



In "**Dude 7Ranch**," Jake Caldwell's grandmother suggests a marriage of convenience between Jake and Rylee Jamison. Crazy, right? Maybe not...

In "**Crooked T Ranch**," ex-bull rider Travis McVey needs time to figure out his life. A job as a foreman on an isolated Wyoming ranch seems the perfect solution... that is until Jodi Thompson, the boss's bratty daughter shows up...

In "**Suzy Q Ranch**," Suzy has wasted years trying to settle down. Unexpectedly, she inherits the ranch where she lived as a foster child. But there's a catch: she must share the inheritance with Trent Tyler, who's already broken her heart once.

Ranch Heat

Book One: Dude Ranch

Book Two: Crooked T Ranch

Book Three: Suzy Q Ranch

By Starla Kaye

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Dude Ranch

By Starla Kaye

Chapter One

Damn headache. Jake Caldwell used the boot remover to pull off his well-scuffed boots, and then strode tiredly toward the living room and the over-stuffed sofa. It irritated the hell out of him to be forced away from his ranch duties to lie down for a few minutes in the middle of the day. But there was no help for it. The throbbing had gotten so bad he could hardly think straight.

He stretched out on the extra long sofa and closed his eyes. A hammer seemed to be pounding at his forehead from the inside out. He reached up to rub at his brow, but it didn't help at all. Only a spell of resting his eyes would ease the migraine.

Just as he started drifting away from the pain, someone knocked on the front door with the heavy metal knocker. He scowled, wondering whom the blazes was calling on him now. None of his men. They knew he'd gone inside to lie down. So who the blazes kept on rapping with the knocker—a knocker he would damn well remove tomorrow?

When his unwelcome visitor refused to give up, he launched himself from the sofa and stormed to the door. His annoyance immediately gave way to shock as he faced a purple-haired female in her late teens.

"Bitchin' place you got here, Cowboy. Ain't never been on a ranch before."

Jake's gaze took in the small gold stud piercing one eyebrow and a matching gold ring in her left nostril. He winced. He'd seen a lot of things in his thirty-three years, but a sight like this he'd missed until now. He wished he'd missed it now.

The girl caught him staring and smirked. "Got more if'n you want to see them."

"No. No, I don't." He for dang sure didn't want to see more bodily mutilations.

"Mom couldn't make it. Her ex showed up at the last minute. Evidently the old heat flamed up again, if you know what I mean. 'Cause she decided to give him another chance," she explained, as though that would make some kind of sense.

"Your mom?" What kind of mother would let her kid do these weird things to her body? Obviously a mother with no sense at all. Seemed to him that both of them needed some reining in, some time getting their bottoms warmed.

Then, to his horror, the girl winked at him in what he imagined she considered a seductive manner. He cringed and stepped back.

"Maybe, when I bring ya back here after our dinner date, we can lasso one of them horses over yonder. Take a midnight ride. Be romantic, huh?" she suggested, her black-painted lips curving up into a smile of sorts.

"Miss, I've got no idea in the world who either you are, or who your mother is." Jake reached up a shaky hand to rake it through his hair out of frustration.

She beamed. "Miss! Way cool." Her nearly painted on tank top rose with the stiffening of her shoulders, enough to reveal her bare midriff and expose a ring in her navel.

He flinched again. He didn't even want to think about the pain she'd experienced with all the body piercings. Or the infections she was likely to get. Again, he thought the teenager needed more control in her life. Control and discipline.

"Who exactly are you?" he managed to question, inching back a little more.

She looked at him calmly. "Zelda. Mom and I just moved to Dodge City from Denver." She stopped to chomp on her gum a couple of times. "We met Maybelle Caldwell—your grandma—at a flea market. She told Mom to come see you here at the ranch. Convince you to go out with her. Said you were having trouble finding a woman."

He nearly bit his tongue in two to keep from cursing a blue streak in front of the strange teenager. Maybelle and him were going to have words. Soon.

Zelda cocked her head to one side and gave him a thorough looking over. "For an old guy, you ain't all that bad." She grinned, winking again. "Anyway, I got a thing for older men. You know, father-figure types. So I thought, why not come in Mom's place."

Jake tried to wrap his pain-filled thoughts around the words "father figure" and "older man." Indignation flowed through him. This teenager from hell and her mother were living proof that his dear, sweet grandmother had finally lost all touch with reality. Her persistent, failed attempts at matchmaking over the last few months had driven her right over the edge. He too, almost.

"You don't talk much, do you? That's all right. Long as you're a good kisser. I'm seriously into kissing. Frenching. You know, tongue wrestling."

It took every bit of his strength of will to keep from holding up two fingers in a cross symbol to ward off the devil child who'd invaded his ranch. Just the notion of "Frenching" with the likes of her made him consider never kissing another woman. "You're a kid! You shouldn't even know about something like that."

She laughed. "You must not get to many movies."

Enough. She needed to go. He needed to get his phone and call his grandmother. He would put his size twelve feet down good and hard this time. "What I know is that you and I aren't going anywhere. Ever."

"Can't handle the time warp between us, huh?" She shrugged. "Worth a shot anyway." She turned and started down the porch steps, stopping to face him. "I don't think Mom and her ex will make a go of it really. I'll tell her to give you a call—"

"No!" Jake snapped, and then offered a weak smile. "I mean, I'm not in the market for a new woman right now. No matter what my grandmother might have told you." And he wasn't. Struggling to keep his ranch going took all of his time and energy. A woman meant a relationship, and he wasn't particularly good at relationships—even when his life was going along well.

Zelda gave another shrug and walked to a battered Mustang that had seen better days. His breathing finally returned to normal, but his headache was back worse than ever. And he still needed to deal with his grandmother. Hell. It had taken Jake a week to try and talk his grandmother out of her obsession with finding him a wife, and then to come up with a plan to thwart her when she refused to listen to reason. 'Course his good friend and foreman, Rusty, had thought the plan amazingly stupid. Actually, worse than just letting Maybelle continue on with her matchmaking schemes. But Jake couldn't deal with anymore Zeldas showing up at his ranch. Nor could he handle more blind dates with the peculiar women Maybelle kept rounding up for him to go out with. No, he was desperate enough to try this plan. At least HE would be in control.

Yet as he stood on the sidewalk in front of the too-modern-for-his taste Jamison Advertising Agency in downtown Denver just after 8 am, his heart pounded. This was unfamiliar turf for him. Denver itself made him uneasy. Life around Dodge City was so much slower, so much saner. He hated all the hustle and bustle of cities, all the traffic, all the noise. He wanted this meeting over and done with as quickly as possible. He had to get out of the city and back to where he felt comfortable, besides he had a ranch to run. Having to take this desperate step was pure annoyance.

He blew out a deep breath of frustration and pulled open the dark glass door to the building. Before he could even step through it, though, a pair of late-twenty-something men in nearly identical, obviously expensive suits hurried by him as if he were some kind of doorman. It riled him. More so when they hesitated and glanced back at him as a coordinated team, giving him a look filled with distaste. Clearly his ranch-worn jeans weren't impressive. To hell with them. He wasn't here to impress anyone in Denver. Well, maybe he needed to impress Rylee Jamison. He hoped his reasoning would do the impressing for him, hoped his future didn't depend on his choice of clothing. Mr. Fashion he wasn't.

Before he could change his mind, he strode into the lobby that sported a gleaming checkerboard floor of large black and white tiles. The pattern was bold enough to make a person nauseous. Looking further into the lobby, he spotted a white-haired, sixtyish woman behind a chest-high, black marble counter. She smiled at him.

Feeling a little more relaxed at seeing a friendly face he headed her direction. “Ms. Jamison’s office?” he asked, glancing at a large sign behind the counter that held a bunch of names and what he assumed were office numbers.

“Sixth floor. The receptionist there will let her know you’re here to see Ms. Jamison.” She smiled again. “I have to say, young man, you’re a pleasant change around here. I’ve always liked a man of the earth. I was raised on a farm back in Oklahoma.”

Young man. He couldn’t help preening a bit at that, especially since he still kept thinking about Zelda’s “older man” comment every now and then. He tipped his hat brim to her and headed toward the elevators. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Elevators made him feel pinned in, but at least he figured it wouldn’t be a long ride. He had a few seconds to ponder the place and the woman he’d come to see. The Jamison Advertising Agency had quite a reputation in the Midwest and Colorado, or so his grandmother had told him several times. Rylee Jamison was an executive with the outfit, and she now owned the whole damn place after her father’s death. He knew a lot about Ms. Jamison—without actually knowing her. Thanks to his grandmother. The much younger woman lived in his grandmother’s exclusive apartment complex and they played bridge together every week or so. He also knew that Rylee had been the only child of a very wealthy man, who had let her go her own way growing up. She’d gotten into one spell of mischief after another in her teen years, which her father had gotten her out of with no more than a “don’t do this again” comment. Clearly, the gal had needed a great deal more than that. If she’d been Jake’s daughter, he’d have warmed her bottom good and made damn sure she didn’t even think about getting into whatever mischief again.

The elevator stopped at every floor going up. Each time the doors opened he got more or less the same critical inspection that the other men had given him. And he was deemed unworthy of being in the building. Uppity people. But what did he care, he wouldn’t be seeing any of them again. Besides, he was every bit as good as any of them. Maybe he didn’t wear an expensive Armani suit—or whatever—to the office every day, but he owned a right fine ranch. A normal ranch with typical financial ups and

downs. Still, the Circle C had been around over a hundred years, and it would be around another hundred, if he had anything to say about it. Probably none of these people knew a thing about tradition and the pride in owning something of real worth.

At long last, he strode out of the metal box and aimed straight for the Executive Suite. Seeing the floor carpeted in a color that reminded him of fresh cream, he hesitated a second and hoped he'd cleaned his work boots really good. He decided he had, and stepped into the reception area that fairly exploded with color: a massive black marble counter surrounding a black desk, shiny chrome and glass tables next to hot red chairs in a seating area, and blindingly bright paintings that he couldn't quite figure out.

He stopped at the receptionist's desk. Then after standing there impatiently for several minutes, he finally gave up on the missing person. He was running real low on patience, and he didn't really want to spend a lot of time here. His plan needed to be presented, accepted, and then he wanted to head back to Kansas by early afternoon.

So he raised his chin determinedly and set off down the hallway to find Ms. Jamison's office. He located it at the back corner of the long hallway and listened in curiosity as a softly feminine voice bit out, "Fudge! Triple fudge!" Not much as cursing went, but he knew that was exactly what he'd heard. He grinned, even though he didn't particularly like women cursing. "Fudge! Fudge! Fudge!" Rylee Jamison grumbled again as her elbow knocked a stack of advertising layouts that she'd already jostled to the floor. To her disgust, the papers she'd worked so hard on involving the firm's newest client scattered all around the big ebony desk, several sliding underneath.

She slipped from her chair, going down to hands and knees to scramble around and gather the papers. What a position for the president of the company to be in! If her board could see her now. She felt her clearly shorter-than-she-thought skirt pull up rather high on her thighs. She gathered the papers faster, hoping to get them all retrieved before one of the staff—particularly one of the men—came in and caught a glimpse of more of her than she wanted them to see.

One paper was elusive, tucked way under the side of her desk. With a tiny groan, she leaned nose to carpet and stretched her arm out as far as she could. The skirt slipped up even higher.

At that precise moment, of course, someone tapped on the open office door. It figured. It was just the way her day had been going. No, make that her week.

"Rylee Jamison?" came a voice in a deep, husky tone that had her stomach instantly quivering. She almost didn't want to look up and be disappointed, as so often happened when you finally put a face to a voice you admired.

But when she pulled her arm back from under the desk and glanced his direction, she was definitely NOT disappointed. Her pulse rate ratcheted up a notch. "Yes?" she managed to squeak out.

"Maybelle Caldwell's bridge partner?" asked the six-foot something, splendidly built male looking down at her, a hint of amusement in his ebony-colored eyes.

She nodded, sitting back on her heels, overlooking the fact that her skirt rose even higher. She could listen to this man's voice forever. It called forth the sensual image of being wrapped up in a quilt on a cold winter's evening, sitting by a crackling fire and watching an old romantic movie. Or just an image of being skin-to-skin with him. Yes, THAT was a much better image!

Making an effort to tamp down her hot-to-tackle-him hormones, she said, "Yes. I'm that particular Rylee Jamison. Can I help you?"

"Pears you're the one needing some help," he said, strolling closer, stopping less than a yard away from her and focusing on her bent legs. "I'm Maybelle's grandson, Jake Caldwell," he added somewhat even huskier sounding.

Oh gawd! He was killing her here. She felt hot; her pulse raced. He looked like he was ready to lay her out on the carpet and... Mortified at her thoughts, she glanced at her lap and discovered that way too much of her was exposed. She immediately slid forward until she was on her knees, but not revealing quite so much of her legs.

He drew in a breath deep enough that she heard it. She sensed that he was attempting to stop staring at her, as much as she was trying to forget some about him. Impossible. How could you forget the amazing sight of a solidly built man wearing a

pair of jeans washed so many times they were almost white in spots. Jeans that fit extremely well on long, muscled legs. A cowboy stud to make any woman's mouth water. Including hers, and she normally wasn't much of a cowboy fan.

Finally, she went back to straightening the papers she'd picked up. Feeling the heat of embarrassment creeping up her neck, she handed him the stack. "Would you mind putting these on the desk for me?"

When he moved closer, she inhaled the pleasing mixed scents of leather boots, man, and some kind of aftershave that had her drawing in another deep breath. Oh, yes, she really liked that.

He reached down a long arm and she noted how his white, Western-cut shirt pulled taut across his broad shoulders. A tanned, work-hardened hand clasped the papers and set them on the desk. A second hand reached down to haul her to her feet as if she weighed nothing at all.

"Thanks," she said, avoiding his eyes lest he see the remnants of pure feminine pleasure that had to be still there.

He released her and she scurried behind her desk. A wall of something solid between them seemed like a very good idea. She wasn't used to such strong reactions to a man, but then she'd been working long hours for the last few months. Little time for dating. Exhaustion no doubt was the culprit behind her explosive responses to this stranger. Well, not exactly a stranger, since she'd heard so much about him from Maybelle. She'd just never seen him in person. Seeing him was very, very nice.

She half-heartedly straightened the stack of papers again. "Are you here to see me about advertising for the ranch? I didn't realize we had a meeting scheduled."

"No, ma'am, I'm not here about the Circle C."

A little nervous and wanting to make some kind of conversation, she said, "I hear the Circle C is a pretty impressive cattle ranch. Struggling a bit financially, but that's not unusual for ranches, I've been told."

"You heard right."

Clearly Jake was a man of few words. She attempted to lighten the conversation again. “So you’re the hard working cowboy who needs a ‘good woman by his side’—as Maybelle put it—but can’t seem to find himself one.”

He mumbled something, and she imagined it was less than complimentary about Maybelle for telling her such a thing. Then he pulled some kind of rolled up papers from his back pocket and began unfolding them. It appeared to be a legal document.

“Maybelle needs to mind her own business. Particularly when it comes to my personal life.” He reached up to thumb his straw hat back a bit. “She won’t, though. Meddling in my affairs has become serious business with her.”

He shoved the unfolded papers at her. “I believe this will solve both of our problems with my grandmother.”

“But I,” Rylee began, and then remembered that Maybelle Caldwell definitely had been making her life a trial lately. Although she didn’t understand how HE knew that. She glanced at the top paper. In shock, she thumbed to the next one, then the next one.

She raised her gaze and found he had removed his hat only to reveal a thick head of black hair that appeared to be a bit shaggy, although she liked it that way. He fiddled with the brim and shifted uneasily from foot to foot. Nervous. Thinking about what she’d just skimmed, she understood why.

“This is a pre-nuptial agreement. Between you and me.” She still couldn’t believe what she’d read, or at least partly read.

He nodded and looked oddly pleased with himself. His crooked grin highlighted a deep dimple at the left side of his mouth. A mouth too kissably tempting for her peace of mind. Especially when she also noted what appeared to be permanent five o’clock shadow—something that seemed to scream virility. An advertising photographer’s dream. Too bad he had all those good looks and not an ounce of brains.

“I figured us getting married would put a kink in Grandma’s meddling. For me, and for you.” He faced her steadily. “I’m tired of her matchmaking schemes. Reckon you are, too.”

"I—" Rylee began, only to have him continue on with his obviously rehearsed speech.

"I need to concentrate on getting my dude ranch operation going. I don't have time to keep arguing with her. Or time to keep coming up with reasons why I can't go out with whomever she sends husband-hunting my way." Annoyance flared in his eyes. Determination set his jaw.

She looked at the papers again, and then back at him. Oz. Maybe she'd zoned out in her exhaustion and had landed in Oz. Or another world. This was just too nuts to be real.

"Aren't you going to say something?" he asked in irritation.

"Something like you've been out riding the range too long without your hat, cowboy? Like you've sun-baked your brains?"

Every muscle in his body tensed with indignation. He clenched and un-clenched his hand.

The reaction made her curious, but she focused on his comments. "Let me make sure I understand you clearly. You want to thwart your grandmother. Put a 'kink,' as you put it, into her plans." She waved the legal document in his face, her voice rising in exasperation. "You want ME to marry YOU. A complete stranger."

"Sure, we haven't exactly met one another 'til now. But I've heard a lot about you. A lot. Figured you'd heard about me as well," he protested. "Besides, this'll only be for a year, and only to keep our sanity. You know, for convenience's sake."

This was insane! A bad dream. She'd been married before and had no intention of ever getting married again. She didn't need that kind of grief. "No! Absolutely, unequivocally no!"

Clearly unconcerned with her refusal, he said, "I heard from Grandma that you're planning to take a year off from your job here. You want to rekindle your artistic juices, whatever the heck that means."

He leaned a hip against the desk. "Unless you get away from here, away from my grandmother, she's going to make your year off a living hell. She'll focus on finding you that perfect mate no matter how much you protest."

Rylee wanted to deny what he said, but it was probably true. Maybelle could be very tunnel-focused. And she'd become obsessed with finding her a new husband, someone worthy of her. A strong man, instead of a wimpy mouse who let her do whatever she wanted and could care less. A loyal man, instead of one with a roving eye for other women. And evidently SHE wasn't the only one being bombarded with blind dates.

"Are you listening to me?" Jake interrupted her musings. "I'm here to save your life, really. At least that's one way to look at this."

She fought down a chuckle at his serious expression. "This is crazy. Beyond crazy."

He shrugged and she admired the play of his chest muscles. "Once upon a time I might have thought so, too. Until the teenager hot for an 'older man' came to see me. Until I realized my situation was only going to get worse."

"Teenager?"

He shook his head. "Don't even go there." He played with his hat brim again. "This won't be a REAL marriage. We'll just be sharing space for a limited amount of time. Until Grandma gets focused on something else."

Sitting down in her chair, Rylee gave him a tolerant smile. "I've been married before. A less than wonderful experience, I might add. Single life suits me. The artist's life suits me." She slumped and glanced around the office. "My current problem is that I inherited my father's company, not something I wanted. I'm contemplating selling it, but I want time away to really think that over."

"Grandmother will make that time away miserable, and you know it."

For a second she didn't answer, and then she sighed. "Yes, I know it." She sucked in a breath, met his gaze. "Strictly for convenience's sake?" This was crazy. She was crazy, he crazier.

He looked relieved at her tentative agreement. "Cross my heart, darlin'. My house is so damn big we won't even see each other most of the time."

"I can do whatever I want? Sleep until noon, stay up until the wee hours?" She decided to tease him a little, to learn a little more about his reactions. "I heard you have a pool. So I can sunbathe, topless if I choose? Maybe..."

His dark eyes widened in shock, and a blush crept up his neck. She also thought she caught a movement below his belt. Hmmm. That was indeed interesting.

"No way in hell will you do something like that!" he gritted out. "You'll behave yourself. Not go around tempting my men, tempting..." He sucked in a breath. "You were teasing me, weren't you? Testing me."

She gave a small smile.

"You'll behave, enough said. The only other thing I would expect of you, in exchange for using my ranch as your artist hangout for a year, is to act as my hostess for certain events at the ranch. Not that many of them, really."

"Whoa, cowboy! I think I want a little clarification on this 'behave' matter." The rest of what he'd said hadn't concerned her at all. But there was something odd about that phrasing, something different about the undertone. This cowboy appeared to have many facets to him. She was intrigued.

He looked deadly serious. "I mean that I don't put up with trouble from ANYONE. Not from my ranch hands, or my women."

Her heart pounded. This tall cowboy was nothing like the smooth-talking city boys she'd been exposed to most of her life. Confidence fairly oozed from him, even about this bizarre marriage thing. Dominance, too. While a very independent woman, she found this side of him oddly appealing. No one had ever made her behave, or ever seemed to care enough even to consider it.

As if he realized she needed further explanation, he planted his hat on his head and said, "A ranch hand that gives me trouble will be packing damn quick. A woman that gets too ornery will find herself over my knee."

OVER HIS KNEE! Had he really said such a thing? Surely not. But then she looked at the firmness of his jaw and knew he DID mean it. Wow! Definitely no wuss of a man here. Dominant was definitely right.

"Your answer, Miss Jamison."

With her unfortunate tendency toward finding trouble, she might find herself getting spanked. Spanked! Her! Say NO, just say NO.

Then she looked at him again, really looked. Fudge, he was a handsome hunk. Real serious eye candy. A year of getting to see him every day, maybe sketch him. Definitely have hot dreams about him. Tempting. His bizarre offer was certainly more tempting than staying here in Denver and having Maybelle shift into high gear about matching her up with some up-and-rising yuppie.

He started to open his mouth again, but she quickly blurted, "Yes, I'll do it. For a year." She decided not to add 'in name only,' because she had a strong feeling that she wouldn't mind spending some time wrinkling the sheets with Jake Caldwell. They could always get a divorce instead of the annulment he had planned. "For a year."

Within minutes, she'd signed the legal document—although she really should have had her lawyer look at it first—and watched him head out of her office as quickly as he'd entered. Then he stopped at the door. "I'll give you a week to settle things here. We'll get married in Dodge City, soon as we get the blood tests and whatever else is necessary done. Okay with you?"

She could still change her mind. But, oddly, she didn't want to. "Sure. I'll get directions to the ranch from your grandmother."

"She's leaving tomorrow for a spell down in Florida. I want to get this marriage thing all done by the time she's back." He held her gaze a minute. "I'll treat you good, Ms. Jamison." Then he gave her a heated look, somewhat serious. "Even if I have to turn you over my knee now and then."

"I'm too old for something like that," she protested, her bottom tingling just at the idea.

"Oh, darlin', a woman's NEVER too old for a spanking." He turned and was gone, leaving her to wonder just what she'd gotten herself into. Rylee sat at her desk, staring at her copy of the hastily signed pre-nuptial agreement that would keep each of their assets separate during and when the marriage ended. She couldn't believe she'd actually agreed to his plan. Sure, she tended to make a lot of spur-of-the-moment decisions—some that didn't turn out well. She'd gotten more than her share of ear

blisterings over the years because of her rash decisions. But there was just something about the cowboy that had intrigued her. Aroused her, too, which maybe had led to her hasty decision.

A soft tap on the open office door drew her attention. She smiled at her best friend and the firm's vice-president, Samantha. "Come on in."

Samantha pretended to fan her face. "Whew! I just saw the most amazing man heading out the front door. A cowboy. A real, ride-'em-hard cowboy."

Ride 'em hard. Oh the image that invoked! Rylee felt herself blush and said, "He was here to see me."

"You? Since when do you know any cowboys? Have you been holding out on me? Does he have any friends?" Samantha walked into the room, settled into one of the chrome and leather chairs across from Rylee.

"He's Maybelle's grandson. You know, the older lady who is part of my bridge group. Anyway, he's the first cowboy I've ever met." She focused on the papers in front of her and added quietly, "By the way, we're getting married next week. In Dodge City."

Samantha slid forward in the chair, leaned on the desk and looked directly at Rylee. As Rylee glanced sheepishly up, Samantha said, "You're kidding, right? I know you've been a while between men, but ... No, you were just playing with me."

"If only that were so." Rylee closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Next week. She, a woman who had never been anywhere with less than a 100,000 population, would be marrying a man—yes, in name only—and going to live on a ranch, near a town. Not a bonified city, but a town.

Samantha was quiet a minute, and finally said, "At least Maybelle won't be able to torture you with anymore matchmaking. Although marrying her grandson, whom you don't even really know, might be a bit drastic to stop her machinations." She locked gazes with Rylee. "Another thoughtless quick decision, wasn't it? How many times did your dad threaten to warm your behind for not thinking about things? For something like this, he just might have actually done it. And you'd deserve it."

Rylee well remembered all her dad's threats, which is all they were. Verbalizations of his frustration with her. Neither she nor Samantha had ever been spanked. Spanked. Only a short while ago a very handsome man that she'd been instantly attracted to had flatly told her she would have to "behave" or else. He'd actually said a woman who misbehaved around him would be taken over his knee. She felt an odd warmth building within her. What would it be like to be bent over someone's knee? Over HIS knee? What would it be like to feel the flat of his hand on her bottom?

She squirmed in her chair. What was she thinking!

"We'd better call a staff meeting as soon as possible," she said, pulling herself from the strangely disturbing thoughts about spanking. Surely he hadn't really meant it. "If I'm to take my leave of absence from the firm sooner than I'd intended, there are a lot of plans to make."

Samantha stood, headed for the door, stopped to look back and said, "I still can't believe you're actually going to marry him. Even if he's probably hotter than hot in bed. I've heard that cowboys—"

Rylee cut her off. "Staff. Arrange the meeting."

She watched her friend disappear out the door and smiled. At least she wouldn't be dealing with running a business she didn't want or really understand. At least Maybelle wouldn't be sneaking around playing matchmaker anymore. Maybelle. Why hadn't she ever tried matching her grandson—whom she desperately wanted to find a wife for—up with her? Distance hadn't mattered to Maybelle. She'd imported potential blind dates for Rylee from as far away as Australia. Had this been some weird kind of unintentional matchmaking plan? Had the sneaky older woman played with them both until she'd driven them together? Interesting idea, very interesting.

Yet she found that she really didn't care. She was going to get away from the firm, get time to work on her art. And—a big "and"—get a chance to maybe get up close and personal with a very sexy man for at least a year. A cowboy who just might be man enough to make her toe the line. Hmmm.

Chapter Two

Early June, morning, and already the temperature had to be at least 90. Going to be a hellish summer, Jake figured, as he loped his horse back to the heart of the ranch grounds. His shirt felt plastered to his back. Thick, denim work jeans were hotter than hot. If he didn't have so much work still to get done today, he'd take a spell off and take a dip in his pool. It wouldn't be fair to his men, though. He'd left most of them out on the south range, rounding up some ornery cattle that had busted down the fence again.

He reined his mount toward his house. He needed to make a couple of quick phone calls. One of them to check on the whereabouts of Ms. Rylee Jamison. She was a day late and hadn't called to give an explanation. He'd give her a talking-to about that kind of behavior. With a ranch to run, a banker hounding him, the cattle market going to hell, he didn't need more to worry about right now. Maybe this whole getting married plan was something he ought to rethink.

He'd just rounded the riding arena built for the brand new dude section of the ranch when he spotted an unfamiliar cherry red Volkswagen Bug parked in his driveway. It looked something like a tomato on wheels. Ridiculous kind of vehicle, could barely hold a driver and a passenger. He couldn't imagine anyone in his right mind wanting to own such a car. Then he looked closer and saw a pair of long, shapely, bare legs sticking out the open passenger door. He recognized those legs. Rylee. He'd thought way too much about those legs, about everything else that made up her very delectable package. It didn't take but a second for his body to betray him and his cock

to grow hard. He was forced to shift in the saddle. He definitely had not expected this reaction to her when he'd come up with this marriage plan.

The tiredness he'd felt seemed to melt away as he rode closer. He stopped a dozen feet away from the car and watched as an upside-down, heart-shaped bottom wiggled back and forth as Rylee attempted to get something from the miniscule backseat. My, oh my, that was a right fine backside.

Jake shifted again. His jeans were getting tight and uncomfortable. How the hell would he survive having her on his ranch for a year? Survive not touching her? Except maybe to spank that sweet little bottom when she got into trouble of some kind—which he knew she would do. Kind of hoped she would do.

"Think you can stop staring at my bottom long enough to come help me?" Rylee asked, sounding flat out irritated.

He hadn't even seen her poke her head up to look his direction. He nudged his horse closer. Late, attitude, and shaking her hot butt around like a come-get-me invitation to any man who might happen by. Not things he particularly cared for. She was damn lucky he didn't take her arm and trot her right on into the house and warm that butt good.

"Fudge and double fudge!" she snapped and then straightened abruptly. In a flash of temper that went along with her auburn hair, she kicked the bumper. When had his blond fiancée become a redhead? He didn't much care for temper tantrums.

"Trouble?" he questioned.

She tossed the wealth of thick, over-the-shoulder-length hair over one shoulder and gave him a sour look. "I'm too tired to play nice with you, cowboy. Help me tug this darn suitcase out of the trunk."

Jake didn't move, other than raising an eyebrow. "Never heard of 'please'?"

Before she could answer Rusty strolled up, smiling in that womanizing way of his. Jake had forgotten he'd been nearby mending the arena fence. "I'd be glad to help, ma'am. With anything, ANYTHING, you might need. Name's Rusty Hawkins."

Jake nearly plowed him down with his piebald pinto, stopping between his possibly former friend and Rylee. "MY fiancée won't be needing your help." He slid from

the saddle and tossed the reins at Rusty, who easily caught them and gave him an annoying grin. Teasing him. The man had been teasing him! "You won't mind seeing to my horse, will you?"

Rusty chuckled, looked around Jake to tip his hat in greeting at Rylee, and said, "Maybe you'll introduce me later to your pretty lady."

"Maybe not," Jake grumbled, watching Rusty climb into the saddle and ride away. The dang man was still chuckling. And he wasn't completely sure his friend hadn't been actually flirting with Rylee.

"That was certainly rude," Rylee commented and gained his full attention once more.

He walked closer, scowling. No wonder Rusty had come over; no man with a breath in his body could have stayed away from such a tempting sight. She really did fill out a pair of shorts and a t-shirt well. He'd have to set a few rules about proper attire: jeans, baggy, nothing that would look painted on; shirts, long-sleeved, buttoned clear to the neck, loose-fitting, too; maybe a hat as well, something to partially hide some of that silky-looking hair. Hell, maybe she should wear it in some kind of tight bun. Surely that wouldn't make a man want to reach out and touch it.

Disgusted with his lack of response, she turned back to the car and bent over again to try and tug the bag out. Immediately his pants became so tight he could barely move. She was definitely going to make his life a trial. "Stop that!"

She turned to cock her head sideways at him. "Stop what? Trying to get my suitcase out of the trunk?"

"Stop wiggling that little butt of yours around. It's like a matador waving a red cape at a bull. What damn bull could resist?" Where had all that come from? He didn't usually get quite so eloquent.

The imp purposely wiggled said butt just to annoy him and went back to her project. Jake stepped beside her and planted a sharp smack on her bottom. Hard enough that his hand stung.

Hard enough that she yelped, straightened, and glared at him while she rubbed her bottom. "What was that for?" she bit out, eyes flashing fire.

He could hardly tell her he'd just had this sudden overpowering need to spank that sweet bottom, even if it were the truth. So he went with the man-who-won't-put-up-with-defiance thing. "I warned you to behave, didn't I? You were deliberately disobeying me."

She rubbed her bottom one final time, her full breasts puffing out her t-shirt with her indignation. "That hurt."

Jake shrugged. "Couldn't have hurt all that much. It was just one spank."

A blush spread from her face down her neck to the expanse of chest revealed by the low scoop of the neckline. She looked away. "It still hurt."

It took him a second and then he understood. "You've never been spanked, have you?"

She studied her sandals and admitted quietly, "I probably deserved it a few times. Dad even threatened it once in a while." She drew up her slender shoulders, lifted her pretty head, and faced him. "No, I've never been spanked."

To his surprise, Jake found the idea of her bottom being basically virginal when it came to getting spanked pleasing. He'd be her "first" in that area. Hell, he really liked that idea. Which was weird, but he didn't care. "Darlin', I've a definite feeling that was only the first of many swats you're going to get while living here."

Her hands slid from her bottom as if she suddenly feared that she might in some way be tempting him to spank her again. She decided to change the subject. "I got lost. Several times. Your map making sucks." While he tensed at her use of the unladylike "sucks," she nodded to the car. "Now Scarlett here appears determined to retain control of my luggage. I'm not having a really good day."

"Scarlett?" He blinked. "You named your car—if that small ball of metal can be referred to as a car?"

"You name your horses, don't you? At least cowboys in movies do."

"Yes, we name our main mounts." He waited for her to move out of the say so he could grab her bag.

She didn't, though. Instead she turned back to dealing with her problem on her own. This time her grip on the bag was good because it came flying out. She lost her

balance and landed on her backside, clutching the recalcitrant red leather bag. "Fudge! Fudge! Fudge!"

Jake snagged the piece of luggage and Rylee's arm at the same time. "You're going to want to watch that tendency of yours to curse. Ladies shouldn't talk like that."

"I DO NOT curse."

"Maybe you don't say the usual words, but the attitude and tone used make the substitutions just as disgusting."

She tried to grab her suitcase from him and he held it out of her reach. "Did I mention that I'm tired and not in the best of moods? You don't want to mess with me when I get like this," she warned.

Deciding he needed to get a few matters settled between them, he set the bag down and stepped directly in front of her. "I reckon everyone gets in moods, and I can excuse most of them. Tantrums, no. Those will be dealt with. Promptly. Understand?"

Her eyes widened, and her cheeks grew pink again. "Are you talking about what I think you are?"

"If you mean spanking your pretty butt, yeah. Didn't I already give you one good swat?" He respected women, had loved a few, but he was an old-fashioned man who believed in taking care of his woman...in all ways necessary. Ways that included heating their seat until they couldn't sit every once in a while. Would she turn tail and race away in that ridiculous little car and abandon their plan? Or would she stay and take her chances with him?

She looked at him for several long seconds, seemed to be considering her options. Finally she heaved a sigh and said, "So you think my butt is pretty?"

He couldn't help it, he laughed. The tension of the moment was gone. And she'd decided to stay, at least for now. His admiration for her rose another notch. It was going to be hell being married to her for a year and not taking her to his bed. But that wasn't part of their deal, and he stood behind his word. "Come on, let's get your things to your room." Rylee tagged along behind Jake into his home, a huge two-story stone and log house. She'd never seen anything like it. While she'd grown up in a stately mansion bigger than this house, this place seemed mammoth due to the high ceilings

and the enormous amount of open space. Yet it felt homey, lived in, even if the décor was strikingly tailored for a man's comfort. She loved it immediately and couldn't wait to see the room he was assigning to her for her stay in his home. Of course, she'd really love to get a glimpse of his bedroom. She'd always thought that a bedroom told a lot about a person.

He practically raced through the house as if anxious to dump her bags and her, and then flee somewhere, anywhere. Jake appeared distinctly uncomfortable around her, especially around her and Rusty. Jealous. He'd bristled with such sudden jealousy that it had taken her by surprise. His friend had seen it, too, but he'd just laughed it off. Interesting. Very interesting.

Something else rather interesting was the amazing way jeans fit this proud, confident man. Nicely. Really, really nicely. He had one of those bodies honed to perfection by hard work, a body she sure wouldn't mind seeing without all those clothes. The artist in her wanted to see the perfect body, that's all. Yeah right.

"Are you coming?" he questioned, sounding annoyed that she hadn't kept up with him. He'd stopped at the end of a long hallway off one wing of the house.

"If I'd known we would be racing, I'd have worn my sneakers instead of high-heeled sandals." She bit back a giggle at the way he shook his head. It was pretty evident that he didn't quite know what to make of her, but the feeling was mutual.

He remained silent, impatient, but silent until she made it to his side. "This'll be your room. If it doesn't suit you, make whatever changes you want. Or choose another room. There's six bedrooms, not counting mine."

When he stepped into the room with her bag, she got her first look at the "room" he seemed nervous about. Okay, at the suite of absolutely beautiful rooms. Not House Beautiful too fancy quality, but rooms that were wallpapered in a soft green print with tiny flowers, highlighted by warm green painted moldings and doorways. The wooden floor gleamed with a polished sheen where thick floral print rugs didn't cover the large space. Floor to ceiling curtains were drawn to the side as they separated the actual bedroom from a sitting room that held a pair of thick-cushioned chairs and honey-gold end tables that perfectly matched the overly large sleigh bed and bedroom

set. Scattered around the space were plants: palm trees, philodendrons vining on top of the tall dresser and a bookcase, and a bouquet of flowers sat on the bedside nightstand. Two exquisite stained glass lamps had already been turned on and gave the rooms an added degree of warm comfort.

"I loooovve this!" she said breathlessly. "In fact, when I leave, I'm taking it all with me. We'll just have to chop off this part of the house and transport it somehow."

Jake looked both enormously pleased that she liked the room, and like she was crazy for the comment. "Sorry, darlin', I'm not cutting up my home."

She gave him a forced pout and dashed by him to fling herself on the big, soft bed covered with a very thick, dark green and floral comforter. She sank into it with a purr of delight. "We'll have to negotiate that, cowboy."

He set her bag down on a footstool in front of a rattan chair tucked in a corner of the bedroom. "Anything else you need right now? Otherwise I should get back to work."

Rylee felt oddly disappointed that he intended to rush off. But then he wasn't here to entertain her; she wasn't there to be entertained. "I'll explore on my own, okay? I promise not to be a bother."

For a second he looked uncertain, but he blew out a breath and nodded. "My room is on the opposite wing. The rest of the place is just your normal old house." He headed for the doorway, but stopped to look back at her. "You cook?"

"Got a microwave? Frozen dinners?" she countered. Cooking had never been something she'd done much of. She'd grown up with a cook and other household staff, so she'd never learned. When she was working on an art project, she got too involved in it to do more than grab whatever was handy to eat. Her diet was a nutritionist's nightmare. And the last couple of months she'd lived back in the family mansion with the cook and staff. Which reminded her, what was she going to do about the mansion? The staff? She certainly didn't want to keep the place.

"I work hard, need real food. A lot of it, too." He sounded seriously disappointed that she didn't know how to cook. "Guess I'll just continue eating with the men at the cook shack. There's probably enough frozen dinners in the walk-in freezer to get you by

for a day or so. Unless you want to eat with the rest of us,” he added the last part grudgingly.

That hurt. “I’ll make do, wouldn’t want to horn my way into your boy’s club.” She flipped over onto her stomach and tried to ignore him, seriously sulking now. “I’ll see you around sometime.”

She thought he’d left until he suddenly said, “You’re getting pretty damn close to going to bed tonight with a warm bottom.” And then he did leave.

The big cowboy left her lying there, tingling all over—especially between her legs. Nutty as it was, she wanted him. It didn’t seem to matter that the man had once again threatened to spank her. Three hours later, as the sun crept closer to setting time, Rylee decided to do some exploring. She’d brought her limited amount of stuff in from the car and managed to park in the enormous five-car garage that held her bug, an ancient pickup, and a bicycle. With a wall of half-windows on one side and the apparent emptiness, she decided the garage would be perfect for her metalwork. After that pleasant discovery, she’d confirmed the arrangements for the moving van to deliver on Monday the guts of what she normally kept in her art studio, the rest of her clothes, and other items she wanted with her. Then she’d checked in with the office and her friend. Which had been a mistake. The board was not happy with her taking time off, even if they had a perfectly capable vice president who could probably handle the leadership of the firm much better than she ever could. Having listened to several fairly pissy voicemails, her mood had worsened. First the long, frustrating drive here, then basically being abandoned by Jake, and finally dealing with office politics, which she hated. Yes, she was more than ready for some distraction.

She strolled from room to room in her wing and found two more bedroom suites, all nicely decorated, but nothing as inviting as hers. The dining room was another pleasant surprise. No super fancy, comfortless table and formal chairs here, even if the room and table could easily seat twelve or more. One entire wall was made of a stone fireplace with a beautiful hand carved mantel that held several expensive pottery pieces of unique design. In the middle of the room was a really long table of some kind of distressed wood, covered by charming hand woven placemats and

another unique pottery bowl filled with apples and oranges. The accompanying chairs matched the wood of the table, had extra tall backs and extra wide seats with thick, plush Western motif upholstery. She really wondered who had been the interior designer, because whoever it was really knew their stuff.

At the back of the middle section of the house she found a huge log and stone walled room filled with some of the most beautiful and comfortable-looking Western furniture she'd ever seen. And the artwork on the walls! An exquisite woven rug of fall colors and Native American design hung from what looked like a tree branch. A pair of delightfully lighthearted portraits of cowboys rodeoing. So much more. She'd be spending lots of time just looking around this room. Her cowboy's tastes were certainly a surprise, a very pleasant surprise.

She considered going to the other wing and checking out Jake's suite, but finally decided against it. Somehow that seemed to be overstepping her welcome. As she headed back to her rooms, she decided to take a dip in the pool. It would be refreshing after the frustrating day, and it would keep her from changing her mind and going to explore Jake's suite. She did remember his warning about not going skinny-dipping—which she really was only teasing him about. He hadn't told her NOT to use the pool, just not to skinny-dip.

Still, as she stretched out stomach down and carefully undid the straps of her bikini top so as not to get a tan line, she felt a twinge of concern. But as the sun lulled her to sleep, the concern melted away. Jake had stormed all through the damn house looking for Rylee, growing more irritated with each empty room he passed. Where the hell was she? Guilt had swamped him when he'd sat down for supper with the men. One bite of steak and he'd tossed down his fork to go find Rylee and fetch her back to the cook shack for a decent meal. Frozen dinners. She needed more than that. He was about to give up, thinking she'd somehow vanished into thin air, when he passed by the French doors off the side of the living room that led to the backyard. His heart nearly stopped at the sight of her lying on one of the chaise lounges at poolside. Lying there in a bikini so small it was little more than strings. Lying there with the top's strings untied and the miniscule excuse for a top barely covering her nipples. Which meant if someone

happened by and startled her she'd sit up in shock and give that person even more of an eyeful of something they had no business seeing. Damn! Double damn! It didn't matter that almost no one ever came back here. It mattered that they could! Damn, damn, damn! HE shouldn't be seeing this.

He yanked open the door so hard it nearly slammed into him. His hands shook with his anger—and he swore that's all it was—as he strode briskly across the patio. His bootheels pounded on the concrete, loud enough to wake the dead, or Rylee. Then it happened, just as he'd feared. She got startled, and sat up in a flash. He stood there staring at a plump pair of breasts he desperately wanted to touch, to caress. And those rosy nipples... Well, hell.

"You-you scared me," she gasped, apparently not aware—or unconcerned, he wasn't sure—that those precious treasures were boldly displayed.

It took him a second to gather enough blood in his brain to speak with any kind of rationality; most of the blood had headed south. Way south. Damn, he was going to have to invest in baggier jeans with Rylee around. "In the house. Now," he said in a husky, curt tone.

"What are you so upset with now?" she asked, sounding as annoyed as he was angry.

He looked pointedly at her breasts. "In. The. House." He considered adding a silent hundred "damns" for his own benefit, and then realized he'd been thinking "hell" and "damn" a whole lot more than he normally did. Her fault! She was making him crazy and she hadn't even been here a day yet.

Kylee blushed to the roots of her hair and snagged the bikini top from the chaise, tried to put it on, and finally just tossed it at him. "It really doesn't make sense covering up now. You've seen everything already."

Jake shoved the handful of strings that in no way made up a decent swimsuit top into his pocket. "Most everything, yes." Since she hadn't moved, he reached down and pulled her to her feet. "It's time for that spanking I mentioned earlier."

She, of course, tried to resist walking with him. So he scooped her up and strode into the house, growling at her to lie still or he'd drop her. She bristled and

glowered and grumbled about his parentage, which was a huge mistake on her part. "Hope you like sleeping on your stomach, because you surely will be tonight." He carried into the living room planning to sit on one of the sofas to do the little chore, but she shrieked in his ear, "Not here! Please. Not here. I love this room, don't make me hate it." She looked at him with such a passionate plea in her eyes that he ground his teeth and gave in, turning to march down the hall to his office.

Even though he was about to take her over his knee in the room, she perked up and looked curiously around. Evidently she liked what she saw because she smiled and said, "You've got amazing taste in furnishings for a cowboy."

For the first time in a long while he actually looked at the massive cherry wood executive desk with golden accents on the curved insets on the front, and the matching credenza behind it. He'd all of it handcrafted from his own designs, same with a lot of the furniture in the house. But only a few people knew he fiddled around with that sort of thing in his spare time. It warmed him that she liked his designs, not enough to tell her, though.

"What'dya expect? A desk made from a couple of boxes and maybe a milk crate to sit on?" He carried her to a leather sofa in front of a wall of bookcases, and set her down while he settled onto the sofa, holding onto her arm.

"Is this really necessary?" she tried to tug her arm free, which made those luscious breasts bounce around temptingly in front of him. "I haven't really done anything wrong."

Jake ran his tongue over his parched lips and forced himself to look away from those beautiful mounds. "I warned you about behaving properly around here. This is a working ranch. My men can show up anywhere, any time."

Ryless felt a blush spreading over her face, her neck, down her chest. She lowered her head and covered her bare breasts with her free arm. "I-I didn't think... I never imagined..." She hadn't thought, hadn't imagined. What an idiot she was! Of course someone could have come around to the pool and seen her sunbathing. Jake had. She squeezed her eyes shut in mortification. "I'm sorry."

“Women always say that when they’re about to get a spanking. Usually plead for it not to happen, too.”

Jake tugged her closer until she stared down at his muscled thighs covered by denim, she didn’t resist. “I’m supposed to... to... to lie down, aren’t I?” She quivered inside from her breasts to her stomach to her vagina. Could she actually do this? Submit in such an embarrassing manner to this darkly handsome, domineering man?

“It’s probably best if you just lie down, not think about it,” he suggested without demanding she do it.

Sucking in a steady breath, although her heart pounded, she awkwardly lay across his lap. She felt the roughness of his jeans against her stomach as she stretched out. This was so humiliating. She was a grown woman. How could she be doing this? How could she lie over this man’s lap and wait for him to spank her? Spank her! Oh gawd. She was really, truly going to get a spanking.

He tugged her against him and put a hand in the middle of her back. “Seeing as this here bikini is so tiny it won’t get in the way, we’ll just leave it on.”

She curled her arms and rested her head on them, heat burning her cheeks. “What?” she asked, not really listening, instead waiting for that first smack.

His large, calloused hand cracked on the middle of her buttocks. “Spankings are done on a bare butt.” He peppered her bottom with a half dozen fiery smacks. “This is pretty damn close.”

“Fudge that hurts!” she yelped and pressed her legs together, her buttocks tightening.

“I can promise you it’s gonna get worse.” He started spanking, hard, back and forth, cheek to cheek. “I’m thinking this spanking needs to be a sound reminder to obey me in the future.” He soundly spanked from top to bottom, each swat a sizzler.

“I’ll obey! I swear, I’ll do just as you say!” Rylee cried as she bucked and flexed her legs up. “I’ve learned. Okay?”

He chuckled, actually chuckled while in the midst of lighting a fire on her poor bottom. His hand was hard as a board. He was determined to do this his way and for

however long he deemed it necessary. She had no control at all, actually when she'd leaned over his lap on her own, she'd GIVEN him control of her.

"Have you really learned, Rylee? Do you clearly understand how horrified I was when I found you all but naked by the pool?" His hand flew down faster, harder, moved to her lower cheeks and went right on spanking.

"Oooooowwww. Ummmmm," she moaned as she twisted her hips and legs wildly in a futile effort to avoid the punishing swats. "Oh please."

He stopped for a second, rested his hand on her blazing bottom. Even though she could think of little beyond the pain, she sensed his worry, his fear. He had really been worried that one of his men would find her in such a vulnerable position. He might trust them on the job, but he wasn't sure what they would do in that kind of situation. She felt shamed, beyond having to endure a spanking. Shamed that she had acted so stupidly and caused him such worry.

Knowing it would probably cause her even more pain, she had to help make things right again between them. She glanced back over her shoulder. "You're right. I need to be spanked soundly. I shouldn't have done what I did."

His eyes widened in surprise as he'd clearly understood her encouraging him to continue spanking her as he deemed necessary. When he raised that big hand high, she turned her head and buried her face once more. She did NOT want to see that hand connect with her bottom. Which it did sharply, over and over. He spanked every inch of her tender bottom all over again.

For the next few minutes her world consisted of his hand biting against her bottom, of her writhing and jerking with each loud smack, of her sobbing like the naughty woman she'd acted and was being punished for. Finally he stopped, held her in place, and let her grieve for what she'd suffered.

When she managed to stop trembling and gasping, he eased her to her feet. She couldn't look him in the eye. She'd been soundly punished and didn't quite know what to do next. Other than reach back to rub uselessly at the sting on her burning bottom, which she did.

"Why don't you go lie down now," he suggested.

She glanced at him, noted how he stared at her bare breasts and how his pants had a distinct bulge in them. Well, at least he was hurting, too. In another way. "Am I being sent to my room without supper?" She'd heard a couple of her friends when they'd been younger and spanked by their parents mention they'd had to do that sometimes. She didn't really like that idea, although she did want to lie down and sulk a bit.

His dark eyes twinkled in amusement. "You're not being banned from my sight just 'cause I walloped your bottom. Figured you might want some privacy. I'll bring you something to eat later."

Raising her chin with as much dignity as possible—considering she was all but naked and had a bright red bottom from his determined efforts, Rylee gave a curt nod and walked out of the room. The instant she was out of his sight, she madly rubbed her bottom again. Fudge, a spanking sure hurt like the dickens. She was definitely glad her father hadn't been a spanking parent, else she'd probably gone around all the time with a sore bottom. She didn't particularly like being spanked by Jake either. Boy howdy, could that cowboy spank! Yet as she hurried off to the comfort of her room, she found herself dreaming of being taken in hand by her future husband again. Maybe another spanking, followed by... Maybe some hot sex first, followed by a spanking... Maybe a spanking, hot sex, another spanking... The possibilities were endless.

Chapter Three

Jake had been right, Rylee was definitely a trial in his life. Ever since he'd spanked her they'd avoided each other. Not that he'd been able to avoid her in his thoughts, or the virtually sleepless nights. Okay, it had only been two days since her arrival, but they'd been a LONG two days. And doubts about his plan of marrying her, even for only a year, had made him testy. At least according to Rusty.

Now, as he sat in the reception area outside the office of the first pastor that he had talked into marrying he and Rylee, he sweat bullets. He'd only wanted a way of thwarting his grandmother's matchmaking for a spell. Rylee needed the same thing. So his plan made sense. HAD made sense, until she showed up at his ranch and become one enormous distraction. He wanted her. Bad. He also had a feeling she wanted him, too. Only he didn't know what to do about it, and obviously she didn't either. Hence the avoiding each other thing.

