

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt that is open, revealing their bare torso. They are also wearing a black bandana with a white paisley pattern around their neck. A thick, light-colored rope is draped over their right shoulder. The background is dark and textured. The title 'Lone Star Trouble' is written in a large, stylized, golden-yellow font with a distressed, weathered appearance. The word 'Lone' is on the top line, 'Star' is on the top line, and 'Trouble' is on the bottom line. The letters have a 3D effect and some of the paint or gold is chipped away, revealing a darker color underneath.

# Lone Star Trouble

A graphic of the state of Texas is shown in the bottom right corner. The state is divided vertically by a white five-pointed star. The left half of the state is colored dark blue, and the right half is colored red. The star itself is white.

AUTUMN PIPER

LYRICAL  PRESS, INC.

## Back Cover Copy

*One hot cowboy plus one tough rancher-girl adds up to trouble!*

Kiersten Day holds a grudge against all things Texan, especially cattle baron CJ Howell, with his hubcap-sized belt buckle and tacky white hat. He's set his sights on her tiny Colorado ranch, and he's a master of dirty tactics, slinging threats to make her sell out.

Caught in the fight of her life, Kiersten meets Cleve, a tall, handsome good guy. Too late, she finds out he's Howell's son. She might be pregnant, she doesn't know who to trust, and danger is closing in. She's head over heels—and kicking herself!

*Content warning, a hot cowboy, dirty tactics and lots of lone star trouble.*

## Highlight

“So damn pretty. Like a sunset.” His mouth nuzzled between her breasts while her hands kneaded his pecs inside the shirt. “Have to tell you somethin first.”

“Shut up, already.” Laughing, she worked his belt loose. “You wanta tell me something? Tell me you want me as much as I want you.” *But don’t move your mouth from there while you talk.*

“I do, but—”

“No buts, let’s just do this thing, Cleve. Jesus, help me pull this shirt off.”

With his help, her tank flew to a corner of the kitchen. His hands nudged hers away from her bra clasp.

“You better not take off again. It’s not gentlemanly to leave a damsel in distress,” she murmured to his salty neck as he carried her to her room. “Damn, you taste good.”

“Kiersten. Please. I really need to tell you something.”

“Tell me anything, just please don’t tell me no.” To make sure he didn’t, she slid her hands in the front of his pants till he sucked in his breath. “Tell me after we’re done. Thirty-two months, help me out here.”

“Okay darlin, you win.”

Ah, it was good to get her way.

# Lone Star Trouble

by

Autumn Piper

Lone Star Trouble

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## Dedication

*For cowboys and all the girls who love them.*

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# Chapter 1

A sparkly white truck turned up Kiersten Day's gravel drive, crawling over the ruts. Blinding spring sunlight flashed on its windshield. Squinting, she made out the license plates. Texas. "Damn big-shot Texans. Always showing off."

Nobody else but CJ Howell, cattleman, billionaire, and pompous ass would drive a Cadillac truck in the rugged hills of Colorado. And he was the only person from Texas who could be coming to visit her. He'd never bothered to meet her in person before, so he must have come up with a new way to pressure her into selling her property to him.

The pearly truck stopped a few feet away.

The driver wore a tall white cowboy hat.

She managed, with great effort, to not roll her eyes.

Near her knee, Oscar growled at the stranger emerging from the truck.

White cowboy boots and narrow jeans appeared first, then the biggest, most gaudy belt buckle she'd ever seen, peeking out from under an enormous belly. That stiff, white, tucked-in shirt... hoo boy. She half expected to see a tiny bolo tie around his big neck, where multiple chins rolled beneath a smile about as genuine as a politician's promise to lower taxes.

While he looked her over, he cleared his throat. "Hello there. Miz Day, Ah presume?" When she didn't provide an affirmative answer, he sucked in a big breath. "Ah'm Charles. Chaz, most folks call me. Ah come to talk bizness." His ruddy cheeks jiggled as he glanced toward her cabin and then back at her. "Is, Mr. Day around?"

No use pretending to be civil. "Mr. Day is my grandpa, and he doesn't live here. He's retired. Any business you've got with the Days, you can discuss with me." Resisting the urge to look defensive and cross her arms over her chest, she planted her hands on her hips instead.

Chaz's piggy eyes narrowed as he scrutinized her. "Well, Miz Day, in the past you haven't come across as a terribly reasonable woman. Ah plan to see Flyin H Colorado operational this year, so—"

"Ho, wait!" She held up her hand to halt his words. "Operational. Does that mean you're bringing the cows this year?" Damn. Bad enough the guy lurked in the shadows, trying every trick in the book to get her property condemned or seized, now he was going to graze cattle on both sides of her? On land that had been owned by sheep ranchers for generations?

"Cattle." If possible, those piggy eyes narrowed even more. "Not cows. Yes, ma'am. We're bringin the cattle this year and Ah'm here to buy this piece o' propitty so's we can utilize the public land we leased."

What a laugh. "It's your own stupid fault for leasing that land before you owned property with access to it." On long winter nights spent alone, this fact had kept her spirits up. She'd foiled



Howell's plan by not selling him her little ranch, the only private access to the Bureau of Land Management parcel behind it.

From collar to hat brim, the Texan turned red. "Your neighbors got fair prices for their land, Miz Day. Ah come to offer you a million five for yours."

"A mill—" She choked. "Million five? For my little two hundred acres?" Man. Howell wanted her land, and he wanted it bad. Made her smile to think *how* bad he wanted it. Not only would it give him access to the two thousand acres he'd leased for grazing, but it would fill the big hole in the middle of the spread he'd attempted to build. "Sorry. No deal."

He shook his head. "Ever-body's got a price. How much more you want?"

"Rocky Peak is not for sale. Get that through your head. Not. For. Sale."

Chaz sputtered and chewed his upper lip. "This is why Ah don't do bizness with women. How can Ah git in contact with your granddaddy?"

His condescending tone made her blood boil.

"It was *no deal* three years ago and it's still *no deal*. Rocky Peak has always been and always will be a sheep ranch, and it's always going to be owned by the Day family." Her voice rose. Why attempt to disguise her anger? "So just load your happy ass back in your fancy truck and take your million bucks back to Texas."

Oscar growled again, as if to emphasize her point.

She turned on her heel and patted her leg so he'd follow.

"Miz Day, Ah was hopin it wouldn't come to this."

His tone was so low, she froze in her tracks to listen.

"This is a mahty quiet place you got here. Peaceful, some maht say, but *remote*. Some folks think it's odd, how you live out here all on yer own. Dangerous, really."

Goosebumps rose along her arms.

"Anythin could happen to a young lady up here all alone. Anythin. Ah wonder if your Granddaddy wouldn't decide to sell the place, without you around to hang onto it."

With her heart pounding, she turned and faced him. "Leave." She managed to keep her voice calm, for the most part. "And next time you show your face on my property, you'll be saying hello to the business end of my twelve gauge."

Oscar snarled.

At Howell's smug grin, she commanded, "Oscar. Kill."

Though Oscar didn't move, Chaz scrambled into his truck and slammed the door shut.

As he drove away, her middle fingers stood tall and proud, saluting both Chaz and the great state of Texas.

"Texan." What bigger insult could she spit out? "Wants to take over the whole state. Like the world needs another Texas. Come to my door and tell *me* everybody's got a price? Kiss my white mountain butt, cattleman!"



Harnessing her furious energy, she plunged her spade into dark, fresh soil. Spring had been slow coming, but was in full swing today. Just this week, the north-facing banks of snow had shriveled to tiny patches in the shadows of rocks and trees. She had to get an early start on gardening if she hoped to harvest more than radishes in the stunted growing season at elevation eight thousand.

“Think because I’m a woman you can show up with your stupid Stetson hat, driving your Cadillac truck, and tell *me* how it’s gonna be? Take your long-horns and shove ’em up your—” Catching her breath, she leaned on her shovel and looked down at Oscar, whose ears perked toward her. “Yeah, I know, yack, yack, yack. Com’ere, boy!”

Oscar obliged, his shaggy tail wagging off-center as he ran a crooked line toward her. His tongue hung out, probably because he’d spent the last hour digging after a gopher. As usual, his chase had proven fruitless when the gopher escaped in its labyrinth of tunnels. Following a fine tradition of canine optimism, Oscar spent several hours every day striving to obtain his lifelong aim of one day catching a gopher. If it hurt his pride that the two cats he shared a home with succeeded frequently where he had failed, he never let on.

She rewarded her mutt’s hard work by scratching his ears and letting him jump up and rest his head on her shoulder. “Stinky dog. You’ve been playing in that yucky mud already, haven’t ya?” He was smarter than he looked. He’d known the Texan’s visit had upset her, and stayed by her side, ears turned forward, until the pearly pickup truck had disappeared down the driveway.

“Okay, down boy. Go swim. You stink!” She tossed a rock into the small spring-fed pond, and Oscar loped away to fetch it. Long after it sank, he’d patiently swim in search of the rock. A cruel trick, but it served the dual purposes of getting the dog out of the way and maybe getting him clean.

Back to the task at hand. She jabbed her spade into the ground. Preparing the soil was hard work, but she’d reap the rewards at harvest time. If she could keep that bastard Howell at bay.

The guy didn’t let up. His lawyers had pressured, begged, and tried to bribe Grandpa into selling, but the old-timer wouldn’t budge. Next, the Texans had turned to underhanded legal tactics. Getting the property rezoned had failed to run the Days off, but saddled them with astronomical property taxes. She’d been able to pay the staggering fees for Grandpa, but he’d still feared losing the property.

Then her personal life had fallen into more pieces than that last shovelful of dirt. She’d leased out her optometric practice and retail optical shop, sold her house in town and moved to the cabin.

Another year of residence, and the Peak would no longer be zoned as a resort. The taxes would go down and she wouldn’t have to live here anymore, but she had no intention of returning to her semi-urban life and her professional career.

“Society sucks anyway. Men especially.”

Now and then, she spent a few days in town covering vacation for her replacement at the practice. Just enough to maintain her license and keep abreast of new advancements, in case she

ever needed to practice again. She wasn't completely cut off from the world. Only as much as she wanted to be.

She paused to catch her breath, leaned on the shovel handle and looked over at her log house, sturdy but small, surrounded by a stand of spruce trees on the south and aspen trees on the west. Because of its mountaintop location, cellular service was good. She'd had a solar power system installed, with a gas-run generator for backup. A spring and holding tank system supplied running water. Her stove and refrigerator ran on propane from a tank big enough to last all winter, until the trucks could make it up her road again in the spring to refill it. The wood-burning stove provided all the heat she needed.

Life on Rocky Peak had been moving along smoothly, one season running into the next, until today.

CJ Howell was more pompous than she'd dreamed any man could be.

Her stomach growled, reminding her how long she'd been at work.

"Lunch time," she announced to the hillside at large. Nobody around to argue.

Maybe today she'd have a little company to go with her tuna fish sandwich.

She'd check her email, see if Nate had sent something funny. God knew she could use a laugh today. She kept a satellite dish mainly for internet access, and several TV shows she'd become addicted to, thanks to Nate's ravings.

Good old Nate, who'd followed her when she left the optometry practice. Gone from office manager to ranch hand and college student, but remained the best pal a girl could have.

Cook-N's message read:

*Kie,*

*Do you ever answer your phone? Hell-o? Get on that thing and call me. I have the most juicy news EVER! Now, girlfriend, now!*

*N*

Smiling, she dialed his number. What could possibly be exciting in the boring little town of Rifle, Colorado?

He answered with, "It's about time!"

"I've been busy *working*, smartass. What have you been doing?"

"Cranky, are we? Whatsa matter, did we miss our nap?"

"Yeah, we did. We had a visit from our Texan neighbor this morning."

"Oh no. Didn't go well, I take it? What's he like?"

"Let's see. Texas-size beer belly, Boss Hogg hat and boots—"

*"No way!"*

“Way, baby. And driving a pearly Cadillac truck, no less. *Chaz* let me know I’m not qualified to make business decisions about selling the property, and that I’m putting myself at risk by being here all alone.”

“He did not!”

“Mmm-hmm. Oh, and he informed me that *anybody* can be bought. But this morning a million five wasn’t enough to buy me.”

Nate whistled long and low.

“Nate, am I crazy? That’s a lot of money, but this place is all I’ve got left of my family once Grandpa dies. All the work he and Grandma put in here, homesteading it... I don’t know.” She sighed. “I just can’t let it go.”

“You’re not crazy, honey, you’re *principled*. After all you’ve been through to keep that place, I’d kick your fine ass if you let it go for some quick cash.”

“Thanks.” It was good to hear from somebody else that she wasn’t making a mistake by fighting what often felt like a battle of her versus the world. “They’re bringing the cattle this year.”

“They’re finally gonna do it, huh? Should be an interesting summer.”

“Charles is gonna be doing an interesting dance next time he shows up at my house, cause I’ll be shooting at his Boss Hogg boots the minute he sets foot out of his pansy-ass truck.”

“You should put in a complaint about him threatening you.”

“He probably has the Sheriff’s department in his pocket along with the County Commissioners. It’d get back to him before I even made it home. Then he’d think he scared me.”

“Maybe you should come stay down here for a bit. We’ll paint the town.”

“There’s too much to do this time of year. I have to get the fence up to keep those stupid walking steaks off our pasture, for one thing. And I can’t appear intimidated.” *Show no fear*. Rocky Peak was one of very few things she allowed herself to be emotional about anymore. Grandpa and Nate were the only people in her heart, and they’d both been there, *before*. Thank God she had Nate to watch over Grandpa while she couldn’t be there—even though the independent old codger had no idea she paid Nate to do so—and to help him out with the heavier ranch work.

“Come on,” he coaxed. “A few nights. Let this thing blow over. I’ll come up next week and help with the fence. You need to go out and get laid, missy. It’s time to move on.”

“Spoken like a true man. Just because you need one to be satisfied, doesn’t mean I do. And I have moved on, but I’ve done it alone. That’s how I intend to stay. I keep telling you, men suck.”

“Only the good ones, darlin. Only the good ones.”

She rewarded his joke with a soft chuckle.

“Okay chica, you want my juicy gossip, or what?”

Unable to suppress a grin at his excitement, she said, “Hit me.”

“Your old pal Trayce is in the newspaper.”

Ugh. Trayce. The original redneck creep, a fitting accomplice for her husband. She ripped out a loose thread on the couch. The fabric puckered at her.

“He had this cute young girlfriend who turned out to be underage. He got picked up for providing alcohol for all her little friends. And statutory rape.”

“Karma conquers all.” Served a thirty-five-year-old man right, for dating a little girl.

“He’s already bonded out, but he was front page news, not just listed in the Cop Shop section of the paper. Since he sells guns in his shop, his record has to be clean. He hired some big-deal lawyer from Denver. If he doesn’t get off, he’ll have to give up his firearms license.”

“Maybe he’ll have to move away if he loses his dealer’s license.” She could only hope. All his evil deeds, like constantly slandering her, were about to be repaid.

“Honey, if things go bad for him in court, he’ll have to move away to Canyon City, to the State Pen. We should go out and celebrate. When you comin down?”

“Tomorrow.” His support was nice, but she wasn’t interested in partying to celebrate Trayce’s possible demise.

“Bring your overnight bag. We’ll bar-hop in Grand Junction.”

“Nate.”

“Come on, no pressure. Pretend I’m your date, and if somebody fine comes along that I can’t catch, I’ll send him your way.”

“Fine. One night. That’s it. Then I have to get back up here.” God, why was he so damned interested in her sex life when his own was complicated? “Don’t you have a class today?”

“I’m on my way there now. Bring your black jeans for tomorrow night. You look really hot in them.”

“Yeah, like you’d know.”

“Tell me you can’t appreciate a beautiful woman, and you can tell me I can’t either.”

“Whatever. You could solve both our problems if you’d fall in love with me,” she teased.

“I already did, girlfriend. Gotta run. Ciao!”

## Chapter 2

Man, it was definitely time to bring Cookie up from the ranch, Kiersten thought, scrambling up a steep bank of rocks. Her mare wintered at the lower ranch, since snow got too deep on Rocky Peak for her to leave the shed. A horse would have been handy to ride now, while she checked the fence around the property for damage and made a list of necessary materials. The four-wheeler was good for hauling materials up, but it couldn't get close to the fence line in many places.

Oscar snuffled ahead, searching out the scent of anything chaseable. Now and then, he raced back to make sure she still followed.

A few birds had made their journeys back from whatever balmy place they'd escaped to in the winter. Their timid twitters serenaded her from the still-bare scrub oak bushes as she passed by.

At the corner of the fence, she stopped to rest and enjoy the early morning quiet. Here the eastern fence line turned and separated the north edge of her property from the BLM parcel. This corner of her property was at the top of a mountain and provided panoramic views in every direction. A good place to be at sunrise or sunset.

Down the hill, a herd of deer grazed. As if choreographed, they snapped their heads up and looked toward the hilltop. Had Oscar spooked them?

The sound of hoofbeats soon told her otherwise.

"Oscar, come!" she called.

Oscar abandoned his play and rushed to her side, ears forward.

This couldn't be good. She never ran into other people up here. And after yesterday's confrontation... Why hadn't she strapped on her pistol before she left the cabin?

A sweaty buckskin gelding topped the hill, then halted.

Time for another confrontation.

The cowboy dismounted and made a thorough visual examination of her.

Freckles. The first thing he'd see would be her freckles, since she never bothered with makeup except for trips to town. Add to that her big messy ponytail, and it was amazing the guy was taking a second look. And a third? Well, he wasn't exactly looking at her face, now was he? Warm from her hike up the hill, she'd unzipped her jacket, exposing the only curves on her body—her breasts. The tall stranger was all but ogling them.

Not in the least appreciative of his silent admiration, she tugged her jacket closed.

With a small cough, he cleared his throat. "Howdy, neighbor. I'm Cleve. You must be Miss Day."

Another Texan, but clean shaven, with light skin, short dark hair and nearly black eyes. He wore a red flannel shirt with a blue t-shirt under, tucked cowboy-style into his Wranglers. Around his waist he sported a plain leather belt and everyday buckle, not a shiny gold-and-silver number

like the guy she'd met yesterday. Brown boots, and the straw cowboy hat he'd removed when he introduced himself.

It was hard not to meet his wide, open smile with one of her own. Too hard, in fact. "Hi. Kiersten." A tiny gold hoop hung from his left ear, odd on a cowboy, but nothing blame-worthy. And he was definitely fine to look at—if she'd been interested in looking at men anymore.

He took her hand in his and shook it with big friendly strokes, settled his hat back atop his head and looked around. "Some view up here."

She nodded. "See that peak over there, the darker one? It's in Utah. My Grandpa said it's about a hundred and fifty miles away."

Cleve whistled behind her. "You walk up here?"

She grinned at how winded he was from riding horseback up the mountain. "I walked the fence line, checking for snow damage. I'll be hanging it back up in the next few days."

"What kinda fence is that?" The wire net lay flat and ran parallel to an army of steel posts marching straight as an arrow into the horizon.

Most cattlemen marked the edge of their property with two or three simple strands of barbed wire, rather than the four-foot net fencing sheep ranchers used. "It's a fence to keep my nuisance sheep in, and your fat cows out, since the law says I'm responsible for both." She probably sounded nasty, but the sheep ranchers had always been treated unfairly by Colorado lawmakers who represented the more wealthy cattle ranchers.

He rubbed his chin with the back of his fingers. "I meant, why's it on the ground?"

"Seven feet of snow on a hillside tends to make a mess of a fence, come spring. Used to come up here and find this part of the fence crumpled up way down there." She pointed at a stand of aspens about twenty feet down the hill. "Might find several steel posts bent over flat. One of the other old-timers came up with the idea of unhooking the wire from the posts in the fall. Keeps the snow from leaning on it for months on end, and the elk from getting tangled in it."

"Pretty good idea, then."

"You'll find I'm not stupid, in spite of what your boss might think."

"Ah...*Boss*?" He scratched the back of his hair, tipping the front of his hat a little.

"Yeah. Charles. The world's last remaining male chauvinist pig. Boss Hogg, in a Cadillac truck instead of his trademark white convertible. Give him my regards."

Her middle fingers raised in another rebellious salute.

His eyebrows lifted. "Doesn't sound like he put his best foot forward."

"Just let him know that next time, his foot better have a bullet-proof boot on, cause I'll be comin out with my twelve gauge. Oh yeah, and let him know I thought over his offer."

Cleve's eyes lit with interest. "And?"

"You're probably shy about giving your boss the bird, even though it's a message, so just tell him, 'Not everybody can be bought, Jackass, and there are a million five reasons why,' okay?"

His eyes widened. "Ah. Wasn't too persuasive, then?"

“Definitely not a people person, that Chaz. I thought his lawyers were bad. You must be his new, what, manager? Ranch foreman?”

Big fingers rubbed over his chin. “Somethin like that.”

Why was the guy so confused? Maybe the thin air was starving his brain of oxygen. Seemed nice enough. Too bad he’d gotten hooked up with such a peckerwood. “Well, it’s been nice meeting you, Cleve. Good luck with Boss. Is there a Mrs. Hogg, I mean Howell?”

He grinned. “Not yet.”

“I’d say his chances keep getting thinner as his waist gets thicker, and women get more crazy ideas in their heads about equal opportunities, all that Women’s *Lip* nonsense.” The mere thought of Chaz’s asinine ideals had sent her hands to her hips again. Damn. “I need to get back and do something domestic around the house now.”

With a wave over her shoulder, she started back down the hill.

“Wait!” Cleve followed down the hill on his side of the fence. “You want some help when you put up this part-time fence?”

Work with the cattlemen? She’d be damned if she’d ever take help from Chaz, but Cleve seemed friendly. And cute. Shaking off *cute*, she shrugged. “Sure.”

“Wanta do it tomorrow? Same time?”

“I’ve, um, got a...date.” And why did she say that? Why should she want him to think she had a date? “How ’bout Sunday.”

“Sunday it is,” he answered with a smile.

Damn fine smile he had. George Strait fine.

As she walked away, she called back, “Don’t forget your gloves!”

“Hey, wait!”

Criminy. She stopped again.

“You startin at the top, or bottom?”

“Top. *If* we get to the bottom, I’ll feed you lunch.”

\* \* \* \*

Finished showering, Kiersten packed up her overnight bag. Cleve had actually offered to help her with the fence. Incredible. He must not know his employer’s policy: Intimidate and Obliterate the Little People. Once Boss told him how he was supposed to treat ‘Miss Day,’ he probably wouldn’t show up on Sunday.

Outside, she slapped the lowered tailgate and Oscar jumped into the bed of her red Toyota. Probably anxious to visit Grandpa’s dog, Scratch.

With one last look back at her house in the rearview, she released the clutch and let the truck idle down the driveway.

It was good to drive an actual truck all the way to town, now that the roads were clear of snow. During the winter months, she kept her pickup parked down the county road where the snow



plows turned around. When the snow was deep, she drove a four-wheeler or snowmobile between the truck and the cabin to make weekly trips to town.

In twenty minutes, she parked in the driveway at the ranch.

Oscar bounded over the side of her truck, yapping at Scratch to come and play.

She took the front steps two at a time and hugged Grandpa, who stood in the open screen door. He felt thinner and smelled like cigarettes, though he swore he'd quit. Well, no good badgering him about it at this point.

"There's my girl." His gravelly voice tickled in her ear and he squeezed tighter. "Looks like ya been feedin that mangy mutt more'n ya been feedin yourself."

"Aw, Grandpa, I weigh more than I did last fall. You're the one who looks hungry."

"Psssh. Your man's out changin the water on the fields. Where's he takin ya tonight?"

*My man?* She stepped back. *Stay cool.* He was forever pushing her toward Nate. Sheesh. When she and Nate had agreed to keep his sexual orientation on the down-low, she'd never dreamed Grandpa would be so determined they were dating.

"We're just friends. Friends."

"I watch the TV, little girl. I know all about friends these days. Call it what you like, it's still livin fast and loose to an old timer like me. You shouldn't be givin away your body without a ring on your finger."

"Grandpa! Friends. That's it." *I'm not loose, I'm freakin celibate!* Which made her think of a tall Texan walking toward her with hat in hand. Now she felt even *more* celibate.

"Maybe you'll at least make me a grandbaby out of it," he muttered. "Here he comes now."

"Good. Let's take him to town for lunch. I'm starving."

Nate parked the ATV next to her truck and swaggered up the steps, managing to look very masculine in the process. No wonder Grandpa believed they could be an item, as hard as Nate worked his act. With knee-high irrigating boots over his jeans, he looked quite the farmer.

"Hey, princess! 'Bout time you showed up. We thought maybe you broke down or got stuck on the way back from your little castle." He brushed a kiss on her forehead.

She smiled into Nate's too-handsome face. It was great to see him, but they couldn't build false hopes for Grandpa.

"I walked the east fence up the mountain this morning before I left. Then I had to shut everything up for the night." Grandpa didn't need to know about her recent visitors. She'd wait until later to tell Nate about her morning. "We're ready for lunch. Clean yourself up. You look like shit."

Truthfully, he looked pretty damn good. With golden hair and skin to match, shining blue eyes and perfectly proportioned features, Nate's picture could have been next to the entry for 'handsome' in the dictionary.

He pretended to take offense as he schlepped inside to get changed, no doubt into something stylish. The guy had more clothes than she did. And all of her *best* ones were gifts from him.

“Chinese or Mexican, Grandpa?” She only asked as a joke, since he refused to eat Chinese. Some holdover from hating the Japs when he fought in the war. No matter how many times she tried to explain the difference, Grandpa would have none of it.

Nate took them straight to La Cocita, where they scarcely needed to look at their menus before they ordered.

“How many lambs do we have now?” She knew, but asking gave them a chance to brag. Four hundred forty remained after weathering a severe late spring storm and two dog attacks.

Grandpa swore he’d never seen such a healthy crop of lambs.

She listened and dug into the chips and salsa, while he progressed to estimates of how much weight the lambs may have gained. Yum. Mexican was definitely hitting the spot today.

Chairs scraped at the next table, and a booming Texas voice said, “There’s no Mexican like Tex-mex, and the *only* place to get it is in the great state of Texas.”

Chaz and Cleve.

The chip lodged in her throat and sent her into a choking fit.

When she finally caught her breath, she snapped, “Then maybe he should go back there, where he doesn’t look like an idiot in his ten-gallon freakin white hat!”

Seated across from her, Grandpa fidgeted, though he must agree with her opinion.

Chaz looked down his bulbous nose, probably to see who was letting their woman speak out of turn. He caught her glare head-on. “Well, well. Isn’t this a pleasant su-prize? Ah’ve been anxious to meet the menfolk in the Day fam’ly.” He looked at her, waiting for an introduction in spite of his sexist slight.

“Oh, all right. Winston Day, Nate Cook, this is Cleve, and *Chaz* Howell.”

The men all nodded and murmured greetings. For some reason, when Chaz looked at Cleve, Cleve put his finger to his lips.

Much as she’d like to say something scathing to Chaz, she didn’t want to worry Grandpa. Bad enough he had to know about the Texans suddenly taking up residence.

She pasted on a cheery expression. “Looks like we’ll be seeing more of our high country neighbors this summer.”

Cleve tipped his head and smiled. “What a nice way to get to know our new neighbors, right Chaz?”

Did Cleve’s brows raise in silent communication to Chaz?

While Grandpa told them stories about the previous owners of the new Flying H ranch, she did her level best to ignore the Texans and concentrate on her food.

Finished with their meal, she rose to leave with Grandpa and Nate.

“Mister Day,” Chaz said, “Ah’d like to make an appointment to set down and talk a bit o’ business.”

Her eyes rolled.

“Why don’t we have our people call your people, and set something up?” she asked in her most nasal imitation of a moneyed snob. “Or better yet, let’s not, and say we did.” Holding Grandpa’s elbow, she escorted him out the door without a look back at the overdressed bully. Damn her nemesis, anyway! As hard as she’d tried to protect Grandpa from worrying, the blabbermouth had to go and involve him.

“What’s that two-bit cowpoke want, Kiersten?” Grandpa asked as she helped him into the front seat of Nate’s Xterra.

She heaved a sigh. “He’s made another offer on Rocky Peak. I already told him to get lost, but he won’t deal with a woman if she doesn’t agree with him.”

“Good girl.”

What a relief when he let the topic go and relaxed against his seat.

A little way down the road, he asked, “How much did that blow-hard offer you?”

She met Nate’s gaze in his rearview. “It doesn’t matter, Gramps. I’m staying on the Peak.”  
*Please let it go, please, please, please.*

“How much?” Grandpa repeated.

So much for letting it go. “A million, five.” Silence followed as Nate drove toward Wal-Mart.

“If you wanta sell it and retire, you should,” Grandpa said, at last. “In all the time I spent on the Peak, I never imagined it’d be worth that much money. Maybe you shouldn’t fight it anymore. Come back to town, settle down and live a comfortable life. A man can die proud knowing he left an inheritance that size.”

“You’re not dying, Grandpa.” She could only hope. For months, she’d been trying to get him to the doctor, but he’d dug in his heels because he feared his diagnosis. After watching Grandma waste away with lung cancer, he was convinced he’d suffer the same fate. “Quit trying to guilt me into settling down again by acting like you’re on your deathbed.”

“Thirty-two years old and she thinks she’s finished with life, Nate. You ever hear of a thirty-year-old widow that never remarried? Why do you suppose she wants to hang onto the damn mountain when she’s got nobody to leave it to? Couple more years and she won’t be able to breed up, anyway.”

In his reflection, Nate fought back a grin while he parked.

“Jesus, Grandpa, let it go.” She slammed her door as she got out, then stalked inside the superstore, leaving the men behind.

After she shopped for her groceries and calmed down some, she’d be ready to speak to Grandpa again. She wouldn’t face him when she was this angry and say something she’d regret later.

Focusing on her list and loading her cart helped cool her anger.

When she’d finished shopping, she found Nate and Grandpa at the front of the store, visiting with one of the guys from the senior center.

Grandpa's arm went round her shoulders as he ended his chat, and she walked close by him out to Nate's Xterra while Nate pushed the cart. So little time they had together, and she had to waste it by being bitchy with him. It was probably best for her to live all alone, since she couldn't seem to get along with other people anymore.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve's eyes had followed Kiersten's backside as she left the restaurant flanked by her men. He'd watched the easy way Nate's arm circled her shoulders before he bent to murmur something in her ear and make her laugh out loud. Her face was glorious when she smiled. Nothing to sneeze at when she was mad, either. She'd worn makeup to town, gone and covered up those pretty freckles. Simple sterling hoops hung from her ears and a worn silver locket dangled from a chain right where her cleavage should start. If she hadn't had on such a big old t-shirt, maybe a guy could see it.

One loose braid had wiggled between her shoulder blades as she'd helped her granddad into the little yellow excuse for an SUV.

Now why in hell hadn't that prettyboy of hers held the door for her?

He shook his head at Nate's lack of manners and pulled his gaze back inside. Crossing his arms over his chest, he watched his father's oldest employee, Charles Randall, tuck into his lunch.

He cleared his throat. Might be hard to treat this elder with respect. "Any idea how Miss Day got it in her head that I'm *your manager*?"

Chaz shrugged and grinned. "Women." He looked away, clearly conveying his feelings of superiority.

Losing his cool wouldn't accomplish much, so Cleve restrained his anger at Chaz's insolence. "Seems you mighta come across a bit abrasive. She was pretty hot about it this mornin, still. It's kinda hard to sweet-talk somebody into a deal when you piss 'em off."

\* \* \* \*

Chaz crossed his arms and glared back at Cleve. He'd been working for Cleve's daddy for twenty years. Truth was, Chaz wasn't the least bit interested in sweet-talking some hard-headed little twit of a girl. CJ Howell, Sr. had played hardball, and instructed him to continue doing so. It would be years till Cleve developed the business prowess of his daddy, and it was his new assignment to hold the little shit's hand until he'd grown into what he was being handed on a silver platter. He'd always be the ranch manager, and never the ranch *owner*, which chapped his hide. If some woman who didn't know her place in God's order of things wanted to think he was the owner of the newest Flyin H Ranch, then far be it from him to correct her.

"Might be, Cleve, might be. The way Ah look at it, her granddaddy's the one we oughtta be makin nice with. He's the one who owns the land."

"Tell me what you know about Pop's lawyers, Chaz. Miss Day mentioned havin trouble with 'em."

“Don’t know.” He shrugged. “That girl caused more than her share of trouble for your daddy. I reckon she got the bad side of old Strom and his son in court more than once.”

He knew full well the tactics the law firm of Strom and Strom had used. While CJ hadn’t necessarily approved, he’d been content pretending real people weren’t steamrolled by his ‘Take No Prisoners’ business ethics. If he didn’t meet them personally, then he didn’t have his conscience wailing about right and wrong. Strom made his millions representing CJ, doing his dirty work. Now that CJ was retired and handing over his Texas estates to his other sons and two sons-in-law, he’d sent Chaz up to Colorado to lend Cleve a hand.

Chaz asked, “How’s come *you* didn’t set Miss Day right about you bein the Howell?”

Cleve shrugged. “Seemed like a good idea to first find out what went on with you two. She’s dead set against my family. Maybe I can smooth things over, pave the way for a deal of some sort. She didn’t go for the one-point-five. I wonder how much it’d take?”

“It ain’t a matter of dealin with that one, I keep tellin ya. It’s Granddad. Women got no idea how to make a deal anyhow, unless it’s a pair of shoes in Dillard’s. Offer her some new *high*-heels, and a coupla pocketbooks, she’ll go for it.”

The younger man looked out at the parking lot. “I’ve seen her wearin hiking boots and sneakers. Somethin tells me she ain’t the type to be bribed with spike heels and purses. Let me deal with her from here on out, old timer. You two didn’t hit it off.”

Chaz nodded. He’d give the kid a chance, but he’d keep an eye on him. And when the time was right, the little lady might run into some persuasion of a different sort.

## Chapter 3

Huge speakers throbbed with bass, setting tempo for strobe lights flashing over bodies on the dance floor. Umbrella-embellished cocktails abounded in this bar. The only beers in sight were in the hands of a few butch women with their arms wrapped around the shoulders of other females. Daiquiris and coladas were popular, along with plenty of margaritas and any mixed shot with a reference to sex or orgasms in its name.

Kiersten had been here with Nate often. They always hit the gay bar first, where he'd pick up phone numbers and email addresses, but never leave with a guy he'd just met. She honestly didn't know how many of the numbers Nate used or threw out later on. He usually filled her in when he had a successful date, but most gay guys weren't repeat daters. He was involuntary proof of the old joke, 'What does a gay guy wear on the second date? What second date?'

Later in the evening, they'd head to a "beige bar"—Nate's term, as all the "colorful" people were at their first stop.

Dishing with Nate about what everyone wore, she'd agree with him or pooh-pooh his choices for prospective dates. The gay crowd was more entertaining as a whole. Hardly a night went by without some guy getting so drunk he'd start stripping on the dance floor. Naturally, the crowd cheered and egged him on. About the time guys started sneaking off to the men's room together, she and Nate would clear out and head to the stomping grounds of the straight.

Pretending to be a couple worked out fine. Together they scoped out hunks neither of them had any intention of approaching. In Nate's case, because he frequently found himself attracted to straight guys and he feared getting his ass kicked. She simply didn't need or want any men in her life.

Tonight, guys coming onto him time and again got on her nerves. She didn't even want to go to another bar. Just back to the room, to sleep. Going out tonight had been a mistake.

Uninterested in the drink she held, she watched Nate shake his fine rear end on the dance floor.

During the drive to Grand Junction, she'd told him about meeting Cleve, and how he'd offered to help her with the fencing.

Nate's neatly waxed brows had danced. "He's a tall cool one, isn't he? How convenient having him so *close*."

"Nate. He's just a neighbor. God. Unlike you, I don't look at every person I meet as a potential lay."

"He's got potential for you, missy. He was checking you *out* at lunch."

"Probably waiting to see if I was gonna start punching Chaz Hogg and he'd have to pull me off him." Just the thought of it made her laugh. "I bet that guy still thinks women shouldn't vote."

Cleve couldn't have been checking her out. She'd have noticed, wouldn't she?

A breathless Nate interrupted her musings, leaning on the bar beside her. "You are sooo not having a good time."

"I'm too old for this, Nate. I feel like being at home, in bed."

"How you ever gonna 'breed up' if you don't find a partner?"

"Yeah, way to cheer me up, remind me I'm breaking Grandpa's heart. He's calling you my 'man' now, by the way. Thinks I'm living fast and loose, giving away free milk. You should've bought me a ring by now, you know." There, she'd put some guilt in his lap.

He hung his head. "I'm supposed to make an honest woman of ya, then?"

"Next time you talk, tell him I'm used goods and you want a virgin for a wife. Maybe he'll finally drop it."

Nate grimaced. "Let's get outta here, chica. You're definitely not having fun. And that flamer singing *Material Girl* on the karaoke is too much."

At the club downstairs in their hotel, Nate seemed determined to improve her mood via alcohol.

Several guys came around asking her to dance, but she staunchly refused and stuck with him.

"Live a little, girlfriend! That guy's a total hottie, and he's so flirting with you."

She looked over at the hunk down the bar, who'd sent her a drink. Not a flutter of attraction. "I'll get his number for *you*, how 'bout that?" The jerk probably had a wife at home anyway. "Come dance with me."

She led him to the floor and shimmied up close, wanting to give the impression that they were *very* together. Hopefully it would run the guys off.

Wow, she always forgot what a good dancer Nate was. Even in sandals, she didn't have to worry about having her toes stomped on.

Now she leaned against him, feeling her margaritas and knowing the room spun a little more for her than it did for the sober folks. God, he smelled good. His ribbed shirt hugged the thin but muscular body she'd seen too many times when they dressed in a shared hotel room. Sometimes she couldn't help but wish he'd come back over the fence and fall for her, if she ever felt like bothering with a man again.

"Mmm, this feels nice," he cooed. "I could almost imagine you're a cute guy with really soft peccs."

"Yeah, I almost could too."

"Brat!" He chuckled, giving her ribs a poke. "Brad look-alike at nine o'clock. Three o'clock for you."

She turned and looked at the guy he pointed out.

"I'm so over the Brads. Give me an Orlando or a Heath." She sighed.

"Or a George Strait look-alike from Texas?"



“Shut *up!*” Just her luck, the protest came out much too high-pitched. Now Nate would know he’d hit close to home.

“It’s about damn time,” he muttered. “Thought you’d never get horny again.”

“I’m not horny!”

Several couples looked over, and her face burned.

Nate winked at their audience. “Later baby, I’ll do that thing I do. *Then* you’ll be in the mood, okay?” For effect, he squeezed her bottom and hung on.

“Nate, you big pervert,” she said through gritted teeth, “take your hands off my ass unless you plan to finish what you start.” Now where had that come from? Jesus, how could she get turned on by *that*, anyway? For two years, she’d done a good job of keeping sexual urges to a minimum, shaving emerging impulses off with a vibrator. Everything had been going along fine, until today.

His hands obliged and moved up, but when he looked at her, he seemed shocked. “Sorry. Everything okay?”

No, everything was not okay. She needed a man again, which wasn’t going to fit in with her life. Especially since the man she was with tonight wasn’t that kind of man. “Just, sometimes...well, don’t.”

\* \* \* \*

What was Kie saying? Why would she act so weird? She almost acted turned-on. Come to think of it, she was flushed, and the bar sure wasn’t hot. Maybe the cowboy did get her blood pumping again. High time. With a little more prodding, she might jump back in the races.

But he’d have to go back through that door he’d closed in college.

Kie relaxed against his chest, her sweet-smelling hair tickling his nose.

If he was to go back for any woman, she’d be the one. They had an emotional connection and he could enjoy sex with her. But he wasn’t sure he’d be happy sticking with it for the long haul, and she deserved to have a husband who was in it a hundred percent this time. So what was she saying? That she had the hots for him? Just tonight, or...hmm. Probably not cool to take advantage of it, either way. But if he got her hot and bothered so she’d start dating somebody, *anybody*, again, then it was fair. Wasn’t it?

When the song ended, he pulled her out to the patio, complaining about the heat in the bar. “Oh my God,” he lamented in his most desperate tone, “there she is. That girl, the one who keeps chasing me. Quick, kiss me!”

They’d kissed as a guise to shake off an unwelcome admirer before, but this time he intended to make some waves. Kie’s lips were soft and relaxed. She tried to pull away after a moment, like they always had in the past. But he managed to get her lips parted, moved his hands back where they’d been on the dance floor, pulling her firm little butt toward him.

Her mouth said, “Hmm-mmm,” against his lips, but through her thin muslin tank, her nipples hardened, which got *him* going, too. Chicks were more exciting than he remembered. That little ass of hers felt way too good in his hands.

“I want you, Kie. Let’s go upstairs.” So much for his strategy to tease her and leave her looking for a man, but this new plan was much better.

She nodded in agreement while he kissed along her hairline. God, what had he been passing up all this time?

The elevator ride left him woozy. He’d had a lot to drink. Maybe too much. But he had more important things on his mind. Like getting Kie’s clothes off. She was an animal now, kissing him back and rubbing her body all up and down his. The smell of that perfume he’d helped her pick out was driving him wild.

In their room, he got his clothes off and went to work on hers. Lord, the feel of her soft skin and the way she pressed it against his! New smells, soft moans, smooth surfaces...her supple body and velvety skin made him hotter than he’d ever been.

He set out to please her the way she’d told him no man ever had.

\* \* \* \*

Painfully bright sunlight blazed through a gap in the curtains. Nate squeezed his eyes shut against the invading rays, closing his positively vile-tasting mouth. Water dribbled in the shower on the other side of the wall. Kie must be up before him, for once.

Kie. He could smell her perfume on his pillow, maybe on his face. Why was that? Oh, yeah. *Kie*. He remembered, and as his pulse raced, closed his eyes. God, why hadn’t they done this before?

He rolled to his side. A heap of their clothing mingled on the floor. He could smell her on his hands. The feel of her...oh Jesus. Thinking of her gave him wood. But, how had it ended? Why couldn’t he remember the grand finale? Why was the other bed all rumpled and slept-in?

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten let the water pulsate against her thick, stupid skull. God, how was she going to face Nate today? Why had she let him kiss her like that? And the rest? It had all started because of her dumbass comment about him finishing what he started. They were friends. She *needed* him to be her friend. She did *not* need a lover. But when he’d started kissing her, touching her like she’d imagined so many times...on top of everything else, she hadn’t been able to fight it. When he’d said he wanted her, her head had spun. He’d touched her like she’d never been touched. Maybe it was simple accumulated lust, a product of such a long wait. Or all the fantasies.

They’d been on their way to the best sex ever. Until he’d said it. He’d been murmuring against her breast, jabbering way more than any guy she’d ever been with—mostly really good dirty talk—and then, ‘I love you, Kie.’

Her heart had stopped. Till the tears had started. She’d mumbled something about going to the bathroom and locked herself in there long enough for him to fall asleep.

The bathroom had seemed like her best hideout this morning, too.

She’d have to leave the shower eventually, and he’d probably wake up. He’d want to know why she’d left him and never returned. Should she tell him? Maybe he’d be mortified about what

he'd done. He was pretty drunk last night. It might not be a good idea for them to go out drinking anymore if he'd lose control and do things he'd regret. Not to mention the things *she'd* regret. He must be feeling like she would if she woke up one morning having made whoopee with one of her girlfriends.

She shuddered and turned off the water.

While she dressed, she listened for his snores. Nothing. Damn, he must be awake. He always snored after he drank. No chance of sneaking downstairs to the buffet, then, while he slept it off.

Drawing a deep breath, she pulled the door open and left the safety of the bathroom. Handsome Nate sat with his back against the headboard. A sheet puddled around his groin, but his entire left side was exposed. Even in the dim light, she could tell he wasn't smiling.

"Morning, princess."

"Um, hey." She looked away, since the sheet did a poor job of hiding his erection.

"Why'd you sleep in the other bed?" He sounded curious. And a little hurt.

"I'm gonna go down and pick up a newspaper. I'll be back in a few."

"Kie. Dammit!" With no modesty inhibiting his progress, he was up in a flash and blocked her way to the door with his tall, tanned body. "What the hell happened last night?"

She studied a corner of the ceiling. Maybe he'd forgotten, but then how come he'd asked why she'd slept in the other bed? She always slept in the other bed. So he must remember something.

"Nothing, Nate. You don't have to worry about anything awkward. You passed out." She couldn't look at his eyes, remembering how much she'd wanted him last night. "We need to get going. I'll pack up my stuff while you shower." Her voice sounded quavery and pathetic to her own ears. She brushed past him and opened the door, ignoring him when he called her name.

"Women are impossible to understand!"

She slammed the door hard enough to rattle the walls. Women were hard to understand?

Navigating the corridors was hard when seeing red. But then her vision returned, and eventually she found the coffee shop.

Twenty minutes later, she re-entered their room bearing a cappuccino peace offering.

Fully dressed, Nate was untangling his clothing from hers in the pile on the floor.

"I *didn't* pass out."

How silly of her to hope he'd be willing to forget about last night.

"Nate. What the hell was that about? We're *friends*. I don't wanta screw it up."

He sat on the bed and hunched over, clasping his head. "You wanted it, Kie. I know you did. I wanted to, I don't know, wake you up. But then—"

"What the fuck does that mean? *Wake me up?*?" Back to Red Vision.

"Calm down. It made sense at the time, but it backfired on me."

"So it was some kinda game? An experiment to see if the frigid bitch would melt or..." She choked back tears. "To see if you could get it up for the poor lonely widow?" Which was worse:

Nate experimenting on her, or what he'd said to her in the heat of the moment? Maybe he said it every time he had sex. Which would explain why he didn't get many repeat visits.

"That was pretty rude." His nostrils flared. "You know I don't think you're a frigid bitch. Or feel sorry for you. And I know I never, and I mean *never*, pass out in the act. Besides, I wasn't even that drunk last night. Now you've lied to me and insulted me in one morning. I *thought* we were friends. I'll be down at the truck." Tugging his suitcase behind him, he tromped out, his Calvin Klein scent lingering as a reminder of him while she stuffed clothes into her own bag.

It was a quiet trip back to Rifle. At the ranch, she loaded her bag into her truck, wanting to get behind the wheel and speed away. But her groceries from the day before were in the house. And she had Grandpa to contend with.

"Did ya have a nice date?"

"Friends, Grandpa. Friends. Please, not today."

When her eyes blurred with tears, he scowled at Nate coming down the stairs with several bags.

"Don't," she begged. "I'm just having a bad day. Too much tequila, that's all."

His grimace told her he wasn't buying her story, but he'd let it go because she felt crappy.

"I'll call ya later. I need to come and get Cookie pretty soon. As soon as I'm done with the fence." With a quick hug, she said, "I love you."

He nodded and ambled back to the house.

Nate was loading bags around Oscar in the back of her truck.

"Nate."

He looked up at her, lips pursed.

"Hey, I'm sorry."

His nostrils flared, punctuating his silence.

She got behind the wheel and sped off.

At the cabin, she got everything unloaded and into the house before letting tears fall. Nate was really mad at her. She'd managed to hurt his feelings. Nate. The only person who understood her.

Maybe if she explained why she'd let him fall asleep... He knew how she felt about having another relationship. Would that rejection be any easier to take? *Sorry, Nate, it wasn't your sex I was turning down, it was your love.* Didn't sound so good that way, either.

Head on arms at the kitchen table, she cried, wiped her tears, and then powered up the computer to check her email. Her inbox had a message from Cook-N. The lead blanket on her spirits lifted, allowing some light in again.

*Kie,*

*I'm sorry too.*

*Get off the computer and call me, already.*

N.

He'd known she'd check her email right away. Probably knew she'd come home and have a good cry first, she thought as she dialed.

"Kie." He sounded as relieved as she'd been to see his message.

"Hey."

"Looks like you're off the hook with your Grandpa. He thinks we broke up, but he told me I still have a place to live."

Poor Grandpa, so out of the loop. "Lucky me, lucky you."

"You, uh, forgot to pick up your mail."

Well, she'd been in a hurry to get out of there. "I'll get it in a couple days, I guess."

"Thought you should know, there's an official-looking letter from a law firm."

Her heart dropped like a rock at the mention of lawyers. "Shit, what now? Is it those Storm bastards from Texas?"

"No, this one's from here. It came certified."

"Open it. Might as well know what I'm up against now." Barely breathing, she listened to the sound of paper ripping, and then silence.

"You're being called as a character witness for Trayce."

"What the hell kinda stupid move is that? Is it the law firm of Imbecile and Twit? What good could I possibly say about that jackass after he's spread so many rotten rumors about me?"

"Hellooo. Chance to get even. He'll be put away for sure after you testify about him poaching that trophy elk."

"Dammit. I *can't* tell them about that."

"Why?" His voice rose.

"Because I didn't report it, remember? Howell would've been on it like stink on shit, making it look like I was in on the poaching."

"Don't you get immunity or something when you testify?"

"Even if I did, Howell could still use it against me in civil court somehow." She mashed her fingers into her eyes in frustration. "This should be a real blast. When's the court date?"

"Wednesday."

"Great." She blew a raspberry. "Just what I needed."

"Kie, about last night—"

"Let's not go there. Not today. I'm gonna get my nap now. Bye." She hung up before he had a chance to stop her.

"Oh, Oscar. What a crappy day. Com'ere, boy." Oscar obliged, laying his big head in her lap. "You smell better, at least. Been playing in the irrigation ditch with Scratch, haven't ya? You're still a stinky dog." He wagged his tail at her familiar endearment.

After a night spent lying awake in the hotel bed, she was beat. Sleep came on like a ton of bricks.

\* \* \* \*

Cool and quiet surrounded the cabin when she woke and stretched. What time was it? Maybe nine or ten.

She wasn't sleepy anymore and her mind wandered where she didn't want it to. Nate had achieved his objective. Her juices were flowing again, in spite of all her attempts to dry them up for good. Lord, what did nuns do to stay away from men?

Definitely not what she was doing. She kept picturing Nate blocking her exit from the hotel room in all his naked glory, which reminded her how she'd felt when he'd been turned on by touching her. His voice and the way he'd breathed when he was hot. Man, it had made her crazy. The scent of his fancy hair products in her face when his head was between her breasts...The way he'd touched her like it was his first time ever. She knew better. He'd dated girls before. But it was different with him, more than simply being with someone the first time. Maybe because she'd subconsciously dreamed of something happening between them.

But he hadn't intended it that way. He'd been screwing with her, literally, baiting her so she'd start playing the field again. That pissed her off.

Well, if she couldn't sleep, it was his fault, and he'd hear about it.

He answered his cell on the second ring. "Hello?" He sounded surprised, but not sleepy. Damn. She'd hoped to wake him from a nice, deep slumber.

"Thanks a lot, dickhead! Now I can't sleep."

"Huh? Um, why?"

"Shut up. You *know* why." She hung up.

His return call, she answered with a bitter, "What?"

"Cold shower." She could practically hear his grin. This time, he hung up before she could.

Oscar had wandered over to take a place by the foot of her bed. He listened with one ear cocked forward.

"Cold shower, my ass," she said with clenched teeth. "Jerk! I shoulda let him finish what he started, then I'd be satisfied and he'd be nursing a broken heart tonight. Dummy, going around telling people he loves 'em, before he even finishes laying 'em. No wonder he's alone. He'll never be a player, that's for sure. Got a notion to go down there right now and—well, that wouldn't do, with Grandpa in the house. At least Grandpa thinks we broke up. Maybe he'll leave me alone about making babies now." Reaching down, she rubbed Oscar's ears. "I've gotta concentrate on this crap with the Texans. That peckerwood Chaz isn't gonna leave us alone, I can tell, Oscar. Damn, isn't Texas big enough? They gotta come up here and try to take over our state, too?"

Giving up on sleep, she moved to the living room and settled in to watch old episodes of Law and Order.

"Perfectly good night, and I can't sleep. See, Oscar?"

He whined and edged closer.

“Now do you see why I had you fixed?”

He rested his chin on the edge of the couch, his eyes much more sorrowful than they should be.



## Chapter 4

Warm fluff settled on Kiersten's face and curled contentedly around her nose. She opened one eye to shiny black fur.

"Mmf! Ebony, geez."

He meowed as she pushed him away. The damage had been done. She was awake. No matter. It was getting light outside, and she had to meet Cleve to hang the fence.

She loaded a five gallon bucket with wire pliers, extra wire hooks, brush cutters and a hammer, then strapped the bucket onto her ATV and headed up the mountain with Oscar loping behind. A sliver of sun had peeked over the horizon by the time she topped the mountain and parked on the corner of her property.

Cleve hadn't arrived, so she set about tugging the wire out of the weeds already conspiring to keep it permanently horizontal.

Oscar snorted around in the brush, digging after escaping prey.

Still no Cleve.

Well, she might as well get started. It would have been easier with a second person. He could hold the wire up while she tightened hooks that fastened the fence to the steel posts. Doing it solo was a pain, but she managed to secure the wire on the first few posts, then picked up her bucketful of tools and moved down the hill.

Cleve had stood her up.

"No surprise there. All guys are jerks."

Running through all the four-letter words she could think of to describe Nate, Trayce and Cleve, she swung a fierce kick at a loose rock. The weight of the bucket tipped her, and she tumbled in lopsided flips down the steep hillside, landing in an awkward heap. A shower of heavy tools and prickly wire clips rained down on her. The hammer whizzed by her face and struck her left hand a bone-jolting blow.

