going wide at seeing the outskirts of Austin far behind them. Her earlier anxiety melted away,

replaced by the heady sensation of having accomplished the first part of her plan.

"Oh, Blu," she said, pushing the bonnet off her head so it dangled down her back by the ribbon tie. "You did it. You got me out of town."

"Course I did," he replied with a chuckle. "Didn't you think I —"

Her swift movement halted his words. Before he realized her intention, she'd twisted on the wagon seat, slipped her arms around his neck, and pressed her mouth to his.

Blu sucked in a sharp breath, which was a mistake because it filled his head with her scent and sent a blast of heat to his groin. Groaning, he leaned closer to deepen the kiss.

She tasted like honey, warm and sweet, and he wanted the kiss to go on forever. But all too soon, her body suddenly went stiff. Then she pulled away.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, swiveling on the seat so he couldn't see her face, but not before he caught her shocked expression.

"I shouldn't have done that." She clasped her hands together in her lap. "But it's just that I was so relieved to be out of Austin and so grateful that . . ." She exhaled with a deep sigh. "Well, I forgot myself for a moment, and I'm sorry."

"No harm done," he managed to say in a voice he barely recognized. Turning his attention back to the road in front of them, he lifted the reins and started the horses forward.

His body still humming from the kiss, he desperately tried to forget what had just happened. His efforts were a total failure.

He squeezed his eyes closed for a second, cursing his miserable luck. Now he had another distraction he didn't need, another memory he didn't want.

The honeyed taste of her mouth.

# Three

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Delana settled herself again on the hard wagon seat, this time the pressure of Blu's thigh and arm causing her heart to pound even harder, the heat in her veins to burn hotter. As brief as their kiss had been, the melding of their mouths had been long enough for her to make a startling realization. Getting out of Austin undetected hadn't been the most difficult task she'd had to face, as she'd believed. Now she knew that had been child's play compared to what lay ahead: the time she spent pretending to be Blu's wife.

Though she understood that they would be posing as a newly married couple, doing so surely would not be an easy undertaking, especially given the unsettling discovery she'd just made. She'd never experienced anything close to the way Blu affected her, never felt more than a small twinge of desire for a man. But if her recent impropriety was any indication, avoiding a future display of such forward behavior could test her to the limit and, in fact, might prove to be impossible.

Still, they were supposed to be married, so perhaps open displays of affection were appropriate and acceptable. She frowned. Except Blu might not share that opinion.

She sneaked a sidelong peek at his face, wondering if he shared her reaction to their kiss. His closed expression gave the impression that nothing untoward had taken place. Was that how he viewed what had happened? Humiliation washed over her, making her breath lodge in her throat. Maybe he found her skill at kissing so inept that he'd felt nothing, or worse, maybe her boldness filled him with disgust.

She frowned again. No, that couldn't be true. Though far from being an expert on male behavior, she knew enough to realize that Blu hadn't been repulsed by either her kiss or her forwardness. She had no

doubt that pressing her mouth to his had shocked him. But once his initial surprise had faded, he'd become a full participant, deepening the kiss and telling her that, for a moment at least, he'd experienced the same mind-numbing desire as she. But seeing the hard set to his jaw, the way he kept his lips pressed into a firm line, she had to wonder if she'd imagined his response. Claspings her hands tightly in her lap, she drew a cleansing breath, hoping to put the entire incident — and any possible repeat performances — from her mind.

Desperate to find something else to occupy her thoughts, she tried to come up with a possible topic of discussion. Finally remembering the loaded wagon bed, she said, "I noticed you found a trunk. Were you able to get everything you wanted?"

Blu flicked a quick glance in her direction, then shrugged. "Reckon so. I gave the storekeep my order for supplies and told him to fill one of the trunks he had with whatever a new bride needed to set up a household. I didn't take the time to look through what he put in there, but I imagine you'll find everything you need to cook and keep house."

*Cook and keep house.* The words echoed in Delana's head, causing panic to bubble up in her chest. When she'd agreed to pose as Blu's wife, she'd been so relieved to find someone willing to help her that she hadn't taken time to think through the full extent of the role. Of course, she'd known her life would be different, but she hadn't considered exactly what she would be expected to do. Now the truth bore down on her like a thousand-pound weight.

She bit her lower lip to stifle a groan and squeezed her eyes closed for an agonized second. How would Blu react when he found out she had no idea how to run a household? That she'd never cooked a meal or cleaned anything in her life, the only sewing she'd done was fancywork, and she didn't have the foggiest notion how to wash clothes? The possibility that her lack of domestic skills could cause him to renege on his agreement created another, even larger bubble of panic to swell in her chest.

One thought eased her panic. He hadn't yet made the connection that a woman from a privileged background wouldn't know how to cook or keep house. With new resolve, she stiffened her back and pressed her lips firmly together. Eventually he would find out, but she had no intention of telling him anytime soon. If he learned the truth

now, he could well decide to unload her on the spot, dumping her in a heap at the side of the road and never look back — something she could not allow to happen. Suddenly feeling the heat of his stare, she turned toward him.

“Delana, is something wrong?”

Her pulse increased, afraid he’d somehow read her mind. Forcing herself to remain calm, she tipped back her head and met his gaze. “Why would something be wrong?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. You made some kind of moaning sound, and the look on your face just now. Made me wonder, that’s all.”

She called on all her inner strength and flashed him her best smile. “I’m fine.”

His gaze moved over her face. “You aren’t having second thoughts about this, are you? Because if you are, it isn’t too late — ”

“Blu, stop it” she said, placing one hand on his thick forearm. Her fingers and palm tingling from the contact, she fought down the urge to scoot closer, to press herself more fully against him. “I’m not having second thoughts. I told you I’d pose as your wife and I intend to keep my word.” She searched his golden-brown eyes, gratified to see what she felt certain had to be a spark of desire flaring to life in their depths. “What about you?”

He released a choppy breath. “I always keep my word.”

“Good,” she murmured, hoping with all her heart that his statement wouldn’t change over the coming weeks. She smiled again, gave his forearm a gentle squeeze, then slowly removed her hand.

Blu turned his attention to the road in front of them, his heart pounding so hard, he feared Delana could hear each pulsing beat. She’d only touched his arm, for God’s sake, not the aching, fully aroused flesh between his legs where he longed for her touch, yet she had him quaking on the inside like a green kid. He cast another quick glance in her direction. Had he misread the squeeze she’d given his arm and the near-caress of her fingers as she withdrew her hand? Were her actions purely innocent, or was she trying to tell him something?

He wished now that he’d taken the time to make one more visit in Austin before heading back to his hotel. He should have called on one of the town’s bawdy houses for a good romp with any one of the ladies of the line. If he’d allowed himself the opportunity to relieve his

sexual tension, maybe he wouldn't be sitting beside Delana Wyatt with a hard-on that throbbed like the devil and a brain filled with lusty thoughts of her naked and willing beneath him.

He clenched his jaw, determined to force such thoughts from his head. He couldn't have a physical relationship with a fine lady like Delana. He'd promised himself years ago to steer clear of women like her, women who would want marriage and a family — two things he couldn't risk. He'd never broken that promise, and he sure as hell didn't intend to do so now, no matter how difficult.

A few minutes passed before he'd managed to wrestle his libido back into control, a task requiring him to exert every ounce of the self-discipline he'd fostered over the years. Hoping to make time pass more quickly, as well as keep his suddenly rampant thoughts away from sexual relations with a woman who was off limits, he mentally groped for a diversion.

He thought about his latest assignment, going over his conversations with his commander, recalling every detail he'd been told. He was to find out the names of the men behind the outbreak of wire cutting in Brown County, then gather enough evidence to have them arrested. His superiors figured the Texas Rangers arresting a ring of wire cutters in that county would put the fear of God in gangs operating in other parts of the state, ending the trouble once and for all.

His biggest problem, he knew, would be infiltrating the ring. Since the state legislature had passed a law two years earlier making the cutting of barbed wire fences a felony, the men were bound to be skeptical of strangers, especially those expressing interest in joining their ranks, which would make the job of gaining their trust even more difficult. Difficult, but not impossible.

Delana's movement beside him pulled him from his musing.

Not glancing her way, he said, "Now what's wrong?"

She huffed out a breath. "This seat. I've never sat on anything so hard in my entire life. Couldn't you have found a wagon with something more comfortable to sit on than a piece of wood?"

Blu chuckled. "Nope, wagons aren't like carriages with fancy padded seats."

Her skirts rustled with another round of wiggling, then she sighed. "So when will we get to Brownwood?"

"If we make good time, I'd say we'll get there in five or six days."

"Five or six days!" The sharpness of her voice clearly revealed her shock. "Is it *that* far from here?"

"Close to a hundred fifty miles, I'd reckon." He glanced at her, noting her wide eyes and pale cheeks. "If you need some relief from the wagon seat, you can ride my horse for a while."

She shook her head. "No thanks."

"You're sure?"

"I don't think sitting on a saddle would make my . . . um . . . *derriere* hurt any less," she said, two bright spots of color appearing on her cheeks. "But I appreciate the offer."

"Well, if you change your mind," Blu replied, biting the inside of his cheek to hold back a grin, "the offer to ride Mouse is still open."

"Mouse?"

"My horse."

"*Mouse* seems like a strange name for a horse."

He shrugged. "Never thought about it one way or the other. He's what's called a grullo 'cause his coat is kinda blue-gray, like the color of a mouse. So the name seems logical to me."

Her brow furrowing, she glanced over her shoulder to where he'd tied the horse to the back of the wagon. "Yes, I guess there is some logic to that."

"Like I said, if you change yer mind about riding Mouse, let me know."

"I won't." She muttered something under her breath, then started another round of shifting on the wooden seat.

Blu made an impatient sound, then pulled back on the reins, bringing the team of horses to a halt. As he turned to climb over the seat into the bed of the wagon, Delana grabbed his arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting a blanket for you to sit on."

"Oh," she replied, loosening her grip, "thanks. That would help."

A few minutes later, Blu had settled Delana on the folded blanket, taken his seat beside her, and started the team forward.

They hadn't gone very far when she spoke. "Something just dawned on me. If we'll be traveling five or six days, where will we stay at night?"

"There are a few towns between here and Brownwood, but I think we should avoid renting a room in any of 'em. I don't want to risk your being seen, in case your stepfather hires men to look for you."



Being that it's summer, finding places along the road to make camp won't be a problem."

"Camp? You mean we'll have to sleep on the ground out" — her gaze swept over the surrounding scenery — "there?" She shuddered. "With bugs and snakes, and who knows what else?"

Blu cleared his throat to cover a laugh over her obvious horror at the thought of sleeping beneath the stars. "There's plenty of room for you to bed down in the wagon, so don't start fretting about any wild critters crawling into your bedroll while you're asleep."

Something in his voice must have tipped his hand, because she stiffened beside him. "Are you making fun of me?"

Her curt tone struck the final blow to his attempts at containing his amusement. A chuckle rumbling in his chest, he flashed her a grin. "No disrespect intended, but I didn't know how amusing folks like you could be."

She scowled. "What do you mean, folks like me?"

Blu cleared his throat, wishing he'd kept that thought to himself. "It's just that you're . . . um . . . well, real different from the women I've known."

"Exactly what kind of women would that be?"

"Er . . . I don't think that's a subject we should discuss. Let's talk about something else."

"No, I want to know what — "

"Damn it, Delana, drop it!" Her eyes widened at the near-roar of his sharply spoken command. "Okay, fine," she replied, tilting her chin upward and turning to stare straight ahead. Blu felt like a heel, but she'd refused to heed his first warning to change the subject, so he'd had no other choice. Regardless, he shouldn't have yelled at her, shouldn't have caused the quick flash of pain he'd seen in her eyes before she turned away.

He waited a few minutes, to make sure he had himself back in control before he spoke. "Look, Delana," he said, purposely keeping his voice soft. "I'm sorry I yelled, but my past is off limits. I won't talk about it with you or anyone else." When she didn't respond, he said, "Will you accept my apology?"

Delana remained still, digesting his words. Finally, she turned to look at him. She wished she could see his eyes, to gauge if the sincerity in his voice was echoed in his gaze. But he'd pulled the brim

of his hat lower on his forehead, hiding the upper half of his face from her scrutiny.

Though curiosity about his statement nagged at her, she resisted the urge to resume their conversation, certain more questions would prod his temper back to life. Once again she realized she couldn't risk doing or saying anything that would jeopardize his helping her. Blowing out a deep breath, she finally nodded. "Apology accepted."

"Good," he replied in a low voice, his dimples making a brief appearance in his tanned cheeks. Then he turned his attention back to the road.

Unable to come up with a subject she dared broach, Delana sat quietly, hands folded in her lap. The creaking of the wagon, the soft clomp of the horses' hooves, and the wind rustling through the trees were the only sounds breaking the silence.

After a few miles, Blu said, "Even though it's a few days away, I think we should talk about what happens when we do get to Brownwood."

"All right," she replied.

"First off, we'll need to find a place to stay. Probably in a boarding-house or hotel, if there is one. Then I'll see about buying a ranch."

"How long will we be staying in town?"

"Not long, I hope. I've got a lead on a place a few miles from town. The previous owner died a few months back, and I heard his widow is anxious to sell. With any luck, I can close the deal in a day or two."

"I see."

He turned slightly, saw her throat work with a swallow, watched her breasts rise with a deep breath to press against the bodice of her dress. The sight sent blood surging to his groin. Silently cursing his body's reaction to the fullness clearly outlined beneath the calico, he forced his mind back to the business at hand. "While we're in town, we'll . . . uh . . . need to give the townsfolk the impression that we're newly married and looking forward to owning our own place."

When she didn't respond, he said, "Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes," she said, a blush creeping up her neck and cheeks, "I can do that."

His lips twitched at her mettle. "There ya go."

A weak smile touched her mouth, then quickly faded. "What happens after we move to a ranch?"

"We settle in. Get some cattle on the land. Make it appear we're there for the long haul."

"But what about your real reason for going to Brownwood — the secret investigating you said you'd be doing? How can you do that if you're busy running a ranch?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll find time to do both."

"Are you going to tell me why we're really going to Brownwood?"

Blu felt the heat of Delana's stare but kept his gaze on the road in front of them. "No."

"But if we're supposed to be a married couple, shouldn't a wife know what her husband does?"

"You should know, maybe better than most, that husbands keep secrets from their wives all the time."

"That's true," she replied with a sigh. "Even so, if the investigating you'll be doing is going to put you in any danger, I think I deserve to know the reason you're placing yourself in that position."

Blu tightened his jaw, inwardly acknowledging the soundness of her statement. Regardless, he saw no reason to tell her more than he'd already revealed. The fewer people who knew he was a Ranger detective working undercover, the less chance the information would fall into the wrong hands. Besides, if and when the situation warranted Delana's knowing more, he would tell her whatever additional details he deemed necessary.

"Maybe so," he finally replied. "But like I told you before, the less you know, the better."

"But I — "

"I'm not going to discuss this, Delana."

"Fine," she replied, her tone frosty.

When he spared a quick glance in her direction, she sat staring straight ahead once again, her chin lifted in an angle he was beginning to know well.

Though thankful she'd let the subject drop, Blu experienced another twinge of regret at having spoken to her so sharply. If he'd hurt her feelings a second time, he was sorry for that. But damn it he wasn't going to apologize again.

He frowned, wondering how the hell he'd got himself into such a thorny predicament. He had no experience being around refined, well-to-do ladies like Delana Wyatt, as he'd almost let slip a while back. And if she didn't like the way he treated her, she could damn well strike out on her own. He opened his mouth, prepared to tell

her that, then quickly clamped his lips shut. There was no way he'd let her leave.

She needed help and he'd offered to provide it. Though his first allegiance was to the Texas Rangers and the state of Texas, he also had a bone-deep personal devotion to help any woman or child in need of assistance, which he wouldn't ignore. Yet being honest with himself, his offer to help Delana wasn't the only reason he wanted to keep her with him. But what other reason he might have eluded him, lost somewhere in the strange tangle of emotions twisting inside his gut — a sensation he had never experienced and, worse, didn't understand.

\* \* \*

Blu poured the last of the coffee into his cup, then returned to his place on a blanket across from where Delana sat. He stretched his legs out in front of him, leaned against a wagon wheel, then crossed his ankles. Taking a sip of coffee, he stared at her over the rim of his cup.

He lowered his cup, then said, "You've been mighty deep in thought ever since we ate. Something on your mind?"

She blinked several times, then lifted her gaze from the dying campfire to look at him. "No, I was just trying to come up with something we could talk about."

"Must be you're not enjoying the evening quiet. For me, it's always been a time when no words are necessary, when everything begins to settle down for the night, when all yer troubles are forgotten for a while." He shrugged. "Not everyone feels that way, I reckon."

"Maybe not, but that's still a nice sentiment." She fussed with the folds of her skirt, then blurted, "Tell me about Blu Cahill."

When he frowned, she said, "I know there are things you don't want to tell me, like your past and why you're going to Brownwood, but since I'll be posing as your wife, don't you think I should know more about you than your name?"

His frown deepened. "Like what?"

"Well . . . like, how old you are, and when's your birthday?"

"I turned twenty-six on the tenth of June."

"The tenth? That was just a couple weeks ago." She flashed him a bright smile. "Belated happy birthday."

"Thanks," he replied, surprised by the sudden rush of pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had wished him happy birthday.

"Mine's September twenty-ninth."

Blu tucked the date away in the back of his mind, though not sure why he did. If all went as planned, his assignment would be completed by then and he'd be back in Austin or already headed out on a new job for the Rangers. But what about Delana? Where would she be on her birthday?

He flattened his lips, his eyebrows drawn together in a scowl. The idea that she might be celebrating with someone else didn't sit well. He wanted to be the one wishing her happy birthday. The one pulling her close and pressing a birthday kiss on that full mouth. The one freeing her hair and letting the silky strands . . .

Her voice jarred him from his musings. Glancing at her, he rubbed a hand over his face, hoping to erase thoughts he had no business thinking.

He exhaled heavily. "Sorry, I was — never mind. What did you say?"

"I asked where were you born."

"East Texas. Little town near the Louisiana border."

"That's where you grew up?"

"Till I was fourteen."

"Your family moved?"

He shook his head. "Just me. I left and never went back."

"Wasn't your family worried about you?"

"Nope."

"Not even your mother?"

He stared into his cup for a long time before he answered. "My mama was dead."

"Oh, Blu, I'm sorry," she replied. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"No harm done," he said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "She died when I was five, so I don't remember much about her."

"What about your father?"

His fingers tightened on his cup, and a muscle jumped in his jaw. "I don't give a damn where he is, as long as he stays the hell away from me."

"But, why would —"

"Congratulations, Miss Wyatt," he said in a clipped voice, "you managed to find another subject I won't discuss. No more questions

about when I was a kid or my father." He gave her a pointed glare. "Understood?"

She heaved a sigh, then crossed her arms over her breasts. "Fine, then we'll just sit here and enjoy the night."

"Good idea."

Their agreed-upon silence lasted all of five minutes. The rustling in the top of a nearby tree prompted Delana to speak.

"What was that?" she said in a loud whisper.

"Probably birds settling in for the night." Blu drained the last of his coffee, set down his cup, then pushed himself to his feet. "Be right back."

"Where are you going?"

The panic in her voice made him smile. "To relieve myself. You're welcome to go with me if you're afraid to stay here alone."

"Ha, very funny," she replied, lifting her chin and giving him a humorless smile. "I'll be just fine."

He chuckled. "I won't be long."

As he took care of his reason for seeking the privacy provided by a clump of mesquite, his thoughts remained on the woman back at camp. She was a prickly little thing, with a stubborn streak and a sassy mouth, who tested his temper at every turn. But he had to admit, she was also a breath of fresh air, and he liked having her around.

Maybe too damn much.

# Four

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Delana flipped over onto her back, the movement making the wagon springs squawk.

"Holy Christ," Blu muttered from where he'd spread his bedroll under the wagon. "Delana, would you pick a spot and lay still, for God's sake?"

She winced at the gruffness of his voice. Though exhausted from the trying day, sleep continued to elude her. Since climbing into the back of the wagon and stretching out on her makeshift bed, she'd already disturbed Blu's sleep more than once with her panicked questions about the frightening sounds drifting to her through the darkness.

At first he'd been patient, assuring her that the owl she'd heard didn't prey on humans, and the crackle of leaves and brush was only some nocturnal animal searching for food. But her restlessness finally had worn his patience thin.

"Sorry," she said, "but, I . . . I'm not used to sleeping outside."

He blew out a deep breath. "Yeah, I know," he said, his previous irritation giving way to weariness. "Just close your eyes and relax."

Delana frowned up at the sky. "Easy for you to say," she grumbled. "You probably can sleep standing up."

The sound of his light chuckle drifted up to her. "Been known to. I learned a long time ago to catch a few minutes of sleep whenever and wherever I could."

"Well, your teachers must've been a whole lot different than the ones I had. Mine didn't teach me anything about communing with nature."

"No, I reckon not," he replied with another chuckle. "You probably went to some fancy boarding school where young ladies weren't expected to sleep with the windows open, let alone outside."

Though she didn't like the condescending way he'd said "fancy boarding school," she also saw the amusement in the situation. "True. Miss Simpkins would have a conniption fit if she could see me. I can hear her now. 'Miss Wyatt, surely you have taken leave of your senses. Traveling with a man who is almost a total stranger, sleeping in the unhealthy evening air, in a wagon, in the middle of nowhere. Have you forgotten everything I taught you?'"

"Yeah, no doubt," Blu said, laughing at the reedy voice and stuffy tone she used to mimic her former teacher. "But that's enough talk." He yawned. "I'd like to go back to sleep. So how about closing your eyes and clearing your mind of where you are? Try concentrating on something else. Something nice, something that makes you feel safe."

She drew in a deep breath, then exhaled heavily. "Okay."

Although she tried to take his advice, the alternate topic her mind persisted in selecting continued to keep her awake. Rather than being filled with worries about her surroundings, her mind buzzed with thoughts of the often puzzling, sometimes frustrating, yet always fascinating Blu Cahill.

In spite of his declaration the night before about not wanting to talk about his past, their conversation had garnered her several new snippets of information to add to the little she already had learned about the man. But the additional facts hadn't begun to satisfy her curiosity. Instead, they created more questions. Why had he left home at fourteen? Did his leaving have something to do with why he wanted nothing to do with his father? And more distressing, what could have happened to cause Blu to harbor such chilling bitterness — bitterness, she suspected, could more accurately be labeled hatred — toward the man who'd fathered him?

Careful to lie still so as not to disturb the man filling her thoughts, she lay awake for a long time, pondering her many questions about Blu, and the numerous others that followed in their wake. Eventually, her body's thorough exhaustion overrode her mind's efforts to find answers, and she slept.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Blu moved silently around the campsite, allowing Delana to sleep as long as possible. He started a fire, set a pot of coffee on to boil, then went to check on the horses.



When he returned a few minutes later, Delana was attempting to climb down from the wagon.

"Wait, let me help you," he said, moving closer. Placing his hands around her waist, he lifted her with ease, then set her on her feet.

"Thanks," she said, offering him a weak smile.

She looked pale and drawn, the purple smudges beneath her eyes mute testimony to her lack of sleep. He hadn't heard anything from her after their last conversation during the night, but obviously his advice hadn't helped. Though he longed to touch her, to bring color back into her cheeks, somehow to wipe away the dark blotches marring the delicate skin under her eyes, he resisted the temptation. Instead, he withdrew his hands from her waist and took a step back.

"You're welcome," he replied, his voice oddly hoarse. Clearing his throat, he tipped his head toward the fire.

"Coffee'll be ready soon. But you have time to . . . um . . . see to your personal needs. I'll put some water on to heat if you'd like to wash up."

"Yes, please," she said, then lifted the hem of her dress and moved past him.

He watched her walk away, his heart thundering in his chest. "Damn," he whispered, rubbing a hand over his face. Even her rumpled and sleep-deprived appearance hadn't stopped the quick punch of desire that left him stunned. As surprising as the suddenness and strength of his need had been, a second realization shocked him even more. If he and Delana became lovers, he feared he'd want more, much more.

He shook his head, determined to clear his brain of such foolish notions. He was a Ranger detective, a man who preferred to work alone because he liked it that way. A man without a wife and family because it had to be that way.

\* \* \*

By midafternoon, Delana had grown bored. Though she found the passing scenery truly lovely, her initial enthusiasm quickly waned, squelched by Blu's sullen mood. She had no idea what had brought about his brooding, but she refused to be dragged down to the same somber level.

Though she knew trying to strike up a conversation might stir his anger, she could stand the silence no longer. Turning to look at him, she said, "Do you live in Austin?"

As she watched him, he seemed to pull himself out of whatever hidey-hole he'd crawled into. For a second, she feared he planned to crawl back into his inner hiding place, but then he cleared his throat.

"Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm in Austin pretty regular, but I don't actually live there," he said. "The longest I stay is a day or two at a time."

"Your visits are business?"

"Yeah."

When he didn't offer to elaborate, she said, "If you don't live in Austin, where is your home?"

"Don't have one. I'm on the move too much." He glanced sideways at her, then added, "And I'm not going to talk about it."

She swallowed the question on the tip of her tongue, then heaved a silent sigh. Now what could they talk about?

Before she could come up with an idea, he spoke again.

"Have you always lived in Austin?"

"No, I was born and raised in St. Louis. Mother and I were still living there when she met Henry. He was in town on business. Then, after she accepted his proposal, she sold Grandfather's house and we moved to his home in Austin."

"Do you miss St. Louis?"

"Sometimes. Have you ever been there?"

"Once." He made a face. "Didn't care for it. Too big."

"It does take some getting used to," she replied with a soft laugh, "especially if you're not used to being in a city that size."

"You plan on going back there?"

"Well, yes, I'll have to go there to collect my trust fund."

"What about after that? Where're you planning to live?"

She pulled her eyebrows together in a frown. "I haven't thought that far ahead, but I don't think . . ." She shook her head. "No, I'm certain it won't be St. Louis. Living there would dredge up too many bad memories."

Blu released the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, an inexplicable sense of relief washing over him. What did he care where

Delana lived once he'd completed his assignment in Brownwood and they went their separate ways? He mulled that over for a few minutes and finally decided he cared because of his concern for her safety. Yeah, that must be it, he told himself. But if he'd found the reason, why did a shadow of suspicion persist in nagging at him?

Before he could continue his contemplation, he noticed something ahead on the road.

"We've got company," he said, indicating a pair of riders heading toward them.

Delana gave a distressed gasp, then pulled the poke bonnet back onto her head and tied the ribbons securely under her chin.

Since leaving Austin, they had passed only a handful of travelers, and none since resuming their trip that morning. The fact that they hadn't met anyone on the road had lulled Delana into a false sense of security. But the approaching horses were a visual reminder that she wasn't safe from her stepfather. Not yet. In spite of the letter she'd given her attorney, Henry undoubtedly had passed around her description and asked to be notified if anyone saw her, or he might have hired men to start a search. She would put nothing past the man.

As the riders got closer, she studied each one for a moment. Relieved to find neither looked familiar, she adjusted the bonnet again to make sure her face remained in shadow, then lowered her head and waited.

As the two men passed their wagon, they called a greeting, which Blu returned. But she didn't speak, didn't dare raise her head for fear one of them might get a peek at her face.

A few seconds later, Blu said, "They're gone."

She lifted her head and turned to glance over her shoulder. The two men were a good distance away. Blowing out a deep breath, she loosened the bonnet and let it hang down her back by the ribbon ties.

"They didn't act curious about us — especially me," she said, looking up at Blu, "did they?"

"Nope, just a friendly hello with barely a glance in our direction."

"Good." She sighed. "I'll be glad when we get to Brownwood."

"Yeah, me, too," Blu replied, though his reasons were more complicated than Delana's. Sure, he wanted to get her somewhere safe from her stepfather, but he also wanted to get to work. Because once he actually started his assignment, he planned to keep himself so busy

that he wouldn't have time to think about anything else — such as wanting to kiss Delana again, wanting to feel the heat of her body pressed to his, wanting to . . . He bit back a groan, clenching his teeth so hard his jaw ached. *Damn it, Cahill, what the hell's the matter with you?*

Unfortunately, the answer that sprang to mind didn't improve his mood.

\* \* \*

The following days passed much as the first two for Delana. Long hours spent rocking and bouncing with the wagon's movement, the monotony broken only by the tense moments of meeting other travelers on the road. But each morning, as she climbed back into the wagon, she felt more relaxed, more confident that she would soon be out of her stepfather's reach — at least until her twenty-first birthday, and by then it wouldn't matter.

Though their trip took them through several small towns, she didn't object when Blu said they wouldn't be spending the night. To her surprise, she'd begun to grow used to sleeping in the bed of the wagon — had even come to enjoy viewing the star-filled sky and hearing the wind whispering through the trees. No longer did the strange night sounds frighten her, a transformation that she realized had a great deal to do with her companion.

Odd how much her life had changed in the span of five days, she thought while preparing for bed on their last night on the trail. Tomorrow they would arrive in Brownwood, and then their charade as a married couple would begin in earnest. As she looked over to where Blu had crouched to douse the fire for the night, her heart did a strange little flip in her chest. Pretending to be his wife wouldn't be nearly as hard as she'd originally thought. In spite of his imposing size and strength, she knew him to be a kind man, one she was counting on to keep her safe. One who also made her pulse increase and her body tingle at the slightest provocation — a glance from those topaz eyes, a touch of his callused hands. Shoving that last thought aside, she climbed into the wagon bed.

As she stretched out on the pallet of blankets, she prayed Blu was an honest man, that she hadn't erred in trusting him. And while she was praying, she added one more — that Blu wouldn't send her pack-

ing once he discovered she knew next to nothing about cooking or housework.

\* \* \*

Blu directed their wagon down Brownwood's main street toward the center of town late the following afternoon. He scanned each building they passed, mentally cataloging the name and location of each business. The dusty streets were nearly empty. On the far side of the town square was the courthouse, where several horses stood at a hitching rail, dozing in the shade of large oak trees. And on the near side, a wagon sat in front of a line of small wooden buildings.

As they approached the wagon, Blu watched two men step through the open door of one of the buildings. One man carried several large packages, which he stowed in the back of the wagon. Then he turned and took a wooden crate from the second man and placed it beside the packages. The two men shook hands; then one climbed into the wagon and the other returned to the store.

"That must be the mercantile," he said to Delana. "Storekeepers usually know everything about a town, so I'll start there."

Delana nodded, intently watching their surroundings.

Blu pulled the horses to a halt in front of the building, noting the "Potter's Mercantile" sign hanging above the door, then tied off the reins on the brake handle. As he jumped to the ground, he said, "Be back directly."

A few minutes later, he came back outside. Rather than getting back into the wagon, he approached the side where Delana was seated.

"There's a boardinghouse two doors down. Virgil, owner of the mercantile, says he's sure we can get a room there. I'll go see Addie right now." He offered her his hand. "Would you like to come with me?"

"Addie?"

"Adelaide Roth, the owner. She's originally from somewhere back East, but after her husband died a couple years back, she came to Brownwood and opened the boardinghouse. She struggled at first since her good-for-nothing husband left her nearly penniless, but she's doing tolerably well now and doesn't have a beau."

Delana's eyebrows lifted. "What? You didn't find out how old she is, or if she has her own teeth?"

Blu chuckled. "Thirty-five, and I have no idea. Told you storekeeps know everything about a town. Not only does Virgil know all the goings-on in Brownwood, he also likes to talk." He rubbed one ear, then grinned. "A lot."

When she didn't reply, he said, "You coming with me or not?"

Delana started to say she'd stay in the wagon, but the words *thirty-five* and *widow* kept echoing in her head. Not too old for Blu, definitely available, and more disturbing, experienced. Pressing her lips together, she placed her fingers in his palm and got to her feet.

Once he'd lifted her from the wagon, she tucked several strands of hair back into place, then straightened the bodice of her dress and shook out her skirts. Hoping she didn't look like a washerwoman, she lifted her chin and met Blu's amused gaze.

"What?" she said, her eyes narrowing.

"Nothing," he replied, offering his arm. "Come on, let's go see Addie."

After stepping into the boardinghouse and witnessing the way the owner's eyes lit up when her gaze landed on Blu, Delana knew she'd made the right decision in accompanying him. Adelaide Roth was lovely. Jet-black hair, dark-blue eyes, flawless creamy skin, and a curvy figure that probably didn't require a corset to achieve the fashionable hourglass shape.

As Blu made the introductions, Delana kept her gaze glued on the woman, carefully gauging her reaction. For some reason, hearing Blu introduce her as his wife didn't seem strange. Truth be told, she was beginning to like the sound of it.

When Adelaide turned toward her, the spark of feminine interest she'd noticed in the older woman's eyes wavered, then flickered out, much to Delana's satisfaction. Though grateful the woman apparently had some scruples about poaching husbands, Delana didn't want to speculate why her conclusion sent a rush of relief whipping through her. She knew only that she didn't want the competition — for what, exactly, she wasn't sure — of an older, more experienced woman.

"So how long are you folks planning on staying in our fair town?" Addie said, moving behind a desk to retrieve a key to their room.

"Depends on how long it takes to find a place of our own," Blu replied. "Will it be okay if I pay you for a couple days at a time?"

"Surely. You're looking to buy, then?"

"Yes, ma'am." He draped an arm around Delana's shoulders. "My wife and I haven't been married long, and we're anxious to have time all to ourselves in our own house."

A throaty peal of laughter bubbled from Addie. "Oh, I remember what that's like. Newly married and looking for some privacy. My husband and I lived with his parents for three months after we were married. Never felt comfortable there. Always worrying someone would hear . . ." She cleared her throat, then flashed a quick smile. "Well, never mind. You're not interested in hearing about the trials in my marriage."

"We just want to rent a room."

"Yes, of course," she said, turning all businesslike. She tucked the money Blu handed her into a small metal cash box, which she kept in one of the desk drawers, then held out a key. "Upstairs, last room on the right."

Blu nodded, then took the key and started to turn away.

"I serve breakfast in the dining room at seven sharp," she said with a broad smile, her eyes alight with amusement. "Provided you newlyweds can get yourselves outta bed early enough."

Delana blinked with surprise, the heat of a blush creeping up her neck and making her entire face burn. Unable to meet either Blu's or Addie's gaze, she dipped her head and headed toward the stairs.

"I'm sorry," Addie said in a whisper low enough so only Blu could hear. "I didn't mean to embarrass her."

Blu pulled his gaze away from Delana, then looked back at Addie and gave her a crooked smile. "No harm done," he said in an equally low voice. "She's still real shy about . . . er . . . that part of marriage."

"Ah, I understand. I'll try to be more careful about what I say around her."

"Appreciate it," Blu said, then stuck his hat on his head and followed after Delana.

\* \* \*

Until Delana actually entered the room she and Blu would be sharing, the implications of their agreement hadn't truly registered. But as she crossed the threshold, the reality of the situation hit her full force. Trying to calm her sudden case of nerves, she looked around.

The room was nice-sized. Crisp, lacy curtains adorned the double window that took up most of the wall opposite the door. A chest of drawers, a washstand with a mirror hanging above it, and a row of pegs for clothes occupied another. And a colorful rug covered the floor along one side of the room's only other piece of furniture: a four-poster bed.

Delana gulped. *Oh, dear, one bed. I didn't think this far ahead.* She drew a deep breath, then released it slowly. *Now what do I do?*

Blu moved to stand beside her. "I can sleep on the floor."

Shocked that he'd read her thoughts so easily, she needed a moment to collect herself, then turned to look at him. "Don't be silly," she said, hoping her inner tremors weren't revealed in her voice. "We're adults, so we can share the bed."

"Uh, that's not necessary. I'll just —"

"For everything you're doing for me, there's no way I'll let you sleep on the floor. So get that idea out of your head right now."

His mouth twitched, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "You're gonna fight the bit about this, aren't ya?"

She straightened her spine. "I don't appreciate being compared to a horse. But yes, that's what I'm doing."

Blu chuckled. "Yeah, I figured." He rubbed the side of his jaw, then said, "Okay, you win. We'll share the bed."

Delana smiled, then turned away, an odd warmth churning in her belly. Whether the sensation came from anxiety, anticipation, or some other, unknown emotion, she couldn't say. But whatever the source, the feeling refused to go away.

She was drawn from her thoughts by Blu's voice.

"I need to see to the horses," he said, starting toward the door. "I'll ask Addie about a livery. Then I'm going to check around town. See if anyone knows about any property for sale."

He opened the door, then stopped and turned back to look at her. "Will you be okay?"

"Of course," she replied, managing a small smile.

He nodded. "Should I fetch your bags?"

"Yes, please. I'd like to unpack some of my clothes. And if there's anything of yours I can take care of, bring that up as well."

A few minutes later, Delana finished putting away the few articles of clothing that she'd removed from her luggage, then turned to Blu's saddlebags.



She loosened the rawhide tie on one side, then flipped open the flap. There wasn't much inside, proving the truth of the statement he'd made when he dropped the saddlebags on the bed. He traveled light. Pulling out a shirt, she shook out the worst of the wrinkles, then started to hang it on one of the pegs. On impulse, she brought the shirt to her face and buried her nose in the fabric. She drew a deep breath, filling her lungs with Blu's scent and making her head swim.

She needed a minute to regain her equilibrium, then hung the shirt next to the other dress Blu had bought her. Somehow, seeing their clothes hanging together seemed almost intimate, as if they were truly man and wife. Shoving that thought aside, she dumped the contents of his saddlebags onto the bed. She found another shirt, a pair of trousers, several pair of underdrawers, two bandannas, an assortment of socks, and a couple boxes of gun cartridges. As she hung up the shirt and trousers, then tucked the rest into the chest of drawers, she wondered if that was everything he owned.

The thought of him owning little more than the clothes on his back caused an ache in her chest. Was he content with what he had, or did he want more for himself? Was that why he didn't have a home somewhere — because he couldn't afford it? The money her grandfather left her could fill out Blu's wardrobe, buy a nice house, give them everything they . . . She sucked in a sharp breath, then sat down on the bed.

What was she thinking? Coming up with ideas about how to spend the money in her trust fund as if they had a future together. What a ridiculous notion. She didn't want to be under anyone's control ever again. Gaining her independence was all that mattered, all she wanted.

She would stay with Blu until her twenty-first birthday, because she needed his help and they had an agreement. Then she would head for St. Louis and he would . . . A lump formed in her throat; tears burned the backs of her eyes. Blinking rapidly, she swallowed hard, determined to stop behaving like a lovesick schoolgirl.

*Lovesick?* She pressed a hand to her mouth to stifle a groan. She couldn't be falling in love with Blu. She was grateful to him for agreeing to help her, and for the kindness he'd shown. And yes, she found him attractive. Just as she couldn't deny her impromptu kiss had affected her more than she cared to admit. But surely those weren't the

beginnings of love. After all, they barely knew each other. They had nothing in common. They were from vastly different lifestyles. Hardly the basis for a long-term relationship.

No, she concluded with a decisive nod, Blu Cahill definitely wasn't the man she should love.

So why wasn't her heart convinced?

# Five

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Blu sat down on the edge of the bed, keeping his movements slow and easy, as if the mattress were made of glass. Heart pounding, skin clammy, and groin throbbing, he closed his eyes and tried to drag a breath through his tight throat.

Erotic images danced behind his closed eyelids. Delana undressing while he waited in the hall. Slipping her nightgown over her head, the fabric gliding down to cover the sweet curves of her naked body. Removing the tortoiseshell combs from her dark-brown hair, the heavy mass tumbling around her shoulders. Pulling a brush through the wavy strands before calling him back into the room. His first glimpse of her lying in the bed they would share, her cheeks flushed, her hair spread across her pillow.

His eyes popped open. *Sweet Jesus*. Wiping a shaky hand over his sweat-dampened face, he reminded himself again that he'd be sleeping in the same bed with Delana. Nothing more.

In spite of the outward calm he tried to maintain for her sake, he was anything but. Thank God he'd had enough sense to douse the lamp immediately. Otherwise, she might have seen his instant physical reaction — a reaction that hadn't waned but had grown stronger with each passing minute. Agreeing to share the bed with her had to rank up there as one of the dumbest things he'd ever done.

Somehow, he managed to dredge up the strength to stretch out on the bed, purposely staying as close to the edge of the mattress as possible and wishing he hadn't stripped down to his underwear. But it was too damn hot to sleep in more than his drawers. Although at the moment, another layer of clothes sounded like a mighty fine idea.

\* \* \*

Blu rode out of town the following morning, heading east toward Steppe Creek and the Chandler ranch, which he'd learned was still for sale, the ranch he hoped would become his and Delana's home for the next few months. *Home*. Just thinking the word seemed odd. He hadn't had a home since his childhood. Not since he lost his mother. After she died, everything changed. The house he shared with his father sure as hell could no longer be called a home. In fact, he couldn't be certain the place ever had been a home. He barely remembered his mother, let alone what life had been like before she died. But he remembered everything that happened in the years following her death. Though he didn't think of those horrible days as much as he once did, there were times when those painful memories still haunted him.

Since the day he'd run away, he hadn't given even a second's consideration to the notion of someday wanting a home. With such a pathetic role model for a father, and a miserable childhood, why would he? But now, with the prospect of living under the same roof with Delana soon to become a reality, for the first time in his adult life he wondered what it would be like to live in a house filled with happiness and laughter — the way he envisioned a real home should be.

He snorted with disgust, calling himself a fool for allowing such nonsense to enter his head. His life as a Ranger required him to live wherever his assignments took him and to travel light. He didn't keep a room somewhere, because he would be throwing away his money, gone more nights than he'd stay there. And since he didn't own more than he carried with him, there was no need for keeping a place to store any personal possessions.

Even when his career with the Rangers ended, he knew he never would have a true home. A home meant a wife and children, and he wouldn't — he couldn't — take that risk. His father's blood ran in his veins, and he'd vowed not to inflict what he'd endured on anyone else.

His gut twisted with the same gnawing sensation he had whenever he allowed himself to remember the sickening truth and the long-ago promise he'd made himself. Clenching his jaw against both the physical and emotional pain ripping through him, he took solace

in one thought. Living out his years alone was a small price to pay for the suffering he would prevent.

As he slowed his horse to watch for the turnoff to what had been the Chandler ranch, he wondered what had brought about thoughts of homes, wives, and kids. He didn't have to wonder long. Delana Wyatt. She'd filled nearly every crook and cranny in his mind since the moment they met.

And last night, he'd spent long hours lying beside her, aching to reach for her and praying for the blessed relief of sleep. He'd managed not to give in to temptation and do the first, and hadn't been granted the reprieve of the last.

"That woman'll be the death of me," he muttered, spotting the ranch road, a narrow opening cut in a stand of mesquite trees. If he had to spend many more nights painfully aroused, getting only snatches of sleep, he wouldn't be able to concentrate on his assignment. The idea didn't sit well with Blu. Nothing in the past had distracted him from his detective work — not miserable weather, not lopsided odds of being outmanned and outgunned by his prey, and sure as hell not a woman who needed his help. But being completely honest with himself, none of the women he'd helped had also fired his desire by their mere presence. He'd felt compassion, even anger, over their circumstances, but definitely never lust. Delana had sole possession of that distinction.

As he reined his horse onto the ranch road, he shoved his disturbing thoughts aside. He had to keep his head focused strictly on business, not what other parts of his anatomy had in mind. A difficult — hell, maybe even an impossible — task, but he was determined to try his damndest to succeed.

\* \* \*

After Blu left that morning, Delana had occupied her time by taking a bath. She'd washed her hair, scrubbed off the grime of the past several days, then soaked in the tub until the water turned cold. Once she got dressed, she brushed her hair dry, then arranged a loose chignon atop her head, securing it with the tortoiseshell combs that had belonged to her mother. Left with nothing more to do in the room, she wandered downstairs.

Addie looked up from where she was clearing the breakfast dishes from the dining room table. "Well, good morning," she said, flashing a smile. "Looks like you're not shriveled up too bad."

Delana's brow furrowed. "I beg your pardon."

"I sent your bath water up more than two hours ago. I figured if you've been soaking all this time, you'd have turned into a prune by now."

Delana blinked, then chuckled. "Well, my fingers are kind of wrinkled," she said, holding up her hands. "But after bathing in creek water for nearly a week, I didn't want to get out of the tub."

"I don't blame you," Addie said, picking up a stack of dishes, then moving toward a door on the opposite side of the dining room. She turned to push open the door with her backside, then paused. "Can I get you anything?"

"I'm not really hungry, but coffee would be nice."

"Come into the kitchen. I'll pour you a cup. Then you can keep me company while I wash up these dishes."

Eager for the opportunity to watch someone else do chores she'd soon be doing, she quickly followed Addie through the door.

She accepted the cup of coffee Addie held out to her, then stood to one side, watching everything the other woman did and trying to commit each step to memory. Pour hot water from a teakettle into a basin. Add some cold water. Dip your fingers in to test the temperature. Set a stack of dishes in the basin. Grab a cake of soap and a dishcloth. So far, washing dishes didn't look too difficult, she thought, heaving a mental sigh of relief.

After Addie had washed, rinsed, and dried each plate, cup, and saucer, she placed them in a large cupboard. Then she did the same to the silverware, which went in a drawer. She threw the dirty dishwater out the back door, then rinsed the basin and hung it on a nail beneath the overhang of the house.

Delana hid a smile behind her cup, feeling smug at her good fortune. At least one housekeeping chore wouldn't be totally foreign to her. Okay, so she hadn't actually washed any dishes, but at least she knew how. Now, if only the other tasks would be just as . . . Addie's voice pulled her from her musings.

"I'm sorry," she said, lowering her cup and meeting the other woman's gaze, "I was just . . . I mean, I guess my mind was — "

"No need to explain," Addie said. Her throaty laugh filled the room. "If I had a husband that looks like yours, I'd be daydreaming, too." She pressed a hand to her full bosom and released a gusty sigh. "He is mighty nice on the eyes."

In spite of the blush heating her face, Delana smiled. "Yes, he is."

"Mr. Cahill said y'all haven't been married very long."

"That's right," Delana replied in a soft voice, dropping her gaze to stare at the floor.

Addie studied her in silence for a moment, then said, "I hope you won't take offense, Mrs. Cahill, but there's something I want to say to you. The first few weeks, even months, of a marriage can be a big adjustment, especially if the couple don't know each other very well."

A strange lump formed in Delana's throat at being called Mrs. Cahill. She swallowed, then lifted her head. "Is it that obvious?"

