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Kendra's Choice

Lauri Robinson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

The Wild Rose Press PO Box 708 Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706 Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History First Cactus Rose Edition, 2009

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Sheree, Thank you.

Praise for Lauri Robinson

Shotgun Bride, The Quinter Brides Book One, Coffee Time Romance, "This firecracker of a story should not to be missed."

The Long and Short of it Reviews, "Shotgun Bride is an absorbing tale...a wonderful read."

Lauri Robinson has rustled up a highly enjoyable read.—WRDF Reviews on *Shotgun Bride*.

I have recently found Ms. Robinson as an author and *A Wife for Big John* continues to cement why she is becoming one I can count on for a wonderful story.—Tanya Joyfully Reviewed

I am thoroughly impressed with this author's work.—Silver Raven from Fallen Angels Reviews on *A Wife for Big John*.

Eastern Colorado, 1883

Chapter One

"Kendra!"

At the sound of her father's voice the fountain pen slid across the page, leaving a long, thick smudge. Kendra Parker dropped the pen and shot a nervous glance toward the square opening holding the ladder leading to the hayloft. After quickly replacing the lid to her inkwell, she gathered the sheets of paper, made a haphazard pile, and stuffed everything beneath the hay while answering, "Coming!"

"What are you doing up there, girl?" Kincaid Parker asked. The sound of his voice was closer this time, echoed off the barn walls below.

Mind racing, Kendra looked around for a believable excuse. The bright stream of sunlight blazing through the wide loft door bounced off a dozing cat. A smile touched her lips. Holding her flyaway hair with one hand, she scrambled across the hay and stuck her head through the opening in the floor. "Oh, just checking on Matilda," she answered.

Her father stood at the bottom of the ladder, one booted foot on the first rung. "Matilda?"

"Yes, Matilda. Her kittens are due any day now."

He gestured for her to climb down. "Your mother needs your help. Kimberly isn't feeling well."

Kendra pulled her head up and twisted about to back through the opening. "Well, that's to be

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expected, morning sickness strikes most mothers to be."

"What? What did you say, young lady?" She bit her lips, muttering, "Nothing."

He touched her waist, aided her climb off the bottom few steps. When she stood on the ground beside him, he looked down at her with the same stern expression he'd used since she was two. "And it better stay that way."

Kendra folded her arms across her chest and stared back at him. "Papa, you can't honestly believe people all of sudden lose their ability to add."

The frown on his face grew, made his thick brows tug together above the bridge of his nose. "What?"

"Addition. Mathematics. It takes nine months for a woman to have a baby. Do you think people forget that when the wedding and the birth are only six months apart?"

Shock flashed across his face before it began to tinge pink.

She cowered, wondered if her smart mouth had gone too far this time. Her fingernails dug into her palms as she held her breath, waited for his outburst.

"Kendra Suzanne Parker, I'm shocked at you." Kincaid Parker had never been physical with his children, didn't need to, his fierce gazes were enough to put the fear of God into them.

Her breath eased out her nose. "I'm sorry, Papa."

"As you should be." His face softened as he patted her upper arms. "Now run along. Your mother needs your assistance."

Relieved, she leaned up to brush her lips to his cheek. "All right."

"And Kendra, watch your mouth. The house will soon be full of guests."

Years of discipline forced her to reply without

question, "Yes, Papa." She hitched her skirt and felt the weight of the world lower on her shoulders as she trudged across the barn floor. Of course the house would soon be full of guests. Kimberly was marrying Jacob Wingard this afternoon. And of course Kimberly wasn't feeling well, she was close to three months pregnant and still morning sick.

Bright sunshine met her at the door, mocking her self-proclaimed gloom. Kendra kicked at a small stone, watched it skip and then roll across the dirt. It really wasn't fair. She should be the first one to marry; after all, at nineteen she was two years older than Kimberly. She was the one who should be packing her clothes, preparing to move out of her parent's house.

It was foolish to be jealous of her sister's condition. She should be embarrassed for Kimberly, having been found in the family way before marriage. But she wasn't filled with shame at what her sister and Jacob had done. She was envious. Wrinkling her nose at the sun, she crossed the front lawn. She was the one editing Mrs. Swanson's article on what every woman should know about her marriage bed.

If she were a prude, as her parents felt every young woman should be, the thought of such a story should make her cheeks burn, but it didn't. Instead, it made her heart beat frantically and her stomach bubble with excitement. Perhaps some of the thrill was because it was such a forbidden subject, something young women were not allowed to make inquiries about.

From the moment she'd read the slip of paper Mrs. Swanson left lying on the table, she'd been captivated. Wanted—no needed—to know more. Helen Swanson had been struck with fever, needed someone to take care of her for a few days, and Kincaid Parker, being the area's pastor, had been called upon to help. He, of course, had sent Kendra,

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which is what he'd always done. She'd been farmed out to care for more sick people in the past five years than any other girls put together. It was not something she enjoyed, nursing the ill, especially when death knocked on the door. But this one time, she'd been extremely grateful for the duty.

It wasn't as if she'd snooped. The paper was lying out as plain as the nose on a hound, and the rest of the article was in a neat stack on top of the writing desk. Later, when the fever had passed and Mrs. Swanson was coherent, Kendra asked the older woman about the piece of writing.

Being a widow for over a decade, Mrs. Swanson was hungry for companionship and gladly shared her writing ambitions, but only after she made Kendra pledge secrecy.

A publisher in New York had several chronicles it needed articles for, and Mrs. Swanson was commissioned to write them. Most were about living on the frontier, the adventures and hardships, but this latest one was for a new publication. According to Mrs. Swanson, the chronicle was selling quite well, namely because it focused on prohibited subjects, including the coveted relationship between a man and woman.

"Kendra!"

Her face burned, had she spoken aloud? Not that it embarrassed her, but her mother would faint if she heard one of her daughters mention such things. "What?" Kendra looked at her mother expectantly, tried to read her face.

Her mother simply shook her head, as she often did when one of her children didn't respond as she thought they should. "Why are you standing out here as if there's nothing to do but soak up the sun's rays?"

Kendra glanced about. How long had she stood on the porch contemplating Mrs. Swanson's article? It was hard to say, the subject could easily consume

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her and soak up hours. Beyond the house, the wind rustled the taller grasses, made a cluster of yellow and brown daisies toss their delicate heads. "Actually, Mother, I was admiring those flowers and thinking what a lovely bouquet they would make for Kimberly. A bride should have flowers at her wedding, should she not?"

Suzanne Parker's gaze went to the flowers, a smile made a few of the thin lines around her mouth disappear. "Why, Kendra dear, what a wonderful idea. I'll get you a sharp knife."

Her shoulders relaxed as her mother turned to enter the house. A twinge of guilt made her glance to the sky. "It wasn't a lie," she whispered. "A bride does need flowers."

She no sooner muttered the words than her mother reappeared. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, dear," her mother whispered as she handed her the knife, "but this, um, situation has been quite a shock to all of us. And you have seemed so out of sorts since you returned from Mrs. Swanson's and heard the news."

"Uh?" Kendra shook her head, letting the words settle in for understanding. "Yes, oh, well, Mother, don't worry about it, they are getting married and all will be just fine."

"Yes, yes, dear, you're right."

Kendra took the knife and stepped off the stairs, mumbling, "I knew about the pregnancy before I returned home from Mrs. Swanson, and that certainly isn't what has me preoccupied." Kendra glanced back to the porch to make sure her mother hadn't heard her whispered confession. Thankful her mother had returned to her cooking for the celebration, she let out a sigh. "It's the ten pages of writing I need to get copied and back to Mrs. Swanson. A person doesn't have a moment to herself around this place."

Careful to check for snakes in the tall grass, she

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made her way to the cluster of flowers and knelt down to cut them near the dry soil covering their roots.

It would be best if she forgot about the article for the rest of the day; her mother did need her help. But so did Mrs. Swanson. The poor woman's fingers had curled from age, and not only made writing difficult, they made her penmanship extremely hard to read. The woman promised Kendra one half of her payment from the publisher if she'd rewrite the pages in clean, clear script. The money was a nice added bonus; however, the true payment was reading and learning from the wonderful article. It talked of how men and women mated. The actual act, which was nothing close to what her mother had told her years ago when she began to get her monthly.

Living on a farm, she knew what happened, but Mrs. Swanson's article went deeper, talked about what it felt like, and how to make it better. The words were so vivid, so enticing, she couldn't wait to actually experience the act. She paused her snipping to silently acknowledge she was jealous of Kimberly. Not because her sister was pregnant and getting married, but because she had done it.

A shiver raced over her shoulders. Shaking off the feeling, Kendra clarified for her own piece of mind she didn't want to do *that* with Jacob, just looking at him made her skin crawl. She'd never be able to think of Jacob Wingard as anything more than the neighbor boy. It was the thought he and Kimberly had mated, the actual act—that's what she wanted.

She snipped off the last stem and gathered the flowers into a bundle. That was also where her frustration came in. There wasn't a man for miles around she could imagine doing it with. They were all already married, twice her age, or just flat out unsuitable.

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"Kendra!" Her father's shout carried on the breeze like a rumble of thunder.

Her fingers tightened on the flower stems so hard a couple of the tender stalks snapped. "A woman doesn't have a moment of peace around this place," she muttered.

Chapter Two

Sterling Marlow pulled in his mount, easing the buckskin to a halt as he topped the hill behind the Parker homestead. The yard was dotted with wagons, and a cluster of people stood on the shorter green grass near the creek that flowed past the place. It appeared to be some kind of a service. A tightening pulled at his chest. He hoped something hadn't happened to a family member. The Parkers were nice folks, and Kincaid, besides being the local pastor, was one of the best horse traders around. The man knew good flesh. His shrewd mind was very capable when it came to buying rebel Mustangs from the few renegade Indians still roaming the area, and then selling them to the Calvary.

He nudged his mount forward, but held the reins taut, forcing the gelding to approach the house slowly. As an Army Major, he'd made plenty of deals with Kincaid over the years and didn't want his arrival to interrupt the service.

Sterling dismounted near the barn, let his horse drink from the water trough, and watched the last few minutes of what he now recognized as a wedding ceremony. A twitch tugged at his cheek. It was one of Kincaid's daughters getting married. There had to be at least two, if not three, and one must be old enough to be wed. He wondered which one it was. Parker also had three or four boys, but they were younger, still in short pants.