The church secretary looked up from her desk and gave him a concerned smile. "Pastor Hayes will be ready for you in just a few minutes." She glanced at the wall clock. "Are you sure she's coming?"

No, he wanted to say, but bit down the response. They hadn't talked since breakfast yesterday. She knew about this, had promised to show up—he really should have insisted on bringing her with him. He plastered a weak smile on his face and said, "Yes. She'll be here. Must be running late."

Seated in the chair next to him, Rusty teased under his breath, "If the gal has any sense at all, she's changed her mind. Probably packed that goofy little car of hers and is on her way back to Denver."

Jake shot his friend a scowl, but only gained a crooked grin in return. Damn cocky cowboy. He reached up to re-sit his best straw Resistol hat on his head. Normally he would have removed it inside and held it on his lap just as Rusty was doing, but not today. The barber had nearly choked this morning when Jake had told him he was getting married today, and ended up cutting his hair too dang short. As if that wasn't bad enough, he'd picked up his dress shirt from the cleaners on his way here only to discover they'd put too much starch in it. He'd nearly scratched himself raw around the neck sitting here waiting. And the bolo tie felt like a hangman's noose. No, he didn't see a damn thing funny about any of the situation.

He'd just shifted again anxiously when the outer door opened and Rylee walked in, with a blonde wearing the tallest, spiked heels he'd ever seen right behind her. Striking as the other woman was, Jake hardly notice her—other than the shoes. The sight of Rylee Jamison in a cream-colored dress that skimmed like a lover's caress over her hourglass body and ended just above her shapely calves stole his breath. Dear God, he was in serious trouble.

"Sorry we're late," Rylee said, shooting an apologetic look at first Jake and then the secretary. "Samantha insisted that I needed a bouquet, so we had to stop at—" Her gaze slid to a small bouquet of mixed white forget-me-knots and white roses sitting on the end table beside Jake. She slammed her mouth shut as her eyes widened in surprise.

Heat spread up Jake's neck. "I figured you needed flowers. All brides have flowers." He felt like such an idiot now. "You don't have to use them. Yours look just fine."

Rylee stood there with tears misting her eyes, unable to speak, as she looked from him to the flowers and back to him again.

Samantha took charge. She snatched the bouquet Rylee was currently squeezing to death from her grip and tossed them at the secretary. "Trash these please." Then she picked up Jake's bouquet and handed them to Rylee, whispering loudly, "Studly, and sentimental. He's a keeper, Ry."

Rusty chuckled and drew another scowl from Jake. "Studly? An old sourpuss like you? Hardly. Sentimental? Well..."

Before any rebuttal could be made, the door opened again and Maybelle Caldwell stepped boldly inside the now crowded reception room. Rylee looked at him in concern. Jake shot out of his chair, his heart pounding. "What are you doing here?"

Her hazel eyes danced with mischief. "Came to witness this blessed event, of course." She glanced at Rusty and winked. "If I hadn't called the ranch yesterday and talked to your good friend, I wouldn't have even known about this wedding." Her gaze shifted back to Jake—who was contemplating killing Rusty right here and now—and chastised, "Shame on you, grandson."

The heat he'd experienced earlier around his neck turned up a notch. He couldn't look her in the eye. What the hell did they do now? Surely his grandmother could see right through this little charade.

Maybelle stepped next to Rylee and enveloped her in a hug, stepping back with tears in her eyes. Tears Jake suspected were part of her award-winning performance of the moment. Her voice was husky with emotion as she said, "I hadn't even realized that you two had met. Of course you've each known about the other through my many conversations about the two of you. Two of the dearest people in my life." She smiled, winningly. "You can't imagine how delighted I am about this."

"I-I...we-we..." Rylee floundered, looking desperately at Jake.

Trapped. In his own lie. Damn. Jake reacted out of self-preservation. "Last year. We met last year."

Rylee's mouth fell open and Samantha nudged her to get her to help in the explanation. "Yes. We met last year." But that was all the help she could manage.

Rusty stood and patted Jake's back, nodding. "Yeah they met last year when Jake went to that rancher's meeting in Denver. They've been calling each other ever since. Biggest phone bills the ranch has ever had. They tried hard to deny anything serious was happening. You know how marriage-shy your grandson can be."

Jake elbowed Rusty in the ribs at the same time Samantha helpfully added, "Rylee was too. Marriage-shy, I mean." She stepped away from Rylee so she wouldn't get poked for interfering. "But true love just couldn't be denied."

Maybelle's lips twitched even as Jake felt nauseous. True love. Ha! Sure he admitted that he found Rylee attractive, he'd even admit to wanting to spend some serious time rumpling sheets with her. But LOVE? Hardly. Still, if they didn't somehow pull this off, he'd be back to dealing with teenagers with studs in their navels wanting to lock lips with him...or worse. His grandmother was capable of anything. He shuddered. He definitely needed Rylee's cooperation.

Although his knees shook, Jake stiffened his determination and walked over to Rylee, who was looking paler by the second. He draped an arm around her shoulders, pleased that she edged closer to him. Comrades. They were comrades ready to do battle against a powerful enemy: Maybelle Caldwell. He looked at the secretary and said, "Is the pastor about ready for us?"

As if on cue, a balding rather round man stepped out of the office behind the reception area. He smiled in a manner that looked far too conspiratorial for Jake's peace of mind at Maybelle. But he must be mistaken; he couldn't see how they would even know each other. "Well, I see everyone is here now. Shall we do the honors in my office, or in the small chapel?"

Jake and Rylee exclaimed together, "Office" at the same time Maybelle insisted, "The chapel." She won, of course, and Pastor Hayes took Maybelle's arm as they led the way to the small chapel. Samantha and Rusty followed, grinning in amusement at the predicament. Jake and Rylee went last, with Jake whispering in her ear, "Everything will be just fine. You'll see."

A half hour later Jake was covered in sweat, every one of the promises he'd just made to this virtual stranger weighed heavily on him. What in the hell had he been thinking to come up with this idea? Promises were important to him. He never went back on his word once it was given. Sure, they'd made a promise to each other before this disaster, a promise to end the marriage after a year. Somehow, though, that didn't make him feel any better. And standing there beside him, her small hand tucked into

the crook of his arm, Rylee Jamison—Rylee Caldwell that is—looked as anxious and confused as he felt.

He forced a smile and faced his grandmother, who'd been conversing with a grinning Rusty. His friend sure was getting a kick out of the mess Jake had gotten himself into. One of these days some gal would end his wild woman-chasing days and then Jake would be the one grinning. Meanwhile, it was time to say good-bye to Maybelle so he and Rylee could drop all this pleasantness and get back to their lives.

"Do you want me or Rusty to drop you off at the airport? I believe Rusty is taking Samantha in an hour or so." He looked to Samantha and she nodded.

"Oh, didn't I mention it earlier? I've decided to stay and visit for a couple of weeks. Of course, I won't get in the way of your being newlyweds. I'll simply move into that lovely suite at the other end of the house you recently had redone," Maybelle stated, smiling at first Jake and then Rylee. "That's not a problem, is it?"

Jake couldn't say a word, not without cursing a blue streak or making the situation even worse. But he ground his jaw so hard that his teeth hurt.

The big guy had turned suddenly useless, Rylee decided. She pulled herself out of the state of shock she'd been in as they were steamrolled through the wedding ceremony. She gently patted Jake's arm, feeling the tenseness of the muscles, and said, "That's no problem at all, Maybelle. Jake and I would love to have you stay with us." A glance at a vein pulsing in the side of his neck made her look sharply at Rusty and add, "Why don't you take Maybelle with you as you take Samantha to the airport, and then bring her home to the ranch with you. I'm sure you understand how Jake and I would like to have this first little bit of married time alone."

Rusty appeared ready to torture his friend some more and make a counter suggestion, but Jake took charge. He spun Rylee around so fast she nearly fell off her high heels. They all but raced out of the church as he called over his shoulder, "See you all later." Jake jerked an armful of clothes from the closet, so annoyed he could barely think straight. Moving Rylee into his rooms had NEVER been in the plans. But there just wasn't any way around it. "Damn, damn, damn."

"Hey! Don't take your anger out on my clothing!" Rylee complained as she came up beside him and frowned as he stood there crumpling them in his arms. "She's YOUR grandmother."

He towered over her, fuming, "Has thought she was YOURS, too, for a long time, and you know it." Then he strode toward the doorway. "Women just can't keep from meddling in a man's life. Never happy with us. Always—"

A shoe hit him in the back. "Now who's sulking?"

"Men do NOT sulk!" He tossed the shoe back, careful to not actually hit his furious bride.

"Okay, they pout. Happy?" She picked up the shoe, and grabbed as many others as her arms could hold. With that she pranced by him and set off in the direction of his rooms.

Jake grumbled to himself about women upsetting his life as he traipsed after Rylee. The wind sort of went out of his sails, though, as he became mesmerized by the rhythmic sway of her hips. Two steps later he was hard as a rock and almost panting with need. Hell! Now he really was in trouble.

As Rylee stormed into Jake's rooms she came to an abrupt halt and stood there gaping in awe. She'd been pretty disappointed to be forced out of the suite she'd quickly fallen in love with. But her disappointment had been premature. These rooms were almost identical except for being done in shades of blue, deep warm gold, and cranberry. The furniture was the same, except the bed was even bigger, amazingly bigger, but then her husband—husband, a concept that still seemed very strange to think—was a big man. She spun to face him, dropping shoes in her whirling. "It's wonderful!"

He must have spotted the emotional tears in her eyes for he looked distinctly nervous. "Just a room." He lifted his armload of crushed clothes. "I'm sure there's space in my closet for these."

She decided to not tease him about his drastic understatement on the beauty of the room. Instead she dropped the shoes at her feet and headed beyond the enormous bed to a walk-in closet that was big enough to really be its own room. She took a quick

glance at the one wall of shelves holding stacks of jeans, a small rod holding a couple dozen shirts, and another small section with a few jackets and dress pants. There were still basically two and a half walls of rods and shelves empty. "Not much of a clotheshorse are you, cowboy?"

Jake strolled in and the room shrunk immediately. He had a very overpowering presence. With their closeness, she could smell that unique scent he favored, some kind of mixture of spice and leather. Fitting. Manly. Sensual. She shook the thoughts out of her head and started taking hangers from him and hanging up her clothes. "I am. A clotheshorse, I mean."

"There's only another armful or so in that other closet." He sounded confused.

Rylee giggled at his naivety. "I only brought a tiny amount of my clothing. You saw the size of my trunk. The rest is coming Monday in the van."

"Van?" He walked closer and she became very aware of him. She enjoyed his touch, wanted to experience it again. Only he seemed really reluctant to touch her, except at the church. Like he was afraid of her or something. Silly man.

"Remember I'm going to work on my art projects while I'm here? I'm having my studio stuff shipped here, as well as the rest of my clothing and a few other things. You don't mind do you?" She accidentally-on-purpose skimmed her fingers across his chest as she took another handful of hangers. His pectorals twitched and he inched back from her.

"No, that's not a problem," he said, his voice huskier than before. "There's extra bedrooms that can be gutted and used. Just let me know what you want done."

What she wanted was for him to stop flinching away from her. What she wanted was for him to throw her down on the closet floor and have his wild West way with her. It appeared that she would have to make the first move. But how? What? She really wanted some kind of touch from him before they had to deal with Maybelle again. The only way he'd really touched her so far... Her heart pounded. Could she actually do it? As she looked at him, standing there all darkly handsome, absolutely yummy in that white shirt with the nifty little bolo tie and dark trousers that hinted at some amazing

leg muscles, she knew she could do it. Had to try it. She'd take anything from him, even that.

She quickly hung up the rest of the clothes and took his hand. He gaped at her, but followed as she led him to the sitting area. With a brisk glance around the room, she made her decision. While he watched in curiosity, she tugged up her dress above her waist so that he could see that she wore no stockings and only a tiny slip of a thong, which she wriggled out of. She heard his sharp intake of breath, sensed his instantaneous arousal. Which gave her the courage to lean over and place her hands flat on the coffee table. Her bare bottom was thrust out in a manner he couldn't ignore.

"I was late getting to the church. I'm sorry," she said softly, looking back at him. His gaze had locked on her bottom. His pants had bulged out and he was definitely ready for her, but would he do it? He could be incredibly stubborn. "I know you must spank me for it. I understand. You're my husband now, in charge."

"Rylee, I don't think—" he protested uncertainly, although he moved closer.

She purposely clenched and unclenched her buttocks to keep his attention. Moisture beaded between her legs and she was certain he could smell her arousal. He didn't move. Stubborn man. She spread her legs further apart, bent more, and wiggled her bottom. "I'll take my spanking like a good wife. Just don't torture me by making me wait for it."

"You don't know what torture is, darlin'," Jake said quietly, moving to her side. He shouldn't be doing this; she hadn't really earned a spanking. Touching her in any manner was dangerous. But, damn, he NEEDED to touch her...even if only to spank that sweet bottom.

The blood in his body was drifting south again, his pulse raced. When he couldn't resist any longer, he reached out and smoothed a palm over that creamy skin. He remembered how nicely that creamy skin turned pink, red even. She'd not enjoyed her last spanking, yet she was practically begging him to spank her now. He'd never figure the woman out. Hell if he could not give her what she apparently wanted. He lifted his hand and brought it down sharply on one cheek and then the other. The smacks had been hard enough that he could see his handprint on each cheek.

“Oooo, Jake,” she purred, and raised her bottom for more.

He sent another set of sizzling smacks to each cheek. They bounced under his hand, accepted his punishment. Then he noticed the beads of moisture between her legs, noted how she quivered with desire. Turned on! The imp wanted him, and had evidently decided the only thing she might get from him was a spanking. So she’d played with him to get it. Only now he understood she wanted more; she wanted his cock. And, of course, his cock was purely delighted by that.

“This isn’t a real marriage,” he stated, ignoring the way his conscience had bothered him at making a whole lot of promises he didn’t intend to keep. He ran a finger up the crack of her bottom and then swatted each cheek, briskly. “And you didn’t earn a real spanking.”

Her legs parted even more and she moved her slightly pink bottom against his hand. “I know the marriage isn’t real. I’m okay with that. But that doesn’t mean once in a while we can’t...you know...enjoy each other.”

To his surprise, Jake didn’t particularly care for her saying she was okay with knowing the marriage wasn’t real. In annoyance, he swatted her begging bottom hard enough that she yelped. She didn’t move out of position, though. She’d even take a spanking if that was all he’d give her. Amazing. He liked it, too. Then he decided maybe she was right, maybe they could “enjoy each other” now and then without complicating their arrangement too much. Besides, he was certainly in the mood to do a little enjoying right now.

“Just so you understand, darlin’,” he spanked her bottom a few more times, pleased when she moaned and took them with ease. “When you’ve earned a real spanking, you’ll definitely know it. I won’t be giving you light swats like these.”

“Light swats?” she countered. “They stung, I’ll have you know.”

Yes, maybe they had a bit. Her bottom was starting to redden up a little. “Okay, they weren’t exactly gentle pats. But when you get a serious spanking, the swats will be harder, and there will be a hell of a lot more of them.”

“I understand,” she answered, wiggling again, begging. “Can you please...”

"Bust your butt at few more times? Sure can." He did, although not as hard as he could have, or would have under different circumstances. Then he unzipped his pants and pulled free his long, hard cock. "Take you like a properly spanked woman deserves? I can do that, too."

He cupped her bare ass, rubbed his cock against the pleasant warmth he'd created. She gave a tiny whimper of need and he slid his hand between her legs, until his fingertips found her wet pussy. As she arched her back, he played with her clit. Rubbed it over and over until they were both panting with desperation.

"Are you ready?" he groaned out even as he slid his thick cock between her spread cheeks. He plunged deep inside her and anchored her hips with his hands.

"So a properly spanked woman," she stopped to moan in pleasure. "Gets taken firmly by her man?"

Jake held her tightly, barely able to think from the sensations of being surrounded by her wet warmth, from inhaling the sweet musky scent of their arousal. He thrust again and again. Each thrust deeper. "Yes. Taken firmly."

She welcomed his strokes, relished each and every one. Her moans quickly mingled with his grunts. He drove into her with same determination he seemed to do everything. He took charge, but she didn't mind at all. The man could give a devil of a spanking, but he also sure knew how to use that wonderful cock of his. "Oooooohhhh, oooooohhhh, ooooo," she whimpered as he drove her into a climax that left her lightheaded.

Rylee had barely recovered from her release than Jake rammed hard and fast another few times. His cock pulsed filling her with cream. Almost instantly he withdrew and stepped back, growling, "We didn't use any protection. I should really bust your butt for allowing that to happen."

She carefully straightened, barely able to keep from purring with her contentment. "I'm on the pill. We should be okay."

He strode into the closet and jerked off his clothes, re-dressing in jeans and a shirt. She, of course, peeked, and got hot all over again. He really had a body to make a woman drool over. And she'd get to enjoy it for a year!

When he caught sight of her watching him, he scowled. "Hurry up and get changed. Maybelle will be showing up before long."

"I'll get changed, but I'm not in that big of a hurry to encounter your grandmother again." She started to move by him to search through her clothes when he snagged her arm.

"I'm NOT facing her alone." He turned her sideways and to her surprise planted a sharp half dozen smacks on her bottom, which stung even through her dress. Satisfied he'd gotten his message across, he left her rubbing her bottom and sulking.

She stuck her tongue out after him as he disappeared out of the room. "That wasn't nice!" she snapped. "And after I let you—"

Then he was back, looking at her in challenge. "I've got a paddle in here somewhere. In case you need some more encouragement to get changed."

Rylee grabbed the first pair of jeans and a blouse she could get her hands on. He nodded approval and left again, left her to wonder about the paddle thing. Did he really have a paddle in here? She glanced around the bedroom in horror. Now a paddle really sounded painful. She so didn't want to have an encounter with that! By the time Rylee dressed, combed her hair, and got over the shock of a warning about a paddling Jake and Maybelle were in his kitchen. She was smiling proudly at a small wedding cake sitting on the counter. Jake was, as usual, frowning. Rylee simply thought the cake was a sweet idea.

"Oh, that was so thoughtful of you!" she exclaimed hurrying over and ignoring Jake's grumble.

"Every bride and groom deserve to have a nice cake for their wedding. Since I didn't get to be more involved in the arrangements, it was the least I could do." Maybelle started pulling cupboard doors open. "Where are the plates, grandson?"

Rather than waste time, Jake got them himself. He set three stoneware plates on the counter so hard it was surprising they didn't break. Maybelle raised an eyebrow and he muttered, "Sorry."

Rylee set a knife and several forks beside the plates. "We're so glad you decided to visit us," she lied, but didn't know what else to say.

Maybelle saw Jake eyeing the knife, saw his glower and decided to cut the cake herself. She placed a piece on a plate and handed it to Rylee, and then a second plate to Jake. "All right, dears, you're supposed to feed each other. I'm sure you remember the procedure, Rylee."

If it were possible, Jake's scowl turned even darker. "Uh-oh," Maybelle said, "You did know that Rylee was married before? I wouldn't have thought, since you're so in love, that it mattered to you."

"Doesn't." He picked up a small piece of cake and all but smashed it into Rylee's mouth. "Sorry."

"It shouldn't," Rylee snapped, smashing a piece of cake into his mouth.

"Hmmm. It appears that you two are feeling a little stressed out by the events of the day. Probably best if you have some alone time." She cut a piece of cake, set it on a plate and started out of the room. "I'm feeling rather tired from all my traveling anyway. I'll see you all tomorrow."

Jake looked at Rylee, thought about what they'd done only minutes ago, and wanted to do it all over again. But this wasn't what they'd agreed to, not why they were together. Oh, he didn't have a doubt that he'd have her again. He just wasn't ready to get his emotions all mixed up again so soon. "I've got to go over some ranch business with the men."

She blinked at him, puzzled. "You'll be back when?"

"When I get back. Don't worry about it." He headed for the door, stopped and said on a sigh, "Get some rest. You look tired."

Rylee watched him leave, considered picking up the cake and throwing it after him. It wouldn't help the situation. He was frustrated by Maybelle's sudden visit and was having trouble adjusting to that change of plans. She was pretty frustrated herself. But throwing something—which he would no doubt find out about—would only earn her a session over his knee. And she'd much rather spend some time dreaming tonight about how he'd made love with her earlier, than how he'd send her to bed with another warm bottom.

Chapter Four

The sun rode low in the sky by the time Jake finished wiping down his horse in the barn. He'd spent the week since his marriage mainly out on the far west range helping his men string all new fencing. They hadn't needed—or wanted—his assistance. But he'd been unable to make himself concentrate on any of the paperwork that needed to be done, or any of the supervising for the construction of the twenty room hotel and sports play area being built as part of the new dude ranch operation. He just couldn't stay too close to either his grandmother or his "wife." Particularly his "wife."

He stepped away from his favorite mount and tried to stretch the kinks out of his body. There was hardly a square inch of him that didn't ache in some way. This getting up before dawn, working damn hard, and then riding back home well after dark each night was killing him. Truthfully, he was dead ass tired clear down to the bone. He didn't know if he even had the energy to spend his now normal handful of minutes with his grandmother and "wife" before finding his bed, and then falling dead asleep within seconds.

"Hell of a life, boy," he grumbled to the horse already focused on fresh feed, content to be back in his stall for the night. Content? It seemed like it had been years since Jake had felt anything close to that. Or since he'd eaten a decent meal in the cook shack; or since he'd taken a good long shower to wash away the tension and dirt of the day, or since he'd slept on a real bed. It was damn hard to force his feet to even head toward the house right now. Head toward a quick shower and his bed, which was a thick, pile of quilts that resembled more a nest than a bed, in the master suite's large walk-in closet. Spending yet another night tossing and turning with dreams of the

woman who haunted his thoughts during the day as well was certainly not appealing. The woman who slept comfortably in his big, special made bed about a dozen feet away from him. "Shit. My life really sucks. What the hell was I thinking."

Footsteps snagged his attention. He stiffened as he caught the scent of roses. Maybelle. Great. Just great. His already wearing day had just gotten worse.

"How long do you plan to keep on avoiding your marriage, Jake Caldwell? Avoiding your sweet bride?" Maybelle headed right toward him, clear challenge in her expression.

"I'm not AVOIDING anything," he protested, knowing she'd spoken the truth but not wanting to admit it. "I've got less than two months to get the whole ranch in shape. To get this dude operation up and running before the first scheduled guests arrive." Maybelle, of course, knew about his plans and the time schedule. She'd helped him arrange the publicity and even managed to find him a small group of people looking for a new place for their annual get-away.

"So why haven't you been here answering your work crew's questions? Taking phone calls from your suppliers? From your banker? You've got perfectly reliable ranch hands to take care of the fencing and other chores."

Guilt kept him from responding. Disgust with his behavior had him shifting his feet like a boy caught up to mischief and being dressed down for it. And it wasn't like Rusty hadn't already pointed the reliability of his hands, repeatedly for the last few days.

"You've been hiding out on the range because you don't know how to behave like a newly married man. Actually, I'm surprised you even went through with the wedding...when the whole notion of marriage scares you right down to your tidy-whities." Her wrinkled face pinched in disapproval.

Jake gaped at her, and felt a blush steal up his neck. "Grandmaaaa," he groaned, uncomfortable with her talking about his undershorts.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh give it a rest! That was only an expression. Maybe you wear boxers. Or even some of those men's thongs. I don't really give a silver dollar

what you wear beneath those jeans. The points are: avoidance, fear. You need to stop the one, and get over the other.”

How could he explain to her that if he stopped avoiding Rylee he didn’t think he would be able to give her up next year? How could he tell his grandmother what he feared most was breaking down and begging that sexy little redhead to stay? He HAD to let Rylee go. It’s what they’d agreed to.

Instead of saying any of that, he blurted out, “The banker’s probably been calling to hound me for money. There’s no point in talking to him right now. I can’t pay him until after the first group stays here.”

Maybelle gave him a tiny smile and watched for his reaction. “Rylee took care of the banker problem.”

That had his attention. “WHAT’RE you talking about?” he pressed, his gut telling him he wouldn’t like the answer.

“I’m not sure of all the details,” she hedged, and he knew that was no doubt a flat out lie. She continued watching him as he stiffened all over. “I believe she either made arrangements to guarantee payment through her company should it become necessary, or she made an actual payment of some kind. Like I said, I didn’t press her for details.”

Jake fisted his hands. “She had NO right interfering in MY business!”

She pinned him with a telling look that reflected exactly how she saw this as yet another sign that she believed their marriage wasn’t a real one. Maybelle Caldwell didn’t fool easily. “You mean, even though she’s your wife she doesn’t have every right to offer her support? I’m confused, Grandson.”

He wasn’t in the mood to play any further games with her at the moment. He needed to track down the woman who’d apparently stepped well beyond her role as temporary wife. He needed to go apply hand to bottom for a long damn time. When he was finished with the spanking, she would fully understand the boundaries they both lived within. There would be no further questions in her mind about talking things over with him first before making a decision that affected HIS life.

* * *

Rylee paced the floor of the loft above the great room, her recently confiscated painting space. She gripped the cell phone in her hand so tightly her fingers hurt. "Mr. Arnoldson, you have absolutely NO right to tell me how I should or should not spend MY money! You're my banker. Period. If I want to spend every blessed penny in my account—which I don't, I can do so without your permission. Just send the money! Today! Now!"

She flipped the phone shut to end the unsettling conversation, and then threw it across the room. Tears filled her eyes. Why was her life so frustrating these days? She'd separated herself from the business she hated running. Except that those she'd left in charge hadn't accepted her "separation" and had started calling her every triple fudge day!

Squeezing her eyes shut against the anger building within her, she thought about Maybelle. A sweet older woman she'd long called friend...and enemy because of the matchmaking attempts. Rylee had taken a bold step to stop that nonsense. Except even that had backfired on her. Now she was married to a man who attracted her so much she worked hard every night not to race into his little sleeping—hiding—place and pounce on his magnificent body. She physically ached for him nearly every second of the day. And she hated that! She'd never been this drawn to a man. Especially not her ex-husband. Most irritating to her, was that she felt certain Jake didn't feel the same way about her. That was pretty darn clear, considering that he'd all but ran from the room after the one time they'd had sex. It hadn't been lovemaking, just pure need that had to be dealt with at the moment.

Furious with the myriad of almost overwhelming problems, she plopped down on the thick, tan carpet. A few feet away the portrait of Jake she'd started work on yesterday snared her attention. She hadn't intended on painting his likeness. She'd planned to begin the landscape based on a photograph a friend had commissioned her

to paint. But before she'd known what she was doing, her brushes had created the basic lines of her husband's face. Like the brushes had a mind of their own.

A tear trickled down her cheek. Fudge, fudge, fudge! When were things going to start getting better? When would her company's board finally realize they weren't going to be able to manipulate her into coming back before she was ready to? When would Maybelle leave? Oh, please, let it be tomorrow! And when would Jake spend a little of his precious time with her? Fudge, fudge, fudge!

As if on cue, the front door flew open and Jake stormed inside, bellowing, "Rylee Jamison Caldwell, where the hell are you?"

Rylee crawled over to look through the oak railing that lined the front part of the loft and down at the room below. It appeared she shouldn't have wished for him to spend a little time with her. He looked pretty hot right now, and not in a sexy-hot way. A realization that made her buttocks tighten. She hadn't known him long, but she knew that his desire to see her now was because he wanted to heat up her bottom. Not take her to their bed and make wild, animal love. Fudge! She'd really like to make wild, animal love with him.

"Rylee! Dammit, Rylee, answer me!" he bellowed again.

Maybelle walked up behind him, and then ducked around him into the entryway. "Just let me grab my purse. I believe I'll spend the evening in town with a friend. Let you two TALK this out." She stopped in the hallway to look back at Jake with a stern expression. "Try to listen to Rylee's side of things. Rein in that temper of yours."

Rylee's heart pounded. From the hard look on his face and the way a vein pulsed in the side of his neck, she didn't think he was even listening to his grandmother. Listening to HER seemed even less likely. Stubborn cowboy. She'd only been trying to help him, but the man clearly had pride up the wazoo and she'd damaged it.

Peeved at his attitude, she climbed to her bare feet and glared down at him. "I'm up here, in the loft."

He looked directly at her. Immediately she felt the heat of his anger even from that distance. "Bedroom. Now."

She considered—for about a half second—ignoring his command. Then, stupidly, she latched onto the word “bedroom.” Maybe, just maybe, once the unpleasantness was done, she could convince him to use the bedroom in the more traditional manner. In spite of her annoyance with him and what he obviously had in mind for her, she wanted him. Badly. She wanted his long, thick cock that she well remembered deep inside her, working its delicious magic. She wanted that even if she had to experience the magic while suffering a toasted bottom.

* * *

Jake went to the kitchen for a beer, and to wait for his grandmother to leave the house. He also wanted his temper to ratchet down a notch before he faced Rylee. He’d never seriously hurt her, but he didn’t want to let his anger fly freely just yet. But she’d definitely be sleeping on her stomach tonight.

When he heard the front door close behind Maybelle, he set the beer down and headed for his bedroom. He found Rylee standing by the window, looking out at the backyard. Her pert little butt was encased in a pair of shorts so short they barely covered the lower part of her buttocks. The sight made him suck in a breath, made his cock begin growing in anticipation. He fought down the arousal. THAT was not what he was here for!

“Care to explain why I’m going to give your fanny a sound smacking?” he asked, stopping beside the triple dresser. He was pretty sure she knew why he was so damn mad he could hardly think straight.

She turned to face him, not looking the least bit repentant. “Because your ego is bigger than this room. Because you can’t graciously accept help from me.”

Jake opened a drawer, not wanting to meet her challenging eyes. “Damn straight my ego is big. My pride, too. You didn’t care a bit about stomping on either of them.” He glanced back at her, trying hard not to pay too much attention to the way her breasts stretched the fabric of her waist-length t-shirt. “I’m not going to blister your

butt for that, though. You're getting punished because you didn't bother to ask me about the situation. You just took all decisions right from my hands and dealt with MY business matters."

He pulled a well-worn paddle that had been used many a time on his own backside while growing up from the drawer. As he looked her direction, he watched her eyes grow big as quarters. To her credit, she didn't try to run screaming from the room, or begin threatening his person for what he intended to do with the paddle. She just stood there, color draining from her face, and silently coming to terms with the inevitable.

"When exactly was I supposed to ask you about the situation? During those few minutes you stopped to visit with your grandmother and I when you came in after dark? Was I supposed to chase you down the hall before you came in here to fall dead asleep on your little pallet in the closet?" she questioned, her chin lifting in defiance. "Or was I supposed to wake up and think logically way before dawn, like you do?"

Holding the paddle at his side, Jake went to sit down on the leather sofa in the corner of the room. He ignored her questions. "Might as well take them little shorts off, panties, too. Then come on over here. I've got a knee you need to bend over."

Rylee's eyes blinked rapidly a second. "Spanking me isn't going to change anything. It's not going to make me regret using money I don't need right now to help your ranch."

He raised an eyebrow to encourage her obedience. Then as she jerked off the shorts and panties, he once again had to fight down the stirrings of arousal. That short taste of her he'd had last week wasn't nearly enough. "Even though you went about helping me all wrong, I do appreciate your help." He shifted to make room for the cock that seemed insistent on making itself known. "I'll be paying you back the second I can."

She walked over to him, her pretty face pinched in annoyance. When she stopped next to his right leg, he said sternly, "It's that part about helping me all wrong...about not talking to me first...that you'll be regretting before long."

* * *

Rylee couldn't seem to take her gaze off the wooden brush a good eight or so inches long that Jake held in his hand. Oh fudge! Being spanked with her husband's hard, calloused hand had been painful enough. She was pretty sure that well-used looking brush would feel much worse, especially on a bare bottom. Like Jake, though, she had a fair amount of pride. She wasn't going to beg him not to do this. And she would give it her best effort not to break down into a sobbing, hysterical mess while he punished her.

He patted his knee, silently demanding she stretch across his lap.

She sucked in a breath. Oh fudge! Oh fudge! Oh fudge! What had she gotten herself into this time.

"Let's just get this over with, darlin'." He was beginning to look pretty impatient.

Lie down. Now. Just do it. Go on. Lie down over his lap. Talking to herself, trying to convince herself to obey wasn't doing much good. Then she glanced at him and saw the grim determination as well as a spark of regret in his eyes. It was the glimmer of remorse for what he felt he must do that had her sliding over his lap. She shivered at the odd sensation of brushing her bare stomach over the thick denim of his jeans.

He didn't waste time with even a tiny warm up with his hand first. As she held her breath, he lifted the brush that seemed incredibly big, looked incredibly hard. He brought it down on her bare bottom with a sharp crack that echoed around the room. She hissed against the unfamiliar pain and was definitely glad that Maybelle had left the house. Had she known her grandson intended to punish her? Well, that would be embarrassing.

"If we're going to make this marriage thing work," he said, interrupting her thoughts and bringing the paddle down swiftly again, "you're going to have to respect me." The paddle blazed down once more.

She sucked in a sharp breath, and then blew it out on a hiss. "Oooooowwww."

Her quiet complaint didn't faze him. "I won't interfere in YOUR business. And you won't interfere in mine." He emphasized his declaration with a series of quick cracks.

Rylee felt a much more intense burning across her cheeks than when he'd merely hand spanked her. It was hard not to cry out, hard not to attempt to fling herself off his lap. "It wasn't..." She arched backward at a particularly biting swat of the paddle. "It wasn't interference! Not really," she bit out, unable to keep from wriggling her bottom sideways away from the paddle. "Fudge that hurts!"

He tugged her back into position and paddled her briskly three times for her action, and for the mild form of cursing. "Did I ask for your help?" Swat! "Did you bother to talk to me?" A quick rain of cracks from the fearsome paddle. "And I'm NOT taking the blame for YOUR not trying to talk to me. We sleep in the same room. You could have woken me up to talk."

Through the red haze of pain that blazed up from the bottom he continued steadily paddling with vigor, Rylee knew he was right. Knew she'd probably have felt just as outraged if the situation had been reversed. He delivered another set of six memorable swats and she squirmed in spite of her determination not to. As the last swat fell, she gasped, "I'm sorrrrry! Oh, please, I'm sorry!"

He stilled for a second, and she tried to catch her breath. Tried to deal with the pain. Then he raised the paddle again, announcing, "To make sure you really understand this lesson in boundaries, I'll end this with another dozen licks. Quick ones." True to his word, he delivered them in less than a minute.

She twisted and turned, kicked and finally screamed out her misery. After the last smack, she lie limply over his lap, sobbing, sniffing. He tossed the horrible paddle on the floor and gently smoothed his hand over her blazing bottom. "That...that was awful!" she said on a sniffle. "Really, really awful."

"You won't react rashly like that again, though, will you?" he asked, caressing her lower back in tiny circles.

"No."

Rylee felt his cock growing hard pressed against her hip. Although she was still in considerable pain, her woman's area grew moist. Her clit pulsed with need. With each tender movement of his hand on her back and her buttocks she wanted him more. Finally she squirmed, not in an attempt to escape his punishment but in an attempt to entice him to make love to her.

Immediately he pulled his hand away and shifted her off his lap and to her feet. His eyes were dark with arousal when she looked at him, but he shook his head. "I know I took you last time after I spanked you. But that goes against my beliefs about spankings."

Disappointment raced through her. "But—"

He stood and took her arm, tugging her after him to an empty corner of the room. She followed in shock. "You can't mean..."

"Spankings are to be remembered, thought about." He guided her into the corner and leaned her head against the wall so that her red bottom stuck out. "I won't often tell you to do corner time. But when I want you to really think about why I roasted your butt, I will. Like now."

Rylee felt fresh tears well up in her eyes. Lying bare bottomed over his lap getting paddled had been awful enough, but this... Standing here with her reddened bottom on display and her nose stuck in a corner... This was beyond embarrassing. "I hate this," she whispered, although she didn't move out of position.

"Reckon you do." He stepped back. "You'll stay there for a half hour. If you try to move away, you'll get another feel of the paddle. And I can guarantee you won't like it."

She stood quietly sobbing in brand new misery. She was a wealthy woman who owned a business. She had a college degree. Yet here she was, tears running down her face, her nose pressed to a corner, and her well-paddled bottom thrust rudely out. She

definitely hated this! Yet, although she probably should, she didn't hate Jake for having paddled the blazes out of her buttocks...or for putting her in this corner. Was she nuts!

She heard him pulling open the dresser drawer again, knew he was putting the paddle away. When he turned around, she sensed him watching her. Could almost feel the heat of his gaze. Her lower lips twitched. Moisture beaded between her legs. She wanted him, even more than before. Fudge, she was pitiful!

* * *

Jake didn't regret paddling the hell out of his wife's bottom, and he didn't dislike seeing her standing there with her cute little nose stuck in the corner. He was pretty sure she wouldn't do something like this ever again. He did figure he'd be warming her butt again sometime. He kind of looked forward to it, too. She had one sweet ass. And it was even sweeter when he turned it nice and red.

He picked up his pillow and carried it to the bed. She might have hated the paddling, but she'd gotten turned on thinking about him afterward. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that she wanted to make love with him. He wanted to spread her shapely thighs and thrust deep inside her as well. He'd been wanting to do that all week. And he was damn tired of sleeping in the closet. So, right or wrong, he aimed to sleep in the bed tonight with her. He also aimed to take another wrong step and make love to her. Long, hot, sweaty sex was what he wanted, and he thought she wouldn't be opposed to it either.

Stripping off his clothes, he said in a husky order, "Take off the rest of your clothes."

She shivered at the tone of his voice, straightening and removing her t-shirt and bra. As she faced him slowly, he saw the longing in her expression. She waited for his next order.

"I want you on the bed, legs spread wide, in the next two seconds."

Rylee's eyes sparked with excitement and she ran across the room and flung herself on the bed. She winced as she rolled over onto her back and her sore bottom

brushed the quilt. It didn't stop her, though, from spreading her legs and smiling sinfully up at him. Every delicious inch of her was being offered for whatever he had in mind.

"This is wrong, you know," he said, moving onto the bed and between her legs.

"Probably," she answered, reaching for his throbbing cock. "But not ramming this wondrous rod inside me would be so much more wrong."

Chapter Five

Rylee put the finishing touches on the portrait she'd painted of Jake and stepped back to really look at it. Mid-morning sunlight danced across the canvas from the large window opposite the loft. Some people would appear angelic when cast with such a light, not her husband. Husband. Even after a month of being married to the big, sometimes gruff rancher the whole thing seemed surreal. It had taken them a few weeks but they finally settled into a routine both could live with. And, thank God, Maybelle had decided to leave the morning after that awful paddling. She'd left with a smile on her gently wrinkled face that still had Rylee wondering what it meant.

She leaned back to stretch the kinks out of her back before glancing one last time at the portrait. Jake still hadn't seen it, had never really even asked about what art project she spent so much time on. He didn't interfere in her life in any manner, although he did get a fierce scowl whenever he caught her on the phone with one of her board members. Yet he didn't step over what he considered to be the boundary of their separate worlds.

She walked to the loft railing and looked across the large entryway, through the big window, and out at the riding arena recently erected in the middle of the ranch yard. Jake stood by the fence as Rusty led one of the new horses—a piebald? what an odd name—through the gate. The horse appeared calm, as did her husband. Her company's money had been the guarantee for Jake getting the loan to build the arena, and much of the other improvements that had gone up in the last two weeks. Jake had definitely not been calm when he'd found out that she'd dared to overstep the boundary lines of the separate lives. He'd roasted her bottom, as he called it, so well

that she hadn't sat comfortably for two days. And she still cringed at being made to stand in a corner to think about why she'd gotten spanked.

A smile crept over her face; her entire body tingled as she watched Jake move away from the fence. There was such power and confidence in his stride. She remembered him telling her at breakfast that he would be "breaking"—whatever that meant—several horses today. He faced the task now with the same determination she'd witnessed many times before. A grim determination settled over his ruggedly carved face when he prepared to take her over his knee for something very unpleasant. Another kind of determined expression filled his face and darkened his eyes when he made love to her. It seemed that he did everything with a passion.

Her heart raced. The tingling she always experienced whenever she looked at the man she'd married for convenience sake grew even stronger. They never spoke of permanence. Actually they never discussed their arrangement. They simply lived it. Lately she'd started to wonder if they really could have a genuine marriage, a real future. She felt comfortable here on the ranch in Kansas, and she certainly liked sharing her bed with Jake. After the night of the famous paddling, he'd never slept in the closet again, having made some kind of decision that he didn't share with her. Not that she really cared. She didn't mind at all when he crawled into bed next to her each night always determined to stay on his side.

She tingled even more as she thought about how there hadn't been a morning since then that she'd woken up without being snuggled against him in some manner. And that thought made her shift with a sensual quiver. Snuggling against his long, lean, firm naked body was such a wonderful experience. The memory of it so delicious that moisture beaded between her legs. There had been so many mornings that he'd awakened her by sliding into her more than willing body. He was much better than an alarm clock, although he usually exhausted her so much that she went back to a contented sleep for a couple more hours.

Battling down the almost desperate need to race outside and drag him back to their bedroom, Rylee turned back to the portrait. Which didn't help her situation at all. The man in the portrait looked hot and sexy in his faded, work-worn jeans, blue

chambray shirt unbuttoned low enough to reveal a sprinkling of black chest hair, and black hat tipped rakishly down on one side. She hadn't painted him with a smile because it was something Jake seldom did. Smile or no smile, there was something about him that would make any woman's heart pound. There was something about the look in his dark eyes and his intense manner that tempted a woman to give in to his sensual pull and just lie down wherever she was and let the cowboy have his way with her. The man in the portrait was every bit Jake.

Her cell phone chirped wildly across the room where she'd left it on a stack of boxes yet unpacked, tugging her rudely from her pleasant musings. She glared at it. Instinctively she knew she wouldn't want to talk to whoever was on the line. The wild chirping went on until the call went to her voice mail. Then after a minute it started up again. Evidently she would get no peace until she answered the call.

She stomped over and snatched up the phone. "Rylee Caldwell," she said briskly, oddly wondering just when she'd started saying her married name with such ease.

"I'm really sorry about this," her good friend and vice-president of the Jamison Advertising Agency began, "but you have to come here. ASAP. I can't handle the board members myself any longer. They're making me have homicidal thoughts."

Rylee squeezed her eyes closed for a second, feeling all the strain of responsibility draining her again. Her stomach burned. Maybe she was even getting an ulcer out of all this mess. "You have NOT been dealing with them by yourself. Alfred Henderson calls me at least daily with some supposed major decision that can ONLY be made by me. Tony Hernandez calls me every other day with some weird new problem in production."

"When they aren't harassing you, they're harassing me. I wish we could afford to fire them both." Samantha's awareness that the wish was an impossibility rested in her resigned tone.

"The two of them practically ran the company for years, with very little guidance from my father. Now they can barely decide anything, even anything simple." Rylee paced the floor, her friend silent and sympathetic on the other end of the line. She

paced back and forth in front of Jake's portrait as if it could give her some help. Finally she walked to the railing once more and looked out at the arena where Jake was now attempting to make nice with the new horse. Rusty had handed the reins to Jake and walked away. She stood frozen, watching the scene, feeling an odd sense of unease. Something about the calm way the horse just stood there didn't seem right.

"Rylee? Are you still there?"

Her gaze remained locked on Jake and the piebald, but she managed to say, "Yes. Yes, I'm still here."

Samantha launched into a detailed relation of her previous day's encounters with Alfred, and with Tony, and with several other board members who'd visited the office out of the blue. Rylee barely heard a word she said. Jake had mounted the horse, whose back legs were now shifting around. She held her breath. Something was wrong. Definitely wrong.

"Rylee! You're not listening to me, are you?" Samantha sounded annoyed.

The arena seemed to explode with action. The piebald tore off bucking and jerking wildly, racing round and round the fenced area.

Rusty and several nearby ranch hands who had been just inside the arena all but leaped over the wooden fence to safety.

Jake tugged on the reins uselessly. He held on for the ride with every ounce of strength in him, yet he was bounced around, jerked side to side, forced front to back.

Rylee sped down the stairs and out of the house, still with the cell phone at her ear, forgotten. At the same instant she stepped onto the porch Jake flew off the back of the horse. He flipped head over heels backward until he landed with a bone-jarring crash against the fence. His head struck a post and he lie in an unmoving heap.

Immediately Rusty leapt back into the arena and hurried to Jake's side. Two other cowboys attempted to get control of the piebald now running around the far end of the arena.

"Oh my God!" Rylee cried out and ran toward the arena. Heart racing, stomach churning, barely breathing, she managed to yell into the phone, "I've got to go! Jake's been hurt."

She tossed the phone to the ground, took two steps, went back to pick up the phone and frantically called 911.

* * *

"What the hell!" Jake roared as he blinked his eyes open just as a pair of paramedics slid a board under his back where he lie in the dirt of the arena. He felt something choking him and reached up to find a thick collar around his neck. "Get his thing off me! Now!"

"Not gonna happen, buddy," Rusty countered, stepping into Jake's line of vision. He looked unusually worried, as did the handful of ranch hands casting shadows over him from a few feet away. "You banged that head of yours pretty hard this time. Been out for a good thirty minutes."

While Jake knew that wasn't a particularly good thing, he instinctively sensed that he was okay. "Concussed is all." Every square inch of his body ached, his head most of all. "Give me a few more minutes to control the demon pounding in my head and..." He stopped to deal with a powerful wave of nausea.

Rylee moved closer, fear etched deeply into her face. "He's NOT talking his way out of going to the hospital," she stated firmly.

He twisted his head sideways to better glower at her, although the movement cost him. He swallowed down the new wave of nausea. "I'm not going to the hospital," he said on a snarl. He hated hospitals. "An aspirin'll take care of the headache."

"You have no say in this," she protested.

"The hell I don't!" He grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut. "Shit!"

Wisely, the paramedics ignored them both and did their job of loading him onto a gurney. He wanted to order them to undo the straps holding him down, wanted to rip them off himself. But he flat out didn't have the strength at the moment. All he could do was concentrate on not losing his breakfast in front of Rylee and his men. He hated

showing weakness, hated it especially in front of Rylee. So he was almost relieved when they'd loaded him into the ambulance to take him to the county hospital.

* * *

The next time Jake saw Rylee he lie on another gurney in one of the small examining rooms in the emergency room. She rushed into the small area with Rusty right beside her, his arm around her trembling shoulders. Now Jake was hurting and pissed.

"Take your arm off my wife," he said in something like a growl, surprising even himself.

Rusty locked gazes with him, his arm still firmly in place. "You going to get up and make me?" he challenged.

"Rusty!" Rylee gasped, attempting to wriggle free.

"Bet your ass I will!" Jake snarled at the same time he started to sit up, only to fall back as his head throbbed and as dizziness took over. "Damn!"

Rusty released Rylee, nodding at the elderly doctor who had taken care of them both since they were rowdy kids and stood a few feet away quietly observing. "Damn stubborn man," he said, both relief and concern in his tone. He tried to tug Rylee out of the way with him, but she shook him off. "Stubborn woman, too." With a smile, he stepped back.

Jake battled down the persistent nausea as both his doctor and his wife moved to opposite sides of the gurney. "I'll be fine, soon as this old coot gives me a quick once over and releases me."

His doctor accidentally on purpose nudged the side of the gurney, smiling when Jake winced. "This old coot won't be releasing you until at least tomorrow." He ignored Jake's answering growl and glanced toward Rylee. "I've known this disrespectful, beat-

up cowboy most of his life. Patched him up more times than I can even count. Name's Thurman Smith, by the way. Most people just call me Doc."

Jake watched Rylee study the older man for a second, and then she clearly decided to side with him. She smiled and reached a slender arm out across his body to shake hands. "Rylee. Rylee Caldwell." Her simple introduction, using his name, which he hadn't ever expected her to do, surprised him. Pleased him. Worried him.

Jake cleared his throat, and even that made his head throb. Evidently he must have looked green or something because Doc dropped all lightheartedness and got back to business.

Doc bent over him, and used a small light to look into one of Jake's eyes and then the other. His frown eased a bit at whatever he'd seen. Next he gently shifted Jake's head to the right so he could examine the goose egg that had developed just above his ear.

"Banged your hard head up good this time, boy. You're going to have a devil of a headache for a few days." He stepped back to motion a hospital aide over. "X-ray department. We'll take a CT scan for starters."

Rylee looked down at Jake in horror, every bit of the fear he'd seen earlier back in place. He managed to give her a reassuring half-smile. "I'll be fine. Doc here tends to go overboard in trying to showoff his medical skills. Must be wanting me to help finance a new wing or something."

"Your stubborn husband's almost right," Doc said with a gentle smile. "I'm raising funds for some new equipment in the pediatric ward."

Rylee saw through the banter. "Truth time, okay? I've got enough other problems to deal with."

Jake pinned her with a questioning look in spite of how much pain it caused him to focus on something serious at the moment. "What other problems?"

She brushed off his query. "Dr. Smith?"

The elderly doctor glanced from Rylee to Jake and back. "Your husband's probably going to have some persistent headaches for a few days, maybe a week or so. Stress will just make them worse. He'll no doubt be irritable, too."

Rusty snorted at the side of the room. "He's always irritable."

"You're not helping," Rylee said, wiping the smile from Rusty's face. "I take it you think Jake has a concussion. Maybe some kind of head trauma?"

"Yes, he's definitely concussed. I'd guess a grade 2, more likely grade 3 concussion. Which means taking it easy for about a week. Preferably in bed."

Jake thought about all that to be done at the ranch and gritted out, "Can't do that, Doc. Just give me a few aspirin and I'm out of here."

Doc shook his head. "The least we're going to do is take a CT scan, maybe do an MRI evaluation. And you're staying overnight for observation, something that's not negotiable."

Before Jake could protest, Rylee said in a tone that implied no there would be no argument allowed, "He'll be staying. I'll sit on him if it's necessary, but he'll be staying here until at least tomorrow."

* * *

The late afternoon sun tried to sneak in through the blinds Rylee had closed earlier in Jake's hospital room. He'd been dozing off and on ever since coming back from the CT scan. Doc had pronounced it a grade 2 concussion and had said it appeared Jake had gotten off with no signs of possible head injury. She'd almost wept with relief, but she'd had to tough it up when Doc had refused to release Jake until tomorrow. She'd spent a good hour arguing with the obstinate cowboy before he'd finally grown too exhausted and drifted off to sleep. He'd been sleeping for a couple of hours now, at peace it appeared. But she wasn't at peace. Far from it.