"I've got a knack for reading people," Addie replied with a shrug. "You and Mr. Cahill strike me as folks who haven't known each other all that long." When Delana didn't respond, she added, "Am I wrong?"

"No," she said with a sigh. "We make each other . . . well, uncomfortable, I guess you'd say."

Addie waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "That's normal, so don't go worrying yourself about it. As soon as you're around each other more, get to know each other better, those troublesome feelings will pass."

Delana stared at the older woman for a long moment. She wished she could tell Addie that her marriage to Blu was a sham, that she wouldn't be around long enough to see the transformation Addie predicted, but she held in the words. Instead, she forced her lips to curve in a smile. "You're probably right. I'm worrying for nothing."

" 'Course I'm right. I'm going to have one of the biscuits left over from breakfast. Would you like to join me?"

"Yes, I believe I would."

After Delana washed down the last bite of biscuit with her second cup of coffee, she said, "That was the best biscuit I've ever had."

Addie burst out laughing. "Trying to flatter the cook so she'll give you the recipe?"

"No, that's not what I was trying to do. I mean it. Your biscuits are the best I've ever had. Much better than any I've . . . um . . . made." Delana kept her gaze averted, afraid Addie would read the truth in her eyes.

"Well, your husband certainly did enjoy them. He must've eaten half a dozen before he left this morning."

"Really?" Delana said, her heart sinking. What would a man with such a hearty appetite do when he found out she couldn't cook?

Addie reached over and patted one of Delana's hands. "Don't look so glum, honey. My recipe is no secret. I'll just write it off for you."

She lifted her head, her gaze searching Addie's. "Are you sure? Because I don't want —"

"Absolutely. Wait here while I get some paper."

Addie pushed open the door to the kitchen, then turned and looked back at Delana. "I've got a recipe for a really fine johnnycake, and one for peach pie that every man who's ever ate a piece can't stop bragging on. I could write those off for you, too, unless you have family recipes your mama handed down to you. I won't be offended if you'd rather use your own."

"No, I don't have any family recipes," Delana replied, relieved to make at least one true statement. "My mother didn't . . . I mean, she wasn't much of a cook, so I'd really appreciate having your recipes."

Addie held her gaze for a moment, then gave a quick nod before disappearing into the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Blu concluded the deal to buy the Chandler ranch two days later. On the following morning, he retrieved the wagon and horses from the livery, collected Delana from the boardinghouse, then headed out of town.

As the minutes passed, Delana tried to tamp down her growing panic. She had the recipes Addie gave her safely tucked in her satchel between the additional clothes Blu had purchased for her at the mercantile, and she'd spent the last two days observing the woman as much as possible. Yet she knew watching Addie to memorize routines was a far cry from doing them herself, so Blu's reaction to her first attempts at housework remained an enormous concern.

"You're awful quiet."

Delana started at the sound of Blu's voice. "I was just thinking."

"About anything in particular?"

She shook her head.



When Delana didn't elaborate, Blu searched his mind for something more to say. He glanced her way, his gaze settling on the dress she wore. Recognizing it as one of the dresses he'd bought for her in Austin, he said, "As soon as I saw that dress, I knew the color would go real good with your pretty eyes." He bit back a groan, wishing he could call back his words. What in the world had possessed him to spout such foolishness? He wasn't courting Delana, so he didn't need to try to win her with sweet talk.

"You did?" She turned to stare at him with a widened gaze.

His lips pressed together, he shrugged.

"Oh, Blu, what a nice thing to say." She placed a hand on his forearm and squeezed. "Thank you."

The warm pressure of her fingers seeped through his shirtsleeve, quickly spreading until every inch of his skin tingled with desire, his groin heavy and throbbing. Forcing a calmness he didn't feel, he managed a mumbled "You're welcome." When she withdrew her hand, he heaved a silent sigh of relief, then grimaced. *Damn it, this has got to stop!*

Once again he worried about completing his assignment. How could he do his job if he couldn't keep himself from reacting like a randy kid whenever she touched him. Touch, hell, all she had to do was get within two feet of him and he was hard as a rock.

There had to be something he could do to keep his mind on business rather than the much-too-appealing woman sitting beside him. But that presented another problem. He had to figure out what that something was, and be quick about it.

\* \* \*

As the wagon continued to rumble down the narrow path they had taken off the main road, Delana caught a glimpse of a building through the brush and trees.

"Is that the house?"

"Yeah. It's only about another quarter mile ahead."

Delana nodded, her gaze fixed in the direction of the house. Equal parts of relief, excitement, and anxiety skipped through her. Relief at having arrived at the place where she'd be staying, safely away from her stepfather, until she could claim her inheritance.

Excitement at the prospect of living with Blu under one roof, with no one around for miles. And anxiety that their living arrangement might be short-lived.

After negotiating a final curve, the wagon entered a clearing, where Blu brought the team of horses to a halt. The house, with a covered porch spanning the full width of the front, sat on the opposite side of the ranch yard, nestled beneath several large live oaks.

Delana studied the house and its surroundings in silence. When she didn't speak after a few moments, Blu shifted on the seat.

"Uh, I know the house ain't much," he said. "Definitely not what you're used to. It's sat empty for almost a year, so it needs a good cleaning. But I looked it over the other day. The walls are sound, and the roof don't leak. There's only a lean-to out back for the horses, so I'll need to see about putting up a barn, but otherwise, the place is in respectable — "

"Blu, stop fretting. It's fine," Delana said, silently amused by his nervous prattle. When he shifted his gaze to meet hers, she saw uncertainty clouding his topaz eyes. "I mean it. I don't need a big, fancy house filled with expensive furniture. I've had that, but it didn't make my life any happier. Believe me, the size of a house, or the cost of its furnishings, is not important."

He held her stare for a moment longer, then nodded and started the team forward. He directed them across the yard and around to the back of the house.

After bringing the horses to a halt once more, he wrapped the reins around the brake handle, then jumped to the ground and turned to help Delana.

As he lifted her from the wagon, she said, "I've never seen a house like this."

"No, I suppose not," he replied. "This is typical of the ranch houses in this part of the state." Then he went on to explain that the house was actually two separate buildings, built about ten feet apart but connected by a single roof. The space between the two buildings formed a long, covered hall, open at both ends, its north-south direction selected to catch the prevailing wind.

"That makes sense," Delana said, moving under the roof of the hall. "This would be a nice place to sit on a hot summer evening. Could we put some chairs out here?"

"Don't see why not," he replied. "Mrs. Chandler left most of her furniture, but I can't remember if there are any extra chairs. I can see about buying some, and anything else you think we need, next time I go into town."

"I'm sure we can get by with whatever's here," she said, stopping to wait for Blu.

He strode past her, then reached for the door on the left side of the hall. She held her breath, not quite sure what awaited her on the inside.

After he opened the door, he stepped back to allow her to enter first. She exhaled slowly, then moved into the room.

They were in the living area of the house, a single room with a fireplace built into one wall. To her right, comfortable-looking furniture arranged in front of the fireplace, and a small rocker placed beside a window filled half the room. To her left sat a dining table and four chairs, with a small hutch tucked against the wall, between the corner and a second window. In the opposite corner, a large wooden worktable, with storage shelves built above the table's thick top, stood against one wall. A tall cupboard and a cookstove sat against the other.

A layer of powdery white dust coated every surface in the room and clouded the windows.

Delana studied everything for a full minute, then finally swung around and smiled at Blu. "This is nice. I think we'll be hap — I mean, we'll . . . um . . . do fine here."

He gave her a quizzical look, then said, "Ready to see the rest of the place?"

"Sure," she replied, heading for the door.

The room on the other side of the hall was actually two bedrooms. The one to the right, facing the front of the house, was larger and obviously meant to be the master bedroom, the furniture similar to what had been in the room they'd rented at Addie's boarding-house. The smaller room contained only another chest of drawers and a cradle.

Delana crossed the floor with slow steps and touched the cradle with her fingertips. "Did Mrs. Chandler have a baby?"

"The real estate agent told me she was expecting her first child when her husband was killed. But she . . . uh . . . lost the baby."

"Oh, God," Delana whispered in a tortured voice. "How awful!"

"Yeah. I guess she couldn't stand the thought of living here after losing both her husband and her child. So she put the ranch up for sale and moved back East."

Delana nodded. "I can't imagine what she must have suffered." She touched the cradle again, an unexpected ache, a deep longing for a child of her own clutching at her heart. Though she hadn't wavered in her decision about marriage, she now realized she hadn't considered one of the consequences of her plan — not becoming a mother. For a second, she allowed herself to imagine a baby lying in the cradle, waving chubby arms, cheeks dimpling with a toothless smile, staring up at her through topaz eyes.

She bit her lower lip to hold in a gasp. Shaken by the unwanted and unsettling image, she turned and started toward the door.

"I'd better get busy," she said, walking past Blu without looking at him. "It's going to take all day to get rid of all this dust."

Blu stared after her for several seconds, wondering at the strange tone in her voice and the sudden paleness of her face.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Blu returned to the house after moving the empty wagon out beside the lean-to and unhitching the team of horses. He stepped around where he'd piled their supplies in the outside hall, then stopped in the open doorway to the main living area.

Delana stood in the middle of the room, facing the opposite direction. Rubbing the small of her back, she hunched her shoulders, then rolled her head from side to side.

Blu stepped into the room, his boot heels making a soft clomp on the wooden floor.

"How's it going?" he said, moving to stand behind her.

"Fine. I just needed a minute to —" Her back stiffened at his touch. "Ow, what are you doing?"

When she tried to pull away from his grip on her shoulder, he dug his fingers deeper to knead the tight muscles. "Shh, it's okay," he said near her ear. "Just relax."

"But . . ." A low humming sound rumbled in her throat. "I still . . . have . . . a lot" — the humming changed to a moan — "to do." Dropping her chin onto her chest, she said, "Ah, that feels so good."

Blu chuckled. "You're wearing yourself out."

"There's so much to do," she mumbled, practically swaying on her feet. "I'll never finish if I don't keep working."

"Yeah, darlin', there is a lot to do. But you'll never get it done if you keep on pushing yerself way too hard."

Her head came up with a snap, and she tried to twist out of his grasp. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Hey, take it easy," he said, trying to hang on to the woman who'd suddenly turned into a wildcat. "Don't get yerself all riled up. I only meant you should take it a little slower."

She finally managed to wrench free, then whirled around to face him. Chin lifted, she looked him square in the eyes. "Thanks for the massage and the advice, but I need to get back to work."

In spite of her show of temper, Blu's lips twitched. But he didn't give in to the urge to laugh, knowing she wouldn't take kindly to his amusement at her expense. Instead, he cleared his throat, then said, "I'll be outside chopping wood. Let me know when you want me to bring in the trunk and other boxes."

She gave him a curt nod, then turned on her heel and snatched up the broom.

Before Blu could move, her zealous sweeping had stirred up a small cloud of dust. Grinning at her back, he headed for the door.

Such a proud woman, he thought with a shake of his head, and stubborn to boot. From what she'd told him of her life, he figured she couldn't have used a broom a whole lot. But that certainly hadn't stopped her from giving the task her all. Making a mental note to check her hands for blisters later, he crossed the yard to the woodpile.

After stripping off his shirt, he set a section of log on end, then picked up the ax. Tightening his grip on the handle, he swung the ax up, then brought it back down in one smooth motion. The blade hit its target with a solid thwack, splitting the log in two. He quickly established a steady rhythm, setting a new log in place, swinging the ax to cleave the wood in half, then tossing the smaller pieces to one side. The straining of his back and arm muscles felt good, a welcome change from his recent lack of physical activity. Soon sweat beaded his forehead and trickled down his chest, but he continued working. He had to make sure Delana had a sufficient stockpile of firewood, in case his detective work kept him away from the ranch for extended periods of time.

That was something he hadn't considered when he'd come up with the idea of having them pose as a married couple. Leaving her alone in a county where the men he was after — ranchers who'd declared war on barbed wire — wouldn't think twice about killing a stranger who poked his nose into places where he wasn't welcome. Others had come under suspicion by the close-knit ring of wire cutters and ended up at the bottom of a creek. Blu could deal with the risk to himself, but he couldn't bear the thought of such cold-blooded sons of bitches turning their wrath on a woman.

He swung the ax up again, then brought it down with more force than necessary. The log split with a resounding crack, sending the two pieces flying high in the air and landing ten feet away. Teeth clenched and heart pounding, he lifted his head and stared at the house. No one had better try to hurt Delana, by God, or they'd have to answer to him.

# Six

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Delana stared, unable to tear her gaze away from the spellbinding sight across the yard. A half-naked Blu. She hadn't meant to watch him, but as she finished sweeping the floor, she had passed one of the windows and caught a glimpse of him chopping wood. Her mouth had dropped open, her feet suddenly rooted to the spot in front of the window.

Though they'd shared a bed in Addie's boardinghouse, she'd never seen him without his shirt. He'd always turned out the lamp before undressing, and he rose every morning before daylight. Wanting to take advantage of the opportunity, her gaze remained glued to him.

He was — she drew a shuddering breath — truly magnificent. Broad shoulders glistening with sweat in the sunlight, back muscles rippling, and arms bulging with each swing of the ax. Just looking at him made her knees go weak and caused a dull throbbing sensation low in her belly. If they'd met under different circumstances, perhaps there could have been . . . Giving her head a fierce shake, she turned away from the window.

There was no point in thinking about what could have been. Getting through the next few months was all that mattered. Then she'd be free to do as she wished, no longer under someone else's control, no longer having someone else telling her what to do. Recalling her last conversation with Blu, a moment of panic struck.

Had she really told him not to tell her what to do? She groaned at her stupidity. Another flare of temper like that and he might decide she wasn't worth the bother. Vowing to be more careful, she moved away from the window and once again set the broom into motion.

\* \* \*

By late afternoon, Delana looked around the bedroom with satisfaction. The floor had been swept, the furniture dusted, and the window washed. Now all that remained was making the bed. Though she'd never actually made a bed, she figured the task couldn't be too difficult. Her muscles aching with fatigue, she dug through the trunk Blu had placed at the foot of the bed, and pulled out a set of sheets.

A few minutes later, she stepped back to view her efforts. The result wasn't quite as good as she'd hoped, but she was too tired to try again. Rubbing her shoulder, she headed for the main living area.

When she stepped into the room, she found Blu bending over the cookstove.

"Is there something wrong with the stove?"

He straightened, then turned to look at her. "No, I was just putting supper on to cook."

Delana's eyebrows arched, then immediately lowered in a frown. "Why?"

"Because you're tuckered out, and I wanted to help."

Her relief at being handed a reprieve vanished. "I don't need coddling. I could've — "

"Yeah, I know you could've made supper, darlin'. And starting tomorrow, you will, but I took care of it tonight."

Tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow he would learn what a poor bargain he'd made by agreeing to help her. Deciding she'd deal with that worry later, she moved closer, craning her neck to look around him. "What did you make?"

"Stew. It'd be better with fresh meat, but we'll make do with dried beef this time."

Her stomach growled, earning a smile from Blu. Ignoring the blush burning her cheeks, she said, "Addie sent some of her biscuits with us."

"Yeah, I know," he replied, his smile growing to a grin. "She's a mighty fine cook. Her biscuits will go real nice with stew."

Delana nodded, surprised Blu's simple statement about Addie made her feel even more inadequate. Yet what came as a bigger surprise, his words caused a reaction she never would have expected, especially over cooking abilities: a strong burst of jealousy. *He's talking*



*about food, for heaven's sake, not something of an intimate nature.* Though she acknowledged the truth of her silent chastisement, the admission did little to erase the jumble of emotions warring inside her.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Delana came awake slowly. Sunlight streamed through the window, filling the bedroom with a soft golden glow. Arching her back, she stretched her arms and legs, then sucked in a quick breath. Every muscle screamed with protest. As she slowly swung her legs over the side of the mattress and sat up, she glanced over her shoulder. Just as she'd expected, she was alone. Even after the hours Blu spent chopping wood the day before, he hadn't slept later than usual.

She pushed herself to her feet, biting back a groan. After taking a few cautious steps, the stiffness in her muscles began to ease. Careful not to make any fast moves, she pulled her wrapper from a peg on the wall, slipped her arms into the sleeves, then moved to the door.

When she didn't find Blu in the main room of the house, she swallowed her disappointment. He'd told her he planned to go into town today, but she'd slept too late to see him before he left. Noticing the coffeepot on the back of the stove, she smiled. At least he'd made coffee before he rode out.

After filling her cup, she looked around, wondering what she should do first. She hadn't cleaned the second bedroom, since the rest of the house had taken so long. And as Blu had pointed out, they didn't need the room, so there was no rush. Remembering the cradle, a pang of longing swept over her. She'd never given a thought to becoming a mother. Children went with marriage, and she'd decided long ago that marriage definitely wasn't for her.

But after seeing that cradle, longings she hadn't known she possessed bubbled to the surface. A reaction no doubt created by Blu Cahill's entry into her life. Frowning into her coffee cup, she decided that avoiding the second bedroom for a while would be a good idea.

So what would she do with herself until Blu's return? When she'd asked how long he would be gone, he said he wasn't sure, but probably until early afternoon. She sighed, wondering how to fill those hours. Taking another swallow of coffee, she glanced around the room and hit on an idea.

Her mouth curving into a smile, she set her cup on the table with a soft thunk, then hurried back to the bedroom to get dressed.

\* \* \*

Blu left the mercantile just after ten, still reeling from Virgil Potter's nonstop palaver. How one man could talk so much mystified Blu, but his aching ears and spinning head were a small price to pay. During the time he'd spent in the man's store, he managed to pluck valuable bits of information from the constant stream of words coming from Virgil's mouth.

He'd learned the names of most of the ranchers in the county, how long they'd been in the area, how many kids each had, and the number of cattle they ran on their land. And more important, he had a feel for which of those ranchers would oppose the use of barbed wire — the ring of men he'd been sent to collect evidence against.

Something else positive had come from Virgil's incessant jawing: Delana no longer occupied center stage in Blu's mind. Ever since rising that morning, he'd struggled to keep his thoughts on the job he'd been assigned. He hadn't succeeded. Memories and images of Delana crowded his brain. Her tantalizing scent. Those gorgeous lavender eyes. How she looked with moonlight gilding her in pale silver while she slept. The heady taste of her mouth.

He stifled a groan. *Damn it to hell. This has got to —*

"You look like a man who's ready to spit nails." Blu spun around, disgusted with himself for not hearing the man's approach. His gaze landing on the badge pinned to the man's shirt, he forced himself to relax. "Got a lot on my mind," he said with what he hoped passed as a smile.

The other man hooked his thumbs in his gun belt. "You're new in town, ain't ya."

The words weren't posed as a question, but sounded more like an accusation, with just a touch of anger thrown in. Wondering at the reason for such a cool reception by the local lawman, Blu studied the shorter man, noting his wiry but well-muscled build and the nervous twitching of the fingers on his right hand. Lifting his gaze past the man's square jaw and slightly crooked nose, he found himself staring into the coldest blue eyes he'd ever seen. Something flickered in those disconcerting eyes, something Blu couldn't identify.

Blu extended his hand. "Blu Cahill. Just arrived in town a few days ago."

"So I hear," the man said, continuing to level his cold stare at him. "Bought the Chandler place."

"That's right. Moved in yesterday."

Several long seconds passed, then the man unhooked his right thumb from his gun belt and grasped Blu's hand. "Rube Duncan, county sheriff. We don't put up with troublemakers in Brownwood, Cahill. Do we understand each other?"

Surprised by the strength in the constable's hand, as well as the poorly veiled threat in his words, Blu nodded. "My wife will be relieved to know that."

Duncan tucked his thumb back in his gun belt, then rocked back on his heels. "Speaking of the little lady, I'd like to meet her." He tipped his head toward the door of the mercantile. "She still inside?"

"Ah, no, she's at the ranch. Since the place sat empty for a while, there was a lot of cleaning to do."

"Reckon so," he replied. "Some other time, then."

"Sure thing."

"You figurin' on running cattle on your ranch?"

"That's my plan."

Duncan mulled over his words for a second, then said, "Well then, you'll be needing to buy stock. Can't say if any of the ranchers around here will be interested in doing business with ya, but I can speak to them if ya'd like."

"That's mighty nice of you, Sheriff," Blu replied, getting the distinct impression no one would sell him anything without the lawman's approval. "I'll be having a small herd brought up from the south. But I'm looking to add a few more head, so I'd appreciate whatever you can do."

"I'll let ya know." Pursing his lips, Duncan appeared to be considering his next words. Finally, he said, "You gonna string wire on your property?"

Blu rubbed the side of his jaw. "Actually, I . . . uh . . . haven't decided yet."

The constable didn't respond right away, his cold gaze once again boring into Blu's. Several uncomfortable seconds passed before he said, "Well, take my advice, Cahill, and think real careful before you make your decision."

Before Blu could respond, the man gave him a nod, then turned and went inside the mercantile. To pump Virgil for information, no doubt.

Blu eased out a deep breath, grateful he hadn't had to keep asking the storekeep questions to keep the information flowing. One simple statement had opened the floodgates. He could only hope Virgil remembered their conversation the same way. Because he sure as hell didn't want Sheriff Duncan thinking he'd expressed more than a mild curiosity about the citizens of Brownwood.

As he made his way to the telegraph office, Blu's thoughts shifted from the constable — and the man's less than cordial welcome — to a more pleasurable and yet just as troubling topic. Delana.

Last night had been another torturous experience. Lying just inches away from a woman whose scent wrapped around him like a blanket of silk, who made him want to touch his lips to her hot, naked skin, who made him ache with a desire like none he'd ever experienced.

A woman he couldn't have.

For a moment he allowed himself to consider the impossible, of doing what his body wanted. Sex with Delana might momentarily relieve his burgeoning need, but it wasn't a long-term solution. Once with her wouldn't be enough, he felt certain of that. And besides, she wasn't the kind of woman to engage in casual sexual relationships — the only type of relationship he allowed himself. But seeking out a willing female to take care of his needs was out of the question. The townsfolk wouldn't take kindly to a newly married husband, with a lovely, desirable wife at home, looking elsewhere for sexual favors.

He cursed under his breath. There had to be some way to rout Delana from his thoughts and cool the heat she stirred in his blood, but damned if he could figure out what it was.

At the telegraph office, he shoved his disturbing thoughts aside long enough to write out a message.

"Could you send this out right away?" he said, handing the paper to the operator.

"Sure thing," the man replied. After reading Blu's message, he added, "You asked for an immediate response. You gonna wait here?"

"No, I have some errands to run. I'll stop back in an hour or so."

The man nodded, then turned to his key and started tapping out the message.

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Delana wiped the back of her hand over her brow, grimacing at the dampness covering her skin. How women could stand working over a hot stove totally befuddled her. The buildup of heat in the house was horrendous, and opening the windows and door had done little to alleviate the discomfort. Of course, if she hadn't had to throw away her first five attempts at making Addie's biscuits, keeping the stove hot for so long wouldn't have been necessary.

She pushed a strand of hair off her temple, trying to prepare herself for another blast of heat. Releasing a deep sigh, she bent to open the oven door, then eased her latest batch of biscuits inside.

"What the hell!"

Delana yelped with surprise, her hand jerking away from the stove so quickly that the oven door slammed shut with a loud clank. She straightened and spun around. "Blu! Dear Lord, you nearly frightened me to death."

Blu had to swallow several times before he could respond. "What are you doing dressed like" — his gaze raked over her — "like that?"

"Like what?" Delana's brow furrowing, she glanced down at herself. Though she thought her face couldn't get any warmer, a blush made her cheeks burn even more. "Oh. Well, I was . . . um . . . making biscuits, and it got really hot in here, so I . . . um . . . decided I'd be more comfortable like this."

Blu took a step into the room, still unable to believe he'd arrived at the ranch and found Delana bent over the cookstove, wearing nothing but her underclothes. "What if someone else had come to the ranch? Is that how you would've greeted 'em?"

"Well, of course not," she replied, lifting her chin, her eyes shooting lavender fire. "And I wouldn't be dressed like this now, if it weren't for you."

"You're blaming me," he said in a near shout, "for you being practically naked?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Blu," she said, her voice full of starch. "My drawers and chemise hardly make me practically naked." Her chin came up another notch. "And yes, I do blame you. If I hadn't been trying to make the biscuits you like so much, I wouldn't have kept adding wood to the stove, nor would it have got so hot in here that I had to take off my dress and petticoat."

Blu stared at her, incredulous. Baking biscuits, for him, had caused her to strip down to her underclothes. Of all the harebrained explanations she could have given, that one caught him off guard. Huffing out a breath, he pulled off his hat and turned to hang it on a peg by the door, using the time to calm down. When he had himself back under control, he moved across the room, slowly approaching the woman who had once again managed to throw him completely off balance.

Though he ordered himself not to respond to her, his desire surged to life at the enticing picture she made: barefoot, her hair coming loose from the haphazard knot at the back of her head, the thin barrier of her underclothes doing little to hide the soft curves of her delicate body. Drawing a steadying breath, he forced himself to glance past her, then came to an abrupt halt. The ingredients for biscuits were scattered across the worktable, a glob of what looked like biscuit dough hung from the edge of a shelf, and a dusting of flour covered every surface within six feet.

"Making biscuits did this?" he said, shifting his gaze back to the person responsible for the mess.

She nodded. "I spilled the flour and had . . . um . . . some other problems."

"I'll say."

Delana chewed on her lower lip, battling with her conscience. Deciding the time had come to fess up, she took a deep breath and blurted, "I've never made biscuits before and my first few batches didn't turn out, so I kept trying."

Blu's eyebrows lifted. "That right?"

Delana moved to stand in front of him, the earlier fire in her eyes replaced by panic. "You won't make me leave, will you?"

"Leave? Because the first time you made biscuits was a disaster?" He shook his head. "Don't be silly."

"But, you don't understand." She swallowed hard. "It's more than biscuits. I . . . I don't know how to make anything else either."

"Then how did you know what to use in your biscuits?"

"Addie gave me her recipe."

He studied her in silence for a moment, then shook his head, a chuckle rumbling in his chest. "You're a piece of work," he said, lifting a hand to tuck a strand of flour-encrusted hair behind her ear. Rather than withdraw his hand, and before he could stop himself,

he stroked a fingertip down one of her flushed cheeks. "A real piece of work."

Her startled gaze meeting his, her tongue peeked out to wet her lips. "Is that good or bad?"

"A little of both," he murmured, smiling into her upturned face. Though he knew he'd probably regret his actions, he lowered his head toward hers, unable to resist the temptation of her damp, slightly parted lips.

At the first brush of his mouth over hers, he heard her suck in a quick breath, then the low moan vibrating deep in her throat. Rising onto her toes, she pressed her mouth more firmly against his.

In an instant, the willpower Blu should have mustered to halt what was happening deserted him. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he hauled her closer and deepened their kiss. She tasted of coffee and heated skin and perfection. Especially perfection. Through the haze of his rapidly escalating desire, he was struck with the notion that her taste had been created solely for his palate. Though he knew the idea was pure lunacy, he couldn't make himself totally dismiss the possibility. Instead, a tiny seed of hope remained — the hope that Delana had in fact been made for him.

His head reeling from both his wild mental ravings and the hard slam of need coursing through him, he tightened his embrace, then pushed his tongue into her mouth. She stiffened in his arms for a heartbeat, then she moaned again. Sliding her hands around his neck, she grasped the hair at his nape and leaned into him until her breasts pressed fully against his chest.

Blu continued to ravish her mouth, using his lips, his tongue, his teeth. Her breathing changed to rasping pants, her fingers gripping his hair even tighter. Easing her away from him slightly, he dropped one hand to her hip, then inched his fingers around to splay over her belly. She started to go stiff again, but he quickly squashed her reaction by breaking their kiss and softly crooning in her ear.

When she was again pliant in his arms, he moved his hand lower, sliding over the thin fabric covering her feminine mound, and even lower to seek out the opening in her drawers. The moment he touched the damp folds of her woman's flesh, her slick heat nearly sent him over the edge. He drew a choppy breath, filling his lungs with her musky scent and racking his body with another jolt of white-hot need.

Gritting his teeth, he opened her with his fingers, searching out her most sensitive spot, then nudging the swollen bud with his thumb.

She gasped his name in a strangled squeak, then pressed her face into his neck.

"Easy, darlin'. I won't hurt you. You believe me, don't you?"

The blood thundering in his ears, he waited for her response. After several seconds, her head bobbed against the underside of his chin. Easing out a relieved breath, he moved the pad of his thumb over her again.

This time, she bucked against him, her fingers releasing his hair to dig into his shoulders. Lifting her head from his chest, she leaned back and stared up at him with desire-laden eyes.

"Wh . . . what are you doing to me?" she said in a husky whisper.

Blu smiled. "It gets better." He continued moving his thumb in a slow, lazy pattern.

Her shoulders rippling with a shiver, she shook her head. "But, I don't — is that possible?"

His smile widened. "Oh, I promise you, darlin', it's more than possible."

She moaned, making his heart pound in an even wilder cadence. He halted his intimate caress, then slowly withdrew his hand. Just as he bent to scoop her into his arms, the reality of what he was about to do struck him like a physical blow, driving the air from his lungs in a painful whoosh. Instead of picking her up, he set her away from him, took a staggering step backward, then turned around.

"Blu, what is it?"

He couldn't have responded even if he'd wanted to, not when breathing required all his strength and concentration.

"Blu, what happened?"

He heard the concern in her voice, and even though the ache in his chest had begun to ease, he didn't speak.

"Please talk to me, Blu. Did I do something wrong?"

Suddenly the raw emotions roiling inside him bubbled to the surface. He whirled around, fixing a glare on her now-pale face. "Yeah, you did something wrong. Parading around here in your underclothes, swishing your behind like a mare in season. Hoping to catch my attention." He made a sound somewhere between a snort and a laugh. "That's the oldest trick in the book, and I almost fell for it."



Her brow furrowed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, darlin', sure ya do. Get a man to take you to his bed, let him have his way with you, then later insist he make an honest woman out of you."

Delana moved her head slowly from side to side. "That's not what —"

"Let me tell you something, Miss Wyatt. I don't plan to get married. Not to you. Not to anyone. So you can call a halt to any notions you have about using me in whatever cockeyed scheme you've hatched."

"Cockeyed!" she practically yelled. "There's someone cockeyed in this house, all right. But it sure isn't me."

Blu watched her squeeze her eyes closed, saw her struggle to control her anger.

Finally, she continued, her voice only slightly calmer. "Did you get hit in the head while you were in town? You know how I feel about marriage. That I refuse to be under someone's control ever again, so why in the world would I hatch some scheme to get you to marry me?"

Blu blinked, stunned to realize her show of temper had reignited his desire. Deciding he really must have lost his mind, he absently rubbed the side of his jaw. "Okay," he said at length. "I'll give you that."

She stared at him for a long time, her lips pressed into a firm line. Finally, her mouth softened and she took a step toward him. "You know why I don't want to get married, but I'd like to know your reason."

He dropped his hand to his side, his fingers curling into fists. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Why? It can't be that bad."

He turned and strode toward the window. "Yeah, it is."

"Tell me, Blu. Please."

"I said, I don't want to talk about it."

"Whatever happened to make you feel that way, talking about it might make you feel better."

"Talkin' about it won't help none."

"How do you know unless you try?"

"All right, damn it," he said, swiveling back to face her. "I'll tell you the whole ugly story."

# Seven

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Delana stared at Blu, the pain in his topaz eyes making her forget her shocking behavior of a moment ago, and the resulting heated words they'd exchanged. Her body still humming with the need he'd stirred to life, she wanted to touch him, to offer her comfort. But she instinctively knew he would welcome neither, so she kept her hands clasped in front of her, hoping he wouldn't change his mind about opening up to her.

She watched him shove a hand through his hair, saw his chest expand with a deep breath — obviously struggling to pull himself together. Finally, he cleared his throat and began speaking in a low voice.

"My father took Mama's dying real bad. The night of her funeral, he started drinking. He was always a hard man, but drunk he was ten times worse. And after a while, his whiskey-twisted mind decided I was to blame for her death."

"What! How could he blame you? You were only a little boy."

"He told me if I'd been a better son, if I'd minded her better, she wouldn't've died."

"You don't believe that, do you?"

He shook his head. "Not now. But as a five-year-old kid . . ." He drew a shuddering breath. "Well, I wasn't so sure. Took me a long time to realize, it was his whiskey doing the talkin', that I didn't kill her. Anyway, he blamed me for his loneliness. His unhappiness. Everything that went wrong was my doing, and he constantly found fault with what I did. Letting the house get too dirty, not getting his clothes clean enough, not cooking his food to suit him."

"Your father made a five-year-old boy do those things?"

Blu nodded. "He said since it was my fault Mama died, then it was only right for me to take over her chores."

"Surely, that was his grief talking."

He shrugged. "Maybe. The reason doesn't matter. He just kept on finding fault with me and drinking his rotgut whiskey. And the more he drank, the meaner he got."

Though Delana didn't want to know the answer, she had to ask. "What did he do to you?"

"At first, I got a few good wallops from a leather strap each time I did something he didn't like. When I got older, he started using his fists."

"Oh, God," Delana whispered, biting her lip to hold in a sob. How could a man do that to his own son?

Blu fell silent for a few minutes, his agonized expression telling her the cost of reliving the awful days of his youth.

A terrible thought occurring to her, she said, "You didn't do . . . anything to him, did you?"

He swung his tortured gaze toward her, his lips curving in a caustic smile. "No, but not because I didn't think about it. A lot. By the time I was fourteen, I was taller than him and just as strong. Then one day, I made up my mind that I'd taken my last beating. So the next time he tried, I stopped him with a punch to his jaw before he could lay a hand on me. I saw the surprise in his bloodshot eyes change to the hatred he always directed at me. While he ranted about how I dared strike the man who kept a roof over my head and food on the table, I knew what I had to do. Rather than sticking around and risk going to jail for murder, I hid until he passed out. Then I took off."

Delana's stomach knotted at what he'd endured as a boy, fury raging inside her at the man who'd mistreated him so horribly. She could certainly understand why he had run away; she would have done the same thing. After taking a moment to collect herself, she finally said, "I'm sorry you had such a tragic childhood. No one deserves to be treated that way by anyone, most especially by a parent. But you still haven't told me your reason for being so dead set against marriage."

"Because I can't take the risk."

"What risk? That your wife will die? That's something all couples have to —"

"No, not that. Marriage means children, and I can't risk fathering a child."

Delana stared at him, her brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"Though it sickens me," he said, his voice shaking, "his blood runs in my veins. What if I'm just like him? What if I have a child and become a monster like he was?" He swallowed hard, his shoulders quaking with a shiver. "I don't want another child to go through what I did."

Unable to bear the anguish in his eyes, she couldn't resist touching him. She wrapped her fingers around his forearm and gave him a firm squeeze. "Don't even think that! You may carry his blood, but that's no guarantee you'll do the same things he did."

"I can't take the chance," he said, sounding bone tired.

"But you're not capable of hurting a child."

He shook off her hand. "How can you say that? We barely know each other."

"Maybe we haven't known each other all that long, but it's been long enough for me to know you aren't capable of doing what your father did."

He made a scoffing noise. "Yeah, right."

"Don't mock me," she said, tipping up her chin. "I am right, and eventually, you'll agree with me."

He stared down at her for a long moment, then shrugged. "Believe whatever you want, but I'm tellin' ya, that's one thing we'll never agree on."

Before Delana could think of a response, he sniffed the air. "I think your biscuits are burning."

"What? Oh, no." She turned and hurried to the stove. When she opened the oven door, a cloud of black smoke puffed into the room. "Damn," she muttered, removing the pan of charred biscuits. With a cry of distress, she dropped the pan onto the top of the stove. Then, to her utter mortification, she burst into tears.

Blu stared at her, feeling as though he'd been poleaxed. Tears? Delana was actually crying over ruined biscuits! He would have expected a show of temper, even a fit of anger, but not tears. Shaking himself out of his momentary shock, he moved toward her and awkwardly laid his hand on her shoulder. "Hey, it's okay. They're only biscuits."

She whirled around to face him. "You don't understand. It's not just the biscuits. I've never cooked, or cleaned, or washed clothes,

or . . . or . . . anything else you expect me to do around here." He studied her anguished expression for a moment, then used his thumb to brush the moisture from one cheek. "I know. But it doesn't matter."

She blinked, then scowled. "You knew, yet you never said anything?" She poked his chest with her fingers. "You let me worry and stew that you'd send me packing when you found out I knew nothing about keeping a house?" She gave him another poke. "Damn it, why didn't you say something?"

Blu grinned, happy to see the return of the feisty woman he was beginning to care about more than he should. Shoving that thought aside, he grabbed her hand before she poked a hole in his chest. "Easy, darlin', those pointy fingers of yours are deadly weapons."

She flashed him a pouty look but didn't try to pull her hand free. "So answer my question."

"After hearing about your fancy life with your grandfather and your stepfather, I suspected you'd never done any housework. But since I wasn't absolutely certain, I didn't see the need to share my suspicions with you." He lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "Besides, I figured you'd tell me the truth, eventually."

"Humph. Well, I just told you, so now what do we do?"

He glanced around at the flour-dusted kitchen. "The first thing is clean up this mess, then I'll teach you how to make biscuits."

Her eyes went wide. "You . . . you'd really do that?"

"I want to eat, so what choice do I have?" he replied with a lopsided smile. "With everything else I need to be doin', I won't have time to cook. I only know how to fix the basics, but we won't starve."

Delana swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. "I'm sorry, Blu. I never meant to be a burden."

He rubbed his thumb over the backs of her knuckles. "You won't be, once you start carrying your weight around here."

She nodded, pulling her hand from his grasp. "I do intend to carry my weight. But you'll have to teach me how to do more than cook."

"Yeah, I know. Let's worry about teaching you to cook first, then we'll tackle the rest."

"Thank you," she whispered, looking up at him through a new sheen of moisture.

Blu had the sudden urge to snatch her into his arms again and let her thank him proper, with a long, drugging kiss, but he didn't move.

"Hey, no more tears," he said, trying for a gruff edge in his voice. "I don't need a weepy female crying in my biscuit dough."

She blinked, then gave a delighted peal of laughter. "Yes, sir," she replied, swiping a hand over her eyes.

Blu chuckled. "We'd best get started." As he unbuttoned one of his shirt cuffs and started rolling up the sleeve, his gaze raked down her scantily clad body. "And put on one of those aprons we got at Virgil's store. Yer too distracting dressed like that."

Her cheeks flushing a deep rose, she bobbed her head in acknowledgment, then stepped around him and headed for the door.

As he watched her hurry toward the bedroom, he wished he hadn't added that part about her being too distracting. Definitely not one of his better decisions. He didn't need her thinking there was a chance they might continue what they'd started earlier.

He rubbed the side of his jaw, resigning himself to the idea of spending most of his time with her over the next few days. But how the hell would he keep his desire in check when he was so close to her?

Unfortunately, no answer immediately came to mind.

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Later that night, Delana lay in bed, listening to the even breathing of the man beside her. She wished she could have fallen asleep as quickly as he had. But for some reason, and in spite of her exhaustion, sleep eluded her. Instead, she stared wide-eyed at the ceiling, her mind aw whirl with the day's events.

So much had happened in such a short span of time. The total disaster of her first attempt at cooking. Blu's surprising offer to be her teacher. And more surprising, his lessons of an intimate nature, giving her a taste of true passion. Raw and primitive need had assailed her, need she sensed only Blu could appease. Her belly clenched at the memory, creating a dull throbbing that slid lower.

She rolled onto her side, squeezing her knees together in an effort to ease the ache between her thighs. Recalling how Blu had kissed her and touched her, she pressed her face into her pillow to muffle a groan. She couldn't believe she'd been willing — no, not just willing, but eager — to have him continue the lesson.

But then he'd stopped abruptly, spewing accusations that she was trying to trap him into marriage. Now that she knew about how he'd

suffered as a child, she understood why he'd called a halt to what nearly happened. His aversion to getting married rivaled hers. So where did that leave them?

They would be spending the next few weeks or months together, living under the same roof while pretending to be man and wife — a situation now complicated by their strong attraction to one another. An unexpected thought popped into Delana's head, one that sent the heat of a flush over her already warm skin. Neither wanted the life-long commitment of marriage, so what would be the harm if they acted on the desire sizzling between them?

Various answers floated into her mind. Some she immediately dismissed, others she had to contemplate before adding them to the pile of discards. But one did give her pause. A physical relationship could result in her falling in love with Blu. She already cared for him, but that had to be a normal reaction to his agreeing to help her. Didn't it? Yes, that explanation made sense, but she still couldn't help wondering if her assumption was correct. Hardening her heart to the possibility that her feelings for Blu might be more than gratitude, she renewed her vow never to fall in love — the first step, she knew from watching her mother, to a woman's relinquishing control over every facet of her life.

But renewing her vow didn't stop her from wanting more of the incredible sensations Blu's kisses and touch had stirred. So why not enjoy each other? And who better to teach her about physical pleasure than a man she found extremely attractive? Not to mention a man who also didn't want a permanent relationship. Besides, this could be her one and only chance to experience the passion between a man and a woman. Which meant, she decided, there was no reason to ignore their mutual attraction. They could give their desire free rein.

The thought making her body hum with the anticipation, she smiled into the dark room, relieved she'd eliminated the last obstacle to . . . Her smile slipped. Well, maybe not. There could be another, more difficult obstacle to overcome. Blu.

She drew a deep breath, released the air slowly, then rolled over to look at him. Her gaze traced his profile, clearly outlined by the silver glow of moonlight. Straight nose, well-formed lips, noble chin. Definitely a fine-looking man. She also knew he was kind, competent, physically strong, and from what she'd been able to tell, honest. All

the attributes most women would find appealing in a potential husband. Ignoring the odd tug of emotion in her chest, she shoved that thought aside. Maybe other women would, but not her. She wanted nothing more than to expand her lessons from the kitchen to the bedroom. Provided Blu was willing.

For the first time in her life, she wished she knew more about men. Blu had been willing enough earlier. But what if he no longer wanted to kiss her? No longer wanted more than kisses? After he had bared his soul about his childhood and revealed his reason for remaining a bachelor, she had no idea if his desire had ebbed permanently, or bubbled just below the surface.

As she drifted into the blackness of sleep, she prayed it was the latter.

\* \* \*

Delana took a seat at the table the next morning, feeling smug after fixing her first breakfast, with only limited supervision from Blu. The eggs were a little too well done, the bacon a little too crisp, but she hoped her biscuits would make up for the rest. Watching him break open one of the fluffy biscuits, she held her breath, waiting for his reaction.

His quick grin, followed by a murmured "Perfect," sent a warmth through her she never could have imagined. The sensation wasn't at all sexual, but more like a deep sense of accomplishment. Who would have thought cooking would be so satisfying? she marveled, putting a biscuit on her own plate.

As Blu forked more of the eggs into his mouth, she said, "What are your plans for today?"

He took another bite of biscuit, chewed, and swallowed. "I'm going to ride the ranch. I need to find the best grass and check for watering holes, so I'll know where to put the cattle when the herd arrives."

"Will that be soon?"

He nodded. "Sent a telegram yesterday. The herd should be here in a few days."

"How could you arrange to have cattle brought here that fast?"

"I made the arrangements before we left Austin. I wasn't sure the ranchers around here would sell me any cattle, so I bought a small herd and had them moved to a friend's ranch down near San Saba.



Then, once I was ready for the cattle, all I had to do is send a telegram asking to have the herd driven up here."

"You thought of everything, didn't you?"

"Hopefully," he replied, frowning into his coffee cup. After taking a drink, he said, "That reminds me. We shouldn't send any mail while we're here. There isn't anyone you need to contact, is there?"

Delana shook her head. "But why can't we send mail?"

"I don't want to take the chance that someone's keeping track of who we're writing to, or have letters opened and read before they leave town."

"You think somebody would actually do those things?"

Blu shrugged. "Can't say for sure, but there's always a chance."

She thought about that for a second, then said, "But you sent a telegram yesterday. Weren't you concerned about that?"

"No. Just in case the telegraph operator felt the need to repeat my message, Sorley and I had already worked out how to word my telegram so it wouldn't raise any red flags."

"Sorley is the owner of the ranch where the cattle are?"

He shook his head.

"So, he's a . . . colleague of yours?"

"Yeah, and also a friend."

Delana opened her mouth to question him further, but caught the warning look in his eyes and changed her mind. Instead, she turned her attention to the food on her plate.

Blu watched her eat in silence for several moments, then said, "So what are you gonna do today?"

"I haven't . . ." She halted her fork halfway to her mouth, her gaze snapping up to meet his. "Is there something I should do?"

He pushed away from the table, then rose. "Nothing pressing, I reckon. If you've got clothes that need washing, I'll put water on to heat before I leave."

"Oh . . . uh . . . sure. I can wash some clothes."

Her expression clearly telling him otherwise, Blu struggled not to laugh out loud. He cleared his throat, then said, "I can stick around long enough to get you started."

The smile lighting up her face sent a blast of pure lust to his groin, making him instantly hard. Amazed once again by his lack of control where Delana was concerned, a flush of embarrassment crept up his

neck and cheeks. Turning away before she noticed either reaction, he said, "I'll fetch the washtubs and start a fire out back."

A few minutes later, Delana joined him, a bundle of dirty clothes in her arms.

"I should wash what you're wearing, too," she said to him, dropping the clothes to the ground. "So why don't you take them off?"

Blu jerked upright, slopping water over the edge of the washtub. "Here," he said, his voice cracking.

"Why not?" she replied, glancing around the yard. "There's no one here but me." As the surprise on his face turned to shock, she couldn't hold in her amusement. His scowl made her laugh even harder.

Once her laughter died, she said, "Sorry. I couldn't resist."

When he opened his mouth to respond, she halted whatever he'd planned to say, by lifting a hand and waving him toward the house. "Shoo. Go inside and change."

He stared at her for a second, then said, "I can do my own laundry. You don't need to — "

"Don't be ridiculous. Wives wash their husbands' clothes all the time, so why should we be any different? Besides, it'd be foolish to heat all this water just to wash my clothes."

Blu rubbed the side of his jaw, his scowl deepening. The idea of Delana washing his underwear didn't seem proper somehow, but he had to admit, she did have a point. He exhaled with a sigh, then turned toward the house. "You're right. I'll be back directly."

After Blu returned with his dirty clothes and explained the steps to doing laundry, she wished she hadn't made the offer. She knew washing clothes probably wouldn't be an easy chore, but she had no idea how much was involved.

