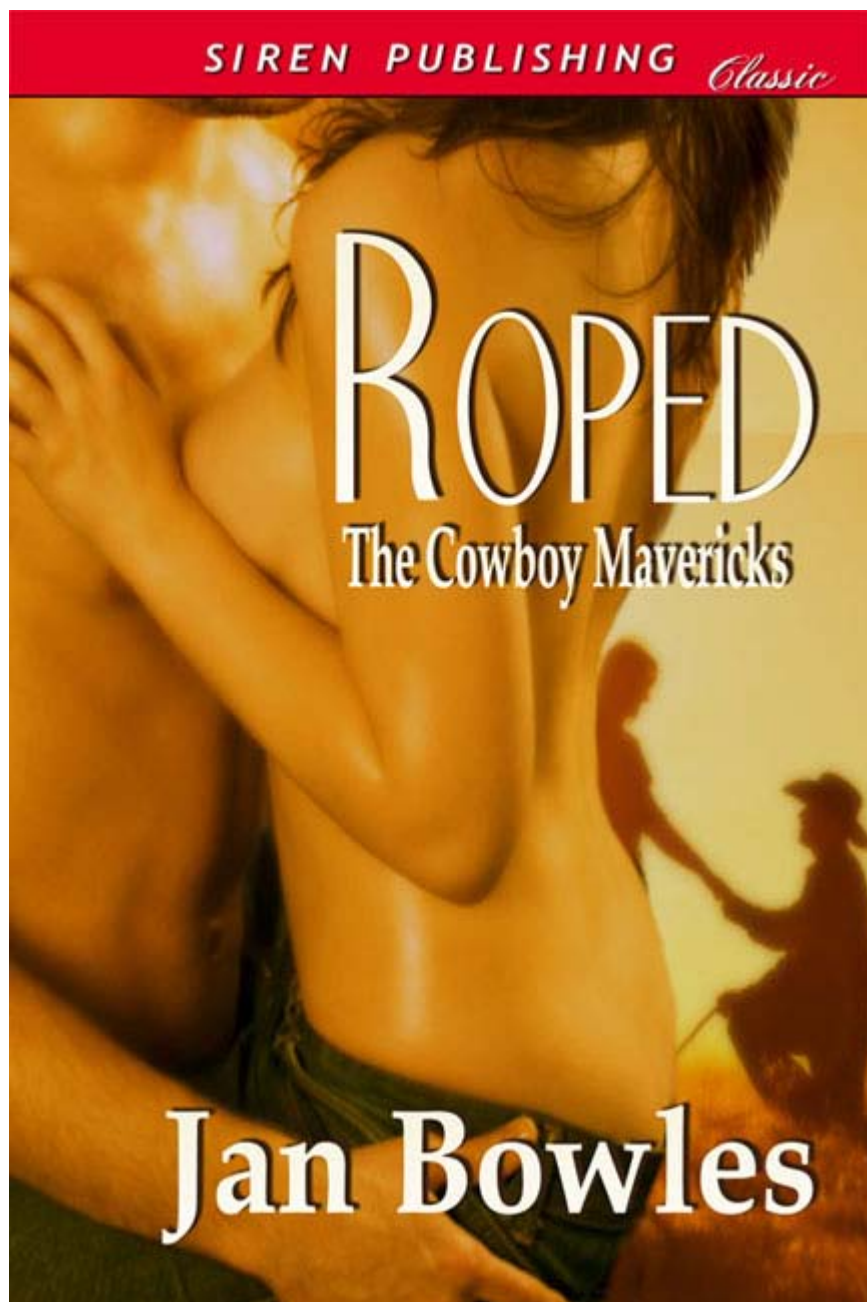


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The Cowboy Mavericks

Jan Bowles



The Cowboy Mavericks

Roped

When thirty-one-year-old Brett Donovan returns to Black Creek, Kansas, the accusation that tainted his life still remains. Disowned seven years ago by his father because of a lie, Brett knows that mud sticks. How can he contemplate a future here, when those around him are only too willing to remind him of his past?

Fay Maverick has always loved Brett. Their brief affair some seven years ago ended before it had really begun. Even if it means going against her four older brothers' wishes, she will use every trick in the book to win her man back. Can she convince Brett to stay, or will her brothers try and run him out of town?

With the Maverick brothers hot on his tail, Brett knows that staying around Black Creek could be dangerous. Should he leave, or will nights of passion with Fay prove far too tempting?

Genre: Contemporary, Western/Cowboys

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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Letter from Jan Bowles

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With deep gratitude,

Jan Bowles

DEDICATION

*I dedicate this book to my Mother, Iris May Beazley Lloyd
Born 1st February 1931, died Christmas Day 2010*

Until we meet again, God bless you my darling.

ROPED

The Cowboy Mavericks

JAN BOWLES

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Chapter One

As the sun grew ever lower in the sky, Brett Donovan could just make out a lone rider approaching on horseback, a dog running alongside. The slant of his hat, silhouetted against the darkening umber sky. He'd recognize a Maverick anywhere.

The dog bounded up the steps and headed straight for him, nearly knocking him over. "Max, my old buddy." He roughly patted the old hound's head, glad for a familiar friendly face. The dog held up his paw as if to say hi.

He turned to the rider. "Cody."

The man nodded a greeting as he pulled his horse up close by the verandah.

"Brett."

An uneasy silence ensued as they both stared at one another. Cody, the eldest of the Maverick brothers, had filled out quite a bit. He guessed he must be thirty-one by now, the same age as himself.

"News travels fast 'round here, Cody."

"We heard you were coming back."

"Well, you heard right."

"Sorry about your Pa. It comes to us all in the end." He then motioned to the dog. "Been looking after the hound since your Pa passed on."

“Then I thank you. Didn’t rightly know if he was still alive.”

“Planning on staying long?”

Brett knew the conversation was being turned toward what he’d really come to say. It looked like nothing had changed at the Maverick ranch. The four brothers had always taken a keen dislike to him. He guessed it was to be expected. There had been a running feud between the Maverick ranch and the Donovan ranch for the best part of a century. It had all started with a dispute over access to water.

“I don’t know how long I plan on staying. It all depends.”

“On what?”

“On the reception I get around here. You know what folks are like.”

“Well, I guess you might as well know me and my brothers don’t want you sniffing around Fay. She’s happy, and we want her to stay that way.”

Just the sound of her name keened his senses. The Maverick brothers had never liked the idea that Fay had a crush on him.

“If she’s happy, then you’ve got nothing to fear from me.”

Cody stared at him for a long time before continuing, “Guess not. Just so long as we understand one another.”

“Loud and clear, Cody.”

“Be seeing you.” With a flick of the reins, he turned the horse around. Dust billowed from its thunderous hooves as he rode away.

So Fay was still there, and by the sound of it, single, or at least not married yet. If only to make the Maverick brothers pissed, maybe he’d stay around just a little bit longer than originally planned.

“Come on, Max. I think you and I deserve a nice, juicy steak each. Things are starting to look up around here.”

He pushed open the door and stared into the gloom of the old ranch house. Almost, just almost, he could swear it hadn’t changed in the seven years he’d been away. The grandfather clock still stood at the foot of the stairs. The leather chesterfield couch, worn and old,

sagged just as it always had in front of the fireplace. Even the pictures remained in position. Time had indeed stood still.

He let the door swing shut behind him and walked further inside. When his father had disowned him some seven years ago, he'd never thought that he would leave him the ranch. He'd been shocked to find that blood was in fact thicker than water.

He removed his hat and tossed it onto the couch then picked up the framed portrait of his father from the mantelpiece.

"You old coot. Like Momma said, you were as stubborn as your father and his father before him." He rubbed his hand over the stubble on his chin then kneaded his fingers into the back of his neck. The journey back to Kansas had taken a whole day, what with pulling the horse trailer and the stops he'd had to make. He was exhausted.

"Well, I guess you'll never give me an apology now."

He placed the photograph back on the mantelpiece and turned away from his father's image. Maybe the old man had left him the ranch to make amends. His way of trying to put things right. It was a start, he supposed. Though he wasn't about to feel sorry for him. He felt a sadness that his father had died alone, but he'd brought it all on himself.

Perhaps, coming back should be a short-lived experience. He'd be better to just sell the ranch and move on. Black Creek held far too many bad memories. The ghosts from the past came crowding in. His plan of action now would be to move fast and make a quick exit.

* * * *

Fay breathed in. That tight knot of tension had been there ever since she'd learned that Brett Donovan had come back to Black Creek. The closer she got to his ranch, the tighter the coil grew in her stomach.

She urged the gray appaloosa faster. "Come, Cinders, just a little farther. I'm the one feeling nervous, not you." It was funny how animals picked up one's mood.

When Brett had left Black Creek some seven years before, it had felt like the bottom had dropped out of her world. Now that he was back, she didn't know how she felt. She guessed that was the reason why she was visiting today. See if any feelings were left between them.

The ranch grew closer until she finally drew up outside and dismounted.

"Anyone home?" she called. Surely, he would have heard her approach? Maybe he was out back. Fay took the still-warm apple pie from her saddlebag and walked around the side of the ranch house. "Brett," she called again.

The fly screen swung open, and he stepped out onto the decking. It shut behind him, and he leaned against it.

Brett had been twenty-four when she'd last seen him. He'd been a man then, but he was even more of a man now. Standing about six-three and weighing some two hundred pounds, he was dressed in tight jeans and black denim shirt. He appeared broader than she remembered. Her gaze drifted over him. His fair hair was kissed by the sun and fell about his manly features in streaks of gold. The channels on either side of his face were even deeper. She'd always loved the way they would spread into a dimple when he smiled at her. Though he wasn't smiling now. Instead his deep blue eyes connected with hers. They seemed to consume her body from her head to her toes.

A deep satisfaction flowed through her veins. The sexual attraction was still there between them. Only now it seemed magnified. No man had ever looked at her in that primal way, no man apart from Brett.

"Good to see you again, Fay." His deep voice lifted the hairs on the back of her neck.

"You, too, Brett." She held out the bag she'd brought with her.

"It's an apple pie."

"Did your mother bake it?"

"No, Ma's been dead some five years now."

"Sorry, I didn't know."

"Me, too, about your Pa, I mean."

He let out a long, slow breath. "Your brothers know you're here?"

She shook her head. "They don't need to know everything I do."

"Well, perhaps you ought to tell them that."

"Why?"

"Cody came calling last night. Said I should keep away from you."

"Oh? They're just over possessive, what with Ma dying and all."

He stared at her, assessing her, making her knees go weak. "You look..." He shrugged.

"What?"

"All grown up. You're not the girl I remember."

At eighteen, she had worn all her emotions on her sleeve. Seven years ago she had carried a huge torch for Brett Donovan. She guessed he'd always known that. Taking on the role that her mother had left when she died made her grow up in a hurry.

"I'm a woman now, Brett. I'm not that girl you once knew."

"So I see." He stared at her long and hard then said, "I've got some hot coffee on the stove. Would you like some?"

* * * *

As Brett poured them both a mug of coffee, he wondered what to say. He wasn't usually at a loss for words around women, but seeing Fay again had been a revelation.

The young woman he remembered from seven years ago had matured into a beautiful, stunning creature. Her raven-black hair shone as it cascaded around her perfect oval face. Piercing gray eyes

lit up her tanned features. Her sultry, full lips smiled at him as he handed her the coffee.

He knew then that he still wanted her. Only this time he couldn't lead her on. Not when he would be leaving so soon.

"I'll not be staying 'round here long, Fay."

Her brows knitted together as confusion showed on her face. "Oh? Why not? You've only just come back."

He sat opposite her and rested his elbows on the table. "I don't think the folks in Black Creek are ready to welcome me with open arms just yet, do you?"

"Well, you and I both know you didn't hold up that gas station. I don't even know why Patty said it."

"Because she knew I was with you. She wanted me to get into trouble either way. Besides I think she took the money herself. She just wanted someone to blame."

"Well she sure as hell made you suffer. I thought once she retracted her accusation, things would die down."

"Mud sticks."

"Then your father threw you out." She reached across and touched his hand. The coolness of her skin lit a fire deep inside him. "I would have told your father the truth. You don't know how many times I wanted to."

He patted her hand then pulled away, trying to put some distance between them. Getting involved with Fay was not an option. "It wouldn't have made any difference. I shouldn't have been with you. Your brothers would have strung me up if they'd found out."

Fay laughed. "I don't know why our families had to have this feud. It never made any sense to me. Why not let the past be. I'm sure as hell not going to take any notice of my brothers now."

It was his turn to laugh. "Don't be so sure. Cody wasn't keen on me seeing you again even though you're now a full-grown woman. In fact, he warned me off."

She leaned back in her chair and smiled at him. "Since when have you ever done what Cody wanted?"

A grin broke on his face as he stared at her. Fay brought out the very worst in him. She always had. "Still the same old Fay. Always trying to get me into trouble."

