

The image is a composite. The background is a large, semi-transparent image of a shirtless, muscular man with a tattoo on his left arm. Overlaid on this is a semi-transparent pink rectangular box containing the title and author's name. In the bottom right foreground, there is a smaller image of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a plaid shirt and denim shorts, lying on her side with her legs crossed and hands clasped.

# **Lovin' The Cowboy Way**

Kelly Wallace

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurb**

When Sarah Collins loses her only sister in a car accident, she's surprised to learn that guardianship of her two nephews and infant niece has fallen equally to her and her brother-in-law. Sarah's not ready to be a parent, but can she trust playboy Raif Manning to do the job? Raif, an illustrious photographer, is ready, willing, and eager to give up his wild bachelor lifestyle. He's just purchased an old, rundown farmhouse in Kansas and his number one priority is to restore it as the perfect place to raise his new family. Raif knows that he has to have a proper home for the kids if he's going to convince Sarah to give him sole custody. But when Sarah shows up on Raif's doorstep he's completely unprepared. The house is in shambles, the kids are running amuck, and what's worse? As soon as Raif gets an eyeful of the sexy Sarah with her sassy attitude and completely transparent suit of armor, he falls hard and fast. Little does Raif realize that while he's trying to find a way to lure Sarah into bed, she's finding her way into Raif's heart and helping him realize his dreams.

## Chapter One

Turning off the motor of her BMW, Sarah Collins braced herself for the inquisition she was surely about to face. After all, hadn't she been avoiding this for the past three months?

"She's here!" A young boy around seven years old scrambled out of the large, dilapidated house. Tommy. He had grown so much since she'd last seen him. The older boy, Chris, chased him, but stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of her car. His face had been alight with laughter while he played with his brother. Now it hardened into a stony mask of rejection.

Sarah felt a twinge of remorse. She was a virtual stranger to her own nephews, and a most unwelcome one at that. Oh well, she fully intended to be gone by tomorrow morning at the latest, then everyone could go about their own lives.

The only reason she was out here in the first place was to make sure Mr. Manning was providing the children with a proper environment and the nurturing they needed. She needed to make sure he was indeed serious about wanting them in his life permanently. He wanted to put his illustrious photography career on hold to play Daddy? So be it. Although she couldn't imagine such a thing, she was well aware of his playboy lifestyle.

Pushing her Dior sunglasses up further on her nose, Sarah viewed the knee-high weeds and varied assortment of rusted garden tools strewn about. An old tire sat in the middle of the yard with an array of wildflowers growing out from the hole in its center. "How charming," she drawled.

The house had definitely seen better days. The remnants of flaking white paint clung to the gray, weathered wood by nothing short of a miracle. She only prayed the inside was in better shape.

Climbing out of the car, the heat from outside smacked into her, nearly singing her eyebrows. "The air-conditioning better be on full blast," she muttered to herself.

As she started to reach back and grab her suitcase, Chris—equally slender and with the same shock of hair as his younger brother—solemnly offered his assistance. "Thank you," she said, noting how they were the spitting image of Debbie. This visit was going to be hard on her already frayed emotions.

She gave a small smile, hoping it was a good cover for the anxiety she felt storming inside her. She really didn't like being in this situation. In fact, her lawyer advised she either sign over guardianship and be done with it, or suggest the kids go into foster care. Sarah could do neither, not until she was certain what type of lifestyle these kids would be living. And she'd take them herself before they ever went into foster care!

Chris offered a grunt in return and trudged back up to the house. Sarah stared after him, feeling about as welcome as the devil in the Vatican. Her sigh was inward and silent. She should have expected such a greeting. Not only had Chris lost his father and mother in that awful car accident, but here she was popping in like some social worker. The thought caused her throat to tighten with guilt, but she pushed it away. She really did have their best interest at heart. Besides, she'd most likely be out of here by tomorrow.

Tommy looked her up and down a good ten times, fists planted on his slim hips, eyes narrowed. "Is something wrong?" Sarah asked, feeling uncomfortable under her nephew's

close scrutiny.

"You don't *look* like a wicked witch."

Sarah pursed her lips. "Thank you, I think."

"Uncle Raif said you were just like the wicked witch in the Wizard of Oz and you wanted to take us away from him. Is that true?" He took in her attire of linen peach skirt suit and matching pumps. "You don't look like a witch to me."

Sarah closed the car door and crouched down in front of the boy who had a challenging look in his gray eyes. "No, I'm not here to take you away from your uncle Raif." *Unless absolutely necessary*, she silently added. "I just want to make sure you're being well cared for."

"Then you'll leave?" His tone was so hopeful and solid, Sarah truly felt like scum.

She poked him softly in the stomach and smiled slightly. "I promise."

"Okay. You can come in then, I guess."

"Thanks for the hospitality," she murmured, walking behind him as he led her up to the house where she was greeted by an inviting blast of cool air.

"Uncle Raif's been expectin' you," Tommy said as he held the tattered screen door open for her. She didn't know why he bothered with the formality. She could have just as easily walked through the gaping hole in it. "He's in the kitchen." Tommy pointed the way then turned and ran back outside to play.

Pushing her sunglasses up on top of her head, she walked through the living room, noting it was decorated in Early American Yuck. The carpet beneath her feet looked as if it hadn't been vacuumed in at least a decade, its original color unrecognizable beneath the thick layer of grunge. Floral curtains hung sagging at the windows and were so dingy nearly all daylight was blocked out.

All this charm was set against what were probably at one time white walls, now dull and grimy. Sarah sighed. Things weren't going to be as simple as she'd hoped. She'd never be able to leave knowing the kids were wallowing in this sty.

She entered the kitchen, detecting the scent of tuna fish, dreading what she would encounter next, but her spirits lifted as she was greeted by the heart-stopping sight of a man's backside. A tall, broad-shouldered man in a cowboy hat stood at the counter. She tried to quiet her racing pulse, noticing he filled out his tight jeans quite well. Western wear had never appealed to her until this very moment.

*I wonder if the front looks as good as the back?*

Her hand tightened on the handle of her briefcase as every muscle in her body stood up at attention. Sweat broke out on her temples and she felt her nipples peak. She blamed it on the quick change of temperatures between outside and inside, but knew it was a lie.

Sarah thought to reprimand her exuberant hormones, but pushed the little voice of shame aside. She was a red-blooded woman who could appreciate a fine looking man just as well as any other female.

"Mr. Manning?" She forced an air of all business into her words.

He had obviously been absorbed in his task of fixing sandwiches since he started at the sound of her voice and spun around.

He stood there mute for a few seconds before touching the brim of his gray Stetson with his thumb and forefinger. "Howdy." The one word seemed squeezed from his lungs.

Sarah groaned silently. *Yep, front's even better.* It had been awhile since she'd seen any publicity shots of him, and he was quickly creeping up on his forties. With his

notoriously wild lifestyle, she fully expected him to look as shabby as the house. Never in her life could she have imagined Mr. Raif Manning looking like this. Those tabloid photos didn't do him justice.

She started to feel a bit self-conscious as his inviting green eyes gave her an intense once-over. Maybe if he wasn't so gorgeous she wouldn't have minded, but here he was, well over six feet tall, that Stetson pushed back on his head revealing a mass of raven curls. A firm, totally male body was clothed in a red and black plaid shirt and blue jeans that might as well have been made of latex. Scuffed black leather boots completed the breathtaking view before her.

Somehow he didn't fit in with the chaos and grime around him. Sarah swallowed hard.

It was she who finally broke the intense surveillance. "I'm Sarah Collins." She aimed to keep her voice clear and steady.

\*

Raif stood there in disbelief. This was nothing like the mental picture he'd created of her. He expected a tall, willowy beauty with her nose held high in the air. Instead, Sarah Collins was more than generously curved, and in all the right places. His gaze dipped to the front of her white blouse and he felt his dick knock against his zipper. Her breasts were full and her nipples tight. He realized it was probably the air-conditioning causing the erotic effect, but he didn't care and certainly appreciated the view.

Her pale blond hair and dove-gray eyes gave her an almost fragile look, but the hard set of her chin and pursed lips told him she could be a real bitch when she wanted to.

Common sense finally kicked in. *Remember, she's the enemy. Keep your mind off your libido, get the papers signed, and get her out of here, pronto.* Raif blinked back to reality. "You're Sarah?" He aimed for a tone of gruffness and prayed he made his mark.

"Otherwise known as the wicked witch." She gave a flat smile.

Raif let out a little cough. "Seems you've already been talking to the boys." He turned back to his chore of putting tops on the sandwiches, not offering an apology for his remark.

When his task was finished, he turned around, leaned against the pink and blue counter that was chipped and pockmarked in several hundred places, hooking his thumbs in the front belt loops of his jeans. He settled his expression into a mask of complete indifference. "So you finally managed to make an appearance? One that's three months overdue, I might add." Remembering his manners, he offered her a seat at the yellow Formica table.

She took up one of the torn chairs and met his gaze straight on. "Well, I'm here now."

Raif didn't like the look he saw in those icy gray eyes.

## Chapter Two

Sarah admitted that his slight drawl, softened by years of city life, only added to his virility and sent shivers down her spine. She squeezed her thighs together, but that just managed to get her more worked up. Simply looking at this man put her lust on a high flame that was quickly boiling over.

*And you'd better put a lid on those hormones,* she warned herself. She detested false charm and sweet-talk—although she expected sweet-talk would be the last thing she'd have to worry about under these circumstances.

"Call me Raif." He flicked invisible lint from his left shoulder. "Got the papers signed yet?"

Sarah let out a soft snort, sliding her black leather briefcase onto the table. Sunlight streamed in through the window behind her, glinting off the three gold letters of her initials. She felt hypnotized by the gleam for a moment before turning her head to face him. "Oh please! You don't think I'm that stupid, do you?" His hard gaze met hers, one black brow raised high over one jade-colored eye. Sarah ignored the mute implication.

"As I said during our phone conversation, I will sign over guardianship once I am certain the children have a stable and loving environment. While I haven't made up my mind in the stable or loving category since I don't even know you, I can certainly see for myself this is no place to raise children." She looked around the kitchen that was only slightly less grimy than the living room. "This place makes an unkempt stable look immaculate."

He didn't so much as blink an eye. "A woman used to speaking her mind." His tone was snide.

"I'd be lying if I said this place looked like the Beverly Hilton, and I'd be crazy to hand over guardianship of my nephews and niece to a man I don't even know—especially after finding this." She held an upturned palm to the house around her.

Mr. Manning seemed to be mulling something over as he stood there staring at her. His feet crossed at the ankles, both arms folded over his chest, causing the material of his shirt to strain over his biceps. Sarah yearned to have just a peek at what she was sure was a rock hard, perfect body hiding beneath all of those clothes. She could just imagine him doing about a thousand pushups ... over her naked body.

What was the matter with her? Ever since she arrived she'd done nothing but let her mind run rampant with this man.

Oh, well. She gave in to her lust filled brain, allowing herself the luxury to fantasize. Only fantasize. She had a feeling that once she married Paul, fantasizing would be all she'd have. Romance was low on his list of priorities. Passion wasn't even on it.

"Name your price." His thick brows bent fiercely.

"Excuse me?" Sarah was taken aback by his suddenly harsh attitude. She had quickly grown accustomed to the cool air he'd projected for the past few minutes. So he has a temper, too? She added a few points to the Unfit-Caretaker list.

"Come on, Miss Collins, everyone has their price. You don't give a rat's ass about those kids." He jerked his head in the direction where the boys could be heard playing outside.

In three angry strides he was right in front of her. Sarah fought the urge to shrink away at his fierceness. "You're just here checking things out so you won't feel guilty leaving them in my custody when you go back to your fancy condo and plush life. How much will it take for you to give me those papers and leave us be?" He ripped his hat off his head, slammed it down on the table in front of her then bent down, his face even with hers as he looked into her eyes. His tone was low and edged with steel as he said, "Name ... your ... price."

Sarah pasted on a look she hoped was as intimidating as Mr. Manning's and glared right back at him, their noses nearly touching. "I assure you I have no interest in your money."

"No?" He backed off, just a little, looking as though he didn't believe her. She affirmed his question with a shake of her head. Now he looked totally baffled.

He stood upright and turned away from her, hands on his lean hips, gazing up at the ceiling for several seconds. Sarah looked up in the area he seemed to find so fascinating, but only saw a gray, sticky cobweb hanging down, fluttering in the breeze from the air conditioner.

When he turned to face her again, he seemed to have recovered his steely air.

"Then what the hell are you doing here, lady? It's obvious you're making decisions on first impressions. I bet you even have a little list made up in your mind with two categories: good and bad. You probably add checkmarks to it as you go along." He started to imitate her, raising his rich voice a few octaves as he said, "Oh, oh, the house is a mess, that's one more checkmark in the bad category. Now he's bribing me, I'd better add another. No, make it two bad marks."

"Come now, Mr. Manning." Sarah let out a little cough, trying to hide her extreme dismay at this man's ability to see right through her. "I'm not as bad as all that." His only answer was a low snort as he dropped himself in the chair across from her looking like a sulking child.

"Okay." Sarah threw up her hands and leaned against the back of the chair. Even she was wondering what she was doing here. What had she hoped to accomplish? To walk in and find everything neat and tidy, the kids in their Sunday best, then she'd sign the papers, confident that the children had the best home possible? Unfortunately, it wasn't working out that way. Not by a long shot. "Let's be honest here, shall we?"

"The stage is all yours, ma'am." He leaned way back in his chair, balancing on the two back legs, crossing his arms in front of him. Sarah hoped he'd fall on his butt.

She got up and started pacing across the worn linoleum in her stocking feet. Her three-inch pumps were abandoned underneath the table. She hated wearing high heels but needed all the help her diminutive height could get.

Back and forth she treaded over the floor, formulating her next move. She didn't want to appear the wicked witch he had labeled her, and thought honesty was the best policy in this case. "First of all, I'm sorry for not contacting you or showing up sooner—" He interrupted her with another one of his low snorts. "Please," Sarah stopped and looked at him, "let me finish. I'm not proud of ignoring your letters and phone calls, but I lost my only sister and it came as a pretty heavy blow."

"I lost my brother. Those kids lost their folks. Do you think that hurt any less?" The challenging spark was in his eyes again.

Biting on her bottom lip, Sarah averted her gaze. "No," she softly replied. The



haunted look in his eyes made her stop and ponder his pain, but she quickly abandoned the feeling. She couldn't let him get to her. She needed to stay objective.

Sarah looked at him and said as calmly as she could, "The last thing I heard, the kids were staying with your sister and her husband. I thought they'd do well with them." She lifted her shoulders in a small shrug. "I don't want to disrupt their lives any more than they already have been, but when the lawyer contacted me about shared guardianship and said they were staying with you now—"

"You thought you'd stop on by and check things out."

"Of course!" She buckled her courage around her like a lifejacket, holding on for dear life. This man seemed to be able to knock her emotions off their steady ship and right into a stormy ocean every time she blinked. She'd never come up against anyone so ... so ... untamed as Raif Manning. All the people she had ever been around were quiet and polite. Her father, silent and surly. Her mother, before her death, soft and obedient. Even her relationship with Paul never went beyond an occasional mild tiff. But Sarah had never been one to back down. If someone pushed her, she pushed back harder. Raif Manning was pushing her about as far as she wanted to go without resorting to anything physical.

"To be truthful, I wouldn't be the best parent at this time in my life, but that doesn't mean I'm just going to turn over my half of custody." She stood as near him as she dared, hands lightly laced in front of her to keep them from fidgeting. It didn't work. She found a loose thread on one of her jacket buttons and started pulling on it.

"I have to be certain the kids are in good hands and that they have a proper living environment." The pearl button fell off and bounced across the floor, landing under Mr. Manning's chair. Sarah's eyes followed the button then rose to his dark gaze. She left the button where it was. "When I'm satisfied, I'll go back to my fancy condo in California, and you'll be the children's legal guardian."

Sarah saw him smile slightly at her last statement and felt a tug in the area of her heart. The glimmer of hope and love was a positive sign, she told herself, and mentally chalked up another good point for the man.

Mr. Manning slid his chair back, picked up the tiny button, and walked over to her, looking down into her eyes with a smirk. "You're right, you don't want my money. Your perfume smells as expensive as your skirt and jacket look. Daddy's sweetheart with an open bank account you tap into whenever the whim strikes you." He took her hand and placed the button there, closing her fingers around it. "Lay it on the line, little lady. How long do I have to pass this test of yours?"

Sarah balked at his words. The way he said it made her sound like a first-class bitch. She snatched her hand away from his, tucking the button in her jacket pocket. "As long as it takes. A few days. A week." Sarah took a step backward, needing some space, but Mr. Manning moved forward. She moved back again and he brought himself uncomfortably near her once more. They continued this until the small of Sarah's back hit the edge of the counter. She felt trapped, ready to bolt for the door and race right back home. Instead, she stayed put, trying to look unbothered by his words and his nearness.

"What do I have to do to satisfy you?" He was unbearably close, his body heat mingling with her own until Sarah felt she would melt into a puddle at his feet. And his words, as harsh and innocent as they were, had her blood surging hot through her veins and dampness forming between her thighs. A million ways he could satisfy her bubbled

in her brain, none having to do with the subject they were on.

Sarah ultimately avoided his gaze. "Well," she began, clearing her mind of the sensual thoughts slipping in and out. "It shouldn't be too hard to find out how the boys feel about you, as well as discovering your character for myself, but this place is certainly not suitable—"

"I'm not moving to another place just because you find the accommodations lacking, if that's what you're implying," Raif interrupted.

"Then hire a maid! Or better yet a bulldozer!" Sarah grew frustrated. This was turning out much harder than she had at first thought. Debbie never talked about Raif much, probably because his visits were few and far between. She had expected a country bumpkin with hay between his ears who would just go with the flow of her visit, or a civilized man who could understand her concern for the children. What she encountered was a fire-snorting bull who had come out fighting the second she stepped foot in the ring.

"Sorry, Peaches, no maid." He stepped to his left and grabbed some glasses from an overhead cupboard, setting them on the counter. "I don't like strangers in my home." He shot her a look that clearly said she was included in the category. "And I think demolition is a little harsh."

"Then you'd better learn what a broom and mop are, real quick." Her fists were planted on her hips. "There's no way I'm going to let those kids live in such utter filth."

Mr. Manning ignored her as he went to the refrigerator and extracted a pitcher of lemonade, pouring some into each of the four glasses. After handing Sarah one, he propped himself against the counter just a few feet from where she stood and took a few swallows from his glass before saying, "Let me tell you a couple of things." He finished off the lemonade and set the empty glass down. "First off, nobody who wants to see the sun rise the next morning better tell me what to do. Second, I just bought this house. The kids and I have been staying with my sister. Little Jenny's over there now. I've been moving stuff in here little-by-little. I had the boys come along to help me out today. In case you hadn't noticed, the place needs some work." He seemed to be smothering a grin.

Sarah's mouth hung open. "Why didn't you tell me this to begin with? Why did you let me go on about the condition of the house when you hadn't even been staying here?" She felt like an idiot.

He walked to the small table, reached for his Stetson and dropped it on his head, looking thoroughly satisfied. "Didn't want to interrupt the roll you were on." Now he was grinning.

Several oaths sat perched on her tongue, but she refused to sound them out loud, as was habit. To this day her father was still emotionally rock-hard and stone-cold. A man who only spoke when necessary, which had usually been to lecture her and Debbie about something they'd done or would surely end up doing. Sarah learned long ago to stay out of trouble and keep her mouth shut, though Mr. Manning was making it extremely difficult.

She watched as he went to the back door, calling for the boys through yet another shredded screen. A moment later Tommy came scampering in, Chris lagging behind, tossing her a hateful look as they sat down at the table and Raif placed their lunch before them.

"Eat up, kids." He ruffled Tommy's hair before directing his attention to Sarah. "Let's

go into the living room while the boys eat," he suggested, walking in the said direction.

Sarah followed, grabbing her briefcase as she passed the table, unable to look at the boys as they purposely ignored her. When she entered the living room, the man sitting so casually on the plum-colored sofa immediately snared her gaze, his booted feet propped up on the polished table before him. He'd opened one of the curtains and daylight poured through the dirty windows. Sarah watched as sunshine sliced through the dust spiraling around the room.

"Take a load off," he offered as she stood uncertainly in the middle of the room. With a flick of his wrist he took off his Stetson and tossed it on the table, running a hand through the springy curls on his head.

"Thanks," Sarah muttered, sitting on the opposite couch, wondering what it would be like to feel those curls between her fingers ... and her legs. She set her briefcase down on the table and wished she still had that glass of lemonade she'd left in the kitchen as her mouth kept going dry. She blamed it on nerves at being in this uncomfortable situation, denying that a good part of it had to do with Raif Manning.

She watched as he leaned forward, tense again as he said, "Okay, Peaches, this is your show. You've got me in the palm of your pretty little hand right now. I want those kids." His tone was tinged with desperation. "You make the rules and I'll follow them, if that's what'll make you happy. You want me to move the kids out of this place," he lifted his shoulders in a careless shrug, "I'll do it." He leaned back once again, laying one booted foot upon the opposite knee, hands folded in his lap, deceptively serene.

"Don't call me peaches." It was an order, not a request. "And there's no need to go to such extremes." Sarah sat back, gauging what his reaction to her ultimatum would be.

At least the boys were in the next room in case he tried to strangle her with those huge hands of his. She felt her insides drop to her toes, figuring the kids would probably help him out in disposing of her body.

"As I was saying, now that I know you recently purchased this place—why you would do such a thing is a complete mystery to me—I intend to stick around long enough to watch you start to get it in shape and see the quality of care you intend to provide for the children." With her last words she hiked her chin up a few degrees, feeling very proud of herself for not flinching once during her spiel, especially with the evil look he was bestowing upon her at the moment. She inwardly shivered, mutely scratching another black mark on Raif Manning's list. Just that look alone deserved at least five!

Mr. Manning got to his feet and strode the short distance over to her. "You've got yourself a deal, only I've got one little stipulation to this plan of yours." A wicked fire lit up his eyes.

Sarah was afraid to ask, so she answered him with a stiff comeback as she looked up at him. "I don't see as how you're in any position to be adding stipulations to my requirements, Mr. Manning. You're the one caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, if you want to know the truth."

"We either compromise or I toss you out on your ass and I'll see you in court, Peaches," he said tightly between clenched teeth. "Who do you think the judge will give guardianship to?" He bent down, placing his palms flat on the cushions on either side of Sarah, his face mere inches from hers. "Their uncle who's been taking care of them for the past few months, treating them like his own, trying to create a loving environment for them? Or their aunt who's seen them exactly two times in their lives, *and* who ignored all

of my letters and phone calls up until last week?"