When the dangerous precipitation had ended, she removed her hands from her face and lay still. "Why me? Why me, goddammit? What did I do to deserve this?" Her left hand ached to the core.

"Oww!"

Her hand was already swelling.

Oscar sat attentively by her side, his eyes sympathetic.

"This is such bullshit." Latching onto the bucket handle with her right hand, she flung it down the hill, where it clattered off several rocks and landed with a scratchy whoosh in a bush somewhere.

“Fuckin bucket!” She started crying. One particularly jagged stone stood out from the crowd under her shoulder blades. Wasn’t even worth it to shift positions. Crying this way was easier, anyhow. The tears ran across her temples and into her stick-and-leaf-infested hair, rather than traveling all the way down her face.

Maybe she could lie there and wait for the end of her miserable existence. If she was lucky, a bear or mountain lion would happen upon her and speed the process. But poor Oscar would meet his end, too, if that happened. Best to send him home where he’d be safe.

“Oscar, go home!”

He merely stood and wagged his tail faster.

“Go home, Oscar!”

“Tryin to get him to go for help like Lassie?”

Cleve. And directly above her head, the grass-stained knees of his jeans. Further into the center of her line of sight, his face, looking down at her. Trying to hide a grin! Asshole.

Oscar took a relaxed seat next to her again, as if reassured she wouldn’t need his help after all.

“Doesn’t look like he’s gonna tell anybody about little Timmy fallin down the mine shaft.” Cleve’s baritone voice shook with hidden laughter.

She struggled to turn over and push herself upright. Wire clips blocked everywhere she tried to put her hands or knees, and the back of her right leg hurt like hell.

Strong hands came around her middle and tugged her up to her feet.

Oh, now he came sweeping in to help, like the goddamn cavalry. Glaring at him, she attempted to brush the bigger debris from her body with her right hand. She seethed inside, positively boiled, but had no intention of letting Cleve know it. No point in bitching about him not showing up on time. That would only hammer home Chaz’s point that she couldn’t handle things on her own. Speaking of hammers...she picked up the offending one from where she’d been lying and heaved it like some deformed discus into the brush.

Criminy. If he wasn’t going to be here to help with the fence, why’d he have to show up and find her bawling?

As she bent to pick up the wire pliers, she noticed Cleve sported a good tear along the right sleeve and shoulder of his shirt. “Well, what the hell happened to *you*?”

Cleve’s grin had faded as he looked her up and down. “Uh, had a little tussle with the ATV this mornin.”

“Looks like you lost.”

He chuckled. “Is the pot callin the kettle black?”

“At least I got here on time.”

“Sorry ’bout that. I came by yesterday to tell you I’d be late, but you weren’t home.”

Well, that was true enough. “Boss Hogg have an early morning errand for you?”

He ran his knuckle under the brim of his hat and looked away. “Uh, no. It’s Mother’s Day, is all.”

So it was.

"I had to give her a call early, while the family was all there for breakfast."

"Sweet." She couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice. Must be nice having a big, happy family, but she sure wouldn't know. Reaching to rub her throbbing leg, she felt blood. "I'm a damn mess."

"What happened here?" Thank God he'd steered the topic away from Mother's Day.

She tried to shrug nonchalantly. "Just a little trip. Nothing major."

His brows shot up. "Hate to see somethin *major*. Better get that cleaned up." He indicated her leg. "And your hand needs some ice. Maybe an x-ray. I'll drive ya down. Your ATV at the top?"

She looked at the disaster around them. The fence still wouldn't be upright, and the day was a bust. "Yeah, where's your quad?" She hadn't heard him drive up. Maybe he'd left it where he'd wrecked.

"Parked it down by your house, so we'd have a way to come back up the hill and get yours." When she looked pointedly at his injuries, he said, "I wrecked the damn thing comin up a hill outta my place. I guess I need to get it geared down for steeper terrain. Lost power and flipped it back on myself."

"You're lucky you didn't break your neck." She failed to stifle a smile.

"Looks like you broke everything *but* yours."

She rolled her eyes. "Did you bring that machine here from Texas?"

He nodded.

She explained, "Probably need to get it adjusted for high altitude. I'd say it was a lack of oxygen making it kill out when it's working hard. Oh, don't look at me like that. Just because I'm female doesn't mean I don't know anything about guy stuff." She tried to stomp up the hill toward her four-wheeler in a huff, but could only manage a gimpy, painful gait. "God, this sucks! I think there's something stuck in my leg. Feels like the whole bush that grew from that bastard stump." Sitting would be excruciating, since the wound was right at the top of her leg.

"Did you, uh, want me to pick up your tools?" Cleve grinned, tipping his head toward the bush where she'd thrown her hammer.

"That hammer can rust straight to hell for all I care!"

She climbed behind him on her ATV and poked his ribs. "Think you can keep this thing upright, since we'll be going downhill the whole way?"

"Got half a mind to *dump* your pretty little ass off the back for that comment."

Was he complimenting her ass, or saying she was pretty? They started moving and pain shot up her backside.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve looked down at Kiersten's hands in front of his chest, one turning a nasty purple and one clenching in what had to be pain or fear. Since he was driving at a snail's pace, it had to be pain. "You okay back there?"

Her head nodded against his back, but she didn't speak. Poor little gal banged herself up good. He should have been there earlier to help. Maybe he could have stopped her from falling down the hill with all those tools.

Her white-knuckled hands had short nails. And long, delicate fingers. Such a feminine little thing, living up here all alone. Why wasn't her prettyboy living up here with her?

Her ugly dog followed along, his tongue hanging out while he watched her almost like he was concerned. This was one case where the dog did *not* look like its owner. The dog had a thin, uneven coat of several shades of brown, black, and gray. His mistress had long, thick brown hair with touches of red. Her eyes were a pretty green, the dog's, dark brown. And most of all, while the dog smelled most definitely like *dog*, Kiersten smelled good scooted up tight against his back. Really good.

Easing to a stop, he killed the engine in front of her cabin and waited for her to move from behind him.

Her limp wasn't any better on the level surface, and blood had soaked through her torn jeans. The leg must be bleeding faster.

"Um, thanks for the ride," she said, her lips barely moving.

"You want me to drive you to the ER?"

Her head was shaking before he'd finished his question.

"How you gonna get that wood out of your leg?" Surely she didn't think she could doctor her own rear end?

Looking pretty miserable about it all, she shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it'll get septic and I'll croak. If you drive up in a few days and there's a swarm of flies around my front door, call the coroner." She waved and started what must be a painful climb up her steps.

No self-respecting Southern man would ever leave a lady in distress. "Miss Day!"

Hand on the doorknob, she turned. "Kiersten. I haven't been *Miss Day* since I got married four years ago."

He refrained from letting out the disappointed 'Oh' he felt. *Married?* "Kiersten. Put some shorts on, and I'll clean that up and put a bandage on it." If she was married, what the hell was she doing up here alone? Was she married to prettyboy?

After looking at him for several long seconds, she finally agreed. "Okay, thanks. Make yourself comfortable while I change."

In the cabin, he took his time looking around. Her kitchen was painted bright red, with a red and white checkered table cloth and curtains, and even a little red microwave sitting on the white countertop. A row of colorful ceramic chickens paraded along a shelf above the window.

In the living room, everything was yellow and blue. Both the overstuffed armchair and sofa had wide stripes of matching fabric covers it looked like she'd made herself. Plants hung in every corner and in front of every window, besides the huge ones standing in several places around the room. The effect was something his Mama would have liked, tropical and outdoorsy.

“Looks like a cabana in here,” he called.

“That’s the idea. Keeps me from going crazy when the snow’s up to the top of the windows.”

If the windows were covered by snow, how could there be enough light for all those plants? He looked up and got his answer. “Don’t the skylights get covered over with snow, too?”

“No, the roof pitch is steep enough so the snow’ll slide right off. Besides, the skylights are always warm. The snow above them would melt.” She came back in a pair of gray cotton shorts. “The rest of the roof is double-insulated to keep my heat in, so it all pushes up against the skylights. I had to add them. I need natural light or I’ll go crazy.”

He wasn’t looking at the ceiling anymore, though she was. His eyes had become unwilling prisoners, shackled to her legs.

When she noticed, she blushed, but laughed. “I know, they almost glow in the dark. I can get you some sunglasses for the glare, if you want. I could use a trip to Club Med. Anywhere sunny, huh?”

He didn’t have a problem with her pale skin. No problem with her legs at all.

“Maybe you could meet your husband there,” he muttered. The good ones were always taken.

“Fff! Only place I might meet my husband is in hell, and I’m hoping to avoid that end, myself.”

He must look like a twit with his mouth hanging open. “You’re um, a widow.” One piece of good news. Well, probably not for her, even though she didn’t seem to think much of the guy.

She wrinkled her nose and shrugged. “So, you have specialized training with tweezers, or what?”

That must be his cue to follow her to her room. He looked around at the quilted country things while she positioned herself face down on her bed.

“Is this where I’m supposed to guzzle straight whiskey and then put a stick between my teeth for the pain?”

The *very* short shorts exposed part of her nice, round bottom. He had to look away at the window for a minute. *Concentrate, dummy.*

She’d done a good job of cleaning her leg, but the wound still bled and needed work.

Forcing himself to think about her injury and not her fine rear end, he asked, “You got some alcohol and maybe cotton balls? There’s dirt in here still, and lots of blood.”

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten groaned. “Alcohol stings.”

No reply.

Might as well cooperate. “In the medicine cabinet for the alcohol. The cotton balls and swabs are in a basket on the counter if the cats haven’t taken off with all of them.”

All business, he strode from the room for his supplies. He’d taken his hat off since they came inside and had a noticeable ring from it around the back of his hair. Why she found a little thing like that cute, she couldn’t say.

“You don’t have AIDS or anything, do ya?”

Hopefully he was teasing.

“Not likely.” At Nate’s prodding, she’d been tested for *everything* after Luke died. God knew she’d given herself no opportunity to contract anything since.

When Cleve returned and the alcohol sloshed, she repeated, “Alcohol stings.” And it did. Gentle as he was, when the liquid ran into the scrape, she clenched her fists and buried her face in the quilt. It took all she had not to screech in pain.

“Okay, you’ll have to relax the muscle so I can get at the piece of wood. It’s stuck in there good, probably from the ride down.”

With an effort, she relaxed the leg, knowing a terrific pain was on its way.

“You have a tetanus shot lately?”

When was her last booster?

“Oww! Jesus Christ, you coulda warned me!” He’d pulled out the offending hunk of stump. Quick or not, it still hurt like hell.

“Then you’d tense up, and it’d be harder to get out.”

She turned and gave him a dirty look, but he was concentrating hard on her leg.

“Be still, so I can finish cleanin it up.”

Face pressed into the quilt and fists clenched, she complied.

Smoothing the bandage, he said, “There.”

“Thanks.” Hurrying, she rose from her prone position.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked out her window. “So, if I wasn’t here, what would you have done? Would you call your Pret—I mean boyfriend, to come up here and take care of you?”

“Nate’s *not* my—” She had told him she had a date Friday. Maybe it was better if Cleve thought Nate was her boyfriend. “Nate doesn’t take care of me. I can take care of myself.” Time to get this man out of her bedroom. This *Texan*. She led the way back to her living room.

Luckily, he followed. “I didn’t mean you couldn’t. It’s just, we all need somebody sometimes.”

“Oh, what? Are you gonna remind me how dangerous it is for me to be here all alone, like Boss did? Tell you what, *Texas*, I’m no sniveling damsel who needs a man to carry in the groceries or wash the car. I’ve been fine the last two and half years, and I’m gonna keep on being fine, whether your boss wants to buy me out or not.” She rounded on him, pointing her index finger, though Grandma had always told her not to. “Tell him to take his threats and his scare tactics and shove them up his ass, cause I’m not gonna be scared off.”

“Threats?” Cleve’s face went crimson. “Tell me what he said.”

“Look, you obviously haven’t worked for Howell very long if you’re surprised. He’s a corrupt, ruthless fuck.”

He cringed at her language. Again. She’d come across as crude again.

Her face heated. “Yeah, I know. Potty mouth. Not very ladylike. I don’t get to act like a lady much anymore, thanks to your boss. He tried to have Rocky Peak condemned because it hadn’t been grazed in five years. Got the county to say it was a fire hazard. Meanwhile the properties on both sides of me—the ones *he* owns—haven’t been grazed during that time either. The county was gonna seize this place under Eminent Domain and auction it off so Howell could buy it. Cute, huh?”

His hands scrunched his hat. “How’d you keep that from happenin?”

“It had to be passed in a public hearing, so I got the voters to show up and let the commissioners know they’d lose their jobs if they did it. Next thing I know, Rocky Peak is a luxury resort.”

“*This* is a resort?”

She nodded. “And I pay a hundred times in property taxes what I paid when it was zoned agricultural. Went up from three hundred bucks a year to thirty grand. Luckily, there’s a loophole for the luxury zoning. If it’s used agriculturally for three years running, or as a principal residence, it can be rezoned.”

“So you got one more year.”

She shrugged. “For the zoning, I guess. This is home now. I sold my house down in town.”

“Tell me about these threats.”

“Oh. He never said anything specific, only that I was putting myself in danger, making myself a *target* here, all alone. Real neighborly, huh? Not ‘Call if you ever need anything’, but ‘You’re just askin for it by bein here, missy’.” Could he turn any redder? “You’re a nice guy, Cleve. You should get out while you can. Go back to Texas, where you can see your mama on Mother’s Day. I bet she misses you.”

His jaws flexed. “This, uh, threat. Was it before he offered you a million five, or after?”

“After.”

“I’m not goin back to Texas, Kiersten. I’m gonna stay here and see you don’t get any more threats. And hey, neighbor, *call if you ever need anything*.”

Poor Cleve. It must be tough finding out what a jackass he had for a boss. But he couldn’t do anything to stop Chaz’s underhanded dealings. “Thanks. I don’t want you losing your job over this, though. I can’t afford any more hands on my payroll. I’m kinda tapped as it is.”

“Hands?”

Whoops. Nate was supposed to be her boyfriend. “Um, I mean, I can’t afford *any* hands.” He didn’t look convinced by her attempted cover-up. Time to send him away. “Uh, it’s kinda early for the lunch I promised you. I guess we’ll have to wait till we do the fencing. Raincheck?”

“Sure. You need anything from town? I’m goin down later.”

“Thanks, but I’m good.”

“Listen, I’ve got a cellular. It works when it’s plugged into the big antenna in the house. Here’s the number. Don’t worry about callin for any reason, okay?”



She took down the number, but she'd die a death of a thousand screams before she'd let Chaz get word that there was anything she couldn't handle on her own.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve sped away from Kiersten's cabin, pushing his ATV to speeds bound to land him in another messy crash, but necessary to cool his temper before he made some phone calls. The things he'd learned in the last few minutes... How was he supposed to hold his head up around here, with folks thinking he'd pulled the rotten stunts Pop and Strom had?

He should've come clean with Kiersten about who he was by now, but she trusted him, and he was damn near ashamed to admit he belonged to the family who'd given her so much trouble. Nearly stole her heritage. He *needed* her to trust him, because now he wasn't sure he wanted her gone from Rocky Peak. She definitely added something to the view, and having a neighbor like her would be a good thing. Hell, who was he kidding? He'd rather have her a whole lot closer than a neighbor. Every time she got mad and her eyes flashed, it pulled at something down deep inside him. And when she smiled... Lord, it made his blood pump.

A little way down the county road, he turned east and drove toward the double-wide trailer he was living in until he could have a proper home built. The property directly across the road was his too. In this, at least, he was lucky. Kiersten had thrown a monkey-wrench in Pop's machinery by not selling the key parcel he needed to access the two thousand acres of public land. Pop had been cocksure of his ability to get the Day family out of his way. Now, assuming they could get a trail permit, it would take at least a week going around through the National Forest wilderness to the land. No motorized vehicles allowed. The cost of the lease itself was minimal—this was a matter of principal. CJ Howell always rose victorious over opposition to his expanding empire.

He made a beeline for his cellular antenna when he entered the cheap, garish trailer. Chaz had demanded the local mobile home dealer have something set up and ready to live in, but he'd failed to inspect the cheesy premanufactured thing first. It reeked "bottom of the line". The dealer must've been thrilled to get it off his lot. The artificial wood paneling with papered foam trim hung by staples at unsquare angles, no two corners met where they should, and every room had squeaky floorboards. At least it would only be for this summer. If his building permits were expedited as promised, he'd have a two-story log home to live in by winter.

He took a seat on the unstable, K-Mart blue recliner and dialed Pop. Mama would be at the church lunch, but Pop would wait at home for her, like as not snoozing in his La-Z-Boy till she got back. Later tonight, they'd go to supper with his brothers and sisters in town.

"Yello?" It was Pop, all right. Sounded surprised to hear from him again so soon.

"Howdy, Pop. Ya sleepin?"

"Got forty winks in earlier when the women took off. What's up, son?"

"Oh, just tryin to get a handle on things around here. You wanta fill me in on what you and Strom worked on with the Rocky Peak deal?" Just what kind of underhanded shit had they pulled here, anyway?

“Well, I think Chaz could brief ya on the big points. That little bugger still givin ya trouble? I’ll plump up your account if you need to offer her more.”

“Pop, you ever met her?”

“No. Heard she’s a real corker. You meet her?”

“Yeah. Just a little bit of a thing, tryin to hang on to what’s hers. Why’d y’all try to have her property condemned? You know how much she pays in taxes on that little place now?”

“Now hold on, son. We was doin business. It wasn’t personal.”

“It’s pretty damn personal when you take a home from somebody. We don’t need her parcel to have a successful operation out here.”

“Look here, Cleveland. You mind how you talk to me.”

Pop was starting one of his tirades.

Cleve leaned back in the creaky chair.

“You may be thirty years old and comin into your own, but I’m still your daddy. We do business in Colorado like we do business anyplace else. I didn’t earn what I’ve got by pussyfootin around. Y’all can thank me for bein strong and fightin for everything the Howells have. For every damn acre of every damn Flyin H ranch.”

“Makes me proud, Pop. Thinkin of all the people you ran outta their homes, so I can have more.”

“Reasonable folks were paid fair for their property.”

“Well, I’m fixin to shop the properties down the road. The Days ain’t sellin their home, and I ain’t wastin my time fightin ’em for it.”

Pop gave his disgusted sigh. “Kids these days. Give up too damn easy, you know? If you had to work for everything like I did, you’d think a lot different.”

“I’m sendin Chaz back, Pop. I won’t tolerate him makin threats to women. Let him work for Conrad or Carter, or one of the girls. He’s done nothin but make my job harder here, turnin Kiersten against the Howell name.”

“*Kiersten*, is it?” Pop chuckled all too knowingly on the other end. “Is she a looker?”

“Pop.”

Silence.

“Yeah, Pop. She’s a looker.”

“Got her womanly wiles workin on ya already. That’s why ya don’t send a boy to do a man’s job.”

*Ain’t no man gonna think she’s not a looker.* “I’m not a boy, Pop. I’m gonna do this on my own. You signed over the deeds, now let me do it my way. Things ain’t done the same now as they were thirty years ago, and you know it.”

“And that’s a damn shame. All right, son. Do as you see fit. Chaz will always have a place in my company. Send him back to me. I’ll send ya Cash and Dusty, and since Chaz is leavin, I’ll send Rowdy too, along with your stock next week.”

Cash, Dusty, and Rowdy. His best cowhands, and his quiet way of making the job of starting up this ranch a little easier.

Good friends. He'd look forward to their company.

"Thanks, Pop. Give Mama a kiss for me when she gets home. She liked the flowers I sent?"

"She liked 'em all right. A person would think you was the only one of her children that remembered Mother's Day, the way she went on. Bye, son."

He had another call to make.

"Chaz here."

"Chaz, I'm makin a trip to town later. I need you available for a little sit-down talk." He struggled to keep his tone civil. "I'll meet you at your hotel room in an hour."

He hung up before Chaz had a chance to question him or wheedle out of the meeting. Then he stared at the forest green carpet, the only attractive thing in the modular. It clashed with the nearly fluorescent blue furniture and red-brown drapes, but at least it didn't show the native dark dirt already being tracked in.

Ironically, after Chaz bought such hideous housing, he'd opted to rent a room down in town, rather than take sub-standard lodging with his boss. He'd be heading back to Texas now, no matter where he'd been sleeping. Chaz ought to be happy. At least he'd get to keep the truck he'd gotten as a bonus for coming to Colorado.

\* \* \* \*

"Chaz." Cleve nodded as he entered the room.

"Cleve. What brings you to town today?"

"Tell me exactly what you said to Miss Day on Thursday."

"Ah think we been over this before. Ah told you we need to deal with her grandpappy."

"You gonna threaten the old man, too, if he won't sell?"

Best to hem and haw a bit. Where was the boy going?

Cleve didn't wait for his answer. "I don't think you're big enough to threaten a *man*, that's what I think. Helpless woman all alone, yes. A guy who can take care of himself, no."

"First thing that cold little broad will tell ya is she isn't helpless. Been provin it for some time now. Don't even want a man's company anymore."

"Her personal life has nothing to do with how we conduct business. And nobody conducts business in *my* name by makin threats. I'm not some goddamn Texan Nazi, and I won't have folks thinkin I am. Your work is done here. Go back to Texas. Pop said he'd put you to work with somebody else."

What? He'd never been kicked off a job. Never. "Now look here, Cleve. I work for your daddy, and I been doin his will for almost all your born days. I take my orders from him, not you."

"Those *are* Pop's orders. Another thing—I won't tolerate havin a man work under me if he doesn't give me the proper respect."

He looked down his reddening nose. “I give respect where respect is *due*, you snot-nosed brat. Keep thinkin with your dick, and you’ll lose everything your daddy and me worked so hard to build.”

“I don’t need you or anybody else to tell me how to run *my business*. I’ve spent most of my life learnin how to be a rancher, and I’m not gonna do it by bullyin girls around.”

Nice of Cleve to remind him he didn’t own a bit of what he’d worked on his entire adult life.

At his window, he watched Cleve drive away.

He’d hold off awhile on contacting CJ. As of five minutes ago, he had *personal* business in Rifle, Colorado.

## Chapter 5

After lunch and a stop at the grocery store, Cleve headed back up the hill. With Chaz and his shitty attitude out of the picture, he felt like celebrating. And somebody else would be even more happy about it. Whistling, he unpacked groceries into press-board cupboards and the miniature, propane-run RV fridge.

As he'd guessed, the carton of ice cream he'd bought wouldn't fit in the tiny freezer. Perfect excuse. He tucked it back in the styrofoam cooler with dry ice and strapped it behind the seat of his ATV, thinking of Kiersten all the while. Thoughts of her prettyboy gave him pinpricks of guilt, but hell, the guy oughtta be *with her*, if he wanted to be with her.

He'd held his own in a few bar fights. Kiersten's buff boyfriend didn't worry him. Christ, the little hellcat could be dating a prizefighter, and it most likely wouldn't be enough to scare him away.

Late afternoon had lost its hold on daylight and given way to early evening when his ATV's sputtering engine died in front of her cabin. He'd have to get the thing in the shop soon so it'd be running when his cattle arrived.

Her ugly dog gave one short bark, then treated him to a good hand-licking while he loosened the bungees holding the cooler.

The dog raced to the porch for a tennis ball, bounded back and dropped it at his feet. The bushy tail wagged while he rested his head on his front feet and begged with his eyes.

Poor mutt. He tossed the ball for him to fetch a few times, then wandered up and knocked on Kiersten's door.

She didn't respond after the third try. Maybe she'd whacked her head. And he hadn't even checked her pupils for a concussion.

The door was unlocked. She was damn secure with her whereabouts. But Chaz—Boss Hogg, as she'd say—had tried to destroy that security. She'd be an easy target to the wrong person, especially since she assumed she could hold her own against any force.

Uninvited and unexpected, he entered the house of a woman he barely knew. If she was unconscious from a concussion, he'd kick himself all the way to town with her. Damn, why hadn't he thought to check for head injuries?

He found her stretched on the couch, her back to him. Ugly red and blue marks showed around the edges of her flimsy tank top. Her fine, fair behind poked out the bottom of the same soft cotton shorts. His bandage from the morning was still holding.

The little lady could snore with the best, for sure. She must be sleeping pretty well. He hated to interrupt such a sound sleep, but he needed to make sure she was all right.

"Hey, Kiersten. You okay?" He gave her soft shoulder a shake.

A groggy, "Mmm?" and she sat up, rubbing her eyes.

He couldn't resist peeking at her bare middle.

By the time his gaze wandered up to see the top was even thinner than he'd thought, she was awake enough to notice.

"Um, hi?" Generous gathered brows betrayed her confusion as she crossed her arms and took away the view.

"Sorry about invitin myself in. I knocked and knocked, but you didn't answer. I'd about decided you had a concussion from your spill this mornin." He bent low enough to put his eyes level with hers. "Your pupils look the same." That was comforting. "You always sleep so hard?"

"Yeah," she yawned. "Like a rock, Grandpa says."

Great. She wouldn't even hear a troublemaker driving up to her house.

"Kinda dangerous for you, leavin your front door unlocked so's anybody can drive up and walk right in. How you plan to defend yourself if that happens?"

"Oh, please. Who's gonna drive way out here on the off-chance that there's something worth taking, when there's so much in one square mile down in town? Boss send you over to scare the bejesus outta me?" Bright green eyes narrowed on him.

No point in carrying on the argument. She either felt safe or refused to heed the risk. "Your friend 'Boss' is headin back to Texas. I brought ice cream, to celebrate." Hopefully the sugar would improve her mood and then he'd explain his true relationship to Chaz.

"What lured Chaz back to Texas? All-you-can-eat ribs? Or did he need to replace those pansy white boots? Oh, don't look at me like that. I'm just joking." Rushing off to her room, she called over her shoulder, "So, you're in charge here now, huh?"

Time to set her straight, whether her mood was good or not. "Well, I've pretty much *been* in charge, Kiersten. You see—"

She came back wearing long pants and a sweatshirt.

Mighty disappointing for her curvy little body to be hidden by the thick clothing. She looked angular and tough again, like when he'd met her. How did the woman hide her body so well? And *why* did she? All the females he'd ever known made it their chief mission to flaunt every curve and swell the good Lord had given them.

"What?" she asked, looking down the front of herself. "You look like you were expecting somebody else."

Commenting on her clothes was liable to get her riled, so he wouldn't. "You got some bowls? This ice cream ain't gonna be frozen much longer. Hope you like fudge chocolate chip."

The way her face lit up at the mention of chocolate told him she was like the other women he'd known, in at least one way.

Hovering over his bowl several minutes later, he shoveled ice cream in. "Freezer I've got at my place isn't big enough to hold that carton of ice cream."

"Let me guess. You got the model that holds a dozen eggs and a half-gallon of milk, plus the world's smallest jar of mayonnaise, and not a damn thing more."

He smirked between bites.

She shook her head. "Horse's ass Chaz didn't know where to get full-size propane appliances, I take it."

"No, and I got three cowboys showin up next week. There's no way that midget ice box is gonna work out for us."

"I'll get you the phone number of the outfit where I got mine. They should be able to hook you up by the end of the week." She paused and licked her spoon clean. "Three cowboys. Must mean the cows are coming, too."

He'd ignore her mistake of referring to his Longhorns as 'cows' for now. "Flyin H, Colorado will be fully operational next week." He'd finally come into his own, and his family would be watching to see if he could manage it himself, especially after he'd given Chaz the boot.

"You four guys all gonna bunk in that Pepto-pink trailer?" She laughed when he ducked his head in embarrassment. "That's the one everybody in town's been calling The Pink Elephant for the last three years. Chaz must be *some* tightwad, to buy that heap for his guys to live in. Nate said Andre, the guy who owns the dealership, bought rounds down at the bar all night long when he sold it. The day I was driving home from town and saw it coming up the road to Howell's property, I laughed so hard I had to pull over."

It was a damn shame to live in what everyone in this podunk town considered the ugliest house in the county.

Kiersten grinned. "Is it as bad inside as out?"

"My Mama would say 'it's ugly as homemade sin.' And it's put together really bad. I already broke the knobs off two drawers."

She hooted and her eyes lit up. "You know, Nate said the high-schoolers called it the Special Olympics House. Andre tried to auction it off two years ago and give half to charity, to get it off his lot and use it as a write-off."

Her laughter was infectious. He smiled in spite of himself.

"But nobody, not a single person, would bid on it!"

"Nobody?" He chuckled too. It *was* funny, aside from the joke being on *him*. If the locals knew what Chaz had paid for the hideous hunk of paneling and masonite siding, they'd really be busting up.

"The volunteer..." She laughed so hard she could barely get the words out. "...fire department...finally offered to...burn it. But they wanted to charge Andre a disposal fee!"

Living in the cheap pile of crap was almost worth watching Kiersten laugh over it. Her eyes sparkled with tears of laughter, her freckles now sprinkled bright over pinkened cheeks.

"Mmm. God. But it's furnished, right?" she asked. "Are there enough bedrooms for all of ya?"

He shook his head. “Two of the guys’ll have to share a room. The rooms are furnished, but my mattress is so bad, I’ve been sleepin on the floor. They’ll likely do the same. I’m hopin plancheck approves everything for the house, so it can be built by winter.”

Kiersten’s spoon stopped halfway to her mouth. “Chaz is building a *house*?”

“Well, not Chaz so much as me. See, that’s what I need to explain—”

“Are you gonna live there, like, year round?”

The way she asked, it was like she didn’t brave the elements all winter herself.

“Yeah, year round. Just like you. Why not?”

“No offense, Cleve. But it’s no picnic up here in the winter. It can get really inconvenient at times. And you have to know what you’re doing to put in your water and sewer so it doesn’t freeze up. You have to ration propane because you’ve got a good five months when *no* truck is gonna be able to get in to fill the tank. You ever been in seven feet of snow?”

If a female could handle the climate all on her own, he sure as hell could. “I was a Texas *Ranger*, I’ll have you know.” He kept from standing, but only just. “I grew up on a West Texas ranch, outside every minute I wasn’t in school. I’m not some citified yuppie. If you can handle it up here, so can I.”

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten stared back at Cleve’s dark eyes, a smile tugging at her lips. So, the Texan thought he was man enough to face a winter alone on the mountain. It might be interesting to watch, and rewarding to rescue him when he floundered. Chaz groveling, thanking her for saving his number one guy from frostbite and dehydration would be sugar to her soul. “You think your house will be done by winter?”

Cleve nodded.

“And if it is, you’ll be staying here?”

Another nod.

“Then I guess we’ll see, won’t we?”

“We’ll see what?” Black eyes glared back at her.

“If you’re as much of a man as you think you are.”

Silence.

He threw his head back and laughed. When he was finished laughing, he met her grinning gaze. “Sugar, you’ll be pretty surprised when you find out how much of a man I am.”

His voice was low, and she ended up thinking more along the lines of what kind of man Cleve was in bed, rather than how snow-hardy he’d be. His half-parted lips heading her way meant he’d intended for her to think just that. Her heart thudded in anticipation of his kiss, thundering in her ears. The pounding grew louder, until it sounded like a motor. As his lips brushed hers, the sound of a vehicle coming up the drive reached her.

“Shoot.” He sat back in his chair.



“Um,” she replied, for lack of bigger words. She pressed her fingertips to her still-tingling lips.

“Nate.” He’d arrived, with the horse trailer and Grandpa’s truck. “Bringing my horse.” If only he hadn’t shown up for a few more minutes. Now Cleve probably wondered why she’d kissed him if Nate was her boyfriend. She should come clean with Cleve so he wouldn’t think she was a hussy, but there was no time.

“Kie! Hey, where are ya?” The door banged shut as Nate rushed through it. “Hey, I’ve been calling all day. You still alive?”

“I’m fine.” She laughed as he kissed her forehead. “Sorry. I’ve been asleep all afternoon.”

“God, you sleep like the dead.” Nate shook his head and looked past her to the table. “Hey Cleve. How’s it goin?”

“Not too bad.” Cleve looked a tad nervous as he slid his right fingers in his pocket. “How ’bout yourself?”

Was Cleve feeling bad for kissing Nate’s ‘girlfriend’?

“All right,” Nate answered. “Thought I’d get Kie’s mare up to her, and stick around to help with the fence in the morning. How far did you guys get today?”

“Not far at all,” Cleve said. *Not far at all, before you interrupted!* “Mountain Woman here decided to be a human rockslide and had to be driven home.”

“Yeah, well, at least *I* got something done before I fell. Some of us don’t sleep until noon before we go to work.” There, make him feel bad about being late.

Cleve grinned at her. “Noon? I walked up the hill and drove your poor injured tail back down and administered first aid before eight, darlin.” To Nate, he said, “It’s good you’ll be here tonight to make sure her, ah, injury isn’t infected. She can’t quite reach to bandage it herself. What time you wanta get started in the mornin?”

Nate looked from Cleve to her. “Uh, Kie? What, maybe six-thirty or so?”

She nodded and narrowed her eyes at Cleve.

“I better go get Cookie unloaded. You want her in the pen by the shed?” Nate asked. “Okay then. See ya tomorrow, Cleve.” His hasty exit left her alone with Cleve again.

“You didn’t have to tell him I got hurt and you had to bring me home, you know. He worries enough.”

“Huh. Don’t look like he worries enough to be around when you need him. More interested in hangin around town for the gossip than makin sure his girl’s safe. Guess they raise men different in Colorado.”

“I’m responsible for my welfare, not Nate or anybody else.” Leave it to a man to assume she needed looking after because she was female. “I don’t want him worrying needlessly. And you don’t know the first thing about the kind of man Nate is, but I can guarantee he’s more of a man than ninety-nine percent of the testosterone-seeping assholes walking the face of the earth. And to

clarify, Nate is not my boyfriend. I don't have one, and I don't need one. So don't let your head bloat up with ideas of how you stole me away from him because I kissed you."

"*I kissed you*, little one." God, he had a great smile. "I'll leave the ice cream. Enjoy."

"Cleve." Now she felt bitchy. "I'll save the ice cream for next time you're over, okay?" When his hopeful eyes met hers, her stomach floated up. "See ya in the morning."

"Lookin forward to it already," he murmured as he settled his cowboy hat on his head.

Cleve's quad sputtered down the hill as she joined Nate, leaning on the split-rail fence around her horse pen.

"Makin friends with the neighbor, Kie?"

"Shut up."

"He wants you."

"Shut up more."

"You want him."

Silence.

"I knew it. It's about time! You ever hear how you can draw more flies with honey than vinegar?"

"I don't want any freakin flies." She waited until he gave her an indulgent grin. "Nate, are we good? I'm sorry for the other night."

"We're good." He blinked and looked away, instead of at her. Something wasn't right with Nate.

He cleared his throat. "So why all the tension? Just jump his bones."

She folded her arms over her chest and watched Cookie rip mouthfuls of tender new grass. She'd expected Nate to pressure her about Cleve. He was like a one-man sales team for sex. "He pissed me off."

"What guy hasn't?"

She wouldn't dignify that comment with a reply. "He thinks he can live up here all year long. Because I can."

"The battle of the sexes?" Nate laughed. "Oldest parlor trick in the book. When he wins, you can act all weak and impressed. He'll look mighty and strong, then carry you off to bed."

"Nah, I'll jump his bones long before that. And besides, hey! What makes you think he'll win?" She gave him a shove.

"Face it, Kie. He's got Howell's money behind him to put in any convenience he wants. He'll probably have a home gym and a hot tub. Not to mention he'll hire his own private snow plow to keep his driveway clear. Probably buy a Hummer to get in and out."

"Shit. Hadn't thought about that. That's not fair." She wrinkled her nose at the injustice.

"Why's it matter? By next winter, you'll either hate each other or be married."

She choked on his prediction. "How do you figure?"

"How long do you think you can sleep together without one of you getting attached?"

“Jesus, Nate. I haven’t even slept with him once, yet!”

“Yet,” he repeated with way too much confidence. “Wha’d ya do to yourself up there on the hill?”

“You can’t tell Cleve. Promise? I was pissed because I thought he stood me up. Kicked a rock and lost my balance and did an endo down the hill. Landed upside down, under the friggin bucket of tools.” She chuckled at the mental image of her crash. “Got about half of an old chokecherry stump stuck in my right cheek. Hurt like hell. Cleve did the honorable job of yanking the wood from me and bandaging it.”

“Bout time you got that stick outta your ass.”

This time she punched his shoulder. “Shut up! You’re supposed to be my friend, you know.”

“You know I am. Let’s go inside and look at your tushy.” His arm went round her shoulders as they walked inside.

“Grandpa still think we’re broke up?”

“I imagine we’re reconciling as we speak. By morning, we’ll be an item again.”

“You’re not getting any more free sex from me until I get a ring.”

He tweaked her nose.

“Bring any good movies?”

“I’ve got Johnny’s newest, darlin. Only the best for you. And for me, of course.”

“Thank God you don’t make me look at hooters all the time, like Luke did.”

“Ugg. Hooters. Can’t stand the sight of ’em.” Her elbow in his ribs made him recant. “Except yours, that is. Oh, it’s Sunday. We have to watch the Skinny Housewives before our movie.”

“It’s a rerun, Nate.”

“Who cares? You can check out the hotties better the second time around, because you’re not busy keeping track of the plot.”

“Sex fiend. I’m gonna shower and have you change my bandage before we get all comfy on the couch.”

Hopefully Nate wouldn’t mind if she took a little longer in the shower than usual. She needed time to think about that kiss. A cowboy kiss. Certain, but gentle, and cut all too short, before she’d had a chance to really get a taste of him. Just enough to whet her appetite—and his, judging by the way those awesome lips had pursed together when he’d pulled away. She’d like to go back in time and run her finger over those lips... Another time. And next time she’d make sure they didn’t get interrupted.

Maybe she could ponder it a bit more while Nate zoned out with his TV show.

Nate whistled when he saw the raw wound on her backside. “No wonder you’re limping. Maybe you should stay here tomorrow and let Cleve and I do the fencing.”

Her feet kicked involuntarily as he swabbed the scrape with alcohol.

“I’m fine. It’ll scab over by tomorrow.”

“Instead of trying to show off how tough you are, you should be milking this for all it’s worth. Helpless, wounded female. Big Texans go for that. Makes a guy feel more macho.”

“Everything I do isn’t sexually motivated.” Unlike some people.

“That’s obvious by those horrible sweats you were wearing earlier. Come on, girlfriend. How you gonna bag your man, hiding in oversized fleece?”

“You weren’t around for a consultation, Fashionista.” He was still swabbing, and she was still squirming. “Christ, can we be done now?”

“Wimpy, wimpy. Hope Cleve doesn’t see that side of you. He might think you’re a *girl* or something. Please, honey, let’s burn the sweat pants. They’re not even your size.”

“Get real, pal. Those are my second skin all winter long.”

“They’re a disguise, like everything you wear. You don’t want anybody to know about that hot little bod you’re hiding.”

“Shut up.” Why did he have to nag? “You’re worse than a wife.”

“Kie, not every guy is like Luke. A very small percentage, really. Stay away from Utah, and odds are you’ll never run into that problem again.”

“He wasn’t a Mormon. He was a con artist. A user. Anyway, I like to dress comfortably.”

“Right. You never did that before Luke died.”

“Did you come here to ruin my night? Lay off, dammit! What do you want from me? I think hating men is perfectly reasonable after what Luke did.”

“Hating men for a while, girlfriend. That’s normal. Living like Locker Room Rapunzel is *not*. I’m going through your closet and getting rid of everything frumpy, dumpy, or lumpy. Then we’re going shopping and outfit you right.” He tore off still another piece of tape, then smoothed it across her leg.

“Touch my clothes and *die*.”

“We’ll see. One day when you least expect it, the Style SWAT Team is gonna raid this place. Let’s go, our show’s coming on.” He gave her a hand up.

God. He was serious about sneaking in to remake her wardrobe. Damn meddling fool.

## Chapter 6

Nate planted himself in Kiersten's kitchen, arms crossed over his chest. "Come *on*, Kie. You can't possibly feel attractive in that." Style snob turned up his nose at her jeans and tee with a loose, long-sleeved flannel shirt.

It was too early in the morning to deal with his oversensitive fashion sense. "I'm going up a mountain to hang fence, Nate. What do you think I should wear, a Miracle Bra and sequined top with a plunging neckline?"

He had the nerve to feign thoughtfulness. "You'll be bending over a lot...Cleve would get to see your ta-tas that way." When she gritted her teeth, he only smiled. "How about a girl shirt, something scoop-necked or v-necked, and girl jeans? What's with these man-pants? Can't even see your waist in them. I *know* you've got an ass under there somewhere."

"Jesus. Let's get up the hill. I think you worry about how I look in my pants more than I do."

"Your *Grandpa* worries about how he looks more than you do."

Hanging fence with the two men left her feeling useless. They worked together so fluidly, she had nothing to do but keep out of their way and periodically walk back to drive the ATV up to where they were. When they neared the end of the east side, Nate suggested she head over to the house and get lunch ready.

Sent off to prepare a meal for men. "Women's work," she muttered to herself, parking in front of the house.

\* \* \* \*

With Kie out of the way, Nate had his chance to talk to Cleve. "She's pissed now," he said with a grin.

"Yeah, been drivin her crazy to stand back and watch."

"I heard about your little bet."

One side of Cleve's mouth raised, along with an eyebrow.

"Be careful with her."

Cleve's other brow went up, but his eyes narrowed.

Nate wanted to leave no doubt what he meant. "She seems tough." He lowered his voice. "But I promise, if you hurt her, I'll make you sorry."

Cleve's shoulders stiffened. Still, he nodded without a word.

"She's got a lot to prove, as much to herself as the rest of the world. Hanging on to this place is the only thing that kept her going for a long time. Don't get involved with her if your boss is still planning to take the land."

"I'm shoppin the properties down the road now. Flyin H doesn't need this parcel. It woulda been nice to have access to the BLM we leased, but it's not crucial."

“That’s good to hear.”

“What happened to her? How’d her husband die?”

Poor Cleve looked hopeful. Obviously Kie wasn’t offering him much in the way of information about her past.

She’d kill him if he told more than she wanted him to. He’d answer only what Cleve asked. “Car wreck.”

“She still broke up over it?” Cleve’s voice raised enough to betray he’d worried about it.

“Not over his death.” No, Kie was most certainly not heartbroken over Luke dying. Not anymore. “Over what he did while he was alive, that she didn’t find out about till he died. She’d kill me if I told you about it.”

Cleve nodded. They worked on in silence for a few more minutes, then he cleared his throat. “You, uh, *related* to Kiersten?”

Nate chuckled. “We’re not a couple and haven’t ever been, if that’s what you’re wondering. Wins thinks we are.”

Cleve still looked perplexed.

Maybe he should tell him about his sexual orientation, but then, how would a Texas cowboy react? He’d been keeping his life private so long now, it was hard to do otherwise. “Kie pays me to keep an eye on Wins, and take care of the ranch downtown. He doesn’t know I’m there to watch out for him, or that she pays me money besides my room and board. But here’s the kicker: *He’s* always trying to pay me to keep an eye on *her*.”

They both snickered. Cleve must already know Kie well enough to imagine how pissed she’d be to learn anybody was watching over her.

He still hadn’t really answered what Cleve had indirectly asked. “We’re, like, very close friends.”

Cleve stared off at a stand of south-facing aspen trees sporting brand new leaves.

Nate held the wire against a post, waiting for Cleve to quit daydreaming and fasten the hook around it.

When Cleve turned back, he didn’t quite look him in the eye.

“I know one guy who could be close friends with a lady and not sleep with her. My twin brother, Clay. Don’t take this wrong, cause I sure don’t want you thumpin me with those brush cutters, but Clay’s as gay as the day is long.” Cleve backed up a step.

Grinning like a fool, he waited for Cleve to look at him again. “Clay comin to visit anytime soon?”

Cleve puffed out a relieved breath and blinked long and slow.

“Kie’s the only other person who figured me out.”

“Yeah, well, I’m probably a little more familiar with certain traits than most folks are, havin a gay identical twin. I’m embarrassed it took me this long to figure out.” He lifted his hat and mopped his brow. With a wide grin, he said, “Let’s go eat lunch before our little woman loses her mind.”

“Honey, we’re home.” Nate called out, walking next to Cleve as they entered the cabin.

Kiersten rolled her eyes when Cleve chuckled and elbowed him. “Looks like you two managed some male bonding. What were you doing out there, smoking cigars and telling football-scoring-cheerleader stories?”

Nate brushed a kiss over her brow. “It’s okay, chica. Everybody has their place in society. Cooking for the mighty is a noble profession, too.”

“Oh, shut up,” she muttered, and turned her back.

“See, Cleve. Didn’t I tell ya how witty she was?” He spun her around to display her grin.

She pushed him away. “Go wash up. I’m not finished grinding the glass for your sandwich. There’s hair on Cleve’s. Take a lesson, Texas. Mock me like Nate, and you’ll graduate to glass, too.”

Over lunch, he announced, “Cleve has a gay identical twin.”

Kie choked on her Pepsi. “Thank God. I thought I’d be the only one to know about you forever. You’re like the last person in the world to come out of the closet.”

“I keep some pretty personal stuff for you too, sugar.”

“Clam up,” she growled. “Don’t mind Nate. He wants everybody’s life to be as intriguing as his. So, Cleve, how many siblings do you have?”

“Oldest brother is Conrad, then MaryEllen, Carter, Susie, then me and Clay.”

“Six kids. Your poor mom. What do the rest of them do for a living?”

Cleve paused, looking from Kiersten to him. “Ranching. Clay and Susie raise horses, but everybody else raises cattle.”

She gave his hand a sympathetic pat. “Must be a bummer,” she said, “having to work for somebody else while your siblings are off raising their own stock.”

He hung his head. “It’s not how you think, Kiersten. The Howells have lots of ranches, one for each of their kids, including this one in Colorado. Each one is a Flyin H, and each son has the initials ‘CJ’, like their dad.”

Dear Kie had it all wrong.

“Fascinating.” She stood and stacked up their plates. “Is each of the Howell sons as big an ass as Chaz?”

Nate tipped back in his chair, grinning.

“Never mind.” She blew a raspberry. “Of course nobody is as big an ass as Chaz.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Cleve said. “CJ senior has been runnin his ranches, but now he’s handin ’em over to his kids so he can retire. He’s a tough operator, and he’s used tactics that maybe his sons aren’t proud of, but it doesn’t mean they’re responsible for his actions, see?”

“Yeah, but it looks like Chaz must be walking right in his daddy’s footsteps.” She glanced out the window. “As riveting as all this Texan aristocracy is, we need to get outside if we’re gonna get another side of fence line hung today. Nate has to leave this afternoon because he has a class

tonight.” She turned on her heel and went out the front door, leaving Cleve with his mouth hanging open.

“Maybe you shouldn’t tell her.” Nate laughed with a hard clap on Cleve’s back. “She’s gonna be really pissed that she misunderstood so much. It gets ugly when she’s embarrassed. And definitely don’t ever take her home to meet your parents.”

\* \* \* \*

Nate had to leave before the fence along the road was finished. Kiersten took over where he’d left off, holding the wire up for Cleve to clip. It had been an interesting afternoon. Cleve and Nate had a blooming camaraderie, teasing her and competing with one another in attempts to prove who was faster at different tasks.

When Cleve called her “Rocky” in response to her calling him “Texas”, Nate had chimed in that it fit her because she was always trying to fight a guy who was bigger than her.

Cleve was probably disappointed to see Nate leave.

“We shouldn’t have let that rat Nate take the four-wheeler. Now we have to walk all the way back to the house,” she lamented when they were done working.

“It’s closer to my place from here. We can walk up there and get my truck, and I’ll take you to dinner.”

“Hmm. Tempting. Do I get a tour of the Pink Elephant?”

They stowed their tools under a bush and walked up the road toward Cleve’s ugly trailer.

He held the door open for Oscar, who stepped inside, looked around, and then hurried back out with his tail tucked between his legs and his ears lying flat.

Inside, she laughed till tears ran down her face.

“I can honestly say I’ve never seen chartreuse and plum used in the same room. Even the colorblind could see those shades don’t go together,” she called from the front bathroom.

“I’m gonna change right quick,” Cleve muttered, leaving her in the lavender and goldenrod kitchen.

While he dressed, she wandered outside to give his gelding a good ear-scratching.

He joined her, dressed in Levi’s and a snug black t-shirt. God. Was there room inside that shirt for her hand?

“What’s his name?” she asked, hoping to bring her attention back where it belonged.

“Bledsoe. Drew Bledsoe.”

“Isn’t that a football player’s name?”

He smirked. “Cowboys quarterback.” At her rolled eyes, he said, “Not my fault. Clay named him.”

\* \* \* \*

Inside Kiersten’s house, Cleve planned on an hour for her to get changed. But he’d no sooner settled himself along her couch for a quick nap than she reappeared, still damp from a shower and



dressed in big khaki cargo pants and a loose t-shirt. Bright peach toenails peeking out from her sport sandals were the only teasing feminine touch. He sat up. Damn. She'd given him nothing to gawk at. Again.

"That's the fastest I've ever seen a woman get ready."

She scoffed, "I'm hungry. No point fooling around in the shower all night just to go eat dinner."

He rose to his feet right next to her. She was so different from other women. Her perfume reminded him of the honeysuckle trailing up the side of Mama's arbor. One thing good, though, she'd skipped her makeup. He ran his thumbs over her cheekbones, making her blush.

"Glad I can still see those freckles." His hands slid around the cool sides of her neck and cupped her jaws. Now was the time. This kiss wouldn't get interrupted. Heartbeat hammering, he moved his mouth down to join hers. Softer than he'd expected, she was pliant beneath his exploring tongue. Willing and welcoming. Then she took the lead, pushing herself against him and pulling him toward her.

He had to lift his mouth up for air. "Oh, Rocky. Tryin to give me a heart attack?"

"*You* started it." She sighed and gave him a flirty smile. A quick slap to his chest, and she turned on her heel, scooped up her little purse and led the way out the door.

He followed, not sure he could've stayed behind if he'd tried.

On the way to the truck she stopped to give Oscar a consolation pat. "Watch the house, stinky dog. Be good, boy."

Cleve turned his truck around, watching Oscar in the rearview mirror. "Where'd you get that ugly dog, anyway?"

"Hey, not so loud! You wanta give him a complex? I found him when he was a pup, on the side of the road by the reservoir. It was just after I foun—after I decided to put my house on the market and move up here. Seemed like he was meant to be mine. He didn't have a collar, so I kept him."

"Why'd ya name him Oscar?"

"Mostly after the grouch on Sesame Street, because he looks like him, kinda always a mess."

"And?"

"It's kind of gross." When her cheeks blushed pink, her eyes were an even prettier green. "Well, he's got all different kinds of dogs in him. Grandpa used to tell me that bologna and hot dogs had dog meat in them, so in some twisted way I thought of hot dogs. Like Oscar Mayer, ya know, not knowing for sure what he was made of."

"That *is* gross, but funny. I'll never look at another hot dog without thinking of that mutt."

"It would have been pretty damn lonely my first winter on the Peak if Oscar hadn't been there. The cats sleep day and night, and I can only bug Nate so much with emails."

"Why'd you let me think he was your boyfriend before?"

Kiersten looked out her window and shrugged. "It's a convenient cover for both of us. I didn't *tell* you he was my boyfriend. You assumed it."

"You made some assumptions yourself, you know." Time to come clean while they were in the truck and she couldn't get away.

"I know. I shouldn't have assumed you're rotten just because Howell is. You can't begin to understand how much I hate that guy for what he's done. Him and his whole precious family of CJs. What a bunch of pompous pricks! They made their millions by mooshing little guys. And I'm just one more bug in their way."

Her all-too-accurate summation of his dad's business ethics made him cringe. "I can assure you the Howells won't try to get your property from you again, Kiersten. Wanta know *why* I can assure you of that?"

Among wrinkles of loose fabric in her lap, her fists clenched. "Let's drop the subject before I get pissy. You pretend you're out with a nice girl, and I'll pretend I don't know you work for my nemesis, okay?"

What choice did he have? She'd made it clear that even working for the Howells was reason for her to hate him. Sooner or later he'd have to come clean with her. Later would be better. He really liked her, but once she knew he was the son of her sworn enemy, she'd have nothing more to do with him. He'd tell her when he dropped her off at her house later. Hopefully she'd cool down overnight and still want help with the fence.

As they parked in front of the local grill, she said, "Look, I seem to be a bitch all the time lately. It's not your fault, and I want us to have a nice time. I'm sorry." She looked up from her lap to his face. "I like you a lot, so I'll try not to put you in the middle of the property war anymore."

*I like you a lot, too, Rocky.* He chewed his lip and watched her face break into an up-to-something grin.

"Kiss me again, and I promise not to be a bitch the rest of the night."

"Kiss *me* again, ma'am, and we might not make it to dinner." Definitely worth the risk. He pulled her toward him and planted one on her.

They'd barely taken a seat at their table when a masculine voice sniped, "Well, if it isn't the frigid Bitch-doctor!"

Several sets of eyes turned toward Kiersten, who looked ready to melt into her seat.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "It's Trayce. Maybe we should leave."

He had a better idea. He stood and strode to Trayce's table. With his elbow resting casually on the back of the booth, he looked the other man over.

Trayce had on skin-tight Wranglers and a t-shirt spouting white supremacy slogans in several fonts and colors. Buzzed hair complemented his military boots and the knife he wore clipped to his camouflage belt. Such a disrespectful person mimicking military style was just wrong.