Too late now, she told herself, separating the clothes as he'd instructed. Whites in one pile. Colors in another. And his heavy trousers in a third. While the water heated, she loosened stains by rubbing the garments on the scrub board the way Blu had showed her. Then, once the water got hot enough, she added soap and the whites to the tub.

She straightened, pushing a lock of hair off her steam-dampened face, and looked up at him. "Now what?"

"Let the clothes boil a while."

"How long is that?"

"Depends on how dirty they are."

"That's a big help," she muttered.

Blu chuckled. "After a few weeks, you'll get the hang of it."

"I suppose," she said with a groan, already dreading the weekly chore. As she poked the clothes deeper into the water with a stick, she said, "Surely there's something more modern for doing laundry than washtubs over a fire."

"Probably is back East," he replied. "Maybe Virgil has a catalog with some newfangled gadget you could order."

"When can we go into town?" she said, trying without success to cover the excitement in her words.

"I hadn't planned on going back right away. But since most folks buy supplies on Saturdays, I reckon we could go then. Might give us a chance to meet some of the other ranchers from around here."

Her eyes went wide. "You mean it?"

"Sure."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a blazing smile before turning her attention back to the washtub.

"Don't mention it."

Blu watched her for a few more minutes, then said, "If you'll be okay, I'd better get started. I've got a lot of land to check out."

"I'll be fine," she replied, turning to look at him, her lips curved in another smile.

He stared at her face, struck with the sudden urge to stroke his fingers down her flushed cheek, to capture those lips in a long good-bye kiss. Shaking off his mind's unwelcome wanderings, he said, "Remember, boil just the whites. Wash the rest by hand, otherwise you'll boil the color right out of 'em."

"I remember. Just dunk them in a tub of warm water, then use soap and the scrub board."

He couldn't make himself look away, held captive by her incredible lavender eyes. After several moments, he gave himself a mental kick, then managed a raspy "Yeah, right." Turning on his heel, he started across the yard. "Don't try to empty the washtubs by yourself," he called over his shoulder, not breaking stride. "I'll do it when I get back."

A few minutes later, Blu led Mouse from the lean-to, then stepped into the stirrup and settled onto his saddle. Deciding to check a final

time on Delana, he directed the gelding toward the house, telling himself it was to make sure she didn't need his help, rather than just wanting another look at her.

As he pulled his horse to a halt a short distance from her, he saw immediately that she had everything well in hand. She'd already taken some of the clothes from the washtub, rinsed them in the second tub, and wrung out the excess water. Satisfied she'd be fine, he started to turn his horse around, when something off to his left caught his attention. Pulling back on the reins, he stared at the clothes she'd already draped over several small shrubs.

"Jesus," he said under his breath. "I've gotta get the hell outta here." Touching his heels to Mouse's sides, he sent the gelding forward with a lunge, hoping what he'd just seen would fade as soon as he got away from the house.

No such luck. The image of Delana's underclothes spread out next to his drawers remained stuck in his head. For some reason, seeing their underwear together like that, practically touching, had seemed so . . . so intimate, and strangely erotic. He groaned, unable to believe what he was thinking.

Why their wet underwear draped over a shrub caused such a shocking reaction completely baffled him. He'd never had such ridiculous thoughts in his life, for God's sake, so why had they started now? Drawing a ragged breath, he knew that was one question he could answer.

Delana Wyatt.

# Eight

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When Blu and Delana arrived in town Saturday morning, the streets were already crowded with other wagons. Several blocks from the mercantile, he pulled the team of horses to a halt, then jumped down and turned to help Delana.

As he lifted her from the wagon, he noticed her sudden pallor and how she kept glancing around.

"Are you feeling poorly?"

She shook her head.

"Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Uh-uh, don't give me that. Something's got you spooked. Now tell me what it is."

From the look of irritation she flicked in his direction, he knew getting an answer might take a while. He folded his arms over his chest, willing to wait her out.

She fussed with her hair, smoothed a wrinkle from her skirt, then finally exhaled with a huff. "Oh, all right. It's just" — she glanced again at the busy business district — "all these people make me nervous."

"Why?" he said, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Because they might see through our act?"

"Well, yes, that is a concern, but that's not..." She drew an unsteady breath. "I know it's stupid, but I'm afraid I'll run into someone I know."

"Unless your stepfather is planning on getting into the cattle business, I doubt any of his cronies would have reason to come here."

She considered his words for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. He isn't interested. He and his business associates agree there's

no longer big money in cattle, and none of them, especially Henry, would waste their time investing in anything unless the return was more than penny-ante." She looked up at him, the annoyance in her eyes replaced by a twinkle. "Besides, a town the size of Brownwood wouldn't be sophisticated enough for their snooty tastes." Her lips curving in a genuine smile, she added, "Thanks for reassuring me."

"Any time, darlin'," he murmured, unfolding his arms to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "But I just pointed you in the right direction. You figured out the rest on yer own."

If Delana replied, he didn't hear it. Her smile, the silky texture of her hair, and the sweet scent of her soap drifting up to tease his nose had caused his blood to pound so hard against his eardrums that he heard no other sound. Unable to withdraw his hand from her face, he trailed his fingers down the side of her neck.

Her eyes went wide, their color deepening to purple. Her throat working with a swallow, her pulse throbbed a wild rhythm beneath his fingertips.

Before Blu realized his intention, he leaned forward, inching his way closer to the irresistible nectar of Delana's mouth.

"Sorry to interrupt such a touching moment," came a soft drawl from behind them.

Blu jerked with surprise, then straightened and turned to face a grinning Addie. "Damn it, woman, don't you know you shouldn't sneak up on folks like that?"

"I didn't sneak," Addie replied with a chuckle. "You were just too busy drowning in your wife's eyes to hear anything else."

He shot a quick glance in Delana's direction. She blinked several times, then gave her head a quick shake, looking as dazed as he felt. Rubbing the side of his jaw, he cleared his throat. "So . . . uh . . . what can we do for you, Addie?"

"Just wanted to make sure y'all knew about the big square dance."

"Dance?" Delana said, finally shaking off the last of the sensual net Blu had cast over her. "When is it?"

"Last Saturday of the month, in the town square. Starts about five and lasts until everybody's tuckered out from the dancing. And they'll also be plenty of food. I'm head of the refreshment committee, so I know. The ladies in town make all sorts of fine things to eat. Every kind of sweet you can name. Oh, and Jake, owner of the Silver Dollar

Saloon, always donates a barrel or two of beer and lots of lemonade for the ladies and any tee-totalers."

"That sounds wonderful," Delana replied, turning her gaze on Blu. "We can come, can't we?"

Blu wanted to say no. As he'd discovered, keeping up the pretense of their marriage was more difficult than he'd imagined. And after nearly losing control several days earlier, he knew he had to keep his distance from Delana as much as possible. Unfortunately, he couldn't maintain that distance while they were out in public. During those times, he had no choice except to continue their charade. Even so, the last thing he should do was go to some damn dance with the woman who had his insides tied in knots. But the townsfolk would think it strange if they didn't attend, and more important, he didn't want to crush the hope he saw on Delana's face. Schooling his features into what he hoped would look more like a smile than a grimace, he said, "Don't see why not."

"Great," Addie said. "We'll look forward to seeing you two." As she started to move past them, she gave Delana's arm a squeeze. "You'll have a wonderful time."

Delana smiled, watching Addie until the woman disappeared into a storefront down the block. Turning back to Blu, she said, "I got the impression you aren't real enthused about going to the dance."

Surprised she could read him so well, he shrugged, searching his mind for a plausible explanation. "I ain't much of a dancer, that's all."

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll do fine." She moved to stand beside him and slipped an arm through his. "Just like you do everything else."

"Appreciate your confidence in my abilities," he replied, ignoring the deep satisfaction her words caused. "But I think you'd better hold off drawin' any conclusions about my dancin'."

"Is that so?" she said, laughter coloring her voice. "Well, not to worry. My dancing is superb, if I do say so myself, so if yours is as bad as you claim, I'll teach you."

"Mighty kind offer," he said, starting them down the street toward Potter's Mercantile. "But not necessary."

"Don't be silly. Just consider the lessons" — she glanced around to make sure there was no one close enough to overhear — "repayment for the ones you're giving me."

Blu started to tell her she didn't need to repay him for teaching her to cook, nor did he want dance lessons. But from what he already

knew about her, she'd demand to know why. Since he couldn't tell her the truth — that holding her in his arms during his lessons would be pure torture and, given the overwhelming desire she stirred in him, easily could lead to something he'd regret — he clamped his lips shut. He'd deal with the problem later, after he figured out an excuse — one she'd accept — for turning down her offer.

Inside the mercantile, Blu told Delana he'd be back to fetch her in an hour, then left her to look through the catalogs Virgil hauled out.

Delana continued staring at the door even after he'd left the store, her lips still curved in the good-bye smile she'd given him. Marriage might not be so bad with a man like Blu. *In fact, it might be won* — Her smile disappeared. Scolding herself for even thinking such a thing, she quickly shoved the unwelcome thoughts from her head. After taking a deep breath, she forced her smile back into place, then turned to the shopkeeper. "Well, I guess I'd better get started."

Virgil returned her smile, his teeth a stark contrast to his drooping black mustache. "Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Cahill. Just take your time." He pointed to one of the catalogs. "Just got that one there in yesterday. Haven't even had a chance to look through all of it m'self."

"I'll be careful with it."

A blush darkening the man's ruddy face, he wiped his hands on the front of his apron in a nervous gesture. "I wasn't worried about that, ma'am. I just wanted you to know that it'd have the most recent line of household goods. A fine lady like yerself would want the latest products available. And the best, o' course. Why, there's even some things in there direct from Paris, France. I bet you'll find every kind of gadget you've heard of. Maybe even some you haven't. I know I'm purely amazed every time I look through a new catalog. I'll see something new and think, 'Huh, now who woulda thought there could be such a thing?' That's why I figured you'd wanna look at that one first."

Delana stared at the man, her head spinning. "Um . . . well, thank you, Mr. Potter," she said, glad Blu had warned her about the man's propensity to talk nonstop.

"Call me Virgil, Mrs. Cahill. Everybody in these parts calls me Virgil. Wouldn't have it any other way. It's real important to get my customers on a first-name basis with me. Makes 'em feel more comfortable when they come into the store."



"I . . . well . . . yes, I suppose it does." At his expectant look, she added, "Virgil."

He grinned. "See there? That didn't hurt none, did it?"

"No," she replied, a smile tugging at her mouth. "It didn't."

She was spared further conversation by the arrival of several more customers.

"Virgil," a male voice boomed through the store. "I need to get an order filled pronto."

"Yes sir, Mr. Riley," Virgil replied, hurrying over to the man. "What can I get for you and the missus today?"

Delana shifted her attention to the catalogs in front of her, relieved that someone else would have to put up with the storekeeper's constant chatter.

She took her time, carefully checking each catalog page before turning to the next. Though Blu had said to pick out whatever she wanted, she didn't want to place an order without his approval. After all, her money wouldn't be paying for what she'd selected, so it was only fair that he have a say in the matter.

A little more than an hour had passed by the time Blu returned to the mercantile. The store was crowded, and he had to elbow his way through the aisles to get to Delana.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "It took me longer to order lumber for the barn than I expected."

"That's alright."

He glanced over his shoulder to where Virgil was wrapping up a customer's order, then whispered, "Did he talk your ear off?"

Delana chuckled. "Darn near. A couple came just in time and saved me before I ended up permanently maimed."

Blu's teeth flashed in a smile. "I hope you thanked them."

"Actually, no, I didn't. They weren't here long. Gave an order to Virgil, then told him they'd be back later to — oh, there they are now. Would you like to meet them? Mr. Riley wasn't overly friendly, but Ethel, his wife was nice."

"Riley? Burch Riley?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"No, but I aim to."

"Then how did you know his first name?"

"Never mind. Come on." He cupped her elbow with one hand and steered them toward the Rileys. "You can introduce me."

Though not as tall as Blu, Burch Riley was a bull of a man, with a thick neck, broad chest, and beefy arms, and didn't appear to have any excess fat on his stocky frame. Based on the bruising grip of his handshake, Blu knew he also possessed great strength.

Once Delana completed the introductions, Burch said, "You must be the one Rube — er . . . Sheriff Duncan said bought the Chandler place."

"That's right," Blu replied. "Did he also tell you I'm looking to add some local cattle to the herd I got coming?"

"Yeah, he mentioned that."

Blu waited for the other man to respond, but when he didn't, Blu said, "You know anyone willing to sell me a few head?"

"Maybe." He tugged on his right earlobe, the narrowed gaze of his muddy-brown eyes riveted on Blu's face. "You fixin' to string wire on your land?"

Blu shook his head, realizing he had to be real careful how he answered. "Not a chance."

"Yeah? Then why'd you tell the sheriff you weren't sure about stringing wire?"

"I wasn't sure when I met him. But I've ridden my ranch since then and done a lot of thinkin'. My cattle'll need water and grass, and there ain't enough of either on my land. Open range is the only way to see they get 'em."

Burch made a grunting sound, which Blu couldn't decipher. Keeping his expression bland, he waited for the man to decide if he'd passed what obviously had been a test.

After several more seconds of intense scrutiny, Burch finally said, "Come by my place, say, tomorrow afternoon and we'll talk."

"I'll do that," Blu replied, taking the invitation as a good sign.

After getting instructions on how to find the Burch ranch, Blu shook the man's hand again. "Until tomorrow, then." Turning to Ethel Riley, a little mouse of a woman with large gray eyes, who looked even tinier next to her husband, he smiled. "Pleasure meetin' you, ma'am."

She smiled in return, then cast a quick glance at her husband, apparently concerned about his reaction. "Nice meeting you both," she said in a low voice.

"Come on," Burch said, grabbing one of the packages Virgil had left on the counter, then turning to leave. "We need to get a move on."

As Ethel started to follow, Delana said, "Wait. Will we see you at the dance?"

"Um . . . I . . ." She glanced at Burch again, who was nearing the door. "I'm not sure." Lowering her voice even more, she added, "My husband doesn't like socializing much, but I'd surely love to come."

A bell went off in Delana's head. "Then tell him to bring you to the dance."

The woman's gray eyes went wide. "Oh, my, no. I couldn't do that."

"Why not?" Delana said through clenched teeth, the bell clanging louder.

"Burch makes all the decisions about where we go and what we do, so I couldn't — "

"Ethel!" The man's voice boomed from the doorway, making the woman jump. "Get that other package and come on."

"I'm sorry, Delana," she said, grabbing the package off the counter. "I've gotta go. I hope we'll see each other again."

Delana nodded, so angry she couldn't speak. *Men! Only doing what suits them, not giving any consideration to the other person in their marriage.* She huffed out a breath. The Rileys were another prime example of why she'd sworn never to marry.

She watched Ethel scurry across the store, then disappear through the door. Rubbing her temple to ease the pounding, she turned to Blu.

"Tell me something," she said, glaring up at him. "Why do men always have to be in control?"

When he opened his mouth to reply, she held up a hand. "On second thought, don't answer that." She shook her head. "What was I thinking, asking you? You're a man!"

Blu chuckled. "Thanks for noticing, darlin'." When his comment earned another glare, he said, "What's got you so hot under the collar?"

"Men, that's what. And how they've always got to control everything. Their businesses. Their social lives. Their wives."

"Ah, now I understand. You didn't like how Riley treated his wife."

"You're damn right, I didn't," she replied, another round of temper simmering just below the surface. "Just because he's bigger and stronger, that doesn't give him the right to make all the decisions, or to tell his wife what she can and can't do. More muscle does not mean more brains."

"I agree."

Delana's gaze snapped up to meet Blu's. "You do?"

"Yeah. Marriage should be an equal partnership." She stared at him for a moment, then shook herself out of her momentary shock. "Exactly. But I've never seen a marriage like that."

"They happen, every once in a while."

"You know a married man who doesn't try to control everything his wife does?"

When he nodded, she said, "Well, he's got to be a rare breed, which makes her a really lucky woman. I'd sure like to meet the two of them."

"You will get to meet him. But sorry to say, his wife passed away a few years back." He frowned. "Damnnear killed Sorley."

"Sorley? The Sorley who's bringing the cattle here?"

"One and the same. Only don't go telling him I mentioned his wife. He might not take kindly to me talking behind his back about something that personal."

"No, of course I won't say anything."

"Appreciate it." He motioned toward the catalogs on the counter. "Did you find something you wanted?"

She stared up at him, struck with the realization that what she'd always wanted might be on the verge of changing. The possibility took her by surprise. How could that be? How could — Blu's voice brought her musings to a halt.

"Delana, can you hear me?"

She blinked several times, then turned toward the counter with a huff. "Well, of course I can hear you," she said, pleased with her tone. "You're standing right in front of me." She didn't want him prying into what she'd been thinking, and figured the best way to accomplish that was to throw him off guard with a little tartness.

Before he could respond, she flipped open one of the catalogs and pointed. "I thought this would be the best choice, but I wanted to get your opinion."

Blu stared at her back, fighting down the urge to laugh. The little minx. What had been going on inside that lovely head of hers? Whatever she'd been thinking, her smart-aleck reply told him she didn't want to share. Unbidden, his mind filled with images of how he could get her into a sharing mood. He'd use a slow, sensual assault, one

designed to leave her breathless and begging him for more in addition to loosening her tongue.

Her tongue. Oh, God!

More images popped into his head, sending a streak of white-hot heat zinging to his groin. He bit back a moan, wondering how the hell he'd allowed his thoughts to get so far off track. And once again, he didn't need long to come up with the answer. She was standing right in front of him. Almost from the moment he'd met Delana, the firm control he maintained over his life had started to fray. And now he feared the remaining strands would unravel completely. Somehow, he had to prevent that from happening.

Clearing his throat, he took a step closer. "Okay," he said, peering over her shoulder, "let's have a look."

Her scent surrounded him, tickling his senses with a heady mix of the spicy floral of her soap and the arousing musk of warm female. Another quick punch of desire caught him in the solar plexus. Cursing under his breath, he forced himself to concentrate on the page Delana had pointed out.

After a quick glance, he straightened, then took a step back. "Looks fine," he finally said, relieved his voice sounded almost normal. "Tell Virgil to place an order."

Delana turned. "Are you sure? Because you barely —"

"Absolutely," he replied, pulling several coins from his pocket and slapping them on the counter. "Order it." He took another step back. "Was there . . . uh . . . something else you wanted to get while we're here?"

She hesitated, then glanced toward the back of the store. "Well, I did see a dress that would be perfect for the dance."

"The dance," Blu responded, his tone less than enthusiastic.

"Never mind. It's not important."

"If you like it, go ahead and have Virgil wrap it up." He nodded toward the coins on the counter. "If that isn't enough to cover everything, tell Virgil I'll settle up with him next time I'm in town."

At her nod, he spun on his heel and headed for the door. "I'll be outside."

Delana frowned at his back, wondering what had made him so antsy. Deciding the source of his uneasiness had to be the upcoming dance, she headed for the back of the store to fetch the dress she'd spotted earlier.

Blu stepped outside and drew several deep breaths, hoping to clear Delana's scent from his head and lungs. Moving away from the door, he leaned a shoulder against the building's rough-hewn siding and closed his eyes. He had to get a grip on his randiness. If he didn't . . . He opened his eyes and cocked his head to one side, his attention snagged by what sounded like sniffing. Pushing away from the building, he headed in that direction.

As he rounded the corner of the mercantile, Blu came to a stop. A young boy sat on the ground, head bowed, a long piece of rawhide lying beside him in the dirt. Blu saw the boy's chest lift with a shuddering breath, then watched him wipe his face on a shirtsleeve.

He cleared his throat to make sure the boy knew of his presence, then started toward him.

"Hey, pardner," Blu said, hunkering down beside the boy, who he figured couldn't be more than four or five. "Why the long face?"

The boy shrugged, lifting an arm to wipe his face again, but made no attempt to speak.

Blu was silent for a moment, then said, "What's your name, son?"

The boy hesitated, then finally said, "Guthrie. Guthrie Dodge."

"I'm Blu Cahill, Guthrie. Now, are ya gonna tell me what's wrong?"

His lips pressed together, Guthrie shook his head.

"Ya know, if you tell me, maybe I can help."

This time, Guthrie glanced up at him, his pinched face streaked with a mixture of tears and dust. "Really?"

"Absolutely," Blu replied with a smile.

The boy stared at him for a second, then took another shuddering breath. "I didn't tie Jeb's leash good enough and . . ." A single tear slipped from the corner of one dark-blue eye. "And he runned off, and now I can't find him."

"Jeb is your dog?"

"Puppy." He sniffed, wiping the tear off his cheek with a quick swipe of a grubby hand. "I've only had him a couple o' weeks."

"A puppy that young would get tuckered out real quick, so he can't be far. We shouldn't have any trouble finding him."

Hope sprang into Guthrie's eyes. "Ya really think so?"

"Yup, sure do," Blu replied, ruffling the boy's pale blond hair.

\* \* \*

Delana stepped through the mercantile's double doors, the package containing her new dress tucked in one arm. Not finding Blu in front of the store as she'd expected, she glanced up and down the street but saw no sign of him. Before she could decide what she should do, she heard voices coming from somewhere close by. Certain one of the voices belonged to Blu, she headed in that direction.

She found Blu hunkered down beside a boy in the narrow alley running along the side of the mercantile.

"Blu? Is everything okay?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah. Come here, I'd like you to meet someone."

As she moved closer, the boy said something to Blu, but she couldn't make out his words.

Blu chuckled, his reply also too soft for her to hear, then got to his feet.

"Delana, this is Guthrie Dodge, a new friend of mine."

He turned to look down at the boy. "Stand up and say hello to Mrs. Cahill."

Guthrie sprang to his feet. "Nice meetin' ya, Mrs. Cahill."

"Thank you, Guthrie," Delana replied with a smile. "It's nice meeting you, too."

She looked up at Blu. "So what were you two doing? Hatching secret plans to take over the town?"

"No, nothing like that," he said, his dimples making a quick appearance in his cheeks. "Guthrie's pup ran off, and I offered to help him. Right, pardner?"

The boy tipped his face up to meet Blu's gaze and grinned. "Yes, sir."

Delana shifted her gaze from the boy back to Blu. "Well, that's real nice of you," she said around the sudden lump in her throat. "I guess I'll see if I can find Addie."

"I shouldn't be long," Blu said to her. "Wait at the boardinghouse and I'll come fetch you."

She nodded, watching the two of them leave the alley, then turn down the street. The way Blu's hand rested lightly on Guthrie's shoulder, they gave the appearance of father and son. She stood frozen in place, a lump of emotion once again filling her throat, while an odd warmth curled around her heart. Blu was wrong to worry, she realized, forcing herself to take a step forward. He wasn't like his father.

After what she'd just witnessed between him and Guthrie, she knew there was no way such a gentle, kindhearted man would hurt his own child. He would be a wonderful father, as well as a wonderful husband. The warmth encircling her heart tightened, stealing her breath and bringing her to a stumbling halt.

Oh, no, that can't be! She squeezed her eyes closed against the unwanted thoughts buzzing in her head. *I can't let this happen. I can't let myself fall —*

"Well, well, what have we here?" a voice said from behind her. "I'm bettin' you'd be Mrs. Cahill."



# Nine

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Delana gasped and whirled around to face the man behind her. Spotting the badge pinned to his shirt, her sudden panic began to recede. "Yes, I'm Delana Cahill," she replied, grateful the name rolled easily off her tongue. Yet perpetuating the lie with such ease brought back her startling revelation of a moment ago. Determined to stop thinking about her growing feelings for the man pretending to be her husband, she released an unsteady breath. "You gave me quite a fright."

"Sorry," the man said, pushing his hat to the back of his head. As his cold gaze raked over her, he added, "You musta been mighty deep in thought."

"Yes, I suppose I was."

"I'm Rube Duncan, county sheriff. Is there somethin' I can help you with?"

Delana tried for a smile but wasn't sure she succeeded. "No thanks, Sheriff, but it's kind of you to offer."

"Just doing my job, Mrs. Cahill."

"No harm done."

When Delana started to turn away, he said, "So how do you like our little town? Everybody treating ya right?"

"Brownwood is very nice, and yes, everyone has been real friendly."

"Good to hear. Wouldn't like word to get out that folks passing through were treated poorly."

"Blu and I aren't passing through, Sheriff," Delana replied, suddenly uncomfortable at the direction of their conversation. "We bought a ranch. We're part of the community now."

His gaze turned even colder. "Yeah, he told me he plans to run cattle on yer land."

Delana frowned. "Yes, that's what he plans. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to —"

"Yer husband also planning to run barb wire?"

"I have no idea. Blu doesn't share all his plans for the ranch with me."

"No, reckon not." Sheriff Duncan stared down at her for several seconds, then said, "Cahill have a lot of experience raising cattle, does he?"

"Look, Sheriff, I don't mean to sound rude, but I really need to go. If you have more questions about my husband's plans or his experience, I suggest you ask him."

The man's chilling gaze narrowed, his lips flattened, and a muscle jerked in his jaw. After a moment, he appeared to regain his composure. "Didn't mean to ruffle yer feathers. But being as I'm in charge of the law in these parts, it's my job to get to know the folks living here." Tugging the brim of his hat back down to hide his eyes, he nodded. "Pleasure meeting ya, Mrs. Cahill."

Before Delana could reply, he turned and walked away. She sighed, hoping she hadn't given the man reason to be suspicious of Blu. Heading toward Addie's boardinghouse, she made a mental note to tell Blu about her conversation with Sheriff Duncan.

\* \* \*

Blu arrived at the Riley ranch the next afternoon, where Ethel Riley told him her husband and the others were in the barn. Wondering who else Burch Riley had invited, he led Mouse across the yard.

After tying the gelding to the corral fence beside two other horses, he headed for the open barn door.

"Come on in," Riley called to him, apparently having seen his approach.

Once Blu's eyes adjusted to the dim interior of the barn, he spotted Burch Riley and two other men standing beside one of the horse stalls.

As Riley made the introductions, Blu shook each man's hand while stuffing bits of information about them into his memory. Carl Griswold. Tall and lanky. Thick, red hair. Clean-shaven. Ruddy complexion. Hardy Pierce. Smaller than the others, but a well-muscled lean frame. Black hair. Thin moustache. Deeply tanned.

"Now that ya've met each other," Riley said, rubbing his hands together, "what say we talk business?"

"Fine by me," Blu replied, shifting his gaze from Griswold and Pierce to Riley.

"Like I told ya, Cahill here is lookin' to buy some cattle," Riley said to the others. "He ain't planning to string any wire, so I was thinking we could each sell him a half-dozen head." His gaze moved back and forth between Griswold and Pierce. "What do you fellas think?"

For several moments, the only sound was the snuffle of a horse from somewhere deeper in the barn. Finally, Pierce cleared his throat, then said, "Yer awful quick to trust a stranger enough to sell him cattle. What if he's feeding us a line about using wire?"

"I figure I'm a pretty good judge of a man's character," Riley replied. "But if you got something you want to ask him, go ahead and ask."

Pierce flashed an annoyed glance in Riley's direction, then turned to look Blu square in the eye. "I don't know what Riley's told ya, Cahill, but around here we don't cotton to barb wire. Using it to keep a herd of beeves from water or decent pasture just plain ain't right."

"I agree," Blu replied in a firm voice.

"Easy words," Pierce said, crossing his arms over his chest. "But how do we know you ain't agreeing just to get us to sell you the cattle you want?"

"I'm agreeing because what you said is true. It's like I told Riley in town the other day, there's not enough water or grass on my ranch to support the size herd I want, so open range is the only way for that many head to survive." He paused, then added what he hoped would be the deciding statement in his favor. "Stringing wire would be financial suicide for me."

Pierce snorted. "Yeah, that's definitely the truth." He continued to eye Blu thoughtfully, then finally said, "Tell ya what. If Riley is willing to sell to ya, I'll add a halfdozen heifers to the deal."

"I'll pay a fair price," Blu said, then turned to look at Burch Riley.

"Yeah, I'm willing." Riley looked over Griswold, who hadn't said a word since the introductions. "What about you, Carl? You in or not?"

He scowled. "I ain't decided yet." He shifted his stare from Blu to the other men. "I need to talk to the two of ya. In private."

Blu turned toward the door. "I'll step outside."

While he waited, he went over everything that had been said, hoping he'd chosen the right words. His assignment hinged on gaining

the trust of these men. If he'd made a mistake and they didn't believe him, the success of his job would be in serious jeopardy.

After a few minutes, Burch Riley's large frame appeared in the barn door, followed by the others. From where Blu leaned against the corral fence, he studied the approaching men from beneath the brim of his hat. Their expressions didn't reveal much, but a flush had darkened Griswold's already ruddy face, and a muscle twitched in one cheek.

He pushed away from the fence but remained silent.

Riley stopped in front of Blu. "Congratulations, Cahill, you've got yerself a deal."

Blu smiled. "Thanks," he said, extending his hand to each man in turn. "I appreciate this." Griswold hesitated, obviously not pleased with the outcome of his private confab with the other two. He finally mumbled something unintelligible, then lifted his hand and clasped Blu's.

Blu breathed a silent sigh of relief, grateful that whatever Riley and Pierce had told Griswold had won the man's grudging acceptance.

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Delana placed a cloth over the large wooden bowl, then set it aside to allow the bread dough to rise. Though her skill at making bread had improved a great deal since her first pathetic attempt — thanks to asking for Addie's advice when she and Blu were in town several days earlier — the chore still required more than a day to complete. As she wiped her hands on her apron, she wondered if a housewife's work was ever done. Did they ever get to relax or find time to do something for themselves, like taking a nice, long bath? What she wouldn't give to soak in a bathtub filled with tepid water.

She sighed, moving to the open window and looking into the rear yard. Blu was out there somewhere, having excused himself right after their noon meal so he could work on a corral for the horses. Resting her head on the window frame, she wished she didn't miss him so much. But the truth was, whenever he wasn't around, she couldn't wait for his return, her heart pounding with anticipation whenever she thought she heard him.

The strength of her need to go to him nearly overwhelmed her. Though she tried to ignore the urge, her mind dismissed all the arguments she'd come up with to stay put. But as she reached for the strings of her apron, her hands froze in the task. Wouldn't he think it odd for her to seek him out? She frowned. Yes, he probably would wonder at her behavior. So what excuse could she use for going to him? Staring out into the glare of the sunny day, watching the heat shimmer off the hard-packed ground, she hit on the answer. On such a hot day, he would appreciate a cool drink.

After tossing her apron over a chair, she poured two glasses of lemonade, then headed for the door.

\* \* \*

Blu straightened from digging another posthole, then wiped the sweat from his brow with a forearm. As he surveyed the partially built coral, a burst of pride surged through him. He'd done his share of physical labor, working some of the hardest, most physically demanding jobs after running away from home, but none of them had given him such a deep sense of satisfaction. Refusing to consider the reason behind the foreign feelings swirling inside him, he dried his palms on his trouser legs, then reached for a cedar post.

He'd dumped several shovelfuls of dirt into the hole to hold the post, when he heard something behind him. Glancing at where he'd propped his rifle against a tree stump, he cursed himself for not keeping the weapon closer. He tightened his grip on the shovel handle, then turned.

Delana's smile of greeting faltered at Blu's defensive stance and the way he held the shovel in front of him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to . . ." Her mouth went dry. Dear Lord, he wasn't wearing a shirt. Though she knew staring was rude, she couldn't help herself. Her gaze moved over his upper body, noting the thick cords of his neck, the width of his shoulders, and the bulging muscles of his arms. Beads of sweat glistened in the thick mat of dark hair that formed an inverted triangle in the center of his impressive chest. The hair narrowed to a thin line, which she followed until it disappeared beneath the waistband of his trousers. She swallowed hard, then jerked her gaze back to his face. "It's really . . . um . . . hot today, so I . . . uh . . . thought you might like some lemonade."

He lowered the shovel, then shoved the blade into a pile of dirt. Moving toward her, he said, "Yeah, I would. Thanks."

She handed him one of the glasses, the rough calluses on his fingers brushing hers and sending a wild tingling up her spine. As she lifted her glass to her mouth and took a sip of lemonade, she wondered how those fingers would feel on other parts of her body. Her throat closed at the direction of her thoughts, making it impossible to swallow. She made a choking sound, then started coughing.

"Hey, are you all right?" Blu said, setting his glass on the ground, then taking hers and placing it beside his.

She nodded, but another round of coughing prevented her from speaking.

He gave her back an awkward pat. "Lemonade go down the wrong pipe?"

She wiped her eyes, then managed a watery smile. "I guess that's one way to put it."

When he smiled in return, her heart did a strange little flip in her chest. Hoping to control her reaction to him, she drew in a deep breath to clear her head, then wished she hadn't. He was so close that her lungs filled with his scent — the tang of his shaving soap and the musk of male sweat — a potent and dizzying combination. She swayed on her feet, leaning closer to Blu.

His hands wrapped around her upper arms, preventing her from falling. "Whoa, darlin', easy there."

She stared up at him, her pulse pounding in her temples. "Blu, I . . ." She ran her tongue over her dry lips. "I don't know what — "

"Shh," he said, lowering his face toward hers. "I know."

Delana suddenly found herself hauled against the bare chest she had so recently admired, her mouth held captive by Blu's possessive kiss. Winding her arms around his neck, she threaded her fingers in the sweat-dampened silk of his hair and pressed her body more firmly against his. She sighed into his mouth, then opened her lips at the insistence of his probing tongue.

His arms tightened around her, one hand splayed in the center of her back, the other cupped over her bottom.

A deep rumbling groan filled the air. Whether the sound came from her, from Blu, or from both of them, she couldn't be certain. But the source didn't matter. All she cared about was having Blu continue kissing her.

Her breasts tingled where their hardened tips pushed against his muscled chest. A primitive throbbing started between her thighs, building in intensity with each bold thrust of his tongue inside her mouth. A low, keening moan vibrating in her throat, she tightened her grip on his hair and instinctively rubbed her belly against the hard ridge of his arousal.

He pulled his mouth from hers. "Don't," he murmured in a ragged voice.

She went still, ashamed at her behavior and mortified that he'd ordered her to stop. Unable to look at him, she kept her gaze averted and tried to take a step back.

His arms tightened, refusing to let her move. "Stay where you are."

"No," she replied, struggling to free herself from his embrace. "You told me to stop, and I —"

He shifted his hands so that he held her at arms' length. "Take it easy, darlin'. I didn't tell you to stop."

"You said, 'Don't.' " She lifted her head and flashed him a mutinous glare. "That sounds like *stop* to me."

"Okay, I'll give you that. But the thing is, *stop* wasn't what I meant, exactly."

She frowned. "Then what did you mean? Exactly?"

Blu chuckled, struck again by how much he liked being around this woman, by how much he wanted her. Looking into her beautiful passion-darkened eyes, he realized he was in deep, deep trouble. One little slip and he'd be in way over his head.

Not wanting to delve into that line of thinking, he cleared his throat. "I said, 'Don't,' because what you were doing felt so damn good, and I was afraid I'd embarrass myself." Seeing she didn't understand, he chose his next words carefully. "I haven't . . . uh . . . been with a woman in a long time. So if you'd kept on rubbing against me that way . . . well, let's just say I would've gone over the edge in one hell of a hurry."

Brow knitted, she stared up at him. He watched her consider what he'd said, hoping he didn't have to spell it out any plainer. Then her brow cleared and the bloom of a blush appeared on her cheeks, telling him she'd caught his meaning.

He pulled her close for a quick hug, then set her away from him and dropped his arms to his sides. "I think I'll drink the lemonade now, then get back to work."

She nodded, still dazed by the residual desire humming in her veins, and what he'd just revealed to her. Though pleased by his admission of not having been with a woman in a long time, she couldn't help wondering if his abstinence was the only reason he'd nearly "gone over the edge," as he'd so politely phrased his close call. Had she been just a convenient female, or was there more to the situation? Was it possible that he wanted *her* specifically, that his desire for *her* was so strong that he . . . She gave her head a shake, silently scolding her overactive imagination. She had no business entertaining such fanciful notions, because if she did, she might start to believe them. And that would be a grave mistake.

Determined to change the direction of her thoughts, she bent to pick up her glass, then took a long drink. But as she searched for a diversionary topic, her gaze strayed to Blu's bare torso, drawn by a force she was powerless to stop. Even squeezing her eyes closed didn't help. An image of his perfectly sculpted chest with its triangle of dark hair remained etched in her mind.

Blu watched Delana struggling to compose herself, certain he knew exactly how she felt. Body throbbing with need. Blood sizzling. Lips tingling. Damn! He lifted his glass and downed the rest of the lemonade in one gulp, hoping the cool liquid would put out the fire smoldering inside him. It didn't. Now what the hell was he —

The sound of an approaching rider snagged his attention. Moving to where he'd draped his shirt over a tree branch, he quickly pulled the garment over his head, grabbed his hat, then reached for his rifle. After racking a shell into the chamber, he turned to Delana. "We've got company," he said. "Stay behind me till I see who it is."

Not waiting for her to reply, he started across the yard.

By the time he rounded the corner of the house, a man had pulled his dun horse to a halt by the front porch and dismounted.

Blu stared at the man through narrowed eyes, then grinned. "Sorley McGregor! It's about time your flea-bitten hide arrived."

"Is that any way to greet an old friend, Cahill?" Sorley replied. After looping his reins around the porch railing, he started toward Blu. "I thought I taught you better manners than that."

Blu chuckled. "That's not all you taught me." He uncocked the rifle and propped it against one of the porch posts.



Sorley shook his head, a deep laugh rumbling in his chest. "Reckon that's true enough." He glanced over Blu's shoulder, then lowered his voice to add, "Most o' which can't be discussed in front of a lady."

Blu turned, spotting Delana standing by the corner of the house. His good mood slipped a notch at being reminded that she was indeed a lady. He had no business wanting to toss any lady — Delana in particular — into bed and make her scream with pleasure. Hell, he knew that. He'd lived with the fact his entire adult life, but somehow, where Delana was concerned, his body had yet to get the message. Or maybe it was his heart that hadn't — No! He shoved that thought aside. What he felt for her was pure and simple lust, nothing more.

"Blu? What is it?" Sorley moved closer. "All of a sudden yer lookin' mighty peaked."

"I . . . uh . . . it's nothing. I'm fine. I want to introduce you to Delana." He lifted a hand and waved her closer.

When she stood next to him, he said, "This is Sorley McGregor, the man I told you about. And Sorley, this is Delana."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. McGregor," Delana said.

Sorley pulled his hat from his head, then ran a hand through his curly light-brown hair. "The pleasure's mine, Miss Wyatt."

She glanced up at Blu. "How did he know my name?"

"Obviously, he talked to my boss in Austin." Shifting his gaze to Sorley, he said, "Am I right?"

Sorley nodded, then settled his hat back on his head. "Yeah. I know your marriage ain't for real, but" — he flashed a smile at Delana, his teeth a stark contrast to his deeply tanned face — "I'll take care to call you Mrs. Cahill if anyone else is within hearing distance."

"I thought you were just delivering cattle," she replied. "Are you planning on staying in Brownwood?"

"When Blu sent word to bring the herd, he asked if I'd stay and help raise a barn. Reckon that means I'll be around for a spell." His hazel eyes narrowed to gauge her reaction. "That ain't a problem, is it?"

"No, of course not," she said, casting a sideways glance at Blu. "But I'm afraid we don't have an extra bed."

"Don't worry yerself none. Blu and me have both spent more nights than either of us care to remember sleeping under the stars."

"There's a decent boardinghouse in town," Blu said, "in case yer getting too old to sleep on the ground."

Sorley frowned. "Who you calling old?"

"I didn't call you anything," Blu replied with a smile. "But I happen to know yer past forty now, and I thought maybe a real bed would be easier on forty-year-old bones."

"Look here, Cahill. I may be a lot older than you, but that don't mean I can't still knock you clear into next week."

"That right?" Blu took a step forward, his smile spreading into a grin. "Care to prove it?"

"Okay, that's enough," Delana said, moving to block Blu's advance on Sorley. "I won't tolerate the two of you engaging in a . . . a pissing contest."

Blu's gaze snapped to her face, his mouth hanging open. "What did you say?"

Her cheeks heating with a blush, she lifted her chin. "There's nothing wrong with your hearing, so you know very well what I said."

"Where did you hear about pissing contests?"

"My grandfather. I overheard him reprimanding two of the young men who worked for him, and he used that phrase to describe their behavior. I always wanted to say it but never had the opportunity." Her chin tilted a notch higher. "Until now."

Blu glanced at Sorley, then they both burst out laughing.

Delana glared at the men, arms folded over her breasts. When their laughter finally died, she said, "Now that you've had your fun, will you promise not to fight?"

"Yes, ma'am," Sorley said, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

She turned to look at Blu, eyebrows arched. "And what about you? Can you behave?"

"Sure, darlin'," he said, topaz eyes still twinkling with amusement. He lifted a hand to touch her face, but the sound of bawling cattle halted his movement.

"Yer cows are thirsty," Sorley said, moving back to his horse. "We'd best get them to water before they take a notion to find it on their own."

"Where'd you leave them?"

"The men I hired to help with the herd are holdin' 'em just off the main road."

Blu nodded, then brushed his fingertips down Delana's cheek in a brief caress. "I'll get my horse and meet you there."

\* \* \*

Once the cattle were settled in an area with fresh grass and a watering hole, Sorley paid off the other men, then he and Blu watched the herd for a spell from horseback.

"Nice ranch," he said to Blu.

Blu nodded. "If I was cut out to be a cattle rancher, reckon this would be as good a place as any to call home."

Sorley was silent for a long time, then finally said, "Maybe you should consider ranching. It's not a bad way to make a living."

Blu shot him an incredulous look. "How can you say that? Being a Texas Ranger is the only thing I've ever wanted to do."

"Ya can't be a Ranger for the rest of yer life."

"Maybe not, but I'm damn good at what I do. And I still got a lot of years to give the Rangers before I havta think about leaving the force."

"What about Delana?"

Blu frowned. "What about her?"

"I saw the way ya look at her. There's more goin' on between ya than a pretend marriage."

"You don't know what the hell yer talkin' about."

"Maybe," Sorley said with a shrug. "But I ain't never seen you look at a woman the way you did Delana." Blu's scowl had him biting the inside of his cheek to hold back a grin.

"Damn it, McGregor," Blu practically shouted, then lowered his voice to add, "she's a lady, which makes her —"

"Yeah, I know. Ya think ladies are off limits." He shook his head. "Never could understand that about you."

"Don't play games with me." Blu glared at his longtime friend and mentor. "You know full well I got my reasons. Damn good reasons!"

Sorley gave Blu a long, considering look. "Reasons for the things we do or don't do in our personal lives can change." He gathered his reins into one hand, then added, "That's one lesson I never could teach you."

Blu watched Sorley and his dun ride away, clenching his teeth so hard his jaw ached. He'd told Sorley more about his childhood than he'd told anyone else. But that didn't mean his friend knew what it was like. Sorley's father hadn't beaten him so badly that some days he could barely drag himself out of bed. He hadn't known the raw terror

of what would happen if he didn't get out of bed — that he'd face an even harsher beating for being lazy and shirking his chores.

No, Sorley had no idea what living that way for years had been like, and without that firsthand knowledge, he'd never fully understand the reasons behind the decisions Blu had made about his life. Decisions driven by an all-consuming fear that he'd turn out to be just like his father. Exhaling a shaky breath, he wiped a hand over his face.

Regardless of what he felt for Delana Wyatt, there was no way he'd ever risk subjecting another human being to what he'd endured. No way in hell!

# Ten

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Delana buttoned the last of the tiny buttons on the bodice of her dress, then smoothed the lace trim. Scrunching up her face, she carefully studied her reflection in the wavy glass of the mirror hanging above the dresser. The color was a good choice, she concluded. The dark lavender background of the floral fabric went well with her eyes, and the white lace sewn to the bodice in a deep vee was a nice touch. She smiled, imagining what her seamstress back in Austin would say if she could hear Delana's thoughts. Madame Bouvier would throw one of her famous tantrums, her French accent becoming more pronounced, then probably take to her bed with a case of the vapors. Delana used to fear the woman's tirades, but now she found the idea amusing. And as for her dress, she couldn't care less what Madame Bouvier would say. All she cared about was Blu's reaction.

Satisfied with her clothing, she turned her attention to her hair. Nothing too fancy, she decided, especially since she never would be able to accomplish some of the intricate chignons she wore in Austin. Then she'd had a maid to act as hairdresser, but now she had to rely on her own limited abilities.

After several attempts, she finally managed an acceptable arrangement atop her head. A collection of wavy loops, each one anchored in place with several hairpins. Thinking the style a little too severe, she pulled a few wispy strands free to frame her face. After taking another critical look in the mirror, sticking in a few more hairpins as insurance, and fussing with the lace on her dress once more, she was finally ready.

After pulling the bedroom door shut behind her, she paused to take advantage of the cool breeze sweeping through the open hallway.

Though she'd taken a bath just before getting dressed, already her skin was damp with perspiration, making her chemise stick to her ribs and back. Just nerves, she decided, wishing for her normal calm to return. After all, this wouldn't be her first social outing. For years, she'd helped host or been a guest at all sorts of gatherings, often with a long list of dignitaries in attendance. And she certainly had attended her share of dances. She inhaled a shaky breath. Yes, but never with Blu.

Now that she'd admitted the reason for her nervousness, forcing herself to relax was no easier. Knowing she couldn't dally any longer, she drew several more deep breaths, then moved across the hall and entered the main room of the house.

At the sound of Delana's heels tapping on the wooden floor, Blu turned from his contemplation of the cold fireplace. She took several steps into the room, then stopped beside the dining table.

"I'm ready to go," she said, her voice slightly breathless.

His gaze swept over her, beginning at her feet and the high-heeled kid boots she'd worn on the day they met, then moving up the skirt of her dress, past the flare of her hips and the belt around her tiny waist, to the snug fit of her bodice and the way her breasts pressed firmly against the fabric. Feeling his groin stir with a flicker of desire, he forced his gaze higher. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shining with excitement and, unless he missed his guess, apprehension, and she'd done something different with her hair. Rather than the tortoiseshell combs she favored, she'd used hairpins to secure some sort of looping arrangement atop her head.

His fingers itched to touch her flushed cheeks, then delve into the dark-brown strands of hair and pull each pin free. Tucking his hands into his pockets before he could give in to temptation, he said, "That dress looks right nice on you. I like the color. Makes yer eyes even more beautiful."