Guilt swam through Sarah, and tears burned her throat at his brusque and all-too-true words, but she refused to back down. One brow shot up and a waspish smile tipped her lips. "And who do you think the judge will give guardianship to? Their aunt who has a stable life and who will be married come next June, or their uncle, the globetrotter and notorious Casanova?" She saw the look of shock in his eyes before he quickly concealed it and stood upright, thrusting his hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

"I see you keep up to date on the tabloids."

"Please, don't tell me they're all lies. You're well known for your itchy feet and wandering eye. One model on your arm this week, another model the next." Sarah felt a sense of power pump through her blood.

She watched as he unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirtsleeves and rolled them up three times, revealing muscular forearms. He looked like he was readying himself for a fight.

If so, she was dead meat.

"Oh, they aren't lies," he admitted. "Highly exaggerated, but true to a point."

Sarah batted her eyelashes. "So you don't date high-school girls, after all?" Her voice was honey-rich and one hundred percent provoking.

He sucked in a sharp breath, nostrils flaring. "Look, we're getting way off the subject here. I said I accepted your ultimatum. All I want to do is add one stipulation to it."

"What is it?" Sarah felt completely deflated and totally adolescent for her outburst. For some odd reason this man got under her skin. He was too handsome, and she was sure he knew it. She *had* read every story ever printed about the man. Though he was touted as the most spectacular photographer of his time, he'd had more women in his past than Don Juan and Valentino combined. Strange as it was, the knowledge burned her up. The kids needed stability, not their uncle bringing in strange women night after night to share his bed, although she hadn't seen a single story in any tabloid or magazine for at least a year or more. Maybe he was simply being more discreet.

"If you're so fired-up about playing social worker then you're going to see firsthand just how the kids and I get along. I want you to stay here." He pointed at the floor.

Sarah gulped. Being here, in this grungy place, with this gorgeous man and three kids? All she wanted to do was get back home to California, to Paul, and settle back down into her everyday routine. "No thanks. I'll stay at a local hotel and pop in every day."

Mr. Manning let out a breath of disgust and took his original spot on the other sofa. He stretched his arms out along the back, the look on his face satisfied. "I knew you couldn't handle it."

"What are you talking about?" Sarah feigned ignorance, sitting forward, hands on her knees.

"You're nothing but a spoiled, pampered brat."

It was Sarah who jumped to her feet this time. "You'd better watch your tongue, Raif Manning!" She shook her finger at him just like Sister Mary Margaret, her 5th grade teacher, used to do whenever Sarah talked back.

"Am I lying?" He stood now, the coffee table separating them. "You'd rather kick back in some fancy hotel with room service than actually have to spend the night in my pig sty. Don't worry, I wouldn't ask you to actually help out with the housework or kids." Raif took one of her hands looking at the French manicure she'd just had days before.

"Heaven knows I wouldn't want you to break a nail. I bet that'd ruin your whole week."

"Why you...!" Sarah attempted to snatch her hand back so she could slap him, but he circled her wrist with his thumb and forefinger, preventing her from accomplishing the task.

He skirted the table and stepped toward her. "Prove me wrong then, Sarah." His face was mere inches from hers, his eyes challenging.

Sarah's breath caught in her lungs when he said her name. And the way he'd just spoken the words, not harsh or taunting, but in a low, petal-soft whisper, ignited a spark deep inside her. For a moment she was lost in those eyes of his. Not the wintry blue of Paul's cool eyes, but jade green eyes with flecks of gold. Wicked eyes. Eyes that made her think of sweaty sex and erotic fantasies come true.

"All right, Mr. Manning." She managed to find her voice and her senses. He released her wrist and Sarah rubbed it to get the circulation back. "You've got yourself a deal. It's quite obvious you won't be the only one proving yourself here." The remark was grim.

His brows rose high. "How's that?"

"You and the children have preconceived notions about me. They think I'm some horrible woman who's come to take them away from you, and you think I'm a spoiled, pampered brat." When he didn't deny the accusations, Sarah's jaw tensed. "Not only will I stay here in your ... lovely home, but I will also pitch in with the children and the housework."

Sarah watched as his lips began to twitch and he smothered a grin. "This I've *got* to see. You're telling me you actually know a thing or two about kids and housekeeping?"

"A thing or two." Sarah's heart thudded at the lie.

He didn't look convinced, but said, "How long you figure you'll be staying?"

"Long enough to help you out, and for myself to be satisfied."

Another grin threatened those sexy lips of his. Sarah's heart beat double-time now. "Don't worry, Peaches, I've never had problems satisfying a woman before. I don't expect this time to be any different."

He deserved a swift kick for that Neanderthal comment, but Sarah felt an infuriating smile creeping over her lips. Had she ever felt so alive and so frustrated before meeting this man? Raif Manning was the monkey wrench in her perfectly running gears. He was the run in her stockings. She had a fiancé to get back to. A wedding to plan. She knew she'd regret accepting his little stipulation, but found herself saying, "Just keep your hands to yourself and we'll do okay, Mr. Manning."

"The name's Raif, and I'll keep my hands anywhere you ask me to."

"Look, Mr. Manning." Sarah was tired, hungry, and her patience wearing thin. "I'll have you know I'm engaged to be married next June, so don't get any wild ideas about turning your charm on and attempting to seduce me into signing those papers. It won't work."

"Don't you worry, Peaches. I prefer my women a tad taller and not quite so feisty." He reached down to the table and put his Stetson on again, tilting it forward so his eyes were shadowed.

"Don't call me peaches." Her words were less harsh than she had aimed for. She couldn't help feeling a little dejected by his comment, but was grateful she wouldn't have to be fighting off his advances while staying here. Not that it would have been a problem

in the first place. She was, after all, spoken for by another man. That aside, Raif Manning ticked her off.

"Well then, since that's all out in the air and settled, maybe you'd like to show me where I'll be sleeping for the time being." She rubbed her hands together briskly, trying to look eager, feeling way out of her element. Why did she have to be so stubborn? The kids had a caretaker. She should just sign over the papers and be done with it.

But she couldn't. Deep in her heart she had to be certain Raif was capable of caring for the children. Two older boys were one thing, but what about the baby? Along with this, she felt she had something to prove to Raif Manning. And herself. He viewed her as a woman who couldn't boil water without burning it, much less make it in the real world.

A time or two she'd thought the same about herself. Always having money, never struggling with bills or putting food on the table. Never having had a real job because she didn't need to work. Didn't need to clean her house or cook her meals. Still, Sarah Collins never backed down from a challenge. This would be the biggest and most important she'd ever faced.

She suddenly felt woozy and had a sinking feeling she'd forever regret her decision to stay here. She was sure she could handle hard work and kids—she hoped—it was men she had trouble with. Which is one reason she was marrying Paul. He was reliable and oh, so predictable. *Safe*.

Like most women, she craved love, commitment, trust. The rest of the world seemed to thrive on one-night stands and casual affairs. Raif Manning was a perfect example of that lifestyle. Paul was as loyal as a man could be. They had been dating a month before he even attempted to kiss her. Half a year before they made love. There hadn't been any fireworks. No rockets had gone off. Sarah was glad of the fact. After her disastrous relationship with Jason, she'd take mutual respect and quiet comfort over wild nights between the sheets and knowing her partner was not coming home late every night because he couldn't control his hormones and was sleeping with every woman who struck his fancy.

Paul was prompt, courteous, and her father loved him—and his money. She trusted Paul and he trusted her.

But as her blood pulsed quick and strong with every heartbeat at the mere sight of Mr. Manning, she wasn't so sure she could trust herself now.

### Chapter Three

Of all the smart-mouthed women Raif had known, this one took the prize. He had a feeling he'd be biting his tongue clean through before she left.

Keeping his mind on the desired outcome of him getting custody of the kids and not her prickly persona, he let go of his irritation. She wouldn't be here forever. "Did you bring your stuff in?"

"Chris brought in my suitcase."

Raif started toward the kitchen and heard Sarah following him. Remains of the boys' lunch sat on the table. Bread crusts were scattered on and around the plates while a puddle of lemonade inched its way toward the edge of the table.

"Hungry?" Raif surrendered to the situation. "I've got some extra sandwiches. I'll take you to the spare room when we're done." He grabbed a paper towel and wiped up the liquid, watching under his lashes as Sarah visibly relaxed.

She let out a sigh. "As a matter of fact, I am."

He silently set a sandwich and more lemonade in front of her then sat down and started in on his own lunch.

For the next few minutes Raif watched as she picked at her lone sandwich while he gobbled down three. He made small-talk, all the while trying to figure the woman out. One moment she'd be sassing at him, acting high-and-mighty, and the next she'd go all quiet and doe-eyed, looking small and soft and vulnerable. She confused him. She also made him hot—under the collar and in his jeans.

But ... although he liked puzzles, there was no way he'd risk getting the kids just for a romp in the hay!

Once lunch was over, Raif got up and cleared the dishes, putting them in the sink to soak along with the others. "You sure didn't eat much," he said while chomping on the rest of her sandwich. "If you keep it up much longer you'll shrivel up and blow away."

"I guess I wasn't hungry after all." She didn't look at him.

"Missing your fiance?" His tone mocked her.

Sarah's chin shot up. "As a matter of fact, yes. He's been away for a few weeks taking care of business in France. He's due back next Thursday."

"Next Thursday," he repeated. Raif hoped she'd be long gone by then. That still gave him at least a week with her in his home, though. He grimaced inwardly. He'd rather play host to a case of the bubonic plague.

"Well then," he dropped the dishcloth he used to wipe off the table, "let me show you where you'll be beddin' down and what needs to be done around here, since you're so willing to help out and all." He grinned right at her, motioning for her to follow.

"From the looks of this place, *everything* needs to be done," she commented before tripping over an army action figure.

Raif caught her by the arm, preventing her from sprawling to the floor. "Yeah, I guess you're right." A soft smile came to his lips. "To tell you the truth, it's in a lot worse shape than I first thought. Something about this place called to me, though." The smile slowly faded as he looked into her eyes. "Did you ever see something and knew you had to have it no matter the cost?" His blood caught fire, creating a slow burn deep in his

belly that quickly spread to his dick.

She ignored his last question and chose to comment on the condition of the house. "Nothing a little elbow grease, soap, and water won't fix." Her voice came out on a choked whisper.

"Oh, it'll take more than that." He looked down at his tanned hand wrapped around her upper arm before meeting her eyes again. "At least I've got some help now." He rubbed his thumb back and forth, wondering what her skin felt like beneath the peach fabric barrier.

"Thanks." She stood up, regaining her physical balance.

"My pleasure." His voice slid out raw and husky, but Raif quickly cleared his throat and mind of the erotic scenes consuming him as he caught the delicate scent of her perfume. "What's say we commence with the tour?" He reluctantly let her go.

"Show me the way, Mr. Manning."

"Call me Raif," he lightly commanded. "Mr. Manning sounds so impersonal." He then turned to lead the way once more.

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*Mr. Manning it will stay then*, Sarah told herself. The more impersonal their short relationship, the better. She followed him down the long hallway, admiring his taut behind all the way, and hating herself for it.

As he walked two strides ahead, Sarah noticed he had a slight limp. She wondered what had happened in his past to cause such an injury. Compassion pricked at her for a second but was quickly replaced with disapproval. He probably acquired it during some daredevil stunt meant to impress whatever woman he was after at the time. She could just imagine him bungee jumping or skiing down a widow-maker, just to show off his machismo and win a woman's admiration.

It would be a lot easier if they could remain formal and distant. She'd do her job while she was here, he'd do his. Or at least if he was an older and less attractive man, then she wouldn't have any problems. But there was a big problem. Raif Manning was handsome and stubborn. And being just as stubborn, she'd now gotten herself in the position of promising to stay here and help out with housework and childcare just to prove to this frustrating man that she wasn't the helpless, spoiled brat he'd labeled her.

"Here it is." He stopped, opening the door in front of him, revealing a quaint but extremely dusty room. "It'll take some work to clean it up, but it's all yours while you're here. Seeing as how you're such a whiz at housework, I'm sure you can perform some magic." He leaned lazily against the doorjamb, looking down at her through long, dark lashes, his Stetson settled low on his forehead.

"I'm afraid I forgot to bring my magic wand, but I'll see what I can do." She was sure there was some very lovely furniture in here ... somewhere. Her suitcase was the only object in the room that wasn't covered with a layer of grime.

"Take your time. The house didn't get this way overnight. It's been vacant for a while. I'm not expecting any miracles." He draped a long arm across her shoulders. "A little more than you expected?" Not a hint of apology tinted his voice.

"Yeah, to tell the truth." The condition of the house was a whole lot more than she had expected, but Raif Manning himself went beyond that. "I'm sure I can handle it though," she said to Raif in regards to the house, and to herself in regards to the man hanging on her shoulder. "I'm not one to give up easily."



"Glad to hear it." His lips tipped up at the corners. Sarah could only interpret the gesture as pure satisfaction. She couldn't put her finger on it, but she had a strange feeling that she'd been had.

At that moment Chris and Tommy came running into the house, screaming and shouting and traipsing mud all over the carpet—though she was sure it wouldn't show. Tommy came barreling right into her side as his brother chased him, sending her straight into Raif's powerful arms, and only inches from his sensual lips. Both children continued their game by running back outside, howling like a pack of wolves.

"You can still back out, you know." A warning look sizzled in his eyes. "There'll be a lot more of this."

A small shiver traveled up Sarah's spine as she wondered whether he was referring to the children, or himself. "I'm here to stay," she said, trying to muster up every ounce of courage to face the long haul ahead.

Raif propped her back up into a standing position. "You sure? It's not too late to sign those papers."

She frowned up at the man towering over her. "Not on your life."

He pressed his lips into a tight line before saying, "Suit yourself."

Sarah looked down at her skirt and the two big mud stains and felt like strangling the little runt—it was her best outfit!—but quelled her anger. It wouldn't be proper to kill her own nephew, especially when she was the one putting Raif Manning's suitability as a guardian under a microscope. Besides, she really liked children ... when she didn't have to take care of them.

She'd only babysat once in her adult life. Never before or since, either. She had watched her neighbor's daughter while she went to take her son to the hospital for stitches after he fell off the dresser and hit his head on the corner of the night stand. What he had been doing up on a dresser in the first place she never did find out, but she had watched over Tiffany for three agonizing hours. Sarah was convinced she was the most active five-year-old on the earth.

Sarah had thought it would be fun. Two girls together. They could do their hair, try on makeup, and microwave some brownies. Instead, she had spent those three hours keeping Tiffany out of everything, rescuing her expensive vases and statuettes from the child's slippery little fingers.

After Tiffany had left, her house looked like a hurricane had hit it and she felt like she'd been run over by a garbage truck. Never again had she volunteered to baby sit. She could only imagine what a week around three children would be like.

But it was only a week, probably less. Then she'd get back to the quiet comforts of her own home and planning her wedding. Keeping this in mind made it easier to work up some courage. "Why don't I change before starting in?"

"Sure thing." Raif started to walk away but stopped, turning back to her. "I almost forgot. I need to pick up a few things at the store. There's not much food around here. Got any suggestions?" Sarah knew he was testing her. He probably thought she didn't know a potato from a pork chop, and believed she couldn't cook either one.

Sarah laughed to herself at the obvious trap. "Why don't I make out a list for you? Got a pad and pencil?" She was certain she could come up with a few suggestions. She had always gone grocery shopping with her mother when she was younger and later on with Debbie, who was a dynamo in the kitchen, though none of her culinary skills had

rubbed off on Sarah. Debbie had been the one to inherit the homemaking genes after her terrible-teens had dissipated. Being six years older than Sarah, Debbie had taken over the household duties when their mother passed away. That had been a big role for her sister to fill at fifteen, though she did a good job of it.

"Sure. Sit tight." With long, easy strides he walked down the hall and was back in less than a minute. "Here you go." He eyed her with great scrutiny.

"Thanks," Sarah mumbled and went to sit on the bed, aware of his intense gaze on her. As she made out a simple shopping list, all she could think about was the way his fingers had brushed lightly over hers when he handed her the items. The effect this man had on her was most distracting. Every time he touched her it seemed to leave a blazing brand behind. Every time he looked at her something stirred deep inside.

Paul. Keep thinking of Paul. Sarah decided to welcome him back home with a special dinner ordered from his favorite Thai restaurant. Maybe some candles and soft music. It had been months since they'd done anything remotely romantic.

After writing and erasing many times, and wearing down both ends of the pencil, she finally had the list down: fruits, vegetables, meat, and other necessary things she had seen Debbie and her mother bring home from the store. What she would do with them once Raif brought the groceries home she wasn't sure, but she would muddle through somehow.

"This should get us by for awhile." Sarah handed him the list, thankful that their fingers didn't touch this time. Still, she found herself wondering what it would feel like having his fingertips caress her naked body before swirling over her most intimate areas and bringing her to climax. She was grateful she'd never find out. A man like Raif could send a woman into dark despair and heartache once he'd had what he was after and had left quicker than she could put her clothes back on after their romp in bed.

Glancing at the scrap of paper and raising an eyebrow in disbelief, Raif tucked it into his shirt pocket and started out the door once more. "Be right back. Don't ever lose that sense of humor, Peaches." He stopped just over the threshold to turn and look straight at her, then winked and was gone from sight.

"Don't call me peaches," Sarah whispered, smiling in spite of herself. She knew he meant it as a little dig in regards to her outfit, but his mellow attitude and laid back manner soothed her. He was good for the kids. The knowledge struck her as she sat on the dingy lilac spread, gazing blankly at the equally dusty chest of drawers across from her. She felt it in her bones. Still, she had to see it with her eyes.

Sarah straightened her back and looked squarely in the mirror perched atop the mahogany dresser to her right. "You aren't out of the woods yet, Mr. Manning."

The futures of three children were on the line. She wasn't going to be blindsided by happy crinkles surrounding emerald eyes, and perfect teeth that flashed with every heart-stopping grin. This was for keeps. He couldn't just get rid of the kids when they no longer struck his fancy. He'd probably left more than several women out in the cold over the years whenever he grew bored. She'd be darned if he'd do the same with Chris, Tommy, and Jenny.

Raif Manning had one week to prove that he was capable of and prepared to raise them. She couldn't prevent him from dating women, but if she could observe his parenting skills and how they got along as a family, that would calm her fears for the most part.

While the boys clamored throughout the house, Sarah changed into battle fatigues that consisted of a faded pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She wasn't about to ruin any more of her good clothes cleaning up this disaster area and warding off muddy children.

Just as she was about to start wiping away a few layers of dust covering the dresser so she could set her makeup and toiletries there, a loud pounding on the door and screams of "We're hungry!" quickly banished the thought. Her room would have to wait. Sarah let out a low groan. The battle had just begun.

Opening the door, she was met by two grinning and very dirty faces. Defiance lit up their eyes. Another test.

"What's for supper?" Tommy asked.

"Looks like dirt soup if you ask me," Sarah remarked, wiping some mud off his cheek. "Your uncle went to get some things from the store. We'll eat when he gets back."

"We can't wait that long!" Chris complained.

"Well, you're just going to have to wait." Sarah stood her ground. Canned ravioli was not her idea of a palatable meal—and that was all she had seen in Raif's sparse cupboards.

"We wanna eat! We wanna eat!" They began chanting in unison, stomping their feet for added emphasis. Sarah knew what they were up to. They didn't want her here and were going to make life hell while she was.

"Okay!" She held up her hands in surrender. "I'll make a deal with you." They grew quiet, eyeing her with suspicion. "You get washed up, as in taking a bath, a shower, or fire hose out back, whatever you do around here to get clean, then put on some fresh clothes and I'll have dinner ready when you're finished." Whatever that may be, since the only thing she'd ever mastered in way of cooking was punching the buttons on her microwave.

Cries of protest now filled the room, threatening to burst her eardrums. "Quiet!" No response. *All right, you little hellions, you asked for it.*

Walking over to the bed, she opened the smaller tapestry print suitcase, retrieving a metal whistle suspended by a long, silver chain. Hanging it around her neck, she put the whistle in her mouth and blew for all she was worth. The shrill, earsplitting sound caused instant silence. It was her single-woman's-creep-deterrent.

The boys looked at her wide-eyed as she walked back over to the doorway. "Look, if you kids don't get cleaned up, you don't get dinner. It's up to you," she said firmly.

"Oh, all right." Chris gave in. "Come on." He motioned for Tommy to comply with Sarah's demands and went running off in their assigned directions.

A smile of satisfaction curved Sarah's lips as she walked to the kitchen. She had made it over one hurdle so far, and hoped the remainder of her time here would go along as easily. Yes, she might have won this small battle, but she still had a siege to face.

Opening the refrigerator, her smile faded, seeing that she was faced with the mother of all challenges. Not only was she a dunce in the kitchen, but the refrigerator was completely empty—except for a six-pack of beer and somebody's mold experiment.

Luckily, the cupboards were in a little better shape. Grabbing a can of creamed soup, a box of macaroni and cheese, and—yuck—two cans of tuna, she called upon her imagination and set forth to make a casserole of some sort.

There weren't any vegetables to be found, canned or otherwise. If there were any in the freezer it would continue to remain a mystery since it was a solid block of ice.

"Cooking can't be all that hard," she muttered to herself, filling a pot with water to boil the macaroni in just as the box instructed. She intended to make up the macaroni and cheese and throw in the soup and tuna. *Not* a culinary masterpiece, but it would be better than nothing.

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Raif walked through the front door nearly an hour later. "Sorry I'm late, but—" He stopped in his tracks at the sight before him, nearly dropping the groceries to the floor. Two unrecognizable children were quietly seated around the yellow table, with Sarah in the midst of dishing up the most delicious smelling tuna casserole.

His eyes took in her new state of dress: a pair of jeans that hugged her generous hips and thighs, and a sky blue T-shirt that clung to her upper body like skin on a grape. Her hair was pulled back into a pony tail; a few strands escaped their confinement and framed her face. Raif liked this sexy, casual look. It was hard to believe she was the same stiff, starched, and uptight woman who had invaded his home a few hours ago. "I'm impressed." He strolled over to the counter, setting the bags down.

"It was nothing," Sarah mumbled and started digging through the bags. "Great!" She grabbed a can of string beans and started opening it with the electric can opener. "Just what we need, something green." She looked at Raif, arching her eyebrows. "And I'm not talking about the fuzzy stuff way in the back of the refrigerator."

Raif smiled sheepishly and laughed. "I suppose you've noticed that I haven't gotten much done around here. At my place in New York I'd get by on a lick and a promise. I wasn't home very much. Now I've really got to roll up my shirtsleeves and get to work on this place."