No need to dignify this militant wanta-be with a greeting. "What you just said was right rude, besides inaccurate. I think you owe the lady an apology."

Trayce's sour-smelling laugh carried up to assault him. "I don't know who the hell you are, Mister, but I know what I'm talkin about. Steer clear of 'the lady', unless you want trouble for yourself. Nobody lives long around her. Both her folks are gone now, and her Grandma. Her husband, he was my good friend, and he's dead because of her, too. Her Granddad's only lasted this long because he was smart enough to send her away to the mountain. Now she lives up there frigid as a witch—"

"I'd like to clear up from my own experience that she's not frigid." Cleve hoped he didn't overstep his bounds with Kiersten. "Course, I guess if *you* had personal experience with her, we wouldn't be havin this conversation, would we?" Good, he'd peeved the idiot. "Now I expect you to keep your trap shut while we enjoy our meal, or management will have to remove you." He turned to the manager, who'd appeared at his elbow. "Am I right?"

The manager nodded. He should be anxious to keep the Howells happy, since they'd been footing the bill for Chaz's hefty tab.

With a look around at the other patrons still watching, he said, "Now for that apology."

Trayce narrowed his eyes, set his napkin aside, and sauntered to where Kiersten sat with her eyes wide. "I'm sorry, *Doc*," he sneered, slithering into the seat next to her. "It was wrong of me to assume you were frigid. And it must be coincidence that all the innocent people around you meet with fatal accidents."

Cleve took a seat across from them.

In a low voice, she warned, "Luke was the least innocent fucker that ever walked the planet, and you knew every bit of it. If I went public with it now, you'd be even farther up shit creek than you've paddled yourself by raping little girls after you pump them full of alcohol. Don't screw with me, or I might just be willing to put it *all* out for the public Wednesday in court."

"You wouldn't dare." Jaundiced eyes darted left and right.

"Revenge at any cost is still revenge, Trayce. And I've heard it's pretty damn sweet." Raising her voice, she said, "Apology accepted, for tonight and all the other lies you've told about me in the past. Bye now."

Trayce stood, hands clenched in impotent fists and stalked away.

She let her breath out in a relieved puff.

"You sure got some spunk, little Rocky," Cleve said with a smile. "Did you reject that guy sometime in the past?"

She looked away, avoiding eye contact.

"I don't let him hunt on the Peak anymore, so he has it in for me."

The waiter arrived and Kiersten ordered a glass of white zinfandel.

"Why'd he keep calling you Doc?"

She lifted one shoulder. "I'm an optometrist."

"Don't reckon you get a lot of business up on the Peak."

“My practice is leased out. Thanks for rushing to my defense.” *Pretty obvious subject change.*  
“You’re a real nice guy. Keep it up and you might change my opinion of Texans.”

Too bad he wasn’t changing her opinion of the Howells, too. “Defending a lady is what I was brought up to do, like takin my hat off when I go inside.”

The waiter arrived with her wine and the iced tea for him, which he dosed with sugar. Why did that guy think Kiersten was frigid, if she hadn’t turned him down cold sometime in the past? She was holding out. Not that he could see her going for a guy like Trayce. Hadn’t Chaz mentioned something about her not wanting men anymore? Must be another rumor, since he didn’t doubt she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Remembering the way she’d kissed him in her house made his shorts seem a little small.

He fiddled with his empty sugar packets, nesting them one inside another. “That’s the second guy around here who seems hell-bent on makin you out to be a lesbian or frigid.”

She snorted and downed the rest of her wine, then set the empty glass down and nodded at the questioning waiter. “Lesbian? Hmm, I hadn’t really considered that option.” Lord, was she really thinking about it? Probably best if he didn’t let his mind go there. “Trayce has been telling lies around town about my sex drive for as long as he hasn’t been allowed to hunt on my property. When I was married to his ‘best friend’, he was even more interested in my sex life. Luke was the kind of guy who kissed and told, well, everything, I guess.”

Her second glass of wine arrived, and she took a hearty drink. If she didn’t slow down, she’d be drunk soon.

The waiter took their orders, then left.

After another swallow, she wiped her mouth with her napkin and leaned closer. “One New Year’s Eve, Luke passed out way early and left me to entertain our guests alone. Trayce just would *not* go home, even after everybody else left. I kept cleaning up the mess in the kitchen, wishing to hell that Luke would wake up and rescue me. I had really bad vibes about Trayce, the way he kept standing too close. You know,” she flicked one hand through the air, “a feeling he was gonna try something. He was pretty wasted, and I doubt he remembered it the next day, but he started telling me things that Luke had told him about our love life. *True* things, that I knew he wasn’t making up. God, I wanted to die.”

She turned pink and took another long drink. “Trayce is, like, a pretty big guy. I got scared, because he kept coming closer, trying to put his hands on me, but I’d always move away, cleaning off the counters or sticking something in the dishwasher.”

Years after, she was still pretty shook up. How’d she managed to act so cool in front of Trayce?

“When I put a jar of salsa in the fridge, he cornered me and started bragging how good he was in bed. I was stuck between the fridge door and him, and he wouldn’t let me out. He got my hands pinned together above my head. I wanted to scream, but I knew Luke wouldn’t wake up. So I acted like I was okay with it, until he moved down to kiss my neck. Then I raised up my knee

like Grandma told me to when she told me about the birds and the bees—I was seventeen by then, and she was already too late, but I never told her *that*. I missed my target between his legs, but he got a good slam in the gut. He doubled over and started heaving in the sink. That’s when I tore ass out of the kitchen and locked myself in the bedroom with Luke. Next morning, Trayce had a hell of a hangover, and I bet his stomach hurt from more than throwing up, but he never said a word to me about what happened. I think he forgot it.”

Her wine glass was empty when the food arrived along with a new, full glass.

He turned in his seat to glare at Trayce, who flashed a malicious grin on his way out. “You never, ah, told your husband?”

Her shoulders went up a smidge. “I confronted him about telling Trayce private stuff, and he denied it. Somehow he put it back on me, like I misunderstood Trayce. I was so pissed I didn’t even tell him about the rest.”

Sounded like her husband had been a real stand-up guy. No wonder she was mad at the world. “What’s happenin Wednesday in court?”

“Um, he’s in trouble for statutory rape and providing alcohol to minors.”

He waited for her to go on.

“His bonehead lawyers called me as a character witness.” She managed a hysterical laugh, but she averted her eyes. Hiding something.

“And you could mess up his whole case with that story.”

Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked at her lap.

Aw, hell. Now she’d cry. “Don’t do that, darlin.” He moved around the table and sat next to her, tipped her chin so she had to look at him. “We’ll talk about this later, okay? You wanta leave, just skip dessert?” He held her against his chest, hoping to comfort her, restore the smile to her face and those pretty green eyes that weren’t focusing much just now. Shit, girl her size probably couldn’t handle much alcohol.

“Cleve, I’m not a very good person. Don’t you have a nice big-haired girl waiting for you in Texas? You should take me home, and then call her.” She pushed herself away from him.

What was eating her and why did she think she was a bad person? He needed to get to the bottom of this mystery, but this wasn’t the place to do it.

“Come on, Rocky. Let’s head back up the hill.”

## Chapter 7

They drove north in silence. Cleve must be taking her suggestion and ridding himself of her. He had to be embarrassed at the scene she'd made. It would be all over town tomorrow. *Recluse eye doc flushes tear ducts at The Grille*. To make matters worse, she'd been so caught up in her shame over being a spectacle, she'd forgotten to check the bill and put in her share for dinner. She had no intention of accepting Howell money in any form, even if Cleve had earned it honestly.

With a miserable snuffle, she said, "I haven't cried in public since my Grandma died, ten years ago." Cleve didn't reply, so she went on. "Not even at Luke's funeral. It was two weeks after he died before it sunk in. I woke up one morning, went out in our living room, and it hit me. He was gone. *Gone*, and never coming back. I sat down on the floor and cried, like, all day. Nate found me there that evening, still in the same place, leaning against Luke's chair. He got me up and helped me to bed, tried to make me eat before he left. Next morning, I did the same thing again. Nate took off work and stayed with me for a week after that."

They'd reached the reservoir, where Cleve pulled over and parked. Two fishing boats bobbed along the opposite shore in the last strip of evening sunlight. He unfastened both of their seat belts, and she didn't mind a bit when he pulled her close against him.

She stared out at the wind-whipped water.

He cleared his throat. "Sounds like you still loved him when he died."

"It was another month before I knew what a jerk Luke was. By then, I'd done the grieving widow thing. But I'll never shed another tear over him."

Cleve stared at the water. Probably wondered what kind of grudge she had against Luke. After all, widows didn't usually speak ill of their dead husbands. "It's not important what he did." Her tone was as firm as she could make it, considering what Luke had done *was* important, had changed how she'd feel about other people forever. "Can you take me home now, please?" She could feel the hate boiling up again, and she'd promised not to be a bitch the rest of the night.

Cleve started his truck and drove up the dirt road with her still against his side.

At her cabin, she asked, "Wanta come help me out with the rest of that ice cream?"

\* \* \* \*

Once inside, Cleve positioned himself in front of the cupboard where she kept her bowls. He watched her pull the tub of ice cream from her freezer. Her invitation had promised more than dessert. What should he do about that? A few more kisses surely wouldn't hurt anything.

In the dim light, she met his gaze, then moved across the kitchen to where he stood.

Her arms slid around his neck and she was close enough he could smell the honeysuckle on her again.

"You haven't left to call that Texan girl."

“There isn’t a Texan girl.”

This time he let his mind spin with the kiss, till it could make no sense and speak no reason to him. She wanted this, and so did he. He could taste the wine on her lips, feel her soft little body inviting him. Who was he to turn down an invitation like that?

Good ole conscience stabbed, deflating his overblown desire. He couldn’t take advantage of a drunk woman. She didn’t know who he was, and wouldn’t be so willing if she did. Breaking the kiss, he tried to stop her.

“Hey, Rocky. It’s only our first date. I’m not that kinda guy.”

“Cleve. I haven’t had sex in two and a half years. I’m definitely that kinda girl right now. No strings attached, okay? Neighbors with benefits.” Her mouth went to work on his neck, causing his insides to twist with want.

He needed a distraction. “Just a bit ago, you warned me to stay away. Tell me why.”

“Um. Let’s not talk. Take me to bed.” Surely she knew what she was doing to him when she pushed herself against his jeans like that.

“Darlin, come clean with me first.” What the hell was she hiding? “Tell me what that bastard Trayce is holdin over your head to make you testify for him, ’stead of against him.”

\* \* \* \*

His voice was so persuasive, and her inhibitions had left her some time ago. Kiersten couldn’t remember why she didn’t trust Cleve, anyway. He’d been nothing but kind and friendly. She hoped to get much more friendly, so she might as well spill her guts. Her hand held his as she led him to her couch, where she plunked down on his lap.

“Okay. Luke died before hunting season, in September.” She fiddled with the hair behind his ear as she talked. “I let Trayce hunt up here in October, because he was Luke’s friend. I’d just won the battle over the eminent domain thing in August with that fucker Howell.”

Cleve sucked in his breath. Must be ticklish around the ears.

“I got the notice a week after Luke died that the property was rezoned as a resort.” Such nice ears, too. And that little gold hoop was sexy. She’d like to get it in her mouth. What was she saying, anyway? “Um. So Trayce comes up here between seasons and shoots a trophy bull, eight points, totally illegal. I freaked out. Everybody knew he was my friend, and I was terrified it would get back to Howell or Storm—”

“Strom,” he said.

Her thoughts might be fuzzy, but wasn’t it strange for him to correct her like that? Probably not. Hadn’t Nate done it a hundred times? “Whatever. The lawyer’s as crooked as his client. Anyway, I was afraid if it came out where Trayce had poached the bull, those jackasses would use it against me and somehow get the Peak. So I told Trayce he couldn’t come back here again. Ever since then, he’s been telling lies about me. He knows I can’t turn him in without incriminating myself for not reporting what he did.”

Cleve didn’t speak. Oh, man. What had she done? His loyalty would be with his boss.

“Please.” She squeezed his arm. “Don’t tell Howell, Cleve.” She pressed her lips to his again before she went on. “If I don’t tell what Trayce did, then he might get off, and he might force himself on some other underage girl. And if I do tell... well, Howell will take all this from me anyway. I was seriously planning on not telling about the poaching. Until tonight, when I remembered how Trayce scared me that New Year’s.”

He cleared his throat. “Trayce must remember you busting his gut with your knee, and that’s why he keeps sayin you’re frigid.”

She hid her face against his neck. “Trayce calls me frigid because Luke admitted to him that he could never...well, I’ve never...I mean, with a guy I haven’t ever...Shit. Luke was the only one who really got a *happy ending* in bed.”

“Couldn’t seal the deal, huh?” While his fingers held her arm, his thumb rubbed the side of her breast. “Two and a half years...”

“Thirty-two months, actually.” Wearing a half-sly grin, she brought her lips back to his.

Then his hands slid around her bottom, and kissing her all the while, he stood and carried her to her room. His hand passed between her shoulder blades. Made her jump. Damn. The bruise.

He set her down on her bed. “You’ve still got lots of bumps and bruises. I’ll see you in the mornin, and we’ll start the fence up the west side. Night, Rocky.”

She flopped back on her bed and listened as he stopped and considerably put the ice cream back in the freezer. His deep voice rumbled outside as he talked to Oscar, and a stick clattered on the woodpile during a quick round of fetch. Then he drove away on his ATV. *No deposit, no return*. No second thoughts?

After heaving herself from her moonlit bed, she padded to the kitchen to get her phone. Nate would be home from his class, probably studying for finals. She settled in the corner of the couch as she waited for him to answer.

“Princess,” he drawled. “What’s up?”

“Hey. How was class?”

“Fine. You didn’t call about class. Did you and Cleve get it on after I left?”

She giggled. “Jesus, Nate! Not in the middle of the day.” Then she sobered. “Not at all, actually.”

“You’ve been drinking. What happened?”

She related the events of the evening word for word, step by detailed step. “I can’t believe he left. Maybe I’ve lost my touch. I’ve never known a man to walk away from free sex.”

“What were you wearing?”

“Nate. It’s not about the clothes.”

Silence came from the other end.

“Cargo pants and a tee.”



“Lord. Not the droopy cargos? Those would fit me! You have to show you’re open for business, girlfriend. How’s a guy supposed to know you have a tight little ass when you wear a tent? Are you ready to listen to me now, and turn off the ‘Not Interested’ sign?”

\* \* \* \*

When Cleve parked his ATV beside his truck next morning, he saw no trace of Kiersten. Maybe she was still fast asleep, nursing a hangover. Had she been that drunk? Probably. Which meant it was a good thing he’d left, despite his body telling him to stay. Everything but his conscience had told him to. Even the dog had seemed to want him to stay, slowing his departure.

Yep, he’d made the right choice, but what did she think of it? It couldn’t feel good to be turned down like she’d been the night before. But a girl who’d been celibate so long shouldn’t be giving it up to a guy who’d deceived her.

He knocked on her front door and was about to yell, when she opened it and stepped out.

If her going-out clothes the night before had looked like the over-sized garments a cancer patient might have once fit into, today’s work clothes sure looked like what a cowgirl would wear out line dancing. A hot cowgirl. He looked up and down the tight black jeans and tighter tank top.

Cleavage. Hell, yeah. He bit his lip to stop a whistle.

Leaving her wanting the night before hadn’t broken her spirit, but inspired her to either torture him into regretting his choice or make him go crazy for her. Whichever her mission, she’d as good as achieved it.

The day was warming up fast. “Mornin Rocky. Lookin’ hotter than a two-dollar pistol. Ready to get after that fence?”

They did make headway on the fence, but not much. He had to hold the wire up for Kiersten to fasten, because he couldn’t quit dropping the fasteners when she held the wire. More often than not, he was looking at her chest instead of his working hands.

Even doing the simple job of holding wire to a post, he’d get distracted by the curls she’d left loose around her face, or the freckles on her cheeks peeking out past the makeup.

She chattered about her sheep and how many truckloads it would take to get them up to the Peak, how much the lambs would weigh in the fall, and on and on.

If only she’d shush and let him tell her he wanted to find a soft spot in the shade and make crazy love. And dammit, he knew they had an attraction, but it seemed like more. Everything about her was just right. She was so spunky and determined to fight for what mattered to her. Smart as a whip, too. That had to be how she’d managed to fight off Strom and Strom. Nobody else had ever stymied them. Much more to admire than her little body. Which he kept coming back to.

Today he didn’t have to imagine what that body looked like under layers of baggy clothes. The way she usually dressed, a guy would guess she was scrawny, but he could see curves aplenty today. She must keep herself hidden away from the world because she’d been hurt when her husband passed away. Now she was out, ready to try again, and he’d make sure she wasn’t disappointed this time. Only hurdle still in the way was his identity.

Thank the Lord when she suggested they stop for lunch. Worried over how mad she'd be at him, he'd left the house without breakfast. Besides, lunch brought them closer to dinner, which he intended to be their second date. Then he'd find a way to tell her who he was. She seemed to like him, so maybe it wouldn't matter to her that she'd been confused about his last name.

Pushing his chair back after eating his lunch, he watched her put the mayonnaise back in her full-size fridge. "Hey Rocky, you wanta go to dinner again after we finish the fence this afternoon?"

"No." She returned to the table, hands on hips, a smile playing below sleepy-looking eyes.

"Oh." Damn. Maybe she had other plans. He looked away out the screen door, where chipmunks raced up and down a tree, cheeks stretched full of grain she'd tossed to them.

"Hey, Texas."

His eyes pulled back to her face.

She was leaning toward him, elbows on the table. "Let's not go back to work today."

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten watched Cleve's Adam's apple bob when he registered the implications. Straddling him, she sat on his lap and tipped her face up to his.

He moaned, then pulled her closer for a kiss. His hands freed her braid and combed it loose around her shoulders.

Butterflies tickled her stomach. This was going to be good.

"Need to talk first." He buried his face in her still-damp hair and sniffed.

"We've talked enough." She tugged his shirt loose from his belt and slid her hands up a furry chest. Scooching closer to him, she arched her back so he had access to her breasts.

"So damn pretty. Like a sunset." His mouth nuzzled between her breasts while her hands kneaded his pecs inside the shirt. "Have to tell you somethin first."

"Shut up, already." Laughing, she worked his belt loose. "You wanta tell me something? Tell me you want me as much as I want you." *But don't move your mouth from there while you talk.*

"I do, but—"

"No buts, let's just do this thing, Cleve. Jesus, help me pull this shirt off."

With his help, her tank flew to a corner of the kitchen. His hands nudged hers away from her bra clasp.

"You better not take off again. It's not gentlemanly to leave a damsel in distress," she murmured to his salty neck as he carried her to her room. "Damn, you taste good." Her lips found his ear lobe as his weight stretched along hers. She'd go easy on the ears so she wouldn't tickle him.

"Kiersten. Please. I really need to tell you something."

"Tell me anything, just please don't tell me no." To make sure he didn't, she slid her hands in the front of his pants till he sucked in his breath. "Tell me after we're done. Thirty-two months, help me out here."

"Okay darlin, you win." His lips closed around her nipple.

Ah, it was good to get her way. His hands worked magic on her body, sending her arching and writhing for him, wanting him. After hiding herself for so long, it was strange to be undressed by a man in broad daylight, have his hands and mouth exploring her in plain sight. Strange in an exotic way. A good way.

He removed his clothes and laid that hard body on her again, a treat to her senses, and she squirmed against him, yearning for penetration, but he held her off. His fingers stroked her like she'd never been stroked, and she thought she'd die if she had to wait another second. Then he started rubbing her with his penis, a smoother, wilder rubbing that made her hands and feet go numb. She'd felt this before with a vibrator, but couldn't believe it was going to happen with a man. Her vision clouded, she couldn't tell which way was up...the big event was only moments away—

He stopped and grinned at her with a confidence he didn't deserve.

"Don't stop!" God, he'd almost gotten her there, and couldn't quit a few seconds too soon. They had to keep going.

He ignored her command and kissed her long, slow, and deep, then his warm lips moved along her jaw, just below her ear. Firm fingers entered her, going directly to a spot Luke had tried and tried to find. The pressure of his touch seemed too intense to endure, and then it was gone. His fingers brushed her clitoris on the way out, and then he entered her. Her body arched and shuddered. Pleasure and pain melded together and rendered her helpless to stop the spasms washing through her like waves. Was she conscious? He thrust in and out, then he collapsed on her, whispered her name once and covered her mouth with his, shuddering. Such a heavenly feeling, one she hadn't realized she'd missed, knowing how much pleasure she'd given a man. Only this time she'd been a recipient, too. Wow.

He lay across her, getting his breath back.

"Yeesh, Tex. You think you could do that again?"

He nodded, without a word.

After they'd finished a second time, she lay spooned in front of him, mumbling about him being her hero.

"Hey, Rocky. About that thing I need to tell you..."

"Mmm. Talk fast. I think I might be one of those people who passes out after orgasms." Her eyes were closing as fast as she could open them.

"Remember how I told you there's more than one CJ Howell?"

\* \* \* \*

She woke up alone and very aware of her swollen female parts. Her breasts had red splotches from Cleve's whiskers. Her other parts were probably red too. Not used to so much activity. She peeked out the window.

Cleve's truck was missing.

He'd left a note on her table by the bed.

*Rocky,*

*Had to meet the fridge guy to take delivery at 5. Be back ASAP.*

*You are amazing.*

*Cleve*

She clutched the note to her chest. *Amazing.*

Her climax-induced sleepiness was completely gone. She felt like working out, or chopping wood. Anything that took mega energy. But first she needed to share.

Nate answered on the third ring. “Kie, what’s up?”

“Oh my God. Guess what I just had!”

He laughed. “Judging by how happy you are, it must be sex. With a tall Texan, perhaps?”

“Not *just* sex. Sex like it should be.”

“He rocked your world.” Good old Nate. He sounded almost as happy as she was.

“I think it’s still shakin, baby!”

“Excellent. Umm, where’s he at?”

“Had to meet delivery guys for a new fridge. I totally fell asleep while he was talking. He kept trying to tell me about it, I think.”

“He was talking about a *fridge* after sex?”

She could imagine the look of horror Nate must be wearing.

Thinking back, she tried to remember those fuzzy, euphoric moments before she’d nodded off. “No, not the fridge. It was...the damn Howells. He seems to be always talking about them. Some crap about all those CJs again.”

“Like?”

“The old guy is CJ, but the son who inherits this property has a goofy name. Not Chaz. Some city. It’s uh, Cincinnati, or Columbus. No, I know. Cleveland! Only a Texan, I swear.”

“Kie,” Nate muttered, sounding impatient. “Think hard. You know anybody named Cleveland? Or maybe Cleve?”

Something clicked. Wasn’t Cleve telling her something about the day they met? Did he work for a guy named Cleveland? No. *He* was Cleveland. The Howell heir to the Colorado Flying H. Her head hurt. “Shit. That son of a bitch! He’s been tricking me this whole time.”

“Not exactly. Did he tell you he wasn’t a Howell? Did Chaz tell you that he *was* a Howell?”

“Goddammit. Don’t take their side. They sure as hell didn’t correct me, did they? Oh, God. I told him all about the poached trophy bull. Oh my God. I’ve screwed it all up, Nate. I traded the Peak for sex!” The tears arrived.

Nate must have heard them in her voice. “Calm down, sugar. Cleve told me the other day he doesn’t want the Peak. He’s shopping other properties. He’s a good guy—”

“My *ass* he’s a good guy! He’s tricked me into giving him what he needs from me. And you knew, didn’t you? This is your fault anyway, getting me all hot and bothered.” Damn Nate for meddling in her sex life! “I have to go. I’m not letting that two-faced prick back in my house.”

“Wait, Kie.”

“Shut up, Nate. I’ll deal with you later. If I lose the Peak because of this, your job will be obsolete. And you can plan on finding a new place to live too.”

She hung up, more furious than she’d been when she’d discovered...well, no time to think of that now.

The padlock that used to go on the gate down at the county road over the winter was in the bottom drawer in the kitchen. She oiled it, double-checked her key ring to make sure she had the key, then grabbed a fat permanent marker on the way out.

Full throttle on Cleve’s ATV, she raced it down to the county road. Then she parked it and yanked out one end of the fuel line. Ha! Let the stupid city slicker figure out why it wouldn’t start.

Once she’d pulled the grass tufts from in front of her heavy galvanized steel gate, then kicked away a pile of dirt the road graders had pushed in its path, she was able to tug it shut, creaking and groaning.

In the center of the gate hung a No Trespassing sign with a wide white margin at the top, bottom, and sides. Using her marker, she wrote on every side, ‘*NO HOWELLS!!!!*’

A thick, rusty chain wrapped through the gate and around a post. She clicked the lock around the chain, then stomped back up the road to her house. Expletives and insults directed at Cleve kept Oscar looking at her all the way back.

She was climbing her front steps when a horn honked several times from the direction of her gate. Ignoring it, she went inside and slammed her door.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve’s truck ground to a halt in front of Kiersten’s shut gate and her sign. He’d been so excited to head back to her, he’d barely noticed in time to keep from hitting it. Her scribbled warnings told him she must’ve finally understood what he’d been telling her.

“Well, hell, Howell.” He punched the horn again. Let the world know how frustrated he was. Should’ve stayed with her, and the devil with the damned refrigerator. At least he could’ve cooled her off some. Maybe bribed her with more sex.

Now she was good and pissed. He left the truck and vaulted over the gate. Might take some explaining, but he’d set her straight.

A few minutes later, Oscar ran out his dog door to greet him, scraggly tail wagging.

“Goddamn Texan!” Kiersten hollered out her open kitchen window. “I have a right to shoot trespassers, I’ll have you know! All I have to do is say I felt threatened.”

“You’re not gonna shoot and take a chance of hittin Oscar. Come out and fight like a man.” Hopefully his taunts would soften her up.

“Like a man!” Her footsteps stomped across the house to her room. “I can’t lie like men can, so I guess I can’t fight like one.” Her voice carried through the open window. “Your daddy should be proud. Did you already call him and tell him how you got in my pants? And how you got the dirt on me so you can take me down? Chaz will look up to you now. I guess he was right about women

not knowing diddlyfuck about business.” She came to her screen door, while he leaned against the deck rail. The shotgun she clutched bisected his view of her middle.

“If you wanta shoot me, go ahead, Rocky. You’ll be dealin with my Pop again, is all. I don’t want your property. Come on, I’ve been tryin to tell you who I am ever since we started gettin friendly.”

“Shut up and get off my deck! You suck, you know that? I can’t believe you slept with me when I thought you were somebody else.” Her voice had risen to a shriek. “Goddammit, why does this always happen to me?” Her head disappeared behind the wall and he heard a wet snuffle.

He seized the opportunity and moved closer so he was directly on the other side of the wall from her.

“Rocky.”

“Don’t call me that! You tricked me, and I *hate* you! Go fuck yourself, you lying bastard. Go to hell, or back to Texas, if there’s any difference.” Her muffled sob burned his insides like cheap tequila. “I hate all of you.”

Her door slammed and the lock snicked shut.

Oscar must have sensed that he was no longer welcome, because his ears went back, then he looked over his scruffy shoulder at him and went in his door.

Cleve’s booted heel came down on the deck and his fist smacked the wall behind him. He shoved away from it, yelling toward the house, “We’re not over, Rocky. We’re *not* over!”

No answer.

“I’ll be back.” Hands shoved deep in his pockets and head hanging low, he took his time walking back to his truck, kicking rocks along the way. He hoped Kiersten was watching till he got around the corner.

\* \* \* \*

Without a backward look, Kiersten locked her doors and then went in the shower, where she couldn’t see or hear Cleve. *Wash away his smell, his kisses.* No more Texans for her. She should’ve kept to her prejudice from the beginning. Just because a guy seemed nice didn’t mean he was. How had she become such a bad judge of character? Shit.

Character.

She had court in the morning. Nate was supposed to go along for moral support, but now she didn’t want to speak to him. He’d known about Cleve, but still pushed her to sleep with him.

Nate’s moral support wouldn’t help now anyway. Since the Howells already knew she was an accessory to the poaching, she might as well put it out there and help avenge the girl Trayce had taken advantage of. Doing damage to a guy for hurting a female sounded pretty damn good. Nate could rot with the straight guys for all she cared.

The hot water was gone. She’d stayed in the shower long enough to completely drain the heater tank, something she’d never done before. Yanking her thick terry robe on, she went to work in her closet. Nate’s little plan to get rid of all the wrong clothes had inspired her.

When she was finished, two black garbage bags bulged with clothes she'd be donating the next day.

Empty hangers dangled around three sides of her closet, as if waving forlornly to the absent clothing. Shoving them together stilled them. She wrinkled her nose at the bare wall behind. Maybe some paint would improve the atmosphere. She'd make a stop and pick some up after court. It would give her something to do at night, since she sure wouldn't be having *sex* again.

The third time Nate called, she answered, "What?"

"Finally! I was about to come up there."

"Don't."

"Look, Kie. Don't start acting psycho or I'll *move* up there."

"You're not welcome. You tricked me too. Just another asshole guy inside."

"Nice. I got you laid, which you sorely needed, and you know it."

"Yeah, thanks a bunch. That'll do me for another couple years until I feel like being lied to again. I'll let you know when that happens." Feeling particularly vindictive, she added, "Better yet, why don't you do the mercy-fuck thing, only without all the talking. Maybe you can write it off as an act of charity."

Nate sidestepped her verbal duel with a dry laugh. "What *is* your problem? Hormones making you bitchy? I hate to think what you'd be like pregnant."

Like the mushroom cloud following an atomic blast, it came to her. "Oh. Holy shit. Shit, shit, shit!"

"What? Kie, what's wrong?"

"Oh, mother of God. I forgot to use the latex you left. Jesus, I can't get pregnant from that bastard. I can't. Oh, dammit."

Nate whistled low and slow. "You both forgot? You guys must've been animals together."

"Shut up. I don't need any reminders." She and Cleve *had* been animals together. It was great. "And I don't need to be told that Cleve's responsible too, if I'm knocked up. I wouldn't want his pompous family near my child. They'd probably steal it, just like they want to steal its mother's home. Screw that."

"Calm down, girlfriend. It's not the smart route, but millions of people have unprotected sex every year without conceiving a child. Don't freak until you know you're prego. When are you due for your period?"

"Christ. He's a friend, he's a sex therapist, a fashion guru, and now a goddamn nurse. If I give birth, will you be my lactation consultant?"

Silent treatment.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm a bitch." She sighed. "Let me look at the calendar... Well, that's just sweet. Looks like I'm about ten days away from 'the first day of a missed period'." Wasn't this her most fertile time?

"Way to think positive. You used to want a baby, remember?"

“Yeah, back when I wanted a daddy for my kid, too. I’ve got none of those things on my wishlist anymore.”

“You gonna tell Cleve? Might be a good revenge to let him squirm some.”

“What the hell do you want him to squirm for? You helped him out with this, traitor.”

“I never expected him to sleep with you before he told you who he was. Come on, you know me better than that. You want company tonight, or what?”

“No.” She sagged against the wall. “Me and my fertile uterus will turn in early. Will you still come to court with me tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. Pick me up, girlfriend.” She’d been awful, but Nate was still there for her, like always. He should cut out that girlfriend thing. Probably how Grandpa got the wrong idea about them.



## Chapter 8

Kiersten skidded to a halt at the end of her driveway the next morning, cursing Cleve long and loud. Because of him, she had to unlock and open her gate, drive through, then get out to lock it again. She lurched away from the gate so fast, the black bags of clothes in the back seat fell down. Helpless Oscar slid the length of the truck bed, his toenails screeching under him.

“Poor dog.” He didn’t deserve that.

But hey, at least Cleve’s ATV was still parked where she’d maimed it.

A cloud of dust billowed above the road ahead of her. Unusual for this early in the morning. Maybe a logging truck. She quickly caught the other vehicle. A tall, red F350.

“Dumbass Texan. Drives like a damned old lady!”

Purposely driving slow, he hogged the middle of the road so she couldn’t pass. Her horn blared her fury, but his dust continued to roll up her windshield.

She’d pull over and get some space between the vehicles so the dust could settle.

The F350 in front of her pulled over also. Damn. She could step on it and speed past him, but he’d probably throw his stupid ass in front of her to make her stop.

Cleve slid out of his truck and strode with cool purpose through the cloud to her door.

Arms still crossed over her chest, she refused to roll down her window until the dust had settled.

He stood stock still outside, seemingly unfazed by the choking haze, eyes fixed on her, jaw tense.

She took her time putting down her window. “What do you want, *Howell*?”

“What’d you do to my ATV?”

For the first time that day, she grinned. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. It ran really good when I had it wound up driving down to the gate.”

“Look, Kiersten. I’m sorry. How long are you gonna be mad at me? I tried to tell you—”

“Yeah, it’s pretty hard to get the words out. I mean, myself, I’d have a hard time admitting that I’m the spawn of Satan, but you should be used to saying, ‘I’m Cleveland Howell’, or maybe, ‘I’m one of many CJ Howells.’ Or how about, ‘I’m your sworn enemy, wanna fuck?’ Any one of those would do, but you wanted to take advantage first. Why didn’t you get me to sign away the deed while my legs were spread?”

Cleve’s face reddened. He turned and walked away.

She sniped, “Where you going, anyway?”

He stopped and gave her a snide grin. “Got business at the courthouse this mornin.”

“Oh, the Howell mansion. How elegant. Hope your plans get rejected. But then, you don’t need to build a house. You’ll probably own mine by winter, right?”

She'd put her truck in gear and was about to speed away when he cupped his hand to his mouth and called, "I'm goin to watch the show in court."

The hell he was! She turned off her truck and jumped out, launching her body at his, hands itching to wring his neck.

Cleve stepped out of her path, but managed to catch her before she tumbled to the ground. "Lord, woman! What in hell are you wearin?"

So he didn't like her outfit. Good. The faded navy blue suit had been Grandma's, and the skirt only stayed up because of its elastic waist. Beneath the oversized jacket was a rumpled white turtleneck. Her shoes were clean, but they were the pair Grandma had left at the cabin for gardening. The wedge heel under a wide black laced upper would support the best waitress through the longest shift. She looked like a little girl playing dress up, but why should she care?

"None of your business what I'm wearing." She tried in vain to tug her jacket sleeve from Cleve's hands.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Hidin out again, huh? That's okay. I don't want any other guys lookin at you, anyway. Can you put on a hat and veil too?"

"Shut up, Howell. What I wear has nothing to do with you. Not since yesterday. Kiss my ass!" She turned on her sensible heel and headed to her truck.

Cleve caught her braid and tugged her back, then spun her to face his chest. He lowered his face to meet hers eye to eye. "Name the time and place, Rocky, and I'll be there to kiss every last inch of that delectable ass."

Hot and supple, his lips hit hers, his tongue diving in her mouth like he knew exactly where he was going.

Her heart stuttered and didn't seem ready to re-start.

By the time he let her go, she'd almost responded. God help her.

She kept her eyes on his as she backed to her open driver's side door. Time to wipe that shit-eating grin off his face. "I'm not on any birth control, Casanova."

His mouth hung open until her dust cloud forced him to close it and get into his truck.

\* \* \* \*

Scads of nosy residents milled in the halls of the courthouse. Nate and Kiersten made their way to the appropriate courtroom, already half-filled with earlybird onlookers. Seconds after she and Nate sat down, she saw Cleve had made it in time to get a seat. Their eyes met and he flashed her the same grin he'd worn in the middle of the county road.

"I still can't believe I'm sitting next to you, in *that*," Nate nagged in her ear.

When he'd first opened her truck door, he'd backed out, arms crossed, and told her, "No way will I be seen with you dressed like that. You look like a 1940s pew-warmer who barely survived a famine. Damn, girlfriend. I know what you have in your closet. Why would you wear that when it's five months until Halloween?"

With a shrug, she'd started backing out of the driveway, knowing Nate would relent and climb in. He shook his head in mute disgust for the first half of their thirty-mile trip. His perceived punishment fell flat, though.

She'd relished the silence, fuming over her earlier confrontation with Cleve.

Well, she'd have to stew about it later. The judge was taking the bench. She whispered furtively to Nate, "Freakin Howell probably tried to hold me up so I'd get here late and be in contempt of court."

Nate replied only by rolling his eyes.

The case was introduced, the judge rapped his gavel, and the murmuring crowd fell silent.

"I'd like to advise one and all, this case will be proceeding in an unusual fashion. Due to the defendant's alleged association with terrorists and his current access to firearms, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms has requested this case be handled as quickly as possible. Therefore, we've held no prior depositions or closed examinations of witnesses. I'll make every attempt to maintain normal procedures, but be warned, counselors, this *will* be an irregular case."

The lawyers for the defense requested a stay, closed proceedings, and finally a dismissal of the case on the grounds that Trayce Gunther had been harassed by law enforcement. The judge denied all three motions.

After the arresting officers made their statements and were cross-examined by the defense, each of four teenage girls took the stand, all attesting that Trayce had dated their friend, who must remain unnamed due to her age. They all knew of various occasions on which he'd had sex with this friend, whose name each girl said by accident at least once during testimony. All testified they'd consumed alcohol provided by Trayce on more than one occasion.

A statement from the mother of the girl who'd dated Trayce was read and admitted to evidence. The defense complained about not being able to cross-examine the mother, which the judge overruled. Apparently, the mother was out of the country on business, leaving her teenage daughter home with an older brother, as she often did. The mother was hospitalized and unable to travel back for the court date.

The girl testified next, made to look like a teen slut by the time the defense was finished.

Kiersten sat seething, watching the sneer on Trayce's face widen to a self-satisfied grin when the girl proclaimed her love for him. She planned to move in with him when she turned eighteen. The prosecution called other witnesses related to the charges of providing minors with alcohol, and then the judge called a recess for lunch. The defense would make its case when they reconvened.

"Jesus. What a waste of my time," she told Nate as they waited for the courtroom to clear so they could exit. She was thinking how much fence she could have hung during the wasted morning, when Trayce sauntered up.

He stopped in the aisle and sneered. "Mornin, Doc. I appreciate your support today."

"I'm not here to support you, I'm here to drive the nails in your coffin."

His eyes widened in alarm for only a second before he smirked confidently and strutted forward with his lawyers.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Cleve coming their way.

“Dammit, let’s go.” But there was no escaping. The crowd still clogged the aisle.

“Mornin, Nate,” Cleve said amiably, putting out his hand to shake Nate’s.

To her supreme annoyance, Nate responded in like fashion.

She tossed her head with its very tight braid, refusing to acknowledge her enemy.

Cleve cleared his throat. “Nate, I was wonderin if you could give me the name of a good mechanic? My ATV was runnin kinda spotty, and now I think it’s been vandalized by a neighbor.”

Nate stared in open-mouthed horror at her, till she pretended to be engrossed in her shoes.

“Check the fuel line. It’s fast and dirty, like the vandal.”

Her elbow plunged into his rib with a satisfying thud.

Nate rubbed his ribs, then smashed her toes in the soft, sensible shoes. “After that, run it down to Fred Murray, over on West Second Street. He’ll fix it cheap and right.”

“Thanks, Nate,” Cleve answered, openly smiling when she jerked her foot from under Nate’s. “I’d like to donate this to the cause.” He handed Nate two hundred dollar bills and a fifty. “Maybe you could take your boss shoppin for a new suit, since I guess it’s my family’s fault she can’t afford more than hand-me-downs these days.”

Even as Cleve eyeballed her reaction, she warned, “Take that money and die, Cook. That’s no better than drug money as far as I’m concerned. Howell probably threw some widow and her kids to the streets so he could use her house as a calving barn for blue ribbon heifers. You’re looking at the prize money.”

“Kie. Christ.” Nate defiantly stuck the money in his Gucci wallet.

“Fine,” she answered. “I’m going to lunch, alone. Just don’t be surprised, Nate, when you find out he’s been lying to you all along.” She marched through the thinning crowd and out the door. It was all she could do to keep from screaming. First this waste-of-her-time fiasco of a hearing, and now Nate taking Howell money after she’d ordered him not to. Who did he think he was, anyway?

She walked up the street for a sandwich, stood stewing in line, then stewed while she ate. It wasn’t bad enough she’d been had by Howell. Now Nate intended to be pals with him, totally not seeing what a jerk the guy was.

To make matters worse, Trayce had given her that confident grin. What did he and his lawyers have up their sleeves?

Public speaking had been an easy thing for her in school. She’d taken speech courses whenever she could, but with all the rumors Trayce spoon-fed the town, she dreaded being a spectacle quoted in the papers. Besides that, she’d probably be cross-examined more harshly than the accusing girl had been, because of what she planned to expose about Trayce.

When the last bite of her sandwich—which may as well have been cardboard for all the enjoyment she got from it—was gone, she trudged back to the courtroom.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve and Nate ate Italian for lunch, chatting about the weather and the case. “I talked to the prosecutor today,” Cleve said as they strolled back to the courthouse. “Kiersten won’t incriminate herself by testifying about things she knew Trayce did. And in order for any of those things to be used in civil court, they’d need to be proven with evidence.”

Nate chewed his lower lip. “Why’d you do that?”

“I know how tore up she was over incriminating herself and losing her ranch. And I want her to know I’m not tryin to take her home.”

With a shake of his head, Nate said, “You really screwed up, man. You shoulda told her who you were before you did the wild thing.”

“I know. But by then, it was already too late. She’d have killed me either way. Think she’ll get over it soon?”

“Soon? No way. Never? Maybe. She’s the most stubborn person I’ve ever known.”

He had a long road ahead of him. At least Kiersten was on the same road, and he’d make sure to pull her over every chance he got.

\* \* \* \*

When Howell and Nate returned and took their seats, Kiersten glared and refused to speak to either of them.

Her name was next on the list after the defendant’s mother. She ignored the snickers as she took the stand in her frumpy suit and got sworn in. *Screw them all.*

“Ms. Day,” the squat, bald leader of the defense team began, “you’ve been called as a character witness for the defense. Could you please explain how long you’ve been acquainted with the defendant and define your relationship?”

“I’ve known him since I met my husband, Luke Snyder. That was, um, four and a half years ago. He was Luke’s friend.”

“Anything else?” he prompted.

“We’re no longer on friendly terms.”

The lawyer nodded and smirked.

“Isn’t it true that you and Mr. Gunther are estranged lovers?”

Kiersten laughed out loud for several seconds. The crowd seemed infected by her mirth and a few joined in. “Huh, huh.” She was still chuckling as she tried to answer. Pulling as serious a face as she could, she leaned toward the microphone. “No.”

“Not before, nor after, your husband’s *untimely accident*?”

Damn Trayce and his incessant lying. “Look, mister, my husband crashed his car speeding down Highway Thirteen. I don’t appreciate the way your client tries to make it out to be my fault all the time.”

Two members of the defense team nudged one another's shoulders. One defense lawyer, a young blond man, turned red and looked at his shoes.

When she looked to Nate, he shook his head no, biting his lip. His eyes closed as if in prayer. Yeah, fat lot of good praying would do.

She went on, "My personal code of ethics prohibits me from sleeping with any man who'll wear a shirt that says 'Neo-Nazis DO whoever they want!'. "

Another rumble of laughter passed through the crowd, and the defense asked that the mention of Neo-Nazis be stricken from the record, which the judge denied. A chorus of boos erupted from the crowd of young bald guys toward the back.

Her interrogator asked, "Have you ever seen the defendant purchasing alcohol for minors?"

"I don't associate with him."

"Yes or no, Ms. Day."

"No."

"Have you ever seen the defendant having sex with minors?"

"No." She rolled her eyes. God, what a waste of her time. Below the clock on the back wall was a tall white cowboy hat. The skinheads were standing behind the back row, and as they shifted, she saw...yes, Chaz. What the heck was Peckerwood doing in this courtroom?

"Ms. Day?" The judge prompted.

"I'm sorry. What was the question?"

The crowd murmured.

Squat Bald Attorney said impatiently, "Isn't it true that you asked Mr. Gunther to help you have your husband killed when you discovered he was having an affair?"

"What? No!" What was Trayce up to now? "For one thing, when I discovered my husband was having an affair, he was already dead."

Another murmur.

Hardly anyone knew Luke had been unfaithful. How was this relevant?

The prosecution had the same question, which the judge ordered the defense to answer.

"Your Honor, I'm showing, through a small sample of the population, how local law enforcement has turned popular opinion against my client. Ms. Day is a prime example. She's a former friend, lover, and business partner, who is now entirely hostile toward my client."

Clenching the edge of her chair, she tapped the toe of one comfy shoe.

"Go on, Ms. Day," the judge said reluctantly.

She seized the chance to speak before the attorney did. "You can't just make up lies about me and tell them in court. I was never Trayce's lover, or his business partner!"

"Didn't you and your husband use Mr. Gunther as a contact to reach individuals who wished to purchase illegal firearms?"

"No."

"Ms. Day, are you the owner of Clear as Day Optometric?"

Colossal waste of time, since everybody here knew that. Half of them had been in her exam chair at one time or another. “Yes.”

“Did you receive shipments from United Parcel Service containing illegal firearms at said place of business?”

“No.” What the hell was he talking about?

“Records from internet websites show many deliveries of assault weapons and illegal accessories delivered to your practice during the time you worked there. Can you explain why UPS would show they were delivered to you, if, in fact, they were not?”

“No. I mean...” Her thoughts spun as she tried to make sense where there was none. “UPS came while the office was closed for lunch. Luke worked next door at Lube-Fast, and they didn’t close, so the driver would drop our packages there, and we’d pick them up when we got back from lunch.”

“What types of items did UPS deliver to your practice?”

She took a deep breath. This she could answer. “Contact lenses, replacement frames for glasses, no-line bifocal lenses, sometimes tools, maybe some office supplies we couldn’t get locally. All of our Ray-Ban orders—”

Squat Bald interrupted, “No clips for automatic weapons? No disassembled machine guns?”

“No! I’ve never bought or sold anything like that.” Then a possibility struck her. “Someone from Lube-Fast may have intercepted the packages I guess, if they used my address. Any of the employees would know our UPS would be delivered there first.” Like Luke. Doublecrossing, user, con artist Luke. Damn. Almost three years in the grave and his sneakiness was still wrecking her life.

“My client tells me you’ve come down in the world some since then, and judging by your apparel today, I’d have to agree. Can you explain?”

She turned what she considered an ugly shade of orange, rather than red, when she blushed. For the benefit of the court, she must have looked like a tangerine.

“My manner of dress has no bearing whatsoever on Trayce Gunther committing statutory rape.”

“Be warned, counselor.” Judge Weinerth glared over his lenses. “Stay on the subject, and no torturing the witness.”

The weasely little lawyer smirked and nodded. “Ms. Day, it’s my understanding that you dressed in high fashion during the time you and your husband were dealing in illegal firearms. My client believes that your husband wanted out of that business and you didn’t want the money artery severed, so you had him killed in the hopes of continuing the sales on your own. When Mr. Gunther wouldn’t comply, you turned against him.”

She sat still, unblinking and unanswering.

“Your Honor, could you please instruct the witness to answer?” the attorney complained.

“I’m waiting for a question,” she replied.

“Did you,” the lawyer asked in a loud, nasty tone, “turn against Mr. Gunther when he refused to participate in the sale of illegal firearms?”

The young blond attorney smiled up at her encouragingly, but why?

Time to fight fire with fire. “In fact, I know from listening to my husband and Mr. Gunther playing darts in the garage, that Mr. Gunther *owns* several illegal firearms. As for them being in business together, I knew nothing of it.”

The suit from the Bureau of ATF fixed his eyes on Trayce, whose eyes narrowed in silent warning at the stand.

“I believe he has a gun safe at his mother’s home.” No more screwing around. She was out for blood now.

Trayce’s attorney conferred with his team and client, then turned back to the bench and gave her a smile wide enough to show several gold-capped molars. “If your husband was profiting from a business without your knowledge, wouldn’t you have become aware of it after his passing?”

“I paid off his debts and went on with my life.” Oh, God, they were heading to dark territory. Trayce had set her up for a big fall.

“Can you name some of those debts?”

She clasped her hands in her lap to stop them from shaking. “Your Honor, I don’t see the relevance of my husband’s debts to this case.”

The judge answered, “I’m sorry young lady, but since there were no closed depositions, all subject matter is open to determine your credibility.”

She nodded and took a deep breath, hoping for hidden strength she didn’t know she had. “Luke had several credit cards with charges totaling around twenty-five thousand.”

The room went quiet. This was the kind of dirt everybody liked to hear. What did other people blow money on? How financially strapped were they?

She would *not* look at Howell. No how, no way. “And he’d been embezzling money from his employer to the tune of ten thousand dollars.”

The audience buzzed. Fast-Lube had kept quiet about the embezzlement, since Luke was dead and she’d reimbursed them as soon as she’d known.

The judge rapped his gavel to restore order.

“You mean to tell me,” the attorney taunted, “your husband stole that kind of money and you weren’t aware of it? Where did the money go?” He asked like it was a riddle for a three-year-old, eyebrows raised to an exaggerated height.

“He put it in an account in his and another woman’s name.”

“Another woman?” the attorney asked with glee. “Who?”

“I didn’t know her.” *Or him. I thought I knew him, but I never did.*

“Can you define the relationship your husband, I’m sorry, *Mr. Snyder*, had with this other woman?”



“They were lovers.” This answer would not satisfy the lawyer, but she couldn’t say what he wanted to hear.

“Ms. Day, do you need to be reminded what perjury is?”

She longed to beg the judge to help her out. Nate’s hands covered his mouth, and though she tried not to check, Cleve’s gaze was positively glued to the stand. Tears trickled from her eyes as she struggled to form the words she’d never intended to say. Knowing the facts was bad enough without having to say them out loud.

As if they came from another body, she heard her words. “She was his wife.”

Over the tittering crowd, the defense called, “I’m sorry, could you please repeat that, only louder?”

“Counselor,” the judge reprimanded.

Squat Bald pretended to look chagrined. “I’m confused. How could *she* be his wife, if you were his wife? Were you committing bigamy?”

This was too much to take. Way too much. “I wasn’t, you jackass, *he* was!”

“Ms. Day,” the judge snapped. “I won’t tolerate obscenity in my courtroom.”

She nodded and sniffled. “He was married to another woman in Utah, as Luke Snider, with an ‘i’. I was the target in their long con. He married me in Colorado as Luke Snyder with a ‘y’. I didn’t have a clue, even when he wrecked his car on the way back from Vernal while he was supposed to be working. When I went to pick up his death certificate, I was told his wife had already been there.” Such a wonderful way to find out. So cliché. The inevitable disbelief, then the checking, turning on his cellphone to see the calls he’d made the day he died. The truth. The true picture of her life, bleeding through the one he’d painted for her to see, bit by awful bit, as she and Nate had solved a mystery she hadn’t wanted solved.

The attorney crossed his arms over his chest. The courtroom was quiet while everyone waited for her to go on.

“She got his life insurance from work and all the money he’d been siphoning from our joint accounts. I got the debts and the twenty grand death benefit the car insurance paid, only because the insurance and registration for the vehicle were under my name.” She scrubbed her face with her hands, wishing to be anywhere but Colorado for the rest of her life. Even Grandpa hadn’t known how stupid she’d been, but he would now.

“Counselor, I agree with the witness.” Judge Weinerth sounded weary and impatient, “This is *not* relevant to Mr. Gunther’s case. If you have nothing more to contribute, I’d like to let her step down.”

The defense attorney took his seat.

The younger blond attorney stood and cleared his throat. “LeeDavid Calhoun for the defense. One more question, Your Honor?” When the judge nodded, the young man said, “Ms. Day, could you please tell the court your age and current marital status?”

Perplexed, she watched LeeDavid’s team members growl among themselves.

The judge cleared his throat. She had to answer.

“Thirty-two?” With a hard swallow and a glare in Cleve’s direction, she added, “And single.”

LeeDavid smiled at her and took a seat. The judge rapped yet again to settle the noise in the courtroom.

“I have something more, Your Honor,” she sniffed. She must look like complete and total hell now, but she might as well put it all out there. If she went to prison, at least she’d escape Garfield County and the pitying stares.

The judge nodded for her to continue.

“In the true nature of he said-she said, I’d like to enter testimony that Trayce Gunther tried to force me to have sex with him on New Year’s Eve, 2005, so I have no doubt what a monster he could be to an innocent young girl. Since I’m a character witness, my opinion that he’s capable of rape should count for something. Additionally, the reason he hates me so much is because I banned him from hunting on my property after he poached a trophy bull elk in October, 2006. One of his skin-head friends mounted it. It’s eight points by nine and probably hanging in the workshop behind his mother’s house.”

The prosecutor stood. “Ms. Day, you do realize investigators will need to talk to you for details regarding the allegations of Mr. Gunther’s banned firearms as well as the poached animal?”

With a nod, she stepped down from the stand and followed a bailiff to the hallway.

A distraught Nate rushed to join her.

“Nate, you have class tonight. See if Howell will give you a ride. I’ll be here late.”

“No, I should stay with you and—”

“Go already. It’s finals week, and you can’t help me with this anyway. Please talk to Grandpa before he hears it second-hand?”

Nate agreed and headed toward Cleve.

## Chapter 9

Kiersten emerged exhausted from the conference room. She'd told and retold her story and her reasons for not turning in Trayce before this. Maybe she could crawl into her truck seat and doze until the whole court ordeal became a hazy memory.