He leaned back, rested a shoulder against the corral, and crossed his arms. Quite a crowd had gathered, had to be twenty or more people

surrounding the couple. Eastern Colorado was sparsely populated, and some of them had probably traveled all day to attend the ceremony. But that wasn't surprising. Folks in these parts gladly traveled for a day or more over the desolate, flat land for the chance to socialize. He twisted his head, took in the yard. An assortment of tables had been erected and covered with various cloths the wind worked hard to blow off. Someone had thought ahead, blue Mason jars full of sunflowers sat on the corners, defeating the winds attempts. Glancing down at his dusty uniform, he determined to stay just long enough to be neighborly.

A clatter of clapping brought his gaze back to the crowd. The group separated, left a wide opening for the happy couple to trail through while being drizzled with grains of wheat.

Kincaid noticed him and raised a hand in greeting. Sterling responded with a wave then removed his hat and dusted away trail dirt by slapping it against his knee. He replaced it as he moved toward the crowd.

Dressed in his Sunday suit, Kincaid met him half-way across the yard. "Major Marlow, I wasn't expecting you."

"I'm on my way back from Denver, thought I'd stop in"—he nodded toward the newly wedded couple—"see how you're all doing."

Kincaid smiled. "Good, we're doing good. That's my second, Kimberly. She and the neighbor, Jacob Wingard, tied the knot today." He waved a hand. "Jacob, come here son, let me introduce you to Major Sterling Marlow."

A young man, clutching his bride's hand, moved closer. Sterling's eyes widen. He pulled his lids down to stifle his shock at how young the couple looked. Hell, they couldn't be more than children, or was it that he was getting old? He rubbed the stubble covering his face, silently admitting he'd be thirty

year after next.

"Major." Jacob Wingard stretched out a thin arm. "Nice to meet you, sir."

Sterling didn't know if he should call the young man Mr. Wingard or simply Jacob. He clasped the proffered hand, nodded. "Nice to meet you too..." His pause lingered.

Kincaid frowned, nodded to Jacob while glancing at his daughter. Jacob's ears turned red as he stuttered, "Oh, and this here's my wife, Kimberly P-Wingard."

Sterling smiled, gently shook the tiny hand the girl—who looked like she should be wearing braids—held out. "Mrs. Wingard. Congratulations."

She giggled, bowing her head as if embarrassed. "Thank you, Major."

"And this here is my other daughter," Kincaid said.

Sterling turned and this time he couldn't tug his eyelids down. He was too stunned. For a split second he thought he might have to pound on his chest to get the air out of his locked lungs. When the air did release itself, he coughed at the whoosh.

"Kendra, this is Major Sterling Marlow," Kincaid continued.

His eyes had gone dry from lack of blinking. Sterling closed his lids, but quickly opened them again—half afraid the vision might disappear in the blink of an eye. She hadn't, and the sight made his groin tighten and grow with such ferocity it almost took his breath away, again.

Straight long hair, the exact color of a chestnut filly, fluttered in the wind. Flyaway strands twirled around her face, and as graceful as a songbird flies, she raised a hand, brushing it aside. The sight was indescribable. He'd never seen anything lovelier, more perfect. Her eyes were so blue, he wondered if she'd plucked them out of the Colorado sky. Their gazes met, and his heart slammed into the side of

his ribcage with a solid thud.

One of her thin fine brows rose in a subtle arch as those blue eyes lowered to his feet, and with a hot, piercing gaze, slowly eased all the way up his body. When the intense stare paused for a brief moment near his belt buckle, his shaft jolted. He swallowed, took a fortifying breath, and met her eye for eye when her gaze once again lifted to his face.

A coy smile twisted her mouth as the tip of her tongue slipped out to moisten pink lips. Sweat popped out on his neck, he tensed against the shiver rippling over his shoulders.

Kendra Parker lowered her hand from her hair and held it out to him.

It took every ounce of control not to grab her hand, pull her against his chest, and kiss the hell out of her. He'd never met a more beautiful woman, nor had one made love to him with her eyes before. *Damn!* He was wound tighter than a diamond back. Exhaling low and slow, he reached for her hand.

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lessened the hold he had on her. Slowly, sensuously, her fingers slipped away. A trail of heat bolted up his arm hotter than venom from a snake bite.

Kincaid spoke again, but it sounded like he was in the bottom of a well. Sterling really didn't give a damn what the man said. His eyes were locked on the woman walking away. Her hips swayed with each step, making the lilac colored dress float this way and that, and right above her trim waistline the bottom tips of her long hair flip-flopped. The vision was hypnotic. If his knees hadn't been locked, they would have collapsed and sent him sprawling to the ground.

The hand Kincaid slapped onto his shoulder was almost enough to make it happen. He stiffened, held his balance, and tore his gaze off Kendra Parker to sheepishly glance toward her father.

A sigh of relief oozed out of his mouth. Kincaid looked the other way as he made an introduction, "This is Major Marlow."

Another man, shorter and rounder than Kincaid, had appeared from somewhere and stretched out a hand. "Major, will you be able to stay and join us for the festivities? My Jacob has been smitten with Kimberly since they were ten-year-olds. We knew today was coming for years."

Sterling, glad the man had unknowingly let him know who he was, greeted, "Mr. Wingard, congratulations." He let his gaze wander back toward the tables. She had disappeared. He turned back to the man. "I wouldn't want to intrude." Sterling almost winced, hearing his voice beg for an invitation.

"Nonsense, there's no such thing as intruding out here," Parker said.

He gestured to the trail dust covering his clothes. "Well, would you mind if I rode downstream a bit, used the creek to clean up, and then return to the festivities? I uh—I've been traveling quite a

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while."

"I'm sorry, Major, I didn't even think of that." Parker raised a hand, and pointed. "If you go just beyond the barn, there's a grove of trees and a small pond I damned off. The family uses it all summer long. It'll be an hour or so before the meal's ready, take your time."

"Thanks." He nodded to Kincaid, repeated the action to Wingard, and twisted about to make his way to his mount. Sterling hoped the pool was full of cold water, ice cold water.

Chapter Three

Straight back and head held high, Major Sterling Marlow strolled toward the barn. Kendra's heart rose to her throat, pounding with excitement. She flipped away from the window, grabbed a tray from the table, and began to pile things upon it haphazardly. "I'll carry this stuff out," she said over her shoulder, rushing to the doorway.

"Thank you, dear." Her mother, fully engrossed at the stove, didn't glance her way.

Meeting her youngest sister at the door, she thrust the tray in her hands. "Here, Kallie, put this on one of the tables." Kendra didn't wait for a response, didn't even hold the door open, her eyes too busy searching the barn yard.

He was mounting his horse. Oh, no, he couldn't be leaving. She'd finally found one—found a man she wanted to experience mating with. During the service she'd glanced toward the barn, thinking of the papers in the loft, and her gaze had landed on the major leaning against the corral. For a split second she'd wondered if her mind had been playing tricks on her, conjuring up the perfect man. It hadn't been until he took her hand and sent her blood raging through her veins that she comprehended he was real. And exactly what she'd been searching for. Hitching her skirt, she hurried off the steps and tried not to run in case anyone watched.

"Kendra!" Her father's voice hit her like a bullet. She dug her toes into the ground, took a deep breath. Teeth clenched, she turned, and suppressed her aversion. "Yes, Papa?"

"Tell Kent to take a towel and bar of soap to the pond. Major Marlow wants to get cleaned up before supper."

She bit her bottom lip, the smile growing on her face sent happiness all the way to her little toes. "Yes, Papa, right away."

After gathering the towel and soap, she went out the back door and looked for her youngest brother. She found him playing with two other small boys. "Kent?"

"Yeah, Kendra?"

"Come here. You other boys, too." She began walking around the house, knew they would catch up. At the corner, she peeked to the front yard. Spotted her father and several others gathered around a large wooden keg.

"Whatcha need, Kendra?" Kent asked.

"Matilda," she pointed to the barn. "I think you boys should go check on her. She's probably in the hay loft and may have had her kittens."

"Really?" the trio asked in unison.

She nodded. The plan had occurred to her in the house. The treasure hunt would keep them busy and give her the time she needed.

"Wow, thanks, Kendra!" The boys tore off toward the barn.

At a more leisurely pace, she followed with the soap and towel tucked near her side, out of sight. She allowed her mind to recall the article, a couple specific paragraphs, just to refresh her memory. As the boys scurried up the ladder, she scampered through the barn, and out the back door.

A smile tickled her lips. June was such a wonderful month, with its warm, long days. Dusk had just started to make its descent, and therefore gave her plenty of light to follow the trail to the grove of trees. She should be nervous, apprehensive even, but she wasn't. Something in Major Marlow's

eyes had encouraged her. They were dark brown, with tiny flecks of gold, and their gaze had left her skin feeling warm and tingly.

And his body, Lord-All-Mighty, there couldn't be a more perfect specimen of the male species. His legs were long and thickly muscled and met his torso with narrow hips. His uniform outlined his flat stomach, broad chest, and wide shoulders that hosted solid, bulky arms. Dark wavy hair, beneath the rim of his hat, enhanced his sun-browned face like a picture frame. A rush of heat flowed over her, as if she'd swallowed the sun, and a touch of moisture dribbled out of her body into her pantaloons. The sensation made her legs quiver.

Silently, she ducked into the grove of trees staying off the main trail and weaved her way through the underbrush to where she knew Sterling Marlow bathed. Arriving in time to watch him dismount, she positioned herself behind a bush and locked her gaze.

He dug into his saddlebags, pulled out clothes, and flipped each piece over the big rock at the edge of the pond. Then he removed his hat and outer jacket, setting them aside. Next his shirt slipped off his shoulders, exposing shimmering skin for her to gaze upon. Thrilled beyond belief by the sight, a little moan tickled the back of her throat. The sun bounced off his shoulders, his back. The skin glistened and muscles bulged as he moved. Mrs. Swanson's article said a man's skin is delicious. She'd compared it to licking a sprinkling of salt off warm bread crust. Drool pooled on her tongue. Kendra pinched her lips together and swallowed.