"You think you can handle it all?" Sarah stood at the grimy stove where the remains of several meals that had slopped and boiled over hid the true avocado color beneath.

"I know I can." Raif took a seat opposite the boys, winking at them. Chris sighed, slumping back in his chair. Tommy dug into his food.

Sarah stopped stirring the green beans to look at Raif. "I believe you think you can, but raising three kids is going to be hard. You have to be absolutely sure. This is a lifetime commitment."

The way she'd said her last words burned Raif up. *A lifetime commitment*. In other words, she was insinuating he had no idea what a long term commitment was like because of his notorious past that followed him around like a pesky shadow.

"I told you, Sarah," his voice was low and harsh. "I'm wiser now, older. And I'm damn well smart enough to know what I want and what it involves." His temper thickened his drawl as he pointed at her with his fork.

Sarah remained silent while turning off the stove and taking the saucepan over to the table. After dishing up the food she poured the freshly bought milk into each glass.

"What's with the whistle?" Raif asked after taking a drink of his.

"I used it to keep the kids in line while you were gone."

"Just like a drill sergeant." He laughed. "I should've thought of that!" She sat there looking at him with an unreadable expression on her face and Raif couldn't tear his gaze away. Her eyes traced his lips as he ran his tongue over them, tasting the remains of milk. She bit on her bottom lip and Raif nearly fell out of his chair. He made a groaning noise in the back of his throat.

"Oh, jeez," Chris said with disgust, shoving his chair back from the table. "I'm not

hungry anymore." He flashed Sarah with a look that Raif could only describe as hate. "Can I go now?"

"Sure," Raif said softly. "You guys sleep in my room tonight. We didn't have a chance to clean yours up today." All eyes landed on Sarah, who was viewing them with pain on her face.

"Whatever," Chris remarked and started to leave the room.

When he got to the doorway leading into the living room Sarah said, "I'm not the enemy, Chris. I only want what's best for the three of you."

The boy spun around and faced her, fury twisting his young face and tears burning in his gray eyes. "Then why don't you leave us alone? We were fine until you showed up. We don't want you here. We don't need you. Uncle Raif is doing a damn good job of taking care of us!"

"Hey now, son." Raif got to his feet. Things were getting out of hand. "That's no way to speak to a lady."

"It's okay." Sarah rose also. Tommy watched the scene before him, half amusement and half fear on his face. "He's upset, and rightfully so." She walked the few feet over to where Chris stood. "I'm sure Raif is taking wonderful care of you kids."

"How would you know?" His hands were bunched into fists at his sides. He reached up to swipe at a tear that spilled. "You don't know us, you don't know Uncle Raif, and we don't know you! We don't want to know you. I just want you to go away!" He turned and ran from the room.

"He's right," Sarah said softly when Raif walk up behind her. "I don't know any of you. And they don't know me." She turned and faced him. "Maybe I should just sign the papers over and leave." She glanced at Tommy as he went sidling by, following the path his brother had taken into Raif's room.

"Is that what you want?" Raif couldn't help the relief swirling through him. If she left he wouldn't have to swallow his pride and prove anything to her. He wouldn't have to fight off this unexpected rush of erotic thoughts that had started bombarding him the second he had turned around and found her standing in his kitchen. He and the kids could get on with their lives.

Then again, he'd feel as if he'd been given an easy way out. He wanted to prove to Miss Priss that he was capable of raising the children. That he'd laid his wild past behind him.

Mostly, he wanted to find out what type of woman lay beneath that stern and snooty cover of hers. A few times, such as now, she had let her vulnerable side show and it did something strange to his insides. Like a slow IV, her presence started a trickle of emotion flowing through his veins, and he wondered if it was just physical desire, or if there was something more to it.

Sarah smiled up at him then. Only slightly. "Oh no, Mr. Manning, you aren't getting away with it that easy." She squared her shoulders. "You've got yourself a houseguest."

Raif did his best to hide his chagrin and eagerness at having her stay. "Not a houseguest, Sarah. You offered to pitch in, remember?" His low sitting Stetson hid his eyes once more. He did it on purpose. With his eyes hidden his emotions were unreadable. His thoughts masked to her. He wanted to keep it that way.

"That I did." She gave a tight smile. "I wouldn't dream of disappointing you."

"Peaches, you could never be a disappointment," Raif drawled, giving her chin a tap

with his knuckles.

With that, Raif ambled down the hallway and to his room where the boys had gone. "Don't call me peaches!" she called after him. Raif laughed and continued on his way.

## Chapter Four

An hour later Sarah walked out of the kitchen sipping a cup of coffee. She had seen Raif make the pot before putting the kids to bed. He had then carried a steaming mug with him out to the barn. In his absence she had taken the opportunity to shower and now felt worlds better.

Donning another pair of jeans and a T-shirt, she stood at the threshold of her bedroom. Ever since Chris' outburst, she had felt somber. Not only was he angry with her for disrupting their lives, but he and his brother were also grieving for the loss of their parents. Though it had been two decades ago, she still felt the pain of losing her mother and knew how they must surely feel.

Her father had become even more angry and distant after the funeral. Debbie had never been close to the quiet, brooding man, and she'd stayed as far away from him as possible. Sarah, on the other hand, had done everything in her power to gain his love and praise. She was infinitely grateful that her father and Paul got along so well.

Visions of a man with smoldering emerald eyes and an infectious grin filled her head, and just as quickly she banished the images.

Turning away from the dust and dirt in front of her, she went to retrieve her cell. She'd call her father and let him know she'd arrived okay and would be staying for a few days. Then she'd call Paul. It didn't matter what time it was, she was sure he'd be pleased to hear from her. "If I can find my phone at all," she mumbled to herself, checking the coffee table and both end tables. Where had she put it? She usually carried it in her purse. Going to the room deemed as hers, she checked the white leather bag. Nothing. "Maybe it's in the kitchen." Though she couldn't recall seeing it while she'd been in there.

"You shouldn't talk to yourself like that. It's a sure sign of being crazy." Sarah yelped, turning to see Raif propped against the doorjamb, arms folded across his chest. He gave a hearty laugh, making her forget how he had just scared the pants off her, leaving in its place a happy, warm feeling that curled up and settled inside of her.

"Heck, I'm halfway there already!" She stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes in proof, enjoying the happy aura that surrounded Raif Manning. Mentally, she reached out to grasp the feeling which in the past had often eluded her.

Raif pushed away from the wall and walked closer to her, his laugh softer now. "Lucky for me I fancy crazy women."

Sarah ignored his comment, knowing he was just laying on the charm. He'd been without a woman for a while and was obviously ready to pounce on anything with a pulse. She just happened to be in the vicinity of his overflow of hormones. "I was just looking for my phone but can seem to find it. Do you mind if I borrow yours?" She looked around the room again, still not finding the elusive object.

"I don't mind."

Sarah noticed he smelled like outdoors and fresh, dry grass. She swallowed hard, willing away the erotic mental images his scent filled her with. "Do you mind directing me to it?"

"Sure enough. Just follow the road outside till it forks and make a left till you hit town."

Sarah's chin dropped. "Excuse me?"

"I told you I've only been here a few days. There won't be a phone put in till late next week. If I'm lucky."

"Next week?" Sarah echoed, her heart plunging to her stomach. "What about a cell phone?"

He shook his head. "I stopped carrying it a month ago. The damn thing would go off and interrupt something I was doing around the house or with the kids. If someone wants to talk to me bad enough, they can call me at home and leave a message or send an email. Worse comes to worst they can forward a message through snail-mail."

"Well, then, I'll just have to locate my cell." She turned away from him. "At least one of us lives in the twenty-first century." She hid her frustration at the lack of amenities and anxiety at being in his stifling company and said over her shoulder, "I'll clean up my room and turn in for the night."

"It's a might late to be cleaning your room. There's no way I'll let you sleep in here tonight." Raif stood right behind her, so close she could feel his body heat. Sarah commanded her knees to hold her upright.

She dared to turn and look up at him. Tapping a finger to the deep cleft in his chin he said, "Guess you'll have to sleep in my room tonight."

"I don't think so!" she quickly choked out, taking a step backward and holding a hand over her heart to help ease the panic collecting there. She was attracted to him, yes, but wasn't about to sleep with him!

"No need looking like a stomped on frog. I'll sleep on the couch. Does that sound safe enough?" His velvet smile and warm, inviting eyes settled her mind, making her feel she had nothing to fear, though her heart wasn't so sure of the fact.

She let out a long breath of relief. "But what about the boys? They're using your room for the night. I don't think they'd enjoy sharing their space with a wicked witch." Sarah noted he still didn't apologize for making the comment.

What was it now, ten bad points and twelve good? Or was it the other way around? She let the thought go, knowing it was childish.

"The boys are camping out tonight. While you were in the shower we pitched a tent and got them set up. Nothing like sleeping beneath the stars. During the summer months I'd rarely sleep in the house, preferring to sack out in the backyard with Jimmy." The happy spark of remembrance in his eyes was quickly doused out.

"I'm sure you had some wonderful times." Sarah's voice was soft. She laid a hand on his forearm, feeling a need to comfort. She knew what it was like to grieve. To grieve and have no one to share her pain with. When Debbie had died, her father all but said 'Serves her right for defying me.' Paul had been too busy with business matters to comfort her—as usual.

"No more than yourself and Debbie," was Raif's reply.

He looked down at her and she noticed he was void of his concealing Stetson. Intrigue swam through her as every emotion flickered in those usually shadowed eyes. Grief, sympathy, lust, rejection, anger, joy. They were all there for her to see.

"True," Sarah murmured, looking away. She wasn't comfortable with sharing her feelings; was used to keeping things bottled up. Besides, who wanted to hear it? Though Raif did a good job of pretending to care. "Our parents were strict and we didn't get away with much. You could drop a pin in our house and hear it from the next room." Sarah



went silent. She didn't like revealing memories she'd never shared with anyone.

"Surely you must have had some fun along the years," Raif softly prodded.

Sarah gave a little laugh as she went to the bed and rummaged around in her suitcase. "Once Mom made a boysenberry pie and was saving it for dessert. Debbie got this idea for us to sneak it into the backyard and have just a taste. Fifteen minutes later Mom called us both into the house and asked what had happened to the pie. We both stood there with boysenberry smudged all over our faces and shrugged. Mom didn't buy it, of course, and sent us to our rooms without supper. Debbie and I still laughed whenever one of us brought it up." She sniffed back a tear that threatened to spill.

Raif came up behind her and she mutely urged him to reach out and hold her. Instead, she turned from him and walked back to the doorway with a toothbrush in her hand. "Thanks for letting me borrow your room tonight." Her voice was now cool and steady. "I'll have my room ready by tomorrow."

"Sure enough." Raif didn't push the moment and she was glad. "My room's just down the hall." He thumbed the way. "Make yourself cozy. I'm taking a shower before I turn in, so if you need the bathroom..." She heard his voice trail off as she walked away, needing some distance between them fast.

\*

After brushing her teeth, Sarah went to grab her hairbrush and a nightgown then went straight to Raif's room. Darkness and the scent of his cologne hit her as soon as she opened the door. It was an intoxicating, masculine aroma that set off sparks of longing all over her body. It wasn't quite as potent as the man himself, but it still made her tingle with desire. Completely unwanted and unbidden desire.

Walking over to the simple wood-framed bed and nightstand, she switched on the small chrome lamp sitting there. As her eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, she was surprised to see that his room wasn't in complete shambles.

Sure, the bed was unmade and clothes lay scattered on the floor, but other than that it was much neater than the rest of the house. Evidently he had been spending the nights here recently.

Alone? The completely possessive question popped into her head. She frowned down at the rumpled bed and told herself she couldn't care less if he slept alone or with an entire women's mud wrestling team. Her only concern was for the children. She certainly hoped he wouldn't be bringing in women to spend the night when the kids ultimately came here to stay. Yes, it was pure concern that sparked that loaded question.

After undressing and slipping into a white eyelet nightgown, Sarah picked up her brush, bent over, and began brushing the underside of her hair. She didn't believe in using curlers, blow dryers, and damaging chemicals on her hair, and felt that brushing it one hundred times from the underside twice a day added all the body her fine hair needed.

She heard a knock on the door then bolted upright when it opened. There Raif stood with nothing on except a smile and a towel wrapped around his waist. A very small towel.

Her knees gave out and she fell back onto the bed.

"Do you mind?!"

He raised his eyebrows at her in innocence. "I knocked."

"What if I hadn't been decent?"

"Well, that would have been real embarrassing now, wouldn't it?"

Sarah growled.

Raif chuckled.

He was one sexy man, every muscle in his body taut and perfectly defined. She let her slow gaze take in every inch of him, from his silky smooth chest and firm abdomen, over the concealing towel, and down to his long, sinewy legs. Even his feet were perfect. Paul could never look half as delicious, even if he worked out for a decade. She cringed at the thought. How disloyal a fiancée could one be? She had compared Paul to Raif at least a dozen times since arriving here this afternoon and always found Paul lacking.

"What's wrong? Never seen a man's body before?" He grinned at her.

"Of course, I have!" She forced herself to look away from the luscious sight and went back to the task of brushing her hair, trying to act as if he had no affect on her. She knew it wasn't working though as her hands trembled and she heard Raif's soft laugh at her reaction.

The faint rustling of material drifted to her ears, and she wondered what he was doing. Cautiously turning her head in his direction, she caught the last glimpse of his naked behind as he slipped into a pair of forest green silk pajama bottoms.

"Lord, don't you have any modesty?" she asked.

"Not a shred," was his snappy reply.

Sarah's eyes narrowed. Oh how that man infuriated her! But her irritation quickly dissipated as she acknowledged to herself that ninety-percent of her frustration was due to the fact that she found him so damned attractive.

She knew she had to keep reminding herself this was very temporary and she would be leaving by next week. Keeping that in mind, she would be less tempted to do something stupid, like crawl into bed with him.

Anyway, what would she do with a man like that if she ever got her hands on him? He was extremely overconfident and was likely a selfish lover. Probably demanding total compliance and satisfaction from the woman he was with, offering none in return.

Realizing where her brain was taking her, she tried to lead it down a safer path. Instead, she laid the brush in her lap and played with fire.

"What do you want me to do with these?" On her finger she twirled a black pair of briefs with gray trim that had been lying on the bed when she first came in. "Sleep with them?"

Rubbing the excess water from his hair, he stopped to see what she was talking about and came right back at her. "Hey," he shrugged, "you wanna sleep with my jocks, go ahead." He threw the towel onto the floor then proceeded to creep across the bed on his hands and knees, looking like a tiger cornering its prey, with Sarah caught in the depths of his hungry eyes.

" 'Course I always heard that sleeping with a man is a whole lot better than sleeping with his skivvies," he purred.

Sarah was rendered immobile as he crept closer, her blood surging so hard and fast she thought she'd black out. His eyes were smoky olive in the soft light of the lamp at her side. His lips were slightly parted. She just knew he was going to kiss her. Try as she might, she couldn't work up any fight to force him away.

They were now nose-to-nose, Raif's smoldering gaze boring into her own. Sarah's lids drifted shut and a small sigh of surrender passed through her lips. *Just one kiss won't hurt...*

Taking the object in question away from her, Raif proceeded to shoot her in the arm with the elastic waistband, slingshot style.

Sarah yelped and her eyes flew open. With the palm of her left hand she rubbed the stinging area. He got her again! How that man exasperated her. "Damn! Are you always so ... so..."

"Spunky?" He flashed straight, white teeth at her as he got off the bed and stood up.

She should have felt spurned but didn't. All she felt was extreme relief and slight disappointment at not having been kissed. "That wasn't the exact word I was looking for," she said dryly, rolling her eyes, "but it'll do for now. Until I think of a more suitable one."

Raif stood in the doorway, a smile teasing one corner of his mouth. "Don't think too hard, I might not like what you come up with."

Sarah forced away the urge to laugh for the tenth time this day. Instead, she fought for a frown and won. "I'm sure you wouldn't." She switched off the lamp.

Raif chuckled softly in the darkness. "Sleep tight, Peaches." And he was out the door.

With a sigh at her unexpected and very discomfiting predicament, she turned to her side, willing herself to sleep, as tomorrow would no doubt be a hectic day. Housework, cooking, children. And she had assured Raif she could handle it all. What would she do when Jenny came to stay? She'd never made a bottle or changed a diaper in her life.

She closed her eyes tightly. She wouldn't think about tomorrow. Trouble was, it left her mind wide open for all thoughts of sexy Raif Manning to seductively slip in.

And stay there.

## Chapter Five

Sarah awoke at six-thirty the next morning, not because of Raif's alarm clock that she had set the night before, but because of the children running rampant throughout the house. Several bumps and thuds had awoken her twenty minutes ago. The sound of a glass object falling on the floor and breaking into a million pieces had her giving up any hope of sleeping in until a decent hour.

"Kids," Sarah sighed, dragging herself out of bed. At this moment home seemed a million miles away and six days loomed before her like an eternity.

Going to her room, she dressed for another war-filled day with the boys and housework, then quickly tidied up. After wiping up a good portion of the dust with a damp washcloth, she found clean sheets in the closet and made the bed. Within ten minutes' time she had the room looking presentable. "Well, at least clean enough to sleep in." It wasn't her king size waterbed with satin sheets, but it would do.

Closing the door behind her, she walked out to the living room finding Raif still asleep on the couch. The boys were playing catch with a football right over his head, Raif oblivious to what was going on around him as he continued to lie there like a cadaver.

"Go outside and play ball!" Sarah whispered loudly, giving them her best evil eye. "You'll wake your uncle. Now get!"

Sarah fully expected a showdown, especially where Chris was concerned. After his outburst last night, it wouldn't have surprised her a bit if he challenged her to a duel, but he seemed to have cooled down. Though she was certain she wasn't forgiven for showing up here, the boys merely looked at each other and with mutual shrugs went bounding out the back door with a mighty slam. Sarah was amazed. Raif hadn't even budged.

Curiosity getting the better of her, she used the opportunity to study the man who had captivated all five of her senses in just one day. She thought how he looked like a Playgirl centerfold. Not that she'd ever seen one, but she couldn't imagine any man looking more provocative than Raif did laying there in tranquil sleep.

He was on his stomach, covers thrown off, giving Sarah a perfect view of the wide expanse of his back and trim waist. His pajama bottoms, riding low, revealed two dimples just above his firm buttocks. She could easily pass the entire day just admiring him, and wondered if women lusted after men as men did women. She was finding out she did—at least when it came to this particular man.

Sarah bit her bottom lip. Here she was again fantasizing, that same feeling growing deep within her. A feeling she had to ignore. She was here to be certain Raif was a proper guardian for the children, to help out with the overabundance of housework, and to prove to Raif and herself she wasn't so sheltered and so fragile that any extra exertion on her part would crush her like an eggshell. Perhaps in this period of time she could get to know the children better.

Mostly, she had a life back in California. A fiancé. A future. A secure future both monetarily and emotionally speaking. When she married Paul she'd be entitled to the trust fund her father promised her once she wedded a proper man. Paul was also financially secure. Emotionally, Paul was as safe as safe could be. No surprises. No hills and valleys. Their relationship ran on smooth, even ground, which was just fine with her.

Wanting to get her mind off sexy Raif Manning, she had no trouble in accomplishing the feat as she walked into the kitchen and stepped on something sharp that pierced the bottom of her foot. She looked down and saw where the earlier sound of broken glass came from. A juice glass was shattered, slivers of it littering the floor at her feet.

With several colorful swear words flowing mutely from her lips, she hobbled to her bedroom and removed the sliver of glass with a pair of tweezers she grabbed from her makeup case. She then went to the bathroom and stuck her foot in the tub, running cool water over it, washing the blood and most of the pain away. She couldn't find a bandage anywhere so put on clean socks and her tennis shoes, hoping the cut, tiny as it was, wouldn't become infected.

After going back to the kitchen and performing the task of sweeping up the broken glass, she was faced with a new worry. "What to fix for breakfast?"

She usually got by on juice or coffee, but didn't think such meager fare would satisfy growing children and a giant sized man.

Despair crept up on her as she stood in the middle of the room; the stove, refrigerator, and cupboards looming at her, huge and foreboding. What had she gotten herself into?

What did she have to prove? Who cared if Raif Manning thought she was spoiled and pampered? Was it so bad to be used to the good life? To not have to slave over a stove and sink full of dirty dishes day after day?

Sarah knew it was more than that. Truth be known, she *had* led a pampered and sheltered life. Her life represented what most people never have. A living fantasy of rich foods prepared in fine restaurants, traveling to exotic locales, hot tubs, designer clothes, chilled champagne. And all had been handed to her. She'd never experienced the satisfaction of working for something. Of earning anything. Be it friendship, respect, or money. Being Jeff Collins' daughter meant it came on a silver platter. The reality had never bothered her before. Not until meeting Raif Manning.

Looking around at peeling paint, grease, grime, and dingy windows, with children and a man to feed, Sarah knew this represented reality. For some reason she felt a strong need to prove to herself that she could handle it all. By doing so, she'd be able to leave here satisfied and a better woman for having had the experience.

For the past decade she had often been plagued with a hollow feeling inside her. No amount of shopping, no weekends at a health spa, and no holidays spent in Europe had helped fill the void.

Was she hoping her stay here might do it for her? Why not? She'd tried just about everything else. Maybe proving she was capable of taking care of a household and others aside from herself would help alleviate that emptiness.

Forcing herself into motion once more and away from sobering thoughts, she took a deep breath and started rummaging through the fridge.

With returning determination she found a carton of eggs. Opening the lid she found it a full dozen. As she pondered what she was going to do with the things her eyes spotted two recipes on the inside flap. One was for a breakfast-on-the-go drink, and the other for a frittata. She read the ingredients for the frittata and found most on hand. Holding the eggs to her chest, she closed her eyes and let out a long breath of relief. All she had to do was follow the directions. She only hoped every can and carton came with recipes. Her neck was saved—for now.

A half hour later, after burning three pieces of toast and dropping a raw egg on the floor, she ended up with a cheese and tomato frittata, toast, a pot of coffee and juice for the kids.

A perfectly browned piece of toast fell off the plate as she carried it to the table and it landed on the floor, butter side down. Sarah bent over to retrieve it.

"Something sure smells good."

She bolted upright to see Raif lounging in the doorway, his hair sleep-tousled, dark stubble shadowing his square jaw, and a sexy grin that could melt the coldest steel. His pajama pants hung onto his hips by nothing more than God's grace, giving Sarah a teasing glimpse of the raven trail running down from his navel to disappear under the cloth barrier.

Knowing that he was waiting for a response, she tried to speak, but could only manage a weak, "Hi."