Trouble was, when she reached the parking lot, her truck was gone. She knew where she'd parked it: next to that tree, right there. It had either been stolen or towed. Or Nate had taken it with his key, and left her without wheels to get home.

The curb in front of where she'd parked looked like a great place to sit down and bawl.

"Don't call the cops. Nate took your truck. I offered to give you a lift because he didn't want you drivin home alone."

Howell's voice was like fingernails on a chalkboard. Nate *knew* how she felt about this guy, yet he'd arranged for him to drive her home?

"Jesus. Why didn't he ask Trayce to give me a ride?" She climbed in Cleve's big red Ford, yanking the door shut before he could make a gentleman of himself and close it for her.

He seated himself behind the wheel. "You want somethin to eat before we head home?"

"Right now I don't care if I ever eat again. I just wanta crawl in a hole."

\* \* \* \*

Those were the last words she spoke the entire trip back to Rifle, though Cleve tried several times to talk with her about her day. He cruised through town and headed north.

"You need to take your next right to get to the ranch so I can pick up my truck."

"We'll get your truck tomorrow. You don't need to drive tonight, or face your Granddad right now."

"Goddammit, I'm a grown woman. You and Nate aren't going to run my life. Let me out. Now."

The F350 kept speeding along.

She turned to stare, helpless, out her window. "Oscar. He'll miss me."

The dog would be okay, but his mistress might need some company.

"Nate'll be up after class. Maybe he'll bring Oscar."

This news, instead of comforting her like he'd expected, only made her cry. She pulled her knees up to her chest and turned her back to him, so she was lost in that big old lady suit. Her sobs carried over the racket of gravel pinging against the bottom of his truck. His hand on her shoulder only sent her scrunching farther into her corner. Well, hell. Looked like the last half hour of their trip would be as awkward as the first had been.

At her gate, she tried to get out and walk home. He had to admire that she still had the energy to be pissed at him after such a lousy day, but he insisted on driving her up to the house, wrestling

her keys away from her hand so he could open the gate himself. He left the gate open behind them, then silently parked in her driveway.

She jumped out of the truck and slammed the door behind her before he'd even come to a complete stop.

Her attempt to bang her front door shut failed, because his hand stopped it. She did an about-face.

"You're not welcome here, Howell."

The way his last name came from her mouth, in the same tone some people said words like *cunt* made him cringe.

Her red-rimmed green eyes flashed. "You're not welcome here ever again."

He followed her in without a word.

"It's so like your family, you know, insinuating yourself where you've got no business. Don't I have any rights? Just get the hell out!"

Her bathroom door closed with the resounding crash he'd prevented at the front door.

He settled in on the couch, where he figured he'd still be when Nate arrived in about five hours.

A friendly white cat with a rhinestone-decorated nametag hopped in his lap and purred before her tail tickled his nose.

"Howdy, Ivory."

At least one female on Rocky Peak wanted his attention.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, Kiersten glared at her reflection above the dresser. Her puffy face went great with her wrecked hair. The cotton workout pants and big sweatshirt she had on would truly appall Nate. Well, good. One look at her ought to run Howell off for good. Kicking her court uniform into a corner, she yanked her door open.

Without speaking, she went directly to a high cupboard, from which she pulled down a bottle. Then she poured a healthy portion directly into a glass.

A strong hand grasped her wrist, delaying its mission of delivering the vodka to her mouth.

"You're not drinkin that."

"I think I am." She jerked her hand, but it barely moved with the death grip Howell had on her. "Take your hand off me. Now."

"Give me the glass." His patient tone got on her very last nerve.

"Sure. As soon as it's empty."

"You might be carrying my child, and I won't let you pickle its little brain."

Guilt pricked her. With so many rotten things to worry about, she'd forgotten about the possible pregnancy.

“You don’t own me, Howell. My body is still my own, and I’ll do what I want, whether or not we conceived Satan’s spawn the other day.” Nevertheless, she handed over the drink and watched Cleve dump it in the sink.

“Don’t you drink?” She wondered if he was a teetotaler, or what.

“Not straight vodka. Lord. You always drink like that?”

On any other day, she’d have concocted a wild tale about her various addictions. But tonight she was too damn tired.

“Only when I have to admit to the whole world that I was conned into marriage and used as a mule to accept delivery of terrorist weapons. And confess to covering the crimes of a complete ass to protect my own, and living as a patsy wife with a married man.”

“Not that often, then.”

His comment almost made her smile. Almost, but not quite.

“Fuck a duck, this has been a shitty day.” She flopped across her couch. “And now I can’t even drink myself into oblivion because I was stupid enough to screw *another* guy who I thought was somebody else, and so damn horny I forgot the rubbers.”

“You know, when you’re a Mama, you can’t talk like that.” He’d taken a seat in the chair across from her. His boyish grin did nothing to offset her annoyance at his telling her what she could or could not do.

“Fuck off, Howell,” she said, deliberately using the phrase she knew would make him flinch. “Why are you so fixated on my being pregnant, anyway? Most guys would be praying to God against a pregnancy, sending me out for a moonlit horseback ride.”

He shrugged. “I like my nieces and nephews, so I guess havin a kid here would help me not miss them.”

Kind of sweet that he was so attached to the kids. Too bad the kids were also Howell heirs, benefiting from years of their grandfather walking on underdogs.

“What about you, Rocky? I don’t see you out on your horse hopin for the worst.”

“I told you not to call me that. Pet names are for friends and lovers. We’re neither now. Anyway, maybe I just haven’t had time to figure out a way to get rid of it. I was about to pickle it, remember?” Hah. She’d shocked him. God, did he actually believe she was serious? “Oh, don’t look at me like that. You don’t need to put round the clock surveillance on me to keep your possible heir safe. I’m getting old, Howell. If I’m knocked up, I’ll deal with it. Grandpa wants a great-grandbaby so he can die happy.”

“Maybe we should try again. Increase our odds,” he said with a half-grin, half-leer.

“Not on your life. Keep your hands to yourself, enemy.” She averted her eyes to ignore the desire on his face. “Don’t you need to leave now? Maybe go redecorate the Pink Elephant or something?”

“I promised Nate I’d stay till he got here.”

“He’s just hoping to get me laid again. He knows I’ll be fine. Take a hike.”

“Nope. A Texan never goes back on his word.”

“Yeah, whatever. But don’t expect me to entertain your Southern ass.”

She grabbed her remote and flipped on the TV. *See how long he can put up with reruns on Lifetime.*

\* \* \* \*

Kie was fast asleep and snoring to beat the band when Nate arrived.

He whispered thanks to Cleve, who said she hadn’t eaten a bite all evening.

Hanging the new suit and extra outfits in Kie’s closet, his breath caught. The little devil had gotten rid of every flattering, clinging, or revealing-enough-to-show-she-was-female piece of clothing she owned. Well, he could play that game too. He removed all the frumpy and baggy items, leaving nothing but the new clothes he’d purchased that day. Sparks were going to *fly* in the morning when she saw what he’d done, but honestly! She could not go around dressed as a bag lady one more day. It had been absolutely horrifying to see her in the courthouse like that. Besides, nothing boosts spirits like wearing great clothes, and little Kie would be needing lots of help with her spirits for a while.

While he settled a quilt around her on her couch, she woke. “Nate. He did it just to humiliate me, didn’t he? Trayce.” With a knuckle, she dabbed at one eye.

“Yeah, sugar. I think you’re right. But you taught him a lesson, because he totally wasn’t expecting you to tell about the bull.”

“I can’t believe you made me bum a ride with that Texan. I was so pissed.”

He smiled and ruffled her disasterized hair. “I knew you would be, girlfriend. But you had no business driving when you were that upset. Forgive me?”

“I love you Nate, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know it. Ditto. You gonna sleep out here or drag your vertically challenged ass to bed?”

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten woke to mid-morning brightness.

Nate was gone.

So were all of her clothes.

Expletives flew off the walls of her cabin as she dressed in snug boot-cut gray slacks, the most casual of the remaining clothing in her closet.

She wished for any one of the outfits she’d crammed in the bags presently in her truck at Grandpa’s. The suit she’d worn the day before had mysteriously disappeared as well, which meant Nate had committed his treachery while she slept. Edging a slinky sequined camisole over her breasts, she stomped in heeled boots to her kitchen. She didn’t even own a bra she could wear under a top cut like this one, so she’d let the girls loose for now.

Nate had left a note.

*Morning, Sunshine!*

*I'm sure by now you're very happy with me. Remember, you LOVE me!*

*Went to help Cleve finish the fence. Give yourself a mani or pedi to go with your new look, and we'll see you at lunch.*

*Smile!*

"Mani or pedi, my ass. He is sooo dead!" She snatched a bagel from her breadbox and stomped out to her four-wheeler.

Nate and Howell were nearly to the top of the west side when she roared up to them. They'd heard her coming, of course, and both were wearing grins.

"What the hell is this?" she demanded, performing a smooth and furied dismount from the seat of her four-wheeler.

"Looks great, girlfriend! Whattaya think, Cleve?"

She patently ignored the lusty look Cleve sent her way. "Who asked you to be my fashion fairy, anyway? Give me back my goddamn clothes, Cook."

Nate shook his head, refusing to comply.

"Give me the keys to your truck so I can get my clothes. I can't live in slacks on this damn mountain."

Again, he flashed those perfect white teeth at her. "I took that stuff and burned it last night before I woke you up, sister. It would've been criminal to donate that suit and have anybody go out in public in it again."

\* \* \* \*

Cleve looked on as Kiersten lunged and throttled Nate the same way she'd attempted to with him in the road the day before.

Nate didn't move fast enough. They both toppled over, with Nate taking care to protect her new outfit from rips or stains. He laughed, lying under her. His one hand gripped both of hers and pushed them back against her out-there breasts.

"Be a good girl, and quit trying to choke your fairy," he teased. "I'll take you shopping later and get you some jeans. You only have to dress like a lady for a few hours." Her glorious eyes glared down at Nate as he said, "This is when you'd get the guy to put on the condom, okay?"

"Very funny, isn't he, Howell?"

Cleve's mouth hung open. What exactly had passed between the woman he wanted and her gay friend? Her lying on Nate wasn't humorous. And he didn't appreciate Nate's teasing. How'd he even know they'd skipped the rubber? That was private.

"Feels like you're all ready for a condom yourself, you big pervert." She scrambled off him, twisting her shirt back to where it belonged.

That did it. Clay needed to drive the horse trailer out when the cattle came up from Texas. Somebody had to divert Nate's attention from Kiersten. Hopefully the attraction was still one-sided. It wouldn't do to lose the first woman he'd thought of long-term to a gay guy.

"What are you glaring at?" Kiersten demanded of him.

Brushing sticks and dirt from himself, Nate paused and looked at him, and he stared back at them.

"It's none of your damn business anyway, Texan." Kiersten's lip curled in a sneer. "I'll see you at lunch, Nate."

She left in a cloud of exhaust and dust, like she'd come.

The two men ambled back toward the fence.

Nate broke their silence with, "I think if she was bigger, she might've kicked my ass."

Cleve only nodded.

They worked in awkward silence for several minutes before Nate spoke again. "I've got a class tonight. You think you could check in on her? Probably persistence is the best route. Make yourself a fixture, and maybe she'll get used to you."

Would Nate purposely lead him to do things that would rile Kiersten? He hoped not, so he agreed to show up at the cabin later in the evening.

\* \* \* \*

As Nate parked in Grandpa's driveway, Kiersten braced herself for the unending questions the senior Day would have for her.

She'd admitted to Nate that she still had her attractive clothes in her truck. He'd agreed to go through them with her and let her keep the better ones, rather than shopping for all new stuff, an expense that didn't seem feasible to her.

First, though, was the matter of Grandpa.

Nate held her hand for support as they entered the house.

"I see ya made up, huh?" he asked first thing.

"Grandpa, we're friends." For the millionth time. Maybe she'd tell him she might be carrying another man's child. That would get him off her back about Nate.

"You got a lotta explainin to do, young lady."

Thus began the 'How the Hell Did You Marry a Bigamist? Q and A Session'. An hour later, she left the house nearly as exhausted as when she'd left the courthouse.

Nate was quite particular about which clothes he let her keep.

"I don't know why I'm even letting you have a say in this," she snapped as he took the cargo pants she'd considered chic. "You see what happens when I dress suggestively. I don't want to attract anybody. Please let me keep the old Levi's? They're not that big."

"Kie, these are *my* old 501s that you cut off so they wouldn't be too long. How did you get your hands on these, anyway? Never mind. They're history, woman. You look like your ass shriveled up and blew away when you wear them. And no more shirts where there's room for your



fists *and* your breasts in the chest area. God gave you ta-tas for a reason. It's wasteful not to use them, and my mom always said waste was a sin."

"So, by your reasoning a woman wearing a loose shirt is a sin?" When Nate nodded, she giggled. "You are sooo not gay. Bi maybe, or perpetually horny, but not gay if you think that much about boobs." She watched a favorite old flannel shirt that she'd swiped from Grandpa go in the bag. "What's with Cleve and the green monster today?"

"You liked that, didn't you? You still want him."

"He who lies down with dogs will wake up with fleas, Grandma used to say. I definitely don't need Texan cooties."

"He's rich, baby, and *too* cute. A gentleman through and through. What more could you want?"

"Picture our wedding day—me, and Cleve, and how many, like four other CJ's, including big daddy, who spent hundreds of thousands trying to exterminate the pestilence that is me. Think he's gonna bless the union of his youngest hetero son with a poor sheep rancher? Not!"

"You know, missy, when you turn on the charm you're pretty hard to resist."

"Says the wheat farmer from Nebraska, not the cigar-smoking billionaire cattle rancher. Guys like that don't change their opinions of people. They choose a stereotype and live and die by it."

"Sounds to me like you just pigeonholed 'guys like that' yourself, girlfriend."

"Okay, time for grouchy Kie to go home before she turns into a bi-atch. Bye Natey."

She kissed the cheek he offered and left for the Peak.

## Chapter 10

Oscar was happy to be home, and Kiersten was happy to be alone. All the doting company lately had just about suffocated her. She was used to her own space, and had lots to think about.

A nice hot bath sounded like just the ticket. Too bad she couldn't have a little wine with it.

Now there was a subject she could ponder for an evening all by itself: pregnancy.

Her hand played in the running water as she remembered trying to conceive for several months before Luke's death. Well, *she* had been. It wasn't until his autopsy report came back that she found out he'd had a vasectomy. So rang the warning bell, the death knell heads-up that her marriage wasn't at all what she'd thought.

God. And that trip she and Nate had taken to Vernal, Utah, to find the woman who claimed to be Luke's wife. Three small children were all the evidence she needed to confirm Luke's only legal marriage was to the Utah woman, though Nate did more research when they got back home. The kids all looked like Luke, and there were pictures of him as a child hanging on their walls. He'd claimed he was raised in foster care, but there hung photographic evidence of both a brother and a sister. And parents.

The most awful part of that day had been the nonchalant attitude of the other woman, who'd *known* Luke was sleeping with her, but didn't mind, because of the money. The con had been nearly up; in another six months Luke would have milked her for all he could get. Then he'd have left her, disappearing from existence.

She turned off the bath water and slid in, letting herself relax. If she was pregnant, and it was still an *if*, life would get complicated. Cleve would become a fixture in her life. He'd probably be a good dad...maybe he didn't lack principles the way his father did.

After all, she didn't have her mother's values, or lack thereof. At least she hoped not. Her own mother had split about the time baby Kiersten figured out how to walk, leaving her in the care of her daddy and grandparents. Then when she was five, an eighteen-wheeler got the best of Dad and his motorcycle in a head-on collision.

Which left her with Grandma and Grandpa, who did the very best they could for her. She couldn't complain about her upbringing.

Her hands settled on her softly rounded tummy. It'd been the bane of her existence all through her twenties, when the thing she coveted most was a set of six-pack abs. Probably would be best if she wasn't pregnant. And yet...well, the idea of it stirred feelings she'd given up two years ago.

The next week would drag on for eternity, waiting to find out, to know for sure whether she was pregnant with the grandchild of her sworn enemy. Visions of a miniature Cleve toddling around Rocky Peak filled her mind as she drifted toward sleep.

"People have drowned, sleeping in the bath."

She awoke to Cleve sitting on the edge of her bathtub, freely looking at her body in the now tepid and bubble-free water.

“Cle-, I mean Howell, get the hell out of here. Ever hear of the word *privacy*? God!”

He only laughed and remained seated. “I knocked and yelled. Got worried about you, so I came in to check you were okay. You sure look good in there, Rocky. Spectacular peaks.”

She splashed a handful of water over him, then sat up and crossed her arms over her breasts. “I insist that you get out now! I need to get dressed, and you have no business looking at me like that.”

Ignoring the fit she was throwing, and brushing the water off himself, he narrowed his eyes. “Speaking of business, what business is it of Nate’s that we forgot to use a condom when we made love?”

How could he call himself a gentleman, when he refused to leave and allow her to dress in private? “We didn’t make love, Howell. We screwed. We had wild, crazy sex. Great it was, but only sex. No love. Thus, now there is no love *lost* between us.”

“I don’t like you telling him things about us.” He must mean business. He’d pronounced the ‘g’ at the end of ‘telling’.

“Good. There is no ‘us’, so I won’t have anything to tell my *closest friend* about.”

Since he still hadn’t left, she wrenched the plug from the drain and stood, giving him the unobstructed view of what he’d been unable to tear his eyes from.

\* \* \* \*

Rocky jerked on a huge, thick robe, cutting short his sight-seeing. The damn thing covered all but her face and toes. Streaks of red played with gold and brown as she loosened the knot she’d tied her hair in, and flipped it over to brush the underside. What color did she call her hair? The nape of her neck...so soft. He should seduce her, make her admit she was his.

What was it about this woman? Did he want her because she was so new to him, so different? Or because she always seemed out of reach? Since the day they’d made love, his body’d ached for her. The ache would hit him at random times, like when he’d spoken to his sister on the phone yesterday at the courthouse. Or when he punched in his PIN—his birthday, and for how many more would he remain a bachelor?—at the ATM. Or eating his lunch alone in the Pink Elephant while he knew she was laughing and touching Nate’s hand or shoulder in her own kitchen.

And now, of course. Damned if seeing her buck-ass naked hadn’t sent him peering over the safety rail, wondering if he could navigate the slippery slope. He’d told himself today that he wouldn’t pursue her anymore. Maybe a good week of ignoring her would bring her around. That idea seemed mighty lame now. The best way to win a woman was to flatter her, treat her kindly. Oh, to hell with that. He’d rather seduce her the old-fashioned way, take her to the floor in the bathroom, pull open that robe, pleasure her with his mouth...

“Yo, Texan! If you’re gonna fall asleep, do it at your own house. I don’t need to a babysitter tonight.”

He snapped back to attention. What were they talking about? Nate.

“Yeah, um. Nate’s not sleepin over again, is he?”

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten shrugged. Why did Howell have to show up at her house to daydream? Why couldn’t he do that in his ugly house and leave her the hell alone? Maybe she could run him off if he thought she was interested in Nate. Nah, it would probably make him more competitive and spur him to try harder.

“Who knows? I sure don’t. Any number of guys seem to be in and out of my house, driving off in my truck, interrupting my bath, burning my clothes. I’ve got no say in my life at all these days. Guess I might as well sit back and let you macho jerks run my whole life. Is it all right if I get dressed now?” She left him alone in her damp bathroom.

Covered from neck to ankle in a lavender velour jogging suit, she flopped across her armchair and glared at Cleve’s hand holding her remote control.

“Haven’t got satellite hooked up to the Elephant yet, huh?”

Cleve turned away from the Weather Channel long enough to wrinkle his nose at her and shake his head.

Rolling her eyes at the inconvenience of his presence, she huffed over to check her email. Nate had sent her a link to the newspaper coverage of her testimony against Trayce. Though she sounded like quite a victim in Luke’s con, her conduct was reportedly questionable when she hadn’t reported Trayce for poaching on her property. The overall tone of the article left her looking stupid.

“Hey, you got internet!” Cleve said from behind her chair. “Could I check my email? My sister sent pictures of her kids.”

“The images’ll probably take forever to load, but knock yourself out.” She left him at her computer. Hey. Why the hell was she even being civil to him, much less letting him use her internet?

“Look at this! Dalton’s Little League team.”

She should ignore him, instead of standing behind the proud uncle while he pointed out his nephew among the crowd of five- and six-year olds. He even knew the names of the other boys on the team. The next picture was Cleve’s niece in her ballet tutu, standing on pudgy toes.

She couldn’t resist smiling at his pride. His sister had scanned a picture Dalton drew of himself and his uncle Cleve on horses, with tall snowy mountains behind.

“He wants to come visit me.” He beamed. “And climb the big mountains.”

“He must miss you.”

She’d sure like to get her fingers in his hair and smooth out that hat-hair ring. *Restrain yourself!* “Did you go to his games?”

“Every one. Helped coach, too.”

“Why’d you come out here all alone when you have such a big family back in Texas?” What would it be like to have a big family like that?

Cleve swiveled the desk chair to face her, and without blinking replied, "I wanted to run my ranch *my way*, not Pop's. He still treats me like a kid because I'm youngest." A tendon stood out on the side of his neck.

"How old are you, anyway?"

His gaze shifted. "Thirty next month."

"Thirty. Ever been married?"

He shook his head. "I spent eight years as a Ranger, kinda goin anywhere I was needed. Met a lot of women, but they weren't marriage material, and I wasn't lookin. Guess you could say I acted like the kid Pop thought I was. Didn't have any reason to do otherwise. I made enough money to buy my gas and clothes and plenty of tequila shots, and Pop kept me in cars. No need to settle down."

"Mmm-hmm. Still feel that way?" Somehow, he hadn't struck her as a playboy.

Dark eyes went to her hand resting on her abdomen. "Truthfully? My partner fell in love and got married, and it hit me like a load of bricks. I'm gettin old, and I want a family. I want my own house and my own cattle, and a woman I know hasn't been with another man in the last twenty-four hours. Pop was so happy I finally wanted to be a rancher, he agreed to sign over this ranch to me before I changed my mind." He chuckled. "I think this one's kinda been a sore spot for Pop anyway. He hit a little road block he hasn't been able to get through."

"And what are you gonna do about that road block, Howell?" Though she'd intended it to be a demand, her voice and eyes were soft on him.

"I figure I can work around it. Right now I'd sure like to be on top of it."

"Pig." She smiled, even though she kept telling herself to back away. *Step away from the enemy*. His hand snaked around her waist and pulled her onto his lap. "Quit," she said halfheartedly when his lips moved along her collarbone. "I hate your family." His hand unzipped her jacket and cupped her breast.

"I know."

"Your dad's a..." A moan interrupted her complaint. "...jerk." God, his hand felt so *right*.

"Yeah." Cleve picked her up and carried her to the bed, where she drew his face to hers for a kiss.

"You'll never take my ranch."

"Okay." He peeled his clothes off, and she traced the curves of lean muscle along his shoulders, sat up and nibbled those muscles as he helped her strip.

"Hurry."

"Mmm." His lips traced along her inner thigh, his fingers doing their magic.

She reached in the drawer by the bed and pulled out the string of condoms, tearing one away from the rest.

"Here. Ohhhh." His fingers had just reached that spot. "Please hurry."

While he worked the condom on, Cleve said, “Guess if we find out you’re expectin we won’t need these anymore.”

Anymore? Did he think this was going to keep happening? “There won’t be any more times after this. This is it, Howell. The last time.”

“Sure, Rocky. Okay.”

Didn’t he believe her? Oh, it didn’t matter now. He was in, and she was in another galaxy.

She was nearly asleep when he came back from the bathroom. His fingers brushed the hair from her face, then he kissed her and said softly, “Night, Rocky.”

“Told you to quit callin me Rocky.”

“But we’re lovers again, so I can.”

“Not love. Sex. We’re...*screw*ers.” She knew another word that would make him cringe. Maybe she’d say it just to irritate him. “We’re fu—”

“Don’t!” His finger shushed her mouth, a line bisecting the grin she couldn’t contain. “If I decide to love you, Rocky, you can’t stop me.”

The hell she couldn’t! She rolled to face him. “You need to go home. You can’t sleep here.” No sleeping in the same bed. What else to keep that ‘L’ word at bay? “And don’t kiss me on the mouth anymore.”

“You can’t make all the rules.”

“Yes I can.”

“I’m not gonna follow ’em.”

His breaths were slowing. She should wake him and send him away, but he felt so nice and warm against her, she turned her back to him and let his arm hold her tight.

One night couldn’t hurt.

## Chapter 11

The tinny sound of *Lean On Me*, along with Cleve mumbling about the radio, woke Kiersten. She crawled over him and pulled her back-lit cellphone from her dresser. One of his hands made an exploration down her backbone as she answered, “Nate. What time is it?”

The hand abruptly moved off her, then returned, firmly clasping her hip.

“It’s three a.m. Your shop burned.”

“What? Shop?” She shook her head. Had to wake up.

Cleve’s hand remained on her.

“The optical shop, the office, it’s all gone, Kie.” In the background, lots of voices and loud engines. “Somebody torched your practice.”

Trying to make sense, she repeated, “Um. Torched?”

Cleve had flipped on a light switch and was staring at her.

“Some guy drove by and saw the front window broken and flames in the optical shop. By the time the fire department got here, the lab was lit. With all the chemicals, it went up fast.”

“Um, I need to come down?” So much to process. Broken window?

“Yeah, the cops and fire department have to talk to you. Win’s in my truck. They called his house because they didn’t have your cell number.”

“Jesus.” Rubbing her eyes, she muttered, “Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” She pressed *End* and stared at the phone for half a second.

“I’ll drive you,” said Cleve in a solemn tone.

“The hell you will. I don’t need Grandpa knowing you were at my house at three in the morning. You shouldn’t have been, anyway.”

“I’m goin, whether I drive you or follow.” He was already pulling on his pants.

“Cle— Howell, why do you have to complicate my life? Grandpa already thinks I’m a slut because I’ve been dating Nate for two years and haven’t made him marry me yet.”

“Tell him you called me and asked for a ride.” His shirt was on. He handed her the velour pants.

“Yeah, good one. My sworn enemy, and I ask for a ride in the middle of the night. Likely story.” She stepped into the pants and he picked up her shirt.

“Please wear somethin under this jacket.”

She plucked a bra out of her drawer and put it on.

“We’ll think of a story for your Granddad on the way.”

While zipping, she stepped into her shoes. Once she’d locked Oscar’s doggy door to keep him from following them or sniffing out a porcupine in the night, they were running for Cleve’s truck.

\* \* \* \*

Clear As Day Optometric appeared to be a dark heap of smelly, smoldering charred plastic and steel. Everything wooden was long gone.

Luckily, a concrete wall separated the lab, protecting the patient charts from the hottest parts of the blaze. The shelves of tightly packed charts had only been seared along the edges, then soaked by the firehoses.

She was soon involved in a heated discussion with the fire investigator over when she could move the files to a safe location to protect patient confidentiality.

One CPU in the basement breakroom seemed to be intact, so hopefully the data from the last day's business would be retrievable.

The firemen and most of the cops had gone when the police chief, a tall, wide man, pulled her into a yellow-taped area in back of the building. On the concrete surrounding the picnic table where employees lunched on nice days, red spray-paint read, *YOUR NOT WANTED HERE! LEAVE BITCH.*

"Not the best grammar, and not great with punctuation." The chief's joke fell flat. "But I guess he got his sentiment across. He'd have left this message first."

"He?"

"Between eighty-two and ninety percent of arsonists are male. Forty percent are under eighteen. Dr. Day, in light of your recent testimony in court, we could be dealing with skinheads, environmentalists, anti-gun fanatics, Trayce Gunther, a proponent of bigamy, hunting activists, a disgruntled patient, or a run-of-the-mill crazy."

"Guess that narrows it right down." Sounded like they wouldn't be solving this crime soon. But that wasn't her job. Her patients were. "When can I salvage my patient files and put them somewhere safe?"

"You should be worried about your own safety right now. If he was willing to set a fire just to get a hate message noticed, there's no telling what he could do."

"Look, Chief, I've got responsibilities. My staff is on the way, along with the doctor who leases the practice. If patient files get lost, it's my ass. We know the fire started on the retail side. No reason for the files to be examined. When my patients are taken care of, I'll worry about who did this." She waved her hand in the general direction of the painted concrete, preferring to not look at it again.

The chief sighed and scratched his thinning hair. "Just let me know where you take 'em in case they have to be reviewed. We'll need a list of appointments and a copy of transactions for the last month, at least."

In front of the building, Nate and Cleve stood with their hands in their pockets, the sun rising behind them. The fire investigator finished his report and joined the police chief in his cruiser.

She approached Nate's Xterra, where Grandpa was snoozing. As if sensing her, he woke up and opened his door. She leaned in for a hug, letting him comfort her. His cigarette smell reminded



her that she needed to get him to the doctor soon, but the Old Spice on his neck made her feel small and safe.

“Sorry, Peanut,” he said. “They know how it started?”

“They think it was in the retail side.” No point in upsetting him by telling him a soda bottle full of gasoline had followed an ordinary river rock through the window. “Grandpa, I’m gonna be working here a long time. I’ll ask Cleve to take you home while Nate and I find a place for the temporary office and get stuff moved.”

“What’s Howell’s ranch hand doin here anyway?”

She brushed stray hairs away from her face. “I had it all wrong. Cleve *is* Howell. That Chaz is the ranch manager. My truck battery was dead, so I called Cleve to drive me down.”

“Women. You leave the radio on, or the lights this time?”

“Lights.” Such crap, pretending she was dumb enough to drain her own car battery, but it was a good excuse for Cleve’s presence. “I’ll go get Cleve, okay? Thanks for coming down.” She needed to get Grandpa away before he found out about the arson and the nasty message. Her lips brushed his leathery cheek, then she shut the door and walked away.

Cleve’s hands were shoved deep in his pockets when she reached him.

“Can I ask you a favor?”

His raised eyebrows told her to go on.

“Would you get my Grandpa home? He doesn’t need to see any more of this. I’m not sure how long Nate and I will be working here.” The concern on Cleve’s face bothered her; she didn’t need him caring what kind of trouble she was in. She didn’t need him caring at all. “Oh, and could you let Oscar out for me? Um, thanks. For the...ride.”

One corner of his mouth lifted a little too much to be subtle, then he left her standing with Nate on the sidewalk.

“The *ride*?” Nate taunted.

“Not the time, or the place, Cook. Got any ideas where we can set up a temporary office?”

The office staff straggled in, looking haggard from having to report at such an early hour. Both the chief and the fire investigator had informed her the employees would all be questioned and asked for alibis in the same manner she had. Thank God she had Cleve for an alibi, though she dreaded it becoming public knowledge.

Nate called someone he knew about a small empty office space. It would do in a pinch. Eye exams would go on hold until the exam equipment could be replaced. Her insurance should cover most of the expenses, including short-term salaries for the employees. She’d be out the lease money the other doctor paid her, though.

How the hell would she pay the insane property taxes with no income? Another installment was due in less than a month.

Dinner time was long past when she collapsed on her bed in Grandpa’s house. She stunk like smoke and melted plastic, but the patient files were safe. Law enforcement had the appointment

schedules and ledgers they needed. Thanks to computer wizardry by her youngest optician, the files had all been recovered and the remaining computer terminal made fully functional. Neighboring businesses had helped out by lending office furniture for the temporary location.

Her insurance claim in the works, tomorrow she'd have to deal with the adjuster after he arrived from Denver.

Distraught patients would start trickling into the new office, wanting to pick up the glasses they'd left for repairs or new ones they'd ordered that week. It would be a disaster for weeks to come. Fortunately, the staff could handle most of it. For now, she wanted nothing more than sleep.

With a knock at the door, Grandpa wandered in. Arg. He'd want to feed her.

She turned over and sat up, pinning on the most energetic face she could muster.

"I got supper ready. Come and eat. Everything looks better on a full stomach," he advised.

Her eyes rolled, but only after his back was turned.

She sat down, rubbing her fingers over the red-checked oilcloth cover Grandma had used for as long as she could remember. It looked like she'd better replace it for Grandpa. The edges were looking pretty rough.

"Before Nate finishes his shower, we should talk," Grandpa said.

"What's up?" He'd set her a glass of milk, which sounded pretty good. "You're not feeling worse?"

"I think we should take CJ Howell's offer on the Peak."

"What?" She slammed down the milk. "No way."

"I talked to him today and told him I might be interested. He said he'd go as high as one point seven."

Cleve was going to pay for this. He'd sworn he wasn't going after the Peak anymore, and yet here he was trying to tease Grandpa into selling.

Her fingers thrummed her ire on the table. "I can't believe you'd be willing to sell out after all I've been through to keep that place."

"We'd be winnin when it's all said and done. That property ain't worth more than a hundred and fifty thousand to anybody else in the world. The joke would be on Howell, if he's willin to pay more than ten times what it's worth."

"It's wrong, Grandpa. He can't take what he wants just because his wallet is fatter." The combination of exhaustion and betrayal made her emotional. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks.

"How you gonna make the property tax payment with no income?"

"I don't know. But this is the last year those taxes will be so high, then they'll go back down and we can manage easier. Maybe I can get a loan, and pay it off when I sell the lambs. Please don't sell the Peak, okay?"

He shook his grizzled gray head. "Why does it matter so much? You could be comfortable if you invested the money. Why do you want this fight?"

"Please, just promise me. Please?"

Grandpa's perplexed scowl accompanied his nod.  
She relaxed. He'd keep his word. Too bad Cleve hadn't.

\* \* \* \*

"Take me up there, Nate!"

He was tired and justifiably cranky at the idea of driving to the Peak after dinner, but she was determined to go home.

"I need to take care of the cats and the chickens and Cookie."

"Cleve'll take care of the animals for you."

"I don't want that double-crossing jerk near anything of mine, ever again."

"Kie, maybe he was trying to help because of the fire. And Win told you himself that he brought it up, not Howell."

"Don't take his side, Nate. This isn't the first time he's lied to me to get at the property. It's all about the land. Life is one giant game of Risk to the Howells. If it was legal to use an army, they'd be doing it."

Nate expelled a weary sigh she guessed was only partially exaggerated. "Okay. Let me pack a bag."

"Um, I'd really rather you come back here tonight. I need to be alone." She didn't want to be alone, but Nate was more important elsewhere. His glare spurred her to admit, "Someone should be with Grandpa. He's worried."

Nate didn't know about the nasty message in back of the shop yet, and she hoped to keep it that way. She needed him with Grandpa, but he'd want to protect her if he found out.

"Besides, you have irrigating to do down here." As she'd hoped it would, her boss voice convinced him. "I'm sorry. I know you've had a long day. When we get the sheep up to the Peak next week, you can take a few days off, okay?"

As Nate had predicted, her animals had all been cared for. Still, she felt better being in the house she was fighting so hard to keep.

She apologized again for making Nate drive up when he was so tired. He left with a kiss to her forehead and promised to lock the gate, but she locked her doors anyway before making a bee-line for her shower. Washing away the grime and stench reminded her how tired she was. When she'd dried off and slid on a sweatshirt and shorts, she climbed in bed, anxious to zonk out.

An insistent pounding on the front door and then the back prohibited her from sleeping.

"Rocky? Are you here? The gate's locked again. Answer me if you're here!"

Lord, he'd think somebody else had been there poking around if she didn't answer.

Throwing open her bedroom window, she yelled around the corner, "I'm here, traitor. Go to hell, by the way."

\* \* \* \*

When Cleve reached her window, Rocky slammed it shut, leaving him to peer in and yell, “What in tarnation? What now?”

“I’m done talking to you, Howell.” There was that tone again, where she spat his name like the dirtiest word she knew.

“You could at least tell me how I’ve offended you now. Aren’t we *screw*ers anymore? Come on, sugar. Tell me about your day.”

Without warning, the window flew open. “It all makes sense now. You scheming bastard! While you were here distracting me, you paid somebody to burn down my practice so I’d be broke and Grandpa would agree to sell you the Peak. I should’ve guessed it before. No wonder you hung around all night, making sure I stayed here.”

“What are you accusin me of? Now I’m an arsonist? Lady, your moods swing more than a saloon door.”

“Shut up, Howell. I’ve got your number now.” The window slammed back down.

He beat on the glass. “Damn you, woman. I told you I don’t want your puny two hundred acres. Get it through your thick head!”

“Grandpa told me you offered him a million seven today,” she yelled.

“I did not!”

The window came back up. Her shotgun clicked as she cocked it. “You son of a bitch. Don’t you call my Grandpa a liar. If he says you offered it, then offer it you did.”

He stuck his hands in the air. After all, she was pointing her gun at him. “Ma’am, please. Your Granddad only talked about how long it would take to rebuild that office of yours the whole way to his house. I’m swearin on my Mama’s grave.”

“Your Mama’s not dead, jerk.”

“Give a fella a break. A crazy woman is aimin a shotgun at me, and I’m a little nervous.”

“Why would my Grandpa make up that story? Just to upset me?”

Something didn’t make sense. “He said he talked to me?”

Her pretty green eyes narrowed and she shook her head. “CJ Howell. He talked to CJ Howell. Shit. What’s your old man doing offering more money for this property?”

“Another feather in his cap. He thinks this ranch is inferior because we didn’t get your parcel. If he got it, he’d be right proud of himself.” Was it safe to lower his hands? “Peace?”

“No.” She lowered the gun. “No peace until you get your daddy to leave this property alone. Dammit. Go away, Cleve. I’m sorry, but just go away. Take your ice cream with you. We’re finished.” A few seconds later, her front door opened and she held out the half-empty carton. “You have room for it in your new fridge. I’ll see you around.”

“No, you won’t.” He grabbed her door instead of the ice cream, and pushed his way in. “You’re not sendin me packin because of what my Pop and your Granddad did today.” He backed her against the wall. “You’re not sendin me packin at all.”

Kissing her sent need stuttering through his body. She kissed back, but sagged against him.

“Just plain tuckered out, aren’t ya, Rocky?”

She nodded and he lifted her in his arms and carried her to bed, took the ice cream from her and put it in the freezer again. Then he returned to her bed, where he stripped to his shorts and curled around her.

“You break all the rules,” she complained. “You call me Rocky, and kiss me on the mouth, and sleep over. It’s no good to have a man who won’t obey me.”

“I can be good in other ways.”

“Yeah.”

He skimmed his fingers along her hairline.

“You do have magic fingers.”

“You’ve only seen the beginning, Rocky.”

“Cleve?”

He closed his eyes. She’d used his given name again. Finally. Thank the Lord.

“Grandpa wants to sell. It almost killed me when he told me that today.”

“Why does he wanta sell now?”

“I don’t have any income until the practice is operational again. The lease is void when there’s no equipment.”

“Wasn’t it insured?”

“The employees will have salaries, and the patients will get their glasses. The building and equipment will be replaced. But I wasn’t insured personally after I leased the practice. You won’t use this against me in the future?”

His gut reaction was to snap at her and ask why she wouldn’t trust him. But he knew why. “I won’t, honey. I swear it. You want a loan?”

“God, no.” She clung tighter to his hand. “I mean, I’ll work something out. I have *some* money banked. Enough to cover day to day expenses and Nate’s salary, and hire trucks to haul the sheep up.”

Her body tensed against his. Because she was worried. About money, something he’d never worried about in his life. There was always plenty on hand, and more available with only a quick request to Pop. This little bit of a thing had to be responsible for herself, her aging Granddad, and a ranch hand. If only he could take the burden from her shoulders. But he had no idea how to go about it. If he thought she’d take it, he’d happily hand her the money as a gift. Wouldn’t be hard to shuffle things in his accounts so Pop wouldn’t know.

Since he couldn’t fix the trouble from the inside, he went to work on her outside, rubbing the tension from her shoulders.

When she slept, he lay awake next to her, wanting her in ways he’d never wanted another woman, for reasons he’d never felt before.

## Chapter 12

Sunlight poured through the bedroom window of the little cabin, nearly blinding Cleve. Kiersten's cellphone played *Lean On Me*, but she showed no sign of rousing.

He silenced it, flipping it open on his way to the living room. "Hello."

The line was silent for a second. "Cleve," Nate said. "Is Kiersten available?"

"She's sleepin still. Is she late?"

Nate knew he'd spent the night. His territory was effectively marked.

"Nooo." Nate sounded miffed. "She's meeting the adjuster at noon. I just read the paper. Did she tell you about the threat against her?"

"Threat?" He stopped, mid-stride, next to the sofa.

"There was a message spray-painted behind the shop. It said, 'You're not wanted here. Leave, bitch!'"

He sat down hard on the couch. "She didn't tell me. She didn't tell *you*?"

"No, and then she insisted I come back here last night so Wins wouldn't be alone."

"Little devil. She always this difficult?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"I'll take care of her. It's probably a good idea for somebody to be around the ranch there, in case this guy goes for that next."

He hung up and paced the living room and kitchen while his guts churned. Rocky had too damn many enemies. She was such an independent little twit. He'd have to play his ace: the pregnancy.

He returned to her bed. Shielding her small body with his own, he watched her sleep. The hair around her face curled a titch, and her lips pouted. As he watched, her sleep-peaceful face contracted with worry, her forehead wrinkled and her neck muscles tensed. She woke looking upset.

He waited for her eyes to find his. He'd never wake another morning without wanting to be the first thing she saw.

"Pretty as the sunset in the evenin, and the sunrise in the mornin," he murmured.

She bit her lip, but only succeeded in slowing a smile. "What time is it?"

"Time for you to start lookin out for that baby. What's the big idea, comin up here all alone last night when you knew somebody'd left that nasty threat?"

Kiersten rolled, turning her back to him, but he wasn't about to let her off the hook.

He poked her ribs. "Nate called this mornin, upset he'd read about it in the paper."

"That was in the *paper*? Damn. I don't want Grandpa hearing about that."

"Again, time for you to quit bein bullheaded and protect that baby, instead of watchin out for everybody else."

“There probably isn’t a baby, Cleve. I hate to think how crazy you’d start acting if there was. When and *if* I find out I’m pregnant, I’ll go buy some prenatal vitamins and avoid cigarette smoke with the best of ’em. If you’re so bent on having a kid, don’t waste your time banging me. You should find a suitable wife and get married.”

He felt like he’d been sucker-punched, but he wasn’t about to let her shrug off his protection.

“Nate and I already decided, you’re not stayin up here alone till this guy is caught. Like it or lump it, little lady. And another thing.” He put his hand under her bottom and bodily turned her to face him. “I’m sick of the nasty way you talk about our sex. I’ve *banged* women before, ones I met at bars and took to motels so cheap the mattresses were probably bought from a rummage sale at the Super 8. In high school and college, I *screwed* so many girls, I lost count. And I’ve *fucked* women in cars in parkin lots after a good night of drinkin.” He liked that she winced at each word, and hopefully the idea of his past escapades. “But when I take you to bed, Kiersten...” She blinked at her name, which he seldom used. “I’m *making love*, pure and simple.” He didn’t like that her eyes were shut now. Not one bit.

And when they opened, they didn’t look at his face.

“Look Tex, this has gone too far. I’m not after what you’re after. I’m sorry I didn’t meet you back in your playboy days, because you’re a great lay, but I’m not up for the whole relationship gig again.”

“*Bull* shit!”

\* \* \* \*

Against her will, Kiersten’s eyes darted to Cleve’s face. She couldn’t recall hearing him swear before. Was he angry, or did he not believe that she didn’t want to fall in love again?

His cellphone rang on the nightstand.

Before answering, he looked at the display. “Rowdy. One of my hands.” Into the phone, he cried, “You ugly old hound-dog! Tell me y’all didn’t get lost on the way to Colorado.”

Rowdy replied something about wiping Cleve’s baby ass but not kissing it, then Cleve’s laughter drowned out the rest.

“Quit cryin. You know I’m teasin. Y’all are slower than a three-legged turtle. Who’s drivin?”

Someone named Dusty.

“Well, that explains a lot. Dusty’s gramma once put him to shame in a drag race. I reckon you been pullin over at every titty bar along the way too.” Sharp denials brought more laughter from Cleve. “Call me when you get to Rifle. I’ll be in town, so I can meet y’all and show your sorry asses the way home.”

He hung up grinning.

“You sound like Yosemite Sam when you talk to them. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a three-legged turtle...”

His hand covered her knee and tickled her until she was howling.

When she'd regained her breath, she asked, "So you're getting cowboys before you get cows?"

"*Cattle*. Cows live in a dairy." So serious about the cow word. Cute. "We've got a corral to build, and the rest of the fence around my ranch needs repaired. It's not all in as good a shape as yours is. And my stock will be here Wednesday."

"Mmm. Sounds like you'll be pretty busy. Maybe you won't be over here pestering the shit outta me all the time."

"I think we've got enough time for a good round of pesterin this mornin before you have to leave," he murmured against her ear lobe. "Your hair still smells like smoke."

"How flattering. It'll take like three more washings to get the stink out." Of course, when she'd washed her hair the night before, she hadn't planned on Cleve having his face in her hair again. "Cleve. Will you talk to your dad and make sure he doesn't pressure Grandpa? Please?"

He groaned. "The only thing more likely to slow me down in bed than mentionin my Pop is mentionin my Mama. I'll talk to Pop. But what I want doesn't mean much to him. He thinks I'm only passin on your property because you're pretty."

She laughed. "Ah, so I've used my feminine wiles to pull the wool over your eyes, have I? What if he thought you slept with me to get something you wanted, like, say, access to the BLM across one corner of my property?"

"So you'd be payin *me* for sex?"

She giggled. "I guess. Unless you paid me for the access. Then it would be like you sweet-talked me into a deal, with sex."

"How's ten grand sound?"

"Don't be silly. Lord, I was thinking of a couple hundred. You can pay to fence off a corner, then make a gate to drive the cattle through. But you can't move the fence permanently." She shook her head. "Ten grand. You Texans sure do always think big."

"It would get me access to two thousand acres, a lot of pasture. You hold the ace, Rocky. Don't sell it for a piddly amount."

"You're giving me business advice by telling me I can gouge you with this deal?"

"Consider it a way for you to get even with my Pop for costin you so much in taxes."

As if ten grand would come close to costing Howell what he'd cost her.

"I'll think about it. I better get showered so I can go meet that insurance guy."

Cleve had different plans for their morning. They weren't dressed until she had to rush to get out the door on time. He rode in her truck to his own vehicle, parked in front of her locked gate.

She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Did you get your four-wheeler running?"

"Yeah, Nate was right about the quick and dirty vandalism," he answered with a tolerant smirk.

"Sorry." She looked at her hands.



He tipped her chin up so she could see his grin. “*Now* you are. Meet me for lunch, sugar. What time you think you’ll be done?”

She drove to town in high spirits for someone on her way to deal with her lost livelihood.

Cleve haunted her thoughts, no matter what she tried to think of. Waking to him watching over her had felt good. Hell, much as she hated him thinking she couldn’t do everything for herself, his protection felt good, too. If only Cleve didn’t come in a package with all the other Howells, she’d consider carrying on with him. But no matter how good or kind he was, his family wanted to steal her heritage. She couldn’t have him taking care of her, being sweet. She’d fallen into the trap of wanting a man to take care of her before, and look what that had gotten her. No, things needed to stay on a physical-only level between them. She just had to keep things light, with no more talk about the four-letter ‘L’ word.

Colorado Loss Protection’s adjuster was thorough and efficiently brief. Nate tagged along for the meeting, filling in details for the adjuster when she forgot because her mind wandered from the subject at hand to her romp that morning.

As the representative drove away, Nate elbowed her. “You are so out of it today, girlfriend. Tell me all about your night.”

“My night?” she asked with feigned innocence. “I locked Cleve out again because I was so pissed about the offer Grandpa told me about. I even pointed my gun at him when I thought he was trying to tell me Grandpa lied.” She shrugged off Nate’s look of abject dismay. “It was CJ Senior that Grandpa talked to. Cleve offered me a loan.”

“And?”

“Please! Like I want to be indebted to that family. It’s hard enough fighting them on an even field.”

“Cleve *cares* about you, lady. You’ll be *in* that family before long.”

“Not! Come join us for lunch.”

“Nate the Third Wheel, let’s see...I don’t *think* so.”

“Come on. It’s not that kind of lunch. He’s killing time waiting for his three cowboy ranch hands to get here from Texas so he can show them the way to the ranch. You can come check ’em out.”

\* \* \* \*

Cleve found Nate and Kiersten sitting close, munching chips and salsa. Should’ve known Nate would show up. The two of them had their heads together, giggling like school girls. Gay or not, Nate was a man, and he’d seen Nate looking at her with more than pal-like affection.

Knowing it would make her madder than an old wet hen if he acted possessive, he swallowed his envy and took the seat across from her.

It was easy for him to forget his irritation when Rocky’s face lit in a smile and she chirped, “Hi Tex!” As long as she was that happy to see him, he could handle anything.

They’d all but ordered when his phone rang.

“Slower than a seven-year itch.” He laughed into his phone. “Never *knew* such a slow bunch. Did y’all make it to town or what?”

Rowdy growled, but he gave him directions to the restaurant.

“Grouchy old cuss,” he decreed as he ended the call.

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten watched Cleve anxiously scanning the parking lot. “I’d say somebody’s homesick,” she told Nate.

Cleve’s lifted shoulders told her she was right. Would he be content in Colorado, or give up and return to Texas by winter?

“There they are!” Cleve said. A shiny black Suburban—the Texas national car, since Texans were always claiming they lived in ‘a whole other country’—with a set of chrome longhorns on its hood, sailed into the parking lot.

She couldn’t resist rolling her eyes and asking, “Is there a chrome cow’s tail hanging over the back window?”

Nate chuckled at her side, but Cleve only pursed his grinning lips and gave her one evil eye.

The side of the vehicle bore the letter ‘H’ with gold eagle’s wings on each side. Flying H.

As the occupants emerged, Cleve gave them a play by play. From the driver’s door came Dusty, spindly and fair. Couldn’t be a day over nineteen. The front passenger door opened and cranky Rowdy emerged, grizzled and lighting up a cigarette. Cash, dark and wild looking, dropped to kiss the ground.

Cleve grinned, until Rowdy opened the other door of the Suburban, offering a hand down to another passenger, a female.

Taller than Rowdy, even without the three inch heels on her strappy sandals, or the bleached-blond bouffant, sprayed to withstand any onslaught of gale-force winds, she might have been a Barbie doll. Except Barbie’s clothing was more modest. Her cropped halter top dangled fringe barely below the bottom curves of substantial, unnaturally high breasts.

Kiersten owned thongs with more butt coverage than that chick’s denim shorts.

Cleve gave her a sideways look, his eyes wide.

“What the hell is *that*?” she demanded. “Jesus. First it’s Boss Hogg, and now Daisy Duke. You come from freakin Hazzard County, or what?”

“Whitney,” Cleve muttered, much like he’d say ‘hoof and mouth’. “Rocky, whatever you think when they get in here, just *don’t* believe *it*.”

The group, minus Rowdy, came in the front door. Cleve half waved, looking like he wasn’t sure whether to attract their attention or bolt out the kitchen door.

She shrugged at Nate.

‘Whitney’ noticed Cleve and rushed toward him. Her huge breasts nearly bounced out of their precarious perch in their sling of a shirt. She shrieked, “Cah-layv!” and catapulted against him. Her arms and legs went round him and she took his mouth with her own.

To Cleve's credit, his hands flailed helplessly in the air, rather than holding the woman who'd attached herself to him. His eyes locked on Kiersten, at least until his sorry male body responded and they closed in what could only be pleasure.

Whitney's dismount revealed a confused Cleve, who dashed a quick look of apology at her before Whitney's huge breasts still smashed against his chest drew his gaze again. Her long-nailed, bejeweled right hand snaked into his back pocket, while her left hand dropped a purse roughly double the size of her shorts on the nearest chair.

"Oh mah Gawd. What a horrible trip, but aren't you lookin handsome as ever, baby."

They obviously had a past. Which would now make *her* a thing of his past.

Nate's hand squeezed her knee under the table.

Nausea threatened when Whitney proceeded to coo over Cleve's razor stubble and sorry need of a haircut. She stood to head to the ladies' room, but Cleve mistook it for her stepping up to be introduced.

"Kiersten Day, this is Miss Whitney Pearson. Whitney, Kiersten."

Whitney extended her hand with grace, but she looked down her nose—a good ten inches above Kiersten's—at her ordinary jeans and baby tee. The lofty nose wrinkled in obvious disdain at the worn sport sandals.

"Charmed, Ah'm shore."

*Bullshit.* She should knock that probing hand so far out of Cleve's jeans pocket that this fake-blond floozy would spend her afternoon scraping fingers from ceiling tiles in the far corners of the restaurant.

Cleve completed the introductions to the men, "...Dusty, and Cash, this is Kiersten and Nate, her lead guy."

Nate's foot nudged hers.

*Quit staring at the hand and answer.* "Hi." She flashed her most winning smile at the men, something she hadn't bestowed upon her opponent. "Welcome to Colorado." Her lashes batted as the wellspring of her old flirting skills bubbled to the surface. "Cleve was tossing and turning, worrying about you all night."

Cleve's mouth dropped open. Then he jumped from the angry pinch Whitney gave him.

The sullen pout on Whitney's face rewarded her, but Cleve's *I can't believe you put me in a spot* look spurred her to tell Cash and Dusty, "You know, I need to run in the girls' room to freshen up, but when I come back I want you two to sit right beside me, and tell me *all* about your trip."