"There was a time when you liked it."

He'd always thought of Fay as a tomboy right up until that one fateful day long ago when he'd suddenly seen her in a different light. She'd played him then, turning on her feminine charm until he couldn't deny the attraction between them any longer. At twenty-four, he should have known better. After all, she was a Maverick and, as such, strictly off limits, but he'd taken her virginity, anyway. That one night was branded forever into his mind. Even the ensuing chaos afterward did not detract from how special it had been. When the alleged hold up had been committed, he'd been with her. He just couldn't use Fay as his alibi, neither to his father nor the police. He would have been in even more trouble then. Her brothers would have lynched him without a second thought, and because of the bad blood between their families, his father would have disowned him anyway. What they'd shared had been amazing, besides, he didn't want the whole world knowing their business.

He breathed in. "I'm not staying 'round here, Fay. It wouldn't be fair to lead you on."

"Do you have someone special back in Texas?"

He shook his head. Of course there'd been women. He had to satisfy his sexual needs, same as any man, but he hadn't wanted to take things further with any of them. Up until now, he'd been contented with his life. However, just a few minutes in Fay's company told him a different story. He wanted her now more than ever, but this time he would do the right thing. He wasn't going to use her for a second time running.

"Like I said, once I've sorted out the ranch, I'm putting it up for sale."

Abruptly she rose from the table, a sad look on her face. Her chair scraped on the tiled floor as she did so. Fay had always twisted him around her little finger, but not this time. He gripped his chair tightly, determined not to reach out and comfort her. It would only make things worse should he become involved with her again.

“Enjoy the pie,” she mumbled as she began walking from the room. She turned as she reached the door. “And, Brett?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t forget to bring the plate back.” He just caught the mischievous slant to her lips before she stepped outside.

He watched her mount the gray mare and tear off down the track, a huge cloud of dust spread out in her wake. Her jet-black hair flowing behind her. Still the same old Fay, wild and untamed, only now she had a rare womanly beauty, too. Keeping away from her was going to prove difficult, and now she’d given him the perfect excuse to see her again. Well, he’d take that fucking plate back, if only to annoy the Maverick brothers.

Chapter Two

“Supper’s ready,” Fay called up the stairs and headed back into the kitchen.

Within a few seconds, the sound of four pairs of booted feet resonated around the house. When they were all seated, she began serving. Cody always sat at the head of the table. While she and Caleb, the youngest of her brothers at twenty-seven, sat on one side, and identical twins, Will and Matt, both twenty-nine, sat opposite. Most strangers couldn’t tell them apart, but to her it was easy, and if anyone were to look closely, they would notice Will had a small scar just above his right eyebrow. With the exception of Cody, all her brothers followed her mother with dark hair and light gray eyes. Cody favored their father with light brown hair and blue eyes.

“Any of you boys staying in tonight?”

“No,” they all replied as they began tucking ravenously into their meal. “In fact, we’re late already.”

She loved her brothers dearly, but they didn’t take their responsibilities seriously. Every night they’d go into town and wake up the next morning with heavy heads. It was about time they started settling down, but not one of them had brought home a girlfriend. She knew they had plenty of experience with women, but she figured they were all love-’em-and-leave-’em guys.

“Guess I’ll just have to keep myself company.”

“Guess you will, sis. Now, pass the gravy, will you?”

“Maybe I could come with you for a change.” She didn’t want to. She was just teasing. By the look on their faces, they didn’t want their little sister tagging along, and that was reward in itself.

“You know you don’t like shooting pool. It’s a guy thing. Last time you came, you couldn’t wait to leave.”

“Only because you wouldn’t let me talk to Jesse.”

“Jesse’s not fit to lick your boots, Fay. We were just looking out for you.”

“I suppose.” Her brothers meant well. They were just a little overprotective, that’s all. Though if she’d really wanted to talk to Jesse, she would never have allowed them to stop her.

“You expecting anybody, Cody?” Caleb asked.

“No. Why?”

“A blue pickup truck has just pulled up outside.”

Fay felt a warm glow pulse through her veins. “That’s Brett’s truck,” she said matter-of-factly.

“What’s that loser doing here?” Cody looked angry.

Fay began collecting their dirty crockery. “I asked him to bring a plate back.”

“What plate?”

“I took an apple pie over to him the other day.”

“You gave him an apple pie?” Cody seemed incredulous that she would do such a thing.

“Don’t sound so surprised. I was just being neighborly.” She put the dirty dishes into the sink, and with her hands on her hips, she turned to them all. “Aren’t you boys in a hurry to leave?”

Cody jabbed a finger over his shoulder. “There’s no way we’re leaving you alone with him.”

Fay scoffed. “I’m twenty-five and all grown up, in case you haven’t noticed. So you can stop babysitting me, right now.” She pointed at them all. “If any of you says anything out of line to Brett, then you can count on doing your own supper for the next month.”

She folded her arms across her chest to show she meant business. “I don’t make idle threats, either.”

“She’s right, Cody. Remember the time we all forgot her birthday? She didn’t cook for a whole week.” Matt looked horrified at a repeat performance, and she smiled inwardly.

“Or do our washing,” added Will, equally worried.

“Okay, okay. We’ll be nice to him, little sister, but we’re not leaving ’til he does.”

“Suit yourselves.” Feeling satisfied, she went over and opened the door.

“Hi, Brett.” She flashed him a smile and leaned nonchalantly against the doorway, trying to keep her heart steady. Brett looked all man, his masculine features and tight jeans only emphasizing the point. She imagined his body pressed hard against hers, if only he would take her seriously.

His eyes twinkled as he appraised her. He handed her the plate. “Brought this back.”

“So I see.” She took it from him. “You coming in? I’ve just made some coffee.”

“Don’t rightly know if I should.” He motioned behind her with his head. “What’s the atmosphere like?”

“You know how it is, middling. Just don’t ask me out, or there could be a mutiny.” Because of the dispute between the two neighboring ranches, her brothers had always disliked Brett, whereas she could never get enough of him.

“Middling don’t sound too bad, so I guess I’ll take you up on that coffee.”

“Brett’s stopping for coffee,” she stated as she led him into the kitchen. She stared at them all, daring them to say anything. They knew better. A month without food on the table hung over them.

Cody leaned back in his chair and placed his booted feet on the table. She guessed he was showing Brett who was in charge. As she walked past, she brushed them off, and he almost fell out of his chair.

“Hey, I was just relaxing, Fay.”

“Manners, Cody. Momma would never have allowed it, and neither do I.” She motioned with her hand to the pine table. “You can sit here, Brett.”

“Howdy,” Brett said as he sat down.

No one answered. Her brothers were not making this easy. “Brett, how many days are there in a month?”

“It depends, about thirty on average. Why?”

“Thirty days sounds a long time when you say it slowly. Just imagine how many meals you can eat in thirty days. It must be at least ninety, and then there’s all the coffee, and clearing away.”

She knew they caught her drift because Caleb cleared his throat. “Heard you been around Lubbock, Texas, Brett. What you been doing these past few years?”

“Mainly ranch work, Caleb. Though I do the rodeo circuits, too. Won quite a few purses that way.”

“Rodeo, isn’t that dangerous?” She’d always known Brett was his own man, but it made him seem even more powerful in her eyes.

“Sure is, Fay, but that’s half the fun. I do tie-down roping, too.”

She placed the pot of coffee on the table so they could all help themselves.

“There’s a rodeo in town next month, Brett. Us Mavericks can rope a steer better than anyone around these parts.” Cody’s voice seemed to hold a challenge in it. Fay wondered if Brett would accept.

“If I haven’t moved on, then I’ll be there. You count on it, Cody.” They stared at each other across the table, and she knew they were weighing each other up. Brett turned to her. “So what do you do, Fay? Surely you don’t just look after your brothers? You must have a life outside the ranch?”

“I’ve a part-time job in Black Creek. I do some secretarial work for a small accountancy firm.”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun. So when was the last time you went out?”

“She doesn’t go out,” Matt butted in, answering for her.

Brett turned to him. "Then maybe she should."

Fay felt a warm glow travel from the very tips of her fingers to her toes. When he turned back to look at her, she could barely stop herself from hugging him.

"I'm going into Black Creek tonight. Would you like to come with me?" Brett asked.

"I'd love to." She smiled warmly. Even though she had an audience, she felt on cloud nine. "I just need to get changed."

"But what about the dishes?" Will asked.

"You're all so keen to stay here, you do them." With that, she walked from the room.

* * * *

The Maverick brothers all just stared at him.

"Just what the fuck do you think you're doing, Brett?" Cody spoke first.

Brett leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his coffee. He couldn't help but wind them up even more.

"I would have thought it was obvious even to someone of your limited intelligence, Cody. I just asked your sister out."

Cody slammed his fist on the table. "Donovan, I thought I warned you, stay away from our little sister."

"You did, but that was before I realized what a nice little setup you have here. I think you're all worried about yourselves. Perhaps Fay deserves a night out, away from all you knuckle draggers. I can see she's almost a slave in this house." He waved his hand disparagingly in the air. "I think you all take her for granted. So, I'm doing you boys a favor by bringing it to your attention."

No wonder Cody had warned him off Fay. The Maverick brothers had it far too easy for far too long. He guessed Fay could handle herself, but he rather liked the idea of coming to her rescue.

Will and Matt both spoke together. "You harm one hair on her head, and we'll rip you a new fucking asshole."

He doubted they could rip a paper bag open, but he let it pass. "I have only the best intentions where your sister is concerned."

Fay returned to the kitchen. "I'm glad to hear it, so how do I look, boys?"

She looked fantastic. A lacy red gypsy blouse hung from her shoulders, showing the delicious swell to her breasts. His gaze swept over her narrow waist and womanly hips accentuated by a black leather belt, and red flowing skirt. Wearing a pair of black court shoes with tiny bows on top, her smooth, long legs seemed to go on forever.

"Fucking hell, Fay. What the hell are you wearing?" Caleb demanded.

"You look fantastic," Brett added more tactfully.

She grinned at him. "Thank you."

Cody added, "Christ, Fay, you're not wearing that. You look like a whore. Go and take it off immediately."

"I wear what I want, Cody. I go out with whom I want. You're not my keeper. I make my own decisions. Shall we go, Brett?"

"You bet." He rose from the table, and they headed to the door.

Just as they left, she couldn't help leaving one more passing shot. "I might be late, boys, so don't bother waiting up for me."

He wondered if they would all pile outside and try and stop her, but they didn't. Instead they both ran laughing to the truck like a couple of love-struck teenagers on a first date. He opened the passenger door for her, and she slid inside. "I forgot just how much you love winding your brothers up."

"That's what brothers are for. Besides, they need to learn that I'm a grown woman in my own right."

He closed the door and walked around to the driver's side. "Now where shall we go?" he asked as he seated himself beside her.

"Let's go to Jerry's. I haven't been there for ages, and I just love to dance."

“Jerry’s it is.”

He gunned the pickup into life and began driving toward Black Creek.

“I’m so glad you came back, Brett.”

“Me, too.”

“You are?”

“Of course.”

Her fingers worked over the collar of his shirt and then threaded into his hair. She kissed his cheek, brushing her lips tantalizingly close to his. She smelled like heaven. All the old feelings came rushing back. In an instant, he parked the pickup on the side of the dirt track and pulled her into his arms. He wanted her so badly. His cock screamed for release inside his tight jeans.

“I can’t promise you anything—”

She quickly placed a finger to his lips. “Dammit, Brett, just kiss me, please.”

Chapter Three

If he didn't kiss her right now, she'd go crazy. From the moment she'd seen him five days ago, an ache had developed deep inside her. Only his touch could calm the turmoil in her body. An infinite sense of satisfaction flowed inside her as his lips covered hers. For the first time in seven years, she felt whole again.

He pulled her possessively into his arms as their kiss deepened. His tongue teased and aroused until a deep, guttural groan sounded from deep inside him, and he pulled away.

"Fay, Fay, Fay, you make my cock go so fucking hard."

She smiled at him and stroked her hand down the side of his face. Enjoying the feel of his hard, masculine skin as it rasped against her fingertips.

"I know, and you love it."

He clasped her hand in his and kissed her palm. "I do, but if we carry on much longer, we won't make it to Jerry's, and I thought you wanted to dance."

She sighed. "I do. It's been ages since I went out properly."

"How long?" He tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip. "A long time." She hadn't realized up until he'd asked that her life had been on hold for far too long. How could that have happened?

He cupped her chin with his finger and thumb and tilted her face toward him. "How long is a long time?" His piercing blue eyes dipped into her very soul. She guessed he already knew the answer.

"I haven't...Not since you, I mean." Tears threatened to spill, and she blinked them back. "After you left, Ma became ill. I looked after

her until she died. Since then, I haven't had time to really go out. I seem to spend all my time looking after the boys' needs and wants."