"Thank you," she replied, the smile accompanying her words causing a swift burst of warmth to settle in the region of his heart. "You're looking real handsome yourself."

Blu cleared his throat, embarrassed to feel the heat of a blush creeping up his neck. Trying to ignore both his reaction to her compliment and the odd sensation lingering in his chest, he started toward her.

"Reckon, we'd best get going. I already put a blanket in the wagon. Is there anything else you need?"

"I was going to take the cake I made, but it's pretty lopsided, so maybe I shouldn't — "

"Stop fretting. Yer cake is fine. Besides, after a few beers, nobody'll notice if it's lopsided or not."

Delana stared at him for a second, then chuckled. "I suppose you're right." She moved across the room, picked up the cake pan, then turned around. "Okay, let's go."

Once they were settled on the wagon seat and started on the trip to town, Blu considered the idea he'd been toying with since he and Delana moved to the ranch. He hadn't mentioned it to her, but now that he'd met some of the other ranchers in the county — and, hopefully, would be allowed into their wire-cutting gang — he needed to get going on his idea. And what better opportunity for him to talk to her than the long ride to Brownwood?

He adjusted the reins to a more comfortable grip, then said, "I've been thinking about buying you a horse."

Delana turned to look at him. "Why would I need a horse?"

"Seems natural to me. Ranches always have saddle horses."

Her brow furrowed. "Our ranch has a saddle horse. Yours."

"Yeah, but I meant, everybody on the ranch should have a horse of their own."

She considered his response for a moment, then said, "What's this about, Blu? Why do *I* need a horse?"

Certain she'd see through any lie he told, he scrambled to come up with a truthful explanation that wouldn't reveal too much. "Now that we've been accepted in Brownwood, I'll be starting the work I was sent here to do. That could mean spending a lot of time away from the ranch. And I don't like the idea of leaving you alone, especially at night, without a way for you to get away."

"Get away?" Her gaze narrowed. "Is that another way of saying I'm going to have to escape from the ranch?"

Blu shifted on the wagon seat, once again wishing he could tell her more about his reason for coming to Brown County. Easing out a deep breath, he shrugged, trying for a nonchalance he wasn't feeling. "Reckon that's a possibility, though I ain't expecting that to happen."

He turned to meet her gaze, this time allowing his expression to reveal the honesty of his next statement. "Delana, can't you just accept

the fact that I'd feel better knowing you have a way to leave in case you need to?"

She blinked, but she made no offer to speak. He quickly filled the silence by saying, "Besides, if you had a horse, I could show you more of the ranch. I found a couple places that are real pretty, but gettin' there wasn't easy. That section of land is really rough. So we'd have to go on horseback."

When she still didn't respond, he said, "Do you know how to ride?"

She gave her head a little shake, then shifted her gaze to the road in front of them. "I haven't ridden since my mother and I moved to Austin. But I used to. My grandfather always kept horses, and started my lessons when I was very young. So I grew up riding, though I didn't like it much at first."

"I suppose you had to use one of those fool sidesaddles?"

She chuckled. "Grandfather insisted that's how all ladies rode, but I hated the blasted thing. A man must have invented that horrible piece of equipment, because a woman certainly wouldn't design something that put her through such torture." She drew a calming breath. "Anyway, I talked the groom into letting me ride astride."

"Your grandfather approved?"

"Of course not. I swore the groom to secrecy, and I was always careful to stay out of Grandfather's sight. I still had to use a sidesaddle if he rode with me, but thankfully, that wasn't very often."

"Then you don't think you'll have trouble getting used to riding again?"

"Not as long as you don't expect me to spend all day in the saddle right away."

Blu flashed a smile. "No, we can work up to that."

She returned the smile, her eyes glowing with excitement. "I haven't thought about riding in ages. Now I can't wait."

That strange sensation of warmth again settling in his chest, he had to concentrate just to breathe.

"I just thought of something," she said, placing a hand on his arm. "I can't ride in a dress, so I'll need to get a riding skirt."

He had to swallow before he could get words through his dry throat. "No problem. We can look for something while we're in town."

She squeezed his arm, then withdrew her hand. "Thanks, Blu."



He nodded, grateful she'd forgotten about his reason for suggesting they buy her a horse. Focusing his attention on the team of horses, his mind wandered to the reason for their trip to town. Certain she wouldn't let him refuse to dance for the entire evening, he wondered what would happen when he held Delana in his arms. Hell, that wasn't true. He knew damn well what would happen. He'd be hard as a rock inside ten seconds, and praying she didn't notice.

As much as he tried to convince himself otherwise, he had a horrible suspicion he was getting in way over his head.

\* \* \*

By the time they arrived in Brownwood, Delana saw buggies and wagons already lining every street, and the town square was nearly filled with people. Blu pulled their wagon to a halt beneath a large oak tree in front of the courthouse. After setting the brake, he jumped down, then came around to lift her to the ground. His hands lingered on her waist a little longer than usual, the spicy scent of his shaving soap combining with the musk of warm male skin to make her light-headed and send her pulse into a wild rhythm.

After setting her on her feet, he handed her the cake pan, grabbed the blanket, then held out his arm.

As Delana wrapped her fingers around his forearm, she smiled up at him, her heart doing an even wilder dance against her ribs. He returned her smile, the quick flash of his dimples causing desire to smolder low in her belly. Ignoring the sensation, she chastised herself for allowing the man to affect her so easily, then turned her attention to the buzzing town.

On one corner of the town square, an assortment of makeshift tables had been set up. One held a large barrel of beer — a popular spot for the men to congregate, based on the number already gathered there. And a short distance away, a dozen women were busy setting out the food on several long tables made from long pieces of board laid across sawhorses.

Blu stopped in front of the food tables. "I don't see Addie, do you?"

Delana shook her head. "She must be around somewhere. I'll just put my cake with the other desserts." As she set the cake pan on one of the tables, she spotted Addie in front of her boardinghouse.

"There she is," she said to Blu. "I don't know who she's talking to, but from here, I'd say she's giving him a piece of her mind."

Blu watched the two for a moment, then chuckled. "That's Sorley. Wonder what he did to get her so riled."

"I don't know, but it looks like he's just as angry. Should we go over there?"

"Sorley wouldn't hit a woman, if that's what yer worried about. Besides, I haven't seen that kinda reaction out of him in a long time." He rubbed the side of his jaw. "Ya know, I'm glad he took my advice about staying at Addie's boardinghouse."

Delana shifted her gaze to Blu's face, a smile teasing her mouth. "Playing cupid, are you?"

He shrugged. "Can't say as I am. After Sorley's wife, Marie, died, he hasn't been the same. I'd sure like to see him enjoying life again."

"And if Addie can help him do that, you'd have no objection?"

"Nope. Fact is, I'd be indebted to her."

Delana glanced back at the boardinghouse. "Oops, Sorley's coming this way. I think I'll go say hello to Addie."

"Careful what you say to her," Blu said in a low voice. "We don't need to get in the middle of their squabble."

"I will." She tipped her head in Sorley's direction. "And make sure you do the same."

He raised his hands in a show of surrender. "Hey, I'm staying out of it. I got enough problems of my own."

As Delana worked her way toward Addie, she couldn't help wondering if Blu had included her on his list of problems. Though certain that was how he'd viewed her after they first met and he agreed to help her, she hoped his opinion had changed. She didn't want to be another problem for him. She wanted him to think of her as . . . She drew her eyebrows together in a frown. Exactly what did she want from Blu? Unfortunately, she didn't know the answer to that question.

Addie's pinched expression brought Delana's disturbing thoughts to a halt.

"You're looking awfully frazzled," she said when she reached the older woman. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Thanks, but everything's under control . . . now."

"Oh, well, I'm —"

"That man is so exasperating."

Though Delana suspected she already knew the answer, she decided to play dumb. "What man?"

"Don't go acting like you don't know who I'm talking about. I saw the two of you watching us." She shoved a lock of dark hair off her forehead and huffed out a breath. "If he wasn't a friend of your husband, I'd be tempted to toss him out on his bony ass."

"Really?" Delana said, choking back a laugh. "What did he do?"

"Ever since his first night at my boardinghouse, he's been trying to tell me how to run my business. 'You're working too hard,' he says. 'You should spend less time cooking and cleaning.'" She made a very unladylike snorting sound. "Just who does he think will do all the work if I don't? Damn fool man, doesn't even have the sense God gave a horned toad."

Delana clapped a hand over her mouth, but that time she couldn't hold in her laughter.

Addie frowned, her eyes narrowing. After several seconds, her lips twitched, then finally, her laughter joined Delana's.

\* \* \*

Blu waited for Sorley to weave his way through the crowd, watching the older man from beneath the brim of his hat. Something had certainly set him off, and though Blu wouldn't pry into his friend's business, he couldn't help being curious about the scene he'd witnessed between Sorley and Addie Roth.

"How's it going?" Sorley said, stopping beside Blu.

"Fine," Blu replied, pushing his hat to the back of his head with a thumb.

Sorley nodded, his gaze sweeping over the square. "Looks like there's gonna be a big crowd."

"Yeah, looks that way."

"Addie said this is always the town's biggest shindig." He glanced over his shoulder, scowling in the direction of the boardinghouse.

"Reckon she'd know, considering all the work she put into it."

"Ain't that the truth," he said in a low grumble, his scowl deepening. "Fool woman is trying to work herself into an early grave."

"Hey, I'm sorry I suggested you stay at Addie's boardinghouse. If things aren't working out, maybe you —"

Sorley turned back to face him, his eyes snapping with ire, "Who said it ain't working out?"

"I figured the way you two were arguing a while ago, and now you crabbing about how much work she does . . . Well, it kinda seemed like yer not getting along."

Sorley pulled his hat off his head, ran a hand through his hair, then settled his hat back in place. "We get along fine. Most of the time." He glared at Blu. "And a little arguing never hurt nobody."

Blu tugged the brim of his hat back down onto his forehead. "Hey, whatever you say. I'm not gonna tell ya what to do."

"Make damn sure you keep it that way!"

Before he could respond, Sorley turned and stomped away.

Blu stared at Sorley's retreating back, too stunned to move. What the hell was that about? Sorley McGregor had always been the epitome of cool and collected, never losing his temper no matter the circumstance. And yet, when their conversation had turned to Addie, he'd started snapping and snarling like a caged mountain lion.

A man didn't get that touchy about a woman unless he was . . . He grinned. *Well, I'll be damned. Maybe I'll end up being indebted to Addie after all.*

When his friend disappeared from view, he turned to survey the rest of the crowd. He recognized a few folks from previous visits to town, but most he'd never seen before. Two ranchers he had met, Riley and Griswold, stood near the beer table and were deep in conversation with several men Blu didn't know. Deciding this might be a good opportunity to continue his efforts to wangle his way into the wire-cutting ring, he headed in their direction.

As he passed the table holding the keg, he picked up a glass of beer, then sauntered over to the group of men.

"Nice evenin' for a dance," he said, stopping beside Burch Riley.

The man turned toward him. "Cahill. We was just talking about you."

"Yeah?" Blu lifted his glass and took a sip of beer. He normally didn't drink — part of his determination not to be like his father — but when necessary, he could handle a beer or two. "Something on yer mind?"

"Saw ya talking to a man over there," he said, tipping his head toward a spot on the square. "So, I was just tellin' Amos and Charley here about you."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, thought y'all should meet. Blu Cahill, this is Amos Kinney and Charley Strong."

Blu nodded to the men, then shook each one's hand. "You ranchers, too?"

"Yup, the Diamond K is west of town," said Amos, a man of medium height with a slight paunch and beady black eyes.

"My ranch borders the Diamond K." Charley flashed a toothy grin, creating more wrinkles in his leathery face. "But the place don't have no fancy name. I just call it the Strong ranch." Older than the others, his shoulders stooped slightly, but his firm grip proved the strength he possessed.

The men made small talk for a few minutes, discussing the recent hot spell and the growing need for rain; then Riley turned to Blu.

"By the way, Cahill," he said, "Mind telling us who you were talking to earlier?"

"Earlier?" Blu replied, pulling his eyebrows together in feigned confusion. He knew Riley had watched him while he talked to Sorley, and figured the man wouldn't forget. These men were too cautious to let anything go unexplained, so the question hadn't caught him off guard. After a moment, he changed his expression to one of comprehension. "Oh, you mean Sorely McGregor," he said. "He's an old friend."

"Ain't he the drover who delivered yer herd earlier this week?" Carl Griswold said.

"Yeah," Blu said, not surprised the men knew that much about Sorley. "I asked him to stick around for a while. He's helping me put up a barn."

Riley gave him a speculative look. "He staying with you?"

"No, he took a room at Addie Roth's boardinghouse."

"Isn't that kinda strange, him being a friend and helping with yer barn, but staying in town?"

Blu took another sip of beer. "Not really, since there isn't much room at the ranch. Besides, Sorley thought he should give Delana and me some privacy. Us not being married all that long." He winked. "If ya catch my meaning?"

The other men chuckled and poked each other in the ribs.

"Yeah," Riley said when their amusement died, "we all remember those days." Then he added, "So is he planning on sticking around and starting his own ranch?"

"I don't think Sorley would cotton to the life of a rancher." Remembering his friend's comments about Addie, he added, "Seems like he's becoming more of a city fella."

"Good," Riley muttered into his glass of beer.

After another long silence, Griswold said to Blu, "So now that ya've got yer herd, you ready for the heifers I sold you?"

"Sure, any time." Blu turned to Riley. "I'll take the ones I bought from you and Pierce, too."

Riley nodded. "We'll get them to ya the first of next week." He took a long drink of beer, then said, "Where'd you put yer herd?"

"They're on my land for now. But as soon as I get them branded, I aim to turn them loose onto the open range north of my property." Keeping his expression purposefully harsh, he moved his gaze from one face to another. "Anybody got any objections to that?"

"Hey, settle down, Cahill," Griswold replied. "You won't hear no objections from any of us." He glanced at the others. "Ain't that right?"

After each man bobbed his head in agreement, Riley shifted his gaze to Blu. "Speakin' of open range, there's gonna be a meeting at my place tomorrow night. Maybe you'd like to join us."

Before Blu could respond, Charley said, "You check with the boss about this?"

"No, but I don't see the harm in Cahill being there." Riley leveled a pointed stare at each of the other three men. "It'll give us a better chance to get to know him better. Find out how he sees things."

When Griswold, Kinney, and Strong remained silent, Riley turned back to Blu, "Whatta ya say, Cahill?"

Blu tamped down his excitement, suspecting Charley's mention of the boss and the meeting Riley talked about had something to do with the wire-cutting ring. Pretending to consider the invitation, he finally said, "All right, I'll be there."

Griswold leaned closer. "And don't tell nobody else about the meeting."

"Why's that?"

"Cuz it ain't nobody else's business. Got it?" Amos said, his tone and piercing gaze carrying an underlying threat.

"Yeah, I got it," Blu replied, now certain his first instinct had been correct. He hoped that by attending the meeting he would be made privy to the goings-on of the gang, but he'd play his cards close to the

vest. No need to risk the work he'd already put into his assignment by appearing too eager and giving the others reason to doubt him.

Riley swallowed the last of his beer, then said, "Fellas, I'll see y'all tomorrow night. I need another beer, then I'm gonna see what kinda food the womenfolk brought."

"I'll go with ya," Charley said. "I haven't et all day."

Carl Griswold and Amos Kinney soon followed suit.

Blu dumped what was left of his beer, then started looking for Delana. He finally found her talking to three women near the area set up for dancing.

"Hey, darlin'," he said, coming up behind her. "Miss me?"

She spun around to face him. "Blu!" she said in a strangled voice. "You scared the daylights out of me."

Before she could recover from her surprise, he murmured, "Sorry." Then, telling himself what he was about to do was for the benefit of the other women and not his own pleasure, he bent and pressed his mouth to hers.

The low hum in Delana's throat sent a jolt of heat surging through his body.

When he finally lifted his head, he let out a ragged breath. "Delana, what have you done to me?" he murmured, his voice raspy.

"I . . . I don't know," she replied in an equally unsteady whisper, "but whatever it is, you've done the same thing to me."

He ran a fingertip down the side of her face, then touched her damp mouth. Withdrawing his hand, he struggled to pull himself together. When at least some of his control returned, he cleared his throat, then said, "Didn't mean to interrupt" — he glanced up to find three pairs of eyes staring at him with open curiosity — "but I thought maybe you'd like to get something to eat."

She smiled up at him. "Yes, I would."

"Good," he said, taking one of her hands and giving her a gentle tug. "Come on."

"Wait. Let me introduce you first." Turning to the others, she said, "Ladies, I'd like you to meet my husband. Blu, this is Hester Potter, Virgil's wife, May Sorenson, one of our town's fine teachers, and Etta Rayburn, whose husband is an attorney in town."

Blu lifted a finger to touch the brim of his hat. "Nice to meet you, ladies."

After the women had returned his greeting, Blu tightened his grip on Delana's hand. "If you'll excuse us. I'm starving." He turned his gaze to Delana. "How about you, darlin'?"

"Yes," she replied, looking up at him, "I am." The huskiness of her voice flowed over him like warm syrup.

He swallowed hard, suspecting that the way her eyes had darkened to purple and the change in her voice signaled another kind of hunger — one having nothing to do with food. Though he should have heeded the warning and run in the opposite direction as fast as he could, he couldn't bring himself to do so.

As they moved through the crowd toward the food-laden tables, she said, "I can hardly wait for the dancing to start."

When he didn't respond, she tugged on his hand, bringing them both to a halt. "Blu, what is it?"

He shook his head, then tried for a smile, though the result felt more like a grimace.

"You will dance with me, won't you?"

"I . . . um . . ." Her pleading expression made his gut clench. Calling himself an idiot, he gave her hand a squeeze. "Sure, I'll dance with you."



# Eleven

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Blu filled his plate, then walked with Delana to an area beneath the large oak trees lining the town square and found a place for them to sit. Once they were seated, he realized the gnawing in his gut no longer came from hunger but from his anxiety over dancing with Delana. The fact that one lavender-eyed woman could tie his insides into such knots continued to astound him. Feeling her gaze, he turned to find her staring at him.

"Is something wrong?" she said.

He managed a weak smile, shook his head, then reached for his fork. Though the food on his plate no longer held any appeal, he knew if he didn't eat, he'd draw more unwanted attention from Delana. If she started asking questions, pushing him for the reason for his sudden loss of appetite, he feared he might slip and reveal the truth. And if one truth slipped out, the whole dam might burst and he'd be making all kinds of admissions. How no woman had filled his thoughts the way she did. How he loved kissing her. How he wanted to strip off her clothes and make love to her for hours at a time. How, for the first time in his life, he found himself attracted to the idea of a permanent home, with a wife waiting for him.

He stuck his fork into a piece of meat. Knowing he couldn't allow himself to tell her things even he didn't understand, he eased out a weary breath, then lifted the fork to his mouth.

\* \* \*

Dusk had just begun to settle over the town when the first strains of music drifted to where Blu and Delana sat. They'd finished eating a

few minutes earlier and were enjoying the coffee Blu had fetched for them.

"I thought you'd be drinking beer like the other men," Delana said, looking at him over the rim of her cup.

"I had part of a glass earlier. Never cared for the taste."

"If you don't like beer, why drink it at all?"

"Some of the men I've had to deal with spend a lotta time in saloons. They might accept me refusing whiskey, but they'd think it mighty strange if I also refused to drink beer. I didn't want to risk rousing their suspicions, so I learned to tolerate a glass or two."

Delana wondered at his reasons for dealing with men who spent so much time in saloons, but kept that thought to herself. Instead, she leaned over and placed a hand on his arm. "Is your aversion to spirits because of your father?"

He glanced at her hand, then lifted his head and skewered her with a penetrating stare. "After all these years, I can still smell the stench of him when he came home, still hear his slurred voice ranting at me about something I did or didn't do, still feel the strike of his belt or his fist." He shuddered. "And I can still remember the sound of him retching, then watching him from wherever he'd shoved me as he reached for his whiskey bottle." A muscle worked in his jaw, and his arm tensed beneath her fingers. "I will never" — his voice dropped to an icy whisper — "never allow myself to become like him."

Delana's heart ached at the pain and anger in his voice, her stomach turning at the thought of what he'd endured and thankfully survived. Wishing she knew how to ease the hurt he'd carried inside him for so long, she withdrew her hand. "I'm sorry, Blu. I didn't mean to stir up bad memories."

He closed his eyes for a moment. Then his chest rose and fell with a deep breath. Opening his eyes, he lifted a hand and fingered one of the curls brushing her cheek. "I know ya didn't. No harm done."

The ache in Delana's heart intensified, though this time not out of sympathy for Blu. The ache was stronger but also had turned sweeter, filling her with a warm glow. Biting her lip to hold in a gasp, she jerked her gaze away from the man beside her.

She stared at the crowded streets but didn't really see any of what was going on around her. Instead, her vision was focused inward. How could this have happened? She'd warned herself repeatedly.

Told herself to remember the independence she longed for and was determined to achieve. Told herself that caring for a man would bring her nothing but heartache. And yet she'd ignored those warnings and now had to face the result of her foolishness.

She'd fallen in love with Blu Cahill.

Though a part of her wanted to celebrate the discovery, to scream with delight, she quickly squelched the urge. Frowning, she wondered how she could have done something so stupid, something she'd sworn never to . . .

"Hey, you two," Addie said, pulling Delana from her anguished musings. "Aren't you going to dance?"

Delana blinked up at her friend, then summoned the strength for a smile. "After all the food we ate, I guess we're just being lazy."

"Well, time's a-wasting," Addie replied. "Come on. Sorley's waiting for me. You two can join our set."

"Sorley?" Delana tipped her head to one side. "You're going to dance with that — how did you put it? Oh, yeah — exasperating man. And I think you also called him a damn —"

"Don't you go quoting my words back to me, Delana Cahill!" Addie stiffened her spine. "If I call Sorley McGregor exasperating, or a damn fool man, or anything else I can think of, that's one thing. But I don't want to hear those words coming outta someone else's mouth."

Delana started to ask if Addie realized what she'd revealed, but decided to keep that observation to herself. Instead she said, "Settle down, Addie. I like Sorley, so save your indignant lecture for someone else." Turning to Blu, she said, "What do you think? Should we dance in the same set with such a contrary woman?"

He grinned. "If you're willin' to risk another tongue-lashing, reckon I am."

Addie narrowed her eyes into a fierce glare. "Very funny." As she turned to walk away, she called over her shoulder, "Better get a move on. The musicians are fixing to start any minute."

As Blu led Delana toward where the dancing would take place, an area cast in pale-yellow light from the lanterns hung around the perimeter, he said, "I wonder what's with Sorley and Addie. He said something similar about her when I saw him earlier."

"Really?" She smiled. "That's amazing. Do you think either one realizes what's happening?"

"What — that they're like flint striking stone? Sparks flying in every direction?"

"Those sparks wouldn't be flying if there wasn't something else between them."

"You really think there's more going on than just rubbing each other the wrong way?"

"Well, I can't say for certain, but that's how it looks to me."

He fell silent for a moment, thinking about his conversation with Sorley. Finally, he said. "Reckon it's possible. Though maybe they just like jawing at one another, which don't mean they're cut out to be together."

"True. But I still think there's more we don't know about."

He shrugged. Having walked to within a few feet of where the topics of their discussion waited for them, he lowered his voice to say, "Guess we'll find out come time for Sorley to leave town."

Delana wanted to ask when that would be, but the music began, bringing their conversation to a halt.

\* \* \*

For a man Blu's size, he was incredibly light on his feet, Delana thought while moving through the patterns of a square dance. In spite of his claims of not being much of a dancer, his natural grace more than made up for lack of experience. He continued to surprise her, just as her love for him continued to build. But he didn't know that. And wouldn't know, she vowed, forcing herself to smile as he snagged her around the waist and twirled her around, sending her skirt billowing out in a wide circle of purple.

She couldn't change the fact that she'd fallen in love with Blu, but she could make sure she didn't stray from the path she'd chosen for herself. Falling in love didn't mean she would give up her independence. She refused to allow herself to be placed in a position where she was under someone else's control. All the years she'd watched her mother being manipulated, first by her father — Delana's grandfather — and then by Henry Lawton, had taught her a valuable lesson, one she hadn't forgotten. Never let anyone have control of your life — not for any reason, and most especially not for love.

Okay, so where did that leave her? She had to stay with Blu until she could claim her inheritance, but such proximity would make the

task of concealing her feelings from him even harder. But somehow she had to find the inner strength to do so. Her future depended on it.

\* \* \*

Blu watched Delana's flushed face in the soft lantern light, saw her expression switch from joy to confusion and then to a kind of resolve. He wondered what she was thinking, what was going on behind those beautiful eyes to cause such changes in her emotions. But he wouldn't ask. She had her right to privacy, just as he did. There were questions he would refuse to answer, so he couldn't expect her to do any different.

Though he'd dreaded dancing with Delana, he silently admitted the experience wasn't as uncomfortable as he'd expected. At least square dancing didn't require them to be in constant physical contact. Yet whenever the dance steps called for him to clasp her hand or wrap his arm around her waist, his pulse leaped. And each time he released her, his palm continued to tingle and his nerves remained strung tight with need. But thankfully, the intermittent contact gave his overwrought senses a little time to settle and his desire a chance to cool.

As soon as the dance ended, the musicians announced they were taking a break to get a cool drink and let the dancers catch their breath. Blu and Sorley escorted their partners to the table where pitchers of lemonade and glasses had been set out.

"That was fun," Delana said, accepting the glass Blu handed her.

He nodded, then lifted his glass and drank half the contents in one swallow.

"Whew," Addie said, waving a hand in front of her face. "Dancing sure does overheat a body."

Sorley leaned close and whispered something in her ear.

She gasped, then let out a laugh. "Shame on you, Sorley McGregor. You shouldn't be saying such things."

He arched an eyebrow. "We'll see how you feel about that later on."

Blu glanced at Delana, saw her mouth the words "Told you so," then lifted his glass to hide a grin.

The couples made small talk for a few minutes. Then Addie said, "I need to check on the food." She turned to Sorley. "Come with me?"

After the two had moved out of earshot, Delana said, "Do you believe me now?"

"I wouldn't bet my last dollar on it," he replied, "but looks like you could be right."

Delana gave him a smug smile, then took another sip of lemonade.

When the music started again, Blu nearly groaned aloud. Instead of the fast tempo of a square dance, the musicians had opted for a waltz. Hoping Delana wouldn't notice, he said, "Think I'll get more lemonade. I'm still dry as a bone."

"But they're playing a waltz."

"Yeah, guess they are." Rather than meet her gaze, he refilled his glass, then took a hefty gulp. As he lowered the glass, he made the mistake of looking at her. His gut clenched, the longing on her face impossible to misinterpret.

He rubbed a hand over his face, heaved a sigh. *Damn it to hell.* Knowing he had only one choice, he finished off the lemonade, then set down his glass.

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand. Though he silently added, *Let's get this over with*, he made sure his expression didn't reveal his thoughts.

When she hesitated, he dug deep and mustered a smile. "I thought you wanted to dance."

"Are you sure, because you don't —"

"I'm sure." He wagged his fingers. "Let's dance, Delana."

She stared up at him for a moment, then set her glass aside and took his hand.

A minute later, with Delana nestled in his embrace and her enticing scent filling his head, he wished someone would shoot him and put him out of his misery. Because holding her in his arms, the firmness of her breasts brushing his chest, the silk of her hair tickling the underside of his chin, was nothing short of pure torture.

She made a mewling sound and pressed closer, making him grit his teeth. Holy hell, how much more of this could he stand? He wasn't a goddamn saint. And if she moved any tighter against him, she'd find that out in spades. He was so aroused that he feared one rub of her belly against his hardened flesh and . . . He didn't even want to think about such an embarrassing possibility.

He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to concentrate on something besides the woman in his arms. He should think about the meeting Burch Riley had invited him to attend, figure out exactly what he

needed to say to win the support of not only Riley but the rest of the wire-cutting ring.

He was getting close — he could smell it — so he had to tread carefully. His mission was too important, so he couldn't afford to do anything to make the others doubt him.

Delana stirred in his arms, bringing him back to the present.

Several seconds passed before he realized the music had stopped. When he glanced down, he found her staring up at him, eyes wide, lips slightly parted. As he watched her, she moved her gaze over his face, then settled on his mouth.

He tried to pretend that he didn't know what she wanted, that he hadn't seen the need simmering in her eyes. And for a moment, he succeeded. But when her fingertips grazed the side of his jaw, his attempt at pretending came to an abrupt halt.

Though certain he was making the wrong decision — he only had so much willpower, and he'd reached the breaking point — he took a step back, then grabbed her hand.

"Come on," he said, his voice a gruff whisper.

Delana never hesitated, but lifted the hem of her skirt with her other hand and let him lead her away from the other dancers.

He walked down the street until they were well beyond the light cast by the lanterns, then he veered between two buildings.

After making sure no one else had chosen the alley for a rendezvous, he leaned against the side of one building and pulled her into his arms.

Delana grabbed a fistful of his shirt, then rose onto her toes to get closer. Her lips just inches from his, he heard her say his name in a breathy sigh.

Dizzy with the need to taste her, he bent and took her mouth in a greedy kiss. With one hand around her waist, the other cupping the back of her head, he held her firmly against him while teasing her mouth with his lips, his teeth, his tongue.

Heat engulfed him, sucking him deeper into the flames, stealing his breath, searing his mind. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for the potency of kissing Delana the way he wanted to, the way they were meant to kiss.

She made a whimpering sound, a low vibrating in her throat. Her fingers relaxed, releasing his shirt, then slid upward and curled in the hair at his nape.

Blu shifted to widen his stance, then lowered a hand to her bottom and urged her closer. When her pelvis bumped against his rock-hard erection, he jerked his mouth from hers with a groan.

Chest heaving, he let his head fall back against the building. "This . . . this wasn't a good idea."

Delana released a ragged breath, then shook her head. "Not true," she managed to say. She'd never known such heady excitement. Such raw desire. And she was certain he'd felt the same things, so how could he say what happened wasn't a good idea?

"I can't go back to the dance like this."

"Like what?"

"I have a problem." He rotated his hips, rubbing the hard ridge of flesh beneath the fly of his trousers against her belly.

"Oh, well . . ." She cleared her throat. "Isn't there some way to . . . uh . . . take care of your . . . um . . . problem?"

He chuckled. "There is, darlin', but that's something best done in private, not in an alley where anybody could show up."

She toyed with the silky strands of his hair. "In private? You mean, like in a bedroom?"

"Yeah." Moving his hands to her elbows, he eased her away from him, then straightened. "That's one place."

"Let's go home," she said, taking a step back.

"That's not necessary. I just need a few minutes to get myself under control, then we can go back to the —"

"No, I don't want to go back to the dance. And I don't want you to get yourself under control. I want to go home, to our bedroom."

Blu's pulse quickened. "What are you saying?"

"I want more than kisses, Blu. I want . . . everything. And I believe you do, too." Her chin came up. "Or am I wrong about that?"

For a moment, the tightness in his chest wouldn't allow him to breathe, let alone speak. When he finally could force words out, he said, "Delana, I don't think —"

"No! Stop thinking and answer my question. Do you want to do more than kiss me?"

"Jesus, what a thing to ask a man."

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Well, do you?"

He huffed out a breath. "Damn it, you know I do."



She smiled, then uncrossed her arms and held a hand toward him. "Come on. I'll find Addie and let her know we're leaving. Then I'll meet you at the wagon so we can go home."

He stared at her for several seconds, then heaved a sigh and took her hand.

As they left the alley, he acknowledged that he'd lost one battle. But the ranch was a long ride, which would give Delana a lot of time to think about her decision. And, more important — he hoped — time to change her mind.

\* \* \*

Delana went to the refreshment table first, hoping Addie would be there. Instead, she found Hester Potter.

"Hester, have you seen Addie?"

"Not in the last few minutes. Last time I saw her, she and that newest boarder of hers was heading off thataway." She pointed up the street. Lowering her voice, she added, "I think they're sweet on each other and were looking for a place to do some sparkin'."

"Do you really think so?"

Hester gave a sharp nod, loosening the gray-streaked twist of hair atop her head. "I do. I've known Addie Roth since she first came to Brownwood. Never took even the slightest interest in any man that I ever saw. But this Sorley McGregor, now he's a whole other story. Got her attention right off."

Delana smiled. "I thought so, too. But they do seem to argue a lot."

"Don't mean nothing. Why, me and the mister argue sometimes, too, but that don't mean we stay that way long." She winked. "Besides, making up can be a lotta fun."

"Well, if Addie comes back, will you tell her I said good night? Blu and I are heading home."

"Sure thing, honey. You tell that good-looking husband of yours to bring you back to town real soon. We'll have us a nice cup of tea and a good gossip."

"I'll do that," Delana replied, chuckling on the way to where Blu had left the wagon.

\* \* \*

Blu unhitched the horses, then took the time to give each a rubdown and an extra scoop of grain with their ration of hay. He knew he was dawdling, hoping Delana would be asleep by the time he got to the house.

The trip from town hadn't produced the results he'd hoped for. Not if the way she occasionally had brushed against him on the wagon seat was any indication.

With a weary sigh, he gave the horses a final pat, then started across the yard.

Delana heard the soft clomp of Blu's boots in the hallway and pulled the hairbrush through her hair a final time. Sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing her best nightgown — one the gowns she hadn't wanted Blu to know about on the day they met — she turned toward the door and waited.

Several seconds passed, then she heard another clomp, this one louder, followed by a soft curse, then silence again. Maybe he'd changed his mind and wouldn't come to her. After all, he hadn't been overjoyed by her bold statement about what she wanted.

She frowned at the closed door. Maybe she shouldn't have spoken so openly. But he hadn't seemed inclined to make the first move, so she'd had no choice except to take that step herself. Now his hesitation made her wonder if he was having second thoughts. She'd certainly had her share, spending most of the ride back to the ranch thinking about the choice she'd made. But after all her soul-searching and thorough weighing of the consequences, she hadn't changed her mind.

Now her only hope was that he realized what she had accepted. The desire sizzling between them could no longer be ignored and couldn't be wished away no matter how much they tried. This could be her one and only chance to know complete passion between a man and a woman. And if she changed her mind about sharing that experience with the man she loved, she would regret the decision for the rest of her life.

The fact that she'd fallen in love with Blu had played a major role in her wanting their relationship to become intimate, but also complicated matters. Eventually, she'd have to deal with a life without him, find a way to mend her broken heart, but she refused to dwell on such a bleak future. She wanted to concentrate on the present, which meant following through with her decision. Provided Blu cooperated.

The silence stretched on, and just when she feared he wasn't coming to her, the door creaked open.

Blu eased into the room, holding his boots. When his gaze landed on her, his eyes went wide. Then he quickly looked away.

"I was trying to be quiet," he said, setting his boots on the floor, "in case you were asleep."

"You knew I was waiting for you."

He removed his hat and hung it on one of the pegs near the door. "I . . . uh . . . thought maybe you might've changed your mind."

"No," she replied, getting to her feet, "I haven't."

He swallowed hard, then nodded. "I can see that," he said, his gaze skimming over her sheer nightgown.

Her skin burning wherever his gaze touched, her pulse increased and her blood hummed with anticipation.

When he made no effort to come closer, she laid her brush on the bedside table, then moved around the bed. Stopping in front of him, she lifted her hands to his chest.

"One of us is wearing way too many clothes," she said in a husky whisper. After removing his bandanna, she unbuttoned the placket of his shirt, then pushed the fabric aside and pressed her lips to the hair-dusted skin beneath.

She smiled at his quick intake of breath, then lifted her head. Basking in the warm glow from his golden-brown eyes, she said, "Don't you agree?"

# Twelve

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Blu swallowed, then muttered, “Yeah.” Trying to resist a woman as persistent and as desirable as Delana was no easy task. He knew because he’d tried, and finally had accepted the fact that it was downright impossible. Their relationship was about to undergo a major change, one he still didn’t think would be wise, but he no longer had the strength or the inclination to stop it. He wanted her too damn much. And as long as she was willing, there wouldn’t be any harm in giving them what they both wanted.

The tiny portion of his brain that was still capable of functioning knew the conclusion he’d drawn wasn’t true, knew there were plenty of reasons for not giving into his lust. But at the moment, with Delana so close, he refused to listen to anything except his body’s need for release by engaging in a healthy dose of mutually satisfying, hot and sweaty sex.

When she started to tug his shirt free of his trousers, he pushed her hands aside. “It’ll be faster if I do that.”

She pursed her lips in a pout but didn’t try to help when he pulled his shirt up and over his head. As he tossed the garment aside, she lifted a hand toward his chest, then stopped just short of touching him. Seeing the question in her eyes, he nodded, then tensed.

“You have such a wonderful body,” she said, running her fingertips over his collarbone, then dipping into the hair covering the center of his chest. “Hmm, I love touching you.”

Blu’s breath hissed between his teeth, his muscles jerking beneath her inquisitive touch. It was obvious she didn’t have a lot of experience touching a man, or probably any — *shit!*

How could he have forgotten? She was a lady and, unless he had her pegged wrong, also a virgin. The last woman he should take to bed.

He grabbed her hand and took a step back. "That's enough." Releasing her, he glanced over his shoulder to see his shirt draped over the far side of the headboard. Refusing to get any closer to the bed, he left the shirt where it was.

"I don't understand," she said. "I thought you wanted me, that you wanted us to —"

"I do, damn it," he said, more sharply than he intended, "but that's not the issue."

"Then what is?"

He dragged in a deep breath, hoping to clear his head in the process. "I was wrong to let you think we were going to do anything . . . er . . . intimate tonight. We can't tonight, or any night."

"You're not making sense. If we both want the same thing, what's the problem?"

When he didn't respond, she said, "Blu, I'm not asking for — or expecting — forever. I know neither of us wants that. What I do want is for us to enjoy whatever time we have together."

When he remained silent, she moved closer and placed a hand on his arm. "I don't see what's wrong with two adults doing what both of them want."

His nostrils flared, and his eyes darkened. "I'll tell you what's wrong," he said in a tight voice, shaking off her hand. "It's you, Delana. I can't have that kind of relationship with a woman like you."

"Like me?" She blinked up at him; then her gaze narrowed. "What do you think I am?"

He gave her an exasperated look, then blurted, "I *know* what you are, Goddamn it. You're a lady, and I don't get involved with ladies."

Her brow furrowing, she gave her head a shake. "I must have heard you wrong. I'm a lady, so you won't have an intimate relationship with me?"

When he nodded, her frown deepened. "Okay, you lost me that time. You're going to have to explain better than that."

He moved to stand beside the window. Running a hand through his hair, he drew in a deep breath then exhaled slowly.

After a moment, he turned back to face her and began speaking with a calmness he was far from feeling. "I told you I'd never get married because I wouldn't risk hurting my own kid."

"Yes, and I told you, you're not like your father. You're —"

He silenced her with a scowl. "I figured the best way to do that was to avoid getting involved with the kind of woman who wanted a husband and kids. The respectable ones." He shot her a pointed glare. "The ladies."

Delana stifled a groan. Now she was beginning to understand. "That's what you meant the day we left Austin, isn't it? About me being different from the women you've known."

He nodded; then his gaze slid past her to focus on some point over her shoulder. "The few times my work got me close to a lady, I never had a problem keeping my mind on business. I just did my job, and when I needed a woman . . ." He shifted his weight, turning so he could look out the window at the moonlit yard. "I knew a few widows who weren't looking for another husband and enjoyed the pleasure we could give each other. And . . . uh . . ." He cleared his throat. "There were always bawdy houses with plenty of willing women."

Delana couldn't breathe. Though she had no right, the thought of Blu with a prostitute or one of his widow friends filled her with wild jealousy. An irrational and shocking reaction, but also an honest one. She wanted to be the woman Blu sought out. And even though she knew any relationship between them would be temporary — which was still fine with her — she couldn't stop longing for more of his kisses, for his touch, for his body to claim hers. She shivered with anticipation.

And then the shiver turned to one of dread. Hoping she could break through the barrier he'd thrown up between them, she moved to stand behind him. Though she wanted to run her hand over the tense muscles of his back, she curled her fingers in the fabric of her nightgown to keep herself from touching him.

"Blu," she said in a soft voice, "I told you this isn't about forever. Neither one of us wants marriage, but we are very attracted to each other. So why not take the next step?"

She gave into temptation, releasing her nightgown, then stroking her fingertips across his back. His muscles bunched beneath her touch, a low groan rumbling in his chest.

"Please, Blu." She moved her hand to grip his upper arm, then turned him toward her. Looking up into his eyes, she said, "This may be my only chance to experience passion, and I want that experience to be with you."

Something shifted inside Blu's chest — that same strange warmth he'd felt before. But this time the feeling had intensified, surrounding his heart and spreading outward. There was no longer any doubt about his earlier suspicions. Not only was he in way over his head, he was close to drowning. Damn it, how had he let this happen?

He forced air into his lungs, then exhaled with a sigh. He had to push aside his growing feelings for Delana and look at the situation with his normally cool and rational calmness. But looking at her, seeing the passion burning in those beautiful lavender eyes, his attempt to think clearly disintegrated.

He cupped her delicate jaw with his palm, then brushed his thumb across her full mouth. Lowering his face toward hers, he whispered, "I reckon I'll regret this one day."

His lips replaced his thumb in a gentle kiss. He ran his tongue over her upper lip, then nipped the lower one with his teeth before pulling the plump flesh into his mouth.

She gasped. Clutching his upper arms, she rose onto her toes and pressed closer.

He jerked his mouth away from hers. "Easy, darlin'," he said, his voice rough with growing need. "We have all night."

Her throat worked with a swallow. "Does that mean we'll — "

"Yeah, we will." He summoned a smile, then murmured, "because I'm too weak to resist you."

"I don't think you're — "

"Shh, it doesn't matter. But before this goes any farther, there's something else I need to say."

When she didn't speak but continued staring up at him with those wide, beautiful eyes filled with the promise of incredible passion, his resolve to say his piece wavered. Drawing a steadying breath, he forced himself to get the words out.

"We had a deal when we left Austin, and I intend to keep my end. I'll protect you as long as we're here, and when my work is done, I'll take you wherever you want to go. Then I'm out of your life for good. If you're in a family way before we leave here, or find out later, I want nothing to do with the child." He paused to let his words sink in, then added, "Are we clear about that?"

In spite of Delana's not wanting a permanent relationship with Blu — or any man — such a coldhearted statement still should have

outraged her. But since she knew about his miserable childhood and how those memories continued to haunt him, she felt only sadness. Once again, she wanted to convince him he wasn't like his father, but she knew the timing wasn't right. Hoping a better time would present itself, she kept the words locked inside.

Instead, she said, "Don't worry. If our being together creates a child, I won't expect anything from you. Once I collect my inheritance and start a new life, I'll be able to take care of myself, and a child if there is one, just fine."

She watched him contemplate her words for several seconds. When he finally nodded, she eased out a relieved breath, grateful the tense moment had passed.

"Well," she said with a smile, "now that we settled that, can we" — she glanced toward the bed — "pick up where we left off a while ago?"

He tried to keep a straight face, but her hopeful expression caused him to burst out laughing. "Yeah, darlin', we're about to do just that."

"Good, because —" She let out a squawk, suddenly finding herself in his arms and being carried the short distance to the bed.

Blu placed one knee on the mattress, lowered Delana to the center of the bed, then started to lie down beside her.

"Wait," she said, pressing a hand against his bare chest. "You're still wearing too many clothes."

He glanced down at his trousers and boots. Flashing a quick grin, he said, "You're awful anxious to see me stark naked."

She grinned back. "And you're not cooperating very well."

With a chuckle, he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots and socks, then stood and reached for the fly of his trousers. "Sure you're ready for this?"

Her cheeks rosy with a blush, she swallowed, then nodded.

He worked each button loose, then eased the denim over his hips and down his legs. After kicking the garment aside, he reached for the tie at the waist of his underdrawers, then paused.

"Blu, stop teasing me." Her voice sounded breathless.

"I'm not teasing, darlin'. I just realized if I shuck my drawers, you'll still be wearing a nightgown. That don't seem fair to me."

"Oh." The bloom of color on her cheeks darkened. "Well, I can fix that." She sat up and, with a little maneuvering of her hips, managed to get her nightgown up around her waist. Yanking it over her head,



she dropped the gown on the floor beside the bed. "There," she said with a satisfied smile. "Your turn."

Surprised again by her boldness, he stared at her for a second, then lowered his gaze. "Oh, Jesus," he murmured, his manhood throbbing against the confines of his remaining piece of clothing.

As he'd imagined numerous times, her body was delicate, with a tiny waist and small but perfectly shaped breasts. The pale mounds and their coral tips, already tightened into firm peaks, begged for his touch. Because of the way she sat on the bed, he got only a glimpse of the triangle of dark hair at the juncture of her thighs, for which he was grateful. If he'd been able to see all of her sweet body, he didn't —

"Blu, are you all right?"

He jerked his gaze up to meet hers. "Uh, yeah, I just . . ." Blowing out a deep breath, he ran his tongue over his suddenly dry lips. "You're beautiful, Delana."

This time her blush spread outward to cover her entire face and neck. "Thank you," she whispered, then flicked a glance at where his hands remained at the waist of his underdrawers. "But, I think you're stalling."

"What?" He shook himself out of his momentary trance. "Oh. No, I'm not." With one swift move, he freed the tie of his drawers, then shoved them to the floor.

Delana's eyes widened, a soft gasp escaping her throat. She already knew Blu was a big man, but totally naked, well, his size flat-out overwhelmed her. Caught in the soft glow from the lamp on the bedside table, his shoulders looked broader somehow, his chest and arms more muscular. He truly was an impressively built man. Pulling her gaze from his magnificent chest, she shifted her attention downward, noting how the mat of hair narrowed to a thin line down the center of his rib cage, widened to create a whorl around his navel, then narrowed again to trail down his flat belly. Her lungs threatening to seize up on her, she forced herself to take a deep, fortifying breath. Inexplicably drawn to the mysteries of his sex, she dropped her gaze lower, to the dark brown thatch of hair at the base of his belly, and the thick flesh of his arousal.

A sudden bubble of panic tried to silence the passion singing in her veins. She hadn't expected him to be so big everywhere.

Blu watched her carefully, easily reading her expression and experiencing pride in her approval. But the feeling lasted only a moment, because he also knew exactly when her doubts surfaced.