As she brushed past them, she grazed her fingers over Dusty's cheek. *Wiggle the hips. Thank God for Nate, making me get rid of all my ugly clothes!*

Once she was out of sight, she let her feet stomp. Cleve was probably pissed, because now CJ would find out he'd been sleeping at her house. Or because Jugs With Legs would know he'd been sleeping with her polar opposite.

The ladies' room was occupied, so she had to stand outside the door, waiting her turn.

Rowdy walked in the front door and paced the hall next to her, cellphone pressed to his ear. “Yessir, Mr. Howell. We just made it.”

Howell’s obnoxious accent carried in a hollow broadcast from the phone across the hallway. “Cleveland su-prahsed?”

“Yessir, he *was* surprised.” Rowdy, completely unaware she was eavesdropping, relaxed against the wall.

“Good. Hopefully Miss Whitney’ll take mah son’s mind off that little chigger next door. Ah don’t much cotton to mah youngest son dallyin with a dirt-poor field maggot rancher.”

Her hands clenched at her sides. Maybe she should snatch the phone from Rowdy’s hand and give Howell a piece of her mind.

“Well, yessir, I reckon Miss Whitney takes a fella’s mind off’n purty much everthin but her.” Rowdy moved away, and she could only hear his “mmm-hmm”s and “yessir”s.

In the restroom, she planted her palms flat on the counter and stared at the mirror. She wouldn’t scream or cry. CJ had sent the bimbo purposely to distract Cleve. What a pompous bastard! In the twenty-first century, parents did not choose their kids’ romantic interests. Hadn’t she feared exactly this scenario? That she wouldn’t be good enough for Cleve’s family and they’d disapprove of her?

“Goddammit.” She would *not* let the old fart win. She’d come out the victor or leave no spoils worth taking. That red face wouldn’t do. No way would she return looking crushed. She’d go back out there and make every man at that table positively hang on each word from her mouth.

Cleve would come to her cabin, to her bed, tonight and every night she wanted him to. Miss Bimbo could go to hell for all she cared. CJ’d probably paid her to come out anyway, so she’d still make her buck off the trip.

Somewhere down in the bottom of her purse was the lipstick Nate had made her wear clubbing. She dug it out and smoothed it on, worked the angry wrinkles from her forehead and amped up her flirty smile. One last look in the mirror. *Unwrinkle your nose. Now go get ’em.* Good thing the natural look was more her forte than the beauty pageant one. It would have to be.

Nate had aided and abetted her plan by moving aside so Cash could have his seat and Dusty would be on her other side. As she eased into her spot between the two guys, Whitney cooed and murmured in Cleve’s ear. Like they were in their own little world.

Across from Dusty, Rowdy complained to Nate about how much Whitney had slowed them down. She insisted on stopping overnight for her beauty rest, then spent two hours getting ready in the morning. She’d drawn out gas stops, in the ladies’ room with her makeup bag and giant can of hairspray. Her hair fixative had made Cash sneeze nonstop, but she wouldn’t let them drive with a window down so much as a dadgum inch, lest her hair get ‘mussed’.

“Mussed, my ass,” Rowdy said in a growl. “Ain’t seen a goddamn hurricane could muss that helmet.”

Nate smiled across the table. He cleared his throat. “Kiersten, this is Rowdy. Rowdy, this is—”

She cut him off, putting her unadorned hand forward. “...the *little chigger next door*.”

\* \* \* \*

Rocky’s snarled words carried over Whitney’s complaints about Rowdy’s cigarette smell in the suburban. Rowdy’s face went red. Cleve tuned in.

“How—Howdy, ma’am,” Rowdy managed.

“Don’t worry, Rowdy, I won’t hold you accountable for the underhanded tactics of your employer, any more than I hold Cleve accountable for them. Maybe you could pass on a message to CJ Senior for me, next time you speak?”

Rowdy nodded with a nervous smile.

“Just let him know he has yet to win a battle, and he sure won’t win the war.”

When Kiersten’s eyes locked on his, Cleve knew he’d become an object in the tussle between Pop and Kiersten. He didn’t feel much in control anymore, but at least she was willing to fight for him. That was more important. Right?

Whitney’s whispers in his ear barely turned his eyes away from Kiersten for the duration of the meal.

How she managed it, he didn’t know. Cash and Dusty flirted with her, and she carried on a friendly chat with an unusually smiley Rowdy, but he *knew* her attention was actually focused on him. He even caught bashful Dusty leaning close and sniffing her, and Cash offered to teach her how to hustle folks at cards. Time to have a ‘hands off the boss’s woman’ talk with his guys.

Pouting like only a Southern girl could, Whitney scooted next to Nate, flaunting her enhanced breasts and flipping her hair around. By the time they left the restaurant, Nate looked ready to kiss the ground outside like Cash had.

Thank the Lord for the groceries in the front seat of his truck when Whitney tried to finagle a ride. He didn’t offer to move them into the back to accommodate her. Instead, he led her by the elbow to the Suburban. Cash begged to ride in the back of his truck to avoid a flare-up of his Hairspray Fever, but he only clapped him on the back and laughed.

The Suburban had headed to the nearest gas station and Nate’s Xterra had left the parking lot when Cleve joined Kiersten.

Suddenly girly, she waited for him to open her driver’s door. And a long, hot kiss.

“You opened a hornet nest for me with Pop today,” he murmured in her ear.

“Mmm. Sorry.”

“You are not.” His mouth crossed back over to hers.

“Maybe not.” Her lips tightened in a grin against his. “You’ll come over later?”

Boiling blood again. But he was damned helpless to fight it. “There’ll be hell to pay, both here and back home, but yeah. I’ll be there, Rocky.”

“You won’t be disappointed,” she promised as he boosted her bottom up to her seat.

## Chapter 13

Kiersten hummed along with Cher as she drove to the ranch to pick up Oscar and her mail. She wanted to talk to Grandpa about renting Cleve access to the BLM parcel.

“Don’t know why you won’t just sell out and retire.”

“Dammit, Grandpa. I’m not selling it.”

His arms crossed over his stubborn old chest. “I can sell it without you and there ain’t a thing you can do about it.”

Luck was on her side today. Her vision blurred with tears, playing on the guilt he so deserved for that comment. “Go ahead and watch me be a spinster for life, just to spite you.”

He gazed at her for a full minute, chewing the inside of his lower lip. Then he threw back his head and laughed like she hadn’t seen him do in years. “You’re bull-headed enough to do it, too, aren’t ya?” He wiped the corners of his eyes. “Tell the cotton-picker we want fifteen hundred.”

“You sure that’s enough? I heard him today telling one of the cowboys that I’m a dirt-poor field-maggot rancher.”

His eyes narrowed as Nate gave an appropriately dramatic gasp. “You know what? I think five thousand is more like it. Maybe the rotten bastard’ll learn to keep his insultin mouth zipped.”

Nate lifted one brow. “Is this Cleve’s money, or Big Daddy’s?”

She shrugged. “I think CJ is bankrolling whatever it takes to set Cleve up in a *respectable* operation. Cleve said we’d be sticking it to his Pop if we gouged ’em.”

Grandpa leaned back in his chair, looking her over. “You seem pretty friendly with Cleve.”

“Yeah. I better get on the road.” Her eyes widened in silent communication with Nate, who coughed into his hands. “I still haven’t got my garden in.”

“Hey, don’t forget your mail,” Nate called, hurrying after her when she’d kissed Grandpa goodbye. “So, is Rapunzel expecting a visit from Prince Charming tonight?”

“I won’t be there alone, Nate.” She sighed, failing to act put out.

He grinned and tugged a hank of her hair. “Lucky little bitch.”

\* \* \* \*

Before meeting his guests at the gas station, Cleve had a phone call to make.

“Yello?” Pop answered.

“Hey Pop, it’s me. Rowdy tells me you arranged Miss Whitney’s trip out.”

“That’s right, son. No need to thank me, though. Ah was a randy young man mahself, not long ago.”

He could just see Pop kicked back in his den with a lit cigar. The old man was not going to appreciate what he had to say.

He fiddled with his keys dangling from the ignition. “Pop, I’m sendin her home as quick as I can get her a plane ticket.”

“Say what? You can’t send her *back*. She’ll get in a snit and tell her daddy. Parker Pearson and Ah got a business understandin. We can’t have no trouble over his little girl gettin her feelins hurt. Bed her a few nights, get it outta your system. She’s gotta go back to practice soon anyhow. You know she’s a cheerleader for the Cowboys now?”

Thanks to the clear connection, he could hear Pop draw an angry puff on his cigar.

“Pop, I know that, but I’m not interested in Whitney. You’ll have to find a way to smooth it over with Mr. Pearson.”

“Not...Not interested? Boy, you jumpin tracks on me too, like Clay?”

The jiggling keys took a good slam against the steering column. “No. I’m not gay. No disrespect intended, but I can find women all on my own now. There’s lotsa tails to chase right here in Colorado.”

“Oh yeah, lots of tails. Connivin, sneakin little tails whisperin in your ears about how much their property means to ’em, huh? Turnin young Cleve against his daddy in spite of all the hard work he’s done.”

“Pop.” He scrubbed his face with his palms in frustration. Maybe announcing Rocky’s offer would help Pop’s mood. “I’m workin on a deal with Kiersten, to access the public land across a corner of her place.”

“A deal? Horse *shit*! Her grandpappy’s ready to sell me the whole shebang, and you’re happy to make a deal with the woman? Son, Ah’ve got half a mind to come out there and show you how business is done.”

“Winston isn’t interested in sellin anymore. And I *don’t* want you out here, makin enemies of all the neighbors I’ll have to live around.”

“Neighbors. Hmph! Hell, if a man’s successful, he don’t *have* neighbors. That Day woman has caused me too much trouble already. You keep workin on your deal with her. Maybe she’ll be distracted enough to let the old man alone, and Ah can get him to deal with me.” Pop chuckled. “In the meantime, Miss Whitney stays. She can hitch home with Clay when he comes back next week.”

“Pop!” Such a stubborn old cuss. He threw his hands up in defeat, then started his truck. He’d better get to the filling station. Even the Suburban’s big tank would surely be full by now.

“Practice your politics, son. Only reason Ah let ya piddle around in the Rangers as long as Ah did was to learn some politics.”

A week of Whitney? No amount of time in the Rangers would prepare a man for that. She’d dazzled him before, but now... Far more trouble than she was worth. All that makeup and perfume. All the fooling around getting pretty in the morning.

“Lord.”

“Have a go at her a couple times before she leaves, son. She’s a pretty little thing, and you’ll feel a sight better. Time you find yourself a regular woman and settle down soon, anyhow.”

“It ain’t gonna be with a girl like Whitney.”

He knew exactly what kind of woman he planned to settle down with, and she wasn’t much like Whitney Pearson at all.

Once they’d arrived at the Flyin H, his ranch hands were underimpressed with their new lodgings. “Hell, I’ve seen bunkhouses fixed up nicer’n this,” Rowdy bellyached.

“Sorry your ten room mansion isn’t in order yet, Your Highness,” he said, bowing low. “Perhaps you’d rather take the young lady to the city and obtain more acceptable accommodations?” Too bad one of the guys wouldn’t take him up on the offer.

Cash laughed so hard he fell to the dusty driveway before he even got the inside tour. “Whoo! Ole Chaz really outdid himself this time, didn’t he?”

Whitney was speechless. For the first time since Cleve had known her, she was bereft of verbal complaint. But when she broke her silence, she’d do it in a big way.

Poor Dusty got the chore of lugging her massive luggage inside so she could “freshen up”.

When Dusty reappeared outside the door, Cleve peeked around the corner of the house, waving for him to follow. The men snuck away up the nearest hill.

“Might be kinda awkward around here for a few days,” he warned the guys after pointing out the property boundaries. “Miss Whitney’s gonna be stayin until Clay leaves.” His news met with groans all around. “The good news is, she’ll be stayin in my room.” He got a few questioning looks. “Bad news is, I won’t be there. Ms. Day next door’s had some personal threats, so I’ll be spendin my nights at her place.”

“Such a hero,” Dusty said, shaking his head in mock awe. “You get tired of pullin night patrol, I’ll pitch in a hand.”

“Another thing.” Cleve crossed his arms over his chest, but cast a tolerant smile on the kid. “Kiersten’s taken.”

Short and simple, his directive was fully understood.

Rowdy clucked his tongue. “Whitney know about this arrangement?”

“I reckon she’ll find out soon enough,” he answered. “Feel free to keep *her* any kind of company you want.” Although ranch hands were beneath the class of men Whitney would consider for relationships, he doubted she’d complain about any male attention. “Tomorrow we’ll get started repairin fences, hopefully be done by Monday. Then we’ll get the corrals built.”

Whitney didn’t let up all afternoon. Didn’t take her long to abandon pouting over Kiersten. His legs were asleep from her perching on his lap and interrupting his conversations with the men.

And the look she’d given him when he served reheated frozen burritos for supper...

He hadn’t quite told her she’d be sleeping alone when his cellphone rang.

“Cleve?” Kiersten, panicked, didn’t wait for a reply. “Can you please come over here, quick?”

Did he hear her cocking a gun?

“Be right there,” he vowed, and tossed a quick “Night, everybody,” on his way out.



## Chapter 14

Kiersten's pistol hung cold and heavy in her right hand, her cellphone jammed in the pocket of hastily pulled on jeans.

She stood inside her locked front door, more freaked out by the second. Damn Trayce. What was he up to now?

Her evening with Cleve had been planned to the smallest detail, and she'd been waiting outside on her porch swing for him, covered with a quilt she'd made the first year she wintered alone. Candles burned inside, a dinner she'd made him waited in the oven. A six pack of Bud Light for him chilled in the fridge. Snuggled under the heavy cover, she'd rocked and imagined the look on his face when he saw her filmy negligee. She'd figured they'd have a *very* late dinner.

Oscar had snuffled along the ground past the deck, kicking dirt behind him, as the sun moved lower in the western sky.

A motor had brought her gaze to the driveway. *Cleve. Finally.*

It wasn't Cleve's truck, but Trayce's.

She'd raced inside with the quilt wrapped around her, locking doors and windows. As Trayce stepped down from his lifted truck with huge knobby tires, she'd yanked curtains shut in her room and dialed Cleve. Only after she'd placed the call and loaded her gun had she dressed.

Now she stood clutching her weapon, waiting. Strange to have a neighbor to call, and even stranger that she'd called him. And she'd phoned him first when she felt endangered. Complex. Too complex to address now. Later.

A sharp bang on the door made her jump.

"I know you're in there, Doc. I saw you turn tail and run inside!"

She barely breathed, hoping he'd give up and take a long hike off a tall cliff. How long till Cleve showed up?

Oscar had run inside while she locked doors and called him, and now he sat growling at the door.

Intending to shush him, she put her finger to her lips. With little effect.

Trayce tromped around to the back door, rattling the knob.

Oscar bounded to his doggy door.

"Oscar!" she hissed.

"I knew you were in there." Trayce sang. "If you didn't go around making enemies, you wouldn't need to lock your doors, up here, *all alone*."

"Get the hell outta here, Trayce! I've got my nine mil aimed right at your crotch. You remember the gun, right?" He should. Luke had paid him retail price for it. "It'd make a nice hole where your overactive wiener dwells." Her hands shook, though her voice didn't.

"I didn't come to play *OK Corral* with you. Anyhow, you know if we have a shooting match I'm gonna outweapon you." Still, his words were a little clipped. He was concerned for his dick. "I got a business proposition."

"I've got no business with you, asshole. Get off my property. Now."

That malicious grin she saw through the small glass of her back door...maybe she should just shoot him. "I've lost a lot of business the last few days, Doc. Money's pretty tight and I figure it's mostly your fault for turning my customers against me."

"Your merchandise is overpriced. That's why everybody shops at Wal-mart for their sporting goods."

"Thanks to you, my dealer's license is on suspension. I have a lot of customers pretty pissed right now. But if you help me out, I won't tell them you're to blame."

"Fuck you, Gunther." If she didn't help him out, he was planning to tell his gun buddies?

"That'll come later, after I come through this pathetic door of yours."

"Try the knob again, and I swear to God I'll be the first resident of Rocky Peak to use the Make My Day law, dickhead."

"I know you need money too."

"I bet you know it. I bet you had something to do with it."

"No point worrying your pretty little red head about that. The local Fifes won't ever figure out who toasted your practice."

"Go away, Trayce. I've solved my money problems. Without your help. I don't intend to be an illegal weapons mule for you."

He chortled. "Right. Lease me the hunting rights for this year. I know some guys who heard about that trophy bull, willing to pay ten grand each to hunt up here. If I lose my dealer's license, I could go into Guide and Outfitting. You could be the camp cook, if you wanta make a little more. I'll cut you in for thirty percent on the hunting."

"Get lost, Trayce." God, where was Cleve? "If I decide to lease hunting rights, I can do it without you, and get *all* the money."

Bang! He'd hit the outside of the door. "You stupid little twitch, you don't have a choice! You hear me? Do what I say, work with me, or sometime you're gonna forget to lock a door, and somebody's gonna be in here waiting for you. Or maybe your truck's gonna go through a whole pile of nails on the way to town, and you'll be stranded on the highway. Never can tell who's gonna come up on a woman broke down on the road. Or maybe poor old Grandpa—"

"You son of a bitch," she shrieked, throwing the door open and aiming her gun at his chest, "Shut up. Shut the fuck up!" Threatening Grandpa was the last straw. The very last.

Trayce stumbled as he backed up, his eyes dancing left and right but always coming back to her weapon.

She followed him from several feet away, keeping the gun aimed dead center on his chest. He backed down the steps, then toward his truck, hands raised.

Focusing without blinking, she mumbled, "Shut up, just shut up."

Taking the steps slowly, she watched him for any sudden movement. Her foot had settled on the last step when a hand reached from behind her budding lilac bush and gripped her arm, smoothly taking the gun.

Shit. What was this, an action movie? Who was Trayce's accomplice?

Trayce eyed her with interest, but his hands did not lower. Rather, he turned white.

"It's okay darlin'," Cleve soothed next to her ear. "You don't have to shoot the bad guy. I'll do it." He moved in front of her, then addressed Trayce.

"Spent enough time as a Ranger, partner, I know how to make it look like self-defense. Or if I wanted, I could get rid of a body the *right* way. So I suggest you climb in Big Foot there and get the fuck off the lady's place."

When Cleve held a gun, there was no doubt he knew what he was doing. She'd done plenty of target shooting, but the only living things she'd shot were skunks and coyotes. Trayce probably doubted she'd shoot another person, but wasn't ready to bet his life on the hunch. Cleve, however, appeared unperturbed by the idea of taking another human life.

Trayce nodded his intent to comply with Cleve's orders, and did so.

Once the black truck was gone down her driveway, she let herself melt against Cleve. "Oh my God. Where did you come from? I never heard you drive up."

\* \* \* \*

With Rocky's face smashed against his chest, he released the full magazine of shells from the weapon and looked her gun over. Shiny barrel, no fouling in the chamber or other signs of being fired since it had been cleaned. His arms tightened around her back. He gave himself the pleasure of burying his face in her hair, his lips resting right in the middle of a sweet cowlick.

"My ATV crapped out on me comin up the hill again. I saw those big tire tracks comin through your gate and guessed what was up. Came through the trees on foot. Hey, you're shakin like a leaf!" He pulled away enough to get a look at her teary face.

She sniffled. "God, I was so terrified."

"You sure didn't look it. I didn't think Gunther was gonna see another sunrise."

"Then how come you took the gun from me?"

"Takin a human life leaves an awful nasty aftertaste, darlin. I wouldn't want you to deal with those feelings."

"Because of the Maybe Baby?" she asked.

"Oh. Forgot about that, actually." He rubbed her back.

"Well, I'm glad you took the gun. I was afraid Trayce was going for a gun of his own in his truck. I kinda regretted coming out the door. Did you hear what he said?"

"I think I got here at the tail end, but I heard him threaten Winston, and then you come barrelin out the door like Annie Oakley in a temper. He wanted you to open the door, Rocky. Would've been a safer bet to stay inside till I got here."

“How was I supposed to know how long you’d be?” she snapped. “Besides, I’m just a sitting duck in the house until somebody else shows up. Supposing he couldn’t bust through the door, all he’d have to do is toss a stick of firewood through a window and he’s in.”

Her invincible attitude was gone. Now she was vulnerable, which he found every bit as appealing as her tough side.

“You won’t be in that position again, I promise it.” Not as long as he was alive and kickin, she wouldn’t.

“I didn’t mean it’s your responsibility. I’m shook up right now. I’ll be fine tomorrow.”

“I’ll be by your side to make sure.”

“You gonna babysit me round the clock now, till you know for sure I’m not carrying your heir?” Her resentment rang loud and clear.

He tilted her chin, forcing her to look up at him. “That what you wanta hear, Rocky? That I’m only into you for a kid?” The way her eyes jerked away to the side and she swallowed hard against his hand on her neck, he knew she’d refuse to answer.

He cut his chuckle short with a kiss.

“Mmm. That’s more like what I had planned before Pencildick showed up and ruined everything,” she said with a half-smile. “You know, you positively *reek* of pink-can Aqua Net.” Her eyes narrowed on him, and she pursed her lips to hide a hellcat’s grin.

It took some time to register what Aqua Net was, then his face got hot. “I’m sorry. I was plannin to change my shirt before I came over, but I left in a hurry. I mean, I didn’t do anything wrong, I mean, I only—”

“Oh, do shut up.” She laughed, which must be a good sign. “I know Barbie’s been all over you like a diaper on a baby’s ass.” Her eyes rolled. “When’s she leaving?”

“Um, well, I haven’t got a ticket yet, but, well—” *Oh hell, Howell, don’t you dare lie to her again.* “That is to say...I guess she’ll be stayin till next week and catchin a ride home with Clay.” There, for once he’d chosen the smart route. He cringed, waiting for her wrath.

Her chin lifted and she smiled. “Oh well, I guess you won’t be around her much anyway. My gain, her loss.”

Did she really want him around or was he just a way to aggravate his dad and now Whitney, too? And get a free bodyguard to boot? Which reminded him... His own weapons were back at his place.

“Here’s your gun back.” He handed it to her, then reached in his pocket for his cellphone.

“Hey, Rowdy. No, everything’s okay now. Listen, I had a bag packed in my room.” He listened impatiently to Rowdy’s complaints about Whitney. “She’ll get over it after a fashion. Pay her some attention.” But there were more complaints. “Well, hell, if she wants to tattle to her daddy, then let her. I got bigger fish to fry. Listen, my ATV broke down on the way over here. I need you to get my handgun from under my mattress and bring it over, along with that bag. Head on up the road from our gate, and you’ll come to the Day driveway. Thanks.”

Kiersten grinned when he hung up. "Sounds like you've got an unhappy guest. Scarlet's not getting her way, huh? *'Oh Rhett, please come to your senses, my thighs are sweatin for you, you're such a handsome devil!'* Please, if I ever get so pathetic, just shoot me." Her grin faded and she looked sick to her stomach. "I guess I can't blame her too much, if she knows what she's missing..."

He scratched his forehead under his hat. Might as well keep on telling the truth. "There's a, uh, past."

"Can't be a very *long* past! Christ, she's not old enough to have been legal for very long... Oh, God. I don't even want to know, do I?" The siren from the restaurant, who'd tonight become a vulnerable woman in need of his protection, turned back into the defensive, man-hating shrew he'd first met. "What the hell are you doing with somebody like me if you're attracted to women like that?"

With his hands on the sides of her face, he made her look at him. "Quit. You're the opposite of every woman I ever knew till now. None of that gloopy makeup, but you're the prettiest girl I know."

Her eyes checked his. Confirming his honesty?

"You've got that huge, soft, every-color hair that makes me nuts when it's loose and hangin all over me, you know that? Sometimes I forget what I'm doin in the middle of a job, thinkin about how some of it curls and some of it's straight, like it has as many moods as you do."

\* \* \* \*

Her hands were full with the gun and the clip, or she'd have self-consciously touched the hair she'd neglected. It had grown from the sleek professional cut she used to maintain into something wild that she suspected she should be embarrassed by, but personally enjoyed. Mirroring the unregimented life she'd led on the mountain, her hair had days where it was alternately straight, wavy, or curly, and much more red than it used to be when it was short. The red seemed to grow in streaks mixed with the rest of her hair, and wanted to curl more than the rest.

Cleve slid his hands down to her shoulders. "And then there's the way you hide that little body of yours like a secret. You don't advertise it like a billboard for every man to see. I like that, Rocky. I like it a lot."

"Um, thanks?" Her cheeks warmed.

"So what were those *plans* you were talkin about?"

"While we wait for Rowdy..." She teasingly tugged the bottom of her negligee out between her sweatshirt and jeans. "I'm gonna give Nate a call and warn him about Trayce, okay? Yeah, it's all the same fabric. So's the panty."

His gaze stayed fixed on her inside while she dialed Nate. "Is there food cookin?" he asked.

"Warming. Chicken Marsala."

She was laughing at the lusty look in Cleve's eyes when Nate answered, "Chicken? I thought you'd be calling to tell me about the sex by now."

“Cleve’s old-fashioned. I have to feed him before he’ll put out.” She laughed. “He earned it tonight though. He rescued me from shooting My Favorite Militant.”

Cleve sat down at her table while she paced and talked.

“Trayce was *there*?” Nate gasped.

“Yeah. I’m sure he was the one who torched the practice. Now he wants me to let him lease out hunting rights on the Peak, and he’ll give me thirty percent.”

“No way! I hope you sent him packing.”

“Pretty much, but first he threatened my safety and Grandpa’s, too.”

“Oh my God, that guy is *such* bad news.”

“Yeah, so can you keep a close eye on Grandpa till I can figure out what else to do with him?” He claimed he was too short of breath for thin air at the Peak. She’d made a doctor appointment for him, but it wasn’t until next week.

“You know I’ll watch out for Wins,” Nate assured her. “That’s not such a bad idea, leasing out hunting rights, girlfriend.”

“I know, I was thinking so, too.” She took a seat on her kitchen table, legs swinging. “Let me know if you think of anybody who wants to plunk down major cash to hunt up here.”

When Cleve fingered the wisp of negligee peeking out between her shirt and pants, her interest in conversation flagged.

“I’ll think on it, shortcake. You be careful up there. Trayce is getting more and more psycho by the day.”

Cleve’s hand snuck under her shirt, exploring the folds of filmy fabric.

“Um, yeah. Cleve’ll be...here.”

“Fort Worth Barbie couldn’t keep him away?”

She giggled and Cleve scowled.

“She was asking for your address, actually. Said she was picking up vibes from you at the restaurant.” She winked at a now-grinning Cleve.

“The vibes were from the Silicone Alarm going off, not from me.”

“Ohhkay...” Cleve’s face was under her shirt, nibbling around her navel. “I’m gonna...go. Go feed Cleve his dinner.”

“Yeah, right. Make it a good dinner, babe,” Nate said with a fakish laugh.

“Night, Natey,” she sighed before she clicked off her phone.

Back-down on her table, her shirt scrunched up to her armpits, what she wanted was a far cry from dinner. Cleve’s mouth paused here and there to kiss her through a thin layer of peach, filmy fabric. But his truck was rumbling up her driveway.

“Hey Tex, I think your first in command just drove up.”

Muttered curses burned against the lower side of a breast.

“Tsk, tsk, weren’t you the one telling me I had a potty mouth?”

He gave her a hand to seated position and she pulled her sweatshirt back down.

“You stay here. I’ll get rid of Rowdy,” he promised.

“Don’t you think it would be more hospitable if I invited him in and gave him a tour?”

His head shook. “If he figures out I’m havin real food over here, there’s gonna be mutiny back at the ranch.” He tossed back a conspiratorial wink as he went out the front door.

She sat on the table with her arms wrapped round her middle, thinking of nothing but his boyish grin and how it messed up her heartbeat, while his low voice rumbled with Rowdy’s outside.

When he came back in with a large duffel bag, she told herself she was pleased to have him around because he was good in bed. And because he held a gun like it was second nature. She *needed* him now, for protection. And for sex. Nothing more.

As she dished up their dinner, he asked, “Aren’t you gonna take off that sweatshirt now?”

She smiled and shook her head. No, it was better to let him wonder what she’d look like without the shirt. Build up the anticipation while they ate, then strip down to the teasing little outfit and give him the ride of his life later.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve guessed she was teasing him, had him by the bit, but she was feeding him a delicious meal and he didn’t have to brave a loaded gun or cross a locked gate to get in her house. Progress was progress, after all.

The lady sure knew how to cook. Maybe she could show Dusty a few tricks in the kitchen. But dammit, that would mean having the kid underfoot. It was better having her all to himself while she was being sweet.

Neither of them had said a word since she’d served his plate and he’d tucked in. Coming up for air and another piece of hot bread, he noticed her barely touched food.

“What’s wrong, Rocky? You’re not hungry?” He put down his bread and fork, leaning forward in concern.

She gave him a half-hearted smile. “I guess it finally sunk in, what a mess I’m in with Trayce. And I must’ve been sampling too much while I was cooking earlier.”

Why didn’t he believe that?

His cell rang.

She read the display on his phone lying on the table. “Looks like Big Daddy.”

“Howdy, Pop,” Cleve answered past a mouthful of heavily buttered bread.

“Son. Ah got a phone call from Pearson. He’s mahhty *upset* cause his little girl called him cryin to beat the band about you leavin her all alone and runnin off to some other woman.”

His eyes squeezed tight. Whitney *had* tattled on him. “She ain’t all alone. She’s with Rowdy and Cash and Dusty.”

“Didn’t Ah tell you most specific that you was to use your manners with her and treat her lahk a guest until she left with Clay? Damn, boy, Pearson is fit to be tied. There’s his little girl hundreds of miles away, throwin conniptions, and he trusted you to take care of her. When you gonna grow up and be responsible?”

“Whitney’s safe. I’m bein a gentleman and lookin out for another lady who needs it a lot more than Whitney does.”

That little lady was looking at the floor, but why? Probably laughing at him, which irritated him more than Pop saying he wasn’t responsible or grown-up.

“Don’t tell me no stories, son. Even Pearson knows you’re all moon-eyed over that mountain woman. Put your pecker in your pants and get back where you belong.”

That did it. He wasn’t some fifteen-year-old boy to be commanded. “Look Pop, don’t order me around. It ain’t none of your concern *where* my pecker is, and it ain’t your job to find places for me to stick it.”

Rocky looked up, wearing her troublemaker grin.

“That’s one hell of a way for a son to speak to his daddy,” Pop fumed. As he ranted on about the disrespect his son was showing, the same son watched a sprightly striptease.

When the barely-clad female straddled him in his chair and begged against his lips, “Baby, come back to bed. I’ll show you where to stick it,” Cleve knew he was done for.

For a second, the phone was silent.

Even as he enjoyed the kiss, he braced himself for the worst from Pop.

“Well, Ah never—”

In a quick, unexpected motion, Kiersten snatched his phone away. “Never? Judging by how many kids you have, I bet you did, Howell.” There was that name-spitting again. “So has Cleve, lots of times. And if you’ll excuse us, he’s about to again. Maybe a few times by morning. You should be proud. He’s *very* good at it. Adios, señor!” One of her hands snapped the phone shut while the other burrowed in the back of Cleve’s hair. “If he grounds you, I’ll come sneak in your window at night.”

To his surprise, Pop didn’t call back. Not that he would have answered, once Rocky led him to her room.

After stripping his clothes and pushing him back on her bed, she released her hair from the loose pony tail, letting it tickle him as she made long, crazy, torturous love to his body with her mouth. If his hands tried to stroke her, she’d push them away, tuck them under his back. His words, his pleading requests, finally convinced her. Her little outfit drifted to the floor.

\* \* \* \*

When Kiersten slid onto Cleve, he didn’t seem to notice she’d skipped the condom. It was a short ride to his destination, an arrival she very much enjoyed watching. She told herself, as she lay on him with her ear to his furry chest listening to his heartbeat first racing and then thudding back to normal, that it felt good giving him pleasure only because he’d done it for her so many times.

The sound of his heartbeat was soon inaudible. Cleve was humming. Feeling it rumbling in her ear against his chest, she searched her mind, tried to recognize the melody. He seemed to be carrying it very well.



She liked the song, she knew that much. A man sang it. Yes, Kenny Rogers. *Won't you believe in my song?* It came to her as he hummed past the title, the word used so many times in the song. *Lady*. She smiled to herself, and then as he hummed, the rest of the words came to her. *I've waited for you for so long*. He held that last note beautifully, but oh, God. It was way too much like a declaration of something she really didn't want. *You're the love of my life, you're my Lady*. Oh God. What was she supposed to do? Or say? Maybe she could pretend to be sleeping. That's what she always ended up doing after sex with him, right? She lay perfectly still, willing her heart to beat normally, knowing he'd feel it.

His hands quit slipping through her hair and settled on her lower back, and she knew he was listening, thinking. She didn't want to hurt him, not ever. He was too good, too kind, but she couldn't let her heart get crushed again. She wouldn't be made a fool of, wouldn't be tricked. Not again, not ever again. She'd told him that before.

This was supposed to be a diversion, all about physical gratification. Another way to best Howell.

So why did it feel fantastic for those first seconds when she'd realized what the words of the song were saying to her? Why did she want to make Cleve smile, give him pleasure, give him the baby he wanted?

That was foolishness. Talk about a recipe for success—getting knocked up by some guy you barely knew and being *happy* about it. First marrying a conman, then worshipping her gay best friend, now hoping she'd been impregnated by the son of her enemy. She must have the market cornered on ways to hurt herself.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve listened to Kiersten's breathing, feeling the tightness of her against him. She was tense, not asleep. The final, telling sign: tears dripping onto his chest. What the hell did he do wrong? It was too soon, that's what. Well, hell. Telling his girl he loved her sure wasn't going the way it always went in the movies. He'd made her cry, when he wanted more than anything to make sure she never cried again.

Feeling a fool because tears of his own threatened, he cleared his throat. "Might bruise a lesser man's ego, you know? Tell a girl you love her, and she cries."

Was that a sob or had she choked back a giggle?

"Forgot the rubber again," he admitted.

"I didn't forget." She sniffled. "I'm either already knocked up, or it's past the time when I can get that way this month."

*Oh, darlin. I like your thi nking.* "Then hell, let's go another round, Rocky." He tugged a lock of hair, winding it round his fingers.

"You gonna make me cry again, after?"

"Yep. Only next time you're gonna look at me while I make you cry. One of these days you'll believe what I'm tellin you, and you won't cry when you hear it."

\* \* \* \*

Nate pretended to fall asleep on the couch while Wins watched the late news.

After the old man sidled off to bed, he lay with his eyes wide open, watching the light from the TV flicker across the ceiling. Thinking of Kie with Cleve. What kind of stupid mess had he gotten himself into? If he'd made a move any time over the last two years, he would have faced her rejection and possibly lost her friendship. He hadn't thought she was ready for a relationship again, or he would have gone for it. Now she was crazy for Cleve, probably in love with the guy in spite of the difficult circumstances with his father.

And where did that leave him? On the outside, again.

Kie had gone from his boss to his good buddy and confidante, to something he refused to name now, given the situation. How long till she figured out he was carrying a torch for her? If she was smart, she'd squeeze him out of her life little by little rather than watch him pining in the corner for her. *This is what happens to people who can't make up their mind.* He'd waited too long to decide, and lost the only female he could probably ever be happy with.

## Chapter 15

Kiersten yawned and stretched, reached and patted the still-warm empty spot next to her. Her shower was running. And Cleve was humming and intermittently singing words in there. She had to smile in spite of the love song. What would it have been like to have a rich cowboy fall in love with her before she'd become jaded, before she knew Luke?

It would be so easy to let herself go. Enjoy falling in love like everyone else. Like she'd done before...Yeah. When she was the only one in love. No, it might be tempting, but she'd resist. The humiliation when she'd learned Luke never truly loved her was one thing, but she'd grieved for him while she still believed in their marriage.

Losing people hurt. She should be used to it by now, but it didn't get easier. No doubt she'd lose Grandpa one day, and who knew when anybody else would get in a car wreck and be gone? It wasn't worth it to get attached to people when they were so damn *mortal*.

A truck rumbled up her driveway. Pulling her curtain aside a titch, she saw an old red, beat-up Chevy. Fletch Latham's. After tugging on her jeans and sweatshirt, she padded barefoot to her front deck to greet her visitor.

"Hi, Mr. Latham." He was a sheep rancher too, as old as her Grandpa and looking it.

"*Mr. Latham*, pooh! We're not in the bank, call me Fletch. Mornin." The handshake he'd started to greet her with became a hug instead. "Looks like spring made it, huh? Sure took its own sweet time coming. Every year it seems like the winter gets longer."

"Grandpa says the same thing. You wanta come in for some coffee?"

"No, Kristin, I come to talk business." *Business*. Her gaze darted back to the house. "I've had an offer on my property from that Texan, and I wanted to give you first chance at it. It ain't right the way he's done you, and I'd sure like to see him turn tail and leave this country."

"Well, I appreciate you thinking of me, but I'm pretty strapped right now, with the fire at my office and all. Was the offer from the senior Howell in Texas, or the son out here?"

"It was that bastid down in Texas. Called me on the phone Friday. I'm afraid I'm gonna have to take his offer, though. Four hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money for a man like me, and it sure would be good to retire and go south in the winter."

She nodded, her mind racing with wicked mean thoughts, and her heart keeping pace with the adrenaline buzz from starting to carry them out. "Four hundred thousand? I'd hold out for more, Fletch. Mr. Howell offered Grandpa a million seven this week."

Fletch's mouth dropped open, as she'd expected.

His leathery face darkened. "A million seven, you say? *How* much acreage you got here?"

"Two hundred acres." Which was a little over half of his three hundred-sixty acres.

Fletch jammed his hands in his pockets, then paced her deck twice. He must be steamed at the idea they'd been offered so much more than he had, but obviously didn't want to offend her. "I guess you've got access to that BLM, so that's somethin'."

She nodded again, suppressing a grin over her next tactic. "It is. But I wouldn't take less than a million from that loud-mouth Texan bully, if I were you. Get him for all you can. And when you tell him how much you want, do me a favor? Tell him your 'dirtpoor field-maggot farmer' friend told you how much to demand." Dredging up the age-old war between the sheepmen and the cattlemen was blatant troublemaking, but a sure way to fire up an old-timer.

"Some things never do change," he muttered, staring off at the horizon. Probably remembering some past slight he'd suffered from a cattle rancher. "Goddamn cattlemen always *have* thought they were better than us. You know, I bet Howell's been talkin to Malcolm across the road. I'll pass your message along to him, too. That Texan sonofawhore wants to put together a big spread up here in the mountains, it's gonna cost him a pretty penny."

Fletch's old truck hadn't rumbled out of sight when she heard *Lean On Me* coming from her cell. Still grinning, she answered. "Nate."

"I guess I don't have to ask why you're so chipper this morning." He snickered. "No more eventful visits last night, then?"

"Everything's fine here. You guys okay down there?"

"Yeah. Wins has plans to go play cards at the senior center, so I thought I'd come up and help you finish the fence along the north."

"Excellent. I don't wanta tag along with Cleve and his guys and Pain-in-the-Ass Barbie all day, and Cleve would probably have a cow before he'd let me stay alone."

"He's watching out for you, which you *need*, Kie."

"Yeah, yeah. Just get your butt up here fast. I've got something juicy to share."

"Impatient bitch," Nate teased. "I'm loading up now, girlfriend."

Humming to herself in her kitchen, she put cinnamon rolls in the oven and cut up fruit while coffee brewed. God, it smelled strong. Must be why she didn't like to drink it. But Cleve liked coffee in the morning, so she'd picked some up to have around for him.

"Mornin, Darlin," he said, brushing his freshly shaved face against hers with a quick kiss. "Damn, it smells good in here. Maybe it's you. Let me see." He nuzzled under her hair, making her giggle.

"Sex maniac. Your coffee's ready."

"So domestic all of a sudden." His arms gave her a little squeeze. "It's like you're Donna Reed or somethin'."

"Hmph! Domestic, my ass. I've seen what a cranky bastard you are when you don't get caffeine first thing."

"You ready to come show a buncha cowboys how to mend a fence?"

He wouldn't like this much. She smiled sweetly, sliding her hand along his soft cheek. "Nope. Got my own fence to tend to. Nate's coming up to babysit me today."

His disappointed, "Oh," was cut short when she invited him to kill some time in the bedroom while the cinnamon rolls baked.

\* \* \* \*

Increasingly dark clouds raced above, and the morning's light breeze had grown to difficult gusts.

"Oh my God, Kie, the old man will *flip* when Fletch calls him," Nate said as they hung fence high up the mountain along the northern perimeter. "Aren't you afraid Cleve will be mad?"

What an irritating question. In the war between herself and Howell, she couldn't afford to worry over what Cleve would think or feel. The fact that she had, almost as soon as Fletch drove away, irritated her more.

"I've been fighting CJ since long before I knew Cleve. He climbed in my bed knowing I despise his father and I'll do anything I can to make CJ's life hell."

"So the bad relationship with CJ takes precedence over your good relationship with Cleve?"

Oh, that condescending tone! "Shut up. There's no *relationship*. Cleve knows that. We have a good time together, mostly in bed. It doesn't need to be anything else. So far all the nasty things I've said to and about CJ haven't affected Cleve's ability to sleep with me. I doubt this will either."

Nate's nostrils flared. "You're really going to lie to me, and tell me you don't care how uncomfortable you make Cleve, putting him between you and his father?"

Ah. It was the injustice of sticking Cleve in the middle that offended Nate's sensibilities.

"We're gonna get you a life of your own, so you won't worry about mine. Clay will be here Wednesday. Bet he's a hottie. Maybe you two can hook up."

"Don't try to change the subject, missy."

She rolled her eyes and looked away. The subject was not only changed, but closed.

He clucked his tongue, sighed, and asked, "So, how you been feeling? Like a mama?"

"No." Her instinct was to keep all thoughts about the possible pregnancy to herself, but Nate's genuinely concerned—excited?—expression, softened her. "I don't know. I got suddenly nauseous last night at dinner, but it totally could have been from nerves, you know? And his coffee this morning made me feel queasy. But you know I'm not crazy for coffee anyway."

"Sore breasts?"

"Jesus, Nate. You'll make a great nurse one day. They're always sore with PMS. So, who knows? Only a few more days to find out."

"You're not very stressed about it." He folded his arms over his chest and stared her down. "Oh my God. You *want* to be pregnant, don't you?"

"No. That's stupid." When her eyes met his round ones, she grinned like the fool she was and looked away. "Shut up. Have you heard when Trayce will be sentenced?"

“Tuesday. I think you should be there, to remind the judge what a rotten jerk he’s dealing with. I’ll drive you.”

Leaking rainclouds sent Nate back to town, after they’d finished their fencing and taken a nice break in the cabin to discuss Cleve’s cowhands’ various aesthetic strengths and weaknesses.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve walked in Kiersten’s front door, caught the tail end of their dishing, and shook his head. How could Nate think of men the way Kiersten could, and still think of her like he did? Today Nate didn’t have a straight bone in his body, giving Rocky a brotherly kiss on her forehead when he trotted out the front door to his little yellow SUV. Almost made him wonder if he’d misinterpreted Nate’s feelings toward her. Almost.

Hours after, he and Kiersten lay snuggled on one of her quilts in front of the fireplace, enjoying a post-sex glow. He told her Whitney had tripped the circuit breaker six times that morning while blow-drying her hair, sending the guys running to reset it for her. On his suggestion, they’d decided tomorrow Rowdy would tell her the breaker was blown, and she’d have to let her hair dry naturally. The guys hoped she’d either decide she couldn’t tough it out any longer or she’d quit washing her hair. She’d used every drop of hot water that morning. Best-case scenario, she’d want to go home early. There wasn’t another way he’d rather spend his money than on a plane ticket sending her whiny ass home.

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten woke to gray, early-morning darkness enveloping the cabin. Rain pattered on her tin roof.

“Mmm. God, that feels nice,” she told Cleve, scooting against his warm body. “Maybe we should stay in bed.” She shivered. They could spend the day making love. Having sex. Spend the day having sex, not making love.

The rain was still pouring down half an hour later when Cleve hummed his rendition of *Lady again*. True to his prediction, she didn’t cry, though she did close her eyes.

“Get yourself dressed, we’re goin shoppin, Rocky.” On his fingers, he ticked off the items he needed to buy. “I need three ATVs, and a trailer for ’em. Living room furniture, since the boys already broke a leg off that cheapo couch in The Elephant, mattresses, and I need you to help me get towels and blankets and such.”

The amount of money Cleve spent gave her a headache. How would it be to have that much money at her disposal at any given time? The big enclosed trailer he bought first thing and paid for with a check was full by the end of the day. Refusing to wait two weeks for the high-end leather furniture he wanted, he talked the manager into selling him the display set. Despite her protests, he’d purchased a replacement bed for her too, claiming he wasn’t up to sleeping on her lumpy old model for another night.

At the mall, they bought double sets of linens for each of the beds and a stack of towels sufficient for four men who would perpetually forget to do laundry.

“Can we leave this stuff here for a bit?” Cleve asked an ecstatic sales clerk.

He led Kiersten away by the hand.

“What do you need now?” Whatever it was he wanted, he whipped out the old Flyin H Visa and it was his. Talk about hooking up with someone from a different world!

“You’ll see,” he said mysteriously, leading her to the lingerie section. While she stood with one eyebrow raised, he shoved past hangers until he found what he wanted: an elegant, sapphire silk gown with a plunging neckline and a matching ivory robe trimmed in the blue. A much more risque coordinating set caught his eye, too. “This your size?”

“Cleve, you don’t need to buy me...stuff.” Knowing where all his money came from, she didn’t want material gifts from him. He’d probably ignore her protests, as he had about the bed. At least he’d be sleeping in the bed. She planned to store her old mattress, and when they parted ways, she’d make sure he got the one Howell money had paid for. But clothing? No way. “What would Big Daddy think about you spending his cash on a pricey nightie for the ‘little chigger next door?’”

Cleve chewed the inside of his lip, said nothing, and carried the lingerie to a register. After picking up his other purchases, they went silently to the parking lot. She ran to keep up with his long-legged stride. He tossed the bags with muffled thumps wherever they’d fit in the trailer amid ATVs, gas cans, and furniture, and slammed the door.

So, she’d finally managed to rile the ever-patient Cleveland. He was pretty pissed, evident by the way he still didn’t speak when he pushed her hand off her door handle and yanked the door open. *Ever the gentleman in the face of any opposition.* This ride home from Grand Junction would be as uncomfortable as the one after leaving the hotel with Nate had been.

The ride didn’t commence as she’d expected. Cleve slammed his door but didn’t start his truck. “A man has to keep a certain amount of pride, even if he’s nothin more than a prize in a game, Kiersten. I’m sorry I don’t have money of my own yet, and can’t offer you anything that hasn’t been Pop’s at some point. Since he’s financin my ranch like he has for all my brothers and sisters, I’ve got nothin to call mine. I’d take a job in town with a paycheck, if I thought you’d quit actin like anything I give you needs to be scrubbed clean before you’ll touch it.”

“Cleve, you’re not just a prize—”

“The hell I’m not.” He slapped the steering wheel, sending off an abrupt honk.

“I’m sorry you’re in the middle of this, really.” God, he wasn’t going to take it well at all when he found out how much money she’d cost his family. “And I don’t think of you as not having anything of your own. Jesus.” Her fingers pressed into her eyelids. “I, well, I can’t fathom what it would be like to just go buy what I needed or wanted, without thinking first whether I can get by without it somehow.”

“Then let me give you the things you need and want.”

It was so simple for him. He had no idea the bruising her pride would take at the notion that she needed help and couldn't make it on her own. Hadn't her grandparents always managed? Times were tougher for them, and they'd never had help. No. She wouldn't be indebted to CJ Howell, and she *couldn't* be indebted to Cleve. What he'd done to her resolve to keep emotionally distant was bad enough. But she couldn't *owe* him, or anybody else. Her freedom and her independence were all she had. And he was wearing them down bit by bit, hanging around her place, making her love waking up with him next to her, reminding her how good it was to know she wasn't alone.

In a voice soft and soothing, he said, "Come on, Rocky. Let's go have a steak somewhere nice."

She gave him directions, and soon Cleve sat beside her, holding her hand while they waited for their order. His sweet need to make up after getting angry made guilt burn her stomach. God, this guy was too nice. It was too complicated with them. Tomorrow morning, she'd tell him what she'd done with Fletch, and send him on his way. Trayce would be sentenced and locked up. She'd be in no danger and wouldn't need Cleve's protection. They could go back to being neighbors. With all his company, he wouldn't miss her. She'd do what she'd always done.

Content with the decision she'd made, she relaxed against him, intent on enjoying their last evening together.

\* \* \* \*

Thank the Lord, Rocky finally softened up and kissed him back. She was a turn-on when pissed, but confusing as hell when upset. Trying to figure her out was like trying to solve a murder on an illegal alien down by the Mexican border. He knew there was motive behind what she did, but he didn't have enough clues to guess it. Then she suggested ways to christen their new bed when they got home, and his worries faded. *Home*.

She promised to only be gone a minute in the ladies' room while he paid their bill. Unlike most women, she wouldn't dawdle at the mirror in the restroom. She'd be in and out quick, like she had many times. Come to think of it, she'd gone off to tinkle everywhere they went. In his limited experience with pregnant women, he distinctly remembered his sisters-in-law constantly needing to pee when they were pregnant. This wasn't the way he'd planned his first kid, but they wouldn't be the first couple to have a shotgun wedding. He fingered his phone in his pocket, chomping at the bit to call Clay and brag. And Mama. As soon as he knew for sure, he'd call to let her know.

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten leaned against the truck door as they drove home. Cleve had tried to convince her to sit beside him in the middle of the seat, but she'd claimed she was tired. God knew, she suddenly felt it, though she'd put on a poker face when facing him after her trip to the restroom.

After all the potty visits she'd made today, she'd been certain. She'd gotten her own hopes up, foolishly. Made the impromptu nausea of the other night—the proverbial molehill—into a



mountain. Then she'd convinced herself all day that she needed to pee. Maybe she did. Could be a bladder infection or something. Whatever it was, it sure wasn't pregnancy.

A bullhorn blasting in her ear couldn't have been more brutally blunt than the bright red seeping across her panty. Now she felt crampy. Imagining that too? A Pavlovian response to seeing the monthly red flag waving, announcing that she was still empty? One more month of fertility gone to waste. Except this time, unlike any in the past thirty-two months, she'd believed there wouldn't be a period. Hmph. Nothing more than wishful thinking, obviously. *Stupid* thinking.

"Might feel better if you talk about it," Cleve said softly.

That damn, sweet concern again. Now she'd have to break it to him: there was no baby. After that, he probably wouldn't worry so about her safety. And once she dropped the bomb about her little sabotage on his daddy's real estate deal, their cuddling days would be history for sure. Stupid, stupid. It hurt to think of him leaving her and not coming back each night. But it was her own fool fault for letting herself care about a guy again. This time she wouldn't hurt alone, though. He'd been in love with the idea of having a family.

He reached for her shoulder and massaged it.

"Don't, Cleve. You don't have to worry about me now. There's no baby. In the bathroom, I..." God, it was awkward telling a guy you got your period. "Well, you know. We're not pregnant." Her voice broke on that last word, hard as she tried to sound unemotional.

"Oh."

How many miles they drove in silence, she didn't know. Her eyes were closed to avoid seeing his face. And to fight back her imminent tears. How had she become such an idiot? She should be jumping for joy right now. They hadn't conceived a child who'd be subjected to lifelong enmity between its mother and grandfather. How many times, during her younger years, had she sent a silent prayer of thanks when her period came? Inconvenience aside, how could a sexually active single woman *not* be happy to get her period?

Finally, Cleve's warm hand took hers. "Guess we shoulda bought one of those giant boxes of Trojans from Sam's Club."

Oh, thank God! "I'll call tomorrow and get my doctor to give me a prescription for the Pill."

Big relieved sigh. Cleve still wanted her. Which made sense. They had great sex, and her place was a lot nicer to sleep in than The Elephant.

"CJ would've grounded you for sure if you came out here and knocked up the first girl you met."

"Yeah, I woulda got the 'keep your pecker in your pants' speech all over again, huh? Mama's a nurse. She'd be all worked up over me not usin 'protection'."

"Your mom's a nurse? Like, she had a job? A career?"

"Yep. They even let women drive cars in Texas these days."

"I can't imagine a guy like your father putting up with his wife making her own money."

“Rocky, you don’t really know much about Pop. A lot of what happened between you two was his lawyers’ doing. And Chaz.” Likely story. “Mama only does volunteer work now, for a mobile well-child clinic Pop funds. She was a nurse in the hospital when Pop’s appendix ruptured. That’s how they met.”

Sick or in pain, CJ Howell would be a big whiny baby. Mrs. Howell must have a heart of gold to have fallen for him when he was hospitalized. Nice that he funded a well-child clinic, but he was still a shithead. It was easy to be a philanthropist where everyone could see, when you went around snatching money from the hungry hands of a few unlucky people who couldn’t fight back.

Cash and Rowdy met them at her house to unload Cleve’s new bed, then take the truck and trailer to the Flyin H to unload everything else. They said Whitney had been sulky all day because her hair was flat and the guys had refused to quit watching bull-riding and poker tournaments so she could see her soaps. She’d called and bought a plane ticket home for the next day. Cleve high-fived both his employees and promised a good party after Whitney left.