"God, Fay. That's just awful."

Her eyes locked with his. "I only ever wanted you, Brett. I didn't want anyone else to spoil your memory, then life just took over."

Within a heartbeat, he'd pulled her back into his arms and crushed his lips to hers. "I think we've an awful lot of catching up to do." His hands brushed under her blouse, slowly caressing her breasts. His thumbs circled her budding nipples, and a jolt of pure pleasure coursed through her veins. She'd longed for this moment every night for seven years. Brett made her whole. He made her complete.

He clasped her buttocks as she straddled his lap on her knees, forcing her tight against his obvious erection. When her panties ground in contact with the huge bulge in his jeans, she let out a moan of appreciation. "Yes," she whispered, tilting her head back as he kissed his way down to her cleavage.

Without warning, the headlights of another vehicle on full beam lit up the interior of the cab from behind. Then a horn blared loudly. Squinting from the bright light, she looked through the rear window. It didn't take long to recognize who it was. "That's Cody's pickup behind."

Brett let out a deep breath. "Fuck, does that bastard ever cut you any slack?"

"No," she answered angrily. "Tomorrow I will teach him a lesson he won't forget in a hurry."

"Good because I'm fast losing patience with him."

"Don't worry, Brett. I've got something rather tasty lined up for him."

"And what would that be?" Brett's eyes twinkled mischievously as he stared at her.

"Take me dancing, and I might let you in on it."

"I can't wait." He restarted the engine, and they sped quickly away. "With any luck, your brothers won't know we're going to

Jerry's because I certainly don't want them watching us dance together."

"Why?"

"Well I plan on getting really up close and personal on the dance floor. They might not appreciate it."

Fay leaned her head against his shoulder as he drove along the road. She breathed in his heady, masculine scent. The thought of being held in his arms made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

* * * *

"That fucking son-of-a-bitch," Cody snapped. Seeing a Donovan openly necking with his little sister while they were parked at the side of the road made his blood boil. He guessed he was being overly protective. That long running feud really shouldn't matter to him now. But, ever since he'd been thrust into the role of head of the household when his father had died some twenty years before, he'd watched out for them all. To make peace with a Donovan would be tantamount to cozying up to the devil.

"You gotta leave her be, Cody," Matt warned. "She won't like you interfering."

Cody let out a slow breath. "Guess you're right, but I still ain't convinced over what happened seven years ago."

Matt dragged a hand through his hair in obvious frustration. "You know Patty. She always was a natural-born liar. Soon as she accused him of holding up that gas station, we all thought she'd made it up. Most likely took the cash herself."

Cody tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as Brett's pickup sped away into the night. "That's as maybe, but he never did have an alibi. You know the old saying, there's no smoke without fire." He shrugged his shoulders. "What if Patty had been telling the truth after all?"

The family feud aside, he'd always taken a keen dislike to Brett ever since they were kids at school. He guessed his resentment had grown over the years. When his father had died, he'd been just eleven. There was no time to do any homework, and his schoolwork had slipped. While Brett managed to come top in most lessons, he came last. While Brett appeared to have a stable family life, his was barely cohesive. His mother had mourned for years the loss of her husband, and they'd all suffered because of it. There'd been many days when he'd get home from school and there'd be no food on the table. For a kid of only eleven, rustling up supper for all six of them had been challenging to say the least. At the time, he'd hated Brett's easy life, and he still felt that resentment even today.

Matt let out a slow breath. "Look, Cody. I think you need to drop it. Patty is long gone from Black Creek. She's married to a rancher out in Cherokee County. Let's just go and play pool like we'd planned."

He began driving along the road again. "Guess you're right. Though I'm going to have a word with Fay tomorrow. She needs to be told to stay away from Brett once and for all."

"Well, make sure you say what you have to say after supper. That girl's got a mean streak. She won't think twice about leaving us all hungry."

Cody chuckled. "Yeah, she sure has a temper on her. Well that kinda cheers me up. If Brett steps outta line, guess he'll know it, too." The thought lightened his mood, and a grin spread across his face. "Matt, I feel lucky tonight. Ten bucks says I'll wipe the floor with you."

"In your dreams, bro, but if you want to throw your money away, then you're on."

* * * *

When they headed out onto the dance floor for a third time, Fay positively glowed. He'd forgotten what fun she could be. He knew she loved the attention, too. And boy, with what she was wearing, she had plenty. He had to admit he'd had a few curious glances himself. Some of the townsfolk remembered him and obviously remembered the problem with Patty. They gave him a dismissive glance.

Mud sticks.

He supposed this was the acid test. If they still held a grudge over what some stupid girl had lied about all those years ago, then Black Creek wasn't a place he'd wish to settle down in. Why bother putting himself through it? He'd make sure he sold up and moved to somewhere far more welcoming. At the moment, most of the townsfolk seemed disinterested in him, which was just the way he liked it.

He glanced down at Fay and pulled her into his arms, pressing the whole length of his body tight against hers. He smiled at her. She'd sure turned into one hell of a looker. Her pale gray eyes smiled back. He loved the way her dark lashes curled against her cheek and the way her lips pouted full and red. They were lips to be kissed over and over.

It had been a revelation when he'd realized that her love life had started and ended with him. He guessed she'd never had a boyfriend since they were both together seven years ago. Why had she kept to herself? Surely she would want the company of other men? Fuck, she was a twenty-five-year-old woman for Christ's sake. He could only blame her brothers. It seemed they'd taken their sister for granted, big time. Treating her as a surrogate mother, expecting her to do all the cooking, cleaning, and general chores around the ranch. If there was one thing he would do while he was back in Black Creek, it would be to show her that her life does not need to revolve around her selfish brothers.

He nuzzled into her ear as he twirled her around.

"Are you ready to leave yet?"

“That depends,” she spoke against his neck, and tiny puffs of air feathered against his skin.

“Depends on what?”

“On where we go next.”

He searched her eyes. Did she have any idea of how much he wanted her?

“Fay, my cock’s been hard against your belly for the last hour. Have a guess.”

Her lashes closed slowly over her eyes, and he could see the young girl return. No doubt she wanted him, but he had to remember not to go too fast. She hadn’t had a man for over seven years. She bit on her bottom lip. “Brett, there’s nothing more I’d rather do than come home with you, but I barely know anything about sex. I just don’t want to be a disappointment, that’s all.”

He cupped her chin and angled her face to meet his gaze. Large gray eyes looked soulfully into his. “Fay, just be yourself. No man could ask for more than that.” He leaned forward and captured her mouth with his. A kiss full of promise then he began leading her from the club.

* * * *

Anticipation flooded her mind. Brett was taking her home. This was what she’d dreamed of for the last seven years. Surely she would wake up to find it had all been just a beautiful fantasy?

A small voice in the back of her mind warned. *What if he leaves for a second time? It broke your heart the first time. Would you be able to cope?*

No, she refused to listen to the devil on her shoulder. She had always, always loved Brett. They were made for each other. If only he could see that, too. Their age might have been against them in the early years, but she had the unerring belief that they were meant to be

together, no matter what. Some things were just meant to be. If only Brett felt the same way.

Silence cut through the dark as Brett parked the pickup outside his ranch house and stilled the engine. When he turned toward her, he smiled. His gaze flicked from her eyes to her mouth and back again. "You look pretty nervous. Sure you want to come in?"

Fay swallowed. If she spoke, she knew her voice would falter, so she nodded.

Brett leaned forward and stroked the hair from her eyes. He seemed so much more experienced than she did. "Good." He kissed her lips. "Come on. Jump out, and I'll show you around."

As she slid from the cab, his dog padded over and nudged her hand. Just that small contact lifted the worry from her shoulders. "Hi, Max." She patted his head. "Did you miss me?"

Brett walked over to her. "I take it you were the one who fed him."

"Yes, it was the only way they'd allow him to stay."

"That figures. Your brothers are far too bone idle to lift a finger. Stay here, Max." He put his arm around her shoulders and guided her over to the door. When he pulled the fly screen back, she stepped inside. A couple of lights cast a golden glow over the interior of the open-plan living area.

"I'm in the process of doing the place up at the moment," he explained. The furniture lay shrouded in dustsheets in the center of the room. "I'm afraid my Pa let the place rundown."

This was only the second time she'd been inside the ranch house in the last seven years, the first being when she'd brought the apple pie over. In the past it had always been dark and gloomy, and just a little intimidating. His father had always been austere, and she guessed it had dominated every aspect of his life. Seth Donovan was a real miserable old bastard at the best of times. Now with the walls painted in bright, fresh colors, it didn't seem like the same place.

"It looks good, Brett."

“You look good, too, Fay.” He pulled her into his embrace and then ran his hands down her arms. She guessed he could feel the nervous tremors running through her body. “My, you’re like a cat on a hot tin roof.”

“I feel like one, Brett. In some ways, I’m still that eighteen-year-old girl you once knew.”

He caressed his hand over her cheek. “You’re a woman, Fay. A beautiful woman. I feel real proud that you would even consider me.”

She smiled at him. When he said it like that, how could she be nervous? “Take me to bed, Brett.”

Chapter Four

He scooped her into his arms and carried her up the stairs. Every now and then he would steal a kiss, making her smile. Her fingers threaded into his hair, and it was all he could do to hold back and slow everything down. Usually he would always think of his own needs, but with Fay, he felt different. He wanted it to be special for her. At the moment, he couldn't analyze why that was. It just felt like the right thing to do.

He laid her on the bed and switched on a small bedside lamp. She looked so fucking sexy stretched out before him. Her long, smooth legs enticing him in her short red skirt, making his cock harden further.

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside, reveling in the way her gaze hungrily devoured every part of his torso. Fay had always wanted him. She'd pursued him for years until she'd reached eighteen, and he'd finally seen the woman behind the girl.

"Your turn." He motioned with his hands and helped her remove her blouse. He breathed in. "Perfect," he murmured, dipping his head and sucking on her pale, pink nipples. She moaned and flexed her hips, arching into him as he circled his hands around her full breasts. He licked the areola, enjoying her taste and femininity. "Just perfect." Her figure had matured in the intervening seven years. Her breasts were fuller and more rounded, and her hips more curvaceous. She had been a teenager. Now she was a woman.

His cock was uncomfortably hard inside his tight jeans. He needed release, but he was determined to slow the pace and make this a night

to remember. Her hands caressed over his chest, feeling every muscle. He'd always done manual labor, and he was proud of his physique.

She kicked off her shoes and began loosening the belt around her waist. He pulled her skirt from her along with her panties. Her freshly trimmed pussy aroused him further. He imagined his cock buried deep inside her and felt himself stiffen even more.

"Hurry," she whispered as he lay down on the bed next to her.

He pressed his hands between her legs, spreading her thighs, and she let out a tight moan. Her whole body writhed as he slipped a finger into her soaking wet pussy. "Easy," he murmured against her lips before kissing her possessively. "We've got all the time in the world."

When his fingers caressed her clit, she bucked and whimpered. "Brett, it's not fair you've still got half your clothes on."

"Just be patient, Fay. Just be patient." He captured her clit between his finger and thumb, enjoying the sight of her body rapidly losing control. Her breathing had gone into overdrive just like his own. Her chest heaved as his fingers continued their onslaught on her senses. The folds of her sex were now so wet with her arousal his finger slipped effortlessly inside her.

"Mmm, you're so tight. I'm just gonna caress you for a while until you loosen up a bit." He kissed her breasts, drawing the nipples against his teeth, enjoying the muffled whimpers that broke from her lips.

She gasped as his fingers sought the swelling nub of her clitoris once more, and he began stroking the entire length of her slit. Her hands fisted into his hair, and she pulled relentlessly at his blond locks.

"Oh, God, yes. I want you so much, Brett."

Her whole body arched off the bed, and he knew she was close. He slipped his fingers further inside her and then curled them back, pleasuring her G-spot. "You like that, don't you, Fay, me finger fucking you?"

“You know I do, Brett. I adore you.”

“How about this. Do you like this?” He pulled his fingers from her sopping cunny before sucking the juices hungrily from them. “You taste so fucking good, Fay.”

“I’m so turned on, Brett. It’s been seven years since you last touched me. Please don’t stop.”

Her gasps of pleasure spurred him on, and he leaned down and opened her legs wider before hooking them over his shoulders.

“You’ll like this, too, then.” He spread her pussy lips apart with his thumbs before freeing her clit from its protective hood. Then he lapped at it, teasing it with his teeth, biting it gently over and over again.

“Brett,” she screamed, as her hands fisted into his hair. When her orgasm finally came, he continued lashing her with his tongue and teeth until her cries turned into whimpers of contentment.

He pulled her into his arms and held her close. As he stroked his hand into her hair, he reflected on his selfless act. He wasn’t usually so generous, so why with Fay? He guessed it was because they still had a connection even though they’d been apart for seven years. He knew that had to be the answer.

