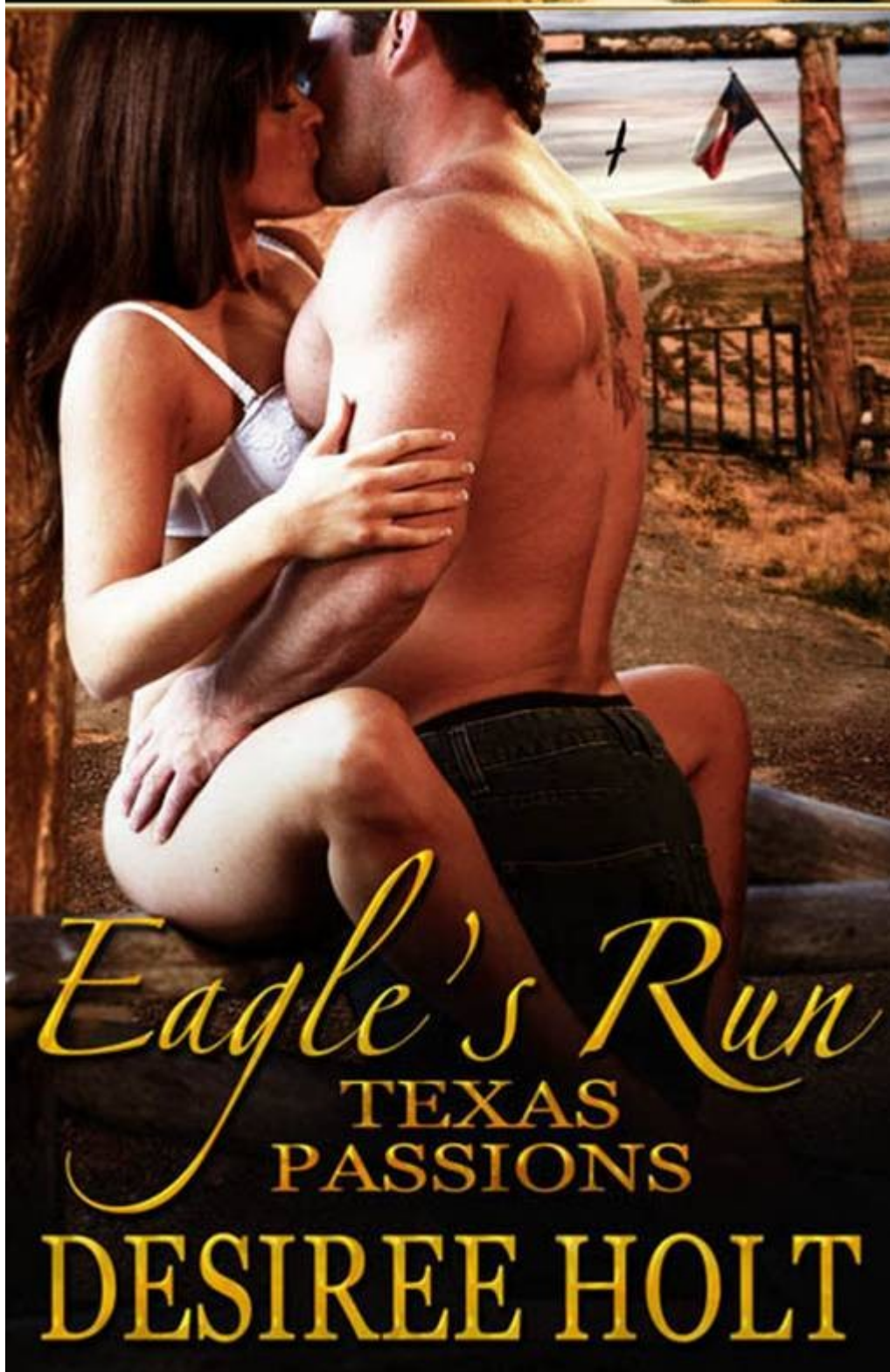


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



## **Eagle's Run**

*Desiree Holt*

*Book 1 in the Texas Passions series.*

Her father was murdered by an unknown killer. Now Leah Morgan, the half-Comanche daughter of the owner of White Eagle Ranch, is faced with his unsolved murder, as well as two illegitimate half brothers who have each been left a share of the ranch. If not for Shane Duffy, the hot-looking, hot-blooded veterinarian, she'd be falling apart completely.

As she fights to retain control of the ranch and considers her heritage, Leah finds comfort in long nights of sweaty sex with Shane. And then there's Grant Fallon, the geologist who wants to show Leah he can bring her more screaming orgasms than the hunky vet if she'll just give him a chance.

But someone has an ulterior motive. Is it Shane? Grant? One of her half brothers? Leah might find the answer...if she's not too busy chasing away the shadows in the arms of her lover.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Eagle's Run

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# *EAGLE'S RUN*

**Desiree Holt**

## *Dedication*

To David, my very own personal hero, who dared me to be myself and who will always be with me in spirit and in my heart.

## Chapter One

Leah Morgan forced herself to sit still in the massive leather chair, moving only her eyes as she scanned the occupants of the law office. No one looking at her could tell her heart was racing and her blood pounding as if she'd just exploded in the throes of orgasm. For a brief moment, as the full scenario she faced hit her, she wished herself back generations. Today she wanted to be one of the fierce Comanche warriors she'd read so much about, brandishing a spear, the light reflecting off the war paint streaking her face as she attacked.

It took every bit of her self-control to tamp all of that down, put a tight lid on it and assess the situation.

*Situation!*

She snorted. Now there was a word for you. This was far more than a *situation*.

She'd come here today for what she thought was a mere formality, a scan of some documents, a few signatures. She'd actually almost forgotten the appointment until Amos DeWitt, her father's long-time attorney, had called to remind her. Shouldn't take too long, he told her. Just the reading of the will. Then she could get back to the ranch—*her* ranch—White Eagle Ranch—and on with her life.

Not for the first time she cursed the poachers who somehow managed to breach their fence lines in the dark of night and shoot the white-tail deer that ran wild on their ranch. A large herd ranged over their property but White Eagle wasn't a hunting preserve and they didn't even allow licensed hunters. And now, she was sure, one of those scumbags had been responsible for her father's death. The grief she'd suffered since her father's murder simmered beneath the surface, a luxury she didn't have time to indulge in at the moment. She couldn't afford to. She had work to do. Responsibilities to take care of. But walking into the familiar law office had changed

everything. She stopped at the sight of the two men waiting with Amos. The last thing she'd expected was to be told they were her illegitimate half brothers. She'd stumbled to the closest chair, fisting her hands to control the quaking inside her.

Illegitimate half brothers? Joe's children?

Mac Moreno was not exactly a stranger to her. Withdrawn and often morose, he had carefully nursed his mother, a housekeeper at one of the local ranches, through a long bout of cancer. Apparently both he and the town were surprised that she'd left him a small life insurance policy, which he used to buy the local honky-tonk, renaming it Hell's Bells. Now he scratched out a living serving as his own bartender, bouncer and manager. He lived in the apartment on the second floor and did his socializing out of the area. If he did any at all.

That was the total extent of Leah's knowledge of him. What was he doing here?

Then Amos had introduced the other man. Dashiell Hyde—Amos told her he preferred to be called Dash—as if she cared. He sat as far away from everyone as he could get at the end of the long padded couch. The first thing Leah noticed about him was the dead look in his eyes. Then came the scars on his face and hands. And finally the hint of nerve injury in one leg as he shifted position.

Joe had apparently met Dash's flight attendant mother on a trip to Dallas. When she told him she was pregnant she'd been paid well, Amos said, under the condition neither she nor the child ever contacted him, so she'd raised her son alone in Chicago. Dash was now a retired cop on disability.

Then came the real shock.

These two men were going to be her partners in the ranch. *Her* ranch. As she listened to Amos read the will and discovered Joe had left each of them an equal share, the Comanche blood in her veins began to boil again. What she wouldn't give to have the late, great Comanche chief Quanah Parker with her right now. He'd never lost a battle to the white man.

Of course, she reminded herself, in the end he surrendered to the white man only when he saw there was no alternative. Leah was far from ready to go that route. Yet.

The remnants of a recent dream flashed across her brain. Two eagles chasing her, a vulture swooping in after all of them. Then it was gone as quickly as it came. The dream had disturbed and frightened her so much she'd pushed it from her mind, but now a shiver skated over her, as if she'd somehow missed a warning.

Tightening her hands in her lap and pinning Amos with her gaze, she blurted out the first thing that came to her mind.

"I don't believe it. Not one word of it. This is some kind of scam. I don't have any brothers and that ranch is mine. *Just mine.*" She raised her voice. "It was always *understood*. What's going on here, Amos? What's that old man trying to pull from the grave?" She banged a fist on her knee. "Grandfather warned me not to trust him and he was right. The old fart."

"Leah!" The older man raised his eyebrows then sighed, leaning back in his desk chair, fingers precisely lining up the documents in front of him.

"Amos!" she spat back at him.

"I told your daddy this would turn out bad," he said, shaking his head. "I warned him but he just didn't want to listen to me. It's a hell of a thing when a man gets a conscience that late in life. Leaves a mess for everyone else to clean up."

"Conscience?" She let her gaze travel slowly from one person to the other. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

For one very insane moment she imagined none of this was happening. That it was still last night and she was back in her huge four poster bed lying in the very masculine embrace of Shane Duffy, sheets tangled and the air filled with the heady musk of their lovemaking.

*Shane!* The vet who cured her animals and kept her heart. The man who promised her the moon and delivered on a regular basis. Tall and lean, his body roped with tough muscles from the work he did. Eyes like chicory coffee and an improbable dimple at



one corner of his very sensual mouth. And a body that drove her beyond any heights she'd ever dared dream about. After six months together she couldn't even imagine not having him in her life. She'd never have made it through these last few days without him, that was for sure. Now she needed him more than ever.

God, she could hardly wait to tell him what a goat stampede this was turning out to be. He'd be just as shocked as she was.

Another sigh from Amos. "I guess I'd better start at the beginning. And y'all need to just sit here and listen to me until I'm done." He glared at them each in turn. "Everyone got that?"

Leah could tell that neither of the men was any happier about it than she was, but she bit her lip—hard—and gave a quick nod of her head. She thought she was prepared for anything, but again she was stunned. Joe Morgan had sowed his wild oats without a care in the world, fathering two sons he'd never claimed and ignoring the women who gave birth to them.

Leah might be tough on the outside but that didn't mean she didn't have feelings. She wondered just how hard it had been for Mac, watching his mother die and knowing a man with all the resources at his disposal could have made her last months a lot more comfortable. When she shifted her gaze to him again, it wasn't hard to miss the resentment simmering in his eyes.

But for whatever reason, before a poacher's bullet had ended his life, Joe Morgan had decided to try to make things right with his two sons. Men he'd kept his own dirty little secret.

*And shafting me while he did it.*

Leah wondered if her own mother, Angel Nightwalker, would have been just another of Joe Morgan's castoffs if her grandfather hadn't shown up in full war Comanche regalia—something he seldom wore except for exhibitions—with a delegation of equally attired young men when her mother turned up pregnant.

Ken Nightwalker was an elder and recognized leader of the remnants of the Comanche tribe that lived in their own community outside Morgan's Creek. Where his daughter was concerned he had been adamant. There would be not just a wedding, a sham ceremony to legitimize the child, but a real marriage. Angel would live on the ranch, not apart from Joe. She would be treated as his wife, and Leah would carry the Morgan name and have all the rights and benefits due to a true Morgan offspring.

And the tacit understanding between them was very clear. In the end, the ranch would belong to Leah.

The longer Amos droned on now, the harder it was for Leah to keep her anger in check. She refused to look at either of the two men whose silent presence was almost like a condemnation. She didn't want or need them in her life, nor welcome any potential interference in White Eagle Ranch. Although she had barely finished grieving Joe's death, she had plans to make for the future and things to do, and she had no idea how these strangers would fit into them.

Amos' monologue was suddenly – and blessedly, Leah thought – interrupted by the intercom buzzing on his desk. At that exact moment the door to the outer office flew open and a tall, regal-looking man walked in. He made an imposing picture in jeans and leather shirt, his long graying hair tied back with a thong, not a trace of humor on his hawk-like features.

Leah had to bite back her smile. Yes, royalty clung to every line of Ken Nightwalker's magnificent, arresting presence.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. DeWitt." Josie Barker, Amos' secretary scurried in behind the man. "I told him this was a closed meeting but I don't think he heard me."

"Oh I'm sure he did." Amos waved a hand at her, swallowing his own grin. "No problem, Josie. The gentleman is welcome here any time. I should have invited him myself." He rose from his chair and extended his hand. "Good to see you, Ken."

Ken Nightwalker stopped at the front edge of the massive desk and accepted the lawyer's outstretched hand. Then he bent to kiss Leah on the cheek.

"Granddaughter." He looked around the room. "Have they boxed you in here?"

She just couldn't help the tiny smile that tugged at one corner of her mouth. "You taught me never to let anyone do that to me, didn't you? I would be a foolish granddaughter to ignore the lessons I've learned from you."

Mac pushed himself away from the wall where he'd been leaning in a forced pose of nonchalance. "Riding to the rescue, Nightwalker? I'd think since your precious princess here was the only one old Joe legitimized she wouldn't need anyone's protection."

Leah felt the flare of temper inside her at the "precious princess" label. Only a warning glance from Ken told her to hold her words. Her life on the ranch had been wonderful but nowhere near what those two words implied. If not for her grandfather, growing up with a burr under the saddle like Joe Morgan, especially after her mother died, could have been disastrous. So she held her tongue and waited to see what would play out next.

"So where are we here?" He addressed the question to Amos, surveying everyone else in the room as he spoke. "Ready for me to get out the tomahawks? Amos, how about a real short version of what we're facing. What *Leah's* facing."

There was no question that, as far as he was concerned, whatever happened, he would see his granddaughter's interests protected.

So once again Amos went through the convoluted tale of woe, and Leah was suddenly struck by the absence of yelling in the room. Of loud objections. Of wild ranting. *She* was the injured party here, but what about these two men with whom she'd suddenly discovered a blood relationship? This couldn't be easy for them either. And why the hell had they even decided to take part in this fiasco?

Calling on every bit of both of her heritages for patience, Leah sat back and let her grandfather take the lead. But at the end of the meeting, nothing had been resolved. The animosity of Leah's two...brothers...was as palpable as ever, matched only by her growing resentment at them and the whole situation.

"Mac." Amos looked at the dark man still leaning against the wall. "Why don't you sit down and we'll try to make some sense out of this situation."

"I'm fine where I am," Moreno said in a gravel voice. "Anyway, I have nothing to discuss. Anything I might have needed from that old bastard is long beyond my reach. I'm outta here."

The softness of his steps as he left the office were louder than if he'd stamped to the door.

Dash Hyde studied everyone in the room one long, last time before he rose from the couch. Silently he took the business card Amos handed him and followed his half brother out the door.

"You can't just ignore this," Amos pointed out. "Or run away from it, no matter how much you might want to. Joe's will was quite clear. And it's my job to see that his instructions are followed."

Leah lifted her chin. "I have nothing to say. I'm going home." She looked at Ken. "And don't come after me with any of your ancient philosophies, old man. They won't work this time."

## Chapter Two

Despite what she told him, Ken was right behind her out of town, following her down the dusty road to White Eagle Ranch. She screeched to a stop in the parking area, throwing the gearshift into park so vehemently the little pickup rocked. She slammed the door and turned toward Ken who was just exiting his own truck. She looked like a virago with her long black hair flowing behind her, fire snapping from her eyes.

"I thought I told you not to follow me," she snapped at Ken.

"*Someone* needs to talk to you about this." Ken was right on her heels with his slow, measured steps and his reasonable tone.

"I won't discuss anything that has to do with those two men. I hate what my father did here."

"As do I, granddaughter. But think for a minute just how they must feel. Cast aside and ignored all these years like so much trash. It can't have been easy for them."

"Ask me if I care," she tossed over her shoulder.

She stormed through the back door into the kitchen, wondering if she would ever feel comfortable in this house again. All the memories of her life were wrapped up inside these walls. And while Joe Morgan had not been an affectionate father, he'd seen she was clothed, fed, and given her a skill with horses that her grandfather enhanced. She hadn't ever intended to leave this ranch, hoping to share it with the man she married. Now it seemed she was to share it with two strangers and suddenly the place of comfort had strange vibrations in the air, and the serenity of its environment had been disturbed.

Running a glass of tap water at the sink, she stood there and drank it down, using the diversion to gather her wits. She knew Ken was preparing to adopt his reasonable tone, and she just wasn't in the mood to hear it.

"White Eagle is mine." She spun around to face him. "I worked for it. I earned it. It belongs to me."

"Maybe they'd like to have had the same chance you did," Ken pointed out.

Leah stood nose to nose with him, the two figures so similar distinguished only by their gender. The sharp yet graceful lines of centuries of their heritage were acutely drawn in the poses of their bodies.

"Maybe they would and I'm sorry they didn't." She would have stamped her foot if not for the childishness of the gesture. "But it wasn't my decision then and it's not my problem now. What about my plans? What about my wish to bring more horses here?"

Long ago Ken had taught her the secret art of horse whispering—a special way of talking to horses that no one else could handle. Leah had always planned to start a business and make the ranch a place where people from all over the world could send their horses for her to work with. How could she do that with two so-called partners who would probably second-guess her every move?

She should have paid more attention to the dream. Should have told her grandfather about it. The fear of its meaning still hadn't left her and maybe it was time to let her grandfather interpret it. She opened her mouth to say something when she heard a deep male voice behind her.

"What's not your problem, sweetheart? Or should I keep my mouth shut?"

Leah hadn't heard the back door open or close, or the thump of booted feet on the tile that announced Shane Duffy's arrival. She hauled in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then turned to look at him. Despite the anger roiling inside her, one sight of him and the heat that always blossomed around them filled the air. Just his presence seemed to center her.

Sunlight shafting in through the kitchen window lit arrows of gold in his thick brown hair and chicory eyes, the sight of him making her heart race as it always did. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, beat her fists against his chest, rail against the situation and have him tell her everything would be fine. Haul his rangy body

upstairs to the still unmade bed, tear their clothes off and beg him to fuck her until all of this just faded away.