The rain had stopped sometime during the afternoon, leaving the mountain clean and chilly for the evening. With Cleve spooned round her on the new bed, Kiersten covered the big hand nestled between her breasts with both of hers. Things were okay. Cleve was still around. He hadn’t abandoned her like she’d expected. But how much would it take before he’d give up on her? He was rebellious enough to enjoy pushing his dad’s buttons. As long as CJ tried to keep them apart, she could hang on to him. Maybe confessing to the trouble she’d made with Fletch wasn’t the best route. CJ would call Cleve as soon as he found out, and he’d give Cleve an ultimatum, demand he stay away from her. This could spur Cleve to refuse and want her even more. It might be a tad underhanded, but it sounded like a workable plan.

\* \* \* \*

Long after Rocky’s breathing become slow and deep with sleep, Cleve lay thinking. Chiefly, he wanted to slide the pretty silk nightgown off her pretty white body and make love. How many days till they could do it again? It was a damn shame she wasn’t pregnant. No, *they* weren’t pregnant, was the way she’d worded it. He liked that. This was better after all. She needed to know she was in love with him, and then they’d get married and have a kid the right way, with no speeches from older brothers or parents. Or Winston Day.

He’d dreaded telling the old guy that he’d been shacking up with his granddaughter and didn’t have the sense to prevent pregnancy.

Tomorrow he’d start building his corral with his guys. The fencing was done. They hadn’t spent much time on the one between Flyin H and Fletch Latham’s, since Pop told Rowdy he’d as good as sealed the deal with Fletch, or on the fence along the Malcolm Cox side. Those fences would be coming down soon, anyway.

Things were coming together for him. He had his girl, whether she knew he had her or not, his ranch was almost operational, and the house he’d raise his family in would start construction

as soon as the ground was dry enough for dirt work. And Clay would arrive in two days to solve the Nate Issue.

He squeezed Kiersten tighter.

She woke and stirred, facing him for a kiss. Then noticing his woody, she took her mouth and her kisses lower and lower. Yeah, things were definitely looking up.

## Chapter 16

Trayce's hearing was uneventful, aside from seeing that white-hatted freak Chaz loitering in the back of the room again. On her double-take, he disappeared, but she knew she'd seen him. She'd have to ask Cleve about it. Chaz was supposed to be in Texas.

Acknowledging some motion Trayce's lawyers filed, the judge temporarily suspended Trayce's sentence, so he was free until the judge waded through the big-shot attorneys' paper deluge. Not good news, but at least she was safe with Cleve around every evening.

She'd called her great-aunt Sophia in Kansas City, and arranged for Grandpa to go visit. This he agreed to, unaware he was being shipped off for his protection. But seeing the doctor was another matter. He had an appointment for the next day for a full physical. Now she stood in Grandpa's driveway, arguing to the death with her only blood relative. And in telling him he had to have it in order to fly to Kansas City, had fibbed just a little.

Like a mule planting his feet and refusing to budge, he insisted he'd not go to the doctor.

"It's not up for discussion, Grandpa. I have to let our insurance go after this month, and all you'll have left is Medicare. You have to go now, so we can get your meds while they're still covered." Another fib. If she managed to lease the hunting rights out, she intended to keep Grandpa's supplemental insurance.

"I don't need no damn doctor to tell me I'm getting old."

"Dammit Grandpa, if they can help you feel better—"

"They can't help what's wrong with me."

What did you do with a mule who wouldn't budge? Hit it between the ears with a two by four? Or maybe pull its ears? Get him where it hurts.

"If you really think you're dying, won't you go get medicine so you can live longer, for me? You're all I have left in the whole world." She buried her face in her hands. Hopefully he'd fall for her old trick of hiding nonexistent tears.

"Oh, all right. I'll go, but it don't mean I'm takin any drugs they give me. Don't cry, Peanut." Eureka!

Driving home after her stop at the pharmacy, she reflected on the conversation she'd had with Nate. He'd overheard her call to the clinic on the way back from court. Her doctor had given her a prescription for only one month of pills, insisting that she come in for a Pap right away. Her appointment was Friday, the day after Grandpa left for Kansas City.

"Pills and Paps," he'd taunted. "Guess you're not prego, huh?" From her less than enthusiastic response, he'd concluded, "You're bummed."

"That would just be stupid."

“Knowing you, you’re as pissed about being wrong as you are bummed about not being pregnant.”

“Being wrong? What the hell are you talking about?”

He grinned. “You thought you were pregnant. You were sure of it.”

“I was *not*.”

“Liar.”

She’d looked out the window then, hiding a sheepish smile.

“Shut up,” was her best response.

He laughed. “Oh, Kie. You’re so predictable.”

“Bite me, Cook.”

“Always a tease.”

Before allowing herself to laugh, she’d punched his thigh for good measure.

Cleve was in a fine mood that night. The corral wasn’t finished, not by a long shot, but definitely coming along. When she teased him, asking what time he expected his “cows” the next day, he laughed and tickled her. She made a pitcher of uncommonly strong margaritas to celebrate convincing Grandpa to see a doctor. They downed it, then another pitcher. She and Cleve sat giggling on her porch swing, watching deer grazing down the hill.

“Rocky, I got a business proposition for ya.”

“You gonna start payin me for sexual favors, Tex?”

“Sorry, can’t pay ya what yer worth, darlin.” They both cracked up for a bit. “I wanta lease yer huntin rights, then not let anybody hunt.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll pay ya what Trayce could get, then we won’t let anybody hunt here or on the Flyin H for, say, four or five years. And *then* there’ll be some damn trophy animals to hunt, huh?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “It’s—” She hiccupped. “A Get Rich Slow scheme, if I ever heard one.” More giggles. “You’re the wisest man under thirty I ever met.”

“Mm. Let’s go to bed, Rocky.”

“Yeah, let’s. I’m pleased to announce I just had the shortest period in history. My yoo-hoo is ready for action again.”

“Hot damn.”

\* \* \* \*

Cleve swallowed hard as he watched Rocky’s truck disappear in a cloud of dust down the road. Against his better judgment, he’d let her drive to town and back alone with that skinhead still on the loose, but he’d have to help unload the cattle today. Besides, he had to meet the excavators and general contractor for his house.

He’d called Nate the minute she left, making him swear if she hadn’t reached him in thirty minutes, he’d come looking for her to make sure she wasn’t broke down or stranded with a flat on

the side of the road. Yesterday he'd done the same and she was none the wiser, which Nate agreed was best. She'd balk at the idea of them keeping tabs on her, and this way she felt independent.

Even though the guy could drive himself, she'd gone to take Wins to the doctor. She'd likely be right in the thick of things, making sure the doctor shared his diagnoses with her so she could take charge and force her Grandpa to comply with any directives. Did she know she ran Winston's life with more authority than he and Nate combined had tried to impose on hers? He guessed Mr. Day put up with her mothering only because she meant the world to him. Well, the old man wasn't the only one who cared about her.

Parking Kiersten's ATV in front of the pink trailer house, he hummed a few bars of *Lady* and remembered her drunk and crying in his arms after they'd made love. No way did she remember the things she'd said in the dark. She'd thanked him for not leaving her when he found out she wasn't expecting. As if he could. And told him she was sorry for costing his dad a fortune.

Seemed she'd told Pop's potential sellers about his offers for Rocky Peak. By his calculation, it would raise Pop's purchase price on the two properties by about a half-million each, by the time he wheedled the sellers down. A cool million she'd cost Pop, in one swat. Pop should be calling any time, good reason for his phone to stay in the truck. There'd be fiery hell to pay. He reckoned only Mama would get a kick out of it, laughing off Pop's temper. Well, Kiersten was worth every bit of the trouble she caused.

After she'd confessed that she loved him in spite of trying hard not to, he didn't imagine there was anything she could do that he wouldn't forgive her for.

Two of the new four-wheelers were gone, which meant Cash and Dusty were out tearing up the hills before their workday started. Through the not-so-level front window, he could see Rowdy reclined in an expensive leather chair.

The rev of an engine coming up the road caught his attention. Black truck with gold accents, pulling a gleaming horse trailer. Clay.

When Clay wasn't around, he was able to function, but a little lost. Kind of like the feeling he got when he forgot to wear his watch. Some thoughts wouldn't complete in his head when Clay wasn't around. Some thoughts didn't need to be spoken when Clay was, because his brother would just know, the same way he had just known and understood how Clay felt about men, and didn't feel about women. He didn't share the feeling, but recognized it as part of who Clay was, a slice of his core, like being a twin. Both had been popular in high school, often dressing alike and popping in and out of each other's classes as their whims caught them. Clay got a little weird when one of *his* girlfriends would mistake him and handle him in the halls, but he was good at acting and had even filled in for him when he'd overbooked his schedule. Thank the Lord, Clay had never asked him to return the favor.

The fancy truck drove up and stopped. After an unabashed hug, Clay stared, agog, at what was likely the ugliest house he'd ever seen.

“What in hell are you livin in?” he finally asked. “Chaz. Chaz did this, didn’t he? Lord, it’s awful.”

“I can’t say it grows on you.” Cleve shrugged. “And the inside is way worse.”

“That man has the worst taste of any person alive.”

Yep. Chaz had bad taste, all right. Including his homophobic dislike for Clay, which was another reason for the sanctimonious bastard to be at the top of his shitlist. He tried not to let it show, had been told to let Clay handle his own problems, but he’d never been able to sit idle and watch his other half be treated lousy.

Clay took a minute to look around in all directions, taking in his surroundings. He nodded his approval, then looked back at his cargo.

“We haven’t built a stable for the horses yet,” Cleve said. “It’s a lot of work getting the ranch up and goin.”

Clay grinned. *Razzing on the way*. “From all Pop’s complainin, you’ve done nothin here but fire Chaz and keep The Enemy on her back.”

Rowdy’s noisy exit out the front of the house did little to stem Cleve’s embarrassment.

Clay asked, “She really as mean and nasty as Pop says?”

“Meaner.” And wait’ll Pop found out what she’d done this time.

\* \* \* \*

Semi trucks hitched to stock trailers, parked one behind another along the road, hindered Kiersten’s progress up the normally empty county road. Behind the last one, animals milled in confused mayhem. She took a deep breath. God, she’d have been irritated if she’d been dealing with anyone but Cleve. Might as well park. It’d be awhile.

Several truck drivers congregated near the first truck paused in their conversation to tip their hats and give her a “Howdy,” as she walked past on her way to find Cleve. Stepping gingerly in her heeled sandals around the inevitable and enormous messes cows left behind, she was too busy to scowl when one of them whistled. Nate and all his stupid ideas about dressing like a lady. If she was in her jeans and boots, it wouldn’t matter so much where she stepped, and she wouldn’t feel like she might lose her balance and drown in a lake of cowpies.

A gravelly voice came from the back of the last trailer. Rowdy, listing off names and numbers, what sounded like head counts from each truck. Another very familiar voice grunted “Okay” after each number.

Cash sat on the fence across the road. “Howdy, Kiersten. Lookin for Cleve?”

She smiled, waved, and nodded.

Cash’s grin widened, and he shouted in what seemed an unnecessarily loud voice, “Hey, Rowdy, here’s Miss Kiersten, lookin for *Cleve*! He’s right there at the truck with you, ain’t he?”

Rowdy chuckled, and Dusty called out, “Yep, Cleve’s right there. She oughtta head on back.”

Maybe the lack of oxygen had affected the cowboys. She rounded the back of the trailer. Next to grinning Rowdy stood Cleve, in different clothing than he'd had on that morning, but similar to what he usually wore.

He made a quick visual inventory from her feet to her face, and then his gaze settled on hers. Cash and Dusty watched from the sidelines, fascinated. Wherever Cleve really was, his guys wanted to trick her with his twin. And that twin was going along with it.

"Hey Tex, did you have to bring *all* the cows in Texas up here?"

Clay chuckled. "Cows? These are *cattle*, darlin. How was your Granddad's appointment?"

"Oh, fine." How long would he play along? Had Cleve primed him with information about where she'd been, or was Clay improvising? Silent Rowdy grinned alongside Clay. "He has high blood pressure. The doc gave him a prescription to help with his being short of breath. They did a full blood workup. We'll have to wait a few days for the results, but he looks healthy." How long should she play along? If the guys busted up laughing, they'd never believe that she knew right away what they were up to.

"That's good, then," Clay answered carefully.

As she moved closer, he looked a little like a mouse, which made her...the cat. She leaned against his chest, then stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips along his jaw back to his ear. Meow. He didn't smell like Cleve, but he was definitely yummy in his own right. And he wore an earring identical to Cleve's. Too sweet. She wrapped her arms behind his neck.

Rowdy looked about to bust.

Clay's arms held her, but not tight. Just warm enough for appearance' sake.

"Nice to meet you, Clay," she whispered, tickle-soft. "Where's Cleve?"

She stepped back then, and tapped a toe, arms folded across her chest.

"How'd you know?"

Cash and Dusty guffawed as they approached.

"Our Cleve's a boob man. He *always* looks at my chest after he says hi."

The guys laughed some more.

Cleve came around the other side of the trailer, gave her a quick smile, then looked at her chest.

His hello was drowned out by whoops as the guys elbowed one another and him.

"What?" he asked, completely confused.

Kiersten palmed his cheek consolingly.

"Any y'all remember how to ride a horse and herd cattle?" He had such an easy way with his guys.

Taking his hint, the three cowhands went to saddle up and get the stock off the road. Cleve signed his invoices with the truckers and handed them cash bonuses, sending them on their merry way back to Texas.



Alone with only Clay to watch, Cleve embraced her for a long, passionate kiss. When he'd finished, head spinning, she leaned against Cleve and self-consciously looked over at Clay.

Rather than looking away as she'd expected him to, he merely smiled. She should've felt uncomfortable about him watching. Clay looked utterly satisfied, like he'd fit the last piece in a puzzle. He nodded once at Cleve, exchanging a look she didn't get to see on Cleve's end, but she did feel him return the nod. Was it man-speak or twin-talk they were sharing?

A vehicle barreling up the road caused them all to turn. Nate drove up unusually fast, then parked behind Kiersten's truck. His door slammed, then he stalked up the road toward them.

"My lord, who *is* that man?" asked Clay.

"Shit," Cleve muttered. Behind Nate came Grandpa, taking much more care where he stepped.

"*Excuse me*, missy. Weren't you supposed to call me when you made it home?" Nate demanded.

"Jesus, Nate. Settle down. I'm *not* home yet, as you can see. So *excuse me!*"

"I've been worried sick, you know. I didn't know what might have happened."

"The boogeyman doesn't come out till after dark, Cook. Chill out." Nate's protectiveness was profoundly irritating, particularly in front of Grandpa. Arching her eyebrows to remind Nate of this fact, she called out, "Grandpa! I can't believe you're here," and stalked away to meet him.

"I was feelin so good," Grandpa said, "I decided to come stay a night with you before I leave town tomorrow. Got room for an old codger like me in your house?"

Arm around his waist, she walked with him over to the group. "Silly, of course! It's your house, anyway. Grandpa, this is Cleve's brother Clay," she told him, indicating which of the twins she meant to introduce, "Clay Howell, Winston Day." The two shook hands, then she introduced Clay to Nate. "Clay, this is the perpetually apprehensive Nate. Nate, Clay."

"I don't believe I've ever seen grown twins that looked so alike," Grandpa said.

Clay looked serious. "We save a fortune on mirrors."

"Which one of ya claims to be older?" Wins asked.

Cleve shook his head. "Mama can't remember. The birth certificates say it's Clay, but she couldn't tell us apart for the first week, so we were both 'the twins' for a while. I might've really been Clay, or he may have."

While Grandpa talked with Clay about twin stuff, Nate asked her in a hushed voice, "So, what's the verdict on Clay?"

Loud enough for Cleve to hear, she answered, "He's a handsome devil, that's for sure." Her heart fluttered in the warm glow of the smile Cleve flashed her. She all but forgot everyone else, gazing into those black eyes, until he broke the spell with a wink.

\* \* \* \*

The vision of the vulnerable little female staring at the tall Texan with her heart bared was not lost on Winston. Every protective bone in his body stiffened, even though he liked Cleve, who seemed like a real stand-up kind of man. Still, like him or no, a discussion needed to be had.

## Chapter 17

Kiersten tiptoed into her living room, where Cleve was supposed to be sleeping on her couch. With some careful explaining, Grandpa'd swallowed their story. Cleve's house full of guests, and she being a friendly neighbor, yaddah, yaddah...

Completely exhausted by all the commotion, Grandpa had headed off to bed as soon as the cowboys left.

Nate and Clay had been last to leave, Clay lingering in an obvious ploy to get a ride back with Nate.

Grandpa had been snoring within minutes.

As she reached her couch, Cleve stood and embraced her and followed her into her room, where she locked the door.

"Are you sure it's okay?" he whispered between kisses.

"Mmm-hmm. I'm sure." She wore the long gown again, and he buried his face in her bare cleavage as she spoke. "We'll have to be quiet so we don't wake him, and you'll have to be back out there before five, cause that's when he wakes up."

"Okay." He carried her to the bed, where they made hot, quiet love.

\* \* \* \*

Young Howell was stretched comfortably along the couch when Wins emerged from the guest bedroom at five on the dot. Wins started coffee and stood with his palms on the counter, looking out the kitchen window. In all the mornings he'd risen on this mountain, he'd never quite imagined himself having the talk he'd have this morning. Grown or not, Kiersten was still a female in his family, and it was his job to look out for her honor.

The younger man rustled in the other room, zipped jeans, then folded the quilt. Neatness. An admirable quality, but not enough to redeem him.

The coffee maker sputtered as Cleve came into the kitchen.

With a cursory, "Mornin," Wins handed over a mug and poured for them both.

Cleve found the creamer in the ice box with annoying ease and they set about mixing their respective drinks.

"You know, Cleve, I'm never sure how things will work out for Kiersten and Rocky Peak."

"No? Why's that?"

"Well, she's a hell of a lot friendlier with the neighbors than I've ever been."

\* \* \* \*

Cleve dropped his spoon. He bent to retrieve it from the floor. *Calm down. You're not sure what the old guy meant.*

“Um.” He struggled to assemble thoughts into words. Words that wouldn’t get him into trouble. “Is that so?”

Winston gave him a less-than-tolerant look. Playing innocent hadn’t been the right tack to take.

Kiersten shuffled into the kitchen, blinked and look from one man to the other.

Winston nodded at her, then looked back at him.

He busied himself adding more sugar to his coffee.

“Sleeps like a damn log, that one,” Wins said, pointing to Kiersten. *Keep your trap shut, Howell. Let the old-timer say what he’s got to say.* “Thing she don’t know is, since I got old, I can’t hold my water like I used to.”

He looked sideways at her.

Her eyes narrowed, but it could be her usual morning crankiness.

Was the old guy going to give him a play-by-play on his health troubles?

“See, a young man can sleep through the night, then get up in the morning to empty his bladder.” Uh-oh. He knew where this was going, and didn’t much like it.

Rocky rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Before she could interrupt, her granddad went on. “I can’t. On a good night, I’m only up once. Last night wasn’t a good night.”

“Grandpa—”

“Keep quiet, girl.” Winston’s tone was calm but deadly. “And what with the moon bein out like it was, it’s a waste of my breath and all our time, but I’ll tell you, Howell, that you were *not* sleepin on the couch last night. Another thing...in all the time I’ve known Kiersten, she’s never closed her bedroom door to sleep. Used to be afraid o’ monsters in the dark.”

“Grandpa. I’m a grown woman.” She stepped between them.

He’d be damned if he’d let a woman protect him. “Kiersten,” he said, “this is between him and me.”

“Well, that’s bullshit!” she charged. “What’s next, a duel? Twenty paces? It’s too late for dawn, you’ll have to wait till dusk now.” She snapped her fingers. “Oh, rats, Gramps, you’ll be in Kansas City at dusk. So much for old-time machismo.”

“I’ll have a word with you outside.” Winston eyeballed him. Did he think he’d scare away?

Kiersten looked ready to hit the warpath. “The hell you wi—”

“Rocky, stay here.” Even though he was in for a good dressing-down, he held his head high and followed Winston out the back door.

Wins looked surprised when Kiersten didn’t follow.

Cleve was little befuddled by it, himself. How’d he manage such a thing?

“I realize Kiersten’s not a young virgin, but there’s still the matter of honor, and we both know it ain’t right to go around using women.”

“Yessir.” He hoped the ‘sir’ had scored him more points. The old man was testing him somehow, probably to see if he’d have the balls to face him on his own, instead of hiding behind Kiersten’s skirts. Glancing behind him, he made sure the window they stood near was closed so she couldn’t hear his defense. “I have every intention of makin an honest woman of her, sir, just as soon as she’ll let me.”

Winston nodded, looking off at the brightening eastern sky. “I never liked that Luke. She loved him, and I think the world of her, so I put up with the guy.” Grizzled gray brows pulled down and eyes as green as his granddaughter’s narrowed. “He was one smooth-talkin SOB. Never did care for him. Rubbed me wrong.” Win’s right hand fisted up. “You know she got hurt pretty bad outta all that mess. About the only reason I bother to stay alive anymore is to make sure she gets settled happy with somebody.” Here it came. He’d take what was given. “Always thought it would be with Nate.”

Cleve dropped his head to hide his expression.

Wins sucked his teeth. “Hell, I reckon the guy’s too slow. And Kiersten needs a man with a strong hand. You’ve most likely figured that out. Just know up front, I’ll rot in hell before I let that old man of yours act like he’s better than her. You make sure he knows.”

“Yessir.”

“You got anything to say to me?”

“No sir.” He looked Wins in the eye. “Think I’ll go empty my bladder now.”

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten tried like hell to stay livid with Grandpa and Cleve for talking about her sex life like she didn’t have any say in it. Like *she* wasn’t the one who’d decided they’d go to bed together! But eating breakfast with them both was nice. Grandpa felt better. And the way Cleve looked at her in the morning made it hard to be cranky. Later, they’d drive Grandpa to the airport in Grand Junction and he’d be safe. It would be good to stop worrying.

Cleve and Clay were coming along with them so Clay could help pick out all the veterinary supplies and tack for the horses. And of course, Cleve wouldn’t let her take a sixty-mile trip without a sturdy man along for protection.

They were all but out the door when Cleve’s phone rang. He grunted a hello, then stepped back inside, waving her and Grandpa toward his truck. A minute later, he strode in a solemn, direct route to them. Without a word, he started the engine and headed to the Flyin H to pick up Clay.

His brows tugged low over his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she mouthed.

His refusal to answer did nothing to allay her concerns. Must be some business thing.

Or maybe—she gulped—maybe CJ’d called about her meddling in the Fletch deal. She joined Clay in the back seat when they picked him up, leaving Grandpa in the front with Cleve. Better give him some space to calm down.

They were near town when Grandpa exclaimed, “My hankies. I forgot my damn hankies. We need to run by the ranch.”

Cleve shook his head. “We’re runnin pretty far behind. Don’t wanta make you late for your plane.”

“Jesus, Cleve, we’ve got plenty time,” she argued. “Just stop and get the handkerchiefs. We can see what Nate’s up to.”

“I don’t *need* to see what Nate’s up to. Call him and see if he can meet us at the Quikstop with ’em.”

As she dialed Nate, she shrugged at a puzzled-looking Clay. The Twin-Talk frequency must be down.

“Nate. Hey. Cleve’s gone psycho and won’t come by the ranch. Can you meet us with Grandpa’s hankies? Yeah. Top drawer. Okay. Ta-ta.” Shaking her head, she slid the phone in her purse. “It would’ve been faster to go by the ranch. Nate’ll have to style his hair before he leaves the house, and probably moisturize. We’ll be sitting at the Quikstop waiting for him anyway.”

Cleve’s sole response to her badgering was a silent glare in his rearview.

Nate beat them to the Quikstop. Like he’d already planned on meeting them. He climbed in beside her, scooting her to the middle, and handed the stack of red handkerchiefs up to Grandpa.

One look at Nate’s posture told her whatever Cleve stressed about, Nate knew it, too. Her questioning shrug met with a moist look from Nate. He was pale, too. Okay, things were getting scary. Cleve’s worried eyes in his rearview weren’t helping. Desperate to know, she snatched Nate’s cellphone from his waist band next to her and flipped it open. His last call was to Cleve’s cell, and the call before that to 911. She handed Nate’s phone back to him and sat stiff, arms crossed.

Nate and Grandpa were okay. Good. But what the hell happened?

Grandpa kept the conversation flowing with complaints about airplanes and his ears popping. Beside her, Clay did a good job of sounding calm, though she knew he’d peeked at Nate’s phone, too.

Grandpa turned around once and gave a scowl at Nate’s arm around her shoulders. She could only guess the crazy thoughts going through his mind. But who had the energy to dispel them?

She was an emotional wreck when they’d checked Grandpa in for his flight and seen him through the metal detectors. It seemed like the more men she was around, the more she bawled.

Outside in the parking lot, Cleve held the truck door for her. Crossing her arms, she refused to enter. “I wanta know what’s going on.”

Nate had obviously expected this scene. “Kie—”

“Don’t even *try* to pussyfoot around this, Nate. Tell me why you called 911 this morning.”

Nate let out a shuddering sigh. “Somebody slaughtered Roscoe.”

Roscoe. One of the bummer lambs Grandpa and Nate had bottlefed all spring, a triplet whose mother didn’t have enough milk.

“Why? How?” He’d been Grandpa’s favorite, a real go-getter, always nuzzling for a hand-out. Grandpa kept one pocket full of alfalfa pellets all the time, just for Roscoe. Someone killed him?

Nate teared up. “They slit his throat, Kie.”

“Some psycho is going around cutting lambs’ throats? Why?” Roscoe had thrived under Grandpa’s care, and he was such a friendly little guy.

Cleve and Nate exchanged a look. “They used his blood for another message.”

Nausea welled up inside her, so she closed her eyes and leaned back against the truck. “To me? What did it say?” Trayce again. He hadn’t gotten what he wanted. Last time it had been red paint, this time, blood from an animal. What was next? “Why the fuck isn’t that guy in prison?” She didn’t even care what the message said. “You should’ve let me shoot him, Cleve. Now look what he did.”

At least Grandpa didn’t know how Roscoe died. Losing animals was a fact of ranching life, getting attached to them an occupational hazard. Predators were usually to blame, and while it didn’t fill the hole left behind by a lost pet, a rancher grew to accept it.

“When Grandpa comes back, we’ll tell him a coyote got Roscoe, okay? A coyote.”

“Goddammit, Kiersten. It’s not about your Grandpa, or about the lamb. It’s about you. It said for you to leave town!” Cleve shook her till she looked up at him.

“Well, I’m not leaving town, now am I?” She looked around defiantly at all of them, then climbed in the truck. Once Cleve had closed her door, she let herself cry. Trayce and his sick scare tactics. *Scare tactics!*

“Cleve, isn’t Chaz supposed to be in Texas?” she asked when he sat behind the wheel.

“Yep. Why?”

“He’s been at both of Trayce’s hearings. I saw him in the back of the room the day I was on the stand. And Tuesday, he was in the back again.”

“Darlin, Chaz doesn’t even know Trayce.”

“How do you know? He was here for what, weeks before you came?”

Cleve’s eyes searched out either Nate’s or Clay’s in the mirror.

“Chaz was there,” she argued. “For some reason.”

“Maybe you didn’t really see him,” Cleve said soothingly.

“What, twice I imagined that pompous prick? I doubt it. Not many people cast the same shadow as Boss Hogg.”

Clay chuckled his agreement.

“And he was wearing the Hogg hat,” she added.

Cleve answered, “See, Chaz would never wear his hat inside a courthouse.”

“He would if it wasn’t a Texas courthouse,” Clay said.

“Chaz wouldn’t kill an animal for its blood, though,” Cleve said.

“No, he’d get somebody else to do his dirty work.” That much, she was sure of.

His head still shaking, Cleve argued, "But Chaz went back to Texas, Rocky. And why would he want you out of town?"

"Who knows? He probably hates me because I use my brain for more than thinking up new pouffy hair-styles." Great, Chaz and Trayce as a team. "Maybe Chaz is a white supremacist and became lifelong friends with Trayce." Or maybe they both hated her as much as she hated them.

"Hey, Cleve, call Pop and ask him where Chaz is," Clay suggested.

"Hell with that!" Cleve answered, "Pop called and hung up on my cell a dozen times yesterday without leavin a message. He must be mad. I'm steerin clear."

Oh, shit. She was suddenly engrossed in...her cuticles.

"Kie?" Nate gasped.

Her face heated. Chewing her lip, she prepared to confess her war crimes.

Cleve saved her the trouble. "It's okay, Rocky, you already told me what you did. Musta been truth serum in those margaritas you mixed." That was a fairly tolerant grin on his face. "Guess Pop knows now, too. Clay, how long do you think Pop'll stay mad about Rocky here drivin up the sales price on two parcels by a million bucks?"

Clay clapped his hand over his mouth in shock and glanced sideways at Nate, whose nostrils flared as he suppressed a grin. "A million? *I'd* wait at least that many days before I tried to talk to him, if I were you. But I'll call him. This has gotta be good." He dialed his cell and waited. "Hey, Pop...Yeah, I made it yesterday. It sure is pretty up here...They rode just fine...No, I don't think they lost much weight...No, what's that?...Oh?"

CJ swore long and loud enough to carry across the truck, with a word here or there thrown in about being made of money, how much money *she's* cost him, *she's* out to get Cleve's money, *she* turned down good money and he's gonna take a million off his offer to Old Man Day for what she did.

She covered her mouth to keep from giggling out loud.

"Mmm-hmm. Well, Pop—" He paused to listen some more. "No? Maybe his phone isn't workin. I'll let him know you're tryin to reach him. So, Pop, you seen Chaz lately?...Oh, vacation. You know where?...Hawaii. When'd he leave?...Mmm-hmm...You sure? Because, well, I thought I saw him in town here... Oh, I see... Okay, just wonderin. Well, bye Pop. Kiss Mama."

With a soft snick, Clay's phone shut, leaving them in silence.

"Hawaii, my ass. Either Chaz is lying, or your daddy is." She must sound like a total shrew. "When did he say Chaz left?"

"Tuesday," Clay answered.

\* \* \* \*

The yellow formica countertop had been rubbed through by thousands of arms before Kiersten's. Had they waited as restlessly to be finished at the Sheriff's sub-station? Insisting Cleve return to his ranch to oversee the work, she'd gone with Nate for her Q and A session. Probably as useless as her presence at Trayce's trial, but the questions had to be answered. Where was she last



night? Did she have any known enemies? Was she, or had she ever been associated with a cult? At least they could rule out animal rights activists and probably environmentalists from the list of possible arsonists, *if* this was the work of the same guy.

Again, the odds favored a male perpetrator.

*Shocker.*

Riding home with Nate, she felt like she'd die without a change of subject. "Clay wants you in a bad way."

"Whatever," he answered nonchalantly. "Why, what did he say?"

She laughed. "Nothing. It's the sign he's got on his forehead. 'Wanted—tall, fair and gorgeous. Apply within'. You're gonna apply, right?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of an audition, than an application."

"Oh, Natey. Maybe you shouldn't look at it like an audition. Maybe you should enjoy it for what it is, here and now, and not what it might lead to."

He pursed his lips. "Is that what you're doing? Not even thinking what you're doing to Cleve, are you?"

"Grandpa figured out he slept with me last night. Almost lost his marbles."

His face lit up with his Oh-My-God Grin. "What did Cleve do? And don't think you got away with changing the subject, missy."

"Cleve was totally respectful and went outside with him when he should have told him what year it is, and people have sex all the time without being married or otherwise committed."

Nate's eyes rolled so high that, in spite of her optometric training, she wondered if they'd stick and he'd crash his truck. "Kie. Cleve is *totally* committed."

"Well, I never asked for that, and he knows I'm not."

"We'll see about that, girlfriend."

"Shut up, Nate. Why are you always so...."

"Right?"

"You know that Kenny Rogers song, *Lady*? Cleve hums and sings it to me after sex."

\* \* \* \*

*Too much information, too much information,* Nate's mind sang.

"Um, hmm." He ran through the verses in his mind. "Told you he was crazy in it for ya." *Why the hell did I wait so long? Look at how happy she is when she thinks of it. Coulda been me.*

"Nate. You look like you're gonna be sick. What's wrong?"

"Must be from thinking of country music. You know how much I hate that crap."

"You might be catching a stomach bug. There's one going around."

"Yeah, maybe it's that." Good excuse, anyway. "Let's stop and pick up some groceries. I'll make spaghetti for everybody."

"You should sleep over. The deputy said they'd be watching the house down here tonight. Come up and party your butt off."

Because Clay would be there, he agreed. He just hoped to God he wouldn't have to listen to Kie and Cleve doing the wild thing.

\* \* \* \*

Nate's spaghetti was a hit. After only a few days of fending for themselves in the kitchen, the cowboys were grateful for every good meal. They left happy and full, tired from a hard day's work. With the corral nearly finished, Cleve figured they'd get started on the stables by next week. After that, a barn and machinery shed.

Clay and Nate seemed to be hitting it off. Once the cowboys left, they relaxed and the attraction came off them in waves.

Needing to distance himself from what his brother was feeling, Cleve suggested to Kiersten that they take a walk and leave Nate and Clay alone.

After a brisk hike to the top of the peak where they'd first met, they rested on a rock within throwing distance of Kiersten's tumble down the hill. Oscar thundered through the brush nearby, chasing a down-on-his-luck chipmunk.

"Oh, that's better. I really needed some air. It bugs me to be around Clay when he's 'in action' with a guy," he confessed.

She scooped up a handful of pebbles and handed some to him, then began tossing them at a fence post. "I don't like to watch Nate like that either."

Before he'd thought, he blurted, "Why? Because you don't want to see him with anybody else?"

Her next stone missed the post entirely. Hopefully his jealousy hadn't made her mad.

He cleared his throat. "Or does the gay thing get to you, like it does me?"

She shuffled the rocks around her palm, arranging them by size for a few seconds. "Because I don't like to see him get his hopes up."

"I'd say his hopes aren't misplaced with Clay. Looks like a sure bet to me."

A wisp of hair along her cheek waved as she shook her head. "Nate's not like a lot of gay guys. He's after a relationship, so he's really selective about who he dates. By the time they go out, he's got a lot invested emotionally, whereas the other guy is only after a piece of ass."

"I think I can feel Nate's pain." He stole a quick kiss and tucked the hair behind her ear.

"Anyway..." She pursed her lips at him, like as not because he'd made a valid point and raised her ire. "...it's hard to watch." Rocks all arranged, she started casting them again, with impressive accuracy. "I guess it's like watching someone you love go rock climbing without safety ropes."

"You, um," he stumbled a bit on the part about someone she loved, "you hate to watch because you're afraid he'll fall?"

"Oh, he *always* falls. But how hard, how fast, and how many pieces will he be in when it's over?"

He tossed a couple of stones from his hand but missed his mark more than he hit it. Fascinated with watching her accuracy, he dumped the pebbles from his hand to hers. He needed to concentrate on what was being said, anyway. “How long have you known him?”

She scooped up more stones. “Over five years, since right after I opened my practice. Nate was my first employee. He knew my business inside and out, and before long we knew each other just as well.” She glanced at him. “Not physically. I don’t know...we clicked. I knew he was gay by the time his interview was over. But I wasn’t sure if he knew, because he acted so masculine. He should take his acting skills to Hollywood, I swear. One day, about two weeks after he started working for me, I waited till the last patient left, and said, ‘You were totally checking that guy out.’ He got kinda scared at first, but then I guess he realized I didn’t hate him for being gay. He told me all about his parents and how it was his dad who was more accepting, but his mom’s a major churchlady, and she asked him to leave town because his *lifestyle* made her look bad. He was in college when some creep from his home town outted him for being at a gay bar in Omaha. They wanted to run him out of town, so he packed up his stuff and got in his car, the world’s ugliest Fiat, and drove till he decided he was far enough away.”

Cleve gave her more stones to throw.

“Nate helped me pick out my dress and plan my wedding. He’s been there for every part of my grown-up life, you know? He’s the only one who knew everything I found out about Luke. I kinda grew away from all my other friends after Luke died, but not Nate. I tried to push him away, but he always resisted. When I’m at my worst, he tells me so and ignores it. Before I met Luke, and after he died, Nate and I would go out, pretend to be a couple unless some other guy caught our eye.” As if to reassure him, she added, “It was never anything but friendship.”

“Was?” It was an effort, but he had to sound curious, not suspicious. “Your Grandpa told me today he thought you’d marry Nate one day.”

“Grandpa doesn’t know Nate’s gay. It wouldn’t go over very well, you know? So he got it in his head—I mean, he likes Nate and all—that we’d hook up. Well, he thinks we *were* hooking up, whenever we went out, or if Nate stayed the night up here. He heard the phrase ‘friends with benefits’ and decided that’s what Nate and I were.”

“But you weren’t. Aren’t.” Not that Nate didn’t want it.

She shook her head. “Thirty-two months, remember? After Luke died, I swore off men. Sex. Love. You name it, I didn’t need it anymore. Just me and this mountain, you know? I used to carry a kind of torch for Nate, because I knew it was safe. I didn’t have to worry about anything happening because there was no way he’d ever want me. Almost like worshipping a movie star, I guess. But then this tall Texan came along...”

He didn’t know how to feel. She’d had feelings for Nate before, but didn’t believe Nate returned them. And now she’d said in a roundabout way that since they’d met, she didn’t feel that way for Nate anymore. “So now you’ve transferred your no-possibility-for-a-lasting-relationship feelings to me?”

She smiled in spite of his badgering. “You’re a pest, you know? Did you really bring me out here to talk or are you gonna ravage me here in the wild?”

“Mm. First...listen.” He ran his thumb over her chin and looked in her eyes. “I love you, Rocky.”

Instead of closing her eyes or looking away, she nodded.

It was progress, and he’d take it.

## Chapter 18

Nate chauffeured Kiersten to her doctor appointment. On principle, she did a fair amount of half-hearted complaining, knowing neither Cleve nor Nate would relent and let her go anywhere alone and Nate would have plenty to say on the way there and back. Indeed, he looked like he was about to burst at the seams by the time they left the cabin.

“So, you and Clay looked pretty cozy on my couch when we got back last night,” she teased.

Nate’s lovely tanned cheeks grew red. “Whatever. We didn’t do anything. I thought you and Cleve decided to stay out all night. You had leaves in your hair when you came in, by the way.”

She was mortified for only a second. “The leaves would’ve been in Cleve’s hair, hon.”

Nate laughed. “Clay told me that you’re The One.”

“One what?” She squeezed lotion into her left palm.

“The One, you know, for Cleve. Twins know these things.”

“Knock it off. You want me married off more than Grandpa does, I swear.” What would Clay know, anyway, after only two days? “So, is their little matching earring not the cutest thing ever?”

“Clay told me he wanted his ear pierced when they were seventeen but there was this stigma about the earring and the gay connection, so Cleve got his pierced too. Apparently Cleve could do no wrong in their school, so neither of them got any shit about the earring. Partly because nobody could ever tell which one of them was which.”

“That’s silly. I can always tell, by their expressions.”

“When Cleve looks at you, cartoon hearts float around him, like in the comics.”

“Oh, do shut up. I think I saw some cartoon hearts around you last night too, my friend. What are you gonna do with yourself when Clay goes back to Texas?”

Driving on, Nate’s face clouded over. Dammit, why’d she have to go and open her big mouth?

“Nate, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to ruin it.” She really didn’t. Just like she hadn’t meant to take so much damn lotion. How could she possibly rub it all in? “Clay’ll be back, I’m sure. How long is he staying?” God, she hated seeing him hurt, and it was going to be bad this time.

“I don’t know how long he’ll be here. He’s coming down to the ranch tonight. Is that okay?”

“You live there. Of course it’s okay.” Stifling a sigh for the sadness she saw coming, she changed the subject to the arrangements for having her sheep trucked up to the Peak the next week.

\* \* \* \*

Staring at an eight-by-ten photo of a mountain meadow taped to the ceiling above her exam table, Kiersten kept up chitchat while Dr. Campbell prepared to swab her cervix. This Dr. Campbell was the daughter of her childhood doctor—the old guy Grandpa still saw.

“So, since you called for a scrip for the Pill, I take it you’re sexually active again,” Dr. Campbell prompted.

That probably went without saying, since evidence of her *activity* from last night was no doubt still present. “Very,” she answered without thinking. The doctor’s laugh spurred her to do the same. “I mean, we just met. Well, I mean, not *just* met, but you know, it’s new still.”

“Gotcha.” Whether she meant she’d got the specimen she needed, or understood what she meant, was unclear. “From what Winston said, it sounded like you were trying to get pregnant.”

“No. God, no. Grandpa wants me to get pregnant. I’m surprised he hasn’t suggested in vitro fertilization. My sex life existed only in his imagination for the last two years.”

“Hmm, I see. Well, I do have another opening right after your appointment if you want a complete physical. According to your chart it’s been, um, awhile since your last one.” ‘Awhile’ must be the good doc’s way of being polite, since the last time she’d bothered with any preventive healthcare had been months before Luke died.

“Okay. My insurance is coming to an end soon, so the timing is good.”

She left an hour later with multiple needle pricks in her arm and a prescription for a year of birth control, happy to be finished in that office for another twelve months.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve’s blood rushed just from sitting in the sheriff’s station.

While Rocky was off at the clinic with Nate, he’d taken a little field trip to get an update on her case. Telling the guys he needed more lumber and had business with the bank had been a good cover for sneaking off to town.

Clay had known he was up to something and insisted on coming along. He had little to say about Nate on the way to town, which told Cleve all he needed to know. When his brother didn’t like someone or something, he had plenty to say.

He’d have lots to say about this shabby copshop, for sure. The building Cleve had worked from as a Ranger, where his twin had often met him for lunch, was modern and clean, mostly due to Pop’s donations.

No matter the venue, this was law enforcement, puzzle solving, and the puzzle at hand, important. Kiersten believed Chaz might have a hand in the arson or the lamb slaughter. That alone didn’t convince him, but Clay had. His questions about why he’d dismissed Chaz had reminded him he’d done it primarily because Chaz threatened Kiersten.

But doing the deeds himself wasn’t Chaz’s style. He would sneak around, hire someone to do the unsavory tasks, not risk getting blood on his own hands when he could slip somebody the cash to do it. So who was he paying? And more importantly, where was Chaz getting the cash?

## Chapter 19

Kiersten eased Cookie down the hillside, leaning on the horse's bare back to keep from sliding forward. The quiet and solitude were relaxing. Having sent Nate and Clay off to return their mounts to the Flyin H, she intended to finish her ride in peace. Today was the last day it would be so quiet on the Peak. Tomorrow she'd help Nate herd her sheep to the corral down at the ranch, then load and have them hauled up to their summer pasture. She'd need to take daily rides around the Peak for the rest of the summer, checking for signs of predators, holes in fences or sick stock.

For the time being, it was nice to enjoy the aspen leaves blowing in the breeze, feel Cookie's soft back beneath her, and think. Something she'd missed lately, with all the constant company. When she'd lived alone, she'd sometimes gone two days at a time without the sound of another human voice, not even turning on the TV or checking her voice mail. Now there was always another person around, watching her every move.

So today, while riding with Clay and Nate, she'd made up her mind to get out from under them for a bit. It hadn't been hard to convince them. She'd be fine riding back down from the BLM while they rode off through Cleve's newly fenced access. Judging by the not-so-secret looks they'd been giving each other, they'd needed some alone time too.

Clay had extended his trip of a couple of days and planned to stay till the end of the week. With a bit of prompting, maybe Nate would take some time off and visit him in Texas. Nate didn't seem so freaked out lately by the idea of Clay leaving. Maybe they'd made some long-term plans to keep seeing one another.

It was good to see Nate happy. A part of her—obviously a mistaken and self-centered part—had feared he had feelings for her after their misadventure the last night they'd gone out. She didn't want to be another person who'd broken his heart.

Cookie faltered beneath her, stumbling over a fallen tree branch.

Her heart skipped. Catching her breath, she patted Cookie's sweaty neck. "It's okay, girl. Everything's all right."

Indeed, it seemed to be. Cleve had become a nightly fixture at her cabin. Waking up with him was amazing. She tried not to imagine what it would feel like when his enormous house was built and he left her there alone. Again. Better to enjoy today and not worry about days yet to come. Think happy thoughts. Saturday, Cleve had knelt alongside her in the moist garden soil, planting early vegetables. She'd look forward to sharing the fruits of their labors later in the summer.

This morning Cleve had gone off to town on business, something to do with signing offers on Fletch and Malcolm's places. She'd have hell to pay if he found out she was solo, so she intended to keep it between herself and her conspirators. Having him concerned for her safety was one thing, but sometimes it took all she had to avoid rolling her eyes when he got overprotective.

Oscar zipped ahead of her, probably ready to jump in the pond for a swim and a drink. His tongue had been hanging out for some time. With all his zigzagging, he must've traveled at least five times as far as the horses had.

"Silly dog."

Leaning close against Cookie's back, she avoided a low limb of the last aspen tree, and then was out in the open between the hill and her house.

Cookie tensed. Her own body followed suit, and a deep growl raised her hairs. A strange dog's growl. Then Oscar's throaty answer. A feather wafted by her face, carried on a puff of breeze. At her urging, Cookie moved toward the house, but carefully, ears pricked forward.

What other dog could be around? More and more feathers. Chicken feathers, dammit. This wasn't good. Her chickens were locked safely in a wire cage to protect them from hawks and skunks. But something had gotten to them. Judging by the volume of feathers floating around, the chickens were hurt.

Not trusting her voice to be calm, she squeezed Cookie with her thighs, coaxing her to move faster.

When Cookie rounded the side of the shed....oh God.

She yelped and all but dismounted. The chicken coop, made of small woven wire stapled to posts, was a shambles, apparently torn apart by the beast Oscar now faced.

The Doberman was easily twice Oscar's size, his face covered in blood and froth.

Her hands sweated around the reins.

The dogs were preoccupied with the face-off, but it wouldn't be long till the pinscher made his move. Oscar would be no match in a fight.

Where did this dog come from? There was no other vehicle in her driveway.

She needed to reach the house and get her gun, but she'd have to get past the dogs first. As she nudged Cookie forward, the mare backed up. Dismounting wouldn't be smart.

The Doberman snapped as if waking from a trance, forgetting Oscar and pointing toward her. She struggled to keep her seat astride skittish Cookie. The dog snarled and looked her in the eye.

His eyes rolled back as he lunged. Cookie skipped to the side and bloody teeth grazed her leg. Oscar was close behind. She urged Cookie forward. If she could just get to the house, and her gun...

Oscar yelped, a gurgling, muffled cry, rolled over and over under the horse's feet, the Doberman's jaws clamped around his throat.

"Oscar!"

Cookie danced, nearly dumping her off her right side.

Over a pile of chickens and feathers, down the pond bank the dogs rolled, while she had all she could handle just to stay on the prancing mare.

"Cookie, come on girl, let's go." Her panicked voice would probably freak out the terrified horse even more.



Oscar rolled into the water. The shock of it, the cold, must have taken the mad black monster by surprise, for he let go of Oscar's neck. Oscar bit one side of its head, wounding its eye.

Furious yelps erupted from the pinscher. It clamped down into the soft flesh of Oscar's stomach, rending a hole that made him howl and reel in pain.

The black dog attacked Cookie, taking a surprise mouthful of her hind quarter. No sooner had he gone back to the ground than the horse kicked him, landing a blow between the hate-and-death-filled eyes.

The slick, nervous lather coating Cookie got the best of Kiersten. She slid off in a hard thump next to the still-whining Doberman.

Cookie thundered up the hill the way they'd come, her hoofbeats sounding otherworldly and distant.

For an awful, terrifying moment, she couldn't catch her breath. Then it whacked back into her, painful as it had been when she'd gotten the wind knocked out of her in a childhood fall from the swingset. Rising and ignoring the pain in the back of her head, she tore down the pond bank, sobbing.

"Oscar!" Blood rushed from his neck and stomach. Everything blurred around her. But she had to be calm, for Oscar. He was still breathing, though not conscious. She bent and scooped him up in her arms. She was going to lose him.

\* \* \* \*

Nate rounded the last curve up the driveway to Kie's cabin. Cookie was beating it up the hill, reins dragging beside her, a storm of feathers in her wake. His laugh at Clay's joke died in his throat. Kie ran up the pond bank with blood pouring down the front of her, and what looked like Oscar in her arms.

As he jerked his Xterra to a halt, Kie stopped near a black lump, kicking it repeatedly and shrieking, "You found me motherfucker, now look. Look who's dead, motherfucker!"

He didn't know how he got to her. In her hysteria, she managed to convince him she was fine

"Oscar. Oscar's bleeding. Please help him. Not me. Please, please...not Oscar."

Clay figured out a dog had attacked them, and Clay drove to the vet, because Kie was too worried about Oscar, and Nate was too worried about Kie. Clay called Cleve and told him to come to the vet's, and Clay—ever the horseman—got Rowdy on the phone after what seemed like a thousand calls, and sent him looking for Cookie, to corral her and doctor her wounds.

Within one second of standing behind Kie at the counter in the vet's office, Nate knew she was positively *not* fine. The blood in the back of her hair had nothing to do with Oscar, and one leg of her jeans had been shredded. Through her tattered jeans, nasty red welts swelled around drying blood.

He sat on a plastic chair with his head in his hands beside Clay, hating himself for what he'd been off doing while Kie was attacked by a dog. "This is my fault. I should've been with her. Did you see her? If she'd fallen off the horse, that dog would've—"

“Nate, it wouldn’t have been much different if we were there. The dog was sent to find her. One of her jackets was torn to shreds on the deck. Somebody sent the dog to get *her*.” Clay’s calm voice did little to soothe him.

Kie was still in with the vet when Cleve’s truck pulled up. With heavy feet, Nate followed Clay outside to meet him. They had to tell Cleve that they’d left Kiersten alone, defenseless.

“What’s wrong with Oscar?” Cleve asked.

Clay had been the picture of calm when he’d called Cleve and asked him to meet them at the vet’s. Was Clay always a rock in a crisis?

“Where’s Kiersten?”

With guilt roiling in his gut, he relayed what they’d seen at the cabin. “Cookie finally dumped Kie after she kicked the dog,” he told Cleve. “She has a lot of bumps and bruises, but most of the blood is Oscar’s.”

Cleve’s face went hard and his eyes narrowed, but he went inside without a word.

Taking his seat next to Clay again, Nate stared at the closed exam room door, numb with anxiety. Poor Kie. What if Oscar didn’t make it?

After only a few minutes, the vet ushered both Cleve and Kie out to the waiting room. He intended to do surgery to repair the tears in Oscar’s stomach and intestine. His throat was injured and the Doberman had left a small hole in his jugular. No guarantees. He’d lost so much blood.

Cleve kept his cool. But the accusatory glares he shot toward Clay and him left him feeling as defensive as he was pissed at himself.

\* \* \* \*

They’d come to the ranch so Kiersten could clean up, though Cleve had tried to get her to the ER.

Alone in the bathroom, she collapsed to the linoleum floor, crying.

Cleve came in quietly. He offered comfort and then physical support in the shower, letting her lean against him and cry while the water washed away the grime and soothed and stung her.

“Cleve. He came for me. That dog, he was a monster. He came to find *me*.”

Towel-drying her hair, he remained wordless.

“Like a possessed dog in a movie. Killed the chickens. Wanted to kill me. P-p-people trained him, didn’t they, to kill?”

“Sounds like it. Rocky, why were you alone? Where were Nate and Clay?” His voice wavered with barely-controlled emotion.

“I sent them away. Don’t be mad at them, please. I wanted to be alone. They couldn’t have prevented the attack if they were with me.”

He lowered the towel and rubbed her shoulders dry. “That’s not the point, dammit! You shouldn’t have to face that alone. Something else, anything else, could have happened. They were so crazy to go off for a screw that they left you alone. It’s bullshit.” His voice had lowered to a growl. “It’s their fault.”

Oh, God. Instead of being pissed at her for sending Nate and Clay away, he was blaming them. “Blame whoever made that monster, not Clay and Nate, and not you.”

With a quiet sigh, the towel he’d been using settled on the floor.

She turned in time to see him stomping down the hall. “Cleve.” Her anxious call echoed unanswered through the house. Seconds later, the front door slammed. Without a second thought, she wrapped the towel tighter around her middle and followed.

\* \* \* \*

Nate brooded in his truck. Clay stood somber inside the house, looking out the front window. Poor Clay was probably getting Cleve’s angry vibes on a much clearer frequency. Obviously torn between consoling him and facing Cleve’s accusations, he’d stayed inside when he’d told him he intended to clean the blood from his seats. Which was fine. He needed space.

He sat in the driver’s seat, slumped over the wheel. Damn. He’d been thinking with his dick when he let Kie talk him into leaving her alone.

The sound of crunching gravel brought his head up. Clay may have respected his need for time alone, but it looked like Cleve had no such concerns.

Instinct and self-preservation sent him to meet Cleve toe to toe, in front of his vehicle.

“You stupid son of a bitch! This is all your fault,” Cleve yelled, jabbing a finger at his chest.

“Don’t you think I know that? I—”

“You were so busy fucking my brother that you couldn’t even do the one thing that mattered most.”