She snuggled into his shoulder. “Thank you, Brett. I feel really relaxed now.”

“That was the idea.”

They lay in silence for a few minutes while he thought about what he was going to do to her next. He wanted to fuck her senseless. He wanted to plunge his dick repeatedly into her body until she cried out in ecstasy. He breathed in. No, he had to hold back. He needed to be slow and easy with her.

Then she said, “I do hope you’re going to take your jeans off because I’d hate to think of you losing anymore circulation.” She giggled as her hand caressed the enormous swelling in his jeans, and his cock twitched from the contact.

“Fuck, Fay, they’re coming off, right now.”

* * * *

Completely at her ease, Fay watched as Brett removed the rest of his clothes. She'd always felt at her best when in his company, and tonight was no exception. When he stood naked before her, she let her gaze drift slowly over him. His body now sculpted by the lamplight appeared perfectly toned. The six-pack abs defined. The strong thigh muscles flexed, highlighting the masculine hair as he moved.

Her mouth watered as she let her gaze drift to his fully erect cock. The shaft lay taut against his rippled stomach, the head glistening with pre-cum. So her memory hadn't been playing tricks with her. When they'd first made love all those years ago for the first time, it had been painful for her. Now she knew why. Brett was built to please a woman.

"My, you're big."

He smiled and then nestled between her legs, spreading them wider as he adjusted his hips. She could feel the hard tip of his ridged cock now pressed against her pussy, and she gasped in anticipation, flexing her hips to encourage their joining.

"There's no hurry." He cupped her chin in his hand and forced her to meet his gaze. Her whole body shook with the sexual intensity she saw in his eyes. She squirmed as his cock pressed harder against her pussy. "I want to look into your eyes as you take me inside you."

His lashes caressed his cheek as he stared directly at her lips, then he kissed her, driving his tongue deep inside her mouth, mirroring what he was about to do with his prick. Her breathing went into overdrive as her whole being craved the final act of completion.

"Brett, I need..."

"Shhh, baby." He stroked his hand through her hair, brushing it away from her eyes. "Look at me."

She did as he asked, staring intently at him as he eased the head of his penis into her vagina. Her mouth opened, and she gasped for air,

sucking it through her teeth. His cock felt huge as he pushed it deeper inside her aching pussy. A stinging sensation burned into her arousal, and she whimpered with need.

“Shhh, baby, tell me when you’re ready. I don’t want to hurt you.” He licked her lips with his tongue, teasing the tender flesh, nipping it with his teeth.

The slight pain eased as he waited patiently for her to regain her breath.

Still looking into his eyes, she spoke, “I’m okay now.”

He smiled and traced her lips with his thumb, then eased himself further inside, inch by slow deliberate inch. Finally when he’d seated himself to the hilt, her head tipped back, and she arched into the delicious feeling of fullness. She had forgotten just how good sex could be with Brett. He kissed her lips, tracing a line to her neck.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered against her ear as he began driving into her with hard, measured thrusts. His broad chest covered her with his warmth and masculinity.

“Yes,” she moaned as she gripped his shoulders and scored her fingernails down his back. “Harder, Brett. I need to feel you deep inside me.”

He raised the tempo, pounding his shaft inside her time after time, bringing her closer and closer to ecstasy.

“Wrap your legs around mine.”

She did as he asked until they were entwined as one.

“Now hold on tight.”

His thrusts grew more urgent, and she arched her body under his, wanting to be as close to him as possible. He withdrew nearly all the way then pounded back inside her. He did it so hard his heavy balls banged against her ass, thrust after delicious thrust.

A whole seven years she had waited for this. She had been just a girl of eighteen the last time she’d been in this position with Brett. Now she was a grown woman, and she intended to enjoy it. “Kiss me, Brett.”

He kissed her mouth, tasting her as he continued to impale her with his cock. His lips caressed down to her neck, lower and lower, until he found her breast. He sucked a nipple into his mouth, and she arched her whole body taut as a bowstring, offering everything to him.

The pressure grew, starting in her stomach as a tight coil of energy. It grew and grew, building until she could hardly breathe. Her whole body bucked, and she screamed out loud as the most wanton, orgasmic pleasure ripped through her. Her stomach muscles quivered and rippled, making her writhe from the delicious intensity.

“Brett, oh, Brett.”

“That’s it, baby.” He continued, thrusting inside her through the aftershocks, adding pleasure upon pleasure until he let go completely, and his seed filled her in a shuddering release.

They lay together until their breathing calmed. Then he withdrew and pulled her into his arms.

As she nestled on his shoulder, he spoke, “I think I got a bit carried away there. I meant to take it a whole lot slower.”

She giggled as she traced her fingers over his finely honed chest. “Well that’s what seven years apart can do to a man.”

“Hmm, I guess you’re right there. Next time it’s going to last a whole lot longer.”

A warm glow spread through her when he said the words *next time*. “Well I hope I’m not going to have to wait another seven years until you make love to me again?”

He laughed and then flipped her onto her back. His gaze devoured her naked body. “Nope, I reckon I’ll be ready to go again any minute now.”

Chapter Five

Fay tossed the ball down the dusty dirt track, and Brett's dog Max, bolted after it. She released a sigh. She felt so at ease, sitting on Brett's porch and just watching the world go by. His land rolled out as far as the eye could see. The trees and bushes had just started to cast their lengthening shadows onto the dried, parched earth as the afternoon moved toward evening.

They'd made love into the early hours of the morning. Her whole body thrummed from his attention. It was no wonder she didn't want to leave.

"Guess I should make a move," she said eventually.

"Not yet." Brett pulled her possessively against his shoulder, and she couldn't help but snuggle into his warmth. He laughed. "Well, you didn't take much persuading."

She giggled. "No, it's so peaceful here. I could stay in your arms forever."

He kissed the top of her head. "Well that's not very practical, is it?"

"Guess not." She took a deep breath. "I suppose I should be going. My brothers will be expecting their dinner to be on the table after they've spent twelve hours in the saddle."

"You can always stay here."

"No, it's no good. I have to go back and face the music. I don't suppose they'll be too happy that I stayed out all night and didn't even get home to cook their breakfast."

"Fay, it won't hurt them to look after themselves once in a while. You're not their mother." He sounded irritated.

“Apart from Cody, none of them know a damn thing about cooking.”

Fay knew that as soon as her brothers finished work, they’d expect food on the table. Then the recriminations would start. Well, she hadn’t forgotten last night and the way they’d all behaved so badly toward Brett. She would make sure they remembered to treat both Brett and herself with a lot more respect in future.

He held her hand in his and then kissed her palm. “Look, do you want me to come with you?”

“No, Brett, it’s better if I go alone.” If he came with her, it would only antagonize her brothers. She stood and then brushed her skirt into shape. “You’d only make it worse.”

“As bad as that, eh?”

She smiled as he came and stood beside her. “No, I guess you and my brothers just don’t get on. I’ll deal with this myself.”

Max brought the ball back and dropped it at her feet. “Okay, one more time.” She leaned down and stroked the furry face that almost seemed to smile at her, and then she scooped up the soggy ball and threw it down the dirt track once more. He yelped and then scooted after it.

“You spoil that dog. He’s supposed to be mean as hell, in case any intruders try to break into the ranch house. The way you’re fussin’ him, he’ll probably roll on his back and ask to have his belly tickled.”

“Aw, he’s all right. I like him. He doesn’t judge me. He just takes me as I am.” It rankled her that everyone had a poor opinion of Brett based on a lie some seven years before. “I only wish humans were so accepting.”

“Yeah, you and me both. Come,” he put an arm around her shoulder, “I’ll drive you home.”

“No, Brett, I’m gonna walk.”

“You sure?” His brows drew together in puzzlement. “By the time you get home, it will be late.”

She grinned. "That's the whole point. I'll have an excuse to rustle up something easy."

"I thought you were going to teach them a lesson."

"That depends on what I find when I get home."

"Well, if you're sure." He leaned down and kissed her lips, then brushed her hair away from her eyes with his fingers. "So when am I going to see you again?"

"When would you like to see me again?"

"Tonight." He grinned.

A warm glow spread through her. She touched his shirt and trailed her fingers down the hard contours of his chest. Brett made her feel so incredibly sexy. "Maybe I'll slip out and come down here while you're asleep. I could creep into your bedroom and surprise you."

"Mmm, I'd like that."

* * * *

By the time Fay reached home, it was getting toward six. Brett would have given her a lift, but she needed some time to think.

It had been just a few days since Brett had returned to Black Creek, and everything had changed. He'd been the catalyst to make her see that her life had been going nowhere.

Looking after her brothers all these years had seemed the right thing to do. It had kept them all together as a family unit. Cody had taken on the major responsibility when their father had died early on in her life. He'd managed to keep the ranch running smoothly, even though her mother had barely coped. When she'd become old enough, she'd slipped into her mother's role, cooking, cleaning, ironing, duty-bound to keep the family together.

Now she didn't feel inclined to do anything. A sense of guilt invaded her thoughts as she walked up to the ranch house and into the kitchen.

That sense of guilt soon turned to anger as she surveyed the scene before her.

The remnants of breakfast lay on the table, half-eaten food, and numerous open packets were left strewn about. Even a bottle of milk had been left out. She picked it up and sniffed it. Sour. Damn those boys.

When she went over to the sink, it contained the debris from the night before. Two unfinished pizzas lay on the drainer, along with the dirty crockery from their supper that she'd made them. Not one of them had bothered to clear it away.

They were clearly taking her for granted. Her brothers needed to find themselves a woman of their own to look after them because after tonight, she'd wash her hands of them. Yes, let them cope on their own for a few months. They'd soon appreciate what she did for them. She was through with them.

With a deep breath, she began running the hot water. Get everything in order then surprise them. She smiled. Revenge was definitely a dish best served cold.

* * * *

Cody removed the saddle from his horse, hung it on the hook, and then began walking across the yard to the ranch house. Caleb, Will, and Matt were already in the kitchen, but as the oldest, he always liked to be the one to make sure everything was in order before he sat down to his meal.

He removed his hat as he took the two steps up to the verandah and then crossed the wooden decking to the backdoor.

Well, there was his sister, dressed in jeans and a blouse, as always, not a hair out of place. The fact that she hadn't come home last night had seriously pissed him off, but as Matt had said, "She's a grown woman. You can't stop her." That may be true, but he didn't

have to like her choice in men. He hated Brett Donovan with a passion.

Still, for the sake of the rest, he'd already promised them he'd say nothing. Not until after their bellies were full anyway. But say something he would.

"Hi, sis."

"Cody. I'm about ready to dish up."

"I'll just wash up, and I'll be right with you."

Finally when he was seated at the table, Fay brought over a large pot from the stove.

"Before I serve this, I just want to say a few words."

He noticed her cheeks were flushed and guessed the reason for it was anger. Or maybe she was just plain embarrassed for spending the whole night with Brett Donovan. He looked at his brothers, wondering if they knew something that he didn't. They all shrugged. "Go ahead Fay. Whatever you want to say, just say it, girl."

With her head lowered, she took a deep breath and then stared at each one of them in turn.

"Now I don't think any of you treated Brett right last night."

Caleb spoke, "We've never really got on with Brett, have we, Fay? You must realize we're like oil and water. The Donovans and the Mavericks just don't mix. We never have and never will. You'd be wise just to accept things as they are."

Matt joined in, pointing out, "You must remember that Cody and Brett were always fighting at school."

"I guess." Fay bit on her lower lip, and Cody knew there was more to come.

"Go on, Fay, spit it out. Say what you wanna say." He was getting mighty hungry waiting for her to dish up. The sooner she said what was on her mind, the sooner they could all eat.

"I didn't come home last night partly to teach you all a lesson. You gotta learn to fend for yourselves sometime, and stop relying on me to feed you."

“We fixed our breakfast, Fay. We’re not completely useless,” Will said proudly.

“Yes, so I noticed. Do you know it took me a good two hours to clean up the mess you’d all left behind?”

“Come on, Fay.” Cody finally lost his patience. “Just dish up now. We’re all hungry. We can continue this conversation after we’ve eaten.”

“Well, that’s just the point, Cody.” He noticed Fay’s eyes flared with something he could only describe as anger. “Because it took me so long to tidy up, I didn’t have quite enough time to cook the dinner properly.”

“It don’t matter none, Fay, just so long as there’s—”

“Good, because in fact, I didn’t have time to cook it at all.” In one jerky movement, she wrenched the lid off the pot and then upended the contents onto the table. Several pounds of raw vegetables rolled in different directions. Then five pieces of raw meat finally fell from the pot to land unceremoniously in the middle of the heap. “There’s your stew. I hope you enjoy it.”

Stunned, Cody looked at his three brothers. They were all as shocked as him. Anger began to surge through his veins. Goddamn Brett Donovan. He’d warned him off Fay, but he hadn’t taken any heed of his advice. Now that he’d come back on the scene, Fay had started to come undone. The girl had obviously gone crazy.