But she was acutely aware, as she knew Shane was, of Ken Nightwalker watching them with his hawk's eyes. Although he commented little about it, Leah knew her grandfather was fully aware of her relationship with Shane and had given it his reluctant yet tacit approval. Shane, for his part, always went out of his way to show his respect for the old man.

Now he enfolded her in his arms in a natural gesture and kissed her forehead, stroking her back. In a flashback of vivid clarity she suddenly remembered the day he'd walked into her barn, wearing that crooked grin.

"Hi," he'd said. "I'm Shane. The new vet. I expect to be spending a lot of time here."

The electricity that had sizzled and snapped between them there in the midst of whickering horses had rocked her. She was by nature a passionate woman, a fervor that she kept ruthlessly under control. Maybe it was her grandfather's teachings of personal discipline and self-respect but indiscriminate sex wasn't something she indulged in. Whatever the reason, she held herself aloof from most men who came into her life, choosing her lovers very carefully. But the *thing* between her and Shane had only built in its intensity whenever they were in the same room. Leah couldn't ever remember a man affecting her that way.

At first she'd been determined to ignore the tug at her hormones, and she felt Shane throwing up all his defenses at the same time. But their restraint and good intentions had lasted barely a week, until the late afternoon he'd caught her coming out of the Appaloosa's stall, bumping against him until a piece of straw wouldn't fit between them. An explosion of heat had consumed them like an unstoppable fireball.

\* \* \* \* \*

His lean fingers gripped her upper arms, locking her in place. She felt his breath on her heated cheeks, and the tantalizing aroma of coffee, hay, horses and mints drifted

past her nose. As hard as he was pressed against her, she felt every ridge of every muscle in his body, right down to his thickened cock straining against the soft denim of his jeans. Instantly liquid pooled at her crotch and pulses throbbed deep inside her body.

His hands slid around to her back, tracing a path the length of her spine, over her shoulders, along the column of her neck. The tip of his tongue drew circles beneath the lobe of her ear and along the line of her jaw, igniting arrows of flame wherever it touched. When his hands shifted to her breasts, cupping them, testing their weight in his warm palms, her knees wobbled and she had to cling to him for support.

"Let me see you naked," he whispered. "Right now."

His eyes locked on hers as her shaking fingers unbuttoned her blouse and unzipped her jeans. Somehow in the next minute they were gone along with her bra and panties, and she stood before him unflinching as his eyes raked over her.

"A goddess," he said reverently. "A goddamn goddess."

He lifted her in his arms and carried her to a stall filled with fresh hay. Shedding his own clothes, he used his shirt and jeans to cover the scratchy straw before placing her on it. Fire blazed in his eyes as he spread her legs and looked his fill at her wet, throbbing pussy.

Sunlight streaming in through a window in the stall lit the bronze of his rugged, sculpted body, but it was the swollen cock standing rigidly at attention that took her breath away. A tiny drop of fluid sat like a jewel at the slit atop the deep purple head, and beneath the skin of the shaft a thick vein pulsed with life.

"More," he rasped as his fingers separated her labia and he bent to place an open-mouthed kiss on her pussy.

Leah jerked at the electricity of his touch, her vaginal muscles fluttering in response, the pulsation in her womb like a ferocious drumbeat.

There was no finesse about it, no slow buildup, no lingering foreplay. It was as if the madness of lust consumed them. Shane reached for his jeans, pulled out his wallet



with one hand and shook out a condom while his other hand massaged her clitoris. In seconds his cock was sheathed and he spread her lips even wider, plunging the length of him inside her.

Her entire body convulsed the moment the tip of his penis touched the mouth of her womb, an unexpected climax rippling through her like a tidal wave.

"God damn!" His voice was raw with desire.

And then he began to move, the thickness of his shaft stretching the tight walls of her cunt as he powered into her over and over again. Wild with a new wave of rising need, Leah locked her ankles at the small of his back and pulled him as tight to her as she could, pelvis thrusting to meet each downstroke of his hips.

The orgasm hit them simultaneously, ripping through them, shaking them with the force of it, bodies convulsing in a syncopated rhythm, her cunt gripping his cock like a tight, wet fist. Harsh breathing was the only sound besides the stamping feet of the horses in the still air of the barn. Leah wasn't sure if it was her heart or Shane's she could feel pounding against her ribs.

Catching his weight on his forearms, he bent his head and pressed his lips to the hollow of her throat, holding himself like that until some semblance of sanity returned to them. Ashamed at her own lack of restraint, her unbridled wantonness, Leah attempted to turn her head away, to avoid whatever she might see on the face of the man she'd given herself to in such a feral coupling.

But Shane licked the pulse beating at that tender hollow, then kissed it again before raising his eyes to hers.

"Don't hide from me, Leah," he told her.

"I don't usually..." She stopped and drew in a breath. "I mean..."

He nipped the point of her chin. "Neither do I. I'm sorry, I was worse than a rutting bull. But holy mother, I wanted you so badly I couldn't take time for the niceties. It's been hell working so close to you and forcing myself not to touch you." Now it was his

turn to drop his eyes. "I want you, Leah. And not just for a quick fuck in the barn." He raised his eyes to hers. "This is just the beginning."

And it was. She'd never had a relationship like this, one that threatened to incinerate them both. But where did they go from here?

\* \* \* \* \*

Leah shook herself, remembering where she was. He'd been right. It was just the beginning of something that grew stronger every day, hotter and wilder every time they were together. At first she thought it was only the sex, but there was a connection between the two of them that was just as strong as the physical attraction. She had no idea where it would lead, but especially since he'd come to play a big role in her life.

Now he kissed her forehead again, a soothing kiss, but, taking one assessing look at her, he captured her mouth in a kiss so hot and searing Ken Nightwalker finally cleared his throat to remind them of his presence.

"I take it you checked on the new colts and they're doing just fine?" Ken said in his dry voice.

Still holding Leah against him, Shane burst out laughing. "Yes. They're doing fine." He lowered his gaze to Leah's troubled and angry face. "But I guess not much else is, right? The meeting didn't go well?"

"Meeting?" Leah broke away. "That was no meeting. That was an ambush." She dropped into one of the chairs at the table, crossed one slim leg over the other and brushed her thick hair away from her face.

"Let me put this in some perspective," Ken said, giving Shane a rundown on what had transpired.

"So you see?" Leah burst out when he finished. "My *father*," she made the word sound like an epithet, "is yanking the rug out from under my feet. Or the ranch, as it were."

Shane lowered himself into a chair opposite her. "I know exactly how you feel, darlin'. I've worked with you and Joe both on this place since I came here and bought out Frank Laney's vet practice. I know how much White Eagle means to you. But it seems to me denying the problem isn't going to make it go away."

"Make what go away?"

This time they all heard the back door slam. Three pairs of eyes turned to look at the muscular, dark-haired man who walked slowly into the kitchen. Instantly Shane's body tightened, his wariness of the other man totally evident in his posture.

Grant Fallon's company, Lone Star Explorations, was checking most of the ranches in that section of the Texas Hill Country for any minerals that might still be worth a reclamation process. Joe Morgan had given him permission to see if there were any hidden treasures on White Eagle land, as long as he didn't interfere with the ranch operation.

He was a quiet man who went about his business methodically and kept out of everyone's way. For months now he'd been working his way from one quadrant to the other. Before Shane had arrived on the scene Leah had shared a number of lunches and dinners with him. You couldn't exactly call them dates, Leah thought, although she was sure Grant looked at them differently. It was obvious to her that, given the slightest indication from her, he'd be happy to take things further. But once Shane entered her life there was no room for anyone else.

Grant had backed off and they still maintained a friendship of sorts. She had the feeling, though, that he was watching and waiting to see if things with her and Shane fell apart. It had become a delicate tap dance to keep things in balance.

And Shane would have been just as happy if Grant disappeared and never returned.

"Nothing you need to worry about," Shane snapped.

"I disagree," Ken said. "This may affect Grant's work here. A wise man knows when to extend the hand of friendship."

Leah saw a muscle twitch in Shane's jaw as he gritted his teeth and ground out, "Sorry. I guess Ken's right. What affects the ranch could have an impact on your research."

*And on my wish to work as a horse whisperer.*

She thought the words but didn't say them out loud. For that she'd have to wait until everything had shaken out and was settled.

*Settled? Hah!*

"So what's the deal?" Grant asked, leaning against the counter, arms folded casually across his chest.

With as much calm as she could muster, Leah repeated the story one more time, bringing Grant up to where they stood at the moment.

"Which is really no place," he commented. "If you want to be truthful, that is. You now in effect have two partners who may choose to make decisions about White Eagle, or exercise their rights in some other way."

Leah's jaw dropped and she turned to her grandfather. "You think they would do that? They don't know anything about this place. At least the one from Chicago doesn't. And can you see Mac Moreno riding herd out in the pastures?"

"But they do have a choice," Grant went on in the same mild tone.

"Just whose side are you on?" Shane demanded, irritation making his words sharp.

"Hey." Grant held out his hands, palms forward. "I'm on your side, guys. Just pointing out some of the realities of the situation."

"Which you know nothing about unless my father talked to you about it," Leah snapped. "Did he?"

"Of course not." Grant frowned. "Why would he?"

"All right. Enough." Ken Nightwalker's voice was quiet but had the effect of a thundercloud. "Leah, use some of that good Comanche sense you inherited. Keep your enemies close by where you can see what they're doing."

"What do you mean?"

"Call the two men. Invite them for dinner. Let's sit down and try to act like intelligent adults about this. Maybe they'll surprise you."

"Dinner?" Her eyebrows flew up. "Here?"

Ken nodded. "This is still your home ground. That's where you want to powwow."

Shane reached for her hand, linking his fingers with hers. "I'll be here, darlin'. And so will your grandfather. Maybe they won't want anything to do with the ranch, considering the situation."

"I don't want to seem like I'm horning in," Grant said. "But anything they decide could affect my work here too. Think I can wangle an invitation?"

In the end Leah capitulated, although not happily. And rather than contact the two men directly, she called Amos DeWitt and asked him to extend the invitation.

"Friday night," she told him. "I need some time to think about all of this. Let me know what they say."

"Of course they'll accept," Ken told her.

And of course he was right.

### **Chapter Three**

Eventually Ken left, and soon after Grant followed, although he said he'd be by the next afternoon. "To discuss the new situation with the ranch," he told her.

"Grant, I don't know –"

"Don't worry." He touched his fingertips to her lips, ignoring the grim look on Shane's face. "We'll work out the problems. Somehow. I'm a patient person."

Leah had a feeling there was more behind Grant's words than the geological work. One glance at Shane told her he was getting the same vibes. Grant was a nice guy, good-looking and sexy. Any other woman would fall into his arms. But her life was wrapped around Shane and she had to make him understand that. Both of them.

Taking an easy step to the side, she dug up a smile for Grant. "Call me. We can figure out a plan of action before the big dinner. Okay?"

His answering smile was slightly strained. "Sure thing. I bow to your wishes. Well, I'd better get going."

The door closed behind him and Leah collapsed into a kitchen chair, burying her head in her hands.

"Why?" she asked. "Why did he do this? What did he expect to gain?"

Shane crouched down in front of her. "I think he had his own demons to wrestle with and this was one way to fight them off. I only knew him a short while, sweetheart, but he didn't seem like a bad man to me. Just hard and tough and challenged by his own bad decisions in life."

"I wish I could believe that," she sighed.

"Come on." He took her hands and pulled her from the chair. "You're coming home with me."

"But—"

"You're just full of buts tonight," he chuckled. "No arguments, okay? The hands can take care of the horses and what has to be done in the morning. And you need some of Dr. Duffy's special treatment." He pulled her close and kissed her lips very gently. "Let me make you feel good."

Leah had no strength to argue with him. And for the moment it was good to let him do just that. Take care of her.

Now, after a takeout dinner from La Cantina, they were lying on Shane's long, wide couch, a nearly empty wine bottle on the floor between them. Although the day had been warm, the Texas nights were still very cool, so logs snapped in the fireplace and the flames warmed their skin.

Joe Morgan's will and the meeting in Amos' office remained at the forefront of her mind no matter how much she tried to push them away. Now she wished she'd told someone about the dream before this. It had come to her twice in the month before her father was killed, and once the week immediately following his death. She'd wanted to ask her grandfather to interpret it, but she was actually afraid of what he might tell her, so she'd kept it to herself.

With today's disaster, she wondered again if the dreams had been warnings and she should be heeding them. God, just thinking about everything gave her a headache, and she raked her fingers through her hair, pulling it back and away from her face.

Shane held her close to him, her head nestled on one broad shoulder, his fingers dancing on the bare skin of her arms. "I can feel the tension humming through you," he told her. "Just let it go for tonight, darlin'. Can you do that for me?"

Leah sighed. The initial anger had finally dialed itself down to simmer. "I guess." She turned her head to look at him. "But only if you can find some way to distract me," she teased.

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of something."

He bent his head close to hers, his lips just barely brushing hers. Her mouth tingled where he touched it. He traced the line of her lips with the tip of his tongue, over and over, his touch as light as a butterfly's. Then he turned his attention to the seam of her mouth, tickling it, teasing at it, finally slipping his tongue inside and sweeping it through the welcoming cavern.

As desire blossomed quickly Leah closed her lips around his tongue and sucked at it, tangling it with her own. When Shane fucked her mouth with his tongue like that it was like drawing on a flame-tipped arrow, its burning point branding her soft flesh. She threaded her fingers through his hair, holding his head close to her and moaning softly at the tide of desire rising from her cunt through her body.

She shifted restlessly in his arms, trying to urge him to do more. To do everything. But Shane was a master at foreplay, at drawing every single response from her until she was nearly insane with desire. Tonight was no different, no matter how she silently urged him.

His lips slid from her mouth to her cheek, licking the line of her jaw and tasting the soft flesh of her neck. When he found that sensitive spot behind her ear she felt liquid gushing from her pussy and soaking her crotch, and her nipples hardening to almost painful points. He took his time, licking and tasting, nibbling the tender spot where her neck and shoulder joined, lapping at the hollow of her throat.

She gripped his hair hard and pushed her hips up at him.

A low chuckle rumbled in his throat.

"Anxious, are we?" He laughed again, but the laugh was thick with lust. "Not tonight, darlin'. Not tonight."

By the time he slipped the buttons loose on her blouse and dexterously flipped open the front catch of her bra she was ready to rip them off herself. Again, he wasn't to be rushed. Spreading the material wide, brushing the cups of the bra aside, he dusted his fingers lightly across her nipples, barely touching them, yet to Leah it felt as if a hot paintbrush was sweeping over them.



When at last he bent his head and took one throbbing nipple into his mouth tiny tremors raced through her pussy and she had to squeeze her legs together. As he sucked he flicked his tongue across the tip, increasing the level of sensation.

"Please," she moaned. "Oh god, please. More."

But he simply shifted his mouth to the other nipple, now cupping the breast in his warm palm. When his teeth lightly scraped the hard point the flutters in her vagina seemed to shoot straight up through her body. The edge of an orgasm teased at her, but Shane wasn't letting her tumble over the edge until he was ready.

When he'd worked her breasts into quivering mounds of need, so sensitized that the drift of his breath across her skin was almost enough to send her into orbit, he let his hand drift down to the waistband of her shorts, popping the button and sliding down the zipper in one smooth motion.

"Lift your hips," he commanded in his low voice, and with a shift of her body her shorts and panties disappeared.

He ran the back of his hand across the soft nest of her pubic curls, catching the tip of her clitoris between two fingers. Her hips jerked at the electric contact and she tried to push herself hard against his caress, but again he teased her with a wisp of a touch.

Wantonly she spread her legs, opening herself to him.

"That's it, darlin'. Show me that sweet little cunt."

He draped one of his legs over hers, widening the spread of her thighs, exposing every inch of her cunt to his gaze and touch. While he bent his mouth to one nipple again, his fingers drifted along the length of her slit, scooping her feminine juice and spreading it on her labia.

When two fingers slipped into her hungry pussy she almost wept with relief. But the next moment his thumb pressed against her clit, teasing it with that light back-and-forth motion while he increased the pressure on her nipple. As he slowly finger-fucked her, she moved her hips in a steady rhythm, riding his fingers, riding his hand. Her

head dropped back, her breathing hitched and the familiar coil of lust began unwinding low inside her belly.

"Come on, baby," Shane whispered to her. "Let it go. Let me take care of you. Come for me, Leah. Let me feel that hot, tight pussy grip my fingers and spill your juices into my hand."

"I...want..." She could hardly get the words out. "I...want..."

"What, baby? My cock? Is that what you want?"

"Yesss." She pumped her hips as his hand increased its rhythm and his fingers pinched her nipple even harder.

"You'll get it. Every hard inch of it. But let me see you come first. Come on. Let it go, Leah. Now."

With his last word he thrust harder inside her vagina, pressed down on her clit and gave her nipple one last squeeze. The orgasm bubbled up from deep inside her, all her muscles quivering and spasming, her body shaking as his fingers worked their magic.

When the last little shiver had subsided, he moved her so he could slip off the couch leg and shed his clothing. As draining as the orgasm had been, it had only left her wanting more. And the sight of Shane's thick cock rising from its dark brown nest of curls had her pussy crying out in need all over again.

Kneeling on the couch between her thighs, he took his cock in his hand, slowly stroking it from tip to root while his eyes ate up her naked body. Leah couldn't ever remember a man wanting her as much as this one did. His need only drove her own higher.

Careful not to crush her, he shifted until he was straddling her waist, his penis barely a breath from her lips.

"Take it, sugar," he said, his voice thick with need. "Let me feel those hot, velvet lips wrap around it and suck on it."

Leah opened her mouth, salivating for the musky taste of him. Lazily he rubbed the velvety head against her lips, pressing lightly, the drop of fluid seeping from the slit moistening her mouth. From beneath half-lowered lids she watched him stroke his shaft from root to tip as she opened her mouth and took him inside one little bit at a time. When he pressed harder she opened her mouth wide and he pushed in until she felt the head at the back of her throat.