She took another sip of the iced tea Rusty had brought her before heading back to the ranch to check on things. Jake hadn't wanted her to stay with him, although she suspected that was more bruised pride talking than anything. Still, she had considered—for about an instant—leaving. Hospitals made her uncomfortable ever since

her father had died. But she couldn't bear the thought of leaving Jake alone. So she'd given him drink after drink as ordered by Doc. She'd adjusted his bed, plumped his pillow. She'd even helped him to the bathroom once. He might not say it, but he needed her. A notion that warmed her heart. Being needed by someone, really needed, was something new to her. And being needed by this often-gruff cowboy touched her clear down to her soul. Again, she thought about how much she liked the ranch...how much she liked being with Jake. When he wasn't being bossy, that is.

She glanced down at him, longing spreading rapidly through her. She wanted to stretch out beside him, wanted to feel his warm, hard body. She wanted to forget all the stupid boundaries he insisted upon and leap right over them. If he could just learn to swallow some of his enormous pride and really accept her help, they might have a real future together. She believed that a genuine couple shared things, including their money. Her financial position would easily allow her to take risks, easily allow her to invest in this new venture of his. He'd minimally accepted her help, but not gracefully. As well her poor bottom knew.

Her cell phone silently bounced in her jeans pocket and had her reaching for it at the same time she looked toward Jake. Still asleep. Good. She walked to the far end of the room and quietly answered. "Rylee."

"Some man has been calling the ranch off and on all day, leaving messages for you. An Alfred Henderson," Rusty said, curiosity in his voice.

Rylee rubbed her forehead. "I guess he got tired of not getting through on my cell phone."

"He demanded that you be in the office tomorrow afternoon. Who the hell is this man?"

"My manager. The man who has been making my life hell the last week. Giving me an ulcer." She sighed, knowing she'd have to go deal with this problem. She couldn't let this situation continue. "Just erase the messages and don't worry about it."

She hung up, swamped by a desperate need for comforting of some kind. Her gaze shifted to Jake. She needed to lie next to him, just for a minute. She wouldn't hurt him, but she just needed him.

* * *

Jake's head throbbed so much he didn't want to open his eyes. His cock also throbbed. It wasn't rare for him to wake up with a hard on, but doing so surprised him here in the hospital room. Until he felt the warm, slender body of Rylee snuggled up against him. Until he smelled her sweet scent. He could get aroused simply thinking about her, but having her lying all sinfully tempting... His cock ached a hell of a lot more than his head now.

He reached down to lightly rub her back, smiling as he realized she'd climbed up beside him at some point this afternoon and fallen asleep. He'd figured she would head on back to the ranch after hearing the results of the CT scan. She had an art project of some kind she'd been working on night and day. He knew she'd been calling back and forth to her company as well. They both had things going on their lives, didn't have time for wasting a day or so like this. But she'd stayed. He smiled even more.

She stirred beside him at the same time Rusty popped his head into the room. Jake shot his friend a look that had him grinning and pulling the door closed. They'd have at least a few more minutes of peace, and Jake planned to take advantage of that fact.

He moved his thigh against the leg she had draped over him, knowing he was rubbing—and hopefully arousing—her clit. She gave a soft little moan and returned the rub. For the first time, Jake didn't mind at all that he was wearing one of them ridiculous hospital gowns and nothing else. His cock danced up against her hand settled beside it, lifting the sheet too.

Rylee's eyes flew open as she felt the movement. She started to slide backward off the bed, but he stopped her. "I've a powerful need for you at the moment."

"But your head..." she protested, the heat of desire clear in her expression, in her tone.

He reached down to shove the sheet out of the way and grab onto his pulsing rod. "It's THIS head that is suffering right now."

His heart raced as she licked her lips. When she started to bend her head closer, he said briskly, "No! I want you coming down on me. I want to drive this shaft up inside you."

To his surprise, she didn't even hesitate. She moved between his legs, undid and tugged her jeans down enough for the task. Then she settled on top of him and slid her warm, wet body down over his eager shaft. It was a bit awkward with her jeans still on, but they managed to get the necessary job done. She took him with amazing desperation. He thrust upward with more strength than he'd thought he had. In only a few minutes they reached that point of wild abandon that left them both panting and incredibly sated.

Jake was slowly stroking his fingers up and down her back as she lie in exhaustion atop him when someone knocked on the door. So much for peace, he thought.

"Rusty," Jake said as he reluctantly let Rylee slide off him and off the bed. "He tried to come in a few minutes ago."

Rylee blushed as she adjusted her jeans and he fixed the sheet. "He knew that we... that you and I..."

Jake shrugged. "He's a good friend." When he saw that she was all dressed, he called out, "Come on in, Rusty."

Rusty strode into the room with Maybelle. "I know you're supposed to be resting." He flashed a saucy grin at Rylee, who continued to blush but narrowed her eyes. Looking back at Jake he added, "But your grandmother showed up about an hour ago. Had a friend fly her in special. She's been anxious to see for herself that you're okay."

Maybelle rushed over to bedside and ran her gaze over him. Seeing the seriously rumpled sheet, she glanced at Rylee with a knowing look. "It appears that you're feeling better now. Glad to know that." Then she pinned him with a stern glance. "Don't you ever give me that kind of scare again, young man."

He didn't like to be reprimanded, but he definitely didn't want her focused any further on the fact that everyone in the room knew he and Rylee had just enjoyed sex in the hospital room. "I'll be out of here tomorrow."

"Doc told me that. He also told me that you will need to take it easy for a few days. I'm sure Rylee will see to it that—"

Rylee avoided looking at Jake as she interrupted, "Actually I'm going to Denver tomorrow."

"What?" Jake bellowed. "You can't go away now. We've got the ranch BBQ coming up this weekend. I need you to..." He stopped, realizing he had just assumed she would be there at the ranch. But they had two separate lives; he'd insisted on two separate lives. They shared the bed. They had sex together. But they'd had an agreement and he had to remember that. "Fine. You go do whatever needs to be done."

As if Maybelle and Rusty sensed trouble brewing, Maybelle suddenly turned toward the door, tugging Rusty along with her. "I'll go settle into my room. Since I'm here early for the big BBQ, I'll use that extra time to keep a watch on my grandson." She smiled at Rylee. "You won't have to worry about him at all. Just take care of that awful Mr. Henderson. Rusty told me he's been leaving rather unpleasant messages for you."

She glanced back at Jake. "Believe it or not, other people besides you have problems to deal with. Of course you would know about poor Rylee's problems, if you weren't so pigheaded."

He watched her walk out the door and wondered exactly how much she knew or suspected about the relationship between he and Rylee. He didn't want to even think about how he'd suspected that she'd maneuvered them together. Nor did he want to consider how much that didn't actually bother him anymore. Right now he was more upset with Rylee, even if he'd just told himself that he shouldn't be.

"Come here," he said brusquely, not fully sure why he'd called her over. He just knew that her planning to leave bothered him. A lot.

Rylee looked at him uncertainly but moved to bedside. "What?" she asked in annoyance.

Without thinking it through, he snagged her arm and pulled her down until she was half stretched over him, and her bottom was thrust out on the side of the bed. She immediately didn't like the position and tried to squirm free. He swatted that well-placed and vulnerable bottom, hard. One time. It was enough to have her glowering at him when he released her.

She shot to her feet, cheeks red with embarrassment, eyes blazing with the fire of indignation. "What was that for?" she hissed, her gaze darting to the partially open door.

He hadn't even considered that someone might happen by and see him spanking his wife. He supposed he should feel guilty for the action, but he didn't. All he felt was frustration.

"For not telling me about your business problems."

"You have NEVER wanted to hear about my business problems." She bristled, her breasts heaving with irritation. Energy seemed to zap all around her. He thought she'd never looked so beautiful. "You don't share yours with me, even though I know most of them anyway."

"Even though you butted right into my business, you mean." He purposely glanced to where she'd covered her bottom with her hands. "For which you got that sweet butt roasted."

"A lesson that made it damn clear I should keep my business issues to myself. Since you intended to keep yours to yourself."

He squeezed his eyes shut at the pounding in his head. "I was honoring our agreement, respecting the boundaries we'd set."

"Boundaries YOU set. And you know what, Jake Caldwell. I'm sick to death of your stupid boundaries. We may only be in this relationship for a year, but we should be able to help each other out during that time when necessary."

She sniffled and he opened his eyes in time to see her dash at some tears on her cheeks. She had moved to the doorway and now looked back at him. "You've got good care here. You don't need me. So I'm leaving."

She was gone before he could tell her how wrong she was. He did need her. Too much. And that idea really scared him.

Chapter Six

Rusty and Maybelle were standing next to Rylee's Volkswagen Bug clearly waiting for her. Waiting to ambush her, she thought grimly. She blinked away the last of the tears that she hadn't allowed to fall and forced a smile. "You'll be glad to know that your grandson is definitely on the mend. Same old surly self."

"I suspect he's going to be a real bear for the next few days," Rusty stated, looking at her closely, seeing more of her distress than she wanted anyone to see. "You'll be lucky to miss that experience."

Maybelle walked up to her and met her eye-to-eye. "The boy has gone and done something, or said something, to upset you, hasn't he?" She heaved a beleaguered sigh and gently patted Rylee's cheek. "Please don't give up on him. For all of our sakes."

Swallowing against the sudden lump in her throat, Rylee countered, "I'm not the one who has this enormous ego problem that keeps people away. I'm not the one who..."

For the first time since she'd met him, Rusty turned on her. "You trod mighty damn hard on his ego." He took a breath before adding, "Even if you only meant to help him out."

"Rusty!" Maybelle exclaimed, shooting him a chastising glance. "You're not helping."

Rylee skirted around the pair and opened her car door. She slid into the driver's seat and felt somewhat comforted by the virtual steel bubble of the Bug around her.

She needed distance from them all, especially Jake. Her feelings for him were too intense, too complicated. She'd never gone so far out on a limb to help anyone before, and clearly she'd been right not to do so. She pulled the door shut, rolled the window down, and looked straight at Rusty. "I 'trod hard' because I foolishly cared about him and about the ranch. I was in the position to be able to help, so I did."

Rusty appeared ready to respond, but she cut him off. "It won't happen again. Your good buddy has more than made it clear that what's his is his...and what's mine is absolutely none of his concern." She didn't add that he'd punished her well for her interference. They didn't need to know that; that part was private. Very private.

Maybelle shook her head sadly. "I admit he's hard-headed... ."

Hard handed, too. "Look, I never should have said anything. I'm just tired. Tired of the uncertainty with your grandson. Tired of fighting with my board of directors. Just plain old stressed out. Tired." Rylee flicked on the engine; glad to hear its quiet purr. "Make sure he does what the doctor says."

She drove off, glancing in her rearview mirror only to catch Maybelle shaking a wrinkled finger at Rusty and burning his ears, no doubt over upsetting her. She loved the older woman dearly, but she was the reason why Rylee and Jake were in this mess. But she wasn't totally at fault. They'd made the situation worse themselves by getting physically involved, and she by getting romantically involved with the impossible man.

* * *

Several hours later Rylee stood in the loft in front of the portrait she'd painted of Jake. She'd been home an hour before Maybelle returned, but Maybelle hadn't sought her out. She was giving her space and Rylee appreciated that. Her attention returned to the portrait and the cowboy who'd come to mean so much to her. What was she going to do about him? The question had run through her mind many times on her drive back from the hospital.

She studied the painting and smiled at the worn hat she'd painted that he always wore. And as she focused on the face, she saw the confidence in his expression that he wore so easily as well. Jake Caldwell was one of the most proud, most driven men she knew. He worked harder than ten men, but he never complained. He made love with great passion, too. At that thought, she felt the first hints of arousal. Yes, sex between them was very, very good. But she liked Jake for so much more than merely the way he could make her body sing with the pleasures of lovemaking. She respected him. He treated his ranch hands more than fairly and the townspeople she'd run into thought a lot of him. She wished he didn't work so hard at trying to keep their lives separate. She honestly would have liked to bounce some of her business problems off of him. After her fiasco in trying to help him, she'd kept her frustrations to herself instead.

Her cell phone rang and she tugged it out of her jeans' pocket. A glance at the screen told her it was Alfred Henderson, again. She really wasn't up to another over-the-phone argument with him. Knowing he'd just keep on calling until he talked to her, she answered, "Rylee."

"This situation is impossible, Ms. Jamison!" he immediately blustered.

"Mrs. Caldwell," she automatically corrected.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Caldwell. Anyway, we really need you here to make some serious decisions. Several of our clients are threatening to leave—"

Rubbing her forehead due to the headache talking to her manager always brought on, Rylee snapped, "I'll be there in two days! I'm driving to Denver tomorrow. I'll be in the office first thing Wednesday morning."

He huffed and she ignored it. "I want the entire board of directors there on the dot at eight o'clock. Make it happen, Mr. Henderson." With that she hung up and slumped against the loft railing, staring at the portrait once more. What she wouldn't give for a real, comforting hug from her cowboy right now.

* * *

Blissfully alone in his hospital room, Jake glanced at the bedside phone. He had reached for it to call Rylee's cell number at least ten times in the last couple of hours. He didn't want her leaving town without... Without what? That was what kept him from calling every time. Without him apologizing for being so pigheaded about keeping their lives separate? He was doing that for a reason, maybe not as good a reason as he'd once believed, but a reason. Without telling her that he'd miss her? Damn straight he'd miss her. He went to bed every night swearing that he wouldn't touch her, couldn't allow himself to want her even more. Yet he woke up every morning with his arms around her, with her snuggled contentedly into his body. And then they'd make love. Love, hell. They had amazing sex, better than any of the fantasies he'd ever had.

He scowled at the nurse who stuck her head in his doorway. Her eyes widened momentarily and she hurried away. Good. He was rock hard with desire after thinking about amazing sex with Rylee. He didn't need some innocent little nurse coming in and discovering his cock bouncing around in eagerness for the wife who had walked out on him earlier.

She'd walked out plenty pissed at him, which he probably deserved. She was going to Denver, tomorrow. Damn. He didn't want her to go. Ever. But what right did he have to say anything like that to her? They had a marriage of convenience, make that inconvenience at this point. He'd finally discovered that he wasn't as against the whole notion of marriage as he'd previously thought. He liked the softness Rylee added to his life, the laughter, even the occasional bout of frustration. Sure she could drive him nuts at times. And, sure, there were times when she needed reining in and needed a trip over his knee for a bottom warming.

He smiled at that, and then winced at the headache smiling caused. Still, he'd been kind of surprised the first time he'd spanked her and she hadn't put up a real fuss about it. She didn't actually like him roasting her bottom, but she endured it. He respected her for that. Truth was, he liked a lot of things about his Rylee. Yet he still wasn't sure she belonged on his ranch, in the middle of the Kansas Flint Hills, far from

the world she'd been brought up in. She hadn't complained any yet, at least not about that lifestyle. Yeah, she'd complained about his stubbornness more than once. Even mumbled a complaint once about having gotten a good spanking. He smiled at that, remembering how he'd taken her right back over his knee and spanked the complaint right out of her. Then they'd made love. It seemed that particular spanking had not only made it clear he would be in charge during a spanking, but it had also gotten her pretty damn aroused. Yep, he'd thought about that particular time more than a time or two.

His thoughts returned to their agreement: The one he'd come up with the lame idea about and insisted on holding to. Thing was, she'd never said anything about altering the agreement. She'd never said anything about staying with him longer than the year deadline. That realization made him frown even more.

He glanced again at the phone and knew he couldn't call her. He couldn't ask her to not go and handle her business matters. A twinge of guilt crept through him. Maybe he should have shared more of his ranch's business with her; she had a good head for business even if she didn't think so. Maybe he should have encouraged her to talk about the advertising agency when she'd tried to several times. There sure were a lot of "maybe he should have" and "what ifs" to consider. He supposed her going away right now might be the best thing for both of them.

Still, he was going to seriously miss her.

* * *

The words "you don't need me" haunted Rylee's thoughts during the long drive to Denver the next day. She could have driven to Kansas City and flown out from there, but she'd wanted the longer time to think. There was so much to think about in her life at the moment. First, there was her long-range goal of having a year off from an actual job to work on the numerous art projects that had been in the back part of her mind for too long. Then there was her marriage. That alone could take her hours, weeks,

months even of continuous thought just to sort out the positives and negatives...and the what-ifs. Unfortunately, and the hardest to deal with, there was also the Jamison Advertising Agency. The agency was a burden so heavy on her shoulders that it seemed a wonder that she could even walk upright.

Driving into Denver right after rush hour, she wondered if Jake had gone home today as he'd vowed to do. At least he'd actually stayed the night in the hospital; although she'd been certain he would convince someone to haul him back to the ranch. He'd scared a dozen years from her life when he'd flown off that piebald into the fence. She'd practically felt the blow to the head herself. She had felt it clear to her soul. And then he'd lain there so still, for so very long.

She forced that horrible memory away and concentrated on finding her turn off the highway. Still she couldn't put Jake completely from her thoughts. He'd also struck a blow to her heart when he'd brought up that awful nonsense about her butting into his business again. Grrrrrr. She actually growled, bared her teeth into the rearview mirror, and pretended she was snarling at her stubborn, pigheaded, obstinate...had she mentioned stubborn?...husband. In the next instant she, for the umpteenth time, heard herself saying "you don't need me" to him.

She banged her hand on the steering wheel, honking her horn by accident and earning a glare from the driver next to her. Whatever! The thing was Jake did need her, and she needed him. They needed each other more with each day they lived together. But she just wasn't sure they could ever work through their differences and figure out how to turn this farce of a marriage into a permanent arrangement. He had so many boundaries, so many rules...except when it came to making love. There were no rules then, only wild expressions of primal need. And, boy, could her cowboy be primal in his need! And oh how she loved that.

By the time she pulled into the long driveway leading to the near-mansion in Cherry Hills that Samantha had inherited, Rylee felt like crying...or screaming...or doing both. She'd thought herself into a real emotionally messy state. Poor Sam, she was going to have a really unpleasant houseguest tonight.

Speaking of Sam, Rylee spotted her friend dashing out the front door and onto the porch to eagerly await her as she finally parked. Samantha's face mirrored delight in seeing her, even under the strained circumstances with the agency. She'd missed Sam. And she'd missed their lunches out together while they rehashed all of the idiotic maneuverings the middle management constantly did. She'd missed going shopping with her, too. In truth, she'd missed a lot of her life here in the city, and she really thought she wouldn't miss it at all. That didn't mean she wasn't content with living in the country, though.

"I'm soooo glad you're here," Samantha gushed as she all but flew down the steps toward Rylee. "There's so much to catch up on. You being married to the studly cowboy for one thing."

"Studly cowboy?" Rylee couldn't help laughing at that comment as she stepped out of the Bug. "Lord, don't tell Jake that. His head is big enough as it is." But Sam was right: Jake was quite a man. Her man. Well, kind of her man.

Sam giggled, and then went on with her list of things to catch up on. "We need to talk about the offer I just got on your behalf for that portrait of him. Plus, there's the whole agency chaos—"

Rylee blinked at Sam's burst of excitement and grabbed her friend's arm as the statement about the portrait snagged her attention. "Offer on the portrait? I never said I would sell that piece. I only sent you a picture so you'd know I actually have been painting."

"It's not like I took the picture and promoted it anywhere, Ry," Sam protested. "A couple of my art collector friends happened to be here and saw the printout of the painting on my desk. Bethany Simmons took one glance and said she'd give you \$1,500 for it. Of course Annette Turner immediately offered \$5,000."

Rylee felt her mouth drop open. It had been a while since she'd sold any of her work for such a sum. She didn't need the money, but the idea that someone would pay that much after seeing just a computer printout of her painting gave her ego a lift. Not that she would sell the painting. She'd put her heart into it. Plus it might be all of Jake

she'd ever have in another ten or so months. Maybe in less time than that, with the way things were going now.

She shook her head. "Not happening." When Sam looked ready to attempt to change her mind, Rylee quickly said, "That one is mine, but I suppose I could paint another one...with less of the actual Jake in it. Maybe I could use Rusty as a model. He's a pretty decent looking cowboy too."

"You paint that, and it's mine. I'll top whatever Bethany or Annette would offer."

Rylee watched her friend blush, which intrigued her. Before she could press her about the reaction, Sam turned and led the way into the house, firmly ending the conversation. For now. Rylee intended to pry more details about her surprising reaction to Rusty later. Had she actually fallen for the flirtatious devil of a foreman during that short time she and Rusty had been together? They were so opposite, but they had made a cute couple. Of course, she and Jake were pretty opposite, too.

"On a more serious matter," Sam said, stopping in the large entryway. "Jake has been calling hourly ever since you left the ranch this morning. He's made it pretty clear that he didn't like the idea of you driving so far alone. He wants to be sure you got here in one piece." She glanced at her diamond-studded wristwatch. "The next time he calls, which should be any minute now, he's all yours."

Rylee felt her heart rate pick up. They hadn't parted on the best of terms, and she hadn't stopped to see him before she left the ranch, yet he was worried about her. So worried that he'd taken to hounding Sam all day long. He could have called her cell phone, though. Then she remembered she'd forgotten to charge her phone before she'd left the ranch and she'd lost her car phone charger. She'd definitely have to get another one before she headed back to Kansas. If Jake knew about this situation, she'd be sleeping on her stomach tonight. She felt a blush creeping up her neck and hoped Sam wouldn't ask about it.

"He also said for you to take all the time you needed to settle whatever business problem you were having." Sam avoided looking directly at Rylee as she added, "He said if you really had to stay here, or wanted to stay here... Well, he'd send your things and deal with Maybelle."

Send her things? Deal with Maybelle? Stay in Denver? Tears welled in Rylee's eyes. So much for her momentary flash of hoping that his concern meant something positive about their future together. He'd evidently just been calling to check on her because of his cowboy gentleman nature, not because he really cared. If he cared, he wouldn't be practically saying it was okay if she didn't return.

She swallowed against the pain searing its way up from her heart to her throat. "Guess that sums up what he thinks of our relationship," she said shakily.

"Oh, honey," Sam said gently, drawing Rylee into a hug and making her finally let the tears fall. "I'm so sorry. I thought..."

Rylee bobbed her head and stepped back, swiping at the tears on her cheeks. "I was beginning to think so too." She shrugged and nodded toward the stairs. "I need some alone time, if you don't mind. Which room do you want me in?"

* * *

"You told Sam what?" Rusty said on a gasp as he watched Jake tenderly stretch out on his bed at the ranch.

It had taken all day for Doc to finally release Jake from the hospital and he hadn't been in the best of moods. He'd been a grouch ever since Rusty had called to tell him that Rylee had left the ranch at dawn for Denver. They hadn't talked since she'd left the day before, even though he'd considered picking up the phone a dozen times that night to call her. Except he didn't rightly know what to tell her.

He sucked in a breath against the throbbing pain in his head and allowed it to ease a bit while Rusty stood waiting for an answer. Let him wait. Jake's ego had been bruised from her witnessing his being thrown by that damn piebald. It had been battered even more when she'd gotten all huffy because it still bothered him that she'd basically financed the improvements to his ranch. She had trouble understanding a man and his pride. Worse than all the other, though, she'd left for Denver without even calling him. That had really slapped him upside the head with how she felt about him.

Their lives were worlds apart. He'd started to see them melding together, but he'd been wrong.

He winced as the pain in his head reminded him what an idiot he could be, thinking he could still break an untamed horse...thinking he could make a sexy little city gal happy enough to stay with him. He glowered at Rusty and gritted out, "I told her I'd pack up Rylee's things and send them to her." He didn't mention that he'd been calling nearly every hour on the hour to see if Samantha had heard anything from Rylee. He didn't mention that he'd taken the chicken way out and called Samantha instead of calling his wife's cell phone.

"You must've hit your head harder than I thought," Rusty said, shaking his head in disbelief. "You're in love with her and we both know it."

Jake glowered at Rusty. "I'll admit we're damn good together at times." His thoughts immediately went to the last night they'd made love. She'd about worn him out that night, and it was a good kind of wearing out.

He forced the memory away and focused on how she'd so easily financed his ranch...without even talking to him about it. She'd told him that people in a real marriage shared everything, and that she'd just been trying to help him. But people in a real marriage, to him, shared everything and that included trust and honesty. She hadn't trusted him enough to discuss the problem with his banker before she tossed her inherited money at the problem. She hadn't trusted him to try and help her with her own business problems either. Okay, they hadn't discussed her business problems because he'd not encouraged her to do so. It was that whole separate lives thing that he'd been struggling to hold onto so he wouldn't get so involved with Rylee that he couldn't let her go as he'd promised he would.

He shut his eyes, not wanting to see the disapproval in his friend's expression. "We don't communicate very well outside of the bedroom. And good sex just isn't enough to make a marriage."

"It's a good start, though," Rusty attempted to lighten the mood. "Besides, you're not the easiest person to communicate with. You've always tried to handle problems on your own, which isn't necessarily a bad thing. But, Jake, there's nothing

wrong with letting someone who cares about you try to help. Rylee cares about you. A lot. Hell, I think she loves your sorry ass.”

Jake had thought maybe she did, even hoped it. Did it really matter if she had feelings for him? And he for her? This had started out as a marriage of convenience because of his grandmother’s interference in both their lives. He’d gone off on a spur of the moment notion to try and solve the problem with Maybelle, suggesting this crazy arrangement to Rylee. But he surely had made both of their lives even more complicated. What could he really offer someone like her? She’d grown up in fancy houses and had money now out the wazoo. She could live wherever the hell she wanted, do what she wanted after she got that ridiculous agency off her back.

“Damm agency,” he grumbled. He wished she’d told him about all those phone calls she’d been getting that Rusty had finally told him about. Again guilt wiggled its way through him. Why would she have told him? He’d basically rebuffed her every time she even started to mention her business. Idiot! Damn idiot! Now she was off getting ready to face down that mangy board of directors alone. Sure, Samantha was there, too. But he’d rather be there giving those fancy-suited pretty boys a good verbal pounding.

“So you’re just going to give up on your best chance at happiness?” Rusty interrupted his unpleasant musings. “You’re going to all but force Rylee out of your life?”

“It’s up to her.” He rolled onto his side; grimacing at the pain it caused him. He’d done enough damage to her already. It was time to let her make some choices, even if he was pretty sure he wouldn’t like them.

“No, Jake, it’s up to you.” Rusty stormed out of the room and slammed the door shut as he left.

* * *

Rylee tossed and turned all night long and woke up drained of energy the next morning. She was struggling to put on her makeup—makeup that couldn't hide the bags under her eyes—when her cell phone rang. It seemed Sam had the same type of phone and had loaned her a spare charger. But now Rylee had to deal with answering the phone. Since she had an appointment with the entire board and key employees in a couple of hours, she felt certain it wasn't someone from the agency calling this time. No, she sensed it was Jake. She should have called him last night, but his words about gladly shipping off all her belongings from the ranch had cut her deeply.

Resigned to finally speaking to her temporary husband, she walked across the lavishly furnished guest bedroom and picked up her phone. "Rylee," she stated quietly.

"You didn't call," Jake snapped.

As annoyed and hurt as she felt, she was still relieved to hear his voice. The horse could have killed him. She'd played that horrible event over and over in her dreams last night. She could have lost him forever. No. She was losing him forever, she reminded herself. By his choice.

She sucked in a steadying breath and said, "I was tired."

"A simple call, Rylee. It would have taken two seconds." He sounded wounded that she hadn't bothered to return his calls. While she mulled that over in her mind, he heaved a bone deep sigh and said, "I shouldn't have called now, shouldn't have bothered you. Sorry." With that he hung up.

Rylee stood there, holding the phone, unable to believe he'd actually hung up on her. His action made her mad. Fighting mad. How dare he act concerned now when he'd more or less decided he was done with their marriage? How dare he announce one moment that he would be getting her things out of his house as quickly as possible, and in the next moment call her and sound worried about her?

Darn, stubborn cowboy! He didn't want to end the marriage. He just didn't want to hazard actually talking to her about what it would take to make it real. But he cared for her; she knew it with all her female intuition. If she'd been thinking straight yesterday as she drove, she'd have remembered all the little things he did for her that should have told her he loved her. Like making certain she had all the space for her art

work that she wanted. Like buying her boots last week and telling her he'd found a very tame horse he planned to buy for her. Like the way he held her so tightly after they made love...

She tossed the phone on the disheveled bed and marched determinedly back to the bathroom to finish putting on her makeup. It appeared that she would have to take the bull—her husband—by the horns and shake some sense into him. She'd have to get him to listen to reason about this whole sharing of everything: feelings, opinions, and most importantly money. And soon she would have even more money, since she'd decided to accept the Board's latest offer to buy her out. No more "should I?" or "should I not?" about the matter because of what her father might have wanted. This was her life, and she didn't want anymore to do with the agency. She had a budding career as an artist, a new life to fully get involved in, and a husband to convince that she belonged with him.

* * *

Jake was sore all over, miserable with missing Rylee, and angry that he'd probably lost her for good with that stupid phone call two days ago. They hadn't talked since. He'd mistakenly told Rusty about his call, and about his hanging up without giving Rylee a chance to really say anything. Of course his good friend had called him an idiot, and he'd been right. What he should be doing was getting in his truck and hightailing it to Denver to talk face-to-face with his wife. Instead he was getting ready for a damn barbeque to promote the new dude ranch operation. He wasn't in a partying mood.

"The guests are starting to arrive," Maybelle called down the hallway toward his bedroom. "Time to quit your pouting about ruining your marriage and get out there to save your ranch."

"I'm not pouting," he grumbled, although she couldn't hear him. Truth was, he had been pouting. He'd have taken Rylee over his knee and spanked her sweet little

bottom good if he'd caught her pouting about something. He supposed he should have Rusty give him a good swift kick in his backside for acting so stupidly. The thought of Rylee, even spanking her, made him more miserable. After this shindig was over with, he'd definitely head down the road to Denver. They had some serious talking to do.

Chapter Seven

The sun rode high in the sky and the temperature had soared to the upper 90s by the time Rylee turned onto the road leading to the Circle C. As luck would have it the air conditioning in the Bug had given out right after she crossed the Colorado border. She felt grumpy, sweaty, and beyond exhausted since she'd ignored Samantha's pleadings and left for home as soon as the final meeting with the staff had ended. She'd nearly driven off the road twice when her eyes had drifted shut. Both times had shot her adrenaline level through the roof long enough to keep her going for a few more hours. But she could barely see straight now, hardly keep her eyes open.

She encountered cars and pickups parked up and down both sides of the road before the ranch house was even clearly in sight. The barbeque! She'd forgotten all about it, but she would have to deal with it apparently. She'd have to put on a smile and pretend her brain was still functioning enough to pull words into halfway intelligent sentences. Maybe seeing Jake again right now mixed with a large group of people was for the best. Otherwise he'd probably take one look at her, sense she'd driven recklessly overnight to get here, and haul her off somewhere for a sound spanking. That wouldn't be a good new beginning for them. And she wanted a "new" start with him.

Growing more frustrated by the second when she couldn't find anywhere to park—unless she went back almost to the main road, she decided to park right in the middle of the damn road at the end of the main ranch yard. That, naturally, had a number of people raising eyebrows. She didn't really care.

She'd no sooner snagged her purse from the passenger side floor and turned to open her door than she sensed trouble. As she lifted her gaze, she knew she'd been

right. Standing there tall, dark, and wonderfully handsome—mad, too—was her husband.

He jerked the door open and pulled her to her feet, right into his embrace. His heart pounded against her ear and he hugged her so tight that she'd be lucky not to stop breathing. She didn't mind at all. She was exactly where she wanted to be: in his arms. But then he released her and held her at arms length, frowning. Seriously frowning beneath his low-tipped Stetson.

"Samantha called me yesterday right after you left," he gritted out. His gaze took in every obvious tired sign on her face and his expression grew even darker. "What the hell were you thinking? Driving all night, drained from two hard days dealing with that agency matter." He bit out a string of cuss words and gently stroked the bags under her eyes with his thumbs. "I've been worried near out of my mind."

Rylee liked being in his welcoming arms, not being lectured where too many eyes and ears could see and hear their discussion. Exhaustion made her lash out recklessly, "Yet you didn't call to check on me."

"The hell I didn't!" He grabbed her purse, nudged her out of the way, and unceremoniously dumped the contents on the driver's seat.

"Hey!" she protested furiously. "What do you think you're doing?"

He motioned toward the mishmash of stuff and growled, "Do you see your cell phone there? No! Because you left it at Samantha's house." He replayed that string of curses, adding a few more. "You're going to get that sweet bottom of yours blistered for that bit of carelessness."

Rylee's buttocks tightened in response to his statement—no, his promise—and she looked frantically around. She felt some relief when it appeared that no one had heard his comment. Actually the group was slowly moving closer to the house and the vast tables set up laden with barbeque fixings. Then she spotted Maybelle and Rusty, group herders. Silently she thanked them, yet hoping they, too, hadn't heard her angry husband.

"Could we go back to the hugging part?" she questioned, trying to change his mood. The smell of roasted beef and the sweet scent of Maybelle's special barbeque sauce caught her attention. She was starved.

Jake blew out a deep breath and tipped his head back for a second to calm down. When he faced her again, some of the tension had left his expression. "For now. Later, though, we'll be discussing your misbehavior. You nearly gave me a stroke from the worry." He tugged her into his embrace again. "We need to talk about a lot of things, but I'm spanking you first. Count on that."

Suddenly Rylee wanted alone time with him, at least for a few minutes. He'd probably insist upon taking care of that unpleasant matter he mentioned, and maybe that was for the best. Get it out of the way. Then they could return to the party—although she'd be standing for all of it—but at least some of the issues between them would be settled. The rest they'd have to talk about when they really could be alone.

She tugged on his arm, bravely saying, "I'm sure our guests won't mind if we go inside for a bit. Not long. Just long enough to..."

They walked by a group of their neighbors and Jake nodded at them, and then finished her sentence. "Long enough for me to burn your butt. You want your spanking now? Now?"

Nerves tingled in her stomach as they always did before he spanked her. She didn't look at him, just kept smiling at people they passed by and headed for the front door of the house. "I don't want to be taken over your knee now, no. But I don't want anything added to the many things already between us."

They walked through the house in silence, with Jake leading the way. Rylee was pleased to see that he didn't appear to have any aftereffects from the horse-throwing incident. She'd like to have him completely naked, however, so she could check him over herself. Of course, she'd like to more than just play nurse checking over her patient. She watched his confident stride, noted the amazing tightness of his perfect butt, and felt heat. The heat of a woman aching to be with her lover.

He stopped just inside the master suite and motioned her by him. From the rigid set to his jaw, she knew there would be no playing nurse for a while. No playing with her lover either. Darn.

Jake quietly closed and locked the door before he set his hat on the dresser and faced his wife. Acceptance of what he would do saddened her eyes. He considered relenting, but decided against it. She expected this; he needed this. He took her hand and led her to the bed. The bed he'd much rather be tossing her onto so he could drive himself deep into her warm and willing body.

As he sat down forcing that desire away for now, he pulled her closer and undid her jean shorts while she stood anxiously letting him do it. He heard her quick intake of breath, felt her tensing as he shoved the shorts and panties to mid-thigh. God, she was so beautiful. Creamy skin with just a hint of tan. Thick bush of reddish hair surrounding...

He almost groaned, but then battled down his rapidly growing need for his wife. When he glanced up, he saw the distress in her eyes. He quickly pulled her over his lap so as not to draw the situation out and distress her even more.

The instant her hands settled on the floor he swatted her bottom, hard. "We don't really need to talk about why you're getting spanked, do we?" He swatted her again and again. He enjoyed the feel of his calloused hand on her soft flesh. Flesh he would like to be caressing.

She hissed out a breath and said, "No."

"Good." He wasn't in the mood for talking. He remembered how exhausted she'd looked when he first saw her in the car. He remembered the fact that she'd traveled all the way from Denver without her cell phone, and he knew how dangerous that could be these days. "You mean a lot to me, Rylee," he admitted, wondering if she even heard him or if she were concentrating on what he was about to do too much to listen.

"It was stupid," she offered weakly, not commenting on what he'd said.

Feeling a little disappointed, he stopped talking and got down to why they were here now instead of at the party. Two brisk swats, one to each perfect globe. He saw

the prints of his hand on the otherwise perfect white cheeks. She tensed, her unhappiness with the situation evident. Still she didn't refuse to allow him to punish her as he saw fit. Her submission pleased him, and he knew he'd never love another woman more.

Then he thought of her having a car trouble, and having some stranger stop to help her. He saw red and sent a brisk dozen swats to her bottom. "You won't do anything so foolish again."

"I made a mistake," she gushed, wiggling from the last spank. "A mistake."

He knew exactly what kind of things a strange man could have done to his forgetful wife, to his precious wife. "A serious mistake," he said and sent his hand flying down again and again and again.

Her legs straightened, kicked up; her sandals flew off her feet. "Jaaaake." It was a pleading and not just saying his name. "Please stop."

But he couldn't yet. All of the worry, all of the fear he'd felt had hold of him. If something had happened to her... If someone had hurt her... He spanked her grimly, firmly, determinedly until his hand ached and his wife's bottom was crimson red all over. And hot. He felt a wave of heat rising from her very well spanked buttocks. This had been a sound lesson, a deserved lesson.

She bucked wildly under his punishing hand, like the untamed horse that had thrown him. She sobbed and cried out, "I-I won't ever be so forgetful again!" Another swat. Another cry out. "Please...I'm sorry. Sorry! Stop. Oh please."

Jake sent three last firm swats to the under side of her buttocks, and then he stopped. Stopping always had to be his decision. Now, though, he felt that she'd had enough punishment.

The strength of his need for her, of his love for her, nearly made him throw her onto the bed so he could ram his cock deep inside her. But now wasn't the time. She'd been soundly spanked. Now was the time for her to concentrate on why it had happened. Instead, he gently smoothed his hand over her fiery cheeks and said, "Thank you."

She sucked in a shaky breath and craned her head to look at him. Tears still streamed down her reddened face. "For what?" she asked, miserably.

"For coming back." He carefully helped her off his lap.

Rylee's hands immediately went around to rub at her pulsing, throbbing bottom. Jake had given her harder punishments, but this was hard enough. She'd be uncomfortable the rest of the day. Still, she was glad to have this unpleasant chore behind them. As she wiped at her tears with one hand and rubbed her bottom with the other, she thought about what he'd said. What had he really meant?

"We're married. Of course I was coming back." She sniffed away more tears.

He looked relieved, hopeful even. "I know you've been unhappy with me lately."

She didn't answer, but instead watched his gaze shift to where she continued rubbing her bottom. She knew he was staring at the area exposed to him by her lowered clothing. In spite of the fact that he'd just roasted her poor bottom, she felt definite stirrings of arousal, just as she had when they walked through the house. Heat coiled within her. Moisture beaded between her legs.

His chest shuddered and she noted the way his jeans bulged. He wanted her. Bad. Yet he didn't pursue the course she'd hoped he would. He stood and with shaking hands carefully pulled her panties and then her shorts up.

"Jake—" Rylee protested, hissing at the pain, wanting the clothing removed not pulled back into place.

"No. You need to remember this spanking." He shook his head and buttoned the shorts. "After what I said before you left... Well, I wasn't sure you wanted to come back."

It hurt so much to have her tenderized bottom tightly enclosed in the thick denim material. When she finally could speak again, she said, "I was always sure I wanted to come back." She looked him straight in the eye. "But after what you told Sam, I wasn't sure I would be welcome."

He crushed her to him and just held her. Held her and gently stroked her hair, and then her back. When his hands touched the top of her bottom, she couldn't help wincing. Immediately he released her. "Sorry, I almost forgot."

Rylee rolled her eyes. "Easy for you to forget. You're not the one with a burning backside."

"My hand hurts, too, does that count?" he teased, taking her around the shoulders to lead her back through the house.

She didn't bother responding, although she hoped his hand would ache for a good long while. At least as long as her tender bottom would.

* * *

Maybelle walked casually up to them as they came down the front steps. There was a knowing look in her gaze as she approached Rylee with a plate filled with food. "It's good to have you back." She glanced up at Jake. "Isn't it, Grandson?"

Rylee was almost sure Maybelle knew what Jake had just done to her, and it really should have embarrassed her. But it was Jake that blushed as his grandmother's look grew more accusing.

"Yes, ma'am, it is." Then he quickly excused himself, stopping to brush Rylee's cheek with a kiss before he headed over to where Rusty stood with several of the ranch hands. He couldn't seem to get away fast enough from Maybelle's disapproving expression.

Rylee took a bite of the barbequed beef during the awkward silence that followed her husband's departure. What she really wanted to do was go back inside and rip the shorts off, stretch out on the bed, and take a nap while her bottom recovered.

"So have you decided to fight to make this a real marriage?" Maybelle asked and made Rylee choke on the next bite.

As Rylee blinked at her older friend, she could see in her eyes that she'd known all along about this ridiculous arrangement. She heaved a weary sigh. "You know, Maybelle, as a person ages they're supposed to notice less, miss things."

Maybelle laughed and waved at a neighbor walking by. "Honey, that boy has been trying to pull crazy things over on me most of his life." She turned serious. "Rusty

told me all about this little plan of Jake's even before he came to see you. He was worried about his buddy. But when I had a moment to think about it, well, I wasn't worried at all. I was relieved."

"Relieved?" Rylee felt confused, and annoyed with Rusty for going behind Jake's back. She'd give him a good piece of her mind first chance she got!

Maybelle looked over at Jake, who was watching them. She gave him a tiny finger wave and he quickly turned away. "You're just what he needed. A woman who is independent enough to not cling to him or try to change him into something he can't ever be. The first woman he ever loved—thought he loved—wanted him to sell this ranch and move to Kansas City."

Rylee gaped. "Leave this ranch? But he loves it here. This is his life." She couldn't imagine him anywhere else.

"Yes, it is. He's needed someone to love, too, as much as he loves this old ranch." She smiled at Rylee. "You needed a real reason to get out of that city and away from the business you hated so much. I'd seen your curious looks when you saw pictures of the Circle C. I had a feeling you'd like it here, and you do, don't you?"

"I can't imagine living anywhere else now, which seems strange to me. I've always seen myself as a city girl." She couldn't keep from seeking out Jake again with her eyes, and her heart skipped a beat when he glanced her direction. "He's so different from the other men I've been involved with. So..."

"So stubborn? So my-way-is-the-right-way? So dominant?"

Rylee's buttocks automatically tensed and she looked down at her plate. "Yes."

"Honey, the Caldwell men have always been all of those things. But the Caldwell women have loved them anyway." When Rylee hazarded a glance up, Maybelle pressed, "You love my grandson, don't you?"

Jake chose that moment to walk over and it looked like he'd heard the question. For a second Rylee didn't know if she should answer, but he seemed so intense, so vulnerable. She raised her chin and said, "Yes, I love this big, tough cowboy."

Maybelle beamed. "I knew it! I just knew it."

Ignoring her, Jake once again took Rylee by the arm, then handed Maybelle the plate. "I'm sure you can make our excuses, Grandmother. My wife and I have a few things to settle, some personal things."

* * *

This time it was Rylee who led the way into the house. Nerves tingled in her stomach as she took him up to the loft, anxiously asking over her shoulder, "Have you looked at any of my work? I know you hadn't before I left for Denver." She stopped at the landing and searched his face. "This means a lot to me, particularly one piece I've finished recently."

He shook his head. "I didn't want to invade your privacy." When she became annoyed at his seeming to go back to the whole separate lives issue, he held up a hand. "Not because of why you think. Not because of my wrongly believing we should maintain a respective distance about our lives. That was wrong. I was wrong."

Her annoyance disappeared since he sounded serious. She forgave him in that instant. "Okay, but from now on when I want privacy, I'll ask you for it."

She sucked in a steady breath and turned back to the loft. She wasn't at all sure what he would think of the painting she'd done of him. Would he hate it? Would he feel she had invaded his privacy by painting him? She'd never been so unsure of her artwork before.

As she faced him, she found him studying several pieces of watercolor landscapes she'd started of the ranch. He remained silent, enough so that her tingling nerves got even worse. Maybe now wasn't the time...

"Damn, darlin', these are good, even unfinished." His eyes mirrored respect for her work and a wave of relief threatened to capsize her. Then he stepped around her and went directly to the partially covered portrait. "I recognize those boots."

She waited anxiously as he carefully lifted the cloth covering the canvas. Breathing seemed impossible while he stood there silently examining the painting.

Finally she couldn't stand it any longer and she burst out, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"You think I don't like it?" he asked incredulously. "You're wrong. I've never felt so honored. And I even look halfway decent for a scroungy old rancher."

Relief danced through her and she scooted over to his side. "Now you're wrong, Cowboy. You look hot. Sexy hot. The fact is I sent Sam an email picture of this painting, and there appears to be a bidding war for who wants it most."

Now he looked shocked, and a bit irritated.

She went up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek and the irritation melted away. "But there's no question of ownership. The painting is mine." She worried her lower lip for a second before adding warily, "I'm hoping the cowboy himself is too."

"The cowboy doesn't deserve you, but he sure as hell wants you. For longer than that ridiculous year." He tugged her into his embrace, concern in his expression and voice. "Until death do us part, if you'll have me."

Rylee was so happy tears welled in her eyes. Still, she wanted to be certain about something really important to her. "No more what's yours is yours, and what's mine is mine? Because if you're still thinking along those lines—"

"You'll have to be patient with me, because, as you've already been witness to, I have a powerful ego. I like being the one taking care of the 'little lady.'" As she frowned up at him, he flashed her his crooked smile. "Yeah, I know, an archaic attitude."

She considered giving him a hard time about it, but she'd just be patient with him. They'd find their way through all of the financial mess. She decided to put things back on a ground that he was comfortable with and understood. Gently she took his hand and placed it on her still warm bottom. "Cowboy mine, you sure 'took care' of your little lady a short while ago."

He grinned, squeezing her buttock carefully. "Feeling up to letting me take care of you in a whole other way? In a way much more pleasant for both of us?"

"Can I as they say in that country song, spare the horse and ride the cowboy?" She wagged her brows at him mischievously. "I'm hankering for a nice, wild ride."

She was in his arms and being carried rapidly toward their bedroom before she could even resist. Not that she wanted to resist. No, this way was saving her energy, and she would definitely need it as soon as they stripped out of their clothes.

He set her down in front of the bed, reaching to undo her shorts with shaking fingers. "I promise not to buck you off, darlin'. Thing is, I've been missing you a lot, needing you. This might be one short ride."

"Do I look like I care? No." She brushed his hands away and nodded. "Get them clothes off mighty darn fast because I want my ride, and I want it now."

An eyebrow shot up, and then he laughed...and removed his clothes in what had to be record time.

Crooked T Ranch

By Starla Kaye

Chapter One

New place, new town, new beginning. Exactly what Travis needed after too many years spent living out of a beat up old travel trailer and his pickup. Too many years chasing the rodeo circuit and the big money. Too many visits to emergency rooms to get pieced back together after another bull got cantankerous and took it out on him. His last near-death experience had put the fear of God in him and convinced him to seek a new way to make his living.

He stretched his arms high, trying to get the kinks out of his back. Grimacing, he heard the familiar Pop! Pop! Pop! of vertebrae trying to settle into proper position. For a man not yet thirty, he felt older than time itself on some mornings. But he refused to let this be one of those days.

As he looked across the ranch yard from the porch of the foreman's house, he grinned. Damn fine spread old man Thompson had here in the heart of Wyoming. A bunkhouse finer than a lot of hotels he'd slept in; a stable so clean you could almost eat right off the floor. And a main house that looked pretty fancy. A Victorian, he thought people called the style. Too much fru-fru for his taste, but he liked the simple one-bedroom foreman's house enough. His new home.

Home. Hell of a long time since he'd had one of those. He planned on working his tail off to impress Daniel Thompson so he could stay here a spell. Of course he could always wander on back to Texas and maybe work with his family on their ranch. Didn't hold any appeal, though. He and his dad hadn't parted on the best of terms the

last few times he'd stopped by. He wasn't even sure he was welcome there anymore. Darn his dad's stubborn hide!

He planted his battered Stetson on still wet hair and headed toward the main house. As the new foreman about to begin his first day on the job, he had a hundred questions for the owner of the Crooked T. One of them being what had made Daniel give him the job? True enough, he'd grown up on one of the biggest ranches in Texas and new his way around the chores. But all that seemed a lifetime ago. There had to be more men out there than he cared to think about capable of taking this position. So why him?

Travis ambled to the back of the house, the kitchen area. Like on most ranches, the front door was used for company and the back door for everyone else. He put one boot on the first step of the porch and knew he'd never ask those questions about why he was here. He wouldn't risk jinxing his good luck at running into Daniel after his final rodeo. Working here in a part of the country he'd come to like, he'd have a chance to get his head on straight and figure out what he wanted to do next with his life. Invest in his own ranch? Could do that, he had the prize money he'd set aside and it was considerable.

Time to put those decisions aside for now and get on with the job he'd been hired to do.

He raised his hand to knock on the door, and then froze at the gruff sound of Daniel's voice. "Lie still! I ain't got all day to get this done."

A loud SMACK! drifted through the screen door, immediately followed by a feminine yelp.

"Dammit, Dad, I'm lying as still as I can!" came a definitely unhappy feminine protest. "It hurts!"

Jodi? Daniel's daughter? Travis had seen her yesterday and been all kinds of impressed. Cute gal, a little young for him, being only twenty. Maybe twenty-one. Sexy, too. Oh, yeah, he'd been impressed by those mile-long legs in skin-tight jeans, and by a short top that showed off a real nice amount of skin. He'd had more than his share of hot little rodeo bunnies chasing after him when the times were good, so he was plenty

used to “cute” and “sexy.” But there’d been something else about Miss Jodi Thompson that had caught his attention. Still, she was not only too young for him but she was also the boss’s daughter. Hands off should be his motto around here.

He’d stood there thinking about the shapely redhead and had barely noted the continued sounds of what could only be a man’s hand connecting sharply over and over with a bare backside. But when she gritted out in fury, “Stop it, Dad! Dammit, stop!” his attention moved to the kitchen again.

Stopping wasn’t what Daniel had in mind. He made his position clear with a brisk round of loud swats that had to have stung. Travis figured the swats were well deserved. He didn’t particularly like a woman cussing, especially not her parent. He’d been raised to show respect.

“Am I going to have to find a soap bar?” Two more firm smacks landed. “I don’t know what has come over you since you went off to college. Whatever it is, I don’t like it!” Another half dozen, quick smacks echoed out of the room.

“Oooooooooowwww,” came a pain-laced moan. “I’m too big to have my mouth washed out with soap. Too old to be spanked!”

Travis shook his head at the foolish words, words certain to challenge an aggrieved father. And, taking up the challenge, Daniel laid down a series of what sounded like a new round of sizzling swats. Which were, as be expected, accompanied by hisses and breathy gasps by the female on the receiving end.

“It appears we have a difference of opinion on that notion.” Daniel followed up his statement with a rain of loud smacks that drew desperate pleas to stop. “I didn’t figure that I’d be tanning your butt the day after you got home for the summer, daughter. But as long as you live under my roof, you’ll be getting a hiding whenever you act out of line. Understood?”