"Hi, yourself." He smiled, his eyes holding a wicked spark of future promises. At least that's what she thought it looked like to her. "Sleep well?"

For some reason Sarah found herself mute, so she nodded and absently sat down at the table, never taking her eyes off him. Cradling a cup of coffee in her hands, she took a sip, though she didn't know why she was drinking the stuff. Every time she was around Raif she felt like she had a caffeine-high that would last a lifetime and her tongue became completely useless.

"Me too, though that couch is a little lumpy." He grimaced, rubbing the small of his back. "In case you haven't noticed, I sleep like a rock." He stifled a yawn. "Seems I was born tired then suffered a relapse." A lazy smile crawled over his lips and he stretched like a lion in the warm afternoon sun, his pajama bottoms slipping down even lower on his hips.

Sarah's pulse jumped, seeing the thick nest of hair just revealed. She stared, feeling like a kid who was dying to reach in and steal the last cookie from the cookie jar. *Just a little lower.*

She ultimately pulled her gaze away, angry with herself for her runaway thoughts, determined to go into town and call Paul today. Taking a big swallow of coffee, she hoped to jar herself back to reality. What was she thinking? Raif Manning represented everything she didn't want in a man or a relationship. Danger. Passion that would be quickly spent. Heartache. She'd been that route before and didn't care to repeat it.

"Mind if I join you?"

The mouthful of hot coffee did help a little. At least it got the gears in her brain moving. "Wouldn't you rather put on something less..." Sexy, revealing, fantasy provoking. "...less comfortable?" she finally forced out.

He looked down in the same direction Sarah was and shrugged. "I'm decent."

She looked inside her coffee mug. "That depends on whose opinion you want."

"Since I'm not asking for yours, I guess I'm dressed just fine."

"Oh, for..." She set her cup down with a loud thud. "Just come eat."

He pushed away from the doorjamb, his long frame unfolding leisurely. "This better?" He slid his thumbs into the waistband and pulled up his pajama pants ... just a fraction.

"Much," Sarah lied.

"Keep smiling like that and your face will split in two." He chose a seat opposite

from her.

"Guess I'll just have to chance it." She drained her cup.

Raif chuckled.

Sarah sighed with frustration.

"The kids already ate and are playing out back. I took the liberty of fixing breakfast." She deserted her seat, going to the oven where Raif's plate was being kept warm. "Hope you don't mind." She felt a need to put a little space between them.

\*

Raif watched as Sarah moved around the room. Something hot jabbed him in the chest as he realized how familial this scene was. The wife bustling about the kitchen while her husband looks on in admiration. Only, Sarah Collins was not and never would be his wife, and he'd sooner die than be hitched up to the likes of her.

Besides, Sarah Collins was as far removed from country life as he'd wanted himself to be for so many years. But while he was grateful to be home again, enjoying the simple things in life like sunsets, long walks, and physical work, he was positive she was eager to get back to California and her lush life. And her fiancé.

"You're more than welcome to take any liberties around here that suit your fancy." Raif gave her an if-you-know-what-I-mean wink over the rim of his coffee cup.

"I'll bet," he heard her mutter under her breath as she set the food before him.

"Did you say something?" He arched his brows.

"I said I'll get ... you some more coffee."

"Thanks. This is delicious," he commented, completely baffled as to how she managed to make yet another tasty meal when he'd bet anything she'd never seen the inside of a kitchen before yesterday. "Can't remember when I've had such good home cooking. The closest I ever get is Big Sal's."

Sarah set the steaming mug in front of Raif yet stayed at his side. "Big Sal?"

"Owns a diner just about twenty miles from here. Thinks it's her job to be everyone's mother and conscience." His attention was on the food before him.

Sarah gave a little laugh. "She sounds very kind."

"Yep, she's one in a million, and thank goodness for that! If she had her way she'd have every bachelor within a hundred mile radius married off within a week. A chronic matchmaker. Been trying to set me up since I reached the ripe age of seventeen." Briefly Raif wondered what Big Sal would think of Sarah. Sal had a sixth-sense when it came to a person's character. Would she find Sarah as intriguing as he himself did? Or would she lay it on the line and tell him his perception was screwed up ass-good because he was viewing her with his hormones and not his brain?

"Maybe I'll get to meet her some day."

Raif scraped his plate clean and leaned back in his chair, his stomach satisfied, though other parts of him felt well-bottom empty. "You could stop by today. Didn't you say you wanted to call that fiancé of yours?"

Sarah nodded.

"Sal's got a pay phone you could use." Raif watched as she bit into a piece of toast then licked butter from her lips. He stifled a moan as his dick sprang to life, threatening to burst through the material of his pajama pants.

"I just might do that." Without asking, she got up to refill his plate.

Raif thanked her then smiled around his fork as he took another bite of eggs. Sarah

smiled at him in return. When their gazes held too long, Raif looked down and became interested in the remainder of his breakfast.

A moment later, there was a crunch and Raif stopped chewing. He looked up, meeting her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Sarah stood near the table looking puzzled.

Raif took a swallow of coffee before speaking. "Just an eggshell." He lifted one shoulder in a careless shrug as he started eating again. "No big deal, Peaches. It added an interesting texture to the dish."

Sarah glared at him and said, "For one thing, Raif Manning, I am not your peaches, and for another you can just fix your own damn meals! I offered to help clean and take care of the kids, but I did not sign up to be your personal chef!" The heightened color in her cheeks gave away the fact that she was embarrassed and angry.

As tough as she acted half the time, he didn't think anything short of a bullet could penetrate that suit of armor she wore. He was wrong. "Simmer down now." He stood and carried his plate to the garbage can, scraping the remains of his breakfast into it, wondering how to handle this situation. He went for the honest approach.

"I never asked you to do any of the cooking—" He heard a noise coming from her direction that sounded like a low growl. He put the plate on the sink. "My brain isn't even awake yet and this is really no big deal."

"You don't need to worry about waking your brain up, because you obviously don't have one!" She stood right behind him now.

Raif turned and looked down at her. "Now what kind of comment was that?"

"You deserved it!"

"Why?"

The calm in his voice only seemed to infuriate her more. "Instead of making your rude comment about interesting texture, you could have been a little more tactful."

"Just like your yuppie fiance is, I suppose?" He raised a brow at her and leaned back, elbows bent and palms flat on the counter to his sides.

Sarah spun around and washed a hand over her face. "You're impossible!" She marched toward the table and started clearing it off.

Raif reached out, grabbed her by the elbow and turned her around to face him. "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, but I don't pussyfoot around. I say what's on my mind. If I don't like something, I'll tell you." He gave a half shrug. "On the other hand, if I like something, I'll let you know." He reached up and brushed his knuckles over the side of her jaw.

"Promise?" The one word was a husky sigh.

"Promise." Raif fully intended to tell her he liked the way she looked this morning. Liked the little beauty mark at the right corner of her mouth. Liked the idea of kissing her senseless. Instead, he decided to show her.

He slid his hand around to the back of her head while lowering his. He could hear his heart hammering in his ears as he touched his lips to hers. She made a soft sound of surprise, but didn't pull back. Slowly, she leaned into him. Raif moaned and pulled her closer. Her lips were firm and hesitant at first, but soon she was moving with him, their tongues sliding around one another.

Damn she felt good, and tasted even better. Her palms were on his hips, before slipping around to cup his ass. Raif thought his balls would explode.



The kiss deepened and he reached up, sliding a hand over her breast. She pressed closer to him as he pinched her nipple through her T-shirt and bra. It stood in a stiff peak and Raif yearned to nibble and suck on it. He skimmed his hand down her side then up and under her shirt.

Sarah's mouth went wild on his. He felt her fingers buried in the curls at the back of his head, pressing his mouth closer to hers. Her other hand roamed over his back and under the waistband of his pajama pants. He'd known passion before, but the way this woman affected him was something different. And he was returning every ounce of that passion he felt in her.

Raif slid one hand down to her lower back, holding her close, while the other slipped down her rib cage and between her thighs. She was hot and damp. He planted kisses along the side of her neck and pressed his palm against her pussy.

Sarah moaned in his ear.

"Oh, Sarah, I've got to have you."

"Mmm..."

At that moment, the boys raced in through the back door. Sarah jumped back as if she'd just had icy water thrown at her.

"Good!" she said a little too breathlessly and a little too loud. "Glad to hear it." Raif blinked hard, as if he'd just woken from a session of hypnosis. Sarah went back to the table and started clearing it off as Chris and Tommy ran back outside. The spell between them was broken once again.

*Damn!*

\*

After the table had been cleared, Sarah walked toward the back door and said, "I'll go check on the kids." Facing the boys' wrath was a lot easier than facing Raif Manning's drugging kisses or the strained silence that had grown between them over the past few minutes.

Stepping off the single wooden step and onto hard, baked earth, heat instantly whirled around her like a small tornado. The huge tree near the barn and the twin trees beside the house looked inviting, though out of place in this otherwise flat land. "What are you kids up to? Oh!" Sarah yelped as Tommy spun around at the sound of her voice and squirted her right in the face with the hose. The water was ice-cold and a shock to her system. Her T-shirt lay plastered against her chest and stomach. Chris grabbed the hose from Tommy as they both stared at Sarah wide eyed.

Her mouth opened and closed, but instead of being angry, Sarah found herself laughing. She didn't know why. She should be furious. She was soaking wet, the water was frigid and her tennis shoes were now covered with mud. She couldn't help herself though. She laughed harder and decided to get revenge on the boys. Her eyes landed on the ice chest just a few feet away, filled with water balloons. "A water balloon fight, huh?"

"Oh no! She's gonna get us, Tommy!"

"You bet I am. Turnabout is fair play." Eager to get her mind off Raif for the moment and spend time with her nephews, she grabbed a tight, purple balloon, hefted it on her shoulder and threw it with all of her might. It landed right in the middle of Chris' back. He jumped as if shot, turned around and sprayed her with the hose again. While Sarah continued to throw water balloons and Chris continued to spray Sarah with the

hose, Tommy crept up to the ice chest and grabbed an armful of balloons. One burst and ran down his blue shorts like a small cascade. He shrieked and ran back to Chris' side where they both bombarded her.

Ten minutes later the balloon supply was exhausted. They were sopping wet and tired from shouting and running around so much. Chris turned off the water. As they started walking back to the house, something in the mud caught her eye. She walked over and lifted up the small, pink item. Her cell phone. It was now covered in muck and dead as dead could be.

She looked over at Tommy and Chris, who tossed nervous glances at each other. Sarah thought to be angry but instead grinned, pulled her arm back, and threw the cell phone as far as she could out into the tall grass.

They all laughed as they walked back to the house.

Sarah stopped as she reached for the screen and saw Raif standing there with an indefinable look on his face.

"Hey Uncle Raif, why are you wearing that goofy smile?" Tommy asked as he slipped in the door past him. Chris followed suit.

Raif merely stood there pinning Sarah in place with his eyes alone. She shivered from that look—or was it because she was dripping wet? "Yes, Uncle Raif," she said softly, "why are you wearing that goofy smile?"

"You're beautiful, you know that?" He reached out and ran his knuckles over one of her cheeks.

Sarah felt uncomfortable so she merely said, "I look like a drowned rat. Now if you don't mind moving, I'd like to go put on some dry clothes."

After a moment of hesitation, Raif finally moved aside.

Sarah walked past him, avoiding eye contact and disappearing into the safety of the house.

## Chapter Six

Later in the day, Sarah worked beside Raif in the kitchen, wiping the table after clearing the lunch dishes. He had offered to make sandwiches again, this time peanut butter and jelly. She hadn't had one of those in at least twenty years and actually found it quite tasty.

A silent truce was forged between them for the moment. A blanket of peace and contentment lay over her. She didn't care if it was real or imagined. There was something so domestic about their working together that eased a part of her that was always in a state of turmoil. As for the kiss, she was determined to pretend it hadn't happened. She had been so thankful that the kids had barged into the house. Right now the boys were out in the field looking for rocks and bugs.

She smiled as she remembered their water fight of this morning, happy that they seemed to be warming up to her.

"So tell me about this fiance of yours," Raif asked.

Sarah stiffened at the seemingly harmless question. She was a very private person. Talking about problems, heartaches, and sorrows made you weak—so her father had always said—and she'd learned to keep it all in.

But Raif wasn't asking her about her problems, heartaches, or sorrows. He was merely asking her about Paul. She didn't want to talk about Paul. Why? Because then her engagement would be officially out in the open, in detail. Once it was, she was afraid Raif would quit laying on the charm. Quit complimenting her. Quit smiling at her the way he often did. Mostly, that he'd never kiss her again. Sarah balked at her greedy feminine ego where this man was concerned.

For a moment she ignored the question and studied a patch of black, sticky gum on the floor. Raif Manning was making her think and do and feel things she never thought she would ... or could. He made her feel needy and wanting and restless.

And she was sure it was one-sided.

"All of my life my father chose my boyfriends for me." She heard Raif's snort of disapproval and met his eyes. "Truth be known, I didn't care for any of them either."

"Real geeks, huh?" He came and stood beside her at the sink.

Sarah relaxed a little and laughed. "Some. But they were all from affluent families or had otherwise prosperous futures ahead of them."

"Looking out for your financial welfare," Raif threw in.

"I suppose." She started running hot water into the left side of the sink. Taking the bottle of dish soap, she squeezed in a few healthy squirts of the blue liquid. Bubbles started billowing faster than lava from a volcano. "Maybe I used a little too much." She laughed, eyeing the quickly growing foam mountain.

"Just a little," Raif affirmed, leaning back against the counter, arms folded over his chest. As always, he seemed to be suppressing a smile. "Now, where were we?" He wouldn't let the subject lay, Sarah noted with great chagrin. What had she started? "Geeks and your financial welfare," he reminded.

"Right." Sarah shut the water off, grabbed the sponge sitting on the back of the sink, rinsed it in the hot, soapy water, and began wiping off the counter. She felt edgy and

wished he'd never brought this subject up. Memories, emotions, feelings, these were things she'd left far behind years ago. So why did she constantly feel like a psych patient eager to tell all to her therapist while around this man?

"Dad would choose a guy, we'd go out on a few dates, I'd naturally find him either a bore or an octopus and that would be the end of that—until he found another would-be suitor." She scrubbed vigorously at the discolored grout between the tiles.

A shrug lifted her shoulders. "Things went along pretty much the same all through high school, college, and into my late twenties. A little over a year ago though I met Jason—at a car wash of all places. He was wild, sexy, rode a Harley, and didn't have a dime to his name. We dated heavily for a few months." Sarah started on the grout on the opposite side of the sink. Thankfully it put a few more feet of breathing space between them.

"I don't know." She took a deep breath and looked at the ceiling before directing her attention to the countertop once again. "I guess Jason represented the reckless side of life. Lord knew he had nothing going for him besides his looks and his daredevil personality."

She watched as Raif turned to the sink and began washing dishes, searching for them amongst the clouds of foam. "Did you ever have sex with Jason?"

Sarah threw him a look of disdain. "Must you always be so blunt?"

"No use pussyfooting around."

She let out a short laugh. "So you said. Yes, I had sex with Jason. I put a stop to it before the relationship officially ended though."

"Why?" He was up to his elbows in suds.

"Do you want to know every minute detail?" She speared him with another look.

Raif merely gave a listless shrug. "Of course."

Sarah gave a little sniff. "Call it women's intuition, but I had a feeling I wasn't the only woman in his life at the time." She abandoned her task of grout scrubbing and found herself drying the washed dishes Raif had rinsed and set on the counter. How easily the urge came to her. He washes, she dries. She talks, he listens.

And that was the key to this whole conversation. Raif was truly listening. Not giving advice as Debbie had. Not telling her what was best for her as her father always did.

Not telling her they'd talk later as Paul always did. For some reason, what she said mattered to Raif. She had to admit that he was quickly, in a matter of mere hours, beginning to mean something to her.

"Did he show up with lipstick on his collar?" Raif kept the conversation going.

"Close." She took a plate from him. Their fingers touched, their eyes met. Sarah bit on her bottom lip, trying to keep the memory of his lips and hands on her at bay. Trying to keep the mute invitation from her eyes that urged him closer. She pulled a little harder on the plate and Raif relinquished it. "Once when I was over at his place I found a red stiletto under the table."

"You didn't."

She nodded. "I sure did. And you know what he said?" She glanced at Raif as she put the last plate up in the cupboard.

"What?" He pulled the plug in the sink, bubbles descending like an elevator going down.

"He said it was his mother's!" Sarah was still incredulous, even after a year and some-odd months.

"He must have one helluva mom." Raif went about making another pot of coffee.

"The woman was seventy-five years old!" Raif laughed softly. Sarah smiled.

"Anyway, the topper to it all was when I went over less than a week later to bring the fifty dollars he said he needed to buy his mom some sort of pain medication."

"Wearing stilettos must be awfully hard on the feet, I imagine, especially for a woman her age."

Sarah couldn't help the little giggle that escaped. She found herself levitating over to the far end of the counter where Raif was pouring coffee grounds into a filter. She inhaled deeply the scent of fresh ground coffee and Raif's own scent. How could the smell of coffee and a man's body conjure up such explicit images of sharing a steaming cup of the bitter brew while watching the sunrise and having Raif Manning by her side, their bodies momentarily sated by a night of wild passion?

With an invisible and mighty shove she forced the mental picture away. When she started talking again her tone was a little less assured, a tad quieter. "I walked in and found him on the couch—naked—with another woman. Do you know what he said?"

"That the other woman was his mom?" Raif made a stab at a joke.

"He asked me to join them!"

"I take it threesomes aren't your style." He poured water into the coffee maker.

"Hardly."

"Me neither. I'm a one woman man."

Sarah arched a brow at him. "Since when?" She retrieved two clean mugs from one of the cupboards.

"Contrary to popular belief, I've never cheated on a woman a day in my life. And I've never dated more than one at a time."

"And you're still alive to talk about it?" Sarah dished out a little of his same teasing.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

They remained in comfortable silence with their own thoughts until the coffee was done. Raif took the mugs Sarah had set on the counter and poured them each a cup. He handed one to her as she sat at the table.

Sarah looked down at the caramel-colored liquid in her cup. A sip proved it to be exactly the way she liked her coffee. "How did you know I took cream and sugar?"

"Lucky guess." He went to sit in one of the kitchen chairs across from Sarah.

After a moment of coffee sipping and long looks into each other's cups, Raif asked, "So I know about Jason, where did a fiancé come into the picture?"

Sarah blinked a couple of times before saying, "Well, after I found Jason with the other woman I called Debbie, needing to unload on someone, but she wasn't home. So I went to my dad. Big mistake. After he erupted he stormed out of the room and introduced me to Paul a week later. We've been dating ever since. He proposed to me four months ago. He's vice president of his father's accounting firm." Sarah drained her cup but still clutched it between her hands to keep from fidgeting.

Raif looked at her through lowered lids as he leaned way back in his chair. "Have you had sex with Paul?"

Sarah rolled her eyes at his straightforwardness. "Yes, though not very often." There was seldom room on his busy calendar for lovemaking. Only temporary, he assured her.

His mouth dropped open as the front legs of his chair hit the floor. "Not very often? What's wrong with him?"

Sarah frowned. "Nothing that I'm aware of."

"The man is either gay or messing around."

"Oh please." She got up, went over to the sink and rinsed her cup, setting it upside down on the counter.

"Why no engagement ring?"

Sarah pretended the question didn't bother her and pasted on a false smile as she faced him again. "He's looking for the perfect stone. Says I deserve nothing but the best. Isn't that romantic?" When he merely grunted in what she suspected was disapproval she said, "All I know is, a lot of people will be happy when we're married."

"Like your father?"

Sarah didn't like this conversation anymore. She turned and faced Raif. "Yes. He's all I have left, Raif. I really want him to be happy with me."

"What about *your* happiness?" Raif was on his feet and in her face, obviously not pleased with her answer.

"Who says I'm not happy?" She lifted her chin.

"This." He grabbed her by the waist, tugging her up against him. Raif looked into her eyes, his breath warm against her lips. She opened her mouth to protest, but couldn't find the strength. As much as she hated to admit it, she wanted him to kiss her again. And he did.

Raif pressed his lips against hers, his tongue sliding into her mouth as if he'd done so a thousand times. Sarah drooped against him, drinking in his wild, soul-deep kiss. Her future back in California with Paul seemed monochromatic and uneventful compared to the rainbow of fireworks Raif ignited within her.

"Oh, Sarah," Raif whispered into her mouth, his hands wandering down to cup her bottom, pulling her close to his unmistakable erection.

Sarah groaned, wanting to surrender to the passion this man offered. Instead, she forced herself to turn away from the paradise Raif had been leading her to and came back to the real world. With extreme reluctance, but great necessity, she shoved him away. It was like pushing a mighty oak, but Raif broke the kiss.

"How dare you." Her voice was low and hoarse.

"Just proving a point." His eyes were hot on her, melting her insides. His smile was one of pure victory.

"Don't ever do that again," Sarah all but growled, feeling both guilty and knocked upside down.

"Excuse me?" Raif's brows snapped into a fierce frown.

Sarah wanted to cringe at both her words and the extreme scowl on his face. "You heard me." She was quickly losing steam. "Just don't pull any more of that Casanova stuff with me, Raif Manning. It won't work." She stood her ground even as his nostrils flared in anger.

"Listen, Peaches." He poked her in the breastbone with his forefinger. "It takes four lips to make a kiss. And you were the one moving all over me like a greased snake. Twice, now!"

Sarah felt like punching him in that square jaw of his. "Just keep your distance while I'm here, okay?"

"Can't trust yourself?" Another arrogant grin claimed his face.

Sarah shifted gears and took another approach. "If that's what your wounded male

ego wants to believe, fine. But aside from the fact that I'll be leaving next week, nothing is ever going to happen between us beyond a couple of small, insignificant kisses, I am engaged to another man." Her voice never wavered and Sarah applauded her bravery. Raif's kisses were no more small and insignificant than a tsunami. And it had caused her just as much damage, though she'd never let it show.

Raif just stood there looking down at her. "There's no way you can be so hell bent on marrying that fiance of yours, be even halfway in love with him, and react like molten lava in my arms."

"Raif." Sarah hitched her chin up and clung to her mature and levelheaded air. "It's obvious we're attracted to each other. Hormones. That's all it is." Plus a serious dose of chemistry and who knows what else. "But we've got to keep our distance." Sarah suddenly felt any bravado she'd mustered up wash away like fallen leaves during a rainstorm.

"I'm engaged to be married!" she cried out. Around Raif, every barricade she'd worked so hard to build came tumbling down with just a single look from him.