Tilting her head back to give him greater access, she began to suck his cock the way he liked, licking the soft skin over hard steel with sweeps of her tongue. One hand worked its way between his legs and she cupped his balls, squeezing gently. The indrawn hiss of his breath told her his own desire was rising and she began to suck harder and faster.

Abruptly he pulled back, shifting position so he could reach his jeans, which he'd dropped on the floor. Leah watched him fish a condom from the pocket, heard the rip of foil and the snap as he rolled the thin latex onto his swollen cock.

"I wanted to come in your mouth," he said, his voice harsh. "I wanted to eat that delicious pussy of yours. But Jesus, Leah, I can't wait another minute."

Straddling her again, he braced his palms at the back of her knees and bent them until they touched her shoulders. His penis probed at the entrance to her vagina, then with a groan he thrust fully inside. As always, the moment he filled her tiny spasms gripped her inner walls, clutching at the thickness inside her.

Shane braced himself on one hand and slid the other between them, seeking her clitoris and rubbing it with his thumb. The spasms increased and every pulse in her body throbbed in time with his movements. Locking her ankles behind his back, she thrust her pelvis up at him and matched her movements to his as he began to ride her.

She lost herself in the movement of their bodies, heat bubbling through her veins, pussy clutching at the hard rod inside it, matching Shane stroke for stroke. She heard the harsh rasping of his breath, the low moan growling from his throat, her own uneven breathing as they rode the wave of desire together.

They exploded together, bodies shuddering and shaking, Shane pounding into her over and over as he spilled himself into the latex reservoir and she bathed him with her liquid heat. She was flying, weightless in space, nothing to anchor her except the man possessing her.

They lay together for a long time, sweat-slicked bodies glued together, arms wrapped around each other, heartbeats thundering. At last Shane shifted and rolled to his side, his breathing still shaky as he feathered kisses on Leah's face and neck.

"Your passion stuns me," he told her, brushing her hair back from her face. "I've seen you give wholeheartedly to the ranch, to your horses, to everything about White Eagle. But I never thought I'd be lucky enough that you'd give of yourself to me without restraint. Completely."

"You make me feel that way," she said, touching his lips with her fingertips. "Don't laugh but I believe there's something...mystical about us being together. I felt it ever since that very first afternoon. You bring all that passion to the surface."

Her grandfather had told her she should be on watch for her soul mate. Had she already found him in Shane? She knew she trusted him, more than she trusted most men. And trust was very important to her, especially right now with the devastating blow her father had dealt her.

For a moment she was tempted to tell him about the dreams, but bit her tongue, holding back the words. She didn't want to spoil the moment. Maybe in the morning, in the reality of sunlight, when it might not seem so frightening. Now she just wanted to wrap the warm glow around her that their coupling had brought to her body. That his words had brought to her heart.

"I want to feel this way forever," he murmured.

She tightened her arms around his neck and whispered back, "Me too."

\* \* \* \* \*

Leah spent a long time showering in the morning, her body deliciously sore in many places. Shane had let her rest after that first orgasm before taking her again and again. He was like a man possessed, fucking her with his hands, his tongue, his cock. There was nothing he didn't do until they both collapsed with exhaustion. Now, remembering the erotic pleasures they'd indulged in, she smiled to herself as her truck bumped along the back road to the reservation.

This morning they'd talked about her dream. She'd been so afraid he would tell her she was crazy, that she was just imagining things. Letting the Comanche part of her affect her thinking. But as always he was completely respectful of her heritage and insisted that she speak to Ken.

"Maybe it's nothing, darlin'," he told her as they finished their coffee. "But I've lived and worked in Texas long enough to know that you should never discount stuff like this. People still believe the stories about the Indian ghosts at Enchanted Rock near Marble Falls. If there's nothing to it Ken will tell you. But go and ask him."

Ken was sitting on his front porch, holding his coffee mug, when she pulled up. She knew the look on her face sent him a message. He rose slowly and walked down the steps to meet her.

"Did something happen?" he asked quietly. "Something since yesterday?"

"No," she shook her head. "But yesterday brought something back that I should have told you about before."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder, giving her a sense of security she really needed. "Come inside. Are you coffee'd out or can you stand a cup of my brew?"

She gave him a shaky smile. "I think your coffee is just what I need."

When they were seated across the kitchen table from each other, Leah took a small drink of the hot liquid, set the cup down and looked at her grandfather. "I had a dream."

Ken sipped from his own mug and waited for her to continue.

"It was about eagles," she said finally. "Three white eagles. I was out riding and they flew down at me from a treetop."

"Go on," he urged when she paused.

"They swooped around me, screeching at me." Leah closed her eyes, the dream sequence now vivid in her mind. "Almost as if they were telling me something. Then two of them flew right at my head, their wings beating so fast it created a strong breeze. One of them landed on my shoulder and screamed right in my ear." She took another drink of her coffee. The memory of that awful sound echoed through her body. "They kept beating their wings until I wheeled my horses around and raced back for the ranch. They followed me, screaming all the way."

"And the third eagle?"

Leah shuddered. "He turned into a vulture and kept swooping after me. I remember I rode into the barn, not even stopping in the yard. The eagles followed, forcing me into a corner of a stall. Then the vulture flew in after them and the last thing I remember was him spreading his wings and blacking everything out." She shook her head. "Then I woke up."

Ken reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "You should have told me about this. Don't keep things like that to yourself. Dreams are important to our people. And you're right. Very often they are harbingers of things to come."

"Do you think that's what this was?" she asked.

"I think maybe the spirits were sending you a message to be alert for two strangers who would affect White Eagle Ranch. Not necessarily in a bad way though."

"But they chased me into the barn. Nearly attacked me," she protested.

"I didn't sense that kind of danger from the two men in Amos' office," Ken told her. "I felt a lot of hidden animosity, but toward Joe rather than you. The ranch is a symbol to them of everything he withheld from them. Tread carefully with them, granddaughter. They are being very stoic but their feelings about this are raw. And in one of them I sense a tortured soul."

"I feel as if the eagles were trying to tell me something."

Ken nodded slowly. "Remember, Leah. The eagle is a good spirit. The Comanche legend of eagle's creation began when the young son of a chief died and was turned into the first eagle as an answer to his father's prayers. The Comanche eagle dance celebrates this legend. Perhaps these two men need to spread their wings too in order to get past what torments their souls."

She got up and refilled her coffee cup from the pot on the stove. "It's quite a coincidence that the ranch is named White Eagle Ranch, isn't it?"

Her grandfather chuckled. "Actually it was just the Morgan place until your father married your mother. I believe he found true love in her, although he had a hard time showing his feelings. He named the ranch when you were born."

Leah felt a pinch in her heart. So Joe Morgan actually had real feelings after all, she thought. "Too bad he never told me all this."

"He was a hard man. Your mother was the only softness in his life."

"What about the vulture in my dream?" she asked.

Ken's face sobered. "Trouble, granddaughter. Bad trouble. And from someone close to you."

Her hands tightened on her mug. "How close? And how bad?"

"That I don't know. Just be alert at all times. Don't trust lightly."

"Are you talking about Shane?" she demanded. *Oh god, please don't let it be him.*

"Not necessarily. I like Shane. But you are my first concern. Just be very, very careful."

"I will, grandfather. I promise."

As she rinsed her coffee cup in the sink a small cloud passed over the sun, casting a shadow over her, and a tiny shiver raced down her spine.

## **Chapter Four**

"I brought lunch."

Shane's voice, breaking the late morning silence, startled Leah. She was in the barn, grooming the buckskin gelding, her mind preoccupied with her conversation with her grandfather. She dropped the curry comb she was using.

"God, Shane." She pressed her hand to her chest. "You nearly gave me a heart attack." She picked up the comb, placed it on the ledge and unhooked the buckskin.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." He waited until she'd put the horse back in his stall and closed the half door before pulling her close to him and pressing his mouth to hers. His tongue traced the seam of her lips.

She automatically opened for him, loving the taste of him and the feel of his tongue. He held her pressed to him with one arm, taking the kiss deeper until they broke for much-needed air.

"Whew!" She stared into his eyes. "What was that for?"

"Just because."

"Because what?" she teased.

"Because I couldn't get you out of my mind all morning and I couldn't wait until tonight to see you again." He grinned and held up a large paper sack that had The Pit Boss logo on the side. "I thought bringing lunch would give me a good excuse."

"Barbecue? Yum!"

He looked around the barn. "Where is everyone?"

"Riding fences or moving the rest of the cows that are ready to give birth back down here." She smiled. "You're going to be very busy out here in a couple of days."



"Music to my ears," he told her. Then winked. "And my bank account." He looked around again as he pulled her into his arms. "You sure no one's around?"

"Of course," she giggled as his hands slid under her t-shirt. "Why? What did you have in mind, Dr. Duffy?"

"A little appetizer before lunch," he growled, lifting her in his arms.

"Shane!" She batted at his arm. "What if someone comes in?"

"I'll hurry," he grinned, then his face turned serious. "Leah, I've just got to have a little taste. Please. You wouldn't make a grown man beg, would you?"

"I don't know," she teased. "I thought last night would hold you for a while."

He cupped her head with his big palm and pulled her toward him. "I'm beginning to think *nothing* will ever be enough."

His lips were warm on hers, slightly rough like new denim, just the touch of them arousing beyond belief. Leah opened her mouth eagerly for his tongue, realizing her need for him was as great as his for her.

*I'm in big trouble here.*

"Okay," she said breathlessly when they broke for air. "You convinced me."

The stall at the end of the row was still empty and filled with sweet-smelling hay. He yanked the horse blanket off the stall door where it was folded over and tossed it one-handed on top of the hay before lowering Leah to it.

She looked up at him, feeling laughter bubble up inside her. "Does this remind you of anything?"

"You mean our first time together? When I attacked you like a maniac?" He gave her a rueful look. "I don't think I'll ever forget it. I was positive you'd never want anything to do with me after that."

"All in all, it was...interesting." She tilted her head. "Besides, I don't remember saying 'Shane, stop. Please, Shane. Stop.'"

He was slowly removing her clothes as she talked to him, kissing patches of her skin as he exposed it. "I think I remember 'Please, Shane'," he told her. His voice dropped. "And I've been trying to make sure I pleased you ever since."

"You do." Her own voice had taken on a husky quality. "Oh my god, you don't know how much you do."

He was naked now in all his glorious magnificence, his cock jutting proudly from its rich brown nest of curls. His flat abs and muscular thighs made her mouth water, and the thought of him inside her made her tremble.

His gaze as he raked it over her was voracious, his eyes literally eating her up. Liquid trickled from her pussy, now quivering in anticipation. God, would she ever get enough of this man? How lucky she was to have him come into her life.

*Fate. The gods.*

She could hear her grandfather's voice in her head.

Then Shane was kneeling between her thighs and his head lowered, his lips capturing one nipple, while his fingers pulled and tugged on the other one. His tongue flicked over the pebbled surface, sending tiny sparks of electricity through her. She threaded her fingers through the silk of his hair, tugging his head closer to her, thrusting her breast up at him. God, his tongue was like a flame painting fire over the swelling bud.

"Shane," she groaned.

He lifted his head, his eyes glazed with desire. "You taste so sweet. Every part of your body. I'll never get enough of tasting you. Eating you."

He lowered his head again and traced a line with the tip of his tongue between the valley of her breasts, pausing to swirl in her navel, then down, down until he reached the silken curls guarding her cunt. His tongue probed between the lips of her pussy, seeking the nub of her clitoris, finding it and nipping it with his teeth.

Leah jerked in response, the touch setting her blood on fire and igniting every pulse in her body. His hands slid beneath her buttocks, lifting her to his mouth, and his tongue traced the wet lips of her cunt. He lapped at her like a hungry cat, moans of satisfaction rumbling from his mouth and echoing through her tightly strung body.

Her hips set up their own rhythm as Shane's tongue licked and probed. When he shifted his hands to open her labia wide, exposing her inner pink flesh and thrusting his tongue deep inside her, she bit her lip to keep from shrieking her pleasure.

"More," she moaned, clutching his head to her.

When he looked up, his lips were slick with her juices and he licked them slowly, his eyes hungry and feral.

"I could do this all day, darlin', but someone's sure to interrupt our little interlude before we're ready for them. This one will be quick but I promise tonight I'll take my time again."

Fishing a foil packet from his jeans, he ripped it open and sheathed himself in a swift motion. Leah reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his thick cock as she widened her legs and guided him to the opening of her cunt.

Shane braced himself on his hands, pinned her gaze with his and plunged home in one hard thrust. Leah moaned her pleasure and locked her ankles behind his back, pulling him in tight. His thick cock filled her completely, the velvet head touching the mouth of her womb. Shane pressed against her just enough so his pubic hair rasped against her clit, driving her wild.

"Hard and fast, darlin'," he growled. "Hard and fast."

And then he began to pump his hips, his shaft creating incredible friction as it slammed into her again and again. Within seconds Leah felt her orgasm begin to build, rising through her body like some unstoppable storm.

"Come, Leah," he commanded through gritted teeth. "Now. Come for me now."

She opened her eyes to see his blazing into hers, the muscles in his neck corded with tension.

“Now,” he said again.

And she did, spasms rocking her body, her pussy convulsing around his rod as it pulsed inside her, spilling his semen into the thin latex reservoir. He rocked his hips as the last shudders raced through him before collapsing, catching himself on his forearms.

It had been fast, all right, but to Leah no less satisfying. Making love with Shane was like riding a whirlwind, one that blew itself into every corner of her body. The last twitches of her cunt still grabbed at his cock, now bathed in the slickness of her juice. She tightened her muscles, gripping him inside her until there were no more aftershocks.

Slowly Leah unhooked her ankles and eased her legs down onto their makeshift bed. Shane buried his face in her neck as he struggled to catch his breath, the choppy intake of air the only sound either of them made.

“Well,” Shane said when his voice was close to normal again.

“Well, indeed,” she agreed, her tone breathy.

“I hate to say this, but we’d better get dressed. No telling when someone will take it into his mind to wander in here.” He brushed his mouth against hers, then leaped lithely to his feet.

“You’re right,” she sighed, taking the hand he reached out to her to help her up.

They might have dressed more quickly if they hadn’t stopped for frequent kisses. At last they were fully clothed, the blanket folded and hung over the stall door again.

Leah felt pleasantly buzzed, glowing with sexual satisfaction. If she had any reservations at all it was to wonder whether sex was the sum total of their relationship. But as quickly as the thought came she banished it. Right now good sex was what she wanted and needed. As soon as she got this miserable situation sorted out she could

take a long look at what was really going on between her and Shane. In the meantime he was better medicine than anything she could think of.

They were sharing a final kiss when a voice echoed through the barn.

"Leah? You in here?"

There was no mistaking the sound of Grant's voice.

Shane had just picked up the sack with their lunch in it. "I'll take this into the next barn with me," he told Leah in a low voice. "If Fallon asks where I am, tell him I'm checking on the cows the men brought in yesterday. Then come on back and find me."

Another quick kiss and he was gone.

Leah walked out of the stall as casually as she could manage, heading back to the buckskin. She hoped she'd managed to compose herself and wasn't wearing a sign that blazed "Recently fucked" on her forehead. Grant was walking slowly down the wide middle aisle, one lock of dark hair falling over his forehead. He moved with a fluid grace, his plaid shirt and worn jeans outlining the muscular structure of his body.

*Any woman in her right mind would be crazy not to fall into his arms.*

Leah knew she wasn't crazy. It was just that next to Shane every other man paled in comparison. She sighed inwardly and waved to him.

"Hi! I was just doing some odd chores around here. What brings you here in the middle of the day?"

Grant studied her carefully from head to toe, then looked over her shoulder. "Isn't that Shane's truck I see out there in the yard?"

"Sure is. He's in the next barn checking some cows about to drop their calves. Did you need him for something?"

Grant paused for moment, studying her again, then shook his head. "Actually it's you I came to see, but I wanted to be able to talk to you alone. I don't expect to have much privacy at dinner. I thought maybe we could settle a few things first."

"Oh?" Leah tilted her head. "What things?"

Grant looked around again. "Got a cup of coffee in your kitchen?"

"It may be a little dark by this time. I made it just before I came out to the barn."

He smiled. "No problem. As long as I don't have to chew it we're all right."

"Okay then. Come on."

*Shane will be pissed as hell but he'll just have to deal with it.*

When they were seated at the table with full mugs, Leah looked at Grant with a questioning look and asked, "So what's this all about?"

Grant ran a finger around the rim of his mug. "Leah, you know Joe and I had an agreement about what I could do on ranch property, right?"

She nodded. "Yes. He marked off on your map all the areas you could investigate. You just had to stay away from where the cattle and horses were."

"And when he shifted herds from one pasture to another, I could check out the ones that were vacated."

"That's right. So what's the problem?"

"Honestly? I'm concerned your brothers will want to put a stop to it. Cancel the agreement." He took a healthy swallow of the bitter brew.

Leah had to swallow the rage that threatened to surface every time those two men were mentioned. "First of all they aren't my brothers. Half brothers maybe, but I want to see some proof. I'm not taking Joe Morgan's word for anything. Secondly, I'm going to insist your agreement be honored or I'll pitch a holy fit with Amos. So I don't think you have anything to worry about. Anyway, I have a feeling they don't want anything to do with White Eagle."

Grant's eyebrows lifted. "You really believe that? What do you think they'll do?"

Leah shrugged. "I'm not sure, exactly. They may want to cash out their shares. I can't see either of them having any interest in the place. I hope," she added.

"Do you have the cash to buy them out?"

She sipped at her coffee. "Not on hand, but I could probably swing something with the bank. The ranch is solvent and a going business."

"Maybe I could help you out there," Grant offered.

Leah frowned. "I don't understand."

"I'd have to clear it with my boss, of course, but what if you sold part of the White Eagle to me? My company, that is."

Leah was stunned. "Sell part of the ranch?" She stared at him. "Grant, are you crazy? Besides, I can't sell you what isn't mine. You have to talk to...those two."

"Okay, I could offer to buy their shares. Then you and I could be partners."

Leah tossed back the rest of the coffee, making a face at its bitter taste, and rose to take her mug to the sink.