With one foot, he tugged at the heel of his opposite boot, then reached down to pull it off and repeated the action with his other foot. Next, his pants fell, and if he'd had on underwear, they fell off as well because his buttocks was there for her to gaze upon—round, firm, and quite lovely. A smile

curled her lips, and she covered her mouth with one hand. He bent down, pulled off one pant leg at a time. She twisted this way and that around the bush, trying to see between his legs. A frown tugged on her brows when his movements didn't allow her even a glimpse. She'd seen plenty, having three younger brothers, but never a full-grown one. She squinted harder. The last things he removed were his socks, and then quick as a whip, he turned and dived into the water.

Disappointed, she plopped onto the ground, ran a hand over the rapid thudding in her chest. Her hand stalled on one breast; her nipple was hard, tight. She closed her eyes for a moment, exploring the other sensations gushing in her body. A tingly, warm, almost aching feeling swirled around her pelvic area, and more fluid seeped into her pantaloons. She tightened the muscles there, and her eyes popped open as hot need surged, making every nerve twitch.

Oh, Lord, she should have stopped to retrieve the article. Surely it said what a woman was to do about these overwhelming sensations. She could barely think, let alone remember what she'd read last week.

A thud sounded, and she peeked around the bush again. A clump of soap bounced off the rock and settled into the shallow water near the edge of the pond. She unclenched her fingers around the soap she'd brought. Major Sterling Marlow—even the name made her swoon—stood in the water, lathering bubbles in his dark hair. The bar slipped from her tingling fingers, landed on her lap with a plop.

She twirled one finger around the top button of her dress. What would he do, she wondered, if she took off her clothes and joined him in the water? How wonderful it would be to let her fingers work at the soap in his hair, and create more bubbles on his shoulders, down his chest.

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A soft meow sounded behind her. Snapped out of her musing, Kendra twisted, glanced into the brushwood. Round and plump, Matilda meandered over the twigs and weeds.

Glancing between the pond and the underbrush, she waved a hand, whispering, "Shoo, Matilda, shoo."

The cat lifted her face, and if animals could smile, Matilda did. With a kitty skip, she leaped over a fallen branch and made a beeline for Kendra. A rustle farther away, signaled the boys followed.

"Dang it!" Kendra scrambled to her feet, and quickly, but silently, slipped through the trees and onto the path. She doubled back and when she knew the boys were close enough to hear, said, "Kent."

The crash and rumble coming through the woods was loud enough to wake the dead. Within a matter of minutes, her brother leaped onto the path. "Yeah, Kendra?"

She handed him the towel and soap. "Here, Papa wants you to take this to Major Marlow. He's taking a bath in the pond."

"Oh, all right." Kent glanced up and down the trail. "Did you see Matilda?"

She bit on the tip of her tongue, pulled her teeth off moments before drawing blood. "I thought she was in the loft."

"She was, but she ran right down the ladder and out the back door," Tyrone Wingard said.

"Yeah, I didn't even know cats could use ladders," admitted George Bean.

Oh, to be six years old again and have such silly worries, Kendra mused and pressed a hand to lingering flutters in her stomach. "Well, she's probably just looking for a mouse. I'm sure she'll go back to the barn later."

"Yeah, probably," Kent said, and then turned to challenge his friends. "I bet I can skip a rock further than you guys."

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The other boys responded at the same time with, "Uh-uh," and "No way."

She watched them run down the trail, leaves and twigs fluttering in their wake, and wished she could follow. With a deep sigh, she turned and made her way back to the house, which was the last thing she wanted to do. The women in the kitchen would be clucking over Kimberly's wedding night. It might be enough to drive her over the edge.

Her body was completely out of sorts, half of it felt weak and wobbly, the other half hot and uptight. It took effort not to turn back to the pond for one more glimpse, but she resisted and trudged her way to the house, kicking a stone here and there along the way.

Chapter Four

Clean and refreshed, Sterling spent some time with the boys showing them how to angle a rock to make it skip across the water like a landing duck. When a glimpse of a cat caught the boys' attention, he repacked his saddle bags and led his gelding to the barnyard. There he unsaddled the animal and let it loose in the corral with several other horses.

A wave of embarrassment made his upper lip twitch. Someone had watched him at the pond, but it turned out to be the three boys instead of Kendra Parker. Why he thought it would be her was beyond him. She's a pastor's daughter and watching a man bathe was probably the last thing she'd ever consider doing.

He must have misinterpreted her gaze earlier, too. After a week in Denver, his lonely life at the almost deserted Fort Lyon was catching up with him. There were only half a dozen men left at the once crowded fort now that most of the Indian tribes had been relocated to Oklahoma or southwestern Colorado. His main job was to purchase horses and drive them to the larger posts near Denver. He didn't mind the solitude, had even turned down the State Marshal post offered to him after the bank in Lamar had been robbed, again, and the city decided they needed more protection.

His mind roamed as he ambled toward the party. Maybe he should reconsider the offer.

The men gathered near a keg of homemade beer. A shiver ripped up his spine. Some of the concoctions

the pioneers made were worse than the rotgut the government gave the Indians. He moved to another table and settled for a glass of punch. His gaze searched the crowd for one specific long-haired beauty.

Just then, as if he'd conjured her up with a single thought, Kendra Parker stepped out the back door. She carried a platter of food, walking toward one of the tables. He set his glass down and hurried across the grass. "Here, Miss Parker, I'll take that."

His hands brushed hers as he took the tray. The contact made his fingers shake hard enough to rattle the dishes on the tray. He squeezed the handles, hoping the dishes wouldn't shatter.

Her head tilted sideways, and those blue eyes twinkled like stars at night as she said, "Well, thank you, Major."

She let go of the tray, but walked beside him to the table. Her fresh scent, reminiscent of honeysuckle in May, floated about. He tipped his head, took a deep breath through his nose, fully appreciating the aroma. "Why haven't I met you on one of my many other visits?" he asked. It was a question he'd been pondering for the past hour.

"I've seen you from a distance a couple times, but I'm not home much." She rearranged several other plates on the table, making room for the things on the tray he held.

"Why?"

Her shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. "I help those who are ailing in the area." She transferred the last dish, and then grasped the tray handles beneath his fingers.

He didn't let go—couldn't. The last rays of the setting sun struck her hair, made it sparkle like gold in the bottom of a creek. He hadn't been mistaken; it had been her hiding behind the bush near the pond. Why?

Her eyes roamed his frame again, left a sizzling

trail that said she was experienced and knew what she wanted—him. His britches became uncomfortably tight.

A boom of laughter hit him like a bucket of cold water. He glanced around, saw men shaking with mirth and stared harder, making sure he wasn't the brunt of their laughter. None gazed his way, and he let out a sigh of relief. His arousal felt so huge, he was sure someone else had noticed.

"Major?" Kendra Parker's soft voice penetrated his ears. Her brows had furrowed. A perplexed look covered her face.

He let go of the tray and tugged the bottom of his suit jacket down. "Forgive me for detaining you, Miss Parker," he said more gruffly than a roused bear.

Twisting, he moved toward the men, and keg, ready for a shot of the rough ale. For Christ's sake, she was the pastor's daughter. She nursed the ill. And here he was ready to take her in the middle of a party, no less. In all of his manhood years, he'd never been so out of control. Never felt so ready to pounce. The lack of civilization must have caught up with him. He tossed his head at the thought. Damn, it really caught him off guard and was quite vexing. He'd write to the governor and see if that State Marshal job was still available as soon as he got back to the fort. It was time he found a steady woman.

He grabbed the first available mug, emptied it, swallowing the brew before he could taste how nasty it truly was.

The beer helped, and keeping his back to the crowd helped more. He focused on the conversation, forced his attention to stay on the group of men and their animated tales of farming, horses, and whatever else someone felt inclined to talk about.

When the dinner bell rang announcing everyone was to find a place to sit at one of the tables, he

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hung back. He couldn't chance taking a peek to see where Kendra Parker sat.

A hand slapped his back. "Come on, Major, it's time to eat." Kincaid encouraged him to follow.

He raised his mug. "I'll be along shortly."

"Nonsense, bring your mug, the women won't mind."

A tick clicked in his head. Maybe it wasn't so out of the ordinary, Miss Parker being so forward. Her father didn't seem like the average pastor. The man not only condoned drinking, he participated in it. Perhaps the man's daughter was as experienced as her lust-filled gaze said.

Sterling turned and followed Parker to the tables. He finished the beer, his third, or possibly fourth, with a final gulp and sat down—right next to Kendra Parker.

By the time the meal was over and the dance in full swing, so was Sterling. The homemade ale now tasted good. Damn good. Feeling loose and relaxed, he twirled one woman after another across the packed-dirt dance floor. His final inhibitions disappeared as he snatched Kendra from the arms of a young man and whisked her about. They had chatted during the meal. Witty, entertaining, and beautiful, she was a bountiful package, and he found himself drawn to her like a bee to pollen.

When the waltz ended, he spiraled her about one final time and brought her lush, firm body up against his. Heaving from the excursion, the soft mounds of her breasts caressed his chest with each breath. Pleasure soared through his body. He pressed a hand into the middle of her back, forced her to remain cradled against him.

Night had fallen, and they stood several yards beyond the edge of the designated dance area. Sterling welcomed the silhouetted darkness and decided to take more advantage of it. His finger ran along the outline of her face, slowly traced the curves of her lips, before his palm slipped beneath her hair to cup the back of her neck.

Her eyes glistened with excitement as he bent, lowering his face towards hers. He moistened his lips, wanting to catch the full taste of her mouth. A sizzle, like a tiny lightning bolt, ripped across his lips as they brushed over hers. The action made his body jolt, and he pulled her tighter.

Her hands moved. One ran up his shoulder, around the back of his head. Gentle fingers spread apart and kneaded the scalp beneath his hair. Her other hand reached around his torso, grasping onto his back.

He wanted more, needed more. Hungrily, he nipped at her lips, ran his tongue over them until they parted. Her breath, warm and sweet, filled his mouth, and he plunged, taking complete possession of her.

She groaned, a soft answer to the moan filling his throat. His hold tightened, pressed every inch of her torso against his. Her body squirmed, and she thrust her pelvis forward, massaged his pulsating shaft. His hand lowered to cup a bun of her firm backside and coerced her delightful strokes to continue.

The intensity of her mouth matched his, hot and invigorating. She met him taste for taste, an equal game of give and take. When the burning need in his loins was strong enough to make him explode, he lifted his lips. Maintaining the groin grinding, he whispered, "Where can we go?"