She turned away until she had herself pulled back together. Just when it seemed he was going to speak, Sarah turned back around and held up a hand to stop him. She hated to be so callous about things, but Raif Manning had to keep his distance while she was here. For her own sake. "Raif, try that again and those papers don't get signed." Her voice came out cold and barren.

Sarah saw the look of shock in his eyes. Watched as the warm golden flecks in his irises turned dark and icy. "Peaches, it wasn't that great of a kiss. In fact, you couldn't pay me to do it again!" He gave a rough snort and raked her up and down with his angry gaze. "Looks like I was wrong. You're stone cold all the way to the core."

With that he turned and left the room, Sarah watching him stalk away as tears burned in her eyes.

## Chapter Seven

After driving the short distance to Hiawatha with the boys, Raif pulled up in front of Alice and Mark's new model home. Unlike the older homes and farms that decorated the scenery along the thirty-odd mile drive over, the homes here were newer, closer together. Raif didn't regret leaving New York to come back to his hometown for one instant—the quiet solitude of the land around his home never ceased to bring him pleasure.

Turning off the motor, Chris and Tommy clamored out of the truck and into the house.

Raif's mood slipped down a notch as he climbed out of the truck and Sarah crept into his mind again. He'd thought they'd been heading in the right direction, but she'd quickly doused out any and all flames between them and shut him out tighter than a skunk-sprayed yard dog.

In the next instant a smile claimed his lips as Chris and Tommy ran out of the house, whooped and hollered, surrounding him like a pack of wild Indians ready to scalp him. "Hey, you two braves look pretty fierce. I think I saw a couple of palefaces run into the backyard." They nodded in unison and went galloping around to the back of the house.

Raif was still chuckling as he strolled in to find Alice, Mark, and their six-year-old twin daughters gathered around one gurgling baby. "Oohs and ahhs" filled the room as they fussed over Jenny. Very soon they'd be adding another addition to their own family, as Alice was nearly seven months pregnant.

For years Alice and Mark never thought they'd be blessed with children. It took over seven years before Alice conceived the twins. Nearly six more with this one. But they'd never given up hope, their marriage never faltered through the long road of disappointment. And the ultimate joy of parenthood only managed to bring them closer.

A tear slipped into Raif's heart as he viewed the sight before him. Would his life ever be so complete? Sure he had the kids, and he loved them, but there was an empty space in him that needed filling. A space that his stubborn mind kept picturing Sarah Collins in after just a few short days in her mostly irritating company. He snorted at his idiotic imagination. What made the thought even more ludicrous was that she made him mad as all get out and could ultimately refuse to sign over those custody papers.

"Raif, why don't you come over here and visit with your niece?" Alice asked. "I'll bring out some iced tea." She was already entering the kitchen, her husband on her heels as the girls raced outside to join the boys, strawberry-blonde pigtails flying behind them.

"Sure thing." He smiled, walking over to the baby.

After playing with Jenny for a minute, Raif scooped her up and entered the saloon style doors. He propped himself against the counter, Jenny nestled in the crook of his arm, interrupting the kiss that Alice and Mark had been sharing. "Don't stop on our account." A crooked smile tipped his lips, a reflection of the love and tenderness he knew his sister and brother-in-law shared even after fourteen years of marriage. If only he could be so lucky. One beautiful and sassy woman came to his mind. Just as quickly he kicked the image away.

As if reading his thoughts, Mark broke into them. "How's your houseguest?" He reached up into a cupboard, retrieving three glasses.



Raif's eyes narrowed and lips thinned at just the mention of his houseguest. "She's as infuriating as hell, has a constant hot and cold attitude that confuses the hell out of me, left eggshells in my breakfast and *she* got all pissy about it, and doesn't know the difference between a mop and a frying pan." *And I want to make love to her so badly I'm ready to go insane.*

"That enchanting?" Mark commented, making silly faces as Jenny squirmed in Raif's arms. The baby grabbed a handful of Mark's hair. The twins had inherited his light-colored locks and now little Jenny was doing her utmost to tear it out by the roots. Mark pried her little fingers loose and rubbed his head where several strands of hair had been pulled free. "If she's as feisty as Jenny you'd better stand clear of her!"

"Feisty is a mighty small word to use when describing Sarah Collins." Raif turned the baby around and propped her up against his shoulder, gently patting her on the back as she began to fuss. Alice had given him a complete crash-course in mothering. Raif was quite good at it now and found that after performing a task so many times it became second nature. "But she does have her good points."

"Such as?" Mark asked, taking the ice cube tray from Alice and placing some in each glass.

"She's easy to talk to—when she's not being a total bitch. She tries her hardest with whatever task she's faced with and doesn't back down from a challenge." Raif grinned now. "She's also easy on my eyes and has greatest ass I've ever seen stuffed into a pair of jeans. Sorry Alice," he directed the apology to his sister who was making a bottle for Jenny.

Alice merely rolled her eyes and muttered, "Men."

"She's got a nice laugh, too, although she doesn't do it nearly enough." He relinquished Jenny over to Alice who offered to feed the now crying infant. "She's pretty uptight. Straight-laced. A bit too prim for my taste."

"She's also the woman who could deny you guardianship," Mark reminded, handing Raif a tall glass of iced tea.

Raif took a long swallow, hoping to wash away the feeling that tightened his throat whenever he thought of that very important detail. "I know." He drained the glass and set it on the counter, wishing it had been something much stronger than tea.

The two men drifted out back while Alice went to the living room with Jenny. Raif scanned the small backyard. A three-by-eight portion had been set aside to cultivate the wild sunflowers Alice loved so much. Maybe he'd plant some on his property, too. Out front on either side of the porch. Sarah would probably like that, he found himself musing.

Mark sat in one of the green and white striped lawn chairs under the shade of the awning and Raif took up the second one. Their small yard lacked even a single tree. Raif never liked that. Though trees weren't abundant in Kansas, he was glad his spread had more than enough to suit him.

"Why don't you marry her?" Mark's question came out of nowhere.

Raif shot him a dubious look. "What did you just say?"

Mark leaned forward, hands dangling between his legs. His usual attire of Dockers and polo shirts was vastly different from Raif's everyday uniform of old T-shirts and older jeans. "You heard me. This woman has gotten under your skin. That much is obvious from the look in your eye every time she comes up in conversation. You've got

looks, money, a nice place of your own. Well, it will be nice sometime in the near future." He gave a small chuckle as Raif frowned at his teasing. "If you marry her, you can forget about playing the congenial host, settle down like you keep saying you want to do, and the kids are yours. Both of yours."

Raif sprang to his feet. "You've been alone with your animal clients too long. Either that or this summer heat has fried your brain. You're talking crazy. I plan on marrying someone a tad less abrasive on my nerves than Sarah Collins. And I couldn't lure a woman into marriage for my own gain." He lost steam with his next words. "Besides, she's engaged."

Mark stood also, a head shorter than Raif, and patted him on the back as he laughed. "I see the thought already crossed your mind?"

"Hell, everything's crossed my mind." His expression suddenly became bleak. "I even thought about knocking her off and dumping her body somewhere on my property. I've been close to wringing that pretty little neck of hers on more than one occasion." He slugged his hands into his back pockets once again as he absently watched the neighbor's dog pull sheets off the clothesline. "I'm stuck with her until she leaves. Which is next Thursday. Which won't come soon enough. Whatever she decides," his gaze met Mark's, "I'm going to have to face it head-on when it happens. I've played games for too long. I'm flying straight now."

Both men started back toward the house. "Good luck," Mark said. "I certainly hope you have your parachute ready in case you need to bail out."

"Brother-in-law, I've got my hand on the ripcord."

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Three hours later Raif returned, after deciding to leave the boys over at his sister's for the day. The weather was hot, the atmosphere within the house since Sarah's arrival was thick enough to drive a plow through. The kids could cool off in the pool for the day. He'd also asked Alice if they could stay the night.

Now Raif was back home. The erotic mist which seemed to fill his head whenever Sarah came near had now been replaced by common sense. In the span of five seconds with that one sentence Sarah had turned into the enemy again.

Using the kids as a way to make sure he didn't lay a hand on her when she knew damn well she wanted him, fiance or not? Fine. He'd play her little game. While she was here he'd work her ass off, getting as much work done as possible until she got fed up enough to leave—but not until those papers were signed. Then he would forget about her altogether. Or until he decided how to handle these feelings that continued to sneak up on him, catching him off guard, threatening to hogtie him.

He didn't like not being in control of his feelings and physical responses to a woman. Didn't like being thrown off-kilter; least of all by a mouse-sized lady with a fire-and-ice demeanor.

Nobody messed around with his pride and got away with it! Sarah Collins would soon learn that lesson the hard way.

As Raif strolled into the kitchen, the sight of Sarah's rear end came into view. She was bent over, scrubbing out the oven. Raif pulled his Stetson down low on his forehead, a sly smile curving his lips. *Yep, sweetheart, I'm gonna work that pretty fanny of yours clean to the bone.* He knew he would enjoy every minute of watching her sweat.

"Better put on some work clothes," he suggested.

"Oh!" She bolted upright. "I didn't hear you come in." She glanced down at her jeans and blue tank top. "I suppose this will do. What are we going to do?" She sounded wary.

"You'll see. Are you ready?" He started toward the door.

Sarah gave a shrug. "Sure." Putting down the scrub brush, she followed Raif out the door.

The air outside was stifling and the sun beat down directly overhead. Raif was already waiting for her at the barn, just inside one of the huge open doors.

"Raif, I want to apologize for what I said earlier. You know, about the papers. I was way out of line." Her forehead crinkled and she bit on her bottom lip. Raif ignored the seemingly sincere look on her face. He was still ticked off.

"Apology accepted. Here you go." He handed her a pair of rusty hedge clippers and suppressed a smile.

"What are these for?" She didn't take the object from him, eyeing it as if it was hexed.

Raif gestured to the weeds around the barn, shoving the clippers into her hands. "You do the outside, I'll do the inside."

"I'm supposed to cut all of those weeds with this decrepit thing? Haven't you heard of a lawn mower? Better yet, a gardener?"

"Don't be such a lightweight. They're plenty sharp. Or can't you handle the job?" The tone in his voice was purely taunting.

"Oh, give me the stupid things!"

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Sarah stalked away with the sound of Raif's soft chuckle following her. Walking around to the only side of the barn that was shaded, she saw the waist-high weeds surrounding the entire area and knew this was not going to be easy and easy task. Was anything concerning Raif Manning easy? "Nope." She started clipping away. "At least this is a job I can handle, though it may take a month to finish it!"

For what seemed like an eternity Sarah cut weeds under the blazing afternoon sun. At first she bent over, and when that became uncomfortable she stooped, until she was sitting down altogether. Sweat dripped off her from head to toe and blisters lay open on both hands.

"I quit!" She threw down the ancient tool and wondered if Raif was ready to call it a day, also.

Walking into the barn, she didn't see him anywhere. "Raif?" No answer. Looking around she noticed that everything was exactly where it had been over an hour ago. Farming paraphernalia lay strewn and scattered about—all in about as good a shape as the hedge clippers she had struggled with. She could only guess as to what job each tool had performed unknown eons ago since anything that didn't resemble a rake or lawnmower was alien to her.

"Raif?" she called out again. Silence was her only answer. She then heard something coming from the loft—a word she had picked up from one of the episodes of Little House on the Prairie she had seen as a kid. She stood there listening and heard the noise again. It sounded like ... snoring!

Climbing the ladder, her eyes now even with the floor of the loft, she saw Raif sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, Stetson pulled low over his eyes, asleep! That

dirty, rotten rat! Sarah fumed. All the time she had been busting her butt out in the scorching sun cutting weeds, he had been taking a leisurely nap!

Taking the last few rungs in record time, Sarah walked over to him and gave him a mighty shove. He fell over sideways, let out a loud snort and mumbled a few unintelligible words before he decided to join the world. Scooting back up into a sitting position, he looked up at Sarah with drowsy eyelids and smiled arrogantly. "Think you could fetch me a glass of water, Peaches? I'm dry as dust."

"Sure, I'll get you some water," Sarah sweetly drawled. Climbing back down, she stalked to the house. Yanking the screen door open she went inside, got the biggest glass she could find and filled it with cold water from the refrigerator.

When she returned to the barn Raif had already climbed down and was leaning against the ladder, arms folded over his chest and a very smug look on his face as he watched her bringing the water he had asked for. "Thanks."

Walking right up to him Sarah stopped only inches away and proceeded to throw the cold liquid in his face. "My pleasure."

Raif gasped out loud. The icy water trickled off his face and onto his chest to join the sopping wet material there. Too surprised to say anything, he simply stood there, staring at her, nostrils flaring and the muscles in his jaw ticking.

Sarah was still furious and didn't give a flying damn if he was big enough to crush her like a matchstick with one hand. "Next time you'd better say please if you want something!" She started poking him in the chest with her index finger and he started chuckling. "How dare you have me working my butt off in the hot sun while you're in here sleeping! Don't forget, Raif Manning, I may be helping you out around here, but I am not your slave! Got it?" She punctuated the last question with an extra hard poke.

Soon the chuckles turned into a bout of deep belly laughs.

"I'd like to know what you find so amusing." She glared at him, fists planted on her hips. There wasn't anything funny about the situation. She was standing here with blisters on her hands, a sunburn that made a tomato look pale in comparison, and he was dripping wet. Served him right!

Raif held his sides now, doubled over with laughter. "I'm—sorry—" he gasped.

"Let me know when you're through," she said dryly, and went to sit on a rickety milking stool while Raif made an attempt to regain his senses.

Minutes passed until he quieted down, the silence around them broken only by his intermittent chuckles. "That felt good!" He wiped tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

Sarah looked indignantly at him. "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

Raif sauntered over to her, crouched down to look into her eyes and flashed her one of his infamous grins. It worked every time, she thought, as her anger subsided under the weight of his happy aura.

"I'm really sorry. I was a complete ass." His smile slowly faded, and he gave no reason for his previous rude behavior. "I had no right to treat you like a servant." He brushed her hair back from her sunburned face as more hung out of her scrunchie than in it. "You really pissed me off about the papers, though." His voice was softer now with a hint of hurt. "I don't want you holding that over my head every time I do something that isn't to your liking. You wanted to help get this place livable for the kids and to make sure they're in good hands. Don't use them as a pawn every time it suits your fancy."

Sarah bristled but realized his words were too true. Raif Manning threatened her emotionally and she tried to hit him where it would hurt the most. How immature could one get? She felt as if she had developed a split personality since arriving here, and was beginning to wonder who the real Sarah Collins was. "I understand." She cast her guilty eyes to the dirt floor of the barn and watched as a little spider went scurrying by. "I really am sorry, but my request still stands." When he looked at her in question she said, "Keep your distance. Please." The last word was a whispered plea.

Raif reached out and lightly touched her cheek. "I'll try, but I can't make any promises."

A half smile pulled at Sarah's lips. "I need more of a commitment than that."

"Can't give you one, Peaches. It's no secret I want you."

That's what Sarah was afraid of. She rose from the stool and started out of the dwelling, but stopped and turned to face Raif. He was a dark and mysterious silhouette standing there in the shadowy interior of the barn. "I'd appreciate it if you'd use my name. I'm not your peaches, not your darling, or your sweetheart. I'm nobody's. Never have been, never will be."

"Never?"

Sarah shook her head. "Never."

"That's too bad." Raif stepped outside and sunlight ran to greet him, wrapping around him as tightly as Sarah's own arms had been hours ago in the kitchen. She saw compassion on his face and hated herself for the slipup, small as it was. Old hurt, rejection, and yearning had been crystal clear when she'd spoken the words, and she loathed the fact that Raif pitied her.

Sarah turned and went back to the house, feeling cold even in the hundred degree weather that enveloped her.

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Raif walked in only a moment behind Sarah and caught a glimpse of the pained look on her face as she washed her hands at the kitchen sink.

He was at her side. "Something wrong?"

"Blisters." She squinted her eyes shut and showed him both palms.

"Oh," he groaned. "I'm so sorry." Taking a clean dish towel from the drawer next to his hip, he gently dried Sarah's hands, his gaze following the movements of his work. "There was no need to cut those weeds. I was just trying—"

"Trying to get even?" The accusation was soft but damning nonetheless.

Raif swallowed the stale taste of revenge in his throat. "Yeah." He still held her hands in his own.

Sarah pulled her hands away and studied the sores there. "I deserved it." When Raif didn't protest she continued. "I can't bully you around. I'm just not used to—"

"Not getting your own way?"

A sigh seeped from her lips. "I guess you can say that. Although it sounds so selfish and self-centered."

"This is the real world, Sarah," he said gently.

He watched her eyes fill with tears. "I'm beginning to realize that." Her smile wobbled.

Raif wanted to wipe away the tear spilling down her pink cheek. Wanted to hold the fragile and vulnerable woman she had just transformed into before his very eyes, but he

had promised to remain at a safe distance at all times, though it was already proving to be a damned hard vow to stick to. He knew he had no right to pursue her when she was engaged, but he felt sure Sarah Collins was the type of woman who wouldn't be feeling desire for another man if she was in love with her fiancé. Just the thought of her married to someone she didn't love caused a sharp pain in his chest. Besides, he reminded himself, he hadn't actually made the promise.

"Let's take care of those blisters." He didn't give her a chance to object as he placed his hands at the back of her waist, guiding her down the hallway and to the bathroom.

Putting down the toilet lid, he patted it, Sarah taking the offered spot.

"Really, Raif," she weakly protested. "I can take care of myself. Besides, I'd like to take a shower first. I feel awfully grungy from all that sweating business."

"All right, but I'll be back in ten minutes whether you're decent or not." He cocked his eyebrows at her. "Got it?"

"Got it."

Raif turned to leave, closing the door behind him.

Ten minutes later on the nose he was back, rapping at the door.

"Come in."

He opened the door and poked his head in. "Decent?"

"Yeah." She pulled her hair back into a damp ponytail.

"Damn!" He laughed when Sarah shot him a scandalous look. "Ready for some doctorin'?"

"Really, I already told you I can do it myself."

"Nonsense." He opened the door further and joined her in the pint-sized room, carrying a first-aid kit. "These blisters are my fault. I did it, I'll fix it. Got to take responsibility for my actions. Have a seat." He gestured to the toilet again. Sarah complied. He then went to work like a practiced physician, retrieving antiseptic, rolled gauze, and cloth tape. "This may sting a bit," he warned before painting the affected area of one hand with the medicinal smelling pad.

Sarah hissed a sharp breath between clenched teeth. Grabbing her hand, Raif blew on the painful region. "Better?"

She nodded and the barest of smiles came to her lips. "It feels good having somebody fuss over me again after all these years."

Raif felt himself warm at the comment. "Good."

He wrapped gauze around her hand to protect the wounds, securing it with a piece of cloth tape he ripped off between his teeth. He repeated the procedure with her other hand then said, "All done!" He kissed her bandaged palms. "Now we'll take care of that sunburn. Here." He handed her a towel then turned his back to her.

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"What am I supposed to do with this?" Sarah eyed his backside, noticing a rather large rip in his jeans that if not for his navy blue briefs would reveal the fleshy skin of his rump.

Sarah soon found herself annoyed at the concealing barrier.

"Take your top off and wrap the towel around you so I can put some goop on your burn." His voice was cool and nonchalant, as if he'd done this sort of thing a million times.

"I think I can handle this myself." Sarah started feeling a bit uncomfortable. It may

be no big deal to him, but she most certainly felt otherwise. She was too aware of his extreme sexuality to let him have such intimate access to her body.

"There's no way you're going to be able to do anything with those pretty little hands of yours all bandaged up." He impatiently rocked back on his heels, hands on hips, whistling to himself.

Sarah knew he was enjoying every second of this. Could just imagine the ear-to-ear grin he must have right about now because of her predicament. But, he was right, there was no way she could do it herself and she wasn't looking forward to her sunburn itching and peeling. She let out a sigh of surrender. "Oh, all right. You win." She shed her shirt and bra, fastening the towel around her. "Ready."

When he turned back around his voice and expression were cool and indifferent. "Let me do your face first." He squeezed some of the white ointment onto his fingers then gently rubbed it over her cheeks, forehead and bridge of her nose. Sarah's gaze remained fixed on him. "Turn around," he softly directed.

Her shoulders, neck and the part of her back that was strawberry colored were next. Sarah wondered if the heat in her body was due to the sunburn or the man standing in back of her. His hand slid over her hot flesh in slow, sensual little circles. Oh, was he good at this! She knew Raif would be a topnotch pro at anything he tried. In fact, she had firsthand experience with some of his work. Just the memory of his kisses had her heart in a constant state of arrhythmia.

"Now the front." Raif's tone was deep and raspy, as if he'd just spent a night of long, lazy sex. When Sarah turned to face him once more, she saw that his eyes were a smoky olive-green. Evidently, he was getting just as aroused as she was.

Applying the ointment to the base of her neck, Raif started to rub it in; languid movements that went lower each time until his fingertips went just under the edge of the towel, lightly grazing her breasts.

For a heated moment their eyes locked, a mental duel of sensual promises, acute yearnings, and fearful uncertainties. Debating whether or not to give in to these feelings, Sarah was grateful when Raif finally broke the foggy, narcotic spell.

"There you go," he said brightly, without a hint of the turbulent emotions that had just passed between them, though it was still there lingering in his eyes. "All better?"

Sarah cleared her throat and mentally shook away the images filling her mind. Images that were centered on Raif, herself, and no barriers such as clothing, uncertainties, guardianship papers, and a fiancé.

"Thank you very much, doc." She smiled up at him with the same false ease he radiated. It was a heck of a lot easier than giving in to lust. Lust she had no business feeling about any man, and especially not about Raif Manning. Though he was a far cry from Jason, they both had a passionate, daredevil personality. All she had acquired from that relationship was heartache and shattered pride.

"My pleasure. Now let's go have some pizza."

"Pizza? They deliver way out here in the boonies?"

"Not a chance. It's a frozen one I threw in the oven while you were in the shower." He washed the ointment from his hands, drying them on a small hand towel.

Sarah was so hungry even frozen pizza sounded great right about now. "I'll be right out." She glanced toward the towel wrapped around her.

Raif looked at the towel. "Oh, yeah." He sounded breathless and frowned before

saying, "Don't take too awful long, I'm hungry as a bear. Matter of fact," he licked his lips, looking her over from head to toe, "you look so tempting, I just might eat you all up."

Sarah laughed, swatting at him, easily pulled into his playful spirit. "I swear, you're insatiable! Now get out of here."

He gasped, holding a hand over his heart in mock horror. "Insatiable? Me? I'll have you know that my appetites can be perfectly satisfied—given the chance. So how 'bout it, Peaches?" He held his arms open wide in invitation. "Care to appease a greedy man?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I thought you said you'd behave yourself."