"I don't think we're anywhere close to even discussing that possibility yet. I want to see how this dinner goes. And what they really want." She forced a smile. "I understand your position, and I will do my best to make sure that agreement stays in place. But that's as much as I want to get into right now. Can you understand that? I mean, none of us knows what's going to happen. This will have thrown a monkey wrench into more than your exploration."

Grant sighed and ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration. But when he looked up at Leah he had a smile of sorts in place.

"Can't blame a guy for trying, right?"

"I'm very sympathetic to your situation," she told him. "Try to give me the same consideration, okay?"

"Sure. I spoke to my boss and he's not pressuring me. We don't even know exactly what's under the land so he's willing to let me spend my time digging and sifting until we get a handle on things." He shrugged. "It may not turn out to be profitable in the end, anyway. I know this has all thrown you for a loop. No one expected old Joe to pull a fast one like this."

Leah blew out a breath. "Boy, that's the truth." She cocked her head. "So are we good to go until the dinner?"

One corner of Grant's mouth kicked up. "Unless I can talk you into having lunch with me."

She smiled at him to soften her answer. "I don't think social activities are going to be on my schedule for a while."

"Is that with everyone or just me?" he prodded. "Come on, what can it hurt? You have to eat anyway. And it's well past noon."

The back door slammed just as Grant spoke and Shane's deep voice cut the air.

"She's already got a lunch date."

Grant held up his hands, palms outward. "No big deal, buddy. Just a friendly meal."

"Like I said." Shane moved up behind Leah's chair and rested one hand on her shoulders. "She's already got plans." He held up the sack in his other hand. "In fact I think we're about ready to eat right now."

Grant pushed back his chair and stood up. "No problem. Leah, I'll see you at dinner tomorrow night."

"I don't like that guy," Shane grumbled when the door closed behind Grant.

"He's a nice guy." Leah stood on tiptoe and kissed his jaw. "Just doing his job. And you have nothing to worry about. You know that."

"And I plan to keep it that way."



## Chapter Five

Leah was standing at the refrigerator, hoping an inspiration for dinner would leap out at her, when the doorbell rang. As soon as she hit the front hall she saw Amos DeWitt through the glass in the upper part of the front door. She opened the door, frowning.

"Amos? Was I expecting you?"

"No. I just took a chance coming out here. I was afraid if I called first you'd refuse to see me." He gesture with the briefcase in his hand. "May I come in? I'd rather not conduct business on the front porch."

She hesitated briefly then swung the door wide. "Come into the kitchen," she told him.

The kitchen had become her sanctuary as this mess bubbled around her. She wasn't ready yet to venture into Joe's den, the place where he'd spent his time when he wasn't outside or away. Like a lot of other things at White Eagle, she'd left it untouched since the funeral, focusing only on the day-to-day operation of the ranch. She'd avoided every other room except her bedroom and bathroom and the kitchen. Joe Morgan's presence was still vividly stamped every place else and now she didn't know if it was grief or anger she was struggling with that made her avoid the rest of the house.

Amos settled himself at the table and opened his briefcase, taking out a folder. "You left the office without taking any of these papers," he told her.

"I'm not sure I want to look at them." She couldn't help the tinge of resentment in her voice.

"You can't avoid them forever," he pointed out. "At the very least, you're still a one third owner of White Eagle, and there are papers for you to sign. Procedures that have to be put into place."

She leaned against the counter, arms folded across her breasts, and looked around the room that had been the hub of the house for as long as she could remember. Would all her good memories be wiped away by this one shocking act of her father's? Would she ever feel comfortable in her own house again?

"Before I do that, I want some proof that these men are actually Joe's sons."

Amos' eyebrows rose. "You won't take your father's word for it?"

"Hell no." She glared at him. "I want DNA tests on both of them so the relationship is legally established."

"Leah," Amos said placatingly. "Honey. You're welcome to do that, but whatever the results, these two men are named in the will and each specifically gets a share of White Eagle Ranch."

"So you mean even if they turn out not to be of his blood, they still get part of the ranch?"

Amos nodded. "The will names them specifically. They could be from Mars and still get their bequest."

"That just sucks, Amos." She gritted her teeth.

"I know how you feel, honey, but meanwhile, you have to sign these papers. Joe made provisions for you to temporarily be in charge of everything until the will is fully probated. So at least for the moment you're in full charge. As soon as you sign."

"Well, that's something, anyway." She yanked out a chair and dropped into it, pulled the papers toward her to look them over. "And speaking of that, exactly how is this supposed to work after probate? Who oversees the cattle? The horses? The day-to-day operations? Who pays the hands and balances the books? Enters the information on the stock into the computers? That's all stuff I've been doing, working out of the office in the barn. And doing damn well, I might point out, despite the fact that Dad insisted on double checking everything."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves here. I've spoken to both men and they figure these are things that y'all can hash out at dinner tomorrow night."

"Oh great. With my grandfather, Shane and Grant watching everything and putting in their two cents worth." She studied Amos. "What do they want, anyway?"

"Honey, I don't think *they* even know that. Can I tell you a little bit about them?"

Leah waved a hand in the air. "What more is there to tell? You gave me the basics in your office. And I've obviously seen Mac around forever."

Amos shook his head. "I don't think you know the important things about him."

"I know he's a loner. Keeps to himself. I heard he used to get in fights years ago but hasn't for a long time. And runs that bar he bought."

"Oh Leah. He's so much more than that." He sighed. "It wasn't easy for Caridad Moreno to raise an illegitimate child as a single Mexican mother. She barely made ends meet cleaning house for Morgan's Creek ranchers. Your father never even acknowledged her after their affair and denied the child was his."

"He was ahead of me in school," Leah broke in, "but I used to see him around. He always seemed sort of...sad."

"Or angry," Amos told her. "But after a while he learned to keep that rage to himself. Anyway, he was cowboying around when his mother took sick. Cancer, you know. He got himself hired on at one of the ranches so he'd have steady pay, and spent every minute he wasn't working taking care of Caridad."

"I'd heard she was sick," Leah said. "Not much privacy in a town this size, no matter where you sit on the social ladder. Just out of curiosity, why didn't he ask my father for money to help his mother?"

"She never told him about his relationship with Joe. And if you don't mind my saying so, Joe was a hard man. He resented the fact that he'd had the affair with a Mexican woman and made it clear she was never to contact him again."

Leah felt pain stab at her. She'd known her father was unemotional. Definitely not a people person. But it was hard for her to swallow the fact that he'd let a woman he'd had a child with suffer so much, when a little money would have made things easier.

"Anyway," Amos continued, "Mac did what he could for her those last months. I think he was totally shocked to discover she'd somehow managed to pay on a small life insurance policy. He paid for her funeral and a proper burial, then used the rest of the money to buy that bar."

"How did he react to this news?" Leah wanted to know. "He didn't seem too friendly in your office."

Amos shook his head. "I think he wanted to dig Joe up and kill him all over again. He was still thinking about Caridad and how much she suffered from her illness. Then he wanted no part of this. Nothing to do with you or the ranch. But Joe's will is pretty tight, and Mac finally decided to exercise his rights and get what he thought of as rightfully his."

"Great. He's sure not going to be agreeable to working anything out."

"We'll see. I think there are opportunities here to make this work for everyone."

Leah snorted. "Yeah right. What about the other one? What's his name again?"

"Dashiel Hyde. Goes by Dash."

"You gave me his background but what about those scars? And his limp?"

"He's a good man, Leah. He was a cop in Chicago, and a highly decorated one. He and his partner were involved in a drug takedown, there was a shootout and a fire and his partner was shot and killed. Dash was shot also, but he's still wrestling with survivor's guilt. Obviously that's why he's no longer a cop."

Leah rose from the chair, took two glasses from a cupboard and filled them from a pitcher of iced tea in the fridge, just to give herself something to do. Her mind was whirling. Two half brothers, both with very good reasons to hate both her and her father. Both with tragedy in their lives. None of this was going to be easy.

She handed a glass of tea to Amos and sat down again. "Well, this ought to be a cozy little family dinner, don't you think?"

He gave her an apologetic smile. "I wish things were different, honey. I told Joe he was buying a wagonload of trouble here but he was the most stubborn man I've ever met."

"No kidding." She swallowed some of the tea, hoping the liquid would cool her down.

"But I think if anyone can bring this all together it's you. And don't forget, Ken isn't going to let anything bad happen to you."

She gave a short laugh. "If scalping were legal I think Ken would have two trophies hanging from his belt right now. He's trying not to show it, but he's as mad as I am. He never liked my father."

"With good reason. But to everyone's credit, he insisted Joe do right by your mother and the man did what had to be done." He finished his drink and set the glass down. "You've got to sign these papers, Leah. I told Dash and Mac the same thing. Tomorrow night y'all can hash out how you want to handle this. Maybe all it will take is making sure they get their share of the profits on a regular basis."

"I sure hope neither one takes it into his head to start exercising management rights." She let out a long sigh. "All right. Where do I sign?"

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd found two steaks in the freezer, called Shane and told him she'd feed him if he'd come hold her hand and let her vent her anger. He brought a bottle of wine, which they drank with the steaks, baked potatoes and salad. While they ate he listened to her account of Amos' visit and her dread of the dinner the following night.

"This may not end up being as bad as you think," he said, finishing the last bite of meat. "They may not want anything to do with the ranch. They may even ask you to buy them out."

"That would take a lot more capital than I've got," she pointed out. "I know I could work something out with the bank, but it just frosts me that I'll end up in debt because that old man finally faced his guilty conscience."

"Don't borrow trouble before it gets here," he said. "I think what you need is something to soothe those frazzled nerves."

Leah's mouth curved in a tiny smile. "And I suppose you've got just the right thing?"

"Oh darlin'," he told her, "you know it."

They had just finished stacking the last of the dishes in the dishwasher. He turned her to face him, one arm banded around her, the fingers of the other threading through her hair. His eyes were hot with need when he looked at her, his face taut with desire. Even as his mouth brushed gently against hers, her nipples beaded and the pulse in her cunt began its insistent throbbing.

Leah felt her body responding to him as it always did. From the first time he'd fucked her that day in the barn, all Shane Duffy had to do was touch her and she was instantly combustible.

His lips teased at hers, rubbing gently, the tip of his tongue tracing the seam of her mouth and outlining its shape. His hand cradled her head, tilting it to allow him to deepen the kiss. She felt every muscle of his body pressed against hers, from the hard wall of his chest to the thick ridge of his erection straining at the denim of his jeans.

Clutching at his shoulders, she moved her hips back and forth against him and was rewarded with a deep groan that echoed into her mouth. His tongue probed harder now, a sweep of flame inside the wet cavern. She sucked on it, pulling it farther into her mouth, her teeth scraping over the rough surface.

Shane lifted his head, his breath laboring. "We need to take this out of here," he rasped.

Struggling with her own breathing, Leah pushed away, took his hand and led him along the familiar hallway and up the stairs to her room. They were barely past the

door when he drew her into his arms again, his mouth capturing hers in a kiss that echoed down to her toes. His tongue was voracious, exploring every inch of that heated cavern, licking it and sucking on her tongue. He drew it into his own mouth and nipped at it with his teeth, sending tingles through her muscles and nerves.

One hand held her head firmly in place, allowing her no escape as the kiss went on and on. She was drowning in the heat of it, her knees wobbling, her body melting. She clutched at Shane's t-shirt as he walked her backward to the bed, his arms holding her securely against him. She felt the edge of the mattress hit the backs of her legs and then he was tumbling her onto its surface, pulling his mouth away at last to give air to their starving lungs.

"God, Leah," he gasped. "I'll never get enough of you. Ever."

His mouth trailed hot, wet kisses along the line of her chin and down the slender column of her neck. The tip of his tongue was like a feather tracing circles at the hollow of her throat then back up at the sensitive underside of her chin. Her breasts ached for the touch of his hands and the liquid of her arousal trickled from her throbbing pussy.

She threaded her fingers through the silken feel of his hair, clutching at him at the same time she tried to free herself to yank off her clothes.

"Easy," he murmured against her skin. "I told you. Today was quick. Tonight we're taking it very, very slow."

Leah moaned and tried to rub her body against his, and a low chuckle of satisfaction rumbled from his throat.

"I'm in control here, darlin'. By the time I let you come tonight, you'll be screaming for it."

"Oh god," she wailed, trying to squeeze her thighs together.

"I love your breasts," he went on. "Have I told you that?"

Somehow he maneuvered her shirt over her head and tossed it aside, his hands cupping the full swell of her breasts as his thumbs chafed the nipples.

"I-I think you might have a time or two," she told him, pushing herself into his touch. "B-but I might need some reminding."

"Look down," he urged. "See how they swell in my hands? See how the curve of them rises over the scrap of lace you call a bra? By the way, I think we need to get rid of it."

Defly he released the front clasp and, one-handed, slid it down her arms and off her body, tossing it to join her top. His hot tongue flicked at first one nipple, then the other, while his hands cradled and squeezed the plump flesh. More liquid gathered in her pussy, trickling down the insides of her thigh as he teased and tormented her already aching nipples. When he bit them lightly then soothed them with his tongue she nearly came off the bed.

"Please," she begged.

"Please what, darlin'. Tell me what you want and you might get it."

Leah caught her bottom lip with her teeth. "Please suck my nipples. Hard. You know, the way you always do."

"You mean like this?"

He pulled one entire nipple and the areola surrounding it into his mouth, sucking hard on it while his teeth grazed the diamond-hard tip.

"Yesss." She arched up to him, her hands clawing at Shane's back. "Yes. Like that. More."

By the time he finished his ministrations her breasts felt as if every nerve in them had been exposed and her nipples were like twin torches, hotter than flames.

Balancing himself on his forearms, Shane kissed his way down her stomach, stopping at her navel as he'd done earlier that day, until he reached the waistband of her shorts. With his teeth he pulled the button free, then grasped the tab of the zipper and tugged it down. He drew a line of kisses along the lacy top of her panties, then grabbed the fabric with his teeth and pulled it away from her body.



"So hot," he murmured. "So beautiful. Your little curls are a work of art, darlin'. But one of these nights I'm going to get you to let me shave them all off so I can see this sweet cunt all naked. Every inch of it. So I can lick my tongue over bare skin and suck up the taste of it."

His words were just as arousing as his actions, and his breath was like a hot wind blowing on her wherever he touched her. The thought of him shaving her mons, making her pussy naked and vulnerable to his gaze and touch, ratcheted up the need growing within her. When he shifted to strip away her shorts and panties, she begged, "Hurry, hurry."

The deep chuckle sounded again. "Not this time, darlin'. This time I'm really going to make you beg for it."

"I'm already begging," she told him.

"Oh yeah? And we haven't even started yet." He had moved up to straddle her after disposing of the last of her clothing. His fingers circled her wrists and lifted them over her head. "Grab the spokes of your headboard and don't let go no matter what." He molded her fingers to the carved spindles, closing his hands over them to make sure her grip was tight. Then he bent his head to place a brief kiss on her mouth. "And that's an order." His face was flushed with desire as his gaze held hers. "Too bad we don't have a pair of handcuffs, but we can remedy that another time."

Leah's pussy twitched and more liquid seeped out to her thighs at his words. From the first Shane had been an aggressive lover, but this was the first time he'd mentioned things beyond what she was used to. With someone else she might be frightened, but not with Shane. She trusted him completely. Tightening her grasp on the spindles, she watched as Shane slid back down her body to position himself between her thighs. Placing his hands beneath them, he pressed them out and upward until her entire cunt and the area down to her anus was exposed to him.

When his mouth closed over her clit she jerked at the heat of the intimate contact, but she held on to the headboard.

Shane raised his eyes to hers. "Get ready for the ride of your life, darlin'."

Then his lips tugged on her clit again, sucking the swollen bud into his mouth, nipping at the very tip with his teeth as Leah's cunt quivered and liquid continued to seep from her. Every pulse in her body throbbed like a drumbeat. The more he tormented the sensitive nub, the more her blood heated and raced through her veins and the more her body demanded satisfaction.

But just as she felt the beginnings of a climax unwinding inside her, Shane moved his mouth to trace her labia with his lips slick with her juices. When his tongue rimmed the opening of her vagina a whimper of need slipped past her lips and she tried to thrust her hips at him.

He simply tightened his hold on her thighs, spreading her even wider, and slid his tongue into the wetness of her pussy. Her vaginal walls pulsed and tried to grip the stiffened tongue, but Shane thrust it in and out in quick, almost feathery movements.

Leah closed her eyes, letting the rush of heat consume her and wishing it were Shane's thick cock plunging into her instead of his very talented tongue. Her position made it impossible to move, to pull him inside her more, to do anything except feel the pulsing need dance through her body as he tongue-fucked her with expertise.

Each time the climax rose within her Shane sensed it and pulled back, leaving her perched on the edge of an erotic precipice. Then he began all over again.

When she was sure she couldn't stand it one more minute, when she was ready to scream in frustration, he increased the friction and speed of his tongue and tipped her over the edge. The spasms gripped her entire body, and she gripped the spindles of the headboard so tightly they dug into her hands.

The orgasm shuddered through her like a summer storm, sweeping her from one level to another as Shane's very clever tongue continued to fuck her cunt. His hands kept her thighs wide apart, denying her the relief that squeezing them together would bring her. He lapped at her until the quivering of her vaginal walls finally subsided and the last pulsing of her muscles died away. When she was limp and drained, he lowered

her legs, placed an open-mouth kiss on her very sensitive clit, then crawled up her body to press his mouth to hers.

She tasted herself on his lips, a tart-sweet taste, and the need inside her began to unwind again.

"I want you to fuck me," she gasped, tearing her mouth away from his. "Please, Shane. Now."

Instead he removed her hands from the headboard and straddled her again, moving until his cock was just a breath away from her lips.

"Suck me, Leah. Take me in your mouth. Do it now."

She moved one hand to wrap her fingers around the thick shaft and opened her mouth to take the velvety head inside. The drop of fluid sitting atop the slit was saltier than her own fluids, but still had that underlying sweet taste. Leah inhaled Shane's scent, loving the muskiness of him as it invaded her nostrils.