"There's nothing to fear," he said, easing onto the mattress to kneel next to her hips. "Men and women were made to fit together." He ran his fingers down the side of her face. "I swear."

She stared into his eyes for a few seconds, then finally nodded, her panic receding.

He smiled at her, then gently pushed her shoulders until she lay flat on her back. Mindful not to do anything to frighten her, he stretched out on his side next to her, then lowered his head until their lips touched.

He gave her several tentative, teasing kisses, waiting to see how she'd react. Soon, she was kissing him back, arms sliding up to encircle his neck and pull him closer. With a groan, he settled his mouth firmly atop hers, then slipped his tongue between her parted lips. Deepening the kiss, he explored the exquisite heat of her mouth, tasted her growing passion, heard her soft moans.

Her hands clutching his hair, she arched into him, the hard tips of her breasts scorching his chest. White-hot need roared through him, his body screaming for him to shove her legs apart and push inside her as fast as he could. With any other woman, he might have done what his body wanted. But not with Delana.

His breathing harsh, he lifted his head. "Delana," he whispered, turning his face to prevent her eager mouth from finding his. "I havta know. This is your first time, isn't it?"

She went still, her eyes going wide. She studied him in silence for a moment, then nodded.

When he didn't respond, she braced her hands on his chest and pushed. "Are you changing your mind because I'm a virgin?"

"Whoa, take it easy," he said, easily foiling her attempts to move him. "That ain't why I asked." When she quit wiggling, he picked up a lock of her wavy hair, rubbing the glossy strands between his fingers. "This is a first for me, too."

She glared up at him. "Now you're going to lie to me, too! Or did you forget you told me about all the widows and bawdy houses?"

"That didn't come out right." He tucked the lock of hair behind her ear. "This isn't my first time with a woman. But it is my first time with one who's never been with a man."

"Is that a problem?"

He gave her a lopsided smile. "Not if I can rein in the urge to take you as fast and as hard as I can."

"Really?" Her brief flash of temper dissipating, she trailed her fingers up his arm, then across his chest. "And that's a bad thing?"

His lips twitched, but he quickly tamped down his amusement. "Probably not for me, but I" — he blew out a deep breath — "I want to make it easier for you. To give you pleasure. And fast and hard ain't the way to go about that." He ran the tip of one finger over her lower lip. "I'll be as gentle as I can, but there still might be some pain."

"Don't worry so," she replied, deeply touched by his concern. "I trust you, and I'm not worried about any pain." Tunneling her fingers into the hair in the center of his chest, she felt the heavy beat of his heart increase beneath her palm. "But after we get this first time out of the way, can we try fast and hard?"

His mouth dropped open, then he chuckled. Shaking his head, he stared into eyes filled with humor and simmering passion. "Darlin', no one could ever accuse you of being shy."

"Is that a complaint?" She wrapped an arm around his neck and gave him a downward tug.

"Nope," he murmured, his lips an inch from hers. "I like you fine just the way you are."

Not giving her a chance to respond, he captured her mouth in a blistering kiss, shooting the temperature of the already hot bedroom even higher.

As his lips devoured her mouth, his hands took the opportunity to explore the rest of her sleek body. His fingers slid down her side, finding the bump of each rib, then eased around to cup one creamy breast.

When his thumb found the stiffened nipple, she clutched at his back, an indistinct sound rumbling in her throat. Murmuring reassurances into her mouth, he rubbed his thumb over the hardened tip, then gently squeezed before shifting his attentions to her other breast.

After a moment, he lifted his head, pausing to catch his breath. Her eyes were dilated, the narrow circle of color a deep purple, her lips swollen and moist from his kisses. Keeping his gaze focused on her face, he moved his hand lower to skim over the smooth skin of her belly, stopping when his fingertips reached the silky curls between her thighs.

Her brow furrowing, she moved her hips in a restless wiggle. Even though her expression told him she didn't understand the message her body was sending him, he did.

He longed to continue kissing her pliant mouth, but settled for a quick brush of his lips over hers, then lifted his head so he could see her face. He wanted to watch her reaction when he touched the flesh between her thighs.

Though he ached to give in to the desire raging through him and seek a swift release, he didn't. His own need would have to wait. Making sure she achieved pleasure became his primary purpose. He didn't have a huge amount of experience with women, but he did have the benefit of a great teacher. The first widow to invite him into her bed had taught him most of what he knew about the pleasures to be had between a man and a woman. But one lesson stood out above the rest: always be a considerate lover by making sure his partner achieved satisfaction.

He'd never forgotten that lesson, one that had served him well with other female companions. But he now faced the ultimate test. Putting what he'd learned to use had never been more important than with Delana. He refused to examine the reasons for his resolve; he knew only that seeing to her pleasure meant more to him than his own.

As he allowed his fingers to inch closer to their target, he held his breath, his gaze never leaving Delana's face. He pushed through the curls shielding her sex, seeking her most sensitive spot. When he nudged the swollen nub of flesh, she gasped, her hips lifted off the mattress, and her hands fisted in his hair.

Blu winced at the sharp pull on his scalp. "Let go of my hair, darlin'," he murmured.

His words took a minute to sink in, then she flashed him a shocked look before opening her fists and withdrawing her hands.

He gave her a reassuring smile, then moved his thumb again. He watched her bite her lip to hold in another gasp, felt the rocking of her hips against his hand. Continuing the gentle brushing motion of his thumb, he opened her with his fingers. The slickness of her arousal met his intimate exploration.

A sharp stab of lust pierced his belly, tempting him to say, "To hell with it," then chuck his chivalrous intentions and take her right then. But by concentrating really hard, he managed to pull himself together. Refocusing on his objective, he eased a finger inside her.

His breath hissed through his teeth. *Holy Christ, she feels like hot silk.* Clenching his jaw till it ached, he pushed his finger deeper.

She made a strangled sound, her body going stiff, her knees squeezing together. Hoping to reassure her, he leaned closer, murmuring calming words in her ear. After a moment, she relaxed and her legs fell open.

He smiled, then lowered his mouth to hers for another heady kiss. Their lips had barely touched when she surprised him by thrusting her tongue into his mouth. Quickly recovering from the shock, he reveled in her passionate response, then returned the favor while keeping up his ministrations to an equally moist spot much lower on her body.

Certain nothing he'd experienced ever had come close to being as torturous, or as gratifying, as teaching Delana about feeding and appeasing a person's carnal appetite, he continued stoking the fire of her desire.

His efforts soon had her chest heaving, her mouth frantic beneath his, her hips moving to the rhythm of his hand. But she didn't begin to scale the final peak until he bent his head to run his tongue over one beaded nipple, then closed his lips around the tight rosette.

Her deep groan and the quickened tempo of her hips told him she was quickly approaching her climax. Then, after two hard draws of his mouth on her nipple, and a flick of his thumb, she cried out, the first spasm rippling through her body. A few more strokes of his fingers and she arched her back, pushing against him harder and faster until she took one last, shuddering breath, then dropped back onto the mattress with a long sigh.

Though Blu would have preferred giving her time to recover, he wanted to take advantage of her sated and relaxed state. He rolled atop her, pushed her legs farther apart, and brought the tip of his throbbing erection to her damp flesh. Trying to steady his nerves, he flexed his hips forward enough to just enter her heated center.

He nearly lost it then and there. She was so hot, so tight, and he was too aroused to last much longer. Drawing on his last ounce of control, he set his teeth, then gave her body a second to adjust to the foreign intrusion.

When he could wait no longer, he inhaled, held his breath, then with one clean thrust, shoved all the way home.

She made a whimpering sound, her body jerking at the loss of her virginity. But then she opened her eyes and met his gaze. "It's okay," she whispered in a raspy voice. "The pain only lasted a second."

He released his breath in a rush, relieved to see no regrets, no remnants of pain reflected on her face. Moving carefully, he lifted his hips to withdraw partially, then thrust forward. He'd expected the moment they became one to be wonderful, but reality went far beyond anything he could have imagined.

The first time he kissed her, the day he'd entered the kitchen and found her baking biscuits clad in only her underclothes, he'd thought she tasted like perfection. Now, lying with her in an intimate embrace, buried deep inside her welcoming body, he knew she also felt like perfection. Another memory of Delana to add to his collection. Memories he would treasure after he completed his assignment. Memories that would stay with him until he went to his grave.

Not wanting to dwell on such a depressing future, he began moving in a series of slow, gentle thrusts. But slow and gentle wasn't enough for his too-long-denied desire. As he picked up the pace, his breathing became more labored, his heart pounded harder against his ribs, and all he could hear was the blood thundering in his ears.

Then, abruptly his climax struck. With a low growl, he pumped his hips harder, deeper, his head thrown back, teeth clenched. He'd never experienced such an intense release, and for a moment he thought he might actually pass out. Pushing into her a final time, he held perfectly still for several seconds, then exhaled a quivering breath.

"Did I hurt you?" he said, gasping for air.

When she shook her head, he found the strength to summon a weak smile, relief sluicing through him. His arms shaking from the effort of holding himself above her, he gave her a quick kiss, then eased away from her and rolled onto his back.

As he lay there trying to catch his breath, a thousand thoughts ran through his mind, but one kept circling back: the tiny seed of hope he'd experienced before about Delana, that she had been made for him. Not only had the hope survived, but worse, the seed had begun to sprout.

He wiped a hand over his sweat-dampened face. Damn, how could he stop that seed of hope from sending out roots? His first attempt had failed, but he couldn't allow the same thing to happen a second time. Feeling the woman who was causing such havoc in his life stir beside him, he turned his head toward her.

"Just so we're clear," he said, purposely keeping his expression and voice harsh, "what happened doesn't change a thing."

# Thirteen

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Delana stared at Blu, her temper doing a slow burn. Oh, how she longed to throw a nasty remark right back at him, or better yet, whack him over the head, but she forced herself to do neither. She would overlook his need to lash out, because she understood the reason behind his cutting words. Besides, she felt too wonderful to let anything, especially the pigheaded man she'd been unfortunate enough to fall in love with, ruin her mood.

When she could trust her voice, she said, "Yes, I know. Nothing's changed." Turning so she stared at the ceiling, she silently added, "But something's going to." Recalling her earlier thoughts about his surly behavior, this time she vowed to do all she could to change his stubborn attitude about what he might have inherited from his father. He'd carried the burden of his childhood long enough, let those painful memories color his life as an adult far too much. She didn't know how long the two of them would be together, but she'd use whatever time she had to help him move beyond his pain and anger, to make him see that he wasn't like his father, that he didn't have to live his life based on a fear-driven assumption. Though not sure how to accomplish those things, she was determined to try.

Blu shifted beside her. "I'm going outside for a while."

She started to say she'd go with him, but instinctively she knew he didn't want her company. Instead, she watched in silence while he pulled on his trousers and then disappeared through the bedroom door. She sighed, wishing she hadn't fallen in love with Blu Cahill. Her life would be a whole lot simpler if her heart had stayed out of the equation.

As she got out of bed, intent on taking a cool sponge bath before trying to get some sleep, she was beginning to realize why her mother had done the things she had. Love.

Ha! What a waste of energy. Befuddling the brain, making people act like idiots. Who wanted or needed that? Though she told herself all of that was true, she knew none of it changed the fact that she loved Blu. Well, maybe so, she told herself, but that didn't mean she would follow her mother's example.

She gave a snorting laugh. No need to worry about that. Considering Blu's views on marriage matched hers, there was no chance she'd end up married, penniless. and heartbroken.

*No, just heartbroken.* Frowning, she pushed that thought aside. If that was her fate, she'd deal with it when the time came, but not before.

\* \* \*

Blu leaned against one of the stalls in Burch Riley's barn. He hoped to stay in the background during the meeting and let the rest of those in attendance do all the talking. He'd always learned more by listening and observing than by wading into the middle of a situation and running his mouth. But in order to get the information he needed, this time he figured he'd have to get actively involved. Not something he looked forward to, but he had a job to do.

From beneath the brim of his hat, he watched the new arrivals filing into the poorly lit barn. Several lanterns, hung from the barn's timbers, provided the only light. As the men passed under one of the lanterns, he recognized Pierce and Griswold from his first visit to Riley's ranch, and Kinney and Strong from the dance. *The dance.* He bit back a groan. The start of his downfall. If he hadn't gone to that damn dance, he could've stuck with his convictions about Delana. He wouldn't have been weakened by holding her in his arms, wouldn't have given in to temptation. *Yeah, but then ya would've missed the best loving you ever had in yer life.*

He shifted his weight to the opposite foot, disgusted with his mental lapse. He shouldn't be wasting time dwelling on Delana or what had happened last night, no matter how incredible the experience. But that didn't keep his mind from filling with images of her lying on the bed, hair spread over the pillow in a wild tumble, eyes shining with passion and wonder at the things he did to her. He remembered the look on her face when he'd brought her to her first climax, how her inner muscles had gripped him, nearly pushing him over the edge the moment he'd made them one.



Lust, hot and pounding, grabbed him by the throat, halting his ability to draw a normal breath, while sending an instant rush of blood to his groin. He squeezed his eyes closed.

*Jesus, I must be losing my mind.* Shifting again to ease the tightness of his trousers, he forced air into his lungs, then opened his eyes.

Determined to concentrate on the business at hand, he noticed that two more men had arrived. One looked vaguely familiar — probably'd seen him in town or maybe at the dance — but even in the barn's dim interior, he was certain he and the second man never had crossed paths.

A few minutes later, Riley introduced Blu to the men he'd been watching. Glen Johnson and Tom Weber. Both men, Riley told him, had ranches northwest of town.

Johnson was fresh-faced. A bit bowlegged. His easy smile revealing a gap between his front teeth. Weber had a pock-marked face. A drooping left eyelid. His thin lips turned down in a permanent scowl.

Once the introductions were out of the way, Riley turned to face the entire group. "Charley, how's the water situation on yer land?"

Charley Strong rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, it ain't near as bad as the drought of eighty-three, but unless we get us a few good downpours right soon, the summer and fall are lookin' to be really rough on our stock."

"I agree," Riley replied. His gaze sweeping over the other men, he said, "What about the rest of ya? You feel the same way?"

Everyone nodded or murmured words of agreement.

"All the more reason," Amos Kinney said, "for making sure there's free range for our cattle."

"Yeah," Charley said, "if more range land gets fenced off, we're liable to lose our herds. And for some of us, that'll mean losing our ranches."

Hardy Pierce straightened, his fists clenched at his sides. "I got a wife and five kids. If I lost my ranch, I wouldn't have any way of taking care of my family." His jaw tightened. "I don't aim to let that happen."

"None of us do, Hardy," Riley replied, looking at the others. "Right, boys?"

Once again everyone nodded or voiced their agreement. The men on either side of Pierce gave him a slap on the back.

Riley smiled at the show of support. "See there, Hardy? We take care of our own." He paused for a moment, then said, "The boss wants to know what's going on with the rest of ya. Anything new we need to know about?"

Riley's mention of someone called "the boss" had Blu tamping down his excitement. Whoever the man was, he obviously was the ringleader, and maybe also an active participant. Blu resisted the urge to smile. Looked like his investigation might finally be making some solid headway.

"Where is the boss, anyway?" Griswold said.

"When I talked to him last night, he said he wasn't figuring on coming."

"He didn't tell ya why?"

Riley shook his head. "All he said was he wouldn't be here, and to let him know if any of y'all had news we should know about."

"Yeah, I got some news," Tom Weber said. "A couple a days ago, I found one of my best beeves with a piece of that damned wire wrapped around one of his legs. He'd lost a lot of blood, his leg mangled so bad he never coulda survived. I had to put him outta his misery."

"Damn shame," Charley said with a shake of his head.

Glen Johnson agreed, then said, "I heard the owner of a ranch near Tom and me is fixing to string wire around his land."

"You know that for sure?" Riley said.

Johnson nodded. "Came from a damn reliable source."

"Well, I'm thinking," Carl Griswold said, "he deserves what happened to that fella down by Indian Creek."

The other men laughed, slapping each other on the back.

Blu decided it was time to join the conversation. "What happened at Indian Creek?"

Riley turned to meet his gaze, then after a moment, he said, "He decided to run barb wire on a section of land that has always been open range. Land with a prime watering hole and some of the best grazing in that part of the county. He figured to keep the water and grass just for his own herd."

A round of angry murmurs rippled through the other men, but Riley silenced them with a glare before continuing. "Anyway, one night a few weeks back, somebody tore down part of his new fence and made off with some of his cattle."

Blu forced himself to smile. "That right?"

At Riley's nod, he said, "Well, then, sounds to me like the son of a bitch got what he deserved."

"Maybe he shoulda got worse," Pierce said in a gruff whisper.

Several of the others echoed Pierce's sentiment.

Riley stared at Blu for a few seconds, tugging on his earlobe. Then he glanced at the rest of the men and said, "If you boys got any objections" — he lifted his chin in Blu's direction — "you'd best voice 'em now."

No one responded for several seconds. Then, finally Kinney spoke up. "We still planning on taking a little trip later this week?"

"The boss hasn't said otherwise."

"Then I say, have Cahill ride along. Let him prove what he's been tellin' us."

Several of the others seconded Kinney's opinion.

Blu kept quiet, concerned anything he said would make him look too eager. Schooling his features to reveal nothing more than mild interest, he waited for a decision to be made.

Riley brought his gaze back to Blu. "Okay, Cahill, here's yer chance to show us your talk about barb wire wasn't just bullshit." He took a step closer, directly into a splash of lantern light. The veins in his thick neck standing out, a dangerous glint flashed in his muddy-brown eyes. "I figure yer no dummy, but I'm warning ya right now. You do us wrong, and you'll go home to yer wife draped over a saddle. You got that?"

"Yeah, I got it," Blu replied, keeping a tight rein on his anger. "Now what's this about a ride?"

Riley's expression relaxed. "Okay, here's the deal."

\* \* \*

Delana pulled a comb through a strand of her damp hair, wincing when the comb caught on a snarl. After Blu's departure just before dark, she'd wandered around the house but found nothing to occupy her time. Finally, she'd filled the brass bathtub with tepid water, then shampooed her hair and took a leisurely bath. When she finished, she decided to take advantage of the cool evening breeze. Wearing only a nightgown, she'd picked up her brush and comb, grabbed a quilt, then

left the bedroom. In the covered hall between the house's two rooms, she'd spread the quilt on the plank floor and sat down.

As she carefully worked the last of the snarls from her hair, she wondered again where Blu had gone. After he'd announced there was something he had to do, he ignored the hints she dropped and refused to say any more. Rather than ask him point-blank and risk stirring his temper, she'd pasted a smile on her face, told him to be careful, then silently watched him saddle Mouse, mount up, and ride off.

Now she wished she'd pressed him harder to reveal his destination and his reason for going there at such a late hour. It had to be close to midnight, which meant he'd been gone for nearly four hours. What if he'd been hurt? Just the thought sent a sharp pain through her chest and formed a lump in her throat.

*Damn you, Blu Cahill! Why did I have to fall in love with such a —*

The sound of hoofbeats ended her silent tirade. She slumped against the wall of the house, relieved that Blu had returned. But a few minutes later, when she heard him coming toward the house, her relief quickly changed to anger. He'd left her alone for hours, hadn't told her one thing about where he was going or how long he'd be gone, and then when he came back, he had the gall to whistle. Whistle like he didn't have a care in the world.

She got to her feet and stared out into the yard, arms crossed over her breasts. He had some nerve, acting like everything was just hunky-dory!

\* \* \*

Blu crossed the yard, pleased with the night's events. The meeting had gone much better than he'd hoped. Though he hadn't found out the name of the boss, he had been asked to join the gang, and if all went as planned, he'd be riding with them on their next wire-cutting job.

As he approached the house, he caught movement, a flash of white, just inside the hallway. The tune he was whistling ended in midnote, his hand automatically reaching for his Colt. He had the pistol part-way out of its holster when he saw the flash of white again — only this time, he could make out the source.

He grunted with disgust. "God damn it, Delana, what the hell are you doing out here?" He shoved the Colt back into its holster. "I could've shot you."

She moved to the center of the hallway, her hands fisted on her hips. "I was worried about you, so I came out here to enjoy the evening breeze while I waited for you to get back."

As he closed the distance between them, he caught a whiff of her shampoo. Ignoring his body's instant reaction to the scent, he stepped up into the hallway. "Don't waste yer time worrying about me," he said, brushing past her, his boot heels echoing on the hallway's wooden floor. "I can take care of myself."

"Don't you tell me not to worry, Blu Cahill," she yelled at his back, then stomped down the hall after him. "People worry about the ones they . . ."

He entered the bedroom, stopped beside the bed, then swung around to face her. She stood in the doorway, the fingers of one hand pressed to her mouth.

When she didn't seem inclined to continue, he said, "Worry about the ones they . . . what?"

Her chest rose with a deep breath, drawing his gaze down to her breasts with a force he was powerless to overcome. The tightened peaks of her nipples were clearly visible through the thin fabric of her nightgown, and lower, he could see the shadowed vee of her — He clenched his teeth, willing the raw need surging through him to cool.

"Stop looking at me that way," she said in a clipped voice, crossing her arms over her breasts.

His gaze snapped back to her face. "Then stop parading around wearing nothing more than . . . than —" He huffed out a breath. "Than that thing. I can see right through it."

Her lips pursed in an angry scowl, she glared at him. "You wouldn't see through it if you weren't looking."

"Damn it, Delana, how the hell —" Clenching his teeth even tighter, he ran a hand through his hair, fighting to control both his body's reaction to her and his rapidly escalating temper. After taking another deep breath, he said, "Look, I don't want to argue."

Her mouth softened a fraction. "I don't either."

"Good," he replied, forcing himself to smile. "What did you start to say a minute ago?"

"Uh . . . never mind." She tilted her chin in an angle he knew so well. "It's not important."

He stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. "Fine." Reaching for the buttons on his shirt, he turned his back to her. "I'm going to bed."

\* \* \*

Delana let out a silent sigh, relieved he'd halted their argument and let the subject drop. She meant what she'd told him. She didn't want to argue. But for some reason her temper always had a short fuse around him, ready to explode at the slightest provocation.

If that was part of being in love, she gladly would skip the overrated emotional experience. Unfortunately, there was a problem with her thinking on the issue of love. Skipping the experience wasn't an option, because she already loved him.

As she watched Blu pull his shirt over his head, saw his back and arm muscles ripple with the movement, she forgot about her earlier worry, her display of temper, and her near miss in revealing her feelings. Instead, other thoughts filled her head. Memories of the night before. Her pulse accelerated, and a sudden burst of heat swirled low in her belly. The physical need was another piece of love's complicated puzzle that she hadn't anticipated.

When he sat on the bed to remove his boots, she moved closer.

"I . . . uh . . . I'm sorry if I sounded like a shrew," she said, pleased with the calmness in her voice, though her insides were anything but calm.

"Forget it," he replied, pulling off one boot.

She sat down next to him. "Blu, whether you like it or not, I was worried about you."

He pulled off his other boot before turning to look at her. "Yeah, I know. I figured you'd be in bed when I got back, so I never thought . . ." He lifted a hand and picked up a strand of her hair. "Listen, I've never had anybody worrying about me, so I don't know how to deal with this."

Her heart cramped at the thought of not having anyone close enough in his life to worry about him. Forcing herself to smile, she said, "Well, telling me how long you'll be gone would help."

His brow furrowing, he rubbed her hair between his thumb and fingers. "I don't generally know, but . . ." He met her gaze, the look in his eyes making her breath catch. "I'll try to give you some idea."

"Thanks." She smoothed the lines on his forehead with her fingertips, her body reacting to touching him with another flare of need. "I'd appreciate that."

"Sure," he replied, his voice a raspy whisper. "No problem." He cleared his throat, then added, "Ya know, we still need to get you a horse."

"Uh-huh." The throbbing between her thighs intensifying, she leaned toward him. "When can we go back into town?"

"The lumber for the barn is being delivered in the morning. So we could go in the afternoon . . ." The muscles of his throat worked with a swallow. "If you want."

"Fine," she replied, her lips nearly brushing his.

"We can . . . uh . . . get you one of those skirts you —"

"Let's talk about this later." She ran her tongue over his lower lip, testing his reaction, hoping she hadn't misinterpreted the heat she'd seen simmering in his eyes.

He sucked in a quick breath. "Didn't anyone ever tell you a woman shouldn't tease a man like that?"

"Who said I was teasing." To prove her point, she swept her tongue over his upper lip.

\* \* \*

Blu wanted to resist Delana — Lord knew he'd tried — but there was only so much a man could stand, and the little game she was playing with her tongue had crossed the line.

A low moan rumbling in his chest, he released her hair, then slid his arms around her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

"Vixen," he murmured before settling his mouth over hers.

He'd show her he could give as good as he got, using his tongue, his teeth, every trick he knew to tie her senses into as tight a knot as she'd tied his.

When he finally lifted his head, her heavy breathing and flushed face told him he'd succeeded.

"Can we lie down?" she said, her voice unsteady.

He opened his mouth, prepared to tell her they had to stop. But with her taste lingering on his lips, her scent surrounding him, and his mind filled with the memory of her passionate response to him the night before, the words wouldn't come out.

Instead, he lifted her off his lap and set her on her feet. After quickly dispensing with the rest of his clothing, he did the same with her nightgown.

Then, taking her hand, he eased down onto the mattress, tugging her with him.

She eagerly returned his kisses, her hands busy stroking his neck, his shoulders, his back. Her throaty moans fired his desire even hotter.

She arched her back, rubbing the hardened points of her breasts against his chest, grinding her female mound against his erection.

He wrenched his mouth away from hers. "Easy, darlin'. You need to slow down."

"I don't want to slow down. I want hard and fast."

He blinked, then shook his head. "I don't think that's a — "

"Blu, you can't talk me out of it." She wiggled her hips again to emphasize her statement.

The friction of her pelvis rubbing his throbbing manhood tilted the scales. Silently cursing himself for his inability to resist this woman, he braced himself on one forearm, then slid his other hand between her thighs. Probing her delicate flesh and finding her already wet with need, he forgot everything except experiencing the heart-stopping satisfaction of making them one.

He continued rubbing her with his fingers, determined to make sure she was ready for him.

She whimpered a protest, then grabbed his hair and pulled him down for a sizzling kiss. Biting and licking, she nearly devoured his mouth.

A moment later, he lifted his head, his breath erratic and the heaviness in his groin nearly unbearable.

"Please," she whispered, staring up at him through passion-glazed eyes.

The last of his restraint snapped at her throaty plea. Settling himself on his knees between her thighs, he said, "Wrap your legs around me, darlin'."

When she complied, he took a steadying breath, grasped her hips, then pushed into her with one quick stroke. He heard her soft gasp, but he could tell the sound wasn't one of pain.

If she felt even a small portion of the incredible sensations bombarding him, then he totally understood the reason for her reaction.



Squeezing his eyes closed, he fought the urge to pound into her again and again. She wanted hard and fast, but if he couldn't scrape up some degree of control, this would end a hell of a lot quicker than that.

He took another deep breath, the scent of her arousal pushing his need to a new level. He flexed his hips, shoving deeper, filling her, stretching her, until he'd buried himself completely. Sweet Jesus. How could anything feel this right, this perfect?

As if from a distance, he heard her say something, but he couldn't make out the words. He glanced down at her, trying to bring her face into focus. When the sensual haze cleared, he saw her furrowed brow, the concern mixing with desire in her eyes.

Her throat worked with a swallow. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." He managed a smile. "Never better."

To prove his point, he bent forward and gave her swollen lips a thorough kiss, then straightened and began moving his hips in a slow and easy tempo. She caught the rhythm, her hips moving in harmony with his.

His heart pounding, his breathing ragged, he increased the pace of his thrusts. Sliding his hands beneath her, he gripped her bottom to hold her firmly in place. Each stroke into her slick heat snapped another thread in his already tattered control, taking him closer to his release. But he wanted to hold off, hoping to bring her with him.

No sooner had the thought formed than he knew it was too late. Muscles tensed, he pounded into her harder and harder. As the first pulsing wave of his climax hit, he picked up the pace even more. Oblivious to everything except the intense spasms racking his body, he called her name in a strangled cry, then gave one final thrust. His head fell forward, a shudder rippled over his body, then he went still.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but her soft laughter pulled him from his fog of contentment.

Somehow he summoned the strength to lift his head and found her staring at him, her lips quirked with amusement.

"What?" he managed to croak.

# Fourteen

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Delana laughed again, raising a hand to caress his chest. "Hard and fast definitely has an appeal," she said, flashing a smile.

"Yeah," he replied, his breathing beginning to slow, "but it wasn't fair to you."

"I don't know what you mean. I thought it was wonderful."

He shook his head, his lips curved in a crooked grin. "You'll think it's even better once I get more familiar with you."

She frowned, looked down at their still-joined bodies. "How much more familiar can you get than this?"

He chuckled, then moved to lie on his side next to her. Cupping one of her breasts, he said, "Darlin', you've got a whole lot to learn about *familiar*."

His comment piquing her interest, she lifted an eyebrow. "Really?"

When he nodded, she said, "Such as?"

He slid his fingers up to her nipple. "How you like to be touched. What gives you the most pleasure. Like, which feels better to you. This" — he rolled her puckered nipple between his fingers — "or this?" He bent and put his lips over the tight peak, then pulled it into his mouth and suckled.

She clamped her lips shut, trying to hold back a moan, but didn't succeed.

After a moment, he raised his head and grinned at her. "Yup, no question. You liked the second way better." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Am I right?"

At her nod, he said, "Now that I know what you like best here" — he gave her nipple another tweak with his fingers — "I'll do the same thing in other places." His gaze made a quick sweep down the length

of her body. "Then it'll be easier to give you pleasure." He lowered his voice to add, "You do want me to give you pleasure, don't you?"

Though certain that her face had flamed bright red with a blush, she refused to look away. Staring into his eyes, she said, "Yes, I do."

His lips twitched, then he leaned closer until his mouth brushed hers. "I thought so," he whispered, before settling in for a real kiss.

Blu's thorough, mind-boggling assault on her mouth left her dazed, her senses scattered in every direction. Blinking several times to clear her brain, she needed a full minute to recover. When she had pulled herself back together, she cleared her throat, then said, "This getting more familiar with each other works both ways, right? I mean, I get to experiment, too, so I'll know what you like best, won't I?"

"Uh . . . yeah, I guess. But you don't have —"

Delana pressed her fingers to his lips. "I want to," she said, a curl of heat forming in her belly at the thought of testing his reaction with her hands and her mouth. Moving her fingers from his lips to trace the line of his whisker-roughened jaw, she smiled. "And I want to start now."

He returned her smile but shook his head. "Some other time, darlin'. Right now I have something else in mind."

Before she could respond, he lowered his mouth to hers for another kiss, while sliding his hand between her legs. She planned to protest; she really did, and for a moment, she fought her body's reaction to his intimate touch. But then his magical fingers began moving, making her throb even more, dragging her into the world that was still new to her — the sensual world of indescribable pleasure. With a groan, she gave up the fight and let herself be pulled to a place where she didn't have to think, where she only had to feel.

Her hips began moving against his hand, the pressure building with each rub of this fingers. She heard him murmur something, but she couldn't make out the words over the pounding of her pulse in her ears.

She dug her heels into the mattress, working her hips faster and faster, becoming desperate to find relief from the delicious torment assailing her. And then abruptly she was there, flying over the crest. Her body shuddering with the intense spasms of her release, she cried out, clutching at the sheet. When the spasms slowed, she arched her back a final time, then exhaled a shaky breath and dropped back onto the bed. Limp. Drained.

A few seconds passed while she regained her strength and her mind cleared. Finally, she released a deep sigh. "Oh, my. That was incredible."

Blu nuzzled the side of her neck. She could feel his lips curve into a smile against her skin. "Yeah, incredible."

"If I had known having sex would be this good, I wouldn't have scared off all the men who —"

"No!" Blu jerked his head up and scowled down at her. "What we did wasn't just having sex."

She blinked up at him. "It wasn't?"

"No, damn it, so don't even suggest you might've made love to one of the men who came sniffing after you."

Delana's heart thumped wildly against her ribs. Was Blu aware he'd said they'd made love? Or did his caustic remark stem from jealousy? A positive response to either question could mean he had started to care for her. Or it could mean nothing. Besides, the answer really didn't matter, since neither of them wanted a permanent relationship.

"Well, it's a moot point, isn't it?" she said, putting a little frost into her tone.

His scowl deepened. "Yer damn right. And don't go getting ideas about scratching yer itch with any man that comes along after you leave here."

"How dare you even make such a suggestion!" She glared up at him, her hands curled into fists. "What I do after I leave is my business, so you have no right to tell me —"

"I have every right," he roared, "because I —" His eyes went wide, an odd expression on his face.

Delana couldn't be certain what had brought about his abrupt change. Surprise or maybe disbelief, but he definitely looked stunned. She watched him collect himself, hoping he'd finish what he'd started to say.

He took a deep breath, then cleared his throat. "Forget it," he said in a much calmer voice, then rolled away from her and stretched out on his back.

Before she could respond, he spoke again. "It's late. Turn down the lamp and go to sleep."

She considered defying him and insisting he explain why he thought he had the right to tell her what to do. But even if he agreed —

which she sincerely doubted — she decided she'd be better off not knowing.

His explanation would either make her angry or add to her future heartache, and she didn't need either one.

\* \* \*

Sorley wiped the sweat from his forehead with a shirtsleeve, placed his hat back on his head, then turned to Blu.

"I got nothing planned for the rest of the day, so I can help ya start on the barn."

"Listen, Sorley, I appreciate your riding out here to help unload the lumber, but I wasn't figuring on starting today. I'm taking Delana into town this afternoon."

"You was just there Saturday. Why didn't ya buy what ya needed then?"

"By the time we got to town, most of the businesses had closed up early because of the dance."

"What's so all-fired important that you need to go back today?"

"A horse for Delana."

Sorley stared at him long and hard. "What's going on, Blu? Are you getting attached to that little gal?"

Blu shot him a disgusted look. "You know me better than that."

"Thought I did. But now I'm wondering if you've finally changed yer mind about ladies being off limits."

"Hell no, I ain't changed my mind."

"I wouldn't be so sure. I seen how you and Delana looked at each other at the dance. And now yer buying her a horse. Looks to me like the two of ya are settling in long-term."

"Yer seeing things, and what I buy for her ain't none of yer business. Besides, you got no room to talk. I saw the sparks you and Addie were giving off at the dance. Could've started a fire with all that heat."

When Sorley didn't reply, he said, "You gonna tell me what's going on between you two or not?"

"It ain't none of yer concern," Sorely replied, a mutinous set to his jaw. "But since I trust ya to keep yer mouth shut, I'll tell ya anyhow. I'm thinking real serious about asking Addie to marry me."

"Marry you! For Christ's sake, you barely know the woman."

"I know all I need to. Addie's a fine woman. Honest and kind."

"And she sets you off like a match to black powder."

Sorley grinned. "Yes sir, she surely does. That's another thing I love about her. Life will never be boring with her around. She can make me mad enough to see red one minute; then before I know it, somehow she turns my temper into another kinda heat." He winked. "If ya get my drift."

"Damn, yer sharing her bed, too."

"Now, don't you go thinking nothing bad about Addie. She's a grown woman with a mind of her own, and what she does in private ain't nobody's business."

"Hey, take it easy. I wasn't criticizing her. I'm just surprised, that's all." Blu shook his head, trying to digest everything Sorley had told him. "I gotta admit, I was hoping you and Addie would get along. Marie's been gone a long time and I — " He cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the direction of their conversation. "Anyway, I never figured you'd actually want to marry Addie."

"Well, I do, and don't you even think about lecturing me. I loved Marie. Still do. But you're right. She's been gone a long time and I'm tired of being alone. For the first time in years, I feel alive again. Like there's a reason for living. I got Addie to thank for that."

Blu stared at Sorley for several seconds, then nodded slowly. "If she makes you happy, then I'm happy for you."

"Thanks," Sorley replied. "I appreciate yer saying that." He looked over at the pile of lumber, then added, "Reckon I'll stick around and start digging holes for the support posts, if that's okay with you."

"That's not necessary."

"Yeah, I know. But Addie's holdin' some kinda ladies' meeting at the boardinghouse this afternoon" — he made a face — "and there ain't no way I'm gonna be anywhere near half-a-dozen gossiping women."

"I see yer point," Blu said with a laugh. "You know where the tools are."

Sorley nodded, then headed toward the lean-to.

\* \* \*

At the livery in Brownwood, Blu helped Delana select a horse. They discussed the good and bad points of each one, finally agreeing on a sorrel mare with a small star between her intelligent dark eyes.

When Delana learned the mare's name was Tabby, she burst out laughing.

"Mouse and now Tabby," she said. "They sure don't sound like names for horses. I guess our picking her was meant to be, don't you think?"

Blu smiled. "Yeah, reckon so." Realizing how much he'd miss hearing Delana laugh, his throat threatened to close. Telling himself to think about something else, he turned to look at saddles.

Once Blu paid the livery owner and told the man they'd be back later to pick up Tabby, he suggested they head for Potter's Mercantile.

"I don't remember seeing riding skirts in Virgil's store," Delana said. "But there's a dry-goods store a few blocks from Addie's boardinghouse. Maybe we should try there."

"Fine," he replied, then offered her his arm.

\* \* \*

Inside the dry-goods store, Delana found a riding skirt she could wear, then picked out several blouses.

"You'd better find a hat," Blu said. "Something with a brim to keep the sun off yer face."

She nodded, then moved to the display of ladies' hats.

She made her selection, then turned to Blu. "I guess that's everything."

He nodded, then stepped aside to let her precede him down the aisle to the front of the store.

Delana approached the counter, where a clerk was wrapping up a purchase for a young woman holding a baby, a cherub-faced girl with big blue eyes and a thick cap of dark-red hair.

Delana smiled at the little girl, who flashed a shy smile in return, then buried her face in her mother's neck.

When the woman struggled to juggle the child while trying to open her handbag, Delana stepped closer.

"Excuse me, but would you like me to hold her?"

The woman turned, meeting Delana's gaze with the same deep-blue eyes as her daughter. Looking slightly harried, she glanced at Blu, then back at Delana. "Thank you," she said with a sigh. "That would be a big help. She's quite a handful when I shop."

Delana placed the clothing and hat on the counter, then held out her hands. "Come here, sweetie. Come see me for a few minutes so your mama can pay her bill."

After a moment's hesitation, the little girl leaned away from her mother, arms extended toward Delana.

"I'm Beth Ann Pruitt," the woman said, relinquishing the girl to Delana, "and this is Sarah."

As Delana settled Sarah in her arms, she said, "Nice to meet you, Beth Ann. I'm Delana Cahill, and this is my husband Blu."

She looked over her shoulder at him, surprised by his odd expression, which he quickly masked with a blank stare.

"Ma'am," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

Sarah chortled and waved her fat fists, pulling Delana's attention from her contemplation of Blu.

"Take your time," she said to Beth Ann, "we're in no hurry."

The woman smiled again, then turned back to the clerk.

While Beth Ann finished her purchase, Delana shifted Sarah to a more comfortable position, then moved away from the counter, closer to Blu.

"She's adorable, isn't she?" she said to him, smoothing a lock of the little girl's baby-fine hair.

He shrugged. "One kid pretty much looks like another to me."

"That's because you've never taken a good look at them." She tickled Sarah under her chin, earning another giggle from the rosebud mouth. "Each one is unique. A true miracle."

When he didn't respond, she glanced up at him. That odd expression was back on Blu's face, but she pretended not to notice.

As she handed Sarah back to her mother a few minutes later, Beth Ann said, "You're real good with babies. Do you have children?"

"No," Delana said, trying to ignore a sudden surge of longing. "Not yet." She heard Blu making a choking sound, but didn't turn around. "But I hope to. I'd like to have a house-full."

Beth Ann laughed. "You're more ambitious than me. I'd like another one or two, just so Sarah don't have to grow up alone, but I don't know if I could handle more than three. All I can say is, good luck." She took her package from the clerk, then turned toward the door. "It was wonderful meeting you, and thanks again for helping with Sarah."



"You're welcome," Delana replied, forcing herself to smile. She watched the woman and baby until they left the store, then sighed. When she turned around, Blu had moved to the counter to pay for her riding clothes.

Several minutes later, Blu followed Delana from the dry goods store, unable to get the image of her holding that baby out of his head. And although it was pure foolishness, he couldn't stop his mind from altering the picture to one of Delana holding another child. Theirs.

That image brought him to an abrupt halt on the street. He inhaled a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Thinking such poppycock was ludicrous, a complete waste of time, but once again Delana had succeeded in upsetting his ability to concentrate. He had to find a way to stop letting —

Delana's voice snapped him back to the present. Turning to look at her, he said, "Did you say something?"

Her brow furrowing, she stared up at him for a moment, then said, "I asked if you were all right."

"Yeah, I'm fine." He looked up and down the street. "Is there anywhere else you need to go?"

Her gaze still fixed on his face, she shook her head. "Let's get Tabby, then go home."

*Home.* Why did she have to make the idea of a real home sound so appealing? Damn, he was doing it again. Letting his imagination run wild when he had other things he needed to be thinking about. Blowing out another deep breath, he nodded.

Once Tabby had been tied to the back of the wagon, and the saddle loaded into the wagon bed, Blu helped Delana climb up to the seat.

She smiled her thanks, reminding him of the way she'd smiled while holding the Pruitt baby. Motherhood would definitely agree with her. Annoyed with his line of thinking, he moved around to the other side of the wagon and climbed up beside the woman who seemed determined to do things that prevented him from keeping her out of his thoughts.

Actually, that wasn't an accurate description of his situation. He didn't believe Delana had an ulterior motive for her actions. No, the blame for her constant presence in his mind rested squarely on his shoulders. Something he'd been trying to deny since the night before. But after seeing her with a baby, and imagining her holding their

child, he finally had to face the truth. As difficult as it was to admit, he'd done the last thing he expected to do in his life. He'd fallen in love with her.

Sorley would fall over laughing if he found out, but Blu wouldn't give his friend the satisfaction. He had no intention of telling Sorley or anyone else, including Delana.

Especially Delana.

Just because he loved her, that didn't mean anything else had changed. His plans remained the same. Finish his detective work. See that she gets wherever she wants to go. Then get on with his life. No home. No passion-filled nights. No wife and kids waiting for him.

He closed his eyes against a sharp pang ripping through his chest. He didn't know how he could feel such agonizing loss for something he'd never known, but the pain was all too real.

\* \* \*

Though Delana had grown used to Blu's long stretches of silence, he seemed different on the trip back to the ranch. More remote. More withdrawn. Everything had been fine on their way to Brownwood, so something must have triggered his current mood after they arrived in town. She hadn't noticed anything unusual while they were at the livery, which left the dry goods store. Even then, he was — Wait, something did happen while they were there. After she offered to hold Sarah Pruitt, she'd noticed the change in his expression.

She didn't like to pry, but if there was some way she could help, she would risk riling his temper. And any reaction was better than his stony silence. Deciding she might as well plunge in, she took a deep breath, then turned to look at him.

"You're awfully quiet," she said.

He flinched at the sound of her voice, then gave her a sidelong glance. "I got a lot on my mind."

"Like what?" When he didn't respond, she said, "Building the barn? The secret work of yours? Me holding the Pruitt baby?"

His head snapped around at her last statement. "What?"

"I saw the way you looked at me when I offered to take Sarah from Mrs. Pruitt, so if something is bothering you, I think — "

"Yer damn right something is bothering me," Blu said, shooting her an angry glare. "The way you were fussing over that baby. If anybody'd seen ya, they would have thought it was yours."

Delana blinked, unable to hide her surprise at his words. "I love children, so what was the harm in me — " Her eyes went wide, suddenly understanding what she'd seen on his face while she held Sarah. Longing.

"Blu, I saw the way you looked at Sarah. I can tell you'd like to have a child of your own."

When his only reaction was a tightening of his jaw, she said, "You should give up the notion of not getting married or having a family. You'd make a wonderful father. I know you would, so you — "

"No! I told you, I won't take that chance."

"That's ridiculous."

"It's not ridiculous," he replied in a tight voice. "What if I'm like my father? What if I hurt my own child? I couldn't live with myself if I did any — "

"Stop it! I saw you with Guthrie, remember. I watched how you treated the boy, saw what a kind and gentle man you are. I know in my heart that you would never hurt a helpless child."

Blu shifted the reins into one hand, pinched the bridge of his nose, then rubbed his eyes. If only what Delana said could be true. But he couldn't live his life on if-lys. He exhaled heavily. "You don't know how much I wish I could believe that, but I can't."

"Yes, you can. Just think about it. You said your father was a hard man, but he changed after your mother's death. Everyone handles grief differently, and unfortunately, he turned to liquor. Even worse, his heavy drinking brought out the absolute worst in him, twisting his mind to the point that he took out his pain and anger on you. You know that's true, because you made the decision not to drink hard liquor." She touched his arm. "Blu, there's no way you could do the horrible things he did."

When he opened his mouth to reply, she held up a hand. "I don't want to argue about this. Just promise me you'll think about what I said."

He stared at her long and hard, saw the compassion and the pleading in her lovely eyes. Finally, he swallowed, bobbed his head in a curt nod, then shifted his gaze back to the road ahead of them.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, then Blu spoke. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure. Anything."

"You told Mrs. Pruitt you wanted a house-full of kids." He turned to look at her. "But you told me you don't want to get married, so how're you figurin' on filling a house full of kids?"

The corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. "First of all, a house-full was a bit of an exaggeration. But like I told you, I do love children. So if I felt differently about marriage, I'd want to have three or four, or at the very least, two. Mrs. Pruitt was right. A child shouldn't be raised alone." Her smile faded. "I know what that's like."

"Yeah, me, too," he replied.

He fell silent again, contemplating what he'd just learned about Delana. She wanted children. Without warning, the image he'd banished from his mind reappeared. Except that now, because of the recent discovery he'd made about himself, the image had taken on new significance. No longer did he see Delana holding a baby; now he saw the woman he loved holding a child born of that love. His child.

The agonizing pain of loss returned, filling his chest until he could barely breathe. Damn, how had he allowed his life to get so out of control? And what the hell was he going to do about it?

# Fifteen

---

By the end of the week, Blu had begun to think that the “little trip” Burch Riley outlined to him had been canceled, or else someone had nixed the idea of including him. He hoped the latter wasn’t the case, because regaining the ground he’d made in being accepted would take too much time. At least he didn’t believe the gang had carried out their latest plan. Sorley rode out to the ranch every morning to help with the barn, so if any rumors were floating around town concerning any illegal nighttime activities, his friend would have heard them and passed on the information.