Travis had heard his own father make such a comment to his siblings many times. The McVey men were good providers, loyal, proud, and firm believers in giving a good spanking when needed. He himself hadn’t been spanked in a dozen years or so. But he knew his much younger sisters still at home occasionally went over their father’s knee. He’d even overheard his mother getting spanked a time or two over the years.

So, no, he wasn't shocked to hear a female getting her bottom warmed. Not shocked, and not opposed to the idea when the situation called for it. And, from what he'd heard from the hands last night as they'd shared some beers and gossiped a bit, Miss Jodi could be a handful of trouble. She fit the clichéd fiery tempered, strong willed, independent redhead image perfectly.

What was happening in the Thompson kitchen intrigued him, but he sure couldn't interrupt just because he had some ranch business. He should walk away, come back later. Yet his boots seemed planted on the porch. His mind conjured up a vision of the spirited gal lying bottom bared over her father's knee, long hair falling down around her lowered head, and getting a sound spanking. She had a right nice backside encased in jeans. He could only imagine how soft and creamy it was with jeans tugged down. Too bad it wasn't HIM seeing that sweet sight, doing the spanking. 'Course he'd do some caressing, too, once the lesson had been taught.

He blew out a shaky breath and realized his pants suddenly fit a lot tighter. What the hell was he doing thinking about a female he'd warned himself to steer clear of? She was practically a kid still. And the boss's daughter. Couldn't forget that little gem. It was definitely time to think of something else. Like what range to move the herd to next. Or when was that stock sale Daniel had mentioned?

Again, his attempt to steer his thoughts to safer territory was swayed when Daniel snapped, "Take yourself to the corner, daughter! And keep that red bottom bare."

Jodi hissed in pain as she evidently scrambled off his lap, and then sniffled while she awkwardly shuffled across the tiled floor. Dang, he'd have enjoyed watching that little shuffled walk.

"Touch that bottom and we'll have a session with the paddle. Understand?"

"Y-yes," came a subdued response, although it did sound a tad forced.

A second later as Travis was trying to decide whether to come back later, Daniel opened the screen door and looked knowingly at him. "Now that I've taken care of that personal business, come on in. I thank you for waiting."

Travis hesitated. He hadn't particularly wanted Daniel to know that he'd heard the punishment session.

"We can go on into the den to talk, if you're uncomfortable with what you overheard," Daniel began, not sounding at all bothered by Travis's eavesdropping.

Travis shook his head, stepped into the kitchen, and took off his hat while inside as he'd mother had taught him. "Talking here is fine." He couldn't keep from looking toward the corner and the shapely woman standing there with a bright red bottom. The man sure knew how to heat up a backside.

Daniel went to pour two cups of coffee, casually saying, "I take it the idea of spanking a gal when she needs it doesn't bother you." He walked back and handed a mug to Travis, watching him closely. "That particular gal had a definite need. Didn't you, Jodi?"

From the corner of his eye, Travis saw Jodi stiffen. He imagined her face was as red as her bottom, but she didn't say a word. Probably hoped he wasn't staring at her. He did try to focus only on Daniel, but it was impossible. "Nope, I'm not opposed to spanking one. Given a spanking or two myself. When it was needed."

Daniel chuckled and slapped him on the arm. "I knew the first time I saw you that you were my kind of man."

Then he glanced across the room. "Jodi, this is our new foreman, Travis McVey. Remember him? The McVey that won the bull riding event that time we went to the PRCA in Las Vegas." He focused on Travis again. "Heard that you won the title two years running, then All Round a couple of years later. That right?"

He'd run into Daniel at his last rodeo in Cheyenne, but he hadn't known the older man was such a

rodeo follower. Travis didn't think Jodi was a rodeo bunny, though. At least he hadn't seen her around any of the rodeos he'd been at, or heard talk of her.

"You heard right," Travis answered simply. His last big win had been five years ago, although he'd made decent money on minor wins since then. But that world was behind him and he preferred not to talk about it.

"Jodi, acknowledge the man," Daniel prodded, clearly annoyed at his daughter's seeming snub.

She didn't so much as turn her head. "Fine. I'd say it's nice to meet you, but it's not."

Daniel bristled, but Travis just grinned and shook his head. "Leave it go. She's not being exactly disrespectful. She's embarrassed about the timing of the meeting, I figure."

Daniel continued to frown. "It's her own fault she ended up standing in a corner with a spanked butt when you showed up for a meeting." He blew out an annoyed breath. "Pull your jeans up. You can go to your room now, and stay there until I say you can come out."

Irritation fairly sizzled off her. She faced the wall, reached down to jerk her panties and jeans up, and sucked in a sharp breath. She clearly didn't like being ordered to her room. And it plainly hurt like hell to pull those tight jeans over such a well-spanked bottom.

She walked right by them, gazed straight ahead of her and not even glancing in their direction. Her mouth was pinched tight with pain and anger. Spanked but not so much that all the sass disappeared. Travis found himself grinning.

She'd reached the doorway when her father said, "Jodi, you'll be fixing supper tonight for Travis as well as us. You'll be working with him around the ranch this summer, too. So you need to get to know each other some."

Her shoulders stiffened and she slowly faced them. She looked less than pleased.

Daniel didn't give her a chance to protest. "You had better get your attitude straightened out right quick." His right hand moved to his belt, the message silent but clear.

Her emerald green eyes widened a second, and then she appeared to give up the fight. She looked at Travis, unhappy and resigned. "I'll be cooking steaks, that suit you?"

Spunk. Standing there facing a virtual stranger who knew she'd just been soundly spanked like a child, she still managed to show spirit. Dang, but he liked Miss

Jodi Thompson in spite of how much he didn't want to. He couldn't keep from teasing her, testing her. "I like mine well done. Although sometimes I like 'em rare, with a lot of red showing."

Daniel got the inference and gave a chuckle.

Jodi got it as well and her face turned embarrassed pink. She looked as if she wanted to sass back but couldn't come up with something to say.

"Get to your room, daughter." Daniel cut short the staring game between Travis and Jodi.

Before she turned away, Travis noted the way she ground her teeth. Then she all but sprinted from the room. She would be a handful for a man. A woman who'd need a strong man to go nose-to-nose with her, to go hand-to-bottom, too. He smiled to himself. His kind of woman.

Hell no! Scratch that thought. Too young, boss's daughter. Definitely not part of the plan he had for his life. Well, if he actually had one, she wouldn't be part of it.

"Shall we take a look around the ranch?" Daniel brought Travis quickly back to the present. Thank the good Lord!

Jodi decided that she must have fallen out of favor with the good Lord. This was NOT how she'd envisioned spending her summer. Sweat trickling down her back, standing in the hot sun holding yet another fence post to be repaired. The mountains off in the distance looked so appealing. They were no doubt a much cooler place to be than here in the middle of miles of pastureland with heat seeming to roll up off the ground in waves.

Irritated, she glanced over at her nemesis re-stringing the barbed wire not six feet away. The new foreman's biceps bulged with the effort, stretching the fabric of his sleeves to their limit. Legs solidly planted, the muscles in his thighs looked rock hard in his faded and worn Levi's. But then a man who'd made his living for years by using his leg muscles to try and stay seated on a determined-he-didn't bull would look like Travis McVey did.

She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of one hand. Sweating was gross. Oddly, though, the way his sweat-stained shirt stuck to his back only added to

his masculinity. If anything, the wet shirt highlighted the way his back muscles rippled. Class A stud, as her best friend Aubrey would call him. A fact that annoyed Jodi to no end, especially when he basically ignored her. Except when he ordered her around.

"Hold it up straight," Travis gritted out, sliding a glance her direction. His caramel brown eyes sparked with aggravation. "Pay attention to what we're doing here."

"I am! This isn't rocket science, you know. I'm holding a damn fence post, that's all," she countered, tired of this chore and being bossed around. They'd been riding the fences all morning, mending spots here and there. She wanted to go take a cool shower, and then hang out by the pool behind the main house. She wanted to stretch out on a chaise and sip on lemonade the rest of the day, maybe call her friends.

He thumbed his hat up a notch so that she clearly saw his scowl. "You've got a definite attitude problem, don't you? Nothing but a pampered little princess."

She felt herself blush, remembering how he'd heard her father comment on her poor attitude several days ago when she'd first met Travis. Right after she'd just received a sound spanking. "I DON'T have an attitude problem. I'm just tired of this particular job, and tired of your harping at me all the time." She narrowed her eyes at him. "And I'm NOT a 'pampered little princess!' If I were, I sure wouldn't be out here baking in the hot sun, breaking every fingernail doing chores with you."

He moved closer to her. Too close. Wrapping the wire around the post and then twisting the end tight to finish attaching it in place, he said, "Reckon it's time you and I parted for the day, darlin'. Before you find yourself going bottom up and getting a butt warming from me." He stood, towering over her by a good six inches, shaking his head in disgust. "I'll check the rest of this fence myself. You take yourself a ride and do some thinking. Thinking about how you're either going to give me a good day's work, or about how you'll find some other way to fill your time here this summer."

If only she had that kind of choice! She didn't know why her dad was so adamant about her working on the ranch this summer. Usually she helped out some, played a lot. And she sure didn't see why her dad seemed so impressed with Mr. Travis McVey. She wasn't impressed. Well, maybe except for his body, but then what woman with eyes wouldn't be.

Again, frustrated with her physical attraction to him, she snapped, "How dare you talk to me like that! You work for me." She took a quick step when a vein pulsed in his neck, his jaw hardened.

"Wrong," he countered, lifting his battered hat to swipe at the beads of perspiration on his forehead with his shirtsleeve. "I work for your father. YOU work for ME, according to Daniel. Which means YOU do as I say, how I say, when I say. Do I make myself real clear?"

Jodi curled her hands into fists and gnashed her teeth. He was right, and she her father would have the same opinion. She needed some space from this stubborn man. The worst of it was that she needed the space even more to figure out how she would possibly work with him all summer and not want to jump his bones. Idiot that she was, she'd wanted him since that first night when he'd come back to eat supper after her spanking. There was just something about his crooked smile, about the amusement that simmered in his eyes most of the time, about the deep warmth of his Texas drawl.

"I said do you understand?"

"Yes, SIR! Anything you say, Sir. How high do I jump, Sir?"

For just a second that crooked smile slipped into place and amusement danced in his eyes. Both quickly disappeared. "Got a craving to go nose-to-ground, darlin'? To have those tight jeans of yours lowered? To feel a calloused hand on your butt?"

She backed up, and then all but ran for her horse ground hitched a dozen feet away. "Time and space. We definitely need a little, or a lot, between us, just like you said."

Her heart raced as she for her pinto. Would Travis have actually carried forth with his threat? Would he have grabbed her and spanked? Pulling herself into the saddle, she decided that, yes, he would have. And, in truth, she wasn't sure how she felt about that.

The sun rid low in the sky by the time Jodi raced across the ranch yard toward the stable. She hadn't meant to stay out so late, but she'd ridden to her favorite spot along the river and then fallen asleep in the shade of a tree. Besides, there wasn't any certain time she needed to be back tonight. Her father had gone to Denver to a stock

sale for a few days. She didn't have to make supper any particular time. Still, she found herself galloping her horse home.

Sweat spotted her mare's neck by the time they rode up to the corral. But Jodi felt good. Better than she had for days. Good enough even to tangle horns with Travis McVey again. Just the thought of seeing him, of challenging him filled her with an excitement she'd never felt before. It was the silliest thing, to be drawn to a man that cantankerous. To a man who held the same attitude toward women as her father, in that a woman occasionally needed behavior adjustment. But she couldn't seem to help herself.

Jodi dismounted and quickly pulled the saddle from the mare's back, and then led her into the corral. She knew she should brush her horse down, cool her off. But she wanted to get to the house and throw some frozen lasagna into the oven, then find Travis and invite him to supper. She could take care of Sasha after she got the meal started.

A half hour later, lasagna heating up, Jodi hurried toward the corral. She'd take Sasha into her stall in the stable, and then hunt down Travis.

But Sasha wasn't in the corral. And Travis stood in the wide doorway to the stable, every inch of his body emanating anger.

"Where the hell have you been?" he growled. "Why didn't you take care of your horse?"

Her knees shook, but she continued walking toward him. "I had a couple of things in the house to do first."

"You've grown up on a ranch. You know that you curry and cool down your horse as soon as you get back from a ride."

She did know that. Had learned that lesson at a very young age. She nodded, feeling guilty. "I'll take care of her now."

He stepped aside so she could walk by him into the stable that her father was so proud of. Big, modern, virtually spotless with all the latest equipment. Sasha stuck her nose over her stall door and whinnied a greeting. That's when Jodi sensed she was in some real trouble with Travis.

When he took hold of her arm and pulled her with him toward a nearby bench, she knew her plans for the evening had drastically changed. Oh, he might still come share dinner with her, but she'd be enjoying the evening a bit less. Sitting on a warmed bottom.

Travis sat down and looked at Jodi in a no-nonsense manner. Damn but this female could try his patience. He'd put up with her sassy attitude, with her do-as-little-as-possible work ethic all day. No way would he put up with her neglect of the ranch stock, especially her own horse. "Drop them jeans. You've got a lesson needing to be learned."

She stood there, those greener-than-green eyes widened. Her small body quivered once, and then she raised her defiant chin. "You have no authority to spank me!"

He patted his thigh. "Gonna do it anyway. Gonna do a good job of it too." He patted his thigh again, meeting her challenging gaze. "Now drop the jeans and bend over, 'cause it'll only go worse if I have to lower them and drag you down."

She clearly didn't want to, but it only took her a second before she moved to obey. He knew this embarrassed her for her face had turned as crimson as her butt would be soon. He felt her heart pounding as she slid across his lap, particularly when she spotted the curry brush in his other hand.

"You're going to paddle me with th-that brush?" she questioned, looking awkwardly back up at him. She attempted to get up, but he held her fast.

"Uh-uh, darlin'," he said, giving her panty-covered bottom a hard swat with his hand. "You're not getting up until this butt of yours is red hot." Before she could do more than wriggle, he rained down the beginnings of a sound spanking.

"When I tell my father ... ooowww... that you spanked me ... uuuuhhhh—"

Travis didn't let up, continued to build up the heat and made her squirm for all she was worth. "He'll understand."

She must have known he was right about that for she remained silent. He had a feeling she was holding her breath as much as possible. She refused to cry out, which was okay with him.

When he decided the time had come to really set the lesson in, he stopped and picked up the brush. She immediately gave one last valiant effort to get up.

"Not gonna happen." He held her firmly and planted the wooden back of the brush in a SWAT! that echoed around the stable.

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Stop it!" she yelped, arching down into his knees.

"Watch your mouth, darlin'. I don't like for a woman to cuss."

As the brush kept on lighting a fire, she hissed and snarled, "I don't particularly...ooooooooowwww, dammit!.... care what you like."

"Well you should. Next time I'll be baring your backside," he said as he showed his talent with a brush paddling.

Jodi turned her head to glare at him, although her long braid got in the way. "There WON'T be a next time!" Tears trickled down her cheeks and she sniffled.

He had the nerve to grin at her before she lowered her head. "Oh there'll be a NEXT time. Probably a lot of 'next times.' I know it, and I've a feeling you know it, too."

If she ended up working with him all summer long, as her father had planned, Jodi had a sinking feeling that Travis was right. She couldn't seem to keep from antagonizing him, from wanting his attention. Especially when he seemed so determined to not give her attention.

The brush landed briskly another couple of times and she yelped in misery. Okay, so he gave her some attention. But this wasn't the kind of attention she wanted from the big, tough cowboy.

Finally he seemed satisfied and set the brush down. His large hand settled on her burning bottom and just lie there. The added pressure stung some, but every nerve in her tingled with awareness even more. She concentrated on stopping the quiet sobs, on calming her breathing.

"You gonna neglect your horse again?" he asked, gently smoothing his hand across her bottom.

She shuddered, feeling warm all over, inside. "N-no."

Gently he helped her up, grinning crookedly at her as she attempted to ease her throbbing bottom by rubbing it. "Now that this little lesson is done with, you gonna invite me to dinner?"

Their gazes held a second, and then she reached to carefully pull her jeans back up. She wiped at the tears on her face with one hand. "You've got a hell of a lot of nerve, cowboy."

With a nod, he stood and covered her bottom with his hand, pulling her closer. "Yep. And a hell of a lot of appetite ... for food."

Arrogant man. He'd spanked her, was now teasing her. She shouldn't want him within ten feet of her, but she did. Oh yeah. Definitely.

Suddenly he released her, stepped away and looked horrified at having hugged her. He strode toward the open doorway. "Never mind, Miss Thompson, I think I'll go into town with the boys tonight."

Jodi rubbed her stinging bottom again, grinning. He was attracted to her, but didn't want to be. Now this could be even more fun, she decided. "I'm supposed to cook for you and Dad this summer. I know you heard him tell me that."

He froze, but didn't turn around.

"Supper will be on the table in about an hour." She watched his shoulders slump in resignation. Then he disappeared as fast as he legs could move.

Chapter Two

Nearly an hour later Jodi stood in her seriously pink bedroom, twisting and turning in front of an antique cheval mirror. All the while she'd thrown together a salad and checked on the lasagna she'd planned what to wear for dinner. She'd decided to dress to impress, as her best friend would call it. She knew Travis liked the way she looked in tight jeans and short tops, because she'd seen the heat in his eyes when he didn't think she was watching him. But due to the unfortunate incident—as she preferred to call the paddling a little while ago—she just couldn't force herself into tight jeans right now.

She frowned, reaching to fluff her long hair that she'd let hang free. Darn the man, anyway. He hadn't really needed to paddle her. She had planned on taking care of her horse.

No sense thinking about that now; what was done, was done. She twisted and turned one more time. The short, flippy skirt of her sundress made her feel so feminine. And, well, the neckline was low enough to show off a good portion of the upper swell of her breasts. She smiled at the image before her. Just you try and ignore me now, Travis McVey.

Her nose wrinkled. What was that smell? Oh no! The French bread. She'd forgotten all about having put it in the oven before rushing up here to change clothes.

She raced down the stairs barefoot. Oh please don't be too burnt; oh please don't be too burnt!

"What the hell is going on here?" Travis bellowed and stomped into the kitchen through the back door at the same time Jodi ran into the room.

Smoke curled in wisps out the corners of the oven. The unforgettable scent of something burnt to a crisp filled the air. Jodi beelined for the stove, jerking open the oven door. Heat flew up into her face and she immediately started to reach for the cookie sheet holding the blackened French bread.

Travis grabbed her around the waist in the nick of time and pulled her away. "You don't have a lick of sense, do you? You'd have burned your hands but good."

Tears trickled down her cheeks and she sniffled. "Ruined. It's all ruined." And she'd so desperately wanted to impress him with her cooking.

"Ah, shit. Don't cry," he groaned, turning her into his arms. He held her close for just a second, and then moved her backward until she was forced to sit down in a chair by the long oak kitchen table.

Jodi tried to get back up, protesting, "I've got to get that out of the oven."

"You just sit there and let me take care of it." He crossed to the stove and donned the oven mitts from the nearby counter. Sitting the cookie sheet on the stove, he shook his head. "Can't save this mess."

She sniffled again, muttering, "Darn it all." Then she wondered if he'd heard her, remembering how he'd said he didn't like women cussing, at all. He was still looking the other direction, but his head had jerked a little. He'd heard. She squirmed on the chair, wincing. In the rush of the situation, she'd sat down too focused on the problem to feel anything but frustration. Now she felt the definite unpleasantness of sitting on a freshly paddled bottom.

He faced her and evidently saw something in her expression. A crooked grin slipped into place. "Butt stings, huh?"

She tipped her chin up and stood. "A little bit, but I'd prefer not to discuss it."

His grin remained as he watched her join him at the stove. "Okay with me. So, is any part of the meal not burnt to a crisp?"

"I moved the lasagna to the microwave to keep it warm, and there's salad in the fridge." She picked up a towel, shook it over and over in an attempt to blow the smoke away from the oven. He'd left the back door open, so the smoke headed toward the screendoor and out.

He turned off the oven and flicked on the exhaust fan. It helped some, not much.

In a few minutes they had the lasagna, salad, a loaf of white bread, and drinks set on the table. To her surprise, he came around to her side and pulled out the chair for her. The big, tough cowboy was also a gentleman. Amazing, and sweet, she thought.

The chair was hard oak and her bottom was still slightly sore. She grimaced as she settled onto the seat. "Thank you."

The grin wasn't back on his face, but amusement sparked in his eyes. "Would you like a pillow? Normally I wouldn't allow such a thing, but since you're being so nice as to feed me. Well, I reckon it would be okay."

"Didn't I say I'd prefer not to discuss it," she snapped, trying not to meet his gaze. This was more awkward than she'd thought it would be. After all, she was casually planning to share a meal with a man who'd not long ago had her over his knee, paddling her with a curry brush.

"Don't get huffy, darlin', or you'll be tempting another spanking for attitude." He reached to put a serving of lasagna on a plate, and then handed the plate to Jodi.

She took the plate and gave him her empty one so he could use it. "Sorry. I'm just a tad upset with how this all turned out."

"I'll buy that explanation. Now, best eat up. You worked hard today, need the calories." He dove into his food with gusto.

Jodi watched him, nibbling at her food. He'd eaten heartedly every meal they'd been together. Seconds, thirds. But you sure couldn't tell how much food he consumed daily by looking at him. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him, at least any place she could see. All the ranch hands, and her dad, ate an amazing amount. They burned off more calories in a day than most people would burn off in a week. She, however, didn't work nearly as hard as they did. So she only ate a small portion of what he'd served her.

They ate in silence. She didn't know what it was about men that they couldn't seem to eat and talk at the same time. Focused is what they were. One chore at a time.

He'd all but licked his plate clean when he appeared to notice her again. A furrow settled between his eyebrows. "You'd better eat more than that. I work you too hard to get by on a bird's share."

She smiled. "Yes, you do work me hard, but if I ate like you... well, I sure couldn't fit in my jeans or this dress."

Travis had drawn on every ounce of willpower he had while he ate not to look across the table at Jodi. She was the best eye candy he'd seen a spell, especially in that dress. Good Lord, the dress showed off every perfect curve, the tiny waist, and the very, very impressive breasts. He swallowed hard, shifting his gaze to his empty plate as he muttered, "Barely fit in the dress now."

"Are you calling me fat?" she questioned, sounding outraged.

He was on tricky ground here. You didn't talk looks to a woman. They just didn't understand how a man saw things, saw women. He tried to save himself. "I'm just saying you're about to spill out the top of the dress." In a damn fine way.

She beamed, which completely confused him. But then women's reasoning always did confuse him.

"Want me to scrounge up some dessert? There's probably ice cream in the freezer," she said, standing and carrying her plate to the sink.

His gaze watched every blessed sway of her hips, which he was pretty sure she'd intended him to do. Fancy dress, a mite skimpy and tight in places that appealed to a man. A hearty meal, in spite of the burned bread. She was making a play for him! Shit, shit, shit. He was as dense as wood for not having seen it earlier.

He shoved to his feet, palms sweating. Dangerous ground here. Too young. Boss's daughter. Remember that, you idiot!

"Thanks, but I gotta go check on the hands." He slipped out the back door before she could even protest.

Furious, Jodi picked up the nearest object: the oven timer, and threw it at the door. It hit with a BAM! and landed with a loud jingle on the tile floor. Then she spun around to brace her hands on the counter, lower her head, and silently curse him for

being such a chicken. A little flirtation wouldn't have killed him! She'd worked darn hard to set this all up.

She'd picked up the pepper shaker and turned around to throw it as well, but froze at seeing a scowling Travis in the doorway. He strode into the kitchen, walked straight to her and took the shaker from her still raised hand. Before she knew it, he had her facing the counter again.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she questioned warily, not liking this situation at all.

He simply bent her forward until she braced herself on the counter, and he lifted her flippy skirt. "A thong? Jeezzzusss," he gasped huskily.

"Stop this right now. Put my skirt down," she ordered.

His hand landed in a very hard SWAT! on the center of her nearly bare bottom. "The skirt will come down after I get done warming your butt."

She tried to cover her bottom with a hand, but he grabbed it and held it out of the way. He lit a brand new fire in a matter of minutes. "I heard you throw that thing, caught you red-handed about to throw something else. Tantrum was what it was. Don't put up with tantrums."

His hand rose and fell with a determined focus. He intended to burn her bottom but good. She grunted and groaned, danced and wiggled. None of it derailed him from his set course of action.

Jodi was sucking in sharp breaths and whimpering by the time he stopped. She collapsed against the counter as the skirt fell into place again. Even that whisper of fabric hurt like hell. She moaned, "Mmmmmmmmmmm."

Travis pulled her up and spun her to face him. "If'n you ever even think about throwing another tantrum, I swear I'll take my belt to you."

She swiped at her tears, quietly saying, "I won't. I won't. Ever."

The fury left his face, replaced by a fleeting flash of tenderness in his eyes. He seemed to hesitate, and then he bent down to kiss her. No, not to just kiss her. To light a fire clear through her.

And then he was gone again. Striding out like a man with the devil hot on his heels. She was getting to him. She smiled, even as she reached back to rub at the new soreness to her poor bottom.

Why was SHE the one who had to ride all the way out to the old line shack to check that the cabin had survival supplies? Jodi heaved a put-upon, bone-deep sigh. Busy work, that's all this was. Some ridiculous little errand to get her away from Travis for a while. The line shack was only used by a ranch hand caught clear out at the edge of the ranch in the case of a sudden storm, which was more likely to happen in the winter.

Looking toward the small log cabin that had been on the Thompson property for well over a hundred years, she thought about other times she'd been here. With her father many times, as the cabin was near the bend in the river and a favorite spot of his to fish. With a ranch hand or two to bring out supplies. Once with a boyfriend during her first summer home from college.

She smiled at the memory. The cabin lacked in amenities, but it still made for a decent spot for some snuggling and kissing. If her father had found out ... She squirmed in the saddle. Her bottom would definitely have suffered. Even if she accidentally let that juicy tidbit slip out now, her backside would get well warmed. Not a pleasant thought.

Forcing the thought away, her eye caught sunlight sparkling off the water through an opening in the trees just past the shack. At the same time she felt the heat of the day beating down on her. She wasn't expected back at the main part of the ranch for hours. Why not indulge in a bit of innocent skinny-dipping? Who would know?

She nudged Sasha with her knees and sent her into a gallop, heading for the river. Just for an instant Jodi recalled the firm warnings her father had issued over the years against doing such a thing. But there wasn't another soul around these parts. And she was hot.

Something in his gut had warned Travis that he'd better go check on Jodi. An idea that annoyed the hell out of him. Here he'd sent her as far away from him as

possible and now he couldn't talk himself out of the need to check if she was okay. Hell of a thing.

Riding over the rise that overlooked the line cabin, his stomach knotted. Something was wrong; he just felt it. He kneed his horse into a gallop.

When he spotted Sasha ground hitched by the trees alongside the river, he reined in and stopped near the cabin. Relief didn't wash over him like he'd hoped. Instead every sense he had screamed a warning that trouble lay ahead. He thumbed back his hat and scanned the area, straining his ears to listen for any unusual sounds.

Then he saw something that filled him with a real bad feeling. A pair of teenage boys who appeared to be 14 or 15 stood amongst the trees. Their attention intently focused on something or someone in the river. He slid from the saddle and made his way as quietly as possible toward the boys just as they chuckled, nudged each other in the ribs, and pointed at the river.

While Travis ground his teeth, he watched one of the boys hold up a pair of jeans and a shirt Travis recognized as belonging to Jodi. Full of youthful excitement and daring, the boy called out, "Come on, sweetheart. Come out of that water before you prune up."

"Yeah, come on out. We promise not to look," the other boy added with a laugh, elbowing his friend again. "Ain't that right, Jeb? Won't look a bit."

Travis swore under his breath, striding in fury to the riverbank. He was going to tan Jodi's hide but good! Sitting comfortably would be a thing of the past for her. Damn, bothersome female!

He was less than twenty feet away—still unnoticed by the boys—when he heard Jodi let loose with a string of curses that even he had to admire. But, at least, she apparently had the good sense to stay put for he didn't hear any splashing.

The boys grinned even more, clearly amused. They'd made a find that they would remember for years. In their place, Travis would no doubt have reacted much the same. But he WASN'T in their place. He was a grown man. He was responsible for the people working on this ranch, which included Jodi. Even more, he didn't like ANY other man, no matter what age, seeing her naked.

"You boys best get the hell out of here!" he bellowed, moving until he stood beside Sasha. If he hadn't been so mad, he'd have laughed when they paled and all but jumped out of their skins. "You're trespassing, something that I could have you hauled into jail for." He gave them his most threatening look.

The freckle-faced, redheaded boy gained a bit of color and spirit at the same time. He edged away from the riverbank. "We weren't doing nothing wrong. Her pa let's us come fishing here anytime we want."

Travis stepped closer and the boy's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Ain't our fault Miss Jodi got caught skinny-dipping in our fishing spot."

With a curt nod, Travis motioned the boys to leave. "True enough. But you're still going to high tail it outta here or we're going to have more'n words. Understand?"

Evidently they understood, as they raced out of the trees and to a pair of horses tied to a bush about fifty feet away. Travis watched them ride off, trying to calm down a bit before he dealt with Jodi. The sound of splashing snared his attention, though, and he picked up the clothes the boys had hastily dropped. He faced the river just in time to see Jodi darting bare-assed naked into the bushes. Damn fine view.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, grabbing for the clothes he tossed toward her.

"Following a gut notion of mine. Rescuing a female from who knows what kind of trouble." He shook his head at the idiocy of the boss's daughter.

"I didn't need rescuing! They were harmless, and I would have chased them off sooner or later."

Listening to her zip her jeans, Travis could barely wait to get hold of her. "That was a damn fool thing you did. Hormones at their age could make them do something they might normally not have done. Like attacking you." He growled under his breath, thinking he'd have torn them limb from limb if they'd so much as touched her.

She stepped out of the bushes and glowered up at him. "I can handle myself."

He snagged her arm. She tried to pull free but he tugged her toward him, until he held her firmly under his left arm. Then he unleashed his pent up frustration and fear for what could have happened. He swatted her jean-covered bottom over and

over, hard. His hand stung after a couple of dozen swats, but he knew from her mere struggling and angry snapping that he'd made little impact on her bottom. A situation he fully intended to remedy.

"Get yourself into the cabin!" he ordered, releasing her and nodding toward the shack. "Get those damn jeans pulled down ... panties too. I'll be there in a few minutes to heat that butt of yours up but good, after I calm down a bit."

"I'm not going to—"

"I'm giving you a spanking you won't soon forget, darlin'. Inside, in privacy. Or out here where one of the ranch hands might happen to come across us." He nodded in the direction the boys had rode off. "Or maybe those young'uns'll come back and catch me giving you a hiding. That what you want?"

She stomped her foot, rubbing her bottom and hissing, "You're impossible!"

When he started to reach for her, she spun toward the cabin and marched off. "I don't know why I thought for even a second that I liked you."

He watched her as she stormed her way into the cabin and slammed the door. The real problem was that he liked her, too. Ornery woman starred in every nightly dream he had. And he had particularly annoying memories of seeing her with that flimsy dress tossed up, wearing that thong thing. Annoying because those memories usually got him so hard he ached.

Shit. Now he'd be seeing her naked just as she'd strode from the river. She was killing him.

Ten minutes later Travis walked into the cabin, pleased to discover that Jodi had somewhat obeyed him. She'd not only pulled her jeans and panties down, but pulled them clear off. Also missing were her shirt, bra and boots. All sinfully delicious five foot something of her lie temptingly on the single bed. At his entrance, she smiled at him, but he understood exactly what she was trying to do. Get out of a spanking. Seduce him.

His jeans suddenly felt a size too small. He closed the door behind him and faced her. She sure had damn nice legs, breasts that made his mouth water, too. He wanted her.

But not now. Now she needed another kind of attention from him. She needed to have that cute little bottom warmed nice and proper.

Her gaze followed him as he walked to the bed. She might be lying there ready to spread her legs for him, take him deep inside her, but she also looked wary. As if she knew he wouldn't take her bait.

"Don't think I'm not tempted, darlin'. Don't think I don't want to bury myself in your warmth. Ride you good and hard." He shifted uncomfortably with frustrated need. "I'm gonna take you over my knee instead. Redden that bottom of yours for acting like such an idiot down by the river."

"Will you still spank me if I admit I know what I did was stupid? Admit that I was scared, glad you came to my rescue?" she asked hopefully, a pleading look in her eyes.

Travis sat on the edge of the bed, sucking in a steadying breath to resist the primal urge to take her. "Yep. I'm gonna spank you no matter what you say. Now slide on over, darlin'."

She just stared at him for a second, and then looked resigned and did as told. He grew even harder as she stretched over his lap. The desire to yank off his clothes and drive into her was almost overwhelming. Almost. From somewhere deep inside him, he latched onto his willpower. His hand rose and fell on her creamy backside, hard.

"Aaahhhhh," she cried out, although she didn't do more than jerk in response.

For the next ten minutes he spanked her soundly, lecturing against any future foolish behavior on her part. They developed a rhythm: his hand landing hard on her upturned bottom, her bottom wriggling and quivering. He vented his anger and fear at her dangerous action. She hissed and cried out, promised never to act so foolishly again. On and on they went until his hand ached and her bottom glowed crimson, and she lie sobbing.

Finally he figured she'd learned her lesson. He sat there again battling his need to take her, knowing the time wasn't right. Would never be right. She remained limp over his lap, trembling and quietly sobbing until at last she eased her way to her feet. Her hands went immediately to cover her stinging bottom and she looked at him through glassy eyes.

"I-I'm sorry to cause you so much trouble."

He couldn't resist tugging her into his arms, just for a second. "You got that right, darlin'. You're a powerful lot of trouble."

She snuggled closer. "You care for me, at least a little bit, don't you? You wouldn't spend so much time warming my bottom if you didn't."

Travis didn't want to admit she was right, but she stood there so vulnerable, so trusting. He sighed and said, "Reckon I do." In a moment of insanity and unable to resist her sweet temptation, he leaned forward and nibbled one breast, then looked at her while breathing hard. "Damn, darlin', I think about bedding you 24-7."

She nudged off his hat and ran her fingers through his slightly shaggy, dark hair. "Then why didn't you make love to me when I offered to let you?"

He struggled to control his growing arousal, pushed her away from him. "It's not going to happen between us, Miss Thompson. Can't." She looked confused and hurt. He tried to level the ground between them again. "I gave you what I could, what was needed. A sound spanking."

She stared at him, studied something about him, and then made some kind of decision only she understood. Without saying a word, she moved to her clothes and started dressing. She winced as she tugged the jeans over her sore bottom.

Feeling suddenly awkward and noting how the sun had gotten lower through the window, Travis sighed. "We'd best be getting back to the main ranch before someone comes looking for us."

"I'm not going to be able to sit a saddle," she said without looking at him.

"Don't expect sympathy from me about that problem. You deserved a spanking. You'll just have to suffer a sore bottom riding home."

He stood, planted his hat on his head and moved toward the door. Oddly, he didn't want to leave here, didn't want to end their time together. So he determinedly walked outside.

Travis had mounted and had Sasha ready by the time Jodi left the cabin. There was a wistfulness in his gaze as he looked at her, and at the cabin. He'd admitted to

wanting her, even if he'd vowed nothing could ever happen between them. But he was wrong. Something could, and would. She was every bit as stubborn as he.

Taking Sasha's reins, she mounted, sitting down very carefully. "Sure wish you weren't quite so good at giving a spanking."

"A man's got to be good at something," he answered, nudging his big horse into a trot.

Jodi grimaced when Sasha took off at an identical trot. She stayed behind Travis, though, enjoying the view. He rode proud and tall in the saddle, long, muscled legs gripping the barrel of his horse with ease. His taut butt was what really had her attention. She couldn't wait to get her hands on it sometime. She couldn't wait to see that entire hunk bare-assed naked, have him make love with her. He claimed to be good at spanking a woman, which he was, definitely. But she imagined he really excelled at making love.

"Are you coming or not?" he asked, glancing back at her.

"Oh, cowboy, if you only knew," she said, thinking of a whole different kind of "coming." When he looked puzzled, she just smiled secretly and trotted right by him.

Chapter Three

Early morning sunlight filtered into the kitchen through the gauzy curtains at the window over the sink. The water in the backyard pool glimmered Caribbean blue, looked inviting. Maybe later, much later Jodi would take a dip in it, after all it was Sunday and her day off of ranching duties. At least she wouldn't get in trouble with anyone for swimming there, unlike when she'd gotten caught skinny-dipping in the river. A week had passed since that little incident; a week where Travis had done his best to keep his distance from her. The strain of trying to get his attention and being determinedly avoided had gotten to her. Her attitude had basically turned snippy, but she hadn't been able to avoid the emotional build-up.

Because of that stubborn man, she'd done something stupid. She hadn't been up an hour, hadn't even made breakfast yet, but she'd already managed to cross threads with her father. He hadn't bared her bottom to paddle her, but he'd come close and threatened it. Instead he had blistered her ears for harping on something he'd already told her "no" about the night before. She had always had serious trouble accepting the word NO.

"Make pancakes and bacon this morning," her father said as she heard him pour himself a cup of coffee. "Travis is supposed to stop in. Make plenty."

Jodi had planned to make eggs and biscuits, so she wasn't particularly happy with the change of menu. "I was thinking about scrambled eggs—"

"Do you always have to challenge me? I said pancakes and bacon."

He was clearly still upset about their battle last night. Well, so was she. "Fine. Whatever," she stayed facing the window. "I doubt whether Travis comes, though."

"Said he would, so he will." He reached over to turn her to face him. "Are you going to have an attitude all morning? The paddle is right there in the pantry, easy for me to fetch."

She shook her head, and scooted toward the refrigerator to get the milk, eggs and bacon out. "Bacon crisp as usual?" she asked, trying to sound more lighthearted. This was proving to be a really rotten day.

"Good girl," he said, taking his coffee as he strode out of the room. "I'll be in my office, checking the latest cattle prices. Call me when breakfast's ready, or when Travis gets here."

GIRL. It annoyed her when he referred to her that way, like she was still a child. Of course he still spanked her as if she were a child. He claimed he always would as long as she lived under his roof.

Yanking open a cupboard door to get a bowl, she turned her focus of irritation to Travis McVey. After he'd spent so much energy avoiding her all week, she wasn't sure she wanted to have him sit down to her table. If he did come, she wouldn't eat with him. He needed a taste of his own avoidance medicine. Maybe she'd put something in the pancake batter to make him sick, make him have bad day like she'd endured a bad week.

As she went into the pantry to get the Bisquick, she noted the well-used paddle hanging just inside the small room. Her bottom clenched in memory. Okay, so messing with the batter wouldn't be a good idea, because it would make her father sick, too. She was angry with him, but she knew that would be going way too far with him. And he'd make her suffer for the childish action by using that stupid paddle.

With a heavy, disgruntled sigh, she automatically started making the batter. Travis probably wouldn't show up anyway. He'd probably call the house and give some kind of fake emergency message, arrange to meet with her father later. He hadn't eaten a meal with them the whole week.

As the pancakes cooked and the bacon sizzled, she went over and over the current problems in her life. She was in serious like/lust with what appeared to be the most stubborn man on the face of the earth. Her father was stubborn, too, but they

normally went nose-to-nose on whatever bothered them and dealt with it. Yes, a lot of the time she ended up getting her backside smacked a few times because she had a tendency to sass when they argued. Basically, though, she and her father understood each other and got along.

She flipped the pancakes on the long electric griddle. Travis didn't go nose-to-nose with her like he had at first when she frustrated him. Not since the swimming incident; not since he'd spanked her and then suckled on her breast in a heated moment afterward. Her breasts felt heavy just at the memory. She'd wanted him so badly right then, and she had seen in his tortured expression that he'd wanted her, too. But he had this ridiculous notion that nothing could happen between them. She suspected it was an age issue, which she found idiotic.

The mound of pancakes on a platter grew as she puzzled over what to do about Travis. What she needed was time away from the ranch to get a new perspective on the problem. Being around him, yet not being around him due to his avoiding her, only made her irrational...and testy.

She drained the bacon and put it on a plate, thinking about the problem with her father. He was leaving tomorrow for a week in Dallas on business matters. She'd thought that a perfect opportunity for her to get away from the ranch, so she'd asked him last night if she could go with him. She'd promised that she'd stay out of his way and entertain herself. After all, she had a good friend there and they could go shopping and whatever else. In the past, her father had usually given in and let her trail along with him.

Jodi squeezed her eyes shut and remembered how he'd hesitated, and then gave her a firm "NO." His excuse had been that she was being paid to work on the ranch this summer. When she'd attempted to get around that little detail, he'd flat out told her that Travis needed her here. She'd snapped back that Travis considered her a nuisance and didn't really want her under his authority. Her father, of course, had taken that as a challenge and began listing every good thing he could think of about Travis McVey, raising him to a near god-like state. And, of course, she'd lost it because of her current frustration with the stubborn foreman. Huge mistake.

She snatched plates out of the cupboard and set them down on the table in a series of loud Thuds! She'd ended up sleeping on her stomach last night. Again, she blamed her poor behavior problem on Travis because... well, just because.

When everything was set on the table, she called her father on the house intercom system, telling him that breakfast was ready. She'd just turned away from the intercom as heavy footsteps pounded on the back porch. Her heart fluttered. Travis. He had shown up after all. Surprise, surprise.

He saw her through the screendoor, removed his hat and walked into the room. "Mornin', Miss Thompson."

She gave him a curt nod in greeting, miffed at him. Yet she was unable to keep from lapping up the oh-so-masculine sight of him like a kitten craving cream. His dark, shaggy hair looked freshly washed; his usual five o'clock shadow recently shaved. Her fingers ached to slip into that hair, pull his head to her and let him kiss her until her toes curled. He could do that, too.

"Glad you could join us this morning," Daniel said as he strode into the kitchen. "Jodi didn't think you'd come, knew she'd be wrong." Then his brow pinched in irritation. "How come there are only two place settings here, daughter?"

Travis was watching her, waiting for her answer. Almost as if he were challenging her in some way. She didn't know what game he played now, but she didn't like it.

"I nibbled while I made breakfast, so I'm not hungry."

Her father snorted as if he didn't believe her lie and might have commented on that, but Travis intervened. "More for you and I, then, Daniel." He patted his rock-hard, flat stomach. "I'm a starving man."

Daniel grinned and pulled out his chair at the head of the table. "We'll take care of that right quick."

Travis slid a curious glance at Jodi, and then took a seat across from Daniel. She flitted around the kitchen, cleaning the stove, wiping the counter, checking the contents of the refrigerator for what was needed, he supposed. She did everything and anything but look at him again. He had a hard time concentrating on what Daniel was telling him

about upcoming ranch chores because he kept wondering what was going on with Jodi. Why she was working so hard to stay in the room and yet not talk to either of them? She wasn't the quiet type. Hell, she generally talked on and on whenever she was around him. Even normally got along okay with her father, unless they were arguing about one thing or another.

Daniel must have caught one of his puzzled looks toward Jodi, because he said, "Suppose you're wondering why my daughter's so quiet this morning. She's feeling sorry for herself."

Ah, pouting over something. Here he'd thought she was upset with him for basically having steered clear of her this past week. Which had been pert near as hard to do as riding some ticked off bull. He didn't much like pouting, though, and frowned her direction.

She'd been leaning against the counter, idly playing with the end of her long braid. Her face had turned embarrassed pink at her father's remark. At Travis' disapproving glance, she tossed the braid over her shoulder and said curtly, "I'm NOT feeling sorry for myself."

Daniel obviously didn't believe a word she said. "I told her last night that she couldn't go with me on this trip to Dallas. She doesn't take 'no' well. So we 'discussed' that issue a bit." His gaze narrowed at her. "I've a feeling that she's been spending time this morning trying to figure out how to get her way yet. Wasted time."

"I suppose her taking a few days off wouldn't upset our work schedule too much," Travis said, relieved that she might be gone for a while, and yet not.

She perked up, although the look she shot him wasn't exactly appreciative of his help.

Daniel shook his head. "She'll be going back to college before we know it. There's ranching business she needs to take care of, that computer work she promised to do in particular." He shook his head again and stood. "No, son, you need her here to deal with the office stuff that you're no good at."

Her shoulders slumped and it was clear she finally realized that she wouldn't be going to Dallas.

Going back to college soon. The simple words were like a sock to Travis' gut. Not around the ranch, not trying every little female trick to get his attention. Not butting heads with him about something or other, not sneaking off skinny-dipping, not trying to seduce him. Damn! He wasn't ready for her to leave, even if he still didn't know how the hell she could fit into his life.

"You're right. Computers and me, well, we're not on friendly terms." He met Jodi's gaze. "We talked yesterday about you getting started on that new ranching program. Reckon you ought to get to it today." He hadn't talked to her face-to-face. He'd taken the chicken way out and called her on his cell phone while out riding the range.

"It's my day off. I want to do some sunning at the pool, have some fun. Not work," Jodi protested, glowering at Travis. "I haven't had any fun in a week, not since the line cabin. Even that fun you ended up ruining."

Travis was surprised she'd mention the line cabin time. Neither of them had talked about what had happened since, and he was real sure she'd never said word one to her father about it. "Do you really want to bring that matter up?"

"What matter?" Daniel questioned, a father immediately honing in on anything related to his child. Sensing there was something he needed to deal with.

Jodi avoided his gaze, turning to wipe down the counter. "Never mind, Dad. What happened was between your foreman and me. We've settled our difference of opinion on that incident."

When Daniel bristled, Travis slid back his chair and stood. Her father was real close to losing his patience with her again. "She's right, Daniel. It's nothing you need to worry about. I handled things."

Daniel didn't appear happy, but he headed for the doorway leading back into the house. "You can do your sunning after you spend a few hours on that program."

As soon as Daniel was out of sight, Travis walked next to Jodi as she put the dishes in the dishwasher, leaning close. "I'll meet you in the stable's office when you're through here. I'll be right there with you until you're good and started on the project."

"I seriously doubt you'll be there," she snapped, nudging him away. "You've become as expert at avoiding me as you were at bull riding."

Travis knew she was right, and he felt guilty about having hurt her feelings. This was just all so hard for him: wanting her, knowing he shouldn't. He didn't like being confused about things.

"Said I'd be there, and I will." He headed for the door, half wishing he were back risking his sorry neck on some bull.

A wet sponge hit him mid back. Instantly he spun to face her, bending down to scoop it up. His gaze was hard as he walked straight to her.

"Didn't we have a lesson already about not throwing things? About how much I dislike tantrums?"

The ornery female stood her ground, even if he saw the color fade from her face. "It was just a sponge."

He set the sponge on the counter and spun her around. She nearly lost her footing, but grabbed the counter to keep from falling. In a flash he swatted her jean-covered bottom a half dozen times.

Daniel stood in the doorway to the kitchen when Travis released her and she railed at him in feminine outrage. "That was uncalled-for, you- you, you cowboy!" She rubbed her bottom.

"Not from what I saw," Daniel countered. "I'd have given you much worse, and you know it."

She blinked and inched closer to Travis. Clearly he was the worst of two evils, Travis decided. Yet he didn't mind at all that she turned to him for protection.

"He-he just makes me so mad sometimes," she said breathlessly.

"I think you need some cooling down time in your room." Daniel motioned into the house.

"Daaad—"

His hands moved to his belt. "Unless you'd prefer some heating up time."

Jodi elbowed Travis in the side as if this were all his fault before she raced out of the room.

"It really wasn't that serious," Travis said, not really wanting Jodi to get a licking for this spurt of mischief.

"She's getting to you, isn't she?" Daniel questioned, sounding pleased. He went to get another cup of coffee. "I'm not going to take her to task. I think some settling down time in her room will do the job for now. I'll send her out to the stable office in about an hour."

Travis nodded, headed out the door. He could use an hour, too, to settle down. He'd spanked her, barely, but the second he'd touched her, his entire body had become hard. What the hell was he going to do about this attraction he had for her?

Two days later, Travis was so mad at Jodi he could spit nails. She'd gotten the computer work done in record time and then hounded him until he let her work more closely with him and the other hands. Against his better judgment. She was trouble waiting to happen. His nerves were shot from trying to watch over her.

He'd been doctoring a calf in the next pen when he watched Jodi suddenly land on her backside with a bone-jarring thud. She sat there in the dirt, cursing a blue streak at the calf that had knocked her flat. He didn't like her getting hurt; he didn't like her cussing either. And he particularly didn't like her drawing the attention of the nearby half dozen cowboys who stopped paying attention to what they were doing and to her instead.

When a couple of them started to abandon their task, Travis growled, "Stay with what you are doing." The fierce look he sent them as they glanced his way had them staying put. Annoyed at the unnecessary interruption to his doctoring, he released his calf and marched over to the next pen and where Jodi continued to sit.

As he stood towering over her, she slammed her mouth shut on one last cuss as she rubbed her sore bottom. Her face pinkened when she realized he'd heard her.

"It hurt," was her meager excuse.

He figured it did. "You all right?" he asked, reaching down to pull her up.

"More wounded pride than anything."

He jerked her to her feet, and then tugged her behind him out of the pen where they'd been working on new calves. She scrambled to keep up with his long-legged stride. "Travis—"

Ushering her out of the pen with a hand to her back, he glanced toward the men. "I'll be back after bit, boys. Miss Jodi and I are going to have a few words."

She evidently understood the threat in his tone for she tried to dig her boot heels in but found no purchase. "I AM the boss's daughter, you know," she offered as a weak attempt to stop the inevitable.

Travis merely looked at her, continued to pull her with him toward his foreman's cabin, and said, "And I'm the man that cares too damn much for the boss's daughter. The man who also spans the boss's daughter's britches when there's a need. Like now."

She tripped over her feet, shocked. He'd finally admitted he cared for her. Well, actually, he'd said something along that line at the cabin, but he'd been dead set against the idea. Now it sounded as if he were beginning to accept it.

"Stop dragging your feet, unless you want everyone here to see something that should be private." He tugged her forward, steadily.

Jodi's buttocks tingled, as she fully understood what he had planned. She really should wriggle free of his hold and refuse to go with him. But, oddly enough, she could only focus on his admission of caring for her. Her silly heart raced. She'd more than cared for him almost from the moment they'd met when she'd come home from college for the summer. It didn't even matter to her that he'd spanked her a number of times since then. It should, but it didn't.

When she started to slow down, lost in her romantic musings, he stopped and faced her. A second later she was in his arms being carried to his cabin. The glow of warmth about being cared for by him faded as she abruptly faced the certainty she'd soon be feeling another kind of warmth. On her bottom. On her bare bottom.