She swirled her tongue around the velvet of the head, then licked the length of his cock from root to tip, tilting her head back to take him more fully inside the cavern of her mouth. As she licked at him, her other hand stole between his thighs to search out his balls, cupping the heavy sac in her palm and manipulating it with her fingers.

"Jesus," he whistled between his teeth. "Take it easy, darlin'. I don't want to come until I'm inside you."

But Leah ignored him, sucking his shaft harder and teasing his balls.

Without warning, he jerked himself from her mouth and shifted his position.

"Enough," he told her. "I want to play more but I can't wait."

He reached into her nightstand drawer where he kept a supply of condoms and sheathed himself quickly. Then his big hands flipped her over and pulled her to her knees. The first time he had taken her from behind, Leah had frozen, feeling a lack of intimacy in the position as if anybody would do for him. But he'd soothed and coaxed and teased her into a high state of arousal so that when he penetrated her, the climax

that shook her was more intense than any she'd ever experienced. Now it had become a favorite position.

"Touch yourself," he told her. "Go ahead. Right now."

This was something else he'd taught her, how to increase her pleasure by masturbating while he fucked her. Again, she'd been embarrassed in the beginning, but she was long past the point of anything except craving the pleasure he brought to her. Leaning forward and balancing herself, Leah reached between her thighs and rubbed her clit, feeling the slickness of the swollen tip. Shane slipped a finger inside her pussy, scooping out her juices, and she gasped when she felt him press the tip of the finger against her anus.

"Do you like to feel me back here?" he asked her. "Tell me. Do you?"

"Yes." She barely got the word out. "Yes, I do."

He pressed harder and his finger pushed inside her heated rear tunnel. Immediately she felt tiny spasms race over her body.

"I never can decide where to fuck you first," he rasped, his voice thick and heavy. "You have the most incredible ass in the world. When those hot muscles close around my cock, sometimes I feel as if the top of my head will come off. That hot, dark tunnel is like a blazing fist pulling everything out of me."

Leah was so aroused she couldn't even form words. Her entire focus was on the orgasm building within her body. Shane was the only person who had ever taken her anally, and it too rocked her world. Sometimes when she was alone, she could make herself come just thinking of it.

"But tonight," he went on, his voice uneven, "I think we'll do it like this."

With his finger still in her rectum, he positioned his cock at her opening and in one thrust filled her with its thickness. At the dual penetration Leah felt a wildness race through her. When Shane began the familiar thrust and retreat movement she shifted her hips to match his rhythm. Soon the room was filled with the sound of flesh slapping

against flesh, his balls kissing her thighs with every forward movement of his body, his finger in her ass matching the rhythm of his penis in her cunt.

Leah rocked back and forth, moaning as the pleasure swept over her body. Shane's hand gripped her waist he plunged in and out of her.

She lost all track of time, gripped by the flood of sensations. Low in her belly the tight ribbon of desire began to unwind and snake its way into every muscle and nerve. It blossomed and expanded through her, the spasms beginning in her pussy and reaching throughout her body.

"Pinch your clit," Shane ordered in an uneven voice. "Now. Do it now."

She pinched the swollen nub hard with two fingers and her climax broke over her like wildfire, shaking her from head to toe, just as Shane erupted within the latex shield. The walls of her pussy gripped him as they spasmed, milking him as he erupted over and over again inside her.

Spent, she collapsed onto the bed, too weak to support herself on her hands. Her heart hammered against her ribs and she dragged air into her lungs. Shane withdrew his cock and his finger from her and rolled to the side, his own breath rasping in the air. One hand rested on her cunt, pressing hard against it until the final aftershocks died away, leaving her too spent to even murmur her satisfaction.

Shane rolled from the bed and padded into the bathroom. Leah heard the sounds of him disposing of the condom and cleaning up. Then he was back in bed, lying next to her, stroking her with a soothing movement of his hand.

"I think you're trying to kill me," she said at last.

He leaned his head over to kiss her cheek. "Can't help myself, darlin'. The minute I touch you it's as if dynamite explodes inside me. The more I'm with you, the more I want you."

She wanted desperately to ask him if that's all it was, the hot sex. Sure, he was always considerate and thoughtful. But that was Shane. What did she really know about him, anyway, except that he made her burn in bed and he had positioned himself

as her rock during this nightmare she was living through? They hadn't been together long enough for her to press him for a commitment, but she didn't want to end up like her mother either, married to a man who didn't really love her the way she wanted him to.

And she knew that despite the fact he had never said a word to her, her grandfather silently disapproved of the fact they were intimate. Nothing was a secret from his all-seeing eyes. The only comment he had ever made was, "Your mother had a wild and passionate nature. I hope you can tame yours better than she could handle hers."

So it lay like an elephant in the room between them.

She sighed, wondering how she was going to juggle all the emotional battles raging inside her.

"I can almost hear you thinking," Shane murmured in her ear. "You mean I didn't manage to distract you for one night?"

She snuggled back against him. This wasn't the time to discuss anything. "Just going over stuff in my mind. But I think my body is telling my mind it needs to go to sleep."

He kissed the edge of her ear and cupped one breast with his hand. "Rest, Leah. I'll take care of you."

*Will you? And what do you really want from me?*

## Chapter Six

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe Shane Duffy has his eye on the ranch, and that's why he's waltzing you around?"

To Leah's dismay, Grant had shown up for dinner before everyone else. He carried two bottles of wine with him, opening one and pouring a glass for each of them. Now he leaned against the counter, watching her prepare the salad, close enough to make her uncomfortable.

"I don't know why you would say that." She picked up her cutting board and moved to the other side of the counter. She could feel a shift in Grant's attitude but he didn't comment on it. Instead he said, "Think what a prize this would be for a vet. Your father made this place rock solid. A ranch this size that brings in a really good income would be a choice prize for someone like him. He could be set for life no matter what happens to his practice as a vet."

"That's ridiculous." Leah viciously chopped at a carrot. "Shane's got more business than he can handle. In a ranching community a vet never goes without business. Besides, what makes you think he has his eyes on White Eagle?"

Grant shrugged. "Nothing specific. Just a feeling I get. I think you trust him too much."

*Sometimes I think that myself.*

"I'm a big girl, Grant. I think I can judge people for myself." She swept the carrots off the board into the big salad bowl.

"Oh, I don't know." He moved fractionally closer to her. "I think you may have misjudged me."

She lifted her wineglass to sip at the cool amber liquid and frowned at him over the rim. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"I only have your best interests at heart," he told her. "I have from the beginning. Listen, you mean a lot to me, Leah. And I really want to help you out of this mess you've been dumped into."

"Oh yeah?" she raised an eyebrow. "Exactly how do you think you can do that?"

"Let me talk to these two men for you. See what's needed to settle this whole thing. I can't believe they actually want to get involved in the operation of White Eagle."

"And what would you want in return?" she asked him.

He grinned and reached out a hand, brushed his knuckles against her cheek. "Just a chance to show you how I feel about you."

She put her glass down and moved away from him. "Doesn't that put you in the same category as Shane?"

He shook his head. "No, because I don't want anything from you except...well...you. And whatever could happen between us."

Leah opened the fridge door and put the salad inside. Closing the door, she turned to Grant. "I think I'd like to hear what they have to say tonight, Grant. And then figure out what I want to do." She sighed. "Listen. I enjoy being friends with you. But I have to be honest. We just don't..." She spread her hands out helplessly.

"Click?" he finished for her. "Sizzle? Whatever you want to call it? If you gave me half a chance I could change that."

"It's not—"

She was interrupted by the opening and closing of the back door and the sounds of booted feet in the utility room. Then Shane strode into the kitchen, took her in his arms and kissed her with an intensity that Leah was sure was meant to send a clear message to Grant.

Releasing her, he turned and held out his hand to the other man. "I'm sure you didn't mind my paying attention to the woman in my life first, did you, Fallon?"



Grant took his hand with barely concealed irritation, then forced a smile. "Not at all. If she were mine I'd do the same thing."

Shane wrapped his arm possessively around Leah's shoulders. "Just so we're clear, she's *not* yours. Okay?"

"Got the message."

"If you two will stop throwing off testosterone clouds," Leah told them, sliding away from Shane, "I need to finish getting dinner ready. I want to be ready when everyone gets here."

But even though everything for the meal was set, Leah didn't think she was. She'd dressed meticulously in black linen slacks and a light blue silk blouse, and brushed her hair until it shone, fastening the diamond studs that had been her mother's in her ears. A glance in the mirror had told her she looked good on the outside, even if she was quivering on the inside. She had no idea how the evening would go, or how it would end. Once again she cursed Joe Morgan for putting her in this situation.

Her grandfather had barely arrived when the front doorbell rang. Nervously she glanced at Shane.

"I'll get it," he told her.

"No, I'd better do it."

The last thing she expected to see when she opened the door was Dash and Mac standing on the porch together.

"Did you just happen to arrive at the same time?" she asked.

"No, we came together," Mac answered in an even tone.

"Oh." *And what does that mean?* "So you what, just decided to ride together?"

The two men looked at each other.

"We've been talking," Dash said. "Can we come in, or is the invitation off because we came in the same car?"

Leah felt heat crawl up her face. She stood back and pulled the door wide. "Forgive my manners. Please come in. Everyone's in the kitchen. We're eating in there." When neither of them said a word, she added, "The dining room has hardly ever been used. Besides, I thought this would be a little more informal. And comfortable."

*Yeah, right. Comfortable. Like that's even going to happen.*

"That's fine," Mac said. "I don't think the room matters."

Leah wondered what he meant by that as she led them down the hallway.

Shane and Grant were at opposite ends of the kitchen, like two dogs squaring off, and her grandfather was standing at the sink, like a stalwart mediator. When Mac and Dash stopped just inside the room, Ken came forward, unsmiling but obviously trying to take the edge off things.

"Excuse my granddaughter's manners, but she welcomes you to her home."

Both men appeared to hesitate, then in turn each reached out and shook hands with the older man.

Ken nodded at the other two men. "These two junkyard dogs are Dr. Shane Duffy, our local vet, and Grant Fallon, with Lone Star Explorations."

Mac frowned. "What kind of business would you have with White Eagle?"

"Yeah," Dash put in. "I'd like to know that too."

Grant's smile was obviously meant to disarm. "Just doing some checking on things for my company. I thought I might explain it over dinner."

"Good," Mac told him. "I'd like to hear what you have to say." He looked at Shane. "I know who you are, but I can't figure out why you're having dinner with us. This is personal business."

Leah felt a familiar knot twisting in her stomach. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

Shane moved to stand beside Leah, his arm enclosing her in the same possessive movement he'd used with Grant. Mac's eyes narrowed, and before Shane could speak,

he said, "So that's how it is. Leah, did you really think you needed extra support tonight? Is there something I'm missing?"

For a brief moment Leah remembered Grant's words about Shane having his eye on the ranch, but she forced them away. This was just Shane giving her the security of his silent presence.

She lifted her chin. "Shane and I are very close," she said with a touch of defiance. "I asked him to be here."

Mac and Dash studied both of them for a moment, but neither of them made any further comment.

Leah slipped out of Shane's hold. "Why doesn't everyone sit down so I can serve dinner while it's still hot. Grant, would you pour everyone some of the wine you brought?"

Again Mac and Dash looked at Grant with suspicion, but they took their seats. Both sat ramrod stiff, watching everything carefully.

Leah was so nervous she nearly dropped the food, but eventually she got everything on the table. She'd decided on familiar Tex-Mex recipes that the cook they used to have had taught her. She placed a huge serving platter of enchiladas in the center of the table, along with bowls of rice and refried beans and the salad she'd tossed. The last thing was a covered terra cotta dish with warm tortillas.

"Mac, would you help yourself and pass the platter, please?" she asked, taking her seat. "I took a chance on the menu, so I hope it's all right."

"Fine," Mac said in a clipped tone, and lifted the heavy platter.

The next few minutes were taken up with people serving themselves, followed by a heavy silence while they ate. Leah had asked Shane to play it low key tonight and let her take the lead. Just be backup for her if she needed it. Now she desperately wanted to start the conversation, but once when she thought to open her mouth, Ken caught her eye and shook his head almost imperceptibly.

*Let them eat and settle their minds*, he seemed to be saying. *Find a comfort zone.*

So, difficult as it was, Leah concentrated on her food, even as Shane and Grant tried to stop glaring at each other and Mac and Dash focused only on their plates. The atmosphere around the table was so charged she expected an electrical storm to erupt at any moment. But at last the meal was finished, she cleared the plates and poured coffee for everyone.

Sitting back down in her chair with her own filled mug, she wet her lips and looked around the table.

"I guess it's up to me to start the conversation," she said, eyeing each person in turn. "So I'll just jump right in. Mac, Dash, you said you've spent some time talking to each other."

"Is that a problem for you?" Mac asked. Even as reticent as he was, he seemed to be the spokesman for the two of them.

"No, of course not." She took a sip of wine to settle herself. "I'm glad, as a matter of fact. And I hope the three of us can talk about what's happening."

"Maybe you should tell us what *you* want," Dash said, speaking for the first time.

Leah was aware of everyone at the table watching her. "All right. As you can imagine, all of this has come as a big surprise to me."

"No more than to us." Mac almost spat the words. "I guess none of us, you included, can figure out what Joe Morgan had in mind. He certainly wanted nothing to do with either Dash or me all these years."

Shane opened his mouth to make a comment, but Leah held a hand out to stop him. She looked first at Mac, then at Dash. "I think the bigger question is, now that each of you owns one third of this ranch, what is it you want?"

The two men looked at each other. "I don't think we can answer that yet. What we don't want is to disrupt the operation when we know nothing about it."

"We'd like to find out more about it," Dash put in.

Leah held her wineglass so tightly she was afraid it would shatter. "And exactly what does that mean?"

"We talked with Amos," Mac said. "He told us there's a line shack just past the north pasture that no one uses anymore. Dash thought he'd like to stay there for a while."

"I'm not much for social interaction," the other man put in. "I like being alone."

*Not if you're running a ranch.*

"It's very primitive," Leah told him. "It's got water and electricity but that's about all. I don't even know what condition it's in. There's certainly no telephone. And cell service out here is very spotty."

"I have a satellite phone and a card for my computer," he told her. "And I don't need much in the way of modern conveniences. The solitude makes up for it. And I can get a feel for what goes on around here without getting in your way."

Leah wished she had the courage to ask him what his real story was, but she was in no position yet to pry. "All right. If that's what you want I'm certainly in no position to argue with you. But there's one restriction."

She could see the resentment and suspicion in Dash's eyes. "I'm not sure you're in a position to dictate 'restrictions'. But if you'd like to give me particular information, I'll listen."

Leah clenched her fists to control her rising temper and wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "There's a cabin in the hills just beyond the line shack. My cousin, Carmen Whitefeather, lives there. Stay away from that place."

A muscle jumped in Dash's cheek. "Why? Will she shoot me? No offense, but I can't imagine someone less welcoming than you."

Leah gave a short laugh. "You would if you met her. She's legally blind, although she has an incredible way with animals. Her only companion is a mixed-breed wolf-dog, and if she doesn't kill you, he just might."

Dash stared at her for a long second, as if trying to read beyond her words. Then he nodded his head. Once. "Fine. Exception – not restriction – duly noted."

Leah let out the breath she didn't even know she was holding. She was fiercely protective of her cousin, who despite being blind drew beautiful illustrations for children's books. She always told Leah she "saw" them in her head.

"Leah." Mac took a swallow of coffee and set his cup down. "Despite how it looks and how it's shaking down, we're trying not to make this any harder than it already is. But we need some time to absorb it all, to find what's going to be comfortable for all of us." His mouth twisted for a moment. "After all, it's not like good old Joe Morgan acknowledged us or made us welcome all these years."

Leah gritted her teeth and clenched her fists under the table. "I can certainly understand that. And if Dash wants to hide out in the line shack and spy on us, what is it you want, Mac?"

"I'm not spying," Dash broke in. "I just want to be left alone to think and see what goes on here, and that seems a lot better place than the local hotel."

Ken put his hand over Leah's. "My granddaughter did not mean to insult you. Like you, she's still trying to absorb the shock of the will and she has no idea what it is you want."

"Fair enough," Mac said. "I have to tell you that both Dash and I have a lot of unresolved anger where Joe Morgan is concerned. We don't, however, want to take it out on Leah. We're just asking for a little breathing room here."

"You still didn't give Leah an answer, Mac," Shane broke in. "What are *you* looking for?"

Mac looked across the table at Grant. "For one thing, I'd like to find out more about what a geologist wants with a cattle ranch. Dash and I may decide it's to everyone's advantage to sell our shares to you, Leah. But we want to know the value of what we're selling."

Grant returned his hard look. "My company is surveying a great deal of land in this and other areas to see what minerals the ground still holds and if they're worth mining."

"And have you found any?"

"I haven't turned in my final report yet. I'm hoping there won't be a problem with my continuing to search here. Are you saying there will?"

Mac looked at Leah. "And I'll say it again. I find it strange that you'd have someone who's an outsider like this at a private dinner."

Grant started to rise from his chair. "Wait a minute, here."

Shane reached out a hand and placed it on his arm. "Hold it, Grant." Grant glared at him, but Shane looked directly at Leah. "I've been thinking the same thing myself. Whatever you, Mac and Dash decide doesn't require any input from Fallon here."

"*You* all wait a minute," Leah said, her temper flaring. "I decide who sits at this table. This is still *my* house. Until someone throws me out of it."

The men all simmered on the edge of an eruption and Leah herself was as close to an explosion as she could get. The dinner she had spent so much time on sat like a hard ball of concrete in her stomach.

"Enough." Ken slapped his hand on the tabletop, the sound like a crack of thunder. "We're getting nowhere here. Mac, did you want to stay on the ranch also?"

He shook his head. "I'm comfortable where I am. But I've spent a lot of time working ranches and I'd like to spend some time seeing how this one operates."

"That's not unreasonable," Ken said, forestalling Leah's angry retort. "As long as you don't have any ulterior motives."

Dash and Mac looked at each other, then at Leah. "We agreed we don't want to make things difficult for you. But you can't expect us to tell you what we want to do until we know what we're doing it with."