He disliked waiting, but for the time being he had no other choice. If he started snooping around, asking more questions, and trying to find out the identity of “the boss,” word would likely get back to someone in the gang. That was a risk he couldn’t take. So until he found out where he stood with Riley and the others, he tried to keep himself busy.

The daylight hours were easy enough to fill. He and Sorley worked on the barn from not long after sunup until late afternoon. Then Sorley would head back to town so he could have supper with Addie, and Blu continued working until Delana called him in to eat. Then, after supper he went back outside and worked until the light failed.

That was what he’d done that day, going back to the barn after supper and hammering siding into place until his arm ached. As he made his way to the house, he almost wished he’d asked Delana to go for a ride. She’d ridden Tabby only a couple of times since they brought the mare home, because he’d made her promise not to leave the yard without him. He knew she wasn’t happy about agreeing to his terms, but thankfully, she’d kept her word. The idea of inviting her to go for

a ride had crossed his mind while they ate, but wisely he hadn't spoken his thoughts aloud.

But now, his shoulder hurting like a son of a bitch, he wished he'd chosen taking a ride over working on the barn. Then maybe he wouldn't ache so much.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. Yeah, well, even if they had gone for a ride, he still would be aching. Only for a different reason.

On the day he'd discovered he'd done the unimaginable and fallen in love with Delana, he'd done a lot of thinking on the way home from town, and he'd made a decision. He intended to put a stop to their intimate relationship. He was already in a whole lot deeper than he ever expected to be with a woman. And the only way he knew to deal with the unfamiliar situation was to keep his distance, working himself into such exhaustion during the day that he'd be too tired to do more than crawl into bed and fall asleep at night.

He snorted. *Hell of a plan, Cahill. You couldn't even make it through the first damn night.* What he considered a sound decision had lasted until they went to bed and she rolled toward him, brushing her fingertips over his arm, then placing a hand on his chest. Suddenly, his fatigue had vanished, his mouth dry as dust, his cock hard as stone. Even then he hadn't moved, but tried to keep his breathing even while hoping, praying she'd move back to her side of the bed.

But neither luck nor divine intervention had been with him. When she moved her hand down to his belly, he must have made some kind of sound. Because she'd scooted closer, pushed herself up onto one elbow, then bent her head closer to his.

"Blu," she'd whispered with so much longing in her voice that his already tenuous control snapped. Cursing his inability to resist, he'd pulled her into his arms and kissed her with all the passion surging through him, with all the love filling his heart.

He remembered her groan of pleasure when he plunged his tongue into her mouth, her fingers digging into his back when he pulled a nipple into his mouth, her hips lifting to meet his when he thrust into her. And he could still hear the little sound she made deep in her throat just before she climaxed.

He took a shuddering breath and tried to shove that memory aside — a memory he shouldn't have. As much as the admission shamed him,

his first failed attempt to halt their lovemaking wasn't his last. Since then, his efforts to fight the battle had lessened with each night. She had become a fever in his blood that never cooled, one he was powerless to resist. The more he had her, the more he wanted her.

Though he knew leaving Delana would be the hardest thing he would ever do, knew every night he spent making love to her would make their parting that much harder, he also didn't want to waste what time they had left. God, he loved her, yet he would have to let her go. A flood of tangled emotions swamped him, clogging his throat.

As he dipped his hands into the washbasin behind the house and splashed water on his face, he allowed himself to wonder, just for a minute, what it would be like to have Delana by his side forever, to make her his wife in reality, to father their children.

*Children.* That brought him back to reality. Bracing his hands on the house, he stood with his head bowed between his arms, water dripping from his hair and face. Damn, love had turned his brain to mush, allowing him to think about the impossible.

\* \* \*

The following evening, just as the last pink shards of the sunset faded to deep purple, a rider approached the ranch house. Blu rose from where he and Delana had been sitting on a quilt at the rear of the covered hall.

"Stay here," he said in a low voice, then headed down the hall toward the front of the house.

The rider pulled his horse to a halt a few feet from the porch, then waited for Blu to approach him.

"Cahill," he said by way of greeting.

Though the man's hat and the deepening shadows of nightfall kept most of his face hidden, Blu recognized the thin moustache, as well as the voice. "Pierce. What can I do for you?"

"You still wanna take that ride Burch told ya about?"

"Yeah."

"Then yer gonna need the right equipment," he replied, flipping open one of his saddlebags.

Blu took a step closer, reaching up to take what Pierce held toward him. As he withdrew his hand, he gave the items a cursory glance, not wanting to appear too curious. "Where's everyone else?"

"We'll meet up with the rest of the men closer to town. Go get yer horse. And bring a pair of heavy gloves. I'll wait here."

Blu nodded, then turned toward the house. Delana was waiting where he'd left her. "What's going on?" she said, getting to her feet.

"I . . . uh . . . have to leave for a while. I don't know how long I'll be gone. If I knew, I swear I'd tell ya."

She gave him a weak smile. "I know that. Just be careful."

"I will," he replied, then pressed a quick, fierce kiss on her mouth. When he lifted his head, he ran the backs of his knuckles down her cheek, keeping his other hand — the one holding what Pierce had given him — hidden from her view. "Try not to worry, and don't wait up for me."

Her throat working with a swallow, she nodded.

He touched her cheek once more, then turned and started across the yard to fetch his horse.

After lighting a lantern in the lean-to, Blu took a moment to look at the "equipment" Pierce had said he'd need. One item was a pair of wire cutters, the type used to cut through barbed wire. The other was a knife, the shape and length of the blade indicating it was designed for skinning. Puzzled why a gang bent on ending the use of barbed wire would need a skinning knife, he tucked the knife along with the wire cutters and a pair of leather gloves into his saddlebags. He didn't take the time to analyze the issue, not when he had more immediate concerns to occupy his mind.

As he saddled Mouse, excitement pumped through him. Hoping the upcoming ride would net him some valuable information, he tightened the cinch, dropped the stirrup back in place, then gathered up the reins.

"Okay, Mouse," he said, turning out the lantern. "Let's get this over with."

\* \* \*

The men, seven plus Blu, which told him one man wasn't taking part — the boss, no doubt — met at the edge of town, then rode north. The partial moon and gathering clouds provided only a few silvery shafts of light for their ride.

Blu didn't know their exact destination, since Riley hadn't shared that part of the plan with him. A safety precaution, he figured. But he



had a good idea where they were headed. After his meeting at the Riley ranch, he'd had Sorley do some checking around town.

According to Sorley, Jared Leslie, owner of a large ranch north of Brownwood, and a neighbor of Glen Johnson, had picked up a half-dozen spools of barbed wire a couple weeks earlier and expected to have the job finished any day. The timing was too perfect to be a coincidence. The Leslie place had to be the wire-cutting ring's target.

Blu hated not notifying the authorities, or at the very least warning Jared Leslie. But even if he did, he couldn't provide accurate details, such as the exact location where the gang planned to strike. Besides, contacting anyone, even anonymously, would risk exposing his identity, and he couldn't take that chance. He needed to put all his energy into gathering the evidence he needed to stop the fence cutting in Brown County for good. And while he did that, he had no choice except to remain silent.

\* \* \*

Blu pulled Mouse to a halt alongside the other men's horses. They had stopped in a mesquite grove at the edge of what looked to be a large open, grassy area. Probably cattle pasture, and unless Blu missed his guess, recently enclosed by barbed wire. A short distance away, he could make out several dark shapes. One of them shifted, giving him a glimpse of what looked like a set of horns. He wished there were more light, so he could get a better fix on their location and check the cattle for a brand.

The wind rustling through the mesquites, and an occasional stomp of a hoof, or jingle of a bridle were the only sounds breaking the silence. Blu sat quietly, wondering at the wait while trying to keep his anticipation at bay.

Based on his calculation, a full five minutes passed before Riley moved his horse a little ahead of the others.

"The boss doesn't want us out here for more than an hour, so y'all need to work fast and cut as much wire as possible. Amos, you and Carl start here. Charley, Glen, and Tom, ride up the fencerow a hundred yards or so and start there. Hardy, take Blu and work between the other fellas. I'll keep watch in case we have to hightail it outta here early. Everybody ready?"

At the murmured agreements, Riley said, "Okay, boys, let's get this done."

In a flurry of motion, the men set off on their assigned tasks. As Blu rode behind Hardy Pierce, he saw that Amos and Carl had already dismounted, pulled on leather gloves, and were heading toward the fence.

Fifty yards beyond the men, Pierce pulled up. He waited for the other three to ride past them, then swung off his horse's back, nodding for Blu to do the same.

Blu jumped to the ground, grabbed his gloves and wire cutters from his saddlebags, then followed Pierce to the fence. He watched to see what the man did, then copied his actions.

He put the jaws of the wire cutters around the top strand of barbed wire and squeezed. As the cutters bit through the tautly stretched wire, it made a twanging sound loud enough to be heard a good hundred yards away. No wonder the gang selected such a remote area to take down fence, otherwise the constant twanging of severed wire would attract plenty of unwanted attention.

As he moved to the next strand and cut the wire, he felt a pang of regret. A hell of a lot of hard work went into putting up that fence — hours of backbreaking labor digging postholes every thirty feet, stringing and stretching four strands of wire, then stapling all the strands to every post. And in only a few minutes, he would be partially responsible for destroying a huge portion of that hard work. That was the one part he truly disliked about being a Ranger detective — working special-duty, secret assignments where he had to break the law in order to catch the real criminals.

But no matter how much he regretted what he sometimes had to do, he had never allowed his personal feelings to get in the way of doing his job. He was a Texas Ranger, sworn to uphold the laws of Texas, and once again he intended to carry out his duties.

He worked quickly to cut all four strands of wire between a pair of fenceposts, trying to avoid the razor-sharp barbs. When the wire cutters severed a strand, the taut wire not only made a twanging sound, but the ends recoiled so quickly that the barbs would rip across anything in the way. As he made one cut, he didn't get his hand out of the way fast enough, allowing a barb to rake his forearm just above the top of his glove. Ignoring the stinging wound and the trickle of blood running down his arm, he led Mouse to another section of fence,

then repeated the process. No matter how careful Blu tried to be, he still ended up with several more cuts before Riley gave the signal for the men to stop.

Blu straightened, pulled off a glove, and rubbed his hand over his face. Glad to be finished with that chore, he waited to see what Riley had planned. Whatever happened next, gut instinct told him he wasn't going to like it.

As soon as all the men reassembled, Riley nodded toward the uneasy cattle milling in a loose herd a hundred feet away.

"Two of you throw ropes on a couple of the bigger steers," he said. "Then drive the rest through this here new gate."

He laughed at his attempt at humor, then drew his pistol. "I'll take care of putting down the steers, then we need to get 'em butchered in a hurry. We've already been here close to an hour. If somebody hears my gunshots, they might come lookin', and we want to be long gone before then."

Blu swallowed the bile rising in his throat. *Damn*. He knew Pierce's handing him a skinning knife had been a bad sign.

As repulsive as Blu found the task, the two steers went down with two clean shots, then were quickly and efficiently skinned and butchered. Obviously, the men had played out that bloody scene before.

A few minutes later, the haunches of beef had been divvied up, and the men prepared to leave.

"Good job tonight, boys," Riley said. "The boss'll be real pleased." He gathered up his reins, then swung into his saddle. "Okay, let's get the hell outta here. You know what to do."

The others nodded, mounted their horses, and rode off, a couple heading to the main road, the others cutting cross-country. As Blu eased onto Mouse's back, Riley moved his horse closer and flashed a grin.

"Ya did fine tonight, Cahill. I'll make sure the boss knows."

"Thanks," Blu replied, fighting the urge to wipe the smile off the man's face with a well-directed punch. "I appreciate that."

"We usually split up as quick as we can. But since yer not familiar with the back roads around these parts yet, I'll ride a ways with ya. Make sure ya know how to get home."

Blu stared at the man for several seconds, then nodded. If he'd had a better view of Riley's expression, he might have been able to tell if

the man had spoken the truth, or simply didn't trust him. But at that moment, Blu didn't care which it was. He just wanted to get away from the scene of cut wire and bloody steer carcasses as fast as possible. Swinging Mouse around, he urged the gelding toward the road.

As the two rode in the direction of Brownwood, Blu was grateful the other man remained silent. He was in no mood for small talk, and he sure as hell didn't want to discuss what they'd done that night. When they finally reached the road leading to Riley's ranch, the man said he'd be in touch, then rode off.

Weariness replacing the tenseness of his body, Blu watched until the man and his horse disappeared in the darkness, then started Mouse forward again. Nauseated at the idea of eating stolen beef, he tossed his share into a stand of mesquite, certain that animals scavenging for food would appreciate what he couldn't stomach.

\* \* \*

A loud crash pulled Delana from a fitful sleep. She pushed the hair off her face, then glanced around the room. The kerosene lamp she'd left burning low revealed no one else in the room. Rising from the bed, she hurried toward the door, then slipped out into the hall.

The door to the other room of the house stood open. Holding her breath, she inched closer and peered through the doorway.

Blu was on the kitchen side of the room, crouched in front of the cupboard, a broken crock and several tins of canned peaches at his feet.

She stepped across the threshold. "What are you looking for?"

He jerked with surprise, then straightened and whirled to face her. "Holy Christ, you scared the daylights out of —"

Delana's gasp drowned out the rest of his words. "Oh my God, you're hurt." Her heart leaping to her throat at the dried, reddish-brown splotches on his shirt and trousers, she rushed toward him.

He frowned. "It's only a couple of scratches. I was looking for —"

"Scratches!" She shook her head. "That much blood didn't come from a couple of scratches." Lifting her hands to his chest, she started to unbutton his shirt. "Let me see how badly you're hurt."

He grabbed her wrists. "Delana, I'm fine. I've really got only a couple of scratches. That's why I was looking in the cupboard. For a bottle of iodine."

She shook her head again. "Iodine won't help whatever caused that much blood."

His frown deepening, he glanced down at the stains on his clothes. "It isn't my blood."

She lifted her gaze to search his face. He didn't look as though he was seriously hurt. His color was good, his eyes clear. Furrowing her brow, she tipped her head to one side. "Then whose is it?"

\* \* \*

Blu silently cursed his clumsiness. He'd planned to clean up his cuts, then dispose of his bloody clothes before Delana had a chance to see him. Instead, the ruckus of his dropping a tin of peaches and breaking a crock had awakened her. He drew a deep breath, eased it out slowly. Now what was he supposed to do? Make up some story about the blood on his clothes and hope she'd swallow it, or tell her the truth?

The answer came easier than he thought.

He released her wrists. "Let me get these scratches cleaned up, then we need to talk."

She stared up at him for a moment, then nodded. "Fill a basin with water. I'll get the iodine."

As she bent to look in the cupboard, he said, "I already looked. It's not in —"

She straightened, a bottle in her hand.

The corners of his mouth lifted. "I . . . uh . . . guess I didn't look very well."

She set the bottle on the worktable. "Guess not," she said, her eyebrows arched over twinkling lavender eyes. "Can't you find the basin either?"

He blinked, then gave a soft laugh. "No, I know where that is."

A few minutes later, Delana had bathed the cuts on his wrists with a gentle touch, then dabbed iodine on each one. Her fussing over him formed a lump in his throat. No one — other than his mother, whom he barely remembered — had ever treated him with such tenderness.

His heart swelling with a surge of love, he swallowed, then whispered a hoarse thank-you.

"You're welcome." She smiled. "I'll just take care of this. Then we can —"

"No. Later." He closed his hand around hers, then started toward the other side of the room. "Come on, let's sit down."

Once they were seated on the sofa, he released her hand, then rubbed the side of his jaw. "I'm not sure where to start."

"How about, how you got the blood on your clothes?"

He looked down at the dark stains and grimaced. "This is steer blood."

"Steer?" Her eyes went wide. "Oh, my God, you're a cattle rustler?"

"No, I'm not. I mean, I did help rustle a couple steers tonight, but only because I didn't have a choice."

"How can you not have a choice about something like that? Cattle rustling is against the law, in case you aren't aware of it."

"Yeah, I'm aware of it," he said with a chuckle.

"Blu, this isn't funny. You have to get out of the rustling business before you get arrested."

His chuckle erupted into a full-fledged laugh.

Her eyes narrowing, she glared at him. "I think you'd better start talking, mister."

"Delana, settle down," he said, trying to control his amusement. "It's not what you're thinking. I'm not a cattle rustler. I'm a Texas Ranger."

"A Texas Ranger!" She made a noise somewhere between a laugh and a snort. "Oh, right, and I'm the — " The expression on his face stopped her cold. "You're serious?"

At his nod, she gave him a fierce scowl. "Why didn't you tell me that in Austin?"

"Because I didn't trust you. We'd just met, I knew next to nothing about you, and I was coming here on a real important assignment. I couldn't take the risk."

She thought about his response for a moment, then said, "All right, that makes sense. But I wish you'd told me sooner. If I'd known, I might not have worried so . . . Well, I still would have worried about you, but not as much as I have been."

He touched her cheek, trying to keep his gaze from straying to the gaping neck of her nightgown. "I'm a Ranger detective. I do special-duty, secret investigations in places where other law officials failed. My true identity has to remain a secret. The Ranger commander and the governor are the only two who know about my assignments. When I was sent here, I asked them to include a third man. Sorley."

"Sorley's a Ranger, too?"

"Was. Best Ranger I ever met. After I joined the force, Sorley kinda took me under his wing. Taught me all I know about being a Ranger. He decided to quit the force last year. But he still helps out once in a while."

Delana shook her head, then slumped against the back of the sofa. "This is unbelievable." She gave him a thoughtful look, then said, "Cattle rustling has something to do with why you were sent here, doesn't it?"

"That wasn't the reason my commander gave me this assignment. But turns out, cattle rustling's part of it." Seeing her expectant expression, he knew he had to tell her something. "How much do you know about the problem the state's had with fence-cutting gangs?"

"Not a lot, except I thought a law had been passed against it."

Blu nodded. "Three years ago wire cutting got so far out of control that Governor Ireland finally called a special session of the state legislature. A law was passed making fence cutting a felony. That stopped a lot of the problems, but not in some parts of the state. Like Brown County."

"So, that's why you were sent here. To arrest fence cutters."

"Not arrest. My assignment is to get inside the wire-cutting ring and gather enough evidence so the men can be arrested and convicted."

"That's where you were tonight, with those men?"

"Yeah. I won their trust, so they invited me on one of their night-time rides. But I found out wire cutting isn't their only activity. After tearing down a section of fence, they also rustle cattle." He rubbed his forehead. "God knows what else they do."

"And you really did those things tonight?"

"Didn't have a choice. If I want the others to trust me, I have to do the same things as them."

"Who are these men? Have I met them?"

He shook his head. "I've already told you more than I should have, so I'm not going to say any more."

She leaned forward, her brow furrowed. "Aren't you taking a huge chance? I mean, if those men found out you're a Ranger." Her shoulders quivered with a shudder. "I don't even want to think about what they might do."

"Yeah, I'm taking a risk. But this is my job, and I've done everything I can to make sure they don't find out."

She wrapped her fingers around his arm. "Blu, tell me what I can do to help."

"The only thing you can do is keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word about this to anyone. Understood?"

"Yes, of course. But there must be something else I can — "

"No," he said, weariness and frustration giving way to anger, "there isn't anything else. So drop it."

Her chin came up, making him stifle a groan.

"I don't want to drop it," she said. "If something happened to you, I couldn't bear" — she swallowed hard — "I couldn't forgive myself for not helping you."

"Damn it, you're not going to get involved."

"But — "

"There are no buts," he practically shouted, surging to his feet and pointing a finger at her. "I'm warning you, Delana. Stay out of this. These men are dangerous. There's no telling what they're capable of. I'd rather die than put you in a position where something could happen to you."

He turned away from her, as much to get his temper under control as to hide what he feared might be revealed on his face. Just the thought of her suffering some injury or even death had chilled his blood with a stark terror like none he'd ever known.

He needed a moment to collect himself. Then he ran a shaky hand through his hair and exhaled a deep breath. Turning back to her, he kept both his expression and his voice as calm as possible. "Have I made myself clear?"



# Sixteen

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Delana pressed her lips together to hold in a scathing retort. Damn Blu's stubbornness. Couldn't he see how worried she was, how much she wanted to help because she loved him? Getting to her feet, she amended that last part. Hopefully, he hadn't realized she'd fallen in love, and she had no plans to tell him.

"Delana, you didn't answer me."

She sighed, then lifted her chin and met his gaze. "Yes, you made yourself perfectly clear."

He held her gaze for a moment, then finally nodded. "Good, I'm glad we got that settled."

Though she longed to tell him they hadn't settled anything, that she intended to help him — once she figured out how, without his permission or knowledge — she knew continuing to argue would serve no purpose. So rather than speaking her mind, she managed a smile. "I'm going to sweep up the broken crock and clean off the worktable."

"I'll help."

"Thanks, but that's not necessary," she said, moving past him. "Why don't you get out of those clothes so I can put them to soak? I don't know if I can get the blood out, but soaking them overnight might help."

"Yeah, okay. I need to wash up anyway."

Before Delana realized his intent, he'd unbuttoned the placket of his shirt, then pulled the garment over his head and tossed it aside. She hadn't meant for him to undress right where he stood, but she wasn't sorry he'd chosen to do so. Kneeling in front of the cupboard, she tried to concentrate on picking up the largest pieces of crockery but found herself stealing glances in his direction. She saw his hands drop to the

fly of his trousers. Saw his fingers work the buttons free. Saw him tug off his boots, then shove his trousers down to his ankles.

Sweet, merciful heaven! Just looking at his powerful body, watching his muscles bunch and stretch with his movements, made her breath catch, her nipples tighten, and her pulse increase to a wild throbbing that echoed in the damp flesh between her thighs. Jerking her gaze back to the broken crock, she tried to cool the desire coursing through her veins, but her body was slow to heed her efforts.

When she thought she'd given him enough time to leave the room, she allowed herself a quick peak in that direction. Grateful to find herself alone, she blew out a deep breath. Desiring Blu with such intensity was bad enough, but also being in love with him made the situation even worse. How would she ever be able to forget him? How could she go on with her life as if nothing had happened between the two of them, blithely pretending she hadn't experienced the most incredible passion with a most remarkable man? The man she loved more with each passing day? She had no answers to those troubling questions.

Or, maybe she did.

If she and Blu stayed together and made their marriage a real one, she wouldn't have to forget him. Of course, that would mean giving up her dream of living an independent life — something she wasn't sure she could do. Besides, even if she were willing to change her plans, she had no idea what his reaction would be.

Not wanting to think about the uncertainty of her future, she concentrated on setting the kitchen to rights. She finished cleaning up the broken crock, put away the iodine and basin, then picked up Blu's shirt and trousers. After putting the clothes to soak in a tub of water, she glanced around the room. Satisfied she'd taken care of everything, she headed toward the bedroom.

Blu had turned up the wick of the kerosene lamp on the bedside table, filling the room with soft golden light. His back to the door, he stood in front of the washstand, naked, rubbing a piece of toweling over his chest.

A quick jolt of desire zinged through her, causing the dull throb low in her belly to return. Easing out a deep breath, she stepped over the threshold, then closed the door behind her.

As she crossed the room, she glanced up and caught him looking at her reflection in the mirror above the washstand. The grim set to his

mouth softened, and something flashed in his eyes — a searing heat that increased the throbbing between her thighs.

She stood frozen in place, caught in the snare of his mesmerizing topaz eyes. He kept his gaze locked on hers while he finished drying his chest, his movements slow and deliberate.

By the time he dropped the toweling onto the washstand and turned toward her, Delana feared she would melt from the intensity of the desire sizzling between them.

He took a step closer, holding out his hand. "Come to bed, Delana," he whispered. "I want to love you."

"I want that, too," she replied, startled to realize she meant the words differently than he had. She wanted more than physical loving. She wanted him to — No, she couldn't allow herself to finish that thought. Nothing would be gained by thinking about what might never be. Determined to heed her own advice, she smiled, then placed her hand in his.

In one quick move, he fell onto the bed, taking her down with him. They had barely landed on the mattress when he rolled atop her, his mouth claiming hers in a fierce, consuming kiss, forcing her lips to open and pushing his tongue inside. Her hands moved over him restlessly, clutching at his shoulders, grasping his hair, digging her nails into the muscles of his back.

She moaned low in her throat, arched up off the bed to rub her breasts against his chest, to press her pelvis against the hard ridge of his arousal.

Without relinquishing her mouth, he shifted his weight so he could grasp the hem of her nightgown and pull it up to bunch around her waist. His hand settled on one hip and squeezed gently, before sliding to her belly. He teased her navel with a fingertip, then moved lower, the roughness of his callused fingers wildly erotic.

Still kissing her, he inched his hand downward to push through the triangle of hair, but then stopped short of her aching flesh. Desperate for his touch, she whimpered a protest, then opened her legs in a silent plea.

A deep groan rumbling in his chest, he gave her what she wanted. As his fingers found her, his thumb brushing over her sensitive bud, she gasped into his mouth, her body jerking at the incredible sensations racing through her.

As the pressure started to build, she began moving her hips. Then, abruptly, he stopped. Wrenching his mouth from hers, he slid down her body and buried his face between her legs.

He drew a deep breath. "Your scent drives me wild," he murmured, his lips brushing her damp flesh. "I want to taste you."

Shocked by his statement and the intimacy of his position, she couldn't speak, could barely breathe. And when he laved his tongue over her, she nearly came off the bed, forgetting everything but the wildfire roaring through her veins.

"Easy, darlin'," he whispered, slipping his hands beneath her bottom and holding her in place. "I want to love you this way."

*Love.* There was that word again. But even if she wanted to rethink what part love might play in her future, she wasn't capable of rational thinking at the moment. All she could do was feel.

He settled more comfortably between her opened thighs, then began stroking her with his tongue. Lapping up, then down in a lazy rhythm. The pressure immediately escalated, the throbbing intensifying with each intimate touch. Mortified to feel herself growing wetter, she tried to scoot away from him, but his hands tightened on her bottom, preventing her escape.

He halted the leisurely strokes of his tongue long enough to lift his head and murmur something. Something that sounded like "So sweet."

The heat of a blush crept over her, mixing with the heat of her arousal and making her skin burn even more. Then, his fingers opened her and he closed his lips around her clitoris to gently suckle. A bolt of white-hot need speared through her, completely overshadowing her embarrassment. The warm, skilled tug of his mouth made her cry out.

Her heart pounding, hands fisted in the sheet, she sobbed his name, unable to bear more of the pleasure-pain he was inflicting on her nerve endings.

She dug her heels into the mattress, thrust her hips against his mouth. His grip on her bottom relaxed, allowing her more freedom of movement. As his tongue and lips continued their assault on her senses, she pushed against him faster and faster, desperate to reach the peak.

Then, suddenly, she was there.

With a sharp gasp, she arched her back, straining to get closer one final time. She held herself rigid, a throaty moan filling the room, her body shuddering with the spasms of her release.

After a moment, she dropped back onto the mattress, limp, her breath escaping in a ragged sigh.

Blu carefully eased his mouth away from her, his head spinning with the intoxicating scent and taste of her. He had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted Delana at that instant. Though the last tremors of her climax hadn't faded, he couldn't wait another second. The powerful orgasm he'd given her had nearly taken him over the edge as well, and he remained close to the point of exploding. He pressed a kiss on the inside of one silky thigh, then rose onto his knees and buried himself in her slick heat with one smooth, quick flex of his hips.

He heard her sharp intake of breath, knew he should apologize for the swiftness of his entry, but he couldn't seem to form the words. The need raging through him had taken control of every part of his body.

He'd planned to be gentle, wanting to make this last, to bring her along for a second climax. But after two strokes, he knew that wasn't going to happen. She was so incredibly hot and wet, her legs locking around his hips to push him deeper, her tight inner muscles clutching him like a velvet fist.

Jaw clenched, the blood thundering in his ears, he could do no more than grasp her waist to anchor himself while he pounded into her. He wanted the moment to go on and on, but his body had other ideas.

Squeezing his eyes closed, he began a silent chant. *Not yet. Not yet.* But he was too aroused, too close to his climax, to delay the inevitable any longer.

"Oh, God, Delana," he said in a ragged whisper, "I'm gonna —" His words ended in a loud bellow. A sound he realized with a shock, had come from him.

His hips pumped forward once, twice, then remained pressed as tightly against her as possible. As he shook with the strength of the spasms racking his body, a groan that felt as though it had started in his toes escaped with a shuddering breath.

A full minute passed before his breathing began to even out and his heart began to slow. His movements sluggish, his arms feeling like lead, he removed her legs from around his hips, then eased away from her.

"Damn, I'm weak as a kitten," he murmured, his voice raspy. Shifting so he could stretch out on the bed took some doing, accompanied by a few moans, but he finally managed.

Delana turned her head to look at him, worry lines furrowing her brow. "Are you all right?"

He saw the concern in her passion-darkened eyes and somehow found the strength to smile. "Yeah," he replied, fighting a yawn. "Just tired."

"It's really late, and you've been up since before dawn. That's enough to make any man tired, especially after what . . . um . . . we did."

A laugh rumbled in his chest. "True." He lifted a hand and stroked the backs of his fingers across her cheek, struck with the urge to say something more. Something from deep inside him, but the words were all jumbled up and he was too exhausted to try to put them in order. Instead, he withdrew his hand and mumbled a good-night.

" 'Night, Blu."

\* \* \*

Delana kept her gaze on his face, watched his eyes drift closed, saw his muscles slacken when he fell asleep. She sighed, wishing she could join him in the peaceful oblivion of sleep. But in spite of having had a long, tiring day, and Blu's loving leaving her relaxed and slightly drowsy, her mind didn't seem inclined to allow her to fall asleep any time soon.

She wanted to move closer to Blu, to feel his solid body against hers, but she didn't want to disturb him. Besides, the bedroom was too hot for cuddling. Content to look at him, her gaze traced his strong profile, then drifted down to watch the steady rise and fall of his chest. One hand lay curled on his flat belly, his fingers occasionally twitching as sleep pulled him deeper into its clutches.

From the angle of his hand, only one of the scratches on his wrist could be seen, a visual reminder of the danger he had faced and would face again. A surge of love barreled through her, a surge so powerful that for a moment she couldn't breathe.

When the tightness eased, she drew a shaky breath, then swallowed hard. Pulling her gaze from the man who had captured her heart in spite of her determination not to succumb to love, she turned her head to stare at the bedroom ceiling, her earlier troubling questions returning.

After much deliberation, she came to a startling conclusion. The independence she'd wanted desperately for so long had lost its appeal.

Now, because she loved Blu more than she ever could have imagined possible, she wanted a future with him. Whether he would agree remained a question she couldn't answer. But one thing she did know. Before she could do anything about convincing him that they should make their relationship permanent, first he had to finish his assignment for the Rangers.

And how better to make sure that happened quickly than to help with his investigation?

Of course, she couldn't tell him about her decision, since he'd ordered her to stay out of it. But that didn't matter, because her mind was made up. She loved Blu, and people helped those they loved. Just how she'd help him she didn't know — she'd figure that out later — but she did know one thing. She had to make sure Blu didn't find out about her plan. He already had enough on his mind — had told her he'd rather die than place her in a dangerous position — so she wouldn't add to his burden.

She lay awake for a long time considering her options, and realized with a sinking heart that she'd be no help to Blu's investigation by staying at the ranch. She knew he'd never allow her to go into town alone, and if she pressed too hard for him to take her, he'd want a damn good reason. So unless she came up with one, she'd have to wait until they made their weekly trip for supplies.

\* \* \*

Early in the afternoon several days later, Delana was attempting to mend one of Blu's shirts — a skill she had yet to master — when he and Sorley came into the house.

She looked up and smiled. "I was going to bring you two some lemonade in a few minutes, but you beat me to it." Laying the shirt aside, she started to get up.

"Sit still, darlin'," Blu said. "We didn't come in for something to drink."

"Oh. Well, can I get you something else?"

"Nope. We just came to tell ya we're quitting for the day."

"Why? Did one of you get hurt?" She raked her gaze over the two men, checking for injuries.

He glanced at Sorley, then flashed a smile in her direction, giving her a quick peek at the dimples she found so attractive. "No, we're not hurt."

"Then what is it?"

"We're running low on nails, so we — "

Sorley made a disgusted sound. "That ain't the real reason, Cahill, and you know it. So stop playing games and tell her."

Blu turned to look at his friend. "Actually, I think you should be the one to tell her."

"Stop it," Delana said, rising from her chair and moving closer. "Don't you two ever get tired of picking at each other?"

Blu grinned and Sorley took a sudden interest in the toe of his right boot.

"Damn it, I don't care who tells me," she said in a deceptively calm voice, "but one of you had better start talking."

"Easy, darlin'," Blu said, holding up a hand. "No need to get all riled. I was only having some fun."

When she shot him a mutinous glare, he cleared his throat, then said, "Okay, fun's over. The truth is, Sorley invited us to have supper with him and Addie tonight."

"Well, that's real nice. Since you quit working on the barn, I take it we're going."

" 'Course we are. Couldn't turn down an invite to a supper as important as this one."

She shifted her gaze to Sorley. "Important?"

She watched his Adam's apple bob with a swallow, and a blush creep up his deeply tanned neck.

"Yeah," he said. "We're fixing to celebrate Addie saying yes to my proposal."

"Proposal?" Delana blinked, then gave a soft gasp. "Oh, my God, you asked Addie to marry you!" She rushed toward him and gave him a quick hug. "Sorley, I'm so happy for you. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Addie must be so excited."

"Well, I don't know what she's feeling right this minute," he replied, rubbing his chin, "but before I left this morning, she was real excited."

Delana noticed the sparkle of humor in his hazel eyes, then realized the double meaning of his words. Her lips twitching, she arched a brow. "I'll just bet she was."

She watched his cheeks turn as red as his neck, then turned to look at Blu.



"Isn't this wonderful? Your best friend's getting married."

Before Blu could answer, Sorley said, "Don't expect him to jump up and down. He don't cotton to the idea of marriage."

"Marriage is fine," Blu said, a hint of irritation in his voice, "for some folks."

"But not for you," Sorley replied, glancing at Delana.

There was no mistaking the sympathy she saw in his expression. Wondering if her feelings for Blu were that transparent, she forced herself to smile. "Blu's right," she said as much for her own benefit — in case her plans didn't work out — as to throw Sorley off track. "Marriage isn't for a lot of people."

\* \* \*

"Mighty fine supper, Addie," Blu said, leaning back in his chair. "And congratulations again. Sorley's a lucky man."

"Thanks," she replied with a smile. "You're real kind." She turned to look at Sorley, the joy on her face unmistakable. "But, I'm the lucky one. I never thought I'd find love again."

"Me neither," Sorley said. He set down his coffee cup, then placed his hand atop hers and squeezed. "But I still think we shoulda gone to a restaurant. You work too hard."

"Don't you dare start that argument again, Sorley McGregor. Especially not tonight." She pressed her lips together, obviously struggling not to lose her temper. After a moment, she released a deep breath, then said, "You know I love to cook. And you certainly enjoy eating the meals I fix."

"Now, Addie, don't get all het up. We got company."

"I'm well aware of that. We invited them here to celebrate our engagement. Though why I agreed to marry such a hardheaded man, I don't rightly know."

"Addie, sugar," he said, leaning toward her, "you shouldn't be talking that way."

"Don't you 'Addie, sugar' me, because I —"

Sorley's mouth pressed to hers ended their heated discussion.

Blu hid a grin behind his coffee cup. Married life for these two certainly would never be dull. Glancing over at Delana, he couldn't help wondering what kind of real marriage they might have. Probably one

not a whole lot less volatile than Sorley and Addie's, given Delana's independent and passionate nature. But then, he'd sure hate to be tied to a timid little mouse of a wife. One who never raised her voice, never disagreed with something he said, never lifted her chin in a show of defiance.

He smiled into his cup. Yes sir, Delana definitely would make his life real interesting, not to mention filling his nights with —

*Damn it!* What the hell was the matter with him? Mentally kicking himself for allowing his thoughts to stray into forbidden territory, he set down his cup with a thump, then shoved his chair away from the table and stood. "If you'll excuse me, I need some air."

At his sharply spoken words, Addie jerked away from Sorley. Turning a startled gaze on him, she said, "Uh . . . certainly, Blu. Sorley, why don't you go with him? Delana and I will see to the dishes."

Sorley frowned in Blu's direction, then nodded. Rising from his chair, he said, "We'll be back in a few minutes."

\* \* \*

Once the men had stepped outside, Sorley turned to Blu. "What the hell was that about?"

Blu rubbed the side of his jaw. "Look, I'm sorry about being rude, but I had to get outta there."

"You gonna tell me why?"

After a long pause, Blu huffed out a deep breath. "It's nothing. My mind got a little distracted on something I had no business thinking about."

"Delana?"

"Yeah."

"You wanna talk about it?"

He sighed. "There's no point."

"Well, now, I'm afraid I can't agree with ya about that. There's always a point, even if it ain't one that sits well with ya."

Blu opened his mouth to reply, then shook his head. "I don't want to argue with you."

"I ain't looking for an argument. If you don't want to talk about whatever chased you outta the dining room like yer tail was on fire, fine by me."

"Damn it, I told you I don't."

"Fair enough. But I got one more thing I wanna say, then I'll hush up. If you change yer mind, ya know you can bend my ear any time."

Blu nodded. "Yeah, I know that, Sorley."

Sorley studied the younger man for a moment. He could tell something concerning Delana was weighing heavy on his friend's mind, and even though he didn't have all the answers, he wished Blu would open up to him so he could at least try to help.

When Blu remained silent, Sorley decided to lighten the mood. "I'm thinkin' this'd be a good time for a couple shots of good Irish whiskey. Might take the edge off whatever's eating at ya."

Blu swung his gaze in Sorley's direction, his eyebrows drawn together in a scowl. "It's a damn good thing I think so highly of you, McGregor. Otherwise, I'd have to smash my fist into yer face for that remark."

Sorley bit back a grin, but not quickly enough.

"I shoulda known," Blu said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I don't get yer meaning," Sorley replied, enjoying their banter.

"You can stop playing the innocent. You know damn well you're the only one I'd let say anything about me taking a drink, without riling me to the point of wantin' to do violence." His scowl fading, a smile teased the corners of his mouth. "You might as well admit it. You brought up whiskey on purpose to make me forget why we came out here."

Sorley shrugged. "Okay, you caught me. So you still wanna take a poke at me, or are we gonna go back inside?"

Blu's smile working into a grin, he shook his head, then uncrossed his arms. "We're going inside."

He started for the door, then stopped and looked over his shoulder. "And Sorley, thanks."

"Somebody had to do something to get that wild hair outta yer ass."

Blu's quick burst of laughter filled the night air.

# Seventeen

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Before going into Brownwood, Delana and Blu had decided to spend the night at Addie's boardinghouse. Not only would staying in town save them a long ride home in the dark, but it would also allow him to pick up the nails he needed before they headed back to the ranch in the morning.

But after Blu's abrupt departure from the dining table, Delana wondered if whatever had sent him running from the room would make him change his mind about staying in town. Thankfully, when he and Sorley returned, he appeared to be more relaxed and hadn't mentioned leaving.

Though outwardly nothing seemed to be bothering him, he was more pensive than usual. And over the course of the evening, she'd felt him staring at her several times. Yet when she gave him an expectant look, hoping to encourage him to say something, he remained silent. He'd studied her with hooded eyes for several seconds, then shifted his gaze away.

Perhaps he'd tell her what was on his mind after they bade Addie and Sorley good-night and headed upstairs. But once they were alone, he didn't seem inclined to speak at all, let alone reveal the reason behind his earlier brooding.

Delana began getting ready for bed, determined not to dwell on Blu's odd behavior. She changed into her nightgown, then sat down at the dressing table. After removing the tortoiseshell combs, she shook her head to let the coils of hair fall to her shoulders before reaching for her brush.

As she pulled the brush through her hair, she closed her eyes, enjoying the slight tug on her scalp with each rhythmic stroke of the bristles.

Senses suddenly on full alert, her eyes popped open. In the mirror, she could see Blu watching her. He had stripped down to his drawers and stood a few feet behind her.

The expression on his face made her breath catch. The desire burning in his eyes was unmistakable. But there was something more. Another kind of longing, one that had nothing to do with physical desire — one that made her heart ache. She drew a deep, steadying breath, wishing he would realize what she'd already decided. They should be together forever. But she knew that just because she was willing to give up her dream of independence, there was no guarantee that he'd get over his phobia about marriage and children.

Determined to find a way to bring about his transformation, she continued working the last of the snarls from her hair, keeping her eyes focused on his reflection.

When his gaze met hers in the mirror, he blinked and his throat worked with a swallow, but he didn't turn away.

She gave her hair one last stroke, then set down the brush and rose from the stool. As she turned to face him, she searched her mind for something to say. Though she wanted to tell him how she felt, to ask him to give them a chance, she knew the time wasn't right to take that step.

Instead, she said, "Did Sorley tell you his plans for after the wedding?"

He wet his lips, his chest expanding with a deep breath. "Uh . . . no."

"Addie didn't say either." She moved closer to him. "Wonder where they'll live. I doubt Sorley wants her to keep the boardinghouse, do you?"

"He might. If she wanted to keep it bad enough."

"But he's always telling her she works too hard."

"So he'll take over part of the work or hire someone to help her."

She smiled, lifting a hand to run her fingers up the prominent vein in his right arm. "Guess that's what loving someone is about. Being willing to make changes in your life for the one you love. Don't you think?"

"I . . . uh . . ." His brow furrowed. "I don't know anything about love."

Though Delana wanted to say she intended to make certain he learned all there was to know about love, she kept the words to herself. Moving her hand across his chest, she could feel the heavy thud of his heart beneath her palm. "Well," she finally said, "there is some-

thing you know plenty about." She slid her hand lower, over the ridges of his ribs and across the flat plane of his stomach, until her fingertips bumped into his fully aroused manhood.

"Um, nice," she murmured, staring up into his face. She traced the hard length of him through the fabric of his drawers. "Is this for me?"

The desire banked in his eyes flared to life. "Damn you," he said, though there was no heat in his gruff voice, "you know it is."

She gave him a smoldering look. "Then how about giving it to me?"

His eyes went wide, and his mouth dropped open. Recovering immediately from his momentary shock, he fought a grin and lost. With a low rumble of laughter, he hauled her into his arms and tumbled the two of them onto the bed.

All the thoughts swirling around in her mind — Blu's earlier strange mood, the longing she'd glimpsed in his eyes, finding a way to convince him they belonged together — vanished like a puff of smoke in a windstorm. Wrapped in his arms, his mouth feasting on hers, her every thought was focused on the moment and the need sizzling through her.

His lovemaking started out tender, gently coaxing her response, but then he became more demanding, almost frantic to push her pleasure to new heights. Something was driving him, something she couldn't identify, but her body understood on a primal level.

She met his demands, panting and twisting, her blood roaring in her head, a complete slave to his sensual assault. The throbbing heat between her thighs had become nearly unbearable, her nerve endings screaming for relief. Ready to beg for mercy, the first tremor struck. With a sob, she gave herself over to the heart-stopping spasms of her climax.

A moment later, he followed her through the gates of sexual paradise, his body shuddering with the powerful explosion of his release.

Completely drained, her breathing still uneven, she rubbed her cheek against the silk of his hair and stroked a hand over his sweat-dampened back. The emotion filling her heart swelled even more, pushing up to clog her throat. Though she longed to voice her feelings, she held them inside. Someday, she promised herself. Someday soon she'd tell him.

The next morning, Blu headed to the lumber company to get what he needed, while Delana went with Addie to the mercantile. When they returned to the boardinghouse, Blu had hitched up the team and brought the wagon around in front of the building.

"Are ya sure you don't want my help today?" Sorley said.

"Nope. The day's already cut short, so enjoy the rest of it, and I'll see ya in the morning."

"Don't have to tell me twice," he said, flashing a grin at Addie. "I know exactly how I'll spend my day off."

Addie punched his arm. "Listen, mister, I got boarders. We can't fool around all the time."

Blu chuckled, then turned to help Delana into the wagon. Soon they were headed out of town.

After a few minutes, Delana said, "Addie asked if I'd like to come to the Ladies' Aid Society meeting on Saturday."

He turned to look at her. "What'd ya tell her?"

"I said I wanted to talk to you first."

Blu nodded, then shifted his gaze back to the road. "Seems kinda foolish to get involved in a ladies' group. 'Cause if things keep on the way they've been, we won't be here much longer."

"You're almost finished with your investigation?"

"It's gettin' close. I'm still looking to find some more information. But I'm hoping to get that in the next few nights."

"What's going to happen?"

"I ran into one of the men in the wire-cutting ring at the lumber company. He said to expect taking another ride real soon."

"Another ride where you have to do the same things as last time?"

He frowned. "Yeah, probably."

Delana repressed a shudder, not wanting to think about the possibility of Blu getting hurt. Finally, she said, "If you get what you need, how soon will we be leaving?"

"Can't say for sure. I'm hoping only a couple of weeks, but that probably won't happen. After I finish collecting evidence, I have to find a way to get the information to my commander before we can leave."

"I know you said we shouldn't send anything through the mail. So what will you do? Take what you've collected to Austin yourself?"

He shook his head. "I want to stick around and make sure the gang members don't take off. I'll have to figure out some other way to get the evidence to Adjutant General King."

She considered his words for a few moments, then said, "Since it sounds like we won't be leaving right away, I'd hate for Addie and the others to think I'm snubbing them if I refuse their invitation. Don't you think it would be better for me to accept, just in case we end up staying longer?"

He didn't answer right away, then his shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Reckon so. If you want to go to the meeting, that's fine with me."

"Thank you." She flashed him a smile. "When Sorley comes to the ranch tomorrow, I'll ask him to tell Addie I'll be there Saturday. Besides," she added as an afterthought, "my birthday isn't for another month. Since I've made some friends in Brownwood, maybe I'll just stay here until I can collect my inheritance. I'll just tell folks you left because you decided our marriage wasn't working out."

"The hell you will!" Blu practically roared, jerking back on the reins so hard the horses tossed their heads, whinnying in protest. Swiveling on the wagon seat, he stared down at her, his face tight with fury. "You ain't gonna tell people that. Do you hear me? And you aren't staying here by yerself, so get that idea out of your head right now."