"I was only trying to help," she finally protested, squirming in his arms as he marched up the porch steps.

"You were told not to, weren't you?" he countered, setting her down so he could open the door. "I knew there was a damn good chance you'd get hurt."

"But I didn't. Just got a little bruised."

He nudged her inside his Spartan living room, headed her toward a well-worn, lumpy sofa. "The next time you got in the way of a calf that had just been de-bulled you could have been. Hurt bad. I've seen it happen to full-grown men." He sucked in a breath that made his massive shoulders look even bigger. "I can't be watching what I'm doing, and worrying about you getting hurt. And I won't have you going against my orders whenever you take a whim to do so."

Her stomach quivered and she felt bad. But not so bad that she wanted to go over his knee like a child. She knew if her father had been the one to find her disobeying him and being in that pen just now, she would have gotten spanked right then and there. He wouldn't have cared who witnessed her humiliation. Travis did care. Still...

"What if I just promise not to go in there again? What if I just went back to the main house and made you a meal that'll make your mouth water?" She knew she was wasting her time by the offer, but figured it was worth a shot.

"I aim to make it clear that you WON'T go back in that pen. I aim to warm your butt damn good so you won't consider disobeying me again anytime soon." He sat on the old, lumpy sofa and pulled her in front of him. "Once your backside is nice and red, and after you've done some corner-thinking time, then you can go make that meal you mentioned. I won't mind that at all."

Jodi scowled at him. "You think I'll cook for you after you've cooked my bottom? Not damn likely."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Am I gonna have to round up some soap for your sassy mouth?"

She clamped her lips together and shook her head. Amusement danced in his eyes. Then he calmly reached out to unbutton and unzip her jeans. She knew better than to resist. Instead she curled her hands into fists and bore the humiliation of being

prepared for a spanking. And it was definitely humiliating when someone you loved did it.

After shoving her jeans down to her knees, he slipped the panties down too. For a second, he stared at her, his eyes darkening. Hope sparked within her. Maybe he'd change his mind. Maybe they'd finally make love for the first time instead. Now that would be a dream come true.

The dream disappeared when he guided her over his lap. Her face flamed, as it always did when she was in this awful position. She stretched out rigidly, feeling the strange sensation of her naked stomach across rough denim.

"Just get on with it, if you're going to do this," she snapped, both aroused and frustrated. His hand had been smoothing gentle circles over her bottom until everything inside her was hot, until she wanted to beg for him to take her. But that wasn't what they were here for.

"Fine by me, darlin'." He began lightly spanking her at first, from one cheek to the other and then the middle of both. "We've talked about your needing to follow orders." The spanking grew more intense. Hard swats landing quicker and quicker, stinging deeper and deeper. "We've talked about your being too head-strong at times."

"Yeeeoowww!" she yelped and kicked when the spanking grew serious. "I'm ssssoorrryyy."

"Not yet you aren't, not really." He made her bottom sizzle with a couple dozen spanks that she'd remember. "You will be, though. Mighty sorry."

Travis stopped talking, concentrated on making sure she understood exactly how little tolerance he had for her disobedience. He swatted her butt so hard the slaps echoed around the room. Her cries were louder. Her promises to never, ever disobey again even louder, accompanied by shuddering sobs. The spanking continued until her voice sounded rusty. Until her butt glowed red with fire.

Then he stopped. She didn't notice at first, just lay there waiting for more.

"Reckon that oughta do," he said huskily, gently smoothing her bottom. He loved touching her soft skin, and when it was heated, well, he enjoyed that, too. He fought

down his desire to mate. "Now let's get you to the corner, darlin'. You can do your thinkin' and I'll get back to doing my job."

Awkwardly, Jodi got to her feet and he guided her to the corner where he'd made her stand once before. She didn't like it, but she wouldn't chance another go round with his hand at the moment. So he settled her in place, making sure her pants were shoved down to her thighs and her red bottom was fully displayed.

"Sure is a mighty pretty sight. That cute little butt, I mean. I don't particularly like seeing it so red, though it doesn't bother me all that much when the reddening was deserved." He bent down and kissed her hot cheeks and she stiffened. "I'd sure like to pay some more attention to that backside, darlin'. Do some soothing. Some caressing. Some ... Well, I think you catch my drift."

He stood, tried to shake off his need for her. He adjusted his too tight jeans while she continued facing the corner. She seemed to be barely breathing. Had he taken way too much liberty here? Was he a damn fool, finally starting to admit just how bad he wanted her?

"I wouldn't mind it," she said quietly, shyly.

Now he was the one he couldn't seem to speak.

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, longing in her eyes. As much time as she'd spent chasing him, all of a sudden she appeared nervous, unsure of herself. "You still want me to fix dinner?"

His chest rose and fell in deep, shaky breaths. They'd shared meals before; he'd spanked her before. He'd suckled her breasts once, and he'd just kissed her hot butt. But this was new ground for them. He didn't want to screw this up. "That would be right nice, darlin'."

She gave him a timid smile. Jodi. Timid. Boy, was this odd. But he liked it, cared for her even more in that moment.

He could hear the hands cussing and yelling at the ornery calves off in the distance. Reality returned. He needed to get back; he wanted to stay. "Damn, you make me crazy."

Jodi hugged the comment to her heart. He made her crazy, too. She'd never felt this unsure before. Boys, men, had been attracted to her for years. She'd had plenty of relationships; only one had been intimate. He'd been a young boy in comparison to Travis, who was definitely all man.

This was the only relationship that meant anything. She didn't want to mess this up.

"Can-can you come hug me? Just for a second." She felt ridiculous standing here in front of him with her pants tugged down and her bottom bare, even if he had been the one to make them that way. She reached to pull the jeans up.

He was beside her in an instant, stopping her. "Keep 'em down a bit longer. You need at least a half hour nose-to-corner."

She wilted in disappointment. Then he pulled her to him for a hug, a gentle hug. One that showed her how tender he could be. They stood that way for several minutes before he carefully turned her back to face the corner.

"I'll be keeping an eye on my watch, darlin'. Don't be leavin' this house before a half hour's up." He blew out a deep breath and strode out.

Jodi stayed where she was, staring ahead at the painted corner but not really seeing it. Even the remaining sting in her bottom faded. What stayed with her was the feel of his arms around her, not the feel of his hand on her bottom. Yes, she believed that she loved the hard-headed cowboy with all her heart, even when he spanked her good and soundly.

Chapter Four

Jodi and Travis had finally gotten started in what she hoped would be a lasting relationship. During the week her father had been in Dallas, they'd not only made peace but also had become lovers. She knew he was still uncomfortable with the age difference, with her being the boss's daughter, and with his having much more experience in all matters of sex. Personally, she liked that he was so much older. She definitely didn't mind him knowing much more than she did about making love. As far as her father being his boss, well, that didn't seem like a problem to her at all. Her father thought a lot of Travis McVey and spoke of it often to her when they were alone.

Yes, she'd thought things were progressing nicely with Travis. Except now there was a new glitch, a new annoyance. He'd left for several days in Denver with her father on a stock-buying trip. She worried that Travis would start worrying to death the differences he believed separated them while they were gone. He'd have too much time away from her, too much time to think. Which was why she'd tried so hard to convince them to take her with them.

Again, she'd lost the argument. Two stubborn men.

Hands on hips, she stood on the front porch and watched them drive away in Travis' new half-ton Dodge Ram pickup. He'd just gotten the truck yesterday and she hadn't even had a chance to ride in it yet. Another thing she was missing out on: a first trip in the fancy truck.

"Well, fine!" she sighed, and then marched back into the house. Leave her behind to wear her fingers to the bone and shovel manure. No. No, she wasn't going to hang around the ranch for three days while THEY were off playing! She'd been stuck

here a month and a half already, except for trips to town for supplies. She was suffering from serious shopper's withdrawal, and she wasn't talking about shopping for supplies.

She made a quick call to Buddy, the ranch hand left in charge while Travis and her father were gone. He didn't like hearing that she planned to drive into Cheyenne and see a friend for a couple of days. She thought he was actually relieved not to have to come up with something for her to do, but he worried that the other men wouldn't want her to leave the ranch. Considering that she lived nine months of the year away from the ranch, she thought that was ridiculous. Anyway, she'd told him that she was leaving within the hour. And she did.

Two days and much plastic later, Jodi walked wearily into her bedroom and dropped numerous, fully loaded bags on the canopy bed. Her friend from Cheyenne, Marianne, stepped beside her and dropped three more bags. For an instant Jodi experienced a twinge of guilt. She was a shopper extraordinaire, but she'd NEVER spent this much money on this many clothes at one time. Her meager savings would be wiped out once the credit card bills came. Her father would be furious. Worse, Travis would look at her with such disappointment, remembering her promise to him to start acting more responsibly.

She fought the urge to reach back and cover her bottom, although Marianne already knew Jodi still received an occasional spanking. And a darn good spanking is just what she'd get for this latest bit of over-indulgence. Probably from BOTH the men in her life. Oh, why was she so blasted impulsive! She should have just stayed here at the ranch as they'd expected her to do.

"We could take it all back," Marianne said, as if she'd read Jodi's mind.

The idea held some appeal. Then Jodi thought about how long it had been since she'd actually bought new clothes, about how most of what she owned was leftover from her first year of college almost three years ago. What she'd bought today—even if it was way too much—were clothes that she hoped would make Travis see her as more mature. There were a couple of items that she hoped would get him all hot and bothered, make him remove them in record time. No, she'd keep what she'd bought

today. Even if her backside would no doubt suffer the consequences of her overspending.

She shook her head. "No, I'm keeping the clothes. All of them." She bent down to rummage through the bags until she spotted the denim skirt she'd picked out just for Travis. "Especially this. Travis will love this little number." LITTLE being the key descriptive.

Marianne's brow furrowed, but before she could say anything the phone beside the bed rang. Hoping, praying it was Travis, Jodi scrambled for the receiver. "Jodi speaking," she said breathlessly.

"Behavin' yourself, darlin'?" Travis asked, the husky way he said "darlin'" causing warmth to curl all through her. Boy, had she missed him!

"Of course." She sat on the bed and savored the sound of his voice. "Miss you."

He chuckled, deep and throaty. Sexy. She could almost see the laugh lines at the corner of those yummy caramel brown eyes. Her heart raced.

"I've only been gone a couple days, but I miss you too." His voice turned even lower, husky. "We'll have to do some serious cuddlin' and kissin' when I get back."

Jodi hugged the comment to her heart, visions of lying next to her deliciously naked cowboy filling her mind. Her stomach fluttered with anticipation. Clearly he hadn't talked himself out of having a relationship with her yet. That was a good sign, a very good sign.

"Darlin'?" he prodded her back to the present. "You okay?"

Okay? She was perfect! "My thoughts wandered for a second. Sorry," she said, noting how Marianne watched her with a knowing smile on her slender face.

Again, he chuckled, he'd no doubt figured out just how far her thoughts had wandered. She wished this conversation were in private; she would have liked to say something that would shock him. But, with her friend listening avidly only a few feet away, she kept her answer simple. "Yes, yes, we'll do just what you said. A lot of it."

She smoothed her free hand over the sinfully short denim skirt on the bed next to her. Thinking about how she imagined his eyes would darken, heat when he saw her

in it, she said more to herself than him, "Wait till you see the new skirt I bought in Cheyenne."

"What skirt? What about Cheyenne?" he pressed not sounding the least bit happy with her.

"Damn, damn, damn," she muttered, chastising herself for being an idiot and more or less admitting she'd not only been shopping, but also had left the ranch without telling him or her father.

"Jodi!" he growled. "You know I don't like you cussing."

She almost cussed again, realizing what she'd said only a second before. Marianne looked worried and was moving a hand sideways across her throat in a silent signal that Jodi should shut up, get off the phone before she dug herself in deeper.

"I'm sorry, I just—"

He ignored the attempt at apology, returning to the other things she'd mentioned. "Are you telling me that you went shopping? That you went all the way to Cheyenne, without telling your father or me?"

"No, I wasn't trying to tell you that..." She let the answer fade away when she grasped that she'd just made her situation worse.

"You're in a hell of a lot of trouble, darlin'," he said, fury raging in his tone. "If I were there right now, I'd have you tossed over my knee and I'd be blistering your butt."

Marianne had heard his angry statement since he was all but yelling at Jodi now. Her friend decided to leave the room and disappeared before Jodi could stop her.

Travis continued in his snit. "We talked about—"

"I know, I know. About being more responsible. About watching my money." She squirmed on the bed, her buttocks practically feeling the fierce sting his hand could leave when he was seriously pissed off with her. Fighting down that unpleasant memory made her snippy. "It's MY money! You can storm all you want, but I'm not taking them back."

"Them?"

Jeez. It just got worse and worse. "I've got to go. My friend from Cheyenne is here visiting, and we're going... we're going out tonight. To Syd's." Of course Marianne didn't know about this plan, because until that very instant there hadn't been a plan for the night. She'd been desperate for an excuse.

"That place is too rowdy for you. You can't go there."

Jodi sat up stiffly. Being told NOT to do something always sparked the rebel in her. "Well, I'm NOT sitting at home twiddling my thumbs while you and dad are off having a grand old time. And don't tell me you won't be going out to some bar tonight. Dad always does when he goes to Denver."

"What your father and I do is beside the point." He let that statement settle in a second before he warned, "You and I are going to have a serious talk when I get back. A discussion about someone's attitude. And about going back on a promise."

"Attitude! I DON'T have an attitude!" Then she heard that very "attitude" echoing in her mind, from the snappy comment she'd made. "Well, maybe a little."

"A dang lot of attitude from what I'm hearing," he countered and she was really glad that he was several hundred miles away at the moment.

She closed her eyes, knowing she'd been making her situation worse with each word that slipped from her mouth. She'd practically begged him for a sound spanking by sassing him just now. Add to that the fact that she'd disobeyed him with the shopping spree. She'd be lucky if she could sit ever again. This time when she spoke, she controlled her tone, "Okay, we'll talk. But I've really got to go now. Bye." She hung up before she could get herself into more trouble...if that were possible.

As it turned out she and Marianne didn't go into town that night. Marianne hadn't felt well and had slept most of the rest of the day. Not knowing what else to do with herself, Jodi had spent the time working on the new ranching computer program. She'd figured that maybe if she had the rest of the invoices entered by the time Travis and her father got back in two days that they wouldn't yell at her quite as much for having taken time off and leaving the ranch.

She'd been exhausted by the time she crawled into bed. All she wanted was a good eight hours sleep, and some hot dreams about her favorite cowboy, even if she was kind of mad at him.

The phone beside her bed rang just as she was drifting off to sleep a little past ten. She snagged the receiver and mumbled, "Jodi."

"Good," Travis said by way of greeting. "You didn't go to Syd's after all."

The pleased-with-himself tone in his voice rubbed her the wrong way. "Not because you ordered me not to. Marianne wasn't up to it tonight, that's all." In truth, they'd decided not to go at all. Now she was changing her mind. They'd go tomorrow night.

"Let's not argue, darlin'. I just wanted to hear your voice, make sure you were okay."

His admission should have made her all warm and tingly. Instead, because she always got cranky when tired, she snapped, "You wanted to make sure I obeyed you, that's what you wanted."

"Someone is sure in need of a butt warming."

"I'm NEVER in need of a 'butt warming,' as you so eloquently put it."

"Darlin', I've never known a woman who needed her backside heated up regularly until now. Until you."

She seethed, not wanting to carry this conversation further. "Whatever. I'm tired, so let's just say good-night. Good-night."

"Good-night, then. Just don't think I'm going to change my mind about spanking you, especially if I find out you go into Syd's before I get back." He hung up, and she slammed the receiver down. Now she hoped she DIDN'T dream about that bossy cowboy.

Jodi had let Marianne sleep late and helped the men with the chores. When she'd returned to the house at lunchtime, she'd found Marianne using her laptop, working hard on a project for her job. So Jodi had reluctantly spent the afternoon helping clean out the storeroom in the stable. It was late afternoon by the time she

tugged off her work gloves, tossed them onto a bench, and walked tiredly back to the house.

She'd ignored the disapproving look Buddy gave her when she strode past him. Foolishly she'd let slip that she and Marianne were going to town tonight, to Syd's for some good old-fashioned fun. He'd tried to talk her out of it, but had finally given up. It really irked her that every man she came across seemed to want to tell her what to do and what not to do.

She planned to get cleaned up, put on one of her new outfits, and then round up Marianne to go out for the evening. They'd eat somewhere. Talk about going to a movie, but Jodi would convince Marianne to go with her to Syd's instead. She was in the mood for rowdy. For fun. For being twirled around the dance floor a few dozen times. In the mood for forgetting how lonely she was without Travis here.

The moon shone brightly in the dark sky as Travis headed down the highway into town from the ranch. His hands clamped so tightly around the steering wheel that his fingers hurt. He and Daniel had come back a day early because Travis had missed Jodi so damn much. And what had he gotten for all his bother? A dang headache and a gut full of frustration.

He spotted Syd's Saloon up ahead and saw that the parking lot was jam-packed. With his window down, he could hear the country music blaring even from this distance. Ordinarily he liked two-stepping as much as any cowboy, enjoyed twirling a pretty gal around the dance floor, too. Tonight, though, he didn't feel like kicking up his heels and having a good time.

The one who would be kicking up their heels later, would be Miss Jodi Thompson. Kicking and squirming and doing who knew what else when he tanned her hide. She'd let that independent streak of hers take hold of her senses. She'd flat out disobeyed him and gone into town to the local rowdy roadhouse, or so Buddy had told him when pressed. The man had been concerned about her and her friend, but he still hadn't wanted to tattle on them.

He turned his pickup into the crowded parking lot and found a spot clear out by the far edge. He'd been absolutely furious when he'd learned what she'd done. His gaze

narrowed and he thought about how a couple of the ranch hands had told him how “damn hot” she’d looked when she’d strolled by them to her car, to head into Syd’s.

One of the neighboring ranchers tipped his hat at Travis as he climbed out of the truck. Travis gave a curt nod. He wasn’t in the mood to stop and chitchat. As he strode into the bar, he barely noticed the band playing their hearts out on stage. He paid no attention to anyone or anything except finding Jodi. When he spotted her seated on a high stool, wearing a denim skirt so short he could see pert near all of her legs as she laughed at some grinning idiot of a cowboy, he saw red. The red her sweet little bottom would soon be.

He shouldered past a pair of young cowboys moving her direction, stopping to make it clear that it would be wise for them to head another direction. Two tables from her, he bit out, “Jodi!”

Her startled gaze flicked his way and she almost fell off her stool. “Travis? What...what are you doing here?”

For a second it looked like the citified cowboy who’d been trying to convince her to leave the bar with him might give Travis trouble. Then he evidently understood the not-and-live-to-see-tomorrow look in Travis’s expression. He all but leaped off his stool to go hunting elsewhere.

Travis edged next to her. “Where’s your friend?”

She became fascinated with her hot red boots. “As it turned out, her father came to the ranch while we were getting ready to go out tonight. He was passing through on business and stopped by to pick her up and take her back to Cheyenne.”

“So you came here by yourself.” His stomach burned; maybe she was giving him an ulcer. He urged her off the stool with a hand to her lower back. “Even though I told you NOT to come here.”

Jodi hated to admit it, but she was relieved to have him here. She was ready to go home, tired of all the flirting fools who only wanted one thing...and it wasn’t to find out how well she danced. She’d much rather spend the night with Travis. Even if he was spitting mad at her, which he clearly was.

As they stopped at the door to the parking lot, she hazarded a glance at him, saw the firm set to his beard-shadowed jaw. “Are you going to spank me?” she asked quietly, relieved that they were alone.

He motioned her out ahead of him. “What do you think?”

“I think I’ll be sleeping on my stomach tonight.”

“Damn right.” He took her elbow and steered her through the maze of haphazardly parked trucks and cars, toward his pickup at the far end of the lot.

Jodi tried to think of excuses for her misbehavior, but knew there wasn’t any. Once again she’d let her stubbornness get in the way. Why, oh why did she constantly test the men in her life?

Travis’s jaw was set in a hard line. His eyes held disapproval and disappointment whenever he looked at her. She hated that. She wanted things to be right between them again. So she waited patiently while he opened her door, unsure what to say to him. But when she turned to climb inside, he stopped her, forcing her forward until her arms rested on the seat. Then, to her shame, he shoved her short skirt up until her panty-covered bottom was exposed.

“Travis, please don’t—”

The words were barely out as his hard, calloused hand cracked down a half dozen times. Her knees gave way and she arched into the seat with each sizzling swat. “Don’t worry, darlin’, I’m not really going to spank you here. This is just a hint of what’s to come.” He gave her bottom another couple of hard swats for good measure before tugging her skirt back down. “Now let’s get on back to the ranch.”

While it hadn’t been much of a spanking, she still settled gingerly onto the seat. She refused to look anywhere but straight ahead, fearing that she might spot someone who’d witnessed the humiliating spanking.

A second later Travis climbed in beside her, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek. When he moved away again, he said, “Don’t worry, darlin’, no one saw me busting your butt.”

“But they could have,” she said forlornly, still not looking at him.

"I reckon I should be sorry, but fact is I'm not." He switched the powerful engine on and headed them out of the parking lot. "I'm disappointed in you, Jodi. Really disappointed. Your sweet little backside is going to suffer for your spurt of rebellion. You'll be spending the night with me so I can spank you good and proper, then..."

She would concentrate on the "then" rather than thinking about the upcoming spanking. "But Dad—"

"Knows you'll be with me." He looked at her, serious. "We had us a talk, about a lot of things. About you. About me and you. We've come to an understanding, and he knows that I want you to move in with me. He's okay with that, although it surprised me some. And he's okay with me taking over certain responsibilities toward you. Like warming your bottom on occasion."

"Move in with you?" She turned on the seat to really focus on him. He hadn't said anything about marriage, but then she knew the idea of marriage scared the hell out of him. Should she be offended that he just wanted her for a lover and not as his wife? Maybe, but she wasn't. She'd take whatever he offered. For now. She still had hopes to change his mind sometime in the near future.

Even in the darkness, she could tell he appeared nervous, uncertain. "If'n you'll do that, darlin'."

She loved him even more because he sounded so worried that she'd refuse him. "Yes. Yes, I'll move in with you." She flopped back against the seat, beaming. "I can't believe this. Before you left for Denver I could have sworn you were still trying to find a way to break off with me. Because I'm 'too young' or so you told me a thousand times."

He reached over and cupped her cheek. "You are, but it seems I have to learn to live with that. Because I need you with me, more'n just seeing you during the day while we're working. More than just at meals."

She sniffled. Happy tears. Love tears. "I need you, too."

He sighed, apparently relieved that she hadn't turned him down. "Now that that's settled, let's get on home. There's still things to be dealt with before we turn in for the night."

Jodi had tried not to think about what would happen when they got back to the ranch. She'd concentrated on getting used to the idea of moving in with Travis. It would seem a little odd with her father living so close to them, but evidently he accepted their situation. Or maybe he was hoping it would turn into an eventual marriage, just like Jodi hoped it would.

Her stomach had knotted the second they'd turned onto the ranch road. By the time they walked silently into Travis's house, she was a bundle of nerves. She followed anxiously behind Travis as he led the way into the bedroom. They'd made love in there many times, but he'd never punished her in here before. She'd gone over his knee out on the range, in the stable, and in his living room. He'd bent her over saddles, haybales, and the table. But he'd never punished her in here.

As if he sensed her anxiety, he came up behind her and walked her to the bed. He turned her to face him and said calmly, "You know you deserve a spanking, darlin'. And you know how much I love you, right?"

She bobbed her head, swallowing hard. "Yes." She looked down at the floor, humbled. "I'm sorry I disobeyed you."

He tipped her head up again with a finger under her chin. "I'm sorry you disobeyed, too. Sorry this is necessary. But I love you too much to neglect my duties to you."

He stepped back. "Let's get this chore done. It's late and we're both tuckered out."

"We could just..."

He shook his head. "Nope. We're not forgetting about the spanking, and we're not putting it off till morning either." He sat on the edge of the bed. "Since you'll be going straight to bed after this, go ahead and slip your clothes off."

Jodi felt her face flame. He'd seen her naked a hundred times, but this was different.

"I'm just saving us both time," he said gently. "Your stripping down isn't part of the punishment. Although I have to admit, thinking about you lying naked across my lap has a definite appeal."

She glanced at him, shifted her gaze down and spotted how he'd hardened already. In spite of the fact that she was about to get her bottom warmed, she heated inside, pleased that she affected him like that. Still blushing, she quickly shed her boots and clothes. As she stretched across his denim-covered thighs, she trembled at the sensation of the roughness of the denim against her bare skin. She wriggled forward slowly, hearing his heavy breaths as he watched her.

"You're killing me, woman," he gritted out, his hands smoothing up and down her back, moving lower to caress her buttocks. He heaved a deep, shuddery breath. "Damn shame I've got to turn this sweet butt red."

Jodi couldn't resist looking back at him and giving him a sassy smile. "Damn shame."

He groaned, and then squeezed his eyes shut and pulled his hands off her bottom. She knew he was changing mindsets now, knew that the spanking would begin soon. She quickly looked down at the floor. Blood rushed to her head. The tips of her toes struggled to stay on the floor.

As his hand connected with her bottom, a loud SWACK! echoed around the room. He had her full attention.

He didn't wait for her response, instead with a hand that felt hard as iron, he spanked back and forth, one cheek to the other. "We've talked over and over about making wise decisions, about not overspending." Two hard blows landed on the middle of her bottom, then three followed to the lower side of each cheek.

Her hips and legs twisted uncomfortably with each biting swat. It was impossible to avoid the punishing fire he lit. Tears stung her eyes.

"I specifically told you NOT to go to Syd's. And you know why. Yet you chose to go, and by yourself." That particular misbehavior seemed to have upset him the most because he seriously spanked her, over and over, concentrating on her under curves.

"I-I'm sorry!" she hissed, trying to arch away. "I'm really sorrrrreeeee."

Even though he heard her, Travis kept right on spanking her reddening bottom. His mind's eye kept seeing her in that barely-there skirt, seeing her perched on a bar stool while at least a dozen half drunk cowboys ogled her. Ogled HIS woman! And he'd

known their thoughts, because they'd mirrored his own. He'd wanted under that skirt. Wanted to sink himself into her warm depths. She was a hell of a woman.

"If you EVER wear that damn skirt outside of this house..." He couldn't even finish the sentence, just smacked her butt hard until he figured she understood exactly what he meant.

Finally, he saw how red her bottom was, knew how sore it had to be. He felt guilty. Just a little. He laid his hand on her buttocks, felt the heat. Felt heat instantly rage through his own body as he hardened all over again.

She lie quietly, although he knew she was probably struggling not to cry. She'd been punished enough. Now it was time for some serious making up.

He eased his hand between her legs, pleased to discover that she was wet for him. Even more pleased when she squirmed her legs apart to give him better access. For a few seconds he trailed his fingers up and down, toyed with her. When she shuddered and looked back at him, he slipped his finger inside her and looked heatedly at her. "I'm thinking it's time to move on to more pleasant things."

She squeezed her eyes shut, gasping as he teased her bud, "Yes! Ohhhh, ohhhhhh, yes!"

He loved the frantic way she moved back as he continued to play, treasured her moans. "Are you going to be my good girl now?"

"Yes! Yes!" Her legs slipped further apart and she stiffened in anticipation. "Soooo good!"

He brought her to climax, proud of his abilities to do so, and then gently stroked her back as he waited for her breathing to settle down again. "Damn but I love you, darlin'. Love taking charge of you, even spanking that cute little butt every once in a while."

She reached back to find his hardened length and begin her own playing. "How about I take charge for a while?" As it turned out, Travis only allowed her to be in charge for so long before he took over once more. But she didn't mind at all.

Chapter Five

The man was impossible! He wanted her up before the crack of dawn every morning, and he expected her to go to bed no later than ten o'clock every night. He wanted her to stop sneaking candy into the house because so much chocolate wasn't good for her. Right! And he kept insisting that she needed to get in touch with the college, get ready to go back in a few weeks. That hurt the most. He was okay with her leaving him, even if it were only for four months while she finished her final semester of college.

Jodi stood at the kitchen window looking out at the pinkish-blue glow of sunrise in the distance. Stood there sulking, eating another of her small cache of Nestle Crunch bars. She still wore the skimpy silk boxer shorts and nightshirt that she put on first thing every morning, since he also preferred that she sleep in the buff. She didn't really mind that edict, especially since he, too, wore nothing but skin to bed. Not having to deal with undressing when they wanted to make love sure was easier this way. And, boy, did her cowboy like making love! Yes indeedie, and he did it soooo well, too.

But he wasn't on her good list this morning, having already put on his "bossy" hat, as she called it. Nagging at her about college again. Right after they'd made some pretty fantastic love, too. She took another big bite, savoring the satisfying taste of chocolate. Heavenly chocolate. Always good for what ailed a woman.

Suddenly a familiar muscled forearm reached around her and snatched the candy bar out of her hand. A hard SWAT! stung her bottom before she could spin to face Travis.

"Where is the rest of this stash?" he said sternly, moving to toss the rest of that precious candy bar into the trash.

“What stash?” she asked trying to sound innocent, not moving an inch from the cupboard where the stash lie hidden behind the boxes of cereal.

“Jodi.” He used her name as a warning, as a promise of trouble if she didn’t tell him what he wanted to know.

Since she’d already fed him biscuits and eggs, she said, “Aren’t the men waiting for you? Aren’t you supposed to move part of the herd to a new pasture today?”

The man might not be a rocket scientist with a wall full of fancy diplomas, but he wasn’t a dimwit either. He saw right through her, knew she was trying to get rid of him, and protecting her last stash of chocolate. He was across the room in an instant, picking her up and setting her out of the way. Then he opened her sacred cupboard and shoved aside the cereal boxes. When he pulled out a handful of candy bars and faced her, she saw that serious trouble loomed on the immediate horizon for her.

“They-they’ve been up there a long time,” she said.

“You’ve been living here two weeks, darlin’. Not a very LONG time in my mind.” He took the beloved candy to the wastebasket and dropped them inside. “Was hoarding those few bars really worth sporting a hot butt for the morning?”

Jodi’s spunk made an untimely return. She raised her chin, glared defiantly at him. “Chocolate is worth more than gold sometimes. Besides, it was only a few bars. The last of my stash.”

Determination sparked in his eyes from beneath his low-tipped Stetson. He walked straight to her, towering over her when she didn’t move an inch. “You lied to me, darlin’. You told me—promised me—just yesterday when you had a tummy ache from eating half a big package of M&Ms that you’d gotten rid of the rest of your stash.”

He shook his head in disappointment and pulled her into a hug. “Damn, Jodi, I held you for an hour in your chocolate-induced misery. Worried about you.” He set her away, not releasing her. “And you lied to me. Didn’t you?”

She wanted to deny it, but the truth sat in the trash a few feet from them. “Just a little white lie.”

Typical of Travis, he took immediate action. He shifted her sideways until he had her tucked under his left arm, holding her firmly in place, and had her vulnerable

bottom facing him. Because it wasn't a really serious act of disobedience, he didn't drag her off somewhere to thoroughly punish her. Instead he peppered her bottom with a couple dozen fiery smacks. Hard enough smacks that they burned right on through the thin silk.

She struggled and squirmed trying to avoid the blows. Each SMACK! was accompanied with words of warning. "NO MORE CHOCOLATE!"

He finally set her free and she clamped her hands on her burning bottom. She rubbed at the sting and scowled at the way he stood there grinning at her actions. Immensely pleased with himself for spanking her poor bottom. She wanted to kick him in the shins, but knew that would really set him off. She didn't particularly want to be dragged to the bedroom and have him apply his belt, which is exactly what he would do.

To annoy her further, he leaned down and kissed her. As usual, her brain turned to mush as her body went to a hormonal high. Just spanked or not, she wanted him right then, right there.

When he stepped back, she blinked, rubbed her bottom again, speechless.

His gaze locked with hers, he said, "Take your time coming out to do your chores, darlin'. Because you need to call the college this morning. Remember? We talked about that earlier."

"You're just so anxious to get rid of me, aren't you? Fine! I'll call the damn college." She marched toward the living room and the phone, not wanting him to see the tears welling in her eyes. His words had hurt a hundred times more than the spanking he'd just given her.

Just as she bent over to grab the phone, he strode behind her and planted another sizzling SWAT! on her tender bottom. She yelped and jerked upright.

Again, she was in his arms before she knew it. He held her tightly against him, so tightly she could barely breathe. Finally he inched her back and looked deeply into her eyes. "It's nearly killing me to let you go off to that college. Don't ever think it isn't, darlin'. But you've worked too hard not to finish your degree."

"You're not tired of me?" she asked in a whisper. Even though they made love twice a day, sometimes more, he still sometimes looked at her like he just couldn't see a real future for them. He looked at her like she was a child, especially when he had to spank her for something. Like now.

"I ought to take you over my knee and burn your butt for that foolish thinking." He kissed her instead, and then turned to head for the door. "What I really want is to strip you naked and take you so damn long and hard neither of us could move the rest of the day. But I can't. The boys are waiting for me."

Jodi stood there, fingers trembling against her mouth that he'd just kissed so passionately. He did love her, and he told her that so many times. She felt like an idiot. He loved her enough to insist she finish the goal of getting her degree that she and her father had aimed for so hard. He was almost out the front door when she said guiltily, "I'll call the college this morning."

His gaze mirrored acceptance and sadness when he looked back at her. "I love you, darlin'. Something fierce."

Three weeks had passed in the blink of an eye. She would leave for college tomorrow morning. Travis had been a bear all day; the ranch hands had steered as clear of him as possible. And he hadn't even caught a glimpse of Jodi all day, since she'd spent it packing and then having some time with her father. Daniel wasn't thrilled to see his daughter leave, either.

He stood, forearms braced on the top of the main coral, only half paying attention to a few of the men as they worked with a new horse. His gut pained him. He couldn't eat, which was not like him at all. His heart hurt, too. Hell, he was one big bundle of misery.

Jodi had walked back to their small house a little while ago. He'd seen Daniel standing on the porch of the main house as he watched his daughter leave him. Even from this distance he'd seen the slump to the older man's shoulders.

Hell and damnation. She didn't really want to go, maybe he should just tell her to unpack her bags. Stay. Stay here with him and her father. Furious with himself for even

thinking that way, he straightened, and then needing a release of his tension, punched the devil out of the fence post with his right fist.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” he growled, his knuckles throbbing, skin busted open and bleeding. The men glanced over and tossed him sympathetic looks, which made him feel even worse. So he cradled his injured hand and stormed toward his house.

Jodi had been bustling around the kitchen, getting supper ready when she happened to glance out the kitchen window. Travis strode across the ranch yard in grim determination. He looked ready to bite nails, but she knew he wasn’t mad at her. This time she hadn’t done anything disobedient. This time she was doing even worse: she was leaving him, even if he’d been the one to insist on it. If he said just one word about her staying, she’d have her car unpacked and clothes put away where they belonged before he could finish his sentence.

She started to turn back toward the stove, when she realized he held his right arm protectively up against his chest. Then she noted the blood on his knuckles. She flew out the door to meet him.

“What happened? Oh, God, Travis! How bad is it? Should we go into town to the doctor?” She forced him to stop on the porch, so she could check out his injury.

He raised his hand high so she couldn’t touch it and refused to look her in the eye. “Fence post got in my way, is all,” he muttered.

“Huh?” She continued to try and look at the bleeding wounds.

“I hit the damn fence post. Okay? Does it make you happy to hear that I acted like a dang fool in front of the men?” He stepped around her and headed inside.

She stared after him for a second. He’d lost his temper with a fence post? She hurried after him and found him at the sink running cold water over the knuckles.

When he turned off the water, she gently she took his hand and dabbed at the wetness with a towel she’d picked up off the counter. “This is going to hurt for a few days. I take it the fence post got out of line and needed a good punch?” she attempted to lighten his mood, worried about him. This was so unlike him. He didn’t just hit things, and spanking her bottom didn’t count.

He blew out a breath. "In truth, I got what I deserved for taking out my frustration on an innocent post."

Jodi lifted his hand to her lips and ever so softly kissed the back of it. "You don't lose your temper easily, My Cowboy. So something really has you upset, and I'm thinking it's me. Because I'm leaving tomorrow."

She was squashed against him in a flash. He'd hugged her a lot in the last couple of days, like he couldn't get enough of holding her. He'd also been almost insatiable in bed, which she hadn't minded at all. She snaked her arms around his waist and held him just as tightly. God, she was going to miss him.

He finally eased away enough that he could look down at her. "I hate like hell that you're leaving, but I'd hate myself even more if I asked you to stay."

Tears glimmered in her eyes and her lips trembled. He looked horrified. When she cried during a spanking, it didn't really phase him much. But when she cried any other time, well, it tore a hole in him and she knew it. She forced a reassuring smile. "You really need to toughen up, Tex, so you don't go all lost and helpless whenever you catch me crying. Women cry for no real reason sometimes. Like now. I'm okay, really."

"That's a load of bull, and we both know it. About your being okay, that is." He stepped back and released her, wincing as he saw the bruising on his hand. "You're right, though, about women crying for any dang thing. Sad movies, sappy movies. When you're happy, when you're pissed off. Hell, whenever."

Jodi sniffed at the last of the tears, grinning. "At least when I'm 'pissed off,' as you put it, I don't ram my hand into the nearest fence post."

He gave her that crooked, lopsided grin that she so loved. His gaze shifted to the stove. "Any burners on? Oven?"

"Not yet. I was just—"

Before she could finish the answer he scooped her into his arms and strode toward the bedroom. "The only hunger I've got right now, darlin', is for you."

She snuggled into him, always pleased when he got determined to make love again. "I guess we'd better see if we can satisfy that hunger. Even if it takes all night."

"Just might. Yep, it just might."

Jodi skipped another class. That made four this week. She sat in bed, surrounded by pillows and wet tissues. Her eyes were scratchy and burned because she'd cried so much. Her throat felt raspy too.

Sunlight filtered into the room through blinds she hadn't managed to close last night. Clothes lie all around the small studio apartment. They fell where she dropped them. As did her textbooks, her notebooks, her pens. She really didn't care, about anything.

She looked at the photo of Travis where it sat on the bedside table. That last week before she'd left the ranch she'd carried her camera around constantly. She'd snapped pictures of everything, as if she were afraid without having them she'd forget it all. Especially Travis. She must have taken a hundred pictures of him in spite of the way he'd grouched about it all the time. But this one of him sitting on his butt in the middle of the coral after having been thrown by a horse he was trying to break to saddle was her favorite. He looked so utterly male in his disgust at having been dusted off the horse's back.

Darn him! She grabbed for another tissue to blow her nose. She'd been here two weeks and had barely heard from him. When she had managed to catch him on the phone, he'd only talked for a minute or so. Like he didn't have time for her anymore, like she was bothering him.

Her cell phone rang beside her. She glanced at it, but it was only Marianne. She didn't want to talk to her friend, as Marianne would only nag at her for not attending class again. She was risking ruining her grade point, yada, yada, yada. So what!

She slumped back under the covers and reached for the TV remote so she could watch some more of the really depressing daytime talk shows. Since she was depressed, too, why not.

A half hour later someone knocked on her door, no pounded on the door. Someone who sounded an awful lot like her father.

In a panic, she flew off the bed and raced to the door. He couldn't come in here! One look at this mess and he would be livid.

"You can't come in, Dad," she said through the closed door. "I-I've got this really awful cold." For good measure she coughed, but it sounded pretty pitiful.

"Jodi Marie Thompson, you open this door right this second!"

She attempted another cough, which sounded even weaker. "You don't want to be exposed to these germs. Really, Dad."

"I'm planning on being the one to EXPOSE something, if you catch my meaning, daughter," he countered, clearly meaning business.

Her face flamed and she jerked the door open, praying her neighbors hadn't heard what he'd said. They might not understand what he was referring to, but she sure did. Fortunately, her neighbors were all students and should be in class right now... like she should have been.

Her father was still a handsome man, but his face was twisted in fury at the moment. His green eyes like hers blazed with promise she didn't want to think about. "Marianne tells me you've been cutting classes."

Marianne was toast the next time she saw her. The traitor.

"Only a couple, but today I'm really not feeling all that well." She couldn't meet his eyes because he always knew when she was lying. She didn't even bother attempting another cough.

He moved into the apartment, carefully shutting the door behind him. His gaze swept in the disastrous state. "This wasn't how you were raised. No man in his right mind would ever want a woman who kept house like this for his wife."

Feeling sorry for herself again, she snapped, "Well, I don't know any man who wants me for a wife anyway! So it plain doesn't matter how big a mess I make."

He went to the loveseat and shoved some clothes off it to sit down. "What about Travis?"

"What about him?" she said, curling her hands into fists. "We barely talk anymore. He obviously doesn't want me back there bothering him. And he's never once mentioned marriage."

"The boy's got problems all over the place. His family has been calling, trying to get him to go back to Texas. His rodeo buddies have been calling him and urging him

to go back on the circuit with them.” He looked pointedly at her. “And the woman he loves up and left him.”

Jodi froze. Texas? He’d told her that he didn’t want to ranch with his family, but families could be pretty persuasive. The circuit? Those dirty, rotten buddies of his! Didn’t his family and his buddies know that he had responsibilities now, a job she was pretty sure he liked? Her, too. He had a responsibility to her because she loved him, although she’d begun to think her feelings weren’t returned, no matter what he’d said before.

Annoyed at that thought, she said, “If you’re referring to me as the ‘woman he loves,’ I beg to differ. I’ve no proof of that, particularly lately. AND I didn’t ‘up and leave him.’ He ordered me to go back to college, probably to get me out of his hair.”

“Of course he did, because he understands that a person has to follow through with something they’ve started.” He shook his head in disgust, waving around the room. “You haven’t been sick, you’ve been sulking. Thinking ridiculous thoughts about being dumped or some other such nonsense.”

She didn’t want to admit he was right. “I’ve got a cold.” Another very poor imitation of a hacking cough followed.

Her father wasn’t impressed. “You know I don’t put up with lying. And I sure don’t pay these kind of fees for you to go to classes, and then you don’t go.” He patted his lap with one big tanned hand.

She knew what he expected, but it wasn’t going to happen so easily. “I’m not living under your roof now. I don’t have to be treated like a child.”

His expression hardened and he patted his lap again. “I’m paying for this apartment, so that makes this MY roof. You’re acting like a child, so you will be treated like one. Now get over here before I get seriously ticked off. Believe me, you really don’t want that happening.”

Jodi didn’t want to obey him, didn’t want to go over his knee for a spanking. Yet she found herself crossing the room to stand beside him. “Is this really necessary? Can’t I just admit that I’ve been pouting a little, and promise that I won’t do it anymore? I’ll get dressed right now and go to my afternoon classes. Okay?”

“Not okay.” He tugged her into the all too familiar position, nudging her forward until he had her bottom exactly where he wanted it. Although he’d spanked her all her life, he hadn’t done so almost since the time Travis had come to the ranch. Travis had taken over the role of authority in her life, the one who punished her when she stepped out of line.

“I think we’ve discussed all that needs to be said. So we’ll just get this bottom warming under way.”

She flattened her hands on the floor and sucked in a breath. At least he hadn’t bared her bottom like he usually did. Still, she knew this was going to hurt.

He got right down to business, spanked with definite intent and purpose. His hard hand landed steadily on her silk boxer-covered bottom and she wished he’d grown weaker with age. But he hadn’t. Lighting a fire in her tail end was his specialty. The spanking went on and on and on until she was kicking and wriggling and sobbing like a naughty little girl getting her bottom soundly heated.

“Daaaad,” she wailed as she kicked her legs and arched her back. “Oooooowwww. Stop! Oh, please stop!”

His hand lie on her throbbing buttocks. “You going to get your thinking straight? Stop feeling sorry for yourself?” He prodded a response with a loud SMACK! to the underside of her bottom.

“YES!”

To her relief, he stopped. He let her stay there until she calmed down some, and then he helped her stand. “You’ve been needing that, I think. Something to get you over feeling sorry for yourself, and back to thinking about others.”

She did her famous spanking dance: wiggle, wiggle, rub, rub. Trying to wriggle the worst of the sting away.

“Travis loves you a hell of a lot, daughter. There isn’t a day goes by that he doesn’t have a hangdog expression on his face. He hasn’t been eating right. He’s losing weight. I’m worried about him.”

Jodi stopped mid-wiggle. “Is he sick? Has he seen a doctor?” She went back to rubbing at the fiery sting with both hands.

"He's heart sick, missing his woman. A doctor can't cure what ails him." He stood, looking around the sloppy apartment once more, but not mentioning it again.

She could cure Travis. "I could drop out of college, come home. You and I both know I'm never going to use this teaching degree."

Her father shook his head, the sun coming in the window catching on the silver streaks in his hair. "He'd be madder than a raging bull if you did that." When she obviously looked dejected, he added, "But you could come home for a long weekend. See if you can get him to eat again."

She gave up on trying to ease away the sting; it would fade with time. "That's perfect. I'll fix him all of his favorites, and I know them, too."

"You need to talk to him about this rodeo nonsense, Jodi. He's only been half listening to me. His buddies are pretty convincing, and I think he's considering joining up with them. At least until you finish the semester."

"No! He can't do that!" she gasped. "It'll kill him. He told me that."

"I know the history, too. Know that he broke his neck the last time he rode and got injured. The doctors told him it was a miracle he didn't die right there in the arena." He looked really worried, more than Jodi ever remembered him being, except when her mother had gotten so sick before she died.

"You've grown pretty fond of Travis, haven't you, Dad?" She went over to hug him, forgiving him for burning her bottom. They needed each other in that moment.

"Like the son I never had."

She slipped out of his embrace, brimming with determination. "You don't have to worry, because he's not going to die in some damn arena. I'll kill him myself if he even hints about joining up with those yahoos."

Her father chuckled. "That's my girl."

"I'll be there tomorrow," she said, already making plans for what needed to be done so she could get away from classes for a few days. Although she still preferred the idea of just dropping out.

He lifted her chin to look at him, saying quietly, "I love you more than life itself, Jodi. It pains me to have to heat your backside, but sometimes you just need a spanking to settle you down. To get you thinking straight again."

She gave him a wobbly smile. "I really hate to admit it, but I'm afraid you're right. I love you, too, Dad."

His eyes shimmered with wetness for a second, and then he strode to the door. "I'll be leaving now that I've done my fatherly duty. I'll see you at the ranch tomorrow."

"Don't tell Travis!" she said anxiously. "I want to surprise him."

"He might not take the surprise all that well, daughter. He might think you're skipping classes for no good reason and turn you over his knee for another spanking," he cautioned.

She figured Travis just might do that, but it didn't matter. "If it happens, it happens. But I'm going to see him and talk to him. We need to get a few things settled between us. And HE needs to get thinking straight."

As her father walked to his car, Jodi closed her door and leaned against it. When the wood connected with her sore bottom, she jerked away. Spanked, again. Evidently she'd be getting spanked her entire life, because she knew for certain that Travis believed a woman was never too old to get turned over a man's knee. Travis WAS going to be in her life, forever. He WAS going to be her husband! And he most certainly WAS NOT going back to the rodeo.

Chapter Six

For mid-September it was pretty dang hot. Travis tipped his brim lower to shield his eyes against the sun rapidly dropping in the west. He shifted in the saddle, looking at the line cabin, then at the river. His mind's eye could still see Jodi as she stepped naked from the river and dashed for the bushes. He'd got an instant hard-on, got one now, too. Damn but she was a pretty gal. And he missed her something awful.

He kneed his sorrel around to head back to the main part of the ranch. What he needed to do was fall face first into bed and sleep for a week. It wouldn't hurt to eat a steak or two first, since he hadn't eaten all day and very little the day before. But then he hadn't felt like eating since before Jodi had left him. He hadn't slept worth anything since she'd drove away either. He didn't eat, sleep, laugh, or even smile anymore. What he'd gotten real good at, though, was snapping at everyone and anyone who crossed his path. This had to stop. He was surprised the hands hadn't quit on him already. Hell, he was surprised Daniel hadn't fired him by now.

Maybe his old rodeo buddies were right. Maybe he needed to get away for a while, if Daniel would let him take a leave of absence. He was miserable hanging around here with Jodi gone until December, but he didn't want to go so bad that he'd lose his job completely. He aimed to be right here when she came home. Home to him. He didn't think he'd ever let her go off without him again.

Topping the rise overlooking the ranch yard, he swiped at the sweat on his brow. He had a pretty good view of his small house from here. He wasn't all that anxious to go there, but if he didn't force at least a bite or two down his throat and catch a few winks, he wasn't going to be much help around here.

He could barely put one foot in front of another by the time he'd cooled down his horse and walked toward the foreman's house. One boot on the porch steps and he smelled lasagna. Jodi's lasagna. He'd remember that smell all his life because it had been the first thing she'd cooked just for him. But surely his mind and his nose were playing tricks on him. She was off at college a couple hundred miles away.

"Are you going to drag your sorry bones in here or not?" he heard the sweet sound of Jodi's voice ask.

Heart pounding, he looked up to where she stood in the doorway. Never had he seen such a welcome sight.

"I'm in powerful need of a kiss from a certain cowboy," she urged, her tone turning sexy, genuine come-hither-right-this-second.

"Jodi? Jodi!" He leaped up the steps and grabbed her as she opened the screendoor. He lifted her off her feet and swung her around, then stopped and held her close. "What the hell are you doing here? You didn't quit school, did you? Because I'll tan your butt good if you did."

She stood on tiptoe and nibbled at his earlobe until he let her go. An impish grin brightened her face as she said, "I'm only taking a long weekend. Had to come home because I heard my cowboy was off his feed, not sleeping, and acting like a bear."

"Your cowboy? Getting kind of possessive aren't you, darlin'?" he teased, hugging her again. He couldn't seem to stop holding her, touching her, making sure she was really here with him. He'd dreamed of this too damn many restless days and nights.

She didn't respond for a minute, and then she seemed to make a decision and lifted her chin in that stubborn way she had. "Let me go, okay? I need to do something."

Travis really didn't want to let her go, but against his druthers, he dropped his arms. To his surprise, she went down to one knee on the wooden porch. Then she took hold of his right hand, looked at it for a moment to make sure it had healed okay. She kissed it, and then boldly said, "Marry me, Travis McVey. Give me the right to feel and

act possessive about you the rest of my days. Let me love you and care for you, and always be there for you.”

Stunned. Speechless. He stood there, mouth gaping, and stared at her. Never had he heard such sweet, wonderful words. He thought his heart just might burst right out of his chest.

Evidently he’d stood there too long taking in and processing what she’d asked. Her face turned embarrassed red. Tears glimmered in her eyes and one rolled down her cheek before she jerked to her feet and raced into the house.