“Well, if you hadn’t spent the night and half the day with Brett Donovan, you’d have had plenty of time to cook it.”

“That’s just it, Cody. I’m done looking after you all. It’s about time you found yourselves a woman because I’ve had it with you boys. I want a life of my own.”

“Aw, sis, let’s not fall out.” Matt was trying to calm the situation, but Cody would have none of it.

“He’s only just come back for fuck’s sake, woman. I can’t believe you’d put him above us.”

Her jaw jutted forward in defiance as she spoke, “Every time, Cody.”

“You know nothing about him. He could be a repeat offender, anything.”

“What do you mean, Cody? Explain yourself.”

“Cody, just drop it,” Will warned.

With hands on her hips, Fay looked at him. “No, let him speak. I want to know what he means by repeat offender.” Her voice rose higher with each word she spoke. Fay was about to explode. Well, so was he.

“Think about it, Fay. He never did have an alibi all those years ago, did he? I’ve often wondered if Patty had been telling the truth.”

The color drained from her face as she stared at him, and she whispered, “You bastard. You think Brett actually robbed that gas station. How could you?” Her hands clenched into tight fists, and he wondered for a minute if she would launch herself at him.

“Cody, just fucking leave it.” Will stood and put his arm around Fay’s shoulder. “Look, let’s just drop this conversation. Why don’t you go up to your room and lie down? I’m sure things won’t be so heated in an hour or two.”

She shrugged his arm away as she continued to stare at him. He knew he should back down, but he just couldn’t help it. Their whole way of life had altered since Brett Donovan had returned. Everything was falling apart. She needed to see the real Brett Donovan for herself.

“Well, Fay, why hasn’t he got an alibi? Tell me that. He’s obviously got something to hide.”

Chapter Six

Fay couldn't believe what she was hearing. Cody had always been hotheaded and impulsive, but this time he'd gone too far. Now he'd betrayed her in the worst possible way. He thought the man she loved, had always loved, was a criminal. Patty's accusation was never going away. It would always be there hanging over them. Cody's words bit into her very soul. Her whole body shook as she looked at him through teary eyes.

"He didn't hold up that gas station."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he was with me," she screamed at the top of her voice. As soon as she uttered the words, she knew it was a mistake. With her hands partially covering her face, she fled from the kitchen and rushed upstairs to her bedroom. After locking her door, she threw herself onto the bed and sobbed into the duvet.

She heard raised voices coming from downstairs. It seemed her brothers were taking it out on each other. Doors slammed and the argument spilled outside. She could hear the truck spring to life and drive fast from the ranch. Then there was silence, save for the ticking of the clock on her bedside table.

When she heard footsteps coming up the stairs, she knew they hadn't all gone.

There was a knock on her bedroom door, and her brother Caleb called, "Fay."

"Go away, Caleb."

"All hell's broke loose down there. You'd better get out here now."

Even though she felt more of an affinity to Caleb, mainly because they were the closest in age, she refused to be consoled. “No, I don’t feel like talking.”

“Fay, they’ve all gone over to—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Fay jumped off the bed and yanked open her door. “Don’t tell me they’ve gone to Brett’s, please.” A sinking feeling began in her stomach and fell heavily into her legs. She grasped hold of the doorframe for support. This was all getting out of hand.

“I tried to talk sense into them, but Cody just snapped. You know he hates Brett. He wants his blood. Matt and Will were real angry, too.” He shook his head. “Fay, we warned you to stay away from Brett.”

“It wasn’t his fault. I pursued him for years. Then he finally noticed me, and I was so happy. That bitch Patty spoiled it by making that false accusation the very next day.” She pushed past him and began running down the stairs. “I’ve gotta get over there. With three of them against one, they’ll kill him!”

Without the truck, the only fast means of transport was her horse. She ran across to the stable and began saddling up Cinders.

“I’m coming with you.” Caleb whistled for his horse, and he trotted obediently across the corral.

She just hoped they’d get there in time.

* * * *

When Brett saw the massive cloud of dust billowing out down the track, he guessed it was the Maverick’s truck. He’d been expecting trouble after Fay had spent the night with him, but he hadn’t expected it to be quite so soon. He wondered who was driving because they didn’t even slow down when they reached the cattle guard. They just kept coming. Fast.

He leaned back on the porch swing seat and patted Max's head. The dog seemed equally interested in the approaching vehicle.

"Looks like we got company, Max."

By the time the pickup reached the yard, he saw that Cody was driving. His face set in stone as he brought the truck to a screeching halt mere inches from the raised porch. He knew then that things were going to turn real nasty.

How could he handle four Mavericks at once? When just three of them wrenched the doors open and then leapt from the pickup, the odds began to look slightly better, but even he knew he'd never stand a chance against Cody, Will, and Matt working together.

He bided his time as they walked toward him. No point in getting agitated. What would be would be. As far as he was concerned, the night he'd spent with Fay was worth a beating. He scratched Max behind the ear, and the dog settled obediently between his legs.

"What can I do for you, boys?" he finally said when they all stood glaring at him.

"For a start, you can wipe that fucking smile off your face, Donovan."

Matt and Will were identical twins. He remembered them from school, but he reckoned he could just about handle the pair of them together. Cody was altogether a different prospect and was one mean fucking puncher. Yeah, he was the one to watch out for. "Matt, I ain't scared of you, or Will, if push comes to shove."

"Well you should be because we've come to rip you a new fucking asshole. We know all about what you did to our little sister, Fay, seven years ago. And we ain't fucking happy." Will sounded angry, and Brett wondered what had happened to make Fay mention it. He guessed they'd used that night to warn her off him.

"You're full of shit, Will, just like your brothers." Will's hands clenched into fists, and Brett knew it wouldn't be long before the punches started flying. He had to think on his feet. "I suppose three against one is the only odds you boys are happy with."

“Any one of us can kick your fucking ass, Donovan.” Cody’s eyes burned with anger. “You’ve messed with the Mavericks once too often. Now it’s payback time. Make no mistake, I can kick your fucking ass all by myself. I don’t need no help to lay you horizontal.”

With all the raised voices, Max began barking. Brett led him to the door and pushed him inside the ranch house. He began removing his jacket. “You sure about that, Cody? Maybe when you get into trouble, you’ll call on your brothers to help you out.”

Cody turned to Matt and Will. “Stay out of this you two, understand? This is between Donovan and me.” He began pulling off his shirt. “I’ve been wanting to beat the crap out of this fucking loser ever since he came back to Black Creek.”

Brett unbuttoned his shirt. No point ruining a perfectly good piece of cloth. “Yeah, there’s something about your face that makes me want to rearrange it.” It had always been like this between Cody and himself. He could feel the adrenaline pumping around his body, preparing him for action. Any moment now and there’d be blood and teeth everywhere.

Without warning, he jumped from the porch deck and launched himself at Cody. They both crashed to the ground. With barely a moment’s pause, he let loose with a right hand, punching Cody square in the mouth. Wounded by the contact, Cody doubled up. Brett didn’t notice the knee that drove up into his ribs. The pain made him wince and cough, and he rolled away, taking a moment to collect himself before he stood.

“First, I’m gonna kill you.” Cody spat blood as he began to stand. “And then I’m gonna hang your balls on a spit and roast them. I’ll make sure you never have the equipment to bother my little sister again.” He charged at Brett, burying his head deep into his solar plexus, and they both crashed to the dusty ground again.

As they lay on the floor, Brett managed to lock an arm around Cody’s neck before kneeing him violently in the lower back. Seizing his opportunity, he stood and quickly kicked the eldest Maverick’s

feet apart before his booted foot savagely connected with his opponent's unprotected testicles.

"You're gonna wish you'd use that pecker of yours a bit more often, Cody, because it'll be ground beef when I'm finished."

Cody stood, gasping for breath, and sent a right hook directly into Brett's jaw. He felt his lip split, and the unmistakable taste of blood filled his mouth. He spat it out and wiped the back of his hand over the cut. In retaliation, he sent two fast blows into Cody's face. One connected with his mouth, the other with his nose, splattering it. A torrent of blood gushed from Cody Maverick's nostrils.

He wiped the blood away, seeing it as little more than an inconvenience. "You're gonna wish you'd steered clear of, Fay. I'm gonna make you pay, Donovan."

"Stay out of my fucking business, Cody. Get a life of your own. Get a woman of your own." Brett lunged at Cody, and they both went sprawling into the dust. Cody managed to get an arm locked around Brett's neck, cutting off his air supply. Unable to breathe, he felt the life force begin to drain from his body.

* * * *

Fay gave Cinders her head as she galloped toward Brett's ranch. Her thoughts were filled with him. Had all three of them attacked him? Were they killing him right this minute? She'd never forgive them if they hurt him. Why had she told them the truth about what happened seven years ago? The truth shouldn't matter. She loved Brett so much it hurt.

She crossed the cattle guard. In the distance she saw the white pickup parked at an angle in front of Brett's porch. Its doors still flung wide open.

As she drew closer, Brett's lifeless body lay on the ground with Cody holding him down.

“Stop it,” she yelled. Her stomach churned. Brett wasn’t moving. “Stop it, stop it,” she screamed, dismounting from Cinders. Cody became distracted, and Brett must have taken the opportunity to lash out because Cody went flying into the air only to double-up in pain. They both lay sprawled on the ground, coughing into the dirt.

Immediately she ran to Brett. “I’m so sorry, Brett. I didn’t mean to say it. I just couldn’t bear the name calling.” His face was covered with blood, and he could barely breathe. Tears began to streak down her cheeks. What if Brett hated her? “I’m so sorry, Brett.”

When she leaned over him, he pulled her into his arms and held onto to her as he fought for breath. She didn’t care that he was caked in blood, sweat, and dirt. His chest rose rapidly, and she knew he’d come close to losing consciousness. Overwhelmed with emotion, she cried against his broad shoulder. Deep sobs that racked through her body as she looked at him lying semi-conscious. This man meant the world to her.

She turned to her brothers who were helping an equally breathless Cody to his feet. “Just fuck off, all of you. You ain’t welcome here.”

“I can’t believe you’d take his side, Fay. The Donovans and the Mavericks just don’t mix. You were told to stay away.” Matt’s pained expression looked hurt by what she’d said.

“He’s paid for his sins, ten-fold. His father disowned him seven years ago for believing what Patty said. He’s done his penance. Now go away, fuck off. I don’t want to see you here. Ever again.”

Turning away, she stared into Brett’s eyes and stroked her fingers through his hair. “Can’t you see I love him?”

“You ain’t no sister of mine. He’s a Donovan.” Will seemed equally put out as he helped Matt carry Cody to the truck.

To hear her own brother say that made her go cold to the core. “Well let me tell you. I’ve only got one brother left, and that’s Caleb. Now get off Brett’s land. You’ve almost killed him. Caleb, help me to get him inside. He’s hurt real bad.”

With Caleb's help, she managed to get Brett into the ranch house. Max was frantically scratching the inside of the door when they opened it, and he bolted outside, barking as the truck reversed down the track.

They lay him on the couch, and Fay went and soaked a towel under the cold water tap before applying it to Brett's face and chest. "Just relax, baby. I'm here now. This will cool you down."

Caleb paced back and forth. "They went too far this time, Fay. I should have stopped them." Caleb was the sensible one. "This makes me even more determined to join the Marines. I need to make a life of my own."

"Don't talk about joining the army again. There are no winners in war, only losers. Look, it just all got out of hand, Caleb. I think Cody got as good as he gave." She smiled at Brett as she dabbed his forehead. "Feeling better?"

He nodded, a hand coming to his neck as he tried to speak. She touched his lips. "Best keep still for a while, I reckon." Her gaze took in his beaten face and torso, caked in blood and sweat, and her heart broke just a little. If only she'd kept her mouth shut.

"Caleb, would you do me a favor?"

"Yes?"

"Bring my things over tomorrow morning."

"Then you're serious about disowning them."

"Yes, I can't go back after this."

Brett held her hand in his and tried to speak. "Don't look so worried, Brett. I'll stay here tonight and then find somewhere in Black Creek tomorrow."

He looked even more agitated, and he finally spoke in a hoarse whisper. "You're staying right here."

Chapter Seven

By the time the golden glow of dawn started creeping up the bedroom windows, Brett was feeling a whole lot better. His throat might still be sore, but the rest of him, after a good night's sleep, was just fine.

He glanced at Fay lying next to him, sound asleep. She looked incredibly sexy in the shirt she'd borrowed. She'd said she loved him. He didn't know how he felt about that, other than a warm glow deep in his belly. Could that be love?

He touched his neck one more time. My God, if Fay hadn't turned up when she did, he might have been seriously injured, or even killed. He wondered if Cody would have kept the death grip around his neck until he'd finally squeezed the life from him.