"He's right, granddaughter," Ken told her. "Let Dash move into the cabin. Let Mac come out here so you can show him the ranch operation. In a few days we'll have something to talk about."

Shane, who had been unusually silent through the exchange, cleared his throat. "I just want everyone to know I'll be looking out for Leah's interest, along with her grandfather."

Mac and Dash studied him carefully and exchanged a look.

Then Mac dipped his head once. "Fine. Point taken. And we're happy to see that." He shifted his gaze to Leah. "We didn't come here tonight to cause trouble. It's as hard for us as it is for you. In some ways, maybe harder. Let's take this one step at a time and see where it goes, okay?"

She felt Ken's hand this time on her arm, sending her a silent signal. She swallowed the words on the tip of her tongue. "All right. That sounds good."

"And what about my research?" Grant asked.

Dash was the one who answered. "If it's all the same to you, we'd like to take a look at exactly what you're doing and what you've found so far before we make any commitment."

Grant made it very plain that wasn't all right but he also didn't have any choice. "Fine." He pulled out his wallet and extracted two business cards, giving one to each man. "My cell number's on there. Call me and let me know where and when you want to meet."

Then Mac said something Leah didn't expect at all. "I think we'll let Leah set up the meeting. She has an equal interest in this and as much say as we do."

Stunned, Leah nodded. "Let's all check our calendars. Grant, you see what your schedule is and I'll call everyone tomorrow. See what time y'all are free." She looked at her two half brothers—the word still sounded foreign to her. "I...don't know what to say..."



"We discussed this," Mac told her, "and neither one of us wants to cause problems if we can help it. I think we need to find a way to work with the conditions of the will without upsetting anyone's apple cart." He sighed. "It really is a mess, Leah, but it's not your fault and we need to sort it out."

"I agree." The knot of tension began to ease slightly. So it might not be all-out war after all. "Thank you."

Grant made a valiant effort to hang back after Mac and Dash left, but Ken eased him out the door, giving him no chance to say or do anything more.

"I'll call you tomorrow, granddaughter," he told Leah as he maneuvered Grant down the front steps.

Leah closed the door, locked it and leaned against it, suddenly limp as all the pent-up energy drained from her. She looked up at Shane standing so close to her.

"Thank you," she told him.

He cocked an eyebrow. "For what? I didn't do anything?"

"And that's the good part. You let me take the lead. But you were there for me, and without making a huge fuss you let the others know that."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head. "Mac and Dash seemed to take it pretty well. I'm not sure I can say the same for Grant. And I have to agree with those two. I'm not sure it was appropriate for him to be included in this dinner."

Leah sighed. "Let's don't go into that, okay? Maybe you're right, but he does have a vested interest."

Shane stepped back slightly and looked down into her face. "And maybe in more than the ranch."

Her temper flared. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Darlin', it's no secret he's got the hots for you. But I wonder if the ranch itself isn't his primary target."

*What would you think if you knew he said the same thing about you? And could he possibly be right?*

She moved neatly out of his embrace. "So you're saying...what? That the only reason a man could find me desirable is because of the property I come with?"

Shane gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him again. "You know that's not true. Not one bit. I just don't trust him, that's all. Something's off about him."

"And what about you, Shane? What are you after? The girl or the ranch?"

He dropped his hands. "I can't believe you even said that." He walked to the kitchen with a measured tread. "I think it's time for me to leave."

Impulsively she ran after him. "Shane, wait. I didn't mean it. I didn't..."

He whirled around. "But you must be thinking it for the words to come out of your mouth. What is it, Leah? Don't you know how I feel?" He waved his hand around the room. "Anyone would be proud to own White Eagle. But that's not why I took you into my bed."

"No?" she spat at him. "Then what's the reason? I'd like to know."

"This." He pulled her up against his body and took her mouth in a claiming kiss that sent heat all the way to her toes.

Her nipples beaded, her breasts ached and her pussy throbbed as her juices soaked the crotch of her panties. It was always like this with him. One touch and she was on fire, aflame with a sexual need so strong it was beyond controlling. How had this happened? She had always been so proud of being the one in control. Shane had knocked down her defenses as if they were paper.

Was Grant right? Did Shane plan to seduce her into sharing the ranch? Make her need him so badly that there was no turning back?

Then her brain shut down as Shane swept her into his arms and carried her to her bedroom, his lips never leaving hers. His tongue painted the inside of her mouth, the

underside of her lips, her teeth, every place he could touch. And when he'd licked every inner surface he sucked her small tongue into his own mouth and nibbled on it.

By the time they were inside her room and he set her down she was already tearing at her clothes, pulling them off helter-skelter. Naked. She wanted to be naked with him. God, he was worse than a drug with her. There didn't seem to be any cure no matter how often, or how many times, or how many ways he fucked her brains out.

She tore at his shirt, buttons popping as she yanked it from his body. Her small fingers fumbled with the snap on his jeans and tugged the zipper down. Reaching into the opening, she wrapped her fingers around his cock, already hard and thick with desire.

"Wait a minute," Shane gasped. "Give me just a minute here."

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," she urged. The tensions of the evening and of the situation hanging over her head were acting like an aphrodisiac. Despite what she'd said to him, what she wanted most right now was Shane inside her. Touching her. Fucking her. Making her come.

Shane skinned his jeans and boxers down his legs and kicked them off along with his boots. In seconds he was as naked as Leah and tumbled with her onto the bed.

Although the drapes were open, the only light in the room came from the slivers of moonlight peeking through the clouds. They tinted everything with a silvery cast, almost magical.

"Magic," Leah whispered. "I need your magic, Shane."

"*You're* the magic." His voice was thick with need, his skin hot to the touch.

His hand drifted down past her breasts to her stomach, skimming the surface with a tantalizing touch. Leah twisted her fingers in the thick mat of hair on his chest, its tips frosted by the moonlight. She found his flat nipples and pinched them as he did to hers, rewarded by a gasp. Dragging her fingernails over the pebbled surface, she drew a moan from him that sent a sense of power racing through her.

When his hand drifted down between her thighs she widened them to give him greater access. His hand was as hot as the rest of his body, his fingers like torches igniting every nerve in her skin. As they brushed over the nest of her pubic curls he murmured in her ear, "This weekend, darlin'. That's when I'm going to shave this little pussy so smooth it'll be more naked than the day you were born. Then I'm going to nibble every inch of it, inside and out, until you beg for mercy."

"I'm already begging. Please. Let me feel you inside me. Make everything else go away except us."

He plunged two fingers inside her hungry pussy, her juices coating them as he slid them out in a steady rhythm. His thumb found her clit and set up a circular motion, drawing little gasps and moans from her as she writhed beneath him. She rode his hand, the rasping of her clit driving her higher and higher.

Shane bent his head and pulled a nipple into his mouth, scraping it lightly with his teeth. Leah thrust up at him, arching against his mouth, her fingers now clawing at his back and undecipherable little noises rolled from her mouth. The walls of her pussy sucked at his fingers but they weren't enough. She wanted more. Much more. Enough to make everything else go away.

Gathering herself, she pushed Shane back onto the mattress. Clamping her thighs together to trap fingers inside her while she shifted and twisted and bent down to take his swollen cock in her mouth.

He jerked at her touch. "Jesus, Leah. Careful, darlin'. I'm close enough I might go off in your mouth."

Ignoring him, she just bobbed her head, taking the heavy stalk deep into her throat, licking its length with her tongue, then drawing back to probe the slit at the swollen purple head. Then she slid her lips to the root again, grasping the base with a free hand and squeezing it in rhythm with her lips.

"Stop!" Shane gasped, yanking her head up and pushing her flat on the mattress. "Don't move."

In seconds he was off the bed and fishing a foil packet from his jeans. His hands shook as he rolled the thin latex over his swollen penis. Then he was back between her legs, lifting them over his shoulders, opening her pussy to his hungry eyes and ravenous cock.

"You want it quick," he rasped, "you'll get it quick. And hard. And fast."

"Yes, yes, yes." She tossed her head back and forth. "Inside me. Now. Hurry, hurry, hurry. Take me over the edge. Make me fly, Shane. Make me fly."

*Make it all go away. Take me someplace where I can't even think about what's happening. Where the memory of Joe Morgan and his twisted legacy doesn't exist.*

"Okay, darlin'. Here it comes." Holding himself with one hand, he positioned himself at her opening and with one swift plunge was seated in her to the hilt.

Leah locked her ankles behind his neck and pushed herself harder onto the impaling rod. "Fuck me," she cried. "Do it, Shane. Fuck me like there's no tomorrow."

"Leah. What's... Oh sweet Jesus, darlin', you are so fucking tight and wet. Shit, shit, shit."

He set up a hard and steady rhythm, his balls slapping her ass as he drove into her again and again, his hands gripping her flesh, holding her in position. Her liquid drenched him, her inner walls clamped onto him, and a low keening sound built in her throat. The coil of need unwound, snapping through her like a whip.

The orgasm crashed through her almost without warning, her entire body shaking and shuddering. The spasms in her pussy drove Shane over the edge and she could feel the pulsing of his semen into the latex reservoir. She rode him like a wild woman, pushing herself harder and harder onto the hot thickness of his cock, mindless in her need, whirling through a place of blackness where all she was aware of was the heat coursing through her body and the convulsive movements of her muscles.

Shane lowered her legs and collapsed on top of her, being careful not to let his full weight rest on top of her. Their bodies were both slick with sweat and their breathing

loud and labored. Leah's heart was banging against her ribs hard enough she thought they would crack.

Sometime long after she came down to earth, Shane rolled off the bed and went to dispose of the condom. When he came back, he turned on the lamp beside the bed, stretched out beside Leah and cradled her against him. His lips trailed light kisses across her forehead and cheeks before tilting her face up so she was forced to look at him.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?"

She frowned. "You've certainly had your share of hard and fast quickies, when you need it right now, right then. Why can't I want the same thing?"

"Because it isn't you. When I do, it always feel as if I've cheated you. Short-changed you because I had a need for you so great I couldn't slow down. This was different. I hate to say it, but I got the feeling I could have been anyone."

Leah pushed him away and sat up. "Don't ever speak to me like that. I should smack your face." She turned to swing her legs over the side of the bed but Shane grabbed her and pulled her back.

"Okay, okay. So that was a little harsh. I know you better than that. A lot better. But I still say this wasn't like you."

She dropped back down on the pillows and covered her eyes with her forearm. No, it wasn't like her at all.

"I'm spooked, Shane. Really, really spooked by this whole thing. I don't know what Joe was thinking of. I don't know what those two men really want. I don't know what's going to happen with the ranch." She let out a shuddering breath and rolled toward him, burying her head on his shoulder. "I'm scared, Shane."

He twisted his head to look at her. "You? I didn't think you were afraid of anything." His mouth curved in a grin. "Where's all that fearless Comanche go-to-hell attitude? I've seen you get in the corral with a horse spawned by the devil and bring him out as tame as a puppy. Nothing scares you."

"This does, because it's something I can't control. I feel..." She blew out a breath. "I feel as if my world is spinning and it's throwing me off."

Shane pulled her tight against him, yanking the covers up over them. "We're going to take care of it, darlin'. I was surprised myself that Mac and Dash seemed, shall we say, nonconfrontational. Might want to try to work things out. I'd say they're as much at sea as you are."

"Shane?" She rested her cheek against his chest.

"Yeah, darlin'?"

"If I asked you..." She let her voice trail off.

"Asked me what, Leah? Whatever it is, I'll tell you."

*Asked you how you really feel about me. What we're really doing. What you really want. But maybe right now I don't want to know. I just want to lean on you.*

"Nothing." She nestled against him. "Nothing at all." She yawned, and it wasn't all forced. She was truly exhausted, emotionally and physically. "Let's go to sleep."

But when she closed her eyes it was to dream about eagles being chased by a vulture.

## **Chapter Seven**

Leah didn't want to have the discussion—if that was what you could call it—with Grant at the ranch. For one thing she got the feeling he was getting too proprietary about both White Eagle and her, no matter what she'd said to him.

"It needs to be someplace neutral," she told Shane in the morning as she poured coffee for both of them.

"You're right," he agreed. "You know how I feel about that yoyo anyway."

"I think you just don't like him for reasons that have nothing to do with mineral exploration." She kissed the top of his head before sitting down across from him. "And I don't want to take this back to Amos' office. The more I can keep the legal wrangling out of this, the better off we'll all be. And since Dash and Mac were gracious enough to leave it in my hands, I want them to be comfortable too."

"Call and ask them if they have a preference," he told her. "You have their numbers, right?"

She nodded. "Dash is moving into the line shack. God knows how he'll exist out there. He gave me the number of his satellite phone, but I think I'll call Mac and let him take the lead. At least I have a history with him, however weak and shaky it might be."

When she reached him, Mac agreed with her idea of taking it off the ranch and suggested they meet at his bar.

"I don't open until noon, so we'll have the place to ourselves," he pointed out. "I'll put on a pot of coffee. Be sure to tell Fallon to bring all his paperwork with him. Maps, surveys, geological studies. Whatever he's got."

"I will." Leah tugged at her bottom lip with her teeth. "I have to ask you. Is there a specific reason you don't trust him? I felt it from the minute you met him."



A chuckle drifted across the connection, but there was no humor in it. "Just my gut, Leah, which I trust more than anything else. We'll see if I'm right or wrong. Would you like me to call Dash about this?"

"If you don't mind." She paused. "Just to let you know, Dr. Duffy will be with me also. Do you have issues with him too?"

Mac hesitated just a little too long for her liking, but his answer was straightforward. "He hasn't registered yet on my bullshit meter, so for now let's say I'm neutral. If it makes you feel better, bring him along."

"Thank you. What time?"

"How about ten o'clock? Can you get Fallon here by then?"

"I'll do it," she assured him.

As soon as she disconnected the call she punched in Grant's number.

"He wants to meet at the *bar*?" Grant's tone was a mixture of shock and irritation. "Isn't that a little odd?"

"It's a place where he feels comfortable, and right now that's important. To me."

"Damn it, Leah." His voice was tight with exasperation. "Are you letting these idiots call all the shots? What's wrong with you? Your father and I signed an agreement and you assured me you'd honor it."

"I don't see the big deal," she told him. "And there's nothing wrong with me. It's all pretty straightforward. I don't see anything wrong with Dash and Mac wanting to get a look at what you're doing. As you know, I'm not the only one making the decisions now. They have equal say in things." She hesitated. "Unless there's something you don't want them – or me – to know about."

She could almost imagine Grant visibly pulling himself together, lowering the tone of his voice, a cajoling look stealing over his face. She'd seen it so many times whenever she'd given him a hard time about something.

"Now, honey, you know that's not true. It's just dull, boring stuff, but if they want to see it, fine by me. Whatever you want, sugar."

*Sugar!*

Lord, it grated on her when he called her that.

"Fine. Thank you. Ten o'clock at Mac's place." She hung up before he could drag her into any further conversation, leaned back in her chair and ran her hands through her long hair.

"Grant being his usual asshole self about things?" Shane asked.

"I wish you wouldn't call him that," she objected. "He's basically a nice guy."

Shane just shook his head and refilled Leah's coffee mug. "So, did we slay all the demons last night, darlin'?"

Last night. She'd wanted to fall asleep but when the dream had gripped her she'd woken Shane and practically attacked him, determined to blot everything out except the erotic coupling of their bodies. This morning her body was sore in places she didn't think could even feel anything.

"I don't know if I should apologize to you or thank you," she told him.

"I think I'd rather have the thank you." He looked at his watch.

"Shane, if you have appointments you need to keep..."

"I'm fine. Nothing urgent and I can put everything else off until this afternoon. But I do want to stop by the clinic first and check on things there. Can you be ready to leave in ten?"

"I can be good to go in five. Just let me brush my hair and get my purse."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Okay, let me get this straight."

Dash Hyde, who had said very little during Grant's presentation, smoothed the largest map in front of him on the big table in Mac's bar. He moved his finger over the lines Grant had drawn with colored pens, looking at each one carefully.

"This may be kind of complex," Grant put in, "seeing as how you're not from around here and all. These lines crisscross through a lot of different ranchland."

"But *I'm* from 'around here'," Mac said, a touch of sarcasm in his tone. "It looks to me like you don't have a real plan. That you're doing this kind of hit or miss."

"On the contrary. I'm using White Eagle as the center of my activities because core samples have shown that land to be the most likely to have effectively retrievable minerals."

"Effectively retrievable minerals," Mac repeated in his slow drawl. "Can you tell me just exactly what that means?"

"I'd say it means there's a lot of money on the land if we give you the right to explore," Dash broke in, in his uninflected voice. "Am I correct?"

Grant pulled out copies of a single-page report and handed them around to everyone at the table. "You're correct that it's possible. But the degree to which they're present is yet to be determined. That's why I'm being so careful in my studies."

"Seems to me," Mac said, studying the sheet of paper, "your company's spending a lot of money for possibly no return. Doesn't seem like good business to me."

Leah saw Grant's face tighten with frustration and his hands clench into fists as he held one of the maps. Not good, she thought. She didn't need to start off this whole ranch "partnership" with a big fight.

"Grant only has the right to explore," she quickly pointed out. "That's all my – our father would agree to. If his company wants to actually extract from the land, we have to negotiate new contracts." She shifted her gaze to Grant. "Am I getting that right?"

A tiny smile curved the otherwise rigid set of his mouth. "Right as rain, sugar."

*Sugar!*

Damn it, she'd have to talk to him about that. Beside her she could feel Shane's body tense. She cleared her throat, aware that she was about to say something that would irritate Grant but hopefully smooth out the wrinkles with Mac and Dash.

"Grant, maybe it would help if you could give us a brief overview of what minerals you're looking for and the probability, statistically, of finding them in an amount worth mining."

Grant stared at her as if she'd just grown two heads. "You're kidding, right?"

In his seat next to Leah, Shane shifted slightly, leaning forward on his forearms. "I think that sounds like a pretty reasonable request." He looked at Mac and Dash. "What about you guys?"

The half brothers looked at each other and nodded.

"I was surprised not to see something like that here with the maps," Dash said in his flat voice. Then he said something that stunned Leah. "Mac and I have talked. We aren't sure yet exactly what our roles will be as far as White Eagle. We may even want to talk to Leah about buying us out."