Her tongue softly ran over the sensitive skin beneath his bottom lip. "Hmm?" she moaned.

"Where can we go? The hayloft?"

She stiffened a touch, sucked in a breath of air. "No."

His hand slipped from her neck, roamed down to caress the side of her breast. The ball of his thumb rubbed the hard nipple beneath the cotton of her dress. "Well, we can't continue this right here. Someone is sure to notice."

Her head snapped up. A startled expression rippled her face. "Oh." She glanced around. "Um..." Perfectly formed teeth nibbled on her bottom lip.

The sight made him chuckle. "Kendra, you're driving me crazy here. There has to be a place, a place we can go to finish what we've started."

"I'm thinking," she whispered, sounding almost as frustrated as he felt.

Not wanting to slow the enticing movements of their hips, but knowing he had to, he stepped back and grabbed her hand. "Come on."

She clutched his fingers, matched his long strides with hurried steps. "Where are we going?"

They made it inside the barn door before he twirled her about, brought her chest back to press against his. The feeling was heavenly.

She shook her head. "The hayl—"

He smothered her protest by taking control of her sweet lips. In a matter of seconds, his heightened senses smoldered again. His hands explored, hips danced with hers, and his mouth ate at her gasping breaths. Sterling was so ready for release he had to grasp her hips, still her stimulating movements for a tortured second.

That exact moment a shout echoed through the barn. "Here she is. I found her. No them, I found them!"

Instantly sober, Sterling wrapped his arms around her, shielding her from whoever found them. He squinted in the muted darkness, looked for any movement. Tiny bits of dirt and hay fluttered through the boards above them as a thunder of running feet rippled over the floor of the hayloft.

"Where, where is she?" Sterling recognized the voice as one of the boys from the pond.

His hold relaxed as Kendra started to squirm. "Shhh," he whispered, pressing a finger to her lips.

"The boys are in the loft."

"The loft?" She sounded concerned and twisted her neck to stare at the ladder.

His body throbbed, still wanted her, but his mind had cleared and told him to take a step back, put more space between them. He did and instantly missed her.

A shaft of moonlight streaming through the door highlighted the gleam of her hair as she glanced back and forth between him and the loft ladder. She took a step farther away, twisted to address him over her shoulder. "I-I'll be right back."

How could she move so fast? His legs were as useless as used leather, yet, she scrambled up the ladder like there was no tomorrow. He pushed off the wall, moved to hold the ladder legs bouncing about.

As her head rose through the opening she demanded, "Kent? What are you boys doing up here?" Her voice held that older sister tone. He knew it well being the youngest of four, and the only boy.

"It's Matilda, Kendra. She done had her kittens," Kent Parker responded.

"Well, you boys can't be up here, especially not with a lit lantern. Come on, leave Matilda alone and climb down."

A smile had grown on Sterling's face. He didn't know why he felt so happy, why the sound of her voice tickled his senses, but nonetheless, he found himself grinning from ear to ear—for a moment.

"Ah, Major," Kincaid Parker greeted, walking through the barn door. He held up his lantern, casting light on the backside of Kendra's skirt above Sterling's head. "You also noticed the light in the hayloft, I see."

Sterling swallowed the frog in his throat. All of sudden he felt like he'd just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. With the lump in his gullet choking him, he nodded and then swallowed again.

"Something about Matilda and kittens," he said, thankful to be coherent enough to repeat Kendra's findings.

"Matilda?" Kincaid shook his head. "One would think this is her first batch instead of the tenth with all the attention she's getting." He held the lamp up higher. "Kendra, you tell those boys to get down here."

She twisted about, brushed her long hair away from her face. "I already did, Papa. They're coming."

The ladder wobbled beneath Sterling's hand as she leaped up, planted her backside on the edge of the hole in the second floor. With her legs hanging beside the ladder, she took the lantern from her brother and held it out to guide the three boys down the ladder. Once Kent reached the barn floor, she made her descent one handed, holding the lantern out beside her.

Sterling reached up and took the lantern while Kincaid stepped forward to guide his daughter down the last few steps. Her feet landed on the floor, but her hand remained on the ladder, where her fingers had turned white from the tightness of her grasp.

Kincaid settled a stern gaze on the three boys. "You boys know better than to take a lantern into the hayloft. You could have burned the barn down."

They hung their heads, answering as one, "Yes, sir."

"I think it's time for bed. Run along, find your mothers, they'll tell you where you are to sleep." His gaze held each of the boy's for a silent moment. "I don't want to see any of you again tonight."

"Yes, sir," they repeated.

He nodded, gave them each a quick smile, and pointed toward the door.

Like rabbits released from a trap, the boys scrambled out of the barn. Kincaid turned back to him and Kendra. The lump returned to Sterling's throat.

Chapter Five

Kendra's fingers were numb. The rough wood of the ladder rung dug into the palm of her hand. But she couldn't let go; if she did, she'd collapse to the floor. Her legs were as weak as a willow switch. She kept her eyes on the departing boys, pretended their exit was a sight to behold.

"Major," her father started.

She winced, dreading the onslaught.

"Thank you. I'm afraid I was too caught up in the party. I didn't notice the light in the loft until a few minutes ago," he continued.

She didn't think it possible, but her legs became weaker, refused to hold her up. Drooping, she eased back, leaning against the ladder.

"Kendra deserves the thanks. I just held the ladder," Sterling said.

Her father shook his head. Oh, Lord, he didn't buy it. Knew what they had been doing. Her cheeks began to burn.

A weight, her father's hand, landed on her shoulder. "She's a good girl, always looking out for others. Suzanne and I thank the Lord every night for giving us our children, especially this one." He turned, blessed her with a loving gaze. "Thank you, sweetheart. Thank you for keeping an eye on things while your mother and I enjoy the festivities."

Her tongue wouldn't move. All she could do was nod her head and dredge up a slight smile.

His hand slipped away, and he took the Major by the elbow. "Well, Major, shall we rejoin the party?"

Sterling looked at her. His gaze was soft, caring, and made her heart pound all over again. She lowered her eyes, hoping her father wouldn't notice, and twirled the toe of her boot on the floor.

"Sure," he said. "Let's rejoin the party." They began to walk away, but after two steps Sterling paused. "Aren't you joining us, Miss Parker?"

Kendra didn't raise her head, didn't want to gaze upon his face right now. She had to gather her wits before she could do that. "I-I'll be along in a minute."

"Matilda will be fine, my dear," her father assured.

"I-I know," she admitted. It was she who wasn't fine.

Her father let out one of his long sighs. "Very well, come on, I'll hold the lantern while you climb up to check on her one last time."

"No!" She snapped her head up. "She's fine. I-I'm just going to wait here, make sure none of the other children come looking."

Her father chuckled, and shaking his head, turned to walk away.

Major Marlow waited for another second. His quizzical gaze lingered on her.

She bowed her head again, held her breath.

After they both walked out the door, she slumped to the floor, rested the back of her head on a ladder rung. She hadn't really lied—she was waiting, waiting for her swirling senses to settle down. Good Lord, who would have thought kissing a man was so exhausting. Her entire body quivered at the memory. A hot, burning hunger renewed itself in the lower most area of her torso.

She covered her face with both hands. It had been like running; exhilarating, invigorating, pushing her to go faster, harder. But once she stopped, she was wiped out and gasping for air. Mrs.

Swanson certainly hadn't written that in her article.

It had been the article that sent her to the ladder. The day had been so busy she hadn't found the time to retrieve it and hide it back in her bedroom. Fear the boys would stumble across the papers made her rip up the ladder like a cat up a tree. It was her fault. She was the one who told them Matilda had been up there. In her rush to follow the major to the pond, she hadn't thought of them finding the article. It hadn't been until he'd mentioned the loft she recalled it was still there.

Her cheeks began to burn again. Had she really done those things? It was odd—almost as if she had two bodies. This one sitting here on the barn floor, and the other one, which came to life when Sterling touched her. This other body felt things and did things she'd never imagined. It had been so much more than the article described.

She pressed two fingers against the frown tugging on her brows. When her second body was in charge, her mind no longer worked. She tried, tried to think while he kissed her. But couldn't. All she'd been able to do was feel—with every inch of her body she'd felt him, his warmth, his strength, his masculinity. And react. Her body had certainly reacted to what she felt.

None of it made sense. None of this was mentioned in Mrs. Swanson article—leastwise not that she could recall. Her head tilted back. She gazed up through the opening. A black hole hovered. The loft was too dark for her to find the article tonight. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath.

Sometime later, she pushed off the floor, tested her legs for a moment before moving toward the door. First thing in the morning, she'd gather the papers and reread every paragraph. There seemed to be an awful lot she'd missed.

Kimberly, still dressed in the light yellow gown her mother had sewn last week for the wedding, met her at the barn door. "There you are. I've been looking all over for you."

Absently, she smoothed the lilac gown, the one her mother had sewn for her for the occasion, a twinge of guilt touched her chest. She'd been so caught up in the article, she'd barely participated, hardly helped with all the preparations. Blowing out a sigh that did little to square away her roaming mind, she answered, "I've been here, in the barn. Matilda had her kittens."

"Oh?" Her sister gave her head a slight shake. The flowers tucked in her blond hair fluttered, but stayed put. "I could have sworn I saw you dancing with the major, but then you disappeared."

She bit her lip. Kimberly did look lovely, and she should have been more supportive, but... "Mmm, yes," she answered, trying to pull her mind to the conversation. "After dancing with the major, I-I realized Kent and his friends were in the loft." She glanced to the spot Sterling had held her tight and sighed. "Bothering Matilda. They had been bothering Matilda."

"Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She frowned. Kimberly seemed nervous about something. Perhaps it wasn't too late. Maybe she could still be the sister Kimberly needed. Kendra took her sister's hand, led her to the small bench the children used to mount horses. "Of course, what's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing is really wrong, per se." Kimberly's downcast eyes said more.

Kendra glanced around, pretending to not notice her sister's discontent. "Well, then what did you need to talk about?"

"You're the only one I can ask."

Interested and a touch concerned, Kendra patted her sister's hand. "Then ask."

"Well, you know Jacob and I have already..." Kimberly swallowed loudly, let out a sigh. "You know."