He was hot on her heels, but not fast enough. She dodged him as he reached for her and ran straight to the bathroom. The door slammed in his face and she turned the lock with a loud click. He heard her sobbing broken-heartedly and it tore at him. He felt lower than a snake for having taken an instant too long to react to her question.

He pounded on the door, but she refused to even acknowledge him.

“Jodi, open this door. Please. Just give me a chance.”

“Go away! I’m humiliated enough without facing you again. Just go away,” she said between sobs.

“Not gonna happen, darlin’.” He kicked in the door.

She sat on the edge of the tub, a sobbing show of feminine misery. Then she picked up the nearest thing she could find, a bar of soap, and threw it at him.

Travis caught it easily, shaking his head. “Damn, woman, you’re forever and day throwing something at me.” This time he wasn’t angry about it. This time he figured he deserved it.

She appeared to be waiting for him to take her to task for the act of disrespect. Instead, before he lost his nerve, he went down to his haunches in front of her. While she watched him with big, tear-filled eyes, he reached out and took both of her hands in his and held them gently. Just the feel of her softness gave him courage. “Marry me, Jodi Thompson.”

He heard her suck in a breath, saw her eyes widen. Now she was the speechless one.

“I don’t have your way with words, but I want you for my wife with all my heart.”

She launched herself at him, and they tumbled to the floor together. He thought maybe she’d knocked his back out of whack, but hell if he cared. Especially not when she started kissing him like a starving woman; hugging him with equal fervor. Somehow he managed to get to his feet and carry her to their bed. There he permanently branded her as his woman, making love until there wasn’t an ounce of energy between them.

Three days later, Jodi stretched like a contented cat as the morning sun shining in through the filmy curtains warmed her where she lie naked and sated on the bed. She looked forward to waking every morning in Travis’s arms, to having him make tender love to her. Or wild love. She really wasn’t picky; he was soooo good at both.

He walked into the bedroom fresh from the shower. Six foot three of absolute male perfection, except for a half dozen or so scars from various rodeo and ranch accidents. She thought they only made him look better, tougher. The man was at home with his body and didn’t care at all that she watched him move about the room naked.

She was about to try and entice him back to bed when he pulled on his briefs and said, “You leaving this morning?”

“What?” Surely she’d heard him wrong. They’d had such a wonderful reunion, made love too many times to even count. Everything was perfect. They’d begun making wedding plans, talking about the future. She’d gotten him to promise—at the threat of her strangling him if he chose wrong—to forever forget about returning to the rodeo circuit. No, he couldn’t think she’d really go back to finish the semester.

“Oh, to go pack up my things and bring them back here,” she said, praying that was what he meant. Knowing it wasn’t.

He pulled on his jeans, focusing on her. “We’re not going to have this discussion, are we?”

“But we were making plans.”

“Plans for after you finish the semester.” He found a shirt in the closet and shoved his arms into the sleeves. “Jodi, don’t make me do something that I’d rather not do. Don’t make me blister your butt before you take off this morning.”

She didn’t want this beautiful weekend to end. She didn’t want to return to the reality of being miles away from him, and spending days and nights studying. “I DON’T want to go! There isn’t any point in it, Travis. I’m not going to teach, so I don’t really need the degree. I thought you understood that.”

He padded toward her on bare feet. His gaze steely. “You give your word on something, you follow through. You set a goal, you meet it.”

She sat up, glowering at him. “You gave your word to love me, to marry me. I want to follow through with THAT right NOW.”

Travis really didn’t want to do this, but she was trying to get her way again. “We’ve talked about this too many times. YOU gave ME your word that you’d finish your schooling. I’m planning on holding up to MY word, but evidently you’re having trouble holding up to yours.”

In an attempt to stop him, she thrust her arms out, palms facing him. He simply took hold of those arms, sat on the bed, and pulled her across his lap. “You’re in need of a spanking, darlin’.”

Jodi wriggled for all she was worth. “Am not!”

He swatted her creamy bottom, hard. “We’re not playing a game here: am not, are too. I’m going to burn your butt for even thinking about going back on your word.”

A man of his word, always, he did just that. She didn’t make it easy, either. When she was in an ornery mood, she could be a real brat. She pummeled her fists into his shin, for which he whacked her even harder a brisk dozen times.

She tried to kick her legs up and cover her bottom with her feet, for which he smacked her upper thighs a number of times.

“Nooooo,” she protested, struggling to stay in place so he wouldn’t do that again. Yet she couldn’t keep from hissing out, “If-if you don’t ssssttttoopppp...spanking me...ooooowwww...I’ll never marry you.”

Jodi quickly realized what a mistake it had been to make a foolish threat like that. He roasted her bottom in a fiery rain of smacks until she finally collapsed and just sobbed and limply accepted the rest of her spanking.

After he'd finally stopped, Jodi scooted up to her knees, wincing, rubbing her bottom. She took his face in her hands, held it tenderly, sniffing. "I didn't mean what I said." She sniffed again, and then kissed him. "W-will you still marry me?"

He gently pushed her long hair out of her face. "Gave my word on it already."

An hour later, he stood on the porch and watched her drive away. Only this time when she left, he didn't feel as bad. It would only be for a short while. They had a whole lifetime ahead of them starting in a few months.

Sitting in the church lounge turned into bride's room, Jodi was a nervous wreck. The flowers had arrived late. The cake still hadn't been delivered. And she, herself, was a disaster. Her makeup looked like Bozo the clown had applied it. The hair she'd attempted to sweep up into a cascade of curls looked really bad. And she was suddenly sure that Travis would probably hate her wedding dress. She burst into a fresh round of tears.

Marianne swept into the room with a team of determined bridesmaids. She took one look at Jodi and began spouting orders. "Marcia and Jolenne, remove that goo from her face and reapply the makeup. Susi, tackle the hair problem."

"It's no use, this is hopeless," Jodi sat in misery, watching her longtime friends descend upon her.

"You're just nervous," Marianne soothed.

Marcia dabbed at the clown stuff with makeup removal cream. Jodi looked at them all forlornly in the mirror. "I'm going to make him a horrible wife. I'm too stubborn, too sassy, too young." A tear slipped from the corner of one eye. "He's always thought I was too young for him."

"He's lucky to get you for a wife. Sure you drive him nuts sometimes, but you make him laugh, too. Make him smile," Marianne countered, reaching for Jodi's hands to apply light pink nailpolish.

"Lordy, but that man is a handsome devil when he smiles," Marcia said on a sigh.

“Bet he’s something wonderful in bed, too. Isn’t he, Jodi?” Jolenne asked hopefully.

“Not bad,” Jodi said, with a secretive smile.

“Not bad? Hell, I’m going to have to practice more then. Practice lots,” Travis said teasingly from the doorway.

Marianne, Marcia, Jolenne and Suzi all shrieked at the same time, “You can’t be in here!”

Jodi didn’t care about that nonsense. She burst out of the chair she’d been sitting in and dashed across the room, flying into his arms. He kissed her deeply, with enough sizzle to have her friends behind her sighing in appreciation of a man who knew how to give a kiss right.

Easing back enough to whisper up at him, she said, “As they say, practice makes perfect, cowboy. We’ll just have to practice together. Lots.”

He gave her a final hug, kissed the top of her head, chuckling as he fingered the odd mess of curls. “Not that I don’t love you however you look, but I think you’d best let your friends get back to work on you.” He nudged her the other way, smiling at the other women. “I just needed a Jodi fix.”

Travis closed the door to the gushing croons of “Oh, please, let ME have him!” “Oooohhhh, that was sooooo sweet.” and two heavy, envious sighs. But it was Jodi’s “He’s MY cowboy, all mine, and I love him so much it hurts.” that had him walking away with renewed courage to get married and a smile on his face.

Jodi stood at the front of the center aisle of the filled-to-the-brim church, her hand resting lightly on her father’s bent arm. Pink roses seemed to be everywhere. He’d wanted pink roses because it had been her mother’s favorite flower. They weren’t Jodi’s favorite, but she’d agreed with him that this was a small way she could honor her mother. The music had been chosen by Travis and was being played on keyboard and guitar by some of his rodeo buddies. Buddies she’d threatened to do serious bodily harm to if they even mentioned about Travis going back on the circuit. Marianne had chosen her dress and the flowers. In truth, the only thing about the wedding that Jodi had picked was the groom. And that was all that mattered.

She started walking down the aisle with her father when they got their musical cue. With each step, she thought about how much she loved him. He'd done his best to bring her up alone after her mother died. They'd struggled with each other at times and he'd warmed her bottom on many occasions when she'd tested her boundaries too much. But none of those less than pleasant times mattered. What mattered was that he loved her with all of his heart.

She squeezed his arm. As he looked at her, pride brightening his face, she said, "I love you, Dad."

Immediately his eyes glazed over and he blinked. "I love you, too, daughter."

Jodi blinked away her own tears and looked toward the front. She couldn't help smiling at the crowd of well-wishers; at the row of Crooked T ranch hands all decked out in their Sunday best. At friends and neighbors she'd known her whole life. At her bridesmaids and Marianne, who was struggling against tears herself.

Her heart skipped a beat, though, when she spotted Travis. In faded jeans, Western shirt, and scuffed boots he looked sexy as hell. Without any clothes at all, he looked even better. But all cleaned up, wearing a brand new black Stetson and a custom-made black tux, eyes darkened with pure desire and a promise of forever... well, he was pretty damn hot.

The rest of the ceremony was a blur. At the celebration afterward, she danced with every cowboy in the county until her feet hurt. She accepted cheek kisses and pleads of "tell me everything later"—which, of course, she wouldn't—from her envious friends. And she shook hands of congratulations with her father's older men friends, listened to words of pure adoration from many an older woman about her groom. Through it all, she just wanted to be ALONE with her groom. From the heated looks he kept sending her way while he experienced his own pats on the back and cheek kisses, he was ready to skip out on the party, too.

Finally, Jodi took charge. She marched over to Travis, where he stood being ogled by yet another disappointed-that-he'd-gotten-married woman, and snared his arm. "Sorry, but it's time for us to leave."

He looked so relieved that she struggled not to laugh. Then he took charge, scooping her up into his strong arms. "Ladies, get ready, 'cause she's tossing the bouquet right now. Then we're out of here."

There was a wild scramble behind them as the single women gathered together. Jolenne managed to nudge everyone out of the way and snared the bouquet. She jumped wildly up and down, and then beelined toward a cowboy who started scrambling out of the room. In the mix of laughter and well wishes, Travis carried his bride out of the church to his pickup all decked out in crepe paper ribbons and "Just Married" on the back window. A shower of rice pelted them as he opened the door and settled her on the seat, giving her a kiss to make every female present swoon.

Travis had made the plans for their first night together as man and wife. He'd kept it a secret, even though Jodi had wheedled and wheedled him. She'd been shocked and amazingly pleased when he took her to the line cabin. He'd claimed this was the spot when he'd first realized that she would be in his life forever. When he'd said that, she'd gotten all blubbery and girly, he called it, although he'd beamed with pride at making her cry.

Now, after they'd all but shredded each other's clothes in the frantic desperation to make love, she lie on her side watching her exhausted husband. Husband. Hers. Amazing. She leaned over to nibble at a nipple and gently finger the light feathering of chest hair. He moaned tiredly, but he smiled encouragingly.

"I'm an old man, darlin'. You've got to let me at least catch my breath."

She bit him, lightly. "I happen to be mighty fond of older men." She trailed her tongue around his nipple, pulling on it with her teeth. He swatted her bottom.

"Better be older MAN, not MEN." He reached down to stroke between her legs, to play with her pulsing bud.

"Ooooooooooooo," she purred, shifting her legs so he could play all he wanted. At the same time, she ever so lightly stroked the sensitive skin of his forearm, enjoying the way he sucked in a breath.

In the mood to really play, Jodi grinned teasingly at him. "What if I it WERE men I meant to say?"

Travis caught the amusement, the challenge in her gaze. Well, hell, he didn't mind playing a spell himself. "Reckon I'd have to spank my naughty wife for thinking like that."

She smiled up at him while slowly, lightly trailing a finger down the center of his chest, over his belly button, right on down to the part of him that now pulsed at attention. He sucked in a shaky breath as she encircled him with her hand. Stroking him, gently squeezing him, over and over she watched as he arched up into her hand. Smiled and watched in devilment as she played her teasing, torturous game.

Then she leaned over and used the tip of her tongue to lick to tip of his cock. He drew in a sharp breath, curling his hands into the sheet.

Impishly, she looked up at him. "I've been thinking, if all 'older' men make love as intensely as you do—"

He'd had enough sensual torture. Travis forced her aside long enough for him to sit up. Long enough for him to tug her over his lap as she giggled in delight. "No more talking about other men, darlin'. No more tormenting your husband until he's nearly mindless with need."

She wiggled her bare bottom temptingly, glancing at him with darkened eyes. "Just what are you going to do about it?"

Travis was rock hard and nudging up against her stomach now. He couldn't play much longer, but the sweet sight of her soft bottom was irresistible. He smoothed a hand over the creamy surface, taking a second to trail a finger up and down between her buttocks. She inched her legs apart, which nearly drove him crazy. Drawing on his fast dwindling resistance to just take her, he spanked one cheek and then the other. Lightly, then again slightly harder.

She quivered all over, moaning, gasping, "You-you're going to spank me. Spank my bottom for being naughty."

He gave her another pair of spanks. She sighed, "Ooooooooo.... Mmmmmmmmm"

"Yes, my ornery little wife needs her butt warmed." He was breathing hard now as he swatted her cheeks a half dozen times, only hard enough to light a small fire.

Just enough to have her begin frantically rubbing against him, pleading, “Mmmmmmmm, oh please. Please don’t spank me.”

For once, he knew she didn’t mean a word of what she said. He was to play the gentle punisher, the sensual chastiser. But he could only play this way for a minute or two longer. Accommodating her, he smacked her wiggling bottom another half dozen times until she was near cumming, and so was he.

In a flash he shifted her off of him and face down on the bed. She scrambled up on her hands and knees, sliding her legs apart just enough, and then bent forward to rest her head on her arms. Her creamy bottom was an irresistible invitation. He covered her from behind and thrust long and sure into her warm wetness. He slid his hands beneath her to cup and massage her breasts as they moved in tandem, both desperate now. “My naughty, naughty wife.”

She moved back against him, treasuring the feel of his balls and his thighs slapping against her lightly tingling bottom. “Got spanked. Ooooooooooooo. Spanked for being naughty. Oooooooooooooohhhh, oooooooooohhhhhhhh. Mmmmmmmmm”

Travis rode her hard, pumping deep, thrusting and grinding until they peaked in a combined “OH GOD!” from her and an animalistic groan of near pain from him.

When he could manage it, Travis rolled off of her and drew in deep, calming breaths. Finally, he tugged her closer, grinning as she smiled completely content at him. “I love you so damn much, darlin’, it almost scares me.”

“I love you, too, My Cowboy. With all my heart.

Suzy Q Ranch

By Starla Kaye

Chapter One

He'd seen a lot of gut wrenching sights during his years in some of the worst shit-holes on earth, but this... Well, this gave him the heebie-jeebies clear down to his black soul.

Trent barely managed to slam on the brakes, stunned by the sight ahead of him. He barely missed plowing right on over the ladder braced between the open wrought iron gates leading to the Crawley Ranch. His heart still pounded. He'd nearly killed the crazy ass cowboy adding some finishing touches to the wooden ranch sign.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he roared through the open window of his shiny new, right-off-the-floor room Dodge Ram. He felt certain he'd gained another gray hair or two in the last few seconds. A scorching wave of Kansas hot summer air blasted him, turning his anger up a notch. "Dammit, answer me!"

No response. The ranch hand perilously perched atop the ladder kept right on painting. Gone was the heavily carved "Crawley Ranch" that had been on the sign longer than even Trent could remember. It tore at him. It tore his gut even more as he took in the hot pink lettering of "Suzy Q Ranch." The fanciful yellow daisies on each end of the name made him cringe. He was a warrior who'd seen and done a lot of despicable things in his time, but until now only the sight of a child dying in his arms had hit him this hard. Although he hadn't admitted it to himself, he now realized that he'd needed to see the familiar ranch name, needed to see that the only home he'd really ever known had stayed the same. He'd needed to experience its stability at least this one final time.

Disappointment weighed brutally on him. Shoving open the truck door, he growled, "I asked what you're doing."

"Zip it already!" a female voice barked at him. A very feminine, very sensual voice that was quite a contrast to the snap in her tone. "I'll be done in a minute."

Trent waited with gritted teeth, standing half out of the truck, lost in the midst of shock. Shock because he hadn't noticed how petite the ranch hand was until now. He hadn't noticed the shapely swells of her butt. He hadn't taken full note of the mighty fine legs encased in faded jeans so tight it was a wonder she could move at all.

"Almost done," she said, adding a husky groan from the effort of stretching and tightening those sweet butt muscles. The movement forced the T-shirt she wore higher until a good three inches of tanned skin was revealed. He thought he might almost be able to span her small waist with his hands.

Her groan twisted into a moan of pleasure in his weary mind. Sweat beaded his upper lip, and not from the heat of the mid-July day. An aching need snaked through him, settling low in his body, making his jeans uncomfortable. He hadn't been this hard in a long time. His body's reaction to her essentially doing nothing to entice him irritated the hell out of him. He liked women, really liked them. Clearly his body didn't appreciate the dry spell of going without sex for as long as he had recently. His body was primed for some sheet rumpling with a hot female. Like this woman, with the hot ass and hotter voice.

He closed his eyes and tried to cool the thoughts in his fevered mind. When he looked in her direction again, he focused only on the sign this time. His hands curled into fists at the travesty before him. One more part of his life—the ranch's identity—had been taken from him. Vowing to blister the young woman's ears and that sweet ass, he watched impatiently as she added one last petal on a daisy.

She stretched a little too far.

The ladder wobbled. "Holy crap," burst from her lips.

He tensed.

She gasped and frantically attempted to steady the ladder again. During that effort, she dropped the can of paint and the paintbrush.

"Shit!" The word exploded from his mouth even as Trent jumped forward to grab the ladder before she could even think of falling. "Get down. Now."

He made the mistake of looking up. Her shapely butt swayed temptingly back and forth while she worked her way down to the ground. His heart rate skyrocketed into the danger zone. What the hell was wrong with him? He wasn't a sex-craved teenager anymore.

As she neared the bottom of the ladder, her arm bumped his. She quickly scooted away from him the instant her feet touched the ground. He stared at his forearm and felt the remnants of the sensation of barely touching her. Okay, he might be far from teenaged, but he was definitely sex-craved. "Shit," he muttered, disgusted with himself.

"Your vocabulary sucks."

"So does yours." He allowed himself a quick sweep up from those fine legs to a pair of breasts all but calling for him to reach out and squeeze them. When he finally met her gaze, he met a pair of mossy green eyes he recognized.

"Susanna?" he questioned on a strangled-sounding choke. The bigger surprise was that his hard-on didn't immediately disappear.

"Dickhead!" she countered in clear disapproval.

Any other time, any other woman and he would have been pissed off by the remark. Trouble was Susanna knew him too well. Or used to know him. But when they'd lived together here on the Crawley Ranch with Allen Crawley and the other two unwanted castoffs he'd taken in as children, Trent had been the worst of the bunch. Dickhead probably was a pretty tame label when it came down to it. If she knew what he had done in his life since he'd left—until the last couple of years, she would certainly come up with something far worse. Still, her ease with less than feminine word choices rankled. Evidently it had been a long time since anyone had washed her mouth out with soap, and he remembered seeing it happen to her on more than one occasion all those years ago.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, studying her again. When had she grown up? She'd been all gangly legs, freckles, and constant skinned knees and elbows most of her childhood. But when she'd reached fifteen, she'd blossomed almost overnight.

She'd become any teenaged boy's wet dream, his in particular. She still was. Make that a man's wet dream.

She thrust that impressive chest out and ratcheted her chin up a notch. "I live here. I run the ranch."

Neither one gave voice to the pain of having lost Allen a few months back. The pain glimmered in her eyes, and he figured it showed in the way he'd tightened his jaw at the memory.

"What are you doing here?" she questioned, nodding toward his truck. "Pretty expensive rig for a boy who once couldn't put two nickels together."

He straightened to impress her with his six-foot three-inches, with his hard-earned pecs that stretched his button-up shirt to its limit now, and with every ounce of life experience he could pull into his expression. "Not a boy any more, Little Suzy."

Her green eyes darkened and not like in the throes of lust, but like in furious. "I'm not little!"

He'd figured that would rile her, being called "Little Suzy" always had. She'd considered herself his and the other boys' equal in all ways, even though she'd been the youngest and the scrawniest of them. Time hadn't blessed her with much of a growth spurt as far as height went. Still, she sure wasn't scrawny any longer. Not at all.

In spite of how weary he was, and how annoyed he was with the new signage, he cocked an eyebrow to silently point out his disagreement with her statement. He didn't figure it was necessary to flat out say the top of her head barely made it to his shoulders.

Now she narrowed those remarkable eyes and snapped, "You're just overgrown is all." She braced her hands on her hips. "I ask again, why are you here? Considering you left here so fast a dozen years ago and haven't graced the ranch with your presence since."

Guilt and shame knotted his gut. He'd meant to come back, had even bought an airline ticket a few times to do so. But he hadn't been ready to face any of them again, wasn't even ready to do so now. Casey and Jet had somehow managed to track him down years ago and kept in touch, as much as he allowed them. Neither of them would

be here now, as both were presently dealing with their own inheritances. He'd heard that Suzy had left the ranch and the state right after her eighteenth birthday. She'd broken Allen's heart, which in turn had infuriated Trent when he'd finally heard about it. He sure hadn't thought he'd have to deal with her while he came to terms with deciding what to do with the ranch he'd inherited—or mostly inherited. Typical of late, though, he'd imagined wrong. Shit. She was right; he needed to learn some damn new words.

"I'm here to sell The Crawley," he said, although he didn't add that he planned to get it on the market in the two weeks he'd allowed himself to be here.

Her pretty pink mouth gaped into an "O." The sassiness seemed to deflate right out of her like a balloon losing air. "But...but..." Her eyes turned glassy with sudden tears that she refused to let fall. "The Crawley is mine! Casey said you wouldn't..." She sucked in a breath and curled her hands into fists at her sides. "The Will said if you didn't get back here by—"

"By tomorrow," he finished for her and watched her grow pale.

That lasted all of two seconds. Then she hurled her petite body at him and tried to pummel his chest with those small fists. "You sonofabitch."

Trent clamped his hand over her mouth before she could expound further on his traits in less than polite terms. He scowled in disapproval. Her pummeling didn't hurt in the slightest, especially when he'd been beaten by men much bigger and tougher than she. Still her reaction surprised him.

She maneuvered until she bit the side of his hand, not deeply, but enough to make him step back and glare in warning at her. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" he growled. And where had she learned to fight dirty like that? "You need that butt of yours busted good."

Looking outraged by his threat, she spun and snagged the nearby tipped over bucket of pink paint. Her intent telegraphed in her eyes as she turned in his direction again.

"Don't you even think about it."

Pink paint flew at him, trailing down his brand new shirt, snaking down his barely worn in jeans, dotting his boots. Who'd have thought that quarter bucket of paint could spread so far?

Trent swore a blue streak and swiped one hand across the dribbles on his face and jerked the bucket out of her grasp with his other hand. He tossed the can a good twenty or so feet, and then did the craziest thing: he tugged her into his embrace.

As she slammed against him with a surprised squeal, he knocked off her hat and bent down to plant his lips hard against hers. He called himself a hundred times an idiot even as he kissed her sweet mouth in pent up frustration. He'd wanted to taste her sweet lips ever since she'd turned fifteen and his libido had gone to hell that day just looking at her. He'd battled against the need then, but he wasn't interested in battling now.

Snaking his tongue into her mouth, he knew he'd regret this later. But, hell, he had a lifetime of regrets so what was one more.

* * *

Suzy clamped down on the tip of Trent's tongue, not enough to draw blood, but enough to make him shove her away. She glanced at the paint on her shirt and knew it was on her face as well. Perfect. The big, scowling man had once again made a mess of things. He'd broken her heart at fifteen when he'd taken off to see the world and become a hero in some people's eyes. He'd taken off the very day of her birthday party. The last one she'd ever had. Now when she'd planned to come back here to make her peace with Allen—even if it was physically too late—and start her life again, Trent showed up. Perfect. Just damn perfect!

The young man she had fantasized about way too many times over the years had matured into a man not to be toyed with. Gone was any hint of arousal that she'd seen in his chocolate brown eyes a mere second ago, before she'd bit his tongue. She recognized a familiar look, a look that promised something far from pleasant. She'd

never seen it on Trent's face before, but she knew that look well, knew exactly what he was contemplating. She was all too knowledgeable about what the look meant, from any of the men she'd been involved with.

He reached out and snagged her arm before she could finish the thought. Even as she tried to dig her heels in, he scooped her up, bent her forward under one hard, muscled arm, and pinned her at his hip.

"You sonofabitch, put me down! This instant!" She wriggled in fury for all she was worth.

"Not damn likely." He gripped her tighter to him.

"You have no right to do this. None!" She battled harder to get free. "Don't you dare! Don't you double damn dare!"

He didn't even hesitate to begin peppering her bottom with fierce smacks. Even through the layer of denim, she felt each burning swat. She'd never been one to just give in to getting spanked, so she started calling him every disgusting name she'd learned over the years. And she had quite a vocabulary of them. She squirmed even harder.

"You always were a little she-devil," he stated, sounding oddly amused. But there was nothing the least bit amusing about how his iron-like hand went about burning her bottom.

"Stop this! Now!" This was humiliating, getting spanked by the boy/man of her fantasies.

Of course he ignored her demand. "You always needed a sound whacking every so often." He smacked her wriggling bottom with more intent. "It appears you've gone way too long without a good spanking."

She tried to twist back to look at him, tried to keep from crying out her outrage and pain. Frustrated that she couldn't grace him with a glare promising revenge, she settled for snapping, "I'm a grown woman. You don't spank grown women."

He chuckled, actually had the gall to chuckle. And, naturally, continued right on heating her bottom. The sound of hand connecting with denim-covered flesh echoed loudly around the Kansas prairie.

"Dammit! Stop!" she hissed, furious that tears threatened to fall. "What if one of the ranch hands drives by?" She tried to kick him. "Or one of the neighbors?" Her face flamed as much as her bottom probably did at the horrible thought of having anyone witness this embarrassing situation.

His hand continuing to whale away, he said calmly, "Then I guess they see how a brat gets her butt spanked."

"I'm not a brat!" She sucked in a gasp at the fire blazing on her poor bottom. "I just have a bit of a temper." A temper that had gotten her in exactly this position, or similar positions, many times while living at the ranch. Allen hadn't put up with any of her nonsense or sassy attitude.

"Always were, apparently always will be." He tucked her squirming body tighter against his side and landed another impressive dozen swats.

Finally she bit out, "Shit, this hurts!"

"That's the point of a spanking. Most times, anyway." The rapid rain of a biting dozen more swats fell. "We're gonna have us a session with a soap bar, too."

Her eyes, dripping tears, widened. Her head raised in outrage. "The hell we are!"

"You just don't know when to back down, do you?" He took special interest in showing her exactly why she needed to quit sassing him back and accept her punishment. By the time she stopped squirming, stopped running her mouth in spouts of useless resistance, she had definitely learned this was not a man to test.

* * *

A half hour later, the sun slipping lower in the early evening sky, Suzy pulled her battered, ancient pickup truck into the driveway of the oversized garage next to the main house. It had been extremely uncomfortable to repeatedly bend down and gather up her painting supplies after getting her butt burned. She'd rather have left the darn things, but Trent had insisted she pick them up. Stubborn man hadn't even helped her.

He'd just stood there sternly making sure she obeyed. Under her breath, she'd called him, again, every disgusting name in her repertoire.

She glanced into the rearview mirror and saw his big, fancy red truck approaching. She shoved open her door and eased down from the seat, sighing in relief. Sitting for the bumpy ride on the gravel road had made for a whole new round of swearing. Damn, that man spanked hard! All she wanted to do was reach back and rub away some of the sting, but she couldn't allow herself that show of relief. Trent was watching her with his eagle eyes. Even more annoying, her foreman and a half dozen of the ranch hands worked nearby in the arena with a couple of the new horses.

Suzy's gaze landed on Trent as he climbed out of his truck. His expression made it clear that he understood just what she'd wanted to do, and her frustration at not wanting the other men to know that her butt hurt. They might not assume that she'd gotten it practically branded by Trent's hard hand, but they'd wonder at her action. She didn't want anyone to even remotely consider the possibility that she'd been spanked.

Calm as you please, Trent strode closer. "You go on inside and wait for me. I'll have a few words with the men."

She curled her hands into fists. "Are you ordering me inside?"

One side of his sensuous mouth tipped up in challenge and amusement. "Yep."

The amusement might be there, but so was determination. Her stomach tensed and her buttocks twitched, rubbing against the jeans. She'd be smart not to press her luck with him any further. So, although she hated backing down, she raised her chin and gritted out, "Fine. I'll go inside."

He gave a slight nod of approval, only to push her some more. "See if you can round up a bar of soap while you're waiting for me." With that said, he turned and strode rapidly across the ranch yard toward the curious men.

* * *

Trent took his time going into the mammoth, rambling log home that he'd lived in for nearly a dozen years. Outwardly it looked the same as when he'd driven away from the Crawley Ranch so long ago. That had been an experience which had haunted him ever since: sneaking off, leaving a note for Allen only, not saying anything to either Casey or Jet, fighting not to stay and share in Suzy's fifteenth birthday celebration. It had been damn hard to leave, impossible to stay. Coming back here after all this time was almost as hard.

He stopped to tug a duffel bag out of the back of his truck. The ranch hands had been curious about why he'd finally shown up here, although, being typical cowboys, they hadn't questioned him. He'd seen it in their expressions. They apparently knew about parts of the Will, like the part where Suzy would have inherited total control of the ranch if he'd chosen not to stake his claim on his share. Now they weren't sure about the future of their jobs. Tomorrow he'd have to at least talk to the foreman and explain his decision.

Walking tiredly up the wide porch steps, the idea of having to explain his decision to Suzy weighed heavily on him. Damn, he hadn't expected her to be here.

As he pulled open the storm door, the same sizzling sexual awareness he'd experienced earlier when he'd first spotted the hot little gal destroying the signage shot through him. He'd wanted her all those years ago. His traitorous body wanted her even more now. It didn't matter at all to him that he'd just walloped the daylights out of her sweet butt. Hell, he would even like to see that butt bared and still tinged with red.

His cock stiffened, rubbed in fierce arousal against his jeans. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that before they went their separate ways he'd sink deep into her willing body, and they'd have a round or two of pure pleasure.

He'd barely stepped into the entry when a bar of soap flew at him. His little she-devil in denim had resurfaced.

His lips twitched in amusement. It was too damn bad that his lifestyle and job wouldn't let him have a real relationship, because he had a feeling that this was the one woman in the world who could make him happy. She didn't let anyone walk over her. She got spanked and never took it gracefully, but she didn't out and out refuse to let it

happen. Struggling against it was one thing, refusing it another thing. And he sure as hell liked the sight of a sweet ass stretched across his lap for a bottom warming. He also liked the passionate make-up sessions that eventually followed. His cock hardened even more.

* * *

Suzy stood, eyes narrowed in anger, at the other end of the long entryway. She'd been waiting what seemed like forever for the infuriating man to finally come inside the house. No doubt he'd stayed out so long only to worsen her anticipation of what he planned to do. The SOB. She'd never liked waiting for punishment as a child, or as a teenager. She disliked it even more now.

She let her voice mirror the disgust she felt as she snapped, "I know you're determined to do this, so let's get it damn done." Not that she wanted this particular punishment. Gawd, she really hated having her mouth soaped.

Trent took his sweet time dropping the well-used duffle bag he'd carried to the floor, calmly shutting the door, and facing her again as he held the soap bar he'd caught. Their gazes locked. She wondered if he'd considered backing down from this, but why should he? Especially now that she'd not only rounded up the soap, but also tossed it to him. After the spanking and this threat, you'd think she'd settle down and stop wanting to butt heads with him. She wasn't settled, though. She still felt like taking him on in any challenge he threw her way.

Even more unsettling was the fact that he looked so doggone handsome. The years had given his chiseled face more character, as well as a few scars. Oddly, she wondered how he'd gotten that one two-inch scar running across his left cheek. And the almost six-inch one running along his left forearm that she'd noticed earlier. She didn't like the idea of knowing that he'd been hurt, bad at some point since she'd last seen him. It really rubbed her wrong when she realized where her thoughts had gone and how she worried about him. Darn man had just lit a blaze to her bottom right out

there on the ranch road! Right out there where anyone could have driven by and seen her getting spanked.

He started in her direction. She stiffened and panicked. "This is stupid! You know that, don't you? Soaping someone's mouth is a big, dumb thing to do. It doesn't do anything."

His big shoulders shrugged. "Still gonna do it, Little Suzy."

She hissed, "Stop calling me Little Suzy. I hate that. Always have and you know it." When he didn't seem to care about her statement, she spun on her heels and pranced toward the kitchen, grumbling with each step she took.

* * *

Trent bit down a chuckle and fought back a strong need to grab that spirited woman. The sway of those sweet hips, the bounce of her no doubt still hot bottom caught and held his attention. His pulse raced. He'd never wanted to ram his cock into anyone as bad as he did Susanna James. He could lean her against the wall right here in the entry, tug down those jeans, run his hands over that spanked butt, and then bend her over to shove his hard rod deep inside her. Oddly, he didn't think she'd resist him doing so either.

She stopped to glower back at him. "If we're not going to do this, I'm going to my room."

His thoughts flashed on all kinds of scenarios for what could happen in her bedroom. But he forced them away and focused on the present. He'd deal with his fantasies later, now he'd deal with his promise.

"March yourself over to the sink."

Without another word, she walked primly toward the double sinks beneath the window overlooking the backyard. She stood with impatience etched on her adorable face until he moved beside her. He ripped off the wrapping to the Ivory bar, and then ran water over it. He knew the horrid taste of it from experience. Allen had done this

punishment to all of them at one time or another. Suzy had probably experienced the fate more than any of them. She'd hated it, yet she stood her ground now. He was proud of her for that.

After a minute, he held it out to her. "I want to see you open that sassy mouth of yours and scrub every bit of your tongue, your teeth, and your gums."

She remained stiff, clearly rethinking obeying him now. Then she snatched it from him and did just as he'd ordered. He watched as her pretty pink lips stretched wide around the wet soap. Her neck muscles worked as she wiggled the soap back and forth, as her tongue touched the lathered surface. Her eyes filled with tears and she fought the urge to gag.

Deciding she'd done enough, he tugged her hand with the soap bar away from her mouth. "Spit it out."

It didn't take her a second to lean over the sink and obey this demand. When she straightened, she looked humbled, not broken in spirit, but temporarily well-chastised and humbled. Again, he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss the hell out of her, just like he'd done back at the gate.

* * *

Suzy shuddered as a taste of the soap trickled down her throat. The awful, awful taste would stay with her for hours.

She glanced at the man who'd made her suffer like this. It was on her tongue to rip him a new one, but that definitely wouldn't be in her best interest at the moment. Plus, she saw the way his eyes had darkened. He wasn't looking at her as someone he'd just punished, or as a "little sister." Which made her recall the shocking way he'd kissed her out on the road. She'd dreamed for years of being kissed by him, and her dreams hadn't been half as intense or as hot as that kiss. She didn't know what to make of this complication to her life. Or what to make of her renewed sexual attraction to Trent.

"I've taken the master suite. You can stay temporarily in your old room," she said as boldly as she could muster before hurrying across the room.

"Opposite ends of the house. Probably a smart plan," she heard him say, his voice husky.

With the way her body instantly heated at the sensual purr to his tone, she wasn't sure his staying anywhere in the house was smart. She suspected he was battling a hard-on at the moment. In her female way she was too.

"I guess we won't be seeing anymore of each other today?" he questioned, sounding like he hadn't moved to follow her. Thank God.

Suzy stopped to look back at him, her chin-length blonde hair swinging around her face. "You got that right. We're done for the day, absolutely done."

He wasn't looking her way anymore, but had turned back to the sink. The soap bar lay at the bottom. He seemed to be studying it. "Too bad we had to start out our little reunion in such a bad manner."

"Yeah, too bad." She stormed down the hall toward her bedroom. Trent hadn't been back at the ranch two hours and already he'd dealt twice with her. He'd given her one devil of a spanking and he'd made her wash her mouth out with soap. She'd be pouting for the rest of the night about both instances. Pouting and wondering what would happen next.

Halfway down the hall she remembered what he'd said earlier. She froze, faced the kitchen and snapped loud enough for him to hear, "We're not selling the ranch."

"Yes, we are," he snapped right back.

She stomped her foot, which only made the fabric covering her poor bottom rub against it. Darn him. Double, double darn him. "No, we're not." Then she sped toward her room.

Chapter Two

The sun blazed just over the rooftop of the main house as Suzy peeked around the side of the horse barn toward Trent's big, fancy truck. She tipped up her wide-brimmed hat and wiped her arm across her forehead. Not even 9 o'clock in the morning and already the day promised to be hot and steamy. Another typical Kansas summer day. A lot of people didn't like the weather here, or the wide open spaces, or the seeming lack of things to do. Maybe she would prefer not so much heat and not so much humidity, but everything else about the state appealed to her.

Her gaze swept the main grounds from the enormous log home Allen had helped build himself to the riding arena in the center that she'd recently had updated and repainted. The ranch hands were helping to remodel the old bunkhouse, the cook shack, and the foreman's house in their spare time. The main project she had planned, though, was the construction of a twenty-room Western style guest house at the far end of the arena. If everything went as she hoped, the builders would start on the project in a couple of weeks—if her rat of an ex-husband finally came through with the divorce settlement. Her goal was to have this project done by late fall. She had a lot of goals, a lot of dreams for the ranch.

She watched Trent walk out of the main house and head for his truck, cell phone plastered to his ear. Darn that man! Talk about a "fly in the ointment" a "pain in the ass." Okay, he was a pain to her ass, thinking about how he'd spanked her yesterday. Spanked her! She still couldn't believe he'd had the gall to do that. She also had trouble believing he was actually here. He hadn't shown the least bit of interest in

either her or the ranch in a dozen years, and now he shows up. Guess that line about a death and a possible inheritance bringing the distant relatives out of the woodwork was correct. Of course, none of them: her, Casey, Jet or Trent were actually relatives to Allen Crawley. He'd given them a home, hope, and love when he'd taken each of them in all those years ago. But he wasn't blood kin. He didn't have any blood kin, so, she supposed, the four of them were as close as he had to that.

She'd spent the last seven years drifting from place to place, and job to job all over the western part of the country. But, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* had said, "there's no place like home." The Crawley Ranch was the only home she'd ever had—that cold excuse for a home, her ex's mansion in Las Vegas, didn't count. This was the only home she'd ever want.

There was no way that Trent Tyler would take the ranch from her. For the first time in her life, she had dreams and a goal. Now she had a short term goal as well: get Trent off her ranch ASAP.

They hadn't spoken since she'd gone to her room last night, sulking and pissed about getting spanked. Still disgusted with him, she'd snuck out of the house at dawn to attend to her usual morning chores. And she'd eaten breakfast in the cook shack with the ranch hands. Her foreman, Brady, had asked what Trent was doing here, asked if his arrival meant a change in her plans. She'd told him she had no idea what Trent wanted by coming here. She refused to even acknowledge in her own thoughts his comment about intending to sell the ranch. She'd said that the plans stood as made, and she absolutely intended to make sure of that. But she wasn't in the frame of mind to confront Trent right now. She needed more thinking time, more time to adjust to her renewed attraction to him. That had been even more of a surprise to her than him burning her bottom.

From a safe distance, she watched him climb into his truck and her traitorous heart skipped all kinds of beats. Tall, dark and handsome. Pretty plain descriptions, but so damn fitting. It annoyed the heck out of her that she wanted his big hands on her again—all over her. Sensually stroking, sinfully piercing, massaging, caressing. Not

spanking her. No, definitely not that. Touching her in any other way, she imagined, would be heaven on earth.

“Shit,” she grumbled, furious at her heated thoughts.

She spun away and strode toward the entrance to the barn. The familiar scents of horses, straw beddings, and fresh lumber recently used to rebuild several stalls calmed her nerves, slightly. What she needed was a good long ride on her favorite horse: Blaze, the spirited stallion most of the men stayed clear of. Allen would have burned her bottom for even going near the barely tamed horse. She figured Trent wouldn’t like the idea either, not that he had a say in the matter. But when she was feeling unsettled—like now, a challenging ride on Blaze was exactly the medicine she needed.

* * *

Trent had just turned his pickup truck onto the ranch road when his cell phone rang again. He pulled off to the side and answered the call, impatient with yet another interruption. He’d already talked to his partners and to Jet this morning. His partners wanted to know when he was coming back to Washington, D.C. Jet wanted to know how he felt about being back at the ranch, and he’d, again, apologized for not being able to come see him. And now, apparently, Casey wanted to converse with him. He was tired of conversing, tired of hemming and hawing around being pinpointed on his plans and his feelings. In truth, the only person he’d wanted to talk to this morning was Suzy, and she’d ghosted right out of the house before the sun had even fully risen.

“Trent,” he snapped, and then realized how roughly he’d spoken, regretted it.

“Guess that tells me how you’re doing,” Casey stated with a chuckle. “And how you’re getting along with little sis.”

Little Sis. Trent thought about kissing Suzy, spanking her, watching her skulk off toward her bedroom, and his wanting to follow her last night. Little Sis had definitely

not been anywhere in his thinking. He did not want his “brother” to know how un-brotherly his feelings were for Suzy.

“Hey, you still there?”

“Yeah, just got a lot on my mind is all.” A big part of what was on his mind caught his attention when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye at the barn. Suzy was leading a saddled black horse, rather attempting to lead, from the barn. The stallion, which he’d seen on his late night walk-thru of the horse barn, was a powerful, independent animal. One that he’d later learned all the hands respected, and kept clear of most of the time. But not Suzy. Of course not. “Shit.”

“Something wrong?” Casey sounded concerned. “You okay?”

“Damn woman is about to ride out on Blaze.” She managed to get the horse to stop for a second and vaulted into the saddle. “Gotta go.” He hung up as Casey was saying, “But—”

The only “but” Trent was thinking about right then was a “butt” with two t’s. One he’d blister but good first chance he got. The problem was that he had an appointment in town with a real estate agent in a little over thirty minutes. He didn’t have time for dealing with this latest shenanigan of hers. It didn’t mean he couldn’t do something about the situation, though.

He shoved the gear shift into reverse and backed up to the first unlucky ranch hand he found. The man side-stepped out of the way, and then stopped when he recognized Trent.

Leaning out the window, Trent demanded, “Follow her.” He pointed to Suzy as she and the horse from hell trotted toward the pasture. “If possible, get her to ride back here. If not, stick with her until she decides to come back on her own.”

“She ain’t goin’ to like me followin’ her.” He shook his head and looked like a man forced between a rock and a hard place. “She ain’t goin’ to listen to me at all.”

Trent’s cell phone rang again. He reached down in irritation and shut it off. “Want to keep your job here? Do as I said.”

The poor man nodded and then hurried to the barn. Satisfied that he’d done all he could at the moment, Trent shifted the truck back into drive and headed down the

road once more. He tried not to look off toward the pasture, really tried. Couldn't keep from it. When he spotted Suzy trying to bring the stallion under control from an obvious momentary spurt of defiance, Trent gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles hurt. He was going to be royally pissed off if she got thrown. Damn woman. Didn't have a lick of sense. But she'd have a red butt by tonight. Redder and sorer than the one she'd gone to bed with last night.

* * *

Trying to calm down and keep his thoughts away from Suzy and whatever danger she might be in at the moment, Trent studied the town he hadn't seen in a dozen years. Comptonville had grown, a little. There were three stoplights now, and a handful of cars on the main street that could loosely be considered "traffic." A far cry from what he experienced in the D.C. area on a daily basis. He'd seen a new bank and what looked like several new businesses a block ago. Some of the same stores were still here: Martha's Café, Ben's Hardware and Auto Store, Andy's Gas Stop. The people here liked to keep business names simple. He had to smile. Life was simple here, friendly too. He waved back to a pair of elderly men who'd waved at him as they played checkers at a table on the sidewalk in front of the café.

He located DeeAnn's Real Estate office half a block ahead and wondered if he could ever again live in a town this small or this uncomplicated. He doubted they ever had any crime here. No drug lords fighting over territory. No weapons dealers. No professional hit men. No... No, they wouldn't have anything like what he had spent the good part of the last dozen years protecting people against. Thank God. It felt good to know that there was still at least one place on earth where people weren't bloodthirsty, greedy, and willing to slit their own mother's throat if it got them another buck.

A middle-aged woman with brown hair streaked with gray and a face mirroring delight stepped out of the office door as he parked a few feet away. Of course she'd be looking happy to see him. He doubted the real estate business in the area was

booming, which might be a problem. Maybe she could run ads nationwide for a potential buyer for the Crawley Ranch. He wanted it sold as soon as possible, mainly because he didn't have time to deal with one more complication in his life. His share of the money from the sale could be invested in the building he and his partners were buying. Suzy's share... Well, he didn't know what she could do with her share of the money, but it would help her no matter what.

Suzy. She didn't want to sell the ranch. A complication, one he knew he could overcome. She'd left the ranch a long time ago and hadn't been back until now. Her accusing him of staying away and obviously not wanting to be there was definitely another pot calling the kettle black. She'd done the same thing. Her being there now had to be a brief spell of homesickness or something, somehow brought on by Allen's death. In a month or so she'd be bored and moving on again. Drifting, just like Casey and Jet had told him she'd been doing ever since she'd left the ranch. Oddly, he didn't like the idea of her drifting around. He never had.

"It's going to be scorcher today," the woman said holding out her hand to greet him as Trent stepped out of the truck.

The steamed heat washed over him as soon as his feet hit the pavement. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled; tiny forked lines appeared at the corners of her eyes. "I've got some nice cold tea inside. Come on in and I'll pour you some." She walked ahead of him and added, "We'll get down to business, too."

A half hour and three glasses of tea later, Trent felt like he'd butted heads with a brick wall. Yes, she wanted to list his property, even had a few possible prospective buyers. Yes, she thought the land would appraise at a very high price. Yes, she would like to receive her commission as soon as possible. But, no, she couldn't even list the ranch without getting both his signature and Suzy's on the real estate agreement. He'd been afraid of this, but he'd hoped the fact that he was set to inherit sixty percent ownership as opposed to Suzy's forty percent would hold weight. Not enough weight, though.

He left the office with an envelope of papers to share with his unwanted partner. His head throbbed from trying so hard to sweet talk a woman who'd proven to be resistant to his limited charm. Bottom line: he needed Suzy to come around to his side of thinking. Bottom line: she would.

* * *

"I don't care what he wants," Suzy said bristly into the phone. She paced the living room, moved in angry steps from the worn leather recliner that had been Allen's, to the two-story-high rock fireplace with a mantel filled with framed photos of she and the boys she'd grown up with, to the bank of windows that overlooked the main ranch yard. She loved each inch of this house. She treasured every foot of the ranch. "This is my home, dammit. Not Trent's!"

"You both inherited the Crawley, Little Sis," Casey countered, trying to sound reasonable.

She wasn't interested in being reasonable. "How could he do this to me? Why?" She stopped on her next lap around the room in front of Allen's photograph and tears of frustration filled her eyes.

"Trent? What has he done? Do I need to come there and refashion his nose?" It sounded like he almost had one foot out the door already.

Casey's instant defensive verbal stance warmed her heart. "Allen. I was talking about Allen." She kind of liked the idea of Casey "refashioning Trent's nose" for having laid a hand on her. Except she'd have to tell Casey that what Trent had done to her was spank her. That was private; nobody's business but hers and Trent's.

"I think Allen was trying to look out for both of you."

"How? By binding together two people who can barely stand to be in the same room with one another?" Not exactly true, but she wasn't about to inform Casey that she had unwanted feelings for Trent Tyler. Especially since the man had once broken her heart, and appeared to be determined to do so again. This time he'd break her

heart over the Crawley Ranch. It seemed that men were always breaking her heart and she was damn tired of that.

"Are you sure?" Casey questioned quietly.

She blinked. "Sure about what?"

"Honey, I think Trent likes you a lot. Too much. At least for his own conscience."

She snorted. Before she could respond further, the man who Casey claimed to like her too much for his conscience sped like a freight train on full steam into the room.

"We need to talk. Now." Those chocolate eyes flashed with determination.

She waved the phone at him. "Talking on the phone here."

He moved closer and the large room seemed to shrink. "You can call whoever it is back later."

"You're not the boss of me," she hissed, barely hearing Casey asking from a distance what was going on.

To her shock, Trent reached around her and smacked her hard, loudly on her bottom. "Hang up, now."

Suzy felt her face flame. Had Casey heard that swat? Of course he had. But maybe he wouldn't recognize the sound for what it was; maybe he'd think she dropped something. She didn't want to find out either way, so she ended the call without speaking to him again.

"That was Casey," she snapped. "He better not have heard—"

Trent took the phone from her and tossed it on the sofa. "I don't care if he heard me swatting your butt."

"Well I do!"

He shrugged, and then pinned her in place with a furious gaze. "I'm going to wear your butt out later for riding that damn stallion."

She narrowed her own gaze, even though her buttocks tensed in anticipation. "I can ride whatever horse on this ranch that I want."

"Not that one and we're not going to discuss the issue. Not now." He waved an envelope in front of her. "We're going to talk business."

"Works for me. The sooner you and I come to a sensible agreement, the sooner you can disappear into the world's woodwork like you did twelve years ago." Suzy felt the bitter taste of what she'd said in her mouth as she plopped down on the worn leather loveseat by the fireplace.

One of his thick, dark eyebrows lifted and his jaw tightened. Would he finally get mad enough to blurt out just what had made leave so suddenly that horrible day? She braced herself, hoping and dreading at the same time.

With a slow blink of his eyes, he shut down whatever defense he might have considered saying. Instead he sat in Allen's recliner and her heart gave a little lurch, remembering the kind-hearted rancher and missing him.

"The agreement we're coming to is selling this ranch." He pulled some papers out of the envelope. "The real estate agent needs both of our signatures on this contract."

Suzy refused to take them when he held the papers out to her. She scooted as far from him as possible. "Not going to happen."

He slapped the papers down on the golden pine end table next to him. "Dammit, Susanna, I don't have time for playing games with you."

She sat stiffly. Hurt curled through her, along with disappointment and fear. "I'm not playing games. I'm fighting for my life here. The world is not all about what Trent Tyler wants."

"You're only kidding yourself if you think you'll stay here very long. You haven't stayed any place for more than six months in the last seven years," he bit out, looking around the room. "The Crawley deserves an owner that knows how to run a ranch. Someone who can keep the place running in the black. The men working here deserve a boss they can count on."