He'd like to think that Cody would have backed off or that his brothers would have intervened, but he couldn't be sure. He had little faith in the human race as it was. Up until seven years ago, he'd had every confidence in people doing the right thing, but that notion had been severely dented when he'd been accused of holding up the gas station. People he'd known all his life turned against him without any proof whatsoever. They'd behaved out of character, taking the word of an unstable woman above his.

"What are you thinking?" A soft, feminine voice whispered in his ear.

He turned to Fay. He smiled and stroked her face. "This and that. I thought you were asleep."

"I can't sleep much. I keep thinking of what happened last night. They could have killed you." She trailed her fingers over his face. "I wish I'd kept my mouth shut."

He patted her hand and then kissed her palm. "It had to come out in the end. It was never going to go away. In fact, I'm glad they gave me a beating. I knew they didn't want us to become involved."

"Don't be silly, Brett."

"No, it's true. Our two families have been warring for generations. It all started back in Grandpa's day, when there was a dispute over water. Since then, the Donovans and the Mavericks have always been sworn enemies. Fay, I never wanted to turn you against your own family. I feel guilty for causing this rift."

Her lips pouted provocatively. "Now we both feel guilty."

"Well I've got the perfect remedy for feeling guilty. Like you said to your brothers, I think I've about paid for my sins. Come here." He pulled her on top of him and begun unbuttoning her shirt.

"Hey, that's taking advantage." She laughed.

"If you're moving in here, I'll be taking advantage all the time."

"Mmm, I hope so, but don't you hurt, Brett?"

"Yes, but you're just the tonic I need."

He peeled her shirt back, exposing her full, creamy breasts. She shrugged it off her arms as he caressed her nipples with his fingers, enjoying the way they tightened beneath his touch.

When she cast the shirt aside, he pulled her hard against his body. Now skin to skin, she comforted him like no other woman could. He cradled her head as their lips touched.

"You feel so good, Fay. So soft and warm." His voice was still hoarse.

She smiled and kissed him slowly. "You, too, Brett."

His hard cock slipped inside her moist pussy. Like a velvet sheath it gripped tightly as he sunk in right up to the hilt. Her moans of pleasure aroused him even more as she pulled herself to a kneeling position, and began riding him.

His gaze scanned down his own torso, from his rapidly rising chest to where they joined so intimately together. His heart rate increased with each stroke of her pussy over his cock. The sight of his thick shaft disappearing inside her, and then reappearing as she rode his length, made him groan out loud.

“I’m not hurting you, am I, Brett?”

“No, baby, I was just thinking how sexy you look with my prick inside you.”

A sensuous smile formed on her lips. “Mmm, and I’ve only just started.”

She rocked back on her hips, changing the angle of penetration. Every nerve ending in his body screamed release as his gaze traveled to her full breasts. He clasped his hands firmly around her waist as she began to ride him harder and faster.

With her hands behind her, gripping his thighs, she undulated and ground her hips over his. He could hardly believe how quickly life turned on a dime. He’d taken a severe beating, and now here he was, being fucked senseless less than twelve hours later by the most beautiful woman he’d ever known.

“You’ve got a wicked grin on your face, Brett.”

“I was just thinking how lucky I am to have a woman like you.”

“You are, and don’t you forget it.”

“I won’t.”

“Brett, I’m so close.”

“That’s it, baby, harder. Keep going.” Her pussy clamped and milked his cock as her orgasm crashed through.

She screamed his name as she climaxed into ecstasy. At that moment, she looked stunning. Her whole body shone in the first rays of dawn. Her breasts quivered, and her stomach contracted with the sheer intensity of her pleasure.

He flipped her onto her back and began thrusting inside her, eager now for his own release. Holding her hands above her head he pounded into her until he reached his own satisfying climax. His balls

tightened, and a powerful contraction surged up his shaft, pumping his seed inside her in one mighty, potent spasm.

He kissed her tenderly on the lips as their breathing returned to normal. "Now that's the perfect start to the day." He thwacked her cute behind as he jumped from the bed. "You can stay here, but I've gotta see to the ranch."

* * * *

When Fay dished up a large plate of bacon and eggs, Brett smiled at the amount of food she'd managed to pile onto it.

"You sure know how to cook, Fay." He forked a mouthful of eggs and bacon to his lips. "I guess your brothers will be missing this."

"Maybe, but they didn't appreciate what I did for them. I don't suppose we'll ever be back on speaking terms after what happened." Her heart ached at the loss of her family. Now there was only Caleb who would speak to her.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Sometimes things have a way of working out."

"It didn't happen between you and your father, Brett. You never did make your peace."

"No, but he was just plain stubborn."

"I guess." She stared at the man sitting opposite her. His face was marked from the fight he'd had with Cody. It was all because of her. "Look, Brett, don't feel obliged, I don't have to stay here. It all got out of hand yesterday. I can go into Black Creek and find somewhere else to live."

"No way. I've just had the best wakeup present in a long time. You're staying right here."

"Then what can I do? I only go to work two days a week. I can help you out around the ranch."

"Good. It would be a great help. In the mornings, I check the water troughs are working and full. There are six of them dotted

around the ranch. If you could take on that chore, I've plenty of other things I can be getting on with. I can show you them now if you like. Takes a good three hours out of my day."

"Whatever I can do to help, Brett."

"I can get on with finishing off the ranch house. That way I can get the place up for sale a lot quicker."

Her heart sank. "You're leaving?"

He finished the last mouthful of his breakfast. "There's too many ghosts here, Fay. I need to start afresh. The folks in Black Creek seem to hold a grudge. I've had seven years in different places, all over Oklahoma, Wyoming, Texas, and South Dakota. I've never once had to answer for my past."

This had to be the worst news ever. She'd fallen out with all her brothers apart from Caleb, and now Brett would be leaving, too. A sense of loneliness pervaded every fiber of her being.

"Come here." Brett held out his arms, and she moved to sit on his lap. "Don't look so sad, baby. I've no idea what will happen to us as a couple, but wouldn't you like to go someplace else? You could come with me. That's if you want to."

"You mean that?" The cold feeling that had wrapped around her heart suddenly lifted. "You'd take me with you?"

"Of course I would, I love being with you. I know that's not a solid commitment or anything, but—"

She placed a finger to his lips, not wanting to hear the excuses. Just the chance to be with Brett sounded like heaven. He had always done things differently. He was his own man and took life as it came, and that had always turned her on. "You mean do the rodeo circuit with you?"

"For a couple of years, yeah. Then when I get too old to win anything, we can find a more permanent home. What do you say?"

"I say, I'd like that very much."

"Good." He held her in his arms and then kissed her cheek. "That reminds me, after I've shown you the water troughs, I'll have to put in

a bit of rope practice. I'm entering the rodeo that's coming to Black Creek in a couple of weeks, and I'm determined to show those brothers of yours how it's really done."

"Good for you, Brett. Cody's won the tie-down roping competition here for the last three years. It'll be good for him to have some serious competition for a change."

"In that case, I'll make it a priority to whup his sorry ass."

* * * *

Over the next fortnight, Fay attended to the water supply for Brett's stock and made sure every morning that it flowed freely into the cattle troughs around the ranch. Brett had a realtor put the ranch up for sale, and a big sign was soon visible for all to see.

When her youngest brother, Caleb, saw it, he had something to say. "You're going with him, Fay? Cody, Will, and Matt ain't gonna be too happy. Has he asked you to marry him?"

"No, but—"

He'd quickly cut her off. "Brett's a good-time guy. I've seen plenty of them to know that."

"That's a bit like the pot calling the kettle black. I've known for years that you boys do that night after night. When are you all gonna settle down?"

Caleb seemed to take little notice of her observations and continued, "He'll use you up and then cast you aside without a second thought."

"That's not true, Caleb."

He held up his hand. "Believe me, it is. He works the rodeo. You'll find there's a broken heart in every town he's ever been to."

She refused to listen to him. "Don't spoil it, Caleb. Just be happy for me."

"I would be happy, Fay, if I saw a ring on your finger. He's just not that sort of guy. I don't hate Brett like Cody does, but when all is

said and done, he's just a two-bit drifter who'll never amount to anything. I'm begging you, Fay, don't go with him."

"Well, I've every faith in him," she said, raising her chin in defiance. If she didn't believe in Brett, what would be the point? "Don't tell Cody, Will, and Matt that I'm leaving with him. I don't want another fight breaking out. I meant it when I said they're not welcome here."

"I have to tell them all, Fay. I don't suppose they'll be happy, but I'll make sure they don't come bothering you. Cody is very hot headed, but he'll listen to me."

"Yes, I'm sure, but he's got to learn to rein in his temper."

"Just remember what I said. You've always got a home back at the ranch, sis, if you change your mind."

"I won't. I'm already committed. I'm going, and that's final." She just wished he could be happy for her. For the rest of the day his words tormented her. *Brett's a good-time guy. There's a broken heart in every town he's ever been to.* Later that evening, she became so consumed with what Caleb had said that even Brett noticed.

"Are you all right, baby?"

"Yes, why?" she answered absently as they ate their supper at the kitchen table.

"You seem very quiet, and you've hardly touched your food."

She pushed her plate away. "Guess I'm not hungry."

"It's not like you to be maudlin, Fay."

"What's it like on the rodeo circuit? Moving from one town to the next must get very wearing." Why had she asked him that? Now Brett knew what consumed her thoughts.

He leaned back in his chair and stared at her. His piercing blue eyes raked over her face. She guessed he was trying to work out her mood. He took a swig from his beer bottle. "Sounds like you're having second thoughts about coming."

"Should I?" She could feel her happiness draining away. For just a few weeks, she'd got what she'd always dreamed of. Brett. Now

because of Caleb undermining her confidence, she'd lost faith in him, and herself. "Maybe I'd cramp your style if I tagged along."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Chapter Eight

The easy intimacy they'd shared for the past few weeks vanished in a blink of an eye.

Fay shrugged and rose from the table. "Just forget I said anything, Brett." When she began to walk past him, he held onto her arm and pulled her hard against him, spinning her onto his lap.

"Come on, tell me what you mean. Spit it out, Fay. If we're going to be living together, let's not have any secrets from each other." He cupped her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. She looked wary and just a little confused.

"I've heard all about the rodeo circuit, Brett. I know there are groupies who follow the rodeo stars around. Those *buckle bunnies* could easily catch your eye. I just don't want to go and then find you've changed your mind. I don't want you to lose interest in me as soon as you see the next pretty face."

Fay seemed to be on the point of pushing him away. He wondered what had brought it on, but deep down he knew. He guessed she wanted some sort of commitment from him. She'd given up everything, her brothers, her lifelong home, and what was he offering in exchange? A nomadic lifestyle was all well and good for a single guy but hardly the stuff that dreams were made of for a young woman wanting to settle down. Yet it was all he'd known for the past seven years. It had suited his needs.

At the age of thirty-one, shouldn't he be thinking about settling down himself? He was almost too old for the rodeo. He had the ranch now. The opportunity was there. He just had to want it enough. He'd convinced himself that he had to sell the ranch, but even he knew the

reason for it was weak. He didn't give a damn about what anyone thought of him. So why sell up?

"Baby, I won't change my mind. I like you." His words sounded inadequate as he stared into her eyes. He stroked her hair and tried to make light of it with a smile. Thoughts and feelings bubbled up inside him. This woman had always held a soft spot in his heart. Hadn't she been the only one he'd ever dreamed about? No one else had ever held a candle to her. Goddamn, he knew he loved her more than life itself, but the words just wouldn't come. He wanted to be with her always, yet the idea of marriage was particularly abhorrent to him. He guessed it was because he'd seen the type of marriage his parents had had. They'd despised one another and had used him as the go between to relay their messages of hate and loathing to each other. He'd spent his entire childhood that way.

He looked into Fay's eyes. Deep down, he knew that they'd never have a relationship like that. He kissed her brow and pulled her close until she snuggled into his shoulder. Fay loved him, he knew that. Surely he should at least give her something to hold onto.

Stroking a hand into her hair, he spoke against her head, "I've been doing some thinking recently, Fay. I'm not entirely sure if I can keep competing at national level. We all get older. If things don't work out at the rodeo next week, then maybe I'll look again at keeping the ranch."

Almost immediately, she pulled away. "No, Brett. Don't stop what you so obviously love doing for me. If you stop, do it for yourself. Do it because you love the ranch more than the rodeo. It wouldn't make you happy any other way."

He knew she was right. "Okay, baby. I'll give it some serious thought. Now," he lifted her chin and kissed her lips, "how about you and I have an early night? I want you to know how much I appreciate you."

At that moment, with a smile on her lips, she looked the most beautiful woman in the world. Maybe, just maybe he had everything here that he could possibly want.