Kendra nodded, she knew. Oh, how she knew. It was her turn to sigh. "Had sexual relations?"

"Shh! Someone might hear you."

"Sorry."

Kimberly twisted, sat sideways so they could look at each other. "Yes, did *that*," she whispered, grimacing. "Thing is, what if we do it again tonight? I know Jacob wants to."

Kendra had to fight to keep her eyes from popping right out of her head. "Of course he does, it's your wedding night."

Even in the darkness, Kimberly's cheeks turned red. "I know. But we're spending the night in the soddy."

Kendra glanced toward the road that led to the dugout-sod house her father had first built when he bought the land. She and Kimberly had both been born there. It hadn't been until her mother was pregnant with fourteen-year-old Kallie that the house they now lived in had been built. The soddy, two large rooms dug deep in the earth, was now their root cellar. Kendra reached up, gave her sister's ear a slight tug. "I know you're spending the night in the soddy, I helped rearrange it and set up the bed. You don't want to travel all the way to your new place at this time of night, do you?"

"Well, we can't do that in the soddy?"

Why not, I almost did it in the barn. Kendra grimaced, hoped her thought had remained silent. When her sister made no reaction, she let out a thankful sigh, and somewhat confused, asked aloud. "Why not?"

"Not with Papa and Mama so near."

She pressed a hand to the throbs forming in her temples. Were they truly sisters? "Kimberly, the soddy is a quarter of a mile from the house."

"But how will I face everyone in the morning?"
Was her sister serious? For a brief moment she

wanted to grasp Kimberly's shoulders, give her a hearty shake. Instead, she took both of Kimberly's hands. "Just like you have every morning for the past two and a half months. As if nothing happened."

Kimberly gasped, clearly appalled.

"Kimmie," Kendra started, deciding to be blunt. "I hate to tell you this, but come morning, everyone is going to think *that* is what you and Jacob did all night, so you might as well."

"Kendra!"

"What? I'm telling you the truth. Married people do *that*. Unmarried people do *that*. The world revolves around *that*. If it didn't there wouldn't be any people left to do *that*."

"Mama would die if she heard you," Kimberly

said, with a trace of a giggle.

"Yes, I know," Kendra admitted, giggling. "But think about it. Everyone does it, or will do it. And not just people. Every living thing has a way to multiply, and does so. That's how God made it."

Silence surrounded them for several minutes before Kimberly admitted, "You're right."

I know! Kendra held the thought in, flinched at the headache building in her temples.

"Do you think Jacob and I will be punished?" Kimberly whispered seriously.

"Punished?"

"Mmm-Hmm," Kimberly nodded. "For doing...that."

Kendra pressed a hand to her head, absorbing the pounding with her palm. "Kimberly," she almost groaned, "You're married."

"Now. But what about before?" Her hand went to massage the baby growing in her belly. "Before we were married. Will God punish us for that act?"

The anguish in Kimberly's voice hung in the air like thick fog. Kendra reached over, pulled her sister's head onto her shoulder. "Ah, honey, if he punished all the people in the world for hav—doing that before marriage, there would be very few left walking around."

"You think so?" Kimberly asked with a sniffle.

"I know so," she whispered. She did know. She'd read the Bible—more than once—and knew free will was a gift, so was love. "God will never punish us for loving one another. That's what we're supposed to do."

Kimberly stiffened a bit, turned her head to gaze up. "Kendra? Kendra, have you..."

Kendra shook her head. "No, no I haven't." Her gaze settled on the tall handsome man standing on the other side of the yard. Her heart jumped up to pound in her throat. "Not yet, I haven't."

Kimberly sat up. "You will soon."

Her eyes pulled at their sockets. How did Kimberly know? Had she seen? Kendra bit her lip, asking cautiously, "I will?"

"Of course, you're nineteen, and Art is still smitten with you." Kimberly lowered her voice to whisper, "It's quite pleasurable."

Kendra bit her lip harder. She'd had a touch of that pleasure. Still felt the after effects of being in Sterling's arms, of his mouth merging with hers, of his hands touching her in the most wonderful ways.

Kimberly let out a loud sigh. "Kendra, do you think God punishes those who do it just for the sake of doing it?"

Dropped back to earth like an apple off a tree, she asked, "What?"

"You know, like those ladies we saw in Denver. The ones Mama told us not to look at. You said they do those things with men they aren't married to. Do you think God punishes them?"

A chill ripped up her spine. An imaginable tug made her gaze float to the yard. Sterling had moved. She searched the crowd. It was dark, but somehow she knew he watched her. She could feel his gaze

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and found him on the other side of the yard.

Is that what he thought? Is that why he looked at her so strange in the barn? He thought she was a prostitute, did *things* for money. She didn't want money—she wanted...

Her stomach hit the ground. What had she done?

When she didn't answer, Kimberly stood up. "Come on, Mama's waving. She said I could throw my bouquet as we drive away." She reached down and grasped Kendra's hand. "If you catch it, that means you'll be the next one married, and then you'll see for yourself."

She rose, fell into step beside Kimberly. Is that what she needed to do? Marry Sterling so they could...

She paused, planted her hands on her hips. *Surely not!*

Chapter Six

Sterling took a swallow of the fresh well water, hoping it would rinse the last of the crude beer from his system and flush out his twisted mind. The glass stalled, slanted against his bottom lip. Over the rim Kendra came into view. He had to squint through the dark night but caught the glint of her hair in the moonlight as she exited the barn.

The front of his chest grew damp. Startled, he pulled the glass from his mouth, wiped at the water soaking his shirt. *Shit!* The woman had him so dazed he dribbled water down his front like a babe. What was it about Kendra Parker that had turned him into a lad still wet behind the ears? Literally.

He set the glass down, moved to the edge of the crowd where he could follow her movements more closely. Her sister joined her near the barn. Together they walked a few feet and sat down on a little bench. Sterling folded his arms. Unsatisfied, his body was tense, hot, but he ignored it, focused on her. He'd never been immediately absorbed by someone. But from the moment their eyes met, the second he'd looked upon her adorable face, he'd become a different person. Sure, he'd lusted after a woman before, craved to have his way with a luscious body, but it hadn't been anything like this. The urge screaming throughout his system was life threatening. A need this raw, this intense, could kill him.

Why did she have this affect on him? From somewhere deep in the hidden confines of

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his memory, his father's voice appeared, silently saying, "From the moment I met your mother, I knew I had to have her. Recognized she was the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with."

Sterling twisted, snapped his head left and right. "What the hell..." he muttered. "The rest of my life?"

Slowly his gaze wondered back to Kendra. A warm, heady sensation encompassed his body. "No," he whispered. It couldn't be. He couldn't have fallen in love with Kendra Parker. Hell, he'd just met her. The crude brew must still have control over his brain.

The women stood, walked toward where a crowd had gathered around a wagon. He'd give his last rifle to be able to lift Kendra into the wagon, as Jacob was doing to Kimberly, and drive away to spend the night together in the dugout over the hill. He grimaced, shook his head to send the thoughts away.

The crowd began to cheer. Kendra stood in the center. The chills racing in his loins multiplied. Between the moonlight and the slight breeze twirling her hair about her shapely frame, she looked like some kind of sphinx staring down at the bouquet of flowers in her hands. Sterling turned around, moved toward the barn. Now that the couple was leaving others would find a place to bed down, either in their wagons or in the Parker home. Kincaid had said he could spend the night in the hayloft, and he needed the rest—wanted the solitude to get his mind and body under control. He stumbled, had to catch his footing. Damn! If he didn't get Kendra out of his mind soon he'd have to relieve himself with his hand.

Hours later, faint pink streaks fringed the dark sky. Sterling turned, resettled his head on the pillow of hay, content to watch the sun begin its rise. It had been a long night in one way, short in another. A

Lauri Robinson

smile twitched on his lips. He was in love. It was as simple as that. Not an impulsive man, he'd spent the night pondering all that had happened, questioned each action. Ultimately, he found a conclusion, one that filled him with peace, contentment, and, at the same time, excitement. Yes, he was in love with Kendra, would ask her father today if he could court her.

A frown pulled on his brows. No, on second thought, he'd ask for her hand. They didn't have time for courting. Besides, it had to be the same for her. Though her eyes said she was experienced, he concluded she wasn't. He'd recalled the way her cheeks had glowed red with embarrassment when her father had appeared in the barn. At that moment, he'd been ready to ask for her hand, would have done anything to shield her from shame. A smile pulled at his lips. She'd been just as knocked off her feet as he was.

Aw, to be the one to teach her, to guide her through the first time. It would be a life experience he'd never forget. It was also one he couldn't wait to occur, knew he'd relish it until the day he died.

He stretched, dug his hands into the hay beneath his head. A crinkle sounded, and his fingers encountered something hard. Grasping the object, he pulled it out as he sat up. A small ink bottle rolled in his palm. He set it aside and dug deeper into the hay.

Neat, elegant script filled the pages he pulled out. Flipping through them, he found the bottom sheets to be covered with shaky, hard to decipher handwriting. He twisted so the dim morning light bounced off the paper, and skimmed the top page, pausing when Kendra's name leaped off the page.

What Every Woman Needs to Know about Her Marriage Bed.

Written by Helen Swanson. Edited by Kendra Parker. He frowned and began to read more.

First and foremost a bride must remember to relax on her wedding night. This will ease the pain as her husband's member enters her for the first time.

The paper shook in his fingers. "What the hell?" Sterling glanced over his shoulder. A large yellow cat, along with several kittens, slept on the hay nearby, otherwise the loft was empty. He swallowed, thankful he was alone, and his eyes went back to the paper.

The sexual act can be very pleasurable, but it takes work, on both parts, to make it so. The man often forgets this, so it may be up to the bride to assure her marriage bed is a place she wants to be. Let's start with the man's member. When erect, it grows long and hard and can be quite frightening to look at. A woman should touch it. Get to know how it feels and tastes...

"Sweet Lord in heaven," he muttered. "What the hell is this?" He glanced around again, and then focused on the pages. He tried to stop reading but couldn't. The last few pages, the ones written with uneven penmanship, were difficult to read, but he read them—every paragraph, every word.

By the time he lifted his eyes, his face was on fire. Hell, he hadn't blushed in years. And the images the writing conjured in his mind had his shaft pulsating.