“Fuck you, Howell!” His response was little more than a feral growl. “What matters most to you is making your ranch bigger. This is all because of your greedy father and that fat bastard manager of yours. I don’t see you jumping to track him down, because maybe you don’t want Daddy implicated.”

“My father has nothing to do with this.” Cleve’s fist raised.

He put his up too. On the edge of his vision, Kie came down the front steps two at a time, Clay right behind her.

“Come on, Cleve. Be the *man*. Hit me. It’s what you want, right? Show Kiersten how tough you are. Kick the fag’s ass. *If* you can. Come on.”

Towel-clad Kie wedged herself between them. “Jesus Christ, you two are a big help. Neither of you better *touch* the other.”

Clay followed at a safe distance. “Yeah, you guys are actin like barbarians.”

“You’re part of this problem,” Cleve snarled at Clay. “If you two woulda kept your dicks in your pants, you could’ve been there to help her.”

“Cleve, there’s a million woulda’s and coulda’s. Think what you’re doing right now.” Clay’s words were obviously meant to distract him, but Cleve’s hand still clenched in a fist. “Is this gonna help Kiersten, or her dog? Help figure out who did this?”

Kie tugged him by the arm toward the house, and Cleve’s face went deep red.

“I’ve *never* called you a fag,” he yelled behind them. Then, to Clay, “I didn’t.”

Clay answered, “I know, Cleve. You’re both pissed. It’s not gonna make her feel better with you two acting like a pair of fucking Vikings. You and Nate might as well have been out here beating your bare chests, and what did it help?”

Inside the house, he followed Kie to his room, where she asked him to lend her some clothes. He rummaged in a drawer for a pair of shorts and one of his smaller shirts. Thinking of her little body in his big clothes made him think of her body in the hotel bed. Guilt steamrolled him these days. Guilt for not wanting Kie to be happy with Cleve, guilt for sleeping through Win’s pet being slaughtered, over hiding his feelings for her, over being crazy about someone else when he was in love with her.

He tossed the clothes on the bed he’d been happily sharing with Clay. To hell with the guilt. He pulled her to him, his hands hugging her soft skin around the edge of the towel.

“God, Kie, I’m sorry. I fucked up. I’m so sorry, honey.” He kissed her forehead, still holding her tight. “If anything ever happened to you—”

“Nate, I’m okay. Really. I’m—”

His lips drowned out her answer. She didn’t fight him, but she was slow to respond to his passion. God, he wanted her. Her lips were so soft. Her tongue so salty. From tears. Because of him. He pulled his mouth off hers in a hurry.

“Jesus, I’m sorry for that too, Kie.”

She blinked in confusion as his hands kneaded her back.

“God, I’m sorry.” He closed his eyes. What else could he screw up in one day?

“Nate. You’re emotional right now. It’s okay. Are *you* okay?”

Cleve and Clay clamored in the front door.

\* \* \* \*

Nate stepped away from her quick, way too quick, then shut the door on his way to the bathroom.

She dressed, feeling nothing less than miserable. What was with Nate now? Why had he kissed her like that? She’d thought he was happy with Clay. That damn night in the bar, when she’d been turned on by him and told him so, that was the problem. Her stupid, stupid big mouth. Nate’s kiss today didn’t turn her on, it just tore her up. Why would he do that? Did he still feel sorry for her? Was her stubborn, self-imposed celibacy going to screw up Nate’s chance for happiness with Clay? God, her head hurt. She had a bump back there, and it ached more now than when she’d hit it.

Dressed, she went to the living room to find Nate answering her phone. It looked like he’d composed himself in the bathroom, but his eyes didn’t meet hers. Or Cleve’s. He nodded and grunted a few times, thanked the other person, and hung up.

Without looking at her, he said, “Oscar’s out of surgery. He’ll be sedated till tomorrow. They washed him up and he looks a lot better. They’re optimistic.”

She blew out the huge breath she’d held while Nate spoke.

Cleve wouldn't look at her either.

Rubbing her eyes to clear them, she tried to think. What did she need to do? Call the sheriff. While tugging the tattered directory out from under Grandpa's phone, she noticed the message light blinking. She pushed 'Play'.

"This is Patty at Dr. Campbell's office. I've got Winston's lab work back. Please call me at your earliest convenience." Another sigh, then she dialed the number for the clinic, and Patty's extension. Patty informed her Winston's bloodwork showed he was anemic, so he should add iron to his diet with a supplement, but he seemed otherwise healthy.

After hanging up, she announced to the room at large, "Grandpa's iron deficient."

Clay acknowledged with a nod from his seat on the couch.

Nate rummaged without a word in the fridge, and at the table, Cleve sat, back to her and stone silent.

She rolled her eyes at Clay and put a call in to the deputy she'd dealt with earlier in the week. He agreed to meet her at the Peak.

Her resolve firmed as she dropped the phone in its cradle. "Clay, I'll catch ya later."

\* \* \* \*

Cleve watched the back door slam as Rocky's fine rear end wiggled down the steps. "What's she—"

"Win's truck," Nate muttered. "Goddammit!"

Unfortunately, they were too late to stop her gravel-spewing departure.

"She is *such* a pain in the ass sometimes," Nate complained.

"No kiddin. You'd think she'd have the sense to know she can't be goin off by herself."

"I'd call a tie," Clay announced, "for which one of y'all is the bigger shthead."

Racing up the gravel road in his truck, Cleve couldn't believe how fast Kiersten was driving. Finally, they were catching up to a dust cloud. With any luck, it would be hers.

"We'll catch her on the long hill," Nate predicted. "She never shifts Win's truck down soon enough, and it peters out halfway up."

They came around a corner at the bottom and saw the old blue Dodge crawling to the top. Nate really did know her. One scowl in his rearview at Clay, and he knew his brother wasn't any happier about Nate and Kiersten being so close.

He'd all but caught up to her when they reached her cabin. With his truck parked, he closed his eyes to block the vision outside. By the number of feathers around, it looked like a couple dozen chickens must have been plucked bald. The killer lay in a heap near the pond, the chicken coop was demolished, and there seemed to be blood everywhere. He wanted to clean it all, take it away, so Rocky wouldn't have to face it again, but the deputy would need to look at it and take pictures.

"Kie, are you okay?" Nate asked through the bathroom door when Cleve got inside. He gestured that she was vomiting.

She came out a moment later, her face still damp from splashing water on it.

“Shit, Kie. Are you dizzy?”

She nodded.

“You have a concussion, girlfriend. Look at these pupils! I can’t *believe* you drove like this. You’re a veritable Nazi about drunk driving, and you drove up that road concussed?”

Rocky didn’t reply.

Nate stepped behind her and probed through her hair.

“Oww! I live in there!” she yelled. “Jesus, you wanta stick your fingers in the scratches on my leg, too?”

“You *drove* with a concussion? When we were all right there, ready to take you home?” Cleve demanded. What in hell had she been thinking? And how could Nate play doctor with him standing right there in plain sight?

Then Clay stepped in, shaking his head.

“Did you lose consciousness at all?” he asked, looking at her pupils. “Let’s get you some ibuprofen. It’ll help with the swelling. Cleve, you find that. You want an ice pack?”

Nate stepped aside to let Clay lead her to the couch, and he rummaged in the cupboard for the pain reliever.

“Does your back hurt? Or your neck?”

When she lay comfortably, Clay turned to Nate and him. “I’m goin outside to call Mama. Try not to act like Neanderthals while I’m gone.”

Outside, Clay’s boots rapped on the decking as he dialed his cellphone.

“Hey, Mama, how are ya?...Good. I’m fine. Cleve’s girl’s got a concussion....Well, she got thrown from her horse.”

Cleve had no shame in eavesdropping by the open window. After all, Clay was out there talking about *his* woman.

“No, she’s a good rider, but the horse was bein attacked by a dog...Yeah. So what do we need to watch for?...Yeah, I’m sure. She threw up and she’s dizzy and her pupils aren’t the same. Got a heck of a bump... Okay. Yeah, I’ll make sure.”

Clay must be smiling when he said, “He’s crazy for her.”

*Got that right, Clayster.*

“I’m not sure, Mama. She hated us all for so long, but it’s mostly Pop she hates now... I don’t know either, but Cleve ain’t backin down...I think so, Mama. He thinks so, too, I can tell... Probably the end of the week. I...well, I guess I like it here. A lot.” Clay’s voice lowered. “Yeah, I like *him* too... I know, and we miss you too. Y’all should come out. Maybe if Pop met her— I know he is, and so’s Cleve. But I think she’s as stubborn as the two of ’em together.”

*Better watch yourself, Clay.* Not that it wasn’t the truth.

With his voice more somber, Clay asked, “Mama, has Chaz been there at all?”

Cleve’s ears perked up. What would Mama answer? Hopefully ‘no.’

“No, there’s some crazy stuff happenin around here, and I think Chaz could be behind it. Pop says he’s in Hawaii... No, I’m *not* accusin Pop of lyin. But somebody’s tryin to run Kiersten off, and you know how much Pop wants that.” He sighed deeply. “I *do* respect him, I just don’t like some of the ways he’s done business.” Sounded like Mama was as prickly about Chaz’s possible involvement as Pop was. “Mama, try to make him understand, Kiersten’s not goin anywhere, except maybe into the new house with Cleve.”

“No, I don’t reckon he will, but if there’s anybody he’ll listen to, it’s you. Bring him out to meet her... I will. Okay. Bye.”

Against Mama’s recommendations, Rocky wouldn’t stay lying down. She insisted on going out to make her statement to the deputy. When the deputy left, Clay sent her directly to bed.

Cleve wasn’t impressed with the investigative skills employed. He located a black trash bag, hefted the messy Doberman’s body inside and put it in his truck bed.

Nate came out to help clean up the mess. “So, what will you do with the pinscher?”

“Looks like a purebred,” he answered. “Our Sherlock Holmes looked for ID tags, but I wonder if this beast didn’t have one of those implanted ID’s? I’m gonna have the vet scan him tomorrow. Maybe we’ll find out who owned him.”

“You’d think that deputy would’ve thought of it,” Nate muttered.

“You’d *think*.”

“Sorry about earlier, man.”

No matter what the guy’s feelings toward Rocky were, he was obviously sorry. And he wouldn’t deliberately get her hurt. Water under the bridge.

“Me, too.”

Cleve spent the evening essentially alone after Nate and Clay left in Winston’s truck.

Rocky slept, waking only when he periodically roused her to make sure she was still coherent, as Clay had advised. He pattered outside, repairing the empty chicken coop.

When darkness fell, he went in to check his email. While the machine fired up, he emptied his pockets, laying his cellphone on the desk.

Pop had finally reached him today, as he’d been leaving the police station, where he’d learned some kids had found a can of red spray paint under the dumpster in back of the burned shop. They’d been caught tagging the dumpster, the can confiscated and fingerprinted. The fingerprints of the person who’d left Kiersten’s warning, which would have been usable, had diminished to a few partials sandwiched between those of the kids.

So Pop had caught him in an especially bad mood. Listening while he pissed and moaned about the money Kiersten cost him hadn’t been pleasant.

“Well, Pop, she’s the monster *you* created. Maybe you oughtta hire her to do your fightin from now on, huh? I’m surprised anybody’ll sell to a Texan around here, after the shit you and Strom pulled... No, I ain’t listenin to any more, Pop. I’ve got business to do now. If you wanta fight with Kiersten about it, then haul your ass up here and do it face to face. It’s between you two.

I'll not have you disrespectin her, though... I ain't takin sides, but I ain't gonna be in the middle anymore. Bye." He'd hung up on his father. *That'd* come back to bite him in the ass.

He'd stopped at the attorney's office to sign the offers, then ducked in the jeweler's next door. Since nothing they offered had seemed right, he'd resigned himself to having a ring sent from the jeweler back home. Maybe Mary Ellen or Susie could help him out some.

Then the call from Clay about the dog attack had come.

He rubbed the back of his neck, tense from a full day of high nerves.

Kiersten's computer was a relic. She could sure use an upgrade. But he'd sell his soul before he'd suggest it to her, lest she feel insulted. Opening Outlook Express, he'd only just remembered that it wasn't *his* email when a message flagged 'Urgent' for Kiersten, from Cook-N came up.

*Kie,*

*I hope you're feeling better. I'm so sorry I wasn't there to help you today.*

*About that thing in the bedroom. Please forgive me and forget about it. Seeing you there in a towel, it reminded me of that night...It was stupid and I don't want it to screw up our friendship.*

*Please let us look out for you, girlfriend. It makes us feel strong and male, and we'd all be lost without you.*

*I've got Bobby coming over tomorrow to help round up the sheep. I want you to rest, OK?*

*Love ya,*

*Nate*

His hands shook as he closed the email program and typed in the web address for his own mail. Then he covered his eyes. Lord, why didn't she have a password or something, so somebody couldn't come and read her mail? Because she was the only person here, and her dog sure wouldn't ever invade her privacy like that. Goddammit, what did that mean, *that thing in the bedroom?* Or *that night?* How was he supposed to live, wondering what the hell was going on with them? If he admitted to reading the message, she'd probably never forgive him, and did he really *want* to know what was going on?

He had to because of Clay.

The pictures of rings his sisters sent were pretty, but he couldn't concentrate. Not when that other business kept coming at him like a freight train down a hill. Damn. He had half a mind to call Nate and ask him point-blank what the hell he'd done with Kiersten, but that would ruffle her



feathers without a doubt. The price of being snoopy. He either had to live with what he'd found, or fess up to poking his nose where it didn't belong.

Giving up on all else, he shed his clothes and climbed in bed beside her. Holding her close eased his mind some. What if there was a budding romance between her and Nate, and he'd showed up right as it took off? He'd gotten in the way. If she wanted to be with Nate, wouldn't she send him away? Maybe not, if she needed protection. Or if she wanted to spite Pop. But if she wanted to be with Nate, she wouldn't risk it by discussing Cleve with him like she did. Would she? How could Nate stand it? He must have heard way more about him from Kiersten than he wanted to.

He almost felt sorry for the guy. Not sorry enough to keep him from wanting to go bloody that pretty nose, though. After leaving her to face a trained attack dog alone, the guy had the nerve to...what? Touch her? Kiss her? Proclaim his undying affection? What? The question rattled over and over in his mind, squelching all else. What? What?

"Cleve?"

"What?"

"Relax." She rolled in his arms and faced him. "And hold me."

He did.

Sighing, she murmured, "I have a confession." Here it was. End of the line for old Cleve when he got booted off for a prettier model. "I'm scared. Really scared."

Thank God she was scared and not something else. "It's okay, darlin." He wished he knew it was, for sure, but he'd tell her so.

"It won't be okay till whoever hurt Oscar is locked up."

"Do you always ignore when you get hurt and pretend it didn't happen?" Why was she always so concerned with taking care of everybody else, without a thought for herself?

"I try. Sometimes it's better not to dwell on it, you know?"

"But you have to face reality sometimes too."

"I know, and it's scaring the hell out of me to do it. At the risk of sounding soft and feminine..." She paused and drew a deep breath. "Make love to me, please? I really want you to, need you to."

"You sound like Elvis. You want me, you need me. You love me?"

"Promise you won't use it against me?"

"Use *what* against you?"

"Jesus. It couldn't be easy, could it? If I love you, you won't use it against me?"

He swallowed hard in the dark, shook his head.

"You're not married to anybody else?"

Another shake.

"I know you're not after me for money, so we're clear there. Um, okay. Yes."

"Yes," he repeated. "Yes, you love me?" He held his breath.

"Yes."

Would wonders never cease. “You hittin your head may be the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Rocky.”

He was so happy over what she’d told him, he gave up worrying about Nate’s email.

## Chapter 20

“Another message from the clinic?” Kiersten muttered the next morning, annoyed that she’d missed the call.

She dialed voice mail and listened to the message. “Hi, Kiersten. This is Yvonne at Dr. Campbell’s office. I need you to call me as soon as possible. Thanks.”

“Yeah, yeah. Done that.” She erased the message. “Hey Tex,” she called toward the bathroom. “You drivin me to town to help Nate?” He was shaving, and she watched him from the door while waiting for his answer.

“Maybe, uh, you should relax. Nate could find somebody else to help him with the sheep.” He grinned and met her eyes in the mirror. “Maybe Clay.”

“Maybe *you* could do it, wise-ass, big shot cattleman.” She giggled, running her hands over his so smooth face. Looking at him brought tears to her eyes for some reason, maybe because of that *I love you* look he was wearing. Hopefully she had hers on, too. She wanted to say the words, but they seemed to stick in her throat.

“What’s wrong, Rocky?”

“Nothing.” She knuckled the corners of her eyes. “I guess smacking my head made me emotional, is all.”

“I’m gonna go start my coffee. You want me to warm up those cinnamon rolls?”

“Sure. I need to go online and transfer some money to pay the trucks. I’ll be right there.”

She joined Cleve at the table, pensive and not especially hungry. In fact, she felt a little sick.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Nate got somebody to help with the sheep.”

“Is that bad?”

“Um...no.” The rest of his email was, though. If Nate had been experiencing some emotional blip yesterday when he’d kissed her, he would’ve felt silly about it later and made a joke. Instead, he’d apologized, as if it was the first time they’d ever kissed. Oh, Nate. Why was he doing this now? Did he just not want to be happy, ever?

“Rocky.” Cleve’s interrogator voice was on. “I read your email by accident.”

“Oh.” Now that she thought of it, that message *had* been opened before. He had no business! When had Cleve read it, and how’d he feel when he did? Must’ve been while she was sleeping. But he hadn’t said anything to her till now.

“Accident?” How do you read by accident?

“I wasn’t thinking when I opened Outlook to check my own email, and there it was, marked urgent, so I read it right away.” He looked at the floor for a moment, then shook his head and looked her in the eye. “I’m sorry. I knew it was for you, but after you took off inside with him

yesterday, I was crazy jealous about you takin his side. And then he wouldn't talk to you when you came out... Well, I knew somethin was up. I deserve to suffer and wonder what the hell happened, for snoopin. I'm sorry," he repeated. His black eyes didn't waver or look away at all.

She could trust him. He wasn't playing a game like Luke would have been.

"You *are* a nosey shit." Her arms folded over her stomach, where the smell of his coffee and nerves over Nate were creating a cold-sweat-causing discomfort. He was probably waiting for her to yell and tell him to get out, but instead she looked at her toenails, which were sadly in need of polish. Well, she had her own confession to make. She'd never told him quite all of her history with Nate. And that night at the hotel was her fault. "I think Nate's...confused. He was upset yesterday. He hugged me, and then, um, kissed me. Only once though." Would he be as forgiving as he was repentant? "I think he felt guilty because he was off with someone else when I was in danger. He's made it his life mission to look out for me these last couple years, and now he thinks he fell short. I guess I need to make him understand that it's okay for him to have a life, even if one day he moves on to another job so he can be with somebody he cares for."

"He cares for *you*."

"Not like you think. He's confused, is all. One night when you first moved here, we went out—"

"The *date*?"

"Yeah. Anyway, he'd already decided, or guessed, that I was into you."

Cleve's grin gave her much-needed courage to continue.

"We had an argument about it because I kept telling him I didn't need a man, not even for sex. So he, like, decided to prove how horny I was. We were both drunk, and it got kinda out of hand. But we didn't have sex." *Damn close to it, though.* Jesus, what was she doing telling Cleve this? No good could come from it. "Damn. You didn't even have to tie me to a chair and shine a bright light in my eyes. You're some interrogator, mister. Let's go."

She was up, pushing her chair in, when he seized her hand. "You're not telling me everything."

"Everything?" She laughed, but without humor. "I told you everything you *want* to know." He wouldn't like hearing about Nate's 'I love you'. "Bottom line is, if it wasn't for Nate, I wouldn't have gone to bed with you. I'm not gonna ask you to give me all the details of your affair with Witless Whitney, and I'd like the same respect."

"Whitney," Cleve said in a growling tone, "isn't hangin around here, always touchin me and sneakin off for stolen kisses."

Her flaming face should tell him how pissed she was. "The kiss won't happen again. I'll get Nate straightened out, but he's part of my life. Accept it, or not. Your choice."

Yanking her hand from his, she already regretted loving him. She could never choose between him and Nate. The tears were back, so she stormed off to the bathroom to wash them away.

On the way to the vet's, Cleve broke their silence. "I never knew I was the jealous type till you. Guess no other girl ever mattered so much. Sorry."

She slid across the seat and buckled up next to him. Even as his arm slid around her shoulder, she knew his jealousy was not unfounded. But what should she do about it?

At the vet's office, Oscar stretched his nose toward her, trying to stand as the tech held him down. At least he was awake, if a bit groggy. His tail wagged, though his ears drooped. And he smelled good from his bath, which was just plain wrong. It upset her, the way the ER smell had always upset her since her dad's crash. She cried when she had to hand him over for the tech to put him back in the small cage, even though she knew he couldn't be out running free like he wanted. He'd have to stay another couple of days, which she tried to explain to him.

Cleve was off doing something with the body of her assailant and the vet. She had no interest in seeing it again, so she waited in his truck and called Grandpa.

"Hey, Grandpa," she said when he answered Aunt Sophie's phone. "How's the city?"

"Not as quiet as the ranch, Peanut. What's new?"

"Well, nothing good. Oscar got attacked by a loose Doberman yesterday, and he's pretty torn up. He'll have to be at the vet's another couple days."

"That ain't gonna be cheap. How you payin for it?"

She sighed and let her head flop back. "I don't know. Maybe I'll take a job in town for a while. I used to make good tips when I waited tables in college."

"You got a damn college degree. I didn't send you through seven years of school so you could work for minimum wage."

"Well, I can't really go do eye exams right now, can I? I'll figure something out, don't worry. Maybe Dr. Gray will take payments for Oscar's bill."

"Yeah," Grandpa said, "you got lots of money comin in later on, right? Why don't you admit it would be a better idea to sell the Peak? You could build yourself a fine house right on the ranch and live happily ever after, instead of worryin about money day and night. Ranching doesn't ever get easier. There's always some big expense sneakin up on ya. Just when you think you got your head above water, the waves get bigger."

"Oh, Grandpa." She'd started crying again. What he said was true, but it didn't make it hurt less. "Take your iron pills, okay?"

"Bye, Peanut. Take care."

The tears ran. She tried so hard to carry on the family business, but he couldn't understand why. To him, ranching was a losing battle, and he'd never understand her need to fight it.

\* \* \* \*

A mushroom cloud of dust hovered over the sheep-filled corral. Distressed ewes called their babies. Lambs bawled for their mothers, separated in the fracas of being crowded into progressively smaller pens until they were loping, single file, through the narrow loading chute into trailers. The ewes would have an inkling of where they were going, having gone there every summer. Sunny

hillsides, longer grass, and during hot afternoons, plenty of chokecherry bushes and aspen trees to shade up under. Once unloaded, each mother would mill around and find her lambs by their unique cries. Then she'd lead them away and nibble the tender mountain greens while her lambs nursed, as much to calm themselves as out of nutritional need.

Kiersten eyed the healthy lambs with pride and affection, leaning against the fence as she watched Nate urging the sheep toward the chute. He and Clay had moved the sheep near the corral early this morning. Now Clay was talking with Cleve, while Nate and Bobby from down the road handled the stock with ease.

Clay listened as Cleve told him in a lowered voice what he'd discovered at the vet's. "The vet got the sheriff to find out who owned the Doberman. It was registered to a guy named Mick Miller, in Denver. The vet rinsed him off, and his nose was covered with scars. Cigarette burns. His name was Hitler. Looked like he'd been a fightin dog for quite a while."

"Didn't you say that Trayce character was some kind of Neo-Nazi?" he asked.

"Yeah. My gut tells me this guy is a buddy of Gunther's." Cleve studied him, narrowing his eyes. "You seem kinda out of sorts, like you're sick."

\* \* \* \*

Clay kept the reason for his sleepless night to himself. Cleve would know he was lying, but it was no good telling him the truth. Shortly after nodding off, he'd been wakened by Nate talking vividly about Kiersten. In his sleep. "Guess all the excitement yesterday, you know, the blood and then watchin you Neanderthals get ready to beat snot out of each other."

It was a cop-out, a way to sidetrack Cleve by reminding him of his stupidity. But it was partially true. Clay had always been upset by animals being hurt, and by people fighting.

"Still Mr. Make-Love-Not-War, aren't ya bro?" Cleve clapped him on the back. "We'll get it straightened out."

As Cleve moved to drape a possessive arm around Kiersten, he guessed Cleve knew exactly what had been worrying him. The way Kiersten's body melted into Cleve's, he figured his brother didn't have much to worry about.

\* \* \* \*

"Tell me how an eye doctor can be so proud of a bunch of sheep," Cleve prompted when they were driving back to the Peak ahead of the trucks.

"I grew up a rancher. It's part of me. What I've always wanted to be."

"That's a hell of a degree to get, for sheep-ranchin. You might be a bit over-qualified."

"I got my degree for Grandma. My dad was an optometrist, and she so wanted me to be one, especially since I was a girl. It's not that I didn't like it. Just wasn't my dream career."

"Scrapin by, wakin up all hours of the night to bring in new lambs, watchin predators eat 'em alive, that's your dream career?"

“Have you ever touched the soft hair on a lamb’s nose? Wait till you see the lambs run along the ridge by the cabin. They play follow the leader, and when one goes jumping and bucking, the others do it, but exaggerated. It’s one of the funniest things in the world. I love to hear the sound of a ewe calling her babies to her when they wander off. Wanting them nearby is a part of me, like the Peak is. Don’t you feel that way about cattle? Cows?”

“I guess I came back to it, after all. But it’s more of a legacy than what I need to be happy.”

She snorted. Cattleman. Of course he wouldn’t get it. How could a cattle rancher possibly feel a similar attachment to big, dumb cows? “You’re going to all this work to build this ranch because what, your dad expects it?”

“I’ve got other plans for this Flyin H, Rocky. The cattle will get me by till I can get a first-class huntin retreat runnin. Who knows, maybe I’ll stick with the cattle afterward, too.”

“I take it Big Daddy doesn’t know of your alternative-ranching visions?”

“No way.”

She giggled, imagining a puff-faced Texan glowering at the idea of his son daring to do his own thing. He’d probably wear a big white hat like Chaz, or a black one, since the devil had to own his soul by now.

\* \* \* \*

Oscar came home on Thursday, with a pile of prescriptions and care instructions. Dr. Gray’s receptionist told Kiersten no payment was due. The Society of Multi-Breed Dogs had donated funds in light of Oscar’s heroic efforts. Something was rotten in Denmark. But, happy to take Oscar home, she didn’t argue.

They made a stop by the ranch so Kiersten could pick up her mail and leave Nate the clothes she’d borrowed.

“Nate, guess what?” Kiersten rushed in the front door. “Oscar’s whole treatment was paid for by some goofball philanthropic foundation for Heinz 57 dogs.”

“What was it, the Ugly Dog’s Advocacy?” Nate teased.

“He’s not ugly. He’s brave. And speaking of ugly, here are those hideous shorts you made me wear the other day. I don’t know *why* you didn’t put me in your Tommy shorts. Talk about adding insult to injury.” Nate had loaned her his favorites, but he needed to pay for calling Oscar ugly. She held the shorts out by the tip of her index finger and thumb, as if they offended her.

“You naughty little bitch, I oughtta...” With one glance at Cleve, he froze. “You’re too cold, girlfriend, way too cold. Your mail’s on the table.” Then he swept from the room with as much flamboyance as possible.

“Shit!” Her expletive brought both twins’ heads up. “I have to go to the clinic *again*? Well, maybe if they took the damn Pap right the first time, it wouldn’t come out abnormal. Goddamn.” Still clutching the postcard, she dialed the clinic and set an appointment for Monday.

“Incompetence,” she complained when she’d ended the call. “Okay, Tex, you ready to take Oscar home?”

“Wait, Kie. I think I’m ready to take that time off,” Nate said. “Without pay.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, vacation? Clay invited me to Texas. We’ll leave in another week. I was thinking of taking off two we—”

“Not what do you mean ‘time off,’” she snapped. “What do you mean ‘without pay?’”

“I know money’s tight right now, so—”

“That is such bullshit. You’re getting a paid vacation, Cook. You haven’t taken time off in almost three years and there’s no way I’m not paying you now. Your wages are in the budget and that’s final.”

“Losing the shop wasn’t in the budget, Kie. I’m fine for money.”

“So am I. Don’t piss me off. Come on, Cleve.”

Cleve shrugged at Nate and followed her out the door.

“Impossible little bitch,” Nate called after her, laughing with Clay when she raised her middle fingers to him.

“Keep it up and you’ll get a *raise*,” she yelled out the window as they drove away.

“Did you do that because you believe a live-in ranch hand deserves a paid vacation, or because you can’t stand the idea of havin anybody’s help?” Cleve asked.

With her arms folded over her chest, she told him, “Shut up.”

“Funny how you always tell the other person to shut up because *you’ve* got nothin to say.”

Turning, she faced him as he drove. “Where do you suppose the Society of Oscar Meyer Dogs gets their money, Howell?”

His gaze skittered to her and then back to the road. “Um, from members or raffles or bingo nights, I guess.”

“I love you, you big fool. You left your freakin credit card slip on the counter. Here it is.” After holding it up for him to see, she stuck it in the cubby above his stereo.

“Not very smooth, huh?” he said with a sheepish grin.

She laughed and shook her head. “No, not very. You can take it out of what you pay me for the hunting.”

“I been thinkin about that. I can get that money right away, if you need it. But this was a gift, to Oscar, to thank him for savin you.”

“Like Oscar’s gonna lie awake nights, worrying about how to pay his bills.”

“I don’t want you to either, Rocky.” His expression was serious. “There’s a biological need for a man to take care of his woman, you know. Besides, it was worth every penny to get you to say you love me.”

In spite of the curvy road, she fell asleep against him and didn’t wake until they’d parked in front of his new home-to-be. With the full basement dug, concrete trucks were filling forms.



“What’s this gonna be, like a sixteen bedroom house or something?” She perpetually teased him about how huge his house would be, and he teased her about the remodel she’d completed on her cabin, converting it into a mere two bedrooms.

He opened the door and they got out, hand in hand. “Downstairs’ll be mostly a game room and a den for the kids.”

“Kids, huh? Do they come in the package with the wife in the kitchen, or do you have to pay extra for them?”

Cleve halted their trip toward the contractor’s trailer, and turning, searched her gaze. He shook his head, then stared at her for several long seconds, looking crushed.

Had he truly believed she could ever be First Lady Flyin H?

“Oh, ho! No, no, no. You’re a dreamer, Howell. Big Daddy would have me capped before he’d let me in this famn damily.” Palms out, she held her hands in front of her chest as she backed away. Damn it.

“Rocky...”

“Oh hi, Tucker,” she called to the general contractor, already on his way over. Perfect escape. “I better check on Oscar.” She climbed in the back seat, where Oscar scrunched in a carrier.

If only she could contain Cleve just as easily.

\* \* \* \*

Cleve tailed his builder, trying to follow the man’s report on the progress of his house. His home, that he planned to share with Kiersten. Why in hell would she think he’d have any other woman for a wife? She couldn’t love him and then let go. Were all women this hard to figure? She couldn’t keep using Pop as an excuse. A grown man thirty years old could marry whoever the hell he wanted, and his father wouldn’t be stopping it. And his lady shouldn’t be worried about his father either.

Then again, he knew how he’d feel if he and Winston didn’t get along. Or worse yet, were enemies like Rocky and Pop.

He’d say no more about the house or his wife.

Until he had a ring, he couldn’t make a proper proposal.

## Chapter 21

Cleve and Kiersten rode their horses to check her sheep each evening, before dinner but after she'd risen from the nap. It seemed each day she started yawning before her nap a little earlier, and she slept a bit longer. Some afternoons he'd get up before she did and use the computer or watch TV. Sometimes she'd wake up and he'd just be lying there, watching her.

"Best view in Colorado," was all he'd say about it.

Kiersten tagged along with Cleve and his guys while he helped finish his corrals and start the other buildings. She liked giving them a hand, holding something up while it was nailed or bringing cold drinks around. If it wasn't for the damn deer flies, the guys wouldn't wear shirts, which would be even better. Nate and Clay showed up every day to lend a hand where needed, exercising the horses Clay worried over. Her heart swelled when she'd see them standing close together, leaning against a fence. Nate looked happy with Clay, which meant he'd gotten over the crazy crush thing.

Cleve was trying to find the owner of Hell Hound, but she didn't want details. It disturbed her to think about that day and all the fear. The fear for Oscar and Cookie was one thing. Worrying about others, she could handle. But not herself. She didn't want to start wondering what would happen next.

On Monday morning, she climbed out of Cleve's truck at the clinic. God, she hated Paps. She'd tried to convince him to go do some business elsewhere and not wait around for her, but he'd refused.

Yvonne called her name and took her back, stopping at the scale on their way.

Kiersten rolled her eyes. "In a week, I doubt much has changed."

"It's routine," Yvonne advised.

"Well." She'd dropped a couple of pounds since the last visit. "Those spinning classes must be paying off."

Yvonne's eyebrows shot up, then she handed over a urine specimen cup.

"Um? I think you got my urine last time, too."

"Routine."

"Alrighty then." Just as well. She needed to go anyway.

In the exam room, Yvonne took her blood pressure and made notes in the computer. "The doctor will be in shortly."

"Uh, where's my lovely paper gown?"

"Gown?"

"Yeah, so I can get naked for my Pap."

"You can't get a Pap."

"I *came* for a Pap because mine was abnormal."

“You came for a Pap.” Yvonee looked at her like she was nuts.

“Is this a new version of *Who’s On First*? I got a card in the mail that said my Pap was abnormal, and I needed to come get another.”

“The lab sends those out.”

“The system works great, because here I am, all ready to climb in the stirrups.” Sarcasm would have to do. She couldn’t bite the ditzy nurse’s head off, like she wanted to.

“You’re here because of the post card?” Yvonne flipped through the chart. “Didn’t you get my message?”

“About my Grandpa’s labs?”

“About *your* labs.” The nurse’s eyes left the chart and met hers. “Oh. Dear. You don’t know, then.”

“Know *what*?”

“I’d better get the doctor.”

\* \* \* \*

Even Rocky’s freckles were pale when she rushed into the waiting room, calling back over her shoulder, “I’ll be right back, just, just a minute, okay?” She tripped over a chair leg and almost landed in an old man’s lap on the way to him.

“Um, Cleve...” What the devil had her so upset? “...uh, um. I need you to come back here, okay? Just, uh, come with me.”

In the hallway outside the exam room, she shifted from one foot to another. “Um, remember, well, that first time when we forgot the condom? And then later, I thought it was safe. I mean...maybe it was too late already. Yeah, I’m sure it was. The thing is, I swear if I would’ve known, I’d have taken care, I mean, I’d never endanger... Well, God, I didn’t know. They called with lab results, but I thought it was for Grandpa. I really had no idea. I’m sorry. So you should be here too. Okay?”

Danger and condoms. Lab results. Lord, it must be an STD. She’d been clean. There was no way she’d been carrying an STD for nearly three years. And she’d told him how Nate had her get tested after Luke died.

He must’ve infected her with something. *He* sure hadn’t been celibate back in Texas. Not by a long shot. Oh, hell.

“Um, darlin, I should be the one apologizin, I mean, I didn’t know either. Lord knows, it wasn’t on purpose. But it’s most likely from me.”

“From you? Of course it’s from you, ninny! Obviously, who else could be the father?”

“Father?” Huh? “But you’re not—”

“But I am. Apparently that bleeding was from implantation or some shit. Come on, Dr. Campbell’s waiting.”

\* \* \* \*

Kiersten jerked to a stop because Cleve's hand still clamped around hers. And he wasn't walking.

"Cleve? Are you okay?"

He looked stricken, but he was smiling.

"You look like a man who just learned he gets to sleep with a supermodel, but it'll be his last lay ever. Come on, the doc's waiting."

"Rocky." He swallowed hard, so loud she could hear it. "Really?"

She nodded and tugged on his hand.

He picked her up by the waist and spun her around. *Criminy*. The gossiping nurses at the end of the hall looked on, oohing and ahing.

With a loud kiss on her lips, he whooped, "Hell yeah," tossed down the Astros baseball cap he'd been holding, and then dipped her low for a long kiss, more the kind that had led to their current predicament.

As the blood rushed back from her head to her body, she mumbled, "I guess you're happy?"

Cheerful onlookers had gathered at both ends of the hall, and both Dr. Campbells stood beaming at them, the older one quite benevolently.

"This would be Dad, then?" Young Dr. Campbell stepped aside for them to enter the exam room, then shut the door. "So, let's see. We can probably stop taking the birth control now."

"Oh, taking it wasn't harmful for the baby was it?" Kiersten's palm rested on her tummy. "And, oh my God, the margaritas I drank. I'm sorry Cleve, I didn't know, I swear, and the fall off the horse—"

This arrested the doctor's attention. "How long ago was the fall?"

"A week."

"Any bleeding since then? Cramping? You're probably fine, but let's do a pelvic exam, to make sure your cervix is still sealed. I'll be right back, just undress from the waist down."

Cleve grinned while she stripped and climbed on the exam table lightning-quick.

"What?" she demanded, her face softening with a smile when he bent to kiss her and took her hand.

"Dad. She called me *Dad*," he murmured, starry-eyed.

"You've gotta be the happiest accidental dad in history." She was still laughing at the goofy look on his face when Dr. Campbell and Yvonne came back in.

His brows tugged down in concern when she winced at the doctor probing inside her.

"It's okay, Tex. She just—ughh!—doesn't have magic fingers like you do."

The doctor and nurse smiled up at Cleve, who turned a handsome shade of red.

"Kiersten," he said under his breath.

"Oh, please! *You're* the one embarrassed while I'm lying here with another woman's fingers up my yoo-hoo, holding the hand of the man who impregnated me, the son of a dude whose name is more offensive to me than a clogged toilet? Puh-lease."

“New medical term,” Dr. Campbell said. “Used in context—‘Insert the speculum in the patient’s *yoo-hoo*.’ Well, this yoo-hoo is still pregnant. We’ll schedule another appointment in a month and do a vaginal ultrasound to determine your due date. Any questions? Oh, stay off the horse for awhile, but I’d say your baby hasn’t faced any more alcohol than most have at this age.”

\* \* \* \*

“Oh my God. Are you serious? You *are* serious!” Nate exclaimed, when she and Cleve stopped by the ranch to share their news.

“Well, congratulations, you two. *Oh* my God!” Nate lifted her up against him and twirled her round.

Clay moved toward her to follow suit, and she held up her hand. “Please.” She gasped for breath. “A normal hug. No more spinning, or I might ralph.”

“I’m callin Mama,” Cleve said.

“The hell you are!” she yelled, stopping him in his tracks. “Your dad’ll have me killed off, for sure. He’ll think I’m a gold-digger or something.” God, all she needed was Howell claiming she’d gotten pregnant so she could get child support.

“Kiersten. Pop would never hurt you, and it’s time he knew—”

“I think she has a point,” Clay interrupted. “Don’t get Pop diggin his heels in. You need to introduce them first. Wait for them to hit it off, don’t suddenly dump a surprise baby on them.”

“I’m not dumpin anything on anybody. It’s my kid, dammit, and I’m happy about it.”

Clay shook his head. “Think about how Pop will react. First the speech about bein responsible —”

“So, I’ll tell him we got pregnant on purpose.”

“Good one,” she cut in, “maybe Big Daddy’ll think I brainwashed you into knocking me up.”

“You’re not *knocked up*. You’re *expectin*, or *carryin my child*. And it’s good news, dammit!” Cleve and all his romantic terms.

“So,” Nate asked with a grin, “you two getting hitched soon? You know what Wins’ll have to say about this.”

“Shut up, Nate,” she mumbled.

“If Little Miss Bull-headed here will agree to it,” Cleve answered.

“We’ve been over this before and we agreed—”

“We didn’t *agree* to anything, Rocky.”

“No, I guess not,” she said.

Clay looked apprehensive.

“I know you have some crazy idea about shoving me in your dad’s face and expecting him to accept me. I’m not gonna do it, Cleve. As much as I hate the old crow, I won’t be responsible for alienating you from your family.”

“Kiersten,” Clay cut in, “I think the family will love you on sight. All except maybe Pop. But Cleve, you need to get Pop out here to meet her so they can settle their differences.”

"If I get Pop to come out, will you feel better?" Cleve asked.

She narrowed her eyes, wicked excitement coursing through her veins. "I've been waiting for years to meet him face to face, and he always hides behind his damn lawyers or characters like Boss Hogg. If he can face me like a man and admit he was wrong for what he did—"

"Pop ain't gonna just bow down and apologize. Don't doom this from the start, please?" Fingers crawling through his hair in distress, Cleve looked at Nate.

"Kie. Your hormones must be addling your brain. Come on, girlfriend. I know you can be civil. I've seen it. Think happy thoughts. Come on, there's a smile. Now repeat after me, 'I'll be a good girl when Mr. Howell visits.'"

"Shut up, Nate."

Nate bowed. "She'll behave now."

Beside her, Cleve let loose a big sigh. "Let's go out and celebrate. I'll call Rowdy and them and see if they wanta meet us for dinner. I still owe 'em a party for puttin up with Whitney."

Cleve had agreed to keep Kiersten's condition a secret, but the news proved too exciting for him to keep a cork on, especially after he'd popped several corks with their dinner. He swore his cowboys to secrecy, then told them.

Cash looked more sympathetic than congratulatory.

Dusty blushed, as he seemed to do whenever she so much as looked his way.

Rowdy laughed nonstop. "Whoo-ee. Your daddy's gonna come undone this time, Cleve. I'd sure like to be a fly on the wall when you give him that news." Slapping his knee, he asked, "So, you gonna go in the sheep business with the little Missus?"

Mom-to-be lost count of how many pitchers of beer the guys drank after the wine. She was more concerned with keeping them and their smell far from her, so she didn't feel compelled to retch.

On the way home, she reveled in her skill at sailing the Suburban around the corners. Not that any of her passengers would remember her prowess the next day.

Cleve rode in the front seat next to her, the same happy grin plastered to his face he'd been wearing since finding out he was on his way to being a daddy. His periodic leaning over to kiss her and ask if she felt okay made her laugh in spite of the nausea induced by the bunch of beer-smelling guys in back. Her window was down in an effort to catch fresh, clean smelling air. She'd only had to put up the window once, to avoid the dustcloud from a white truck traveling down the road.

Her load of liquored-up passengers sang along with George Strait's *I Can't See Texas from Here*.

The night was clear, with a breeze blowing from the north. She'd nearly rounded the last curve before the Flyin H driveway when she smelled smoke. Calling over the music to ask if anybody else smelled it got her only grunts for replies. Before she turned into the driveway to take the cowboys home, out of habit, she looked toward the Peak. A bright, irregular swath of orange oozed its way toward the top.

“Shit! Fire!” she yelled. Turning away from the driveway, she punched the gas and the huge SUV lurched toward the Peak, its occupants suddenly alert. While the men discussed how to fight the fire, she sped up her driveway. With the wind blowing against it, the fire was moving slowly. They could only hope this good fortune would hold.

As soon as she parked, the men were off with shovels from the back of the Suburban. Cleve instructed her to stay put and call the fire department. “Don’t let me see you near that smoke, Rocky.”

“But, you need all the manpower—”

“No. Get your hose and wet down everything around the house. Promise me? Better pull Cookie over here, too.” With that, he was off.

She made a frantic call to 911, emphasizing her proximity to National Forest to help her cause get as much attention as possible. While she drug her hoses out, she called Nate.

“Kie?” he answered, obviously out of breath.

“Nate, there’s another fire. The front side of the Peak. Cleve and the guys are fighting it, but can you go meet the fire engines and show them where to come so they don’t get lost?”

“Did the cabin—”

“No. Not yet. I’m wetting it down now. Please, hurry.”

In the background, Clay asked in a slurred drawl what was going on.

“On my way,” Nate promised.

The smoke reeked, even with the breeze blowing it away. Against the dark night, the other side of the Peak glowed like a volcano on a nature show.

This was the worst nightmare of every rancher. If her pasture burned, she was sunk. Sure, next year the vegetation would be fantastic. But the ashes and cinders left wouldn’t be much nutritional value to the sheep this year.

She kept watering, hoping to God the guys could turn the fire back on itself and it would go out. It might be an hour before the firemen reached them, and even then they wouldn’t be able to get the big engines close to the flames on the steep hillside.

An explosion of curses and yelling made her look up. Fire raced in a straight path over the Peak, fracturing and going three different directions. Either the wind had stopped, or...gas. She smelled the gasoline. Somebody had poured trails of gas to accelerate the fire. One flaming branch headed straight toward the house. All four men raced toward her, behind the alleyway of flames. She stood with her hose, spraying for all she was worth in the direction of the oncoming fire.

Someone had deliberately set a wildfire. On her property.

“Kiersten! Goddammit, let your horse out and get out of here,” Cleve yelled. “Get in the truck and leave!”

“I’m not leaving this house.” The house couldn’t burn. Not with them all there fighting the fire. And it was wet. Wet things didn’t burn.

“Go down to the main road to meet the firefighters. You can’t stay in this smoke. It’s bad for the baby.” He dragged her bodily to the Suburban.

“Cleve? Please save my house?”

He boosted Oscar to the passenger seat. “I promise, Rocky.” He slammed the door and hit it once to prod her to leave.

Waiting at the gate, she could see the hillside above, lit by the flames and the moon. Cleve’s shouts, mingled with those of his guys, were audible but indiscernible. Would she have a home next time she went up her driveway?

The roar of a fire engine neared. Nate’s vehicle was not in front of it. But when the engine slowed at her driveway, Nate swung down from a passenger door. The big truck and two smaller ones behind it passed by and headed up the driveway.

“Kie. Oh my God!” He rushed toward her after the trucks were gone. “Clay’s gonna take them to the house. I thought you said the fire was only on front of the Peak.” He buried her in a hug.

“Somebody poured trails of gas for the fire to follow. One goes straight to the house.” In Nate’s strong arms, she lost it. “God, why does everybody hate me? Why can’t they leave me alone up here?”

“Shh. Everybody doesn’t hate you. Just somebody. And that person might only be trying to make you leave, honey. Shh.” He held her while she cried.

She needed air.

“God. I’m gonna be sick now. The smell. Oh, God.” It wasn’t only the smells, but the idea, the fear. She had a baby inside her, and somebody meant to do her harm. How could she safely raise a child when she was in danger? “I need to go up there, Nate. I need to see if my house—”

“No. The smoke is too much, hon. Let’s get in the truck where it’s not so bad.” He didn’t wait for her consent, just pulled her to a back door of the Suburban, where he pushed her up in the seat next to Oscar, then climbed in beside her.

Oscar sniffed and lay down with his head on her lap.

“Y-y-you think they’ll put it out? What if all the pasture burns?”

“It’s still green, Kie. It probably won’t burn very fast once the accelerant is gone.”

She rested her head against his shoulder while he stroked her hair.

“What were you doing riding in the fire truck?”

“They decided Clay and I had both been drinking too much to drive up, so they let us ride with them.”

“Lucky dog. Sandwiched between all those buff firemen.”

“Yeah. Damn shame I was too worried about you to enjoy it.”

“The smoke is worse down here, from the wind. We should go up to the house. We might need to move the sheep from the bedground if the fire moves that way. And besides, do you really wanta leave Clay alone with all those firemen?”



“You won’t rest until you go up there to see the damage, will you?” Nate sighed dramatically. “All right then. Let’s go. But if it’s bad, we’re coming right back here. I won’t let you watch your house burn, girlfriend. Even *you* aren’t that tough.” He climbed to the front seat and took the wheel, chuckling. “I promised Clay I wouldn’t let the twins be endangered.”

“Twins. Shut up! Don’t even think it. Twins.”

The last bit of fire was buried as Nate parked the Suburban and she scrambled out to survey the damage. Her home was intact. Relief washed over her, leaving her weak-kneed. She should be thankful. It could have been worse. But she couldn’t help being afraid. And pissed. Whoever had set the fire had hoped to burn her home. Did that person think she’d be home and might die? Or was it intended as a dire warning?

Another fire investigator would be up in the morning, along with one of the many deputies she’d gotten acquainted with.

The fire chief left after giving stern instructions to stay away from the source of the fire.

## Chapter 22

Kiersten woke early, so nauseated she could barely breathe. The stench of burned brush permeated everything she owned. Cleve's arms were reluctant to let her go when she slipped away for a shower. Thank God the guys had been with her last night. Or what would have happened? She swallowed the need to retch as she turned on the water. Couldn't keep thinking like that. But what could she do? A good two weeks' worth of pasture had gone up in smoke. She'd have to either sell her lambs sooner in the fall and take lower weights for them all, or sell a few ewes and lambs together right away, so there was enough to go around for the remaining stock. Either choice would decrease her lamb check in September. Grandpa was right. Just when you thought you'd caught up, some disaster hit and you were still sinking.

Dawn broke as she sat at her kitchen table opening her mail. Bills, bills. Why did she bother to open them? She couldn't pay them anyway. Junk mail, fan mail from the county assessor. An odd business letter with no return address. Inside, it read:

*Dear Ms. Day,*

*Must see you. Please email me at below address. Do not contact me at my place of business.*

*Sincerely,*

*LeeDavid Calhoun*

Why'd that silly young attorney want to see her? Was he asking her out, or did he have something else up his sleeve? This, she had to know. She tiptoed over to her computer, powered it up and sent him a message.

*LeeDavid,*

*You are very mysterious, but I'm intrigued. Name the time and place, but know that I go nowhere alone. After arson on my business and now my home, as well as an attempt on my life (by your client, I suspect) I am under constant protection.*

*You can let Mr. Gunther know that the next time he shows up at my home threatening myself or those I love, I WILL shoot. With no regrets.*

*K. Day*

He responded minutes later, before she'd finished reading her other messages.

*Ms. Day,*

*I will be in Rifle tomorrow. It's imperative that we do not meet in public. I've been following the incidents you mentioned in the newspaper. Your life could be in jeopardy. You must agree not to disclose the source of the information I provide. I will be at the address I mailed the letter to, at 5:00 PM tomorrow.*

*LeeDavid*

"Who's LeeDavid?"

She jumped, but managed not to yelp at Clay.

"Um. He's an attorney from the firm Trayce Gunther hired. In Denver."

"Denver, as in where Hitler came from?" His brows raised. Taking a seat on her file cabinet, he crossed an ankle over a knee. He wore his jeans and nothing else.

"Well, yeah. This guy seemed appalled by the stunt his firm pulled at Trayce's trial, though." Clay. The very image of Cleve, but different. Same body hair, same build. Different posture. Defensive. Less macho, maybe. Less poised to fight for what he wanted. "Sorry about interrupting last night."

"Oh. I think a wildfire would take priority. Over the other fire," he answered with a grin.

Her face burned. Jesus, why should she be embarrassed over what he'd said? She'd already known what he and Nate had been up to. Anyway, she'd brought it up.

*Get over it.* She looked back up at Clay and found him eyeing her suspiciously.

"You won't hurt him?" she pleaded. "He falls so hard."

"I know." He glared at her like she was evil and chewed his lower lip.

Her eyes burned. Damn the emotions lately. Clay clearly knew more than he was saying. And he hated her for it.

"Oh, hell. Please don't cry. Cleve'll kick my ass if he wakes up and finds out I've hurt your feelings."

Too late. She had a bottomless wellspring of tears these days.

"I'm sorry. It's the hormones." She wiped a tear off her cheek. What did he have against her? She didn't really want to go there. If she was coming between him and Nate, surely he'd tell her. "Clay, if you care about him, don't let anything get in the way. He deserves that, and I think you do too."

Clay's face softened like she'd seen Cleve's do so many times. His eyebrows went back up where they belonged and the corners of his mouth turned up a fraction. He put his hand over hers and something warm, more than the usual transfer of body heat, passed between them.

“Tell me,” she implored. Something troubled him down deep. Something associated with her.

Clay’s eyes narrowed again, then he nodded and took a quick look behind him. “He, um, he talks about you. In his sleep.”

“Oh. Because he’s worried.” Please, please let it be that.

“No. Not that kind of talk.”

Oh. Jesus. “Oh. Um.” She could think of nothing more to say. “I’m sorry. We’ve never, I mean...”

“I know. But I think he wanted to. Wants to.”

“No. You’re wrong, Clay.” She lowered her voice before she went on. “He’s afraid to believe he has what he wants. He’d rather want what he believes he can’t have. I know, it’s fucked up.” Been there, done that. “Nate knows I’m a commitment-phobe, so he could never have me. It’s easy to *know* you want what you can’t have. No disappointments that way.”

Clay looked only marginally reassured and opened his mouth to speak, but Nate staggered out of the second bedroom.

“What secrets are you two whispering about out here?” Nate asked, still fastening the top button of his Levi’s.

Her email was suddenly riveting, when faced with the intimacy of Nate hugging Clay from behind and nuzzling his neck.

“If y’all drank as much beer as I did last night, you’d be sleepin still, instead of wakin me up from a perfectly good sleep,” Cleve grumbled from the bedroom.

“Maybe if you could hold your alcohol better, you wouldn’t be such a crank-ass the mornin after,” Clay called back.

Cleve appeared in the doorway, palms rubbing red eyes and fingers cradling his head, wearing only the towel he’d dried off with after his shower the night before.

Nate raised his brows suggestively to her and she grinned back.

Cleve blinked his eyes to clear them, then gazed her way.