* * * *

When the day of the rodeo eventually arrived, Fay couldn't help but be in two minds about it. Obviously, she wanted Brett to win, but she couldn't help think that if he lost, he'd give up the rodeo and maybe settle down with her in Black Creek. In his own way, she knew he cared for her, and she really ought to appreciate that fact. She couldn't help but think that maybe Brett wasn't the settling down type. Perhaps her brother Caleb was right all along. This time, she shook the thoughts from her head. Last time they'd nearly fallen out over it, and she didn't want that to happen again. Best to erase them from her mind, that way they wouldn't be able to bother her.

All her brothers were there competing in the tie-down roping competition. Brett was the only one she knew competing in both the calf-roping and the saddle-bronco-riding. As the competitions progressed, she saw the raw bravery for herself. These men laid it on the line. Their courage was simply breathtaking. Her admiration of them grew, and when Brett took up the reins inside the pen, she was all for him winning. He looked so masculine as the horse snorted in an agitated manner. He twitched and bucked, but Brett looked calm as the gate was released, and the horse spun out into the arena. A loud cheer erupted from the crowd as the untamed beast twisted and turned, trying to remove the unwanted weight from its back. With nostrils flared, it was one wild ride. Brett moved in symmetry with the horse. He had a natural flare for it. Eventually he reached the required eight-second stint and was immediately whisked to safety by another rider.

When he walked from the arena, a group of adoring female fans surrounded him. Fay felt her hackles rise as he smiled at them all, but luckily at that moment, he chose to walk toward her.

“Quite a following you have there,” she quipped as he stood next to her and leaned against the corral.

He placed one booted foot on the rail and turned toward her, a huge grin on his face. “I can’t stop the fans, Fay. They turn up at all the rodeos. They’re part of the scene.”

“I guess. So how did you do?”

“Okay, but I’ll have to wait and see how the others score. In the meantime,” he held her around the waist, “did I tell you how beau—”

“Brett, Brett,” a female voice called loudly from behind them. Fay watched as a woman in tight jeans and high-heeled boots came right up to them. She was dressed like a cowgirl with a white hat and long, flowing, blonde hair. Fay thought she looked like trouble. The cowgirl noticed Brett’s hand on Fay’s waist, and a faint smile touched her lips. She looked right into her eyes. “Don’t take no notice of me, sugar, but Brett and I, we go way back.” Fay could barely believe it when the woman took hold of Brett’s arm and pulled him away from her. “Stand over there, sugar. I just have to get me a photo of your fine physique.”

Brett looked slightly apologetic but moved aside anyway, striking a pose as he leaned back against the fence. He lifted his hat, as the woman took several more photographs, no doubt for her groupie friends.

As her blood began to boil, Fay realized the woman had completely blocked her view of Brett. Unable to control the raging fury inside her, she tapped the woman on the shoulder. “Excuse me, but who the hell are you?”

“I’m Kat Daniels, and I’m—”

“For your information, Kat Daniels, he’s with me.”

“Why sure, sugar, but you—”

"I think that means you're done here, lady. Move that scrawny ass of yours before I kick it clean past the Kansas State line." After watching Brett being chased by a gaggle of buckle bunnies for the last hour, the anger spilled effortlessly from her. Unable to contain it for a moment longer, she grabbed hold of the woman and pulled her out of the way.

"Hey, you bitch, take your hands off me, you goddamn hick." Taken by surprise, the woman pushed back, and they both tumbled to the ground.

Immediately she was hauled to her feet by a none-too-impressed, Brett.

"Jesus, baby, what's gotten into you?" Brett looked annoyed by her outburst.

"Well, if you don't know, then you're more stupid than I thought."

Just then, the loudspeaker burst into life. "*Will all contestants please make their way to the arena.*"

"That's you, Brett. Shouldn't you be going somewhere? Run along, your fans are waiting," she said with undisguised sarcasm.

Brett hesitated, and then he pointed at her, anger on his face. "You and I are going to have a long talk later." Then he made his way back to the arena.

A large crowd had gathered, enjoying the entertainment. Cody helped the woman to her feet. "You'll have to excuse my sister, honey. She's been acting real strange lately."

The woman brushed her clothes in exaggerated movements. "Hell, sugar, could have fooled me. But just for you, I'm willing to forgive her. I'm Kat Daniels." She held out her hand.

"Cody Maverick."

That was just great. Now the peroxide bitch had made a b-line for her eldest brother. Fay didn't want to stay there a moment longer.

When she looked around, she saw all her brothers were there with "I told you so" smiles on their faces.

Cody laughed. "You've a right temper on you, girl, and no mistake. I almost feel sorry for Brett." The crowd that had gathered 'round started laughing, too.

"What are you all looking at? And you, boys," she pointed at her brothers one by one, "can wipe those smirks off your faces because you ain't exactly covered yourselves in glory lately, either."

Feeling hot and bothered, Fay stomped from them and walked hurriedly over to where Brett had parked the truck. She unhitched the trailer and then drove straight out of the rodeo. This just wasn't her scene. If this was Brett's life, he could keep it. She knew she'd just blown any chances of a happy future together.

* * * *

When Brett finally arrived home, he was in no mood for a confrontation. That's if he could have even found her. There was a hastily written note on the dresser. *Gone out*. Now that was just great. Hell, he'd had to organize a tow back to the ranch. He couldn't leave his best horse, Warrior, there.

He slung his trophies on the table with barely a glance. They no longer interested him. Just where the fuck was Fay?

He knew jealousy had a part to play in the way she'd acted. Now deep down that gave him a sense of satisfaction. Although, the fact that she'd took off in his pickup and left his horse trailer behind had seriously pissed him off. When he could find her, he'd give her a lesson in restraint. One that she'd never forget.

That's if he could find her.

Well, he'd take a shower first and try and calm down. If she hadn't returned by then, he'd go and look for her. The pickup was parked outside, so that meant she was still on the ranch either on horseback or on foot.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, he headed outside. Cinders was still in the corral. He saddled up Duke, a young stallion

that he'd been recently training up to eventually take over from Warrior, and headed outside into the evening light.

As Duke settled into an even gait, Brett stared at the slowly setting sun descending behind the oak trees. He breathed in. This sure was a beautiful country. Fireflies danced in the soft light, back lit as they hovered just above the grass.

He remembered exploring the land around the ranch when he was just a boy. If only to get away from the constant bickering of his parents. It seemed the only place where he felt calm. Strange how he'd forgotten how tranquil the open countryside made him. Surely this was heaven wrapped up in his own paradise. Now he just had to find the one person to make it complete.

After about a half hour, he caught sight of her near the hay meadow. Wearing a white summery dress, she was walking through the tall grass. Her hands spread out, skimming the feathery tips as she passed through. Her whole body appeared in silhouette, haloed by the slowly setting sun. He'd never seen a woman look so beautiful and breathtaking.

"Fay," he called. She didn't turn or acknowledge that he was even there. Either she was ignoring him, or she hadn't heard. He called again, "Fay." This time he knew for sure that she was ignoring him. "If you carry on like this, you'll regret it," he warned.

"Go away. I don't feel like talking."

Exasperated, Brett pulled the hat from his head and combed a hand through his hair. He rode Duke around in front of her. Instead of stopping, she just changed direction and walked away from him.

"Now that's no way to treat the man you love."

She speeded up as he brought the horse alongside her. She looked quickly at him, her eyes all defiant. "Who said I love you?"

"You did."

"They were just words, Brett. That's all. I didn't really mean it."

"Look, are you going to stay put, so I can talk to you?"

“Don’t you listen, cowboy? I’ve already said I don’t feel like talking.”

“That’s too bad because I do.” There was only one way to settle this. He took the rope from his saddle as she suddenly changed direction once again. “Now I’ve given you fair warning, lady,” he called after her. “So you’ve only yourself to blame when you come unstuck.” When she saw that he was preparing to lasso her, she began to run.

“I told you I’m in no mood for talking, cowboy.”

Chapter Nine

The pounding of hooves echoed in her ears as Brett and Duke closed in on her. When she'd almost made it to the copse of trees, a circle of rope dropped over her shoulders, falling to tighten around her waist. With her imminent escape thwarted, her heart rate increased dramatically. She knew Brett was mad as hell with her. Now what would he do?

"Hey, Brett, let me go." When she spun around, she saw him tying the rope around the horn of his saddle with a look of sheer determination on his face. She grabbed hold of the lasso and tried to prize it loose. If there wasn't a future for them, she didn't want to talk to Brett. She didn't want to have to face the hard facts yet.

"Don't bother trying to pull it off, Fay. Duke here's trained to keep the rope taut at all times. If you walk toward him, he'll only move backward."

"Brett, let me go," she demanded. She knew it was futile. Every time she made some slack in the rope, Duke pulled it taut. "Goddamn it, you've trained that horse too well."

Brett jumped from the saddle and started to slowly reel her in. Digging in her heels, she tried to resist, twisting and turning, but all to no avail.

"Leave me be. I hate you. You don't love me. You were ready to go off with that blonde tramp at the rodeo," she shouted in frustration, tears now running down her cheeks.

"I've got me a real live one here, Duke, and no mistake. I'm gonna have to tie this one down before she hurts herself." He stared into her eyes as he finally pulled her against him. "I did warn you, but

you wouldn't listen." To her surprise, he manhandled her to the ground as if she were one of his steers. Kneeling over her legs, he took hold of her hands and tied them together with a smaller piece of rope.

"What are you doing? Get off me you, bastard."

"I'm dishing out some swift justice, and then I'm gonna claim what's mine."

"Don't be ridiculous. Stop this right now." Her heart pounded in her chest. What exactly did he mean by swift justice? Now she regretted her actions at the rodeo.

Holding her hands above her head, he leaned in and spoke against her neck. "Do you have anything to say, Fay? I've just been put through a whole lot of trouble to get back from the rodeo." His voice was barely a whisper, yet the hairs on the back of her neck rose in anticipation at what he would do next.

Then she thought of all the women following him around at the rodeo. Any apology she might have given died on her lips. "No." Her voice cracked as his one hand moved lower and pressed against her mound through the flimsy dress she wore. She struggled to move as he gave just enough pressure to make her gasp in pleasure.

"I see, and I wanted to be so gentle with you. Now I have no choice." In next to no time, he'd turned her onto her front and tore the panties from her body. As he roughly pulled her dress up, the cool night air caressed her bare ass.

Reality struck home. Thigh deep in grass and he wanted to give her a bare butt spanking. "No, Brett, no."

He thwacked her behind, causing her to yelp. "Now that's for leaving me without any transport." He thwacked her again. "And that's for being rude to Kat Daniels."

"She deserved it. She's nothing more than a two-bit tramp."

"Actually, she's a reporter for the *Kansas Rider*, a well respected magazine. That's why she wanted the photographs. So are you ready to say sorry, then?"

“No.” Tears stung her eyes. She wanted to apologize, but she wouldn’t back down.

He thwacked her bare ass once more, delivering a stinging blow. It hurt like hell, but still she wouldn’t give into him.

“Stop it, Brett.” The words came out, but the truth be known, she liked him disciplining her. She knew her pussy was now soaking wet.

“You made me a laughingstock, especially with your brothers. Now that’s the last time you pull a crazy stunt like that in public. If you’ve got something to say, we do it in private.”

“Why should you care?”

“Goddamn it, woman.” He rolled her onto her back and stared into her eyes with such devotion. “I love you, Fay. Can’t you tell?”

She stared dumbfounded at him. Brett loved her? At that moment, she felt their connection. “I’ve always loved you, Brett,” she whispered, unable to comprehend anything but the warmth and masculinity of the man leaning over her.

He kissed her then, a kiss so powerful that nothing else existed but the two of them. Their lips melded together as though they were one and the same person. His whole body crushed into hers, and she savored every last ounce of his weight pushing her down into the ground.

“I’m so sorry, Brett. I just got jealous, that’s all.”

He traced tiny kisses down her neck. “Nothing else matters. I need you so much, Fay, it hurts. Say you’ll marry me?”

Tears welled in her eyes. This was more than she could have hoped for. “Of course it’s yes. I love you so much I want to be with you forever. I want us to grow old together.” Feverishly, she kissed him back as her legs spread open beneath him. An overwhelming desire to seal their love burned into her very core. “Please, Brett, I want you inside me now. I want you to fuck me hard. I need you to show me how much you love me.”

“I’ve every intention of showing you, baby.” He reached down and unzipped his jeans. When he freed his fully erect cock, a moan

tore from her lips, and she writhed in anticipation. The head lay swollen and glistened with pre-cum. He was ready.

“Christ, you’re huge, Brett. Hurry, I want you.”

He pulled her dress over her head, but because her hands were still tied, it lay gathered at her wrists. Now completely naked, his gaze devoured her. Lying in the long grass, Fay had never felt so womanly and sexy.

Sucking on her breast, he slowly sunk his hard prick inside her. “Fuck, you feel good, woman.” His tongue licked and tasted her areola until she moaned in pleasure. He feathered kisses up to her ear. “You’re mine, say it,” he ordered as he thrust inside her.