Once more his gaze flit around the loft, assuring his solitude before it floated back down to the sheets of papers. Small notations filled the edges. He twisted the pages. In her neat, precise handwriting, Kendra had made short notes near specific passages.

Must experience.

Need to know more.

Does this really work?

How could this happen?

The pages slipped from his fingers, as he gasped for air. Out of control, his groin shuddered and quakes vibrated his loins.

Once his body was back under control, he took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Gathering the papers, he began to stuff them back under the hay, but his movements stalled. A chill, like a December north wind, rippled up his back.

Kendra Parker wasn't in love with him. She was researching. He was nothing more than a specimen for her to test the theories Helen Swanson had written.

Sharper than a knife, pain sliced through his chest. He tipped forward, clutched his hands over the area. *Damn that little minx!*

When the sting eased and he thought he could move, he stood. His eyes settled on the sleeping cat. For some reason everything was blurred. He blinked, cleared his vision enough to turn and make his way to the door in the floor. After climbing down, he stumbled toward his tack.

It wasn't until he bent to gather his bridle he realized one hand still clutched the papers. He stared at the sheets for several minutes before he stuffed them into his saddle bag. After drawing in a deep breath, he left the barn to retrieve his gelding from the corral.

The horse was content, breakfasting on summer grass near the far side and the walk across the paddock was good for Sterling. By the time he'd bridled the animal, he felt more like himself—stronger, and the world was clearer. He led the gelding across the pen and into the barn where he'd left his saddle. A rustle sounded above, and a dusting of hay bits fell between the floorboards of the loft.

After tightening the girth, he looped the reins around a stall door and moved to the ladder. Silently, he climbed only partway, wondering who he'd find. His sixth sense made the hair on the back of his neck stand at attention already alerting him to

who was up there.

Fly-away hair floated in the breeze coming in the wide upper door as she searched the hay he'd recently left. Particles whirled in the faint shaft of light. By the handfuls, she tossed straw aside, brushed at the dry stems until the floor appeared.

He rested his arms on the edge of the hole, half of him humored by her frantic search, the other half irritated by the sight.

She sat back on her haunches, twisted to gaze about the loft.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

Like a frightened critter, she jolted. Wide and luminescent, her blue eyes landed on him. "Ster—Major. Wh-what…"

"What am I doing?" He shrugged. "Watching you. The question is Miss Parker, what are you doing?" With his head, he gestured to the upper door. "The sun's barely up."

She licked her lips, bit them together. "I-I'm an early riser."

He raised a brow. *Liar*. He watched her gape around the loft.

"Oh, and Matilda." She rose, walked to the cat. "I had to check on Matilda."

"Really? Matilda?" He moved his hands to the top rung, squeezed the wood. "I thought maybe you came to finish what we started last night." A moan formed in his throat. What was he thinking? He wasn't, that's what the problem was. His mind couldn't think when she was near.

Her cheeks were bright red. "Ster-Major, I-"

"Never mind, Miss Parker. I must be on my way." He climbed down, stormed over to his horse. The mere sight of her made his body scream with need.

"Major. Major." She scrambled down the ladder.

He gathered the reins of his horse with a tight fist. "What? What is it you want, Miss Parker?"

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A grimace contoured her face. "I—"

"Oh, let me guess," he interrupted. "Perhaps this is what you're looking for?" Paper crinkled beneath his fingers as he tore the sheets out of his saddle bag.

Chapter Seven

Kendra froze. A thousand thoughts ripped across her mind, not one slow enough to form into a retort. Didn't matter, her heart beat so fast she couldn't catch enough air to speak.

"What's the matter, Miss Parker? Cat got your tongue?"

Fury shot up her spine. She lurched forward. "Give me that!"

He held the papers high above her head. She jumped, but he just flipped them higher.

"Give it to me. It's mine!"

"Oh, I know it's yours," he growled. "I also figured out your little ploy last night, Miss Parker."

She narrowed her eyes, glared at him. "Give it to me."

He shook his head, turned his back to her. "No, I don't think so." After tucking the pages into his saddle bag, he buckled the strap. "I think I shall keep it."

Her throat swelled. "You can't. It's mine." She stepped forward, but so did he, protecting the bag with his broad form.

"And now it's mine." His gaze was hard, cold.

She shivered, backed up a step. "Why? What do you want it for?"

He twisted and in one swift movement, mounted his horse. "I don't know yet. But I hope without the article, you won't be so apt to pull your little stunt on someone else."

She pressed a hand to her pounding temple.

"What? What little stunt?"

"Don't lie, Miss Parker. You know what I'm talking about." He tugged on the reins, turned his horse toward the door. "That's a very dangerous game you played." Over his shoulder he met her gaze. "Don't try it on any other man, or I'll show these papers to your father."

She gulped, but the lump was too large to swallow around. One hand clutched at her burning throat.

He spurred his horse. "Good day, Miss Parker," echoed into the barn as he rode out into the muted morning light.

A sob bubbled out. She pressed both hands over her face to smother the sound. It was several minutes before the tears eased enough she could wipe them away. With the heels of her hands, she cleared her cheeks, wiped her nose. Stumbling, she made her way out the barn door. The overwhelming sense of loss made her shiver.

Silence filled her ears. It would be an hour or more before anyone else began to stir. Not that it mattered. Her life was over. She twirled about and ran down the trail to the pond. Every breath of air sent new pain into her burning chest. Her heart slapped the wall of her rib cage, every thump scattered more broken pieces.

Her pace slowed. It wasn't the loss of the article that ripped her apart. It was Major Sterling Marlow. She'd never see him again. Never taste his lips, never feel his body molded against hers. A new sob tore at her raw throat.

This isn't how she pictured this morning when she'd slipped from her bed. The night hours had trickled by, gave her troubled mind plenty of time to think, to dream. It had been late, long after the wedding party had departed and everyone bedded down, when she came to the conclusion she was in love. It had been hard to interpret, after all the

article had been the center of her attention for some time. But her wondering mind had finally sorted everything out. Made her realize it wasn't just the act she wanted, it was love, marriage.

If it had truly been just coupling with a man she could have had it before. Art Blackwell had been trying to court her for years, even had asked if he could. He was her age, and most of the other girls thought he was quite handsome, especially Kathleen Hooper.

Kendra paused at the rock wall holding the water in the pond. Art had spent the night in his wagon, not ten feet from her bedroom window. She shivered at the thought and gazed at the crystal clear water for a moment, watching how it twirled about and then rushed over the wall to flow downstream where the waterway grew wide and bubbled over a large group of jagged rocks. Her feet stumbled as she moved forward to trudge beside the flowing creek.

She had declined Art's offer of courting, mainly because she couldn't see herself touching him and didn't want him to touch her. Of course that had been before Mrs. Swanson's article, but she still felt the same way—had felt that way about every man before Sterling came along.

The sound of gushing water filled the air. The creek rolled over the rocks, left swirling water full of boiling bubbles in its wake. She moved closer to the edge, stared at the turbulence. He could have the article. She didn't care if she never saw the silly thing again. Heaviness filled her chest. She would never experience a sexual relationship. Sterling was the only man she'd ever want to do it with, and that would never happen.

Tears began to roll again. He hated her. The look in his eyes had made his feelings crystal clear. How could she have been so stupid? She stared harder at the water, wondering for a split second

about jumping in, but fighting the force of swirling water would take more energy than she had. With a heavy, pain-filled sigh, she plopped down on the hard ground and buried her face in both hands.

She hated him, too! Every inch of his tall, stupidly handsome body. How could she have thought she'd fallen in love with such a cad? Why on earth would she have thought about doing *that* with him? Well, she didn't, and sincerely hoped she'd never, ever, see Major Sterling Marlow again.

Kendra didn't try to stop the burning sob ripping her throat. She gave into it, gave in to a complete, blubbering bawl.

When the crying came to an end, her face felt stiff and her eyes puffy. She rose, squinted at the bright sun now bouncing across the land, and moved to the edge of the stream. After splashing her face, she wiped away the water with the heels of her palms and smoothed the hair out of her eyes. Twisting about, she began her trek back to the house. The bout of tears had ended, but the heaviness, the gloom, pressing hard on her body still remained.

Kendra tried to scuff it off, but her mind was too exhausted—couldn't come up with a single thought to ease the weight. Eventually, she quit trying, and simply trudged forward, one foot in front of the other like a mourner in a funeral procession.

The house and yard was full of life when she rounded the barn. For a moment, she wondered about slipping into the loft. Hide out with Matilda, the cat wouldn't mind.

She lingered too long. From the front steps, her father waved. "There you are. Breakfast is almost over."

Pasting on a smile was too difficult, and waving too much work, so she gave a slight nod and moved forward. At the top of the steps, she pressed her chilly fingers to her face, checked the puffiness of her eyes, and took a deep breath.

Her father had already entered, right after his wave, so Kendra pushed open the door and entered the house. Her steps faltered, and she grabbed the wall, gasping for air, her gaze glued to the kitchen table.

Sterling braced himself and met Kendra's gaze full force from his place at Kincaid Parker's breakfast table. He lifted one brow and folded his arms across his chest. Kendra's face turned completely white, and her mouth dropped open. His entire body began to pulsate.

"Kendra, bring me some more plates, please," Suzanne Parker said from where she stood near the stove flipping flapjacks.

Sterling planted his heels, refusing his feet, which wanted to move to Kendra, aid her unsteady stance. Evidently, her mother didn't notice how distraught she was. He should be satisfied, seeing her shaken so, but instead, a gallon of guilt sloshed about in his stomach like rotten milk.

Narrowing her eyes, sending a nasty glare his way, Kendra brushed her hair away from her face and pushed off the wall. The room was chaotic, those preparing to leave quickly feasting on flapjacks, and others mingling about with mugs of coffee in their hands. It appeared he was the only one to notice just how startled she'd been to see him sitting at the table, and to see how irritated she'd become once she caught her bearings. Plates clattered as she pulled them from the shelf.

He lifted his mug, caught the smile twisting his lips before she noticed it by taking a long drink. The coffee had gone cold, and he almost coughed as the bitter brew flowed over his taste buds.

"Thank you, Kendra," the man next to him said a few minutes later when she set a plate in front of him.

"You're welcome, Art," she answered sweetly.

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Too sweetly for Sterling, he had to fight the scowl forming on his forehead.