"Just an offer." He held his hands up in innocence. "Can't blame a man for trying." He then added, "In case you haven't noticed, I am a man."

"Oh, I've noticed," she said wryly. "Maybe once or twice."

"Glad to hear it. I was beginning to wonder." He winked at her before leaving the room.

Sarah sat down on the toilet as her knees wobbled fiercely, threatening to collapse under her weight. *Believe me, I've noticed.* How was she going to last five more days? She'd have to stay strong. She wasn't supposed to want Raif. Wasn't supposed to care. Since she first arrived and laid eyes on him she'd tried to build a wall between them so high and wide she was certain he'd never get through. But as her traitorous mind relived his wicked kisses, she found herself digging a tunnel right underneath that wall.

"Well, Sarah," she stood up, examining her sunburned face in the mirror, the fading remains of ointment still covering her cheeks and nose, "you've sure gotten yourself in a mess." Shaking her head in disbelief, she put her bra and top back on, refusing to further reflect on her impossible situation.



## Chapter Eight

By the time Sarah walked out into the living room, the pizza was ready. Raif was huddled around the serving platter sitting on the coffee table, dishing himself up three healthy slices. Randy Travis played softly in the background, coming from a stereo nestled in the far corner of the living room. The music lulled her already peaceful mood further and she smiled as she watched Raif take a huge bite of what she hoped was pepperoni pizza.

"Hey, leave some for me!" Sarah reacted to the moment, feeling carefree, forgetting she was supposed to keep a physical and emotional distance from this man. Raif looked up and motioned for her to come and sit next to him on the sofa. His mouth was full of pizza, making it impossible for him to speak for the next few minutes. He then washed it down with a healthy swig of beer.

"My! I guess you're hungry. Here." Without thinking Sarah picked up a paper napkin from the table and wiped the tomato sauce from his chin. "You had some sauce on you." She would much rather have licked it off, but resisted the temptation. Resisting temptation. She knew she'd be doing a lot of that for the next few days.

"Thanks." Raif smiled sheepishly. "Don't you want some?"

"I'd love some, but..." She held up her bandaged hands. "I don't want to get pizza sauce all over your handiwork."

"Ah, I see the fix you're in. Guess I'll just have to feed you." Sarah noticed he didn't seem put-out by the fact.

Sarah waited as he tore off a slice for her, trying not to appear eager with having him so near, sharing what under different circumstances could be considered a very romantic act. Her mind told her she shouldn't let this man near enough to hand feed her, but another part willed her to stay put and let it happen. "Do you have any without olives?" She wrinkled her nose at the piece he held in front of her.

"Nope. Why?"

"I hate olives."

"Oh, okay." He shrugged, and started picking off the black spots sprinkled over the cheese, popping each one into his mouth.

"You don't have to do that for me." Sarah felt a slight catch in her throat at his kind gesture. She bit on her bottom lip and looked away briefly. He wasn't supposed to be kind. To the children, naturally, but not to her. She hadn't really given him any reason to like her. Barging in on him and the kids. Putting him under her scrutiny to be sure he was a suitable guardian for the children. Threatening him by telling him she wouldn't sign the guardianship papers. He had every reason to hate her, to toss her out the door, and tell her to get lost. Yet he hadn't.

Sarah knew he wanted those papers signed. And she bet a good part of his hospitality stemmed from the fact. But it was more than that. She could see it in his eyes. Eyes so unlike any she had ever seen before. Not the cold, dark eyes of her father. Not the calculating eyes of Paul. Not the slightly mad eyes of Jason. No, Raif's eyes were warm and inviting, emotions clearly visibly for all to see. Which is probably why he wore his Stetson so much, it shaded those awesome eyes.

Yes, Raif Manning was genuinely kind and compassionate. Passionate. Her blood surged at the memory of them wrapped around each other in the kitchen earlier.

What was wrong with her? She wasn't supposed to like Raif Manning on a personal level. But every moment she spent in his company it was becoming precisely that: personal.

"No problem." He brought her out of her confused thoughts. "I love olives. Now open wide." He held a piece in front of her, the smell enticing her until she gave in to hunger and took a bite. She then took a sip of the beer Raif offered her, noting that it was the same bottle which he was drinking from. He repeated the actions for himself, Sarah never taking her eyes off of him.

So went the intimate ritual as they ate from the same pieces of pizza—picked free of olives—and drank from the same bottles of beer until Sarah had her fill.

"I'm stuffed." She shook her head at the next slice he offered, marveling at the fact that he gobbled it down with ease.

"Do I have sauce all over my face again?" Raif asked since she was staring at him again.

"No." She leaned back, resting her head against the sofa. Her hunger sated, her mind slightly woozy from the beer, and her body exhausted from the workout she had earlier all got to her, making her tongue want to say what was on her mind at the moment. "Just thinking."

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, tell me. By the look on your face it must be a doozy."

"Well, I read in a magazine once that a man's appetite for food is the same as his appetite for sex." She shrugged, trying to look as if talking about sex was commonplace for her. "The way he eats is the way he is in bed."

"Oh?" He arched an eyebrow. "You've seen me eat. Now tell me, how would I be in bed?" He leaned back, ankles crossed as his boot clad feet rested on the table.

"A rousing fury and you'd want lots of it." Raif only smiled as he chewed on yet another slice of pizza. Sarah wondered if what she read was true and grew uncomfortable with her line of thinking. There was no way she intended to find out.

She gave her head a mental shake, feeling rather embarrassed at her candid ruminations and brazenness of her previous statement. She made a move to clean up the mess from dinner, needing some distance from the man who muddled her mind and did all kinds of strange things to her insides.

"I'll clean up," he interjected into her thoughts.

"I promised to help out, Raif. I'd feel guilty if you did it for me."

"Don't be silly. You've had a hard day. Go get ready for bed and I'll stop by in a while to say good night." He kissed her forehead and carried the empty platter to the kitchen.

Sarah watched his long strides. Even with his slight limp he moved with surprising ease. A warm, contented feeling curled up inside her at his tender, caring ways. Yes, she could definitely get used to this man. Trouble was, she shouldn't be feeling this way about Raif Manning. Not when she had a fiance and a life back in California.

\* \* \* \*

A half hour later, Sarah lay awake in bed staring at the ceiling. Since she had the chance to clean her room earlier in the morning, she found it to be quite lovely underneath all of the dust, decorated in much the same way as Raif's, with simple wood furnishings and bare hardwood floors. She knew she should be dead tired after all she had done today, but sleep would not come as thoughts of Raif kept invading her mind.

Just when she thought she understood his actions, he'd do a complete turnaround, leaving her more perplexed than ever. One minute he'd look at her as if he was ready to wrestle her to the ground and rip her clothes off, and the next he'd treat her as if he was her big brother. Sometimes he'd act like a complete jerk. This afternoon was a perfect example, she thought resentfully as her blistered palms throbbed with every heartbeat.

As she turned those thoughts around in her head, the sound of light tapping on the door caught her attention.

"Sarah?" Raif's voice was a soft whisper.

"Yes?" She heard the door open, felt the side of the small bed yield under his weight then a large hand softly caress her arm.

"I wanted to apologize again." He sounded sincere.

"It's all right. We didn't exactly start out on the right foot. I probably deserved it." Sarah sat upright, resting her back against the headboard.

Raif swung his long legs up on the bed, sitting right beside her, their thighs touching. "Can I be honest with you about something?"

"Please do." Sarah thought how right it felt having him next to her. So satisfying. So natural. Though she knew it was oh, so wrong. She should tell him to leave her room. Now. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Raif was like a salve to wounds she never knew she had.

"You confuse the hell out of me."

Placing a bandaged palm over her chest to keep her heart from flopping out, Sarah said, "That makes two of us."

"I know I made a promise of hands off, but..." He inhaled deeply. "What do we do about this?" He pointed to her and then himself.

Sarah felt a strong need to put an end to this conversation. Her head was spinning and her priorities were getting jumbled in her brain. "We do nothing, Raif," she said firmly, scooting away from him. "I'm here to help you out with the kids and house. That's it. By next Thursday I'll be gone." She felt him stiffen at her words.

Suspicion crept up on her before she could fight it off and she didn't resist accusing him. "So, was your plan to woo me into bed as a way to get the papers signed?"

He made a sound as if he'd actually been punched in the stomach. "Is that what you really think?" The indignation in his voice was clear.

"I don't know what to think. I probably shouldn't have come in the first place. This is turning out far more complicated than I thought it would." She sighed, and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to steady her nerves. "But, I'm here, and I'll be here for a few more days. No more. No less."

Raif swung his legs off the bed and stood there glaring down at her. "It can't come soon enough for me, Peaches." He turned and left the room.

Sarah stared at the empty doorway and whispered, "Me neither."

## Chapter Nine

The next morning Sarah awoke to the sound of absolute silence. The children were gone but would be coming back today. Would Raif be bringing Jenny too? She rolled over onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Wasn't there a single cobweb-free room in this house?

For some reason she was wide awake even though it was only—she glanced at the clock—a quarter to seven. Normally she slept until after nine. Truth was, she hadn't slept soundly all night as Raif Manning kept vying for her complete attention both in her waking and sleeping mind.

Yesterday was only a tiny sampling of what would happen in these next five days—if she allowed it. Which is precisely why she'd put a stop to it. She recalled how angry Raif looked after they'd had such a cozy meal, started an even cozier chat on her bed, then she put a quick halt to anything further. There could be no more intimate moments together. The kids being here would help immensely. She'd be certain to throw herself into housework. That should drive a good wedge between herself and Raif Manning.

A soft knock on her door had her heart bolting into her throat. She heard Raif whisper her name. She thought to feign sleep, but her traitorous lips welcomed him in.

He opened the door, the look in his eyes clearly guarded. Sarah inhaled a fortifying breath, steeling herself against the potency of this man. He had already showered, his hair still damp, and he was dressed in his customary attire of painted-on jeans and a plaid shirt.

"Did you want something?" she asked when he simply stood there staring at the mussed bed.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, Alice wants to know if you'd like to go over for a cookout today." He finally made eye contact. "She asked yesterday when I took the kids over, but I forgot to mention it. We'll bring the kids back with us."

Sarah felt uncomfortable. "I—I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?" He frowned. "It would give you a chance to finally meet your niece, and you've been cooped up here doing nothing but cleaning the past few days."

Pulling the covers up to her chin, she felt her eyes grow wide. Just the thought of meeting Raif's family had her breaking out in a sweat. The more she knew about Raif, the deeper she was getting in with him.

Here he was inviting her over for a cookout as if she was family. As if she actually belonged here.

She gave a mute snort at her ludicrous musings. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the children were blood related, that's as far as their connection to her went.

She wasn't wanted here by Raif or the kids. She swallowed the sad thought.

When she didn't answer, he came into the room and stood a few feet from the bed. He smiled down at her then said, "Come on, you'll have a good time."

Sarah sighed, pushing the covers down to her waist and sitting up. She glanced at their reflection in the mirror across the room before looking at Raif once more. She nodded. "Okay." *What harm could it do?* she asked herself. And it really was time for her

to meet her own niece.

"Great. We'll leave here around noon."

"Sounds good," Sarah whispered, watching as Raif walked out and turned down the hall, whistling to himself. The man certainly didn't hold a grudge. The knowledge sobered her. It would be far better if Raif kept up a wall of ire against her. At least then she could be just as angry in return. Instead, he seemed to let things go with surprising ease and welcomed her back into his good graces.

Rubbing her temples, Sarah groaned. This was going to be a long day.

\* \* \* \*

The entire morning Sarah did her best to avoid Raif, and concentrated on cleaning the house. Earlier she cleaned out the refrigerator and now she worked in the living room. She had already dusted, taken down the dingy drapes, and was now trying to get the carpet halfway decent looking. Raif was working in the boys' room setting up the bunk beds and installing a ceiling fan.

Being in his lone company was simply too much for her to handle. The loud motor of the vacuum assured her that he'd refrain from making small talk as he had off and on over the past few hours.

The kids would be coming home today and she had every intention of concentrating on them. They'd be an excellent deterrent for her traitorous mind and body. She'd come close to giving in to lust more often than she cared to admit where Raif was concerned. And that was just it. Lust. Nothing more and nothing less.

She hated herself for being attracted to him. After Jason, she had sworn off men who got her hormones in a spin because it just managed to get her heart involved.

Sarah stopped her back and forth motions with the vacuum as that last thought ran through her mind a few more times. Her heart beat so loudly in her ears it drowned out the sound of the vacuum.

No. There was no way she was doing this again. She was just stressed, confused, still grieving. And Raif hit every soft spot inside her. Filled every empty area she possessed. Jumped over the emotional hurdles she had firmly put in place.

She closed her eyes and let out a small breath of realization.

"I think the rug would get cleaner if you actually moved the vacuum around a little."

"Oh!" Sarah jumped as she felt a hand on her shoulder and Raif spoke the words close to her ear.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm sure that one area's about as clean as it can get." He laughed as she gaped up at him. "Though, it just might take you the better part of a year to do the entire room."

Sarah's hand trembled as badly as the smile she felt on her lips. She shut the machine off, avoiding eye contact. "I was just thinking."

"That thought you had last night was pretty interesting. Care to share this one?" He rubbed her back and Sarah moved away from his touch, going to unplug the cord.

"No." The one word was meant to cut off the conversation and shut him out.

He tipped his head back, regarding her through narrow eyes. "Suit yourself. I've just got a couple of things left to do then I thought we'd head over to Alice and Mark's place."

"Sounds good," she said a little too loudly as she fumbled around with the cord, wrapping it around the vacuum and tucking the plug under.

She dared a peek over at Raif as he stood so near. There was a half smile on his face and his thumbs were hooked in his front pockets. He looked satisfied at seeing her so flustered.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Couldn't be better." She wheeled the vacuum into the hallway, sticking it in the closet there. When she glanced back into the living room she saw Raif walking away, whistling a sexy-sounding tune that caressed her every nerve ending.

When he was out of sight she slumped against the closet door, staring at the room across from her. The door was open and she could see Raif's bed. The covers were mussed and clothes lay strewn on the floor. Images of the night he had come into the room after his shower seeped into her mind.

Sarah inhaled a fortifying breath and let it out slowly. Gathering her strength once again, she went to her room to freshen up before they left. She was now more determined than ever to put a wedge between her and Raif. She only had to hold out a few more days.

\* \* \* \*

Later they drove over to Alice's in virtual silence. Raif didn't prod her to talk and she was grateful of the fact. She would have rather stayed at the house than joining in on a family day—a family that wasn't even hers. But, she had given her word. At least it would be easier to avoid Raif with other people around.

Stopping in front of the new home, Raif shut off the engine. After he got out, he came around to the passenger side of the truck and helped Sarah out.

Before they reached Alice and Mark's front door, the twins, along with Tommy and Chris, scrambled out of the house to greet them.

"How's it going, rug-rats?" Raif tousled Tommy's hair and heaved Stacey up into his arms. Carol was already beside Sarah, holding her hand, chattering away about the new baby her mother would be having, while Chris relayed the highlights of the flip he'd just done off the diving board.

"Mark!" Alice called from the front porch where she awaited her guests. "Help Raif corral the kids, they'll scare Sarah away before I even have a chance to meet her." She smiled widely as Sarah approached and gave her a warm hug, ignoring her brother completely.

"Hey, no hug for me? Not even a howdy?" He shot his sister with a fake look of dejection.

"Get out of here!" Alice pushed him aside. "Sarah's the one I want to see." She led Sarah to the kitchen, leaving Raif to entertain the children.

As soon as they entered the cluttered but spotless room, Alice sat Sarah on a spool back dinette chair then took one for herself. "The baby's active today." She placed a hand on her abdomen and laughed. "So tell me, how did you do it?"

"Do what?" Sarah chuckled at Alice's show of enthusiasm, noticing she was a female replica of Raif. Though she had coffee-brown eyes and was a few inches shorter than him in height, she certainly possessed Raif's outgoing personality.

"Get my brother to fall in love with you!" Her eyes were wide and expectant. "Did you use a love potion? Voodoo doll? A frying pan upside the head? What?"

"Now hold on a minute." Sarah held up her palms and got to her feet. "What are you talking about?"

Alice pursed her lips. "Well, Raif didn't actually tell me he was in love, and he's always insisted that no woman would ever catch him. But by his actions, looks to me like you've not only caught him, you've lassoed him and put him under a spell!" Alice looked Sarah over and smiled.

Sarah flushed at her blatant appraisal. "I'm ... not sure I know what you're talking about." She suddenly felt dizzy.

"Now I don't want to be bringing up my brother's past since it's really none of my business, but with his looks and personality he's had more women than a dog has fleas and not once, not a single, solitary time, did he get emotionally attached." Alice crossed her arms and rested them on her taut belly then nodded. "Yes, you must be pretty special." Deserting her chair she walked over to Sarah and gave her another hug.

"Welcome to the family."

Sarah felt as if she had been thrown into the Twilight Zone. "Thank you, but I'm afraid you're reading more into what's going on than what's actually going on."

Alice started digging around in the fridge. "I don't think so." She turned and placed lettuce, tomatoes, and onions on the counter. "Looks perfectly clear to me." She held a carrot between her teeth and bit off a piece. "He's nuts about you." She set the carrot on the counter and grimaced when she saw Sarah's expression. "Oh no, don't tell me this is all one sided?"

Sarah drifted over to where Alice stood, silently offering her help. Though she wore a thin cotton blouse and the air conditioning was on in the house, she felt perspiration dripping down the back of her neck. "Well, I do care about Raif, but I have a life back home in California and a fiancee."

"I see," Alice said slowly, one dark eyebrow raised high and a smile of conspiracy lifting her lips.

Sarah ignored the look and continued talking, needing to set the record straight. "I'll be leaving next week."

"Uh-huh. Gotcha." She handed Sarah a knife while she herself began tearing the lettuce and placing it on a platter she had retrieved from a bottom cupboard. "A lot can happen before then."

"Not if I can help it," Sarah muttered, ignoring Alice's grin as she turned toward the sink.

Mark called Alice outside to help set up the necessary items for the barbecue just as they finished in the kitchen.

Sarah followed suit, smiling and holding out her hand as Mark introduced himself. "So we finally meet." Mark had a dazzling smile and a receding hairline. He wore khaki pants, a white polo shirt and gold wire-rimmed glasses. He looked like a lot of the men Sarah's dad had picked out for her to date over the years—although he clearly had more personality. "We've heard a lot about you. It's nice to be able to put a face with the name."

Sarah wondered what exactly Raif had been saying about her on his trips over here, but figured it couldn't have been all that bad since Mark and Alice were being not only civil but downright nice. "I'm pleased to finally meet the both of you, too. Are you sure you don't need any help?"

Alice quickly piped in. "Well, you could keep an eye on Jenny for me. Raif's helping Mark find the charcoal and set up the grill, and I've still got a few things to throw

together." Alice didn't give her a chance to argue as she walked back into the house, taking Mark with her.

Sarah watched as the kids all dove back into the kidney shaped pool and began to splash about, yelling and giggling. A plaintive wail came from the other side of the yard. Sarah warily walked over to the portable crib and peered inside. Jenny was wide awake, sucking on her fist and kicking her feet for all she was worth. Her face was screwed up tight and she let out another high-pitched cry. Sarah's blood went icy and she glanced around for Raif. He was nowhere in sight.

Bending over the crib, she felt the baby's diaper. Dry. She was probably hungry. A fresh bottle sat in one corner of the crib. Sarah truly felt this was a setup. Heaving a sigh of surrender she gingerly picked up the baby and the bottle, settling herself on the sky-blue blanket spread out on the small lawn before her arrival.

"It's okay, sweetie," Sarah talked softly to Jenny as she uncapped the bottle. "Let's work together and everything should be fine. I'm just going to feed you, okay?" She took the nipple and placed it in the infant's mouth. Jenny eagerly accepted and began sucking greedily. "My!" Sarah laughed. "I promise, you will eat again."

"Motherhood becomes you," Raif came to whisper in her ear. "What say we start on our own, right away?"

"You're insane, you know that?" She frowned, but couldn't help smiling at his bit of teasing. "Besides, haven't you got your hands full with three already?" Sarah avoided eye contact.

"Want me to burp her?" Raif offered. Sarah relinquished the baby and watched as Raif held the tiny child with such gentleness she had to fight back the rush of emotion that made her realize how much love she'd missed in her life. And how freely Raif gave his away.

"Fatherhood becomes you," she said softly, watching in tender delight as Raif babbled and cooed to the baby in his arms.

Their gazes locked for a moment until Raif said, "I'm going see if Alice needs any help." He handed the baby to Sarah.

Sarah nodded and took Jenny in her arms, though she wasn't eager to be placed quite so quickly back in the role as caretaker to the baby.

"Good luck." Raif winked at her, rising to his feet.

"Thanks, I'll need it." She watched as he turned and walked back to the house.



## Chapter Ten

The following morning, Sarah got out of bed while Raif still slept, and put on a pair of navy slacks and an ivory silk blouse. He could just make breakfast himself today. She was going into town to call Paul and her father.

After the barbecue yesterday, Alice suggested the kids stay the night since they were all asleep by the time she and Raif were ready to leave. Sarah was glad of the fact, not eager in the least to be plopped down in the role as caretaker again.

Guilt stabbed her heart when she realized that's exactly what had happened to Raif, and he was taking everything in stride. In fact, he had taken over the role as sole parent to those three kids in a way that amazed her.

Last night, after she had brushed her teeth and was on her way to bed, Raif stopped her in the hall to say goodnight. All he had done was place a chaste kiss on her forehead, yet the act had caused her to have one erotic dream after another in which Raif planted sultry kisses all over her body. In her heated dreams he settled himself between her thighs, running his tongue in exquisite circles over her clitoris, bringing her to climax again and again.

So today she was on a mission to reconnect with Paul and her father. They'd add some sanity to her frazzled brain, though she'd never breathe a word about her and Raif's brief kisses. All she wanted was confirmation that she belonged somewhere. That she was missed. That she had a secure future back in California.

After applying some makeup and smoothing her hair back with a tortoise shell headband, she grabbed her purse and walked out the front door without a look over her shoulder. Her destination: Big Sal's.

A half hour later Sarah walked into Sal's Diner. Her gaze scanned the nearly empty dining area as she bypassed the bar stools perched before a pink counter, and walked over to a payphone at the far end of the tiny establishment. After wiping the earpiece with a tissue she'd scrounged from her purse, she extracted her emergency phone card from her wallet. Her first call would be to her father.

She held the phone between her ear and shoulder while holding the card with one hand and punching in the numbers with the other. When the call finally connected she was greeted by her father's most impersonal voicemail. He was out. Again.