Outraged, she jumped to her feet. "Have you been spying on me? Get your kicks that way?" She stormed over to glower down at him. "You're wrong, anyway. I did

stay in one place, in Las Vegas, longer than six months. It took me three months to realize I'd married a lowlife SOB, and over a year after that to get rid of him."

If she wasn't so mad at him, Suzy might have laughed at the look of astonishment that crossed Trent's face. He hadn't known all about her past. He hadn't known she'd been married. "Also, just so you get your facts straight, Bubba, the Crawley is only in the black at the moment because of me. Me. Money from an inheritance that I got several years back and used to catch up the bills around here. Allen . . ."

Her throat clenched with emotion and she turned away to walk back to the fireplace, and look up at Allen's photograph. "When Allen got sick everything just about fell apart. Brady and the boys pitched in all their combined meager savings accounts, even sold some of their belongings to help out as best they could. I've paid them all back."

She faced him again, hands on hips. "So, as you should be able to see, those men working here have a boss they can count on."

"And just so you know, Sassy pants, I haven't been spying on you. Hell, I've tried damn hard not to even think about you. Casey kept me filled in, even when I told him I didn't want to know." He gritted his teeth for a second before adding, "He didn't tell me that you'd been married."

His words felt like a punch to the gut. He hadn't wanted to think about her. That hurt, a lot. Bitterly, she snapped, "So why in the hell did you kiss me yesterday?" She didn't want an answer.

She ran out of the room, out of the house. When he started to follow her and she heard his boot steps on the porch, she spun around. "Don't you dare talk to me! Not now! Just leave me the hell alone."

She tore past a startled Brady, who was evidently coming to the house to see her, or Trent, or both of them. She didn't care. All she wanted to do at the moment was salvage some wounded pride, regain some control.

* * *

"What the blazes did you say to her?" Brady questioned, stopping almost toe-to-toe with Trent on the front porch. "I've never seen her look so broken."

Trent rubbed at a spot on his chest that was suddenly giving him pain. Broken. Shit, shit, shit. He hadn't meant to hurt Suzy, never had, but he always did. This was just another reason he needed to get this mess wrapped up and get out of her life once and for all.

"I asked you what you said to her," Brady pressed not backing down an inch even though Trent was essentially his boss. Or one of his bosses.

"Did she pay you and the other men back for some ranch debts?" Trent asked, ignoring the foreman's pointed look.

"Sure did. Paid off a couple of bank loans too." He turned sideways and waved back at the arena and the other buildings. "Paid for the remodeling as well." There was definite pride and respect in Brady's tone.

Where had she come up with that kind of money? Trent had seen the improvements and figured Allen had started some general fixing-up before the first heart attack. The improvements would considerably raise the property value; even the real estate agent had mentioned that fact. Now he saw those improvements as yet another complication to his original plan to walk in, check things out, and put the ranch on the market. Now he'd owe his "partner" for those remodeling efforts, wouldn't be right otherwise.

He shifted impatiently. He wanted to avoid a conversation with Brady and get back inside to think about this bit of news. And he needed time to absorb her admission of having been married—something which he didn't particularly like, and knew he didn't have a right to feel either way about.

"Did you come here for a reason? Otherwise I need to go inside and make some phone calls," he stretched the truth, knowing he wasn't going to make any calls.

Brady shook his head. "It'll wait. I just had a question about the guest house plans I wanted to run by Miss Suzy."

"Guest house plans?" Trent asked on a near shout. Damn, now what was she up to?

Looking disgusted before he walked away, Brady said over his shoulder, "You two really need to talk."

Damn straight they did! And Trent would definitely be having a heart-to-heart with Suzy after she returned to the house. He remembered how she'd scared ten years off his life by riding out earlier on that black devil of a stallion. They'd be having a hand-to-butt session as well.

* * *

The night was almost pitch black by the time Suzy drove her battered truck into the driveway. She'd sulked in the barn for over an hour after she'd raced away from Trent, sulked and mended some bridles. For some reason working with her hands that way always settled her down. And she liked the calming scents of leather and animals. Still, after a while, she'd needed to get away from the ranch. So she'd gone back to get her truck, wondering if he'd come out and try to keep her from leaving. He hadn't. That had ruffled her feathers even more.

She'd ended up at the Laid Back Bar and doused her frustrations with a pitcher of beer. Eventually she'd called one of her girlfriends and they'd ended up dancing and laughing and flirting most of the night away with some of the good old boys in the area who'd shown up at the bar too. Now she was tired, and a tad tipsy. Probably shouldn't have driven back to the ranch on her own, but she'd made it okay.

"Damn, Suzy, where've you been?" Trent asked as he met her at the door. His gaze swept over her and he scowled when he smelled beer on her breath. "Don't tell me you drove all the way from town half drunk."

Her unfocused brain didn't pay any attention to the sternness in his tone. All she heard was his concern. It felt like an amazing balm to her inner wounds, wounds that

he'd caused. The beer buzz made her even more daring. She leaned toward him and ran her hand over the side of his face. "You're a handsome son-of-a-gun. Hot, too."

His breath caught and she watched his eyes darken. "Susanna . . ."

She smiled and gently stroked the beard stubble on his hard jaw. Then she traced her thumb over his full lips. As he tensed, she said silkily, "I bet you've got a real woman pleaser too." She reached out to rub the hardened ridge that had appeared in his jeans.

"You're drunk. You're not thinking straight." He caught her hand, but didn't shove it away, instead held it in place. Let her massage him. Let her torture him.

"I'm thinking that we need to have a little one-on-one. Something hot." She nudged him back into the house, her hand continuing to rub the cock behind a thin layer of denim. "Something fast and intense."

His eyes had glazed over; his breathing was ragged. "This is so wrong," he ground out even as he tugged her into the living room.

Suzy wasn't so far gone that she didn't understand what was going to happen. The drinking had only loosened her inhibitions. She'd wanted to be intimate with this man for almost half her life. And no matter their differences at the moment, she was not going to pass up this opportunity to finally find out how sex could be with Trent Tyler.

"I won't be gentle, can't be," he said huskily, pulling her to the sofa.

She gave him a saucy look, moved behind the sofa, and wriggled her jeans and panties down in a flash. "I'm not interested in gentle tonight. I'm interested in a man taking charge. You game?"

He'd already freed his long, pulsing cock by the time she finished her challenge. Without a word, he guided her down to where she braced her hands on the sofa back and boldly stuck her bottom toward him. She was already hot, moist and ready.

A quick brush of his fingers confirmed her condition for him, and he gripped her waist while ramming deep inside her on a groan. "I've needed this. Oh, gawd, I've needed this."

Suzy met his thrusts eagerly, desperately. "Oh yes, yes, yes, yes!" She arched her back and all but howled in pleasure during the fierce, determined way he took her from behind. She wouldn't have minded lying beneath him, touching his muscled chest, seeing the wildness in his eyes as he drove into her. But this was pretty damn good, too. "Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhhhhhhhh."

Somehow they found release at the same time. In that brief moment when he collapsed against her to regain his breath, Suzy knew her world had definitely become more complicated. As a young girl battling puberty, crazy hormones and young lust, she'd had a serious crush on Trent. When he'd shown up yesterday all he-man, thinking he was in control, kissing her, spanking her, challenging her... well, she'd felt something stronger than girlish lust. She'd worried about acknowledging a real interest in him again. A few beers had made her get past that worry. It had made her go after something she was curious about, something that excited her: making love with Trent. Only they hadn't made "love." They'd had flat out, quickie hot sex. And she'd loved it. A relationship could never be more than this with him. They held completely different opinions on the ranch, probably on life itself. He would never be happy staying here; she wouldn't be happy anywhere else.

He stood up and gently eased out of her. For a second, as she continued standing there bent over and uncertain, he lightly caressed her bare bottom. It quivered. She was getting hot all over again.

"This didn't change anything," he said, giving her one last caress before pulling her upright. As she faced him and tugged up her clothing, he looked her in the eye and added, "I'm still upset with you, and we'll deal with that tomorrow. And we're going to talk about the whole ranch situation, too."

Still riding that slight beer buzz and a sense of pleasure, she met his gaze. "I learned one thing, though. Sex with you could be amazing."

On an aggrieved sign, he turned her toward the doorway, lightly swatted her bottom and said, "Not going to happen again. Shouldn't have happened this time."

She gave him a sassy hip sway and giggled as she strolled to her bedroom. "Want to bet it won't happen again?"

Chapter Three

Trent reached up to run a hand through his hair, wondering if he'd have any left by the time he returned to D.C. in less than two weeks. The problems and complications were mounting all around him on a daily basis. His partners needed him to finish the negotiations for the purchase of their office building near Georgetown University, prime property. He'd had the price and details narrowed down, verbally—he'd thought, before he'd left to come to Kansas. Now the seller had re-thought things and recently revealed a large greedy streak. Besides that, their personal protection firm had more demands on their limited staff now than they could handle. Three regular clients had specifically requested him and were giving Todd and Joe heck about refusing to settle for anyone else.

He tossed the cell phone on the sofa beside him. Weariness weighed him down. He'd spent too many years fighting as a warrior for the U S of A, and then as a warrior for hire. Going into the private protection business had seemed like such a simple idea two years ago when they'd first started the partnership. Gaining a reputation as being more than reliable, more than competent should have been a good thing. Instead it had made their lives more complicated.

The movement of the brass pendulum on the grandfather clock across the room caught his attention. As did his glimpse through the large front window of the brilliant clear blue sky, the sun already blazing away. He was sure if he set foot outside right now, even at barely eight o'clock in the morning, he'd discover what a scorcher the day promised to be.

Eight o'clock. For a supposed "rancher" Suzy sure wasn't showing any sign of getting around for morning chores like was the custom of a real rancher. He still believed this was a passing phase of interest for her. Okay, she'd evidently invested a lot of money—from an inheritance, she'd said, that he wondered about—in the place. And Brady claimed she had some kind of plans for the ranch, but, dammit, so did he. He needed the money, had practically spent it already.

Complications. He rubbed his stomach where it rolled with an annoying pain, again. Wouldn't it be perfect if he developed an ulcer from all this stress in his life? Hell, he already had survived more wounds, had more scars, than any ten men would ever have in their lives. Wasn't that enough!

The shower. Even from this distance from the master suite, he could hear the shower running. About time! In the very next second he envisioned Suzy's petite delectable body standing naked under that rain of water. All those sexy curves, those plump, full breasts, that long, sensual neck. All of that gloriously naked, with water slithering like a lover's hands over the soft skin.

He hardened, painfully. Along with that torture, his mind turned to their hot little session right here in the living room late last night. Right here against the very sofa he was sitting on now.

His cock threatened to burst right through the too-tight denim of his jeans. Damn, damn, damn. He could not keep reacting this way to her. To his "little sister." Yeah, right. He'd never really thought about her that way, no matter how much he'd tried to convince himself and his "brothers" that he did. Talk about another frustrating complication!

Standing, he also remembered the two promises he'd made Suzy last night. One promise was a serious discussion about what to do concerning the ranch. Oh yes, they were definitely going to talk about that issue. Later.

He took a second to readjust the denim around his pride and joy, and then strode briskly toward the pantry. He wondered if he'd still find the item that Allen had kept hanging in there for so many years. A minute later he found the well-worn, foot-long, four-inch wide paddle that had once said "Butt Warmer" on one side. The words

had long ago been worn off from frequent use on their backsides. This paddle was a real attention getter, a definite tool for dealing with misbehavior.

As he headed down the hallway toward Suzy's bedroom, he could still hear the shower running. He fought the growing hard-on again, but refused to give in to his need to have another round of quick, hot sex with her. It was difficult, but he could control his base urge for mating. He'd spent way too much time yesterday and during the night recalling how she'd ridden off on that big, black devil of a horse. Allen wouldn't have put up with such nonsense, and he sure as hell wouldn't either.

* * *

Suzy stepped from the hot, steamy shower, revived and ready to face the day. Thankfully she only had a tiny bit of a hangover, but it had been hard to drag her way out of bed this morning. She should have been out doing chores at least a couple of hours ago. The men would, of course, cover for her and take care of the work, but she felt guilty for being such a slacker anyway. She was determined to earn and keep their respect by pulling her weight around here.

She quickly dried off and slipped into the Victoria's Secret lacy bra and barely-there panties she'd brought into the bathroom with her. A glance into the mirror told her the undergarments were definitely not practical ones to be worn doing ranch chores. They were her weakness, though. She didn't mind getting all hot and grungy, but she would feel feminine doing it.

Speaking about feeling feminine ... Had she really boldly stretched over the back of the sofa last night? Had she really practically demanded that Trent take her hot and fast? Or had that been part of the series of dreams she'd had last night, ones that he'd starred in?

Her pulse pounded; moisture gathered between her legs. The man had serious potential as a hot lover. Definitely.

She heard footsteps on the wooden floor of her bedroom and tensed. Heavy footsteps. Trent. Even though she felt certain his presence in there didn't bode well for her, she continued battling strong feelings about him. The moisture seemed to pool even more. And she clearly remembered how he'd revealed an amazing cock to her as she'd bent with determination over that sofa. She could almost feel that wondrous rod slamming into her wet, needy body. Wouldn't it be great if he were here to give her another taste of his sexual mastery? Not likely, but, oh yeah, that would be great.

"You can't stay in there forever." Trent's voice was grim and determined as he called out to her.

Butterflies soared and dipped in her stomach. The arousal immediately dimmed, not completely, but a lot. That was not the way a man spoke to a woman he intended to make love with. That was a man determined to make a woman's life darn unpleasant for some error she'd made or some misbehavior he believed needed correcting. She was well experienced with men sounding that way, and with men going all alpha-male, protector/corrector. First Allen had held that role in her life, then Grayson had stepped into the role as her husband, and now it appeared that Trent was taking on the role.

With a sigh of reluctant acceptance, she raised her chin and opened the door. She'd try to sway him from what he thought had to be done, but instinctively she knew he wouldn't be swayed. Trent had been a stubborn boy, and she'd seen no signs of that personality trait having changed.

It did her pride good to see Trent's immediate reaction to the sight of her walking into the room in nothing but skimpy undergarments. His eyes widened, darkened. His big chest rose and fell in a breath sharply sucked in and exhaled. And the horrible paddle he carried wobbled in his shaking hand.

Suzy tried not to look at that paddle, tried to calm her nerves. "You've graced my room with your presence, why?"

He recovered quickly. "I'm going to paddle you damn good."

The ridiculous never-give-in-easily part of her took control of her mouth. "I don't think so."

He tapped the hated piece of wood against the side of his leg and grimly looked at her. "It's going to happen, Susanna. There's no way, no way I'm not going to beat that butt of yours for stupidly riding that crazed horse yesterday. Hell, Brady told me the damn animal nearly crippled a man last year."

Nervous anticipation curled through her tensed body. Her palms were sweating. "I've ridden him before," she countered, realizing when his expression turned even harder that she'd made a serious error in telling him that.

"That admission just guaranteed you an even sorer ass." He glanced at her unmade bed, and then marched over to stack two pillows over the end of the mattress.

"I don't have time for this. I have chores to get done. I-I need to go into town today." Her throat had gone dry with the memory of how painful a well-paddled bottom could be. Yet her stubborn streak chose that second to show itself again. "I don't want a spanking."

"I'm sure you don't." He raised an eyebrow and walked over to take a firm grasp of her elbow to pull her toward the bed, unconcerned as her bare feet skidded on the floor in resistance. "All the excuses in the world aren't going to keep you from getting one."

Her heart raced as he pushed her torso against the pillows. Then he tugged her panties down, off, and then tossed them to the floor before she could do more than grumble under her breath at him. Her cheeks burned in humiliation. Defiance had her creeping back, until he swatted her bottom hard and shoved her back into the position he wanted.

"Trent, no! Don't do this!" she demanded with a glance back only to find that he'd raised the paddle to shoulder height. "Shit!" She ducked her head down, curled her fists around the quilt, and braced herself.

He lowered the paddle with a crash that had her grunting in spite of her determination not to, "Aaaarrghhhh." Her tender flesh flamed immediately at the feel of the unforgiving wood.

"I'm not going to lecture you about why you're getting this sound paddling. It's justified, that's all that needs to be said."

He went straight to business. He held her in place with a hand in the middle of her back and painted her bottom with fierce, rhythmic swats that gave her no break and no chance to protest.

Suzy twisted and turned, battled the blaze he built on her bottom. She kicked and fought him, but he was stronger, more determined. It had been a long, long time since she'd endured this intense of a punishment. Not long enough.

"You're killing me! Oh, ohhhhhh! Stop!" She gripped the quilt tighter. She twisted beneath his hold even more.

Nothing swayed him from delivering a paddling she would not soon forget. She had no chance to recuperate between the hard strokes that methodically landed.

A dozen swats, two dozen. She'd counted those, somewhat. She gave up even trying to count after what seemed like a hundred, but felt more like a thousand. All she could finally do was give in to the submission he sought, scream out and sobbingly plead for the paddling to end.

At long last he released her and she lie limply, bawling like a baby. She knew he'd moved away and watched her in silence as she struggled to catch her breath. She could barely think with the horrible pain that felt like a swarm of bees had stung her poor bottom. This was definitely a man she didn't want to cross threads with very often. Never again, actually, but she knew herself enough to realize "never" wasn't likely.

Gingerly, she reached back toward her bottom. Wow! Heat met her hand before she even touched the swollen, extremely sore cheeks. She didn't look at him, wasn't ready to face him yet.

As if he understood, he moved further away, saying quietly, "I'll leave you alone now. We'll talk about the ranch later."

She almost snapped at him about the way he sounded determined to ruin her dreams, but wisely she bit down the urge. He had the paddle still in his hand, and she was still in prime position for having it applied again. She didn't want that at all.

* * *

Trent leaned against the empty arena, sun like a fireball rising higher and higher, making the day hotter and hotter. Sweat rolled down his spine and plastered his shirt to his back. The heavy denim jeans he wore fit ranch life, but were miserable to wear otherwise. He much preferred the lighter linen slacks he wore to the office. He'd changed a lot—a hell of a lot—since driving away from the Crawley Ranch twelve years ago. Some good changes, some bad. He knew he was a hard man, difficult to get along with at times. He set his mind on a goal and he accomplished it. Someone under his protection got protected.

He tipped the brim of his hat up and studied the log home that stretched widely in two directions. The place hadn't seemed so big when there'd been four kids and an adult running around within it. It seemed enormous now that there were only Suzy and him staying there. He had a fair sized condo in D.C., but it would barely compare to even one of the main house's wings. Yet there was something about the house that comforted him and made him realize that he'd actually missed the place.

He'd missed Suzy, too. A lot. He'd tried to deny it, tried to tell Casey he hadn't wanted to hear about her whenever his brother had been eager to share something he'd heard. In truth, Trent had listened like a man in a desert dying for a drink of water. He'd drunk in every word and savored it.

His thoughts replayed her comment about having been married. His stomach tightened against that knowledge, just as it had when she'd made the statement. He sure as hell didn't remember Casey ever mentioning that tidbit of information! He wanted to know more about it, and yet he didn't. He really didn't want to know about any other man touching, caressing, and fucking her. Not that he'd "fucked" her. No, what they'd done might have been quick and hot, but it had been sex tinged with desperate intimacy, bordering on lovemaking. He honestly didn't know what to think about that, except that it couldn't happen again.

He glanced at his watch. Almost three hours had passed since he'd delivered a paddling to Suzy's sweet ass. Boy, he'd been upset with her about that horse riding

incident. Especially after what Brady had told him. And then she'd admitted to having ridden the beast other times. The idea made him angry all over again. She could have been killed, could be killed if she ever stupidly decided to take another chance like that again. He'd have to sell the damn horse, ASAP. She'd be pissed, of course. But he didn't care.

Okay, he'd given her enough time to calm down and recover from the much-deserved spanking. It was time to go nose-to-nose with the little she-devil about selling the ranch. This would not be a pleasant confrontation.

* * *

Suzy wasn't in the living room, the kitchen, or even the office. Actually, the house was silent except for the steady pendulum movement of the grandfather clock. Could she possibly still be in her room?

Trent headed down the hallway, trying to gather his thoughts in preparation for their argument about the ranch. All rational thoughts fled the second he stopped in the doorway and spotted Suzy lying face down amidst the rumpled sheets. She wore only that intriguing lacy bra and jeans that, along with the tiny panties he'd pulled off of her, were lowered to just below her buttocks. Her raised arms hugged a pillow. Her breaths were soft and steady, probably asleep and exhausted from all the crying. He'd certainly given her something to cry about. Not that his actions bothered him, and he could live with her emotional reaction...expected it.

He wanted to strip down and stretch out beside her. He wanted to spoon next to her well-spanked bottom and admire his handiwork up close and personal. Maybe it was odd, but a woman's pretty hot pink bottom turned him on like crazy. He also enjoyed smoothing his hands over that smooth, soft, warm skin.

"Proud of what you did?" she questioned, proving she hadn't actually been sleeping. She looked at him over her shoulder, her adorable face pinched in annoyance. "I'm not particularly happy to see you, you know."

Her quiet sass given the circumstance made him smile. "I'm not so much proud, as satisfied. I set a goal, and accomplished it. Just like I always do."

She eased onto her side to face him, hissed out a breath, and glowered in his direction. "So happy that one of us is satisfied."

The sight of her almost bare breasts, on the verge of bursting free from the skimpy lace bra, had the blood draining from his head and pooling south. It nearly finished him off when his gaze slipped lower, down to where golden curls served as a hard-to-resist temptation. He'd desperately wanted to flip her completely onto her back and shove his hard cock into the warmth he knew would be waiting for him. He swallowed hard, fought for sanity.

"Enough of this little chitchat, Susanna," he said with a croak in his voice that irritated him. "Get that red ass out of bed. Get dressed properly, and meet me in the kitchen. I'll fix us a sandwich. I'm starving." He left before he did something he'd regret, again.

* * *

It took Suzy fifteen minutes to ease her way into "proper" clothes, not the jeans she'd attempted to put on earlier, but a short, flippy cotton sundress. By the time she walked into the kitchen and found Trent setting plates filled with sub sandwiches and chips on the bar, she was ready to face him. He'd paddled her. She'd survived it with a burned bottom and wounded pride. Done deal, time to get beyond that.

He walked around her and climbed onto one of the bar stools. His gaze sweeping over her dress showed his male appreciation, but he didn't say anything. Instead he concentrated on picking up half of the cut-up sub in front of him.

She admired the way his shoulders stretched taut a pale blue Western shirt with the sleeves rolled up to just below the elbow. The muscle in his forearm that bunched with the movement of his arm also fascinated her, as did the touch of stubble already

forming on his firm jaw. There was a lot she enjoyed looking at when it came to Trent Tyler. But she wouldn't comment on the subject either.

She scooted her plate to the side of the bar instead of joining him on one of the wicker bar stools. That would just have been masochistic torture for her damaged bottom. "I believe I'll stand, thank you very much."

His only response was a quick glimpse of a seldom-seen dimple, which rubbed her the wrong way. "Not amusing, big guy."

Those large shoulders shrugged. "There's nothing funny about a spanking. It's just your attitude sometimes that strikes me funny."

Time to move past this unpleasant topic. She picked up a potato chip and waved it in his direction. "So, ready to rumble?"

For a second he simply chewed on a bite of sandwich. Then he met her gaze and said in his usual no uncertain terms, "We need to sell the ranch. I've already got a real estate agent lined up, and she has several potential buyers."

Suzy shoved her plate away. "Didn't I tell you already that I'm not interested in selling? You had no right to make any kind of arrangements behind my back."

"I have the majority interest."

"Surely you can't sell the ranch out from under me. Surely you need my agreement to put it on the market. Which you'll never get." She didn't like the way his eyes had darkened, and not with male lust this time.

She stepped completely around to the other side of the counter, deciding distance from those long arms of his, from those hard hands, might be a good idea. "Stop giving me that look."

A furrow of confusion settled between his dark eyebrows. "What look?"

"The one that seems to forewarn a possible swat of your hand." She didn't like the way that furrow stayed in place. "You can't spank me every time I don't agree with you. That's just not right. That must be written somewhere in a Spanker's manual."

"Spanker's manual?" He actually grinned. "Damn, you're a sassy girl."

"Woman." A woman whose body was starting to react again to the handsome man seated across from her.

His gaze moved in a silent lover's caress over her, making her tingle everywhere.

"Sweetheart, I remember exactly how much of a woman you are."

Immediately she thought of him gripping her waist, ramming into her more than willing body last night. His cock had been so long, so hard, so wonderful. And he'd been sooooo good. She sighed, disgusted at the wet feeling forming between her legs again. "We can't play that game," she said in a trembling voice.

He sucked in a deep breath and closed his eyes for an instant. "No, we can't. We should never have started it last night."

Suzy gave a tight nod of her head, even as disappointment made her sad. "Back to the current disagreement then."

"You need to be reasonable."

"I need to be reasonable? Exactly what makes my plan to run this ranch unreasonable?" She felt the arousal draining rapidly away, thank goodness.

"You always hated doing the chores. You sneaked away or tricked your way out of having to do them every chance you got." His look had turned stern. "Those little shows early on of irresponsibility earned you more than one spanking."

"Would you get your damn mind off spanking!" He really knew how to get on her bad side, always had.

"Are you denying you frequently got your butt busted for shirking your responsibilities?"

She huffed and bit out, "I got my bottom spanked. A lot. I've always had a tendency to push my limits, and I usually paid dearly for that. Yes, I got my butt busted. Happy?"

Trent didn't look happy, didn't look satisfied either. "From what Casey told me, you've been drifting around for years. Clearly not handling responsibilities, or even taking any on."

"I got married. I took on that responsibility, for a while."

His look told her he didn't like being reminded that she'd been married. "You didn't deal with the responsibility of marriage for very long, according to what you told

me. Maybe your husband couldn't keep you from going off on tangents, from flittering around with no real commitment to anything, or to him." He met her gaze. "Maybe you needed a stronger man. Someone who—"

He'd managed to set fire to the short fuse of her temper. "Someone who turned me over his knee and spanked me," she brusquely finished for him. "For your information—not that it's any of your damn business—Grayson did do that! I spent plenty of time nose-to-carpet getting my bare bottom smacked."

That took the wind out of Trent's sails. He looked torn between pleased to hear her misbehavior had gotten her punished and irritated that another man had done the job. Men!

She looked at the clock on the microwave. "As enjoyable as this conversation has been, I've got an appointment in town in about an hour."

"We haven't settled anything. We need to come to an agreement in some manner about selling the ranch." Trent stood, blocking her way when she would have hurried out of the room.

She refused to back down. "Look, maybe we can figure out a compromise. Later. My attorney is supposed to give me some news concerning something important. A lot of my decision will be based on what I learn."

Surprising her, his tone filled with concern. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Yes. No. She needed to finish handling the complicated details of her divorce on her own. Grayson was up to something, and she didn't want to get Trent involved in her problems.

"Thanks, but no." She was relieved when he didn't press her further. As an olive branch offering, she said, "How about you grill us some steaks tonight and we can talk more about this ranch situation? You can tell me why it's so important to you that we sell The Crawley."

Looking reluctant, he stepped aside. "Agreed. But you need to tell me about these plans Brady hinted at that you have for the ranch. Try and convince me that you're serious."

"I am serious." She left the room before her temper got her into trouble again

Chapter Four

The ride into town in her nearly shocks-free pickup truck had been slow torture, thanks to Trent's handiwork on her bottom. Even worse, though, was sitting for nearly an hour in her attorney's reception room as he ran behind schedule. Suzy had caught the young receptionist looking curiously in her direction several times. She just couldn't keep from shifting around, from re-crossing her legs, from trying to lift one sore buttock after the other in an attempt to ease the discomfort.

When she could finally stand it no longer, she stood and started toward the door. "Tell Mr. Peterson that I'll call him tomorrow to reschedule."

As her hand landed on the door knob, she heard the older man's voice say on a rush, "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Adams. Please don't leave. We can talk now, better today than tomorrow."

Suzy turned in reluctance. She really would rather have gone home, but his expression told her that wasn't a good idea. "Fine. Lead the way."

A minute later she carefully sat in one of the dark crimson leather chairs across from Randolph Peterson. The sixty-something, white haired man had a kindly grandfatherly look about him. Yet she knew Allen had always believed him to be a lawyer of extreme honor, cagy and smart. He had a reputation for having faced many a high-priced fellow attorney in his years of practice back in New York City, attorneys who mistook his quiet good-old boy impression for someone they could run over. They'd been wrong. As soon as she'd decided to come back to Kansas and make something more of the ranch, she'd sought him out. She wanted his intelligence and strength behind her as she continued to deal with her settlement-dragging ex-husband.

"Your husband's attorney sent a certified check for \$125,000," Randolph said, leaning forward to hand the document to Suzy.

She shot out of the chair, winced, and snatched the check. "It was supposed to be for \$500,000!"

"Are you all right?" he asked in concern.

Her cheeks flamed and she avoided looking at him directly. Darn Trent's rotten hide! His determination to beat her butt for misbehaving—in his biased opinion—was causing her great embarrassment now. She couldn't help the small responses to twinges of discomfort as she sat for too long, or when she scraped her tender bottom as she stood too quickly.

She stared in bitterness at the check that was supposed to have been the final payment in the divorce settlement. "I'm fine. Fell off one of the horses and bruised my dainty posterior is all." Lie, lie, lie, but so much better than telling him she'd gotten paddled almost raw this morning.

He continued looking concerned, but, fortunately, dropped the subject. "I was also going to tell you the attorney sent a letter from Grayson, which I, of course, haven't read. The note attached to the envelope did say that your ex-husband is thinking about coming here sometime in the next week or so."

"What!" Suzy dropped back into her chair, crumpling the check in one hand and grasping the envelope Randolph had just given her in the other hand. "Shit!" she gasped, shooting up again when her bottom strongly protested the firm slap against the leather seat cushion.

"Maybe you did more than just bruise your ... your ... Well, perhaps you need to have a doctor check out your, uh, injury." His face was tinged with the pink of his own discomfort with the subject matter.

She had to get her reactions under control. This was humiliating. She ripped open the envelope and decided not to respond to the man's suggestion. With time, the bruising and sporadic moments of pain would go away.

After taking a minute to read the letter, she ground her teeth. At the same time her heart pounded and her stomach fluttered with familiar feelings that she'd once

experienced because of Grayson. She held up the letter, stating in confusion, "It's an apology. For everything."

Suzy's gaze shifted back to the piece of parchment. He'd called her "honey" several times, like he had in their most tender moments. He said that he regretted more than she could ever know the mistake he'd made. He claimed he would grovel at her feet, do anything if she'd take him back. Several months ago she might have considered swallowing her pride and giving their marriage another chance. But she'd finally recovered her pride and decided she didn't need him. She'd also discovered that she could stand on her own and make serious plans for her life, for the first time since she'd left The Crawley. Men were too easily controlled by their "small head," instead of by their "big head." Grayson definitely fit that description. She knew that Trent had always had a string of cheerleaders hot after the sexy football hero in high school. And she figured there were a line of women waiting to take their turn in his bed as a grown man. She'd certainly enjoyed his skills, wouldn't mind enjoying them some more. But she'd never again trust a man with her heart.

Randolph cleared his throat to stop her wandering thoughts. "Would you like me to write the attorney back and demand full payment? We really should set a firm deadline for that, too."

"Yes. Tell him I want full payment no later than the end of next week."

She thought about her dwindling funds from the inheritance. A million dollars had seemed like a lot of money at the time she'd received it. With all the repayments she'd made to her foreman and to the other ranch hands, plus to Allen's suppliers for the ranch, the money was nearly gone. Now her builder needed payment before he'd even start construction of the guest hotel. And she needed that hotel, if her dreams for the ranch were to really become reality.

She raised her chin, stuffed the check into her purse, and repeated, "No later than the end of next week." That said, she turned on her heels and walked regally out, again fighting the lingering discomfort on her sore bottom.

* * *

"I'll have it settled by the end of next week," Trent firmly told his "brothers" in a conference call as he sat in the home office late in the afternoon. It had already seemed like a long day, and he still needed to have a heart-to-heart with Suzy. If she ever got back from town. Where the hell was she?

"She's really changed her mind about keeping the ranch?" Casey questioned, sounding as if he didn't believe Trent. "The last time I talked to her she was pretty determined to stay there and change the ranch's focus."

"I told you both she wouldn't actually stay there," Jet added. He'd been the brother Trent had counted on to be right about Suzy.

Trent, truthfully, didn't have as much confidence in the outcome he wanted as he'd said. He looked out the window that had a good view of the ranch road into town. She'd been gone several hours already, longer than he'd expected. Had everything gone all right with her attorney? He sure wished he knew what that meeting had been about, although he suspected it had to do with her ex-husband. Just the thought of an ex-husband left a sour taste in his mouth.

"Are you still there?" Casey prodded when Trent had disappeared from the conversation.

"Yes." Then a thought occurred to him and he asked in irritation, "Did you guys know Susanna had been married? That she's divorced now?"

For a second it didn't seem like either of the other men would respond, and then Jet said, "Allen told us about it when she suddenly got married. He had a real bad feeling about that casino owner."

Trent sat up straighter in the massive leather desk chair that still smelled of Allen's Old Spice aftershave. "Casino owner?"

"Grayson Adams," Casey clarified. "He owns a couple of the mid-size casinos on the Strip in Vegas."

"Mob ties?" Trent pushed, knowing all too well that there were a lot of less-than-desirable casino relationships still connected with the Mafia dons who had

infiltrated the city years ago. The idea of little Suzy having anything at all to do with that crowd made him sick in the stomach.

"No. The guy came from old money back East somewhere. Banking family or something. He invested heavily in some places that he picked up cheap, cheap for Las Vegas that is," Jet explained. "Evidently he's done all right. From what I've heard—and I did investigate him a little, he runs a tight business. The criminal element appears to have left him alone."

"Why the hell didn't either of you mention any of this to me before now?" Trent had a hard time tamping down the urge to rip into both of his brothers. He'd have done a hell of a lot more than a little investigating. He'd have gotten his partners and their impressive network of contacts all over learning everything there was to know about Grayson Adams.

Neither man responded right away. Finally Casey said, "You always got pissed whenever I mentioned anything about Suzy. I figured giving you just the basics was enough."

Trent might be pissed now, but in truth, he knew he'd given his brothers that impression. He'd tried to believe that line of b.s. himself, that he was only vaguely interested in what happened to Suzy. A lie. Flat out, a lie.

"Why are you so interested in her past all of a sudden?" Jet questioned with suspicion in his tone. "You're sounding pretty damn testy. Almost jealous."

His brother had pinned Trent's reaction exactly. He did feel jealous. He shouldn't, but he had felt that way since the first mention of an ex-husband. But he really didn't want to talk about any of this further. He needed to get a handle on his relationship with Suzy; specifically where—if anywhere—it was going.

Saving him from interrogation by his brothers, he heard the front door opening, followed by the light tapping of Suzy's heels on the tiled floor. It shocked him just how relieved he felt at listening to her, at knowing she was back at the ranch.

"Gotta go. Suzy's here now, and we need to talk." He hung up before either of them could even attempt to keep him on the line.

* * *

Suzy nearly slammed the front door to release some of her pent-up anger from having thought about Grayson and the check and his ridiculous letter during her drive back to the ranch. What had he been thinking? That she was still the naïve foolish woman who'd married him? That she hadn't finally seen through the charm he showed the world, down to the egotistical slime ball he really was? She considered opening the door again just so she could slam it this time. Then she thought better of that little fit of temper.

Good thing too, she decided, when she spotted Trent striding into the living room and looking oddly at her. She didn't know what to think of his expression. It wasn't exactly angry, not exactly happy, but something complex and mysterious. Whatever emotions he was dealing with now were too deep for her to consider at the moment. Still, she instinctively knew that having him witness her throwing a tantrum wouldn't have been good. It would've been like asking for a spanking she was sure.

"I'm starving," she said, hoping to avoid any discussion of where she'd gone and why.

"Ready to fire up the grill?"

He continued to study her for a long second, which made her uncomfortable without understanding his current mood. Then a telling gleam sparked in his eyes as he said in a throaty voice, "If you don't want a repeat of last night, you'd better go put on more clothes."

Well, now. She hadn't expected that particular reaction. Her pulse picked up speed, and she grew warm in places best not thought about at the moment.

"It's a sundress, Stud Boy, not a diaphanous, see-through gown." Still, the idea of him being turned-on just looking at her was a really nice ego boost. Especially after the day she'd had so far.

He took a step toward her. "Sweetheart, that's damn little fabric covering a mighty appealing body."

His eyes had gone even darker, his rapt attention to her was clear by the way his jeans had filled out in a certain spot. She swallowed hard; her body had reacted to his intense look, to his nearness. She felt confused.

"Didn't we skirt around the notion earlier of repeating anything like what happened last night being a bad idea?"

He gave a small nod, but the intensity stayed in his eyes.

"Jeans it is," she gushed and edged toward the hallway leading to the bedroom, puzzled by what was happening here. If she didn't get away from him, she might do something really foolish. Like rip her clothes off and let him have his way with her right here in the entry way.

* * *

By the time Suzy joined Trent out on the patio, where he was lighting a fire in the propane grill, she had her emotions under control. It was still uncomfortable to wear her tight jeans, but better. And they gave her more cover-up than her usual shorts would have. Because of his strange mood—and her response to him—she thought maybe hiding some of her bare skin might be for the best. Maybe. Maybe not, she realized as her strong attraction to him hit her again.

"That's better," he stated simply, glancing at her before focusing again on the grill.

"I aim to please." She walked closer, inhaling the scent of him and of the patch of peppermint lining the edge of the brick patio. But it was Trent's sensual aftershave, and the smell of him alone that had her drifting on a cloud of feminine appreciation.

He cocked an eyebrow in her direction, with a quick glance toward her jeans. "Feeling better now, aren't you?"

Suzy huffed in annoyance. "It was a difficult trip into town, and then sitting so darn long waiting to see my attorney. Thanks to you."

"You're welcome," he countered, with a chuckle.

"I wasn't really thanking you for ... well, for you know what." She moved to the table with the umbrella that he'd piled plates and silverware on. Irritating man.

She reached for the plates to separate them, and then suddenly he was behind her. Her heart raced as he swept his arms around her and pulled her against his hard body. Hard everywhere.

"For paddling that sweet butt of yours," he said on a husky whisper.

She really should move away from him. Instead she savored the feel of him surrounding her. Grayson had been tender at times, not often, but sometimes. But he'd never made her feel anything like Trent did. When this big man touched her, she went up in flames.

"Weren't we going to talk?" she asked, struggling to control the powerful desire building within her. She rubbed her slightly tender bottom against the hard ridge in his jeans.

He groaned and held her firmly in place with hands on her hips. "We need to, yes. But, damn sweetheart, if you don't stop that, I'm going to strip you bare right out here before nature and God."

Slowly she turned in his embrace to smile sassily up at him, with her lower body still pressed tight against him. "You gave me a sound bottom warming earlier. What makes you think that I'd allow you to make love to me?"

"The fact that you're practically crawling inside my skin at the moment. That you want me as bad as I do you."

She shuddered. "Can't deny it or I'd be lying."

He lightly patted her bottom, "Lying will get you in trouble."

"Trouble like in having you undress me? Like in having you pay extra special attention to me?" She gave a nervous giggle. "I could live with that kind of trouble."

His chest rose and fell on a deep breath as he grinned at her. Then he turned to flick off the grill before scooping her into his arms and carrying her into the house.

"We're going to burn the sheets up for a spell. Sometime later we'll grill those steaks. Okay with you?"

She settled against his chest. "I like a man who knows his priorities."

"Getting myself damn deep inside you is high priority at the moment." They were halfway down the hall before he added, "Later we'll have that serious discussion about the ranch, another priority of mine."

It was on the tip of her tongue to call this round of potentially hot sex off in her annoyance with his determination to talk about the ranch. When he looked at her with such promise of driving her wild, she changed her mind. Wild first. Then they could butt heads.

* * *

"You about killed me, sweetheart," Trent said when she crawled off the badly rumpled bed that smelled of sweet sex and Suzy to scoot into the bathroom. "I'm not sure I can even move."

Suzy stuck her head back around the corner of the doorway, grinning. "I've always loved that country song. You know, the one about riding a cowboy."

"I'm a jazz lover, but, hey, you can ride this cowboy any time you feel like it."

He watched her disappear into the adjoining room and close the door. His thoughts went right back to where she'd sat on top of him only moments ago, bouncing up and down like the skilled rider she was. He'd held those plump, firm breasts in his hands, massaged them, and leaned up to lavish them with his tongue ... until she'd taken him to the edge and beyond. "Yeah, you can ride this cowboy any damn time."

He lay there another minute and finally drug himself off the bed. His clothes were scattered across the floor, as were hers. Things had gotten pretty hot and heavy real quick, but at least they'd made it to her bed. As he gathered up everything carelessly flung to the floor, he also picked up an envelope addressed to Suzy. Somehow without even opening it, he sensed that it was from her ex-husband. A

thought that brought back his earlier frustration, his earlier jealousy. He didn't even want to think about another man making love to her.

She opened the bathroom door at the same moment he was zipping up his jeans. "Damn, woman, you're beautiful." The words came out more of a growl than an admission of male appreciation and he could see the confusion in her eyes.

Reaching for her panties, she slipped them on without looking at him. "I'm sorry that's such a problem for you."

"I didn't mean ... It's not a problem ..." He blew out a breath and nodded toward the envelope now lying on the bed. "Something from your ex?"

She glanced at the bed, and then frowned in his direction. "If it is, it's none of your business."

They did silent battle with their eyes, until he grabbed his socks and boots and headed out the door. "You're right. The only business that has to do with me and you is this ranch. I'll meet you outside to grill those steaks. We need to talk."

* * *

Suzy took her own sweet time joining him out on the patio. His sniping at her over the ranch after what they'd done had teased her always-short temper. She'd, oddly, wanted to be more than a quick tumble in bed to him, and yet his attitude certainly hadn't given her any hope for that. She should be happy, really, just enjoy their time together ... and the sizzling little rounds of sex. She'd always known they wouldn't have the kind of relationship that she'd spent hours and hours dreaming of as a foolish love struck teenager. They didn't even want the same things in life, although she really didn't know what he wanted. But she fully intended to find out, at least as far as it affected her and The Crawley.

She carried the platter of thick Kansas City strip steaks over to him. "Okay, Trent, explain to me exactly why you feel so compelled to sell the ranch. Why you don't seem to even want to consider giving me a chance at running it."

He took the platter and placed the steaks on the hot grill. They immediately began sizzling and filling the area around them with smells that made her stomach rumble. As he set the plate down on the nearby table, he moved to look over the wide expanse of backyard. "I remember Casey falling out of that old oak tree. Must've been ten or so. You'd pushed him, if I remember right. He broke his arm, and Allen burned your butt for it."

Her gaze followed his and she recalled the event, too. All of it. Casey had been teasing her as they'd sat on a branch, and she'd had enough. She nudged him to stop picking on her, but he'd lost his balance and fallen. She'd scrambled down from the tree as fast her eight-year-old body could and hurried to his side in horror. She had demanded that she ride along with him in the truck as Allen had taken them all into the local hospital.

"That was my first time in a hospital," she said thoughtfully. "I didn't like it. Didn't like the paddling I got after we got back to the ranch, either."

Trent gave her a nod of understanding and studied the steaks. "Do you remember going swimming in the pond that next summer? Catching all those baby frogs and then letting them loose in the barn that one time?" He chuckled. "Talk about a wild time. Horses going nuts. Jet, Casey and me trying to catch those little hopping devils."

She laughed and reached back to cover her bottom. "Yet another memorable application of the famous Butt Warmer."

He reached out to tuck a wayward strand of her hair behind an ear. "You sure could find or make trouble. In school, too. You were always looking for mischief, and a way out of doing your share of the chores."

Suzy stepped back. "I pull my own weight here now. You can ask Brady or any of the other ranch hands. I'm not that same irresponsible girl, Trent. No matter what you think."

"I wish I could be sure of that. I really wish I could be convinced that you're interested in wanting to keep the ranch running for the long term. But your track record of staying with anything isn't very good, and you know that."

He turned to flip the steaks over and she had the strong desire to kick him in the butt. Instead she said firmly, "Yes, I struggled a bit finding myself. You and the other boys always had each other to bounce your dreams off of. You could toss out ideas, talk about the good or bad of them, and work together to figure them out. And Allen helped you, all of you."

"What are you saying?" Trent asked, frowning in confusion.

"I'm saying that I was the little sister that no one took seriously. I wasn't included in any of those kinds of talks. I had to figure things out for myself, and, frankly, it took me a long while to make sense of life." She concentrated on placing the silverware next to the plates just so. "Then hormones kicked in and I went through one love struck phase after another, while the three of you just made fun of me. Especially you. You'd tell me how silly I was messing with makeup. Or you'd tell me how I didn't know how to dress right. Or you'd pick on me about liking this boy or that one."

She looked up at him and saw the astonished guilt in his expression. "Until one day you stopped talking to me. You avoided me, couldn't seem to stand even being in the same room. Then you took off. Right in the middle of my fifteenth birthday party. You ruined that day, and I've never celebrated my birthday since. Bet you didn't know that, did you?"

"Shit." He looked shell-shocked, miserable at the knowledge he'd gained. "I couldn't stay."

Now that she finally had her chance, she pushed him for an answer, "Why the hell not?"

It took him a minute to respond, but finally he did. "Because you weren't my little sister anymore, and it scared the devil out of me."

"Explain that."

He held her gaze and seemed to be biting a bullet as he admitted, "Casey and Jet did, and have always thought of you as their little sister. I did for a long while. Until you started getting interested in boys. Until you started maturing. It seemed like one day I just didn't see you as a sister, but instead as a girl I wanted to do things to and with. Things I shouldn't even have been thinking about. So I left."

She'd think about his revelations later, when she could savor the truth she'd finally heard. Right now she asked, "You've come to terms with it being okay not to see me as your little sister now?"

He shook his head. "Not entirely. But I can't seem to keep my damn hands off of you."

Her heart fluttered, very much pleased with the obvious frustration he felt. "Or keep your dick out of my body?" she dared to tease.

He blinked, tugged her to him and swatted her bottom once. Then he hugged her. "You've got such a mouth sometimes."

"Evidently I have an irresistible bottom, too." She hadn't minded the swat, but she really liked being held within his embrace.

He just held her in silence for several minutes as she let him, as the steaks sizzled behind them. Finally he seemed to know the meat was done and he released her to remove the steaks from the grill. She quietly handed him the plates as she went inside to bring out a tray she'd readied earlier with steak sauce, a tossed salad he must've made up earlier when she'd been in town, and a bowl of cold baked beans that he'd always liked.

As they sat down at the patio table and went about filling their plates, he said, "I'm part owner of a private protection firm in the Washington D.C. area. My partners and I are trying to buy the building we've been leasing for the last couple of years. I need money, a big chunk of it. And by selling this ranch, I can fulfill my verbal commitment to the purchase with my share of this sale."

She considered what he'd admitted for a second. "I've made plans to turn the Crawley Ranch from just a cattle operation into the Suzy Q Ranch. I'm turning part of into a bootcamp for aspiring cowgirls."

His look of almost horror made her instantly defensive. "Brady and the others are okay with the idea."

"I bet they took some convincing." He cut off a piece of steak. "Wonder what Allen would think of your plan." Then he captured her gaze and pressed, "Do Casey and Jet know about this?"

"Some of it," she said. "At least they didn't all but laugh in my face, like you appear to want to do."

"What can you possibly know about running an operation like that?" he questioned, waving the forked piece of meat at her. "What can Brady and the boys know about it?"

She shoved her plate aside. "You really have an amazing way to make me feel like a complete idiot, even when you're dead wrong." She took a quick swig of iced tea she'd also carried out on the tray. "I've researched this business, visited a couple of such ranches. It's got real potential. And I'm going to see that the Suzy Q succeeds."

"Only if I agree not to pursue trying to sell the ranch."

"You could be a partner in this cowgirl bootcamp. It could turn out to be a terrific investment."

He set down his fork and shook his head. "I've got more investments now than I can handle. And my partners are counting on me to follow through with my share to purchase that building. We need to sell this ranch. Period."

"There is no period to it! You don't rule the world, you know. I've got a say in this matter, too." Suzy ground her teeth and stood, scowling furiously at him. "Let me find a way to buy you out."

"You won't be able to come up with that kind of money."

She hadn't wanted to deal with Grayson any further, but he might be her only chance at making her dream come to fruition. "You'd be surprised at what I can do these days when I set my mind to something."

As she started to walk away, he told her flatly, "You have until the end of next week. After that we're going to put the ranch on the market. You can use your share to find another business to run, and I'll stand behind my commitment to my business."

Chapter Five

Three days had passed since Trent had given her the time limit, and Suzy had avoided him like the plague. Actually, she thought of him as a plague. He was killing her peace of mind even from a distance, like now as she peered around the corner of the barn after an early morning ride to clear her thoughts. The big man she grew more curious about on a daily basis damn near stole her breath whenever she happened to watch him doing chores with the ranch hands. He had muscle upon muscle in both his arms and legs. And talk about a nice tush!

Disgusted with her thoughts, and the way her body always reacted to him, she strode briskly around the building. Brady, Trent and two of the men looked up from where they were working with another new horse she'd recently bought. She knew Brady expected her to come over and check how things were going, but she couldn't. Not with Trent standing there now looking all sweaty and tempting. Besides that, she was still upset with him.

"I'm going into town," she called out, heading right on toward the battered pickup in the driveway. "I'll probably stay late and visit Sally Anne." She didn't know why she'd added that last part. She hadn't even meant to spend the day and night in town, but it was getting harder and harder to keep from running into Trent in that big house of Allen's.

"Got things figured out yet?" Trent called out as well in challenge.

She shot him a sizzling glare that had the other men quickly looking away. "I'm working on it."

The odious man had the nerve to flash a grin. She hadn't had any luck so far trying to make all the pieces fit into the puzzle of her life. But she planned to meet with her banker one more time this morning. She hoped to appeal to his past friendship with Allen, hoped to make him see the potential of her plan for the ranch. If he wouldn't cooperate, she had one final person that she could approach. Gawd, she didn't want to go that route.

Her stomach twisting with nerves, she walked toward the driveway and studied the two vehicles parked there. Her pickup—well, Allen's old one—looked so sad parked there next to Trent's mammoth shiny red Dodge Ram truck. The stupid Dodge annoyed her, as did the man who drove it. If he was so hard-pressed for money for that real estate investment, why had he spent so much on a truck that didn't fit who and what he was today? He'd told her that he'd bought it in Kansas City the day he flew into the airport, instead of just renting a vehicle for what he intended as a short visit to The Crawley. His action didn't make a lick of sense to her. Some weird kind of male logic, she guessed.