She glanced at him, eyes firing daggers faster than a Gatling gun. For his ears only, she seethed, "What are *you* doing here?"

He couldn't hide the smile, not with the way young Art darted speculative glances between the two of them. "No, thank you, Miss Parker, I already ate."

She frowned, then her gaze caught Art's, and with a huff, she whirled around to set the other plate she carried in front of the girl sitting on the other side of Art. The smile on Sterling's face faded. A twitch formed in his cheek at the way Art's eyes followed Kendra's every movement. He had a tremendous urge to knock out the kid's teeth, or at least bloody his nose.

The meal proceeded, and Sterling began to second guess what he'd done. He'd ridden away, but made it no farther than the first hill before he turned around. Kendra had been nowhere in sight when he'd entered the barn, and Kincaid had walked in as he was digging the papers out of his saddle bags. He'd shoved them back in, of course, without her father noticing, and then for some unknown, unexpected reason, he'd asked Kincaid Parker if he could court his daughter.

The man hadn't seemed surprised, but had thought for several long, torturing minutes before he said he'd have to talk to Kendra. If she approved, then he'd give his blessing.

Sweat popped out on Sterling's upper lip, stinging the tender skin. He wiped it away and took another swallow of cold coffee. He peered over the mug at Kincaid, who was in conversation with his new son-in-law. Should he withdraw his request? Say he changed his mind and ride out, hightail it back to the fort?

Kincaid must have felt his stare. He turned, met

Sterling's gaze, and gave a slight nod before he said, "Kendra?"

Sterling's heart leaped, damned near choked him. He tugged at the collar of his shirt, even though the top button was already undone.

"Yes, Papa," Kendra said, twisting her elegant neck about from where she stood washing dishes.

"I'd like to speak with you," Kincaid said, pushing away from the table.

She went white again, and her gaze snapped to Sterling.

He was sweating again, profusely, and couldn't muster up an arrogant gaze, or a reassuring one, which is what he wanted to do, reassure her he hadn't shared the article.

"I-I'm a little busy right now, Papa," Kendra replied in a quivering voice.

"Kallie," Kincaid gestured to a younger girl, "take over for your sister." When the girl moved across the room, he said, "Kendra, I'll see you in the parlor."

Sterling placed both hands on the table, preparing to rise, but Kincaid laid a hand on his shoulder, leaned down, and whispered, "You better wait here. You'll know her answer soon enough."

Kendra, lips tight and eyes firing, glared at him as she walked across the room, wiping her hands on a white flour sack.

The noise about him continued, conversations, flapjacks sizzling, dishes clanking. It wasn't until a loud, screeching, "What?" echoed through the house that the room went silent.

Kendra, heart beating against her ribcage like a hail storm, stared at her father.

"Major Marlow is an upstanding man, Kendra. I wouldn't have considered his request if he wasn't, you know, that."

Kendra couldn't even offer a nod. Her mind was drowning in a thick swirl. Sterling wanted to court her? It just couldn't possibly be.

"Your mother and I will miss you, dear, tremendously, but I do believe you'd have a right fine life, married to the major—if that's what comes about," her father continued, patting her shoulder as he spoke. "It's your choice, Kendra. If you don't wish to encourage him, I'll tell him no. But I suggest you think about it."

"Yes," she muttered. "I mean no."

"Yes?" her father questioned, looking a bit puzzled. "Or no?"

"Yes, I need to think about it." She caught her upper lip between her teeth, forced her racing mind to slow. "Papa would ah-it be"—she paused, pointed to the doorway—"be all right if I spoke with St-Major Marlow for a moment?"

Her father smiled, leaned forward, and kissed her forehead. "Of course, dear. I'll go get him."

She grabbed his arm. "No. No, I'd prefer to speak to him outside." Actually, she wanted to throttle the man and didn't want the entire house full of people to hear her doing so. "Would that be all right?"

"Of course," her father answered. Then with a sigh, he added, "Oh, yes, we certainly are going to miss you."

A new wave of anger rippled her spine. "I haven't made up my mind yet, Papa," she reminded him. He acted as if her bags were already packed. They weren't. Not a single chest, crate, or tapestry bag had been loaded with her belongings, and that's the way it was going to stay.

"Oh, I know, dear. I know." With that he turned her about, let her lead the way out of the parlor.

She really wanted to stomp, but Kendra forced her feet to glide over the rug, past the needlepointcushioned rocker and the piano near the glasspaneled door. As she crossed the threshold into the kitchen, she planted a smile as false as fool's gold on

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her face and settled a loathing glare on Sterling. "May I speak with you for a moment, Major Marlow?"

His Adam's apple bobbed as he nodded. "Of course, Miss Parker."

She didn't wait for him to stand and make his way around the crowded table. Teeth clenched, she marched to the door and into the front yard, leaving him to follow in her wake.

At the bottom of the steps, he caught up with her, but it wasn't until they were half-way to the barn when, with a sting as sharp as a pesky mosquito, his hand touched her elbow. She wrenched it away. His fingers returned, more forceful this time making her stop in her tracks. "I thought you wanted to talk," he said.

Her blood was on fire, boiling in her veins. "How dare you!"

"How dare I what?"

Chapter Eight

"How dare you pretend to want to court me!" She seethed, barely able to breathe.

"Who said I was pretending?"

She really wanted to scream and twisted about to glare at him. One of his fine brows arched, and the sight played havoc on her stomach, sent it rolling. Why did he have to be so fine looking? "We both know you're simply trying to irritate me." She pulled from his grasp and began to move to the barn again. "Just give me the article and you can ride away. I'll tell Papa you changed your mind." For some reason the words made the back of her throat burn.

"No," he said, his hand stopping her movements again.

"No, what? You won't give me the article? Fine! Keep it. I really don't car—"

"No, I'm not trying to irritate you. I want to court you. Get to know you, see if this"—he waved his other hand between them—"attraction we have for one another is real."

She was drowning again and gasping for air. Art Blackwell took that moment to interrupt. "Kendra?"

Needing a life line, something that would keep her from melting into a puddle like a bowl of ice cream on the Fourth of July, she turned toward the wagon he was hitching to a team of plow horses, and replied, "Yes, Art?"

His worried frown bounced between her and

Sterling. "Are you all right? Need some help?"

"No—I mean yes, I'm fine, and no I don't need any help, but thank you," she answered, turning her gaze back to Sterling. His lips were tight, and his brows furrowed. She glanced back toward Art, where Sterling's gaze lingered. A thought took hold in her mind. With an exaggerated sigh, which pulled Sterling's gaze back to her, she said, "I can't allow you to court me, Major Marlow."

"Why not?"

"Because"—she gestured over her shoulder with one hand—"Art asked to court me some time ago, and I agreed."

"When?"

"Oh," she said, shrugging both shoulders, "last year."

Sterling grabbed her other arm, now held both of her elbows firmly. "Not when he asked, when did you agree?"

A lump she couldn't swallow settled in her throat. "Um—"

"You little liar," Sterling said, sounding almost happy.

She looked up to glare at him, but frowned instead. His eyes glimmered, like he knew a secret, and his lips were pulled into a grin the devil himself must have created, for it drew her in like a sinner to hell.

Suddenly her breasts slammed into his chest, and his mouth landed on hers with enough force to steal the breath right out of her lungs. Hard, determined lips forced hers to comply, and try as she might, she couldn't control the way her lips burst into life. The kiss grew, and she had to close her eyes to block out the way the world spun out of control.

When Sterling ended the contact, lifted his face from hers, she leaned forward, not ready to stop. A chuckle entered her ears, and she pulled her eyes open. His smile was great, filled his face, and her heart fell, probably landed somewhere near her feet.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said, tipping forward to brush his lips against her forehead.

Her heart wasn't on the ground. It was pounding in her chest cavity, sent blood racing into her face, throbbing in her ears. Her hands, wrapped around his neck, latched on tighter so she wouldn't fall to the ground since her legs seemed to have disappeared.

"Major Marlow!" The yell, along with the thundering of hoofs blew into the yard at the same time. "Major Marlow!"

Half dazed, Kendra twisted her head. A cloud of dust followed two uniformed men galloping down the road. They reined in, brought their sweating mounts to halt only a few feet away.

Sterling's hand, the one that until this moment she hadn't realized cupped her waist, tightened, held her close to his side as he addressed the men. "What's happened?"

The rider pulled his hat from his head, wiped at the stream of water running out of his hair and down the side of his face. "The bank in Lamar was robbed again. This time four people were killed. The governor sent for you."

"Shit," Sterling mumbled.

A cold chill made Kendra quiver and lean into the heat of his body. "Sterling?" she asked, not really knowing what she wanted to ask, but icy fingers of fear had gripped her spine and just saying his name eased the painful hold.

He wrapped his other arm around her, held her tight for a moment that was much too brief. Lessening the hold, but not releasing her, he asked the man, "How'd you know where to find me?"

"We were on the trail to Denver, but met up with some folks on the main road. They'd been here for the wedding."

A crowd had formed, including her mother who

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said, "You boys climb down and eat some flapjacks before heading back out. They're hot and on the table."

The soldiers glanced at Sterling.

"Go ahead," he offered.

"Thank you, ma'am, we're much obliged," the man said as he dismounted.

"Kent, take the soldier's horse, see they're watered," her father said.

The ability to stand on her own had returned. Kendra slipped her hands from Sterling and took a step back. He smiled at her, which made her heart leap about, and touched the end of her nose with his index finger before he turned to walk toward the barn.

Ignoring the commotion of the crowd, people asking the soldiers a dozen questions all at once, she moved to follow Sterling. He paused and looped her arm through his. Together, silently, they walked to the barn. Once inside, her mind darting a dozen ways at the same time, she asked, "Why would the governor ask for you?"

He shrugged as if it was of no importance. "I helped out with the last two robberies. Apprehended some of the robbers."

The information didn't settle well, made her stomach hic-cup. "Why? You're an army man, not a lawman."

His horse, golden brown with a black mane and tail, was in the first stall. He slipped on its bridle before leading it out. "Lamar falls within our domain. We help out in whatever way the area needs."

"Oh," was all she could think to say watching him smooth the blanket over the animal's back before hefting the saddle off the stall rail. "That's dangerous, isn't it?" Kendra asked aloud, while trying to understand why it felt like she wanted to throw up. Her temples had started to throb as well, and more so, none of the anger fueling her earlier remained.