"Once you leave here, you can't tell me what to do, Blu Cahill," she said, lifting her chin. "Besides, I wouldn't stay at the ranch. I'd move into town. I'm sure Addie would trust me to pay her when I can. Or maybe I could work for my room and board."

"No, God damn it, that's not what yer gonna do. You're my responsibility until you're old enough to get your inheritance, and that means when I leave Brownwood, you leave with me."

Delana stared into his furious eyes, her initial anger at his attitude dissolving in light of what he'd just revealed. Surely, he wouldn't have protested so vehemently unless he cared for her. Blu Cahill was an honorable man, one who would never go back on his word. But this time, she felt certain, his claim of being responsible for her went well beyond duty.

She tried not to be affected by her conclusion, knowing that even if he did care for her, he'd given her no indication he wanted a relationship once he completed his assignment. Still, she couldn't stop the hope in her heart from growing a little stronger.

"I suppose," she said, striving for an angry tone, "you're not willing to discuss a compromise about this."

"You got that straight."



She didn't want him thinking she'd given up so easily, so she paused for effect, her mouth pulled into a pout. After a moment, she heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Oh, all right. I won't stay in Brownwood."

His gaze still locked on her face, his eyes narrowed. "And you'll leave with me?"

At her nod, he continued to study her in silence, a muscle ticking in the side of his jaw. Apparently finding nothing in her expression to rouse his suspicions, after several seconds the tightness in his features relaxed. He shifted back to his original position, then slapped the reins on the horses' backs. With a jolt, the wagon moved forward.

\* \* \*

Two nights later, Blu was summoned to ride with the rest of the wire cutters for another of their covert missions. Their targeted ranch was in southwestern Brown County, a long way off. At least the partial moon provided meager light, giving Blu some idea of the passing scenery. The only sounds to disturb the stillness of the night were the rustle of leaves dancing in the wind, and the steady beat of horse hooves hitting the hard-packed road.

When they arrived at their destination, they followed the same routine as before. Burch Riley again gave the orders, dividing the men into twos and threes, then telling each group which section of fence to destroy. Once all the assignments were given, the men spread out and began cutting the strands in their sections, working quietly and efficiently.

While Blu plied the cutters to each strand of wire, he looked around as inconspicuously as possible. From what he could see, there weren't any cattle near the wire they were taking down, which hopefully meant he wouldn't have to help butcher another steer.

He'd just crouched to snip through the last strand of wire when he heard the approach of a horse. As he straightened, he saw a black horse with a white blaze come to a halt near where Riley stood. The rider dismounted, then approached Riley.

Blu was too far away to make out their conversation, but he did catch their hushed laughter. He fell into step beside Tom Weber, his partner for the evening, and headed toward Riley and the new arrival.

As they got closer, the man beside Riley turned toward the others. The brim of his hat kept his face in shadow, but moonlight spilled across his chest, catching and reflecting something silver.

*Son of a bitch. A badge!* No wonder the wire-cutting ring had been able to operate all over the county without getting caught; they had the law in their pocket.

"We got a visitor," Riley said. "The boss came by to see how we're doing."

"Evening, boys," the man said, pushing his hat off his forehead.

Blu bit back another curse. Rube Duncan. He should've known. The man had made him uneasy from the moment they'd met, but he'd written it off as a clash in personalities, an instant mutual distrust. But the truth had been revealed. Not only was Sheriff Duncan involved with the wire cutters, he was the damn ringleader.

Hot waves of fury washed over him. There was nothing worse in his book than a double-crossing lawman. Mustering all the self-restraint he could in order not to step forward and place the men under arrest — an action that surely would result in his getting shot — he held his ground and kept his mouth shut.

"Nice night for a wire-cuttin' party," Duncan said with a chuckle. Tucking his thumbs in his gun belt, he glanced around. "Yes sir, you boys did a fine job of serving another notice that Brown County ain't gonna tolerate no barb wire. But some folks don't seem to be getting the message. So we may have to pick up the pace."

"No problem, boss," Burch Riley said. "We ain't opposed to making as many nighttime visits as it takes."

"The rest of you boys agree with that?" Duncan said, moving his gaze from man to man.

After they all nodded, he looked directly at Blu. "Riley here tells me yer fittin' in real good, Cahill."

"Appreciate the vote of confidence," Blu replied, careful to hide his anger and disgust.

Duncan held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned back to Riley. "I want to hit a couple of ranches next week. I'll be in touch with the details."

Once the sheriff had ridden away, Riley said, "Let's call it a night, boys. I'll let ya know the boss's plans as soon as I hear from him."

When Delana entered the main room of the house the next morning, she found Blu sitting at the table. As she moved closer, she could hear the scratching of his pen nib moving across a piece of paper. An inkwell and a few more sheets of paper sat in the middle of the table next to his coffee cup.

She stopped beside his chair. "What are you doing?"

He paused in his writing long enough to glance up. "Making notes for my commander."

"About last night?"

He nodded. "And everything else I know about the ring of wire cutters."

"Did you get the information you wanted?"

"Yeah," he replied, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

She moved to the stove and poured herself a cup of coffee. After taking a sip, she said, "Have you figured out how you're going to get your notes to Austin?"

"Not yet."

"What about Sorley? Couldn't he help?"

"He probably would. But he's already done me more than one favor on this assignment, so I'd really hate for him to get more mixed up in it. Especially now."

"You mean, because of Addie?"

"Yeah," he replied, laying down his pen, then reaching for his cup.

"Well, from what I've seen, you're very resourceful at figuring out how to get everything you need. So I'm sure you'll come up with something."

He stared thoughtfully at her over the rim of his cup, then nodded and took a swallow of coffee.

\* \* \*

Over the next couple of weeks, Blu continued to participate with the wire-cutting ring. As the sheriff had predicted, the gang struck more frequently and, when the opportunity arose, butchered several beeves after cutting down their targeted section of fence.

Each time he rode with the men, his disgust grew, making it more difficult to put on an enthusiastic facade for their illegal activities. His disgust increased even more at the gang's arrogance. Not once had

any of them mentioned that cutting fences could earn them five years in prison. Such blatant disregard for the laws of the state increased his determination to make sure the men paid for their crimes. Knowing that justice would prevail was what kept him going. That and knowing Delana waited for him at the ranch.

He'd return home after a night of cutting fence, take the time to wash the taint off his skin, then slide into bed and pull her into his arms. Though he hated depriving her of sleep, he needed the comfort of her embrace, needed to stoke the desire always simmering between them into a full-fledged inferno, needed to lose himself in the mind-shattering passion only she could provide.

\* \* \*

While his nights were filled with Delana, he spent his days with Sorley. Once they'd finished the barn, they started on a second, larger horse corral.

As surprising as the thought was, Blu had begun to think of the ranch in more permanent terms. Which was foolish thinking, because he wouldn't be welcome anywhere near Brownwood once the truth came out about his reason for coming to the county. Of course, that didn't mean he couldn't buy a place in another part of the state.

He loved being a Ranger for a number of reasons, but a major one was the freedom the job gave him — of not being tied down in one place for long. So why the hell was he toying with the idea of settling down once he finished his assignment?

When he first ran away at fourteen, he'd moved around constantly — mostly to find work, but also in case his father tried to find him — and taken shelter wherever he could find it. At seventeen he'd joined the Rangers, which meant spending most nights in a tent in a Ranger camp. Then, after his promotion to detective, he'd rented a room in Austin whenever he needed to be there for more than a day. On occasion, he'd spent the night in the bed of one of the widows who enjoyed his company. But on more nights than he could count, he'd slept under the stars while traveling from one assignment to the next.

He'd liked his life just fine and never given even a fleeting thought to buying a place and settling down. But then he met Delana, who'd

turned his world topsyturvy from the moment he first looked into her unusual lavender eyes.

He still couldn't believe he loved her, but the strange emotions churning inside him had finally taken on a name — one he'd never planned to experience. And those new feelings led to him thinking about putting down roots.

"You all right?" Sorley said one afternoon while working on the corral. "You've been staring at that post for nigh onto five minutes without swinging the hammer."

Blu flashed his friend an annoyed glance, shocked to feel a blush burning the back of his neck. "I'm fine," he finally said. "Just thinking."

The two worked in silence for a few more minutes. Then Sorley said, "Every man's got a right to his privacy, and I know you don't want me sticking my nose in yer business, but there's something I gotta get off my chest."

Blu finished hammering a nail, then straightened. "You won't be satisfied until you do, so spit out whatever's stuck in yer craw."

"I know love ain't something yer familiar with. Lord knows you got every reason to feel the way you do. And because of that, you may not recognize the signs. Anyway, based on what I've seen, I'd say yer damn close to falling in love with Delana. Hell, maybe ya already have."

Blu shifted his gaze toward the house and its canopy of oak trees, debating whether to unburden himself. After a moment, he turned back to Sorley, then heaved a sigh.

"Yer right," he said, rubbing the side of his jaw. "Damned if I know how it happened, 'cause I sure as hell didn't intend to fall in love with her. But the fact is, I did."

"So what're ya plannin' on doing about it?"

"Nothing." He went back to nailing the fence rail in place.

Sorley shifted his stance, hands braced on his hips. "Well, now, that's what a coward would do."

Blu stiffened but didn't stop working. "I'm gonna pretend you didn't say that, McGregor."

"I ain't calling you a coward, but if you don't do something to rope that little gal in permanent-like, you'll be making a big mistake."

"When the hell did you," Blu said through gritted teeth, "become an expert on what I should or shouldn't do with my life?"

"I never claimed to be an expert about you or anybody else, but I think I know you better than anyone. I watched you change from a raw, hurtin' kid to a damn fine Ranger and, more important, a good man. But you've got a way of lookin' at everything as either black or white."

Blu swung around to face his friend, anger surging through him. "Yes, damn it, and you're the one who taught me that. When it comes to enforcing the laws of Texas, there's only right or wrong. Black or white. Ain't that what you told me time and again?"

Sorley stepped closer and jabbed Blu's chest with a finger. "Yeah, knothed, but I was talkin' about the law. Not everything in yer personal life can fall on one side or the other. Sometimes things happen that're more in the middle. Kinda gray." He jabbed Blu's chest again. "That's when ya gotta be willin' to take a chance."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Sorley took a step back. "Yer a smart man," he said, turning back to his work. "Figure it out."

# Eighteen

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No matter how many times Blu shoved Sorley's words aside during the coming days, they kept popping back into his head. Taking chances was part of his job as a Ranger, a price he'd accepted long ago. And he wasn't alone. All lawmen took a chance every time they pinned on a badge. There was always somebody laying for the law: a trigger-happy gun shark, a criminal on the run, or an escaped prisoner determined not to return to jail.

But the chances Sorley talked about taking weren't professional — they were personal. He didn't need a whole lot of time to figure out what his friend meant. Delana. Everything kept circling back to her.

He understood Sorley's poorly veiled suggestion to do something about his feelings for Delana, but the fact remained that, even though he'd fallen in love with her, nothing else had changed. He still carried his father's blood, and with it, perhaps a tendency for violence. So marriage was a chance he just couldn't take.

Even after reaching that conclusion, his conversation with Sorley remained in the back of his mind, and no matter what he did, nothing would shake it loose — a situation made worse whenever he and Delana made love. Afterward, while he lay relaxed and sated, he couldn't help wondering what his life might have been like if he hadn't been cursed with a monster of a father. During those contented moments, his head filled with images he didn't dare imagine any other time. Delana's face on their wedding day. The tiny face of a child — their child — cradled in her arms. Though he knew the price would be high for allowing himself to daydream about a future that couldn't be, his mind refused to cooperate.

\* \* \*

A week later, Blu prepared to leave for another wire-cutting party — a term he despised, mostly because that was how Rube Duncan referred to the gang's nighttime activities. What the men did was certainly no party in Blu's book, and the idea that others thought so only increased his anger and disgust. As much as he hated having to cut more wire, at least he no longer needed an escort whenever they were sent on a mission. Having finally won the gang's trust, he was given advance information about the time and location of where to meet the others.

The sheriff had continued to keep up the pressure in the county, sending the gang out at least once a week. Often their target was a ranch they'd hit weeks — even days — before, where the owner had yet to concede defeat over his use of barbed wire. Those ranchers barely finished stringing new wire when Duncan sent the gang back to cut it down. A vicious cycle Blu hoped to stop soon.

After saddling Mouse, he led the gelding around to the front of the house where Delana stood on the porch. Seeing her there, her nightgown creating a white blur in the deep shadows, his chest tightened with a surge of love so powerful that a huge lump formed in his throat.

He dropped Mouse's reins over the rail, then stepped up beside her on the porch. Swallowing hard, he ran his knuckles down the side of her face.

She turned to press a kiss on his hand. "I wish you didn't have to keep doing this."

"Me, too," he replied, his voice raspy. "But if I'm gonna break up the ring, I don't have a choice."

She nodded, releasing a long sigh. "You'll be careful?"

"Yeah." He pulled her into his arms for a long, mind-drugging kiss.

When he finally lifted his head, he gave his senses a moment to settle, then grasped her upper arms and held her away from him.

"Delana, I need you to make me a promise."

"What?"

"If something happens tonight and I don't . . . come back, I want you to make sure my notes get to Adjutant General King, the Ranger commander in Austin. Will you promise to do that?"

Her fingers dug into his forearms. "Why? Do you think there's going to be trouble tonight?"



"None that I'm aware of. But the longer I keep doing this, the bigger the chance that sooner or later something will go wrong."

"Oh, God," she whispered. "I couldn't bear it if something happened to you."

He smiled, hoping to ease her fear. "I won't do anything stupid, darlin', I swear. But I'm not sure what the others will do if something goes bad. So just in case I can't finish my assignment, I need to know the wire-cutting ring will be stopped."

"And what's in your notes will make sure that happens?"

"Yeah, there's enough there to have them arrested and convicted." He let her mull over his statement for several seconds, then said, "Do I have your promise?"

She inhaled a quivering breath, then exhaled with a sigh. "Okay, I promise."

Blu gave her another quick kiss, then told her where he'd hidden the notes and how to reach his commander.

After one last kiss, he turned and mounted Mouse. Adjusting his grip on the reins, he stared down at Delana for a moment, words of love filling his chest and welling up in his throat. Though he longed to speak the words, declaring his feelings for her would serve no other purpose than easing the pressure in his chest. Instead, he merely nodded, then swung Mouse around and raced away.

\* \* \*

As Delana watched Blu disappear in the darkness, she wrapped an arm around one of the porch posts, afraid her knees might buckle. Though she had known his work as a Ranger was inherently dangerous, and she'd worried about his safety on the other nights he'd left her, having him voice the possibility that something could happen to him increased her fears tenfold.

But Blu was strong, smart, and an experienced lawman. And hopefully his determination to finish his assignment wouldn't make him prone to taking unnecessary chances. She also knew he possessed the abilities to keep himself safe, provided he wasn't foolish enough to sacrifice himself for his cause. Closing her eyes, she whispered a prayer that he wouldn't be put into a situation where he might be tempted to give his own life in the name of justice.

When she felt steadier, she turned and headed down the hall toward their bedroom door. Though she'd given him her promise, it was one she hoped she never would have to keep. If their relationship didn't become permanent, her broken heart would be a small price to pay for knowing that he was alive. But if Blu was killed . . . She choked back tears. Just the thought of his death filled her with such bone-deep pain that, if something actually were to happen to him, she didn't think she'd be able to survive.

She stretched out on the bed but found sleep impossible. She lay wide awake, alternately cursing herself for falling in love with a man with such a dangerous job, and praying for his safe return.

\* \* \*

Blu untied his bandanna, wiped the sweat from his face, then bent to snip another strand of wire. As much as he detested having to continue his charade, at least he'd learned to cut the wire without getting scratched by the barbs in the process. Not that he'd need such a skill in the future, but he did take satisfaction in returning to the ranch without cut and bloodied arms. Delana already worried about him, so not adding to her worries had become important to him.

Once the gang's assigned section of fence had been destroyed, Burch Riley said, "Mount up, boys; we ain't leaving yet. The boss decided there's something else he wants done."

As soon as the men had swung into their saddles, Riley moved to the front. "There's a herd of horses in this pasture. Some of the best horseflesh in these parts. Find 'em and cut out half a dozen or so."

"Sure thing," Hardy Pierce said, "only what's the boss figuring to do with the horses?"

"Sell 'em, I reckon. Y'all wouldn't mind a little extra cash in yer pockets, would ya?"

"Hell, no," Tom Weber replied, "But we can't sell stolen horses around here."

"Nobody said we were gonna try. The boss'll be here any minute, then you can ask him yerself what he has in mind. In the meantime, we're wasting time sitting here jawing."

The men nodded, settled their hats more firmly on their heads, then took off across the mesquite-dotted pasture.

By the time Blu and the others led the horses they'd lassoed back to where they'd left Burch Riley, Sheriff Duncan had arrived.

Duncan pushed his hat off his forehead, then crossed his wrists over his saddle horn. "As always, you boys do damn fine work," he said, his smile a bright flash of white in the purple shadows of the night.

"We know what kinda work we do, Rube," Charley Strong said. "What we're wantin' to hear is why you had us round up these horses."

"Yeah," Carl Griswold said before Sheriff Duncan could reply. "This ain't like butchering a steer or two, when we get fresh meat for our efforts."

Duncan held up a hand. "Take it easy, Carl. You won't get fresh meat out of this, but you will get yer share of what we get for the horses."

"And just where're you proposing we sell them?" Amos Kinney said.

"Anywhere outside the county." Duncan glanced at the others. "Any of you know a good place?"

"How 'bout Belton?" Charley replied. "Heard that used to be the best place to sell rustled horses."

"Belton?" Amos said. "That's in Bell County, at least a hundred an' fifty miles from here."

"Yeah," Duncan replied, "but the farther away, the less chance anyone will find out the horses came from Brown County."

The others murmured their agreement, then Riley said, "You got somebody in mind to take the horses, boss?"

Duncan shifted in his saddle, the leather creaking with his movement. "No. I was thinkin' one of you should volunteer."

More creaking of saddle leather followed the sheriff's statement, but no one said a word. The men's tightly sealed lips told Blu none of them wanted to take up the sheriff's challenge. Realizing this would be a perfect opportunity to get the information he'd gathered to his commander, he tamped down a rush of excitement. Not wanting to appear too eager, he held his tongue, waiting to see if one of the others would break the strained silence.

"I'll go," he finally said, urging Mouse closer to Duncan's horse.

The sheriff stared at him for several seconds, then said, "Yer sure about that, Cahill?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Getting caught with stolen horses is a hanging offense."

"I'm aware of that."

Duncan continued staring at him, making Blu wish he could see the other man's expression.

Finally, the sheriff said, "Why are you willing to risk makin' that pretty little wife of yers a widow?"

Blu drew a deep breath, trying to clear thoughts of Delana from his head. He couldn't allow himself to think about her, or his fears for her safety, not when so much relied on his finding the words to satisfy Duncan.

"I believe in what we're doing," he said at last. "We need to keep open range for our cattle, and I'm willing to do whatever's necessary to stop the stringin' of wire."

Again the sheriff stared at him for a long, tense moment. Then, flashing another smile, he said, "Well, now, boys, looks like we got us a volunteer."

The men seemed to release a collective sigh. A couple of them made approving comments, and several others moved their horses close so they could give Blu a slap on the back. Though he suspected their reaction had less to do with congratulating him than relief that they hadn't been forced to "volunteer," he smiled and nodded.

"Okay, boys, settle down," Duncan said. "We got a couple more things to discuss." When the men fell silent, he continued. "First off: Cahill, any chance you can keep the horses at yer place for the rest of the night?"

"No problem."

"Good, then when can you take 'em to Belton?"

"I can leave right after sunup."

"Okay, figure on doing that." Duncan turned to the others. "The last thing is plannin' our next little get-together."

"You got something in mind?" Riley said.

Duncan chuckled. "Always do. That son of a bitch Leslie had his hands restrin' the wire we tore down a while back, so we're gonna hit his ranch again. This time I aim to make sure the wire stays down."

"When're you figurin' on us hitting the Leslie ranch?" Charley Strong said.

"Depends on when Cahill gets back." Duncan turned to look at Blu.

"If I don't push the horses too hard, I should be able to get them to Belton in three days," Blu replied. "Then if finding a buyer goes well, I'd say I could be back in . . ." He did a quick mental calculation on

how much time he'd need to get a message to Austin and then how quickly his commander could get additional Rangers into Brown County. "Seven or eight days. But if that don't mesh with your schedule, maybe you should go ahead without me."

"No, we need every man in on this. We'll wait until you get back. Let's figure on ten days from tonight." Duncan glanced around at the others. "Anybody got a problem with that?"

When no one spoke up, he nodded. "Good. We'll meet at midnight at the southeast corner of Leslie's ranch in ten days. Now, let's get the hell outta here."

Several of the men helped Blu tie the horses together in a picket line, then they rode off. Wrapping the lead rope around his saddle horn, Blu started Mouse in the opposite direction. Though leading rustled horses back to his ranch didn't sit well, he took consolation in knowing that at least he would be able to control what happened to the animals. Had one of the other ring members volunteered to take the horses to Belton, there would be no way of knowing whether they could be recovered and returned to their owner.

For once, he was glad for the long ride back to the ranch, because he had plans to make. And by the time he arrived, he had everything worked out.

After putting the horses in the corral closest to the barn and taking care of Mouse, he headed to the house. He hoped Delana wouldn't be asleep, as she often was when he made his late night trips. But if not, he'd have to awaken her because they needed to talk.

\* \* \*

Delana awoke with a start. She sat up in bed, startled to realize she actually had fallen into a fitful doze. Fighting off the last of her grogginess, she rose from the bed and tiptoed to the window. A few minutes passed, then she caught a shadow of someone moving toward the house.

She held her breath, waiting for the shadow to separate itself from the other nighttime shapes. When the person got closer to the house, she exhaled a relieved sigh. The size and stride of the man told her Blu had returned.

She knew he liked to wash up outside before coming into the house, so she waited until she heard the clomp of his boot heels on the

wooden hallway before moving toward the bedroom door. When the door didn't open as she'd expected, she went to find him.

He'd lit a kerosene lamp in the other room and was adjusting the wick. When she called his name, he straightened, then turned toward her.

She moved closer, intent on stepping into his arms. But when he removed his hat, allowing the lamplight to illuminate his face, something in his expression stopped her.

"What is it?"

The corners of his mouth lifted in a tired smile. "Darlin', yer gettin' awful good at reading me. Good thing Duncan and the others can't read me that well."

"Duncan? Rube Duncan, the sheriff?" When he nodded, she said, "Are you saying he's involved in the wire-cutting ring?"

"Up to his eyebrows."

"Oh, my God." She pulled out a chair at the table and plopped down. "Well, that explains why he asked me all those questions about you." Glancing up at Blu, she said, "When I told you about meeting him, did you know he was involved?"

Blu took a seat at the table. "No. I didn't like him from the start, but I had no idea he was the leader of the gang. Damn turncoat! When I found out, I coulda rung his neck with my bare hands."

"Obviously, you resisted," she said, trying to lighten his mood.

He flashed her another brief smile. "Yeah, but it wasn't easy."

"I can imagine. So who else is involved?"

He ran a hand through his damp hair. "I'll get to that, but first, there's something else we need to talk about."

"Okay."

"After cutting more fence tonight, we stole some horses. They're in the corral by the barn." At her shocked expression, he sighed. "I know, I can't believe it either. Me, a Texas Ranger, helping steal horses, and now I'm hiding stolen property. But if all goes well, this whole mess will be cleared up soon."

"What are you going to do with the horses?"

"I volunteered to take the horses to Belton in Bell County and sell them. Only, I won't be going to Belton. I'm gonna head to a friend's ranch near San Saba."

"Is that the same friend who kept the herd of cattle Sorley brought here?"

He nodded, then went on to explain the rest of his plan. That when he arrived at his friend's ranch, he'd find a way to get his notes delivered to the Ranger commander in Austin, then wait for a response.

When he finished, she said, "But what about the horses? Are you really going to sell them?"

"No. I'm going to ask my friend if I can leave them at his ranch. Then, once the wire-cutting ring has been arrested, the horses will be returned to their owner. But I still need to make Duncan and the others think I went to Belton and found a buyer. So I'll have to bring back enough cash to keep 'em from getting suspicious."

"Will that be a problem?"

He shook his head. "I always carry a letter from my commander authorizing banks to advance whatever cash I need."

Delana took a moment to absorb everything he'd told her, then said, "When do you have to leave?"

"First light."

"That's just a few hours away, and you haven't been to bed. You should lie down and try to —"

"I'll be fine. This won't be the first night I've gone without sleep." When she frowned, he added, "Besides, we still have some things to talk about."

Her mouth tightened even more, but she didn't argue. Instead, she said, "What?"

"I want someone else to know what's in the notes I made for my commander, in case —" He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I don't have time to write out an entire second set of notes, so I'm gonna have you read through them, and afterwards I'll tell you some other things. Then, like I told you before, if I don't make it through this, get in touch with Adjutant General King at the State Capitol and tell him everything you can remember."

When she started to respond, he held up a hand. "Do you understand?" he said, his gaze boring into hers.

She swallowed hard, then nodded.

He rose from his chair, fingered a strand of her glossy hair, then tucked it behind her ear. "I'll be right back."

After fetching his notes, a pen, inkwell, and fresh paper, he sat down at the table again. He handed her his notes. "Start reading while I write down what happened tonight."

She took the pages from him, then looked down at the neat handwriting and began reading. When she finished, she was stunned, not just by the names of the men in the wire-cutting ring and the things they'd done, but also by Blu's succinct yet clear and thorough notes. He'd make a terrific reporter, she thought, sitting back in her chair.

"Questions?" He didn't look up but continued moving his pen across the paper.

"Not about these," she replied, refolding the sheets of paper and setting them aside. "You did an excellent job of reporting what happened. I understood everything you wrote. But you can tell me more about what happened tonight."

"Okay, just let me finish this." A few minutes later, he laid the pen aside, then told her everything that had taken place that night, ending with, "While I'm gone, I want you to stay in town with Addie and Sorley."

She opened her mouth to voice a protest, but his eyebrows rose in silent warning. Realizing he wasn't going to budge on this, she exhaled a deep breath. "Okay, if you really think that's necessary."

"Yeah, I do. Sorley won't know you're coming, so I want you to tell him what happened tonight and where I went. If anybody asks why yer staying in town, tell 'em I went up to Fort Worth to buy more cattle, and you wanted to spend a few days with our friends."

She nodded. "How long will you be gone?"

"I told Duncan seven or eight days, because if I really went to Belton, the trip would take that long. I probably could come back a day earlier, but showing up any sooner would raise too many questions. So once I finish what I need to do, I may have to lie low for a couple extra days."

She nodded again, then said, "If you're leaving at first light, you won't be able to take me into town."

"No, you'll have to ride Tabby. I don't like the idea of you riding that far alone, so figure on leaving the same time as me. That way, I can ride partway with you before I have to head southeast with the horses."

"Blu, you've seen me ride Tabby. You know I can handle her just fine, so riding into town by myself isn't a problem."

"It is for me."

"But, I — "



"Don't argue with me, Delana." He leaned back in his chair, arms folded across his chest. "Just do like I said. Please."

The gentle pleading in both his words and his expression snagged Delana's attention. That observation along with the warmth in his topaz eyes silenced any further objections and led to a surprising conclusion. His demands weren't mere male dominance, an attempt to control her, but stemmed from genuine concern. Her heart skipped a beat. He cared about her. She was sure of it.

So what was she going to do about her discovery?

"Delana?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you all right?"

"Of course." She blinked, then lifted her gaze to Blu's face. "I was just thinking."

He nodded slowly. "Not about riding into town by yerself."

She rose from the chair. "No. I promise I'll leave with you in the morning." Grabbing one of his forearms, she gave him a tug. "Come with me."

"Where?" he said, allowing her to pull him to his feet.

"The bedroom."

He froze. "I told you, I have to leave in a couple of hours and still have things to do. I don't have time to take a nap, not even for a few —"

"Who said anything about a nap?" she said in a husky whisper, giving him a smoldering glance from beneath partially lowered lashes.

His eyebrows shot up; then a low laugh rumbled in his chest. When she tugged on his arm again, this time his feet moved.

# Nineteen

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Blu whistled while he headed to the barn to saddle Tabby and Mouse. He couldn't believe how great he felt — not at all as if he'd missed a night of sleep. But then, Delana could be credited for his mood. Remembering how he'd spent the past several hours, he shook his head with disbelief. She'd become a demanding partner, pushing him to new sexual heights he could never have imagined.

If he lived to be a thousand, he never would forget the sight of her sitting astride his hips. Naked, skin flushed with desire, breasts thrust forward and back arched, her glorious hair trailing past her waist to brush his thighs. Just the thought of that incredible sight made his fingers itch to tangle in the silk of all that thick hair and sent a rush of blood to his groin so powerful he nearly stumbled.

*Damn.* After his last shattering climax — he still couldn't believe Delana had coaxed him to full arousal a second time — he figured his body would need at least a day to recover enough to make love to her again. But as he had discovered regarding everything else with Delana, the throbbing behind the fly of his trousers proved him wrong again.

As he swung Tabby's saddle up onto the mare's back, he winced. After settling the saddle in place, he rubbed the tender spot on top of his left shoulder. Not only had Delana become more aggressive in bed, she'd also taken to using her teeth on him. He'd found the scrape of her teeth on some parts of his body exciting, but then she nearly took a chunk out of his shoulder at a particularly passionate moment. Remembering how his howl of pain had transformed into another type of howl as her release had brought on his, he grinned. Who would've thought the fancy-clothed lady he'd met in Austin would become such a bewitching hellcat in the bedroom. Not that he minded.

Hell, he found her newfound sexual aggression as appealing as everything else about her.

His grin faded, replaced by a tight-lipped scowl. Dropping his hand from his shoulder, he reached under Tabby's belly to grab the ends of the saddle's cinch. Once he finished with the mare, he moved to Mouse's stall, doing each chore with an outward calmness that didn't reach his mind. Though he should be thinking about winding up his assignment, his thoughts persisted in dwelling on Delana.

Once again he wondered how the hell he'd managed to allow his life to get so far off track. Not only had he become involved with the type of woman he'd avoided all his adult years, when he knew damn well he should've kept his distance, but he'd also done the unthinkable and fallen in love with her. A development he never could have foreseen.

"So what the hell am I gonna do about it?" he muttered, leading Mouse and Tabby out of the barn.

He liked nothing better than a challenge, but this time he'd painted himself into a corner. There simply wasn't a satisfactory solution to his current situation, unless — He stopped so quickly that Mouse's nose bumped his back.

"Sorry, boy," he said, absently turning to run a hand down the blue-gray muzzle. Looking up at the canopy of stars overhead, he remembered the conversation he'd had with Sorley a few nights back. His previous lighter mood returning, he corrected "conversation with Sorley" to receiving a lecture from the man. Since that night, Blu hadn't given much thought to what his friend had told him, but now those words came back to him and he had to wonder. Was this one of those times in life that Sorley had mentioned? One that was neither black nor white but fell in the middle gray area? A time when he should be willing to take a chance?

He pinched the bridge of his nose, then released a deep breath. Yeah, it probably would fit Sorley's definition. But damn it, he couldn't do it. He just couldn't risk taking a chance.

\* \* \*

A short time later, Blu and Delana arrived at the crossroads, where they would have to go their separate ways. The sun had just begun to

poke its golden head above the eastern horizon, lifting the gray curtain of predawn with bright splashes of pinks and yellows.

Captivated by the glorious sunrise — a scene reflecting the exact opposite of her emotions — Delana pulled Tabby to a halt. Her attention shifting to Blu, she watched him move Mouse closer. Their knees touching, he leaned toward her. She tried to prepare herself for his good-bye kiss, but a small sob escaped before she could stop it.

He gave her a lopsided smile, pressed his lips to hers briefly, fiercely, then touched his fingers to a cheek. "Take care of yerself, darlin'. I'll be back before ya know it."

She nodded, swallowing hard. "You're the one who needs to be careful."

"I already promised I would, so don't go gettin' yerself all tied in a knot worrying about me."

"Easy for you to say," she replied, managing a weak smile.

He touched her cheek again, then reined Mouse away from Tabby. "You'll be with Addie and Sorley, so time'll pass quickly."

"I hope so."

He glanced over his shoulder at the eastern horizon. "I've gotta get going."

Her throat tight, she nodded, then watched him wheel Mouse around. He'd moved only a few yards away, when she called to him. "Wait."

He stopped, then turned in his saddle and met her gaze.

"Blu, I — " The rest of her words, a declaration of her love, had almost slipped out, but at the last minute she decided against revealing her feelings for him. Not knowing how he'd react, she hadn't wanted to say anything that might distract him when he needed to focus all his concentration on his job.

"What is it, Delana?" Both his tone and face reflected a flicker of irritation at her hesitation.

"I — I'll miss you."

His expression softened. "I'll miss you, too, darlin'." He lifted a hand in a final wave, then shifted to face forward again. At his signal, Mouse started down the road, the string of stolen horses following behind.

Delana watched until the last horse disappeared from view. Releasing a deep sigh, she turned Tabby toward Brownwood, then urged the mare into a trot.

\* \* \*

Blu didn't want to spend the night on the trail and figured he could make the trip to San Saba by nightfall, as long as he didn't push Mouse and the other horses too hard. He kept their pace steady, alternating between a walk and a trot, and stopped to rest as soon as any of them showed signs of tiring.

He wished he could have stayed off the main roads, but he didn't have a choice since he had to make the journey as quickly as possible. Still, he was concerned that a single rider leading a string of horses would send up a warning flag to any other travelers he might meet. So he'd made up his mind that, if need be, he'd show his Ranger badge to curb any unwanted attention.

The sun had just set when he rode into the yard of the ranch owned by Wyck Corrigan, a man he'd first met after joining the Rangers and being assigned to Company D.

Wyck had been a member of that Ranger company for several years when Blu joined their ranks, and although the two hadn't worked together very often, they'd developed a friendship over the years. Then, a year ago, Wyck had quit the Rangers and bought a small ranch. Blu never heard the reason for Wyck's sudden resignation, but he figured it had something to do with an assignment gone bad. A man was entitled to his privacy, so Blu hadn't brought up the subject on the two occasions their paths had crossed — once in Austin not long after Wyck left the force, and the second time at Wyck's ranch six months later, where Blu had stopped on his way through the county.

As he drew close to the house, the front door opened and the silhouette of a man momentarily filled the opening before moving onto the deeply shadowed porch.

"State yer business, mister," the man called to him, the words followed by the sound of a shell being racked into a rifle's chamber.

"It's Blu Cahill, Wyck. I need yer help."

A low chuckle rumbled in the heavy evening air. "Well, I'll be damned," Wyck replied, releasing the hammer of the rifle, then crossing to the top step of the porch. "Good to see ya again, Blu. What can I do for ya?"

Blu nudged Mouse forward, then he dismounted in front of the porch steps. "I need to leave something with you." He waved toward the half-dozen horses standing placidly behind his gelding.

Wyck, though an inch or two shorter than Blu, matched him in physical build. Pursing his lips, he looked at the picketed horses through narrowed eyes. "Is this an official visit," he said, bringing his gaze back to Blu's face, "or are ya thinkin' of starting a horse ranch?"

Blu gave him a weary smile. "Ranger business. They're stolen property, and I need a place to stash 'em for a week or two."

"Sure thing."

"Thanks," he replied, extending his hand. "Appreciate it."

"Any time." Wyck shifted his rifle to one hand, then gave Blu a firm handshake, eyeing him closely. "Listen, why don't you let me take care of the horses? You look like yer about done in."

"Yer right," he replied, rubbing the side of his face. "Between not getting any sleep last night and a long day in the saddle, I am pretty beat. But, I can still take —"

"Nope. Yer gonna go inside the house. There's stew on the stove and a fresh pot of coffee. Help yerself while I get the horses settled."

Blu stared at Wyck for several seconds, released a deep breath, then nodded. After handing over Mouse's reins, he stepped up onto the porch.

When Wyck returned to the house a while later, he filled a plate for himself and joined Blu, who had finished eating and was sitting at the table, sipping a second cup of coffee.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" he said, digging his fork into the thick stew.

Blu nodded, then told the man what he could share about his special-duty assignment, ending with "I've got a packet of information I need to get to the adjutant general as fast as possible. Unless you've got another suggestion, I'll start for Austin tomorrow."

"Yeah, I got a suggestion," Wyck said, then swallowed another bite of his supper. "I'll take the packet to King."

Blu straightened. "That's not necessary. You've already —"

Wyck held up a hand. "No, I insist. You're exhausted, so I'll make the trip."

"Exhausted or not, I'd survive."

"I don't doubt ya would. But you need to be at yer best to finish this job. If you ride hell-bent-for-leather to Austin and back, you won't be worth a damn when it's time to head for Brownwood." He took a sip of coffee. "You stay here and get some rest. I'll take the packet to the Ranger commander."

"I don't know, Wyck." Blu slumped back in his chair. "I agree I could use the rest, but I still don't like the idea of you going in my place. There must be another solution."

Wyck shook his head, flashing a wry smile. "I haven't exactly been the friendly sort since moving here. I've only met a few of the folks in these parts and don't know any of 'em very well. So there's nobody I'd trust to do something this important. Face it, Cahill, I'm yer best choice."

Blu frowned, staring at the contents of his cup while contemplating Wyck's argument. He had to admit, his friend's rationale made sense. And since he didn't have a better idea, he had no other options.

"Okay," he said at last. "We'll do it your way."

A real smile appeared on Wyck's face, and for a moment the shadows Blu had noticed in his gray eyes seemed to lift. "Good. Glad we got that settled."

Blu returned the smile, then lifted his cup and drained the last of his coffee. "Anything I can do for you around here while yer gone? Stock to take care of? Repairs I can make? I've become a pretty fair carpenter."

"That so?" Wyck replied with a chuckle. "You learn a new trade because yer fixin' to leave the Rangers?"

"No, just doing what needs to be done. Part of the job. You should remember that from yer Rangering days."

Wyck turned somber. "Yeah, but sometimes doing what has to be done isn't enough." He fell silent, lost in thought, the earlier shadows once again clouding his eyes.

Blu didn't respond to Wyck's statement, nor did he make a comment on the sudden change in his mood or the inner anguish reflected in his gaze. The reasons were none of his business. Still, he couldn't help wondering at the cause. But unless Wyck chose to talk, he wouldn't poke his nose where it didn't belong.

When the silence between them stretched into several minutes, Blu cleared his throat, then pushed away from the table and stood up. "Where do you want me to bunk down?"

Wyck blinked several times, then looked up at Blu. "Come on," he said, shoving back his chair and getting to his feet. "I'll show ya."

\* \* \*

Delana checked the last few stitches she'd made on the quilt the Ladies' Aid Society was working on, then released a relieved breath. Better. Not

quite as neat and straight as the other ladies, but thankfully not as bad as when she'd begun. Joining the other society members to work on the quilt had been Addie's idea, and though Delana had considered refusing, given her pathetic ability with a needle, she accepted the invitation.

If nothing else, the hours spent sitting with a roomful of women would get her caught up on the town's gossip, which she definitely didn't want to miss. Since her arrival in town four days earlier, she'd had little opportunity to learn anything to help Blu's investigation. Though the obvious place to hear something useful would have been where the men congregated, she realized she couldn't walk into a saloon or any of the other male gathering places without causing a stir. Which reduced the possibilities to only one. Spending several boring hours with some of the ladies of Brownwood, listening to them rattle on about every topic under the sun, and hope she could pick up a tidbit of information.

She'd already heard about the various ways to treat a toothache, the benefits of using rainwater over water from a well, how to pickle pigs' feet — as if she'd even consider such a disgusting task — and more than she ever wanted to know about piles.

As she continued plying the needle to the quilt, she was only half aware of the conversation droning on around her. But when one of the women mentioned the goings-on of her husband or another man in town, Delana perked up, leaning closer to catch every word. She tried to commit everything she heard to memory, even if it didn't sound like something worth repeating to Blu.

*Blu.* Just thinking about him caused a sweet ache deep in her chest. She couldn't believe how much she loved the man, or how much she missed him. Her future had seemed so clear-cut only a few weeks ago. Plans firmly in mind for what she intended to do with her life. But then she'd met Blu Cahill and everything had changed. Now, rather than her independence, she wanted nothing more than the commitment of marriage and children.

Of course, one very large barrier stood in her way. The man who filled her thoughts and her heart. But before she could do anything more to convince Blu they had a future together, he had to complete his secret investigation.

Every time she thought about his work to break up the wire-cutting ring, she remembered who was leading the gang, and her temper flared. How could Rube Duncan, a sheriff sworn to uphold the laws of



the state, look in the mirror and not see himself for what he was — a lowdown traitor? When she'd posed the question to Blu, he'd tried to explain, telling her men like Duncan had no conscience, felt no remorse over bending or breaking the laws to suit their own agenda. Her stomach turned at the notion that anyone could be that self-absorbed, with such blatant disregard for right and wrong.

For a moment, she feared she may have voiced her thoughts about the sheriff out loud, because she heard one of the other ladies say the man's name. Glancing around, she realized Hester Potter had directed a question at May Sorenson.

Annoyed with herself for letting her thoughts drift and missing whatever Hester had asked, she turned her attention to May.

The young woman's cheeks had turned bright pink, and a timid smile curved her thin lips. "Yes, Sheriff " — her blush deepened — "I mean, Rube and I have been keeping company for a few weeks."

Delana started, her hand jerking so much that she poked herself with her needle. As she wrapped a piece of cloth around her finger to keep blood from getting on the quilt, she wanted to shout at May to stop seeing Rube Duncan, that the man was a disgrace to the badge he wore and definitely not worthy of her. But then she remembered her promise to Blu.

She'd sworn not to repeat anything he'd told her about his secret assignment, because if she did, all his hard work might be for naught. That was a risk she wasn't willing to take, so she kept quiet. Still, not being able to warn May about the sheriff made her feel terrible. Her only consolation was her faith in Blu to wrap up his investigation soon, before May got any more involved with Duncan.

\* \* \*

Blu stood at the corral fence, arms draped over the top rail, watching the horses he'd brought to Wyck Corrigan's ranch. The young mares were fine-looking animals and, thankfully, showed no ill effects from the marathon trip to San Saba. For a moment, he allowed himself to consider what owning a horse ranch would be like. He found the idea much more appealing than raising cattle.

He frowned, cursing himself for letting his mind wander. Again. Ever since Wyck left for Austin three days earlier, he'd had trouble

finding enough to keep him busy. After finishing the few chores that needed doing, there'd been little to occupy his hands or his mind. Which left way too much time for woolgathering.

Although he didn't expect Wyck to return for at least another day, he couldn't help wishing his friend would show up sooner. He needed to get back to Brownwood. More precisely, back to Delana.

*Damn.* Like a newborn foal seeking its mother's teat, his mind kept circling back to the woman he loved. The sudden burst of warmth in his chest nearly dropped him to his knees. Clutching the top rail of the fence, he wondered how he'd be able to walk away from her. She was water to a parched throat, food to an empty belly, peace to a tortured soul. In a few short weeks, she had become everything to him. How could he leave behind so

meone who had become as important to him as the air he breathed?

He drew an unsteady breath. He couldn't explain how he'd been lucky enough to have her enter his life, but he wouldn't trade their time together for anything. She'd given him happiness as he'd never known it and, more astounding, the opportunity to experience love — something he firmly had believed would never happen to him.

But now that he'd fallen under love's spell, what did the future hold? Was he truly willing to give her up? And if so, would he be able to survive without her?

The answers to those questions haunted him for the rest of the day and into the evening. His mind wanted to shout an unequivocal yes, that he could give up Delana and survive, but his heart refused to agree — no doubt influenced by Sorley's talk about taking chances.

That conversation still haunted him as well, along with one he'd had with Delana about children, in which she'd insisted he wasn't like his father. That he would never hurt a child. Could he dare hope she was right?

Those conversations and more questions continued to swirl around in his mind until he thought his head would burst from the pressure. Rubbing his temples to ease the pounding, he squeezed his eyes closed for a moment.

If only he could get a good night's sleep. Then his mind would be clear enough to view everything more logically, and he'd find the answers he needed. But along with trying to find something to fill his days, and the questions nagging at him, he hadn't been sleeping well.

And when he had managed to fall asleep, dreams of Delana intruded. Sexually explicit dreams that awakened him, heart pounding, his body slick with sweat and aroused to the point of pain. Getting back to sleep after those erotic interruptions proved impossible.

He managed a weak chuckle at the irony of his situation. Wyck had offered to go to Austin so he could get some needed rest, but he hadn't slept soundly for more than a few hours total since his friend's departure. So unless things changed soon, he'd be heading back to Brownwood more exhausted than when he arrived at Wyck's ranch.

He released a weary breath, then rose from the table where he'd eaten a late supper. As he washed dishes, he decided to go for a long walk afterward. Maybe the exercise and the night air would help him sleep.

It was worth a try, because nothing else was working.

# Twenty

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Blu slipped into the back entrance to Addie's boardinghouse and carefully shut the door behind him. He took a deep breath, blew it out slowly, willing his pounding heart to slow. Christ, he felt as if he were sneaking into the hideout of a gang of dangerous killers, not creeping into a boardinghouse in the middle of the night so no one would know he was back in Brownwood.

After Wyck's return the day before, he'd assumed knowing that Adjutant General King had received his packet of notes and had immediately initiated measures to make sure the wire cutters were stopped would ease his growing agitation. He'd assumed wrong. Although the news Wyck brought him provided some relief, he still felt edgy and out of sorts.

A day later, Wyck had had enough and told Blu to get the hell off his ranch. Not that Blu blamed him; he *had* been a real pain in the ass. After getting over his initial shock at being given the boot, he'd grinned, then agreed he needed to leave. The next morning, he'd thanked Wyck for his help and especially for putting up with him, then mounted Mouse and headed north.

He'd pushed the gelding hard, reaching Brownwood by late afternoon. But not wanting to be seen entering town, he waited until full dark before making his way to Addie's boardinghouse. And Delana.

On the ride from San Saba, he'd spent the hours thinking about the previous couple of days, and finally acknowledged his grumpy attitude had more to do with Delana than with his concerns over completing his Ranger assignment. He missed her something awful, worried about her safety, and desperately wanted to see her. That was why he'd ridden to Brownwood rather than the ranch, where

he'd have found an empty house and an empty bed. Seeing Delana again had become an obsession.