All during the drive into town, she tried to wrap her mind around how a man thought. She needed to be on her best game when she talked to the banker. She didn't want him seeing her as the irresponsible girl that so many in the area still seemed to remember. Several times since she'd been back she'd overheard snippets of conversation—gossip really—about the wild girl Allen had taken in being at the ranch now. They'd evidently seen her as a burden the kind-hearted rancher had taken on when her folks had died while drinking and driving one night so long ago. They also talked about the three boys he'd taken in, also from tragic situations. But it seemed she'd been the one everyone saw as a waste of Allen's time and love. Hadn't she run off to unknown parts the second she graduated high school? Hadn't she broken his heart? Hadn't she lived with and then married some gambler in Las Vegas?

She parked in front of the bank on the nearly deserted main street and took a minute to settle her nerves. In time she was sure that she could change the townspeople's opinions of her. Making a success of her ranching idea would go a long

way toward changing their minds. Still, she hadn't come up with this plan to prove anything to anyone other than herself. It was time to focus on that.

* * *

Trent stood under the shower and let the warm water beat the weariness from his body. He'd spent most of the day trying to teach the new mare to accept a rider. Damn mare had the same defiant, sassy spirit as the woman who'd bought her at auction last week. She'd managed to kick him in the shins twice. She'd thrown him into the fence railing. She'd tossed him on his ass. He had bruises on top of bruises. In the end, though, he'd won their little battle of wills.

Finally he shut the water off and heard his cell phone ringing in the bedroom. Grabbing a towel and drying off as he walked naked into the bedroom, he felt tension stiffening his shoulders all over again. The call had to be either from his brothers, who were now intent on butting into his issues with Suzy and pressing him about his change of attitude toward her. Basically, they were getting too damn personal about his feelings for her. Something he didn't totally understand either.

He snatched up the phone from the dresser and sighed as he recognized the name in the window. Or the call could be from his partners, which it was. They'd also been pressing him about what the hell was keeping him in Kansas for so long. He'd told them when he'd left D.C. that he'd be here two weeks, but they had thought a week in Kansas would have been all he could stand.

"I said I'd get back to you on Monday," he said sharply in way of greeting.

"Senator Alderson needs you to escort his daughter, home from college for the summer, to some fancy charity ball Monday night," Joe countered. "You need to get your ass back here tomorrow, and get focused on business again."

Trent tossed the towel to the floor in annoyance. "I'm not finished here."

"We need you. Now."

"I haven't convinced Suzy to sign the contract so I can put the ranch on the market."

"Actually, our seller said he might consider taking your share of the ranch in exchange for your part of the payment on the building," Joe said, sounding pleased.

"Your little sis could keep her share of the ranch. She could try to convince her new controlling partner about that cowgirl thing you mentioned. You'd both get what you wanted," Todd added in what had turned into a conference call.

Trent sat down on the edge of his unmade bed. "She's not going to like the idea." Hell, he didn't like the idea. Sure he'd be getting what he wanted, but he felt certain that hard-hearted seller wouldn't agree to Suzy's plan. He'd seriously press her to sell the place. He'd bring in his high-powered lawyers and they'd run all over her. No, he really didn't like this idea.

"I've never seen you take so long to convince anyone of anything," Joe now sounded irritated. "She's just a simple country gal. Surely—"

"There's nothing simple about Suzy," Trent bit out. Nothing simple about his feelings for her either. One thing he did know, any decision about this situation would be his and not his partners'.

"Alderson," Todd prodded.

"I'll catch a flight tomorrow. But I'm coming back here as soon as that job's done. As I said, I'm not finished here." He hung up to some grumbled comments from Joe that Trent really didn't want to hear. Maybe he needed to do some re-thinking about this partnership of theirs. Joe had been getting on his nerves for some time now.

He picked up the phone again and made his plane reservations. This was a bad time to be leaving the ranch, to be leaving Suzy. There were three more horses scheduled to be delivered Monday, and they'd need working with. Brady said there was some fence down in one of the far off pastures. And ... What was he worrying about all of that for? The ranch was only a temporary problem of his. Like his attraction to Suzy was surely only a temporary problem. Right? Damn straight.

* * *

The Laid Back hardly had room for a stick to stand upright by the time Suzy fell back into the chair at a table near the bar. Sally Anne hadn't wanted to come here tonight, but she'd refused to let Suzy come here alone. Her friend had been afraid of her mood and what might happen to her. Sally Anne had feared she would drink herself to near oblivion, and then make a stupid decision to go home with one of the cowboys.

Sally Anne pushed the recently refilled pitcher—third pitcher—of beer out of Suzy's reach. "I'm thirsty," Suzy complained, reaching for the pitcher again. She giggled when her hand swiped the beer glass instead and it crashed to the floor.

"I don't doubt that you are, considering how long you've been out there dancing," Sally Anne said in disapproval. "There's probably not a cowboy's arms here tonight that you haven't been in. More than a half dozen are probably hoping they're going to get real lucky later. Take you home with them."

Suzy straightened in her chair. Her head felt fuzzy. She grinned sappily at one of the men she'd danced with earlier as he walked by their table. Even through her muddled mind she could see exactly what her friend had talked about: an invitation for a long night of getting sweaty between the sheets. All she'd have to do was give him a nod or a smile or a "let's go."

"Only one man lights my fire these days ... and he isn't here." Suzy tried to focus, tried to get her thoughts to clear up.

"Trent Tyler, right?" Sally Anne knew about Suzy's crush on him all those years ago. "I thought you said he wasn't going to stay around these parts. I thought you said he was giving you all kinds of grief about the ranch."

"That damn ultimatum," Suzy grumbled. "He's a sonofabitch, you know." Her eyes had trouble focusing, as did her thoughts. "Damn sexy. More stubborn than a mule, too." She scowled and planted her elbows on the table to rest her head in her hands.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Stop having wild sex with him ... for one thing. Hard to do that, though." She tried to concentrate on Sally Anne, who looked wide-eyed now. "He's hot. Real hot."

"Uh ... Uh, yes, I've noticed." Sally Anne blushed and said pointedly, "I think it's time I get you home. You've had enough beer for tonight."

Suzy bobbed her head, blinking as things started losing focus even more. "Maybe you're right."

Sally Anne came around the table to help her stand, and then struggled as Suzy wobbled. Slowly they made their way through the crowd toward the door. Finally one of the cowboys Suzy had danced with strode over, scooped her into his arms, and carried her to Sally Anne's car. He deposited her in the front seat with a genuine look of disappointment.

Suzy closed her eyes and they drove in silence for a while. They'd turned onto the ranch road and the bumpiness had her eyes blinking open. She looked ahead into the darkness, toward the security lights dotted around the main part of the ranch. All the failed attempts at solving her problem made her heartsick.

"Bank turned me down ... again ... this morning," she said quietly. It was hard to concentrate, getting harder. "Said I needed ... Trent's approval for ... any more bank loans." She rubbed her fuzzy head. "He ... he ... told me all kinds of if's and things."

Sally Anne reached over to pat Suzy's leg. "I'm real sorry about all this trouble you're having. Wish I could help, but I'm mortgaged to my eyeballs and beyond for my house and the beauty shop."

Suzy tried to meet her friend's eyes, could barely keep her own eyes open. "I appreciate that." She let her head plop against the seat back before mumbling, "I-I called Grayson. Left him a ... message ... need his ... help."

Then she slumped sideways just as Sally Anne said, "Oh no."

* * *

She had the hangover from hell and Trent was making too damn much noise this morning.

When she could stand it no longer, Suzy climbed out of bed, plastered her palms to the sides of her throbbing head, and stormed down the hallway toward the living room. The light trickling in through windows ahead hurt her eyes, so she closed them to near slits. Not only did her head and eyes hurt, but her brain hurt. Too much heavy thinking lately, and none of it had done her a damn bit of good. Her life was going to hell. Again.

Sensing she was no longer alone, she released her head and looked up. She skidded to a stop. Trent stood dead ahead, glowering and nearly growling at Grayson, who had evidently just been let into the house.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed at Grayson, wincing as her head threatened to explode. Her heart raced.

He looked as tastefully GQ as he always did, not a wrinkle in his khaki slacks or on his designer Polo shirt. His prematurely gray hair was carefully styled. Everything about him spoke of money and self-confidence. He didn't grace her with an answer, just swept his blue-eyed gaze up and down her body. Definite male appreciation flickered in his eyes when they met hers.

"I said what are you doing here?" she asked again, irritated at the amusement now teasing his lips.

Then she noticed how Trent, too, had taken a second from frowning at her to examine her body, then went back to frowning. An enormous feeling of dread swamped her and she hazarded a glance down. "Shit."

She turned to tromp in annoyance back to her room, snapping, "I'll be right back." She must've stripped off her clothes last night before falling into bed and failed to drag on even a nightshirt. Naked. They'd seen her naked! Well, of course, both of them had seen her that way before. But this was different. She stopped in her doorway to yell, "Forget what you saw! I mean it."

Was that Grayson chuckling? Was that Trent threatening to smash the other man's face in? What a mess she'd created now!

A few minutes later she rejoined the men still standing in the entry, still clearly sizing each other up. The testosterone level in the room had to be off the scales. Her brain was screaming, "Warning. Warning. Danger ahead." She wished she could march right on by them and disappear somewhere out on the ranch.

"I rather liked your previous look," Grayson said casually.

Trent did growl, but Grayson didn't seem to care.

She stopped a few feet in front of her ex-husband as confused emotions tumbled through her. There was still a strong attraction between them and it would be easy to remember only the early days of their all too brief marriage. She fought the memories. "You're here because ..."

Trent moved close to her, obviously making some kind of claim on her apparent to the other man. "He said you called him last night. He said you asked him to come here."

When she glanced at Grayson she found his expression smugger than she appreciated. A knot tightened in her stomach as she vaguely remembered using her cell phone to call him sometime during her pity party at the Laid Back. She really needed to stop going there, for sure she needed to stop drinking anything stronger than water.

"I shouldn't have done that," she mumbled, looking down to study her red painted toenails. "I got a little wasted last night. Wasn't thinking straight."

"I think it was your subconscious knowing it could reach out to me. Whatever condition you were in, you remembered how I previously told you that if you ever needed me, I'd be there for you." He looked at her squarely. "I meant it. I flew into Kansas City first thing this morning."

She blew out a breath of annoyance. "Well, you picked a hell of a time to turn over an honorable leaf."

Their gazes locked and held for an intense few seconds before he gave a nod and his expression mirrored regret. "Did you get my letter?"

Suzy didn't want to discuss that letter, especially not in front of Trent. She let Grayson's question go and suddenly noted the duffle bag off to the side, Trent's.

"Where are you going?" she questioned, focusing on him and momentarily filled with panic.

Trent glanced at the bag and said in a tone echoing frustration, "I've got to fly back to D.C. for a couple of days. Important client." He stepped closer to her. "Still, if you want me to stay here"

"Yes." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I mean no. You don't need to change your plans because of me, or because Grayson showed up. I can handle him."

To her real annoyance, Grayson stepped close to her other side. She felt sandwiched between two Alpha males each fighting for territory that they believed was theirs. She pushed out an arm to each man, shoving them away. "Back down, boys. I don't belong to either one of you."

The two men shared a glance, stated some kind of silent warning to one another. A second later Trent picked up the bag and strode toward the front door. He stopped to look back in her direction. "I'll tell Brady to keep an eye on things while I'm gone. And, you, Suzy, mind your P's and Q's."

She wasn't totally sure what he meant by that, but she figured it had something to do with keeping out of trouble while he was away. That would be hard to do, considering she was left to deal with Grayson on her own. Which she could, of course, but she didn't want to deal with him. Okay, he really was her last hope to see her dream become reality. But maybe she should just let this dream go. She'd let others go. Like the idea of a happily-ever-after kind of marriage, one where the two people involved loved and trusted each other.

"No more going to the Laid Back. Understand?" Trent stated in a no-nonsense tone before closing the door behind him.

A strained silence filled the entry. Suzy rubbed her moist palms on the sides of her jeans. "I shouldn't have called you." Yes, she'd like his financial help. More than just coming up with the rest of her settlement, because that wouldn't be enough now. But she knew there would be strings attached to whatever agreement he made with her. Strings she wouldn't like.

He walked past her and into the living room, taking a moment to look around the large room with its thick log walls and comfortable, well-used leather furniture.

"Very nice. Very Western. It fits you, my dear."

My dear. She hadn't heard that phrase in a while. It brought back warm memories, and then tarnished memories. "Yes, it does. And don't call me dear."

They hadn't heard the door open again or the footsteps, but suddenly Trent had joined them in the room. He was not a happy man. Neither, it appeared, was Brady, who stood next to Trent.

"She's not your dear anything, Adams. Not anymore." The expression on Trent's face held many emotions: jealousy, anger, acceptance, determination.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, puzzled and glad to see him at the same time.

His attention was solely focused on Grayson. "I've got a little business to take care of before I leave. Privately. Brady will show you around the main grounds, Grayson. Now."

Grayson didn't move so much as an inch.

Brady turned all Super Protector and demanded, "You'll be coming with me, now, as Trent said. Or I'll fetch the other men and we'll see to it that you're thrown off the ranch."

"Susanna?" Grayson questioned, still resisting, concern in his gaze.

Trent had hold of her arm at this point, and she knew something bad was coming. She tingled from where he touched her right down to her toes. Still, she trusted him, and she didn't want to make her situation any worse. She forced a confident smile, "Go with Brady. Let him show you the ranch. I-I've got ... business with Trent, just as he said."

Trent held her in place, grimly, until Grayson and Brady left the house. As soon as they heard their footsteps going down the porch, Trent speed walked her out of the room to the home office.

Her head still pounded, but she was pretty sure he wouldn't care to hear about that. "Trent? What's going on? I don't understand." Unfortunately, she really thought she did know, she just didn't want to believe it.

He walked them straight to the desk in front of the window that looked out to the main part of the ranch. "You'll understand real soon, sweetheart. Real soon." He released her arm but his look told her not to dare move.

When his hand went to his belt buckle, the breath froze in her lungs. She wanted to run from the room. Allen had only walloped her a few times with the belt, none of them were good memories. And Trent appeared very upset with her.

"Don't you need to leave right away? I-I mean you seemed in a hurry when you walked out earlier." Why weren't her feet moving? Why wasn't she halfway out of the house by now?

Nerves tingled all through her as she watched in horrid fascination while he slid the belt from his pants. Leather, over an inch wide, supple. He doubled it. "Pull your jeans down and face the desk."

"Can't you just ... can't you just ... spank me?" She hardly recognized her voice with the quiver in it. She remembered the pain she'd suffered at the paddling he'd given her several days ago. This would be as bad, maybe worse.

"I don't have a lot of time, but if necessary, I'll spank you and burn your butt with the belt. Your choice."

There was absolutely no back-down in his expression. Her hands trembled as she turned toward the desk and shoved her jeans down. She looked toward the window, knowing that someone could see inside this room—even if it wouldn't be a view from all that close. It was the idea, though, that if someone really looked in this direction, they could see her being soundly punished. But, thankfully, no one seemed to be in this part of the ranch yard.

"Bend over." There was definitely no "please" to his request.

Her heart hammering with dread, Suzy moved to within a foot of the large mahogany desk. She gathered her pride and bent over the desk, resting her forearms

on its cold surface, placing her head on her arms. Her bottom stuck out in an all too vulnerable position.

She didn't lift her head, but she did ask, "Are you going to explain?"

He started his explanation with a crack of the belt across her buttocks. "Did you know that I carried you into the house last night?"

He raised the belt up high and licked her again and again. "You were all but passed out drunk when I scooped you out of Sally Anne's car." He stroked her over and over with intent and purpose.

She did her best to stay in position and take her punishment stoically. For the first dozen lashes. But when he jerked down her panties and she had a second to feel the painful inferno already blazing on her poor bottom, she gave a muffled sob.

He pressed a hand to the small of her back to hold her firmly in place, and then laid a swift line of fire across the middle of both cheeks. At that point her meek submission was a thing of the past.

She squirmed, kicked, and hissed out every disrespectful name she knew. All of which had him changing tactics and aiming a half dozen licks across the tops of her thighs.

Her back arched at that and she screamed, "Ohmigod!"

She was quickly shoved back into position for another round of lashes with the horrible belt. "At least you had the sense to let your friend drive you home." Three more fiery strokes landed as she danced on her toes.

"Trent! Ohhhhh...ohhhhh. Stop! Oh, stop!"

She heard him toss the belt to the floor, but she was in too much misery to be thankful. But he wasn't finished with her. He grabbed her arm and made her walk painfully, awkwardly with her lowered jeans, to the straight-backed chair by the fireplace. A chair that had traditionally been used for only one reason.

Before she could do much more than suck in a couple of shaky breaths, he sat and she went stomach down over his rock hard thighs. She struggled a little as he clamped an arm around her waist and hugged her close to him.

"Now we're going to address your calling Grayson." His hand peppered her blazing bottom and she kicked her legs in earnest, first straight out and then wildly.

"I-I didn't mean to call him," she said on a hiss as he smacked the crease of her bottom repeatedly. "Jeeezzzz! Stop!"

"The phone didn't call by itself." He punctuated each word with a sizzling slap to her bottom. "You're divorced. He did something bad enough that you quit that marriage."

At his reminder, she had brief flashes of arguments, of overhearing comments about Grayson cheating on her, of her confronting him. But it was impossible to think about any of that when Trent was spanking her so damn hard. All she could manage was to wriggle again, to buck in an effort to get away from that punishing hand. And to sob.

At some point he finally stopped. She'd reached the point where she'd been howling with each fiery blast to her bottom. Now she lie desperately trying to catch her breath, and trying to quiet the miserable sobs.

"I hate to say this, sweetheart, but I really need to get going." His hand tenderly, gently touched her swollen, blazing bottom.

She absorbed his comment as she felt disappointment curl through her. Carefully she eased to her feet, flinging her hands around to touch the fire. She stamped her feet and bounced in place in the age old spanking dance, which really never accomplished anything.

"You couldn't have just left without doing all of this?" she grumped, giving him an unhappy look.

He stood, pulled her to him and placed his hands on top of hers as she held her throbbing bottom. "No. You'd earned this butt burning, and I needed to give it."

Setting her away from him, he looked at her again with mixed emotions in his brown eyes. "I'm hoping having a sore ass will keep you out of trouble until I get back."

"It'll keep me from sitting comfortably, that's for sure." She tried to give him a smile, but she really didn't want him to leave. And that thought made her as uncomfortable as her tortured bottom.

He leaned down to kiss her, intensely enough that she let go of her bottom and put her arms around him. Enough that she trembled from head to toe. Enough that as he released her, she whispered, "I'm going to miss you."

The grandfather clock in the living room bonged ten o'clock and he stiffened. "I'll have to drive like hell to not miss my plane." He strode quickly from the room calling out, "We'll talk when I get back."

She'd just tugged her jeans into place and wiped away the last of her tears when she heard Trent say something brittle to Grayson, who'd evidently finally returned to the house. Damn. First a butt burning from Trent, and now she had to deal with her ex.

Chapter Six

Suzy was almost fully composed by the time she walked into the living room and found Grayson studying the photographs on the fireplace mantel. He'd never seen pictures of her as a child, or as an adult for that matter—other than their few wedding pictures. She'd barely even told him about her "family," which should have told her right at the start that she hadn't trusted in their marriage.

When he turned to acknowledge her presence, his distinguished face held a look she didn't know how to interpret. "I take it these are the brothers you mentioned one time. You don't look anything alike. Different fathers? Different mothers?"

"Both. Allen Crawley was a foster father to us. He took Casey in first, and then Trent. He'd decided they were enough for him to handle. But then Jet showed up one day all battered and bruised, starving, and Allen couldn't turn him away."

"He sounds like he was a good man."

"The best. Especially to have the kind of patience he did with all of us. We were real handfuls." Her eyes got misty and that slight pain in her heart she'd been dealing with since Allen's death returned.

"What about you? When did you come to the ranch?"

There'd been so much skirting around who and what they were in their marriage, so little actual sharing. But the interest in her background was clearly evident in the expression on his face. She felt guilty for not having taken the time to pursue serious conversations with him before now. Now it didn't really matter.

"He took me in a year after Jet, after my worthless parents were killed while drinking and driving. They'd been on a bender for two days. I'd already spent most of my life taking care of myself, as best I could." She swallowed down the bitterness that she still occasionally battled. "I remember Allen telling me one night as he held me after

a nightmare that, with my arrival, he now had the kind of family he and his wife had always wanted.”

She blinked away tears and felt the sympathy for her past that she’d never before experienced from Grayson. It was disconcerting. She’d misjudged him. Some. He’d still proven to be a major jerk, but it seemed he actually had a heart buried somewhere within all that charm he so easily showed the world. The charm that had won her over, at first.

He looked again at the photograph of the four of them together riding in the back of Allen’s new pickup truck, when she was eight. Grinning like the idiots they were. Happy, if you didn’t look too closely into any of their young eyes.

“You weren’t a real family, but you became one, didn’t you? You and your brothers care a lot about each other, I’d bet.” There was something sad in his tone and in his stance. It reminded her that she knew as little about his past as he had about hers. What a pair they’d been.

As he forced his attention from the mantel filled with family photos, he said, “My brother and I find it absolutely necessary to live on opposite sides of the country. Our parents have always encouraged competition between us, almost from the day Turner was born when I was three. They made—and still make—us battle, make us miserable.” His expression mirrored the depth of his anger.” It’s all a bizarre game to them. It took me a long time to realize that and come to terms with our dysfunctional family.”

“I suppose, in a way, the boys and I are lucky. We each might have had pretty rough beginnings, but Allen was good to us. Casey, Jet, Trent and I really do care about one another.” Without thinking about it, she reached back to gently rub her sore bottom. “I tend to try my brothers’ patience sometimes. Always did.”

She dropped her hand when she realized what she’d done and hoped he hadn’t noticed. Her cheeks heated as she attempted a casual air. “They love me and I know it. I love them, too, although I’ve been pretty lax the last few years about keeping in touch. Guess I had a little trouble growing up.”

Grayson studied her for several seconds, making her squirm uncomfortably. She felt like a bug being examined under a microscope. Finally he moved to settle in Allen’s

big leather recliner. The chair didn't seem to fit him. His furnishings were all very contemporary, very stiff and formal—like he was most of the time. This was a side of him that she'd never witnessed before, a side that made her wish she had.

Surprising her, he said with a hint of amusement, "Susanna, I doubt you'll ever fully grow up. Truthfully, it would be a shame if you did."

She narrowed her gaze in irritation. "I'm not sure I like that statement."

His amusement became much clearer. "That's the spirited woman I married."

"The one you cheated on," she snapped automatically. Even if their battles were in the past, the pain of what he'd done was still all too near the surface.

Annoyance flashed in his eyes for a second, and then acceptance. The truth couldn't be denied. He avoided that argument and said instead, "I meant there is something oddly enjoyable about the sassiness you spout from time to time. Something strangely adorable about the way you find or make trouble, trying a man's patience. You certainly tried my patience enough times."

She heaved a put upon sigh. "Well, my adorable ways sure work against me a lot." She could easily remember the many times in their three month marriage that she'd taken him beyond his limits of patience. He'd reacted much like Trent: he'd planted his hard hand repeatedly on her bare bottom.

To her embarrassment, his gaze slid down her body. "Your mischief and misbehavior tend to lead to your getting spanked, yes. Even today, I suspect," he said, confirming the notion that he had seen her rubbing her bottom.

Her face heated but she didn't answer, simply tipped up her chin in defiance.

"Yes, Trent dealt you. It's in your attitude. And in the fact that you don't appear to want to sit down." When she continued to just stand there, he added, "I imagine he dealt with you quite well."

Annoyed, she walked over to straighten a lampshade that didn't need straightening. "I don't want to discuss that subject. Done deal, as they say."

"Lucky man, your Trent."

"He's not my Trent!" she protested, and wished he really were her Trent. But that just couldn't be. There were too many issues between them; both carried too much emotional baggage as well.

He ignored her sharp denial. "A man who gets to take you over his knee, gets to look at your sweet little bare bottom, and then gets to warm it up is a very lucky man. Although, I suspect, you can't understand that. I miss being that man."

Suzy glowered in his direction. "Men are just so weird sometimes."

"As are women, my dear." He actually gave her a gentle smile, along with a shrug. "I miss much more than having the opportunity to spank you, actually."

Uncomfortable with the way the discussion had veered off, Suzy pointedly asked, "Why did you come here?"

At first she thought he wouldn't let the matter drop, and then he said, "Because you called to ask for my help."

Forgetting her special problem for a second, she started to perch on the wide arm of the sofa. With a grumbled complaint, she shot back to her feet, doing her best to ignore the amused look on Grayson's face, again.

"Why do I find that hard to believe? You wanting to help me. I haven't even been able to get you to send the final part of our agreed upon divorce settlement." She really wanted to reach back and rub her bottom, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

He sobered. "I know that I've been dragging my feet, Susanna. It took me far too long, but I finally realized how big a mistake I'd made in letting you go."

"Grayson—"

"Forget I said that, for the moment. Just tell me about this plan of yours for the ranch. Tell me why you wanted my help, and what exactly it is that you want." He settled back into the chair.

Suzy wasn't sure she should discuss any of this with him. But he was here, and he looked ready to listen to her ideas. He looked like a businessman now, instead of a man she'd once married and divorced. She could handle this particular role. Shifting her

own thoughts to focus only on business as well, she went about sharing her dreams and all of the research into the business that she'd done.

* * *

The streetlights were on and the city had quieted for the night when Trent stood at the window of his third floor office that overlooked Georgetown University. There were still cars on the busy intersection, still students coming and going on the campus. But essentially the area was settling in for the night. When he'd first moved here to D.C. after leaving the life of "secretive" operative with one of those "unknown" but indispensable organizations, he'd considered trying to get into the law school. Then he'd started the partnership with Todd and Joe, and then they'd gotten too busy for him to think about it anymore. Now the idea didn't appeal to him at all.

Frowning, he realized that this building didn't appeal to him any longer either. He'd once been fascinated by everything about the property: the historical status of the structure, its colorful history, and the location. Now that the landlord had decided to play hardball in the current negotiations of selling the property to them, he was not interested.

He heard the traffic below, something he'd long ago learned to tune out. Traffic was a part of city life. Even in the limited time he'd been back in Kansas, he'd gotten used to the near silence of country life. The thought of being halfway across the country from the ranch and from Suzy was driving him nuts. He was moodier than a woman in the worst stages of PMS. He'd practically growled at his partners the second he walked into the office, after insisting they meet him there even if it was Sunday evening. He'd gotten so irritated that he'd finally stormed out of the conference room to come here and try to re-gather his thoughts.

Evidently he'd used up his quota of time to calm down because his partners walked into the room. He faced them, determined to keep his temper under control.

"Look, we've all got things we'd rather be doing right now," Joe said, planting himself in one of the chairs near Trent's desk. "Let's get everything settled so we can get out of here."

Trent gave a curt nod, noting how Todd stayed in the doorway, looking uneasy.

"Todd and I have managed to come up with our share for the purchase," Joe stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "All you need to do is make your arrangement with the landlord and we're good to go."

"I told you not five damn minutes ago that I'm not going to trade my share of the ranch for a share of this building." Trent felt his anger rising again.

Todd looked torn between wanting to side with him, and with backing his other partner. "This is a good investment. Probably a lot more solid than a ranch. I've heard they swing from running in the black to running in the red pretty darn often."

"True enough at times. But, The Crawley has only run in the red recently, and only because of Allen's unexpected heart problems and his equally unexpected death." The reminder of the situation added to his level of frustration at the moment. He wished he'd found out about the financial problems sooner. He should have done his part in setting things right again. Instead it had all fallen to Suzy. The idea made him feel damn low.

Joe had little interest in the workings of the ranch and his bored expression made that evident once more. "If your sister had the financial means to salvage the ranch, and do all that remodeling you mentioned, surely she can find a way to buy you out," he pressed.

Sister. The word struck Trent. He might have told his partners that she was his "sister," but he sure didn't feel that way about her now. Actually, he hadn't in a long time. Ever since he'd left the ranch—especially knowing her ex-husband was still there, Trent had known his feelings were even stronger about her than he'd feared. What he felt was far more than a need to take her fast and hard, or slow and gentle, or any way in-between. He wanted Suzy in every way a man wanted a woman permanently in his life. He wanted the whole "I do" thing and everything that was supposed to come and last after that. And that knowledge scared him as little else did.

When he realized he'd taken too long to respond, he quickly said, "She's been working on that. Not having any luck. I could have helped the situation, if I'd told the bank I agreed to the sale." He blew out a breath and looked away again. "I just didn't think she was really serious ... until now. Now I'm afraid she's going to make a deal with the devil to make this happen. And it's my own damn fault."

Joe stood and the two men locked gazes, just like they had on far too many other occasions when they disagreed about something. "It's not your problem what deals she makes. You just need the money. Take the damn easy way out and sign over your share of the ranch to our seller."

Trent's shoulders stiffened at the "not your problem" comment. He was on the verge of telling Joe off when Todd stepped closer, always the buffer between the two of them.

"You want to keep the ranch, don't you?" Todd interrupted. "You want to go back to working the ranch, with Suzy."

Todd looked steadily at him, reading him. This partner, his friend, had always understood him better sometimes than he knew himself. They'd become friends when they served in the Marines together. Good friends who watched each other's backs. Joe watched only his own back, and that was the biggest part of Trent's hesitation in tying the three of them even more together. Now as Joe's expression turned angry, Trent knew it was time to end this partnership.

"I'll handle the job for the Senator tomorrow night. After that it's all up to you two. You can buy me out." He'd mulled over this idea during the long flight here. Now it was more than an idea, it was a necessity.

As Trent expected him to, Joe lost it. "You can't walk away from the business! We have clients. We have commitments." He looked ready to reach out and try to shake some sense into him, which would have been an enormous mistake. Instead he bit out, "I've invested everything I have in it. So has Todd."

Trent shrugged. "I did, too. But we're done here. I'm done here."

Joe wasn't finished fuming. "Half the regular clients will only deal with you. You can't quit." Joe strode over to get right in Trent's face. He looked murderous.

"The hell I can't," Trent countered, feeling murderous. He'd like nothing more than to plant his fist right in Joe's face, which was yet another reason to end this partnership. "I'll get my lawyer on it tomorrow."

"You—"

Before Joe could finish, Todd raised his voice—which he seldom did—and demanded attention. "Back off!"

"Surely you're not agreeing to this insane idea!"

Joe might be easygoing most of the time, but when you pressed the wrong buttons with him, watch out. He stepped right up to Todd, towering over him by a good six inches, outweighing him by at least twenty pounds of pure muscle. "I sure as hell am! We'll find a way to work with those particular clients, or they'll go away. Whatever. We'll get new ones."

"He walks," Joe eased back several safe feet, and then aimed a thumb at Trent. "I walk."

Trent had wondered if the whole business would blow apart with his decision to leave. He hadn't intended to hurt his friend Todd, but maybe this was for the best. Joe had finally proven to be a real piece of shit.

"I'll pay whatever I need to in order to meet our current financial commitments," Trent stated.

Todd shook his head. "Don't sweat it. You're going to need every cent you can pull together for that ranch." He looked Trent squarely in the eyes. "I'll figure out how to keep the business afloat, and I'll bring in another partner or two. A couple more of the guys from our old unit have shown some interest."

"You can buy me out, too," Joe snapped, storming out of the office.

Todd didn't appear the least bit concerned. He focused on Trent a final time. "Just know that if you get tired of ranching, there'll always be room in my business for you."

* * *

Suzy stood at the front door as the sky faded from blue to pinkish-orange, the day's light quickly disappearing over the horizon. It had been a hell of a day. A long one. Grayson had shown up at the ranch bright and early, and was only now finally driving back to Comptonville for the night. He would've stayed here if she'd asked, but she didn't want him here. It just wasn't right. So she would finish dealing with him tomorrow. Tonight she needed to seriously weigh the pros and cons in her life, and of her dreams for the ranch. Grayson had given her a lot to think about.

She closed the door and leaned back against it, weary to the bone. Trent, too, had given her much to think about. Of course, he'd started off his discussion with her this morning by firmly explaining in his not-so-subtle way how he didn't like her getting drunk. He'd followed that memorable experience by making it clear what a stupid idea it had been for her to call her ex-husband. After making it impossible for her to sit today, he'd told her they would talk when he returned in a couple of days.

Reaching back to gently rub her still slightly tender bottom, she felt tears threaten. Not because he'd thrashed her royally with his belt, which he most definitely had. Not because he'd spanked her after that, and he'd done a good job with that spanking, too. No, the tears threatened because she missed him. It seemed to her that the man burned her butt every time she turned around, and she still hated him not being here.

For a minute, she considered calling him, and then remembered the two hour difference in time. Besides, he might be busy with his partners. Then she thought of something that hadn't occurred to her until now: maybe he had a girlfriend back in D.C. They hadn't actually talked about anything like that. She knew from personal experience with Grayson that a man—some women as well—might have no qualms at all about having sexual relations with more than one partner at a time. Maybe Trent was even now ... No, she would not go there!

Where she would go was to bed, early. She'd spend most of the night tossing and turning as she battled over what was best for her, best for the ranch, and best for Trent.

* * *

"No." Suzy scooted into the 50's-style booth in Martha's Café across from Grayson the next morning.

He glanced up at her from where he was stirring sugar into his coffee.

She repeated the words that were hard to say, but necessary. "Thank you, but no."

"I expected that would be your answer today." He appeared disappointed. "If you give me half a chance, I'll try to change your mind."

The sixty-something, grandmotherly-type owner of the café walked up to the table with a pot of coffee. She'd run the café for as long as Suzy could remember. She was also the main source for gossip in the area. By this afternoon there wouldn't be a soul within the county who didn't know Suzy had met a good-looking stranger here for breakfast this morning.

Smiling and determined to cut down on the speculation and twisted stories that would spread, Suzy calmly said, "Martha, I'd like you to meet Grayson Adams. My ex-husband."

Grayson gave her a questioning look, and then flashed a charming grin at Martha. "Nice to meet you."

Martha studied him from his neatly trimmed gray hair, to his clearly expensive silk shirt so out of place in these parts. "So you're the gambler she married."

"Casino owner," Grayson clarified, looking almost amused. "I seldom actually gamble." He focused on Suzy. "Except for maybe today."

Another patron called out for coffee and Martha appeared irritated about having to leave and possibly miss picking up more juicy tidbits of gossip. At a second call, she finally took her pot and hurried away in disappointment.

Suzy met Grayson's gaze. "Small town. Gossip will spread like wildfire the second we leave the café. I just wanted to have some of it start out with a thread of truth."

"Ah, I see." He sipped the coffee. "Back to our discussion then. You're sure you won't reconsider what I asked last night? Give me another chance? I won't be such a fool this time, I swear to you."

Suzy sat quietly for a minute, staring down at her own cup of coffee. Everything she'd considered during the long night tumbled through her mind again. She and Grayson had talked for quite a while yesterday, and she'd discovered she actually enjoyed talking with him. Too bad they hadn't done more of that in their short marriage. They'd spent most of their early marriage days—the happy days—only talking with their bodies. Sex between them had never been a problem. The problem was Grayson Adams had proven to be far too sexual a man than she could live with. Testosterone ruled him far too often. It ruled his behavior and thoughts and made him forget vows he'd made. He too easily fell into bed with any woman who'd let him. That hadn't meant he didn't love her, in his own way. What it meant was she could never count on him to love only her.

"I'd rather we parted this time as almost friends." She leaned forward to cover his hand with her own. "I no longer hate the ground you walk on. I've come to terms with who you are, with your limitations. And I do care about you, strange as that may be. But I cannot live with you."

A sad acceptance filled his expression and he looked older than his forty years. "I know last night I said that I'd only loan the money for the buyout if you'd agree to remarry me. But I've changed my mind. There'll be no strings, if you want the loan."

She wanted that loan so bad she could almost taste it. Yet somewhere toward dawn she'd realized that maybe the bank, Trent, and the townspeople were right. Maybe her idea had just been a foolish wish to finally make a place for her to burrow in

and stay. She didn't have a business degree. She hadn't worked a ranch in a lot of years, until these last few weeks. She'd never really paid attention when Allen had talked to the boys about what it took to run a ranch. No, this was a dream that she needed to let go. She'd tried reaching for the stars, but they were just too far out of her reach.

"I appreciate the offer, I really do. But, again, my answer has to be No." She'd let her dream go and instead she'd help Trent with his.

Shaking her head, she withdrew her hand and slipped back out of the booth. "I've got some appointments. Sorry about breakfast." She grabbed the purse she'd set on the seat. "Have a safe trip back to Las Vegas, and thanks for coming."

Even knowing she'd made the right decision, it was hard not to change her mind and accept his offer. So she left the café quickly, determined to go see her attorney first, then the banker, and finally the realtor. She would sign whatever papers were necessary so that Trent could sell The Crawley like he'd intended to do all along.

* * *

Half the day had already slipped by when Trent pulled into the driveway. He frowned, wondering where Suzy had gone to now. He'd meant to call her Sunday night, but had decided after having so thoroughly punished her that it would be wiser to give her some time to get over that. He'd tried to call her several times yesterday, but the calls had always gone to her voice mail. And he hadn't been able to connect with her today either. He was feeling a little bit pissed off at what felt like her avoidance of him.

He slid from the truck, pulling his duffle bag out with him. The rest of his belongings would arrive sometime next week. This time as he'd driven toward the ranch house, he'd felt like he was coming home. He had a hundred things to say to Suzy and it was frustrating not to be able to track her down and say them.

"Good to have you back," Brady said, walking in his direction from the riding arena. "At least until you get the ranch sold."

Something knotted in Trent's gut. Something was off here. "We're not selling the ranch."

Brady looked confused. "But Miss Suzy said ..." A deep furrow formed between his eyebrows. "Yesterday, before she left, she said—"

"She what? Left?" Trent barked the question.

Now Brady looked like he'd stepped into someplace he had no business going. "I'm not exactly sure of all the reasons she took off. But she came back here after breakfast with that ex of hers, packed up her things, and then told me and the boys that she was leaving. Don't know the where's or the why's."

"Well, shit."

"Guess she didn't talk about any of this with you."

"Guess not."

Trent had a hard time wrapping his mind around the idea of Suzy not being here. He'd been sure that his previous notion of her not really being serious about running the ranch had been wrong. It annoyed the hell out of him that he'd been right after all. "I can't believe I sold my share of the business in D.C. for nothing."

Brady blinked in puzzlement. "You sold that business of yours back East? Now ain't that ironic."

"What're you talking about?" Trent wasn't in the mood to stand here conversing with anyone, not even Brady.

"Like I said, I don't know all her reasons for leaving. She did mention, though, that she'd signed some kind of papers for you. So you could do what you needed to do. Whatever that means."

One of the other ranch hands called out to Brady. "I'd better get back to work. We've still got two horses to break in, although I'm not sure why at this point." He walked off, shaking his head, clearly confused about everything.

Trent blew out a breath of frustration that seemed to come all the way up from his toes. Damn woman. Still causing him trouble, even if it sounded like she hadn't meant to. Now he had to track her down and go shake some sense into her. Giving up on her dream because of him! Not going to happen.

Chapter Seven

Thick gray clouds rolled steadily across the sky with occasional deep rumbles of thunder, followed by flashes of lightning And rain. Lots of rain. Suzy stared forlornly out the door of her motel room and looked at yet another sheet of rain that had let loose only moments ago. She'd left the ranch in the Flint Hills two days ago and had only gotten a third of the way west across the state. The rivers and streams had overflowed their banks all over the state. The highways had turned into rivers as well. It was like the sky was crying nonstop, almost like she'd been doing.

When she'd driven away from The Crawley, it had broken her heart. The Suzy Q Ranch would never come into being. She hadn't been able to prove she could set her mind on something and follow through with it after all. Unless you counted her decision to abandon her goal and surrender to Trent's wishes.

She stepped back into the room and glanced at the little feast of Twinkies, potato chips, and two Hersey bars she'd gathered from the vending machine last night. All she'd managed to get down in her two days of travel were a few French fries and a half dozen bottles of Pepsi. She'd been too heartsick to eat. Too homesick for what she'd left behind as well. She had no real destination in mind, just like when she'd left the ranch seven years ago. She was wandering aimlessly once more. You'd think she'd been born a damn nomad!

Restless, she picked up the remote, flicked on the TV, and channel surfed. Daytime television really sucked. She flicked the TV back off. Even more restless and frustrated, she flopped backwards onto the almost-rock-hard bed. What the hell was she doing here? Why was she running away from the one person in the world she desperately wanted to be with?

Tears leaked from her eyes again, irritating her further.

Trent obviously didn't care about her, or the fact that she'd left the ranch. He had to be back at the ranch by now, although she hadn't actually called to check for sure. She didn't want to call him if he wasn't going to call her. Now how was that for twisted logic!

She glared at her purse across the room, glared at the cell phone buried within it. How'd that line in the commercial go? "Out, damn spot, out." Her miserable version was more along the lines of "Ring, damn phone, ring." Nothing. Nada. Not one gosh darn peep from the phone. Useless piece of junk.

Fine! She'd go take another damn shower. Pretty soon there wouldn't be a speck of flesh left on her bones, if she kept taking a shower and trying to scrub away all her ails.

A few minutes later her head was bowed and warm water was beating down on her. And then she heard it: her phone ringing. "Naturally," she grumbled only to get a mouth full of water for her effort.

By the time she snatched up her phone and gasped, "Hello" the caller had given up. She looked down at the small electronic devil and, to her horror, realized the caller hadn't given up, her phone had. It was out of juice. Completely. She couldn't even check caller ID to see who had called her. More annoying was the fact that she'd left her phone charger on the nightstand beside her bed back at the ranch. Damn, damn, damn.

Completely disgusted with this final bad turn of events, she threw herself back onto the bed. She didn't care that her still wet body and hair were soaking the disheveled sheets. In full pity-party mode, she banged her fists on the bed and kicked her legs. "Damn, damn, damn!" she repeated the words she'd only thought a minute ago.

* * *

Trent swerved his truck to avoid an extra high patch of water on the interstate highway. He curled his fingers tighter around the steering wheel. She'd hung up on him. He couldn't believe she'd done it. When he caught up with the woman who meant everything to him, he was going to blister her ass but good.

It was fortunate that he had friends in all the right places, friends who had tracked her credit card trail across the state. The last they'd been able to learn was that she'd stopped sometime yesterday in Hays. There'd been no signs yet that she'd moved on, and considering the heavy, steady downpour of rain, she would probably be staying where she'd taken a motel room a while longer. At least she'd damn well better stay put!

As he fought to see through the windshield where the wipers couldn't keep up with the rain, he ground his teeth in frustration. It was bad enough that he was driving like a crazy man trying to catch up with her. It would be worse if she completely lost her good sense and decided to get back on the road in that battered old truck of hers.

He risked life and limb to dial the motel's phone number again. This time the SOB better put him through to Suzy's room or else. Trent wasn't sure what the "else" would be, but he'd find something to make the deskclerk's life pretty damn miserable if he refused him again.

* * *

Suzy's momentary temper tantrum had just finished and she started to get off the bed. The phone on the nightstand rang and startled her. She couldn't imagine what the deskclerk would want, but she picked up the receiver anyway. "Hello."

"There's been a man calling here off and on all morning, wanting me to patch him through to your room. He's getting pretty angry, and I'm not very happy either," the clerk said, sounding really annoyed.

She stood there in shock. Grayson? No, he wouldn't know she'd left the ranch or probably even care at this point. Trent? Dare she hope?

"I told the man that I would talk to you first. He's supposed to call back in a couple of minutes. Are you willing to talk to someone named Trent Tyler?"

Her heart pounded. "Yes."

The clerk hung up with a brisk Thud that left her ears ringing.

Tears filled her eyes again and she did a Happy Dance around the room. She'd just stubbed her toe on the end of the bed when the phone rang again. Hopping over to grab the receiver, she gasped on a wince of pain, "Hello!"

There were no niceties expressed, no I'm glad to hear your voice. Trent bit out, "I'll be there in less than a half hour, I hope. Stay put."

Before she could even respond, he'd hung up. Okay, their immediate reunion might not be quite as enjoyable as she'd have preferred. Unconcerned, she ignored her throbbing toe and streaked to the bathroom to make herself presentable. Trent was coming here! Trent had come after her!

* * *

Trent arrived on her doorstep twenty minutes later. He was soaked from head to toe, absolutely drenched. He looked damn good.

"You're in so much trouble," he stated grimly, trying to shake off some of the moisture.

The next second he grabbed her and pulled her to him. His mouth covered hers before she could even draw in another breath. He kissed her so hard, so intensely she could barely breathe. When he released her, they were both soaked.

Slowly he backed her into the room and slammed the door behind him. "I'm so upset with you that I don't even know where to start."

Suzy saw see all the warning signs of bad things about to happen to her written all over his wet, handsome face. But it was the fully aroused part of him much lower that caught and held her attention. Not everything would be "bad" it appeared. She'd long ago learned to accept enduring the ups and downs life threw at her. In their case,

it would be her benefiting—at some point—from the “ups” of his long and proud erection. And it would be him benefiting—certainly not her—from her going “down” over his lap for a spanking he apparently needed to give her.

“Maybe we should start by getting you out of those wet clothes,” she said, heading for the bathroom and a towel.

He’d already tugged off his sopping wet shirt and was working on heeling off his boots when she walked back into the room. “You might as well get undressed too. You’re about as wet as I am.”

“Entirely your fault.” She gave him a sassy look, and then she obediently shoved down her jeans, and then her panties. “It’ll save time too.”

His eyes had darkened. He fumbled with taking his jeans off as he watched her pull off her blouse, and then her bra. “Yes, save time.” He blinked. “Why save time?”

She stood naked before him, quivering all over in anticipation. “For stripping down so we can warm each other up. Closely. Intimately. Get the idea?”

His nostrils flared as he went back to undressing.

“So, what brings you all the way to Hays? Besides a clear need to sink that cock into me?” She felt bold, daring, and so damn anxious. Her heart raced. She knew what she would like to hear, but she’d been disappointed so many other times in her life. Hope was a hard thing for her to hang onto.

“You’re really something else,” he said huskily, dropping his jeans. His shorts quickly followed them. “I got home and discovered this gal I’d been in a hurry to see had taken off for parts unknown.”

He walked toward her, with his long cock practically pulsing with the desire to be put to use. She so wanted to reach out and hold it. Or drop to her knees and take him in her mouth. Or go down on all fours and let him take her. Or ...

“We’ll get around to all of those hot little scenarios flittering through your mind, sweetheart. Count on it.” He captured her head with his hands, held it while he tasted her lips again, gently this time.

She could hardly think straight just from his touching her. She was ready for anything when he finally set her away.

He looked around for a second, and then took her arm to pull her with him. In a heartbeat he'd sat on the side of the bed. In another heartbeat she lie draped over his thighs.

Okay, maybe she wasn't ready for anything. She was ready for something obviously not on his mind at the moment. "Did you really drive all this way, through all that rain, to do this?" she asked, twisting around to look at him. She considered resisting, but, truthfully, she kind of liked feeling her naked skin touching his naked skin right now. Even in this disgusting position.

Trent slowly smoothed his large, calloused hand over her upturned bottom. "Partly." He smacked one cheek and then the other. He smoothed the area again.

"Partly?" she prompted, her insides quivering at the slight sting, at his sensual touch.

"Partly because I needed to burn your butt for running off like you did." He stung her bottom with a half dozen smacks.

She sucked in a breath and gasped, "I didn't just run off. I left so you could do what you wanted to do." Spanking or not, she was getting aroused. She felt his hard cock next to her, and wanted it inside her. She ached in her woman's place. Her clit hardened with the need for attention.

His hand smoothed over her warm cheeks; his fingers played with the separation of her buttocks. "I changed my mind about what I wanted to do. You should have waited for me."

That tiny bud of hope blossomed within her. He'd changed his mind. And he'd come after her. She wanted to get up and kiss him senseless. She wanted to toss him back on the bed.

Evidently he wasn't quite ready for any of that. He went back to spanking her. "I told you we would talk when I got back." He spanked her harder, but took his time between swats.

She moaned and squirmed as the spanks turned softer, teasing, and sensual. "I-I ... Ohhhhhh. Uhhhhh."

"Enjoying this, sweetheart?" his question came out husky. His cock bounced against her.

"A-a little," she squeaked, shivering all over.

He gave her two more soft swats, followed by two hard ones. Then his fingers slipped between her legs, which she gladly eased apart. He found what he sought, slipped inside, thrusting and playing until she trembled.

"Trent please," she begged.

He repeated the two soft spanks, the two hard ones. Then he teased her delighted clit until she thought she couldn't take it anymore.

Finally he allowed her to slide off his lap. The second she was able to recover enough, she stretched across the bed face down, waiting, wanting, offering.

Trent took the hint immediately. He straddled her legs, smoothed a hand over her bare back, and then down over the bottom he'd barely spanked. Determined, she raised up enough for him to guide himself into her. It only took a few thrusts, only a few motions of her rising up to meet him, before they both cried out in release.

It took longer for them to snuggle and silently reassure each other that somehow things would be okay.

Suzy was trying to find the words to tell him how she felt when Trent sat up, shifted back to lean against the headboard. She stayed where she was, but waited for him to speak first. Again, that tiny spark of hope flickered within her.

"I put your attorney—our attorney now—to the task of getting the ranch's name officially changed to Suzy Q Ranch." He looked directly at her, his gaze tender.

She blinked. "I don't understand."

"As soon as it stops raining, the builders are supposed to start on that guest hotel you had designed." His gaze turned hesitant. "That is still all right with you, isn't it?"

"You're not selling the ranch?" She was having trouble accepting his news. "But you needed the money for your business."

He shook his head. "Not anymore. I sold out of the business back east. It wasn't what I wanted anymore. I have a different goal now."

Afraid she'd somehow jinx things, she slowly sat up, slowly moved toward him. "We're going to run the ranch together?"

He grinned, confident again. "Cowgirl bootcamp. We're going to run that together. Although I still find the idea a little strange, but I'll adjust."

Too excited to contain herself any longer, Suzy straddled his lap, leaned forward to rain kisses all over his face. "I can't believe you're doing this for me."

Gently he eased back so he could look deeply into her eyes. "I'm doing this for us. I want you to marry me, Susanna."

"Marry you?" Suzy wondered if her heart could take this wild beating for very long. So many of her dreams were suddenly becoming reality. When she realized he was watching her in uncertainty, she grinned. "I suppose I could do that."

He reached around to swat her bottom playfully. "You are such a trial sometimes. But, damn, if I don't love you anyway."

She giggled, giving him a challenging look. "Want to play 'ride a cowboy' again?"

"Gawd yes."

THE END