Sarah sighed deeply and didn't bother leaving a message. She hung up with the same feeling rushing up that had plagued her since childhood: loneliness. Her father had always been busy. Always gone. This time was no exception. She had hoped he would have been waiting for her call. After all, she hadn't contacted him in over three days and he knew she was coming out here to Kansas. He hadn't even left a message on the voicemail for her in case she called.

With her next achy heartbeat, she threw up the wall of steel around her soul and dug around in her purse until she found the small leather bound address book and located Paul's hotel number in France. A small glimmer of hope burned in her. Paul would be pleased to hear from her.

The call seemed to take forever to go through, but he finally picked up on the fourth ring. Her grip on the receiver tightened. Her pulse quickened. "Paul?" she said with

eagerness in her voice. She just wanted to hear someone say they missed her. Have Paul tell her he couldn't wait to get back to California—and to her.

"Who may I ask is calling?" His ever polite voice traveled through the line.

Sarah frowned and pulled the receiver away, wondering if she had a wrong number. She put the phone to her ear again. "It's me. Your fiancée."

"Sarah?" He sounded slightly surprised and very preoccupied. Probably doing paperwork, Sarah thought. He was forever absorbed in facts and figures.

"Of course it's me." Sarah watched as a tall man in a cowboy hat entered the diner, ambling over to one of the stools at the counter. He was as thin as the unlit cigarette hanging from his lips. Sarah smiled as he tipped his hat in greeting.

"Where are you?" Paul asked. Sarah heard him mutter something to whoever was in the room with him even though he placed his palm over the mouthpiece. That was just like Paul. Oh, so predictable. Forever having meetings. Always working. Little time for fun and play. Her smile faded.

"I'm here in Kansas. I'm staying a little longer than expected." She turned back to the phone and touched the cool metal as if she could actually touch Paul through it. She needed a familiar face right about now. Something to divert her from the most distracting man with green eyes. "I'll be back home next Thursday before you arrive. I'll meet you at the airport. I thought we could..." Sarah felt herself blush at her next words, "you know, get some Thai food and have a cozy meal at my place." A nervous laugh bubbled up in her throat. She attributed it to expectation.

"Well," he began in a hesitant tone. "I'm sorry to say but business is taking a bit longer than I had anticipated." Sarah heard someone giggle in the background. A female someone. Paul covered the mouthpiece once again and said something she couldn't make out. Sarah frowned harder this time.

"Who's there with you?" Her suspicious streak surfaced with a vengeance.

"Just a client, dear." His voice was sugar-sweet and so unlike him. Sarah had a sinking feeling that a boulder was about to be dropped on her and there was nothing she could do about it. "As I was saying, Sarah. Business is taking longer than expected and I'll be here approximately two more weeks. Perhaps longer. I'll keep in touch."

Before Sarah could utter a single word, she heard the phone clatter as if being hung up, but it didn't disconnect. Instead, she could hear the distinct sound of heavy breathing, more giggles and several sexual words from Paul's lips that Sarah had never heard him say before even in their most heated moments. He obviously didn't realize she was still on the line.

A sensation like lead being poured through the top of her head and cement encasing her feet filled her as she hung up the receiver and walked over to an empty booth. She slid her numb body behind the table, never feeling so lost, hurt, and abandoned as she did now. She couldn't face Raif right now. She needed time to absorb this and pull herself together.

Sarah sat there for a long while, fighting back the tears she felt threatening her eyes. Of all the people in the world she felt she could trust. How could he do this to her? What would become of their relationship now? Naturally she couldn't marry Paul, after having his infidelities practically thrown in her face. But what about her father? He'd be so disappointed if she broke off the engagement. And having an affair wasn't something he considered life-shattering.

Robert Collins had been known to have a few in his time. Even at an early age Sarah could remember hearing her mother cry at night when her father was out until the wee hours. She'd tell Sarah and Debbie their father was working late at the office. Their mother's red eyes and solemn features told them something very different.

After her mother's death, her father became completely absorbed in his work. In fact, he'd only dated sporadically in the past twenty years. Sarah could never figure that one out. Maybe the thrill was gone because he didn't have anyone to cheat on; the rancid thought twisted in her mind.

A glass of ice water was silently put on the table and Sarah took several swallows, forcing away the rude words perched on her tongue that had nothing to do with the service and everything to do with her shattered life. She then glanced up to find an older woman of quite enormous size standing beside the table. A pad in one hand, a pencil perched between the fingers of the other, she looked down at Sarah with an expectant look in her pale-blue eyes. This had to be Big Sal.

"What'll it be, hon?" The woman's gentle tone belied her ominous proportions.

Sarah sniffed back a tear and cleared her throat, trying to steady her voice as she said, "I'll have the biggest hot fudge sundae you've got. Extra fudge." Her voice quavered. "No nuts."

"Want to tell me what's wrong?" The woman tucked her pad and pencil in the front pocket of her blue denim apron.

"No." Sarah refused to make eye contact, instead, focusing on her reflection in the window at her side. She looked miserable. She felt worse.

Big Sal bent down and whispered in Sarah's ear. "Man troubles?"

Sarah looked at the older woman who held so much wisdom and compassion in her eyes she decided not to even try to deny it. "That obvious?"

"Nah." She slid into the seat opposite Sarah. "I'm just a good judge of character. I also know a broken heart when I see one. Now you just tell Big Sal all about it."

Sarah smiled at both the woman's attempt to pry information out of her and the fact that, though Sarah was a virtual stranger to this woman, Big Sal seemed genuinely concerned. "Not a broken heart." She never really loved Paul. "I found out my fiancé is having an affair." Briefly she wondered how many others he'd had behind her back. No wonder he never wanted to make love, he was too worn out! She felt like the world's biggest fool. Thank heaven they'd always used protection. Sarah hadn't wanted to get pregnant, now she was grateful they'd taken the precaution.

The older woman reached out and patted the back of Sarah's hands that were in the midst of shredding a paper napkin with vengeance. "Ah, no broken heart? That's good." Their conversation was momentarily interrupted as the cowboy stood at the cash register and called to Big Sal. She waved him off and cast her attention back to Sarah. "So was this going to be one of those convenient marriages? Got a bun in the oven, do ya?"

Sarah's head jerked up, her eyes wide. "Heavens no!" She had no idea why she was entrusting her private life to this stranger, but Sarah continued on. "I have no desire to have children at this point in my life." She gave a heavy shrug then said, "My father loved Paul. He has a good future ahead of him at his father's accounting firm, and I'd be getting my trust fund once we were married."

Big Sal looked utterly perplexed, the grooves in her forehead turning to deep valleys as she lifted her eyebrows in disbelief. "You mean to tell me you were going to hitch up

to this guy for money?"

The way Big Sal said it sounded so cold and calculating. And it was. Why had she never seen it before? "Not only for financial security, but also emotional security." There, that sounded so much less greedy. She sniffed back a few more tears.

"Well, so much for emotional security. Hopping in the sack with another woman pretty much killed that. Now that only leaves money." The cowboy called to Sal once again. "Oh, hold your horses, Pete!" With a heavy grunt Sal slid out from behind the table. "I'll be right back, hon. Don't you go nowhere."

A shuddering sigh escaped Sarah's lips. Already she felt loads better. She wasn't used to dealing with her feelings out in the open, yet a total stranger had her pouring her heart out. Usually she'd keep her emotions locked inside where'd they'd fester and grow. Or on rare occasions they'd go away completely. She laughed as she polished the silverware with the hem of her blouse. She must be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Sarah's eyes drifted around the room once again. On the wall next to each booth was a potted philodendron in woven half baskets. Some had a few yellow and brown leaves, but other than that they were green and healthy. Sarah wondered why Big Sal didn't buy artificial plants and save the trouble and worry of taking care of these.

She turned her head in the direction of the ancient cash register and watched as Big Sal and Pete shared a dirty joke and a few laughs. The cowboy placed his battered hat back on his head, touched the brim and stuck the unlit cigarette in his mouth once again before ambling back outside into the stifling heat. Sarah found herself smiling as she turned back around. Big Sal would never go for artificial plants. Everything about the woman was genuine. She also had an easygoing personality that beckoned Sarah to trust her on the spot. Just like Raif. Could growing up in the country have that effect on people?

She looked out the window beside her and only saw one pickup truck pass by. Huge burlap sacks were piled in the back and she found herself wondering what was in them. Manure? Seeds? Food for livestock?

Looking down at her completely ruined manicure and not really caring, Sarah realized that country life was as far removed from city life as night and day. Things here were slower paced, she expected that, but the people were more relaxed, happy, ready to share a story, a joke, or simply a smile. Though the lack of amenities still left a lot to be desired, Sarah didn't find it so hard to see why Debbie moved out here all those years ago. Back at home, life was ruled by the clock and the size of your bank account.

"Sorry it took so long, hon." Sal was back with the biggest sundae Sarah had ever laid eyes on. She took a bite and groaned with utter delight. The fudge was hot and thick and gooey. "Glad you like it." She then bent down near Sarah's ear and whispered. "It's on the house."

Sarah looked up and shook her head. "Oh, no. I couldn't possibly—"

"Your money's no good here, little lady." Big Sal winked. "Now I'll just leave you alone to finish up your treat."

Reaching out a hand, Sarah touched the other woman's elbow when she turned away. Raif said he'd known Big Sal since he was a kid. Maybe she could gather some useful information while she was here. "Please, would you mind talking for a few more minutes?" Now that she'd spilled her sob story to the woman, Sarah had a few questions of her own.

"Sure thing." Big Sal slid her ample form behind the table once more. She took the cherry Sarah had placed on her plate and popped it in her mouth. Ordinarily Sarah would have been shocked by the action, but sharing food around here seemed the norm. She recalled the pizza she and Raif shared the evening before and flushed as the memory curled up inside her.

Sarah took a few bites of vanilla ice cream, not knowing where to begin. Big Sal seemed like a straightforward woman, so she'd just come right out and ask. Maybe she'd tell her to mind her own business. Maybe not. Sarah also debated on telling Big Sal who she was, but figured she'd let the woman know only if she asked. Sarah was certain Raif had told everyone in town she was coming and was equally certain their opinion of her would be about the same as Raif's and the boys.

She took a deep breath and finally said, "Tell me about Raif Manning."

The older woman's dark eyebrows shot up again. Sarah thought she'd get up and walk away. Instead, she didn't question her curiosity and said, "A good man. Maybe a little rough around the edges." She cocked her head to one side. "Nothing a good woman can't fix. Been trying to hitch him up since he was all of seventeen." Sal laughed clear from her belly. "His last year of high school he stayed clean away from my place. My niece was visiting and I thought they'd make a real nice couple." She chuckled again, pushing in a few bobby pins that were slipping from the bun at the back of her head. "He's avoided any type of commitment for as long as I can remember."

Sarah felt her heart beat sluggishly. Just as she had suspected. Her mind was beginning to sway in the unfit guardian area once again. "How does he feel about the kids?" She lost interest in the sundae and was merely running tracks through the ice cream with her spoon.

Sal leaned closer. "He loves those kids like they were his own." The statement was solid. "When he came back a few months ago, I expected the same young man I'd always seen. Angry, restless, and a charmer clear through. But he'd changed." Big Sal held her hand up as if swearing into court. "That angry young man is gone, and no more itchy feet. He's here to settle down and start a new life with them kids."

"And you believe him?" Was Big Sal that gullible, or had Raif really changed?

"Now why wouldn't I?" The woman folded her arms across her chest and leaned back regarding Sarah with keen eyes.

Sarah shrugged.

"He's good for them kids, little lady. Same goes the other way around." She gave a slow shake of her head. "It's a crying shame their folks were snatched away from life so quickly."

"Yes," Sarah agreed with new tears in her throat.

"Must be equally hard on you to lose your only sister."

Sarah looked up at the older woman in surprise. "How did you know?"

Big Sal smiled. "Not much gets past me. Raif said he was expecting you, and when you started asking questions it wasn't hard to figure out. Debbie and the kids used to come in here and have a burger every now and then. Raif all but grew up within these walls."

"So what they say about small towns is true?" Sarah smiled softly.

"Every bit of it!" Big Sal threw her head back and laughed as if she'd just told the funniest joke on earth. Sarah found herself chuckling too.

"I'd better get going," Sarah said a moment later, grabbing her purse and sliding from the booth. She felt better in regards to Raif. Even if Big Sal was simply saying what Sarah wanted to hear, he must have done something right to have this woman vouching for his change in character.

"Sure thing." Sal was now on her feet also. "Don't you worry about those kids," she said softly looking down at Sarah with serious eyes. "Aside from their folks, they couldn't ask for anyone better. Raif Manning's got a lot to offer."

Sarah's smile was lopsided as she said, "Even if he is a little rough around the edges?"

Big Sal smiled back. "Like I said before, nothing a good woman can't fix." Sal turned and walked over behind the counter, talking to the cook about tomorrow's special of meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

Going to the front of the diner and out into the hot afternoon, Sarah couldn't help the ludicrous thought of herself in the role of that good woman.

## Chapter Eleven

Sarah arrived home just as the sun was setting low on the horizon. She had driven around most of the day, wondering what she should do. Staying in Kansas seemed so pointless now. She had more than enough proof that Raif was a good guardian. The kids adored him, Big Sal gave him a shining recommendation, even her own intuition was on his side.

She should just sign the papers over and head back home. Trouble was, going back home seemed a lot scarier than staying here and facing Raif with his persuasive grin, mountain of housework, and three children to take care of.

Once she went back to California she'd have to tell her father about calling off the wedding. Robert Collins would not be happy. She wasn't quite ready to face that yet. Hopefully she'd develop some courage before next Thursday arrived.

Walking into the house, she tossed her keys on the coffee table and made her way to the kitchen for a glass of water. She felt like she'd crossed the Mojave Desert ten times over today. As she held the filled glass to her lips, not caring that it was tap water, she noticed that the house was unusually quiet. Hadn't Raif brought the kids back today?

She took a few sips of water, then with a frown set the glass on the counter and went to have a look around. Her footsteps echoed in the house. She could have sworn Raif's truck had been parked out front. She checked the bedrooms and bathroom. No sign of Raif or the kids. No baby paraphernalia lay strewn around. No crib was set up in any of the rooms.

Her thoughts started spinning at full speed as she walked out to the back yard in the fading daylight. Maybe he kept leaving the kids at his sister's because he didn't want her to see that he was really incapable of taking care of the kids. Especially the baby.

But that didn't make sense. If he couldn't handle the kids why would he be seeking sole guardianship? She stood near the barn and looked around Raif's immense property. Her eyes scoured the land, trying to find any sign of life other than knee-high weeds and a few wildflowers sprouting here and there through the golden sheaves of whatever it was that waved in the slight breeze. Still no sign of Raif or the kids.

She took a deep breath of fresh evening air and sighed heavily. Maybe he was protecting the kids from her. Tommy and Chris were basically tolerating her, eager for her to finally leave, and she was certain Raif knew she couldn't diaper a baby if her life depended on it.

Feeling unwanted and completely alone in this wide universe, Sarah thought maybe it was best if she just packed up her things and left. It was clear she wasn't wanted here. Heck, she wasn't even wanted back home. Where before she would have had wedding plans to keep her occupied for another year, now she only had an emptiness inside of her.

She looked down at her bare finger, finally acknowledging what a sham her and Paul's relationship had been. She didn't love him. She had just wanted to please her father so badly she was willing to marry a man who brought about as much spice to her life as cold oatmeal and cared for her as little. *What about your happiness?* Raif's words of the other day swirled in her brain.

"Yes, what about my happiness?" she whispered, wrapping her arms around her

waist to keep out the sudden cold settling in her bones. Her life spun through her mind and she saw herself as an empty bottle in the ocean, tossed around, going wherever the tide took her. She never had any direction. No goals. No dreams. She just went wherever the days lead her.

She hadn't even finished college. Her father told her how ridiculous an education would be for her to pursue, especially since she'd have enough money to take care of whatever needs she had. The trust fund would take care of that. Once she was married. So she'd followed his advice, dropped out, and forgot about obtaining her business degree. She'd been a puppet. And it took a pair of emerald eyes and a mesmerizing smile for her to realize it.

She was just about to turn and head back to the house when she heard someone humming. She didn't recognize the tune, but the melancholy sound pulled at her heartstrings nonetheless. Sarah followed the sound into the dusky interior of the barn. The last remnants of daylight sliced the otherwise gray murkiness inside as she looked around. Raif had been busy. Where before rusty cans of old paint occupied one corner and various farming supplies in different states of decay lay scattered around, now all was cleared away, making the barn seem so much bigger than when she had first entered it the other day.

Walking over to the ladder, she placed one foot upon the first rung and then the next, making her way up to the loft. Her high-heeled pumps made ascending precarious, but she was at the top with only a few more wobbly steps.

Her breath caught as she saw Raif sitting at the entrance of a huge open window, his profile silhouetted as golden light from the setting sun framed him. One leg dangling outside and the other bent, his elbow resting on his knee, she decided to leave him alone with his thoughts.

"Why don't you join me?" His soft voice startled her and she nearly fell backward. Only her tight grip on the topmost rung kept her from tumbling down the ladder.

Sarah was glued in place. "I—I didn't mean to disturb you. I can see you'd like to be alone." She looked at her feet and was just about to step down when she felt a hand on her wrist.

"You aren't disturbing me." She looked up and saw him smile, though it seemed weary. Had she caused this man so much stress with her visit? She felt like scum. Her life had just been turned upside-down by Paul, and she now knew how Raif and the children felt with her entering the picture days ago. The circumstances were different, but the outcome was the same. Lives thrown into chaos by one individual.

"Really, Raif." Her gaze tangled with his and her blood raced as his grip tightened on her wrist. She was certain he could feel her out of control pulse. "I shouldn't have come here." She meant it in regards to Kansas itself, but wondered if Raif thought she meant the barn.

"Nonsense. Come on up. I'll show you a surprise." His smile turned genuine, less strained. Sarah relaxed a little. Just a few minutes in his company wouldn't hurt. Besides, she really didn't want to be alone right now. Even if she had nobody in this world, at least she could pretend that she and Raif could be friends. Maybe more.

"All right." She allowed herself to be helped up. Raif kept her hand in his as he led her over to the huge window cut into the side of the barn. The big wooden shutters were pushed outward. Raif relinquished her hand and sat down on a folded blanket, his feet



hanging outside. He wore another pair of faded jeans and a black cotton shirt. His ever-present Stetson sat nearby. Sarah's pulse beat triple time at the sight of him.

"Have a seat." He patted the empty spot by his side. "You won't regret it."

Sarah wasn't so sure. All afternoon she'd been mulling over her multitude of regrets. She sat next to him anyway, being careful to avoid body contact, and gasped at the sight before her. They had an excellent, unobstructed view of the setting sun. It was a fiery orange-red sphere on the horizon, painting the sky brilliant shades of pink and yellow while the rim of the horizon melted into a deep rose color. "It's breathtaking," she said in awe.

"I try to come up here just about every day to watch, think, remember, plan. It's never the same view twice." His voice was low. "It's my special place."

"Thank you for sharing this with me." Sarah's eyes felt misty as she looked at Raif. She didn't feel worthy. Not of the kindness he offered her, even though she'd barged into his home spouting ultimatums and a bad attitude. Not of the restraint he showed when she provoked him on numerous occasions, both with her words and her actions. Not of the desire she saw burning in his eyes right now.

Even though she had been here only a few short days, everything seemed so different since she had met Raif. His zest for life was quickly rubbing off on her. Even the country, the very world around her, was being viewed in a different light. Where before she had seen mile upon mile of pale, dead grass and just one day fading into yet another, now she saw waves of golden prairie softly swaying in the breeze and the day ending in a colorful blaze of glory. She felt like she'd been dead for so long and brought to life by this man. And she didn't deserve a bit of it.

"You're welcome." He looked at her before turning his head to face the ending day.

"I thought you were bringing the kids home today."

"They wanted to stay another day. I'll be bringing them back tomorrow." He offered no reason as to why they didn't want to come back home. He didn't have to.

She looked down at her hands folded in her lap. "They're staying away because of me, aren't they?"

His measured gaze met Sarah's. "I'd be lying if I said no." She flinched at his words.

With her next breath she pulled her emotions in tight and lifted her chin, jaw tense. "I only have their best interests at heart. I hope you know that."

He reached out his fist and brushed his knuckles along the side of her jaw in a feather-light fake punch. "I know. The kids'll come around. They just need time to adjust. A lot has happened in the past few months."

Sarah looked away from Raif and tried to concentrate on the view before her. She wanted to tell him that she didn't have time for them to adjust. She'd be leaving Thursday. The way she felt right now, probably sooner. Her intentions of proving or disproving Raif as a fit guardian were quickly dissolving, replaced with a new need to know her own nephews and niece. Aside from her always absent father, they were the only family link she had left in this world. And they pretty much hated her. Sarah closed her eyes in regret. Could she blame them?

"Where'd you run off to today?" Raif softly asked.

His question was innocent enough yet Sarah felt her spine stiffen. She leaned back against the jamb and looked at Raif through lowered lashes, her chin held high. Her entire world had crumbled right out from under her today. She needed to remain in control

because she was seriously about to lose it. "I went to make a phone call at Big Sal's." She wasn't about to reveal the fact that Paul had a woman in his hotel room with him.

He didn't look at her. "Get any information out of Big Sal that interested you?" The tone was purely accusing, as if he knew she'd been asking questions about him.

Sarah bristled further, yet attempted to remain calm. "If you're wondering whether or not I asked her about you, yes I did." He turned to face her then and Sarah could see the wariness in his eyes. She held up a palm and said, "Don't worry, she spoke highly of you. If you were applying for a job I would have hired you on the spot." With those words, he seemed to relax a little. Sarah put her hand back in her lap. "She's quite fond of you."

Raif gave a small laugh. "She pretty much tried to raise me after my mom died when I was thirteen." His eyes frosted over and the smile on his lips faded. Sarah knew the type of pain he must keep locked inside, and was surprised she had anything in common with this man. They'd both lost their mothers at an early age. Sarah tucked the knowledge away for now.

"What about your father?"

"He died a couple years back. Heart," he added.

Sarah didn't know what to say. She wasn't good at comforting other people so she simply remained silent, since the only thing she could think about doing was taking Raif in her arms and soothing the pained look in his eyes.

"Get a hold of your fiance?" He was turned away from her once more, the sky deepening to violet.

"I did call Paul." When he didn't say anything she felt compelled to purge at least a little of the pressure within her. Her shoulders were becoming weary with the weight of her burdens. "He'll be staying another two weeks. Or so."

Raif grunted and looked at her. "Does he do this often?"