“I’m yours, Brett.” She arched as he thrust once more.

“Again. Say it again.”

This time he thrust even deeper, and she gasped with pleasure, her whole body responded to his demands. “I’m yours, always.”

He smiled into her eyes and stroked the hair from her face. “And I’m yours. Say it.” He thrust again, building the pressure that grew like a tight coil deep inside her.

“You’re mine.”

“Again.”

“You belong to me, Brett.” A sense of wellbeing pervaded her very soul. Brett loved her, and he wanted to marry her.

He kissed her lips. “Always.”

Cupping her buttocks, he raised her up as he pounded his length deep inside her over and over, bringing untold pleasure to her senses. He caressed her breasts with his tongue, lashing the nipples as they peaked toward him. “Brett.”

He captured her moans of pleasure with a kiss, savoring her climax as she came like never before. Her whole body bucked and writhed in sheer unadulterated pleasure, spasm after delicious spasm.

“That’s it, baby.” He rolled onto his back, taking her with him, and drove his prick into her several more times until he spilled his seed inside her with a deep, satisfying growl.

He stroked her hair as they slowly caught their breath then cupped her chin so that she would look at him. "Now we must never fall out again. I love you, and you love me. That's all we need."

She kissed him on the lips. "Yes, yes, oh yes, Brett." Even if he sold the ranch, it didn't matter now. He loved her, and that meant everything.

* * * *

Brett stood on the porch and surveyed his land. It was three weeks since he'd asked Fay to marry him. Contentment filled his heart as he saw her return on horseback from her water duties. She waved to him from down the track. Surely this was what life was all about. A stable home, food on the table, and the woman he loved warming his bed.

He patted Max's head. "Sure is a fine country, Max. Settling down might be the making of me."

Even the rodeo held little appeal these days. He knew he was getting to the age where he'd have to hang up his rope and spurs. Maybe he should quit while he was on top of his game. Surely that would be the best legacy to leave his kids.

Whoa now. Kids? Where had that one come from? All his adult life, his gut reaction was to love them and leave them. He didn't want that kind of responsibility tying him down. But it was different with Fay. He knew then that he wanted the complete package.

He watched her round the old barn on Cinders. She was a completely different woman since he'd asked her to marry him. All she'd needed was some commitment from him, and her whole persona radiated love and wellbeing.

With Max padding obediently behind him, he walked across the yard to meet her. As she slid from the horse, he wrapped his arms possessively around her. "How's my favorite girl?"

She turned in his arms and kissed him. That smile she gave sure was worth a million bucks to him. "I'm fine, Brett. Never better."

“Looking forward to getting married next week?”

“You bet.” A hint of sadness clouded her eyes.

“I know you wanted your brothers there. I’d hoped we’d all be friends together, but it seems a step too far for them. They’ll never forgive me for taking you away from them. Especially as I’m a Donovan.”

She touched his collar and bravely smiled. “That’s okay. I get to have you all to myself on my wedding day. Brett, the water over at the East field isn’t flowing too well.”

Brett thought of his stock. If the water wasn’t flowing, it would mean moving around five hundred head of cattle. No mean feat. He’d most likely have to hire in some help. “Maybe I’d better ride over there and check it out.” He stared into the darkening sky. “If I’m quick, I can get back before the storm breaks.”

“I’ll come with you. If it’s something I’ve missed, then you can show me how to fix it.”

Within ten minutes, they were on their way. Fay loved to ride fast, and they made swift progress to the field. When they got to the trough, the water seemed to be flowing freely.

“Guess it was just a temporary blockage.”

“Oh, my God.” Fay’s voice sounded full of fear as she stared in horror at the sky.

When he turned around, he saw dark clouds forming. They swirled lower and lower, a portent of something terrible about to happen. They both watched in awe as the wisps of cloud turned toward the earth, forming suddenly into a funnel. Any moment now and it would touch the ground.

Shaking himself from awed stupor, Brett took hold of Fay’s hand and dragged her toward their horses. “We gotta get back to the ranch and the storm shelter. Like now!”

Immediately she sprang to life, and they both mounted their horses, urging them back to the ranch.

The wind whipped up behind them, and a deep, thunderous roar told him that the tornado had made contact with the earth.

Lightening lit up the darkening sky, and debris began swirling around them. The roar became a howl as they urged their horses faster and faster. Any moment now and they would be swallowed up into the deafening vortex.

Fay and Cinders charged into the yard as lightning arced across the sky. Brett shouted to her, "Get inside." But he knew his voice wouldn't be heard above the very worst that Mother Nature could produce. The torrent of noise seemed overwhelming in its intensity.

The hat was ripped from his head as he dismounted his horse. He gave a hard thwack to Warriors rump, and as he charged away in blind panic, he hoped he'd find safety. Fay did the same only to be caught mesmerized by the approaching pillar of swirling dust and dirt. Debris blew around them as he opened the doors to the shelter. He grabbed Fay just as a large piece of timber cracked across her brow. She fell limp into his arms as he jumped down into the shelter below them. He secured the doors behind him and pulled her seemingly lifeless body into his arms.

In complete darkness, he heard debris and timber crashing overhead and the unmistakable vacuum as the tornado passed directly above them, screaming like a demented banshee. The two metal doors secured above them vibrated from the incredible sucking force. He cradled Fay in his arms and prayed for a miracle. He knew she was hurt real bad.

Chapter Ten

Will burst through the kitchen door. “You all better come and see this, now.”

Cody knew something was wrong by the look on his brother’s face. He discarded his half-eaten plate of food and followed him outside.

They could all see for themselves the carnage and devastation as the tornado ripped a path through the countryside.

“Jesus.”

It was as if hell had opened up and sucked the very life out the earth.

“Fuck, it’s heading straight for the Donovan ranch. We’ve gotta get over there.” Cody began running toward the pickup, but Matt put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

“You don’t know what direction it’s going next.”

Irritated, Cody pulled away. “You stay here if you’re worried, but our sister might need help.”

In the end, they all piled into the truck, and he raced down the track anxious to make sure that she was all right. He only wished he’d been more supportive of her. When he’d heard she intended to marry Brett Donovan, he’d dug his heels in and refused to accept the invitation to the wedding. He disliked the stubborn streak that flowed through his veins, though he guessed it ran through all the Mavericks, including his sister, Fay.

The tornado swept away to the south, continuing its path of destruction. “Shit, that’s one mean motherfucker.” Caleb stated in awed respect as he stared out the passenger window.

Debris lay scattered in their way when they arrived at the entrance to the Donovan ranch, and he pulled the pickup over to the side of the road. They all piled out and began running toward the ranch house. Even though a lot of the windows were smashed, the house was still standing, but the stables and barn had been completely destroyed. All that remained was a pile of shattered and splintered wood. The tornado had ripped them apart as though made of matchsticks. Brett's pickup lay on its side some hundred feet away in what used to be the corral, its hood buried deep in the Kansas earth. Anything that had lain in its path had simply been stripped clean away.

He heard a whimper, and Max slivered out of the crawl space from under the house. He looked terrified. Brett knelt on the porch, leaning over something. As he got closer, his heart chilled. Fay's unconscious body lay on the wooden decking. Her complexion ashen gray, a deep gouge on her forehead as Brett pumped her chest with his hands.

"Come on, baby. Don't you dare leave me." His voice was filled with raw emotion, and then he tried to breathe life into her once more.

Brett looked as scared as he felt. Maybe that was why he said, "If she dies, you do, too, Donovan." He had to have someone to blame. Why not Donovan? Matt flipped open his cell phone and called nine-one-one.

Brett stared at him. "Whatever you want, Cody, but right now I'm the only chance she's got." He turned back to Fay. "Come back to me, baby. We've got a whole lifetime ahead of us."

"You ain't helping the situation, bro." Caleb put his arm around his shoulder and steered him further away. Cody clenched his fists as a feeling of powerlessness overwhelmed him. He had to do something. He punched the wall in frustration. If only he hadn't driven his sister away. This would never have happened.

"I'm telling you, girl, it ain't over."

Hearing the plea in Brett's voice sent a worried look between them all, and he prayed with all his heart that he could save her.

* * * *

Brett continued the mouth-to-mouth on Fay. If she didn't come back to him, he didn't know what he'd do. Frankly, if Cody wanted to kill him, then he wouldn't put up a fight. Fay meant the world to him. He didn't want to live without her. What would be the point? He knew now that he wanted everything. The whole damned thing. He wanted a family with this woman. He pumped her chest harder.

"Damn it, you're not leaving me."

As the sick feeling intensified in his stomach, he caught a glimmer of movement behind her eyelids. His heart soared as she sucked in a huge gulp of air and coughed. Relief flooded his entire body as she began breathing on her own. He turned her onto her side and stroked her hair. Tears sprung into his eyes, and he wiped them quickly away.

Cody came up and squeezed his shoulder. "Thank you."

Will handed him a dampened towel, and he pressed it against her injured temple. "The paramedics will be here soon."

Brett gave a prayer of thanks. Now that he had a second chance, he would live life to the fullest and cherish everyday he had with her.

* * * *

"Thank Christ."

The first words she heard as she woke up. Her head hurt as she tried to move. Just where was she? A reassuring hand stroked her hair.

"It's okay, baby. You've had a nasty knock to your head."

She groaned and touched her temple. Slowly it all came back. The tornado. Oh, my God. It had nearly killed them. She remembered jumping from her horse and then blackness, nothing. She tried to sit up. "Cinders. What's happened to Cinders?"

Brett stroked her face. "We'll look for her later. First we've gotta see to you. You've been unconscious. The paramedics are coming."

"We?" All her brothers came into her line of vision. "You're all here. Please no fighting."

Cody squatted down on his haunches beside her. He smiled and took of hold of her hand. "There'll be no more fighting, Fay. You've got yourself a fine fella here. I'm right proud he's joining the family." He held out a hand toward Brett. "I doubt we'll be best buddies, but I'm sure we'll get along just fine from now on."

Fay watched as they both shook hands, wondering what had happened while she'd lain unconscious. Whatever it was, she was grateful. "Does that mean you'll be coming to the wedding?"

"You bet. Someone's got to give you away, little sister."

"Cody, that's the best wedding present I could ever wish for. I'm so happy." Contentment settled in her heart. She knew they'd all had a shock when the tornado swept through. "Brett, your ranch. All the effort you put in and now this."

"They're just things, Fay, they don't matter. What's important is you." He held her close and pressed his lips to her forehead, and she slowly drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

After two days of observation at the local hospital, she was finally allowed back home. During her stay, she learned exactly what had happened. How the tornado had almost swallowed them up, and how Brett had saved her life.

All her brothers had nothing but praise and admiration for him now. Of course, in one respect she was grateful to the tornado for reuniting her with her family, but the cost for that had been very high.

Brett had lost his barn and stables, and although he'd found Warrior, frightened but alive, they'd found Duke dead. Cinders couldn't even be found at all. She'd simply vanished, sucked into the

swirling black vortex never to be seen again. She shivered knowing that fate had almost befallen them.

When she arrived back at the ranch, it was a hive of activity. All her brothers were there, busy clearing away the debris and burning it. Cody was replacing the windows of the ranch house. Her heart swelled. All the animosity was gone.

Caleb walked across to them. He held out a large wooden sign. "I found this while I was clearing the track, Brett. I can fix it back up if you want." Fay recognized it as the for-sale board for the ranch.

"No, you can throw that on the fire, too, Caleb. This ranch is part of me. There's no way I'm selling it now."

She touched Brett's hand. "Do you mean that?"

"You betcha, baby. When that tornado tore through here, it felt like it ripped out a part of me." He smiled into her eyes and cupped her chin with his forefinger and thumb. Then he kissed her lips. "Besides, where else are we going to put all our children?"

Her body felt weak with elation. Surely she wasn't meant to be so happy? They were staying in Kansas. Tears of joy flowed down her cheeks. Brett was all she'd ever really wanted. She touched his shirt as she smiled into his eyes. "How many children?"

He pulled her into his arms. "How does six sound?"

"Wonderful."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

At present Jan Bowles lives with her husband in an old farmhouse in Lincolnshire, England, UK.

She would like to think that she's a free spirit, having lived in various parts of the UK and Europe. When she was younger she lived in Los Angeles, and travelled by car across the entire length of Route 66 to Chicago and then finally linked the journey to New York. It was an experience that Jan has never forgotten.

Jan has an enquiring mind, and will often muse about events having an everlasting effect on the human psyche. There is always a reason why people act the way they do. You just have to look below the surface. She hopes to bring these ideas to her writing.

When she's not writing Jan likes to paint large landscapes and sweeping vistas. She loves walking, and there's nothing more she'd rather do, than stand on the top of a hill with the wind blowing through her hair, and yep, if it's raining that's all the better. Jan says there's nothing like nature to make one feel truly alive.

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