“You oughtta be sleepin still, Rocky. You got big dark circles under your eyes. Come on, let’s get some food in ya. Baby needs to eat.”

She followed him into the kitchen.

He pulled her close, kissed her neck and fondled her breasts.

“They’re growin,” he whispered happily.

“Yeah, but please be gentle.”

## Chapter 23

Cleve watched the Day ranch get smaller in his rearview, hoping to high heaven his instincts regarding the young LeeDavid Calhoun wouldn't fail him. He'd agreed to leave Rocky with Nate for a few hours while he took a trip to Grand Junction. With Clay's help, he'd pick out an engagement ring.

He had to trust Nate to make sure she came to no harm.

Though it had been Clay's idea as much as his own to leave Kiersten and Nate together, Clay seemed anxious. Wasn't rocket science for him to guess something was up when Clay'd tailed Rocky into the kitchen, whispering furtively with her before they left. A born sneak Clay was not.

"What's got your feathers ruffled today?" he asked when they hit highway.

"Hmm?"

Clay was stalling, plain and simple. "You and Nate have a tiff? How come you're in the kitchen whisperin to Rocky?"

Fiddling with Cleve's collection of CDs, Clay settled on the Eagles and slid it into the player.

Regardless of all the interrogations he'd conducted, he'd never been able to make his twin crack once he clammed up. May as well change the subject. "What do you suppose that Calhoun character has to say?"

Clay shrugged. "Nate said he asked Kie's age in court. Maybe he wants to ask her out." So, Clayster was out to rile him for being so keen about his mood. "You really think she'll take your ring without meetin Mama and Pop first?"

"Just gotta make her think it'd piss Pop off. She'll do it if it fits in her war strategy." He grinned at his own underhanded scheme.

"Should be kinda interesting around here Friday, what with both Mr. Day and our folks showin up. You still didn't tell her they were comin, huh?"

He shook his head, chewing his lip. "No. Why make her worry? She'll have her hands full with Wins. I think she'll take the ring so he won't lose his head over her bein pregnant, though."

"You mean you *hope*." Clay laughed. "So what kinda ring are we lookin for today? An impressive rock, or somethin sickeningly expensive?"

"One she'd really come undone over, if she found out how much it's worth. But it has to be pretty, like her."

\* \* \* \*

"Jesus, Nate. How many times do we have to go over this? You'll be paid for your vacation. I'm getting offended," Kiersten warned. "I don't understand why you're still here, instead of already going off to Texas. Didn't Clay want to leave before now?"

Nate pouted and lifted his shoulders. "I don't know, girlfriend. I guess he likes it here. Maybe he likes being near Cleve."

"Nate. What's wrong?" She settled herself comfortably on the arm of the easy chair he sat in, held his cheeks between her palms, and searched his face. "Come on. You know *everything* about me. Please tell me." She had to hope he'd open up to her somehow.

Clay's pleas had been desperate. He'd asked her to convince Nate he wasn't in love with her, no matter what it took. Nate must be having more nighttime episodes of delusional love for her.

"Kie." Nate's voice broke, and he put his hands over hers. "I'm losing him."

"No you're not, Nate. You're not. He's crazy about you." She said it to convince Nate, but getting the words out made it clear. Clay's asking for her help, his willingness to fight for Nate, told her he was serious. She looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes till LeeDavid was supposed to be there. "What if Clay's intimidated by our relationship, Nate? We're pretty close, and it freaked Cleve out at first, too."

Nate rolled his eyes and looked away. "That's silly, Kie. I'm gay. Why would he be worried about me and you?"

"You tell me."

His eyes snapped back to her face, and when she moved closer, he reminded her very much of a doe staring into the headlights of her truck on Rocky Peak Road. She managed her most sensual chortle and kissed him. He was just as she remembered. Strong and smooth. Well maintained. Hot. The kiss was more than Clay would approve of, but the only way she could think of to end Nate's attraction once and for all. Fight fire with fire.

Nate responded with more eagerness than she'd anticipated. After the initial shock wore off, he pulled her onto his lap and kissed deep, skillfully tangling his tongue with hers.

"Kie. God, I want you so much."

His words, holy hell. They made her stomach ache with need. But she loved Cleve. It was wrong to respond to Nate this way. His hands seemed to be everywhere. The same strong hands that had held her and comforted her so many times stroked with a gentle persistence, building fiery need.

Hesitant rapping on the front door brought her head up.

"One minute," she called out, breathless.

Nate's glazed eyes told her she'd really started something this time. He wouldn't forget about this and move on. She'd have to see it through.

But first she had to deal with LeeDavid.

Removing Nate's hand from her breast and the other from her badly mussed braid, she scrambled off his lap.

"Kie," he chuckled. "Come here. Your hair." He stood and loosened the braid, then combed her hair with his fingers. With a quick kiss on her ear and a pat on the butt, he sent her off to open the door for her visitor.

“Ms. Day?” LeeDavid said through the screen door when she appeared. “Hi. LeeDavid Calhoun.”

“Hi,” she answered, pushing open the door for him and accepting his handshake. “Nice to meet you.” He looked like he couldn’t have been out of law school for long.

Nate came up behind her as LeeDavid handed over a bouquet of flowers and looked nervously over his shoulder out toward the road.

“I don’t think I was followed,” he told them. “In case I was, I wanted it to look like this was a date.”

He turned back to her, looked up and down. Barefoot, in denim shorts and a close-fitting tee, she must cut a more attractive figure than she had in court in the old baggy suit. His gaze returned to her chest, and Nate’s hand took a possessive hold on her shoulder.

“Um, come in. Have a seat,” she said, indicating the couch. “Would you like a drink?”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” LeeDavid loosened his tie a bit as he perched on a couch corner.

“This is my, um...” She wasn’t sure what how to categorize Nate. “...This is Nate Cook.”

The two shook hands across the coffee table, and Nate claimed a spot next to her on the love seat.

“I’ve been looking for a position with another firm since the day of Mr. Gunther’s hearing,” Calhoun said. “I could be disbarred for what I’m about to tell you, but I found the position my associates put you in that day to be reprehensible.”

She looked out the window. Her life had been such a public soap opera that day.

“While Mr. Gunther provided the information necessary for the line of questioning, it was his financial supporter who ultimately demanded it be carried out.”

Her eyes snapped back to LeeDavid’s face.

Nate squeezed her shoulder.

“And who was that?” she asked.

“A character by the name of Charles Randall, acting on behalf of one CJ Howell.”

“That motherfucker.” She should have known. “Howell and I go way back.”

“I’m aware of that. Howell paying Mr. Gunther’s legal bills isn’t in itself incriminating. However, Gunther was referred to us by another very regular client. He’s been in various altercations and suits, all going back to his ties with white supremacy. His name is Mick Miller.”

“Of Denver?” Nate asked. At LeeDavid’s nod, he added, “He was the owner of the Doberman, Kie.”

“Ms. Day, the reason I’m giving you this information is that Mick Miller runs with a very violent crowd. Judging by the number of incidents you’ve experienced, you might be in serious danger. I think it would be wise for you to disappear for awhile.”

She tucked her arms around her tummy. Where could she go? It wasn’t like she could sneak off to Texas with Cleve, not with CJ involved. “Do you know where Chaz is?”

“No. He was present at Mr. Gunther’s sentencing hearing, but I’m not sure. I’m sorry I can’t help you more.”

\* \* \* \*

When LeeDavid had gone in his little BMW, Nate was left with a pacing, muttering Kie.

“...fucker Howell. Gonna get him if it’s the last thing I do. He thinks he can run me off...gonna show him. Long after he’s rotting in hell, I’ll still be living on the Peak, still running sheep. Oughtta call him and tell him. Wonder if he’d like knowing he’s endangering his grandbaby every time he tries to knock me off. Think I *will* call him. Wonder if Grandpa has his number written down somewhere?”

“Whoa, girlfriend. Let’s calm down,” he soothed. “Maybe Howell doesn’t know what Chaz was up to.” Clay’s dad *couldn’t* be such a snake. He stopped Kie and held her by the shoulders, forcing her to look at him. “Let Cleve talk to his dad, okay?”

“Yeah, like he’s really gonna come clean with his son. This guy’s a criminal, Nate. God, and I’m bonded to him for life now.” His feisty little friend parked herself on the loveseat and buried her face in her hands. Crying. Not crocodile tears to get her way with Wins, but real, true weeping. “God. How do I tell Cleve his dad’s a monster?”

She wasn’t suspicious of Cleve. Progress. Whether good or bad, he wasn’t sure. Especially since he wanted Kie for himself. He wanted her happy, though, and she loved Cleve. Then why were they kissing like there was no tomorrow when LeeDavid arrived? He could only offer his support by letting her lean on him, holding her close. Did it make her feel like it made him feel?

“Jesus, my stomach,” she complained.

“Nauseous again?”

“No. I’m starving. This kid’s gonna kill me. If its grandfather doesn’t first. Let’s go to Sonic. I could kill for onion rings right now.”

Sonic it was. After Kie had scarfed her own food and pilfered some of his too, she seemed more stable.

“Wins will be *ecstatic* that you finally bred up,” he teased.

“Ugg. Not so much, since I’m not married. That makes me *knocked up*, not *bred up*.”

“Cleve wants to marry you. You only have to accept. You know, it would really piss off CJ. I’m surprised you haven’t jumped at the opportunity already.” He started the drive back to the ranch.

She shook her head like a mad woman. “Nuh-uh. I won’t put Cleve in the middle of something that big. He loves his family. No way am I gonna put a wedge between him and them.”

“What are you waiting for, *exactly*? The entire family to show up with a parade and banners, inviting you in?”

“Shut up, Nate. It’s not like with you and Clay. There’s a history of me antagonizing this family. They all hate me like I hate them. Except for Cleve and Clay. I doubt I’ll ever fit in. How many of CJ’s kids are gonna believe he’s been trying to kill me off?”



“You don’t *know* CJ has been a part of all the threats.”

She scowled as he parked and they got out.

“You’re using it as an excuse, Kie.”

“Oh, I give. An excuse for what?”

He unlocked the front door and held it open for her to stomp through. “To keep from being happy. You’re scared to death of letting yourself fall for Cleve, in case he turns out to be a bastard like Luke.”

Locks of red hair snapped like whips around her head as she whirled and faced him. “Thanks for the analysis, Dr. Freud. It’s especially meaningful coming from a guy who’s fucking up his own wet dream.”

“Nice of you to assume I’m fucking it up with Clay. Thanks for the vote of confidence, *friend*.”

“Okay. You tell me how much I’m assuming, Cook.” Before he got the door locked, she’d made her intentions clear. His protests were muffled as she kissed him again. Hot, angry little lips met his confused and aroused ones. Pregnancy must be making her nuts. And amping up her libido.

“Knock it off. We can’t keep doing this,” he protested. Having her body pressed against him was hard to complain about, though. She must want him as much as he wanted her. Which was a lot. They’d been in the middle of exploring that when they were interrupted earlier.

“I’m not gonna be able to stop soon,” he warned her. He didn’t have to talk past her lips anymore. They’d moved down to his neck, bent on driving him wild. A singeing, long-saved-up desire from down deep surfaced, making him want her so bad it hurt to breathe. How long had he dreamed of this?

“To hell with it.” In one quick arc, he swept his arm behind her knees and lifted her. She tightened against him, almost like she hadn’t expected him to respond. Well, the little Miss was in for lots of surprises.

Lying across her on his bed, he felt her heart race below his, and tasting her onion rings and cherry limeade, thought fleetingly of Clay.

Hell, Clay wanted to ditch him anyway. Things had been tense between them for days.

“Nate,” Kie moaned against his lips. “Wait. I need to know. You would have been a godfather or uncle, but you’re okay with being a stepdad? At least, until you and I can have a baby, right?”

“Um.” His head spun. Was she talking about babies before they made love? Maybe this unplanned pregnancy had made her cautious. But *stepdad*? “You wanta have another baby, with me?” His voice raised to a falsetto on that last word.

“I know you love me. You told me that night in the hotel. When we were about to—”

*He loved her?* Of course he did. But did he love her like she thought? “Kie, I’m not sure I meant what you think. I mean, I care about you and I really wanted you that night. I’ve wanted you ever since then. But I’m not sure about love.”

“Do you not want me if you can have me?” Feigned innocence. Her eyes glittered and her lips twitched as she tried to restrain a smile.

Actually, the idea of being her husband and having babies with her didn’t really do it for him.

“Girlfriend, I’m not sure how to tell you this. Please don’t get your feelings hurt, but I think maybe I *don’t* want you.” God, he hoped she didn’t cry again.

“Oh no!” she said in a laughing breath. “You are sooo not brushing me off. Clay begged me to get through to you somehow. Your twisted mind has been dreaming about me at night and it’s killing him.”

“Jesus.” He buried his face in the pillow next to her hair. “Oh shit. Poor Clay. I can’t believe he’s still around. I’m such a disaster.”

“Well, as a fellow disaster, I’m predicting Clay won’t ditch you now. Try not to fantasize about me too much, huh?”

He rolled off her and stared at his ceiling.

“Shut up, you little minx. You started it, you know.”

“Ouch! Fashion fairies aren’t supposed to pinch. Think Grandpa will ever get over us not being together?”

“No. Think he’ll ever get over me being gay?”

“You’re really gonna tell him?”

“Gotta come out someday. I’ll wait till he’s pissed about you being an unwed mama. His horror will be split that way.”

“Coward.”

Pulling her into his arms for a hug, he was not aroused in the least.

\* \* \* \*

Nate shook his head, then regretted it.

“Nate?”

“Kiersten?”

Two voices...or one?

Pitch black surrounded him, and his head hurt like crazy. He touched his left temple. Sticky ooze, with something stuck in it. Straw? Not only a headache, but also a surface wound. What the hell?

The voices came closer and he tried to yell back, but his voice croaked. Silhouetted against deep dark was a doorway, backlit by the big pole light in the driveway. *The shed.* He was in the sheep shed. Why?

*Kie, napping soundly in that sleep-of-the-undead way of hers on the couch. Clanging racket out in the shed. Going out with Win’s ten-gauge in his hands, expecting to find a skunk stuck in the s tack of aluminum buckets. Then the blinding pain, and darkness.*

“Out here,” he yelled again in answer to the voices. Cleve and Clay. Why couldn’t they find Kie? Cold sweat rolled over him as he struggled to his feet. He leaned against the wall, regained his balance, and eased along it toward the door.

Someone burst in, flipped the light switch by the door. Blinding yellow light bathed them.

“Nate! Where is she? Where’s Rocky?”

Right behind Cleve, and looking like he’d be sick, Clay met his gaze. “Nate? What happened? Are you okay?”

Clay inspected the wound, and Cleve noticed the spade nearby that must have been the cause of it.

“I’m fine,” Nate lied. “Kie. Where is she?”

Cleve shook his head. “Her shoes are still inside. Is she out here?”

“Sleeping,” he answered. “I came out because there was a noise. She’s on the couch asleep.”

Cleve kept looking around the shed, obviously hoping he’d locate Kie. “Musta been that Calhoun character.”

“No. He came and left. He told us Chaz and your dad are paying Trayce’s bill. Trayce is buddies with another client of theirs. Mick Miller.” He was babbling, but there must be a way to put it all together and make sense. “He left and we went for onion rings. She was sleeping. Maybe she just didn’t wake up when you went in the house. She was so tired.”

Kie couldn’t be gone. Couldn’t. Not on his watch.

Cleve shook his head. “She’s gone.”

“No. She was sleeping.” The reality that somebody had knocked him out so they could kidnap Kie set in with sickening clarity. “Fuck me. I walked right into it. I even had the gun. I’m sorry, Cleve.” *I’m so, so, sorry, Kie. I failed again.*

Clay wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“What gun?” Cleve, all business, slid back into his detective persona.

It seemed his assailant had taken Win’s shotgun as well as Kie.

## Chapter 24

In the dead-quiet darkness, footsteps stopped outside. Kiersten shook away the sleep and listened. The doorknob rattled. Someone landed on the floor with a thump and a grunt. The door shut.

“Dammit, lemme outta here! You cain’t do this!” The lock clicked shut. “Darker than a gopher’s asshole in here.”

That obnoxious accent could only be coming from one person. Just when she thought her situation couldn’t get worse. Pregnant and kidnapped wasn’t bad enough. Oh, no. Now she had to be co-hostage with Satan himself.

He fumbled around some, then flipped the light switch up and down several times. “Sons of bitches. I’ll be goddamned.”

Time to announce her presence. “They turned off the breaker after I kept flashing the lights on and off the first night.”

Bang! He’d apparently walked into the wooden chair she’d set beneath the wall-mounted air conditioner.

She didn’t attempt to conceal her chuckle. “Don’t worry. They’ll turn it back on in the morning so the AC will work.”

Silence from her nemesis. No more footsteps. Maybe he’d wised up and decided to stay still instead of clubbing around in the dark all night.

She lay still on the uncomfortable narrow cot and smiled at the image of him rubbing his shins. “CJ Howell, I presume?”

“Mmm-hmm. And Ah guess you must be Miss Day. How long you been here?”

“Fuck you, Howell. You know exactly how long I’ve been here, since *you* had Chaz snatch me. What I’m wondering is how you ended up locked in here like this, instead of trying to bully me into skipping town like Chaz did all day.”

CJ shuffled along a wall. “Chaz is gone back to Texas. Ah met him at a restaurant and he told me where you were. Ah called my sons, who weren’t exactly talkin to me since the evenin you were abducted, and told ’em Ah knew where you were. Ah was out waitin for em in the car. But before they got there, a buncha skinheads drug me here.”

“Right. You’re gonna tell me you were planning to free me? What a hoot. Chaz was keeping me here till you arrived so you could take over. Well, guess what? I’ll see you six feet under before you get Rocky Peak from me, you greedy asshole!” Though she was pissed, her heart raced because of fear. Skinheads? How’d they find out where she was? If they kidnapped Howell, they must be after money. But she had none. “Besides, your buddy Gunther wasn’t gonna let me go even if Chaz would have.”

She wouldn't warn him he was about to bump into the grungy sink.

"What's Gunther want with you? Oof!"

She took her time snickering at his pain. "Oh, he was in here this evening shoving a contract in my face, trying to get me to sign away my hunting rights in return for my freedom."

"And you didn't sign it?" Back in the corner past the sink, he ran into the toilet. "Damn it. You have to be the most bullheaded woman alive."

"Oh, fuck off. I'm not stupid. If I sign that paper, he's not gonna let me go. I'd report him for kidnapping. Please. Besides, I couldn't sign that paper if I wanted to."

"Why not?"

He'd reached the small table and paused a few feet from her cot in the darkness. Strange, after waiting so long for this meeting, to be unable to see him.

"I had to lease them out to somebody else already. I needed that money to pay my property taxes, thanks to some butthair Texan and his shitball lawyers. And thanks to their friend Gunther burning down my business."

"Now wait one minute, little gal. It wasn't Gunther that burned down your store. That was the skinheads. Chaz went off on his own and hired them to send you *a message* and they got outta hand."

He was now close enough she could smell his cologne. Stetson. Naturally. Better than the B.O. she'd expected.

"Whatever. Sounds good, Howell. Stick with that story. If we ever get outta here alive, we'll see how many people believe it after all the shit you've done to me."

"Miss Day, Ah ain't never gone about my business doin dangerous nor illegal things. Chaz did that all on his own. Ah'll admit, Ah agreed to pay Gunther's attorney retainer in exchange for information that would convince you to sell. But all the rest has been his doin's with Chaz. Ah wanta make things right with my two youngest sons."

"I don't suppose you told them on the phone where I was?"

"No."

"Good job." If he had, Cleve would have already been here to save her. "You're probably lying. I bet you didn't even call them. You lied to Clay about Chaz leaving town. Why should they believe anything you say?"

"Chaz did leave town, but that snake Gunther started blackmailin him, so he came back. He paid him off with the cash he was supposed to have bought Cleve's trailer house with. Ah got the bill for the house this week."

"Chaz is a real stand-up kinda guy. You must be very proud to have him on your payroll." Which reminded her... "That son of a bitch hurt Nate, but he wouldn't tell me what he did. Is he okay?"

“Clay was pretty mad on the phone when he talked to me, and Cleve wouldn’t talk at all. That’s how come Lacy and me ended up comin today instead of tomorrow. But Ah think Nate’s okay. He’s the guy Clay’s been...uh, seein?”

She cackled, enjoying CJ’s discomfort with his son’s homosexuality. “Yeah. Seein. Good one.” Her laugh ended and she lowered her voice. “Nate’s my best friend in the world. If Chaz hurt him and I ever get outta here, he will pay dearly.”

CJ sucked in a breath and remained quiet a moment. “Sure is dark in here. How do you stand it?”

“I sleep, mostly. Not much choice. In the morning it’ll be light. Six little windows up high, and a couple of skylights.”

“What *is* this place?”

“Trayce’s dad used to park his wheat combine in here. Then he died. When Trayce was a teenager, he converted it into a hangout for him and his loser friends. Now it’s a hostage hold, apparently. Lucky me, I got to be the first guest at the Hotel Gunther. From what Chaz told me, Trayce’s mom is on vacation. It seems your money sent her on an Alaskan cruise. Aren’t you proud?”

“In case you didn’t notice, Ah’m a victim here, same as you, Miss Day.”

“Yeah. Only it’s *your* fault that both of us are here. So don’t expect any sympathy from me, asswipe.”

“Nice language. Such a little lady. If you wouldn’ta been such a pain in my ass over that spot of property, you’d have a big pile of cash and no troubles right now. So maybe this is *your* fault!”

“Go to hell, *Howell*.” His name really was her own worst swear word. “Hope sleeping on that wooden chair gives you a backache that just won’t quit.”

“Friendly as fire ants.” He tripped into the chair again, then settled on it with a grunt. “Not hard to see why Cleve took to ya so.”

Unwilling to dignify his sarcasm with a reply, she rolled over to sleep. If only she was with his son instead of him.

\* \* \* \*

Birds bouncing tree limbs against the roof of the shed woke her.

The toilet back in the corner flushed. Ugg. She hadn’t dreamed CJ was there.

Trayce had built a stud frame around what he’d intended to be a bathroom, but never put up the drywall. Thus, she kept her eyes carefully averted from that area. She had no desire to see CJ’s bloated hind quarters, or any other part of his anatomy.

When he walked up to the door and rattled the locks, she turned toward him.

He was much thinner than she’d imagined. She’d expected he’d be built like Chaz, maybe bigger. CJ was long-legged and broad in the shoulder. The back of his salt and pepper hair had a noticeable ring from his cowboy hat, which looked rather smashed on the table.

"I already tried getting the pins out of the hinges, but it won't help because there are two hasp locks on the outside," she informed him. "Trayce must've researched How to Lock Somebody Up for Good in his white supremacist handbooks."

CJ didn't turn around or reply. He seemed bent on proving her wrong. Probably figured he was more capable. It'd be nice if he was right and they could escape.

"I'm just gonna, um...stay where you are, okay? Cause I need to go use the bathroom."

The back of his head moved as he nodded, fixed on what he was doing.

When she'd finished in the bathroom and sidled up to one of the two chairs at the table, CJ was finally convinced the door would not be an avenue of escape, and he turned to face her.

Only having her hands busy braiding her hair kept them from clamping over her mouth. Though he didn't look a bit like she'd imagined, if she'd met him on the street, she would have immediately recognized him as Cleve's father. She couldn't reconcile the man before her with the monster who'd haunted her worries for so long. Same handsome features as Cleve, same friendly, if weathered, look. The shell of her animosity cracked. Something warm and fuzzy tried to chip its way out.

"So that's what Cleve's gonna look like in thirty years." She braided, careful to remain cool. God, he didn't look greedy or mean at all. He looked like Cleve. Cleve. Where the hell was he anyway? She really needed her Lone Ranger to ride in and rescue her. Now.

"Twenty-six," he corrected. With a tip of his head he added a friendly, "Mornin." So like Cleve, greeting her for the first time that morning on the Peak. Would she ever see him again?

Continuing to braid, she eyed him. "Six kids by twenty-six? I hope your wife's older than you."

"Two years. Whattaya say about me liftin you up to those little windows, see if you cain't scramble out?"

"It might be nice to open them, but I don't see where I'd go. They're too far down for me to reach the roof from them, and too high up for me to jump."

"Maybe there's somethin out there you could drop on?"

She shook her head. "There's not. And to be frank, I can't risk a fall." Not while pregnant. "I doubt I'd get far without my shoes anyway."

CJ looked around the shed. "Why don't you have shoes? And what happened to your eye? Did Chaz do that?"

She nodded. "Boss Hogg didn't figure I needed shoes, I guess. I bet he didn't show you the bite I inflicted on his big fat arm before he elbowed my eye. Like to think I got the upper hand in that fight."

CJ shook his head and a familiar smile tugged at his lips. "Except he still ended up takin off with you and lockin you up."

"Thanks for that." She restrained herself from sticking out her tongue at him. Barely.

Tucking the braid's end away, she grabbed a deck of tattered cards from the ledge above the AC unit and dealt herself a game of Solitaire. She sorely needed a diversion from thoughts of Cleve and why he hadn't come charging to her rescue. Was he okay?

"If you weren't such a pain in the ass, your boys would've been keeping you up to date on their search and maybe we'd know why they haven't got here yet."

"Put your seven of spades on the eight of hearts," he told her.

She rolled her eyes and continued play. It wasn't a bad move, but she'd be damned if she'd take his help.

The third time CJ butted in and gave her a hint, she snapped, "Ever wonder why this game's called *Solitaire*?"

A taunting grin answered. He'd been hoping to get a rise from her.

"You wanta play, huh? Okay. Deal."

She shoved the cards toward him with eyebrows raised in challenge.

While he shuffled, she complained, "God, I wish he'd bring breakfast." She was starting to feel woozy. Before long, full-blown morning sickness would set in.

"Texas Hold Em," she sighed when he'd dealt. "Why expect anything else?"

"What'll we bet?" CJ asked, looking around their quarters.

"Meatballs. From your SpaghettiOs. There's usually twelve in a can."

"That what they serve for lunch around here?" He laughed, but curled his lip a bit.

"That's what they serve for every meal around here." Talk of food brought on hunger, and with it, nausea. Not good at all. "Guess you'll have to wait till somebody pays your ransom to dine on caviar and paté again."

They played till he'd lost all of his upcoming meatballs.

"One more hand?" she asked. "Double or nothing, for your drink. It'll be a can of Sam's Choice pink lemonade. Damn, I wish Trayce would get here with the food." Her face was starting to sweat, and it had nothing to do with the temperature. Tossing her cookies in front of her sworn enemy would be the ultimate show of weakness. It couldn't happen.

"All right. But Ah'm warnin ya, I won't go easy, and your luck's gotta run out soon." His coal-black eyes spent more time looking over her clammy face than she cared for.

"The water at the sink tastes shitty and probably isn't safe," she advised.

He nodded for her to deal, still looking at her.

"What?"

"Cleve was right. You are a pretty little thing."

"Don't try to soften me up, Howell. You're goin *down* with this hand." She was sure of it. But before she could see what he had, she rushed to the would-be bathroom to be sick.

"Fuckin Trayce." She moaned when she'd finished splashing her face at the sink. "Why can't he get here earlier?"



CJ tipped back in his chair, his feet on the table as he watched her every move. "Tell me how it is that a woman who's sick at her stomach wants her breakfast to come sooner, Miss Day."

"Kiersten," she muttered. "Jesus. If we're gonna be locked up together, at least use my first name."

"Okay. Then you can call me CJ, if that's my grandbaby you're carryin'."

"Shit." She sat down and rested her forehead on the cool wood of the table.

"After watchin Lacy be sick with five pregnancies, it ain't hard to spot mornin sickness." His voice sounded almost sympathetic. "Thought Ah taught all my boys better'n to get a girl pregnant like that."

"Oh, skip the tirade. Please. I'm gonna hear it from my grandpa. If I ever get outta here." Her voice cracked. "Besides, it's not Cleve's fault. It's mine."

"That's a new one. Some new self-insemination technique I ain't heard of yet? Usually the woman blames it all on the man. Kinda strange for it to go the other way."

"Cleve seems to be afraid of you for some reason, but I'm not." The table muffled her words, so they didn't come out quite as defiant as she'd planned.

CJ threw his head back and laughed. "*Some* little spit-fire you are, Kiersten Day. Half the folks in West Texas are afraid of me, and Ah've done nothin but charity works around there. You believe Ah'm responsible for all kinds o' evil, and you're not scared."

His hand smoothed the back of her braid, and she nearly jumped.

"Tell you a little secret. Ah was comin up here this weekend, plannin to give you a real dressin down. Be a regular ole SOB to ya. Payback for all the aggravation the last few years. Not to mention that million bucks last week." He tugged her braid. "Maybe us bein locked up here together ain't such a bad thing, cause Ah think maybe Ah like you."

"Even after I knocked up your son?" She sat up to find him grinning at her joke much as Cleve would, with a few extra laugh lines and an almost affectionate look in his eyes.

"To tell you the God's honest truth, Ah didn't think Cleve was ever gonna settle down. He *is* plannin to do the right thing and get married, ain't he?" One thick, dark eyebrow raised. Probably paranoid his youngest son wouldn't step up to the plate.

She shrugged, trying for a nonchalant response. "I guess he wants to. But I've been avoiding the issue. I don't wanta be married to a family where I'm not welcome."

"That ain't half bad reasonin. Trust me, it's no picnic puttin up with in-laws, especially bad ones." He tipped his chair back again and looked up at the high windows. "But Ah think our troubles are behind us. If you marry Cleve, we've got nothin to fight over anymore. Your land will be Howell property after all."

She didn't like the satisfied smirk on his face. Not one bit. "Don't get any stupid ideas about turning Rocky Peak into part of your cattle ranch, *Howel*."

CJ let his chair clatter to the floor with a bang.

Time to get one thing clear. "The Peak always has been and always will be a *sheep* operation."

His face went red, but before he could respond, the lock on the door squeaked.

“Morning, prisoners.” Trayce laughed past the butt of a huge pistol. “I brought you some breakfast. Long as you behave yourselves, the food’ll keep comin. Doc, be a good woman and come pick up this box for me. Quick now, I don’t have all day. There’s a good, barefoot broad.”

She glared over her shoulder and put down the Old Milwaukee carton.

“Wasn’t locking me up torture enough, Trayce? You *had* to stick my worst enemy in here with me. Shit.”

Poor CJ looked surprised before she winked at him.

Trayce snickered. “Thought you might enjoy the company, Doc. You seem to like his son so much. I brought the papers for ya to sign. Got a little more incentive for ya today. See, Mick don’t know you’re in here. Thinks it’s just Big Daddy Morebucks we captured.” He put his hand on her shoulder. When she slapped it off, he laughed. “Ole Mick kinda has it in for you, since you killed his favorite pooch.”

“Hitler committed suicide when he attacked the back end of a horse. But I woulda killed him if I could.” Steam wafted up from the bowls of pasta, and she fought the need to throw up again.

“Well, you know there’s two sides to every story.” Trayce cackled. “Anyhoo. I’d still be willing to let you go if you sign my contracts.”

“Fuck you, Trayce.”

“Oh, that’ll come later, darlin,” he cooed in her ear.

She shivered as his fingers slid down her neck and reached around to grope a breast.

“I been waitin a real long time for you.”

Again, she smacked his hand away.

“Yeah,” she answered with a voice she was pleased to find even and cold, “wouldn’t it be the ultimate bitch if you couldn’t get it up, like last time? Like that New Year’s Eve when we tried for so long?”

CJ’s eyes widened in surprise, but she didn’t have time to allay his concerns.

“You’re lying.” His closely shorn scalp turned red, his lips pouted, covering tobacco stained teeth.

“You teased and flirted all night, and then I guess you were too damn drunk.” She faked an annoyed shake of her head. “God knows, I’m glad now that you couldn’t perform. But I have to wonder if your *little problem* might not come back.”

Her ominous suggestion seemed to have hit home. Trayce looked as ill as she felt.

“You ain’t goin near this girl anyway,” CJ warned.

“Shut up, Howell. You’ve got no say in this.” To Trayce, she said, “Get lost. I’ll make my decision by lunchtime.”

Trayce heehawed as he backed out of the room. “Wouldn’t be surprised to come back out here and find one of ya killed the other. My money’s on Doc.”

\* \* \* \*

When Trayce had gone and they sat looking at one another, CJ found himself in the odd position of not knowing how to ask what he wanted to. Green eyes across the table flashed defiantly, daring him.

"I've got two pair, ace high," she told him. "What you got?"

"King high," he answered, handing over his can of lemonade. "I woulda given you the drink and the meatballs for the baby, anyway."

"Yeah," she replied, eagerly digging her winnings from his bowl with her spoon, "but it's more fun to earn it." After choking down a meatball, she said, "It's important for Trayce to think we're still at odds."

"Are we?"

"Nah. I'm not too worried about you turning the Peak into a leather farm. Cleve'll back me up." When his jaw dropped, she laughed. "Oh, and don't worry. I didn't ever try to sleep with Trayce. To my knowledge he's never had an impotence problem. But he might now."

"That's hittin below the belt. Pretty damn mean." His respect for her ability to handle trouble grew. "But probably well deserved."

She tucked into her food, now and then stopping to close her eyes during a wave of morning sickness.

"Here. I was just messin with you about the lemonade." She pushed the can back to him. "The water really is terrible. Besides, how could I face Cleve, knowing I'd taken his old man's food as well as his drink? So. I think I have a plan. What if I distract G.I. Jerk when he comes back at lunchtime, so you can beat it outta here?"

"Distract him how?"

The wicked gleam in her eye made him uneasy.

"The only weapon I've got. Womanly wiles. Since your sons and Nate and the cops are never gonna rescue us, we'd better find a way outta here. I'm surprised they don't have GPS things implanted in you rich people these days, so you can be found if you're snatched."

"My watch did." He rubbed his naked arm as she looked on.

"Let me guess: they took your watch because it was expensive? Great. That means everybody's probably chasing the watch around. We can only hope they're able to save it before it comes to any harm, huh?"

"So you're lookin to keep Gunther busy and have me escape, and leave you here alone again? That ain't gonna happen."

"Look. I can't run very fast without shoes, can I? You've got a lot better shot at getting us help by yourself."

"I could pack you on my back." Her rolled eyes told him she planned to protest. She had a point. He might be healthy for his age, but packing an extra person would definitely slow him down. "You can wear Gunther's shoes. They'll do in a pinch, won't they?"

"Oh, sure. He'll probably just hand them over because we ask him to."

“If you, uh, distract him good enough, I can get his gun and we’ll tie him up. With...somethin.”

Both ate in silence while they looked around the shed for something to tie with.

“Only one thing,” she declared resolutely. “My bra. It’s not much, but maybe it’ll hold him till we can get far enough away to get help.”

“You want me to use a *brassiere* for handcuffs?”

His shock must’ve cracked her up. She held her sides and laughed, her pretty green eyes twinkling. “Tie him to one of those studs back there. Surely an old cowboy can make a knot Trayce can’t get out of?”

“My boys will *never* let me live this down.” Especially Cleve, the Ranger.

“Think of it as something Magnum, P.I. would do. Or Walker, Texas Ranger. Is that more your speed?”

In spite of himself, he found himself grinning. It was a crazy plan, but it might just work.

\* \* \* \*

“All done,” Kiersten called. Needing to tinkle so often was mortifying, and every time she had to announce it to CJ so he’d turn his back. He seemed to take it in stride, making her the more embarrassed of the two. But when she handed him the bra she’d removed, he turned a cute shade of red.

“Uh. Okay,” he muttered, turning the lacy number over in his hands. He forced the underwires out, raised one brow, and then glanced at her chest. The red on his face deepened. “Uh. Ah can see your—”

“I know. I’m sure it’ll be the first thing Trayce notices.” Her nipples, ever hard these days, not only pushed against her tight little t-shirt, but the pink rings around them showed through the stretched fabric. Her face got hot. She’d probably end up running for help somewhere, to boot. “Just so you know, it’s not my usual style.”

## Chapter 25

“Honey, I’m home,” Trayce called, throwing the door open at lunchtime. “Daddy brought home the bacon, now come cook it up.”

Kiersten gave him her sourest look, then moved forward and picked up the box.

“Hooo-eee! What have we here? Did we forget part of our clothes this morning, or is this a feminist statement?”

Though his leer was not unexpected, it was sure unwelcome.

“Somebody forgot to turn on the power, so we don’t have any AC out here,” she griped. “It’s too hot to wear a bra.”

“Remind me to move to a hot locale.” Trayce licked his teeth. “So, have you considered my offer?” He slid into her seat, leaving her to stand. Such a gentleman.

No matter, she needed to pace. “Well, I looked the papers over and it suddenly occurred to me. There’s nothing in this contract about my thirty percent cut.” Facing him, she braced her hands on her hips and stopped walking.

“That’s because you didn’t take me up on the offer soon enough. You snooze, you lose.”

“She’s good at passin up reasonable offers,” CJ said helpfully.

She rounded on him. “Shut up, Howell. I sure got a lot of *reasonable offers* out of your son when he was flat on his back.”

CJ rewarded her with an appropriately appalled expression.

“Trayce, I’m afraid I can’t afford to take the deal with no monetary compensation. I’m kinda strapped for cash.”

“Yeah.” Trayce laughed. “I hear your pasture went up in smoke the other night. Tough break.”

“You!” she snarled, pointing her finger at him. “You fucker. I thought it was Chaz. I met his truck coming down the road that night.”

“Good ole Chaz. He let me use his wheels. He’s been doin me all kinds of favors. Ever since Mick and them torched your shop when he hired ’em to scare you off. It’s so easy to bully ole Hoss. Threaten to nark him out, and he’s your new best friend.”

“Chaz has enough respect for wild fires, he’d never set one,” CJ assured her.

She doubted whether Chaz had enough respect for anything or anyone, but she had more important concerns. “Thirty percent or no deal, Trayce.”

“No can do,” Trayce answered.

“Okay then. I guess I’ll have to take my chances here as a hostage.”

“Mick’s coming, remember?”

She planted her hands back on her hips. "I'll risk it. I'll lay odds that before then, the cops find old CJ using the GPS device Cleve told me about. Mrs. Howell insisted CJ have it put in. Embedded in the scrotum, I believe. And if my eyes weren't deceiving me earlier, it must've been vibrating or sending electric shocks, because Big Daddy was sure scratching a lot." She laughed at CJ's open mouth. "So they should be here any time."

"Okay. Okay." Trayce's leering eyes fixed on her nipples. "I'll have the thirty percent written in the contract."

Getting even was going to feel great. "You know, if you were willing to make it fifty percent, I could help you out with your little problem." Squelching her disgust, she put her fingers under his chin and rubbed her thumb along his lower lip.

"Um." His eyes went from her face back to her chest, then his groin. His Adam's Apple bobbed. "Well. Seein what I've got outta Chaz lately, I guess I could afford fifty."

"Bring me the amended contract and I'll sign it," she said airily, moving away.

Trayce's hand snagged hers and swung her back. Cool. He was going to make this easier than she'd expected.

With a hungry look, he purred, "You do your end of the deal first, then I'll add the twenty percent."

Her voice smooth as silk, she answered, "You drive a *hard* bargain, Gunther." She let him pull her onto his lap. His hand groped her breast and she closed her eyes. "You know, I would've gone for forty." She laughed, trying to think of anything but his hands on her. "I'd like to see your problem resolved. It's kinda demeaning to a girl when a guy can't get excited about her."

His hand dropped from her breast. Uh-oh. Can't have him losing interest yet.

Cupping his face in her hands, she stared without blinking into those eyes she so hated. "Why don't you give me a little taste of what I'll be getting?"

"What, right here in front of Morebucks?"

"It's a lot of fun with somebody watching. But I guess in this case we shouldn't add *performance anxiety*, should we?"

As Trayce made to kiss her, CJ snatched the pistol from under his left hand on the table.

"Get your hands in the air, Gunther," CJ commanded.

Whew! Just in time to save her from the horrors of Trayce's mouth.

CJ pointed a gun with same confidence as his son. "Now, move over to that bank of studs."

She held the gun on Trayce while CJ pulled the knife and cellphone from Trayce's belt. Then he bound him, with two sets of studs between his back and his hands.

"Thanks for telling us about blackmailing Chaz and setting the fire," she told him. "I knew for a fact you weren't planning to let me go when you admitted to that, you dumbass. Why'd Mick sic that dog on me and kill the lamb?"

Trayce stared back insolently, refusing to speak.

CJ boxed his ears.

“Oww! Shit. Mick came to my hearing and heard you badmouth Neo Nazis. He hated you on his own. That’s why he did the lamb. He put Hitler on you to scare Chaz into coughing up more cash. Hurting you was a bonus. Howell here was his ticket for a big ransom.” He cringed as CJ tightened the binding around his wrists. “Hey, what’re you doin with my shoes?” CJ had yanked them off, handed them to her.

“God, this is gross,” she complained, sinking her feet in the big, sweaty high-tops. CJ was busy shoving a sock deep into Trayce’s mouth.

She paused in the doorway. “Trust me, Trayce, I’m hating this more than you are.” Then she turned and clomped after CJ, dialing Nate’s cell number.

He answered immediately, and in a far from friendly tone. “Gunther?”

“Nate, it’s me.”

“Kie? Oh my God! Where are you? Are you okay?”

“I’m with CJ. We just left Trayce’s mom’s. Can you come pick us up?”

CJ hurried from one old vehicle to another.

“Clay and I are on our way back from Denver, girlfriend. We were hoping to bring you home, but then the cops couldn’t find you at Mick’s. How could you be at Trayce’s mom’s? We went there the first night you were gone.”

“Chaz took me to his hotel room first, but he got paranoid halfway through the night, because CJ kept calling his cell. So then he drug me to Trayce’s shed hangout. We’re on foot, and it looks like there aren’t keys in any of these trucks. Where’s Cleve?”

“He went to Texas yesterday to find out what Chaz knew. He’s got the Rangers tracking him by his cellphone. Call the cops, girlfriend, before you get captured again. Are you all okay?”

“We’re fine, Nate. I better go.”

“Okay. I love you, Kie. I’m sorry I let you get swiped. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Oh, shit. Wait. Who’s picking up Grandpa from the airport?”

“Dusty and Ma—Lacy went to get him. Jesus, girlfriend. Get yourself out of a hostage situation before you worry about Wins getting a ride home. Quit trying to run the world.”

“Shut up. I’ll deal with you when I see you.” She laughed.

\* \* \* \*

A deputy had given them a lift to the ranch, and after taking CJ’s and her statements, the sheriff had left to set up a sting for Mick’s gang.

“Let’s have some lunch before we go up the hill to the Peak,” Kiersten suggested.

With one of Nate’s shirts over her own and her feet snug in her sandals, she was ready to roll.

“Someplace we can get a steak?” CJ asked hopefully.

“I was thinking more along the lines of hamburger and onion rings.” After two full days of canned pasta, nobody was coming between her and her rings. “Come on, we’ll take Grandpa’s truck.”

Over lunch, she did the unthinkable and invited him to bring his motorhome up to the Peak while he and Lacy visited. “Trust me, you will *not* want to use the ugly bathrooms in that house Chaz bought.”

“Cleve sounded mahty happy to hear your voice,” he said, as she scarfed her second order of onion rings.

“Yeah.” The feeling was mutual. Though she’d rarely doubted she’d escape from Trayce alive, the fear had been there. “Think I should do the right thing and propose later on when he gets here?”

CJ laughed heartily. “Only if you’ve got a ring.”

She snapped her fingers. “Damn. Guess I’ll have to wait a couple days then.”

\* \* \* \*

Nate was out of Clay’s truck and running up the steps to Kie’s cabin before Clay had killed the engine. Chair legs scraped tile as he reached the screen door, and he’d scarcely opened it when a squealing Kie flung herself at him.

The tight hug he gave her met with Clay’s full approval, judging by the encouraging grin he wore.

“Oh my God. Poor Nate.” Kie had noticed the bump he still had on his head, and the bruise along that side of his face. “Your poor pretty face.”

“What about yours?” She had a hideous green ring around her eye. “Ever hear of makeup, girlfriend?”

“Oh, quit being a bitch.” She laughed and pushed his fingers away. “It’s fine. Come on. We’re playing cards.”

“Not before I get *my* hug,” Clay announced. “And how’s my little niece doing?”

“Nephew,” Nate argued as they followed Kie inside. Her finger to her lips told him Wins still didn’t know she was pregnant. Did the Howells?

The scene inside was one he’d never imagined. Dusty, Rowdy, Lacy, Wins and a man who could only be CJ Howell were all seated around Kie’s table with poker chips and cards in front of them. *CJ Howell at Kie’s table?*

“Lacy’s the only one beating CJ,” Kie announced after she’d introduced him, and Clay had hugged his Pop. “But I beat him when it really counted—This morning. For *food*.”

“Ah’ll have to let you down sometime, Shortcake,” CJ sighed. “Ah *let* you win those hands this mornin’.”

“Oh, Howell. You are sooo gonna pay for that lie.” When she took her seat next to him, the old guy put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. And she let him.

“Clay, we must’ve gone through a worm-hole into an alternate universe,” he said. “How long till Cleve gets here?”

“Soon, I hope. It seems like forever since he called.”



"It's only been a half-hour," Wins said. "Always was impatient," he informed Lacy. "Cleve should be goin through Grand Junction any time."

\* \* \* \*

Too antsy to sit still and play, Kiersten gave her seat to Clay so she could stand by the front door and watch for Cleve.

"He'll probably call from Junction, Kie," Nate said with a chuckle behind her.

"He was driving really fast. Maybe he didn't wanta talk, to be safe. He should be here soon." She stubbornly refused to leave her post. "By the way, dork! You don't have to apologize for me getting kidnapped. What kind of nonsense is that?"

His nostrils flared. "I was supposed to be watching over you."

"Please. As if I needed taken care of." She waved away his protests.

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "You and CJ seem to have bonded."

"We have an understanding. He guessed I'm pregnant. Nate, I'm gonna ask Cleve to marry me."

Nate laughed much harder and longer than necessary. "Hey Clay," he said, gasping. "Come here."

When Clay hurried to the door, Nate told him in a lowered voice, "Kie's gonna propose to Cleve."

To her profound irritation, Clay laughed too. "Not a traditionalist, huh?" With a shake of his head and another chuckle, he returned to the card game.

"Shut up, Nate. At least I know what I want now. You got anything concrete yet?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," he answered with a smug smile. "Clay's looking for property near town. He figures he can raise the same champion horses here that he does in Texas."

"Oh, thank God. I was terrified you'd move away to Texas with him." Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes as she hugged him. "Go be a good friend and entertain my guests while I wait for my future fiancée."

Her legs were getting tired. She'd been standing by her front door for what had to be hours, reflecting on the day's events as she looked forward to a night back in Cleve's arms. Strange, how fast her life had changed. A few short weeks ago, all she'd wanted was to be left alone. Now she couldn't imagine sleeping in her bed without Cleve. Of course, it could be because she didn't have all that hate to keep her company any more. Another huge change.

She'd given CJ a tour of the Peak, and he'd seemed to understand why she didn't want to part with it. Absurd, how alike they were. Not that she was ready to admit it to anyone but herself. One day, maybe.

When Grandpa arrived, he'd known about her abduction and all the other incidents. He was cross with her and showing it. He'd hugged her hello, and then told her she had no right sending him out of town when she was in danger, but he hadn't spoken to her since.

Telling him about the baby should be a real trip.

Lacy had managed to out Nate and Clay, and Grandpa seemed a little *more* angry with her about that. He'd get over it in time. Hopefully.

For now, she needed to see Cleve again. Tell him she loved him. She'd spent most of her time alone regretting all those opportunities she'd wasted instead of saying *those words* to him. She wouldn't spend another second in his presence without telling him.

Her nerves stretched tighter with anticipation as she stood and waited.

Dusk was turning to dark when headlights finally flashed on the trunks of the aspens down by the curve in her driveway. Without waiting for Cleve to even get to the house, she ran out to meet him. He stopped his truck where she met him, and bailed out.

She leaped at him, wrapped her legs around his waist and smothered his mouth with hers.

"Rocky, thank God you're okay."

"I love you. Hi. I love you so much, Cleve. Oh, God I love you."

He laughed against her hair and said, "We have an audience."

"It doesn't matter. They all know I love you. God, I missed you."

"Everything okay? With the baby? Goddammit, what the hell is this?" He'd noticed her black eye.

"Just a war wound from Chaz. I'm fine." In his ear, she whispered, "Your dad knows I'm pregnant." His arms stiffened around her. "But he's not all that mad at me for it now."

Lacy and CJ crowded up, waiting to greet him. He set her down next to him, but kept one arm round her while he hugged his parents.

Sprightly little red-headed Lacy reached on tiptoe to kiss her tall son, and told him, "I hear you're finally gonna be a daddy."

Shit. Grandpa was only a few feet behind. Why couldn't he be hard of hearing, as well as hard in the head? While Cleve took congratulatory pats on his back from his dad, she looked down. Grandpa would probably make a scene, as much as he hated them, because he'd be embarrassed by finding out in front of everyone like this. So much for sappy reunions.

Warm fingers on her chin tipped her face up. Uncomfortable silence fell all around.

Looking up at Grandpa's brimming green eyes, she expected the worst.

"I been waitin all day for you to tell me," he said. "Lacy told me on the way from the airport. Why in hell would you leave me to be the last to know?"

"I..."

"No excuses. You know I been wantin a great-grandbaby for years. This day and age, it's no big thing to be expectin if you're not married. We all know you're no virgin, little girl."

"Well, thanks for that."

"I wish you wouldn'ta been keepin so much from me lately. Makes me feel old."

Cleve let go of her and she accepted the familiar, warm, bony hug that meant everything. The tears she'd been expecting rained down and she let good old Grandpa hold her through them.

\* \* \* \*

“Alone at last.” Kiersten heaved a sigh.

Nate and Clay had hauled Grandpa back to the ranch, CJ and Lacy were out in their huge, posh motorhome, and the ranch hands had dispersed.

Cleve’s tongue didn’t wait to invade her mouth while his hands loosened her damp hair from the braids she’d put in after her shower.

“Cleve, I wanta talk to you about something.”

“Not now,” he said firmly. “Talk later.” Her shirt was over her head and he’d unclasped her bra.

“I love you.” She sighed as his lips settled on her nipple.

“Me too, Rocky.” He pushed her down on the bed and pulled her already-unbuttoned shorts off. His hungry mouth ran a fast race from her navel to the hair below. She cried out at the welcome surprise.

“Hey Tex, hold on.” She panted, squirming away. “I really wanta talk.”

“Didn’t we have this problem before?” he asked her leg, easily keeping up with her retreat. “Only, you wouldn’t let me talk till you had me.” His fingers told her he had no intention of talking until he was finished.

“Oh. Yeah, there.” She squirmed against the fingers, quickly giving up any notion of escape. Her own fingers dug in his hair as she convulsed. That handsome, clean cut face came into view when he slid into her. He gave her the supreme privilege of holding him close while he drove himself deep inside. His climax was as swift as hers, his face pulled back far enough for her to look with adoration in his eyes while she took him where she knew only she would for the rest of their lives.

She let his breathing settle back to a normal pace. “Tex, now can we talk?”

Against her neck, he chortled. “Talk.”

“You have to look at me.” With a groan, he slid partly off her and turned his head to the side to see her face. “Cleve, I’m ready to be married again. Will you marry me?”

His face turned into the bed. His abdomen contracted against hers.

“Dammit, are you laughing at me? You know how hard this is? I guess not, since you’ve probably never proposed before, but—”

“Shh.” He put his finger to her lips. “Hang on.” He eased off her and the muscles of his magnificent back rippled as he dug in his duffel bag. When he stood, his hands were behind him. “So impatient,” he muttered, echoing Grandpa’s words from earlier. “Rocky, this isn’t how I imagined.”

Her expression must have fallen, because he quickly corrected himself.

“Not the pregnancy and all. This...getting engaged. I mean, the day Chaz snatched you, Clay and I were shoppin for a certain thing. I found it, but then when we got back, you were gone. And now you jumped the gun on me.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Will you marry me or not?”

Exasperated, he pulled a black velvet box from behind his back.  
She gasped and clapped her hands over her big mouth. And sat up.  
“Rocky, I don’t guess I need to ask, but will *you* marry *me*?” He opened the box to the biggest diamond she’d ever seen on a ring.  
“Oh, my God. Yes!”  
He slipped it on her finger.  
“Damn big-shot Texans. Always showing off.”

## About Autumn Piper

*[http://www.lyricalpress.com/autumn\\_piper](http://www.lyricalpress.com/autumn_piper)*

I write contemporary romance and women's fiction/mom-lit. My stories often have a high heat index to match their American southwest settings. Known by my writing buddies as "Angst", I have a penchant for making my characters suffer. My stories may be tributes to the old saying, "No pain, no gain", but my Hero and Heroine always get the happily-ever-after they so deserve.

I love sunny days, hot bread, the ocean, and that fluttery feeling I get inside at the first spark of a great romance. In between being a wife, mom of two adolescents, and writer, I like to read, take morning walks, make people laugh (this probably happens when I break into a jog!), garden, and conquer the beast that is Sudoku. Working as a substitute teacher keeps me on my toes and makes me hope to become a very successful writer!

For me, an excellent book has characters you can sympathize with or hate (sometimes both at once), a story you simply must see through to the end, and realistic dialogue. Give me those key elements, and I'll read any genre or time period, any author.

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