With her bottom lip gripped between her teeth, Sarah nodded.

Even in the fast approaching darkness Sarah could see him lift one ebony brow. "Does he cancel dates at the last minute? Perhaps act a little *too* gentlemanly? Walk you to your door and offer you nothing more than a peck on the cheek?"

Sarah wanted to believe that he was making fun of her. She wanted to slap him in the face for saying such things. But she couldn't. It was as if he had been sitting on her shoulder all through hers and Paul's relationship. "How did you know?" Her voice was unrecognizable to her ears.

He shrugged. "I've known guys like that." He looked down and brushed a palm over the thigh of one leg. "When a man's got a woman on the side—"

"Hold it!" Sarah jumped to her feet and glared down at him. "Don't you dare imply anything, Raif Manning! You don't know a damn thing about me or Paul."

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Raif was on his feet also, sorry for the turn of events. He and Sarah had been spending some close and quiet time together, but he had to go and open his mouth and ruin it by pissing her off ... except maybe that meant there was more to this than she was letting on? "Now hold it a second, Peaches. I was only speculating out loud."

"Don't you dare call me peaches, and keep your speculations to yourself. I've had a very bad day and I don't need your opinions thrown in my face." Her eyes blazed and Raif thought he actually saw sparks flaring in their depths.

A smile threatened his lips. He knew it was mean, but he loved seeing her riled up

like this. She might be mad at him, but with her hair blowing in the wind, eyes alight with anger, body surging with rage ... she got him hot as hell. "The truth hurt?" He couldn't help stoking the fire in her higher. She made him feel too many things he gave up on years ago.

"Why, you...!" Sarah balled up her fist tight and slugged him in the stomach, oblivious to the fact that they stood so close to the edge of the opening and could plummet two stories down at any second.

Raif barely felt the blow, but her courage impressed him.

They were alone out here, he was twice her size, and could easily hurt her or push her to the wooden floor and have his way with her. That thought was cut short as she hit him again. This time Raif felt it. Soon she started barreling into him with both fists, flinging words at him like *barbarian*, *egotistic pig*, and *uncivilized low life*.

"That's enough!" He grabbed her arms and took a few steps back so they wouldn't take a tumble outside. "I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have assumed that your beloved was cheating on you."

She couldn't accept an apology gracefully like any other human being. No, she had to call him a few more colorful names before kicking him in the shin. "Enough, Sarah!" he yelled, yanking her against him. She was hysterical and out of control. Could a few stupidly spoken words have such an effect? It seemed he hit a nerve with his remarks. He felt like breaking the bastard's neck for hurting her like this.

"You think I'm so uncivilized? Let me show you how uncivilized I can be." He pulled her tighter against him, expecting her to scream and try to wiggle out of his embrace.

Instead, she met his hard stare straight on. Her pupils were huge and she looked like someone hanging on to the edge of a mile high cliff with desperation. "Give me your best shot," she said on a shaky breath.

That was all the provocation he needed. Raif lowered his head and fastened his hungry mouth over her lips. His body tensed with desire as he released her arms and she lifted them to his shoulders, clinging to him. Raif moaned, plunging his tongue into her mouth as far as he could. With a wild fury their tongues twisted and writhed. Sarah returned his kiss with a fiery passion that singed his soul with such intensity it scared the living shit out of him, yet he wanted more. So much more.

Sarah's hands were all over him. Raif relinquished control as he felt her fingers go to work at the buttons of his shirt. Usually, he'd be the one taking the driver's seat, but the fact that she wanted to be in the lead had him on the verge of coming.

Pushing his shirt off, her lips covered his chest with warm, wet kisses. She licked and lightly bit his nipples. Raif sucked in a sharp breath, burying his fingers in her hair. "Oh, baby, I've got to taste you."

She looked up at him and shook her head. "I've got to taste *you*." Reaching down, she rubbed her palm over his stiff erection.

Raif inhaled sharply as sensation ricocheted off every hot zone in his body. Sarah smiled at him as he felt her release the top button on his jeans. Without a word, she was on her knees, her face level with his crotch. Raif moaned as she slid the zipper, and tugged his pants down.

The interior of the barn was shadowy, but he could see her perfectly as she reached into his briefs and withdrew his stiff cock. Their eyes met as she took the head into her

mouth. Raif thought he'd lose it at any second. His eyes rolled back as he felt every inch of his shaft being swallowed up by her slick, warm lips. He groaned deep in his throat as she squeezed his balls and made love to him with her mouth.

Raif loved the sound of her sucking on his dick, loved the feel of it about a thousand times more, but he wanted to taste her, wanted to bury himself inside her.

"Hold on a second, honey." Reluctantly, Raif pulled her away from him and grinned as she made little sounds of protest. He reached over to grab the blanket and spread it on the floor. Sarah was still on her knees as he pushed her softly back onto the blanket until she was lying down. Her eyes were half closed, drunk with passion.

"My turn." Raif knelt beside her, kissing her lips and the side of her neck as his hands went to work at removing her blouse. He ran his tongue over her stomach then nibbled at her breasts through the lace of her bra. Her nipples peaked and she pushed his head closer.

Reaching his fingers inside one cup and then the other, he lifted her breasts out of her bra until they were bared before him. "So beautiful," he murmured as he suckled on one nipple and then the other. He held her breasts and loved how they overflowed his palms, loved how soft they felt as he ran his face back and forth over them.

Down her stomach he planted tender kisses before lifting her skirt and sliding her silky panties off her thighs. She moved restlessly and he thought about licking her until she reached climax, but his dick was ready to break in two. The thought of Sarah Collins' pussy wrapped around his shaft was too enticing to consider anything else.

He slid a finger inside and found her slick and ready for him. While he moved his middle finger in and out, his thumb ran circles over her clit. She lifted her pelvis up and whimpered for him. Raif was ready to explode, but enjoyed watching her move as he rubbed her. He lay down at her side, sucking on her nipples as he felt her inner muscles grip his finger tightly. Her breathing came faster and she reached down, guiding his hand, showing him how to please her.

"That's it, baby," Raif whispered as her body tensed. "Just let it go." He placed his mouth over hers just as she came, her screams of release swallowed by him.

As her body shuddered, Raif positioned himself between her thighs. His jeans were around his ankles and her skirt was up around her waist. Their eyes met. Sarah grabbed hold of his shoulders as Raif slid every inch of his cock into her. She let out a sigh as if she had waited a lifetime to feel him buried inside her ... or was that just his ego talking?

He could feel her heart pounding against his chest as he lay on top of her, pressing her into the wool blanket and the wooden floorboards. Holding her head between his palms, he looked deeply into her eyes. What started out as something soft and gentle now turned savage as he thrust his pelvis again and again. Sarah wrapped her legs around his waist and Raif felt blood rushing into his shaft until it felt hard as granite. He held back though, wanting her to come again.

Reaching down between them, he took his dick and ran the head of it over her clit. She moved her hips around as he brought her to the peak once again. When she gripped his shoulders, Raif pushed his cock back inside her pussy.

She called out his name as she climaxed, sending Raif over the edge himself. He whispered words of sex and affection as he slid in and out of her. His balls tightened and he kept his eyes on Sarah's as lust exploded inside him. Letting out a gasp, he spilled his seed deep inside her, burying his face in her hair.

When his heartbeat slowed and he could catch his breath, Raif lifted his head. The look in Sarah's eyes was half fright and half confusion. He knew it matched the look in his own. "What the hell just happened here?" His body felt so weak he thought he'd collapse right on top of her.

"I don't know." Her body was slick beneath his. She bit on her bottom lip, searching his eyes for something he couldn't reveal at the moment.

"I'm sorry," he said huskily, getting to his feet and pulling his jeans up. "This shouldn't have happened." He slipped into his shirt, grabbed his Stetson, and was gone.

## Chapter Twelve

Sarah awoke the next morning feeling more depressed than ever. After their wild encounter in the barn last night Raif had made it a point to avoid her all evening and gone to his room quite early. It was true they had some amazing chemistry going, but it was also true that Raif saw her as the enemy. It wouldn't be too hard to imagine the two of them ending up in bed together every available moment if she stayed here. Raif was pure dynamite and she couldn't even begin to resist him, though she'd tried.

She attempted to put the situation into perspective as she stared at the window across the room, making a mental note to wash the curtains today. He was just experiencing a rush of hormones, and she was a woman who had no business being around him with all of the worries she had filling her to overflowing right now. Perhaps if she was surer of herself, more worldly, more independent, she could have a brief affair with Raif, leave and not let it crush her soul. But he was becoming embedded in her heart all too quickly. Her pride had been wounded by Paul's infidelities. She didn't need to add a broken heart to her list.

Besides, she thought as she rolled onto her back, Raif reminded her too much of Jason. His extreme good looks, charm, heart-stopping smile, and the devil lurking in his eyes. She'd had a taste of wild love before; she didn't dare repeat the scenario. She needed to put their one episode of sex out of her mind. It wouldn't be long before he grew tired of her and he hopped into bed with the next woman that came along. A man like Raif wasn't the type to stay true to one woman all his life and no amount of wishing it wasn't so would change that...

No. Sarah knew his type all too well. The tabloids had painted half the picture and she'd had the other half thrown in her face on more than one occasion. He could pretend to care one minute, get a woman to pour her heart out and give herself to him totally, then walk out and never look back. Still, she found herself liking him more than she should.

His concern over the children touched her deeply. Watching him as he had played outside with the boys yesterday and tended to Jenny had brought a tear to her soul. His wanting to fix up this house gave him roots. Permanence. Stability.

Sarah envied him.

There was only one noble thing left for her to do. Pack her suitcase, sign the papers, and leave Raif's home. She'd caused enough turmoil in their lives. Even if her life was in tatters, at least they could pick up where they'd left off before she arrived. The kids needed Raif, and he needed them. It was that simple. She had no business being here.

Her mind made up, she rose from the bed, thankful she'd taken a shower the night before, since she wanted to be out of the house within ten minutes tops. Quickly, she shoved everything in her suitcase, heedless of wrinkles or spilled lotions. She dressed in the first thing she grabbed, a pair of jeans, sandals and a white poet blouse. Her hair was quickly brushed back into a ponytail, make-up neglected, as she'd already tossed it in her smaller case.

Reaching under the bed, she grabbed the briefcase Paul had gotten her for her birthday and placed it on the bed. She fiddled with the small combination lock that she always thought was ridiculous, since anyone who wanted the contents badly enough

would simply steal the whole briefcase and not bother sifting through the papers.

Extracting the papers and a pen, she began signing her name on each copy as quickly as she could. When that was done, she quietly tiptoed to the kitchen and placed them on the table. No note of explanation, just the papers. She refused to reminisce over the few meals she'd shared with Raif at this very table and the awful evening when Chris had shouted at her with the anger he felt at her arrival.

Walking out of the kitchen, she went back to her room and picked up her suitcases and briefcase. She didn't bother making the bed, and mentally apologized to Raif. They'd be so much happier with her gone.

Tears stood in her eyes as she walked outside and met the early morning sun. Birds chirped nearby, cheerfully bidding her good-bye. Even they were glad to see her go.

Sarah loaded up her car and got in the driver's seat. The leather was already hot with the sun beating down on it. Only then did she realize she'd forgotten her keys. "Damn!" She hit the steering wheel with the palm of her hand. Opening the car door she got back out and hurried to the house, opening the door quietly. Once she was inside she stopped, her breath trapped in her lungs.

"Looking for these?" Raif stood before her, his hair sleep-tousled and wearing only a pair of faded jeans with the buttons undone. Her car keys dangled from one finger of his right hand. Sarah gulped hard. He was goddamned sexy. He was an amazing lover. And she was leaving.

"What's all this about?" He held the papers in his other hand, his gaze hard on her, his lips that had been soft and giving the previous night were now pulled into a tight, thin line.

"I thought it was best if I leave." She tried to look adamant, hoping he wouldn't argue her on this. Sunshine caressed her back, though the warmth couldn't penetrate the chill that went clear to her soul. "I don't belong here. I don't need any more proof that the kids are in good hands. It's best if I leave." Her bravado quickly faded. "You need to get on with your lives without me nosing in."

Raif set the papers down on the table, but stuffed her keys in his front pocket. "Was your decision based on the fact that we made love last night?" He buttoned up his jeans, waiting for a response.

Sarah wanted to lie and tell him he had no effect on her whatsoever. That their one encounter was the same as all the rest she'd ever had. That in no way did they make love. They simply released some hormones. Her lips refused to form the words. "Partly," she finally managed to squeak out.

Raif lifted his head, his eyes dark with anger. "Sarah." He stalked up to her and grabbed her by the upper arms, pulling her over the threshold and into the house, then closing the door behind her and locking it. "I won't let you run away like this." He pressed her back against the door, his hands on either side of her head, her lower body wedged between his thighs, preventing her escape.

"Raif, please don't." She squeezed her eyes shut. This was so much more than she could take. When she opened them again new tears stood there waiting to be shed. "Just let me go. It's better this way." His lips were unbearably close and Sarah hoped he would kiss her again, yet prayed he wouldn't.

"Better for whom?" Raif brushed his lips over hers and she shuddered. He sighed deep in his throat at her reaction. "Certainly not better for me. I'm kind of getting used to

having you around."

"You said it was a mistake. Us having sex last night. It was my fault. I was upset. Out of control." She looked at a spot just over his left shoulder, unable to meet his eyes, too aware of his hips pressed against her belly and the fact that he was aroused. Lord, he probably thought she was the biggest pushover ever. Either that or a complete lunatic. Last night she had been beating him with all her might then melting in his arms like a candle under the heat of a blowtorch.

"Sarah, look at me." When she wouldn't meet his eyes Raif grasped her chin, turning her face slightly so she was forced to meet his gaze. "It was not a mistake. In fact, it felt very right."

"Then why did you walk out and just leave me there?" Her bottom lip trembled so she bit on it.

"You were upset last night. I took advantage of the fact and made love to you right on the hardwood floor of that loft." He tipped his head in the said direction. "That's not how I wanted our first time to be. And I damn sure don't want another man on your mind when we make love next time. I want your complete and undivided attention." He smiled slightly and Sarah's heart nearly burst through her chest.

Though his words touched a part of her that was eager to move forward into a real relationship with this man, she also knew it wouldn't last. How could it?

He ignited a passion in her she never knew she possessed. A passion that terrified her, yet beckoned her to walk into the fire with him and feel his heat. *Their* heat. But was that all that was between them? Sex?

"Maybe I shouldn't have made love to you last night," he murmured. "But I did. At first, all I wanted was to get you out of my house, but things have changed and now I don't know what I'm going to do without you." He kissed her then, soft and sensuous and soul stealing. His tongue slid over hers, his heart hammering against her breasts. Sarah wrapped her hands around his waist. He made a grunting noise and pushed his pelvis closer to her.

Several moments later, Raif pulled his head back and looked at her through lazy eyes. "Still want to leave?"

Yes, Sarah thought numbly. *Now more than ever.* She was getting in too deep with this man. The man who made her ache for silly things her heart gave up on long ago. Things like a forever love, laughing children, long playful days, and even longer lazy nights in bed. "It doesn't matter if I want to leave. It's just better if I do."

She reached up and put her palms flat against his bare chest intending to push him away. That was a giant mistake. He felt too good. She let her hands glide over the silken skin there. Felt his strong heartbeat beneath her fingertips. Her voice came out on a tight whisper. "The papers are signed. The kids are yours. There's nothing keeping me here."

Her mind willed him to say he wanted her to stay because he cared about her, but she knew that was a stupid thought. Raif barely knew her, and their first few days together had been filled with anger and mistrust. She wasn't exactly a tall, cool beauty who made men fall at her feet. Nor was she the perfect homemaker who appealed to a man's desire to settle down and marry. Still, she found herself aching to know she was wanted.

\*

Raif knew he had to think of another tactic quick. He couldn't let her leave. Though he should be ecstatic that the papers were finally signed and the children his, he wasn't



completely satisfied. Not until Sarah Collins was branded his also. One thing he had learned about her over these few days was that she was fiercely proud and equally stubborn. He decided to go for that vein.

He frowned down at her. "You promised to help me get this house cleaned up. You also promised to help out with the kids. I'm going to be very busy around here and Alice has her own kids to worry about. She can't keep watching over Chris, Tommy, and Jenny too. I've taken advantage of her enough these past few months." His voice suddenly went soft and husky, his eyes as intense as his next words. "You can't just back out now. I need you, Sarah."

He searched her eyes, hoping he had made his point. To the outside world this would all seem insane. They had only met days ago. But she had roots here now. The kids bound them together, along with the fact that they had all lost people they loved. Not to mention the intense attraction they felt toward one another. If he looked deeper he'd probably find out he was in love with Sarah Collins. But would she believe such a thing? He doubted it. She'd say it was too soon.

"Look, Raif." She closed her eyes. "I only wanted to be certain you could take care of the kids. I didn't come out here to sign up as your housekeeper and bed-buddy."

He stood upright and let his hands drop to his sides. "Is it so hard for you to believe I might actually want you here for other reasons? Sarah, I don't know what happened yesterday between you and Paul, and I'm sorry things went along as they did between us. But, I'm not sorry that it happened."

When she opened her eyes he saw that she actually looked frightened. He was hitting a nerve and he didn't know if it was good or bad.

She bit on her bottom lip for a second then said, "You were right."

Raif frowned and tipped his head to the side just a fraction. "How so?"

"He's cheating on me. Probably has been for a very long time." She lifted her chin, but her lower lip trembled. "I couldn't get hold of my father, not that it's anything new." A tear slipped down her cheek and Raif watched it for a moment before reaching out to brush the trail away with a fingertip. "Can't you see? I'm not wanted nor needed anywhere, really."

Since meeting this woman he'd seen a lot of emotions from her, everything from rage and passion to laughter and rejection. But this look of complete surrender was nothing he'd expected to witness.

Raif didn't resist the need to pull her into his arms. Though she was stiff, he refused to let go. "You're wanted here, Peaches. Very much. The kids and I need you in more ways than you give yourself credit for."

At his words Sarah wrapped her arms around his waist, buried her face in his chest, and cried. He'd lay bets these were the first real tears she had shed in a very long time.

Raif caressed her back and whispered against her hair. "You got family here. You've got me. Don't you see?" He lifted her face placing a tender kiss on her lips. "This is your home now."

"But for how long? How long before you..."

"How does forever sound?"

She didn't answer him, but nodded, a watery smile claiming her.

"I'm not ever letting you go. I love you, Sarah Collins."

With that, Raif lifted her into his arms and started toward the bedroom. "Now, let's

see if we can do it right this time."

Sarah put her arms around his neck and laughed. "I thought we did it just fine yesterday."

He chuckled and she looked up into his eyes as he laid her on the rumpled bedspread. Sighing, she whispered to him, "It's good to finally be home."

\* \* \* \*

## **One Year Later**

The night was especially cool and a brisk wind blew, bringing with it the scent of a coming storm. Raif and Sarah walked hand in hand through the lush, green grass and over to the barn as they did each evening after the children were tucked into bed.

Raif helped his wife up the ladder and they took up their usual places. Resting her head against Raif's chest—a place Sarah had grown to depend on for a warm, protected feeling—she let out a sigh of satisfaction. She stared out at the nighttime sky as it painted the billowing clouds on the horizon deep purple and gray.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Sarah said.

"Sure is," Raif whispered in her ear, gently nipping at the fleshy lobe.

A few weeks after their wedding, he had gone back to his photography career on a permanent basis. Sarah discovered he loved it deeply. The scenery and people of his hometown provided plenty of inspiration and photos for a variety of local and countrywide publications.

In the year up to now both had shared their most private feelings, their dreams, and their pain. And they had helped one another to heal.

She had even made amends with Paul and her father. She'd called Paul and called off the engagement and they'd parted. They both realized they weren't for each other and were relieved over the break up. Paul went back to France and to Monique. Sarah wished him well.

After Raif had proposed and she accepted, she went back to California to have a long talk with her father and clear the air on several issues. Number one being that she was in charge of her own life and her own happiness. He had no right to dictate who she married and what she did with her life. He'd been furious at first but didn't want to alienate his only living daughter. In the end they hugged and she felt a new bond grow between them. Last month her father had called to say that he was actually dating again. Sarah was happy for him. She hoped her father would be as happy as she and Raif were.

Like most married couples they had fallen into a comfortable routine. Waking in each other's arms, sharing coffee with the rising sun, working on the house and landscape, housework, photo shoots and the like. They helped the boys with homework and other school projects and tried to keep Jenny out of too much trouble now that she was walking and into everything she could get her chubby hands on. For some people their daily regimen might seem boring, but for Sarah it was a familiar permanence she had come to expect and rely on.

"Oh!" Sarah suddenly let out a yelp of surprise.

"Are you all right, Peaches?" Concern bent Raif's brows and seeped into his eyes as he examined her face.

"I'm fine. Here." She took one of his hands, placing the large palm under her bulky

sweater to cover her full, round abdomen. "There! Did you feel that?" Sarah looked up at him, smiling.

"I sure did! The baby just kicked. There it goes again!" He let out a laugh that sounded slightly nervous.

"You know it's going to be a boy, don't you?" Sarah said matter-of-factly.

"Oh, yeah? And why do you think that?"

"'Cause he's raising hell, just like his father!" She grinned up at him.

Raif let out a howl of laughter before kissing Sarah. "Well, I sure feel like raisin' a little hell myself right now." He reached up under her sweater to cup one of her heavy, lace-covered breasts.

"I swear, you can't get enough, can you?" She then laughed. "And neither can I! Let's hit the sheets!"

"I heard that!" Raif sprang to his feet, and, after helping Sarah back down the ladder, he strode quickly ahead then waited for her at the back door. "Ha! Ha! You have to make breakfast in the morning."

"No fair," she complained. "I'm walking for two!"

"I'll accept that excuse." He walked back to meet her halfway then hauled her into his arms. "I'll do the cooking," he offered. "First in bed and then the kitchen."

Sarah giggled. "Never change, Raif."

"Never," he promised, carrying her to bed; both of them eager for another night of loving.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Kelly Wallace is a typical workaholic—and loves every busy minute of it. Not only is she a single mother and best-selling romance author, but she's also a well-respected psychic counselor through her own website The Psychic Soul, international radio show host of The Psychic View, and resident psychic writer for WPRT Paranormal Radio

A lover of romance and strong characterization, Kelly believes that any story worth reading should have a hero/heroine that readers can fall in love with. She is currently living her dream, writing sizzling tales of suspense with paranormal elements, as well as contemporary and humorous romance. All of her books contain highly sensual love scenes and sexual tension that will make your heart race!

She loves receiving emails from fans and aspiring authors.

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