"What?" The word rolled out before she could think. "But that's... I mean... Don't you..."

"It's just something we discussed," Mac explained. "We have to see what's to everyone's best advantage. And that would include an estimate of the real value of the property, including mineral rights."

She couldn't wrap her mind around the possibility. Make her the sole owner? Could she get the cash if that's what they wanted? "I-I don't know what to say."

"Nothing yet," Shane interjected. "Let's wait until everything's on the table and we can all make an informed decision."

*We? Was he already adopting a proprietary interest in White Eagle?*

*No! She would not let Grant's words erode the relationship.*

Silence dropped over the group while everyone waited for Grant to say something. Finally he slapped his hand on the table and stood up, rolling up his maps.

"Fine. If that's what you want, I'll get something ready."

Mac reached out and put his hand on Grant's forearm, restraining him. "Before you leave, I'd like to make copies of these maps on my machine in the back."

"You want copies of the maps?"

Dash rose from his chair, the cop in him blatantly obvious even in his injured condition. "Surely you can't have a problem with that, Mr. Fallon. These maps do cover our property, after all."

"Fine, fine, fine." Grant snapped off the rubber bands. "But I'll come with you, if you don't mind." He gave Mac a nasty smile. "I'd hate for anything to happen to them, wouldn't you?"

Leah sat stiffly, beyond making conversation, while Mac and Grant headed to the back where the bar office was. Something strange was happening here and she couldn't begin to figure out what. Joe Morgan was nobody's pushover. He'd questioned Grant at great length about the how and why of his project before signing the agreement to let him search. If anything had smelled wrong, Joe would have found it. Wouldn't he?

She jerked, startled out of her reverie, when Dash reached over and touched her arm.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." He looked at Shane and back to Leah. "I know this is as difficult for you as it is for us. I don't imagine Joe Morgan was an easy man to live with."

"That's the damn truth," Shane spat out. "And Leah, don't you contradict me. He may have been your father but he was a real hardass. If Ken Nightwalker hadn't threatened to call down every curse on his head, your mother wouldn't have fared any better than Mac's or Dash's. And now he's screwed you over with the only thing you really wanted." He looked at Dash. "I'm sorry, but someone had to say it."

Dash nodded. "I understand. Mac and I talked a little about it. We're still trying to figure out how to fit into this picture. If you could maybe try to see things from our point of view..."

"You think she doesn't?" Shane leaned farther across the table.

Leah pushed him back in his seat. "Enough. Shane, I can answer questions for myself." She turned to Dash. "It *is* hard for me to understand why my...why Joe did what he did, but I imagine being thrown into it isn't very pleasant for you or Mac. I'm hoping—"

"That we can find a way to work things out?" Dash nodded. "Us too. We don't know what that is yet, but I do think on this geology thing we need to present a united front."

"If you think Grant's yanking her chain," Shane said, ignoring Leah's protests again, "you need to speak up."

"I don't know yet. It's just my cop's nose smelling something. But being out at the line shack will give me a good chance to look around at things, see what I can get a feel for." His lips curved in a half-smile. "I've still got some friends I can call too."

"Listen, Dash," Leah said. "I cook dinner every night—"

He held up his hand. "Let's leave it at that for now. Socializing isn't my thing anymore. Let's keep whatever we do to conversations about this business and the ranch. One dinner's my limit for the month. Okay?"

She forced herself to smile back. "Of course. Whatever you want." What had happened to this man to create such bitterness, such a lost look in his eyes? "And I'll appreciate any information you can find out."

At that moment Mac and Grant walked back into the room.

"I'll get that report together," Grant said in a stiff voice. He leaned down and kissed Leah's cheek. "I may stop by the ranch later, sugar." Then he straightened up and looked around. "Gentlemen. I'll be seeing you shortly."

Leah noticed he deliberately ignored Shane.

For a long moment no one said anything. Then Shane rose from his chair.

"I guess we'll be going. Leah, I have some patients to see after I take you back to the ranch."

"I'm going back that way," Dash interjected. "I can drop her off."

Everyone stared at him.

He shrugged. "It's just a damn ride."

Leah finally found her voice. "Thank you. I'd appreciate it. Shane, call me when you're finished for the day."

"Leah, I don't..." he began.

"It's all right." She brushed her mouth against his. "Really. This is good. I'll see you later."

\* \* \* \* \*

The man had pulled his truck off the road into a dirt path shielded by trees and pulled out his cell phone.

"I'm telling you this is getting complicated. More than I bargained for."

"Then you'll have to adjust," the voice at the other end told him. "It's too late for me to try to send someone else in. You're already an accepted part of the community. The ranchers know you."

The man snorted. "That may not mean squat. These new players are nosy and they have nothing to lose."

"Then it's up to you to make sure they don't find anything."

"Yeah right."

"Just do it. You know I don't believe in excuses."

"The girl is the real roadblock. I think the two guys are half ready to sell out to her. I can make sure they get something they'll be happy with and everyone moves on."

"And the girl? Does she move on too?"

"I can't manipulate this the way I want to. She may not want to pursue anything happening on the ranch except for what she's got going on now. No matter what."

"If the woman isn't squarely in your camp, if you think she'll throw up roadblocks like the others, get rid of her."

The man was shocked into silence for a moment. "Kill her?"

"She's the key to the ranch. Get rid of her and the other two can be bought off."

The connection was broken and the man sat in his truck, staring at the phone.

*Well, shit.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Leah was measuring the special blend she fed the horses. She usually worked with one of her hands to fill each animal's bucket but today she wanted the solitude and needed the extra labor to work off nervous energy. She always fed them late in the afternoon, letting them graze on hay and grass during the day. Today she was grateful for the chore, something physical that allowed her to work off some of the pent-up energy simmering inside her.

Dash had been politely quiet, not surly, on the ride to the ranch. She asked him if he was settled in at the line shack and if he needed anything. He replied he was fine, and that was it until they pulled into the parking area next to the ranch house.

"I'm going to get this whole business checked out," he told her. "It's to your advantage as well as ours."

How could she argue with that? "Thank you. I appreciate that."

"Like I said, Leah. We're not the enemy. If anyone deserves that title it's that bastard Joe Morgan."

Leah started to say something, then thought better of it and closed the door to the cab. She was beginning to think she couldn't figure out either Dash or Mac.



And what was up with Grant? He had a solid agreement Joe had signed. If he wanted to move along he needed to curry favor with her half brothers—now there was a word she had trouble getting used to—not antagonize them.

And Shane. He'd sat at the table leaking testosterone.

She was beginning to be sorry she had anything to do with this. Maybe she should just cut some kind of deal with Dash and Mac, take her horses and start over somewhere else. But the thought of leaving White Eagle Ranch made her stomach knot. She'd be walking away from her heritage.

"I can think of a better way to work off that nervous energy." A warm, smooth voice rolled over her.

Leah stood up abruptly, banging her head on a bucket hanging on a nail. "Ouch." She rubbed the sore place. "Shane, you have to stop creeping up on me like this."

He took the scoop from her hand, dropped it into the grain storage bin and pulled her into his arms. "But then I get to kiss it and make it all better," he teased, and proceeded to do just that.

Leah wound her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him. One touch and any irritation with him she felt melted away. Just like that. His tongue licked and tasted, feasting on her mouth as the fingers of one hand wound through her hair and the other hand rubbed the length of her spine. She felt her worry and anxiety fall away as the heat of desire washed over her. They broke only to pull air into their lungs.

"So," she said breathlessly. "Did you get everything taken care of that you needed to?"

"Much as I can. Some patients need return visits." He kissed the tip of her nose, then trailed his mouth down her cheek. "I was hoping I could talk you into taking a shower with me."

She was about to answer when another voice broke into the mood.

“Hey! I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” Grant Fallon’s laugh echoed through the barn. “Actually, that’s not true. I’d be happy to be an interruption.”

Leah stepped away from Shane, smoothing a few stray hairs back from her face and rearranging her blouse as Grant strode toward them.

“Grant.” She pasted a smile on her face. “Hey. I guess I forgot you said you might stop by.”

He shrugged. “I took care of some business and thought I’d stop by. See if maybe you had a chance to talk some sense into Dash Hyde when he drove you home.”

“Grant...” Leah shook her head. “Actually, I don’t see anything wrong with what they asked for. It will give us all some idea of what the land is actually worth so Amos can finish probating the estate.”

“What it’s worth?” he snorted. “If there’s nothing underneath it, it’s not worth a damned thing except for grazing.”

Shane pulled her back against him and looped his arms around her. “I think what they asked for is reasonable, Fallon. Now, if that’s all you came for, Leah has work to do and I need to help her.”

Grant glared at him. “Don’t think I’m unaware of how you’re feathering your nest, Duffy. I’m going to make sure she opens her eyes.”

“You do that. They’ll be looking straight at you and seeing you for what you are.”

Leah pushed herself away from Shane. “Grant, I think once you give us some idea of what we can expect from your exploration you’ll have a better chance of getting all three of us to agree to whatever you want.” She turned her head. “Shane, I’m going inside. Maybe you should jump into the horse trough to cool off.”

She stomped out of the barn and up to the house, slamming the back door behind her.

## Chapter Eight

The man was talking on his cell again.

"She'll be trouble all right. She's already got the Comanche anger simmering beneath the surface."

"Get rid of her and deal with the others. From what I understand, that should be no problem."

"I'll have to catch her when she's out riding," the man said. "She'll be alone up in the hills, no one around. I'll keep an eye out for the first opportunity."

"You don't think it will remind people of what happened to the old man? We can't afford unnecessary questions."

"No. There are poachers around here all the time, trying to take shots at the white-tail herd. Leah said it's an ongoing problem."

"Just make sure she doesn't see you," the voice at the other end reminded him.

"I know how to hide myself." The man's voice was heavy with irritation. "I just wish there was another way."

"Well, there isn't. And the investors aren't going to wait much longer. Call me when it's done."

Once again the man found himself holding a dead phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leah ran a glass of cold water and stood at the sink drinking it, hoping it would cool down her temper. She wasn't sure who she was angrier with—Grant for his refusal to stop injecting a personal note in their relationship or Shane for so obviously staking his claim. There'd been so much testosterone in the barn she'd been afraid the building

would explode. She wished Grant would just give them the report Mac and Dash had asked for and then they could move forward.

Although at the moment she wasn't sure where that would be.

Since that day in Amos' office she'd been a cauldron of boiling emotions. Having the foundation of her life practically shattered beneath her had left her feeling no longer in control, a situation she hated. She'd learned how to create a life for herself despite Joe Morgan and now it was all unraveling.

She was suddenly just as conflicted where Shane was concerned. Was Grant right? Did Shane only have his eye on White Eagle? Did he know more about the mineral exploration than he let on? Or was she letting Grant manipulate her to get Shane out of the picture?

Rinsing the glass and sticking it in the dishwasher, she stormed into her bedroom, tearing off her clothes as she went. Maybe a shower would cool her down and help her think straight.

She was standing directly under the wide showerhead, letting the water rain down on her like a waterfall, when the door to the shower slid open and a muscular male body stepped in behind her. Arms crept around her, hands cupped her breasts and a thick, hard erection pressed against the cleft of her buttocks.

She gasped at the contact. "S-Shane?"

"It better be," came the deep answer. "I'd hate to have to kill someone before the sun fully sets."

The arms tightened around her and suddenly all Leah wanted was to lose herself with this man, to let her body take over and her brain go on vacation. She pushed back against him and wiggled her hips.

"Careful," he murmured. "You're playing with fire."

"Good." She raised her hands and placed them under his where they cradled her breasts. "Light it up."

Before she had time to react, Shane had turned her around, knelt before her and lifted one leg over his shoulder.

"Don't move," he ordered, using his thumbs to spread the lips of her cunt and spearing it with his tongue.

Leah jolted at the electric contact, knowing her juices were mingling with the water from the shower and raining into Shane's mouth. He lapped at her steadily, holding her open for his assault then shifting to take her clit into his mouth. He nibbled at it with his teeth, pulled at it with his lips, flicked at it with his tongue until she shook with need. She wanted him inside her, but he seemed determined to tease her endlessly.

Every nerve in her body responded, fire racing beneath the surface of her skin, an icy fire whose flames thrust her onto a high plane of pleasure. Her fingers wrapped themselves in the wet strands of Shane's hair, anchoring her against the storm threatening to break.

He was relentless, tormenting her clit, stabbing his tongue into her needy vagina, rubbing the lips with his thumbs. Leah wondered how much longer she could stand this without the release her body was aching for.

And then it was there, erupting with one final stroke of his tongue, whipping through her body and stretching her on such a rack of pleasure she was sure she would break. She nearly collapsed when Shane lowered her leg, the orgasm still pulsing through her. She sensed him moving, then he was between her legs, his strong hands beneath her buttocks, lifting her. She felt the head of his penis at the opening of her cunt and with one roll of his hips he plunged deep inside her.

"Oh god," she screamed, the thickness of his cock igniting yet another orgasm before the last had even died away.

"Wrap your legs around me." His voice was hoarse, guttural. "Nice and tight."

Leah locked her ankles at the small of Shane's back and rocked with him as he thrust in and out of her. Her nails dug into his skin as her hands gripped his shoulders.

A low, animalistic wail echoed in the steamy enclosure and she was shocked to realize it came from her.

Shane moved in a steady rhythm, his head bent to take one nipple into his mouth. She tried to hurry him, begging, pleading, but he never varied his speed, pushing her from one plane to the next, one climax to the next. At last, when she was sure one more minute would kill her, she felt his big body tense, the muscles of his buttocks beneath her heels tighten, and then his cock pulsed inside her, spilling himself into the condom.

They were completely waterlogged by the time Shane lowered her legs and found the strength to turn off the shower.

"Nap time," he muttered.

"I have things to do," she protested weakly. "So do you."

"One hour," he told her. "Otherwise we won't be able to make it to the kitchen."

He managed to set the small alarm on her bedside table, then spooned himself around her as he dragged the covers over them both.

As she fell asleep, Leah tried to catch onto a thought that suddenly intruded into her brain, but her exhausted body simply fell into unconsciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leah came into the house late in the afternoon, hot and sweaty from working one of the horses, to find messages from both Dash and Mac on the answering machine asking if she'd heard back from Grant. The lack of a message from Grant irritated her and she was in no mood for his smooth bullshit. Stabbing the buttons on the telephone, she tried his apartment without success, finally reaching him on his cell phone.

"I'll have something first thing in the morning," he promised. "I was out of pocket all afternoon and couldn't get back to pull it together."

"Is there something you don't want us to find out?" she asked.

She knew she probably sounded like a shrew but at this point she didn't care. It might be only a few days since all this happened but she was tired of wondering what

was going to happen to her life. If all it took was this report to settle things with the two men who had turned out to be a large part of her heritage, then she wanted it done and finished.

Grant chuckled. "Don't you trust me, sugar?"

"Don't give me a reason not to," she snapped. "And don't call me sugar. Can I tell the men you'll have something in the morning?"

"Why don't we meet at the diner at noon? Lunch will be on me. I'll have something pretty drawn up for each of you."

"It doesn't have to be pretty, just accurate."

She slammed the phone down, nibbling one fingernail. Why was he drawing things out like this? For all the time he'd been spending exploring he should be able to whip something up from his computer in seconds.

"Did Dash get in touch with you again?" Mac asked when she reached him to tell him about lunch.

Leah frowned. "No, he didn't. I was outside most of the afternoon but the machine was on."

"I don't think he wanted to leave a message," Mac told her. "He has some information for you."

"What information?" she asked. There was a tone in Mac's voice that unsettled her.

"I don't want to tell you over the phone any more than Dash did. Call him on his sat phone. If you can't get hold of him, call me back."

Leah immediately punched in Dash's number, but when the phone rang ten times with no answer she slammed the receiver down. What was so bad she had to hear it in person?

She called Mac again to tell him no dice on Dash.

"Sorry," the sometime bartender told her. "Something came up and he left in a hurry. Don't have any idea what. I'm just the guy who fills in when he needs to take off for a while. Anything I can help you with?"

"No thanks. Just tell him I called."

She stood by the counter nibbling on her bottom lip. A glance at the clock told her it was after six. Shane had said he'd be back about seven after a late call, and he'd bring takeout. If she hurried she could take a ride out to the line shack. Maybe Dash was just outside and didn't happen to have his phone with him.

"I'm going to saddle Warbonnet and ride out to the line shack," she called to her foreman as she hurried into the barn.

Mick gave her his usual warning. "You watch that stallion, Leah. I don't know why you ride a piece of hell like that anyway."

Leah laughed. "I'm the only one who understands him."

She fastened the bridle in place and centered the saddle on the broad back. The high-spirited black horse pawed and snorted, anxious to be off.

"Just be careful. You got your radio with you?"

"Never leave home without it." She pointed to the instrument clipped to her belt. All the hands wore them. With spotty cell service it was the only way to communicate when anyone left the main ranch to go out into the pastures or ride fences. "I won't be gone long." She swung up into the saddle. "If Dr. Duffy should get here before I'm back, just tell him to make himself at home."

The foreman grinned. "And that would be different from his usual actions how?"

Leah made a face at him, nudged the stallion with her heels and edged away from the barn. Before long they eased from a gentle trot to a slow canter and finally a full-out gallop. Leah loved the feel of the wind against her face and the sense of being one with the horse. Warbonnet had been a gift from her grandfather, angering Joe, but girl and horse had bonded in the first instant so that was that. She leaned low across his neck,



whispering to him the Comanche words Ken had taught her, urging the big stallion to stretch it out even more. For a moment she thought she saw the sun reflecting off something in the distance, then it was gone.

The long legs ate up the ground effortlessly. Leah had just spotted the line shack when she heard a *crack!* and felt a sharp sting on her arm. Warbonnet pulled up short and reared to his hind legs. Just before she fell Leah thought she saw a black vulture circling above her. Then she was tumbling to the hard ground, her head landing on a sharp rock.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane stared at Mick. "Well, how long has she been gone? She knew I was coming out here."

The man shrugged. "It's been half an hour, maybe. She said for you to make yourself at home."