He sucked in another deep breath, then exhaled slowly. Once he had himself under control, or as much as he figured was possible, he moved through the quiet house on the balls of his feet so the heels of his boots wouldn't make any noise on the wooden floor.

After entering the hall and taking a step toward the staircase, he caught a whisper of sound behind him. He came to a halt, then turned slowly, right hand hovering near the butt of his Colt.

"She's in the same room as before."

The familiar voice eased the tightness in his chest. He should have known he couldn't sneak in undetected with Sorley in the house. The man had impressed him more than once with his uncanny sixth sense.

When Blu remained silent, Sorley said, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. King knows what's going on, and he's finalizing plans to end wire cutting in the county for good. I . . . uh . . . decided to come back early so I could . . . um . . ."

Sorley's low chuckle drifted to him in the dark hallway. "No need to explain yerself. I got the picture. I'd tell ya to sleep well, but I doubt you'll be doin' much of that. Just don't leave yer room in the morning till I give you the okay."

Blu murmured his agreement, then turned and climbed the stairs.

A few seconds later, he slipped into the room he and Delana had shared last time they were in town, then carefully pushed the door closed until he heard the soft click of the latch. Moving farther into the room, he kept his gaze glued to the bed.

Delana lay curled on her side, one knee drawn up, the top sheet twisted in a tangle at the foot of the bed. A soothing warmth filled his chest at the sight of her, the anxiety he'd felt for days melting away. His throat threatening to close, he drew a ragged breath.

Blu stripped off his clothes as quietly and quickly as possible, then slid into bed beside Delana.

He scooted closer until they lay spoon fashion, his chest brushing her back. As he slipped an arm around her waist, she jerked awake.

"Easy, darlin'," he murmured in her ear.

"Blu!" She twisted in his arms until she faced him. "What are you doing back here early?"

"I missed you," Blu replied before he could stop himself.

"Oh, Blu," she said, her voice thick, "I missed you, too."

She pressed against him, her mouth seeking his.

A groan vibrating in his throat, he lifted his hands to cup the sides of her face. The taste of her lips, the scent of her hair, and the pressure of her breasts against his chest made him feel whole again. His mind reeling from the tangle of emotions and sensations filling his head, he deepened the kiss, grinding his lips on hers, thrusting his tongue into her mouth.

He abruptly lifted his head, then rubbed his thumbs over her cheeks. "I should have been more careful," he said, his breathing ragged. "I haven't shaved since yesterday, and I probably rubbed your face raw."

"No, I'm fine." She touched his jaw, testing his stubble with her fingertips. "I like you unshaven. Makes you look more . . . um . . . wild."

"I probably smell that way, too," he replied, trying to scoot away from her. "I've been riding hard all day and didn't think . . ." He blew out a deep breath. "I should've taken time to bathe before comin' in here."

She grabbed his arm. "Don't you dare move." She leaned closer and inhaled deeply. "I love the way you smell," she said, pressing a kiss to his chest, her tongue flicking his left nipple.

*Jesus.* He clenched his teeth against the sharp stab of desire sizzling through him, one hand gripping the edge of the mattress so tight his arm shook.

Delana lifted her head, then ran her fingers along the side of his jaw. "You're so exhausted you're shaking."

He swallowed. "No, that's not what —"

"Yes, you are." She pressed a quick kiss to his stubbled chin. "You should get some sleep."

"I will." He smiled. "Eventually." To emphasize his last word, he flexed his hips to bump his erection against her leg.

Though he couldn't see her expression in the darkness of the room, he sensed her indecision. When she remained quiet, he said, "Delana, I want to fall asleep with you in my arms, but first I want to love you."

He heard her draw a quavering breath, then felt her hand slide up his arm to curl in the hair at his nape.

"Yes," she whispered, leaning into him, "love me."

With a groan, he wrapped his arms around her, then lay back on the bed with her sprawled across his chest. Though he didn't want to

rush — wanted to savor every kiss, every caress — he quickly realized his body wouldn't allow the slow pace.

As soon as he'd pulled off her nightgown, he flipped her onto her back, pushed her legs apart and buried himself with one swift thrust. She gasped his name, her fingernails biting into his back, her hips lifting to press closer.

Their joining was frantic, a wild ride of moans, whispered words of bold encouragement, and intense exhilarating pleasure. Then, at the moment Delana reached her peak, she opened her eyes and looked directly into his.

"I love you, Blu," she said in a ragged voice. "I love you." Then her eyes closed, her body shaking with the strength of her climax.

Her words echoing in his ears, Blu followed into the ecstasy of release. As he thrust into her a final time, he had to clench his jaw against the urge to tell her he loved her, too. But somehow, the only sound he made was a deep, guttural groan. Revealing his love would have been a mistake — a bullet he'd managed to dodge, barely — because he didn't want to give her false hope.

A few minutes later, Blu tucked Delana more securely against his side, wrapped an arm around her, then closed his eyes with a sigh. Though drained physically, he had never felt more alive, never known such contentment as he did at that moment — feelings he knew were directly attributable to the woman lying at his side. A woman who'd just told him she loved him.

He drew a shallow breath. He didn't want to think about her declaration of love, how close he'd come to admitting he loved her, or how he'd get along without her. At that moment, he didn't want to think about anything. He wanted only the sweet oblivion of dreamless sleep, and in a matter of seconds, he got his wish.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Delana packed her satchel while Sorley and Blu came up with a plan. Then a few minutes later, Sorley helped Blu slip away from the boardinghouse. Following Blu's instructions, Delana waited half an hour before making her departure. After bidding Addie and Sorley good-bye, she secured her satchel behind Tabby's saddle, then mounted the mare and started down the town's main street. To

anyone who saw her ride past, she gave the appearance of returning to the ranch alone.

Since Blu wasn't due back for another day and couldn't risk being seen, they'd agreed to meet a few miles outside town.

As she made her way through Brownwood, her thoughts drifted to what would happen in two days — Blu's final mission with the wire cutting ring. If all went well that night, her time with him could come to an end. That had been their original agreement. But now that was the last thing she wanted. Now she prayed he'd realize they could have a future together. However, she was realistic enough to know he might simply ride out of her life forever.

She hoped she hadn't made a mistake by telling Blu she loved him, that her honesty wouldn't push him away. But she couldn't tell what her admission had done, since he'd said nothing on the subject. In fact, he'd been extremely cool that morning, acting as if the incident hadn't taken place — which wasn't unusual for a man who earned his living by keeping his inner thoughts and feelings well hidden. Still, she wished in this instance that his outward calm would crack, even a little, so she would have some idea of what was going on inside his head.

\* \* \*

As Blu prepared to leave for his meeting with the wire-cutting ring, Delana made a decision. She couldn't let him ride away without confronting him about his withdrawal from her. Ever since she'd confessed her love, he'd pulled back both physically and emotionally. Not that she'd expected him to say the words back to her, either then or since, though she couldn't deny that hearing them would have been wonderful. And even though he initially must have been in shock, she also hadn't expected him to remain so distant, as if he'd shut himself off from feeling anything.

She stood in the yard behind the house, nervously waiting for him to return from fetching Mouse from the barn. Though her timing wasn't the best, she had no choice. She had to confront him before he left, because she simply couldn't allow the discord between them to go on any longer — especially when she didn't know what would happen after he rode off that night. If Blu were seriously hurt — or



worse, killed — she might not have another chance to initiate this conversation.

The soft clomp of Mouse's hooves brought her out of her momentary lapse. When Blu stopped in front of her, she took a deep breath, then plunged in headfirst.

"Before you go," she said, "there's something I need to ask you."

He widened his stance and folded his arms over his chest. "Okay, what is it?"

"I want to know why you changed. Why you've withdrawn from me."

"I don't know what —"

"The hell you don't. You know exactly what I mean, and you know exactly when it started. It was as soon as I told you I loved you."

He stared at her for a moment, then shrugged. "You want me to deny it?"

"No, damn it, I don't want you to deny anything. I just want to know why your knowing I love you changed things between us."

"I've got a lot on my mind. The success of my assignment is ridin' on tonight, so I —"

"Don't you dare lie to me, Blu Cahill. I can stand a lot of things, but not you lying. Now tell me the truth. Please."

The seconds crawled by. Finally, he took another deep breath, exhaled slowly, and then said, "All right. The truth is, knowing you lo — uh, how you feel about me, doesn't change anything. If I acted like what you said mattered, you might start hoping for something that ain't gonna happen."

When Delana didn't reply, he said, "Does that answer your question?"

She lifted her chin. "Yes, but there's something else I want to know. You said you never get involved with ladies, yet you did with me. Was it because I was the only woman around, a convenient female, so you used me for —"

"Used you!" he said in a near-roar, uncrossing his arms and taking a step toward her. "If there's been any using around here, you'd better look at yerself."

"What! How can you say such a thing?"

"It's damn easy, darlin', 'cause it's true. You've been using me from the day you convinced me to help you get out of Austin."

"As I recall, I didn't need to do a whole lot of convincing. You were more than willing to help me."

"That ain't the point," he said, his voice rising again. He took a deep breath, then continued in a calmer tone. "The point is, ever since that first day, you used me for all kinds of things. Teaching you how to cook, how to wash clothes, how to do just about everything around here. You even used me to show you what being with a man was like."

His final statement drained the heat from her simmering temper. "Oh, Blu," she said, shaking her head. "You don't really believe I tricked you into becoming intimate with me, do you?"

He rubbed the side of his jaw, then exhaled heavily. After a moment, he said, "No, I don't believe that. I was just angry and frustrated, and spoke out of turn."

Delana tipped her head to one side, studying his face for several seconds. At last, she said, "How do you feel about me, Blu?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters because . . . because I think you love me, too. And I want to know if it's true."

He stood absolutely still for so long, she thought he wasn't going to answer.

Then he sighed. "Okay," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, I love you."

Her breath caught, and her heart thumped hard against her ribs. Hope sweeping over her, she started moving toward him, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"Don't, Delana. Nothing's changed."

"But . . . we love each other. That should change everything."

He shook his head. "Not for me."

Her mouth dropped open, then snapped shut, her temper once again rising to a slow boil. "Love isn't something to toss aside. Yet that's what you're planning on doing. You're going to throw away a chance at a lifetime of love and happiness with me and" — she placed a hand over her belly — "our child, because of your pigheaded notion that you might turn out like your father."

"Child!" His eyebrows shot up. "You're pregnant?"

She took a shuddering breath. "Maybe." Then, acknowledging what she'd suspected for several weeks, she added, "Probably."

When he did nothing more than stare at her, she said, "To quote you, nothing's changed. I want us to be together because we love each other, because we want to be a family. There's enough money in my

trust fund for us to have a wonderful life. We'd never want for anything." She took another deep breath, easing it out through the tightness in her throat. "Foolishly I'd hoped you'd want the same for us, but if the love we have for each other isn't enough, then I don't know what else to say."

She started to turn away, then swung back to face him. "One more thing. Just in case your conscience actually bothers you about your own child, you needn't worry. We'll do just fine without you."

Not waiting to see if he'd respond, she turned on her heel and marched toward the house, head held high so he wouldn't know the extent of her anguish.

Only after she heard him ride away did she give in to the pain of her crushed hope. The ache squeezing her heart so intensely she barely could breathe, she ran down the hall and went into the second bedroom. Falling to her knees beside the cradle, she choked back a sob, then finally gave in to the tears welling in her eyes and burning her throat.

\* \* \*

As Blu rode toward the Leslie ranch, Delana's parting words kept replaying in his head. "*We'll do just fine without you.*" We, as in Delana and his child. Feeling a warmth he'd never experienced settling in the region of his heart, he groaned. He'd thought he could handle leaving Delana without a twinge of guilt, even if she was with child. But now that the possibility had become reality, he wasn't so sure.

For a moment, he allowed himself to consider setting aside his fears about what he might have inherited from his father, and take a chance as Sorley had suggested. But if he stayed with Delana, how would he support a family? Ranger pay was fine for him, since he had few wants and needs, but stretching his wages far enough to provide for a wife and child would be a problem. He didn't want to leave the Rangers, but if he did, finding a job could be difficult, especially since law enforcement was all he knew. So how the hell would he be able to give Delana the lifestyle she'd always known?

Something she said niggled at the back of his mind. Something about having enough in her trust fund to take care of them. He frowned. If that was true, apparently she'd lied to him about knowing the fund's worth.

His frown turning into a full-fledged scowl, he couldn't help wondering what other lies she'd told him. Maybe she'd only claimed to love him in order to keep him around because of the baby. Or maybe there wasn't a baby. No, he didn't believe either of those. Her profession of love had happened at a particularly passionate moment, hardly the timing she would have chosen as part of a well-crafted plan. And she'd seemed completely sincere, as well as genuinely stunned that she'd revealed her pregnancy. Again, not the work of a devious mind.

He huffed out a deep breath. Damn it, he had to stop thinking about Delana. He needed to keep his mind focused on the next several hours, on making sure the wire-cutting ring was stopped for good. Then, once the additional Rangers sent by Adjutant General King made their move, he could turn his attention to figuring out what to do about the mess he'd made of his personal life.

By the time he arrived at the ring's designated meeting place, most of the others were already there. As he dismounted, he casually glanced around. He saw no signs that the ring members weren't the only men in the vicinity, but that didn't worry him. He was confident Rangers were somewhere close by, ready to make their move at exactly the right moment.

Carl Griswold arrived soon after Blu, then, finally Burch Riley. That left just one member unaccounted for. Rube Duncan.

When Blu had dropped by to see Riley the day before to turn over the supposed proceeds from selling the horses, and to make sure the ring's plans to hit the Leslie ranch hadn't changed, Riley had indicated that Duncan planned to be there. But with his obvious absence, Blu had to wonder if the sheriff had got wind of something and changed his mind. He doubted the possibility, but the idea still made Blu clench his teeth in frustration.

Before he gave in to the urge to ask about Duncan, Hardy Pierce spoke up. "Wonder what's keeping the boss. I thought he wanted to be in on this."

"He did," Riley replied. "When I talked to him a couple days ago, he said he'd be here." He shrugged. "Reckon somethin' musta come up."

"Well," Charley Strong said, "we can't stand out here all night waiting on him."

"Yeah, right," Riley replied. "We'll wait a little longer to see if he shows."

When five minutes had passed and Duncan hadn't arrived, Riley said, "That's it. We ain't waiting any longer. Let's get this wire cut so we can get the hell outta here."

As Blu moved into position, he let out a relieved breath. For a second, he'd feared Riley might call off the evening's events. But apparently the sheriff's absence hadn't spooked him from carrying out their plan.

Blu pulled his wire cutters from his saddlebag, his senses on full alert, and started on the section of fence Riley had assigned to him. Bending to cut the bottom strand, he heard something behind him and froze. Slowly pivoting on his heels, he saw someone leave a thicket of mesquite trees, heading toward where he and the others were cutting fence. When moonlight flashed off a gun barrel, he dove to the ground.

Suddenly, the area erupted in a flurry of sounds. Shouts of "Halt!" by the Rangers who'd materialized out of the darkness. The disbelieving curses of the men in the wire-cutting ring. The nervous whinnies of horses sensing the tension around them.

In the next instant, the air exploded with the sharp report of a pistol from one of the wire cutters, followed by a volley of return fire from the Rangers. Trying to avoid getting hit by a stray bullet, Blu flattened himself even more against the ground. He caught the acrid scent of expended gunpowder, heard the soft thunk of bullets hitting their targets, followed by a grunt from one direction and a howl of pain from another. Then, abruptly, there was only silence, the fight over as quickly as it had begun.

He waited several more seconds before getting to his knees and looking around. Two Rangers held their guns on three ring members, while two more Rangers disarmed the men, then moved away to check the condition of the others.

As Blu got to his feet, one of the Rangers started toward him.

"Damn, Cahill, I was afraid you weren't outta the way when the shootin' started."

"Corrigan? What the hell are you doing here?"

Blu caught a flash of white as Wyck grinned. "Figured you might be able to use a little help. Yer not hurt, are ya?"

"No, I'm fine," he replied, brushing the dirt from his clothes. "You join the Rangers again?"

"Nope, just offered my services. The commander was more'n happy to let me throw in with the Rangers he assigned to this job."

Blu nodded, then started walking toward the others. "There were seven. You get 'em all?"

"Yup. Four shot — two pretty bad — but the other three look like they're not hurt."

"Cahill, you double-dealing bastard," Burch Riley shouted from where he lay on the ground. "I oughta rip yer head off."

"Yer welcome to try, Riley," Blu replied, heading toward the man. "After you've been convicted and spent five years in prison."

When the man didn't respond, Blu tipped his head toward the blood stain on his right shoulder. "How bad is it?"

"I'll live," Riley grumbled.

Blu reached down to grab Riley's good shoulder, then hauled him to his feet. "Where's Duncan tonight?"

"Go to hell."

Blu smiled. "Yeah, I figured you wouldn't cooperate." Turning the man over to Wyck, he added, "Don't matter, Riley, 'cause I'll find him."

Once Blu was assured the seven men would cause no further problems for their captors, he found Mouse and swung into his saddle. Before he left, he stopped beside Wyck. "Appreciate yer help tonight," Blu said. "This ring has been causin' problems way too long."

"You bet," Wyck replied, rubbing Mouse's nose. "So where ya headed?"

"Into town. See if I can scare up Rube Duncan."

"He's the leader of the ring?"

"Yeah, and the county sheriff. But the sorry son of a bitch doesn't have the balls to do any of the dirty work. He just shows up later to take the credit and spread more bullshit about how good the rest of the gang did cutting wire. Placing him under arrest will give me a lotta pleasure."

"Especially since he's a lawman." Wyck gave Mouse a final pat, then stepped back. "We'll be bringing these seven into town soon, so maybe I'll see ya there."

Blu nodded, settled his hat firmly on his head, then reined Mouse toward the road and urged the gelding into a trot.

Blu went to the sheriff 's office in Brownwood first, not that he expected Duncan to be there at such a late hour, so finding the place deserted came as no surprise. Then he checked the saloons but came up empty, and nobody he asked had seen Duncan that evening. Next he went to the man's house, a small place at the edge of town. Again nothing. Cursing his luck, he headed back to the main street, not sure where to continue his search.

When he noticed a group of men gathered in front of the sheriff 's office, he turned Mouse in that direction. As he drew closer, he recognized Wyck and Sorley. The other three men had to be the Rangers Wyck had helped to bring down the wire-cutting ring.

He pulled Mouse to a halt, then dismounted. Wyck and Sorley broke away from the group and came toward him.

"Any luck?" Wyck said.

Blu shook his head. "Couldn't find hide nor hair of the bastard."

Sorley pursed his lips thoughtfully, then said "You don't think he had an inkling about what was going on tonight and lit outta here, do ya?"

"Possible, I reckon, but I doubt it. The more I think about it, I don't think he ever planned to be there tonight. The way I read him, he just wants to be in charge. Not once has he actually done what he orders the other men to do. Cut wire. Butcher steers. Rustle horses."

Wyck and Sorley both nodded, then Wyck said, "What're ya figurin' on doing now?"

Blu rubbed the side of his jaw. "Continue searching. But first I'm going back to the ranch. I wanna tell Delana what happened tonight before I start looking for Duncan again."

"She know yer a Ranger?" Sorley said.

He nodded. "Listen, Sorley, I need yer word about something. I'm gonna tell her to come to you if anything happens to me. And I want you to make sure she gets to St. Louis."

"What's this talk about something happenin' to you and her needin' to get to St. Louis? Ain't you come to yer senses yet and offered to make an honest woman outta that gal? If you can't tell she loves you, you must be blind in one eye and can't see outta the other."

Blu stiffened. "I know how she feels about me. And not that it's any of yer damn business, but I haven't decided what I'm gonna do about it. Yet. For now, I just need you to tell me that if something goes wrong

and I don't make it back here, you'll watch out for her. So will you give me your word or not?"

Sorley stared at him long and hard, then finally bobbed his head in agreement before turning and walking away.

Wyck watched the older man for several seconds, then shifted his gaze back to Blu. "I don't know nothing about this Delana woman, and I don't want ya to think I'm hornin' in where I ain't wanted. But I've got something to add to what McGregor just said."

Blu crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine. Spill it."

"The love of a fine woman is something you shouldn't take for granted, Blu, and you sure as hell shouldn't toss it aside. I know, 'cause I let my own foolish pride get in the way, and I ended up losing the best thing that ever happened to me." He stared down the street for a few seconds, apparently lost in thought, then his shoulders rippled with a shuddering breath. "Don't do like I did," he said in a soft voice, "and make a mistake you'll live to regret."

Before Blu could think of anything to say in response, Wyck turned and followed after Sorley.

"Jesus," Blu muttered. "Everybody's got advice they just gotta share." But as he swung back into his saddle, he couldn't dismiss what either of his friends had said. Their words remained lodged in his mind, adding to the confusing thoughts already swirling there.



# Twenty-One

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Delana heard the pounding of hooves in the stillness of the night, rousing her from her thoughts. She hadn't gone to bed, hadn't even considered trying to sleep, but waited in her usual spot in the hall at the rear of the house. Blu had never been out this late — dawn was only an hour away — and her worry had grown with each passing minute.

When Blu brought Mouse to a skidding halt a few feet away, she drew a shaky breath, weak with relief that he'd returned safely. Forgetting about their last conversation for the moment, she got to her feet and rushed toward him.

"Blu, what happened? Were the men in the wire-cutting ring arrested?"

He jumped to the ground and practically ran past her on his way into the house. "Yeah, I don't have time to tell ya all the details. But Duncan didn't show up, so I've gotta keep looking for him."

"Looking for him?" she said, trying to keep up with his long strides. "You already tried to find him?"

"Yeah, but he wasn't anywhere I checked. So I'll head back to town and start over. If he still doesn't turn up, maybe I'll find some clue about where he went."

"He went fishing."

"Thanks for the suggestion," he said, grabbing several boxes of cartridges from a dresser drawer, "but I doubt that's where he —"

"He needed to get away for a few days, so he went fishing."

He turned around to face her. "Mind telling me just how the hell you know that?"

"I know," she replied, taking a calming breath, "because May Sorenson said that's where he went."

Blu's eyes narrowed. "And May knows that . . . how?"

"While you were gone, I went with Addie to help the Ladies' Aid Society work on a quilt. They're going to raffle it off at —" She cleared her throat. "Anyway, May was there, and during the conversation, I found out she's been keeping company with the sheriff. When one of the other ladies mentioned not seeing Sheriff Duncan around lately, May said he'd left town the day before. He told her he had a lot on his mind and needed to clear his head, so he was going fishing. He's supposed to be back late tomorrow, because May's fixing supper for him."

Blu closed his gaping mouth, apparently considering her reply. Finally, he said, "Well, uh, that might be helpful, but there are probably lots of places to fish around here. I wouldn't know where to start looking."

"There's a little cabin on Pecan Bayou, north of town about ten miles. That's his favorite fishing spot."

"And that just happened to come out in the conversation?"

"No, actually, I asked May where he went." At his shocked expression, she said, "I told her you liked to fish and would like a suggestion on a good location." She shrugged. "Since we aren't from around here, she had no idea I wanted the information in case it would help our investigation. The sheriff —"

"Our investigation! God damn it, Delana, this is *my* investigation, and I told you to stay out of it."

"Yes, well, it became my investigation, too, when I realized I'm carrying a child." Her chin tilted in an all-too-familiar angle. "Our child. And I wasn't going to let your warning stop me from doing whatever I could to prevent our son or daughter from growing up without a father."

Blu opened his mouth to make a scathing retort, couldn't think of anything to counter what she'd said, then snapped his jaw shut.

"So, as I was saying," she said, "the sheriff took May for a carriage ride near his cabin not long ago, so she told me exactly where it's located." She gave him a smug smile. "As it turns out, I'm glad I did."

He groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Please don't tell me you were asking questions all over town that might help my . . . er . . . our investigation?"

"Don't be silly. I knew better than that." She flashed him a quick grin. "Not that I didn't consider it. But I had to settle for talking to the

women. If they didn't bring up their husbands on their own, one little innocent, well-timed question was all it took for them to tell me all kinds of things. Unfortunately, none of it sounded helpful until I found out about May and the sheriff. That really got my attention. Then, when she said he was out of town, I figured you'd want to know where he went."

"Amazing." He shook his head, clearly in shock. "I should turn you over my knee for disobeying me," he said, "but I've gotta get going."

"Will you kiss me before you leave?" Delana whispered, moving closer.

Blu wanted to refuse. He still hadn't recovered completely from what she'd said to him earlier. Also the issue of her lying to him remained unresolved, along with what he intended to do once Duncan was in custody with the other ring members. No, kissing Delana would be a big mistake and only cloud his mind more.

But somehow, the refusal he started to voice turned into a moan. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her against his chest.

The kiss went on longer than he planned, but finally he forced himself to lift his head. He drew a ragged breath, then said, "I gotta go." He stared at her intently for a moment, then added, "When I get back, there's a lot more talking we need to do about this." Delana stepped away from him. Her brow furrowing, her gaze searched his, then she whispered, "Okay."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, Blu had stuffed the boxes of extra cartridges in his saddlebags and once again mounted Mouse. Adjusting his grip on the reins, he looked down at her.

"One more thing. If I don't come back, go to Sorley. He'll make sure you get to St. Louis."

Words of love clogged Delana's throat, but instinctively she knew it wasn't the time to speak them. Instead, she nodded, then watched him ride away.

Her heart heavy, she went inside the house. She considered giving in to a new round of tears, but defiantly blinked them away. She'd have plenty of time to cry after Blu came back. If the expression on his face when he said they needed to talk was any indication, he planned

to give her hell for disobeying him, before his final stab to her heart, telling her good-bye forever. She curled her hands into fists, wishing he were there so she could slug him.

Why did the man have to be so damn stubborn? He was so blinded by the pain of his childhood, so tortured by the fear that he'd inherited his father's violent behavior, that he couldn't see the futility of those fears. He needed to see the truth. He wasn't like his father. He wouldn't hurt his own child. And they belonged together.

She sat down on the side of the bed with a sigh. Even if he didn't agree to make their relationship permanent, at the very least she hoped he would accept the other truths and stop torturing himself.

\* \* \*

Blu pulled Mouse to a halt in a stand of trees growing near the banks of Pecan Bayou, the river running catty-corner across the county, then dismounted.

He'd followed the directions May had given Delana and was, by his estimation, about fifty yards upstream from where Duncan was supposedly holed up in a cabin. He'd go the rest of the way on foot, not wanting to give the man any advance warning.

After looping Mouse's reins around a tree branch, he checked his Colt, tucked a handful of cartridges into his pocket, then patted the gelding on the neck.

"Get some rest, boy," he said in a low voice. "It's been a long night."

Mouse bobbed his head, nickering softly. Blu smiled, then started through the trees.

\* \* \*

Delana stared at the bedroom ceiling, watching the room get brighter and brighter from the sunshine pouring through the window. Though she'd stretched out on the bed, she hadn't slept since Blu left several hours earlier. She couldn't stop thinking about their last conversation and what would happen when he returned. If he returned.

"Oh, God." She jerked upright, shoving the hair off her face. She forced herself to consider the possibility that Blu might not return, either because he chose not to see her again or his confrontation

with Duncan had gone horribly wrong. Either way she wouldn't see him again.

"Damn it, Blu," she said in a fierce whisper. "I can't stand this."

She slid off the bed and started pulling on her clothes. Unable to continue sitting around waiting and worrying, she had to do something. In case Blu had any ideas about not coming back, she'd go to him, make sure he was all right. Then, if he wanted to say good-bye — No, she didn't want to think about that. For the time being, she just needed to know he was safe.

\* \* \*

Blu shifted his position against a tree trunk to ease the beginning of a cramp in his left leg. He'd been sitting in a thicket of brush and trees for a couple of hours and had yet to see Rube Duncan. But he was sure the man was inside the cabin.

As soon as he'd reached the clearing where the cabin sat nestled in a stand of trees, he thoroughly scouted the perimeter and found a horse picketed out back — a black with a white blaze, which he knew belonged to Duncan. But since beginning his surveillance from his hiding spot a hundred feet in front of and slightly to the west of the cabin's only door, there had been no activity. Blu could be an extremely patient man when necessary, prepared to wait as long as it took. Sooner or later, the man would have to come outside, and when he did, Blu planned to be his greeting party.

His stomach rumbled, but he ignored it. There were more important items on his agenda than filling an empty belly. Like the turncoat Brown County sheriff. And Delana.

He stifled a groan. His efforts to keep thoughts about her at bay, so he could concentrate solely on his work, had succeeded for short periods, but then she'd popped back into his head. Her delicate chin once again lifted in a mutinous angle, full mouth puckered with annoyance, those lavender eyes daring him to —

The slight creak of wood snagged his attention, ending another of his mind's persistent wanderings. He turned carefully and saw the cabin door open. Then Duncan stepped outside.

Blu watched the man stretch, scratch his chest, then turn and head for the outhouse behind the cabin. His gaze not leaving the direction

his prey had taken, he slowly got to his feet, then eased his way through the trees toward the edge of the clearing. When Duncan returned from his trip to the outhouse, Blu planned to make his move.

Several minutes later, Blu was in place, his Colt drawn, waiting for Duncan to reappear. As if his thoughts had conjured the man, the outhouse door swung open and Duncan emerged, adjusting his trousers.

Blu watched him come around the corner of the cabin, bend to pick up a bucket, then head toward the river. As soon as his back was to him, Blu stepped into the clearing.

"Hold it right there, Duncan."

The bucket hitting the ground with a thud, the man spun around, surprise registering on his face. "Cahill! What the hell are you doin' here?"

"I came to arrest you," Blu replied, glaring at the man who was the worst kind of criminal in his book — a lawman who'd disrespected his badge and turned to the other side.

Duncan appeared to relax. "Yeah, you and who else?"

Blu smiled. "Haven't you heard it takes only one Texas Ranger to break up a mob? So I reckon I can handle you with no problem."

"You tellin' me yer a Ranger?"

"Yeah, Sergeant Cahill, Texas Ranger Company D," he replied, slowly walking toward Duncan. "And I'm also placing —"

The sound of an approaching horse halted his words. Turning, Blu watched in horror as Tabby galloped into the clearing. Before he could overcome his shock and move to intercept Delana, she pulled the mare to a halt a few feet in front of Duncan.

"Delana, get out of here," Blu shouted.

Her head snapped around, her startled gaze meeting his. She blinked, but hesitated a moment too long. Before she could get Tabby turned, Duncan was suddenly beside her, reaching up and hauling her from the saddle.

As soon as her feet hit the ground, she turned into a wildcat, twisting and turning, trying to break his grip. But she was no match for his size and strength. One arm wrapped around her throat, and the other holding the barrel of his pistol pressed against her side ended her efforts to yank free.

Blu took several steps closer, his Colt still aimed at Duncan. "Let her go, Duncan. She's not part of this."

The man laughed. "I ain't stupid, Cahill. As soon as I release her, you'll pull the trigger."

"That's not my style," Blu replied, taking several more steps forward. "Release Delana, and I swear I won't shoot you."

"Like I'd believe anything a double-dealing Ranger said. And you can stop right where you are."

Blu stopped, but he didn't lower his Colt. "You hurt her and I'll tear you limb from limb. Let her go and you'll live. So what's it gonna be?"

"What it's gonna be, is this," Duncan said with a smirk, "you're gonna throw down yer gun, then I'm gonna take the little lady and ride outta here. When I get far enough away, I'll leave her some place where you can find her."

Blu shook his head. "Nope, that won't work."

"Well, then, I guess my only choice is to shoot you right now."

As the man shifted the aim of his pistol, Blu realized this might be the last time he'd ever see Delana. His gaze locked on her pale face, regret cramping his heart. Regret that she had to witness what was about to happen, and regret that he wouldn't have a future with her.

Blu didn't dare risk firing his Colt, for fear he'd strike Delana. And if he tried making a run for it, hoping Duncan's grip on Delana would loosen enough for him to get a better shot at the man, a bad situation could escalate into a disastrous one. That was another risk he couldn't take. He had no other choice but to stay put. An open target.

Somehow, he managed a weak smile for Delana, then took a deep breath, trying to prepare himself for the impact of a bullet. His only hope was that he wouldn't die instantly, that he'd have enough time to squeeze off an accurate shot at Duncan without endangering Delana.

At the exact instant Duncan's finger tightened on the trigger, Delana screamed, thrashing her arms and legs, throwing him off balance. His pistol fired, the bullet going way wide of its mark.

As Delana's heel connected with Duncan's shin, and her elbow rammed into his ribs, he grunted. Spewing curses at her, he struggled to remain on his feet while maintaining his grip on both her and his pistol. But she was not to be denied, squirming and wiggling even harder, until she managed to wrench out of his arms. Once she was free, she took off in a sprint toward Blu.

"Delana!" Blu yelled. "Get down. Now!"

She never hesitated but fell to the ground instantly.

The air echoed with pistol fire coming from both directions, then silence.

Delana cautiously lifted her head and looked over her shoulder. Seeing Sheriff Duncan stretched out on the ground, motionless, she glanced in the opposite direction and saw Blu rushing toward her. Choking back a sob, she scrambled to her feet and stumbled into his arms.

"Oh, God, Blu," she said, pressing her face against his neck. "I thought he was going to kill you."

"Yeah, me, too," he whispered into her hair, a huge lump in his throat. He swallowed hard, then held her away from him. "I . . . uh . . . I've gotta check on Duncan."

She nodded, then stepped aside.

After Blu withdrew his fingers from Duncan's neck, he straightened and crossed the yard to where he'd left Delana.

"Is he . . . ?"

He nodded. "I didn't want to kill him, but he left me no choice."

She took a quavering breath. "I know."

Blu stared down at her for a few seconds, still trying to shake off the last of the fear that had chilled him to the bone while Duncan held a gun to her side. Finally, he said, "What the hell were you thinkin', riding in here like that? You could've got yerself killed, not to mention me."

"Don't you start with me, Blu Cahill," she said, poking a finger into his chest. "I was worried sick about you. Not only that you might get hurt or killed" — her shoulders rippled with a shudder — "but I was afraid you'd decide not to come back to the ranch." Her chin came up. "And I couldn't bear the thought that I'd never see you again, so I came here to . . ."

He pushed his hat off his forehead. "To what?"

She pulled herself up to her full height and met his gaze. "I came here to convince you that we belong together, and to ask you to marry me."

Blu blinked; then his lips quirked with a smile. Lifting a hand to run his knuckles down one of her cheeks, he said, "I think you got this proposing business backward. That's supposed to be my line."

"Well, yes, it's usually the man who — " Her eyes went round. "Are you telling me you would've proposed? That you really want to marry me?"



"Yeah, darlin', that's what I'm telling you. I'm a lot of things. Some I ain't too proud of, like being so blasted stubborn about me maybe being like my father. But I'm definitely not stupid enough to let the best thing that's ever happened to me slip away."

"Oh, Blu," she whispered. "I feel the same way about you." Rising on her toes, she pressed a quick kiss on his mouth. "So when can we get married? It probably should be soon, since we've already started a family, don't you —"

"Before we go making any wedding plans, there's something we need to discuss."

Her brow furrowing, she said, "Okay, what?"

"Do you remember the day we met and you told me about the trust fund your grandfather set up for you?"

"Of course."

"Do you also remember telling me you didn't know the exact amount in the fund?"

"Uh, yes," she replied, her cheeks flushing a bright pink.

"I see you've figured out where I'm heading with this."

"Look, Blu, there's a very good reason why I didn't tell you the truth that day in Austin."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, then, I'd like to hear it."

She drew a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "I asked you to help get me out of Austin because I was desperate. I never would have approached a stranger if I hadn't been. I hope you realize that."

When he nodded, she continued.

"Even though I'd placed my trust in you to help me, I didn't know you at all. I was afraid that if I revealed the size of my trust fund, you might come up with a scheme to get your hands on the money. Just like my stepfather tried to do, and I couldn't take that risk." She gave him a pointed look. "And you're not so innocent in all of this either, Ranger Cahill. If I'd known you were a Texas Ranger, I might have told you the truth. But I didn't know that, did I?"

He stared into her eyes, seeing a flash of anger in their lavender depths, but also her love for him. "Yer right. But you also know why I didn't tell you sooner."

He waited for her nod, then chuckled. "Reckon that makes us even, then, doesn't it?"

The anger in her eyes flickered then died. "So, you understand why I didn't tell you the truth?"

"Yeah, I understand."

"And you're not upset with me anymore?"

"Nope," he murmured, uncrossing his arms and drawing her close. "But there's one more thing I want you to know. I'm not marrying you for your money."

"Are you sure?" She slid her hands up his chest and locked her arms around his neck. "Because my trust fund is pretty big."

"Don't matter."

"Hmm. Well, if it isn't my money you're after" — she gave him a wide-eyed, innocent look — "why do you want to marry me?"

"Because, darlin', I'm head over heels in love with you."

"That's a pretty bold statement," she said, then ran her tongue over his lower lip. "One that I think requires some proof."

He shivered. "Yeah? Got something in mind?"

"Uh-huh. How about going someplace private so you can prove exactly how much you love me?"

Another chuckle rumbling in his chest, he hauled her closer against him. Just before his lips captured hers, he whispered, "There ya go."

# Epilogue

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*Four years later*

Delana sat in a rocking chair on the front porch of the house she and Blu had built in Austin. They also owned some property ten miles northwest of town, a horse ranch — Blu had decided he'd rather raise horses than cattle — that they started after he resigned from the Rangers. She still thought he'd make a wonderful reporter, but she hadn't been able to convince him of that. But as long as he enjoyed working on the ranch, she was content. And as much as she loved living at the ranch, she also loved spending time in the city. There were the wonderful restaurants, the theater, the shopping, and countless social events — not that they took advantage of what the city had to offer with any frequency.

When she'd first suggested they build a house in Austin, Blu had balked, saying he had no desire to attend a lot of charity functions where he'd have to rub elbows with all the city's stuffy upper crust. But even after she convinced him she wasn't trying to turn him into one of the prigs he despised, that she'd keep their social calendar very light and only wanted to make sure their children would be exposed to other things in life besides horses and their ranch, he still hadn't seemed all that taken with the idea. Though he never said so directly, she sensed he was concerned about being so close to her stepfather and about how she and Henry might react if their paths crossed. Hoping to ease his worries, she took the initiative and brought up the subject. After she told him she couldn't care less about her stepfather, and insisted the man posed no threats to her, Blu finally gave in.

Then, soon after work started on their house, any potential problem he had envisioned came to an abrupt end when Henry Lawton

left town. Delana figured they probably never would learn the truth about his disappearance, though she had her own suspicions. Knowing Henry's rocky financial condition, his creditors likely had started breathing a little too heavily down his neck, and he chose to hightail it out of Austin rather than face the consequences.

All speculation about his whereabouts ended a year later when Wyck Corrigan returned from a trip to California, bringing them the news that Henry had been killed. Delana had tried really hard to feel a sense of loss over the man's passing, tried to dig deep for even the tiniest bit of grief, but she couldn't — not after what he'd done to her mother, and how he'd tried to manipulate her own life.

The memory of the day she'd learned of Henry's death made her think of Wyck. He'd stopped by on several other occasions, the last time just after she'd given birth to twin girls. Startled to realize that was almost eighteen months ago, she wondered how he was doing. He was such a good-looking, kindhearted man who loved children. Definitely a great catch for some lucky woman. But as far as she knew, that hadn't happened. Probably because of the haunted look she'd noticed in his gray eyes every time she saw him.

She'd asked Blu once if he knew the reason for those lingering shadows. Though he suspected Wyck's internal wounds had been caused by a woman, or his work as a Ranger, or both, he couldn't give her any real insight. Too bad, because she would've —

The sound of the front door opening halted her thoughts of Wyck Corrigan. Turning, she watched Addie McGregor walk across the porch, her movements ungainly because of her advanced pregnancy.

"Whew," Addie said, slightly breathless. "Just walking out here from the kitchen is quite a chore." She settled into the rocker beside Delana's with a sigh. "If I get any bigger, Sorley's going to have to widen the doorways in our house."

Delana smiled, pushing a foot against the wooden floor to set her rocker into motion. "You're not nearly as big as I was when I was carrying Molly and Jessie."

"No offense, but thank the Lord I'm not."

"I agree," Delana replied with a laugh. "I wouldn't trade my daughters for the world, but I hope I never have to go through another pregnancy like that one."

"You and Blu aren't thinking of having more babies are you" — she nodded toward Delana's pregnancy-swollen belly — "I mean, after this one?"

Delana shrugged. "Maybe. We haven't talked about it."

"Well, this is it for me. Two babies in four years at my age is all I can handle."

"Sorley agrees with you?"

"He'd better, or I'll tell him I'm going to cut off what's causing these pregnancies and feed it to the cat."

"You don't have a cat."

"You think that would stop me?"

Delana nearly choked. "I hope you're only teasing."

Addie waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. "'Course I am, but I think I'll tell him that just to see his reaction."

Delana chuckled. "I bet you will." She dropped her head against the back of the chair, then sighed. "I never knew life could be so good."

"Me either," Addie replied in a soft voice. "When my first husband and I couldn't make a baby, I came to accept the fact that I wasn't meant to be a mother. Then, after he died, I figured I'd had my share of happiness, and there was nothing else to look forward to in life." She smiled. "Then I fell in love with that damn fool man, Sorley McGregor, and" — she placed a hand on her belly — "look what happened. I'm thirty-nine years old and pregnant with our second child."

"I'm so happy for you," Delana replied, blinking back tears that were so close to the surface those days. She looked at the girth of her own pregnancy, then over at Addie. "Wonder which of us will deliver first."

"I don't know, but I'm sure hoping it'll be at the same time, like it was with our first babies. It would serve our husbands right."

When Delana made a sputtering sound, Addie turned her head to meet her gaze. Then both of them burst out laughing.

"Hey, what's so funny?"

Delana looked up to see Blu step through the front door.

"Yeah," Sorley said, following Blu onto the porch, "I could hear you hens cacklin' all the way upstairs. If you don't keep it down, yer liable to wake up the kids."

"We were just talking," Delana said, smiling up at her husband, "about the day Wyatt and Ian were born."

Blu groaned. "Don't remind me."

Sorley slapped him on the back. "Got yer first taste of Irish whiskey that day, in addition to a fine son."

"A taste! You damn near drowned me in that stuff."

"I did no such thing." Sorley gave Blu a fierce scowl. "I didn't tell ya to match me drink fer drink. You did that all on yer own."

"Yeah, but I couldn't bear the idea of Delana being in pain." He moved to stand beside his wife's rocker, then touched his fingertips to her cheek. "I paid for my stupidity the next day."

Sorley laughed. "You surely did. I thought you never was gonna lose that purty green color."

Blu's laughter joined his friend's. "I learned a lot of lessons that day. To sip whiskey, not gulp it down like water. And drinking too much didn't turn me into my father."

"That's the truth," Sorley said, bobbing his head. "I ain't never seen a happier, more sentimental drunk than you, Cahill. All you wanted to do was blubber over Delana and Wyatt. Well, until ya had to run from the room so ya could —"

"Don't say it, McGregor. And besides, you weren't so calm and collected yerself, with Addie delivering Ian at the same time."

"Never said I was."

"Hell, the first time you held yer son, ya sat down and bawled."

Sorley's expression turned mulish. "Yeah, and I'm damn proud of every one of the tears I shed that day. You wanna make somethin' of it?"

Before Blu could respond, Delana silenced him by grabbing his arm. "All right, you two," she said. "No need to compare stories or trade barbs about the day your sons were born."

"Yes," Addie said. "Just be grateful we let you back into our beds after what we went through."

"You shouldn't be talkin' like that," Sorley said, giving his wife a pat on the hand.

"And why shouldn't I? You didn't spend six hours in labor, feeling like you're being split in half while trying to bring a child into the world."

"Addie, sugar. Don't get —"

"Don't you 'Addie, sugar' me."

Blu ignored the bickering between the McGregors — nearly an everyday occurrence — and crouched beside Delana's chair. In a low voice, he said, "Yer not thinkin' of cutting anything of mine off and giving it to the cat, are ya?"

She turned to meet his gaze, a smile teasing her mouth. "So you heard Addie say that, huh?"

"Yeah, but Sorley didn't. I was standing just inside the door, waiting for him to take a drink of water upstairs to Ian." He lifted a hand and brushed his thumb over her lower lip. "You didn't answer my question."

Her beautiful eyes sparkling with amusement, she said, "Why in the world would I want to give the best part of a man to a cat?"

He gaped at her, then his lips twitched and laughter rumbled in his chest. "I'm glad to hear that, darlin'," he said, leaning closer to press a quick, firm kiss on her mouth. "Real glad."

# Author's Note

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Barbed wire was introduced in the American West in 1873 and, by 1880, was in heavy use in Texas. But many would not accept that the day of the open range was coming to an end, and set out to stop the use of barbed wire. By 1883, fence cutting occurred in more than half the counties in the state, and had become a true epidemic in some parts — particularly the central portion, which includes Brown County.

As Blu related to Delana in *The Ranger*, in 1884 Governor John Ireland called a special legislative session to address the issue. After a long, heated debate, fence cutting was made a felony, punishable by up to five years in prison. While the newly enacted law slowed down the occurrences of fence cutting, the problem continued until the turn of the century.

Ending what had become nearly a war between the two sides of the barbed wire issue was not an easy job, and the Texas Rangers were often called into counties where fence cutting had become widespread. But the Rangers faced an enormous challenge: there were thousands and thousands of miles of fence, and only a few hundred of them. Another problem for the Rangers was the fact that the wire cutters carried no evidence linking them to the crimes they had committed. They simply cut the wire, then rode away. In order to be stopped, those men had to be caught in the act through the detective work of Rangers. That often proved to be a difficult task, since strangers weren't trusted in areas where wire cutting was rampant.

Just as Blu did in *The Ranger*, some Rangers successfully went undercover, infiltrating the wire-cutting rings and gathering evidence needed to shut down the gangs. But in other counties, the Rangers' efforts resulted in only marginal success.

The Texas Rangers had a well-deserved reputation for always bringing outlaws to justice, rarely experiencing the taste of defeat. But the fence-cutting war was one of those rare times when the Rangers came



out second best. Ultimately, strong public sentiment against fence cutting achieved what the Rangers could not. Faced with so much opposition against them, the wire cutters finally realized the futility of continuing the long-fought battle.

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