"How about calling her on the radio. Letting her know I'm here. Then I'll go on inside."

"Okay." He grinned. "Just tell her it was your idea. She thinks I'm too much of a mother hen."

"No problem."

Shane stood leaning against the corral fence while Mick called Leah, watching the horses that had been turned out for some end-of-the-day romping. He only half-listened to Mick's voice, letting the sun warm him and the soft breeze tickle his face. He almost didn't hear Mick call him.

"Shane? Damn it, man, are you in a trance?" Mick jabbed him in the arm. "Where's your head? Didn't you hear me call you?"

"Sorry." He shook himself. "Did you get her?"

"No, and that worries me. She always answers her radio."

"Maybe she's in a heated conversation with Dash and just doesn't want to be disturbed," Shane offered.

"Not possible. She knows the rules. I'm going out there and take a look."

"Let me try Dash's sat phone first." Shane pulled his cell out of his pocket and punched in the numbers Leah had given him. But all he got was empty ringing.

"Something's wrong. I know it." Mick headed into the barn. "I'm going."

"Wait." Shane hurried after him. "I'm coming too."

They were less than half a mile from the line shack when they spotted Warbonnet standing still over something on the ground, as if he were guarding it. Shane spurred his horse forward, pulling up short and leaping out of the saddle when he realized the "something" was Leah, unconscious and surrounded by blood. In an instant he was on the ground beside her.

"Leah? Baby?" Forcing his emotions back, he checked her over using his medical expertise. Maybe he worked with animals but the basics were the same. When he found the wound on her arm, blood still leaking from it, he ripped off the bottom of his shirt and tied a tourniquet just above the wound. When he slid his fingers beneath her skull, they came away coated with blood. "She's been shot," he yelled at Mick, "and she hit her head on a rock when she fell."

"Shot?" Mick pulled his horse up beside them. "Who the hell would have shot her?"

"I don't know. Do you see Dash anywhere around that cabin?"

Mick shaded his eyes as he looked off into the distance. "Not a sign of him. You don't think he did it, do you?"

"I don't know what to think." Shane was still busy checking Leah over. "There'd be no reason for him to. Even if he wanted the ranch for himself, there's no provision in the old man's will for what happens if one of the heirs dies. It just turns into a great big mess."

"I'll ride up to the shack," Mick told him.

"Watch your back," Shane warned. "If it's not Dash, whoever did this could still be around here and we could all be targets."

Mick pointed to rifle strapped to his saddle. "I'm good." He tossed his radio to Shane. "Better radio in and get some help out here right away."

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane paced the hospital corridor, hands thrust in his pockets, face taut, body tense. Mac leaned against one wall of the hospital waiting room, his face deliberately blank. Mick Dana slumped back in an uncomfortable chair, nursing a paper cup of vending machine coffee. Ken Nightwalker stood near Mac, ramrod straight, watching everyone. Leah had been in surgery for more than three hours and no one had come to tell them anything.

"Where's your damn brother?" Shane asked, stopping directly in front of Mac. "Couldn't you find him?"

"Yeah, I got hold of him. He'll get here when he gets here."

"Maybe he's the one who shot Leah and he's long gone by now," Shane accused.

Mac straightened, hands tightening into fists, but his face never changed expression. "Dash had no reason to shoot Leah."

"Maybe he wants her out of the way," Shane persisted. "Maybe the two of you made some kind of deal after we left yesterday and decided it would be a lot easier if Leah was out of the way."

"You have no idea what you're talking about." Mac's voice was as expressionless as his face. "Dash tried to call Leah this morning and just got the answering machine. He's out double checking something right now but I expect him any time."

"Can you guys go to opposite corners?" Mick said in a quiet voice. "This is a hospital, not a gym or bar room."

"Watch what you say about bars," Mac told him.

"Let's all watch our words," Ken said. "This is no time for arguments. And by the way, Shane, when Dash couldn't reach Leah he called me. I was just on my way to the ranch house when Mick got hold of me."

"What did he have to say?" Shane asked.

"I think we should wait for Dash to get here," Mac answered for him.

"How is she?" a voice broke in.

Everyone's eyes moved to the door where Grant Fallon stood, breathless, as if he'd just run a long way.

"What are you doing here?" Shane demanded.

"Leah's my...friend. I stopped by the ranch and one of the hands told me what happened."

"And you just *happened* to stop by there?" Shane's whole attitude was belligerent.

"I have the reports y'all asked for. I thought I'd go over them with Leah first."

Mac pushed off the wall and came to stand next to them. "I thought we were all going to look at them together? Or did you think you could pull the wool over Leah's eyes and get her to sweet-talk us?"

Grant raised his eyebrows. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"He's talking about logues." Dash walked into the waiting room, somewhat disheveled, a rubber-banded roll of papers in one hand. "Right, Grant? Or didn't you think we were smart enough to find out about them?"

As he moved into the room, everyone noticed Sheriff Colman and one of his deputies behind him.

"What the hell is going on?" Grant demanded.

"Never try to fool a cop," Dash said. "Their noses itch so they stick them in places people don't want." He slanted a glance at Mac. "I've got the rest of the proof too."

The sheriff and his deputy took up positions in the doorway, effectively blocking everyone from leaving the room. Dash moved to where he could see everyone.

"I had a funny feeling about Joe Morgan's death," he began, "and Grant, you were doing a monkey dance about giving us those reports, so I went to see Amos DeWitt. Seems a long time ago before the cattle business ran in the black again, Joe Morgan thought there might be oil or gas under the land. He hired a geologist to run what's called logues—maps of areas beneath the ground that show types of rock, soil and possible pockets of gas and oil."

"I knew that," Ken Nightwalker said. "I thought the geologist he hired came up dry."

Dash shook his head. "On the contrary. He showed rich pockets of both oil and gas, but old Joe wasn't ready to turn his ranch into an oil field yet, and as time went by he decided against it. Left the maps with Amos. It was so long ago, and Amos is no spring chicken himself, they both forgot about it. Joe really didn't want anyone digging up the ranch anyway." He turned to Grant. "Then you came along and told him there were probably mineral deposits that could be mined very easily."

"Only he was lying," Mac took up the thread. "Joe finally remembered the old logues and did some checking on his own. Discovered the original geologist he hired sold out to Lone Star Explorations. They waited what they thought was a sufficient length of time, then sent their little errand boy here," he stabbed his finger into Grant's chest, "with a cock-and-bull story and a plan to hang around until he could get all the mineral rights to the property. And maybe a few other ranches."

"Steal them, you mean," Ken interjected.

Dash nodded. "But Joe was ready to throw him off the ranch, so Grant had to get rid of him."

"Kill him?" Shane was astounded.

"Blaming it on a poacher. He was shocked at the terms of the will, but figured he could sweet-talk Leah into working with him. When that failed, he hoped she'd sell out to Mac and me. Figured neither of us would know a damn thing about gas and oil and we'd be glad to get rid of the property. Take the money and get on with our lives."

"Why didn't Amos do anything about it?"

"I guess Joe was just...Joe. Played everything close to the vest, didn't want any of his heirs...like us...giving someone the right to dig up the ranch so he said nothing to his friend and attorney." Dash looked at Grant. "But he said plenty to you, didn't he? When I got suspicious and went to Amos, he finally remembered the whole thing. Told you to go to hell, right, Fallon?"

"You can't prove a damn thing," Grant challenged. "Nothing."

"Oh I think we've got you there," Sheriff Colman drawled. "Thanks to some help from my Chicago cop friend here." He nodded at Dash.

"The sheriff found cases for the bullets that shot Joe. As soon as I found out about Leah, I hightailed it up by the line shack and did a thorough search of the area. Found identical shell casings."

"So what? That still doesn't prove anything."

"Well now, Grant." The sheriff took one step forward. "I managed to get a warrant to search your truck and you were kind enough to come here and make it convenient for me. Right now that fancy rifle of yours is back at my office being tested for comparison. I think this is one situation you won't wiggle out of."

There was a great deal of scuffling while the deputy cuffed Grant and dragged him out of the room. The sheriff threatened to gag him if he didn't remember he was in a hospital and shut up.

"That's what I wanted to tell Leah about," Dash told Shane. "I'd already let Mac know. I just wasn't sure how close Leah was with Grant and if she'd believe me."

"There's nothing between her and Fallon," Shane said with vehemence, "no matter what he might try to imply."

"And I think that's why he tried to kill her," Mac said. "He saw he wasn't going to marry the ranch, so with her out of the way he figured he could steamroll over Dash and me. That we'd be glad to sell out and be rid of White Eagle."

"She saw it in a dream," Ken Nightwalker said in his even voice.

Dash and Mac looked at him. "A dream?" Mac asked.

The old man nodded. "Two white eagles came into her life, chased by a black vulture. I think we can say the vulture is gone for good."

Whatever anyone else might have said was interrupted by the doctor who walked into the room. He looked tired but he was smiling.

"I assume this is the family of Leah Morgan?"

"Yes," they answered as one voice.

"How is she?" Shane demanded, pushing his way forward.

"She'll be fine, but she's got some recovery time before she's up and around." He smiled at Shane. "The tourniquet on her arm and the ice packs on her head saved her a lot of grief. Good work. Are you a doctor?"

Shane grinned. "A vet, but medicine is medicine. What did you find?"

"The bullet did a lot of damage to her arm, tearing muscle and tendons and chipping the bone. She also bled a lot from it. But if she'd been holding her arm a fraction either way the bullet would have hit her heart."

"Shit. Sorry, doctor. What about her head?"

"The rock she fell on cut the temporal artery, but again, you managed to stop the blood flow or we might not have been able to save her. She's got a hairline skull fracture but no internal bleeding. She has a lot of stitches, and she'll be sore for a long while. But if you can keep her in bed, she'll recover nicely."

"I intend to do just that," Shane assured him, then felt himself redden as the men around him grinned knowingly.

"It will be at least an hour before you can see her," the doctor told them. "Why don't you all get a cup of coffee? You look like you can use it."

"Thanks, doc. For everything."

They found an empty table in the hospital cafeteria. Ken fetched coffee for all of them, passed the cups around the table before sitting down. For a long moment no one said anything.

"I'm going to marry her," Shane said, breaking the silence. He looked at the other men. "I'm not interested in getting a share of the ranch or anything else. My practice does very well. I love Leah and I want to make a life with her." He looked at each of them in turn. "Any objections?"

One by one each man shook his head.

Ken Nightwalker stared at him with eyes so piercing Shane was sure they could see into his soul. "I think you are a good man. Take care of my granddaughter or you will answer to me."

Shane swallowed a grin and nodded, then looked at Mac and Dash. "What about you two? What are your plans? Leah will want to know."

The two men exchanged a look.

Mac cleared his throat. "We've had a chance to do some talking. I know this was a shock to Leah and it's been hard to handle, but we want to claim our share of the ranch."

"Exactly what does that mean?" Shane demanded.

"I think it's something we have to work out with Leah," Dash said. "We don't want to disrupt anything. We're willing to work on the ranch too. Share the profits, share the work."

"Dash is happy with the line shack for now," Mac told them, "but I'd like to stake out a place for me to build a house. As soon as Leah is well enough for us to talk about everything."

"We could have incorporation papers drawn up," Dash went on. "All legal, regardless of the will. They can spell out everything."



"If you're serious," Shane said, "I know Leah will work things out with you. She doesn't want a battle any more than you do."

"Let's put this on hold until she's had some time to get her strength back," Ken interjected. "I think a couple of weeks won't matter, right?"

Dash and Mac looked at each other, then both nodded.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Whew!" Shane stripped off his jacket and tie and unbuttoned his shirt. "I'm sure glad that's over."

"Shane!" Leah glared at him. "You're talking about our wedding."

He laughed and reached for her. "And a beautiful wedding it was. With the most gorgeous bride in the world."

Leah had worn a long, white silk dress with seed pearls at the neckline, perfectly setting off her smooth tan and long, dark hair. Ken Nightwalker had given her away, whispering as he handed her over to Shane that the spirits predicted much happiness for the two of them.

Shane, in his suit and polished boots, looked every inch the Western gentleman. But now the reception was over, the last of the cake eaten and the last of the champagne drunk, the guests urged on their way by Mac, Dash and Ken. And the newlyweds were alone at last.

They'd waited for the doctor to give her a clean bill of health before scheduling the ceremony. Knowing how serious both wounds could really have been, they gave prayerful thanks over and over again.

"God, Leah," Shane said at least twice a day, "I thought my heart would stop when I saw you on the ground. You scared the shit out of me. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

"But I'm fine now," she constantly assured him. "Really."

Both Grant Fallon and his boss were in jail, Grant on charges of murder and attempted murder, his boss on charges of conspiracy to murder and attempt to defraud. Leah knew she'd be a long time getting past the lingering fear, but Shane worked hard to make her feel safe and secure.

Mac had worked out the best place for him to build his home, construction had started, and—good as his word—he was at the ranch every day, learning about the working of the ranch. Shane had mentioned several times that if they expanded the cattle operation even more, Mac could sell the honky-tonk and devote all his time to White Eagle.

Dash was still living in the line shack, wrestling with his own demons, but the three Morgan heirs had settled into a semblance of a relationship. Leah, finally able to put her anger against Joe aside, hoped the three of them could create the family none of them had ever had.

"I'm glad Carmen came to the wedding," Leah said as she removed the flowers she'd worn in her hair. "She seemed to actually be having a good time."

"Maybe she'll come to the ranch once in a while now," Shane ventured.

"I hope so. I want to be close with her."

"And Mac and Dash have both supported your plan to bring horses in to 'whisper' to," he pointed out. "So I'd say you got pretty much everything you wanted."

She smiled at him. "All I really need is you."

Shane cupped her face in his warm hands. "It seems like forever since I've been able to hold you and do the things I want to with you."

"Me too," she whispered.

His kiss began as a gentle touch of lips to lips, but hunger surged through them both. This was the first time they'd really been able to make love since the shooting, and she was so greedy for him. Pressing her body against his, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him as close to her as possible.

Shane licked the outline of her mouth with his tongue before thrusting it inside, sucking her tongue. He tilted her head to give himself better access, devouring her like a starving man at a bountiful feast. Her breath mingled with his as if they were one person.

Panting, Shane drew back, kissing her lightly and sliding his hands down her arms.

"I want to see you naked," he breathed. "I want to touch and kiss every inch of you."

He turned her to face away from him so he could slide the back zipper all the way down below the swell of her buttocks. With great care he pushed the fabric from her shoulder, inching it down until it fell into a pool at her feet. Leah shivered as he swept her long hair aside, brushed his lips against the nape of her neck and traced a path the length of her spine. The tip of his tongue licked delicately at the top of the cleft between the cheeks of her ass, sending shudders of pleasure racing through her.

She kicked the dress away, standing only in her high heels, silk thong and lace and silk demi-bra. Shane's fingers danced from her shoulders to her wrists, his lips following. She knew the exact moment he reached the scar on her arm. His mouth opened and he sucked in the healing flesh as if branding it with his own mark.

"It's ugly," she whispered.

"Nothing about you is ugly," he told her, his voice so thick with desire she almost didn't recognize it. "The man who gave you this is ugly but not you, darlin'. Never you." He kissed it again. "Consider it your badge of honor."

He turned her to face him. "God, you look so sexy."

He trailed the tips of his fingers over the swell of her breasts, his breath as he bent closer a warm breeze over her skin. Linking his fingers with hers, he lifted her hands and pressed light kisses on the inside of each wrist. Leah felt moisture flooding the crotch of her thong and dripping to the insides of her thighs.

Shane was definitely taking his time, drawing out every touch and every caress, inciting the throbbing of her blood at every one of her pulse points. Hands still linked,

he unfastened the front closure of her bra and pulled one of her nipples into his mouth, wrapping his tongue around it.

The sensations shuddered through her and she moaned with the pleasure of it. Slowly Shane dropped to his knees, his mouth showering kisses from the valley of her breasts past her navel to the lacy edge of her thong. Gripping the fabric with his teeth, he drew it slowly past her thighs. Pausing to lick the satiny nest of curls on her mound, he bit the fabric again and eased it slowly down to her ankles.

Tightening her fingers in his for support, Leah stepped out of the scrap of material and kicked it away, along with her heels. Shane licked the moisture from the inside of her thighs before turning his attention to her cunt. She knew she was dripping with arousal and she pushed her cunt against his marauding mouth, a silent plea for more.

But he wasn't to be rushed. His tongue explored her pussy thoroughly, lapping and sucking and driving her to the point of insanity before he finally lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed. Flipping back the comforter and sheet, he laid her gently against the pile of fluffy pillows, then stood eating her with his eyes while he removed the rest of his clothes.

When his magnificent cock sprang free she sucked in her breath and reached for it with one hand, her small fingers curling around its hot thickness.

"No more teasing," she begged. "I want you inside me so badly, Shane. Please."

She saw the desire to prolong the foreplay with the need for completion battling in his eyes. Then he sheathed himself, knelt between her bent knees, and pressed the head of his cock to the entrance of her wet, welcoming pussy.

He held himself rigid for a moment, not moving, his eyes blazing into hers. She saw in them love, hope, desire, passion—all the things she'd always wanted.

"I love you," she breathed, wrapped her legs around his waist.

"I love you too, Leah. Always."

And with a quick thrust, he slid home.

## About the Author

I always wonder what readers really want to know when I write one of these things. Getting to this point in my career has been an interesting journey. I've managed rock and roll bands and organized concerts. Been the only female on the sports staff of a university newspaper. Immersed myself in Nashville peddling a country singer. Lived in five different states. Married two very interesting but totally different men.

I think I must have lived in Texas in another life, because the minute I set foot on Texas soil I knew I was home. Living in Texas Hill Country gives me inspiration for more stories than I'll probably ever be able to tell, what with all the sexy cowboys who surround me and the gorgeous scenery that provides a great setting.

Each day is a new adventure for me, as my characters come to life on the pages of my current work in progress. I'm absolutely compulsive about it when I'm writing and thank all the gods and goddesses that I have such a terrific husband who encourages my writing and puts up with my obsession. As a multi-published author, I love to hear from my readers. Their input keeps my mind fresh and always hunting for new ideas.

Desiree welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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