He finished cinching the saddle, checked its snug fit, before he turned and took her hand. Pulling her close, he asked, "Dare I hope all this concern means you've agreed to my request?"

Concern? Is that what it was? All these unusual sensations eating at her like a swarm of hungry locusts? *Surely not!* Why should she be concerned about him? She hated him, didn't ever want to see him again. Hoped...

"Stop it, Kendra," he whispered. His lips were only an inch from hers.

"S-stop what?"

His lips touched hers, fluttered about as he said, "Stop trying to fight it." Then his mouth consumed hers in that indescribable way that made her heart soar like a bird taking flight.

Her thoughts dissolved, leaving only instinct to fuel her. She wrapped her arms around him and let free will take over. Later, vibrating from head to toe, Kendra collapsed against him when he broke the union, and gripped the back of his uniform as if it were a rope pulling her out of a pool of rushing water. She couldn't take much more. In the past twenty-four hours her body had experienced so many new, overwhelming, and absolutely devastating, yet, awe-inspiring sensations it might just give out from the shock of it all.

With a gentle caring touch, Sterling ran the pad of one thumb over her cheek. "Shh, now, darling, no tears"

She raised the back of her hand to her cheek and felt the tears she didn't know had fallen. "Sterling," she gasped, without knowing why.

He cupped her face, splayed his fingers into her hair, and looked deep into her eyes. "Thirty days."

"What? Thirty days for what?" she asked.

He winked at her. "Our wedding. Plan it for

thirty days from today."

Happiness surged through her system. The events of the past hour trickled into her brain. She tilted her head, rubbed her cheek against his palm. "But I haven't even said you could court me."

"Yes, you have, darling. I heard it loud and clear." Both palms massaged her cheeks, and his fingers rubbed at her scalp behind her ears.

She loved the way he said *darling*, it rolled off his tongue like honey on warm bread.

"Thirty days will give me plenty of time to catch Jarvis Smith and still do a bit of courting," he said, planting a kiss on the end of her nose.

Floating again, unable to feel the ground beneath her feet, she asked, "Who?"

His hands moved, flowed over her shoulders, and down her back to grasp her hips and tug her into another strong, warm embrace. She snuggled in, amazed at how this time comfort, and not lust, warmed her.

A deep voice, saying, "Major?" is what drew them apart.

Sterling gave her another wink, then set her from him and turned to the man in the doorway. "Ready?"

"Yes, sir," the army man answered.

Sterling nodded, and the next instant he sat upon the buckskin, gazing down at her. "Thirty days, Kendra."

She opened her mouth, but it was too late, he'd already spurred the horse. The animal bounded out of the barn. She lifted her skirt, so she wouldn't trip, and chased after them. The sunshine, bright and bold, slapped her in the face, and her father caught her arm as soon as she leaped through the doorway.

Sterling, flanked by the two other men, rode away engulfed in a cloud of dust from the hooves of the shod animals. When the cloud became too thick, Sterling too far away for her to make out, she turned

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to her father. "Thirty days."

He frowned. "Major Marlow will be back in thirty days?"

She nodded. "Our wedding will be thirty days from today."

Gasps and wheezes sounded around her. Her brows puckered, and she glanced about. Her family and several of the neighbors still in attendance had their mouths hanging open, as if they'd just seen a ghost or something.

She turned to her father, the only one whose face held a fragment of a smile. "Thirty days."

"Yes, dear. We heard you," he said, patting her mother's shoulder.

Chapter Nine

As long as he lived, Sterling would never forget riding out of the Parkers' barn. His heart singing with joy and crying with anguish at the same time was a sensation too utterly distinctive to forget. Leaving Kendra—her hot, plush body, so ready and willing for him to love—was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. But knowing he'd return in thirty days and make her his wife gave him the power of a keg of gun powder and made leaving possible.

Now, after two weeks of trailing Jarvis Smith, he wondered if he'd make the date. They didn't appear to be any closer to catching the bank robber. The man was like a tornado, could appear out of nowhere, cause havoc, and then disappear without a trace as to where he'd gone.

Sterling rolled over, resettled his head in the hard seat of his saddle. It made a disgusting pillow, but the twigs and rocks beneath it would be worse. There was no fire tonight, didn't want to give away their campsite to the person or persons who'd been trailing them the last couple days. A deep sigh emptied his lungs.

It was like this, late at night, when his body would hum remembering how Kendra's firm, perfectly-molded breasts felt pressed against his chest and her trim hips grinding into his swollen staff, that he missed her the most, and would almost tremble with fear he wouldn't make the wedding date. Would she wait for him? Had he read her

signals right? Did she really feel towards him the way he felt for her?

Of their own accord and out of habit, his eyes went to his saddle bag lying next to him. The article was still in there, neatly folded and safely tucked into the pants pocket of his extra uniform, just in case someone rifled through the pouch. Not that he worried Pat Merit or Tully Bush, the two privates who'd found him at the Parkers' and now rode with him to capture Jarvis, would look. They'd seen him reading the pages more than once, but hadn't asked about it, just as he knew they wouldn't. What was in a man's saddle bag was no one else's business. But Jarvis, or some other sidewinder roaming the desert plain, that was a different story; they'd kill a man just to ransack his bag.

He'd meant to give it to her, the article that is, but with Pat and Tully riding in, and with holding her, kissing her, leaving her, the pages had slipped his mind. There were five pages, and by now, he didn't need to read. He had them memorized. That hadn't been his goal the first time he pulled them out. He'd been searching for his other shirt and the papers had tumbled out.

At first he'd read them just for recollection, wanted to recall what had raised his ire, but the next time, and those after, it had been to feel Kendra, even though she was miles away. It was odd, indescribable even, and the last thing he'd expected. But when he recalled the article he *felt* her. He still lusted after her that was for sure, but this emotion went deeper, had more force. It actually made him want to get down on his knees and thank the good Lord for allowing him to find her.

The article was sensuous, could damn near make a man burst at the seams, but at the same time it gave him a glimpse of the future. Imagining it was he and Kendra experiencing those acts, tasting, touching, reveling in each other, was so

intoxicating, he grew more light-headed than if he'd drunk a gallon of that homemade brew at the Parkers' wedding.

He closed his eyes, let his mind wander to a specific passage about how a woman should be curious and expect pleasure by allowing her husband to be amorous and kiss her in forbidden places. The thoughts had barely formed, just started to fully touch his senses when a single crack echoed through the night air and into the camp.

Sterling snapped his eyes open, but held in the urge to leap to his feet. He reached over, drew his gun from where it lay beside his hip, and slowly, silently, cocked the trigger. The change in breathing patterns said Pat and Tully had done the same. Jarvis knew he was after him. Had he doubled back? Is that who followed them?

They lay there, all three of them, listening for another sound. Nothing came, which should have eased the muscles in his neck, but it didn't because the silence was too quiet.

It all happened at once—the snap of a branch beneath a boot, Sterling leaping to his feet, gun drawn, and the faint hint of recognition strong enough to make him not pull the trigger. He held up his other hand, informing Pat and Tully standing nearby not to fire, and squinted in the darkness, deciphering the man standing at the edge of the cluster of brush.

"Art? Art Blackwell? What the hell are you doing here?" Sterling went from full alert to seriously pissed off in less than five seconds. "What the hell are you doing sneaking around in the dark? Don't you know that's the best way to get yourself shot?"

"I-ah—" Art started, stepping out of the buck brush.

"You what?" Sterling all but shouted. The urge to knock the kid's teeth out grated his spine again.

Art took a deep breath, puffed his scrawny chest out. "I want to know what your intentions with Kendra are."

Steam blew out of Sterling's ears. "Why you little—I oughta—" he stepped forward, stuffing his gun in his holster.

Pat or Tully, he wasn't sure which, laid a hand on his arm. "Major..."

It drew him down to earth enough to drag in a breath, slow his onslaught. He pressed his heels into the dirt and let the air out of his lungs. "I plan on marrying her. Why?"

Art took another gulp of air, his tall gangly shape shuddering in the moonlight. "I—I don't know if that would be good for Kendra."

A buzzing noise echoed in Sterling's ears. He shook his head to clear it and bit his molars together in response to the anger gripping his spine. "You don't know if that would be good for Kendra?"

"No, ah—"—Art swallowed—"sir."

Sterling almost felt sorry for the kid. It was evident Art was in love with Kendra, probably had been for years, but damn it, so was he. And she was his, would soon be his wife. He relaxed a touch, crossed his arms. "And what do you think would be good for Kendra?"

Art lowered his rifle, letting it hang loosely in his hands. "Well, not married to an army man. She's the gentle sort. An innocent and needs to be coddled."

Sterling arched a brow, but didn't say a word. It appeared the young Art, whether he'd known Kendra for years or not, didn't know her at all.

Nervously licking his lips, Art went on, "Living at an army base would be too hard on her. I—"

Sterling had to interrupt, couldn't help it. "And being a sodbuster's wife wouldn't be?"

Art stiffened. "I plan on moving to Denver, finding her a fancy house to live in."

Kendra's Choice

Something in Sterling snapped. Hard. He lunged forward, grabbed Art's gun with one hand, the back of his shirt with the other, and pushed the man into the center of the camp. "We'll just let Kendra decide what's best for Kendra."

After throwing the rifle down near his saddle, Sterling lowered himself onto the ground. "Right now we gotta get some shut eye. We got a lot of riding to do tomorrow." He glared at Art. "Hard riding to do."

Pat and Tully settled themselves on their bedrolls while Art stood, glancing about. "My—uh—stuff is back on my horse."

"Hope he's tied up, otherwise you're in for a long walk back home tomorrow," Sterling said, throwing Art his blanket. He still had his canvas roll, which was enough. "Now get some sleep."

The rustling of the other three making themselves comfortable soon ended, and Sterling let out a deep sigh. *It was going to be a long night*.

Kendra hoisted up another bucket of water, dumped it over Kent's head. "I hope, young man, that you've learned a lesson."

Kent spit and sputtered, water flying from his hair like a wet dog. "I thought it was one of Matilda's kittens, Kendra, honest I did."

"Kittens do not have white stripes running down their backs," she explained, turning her head from the strong smell still emanating off her little brother. She'd already used a bushel basket of tomatoes on him and really didn't want to waste a second basket. Holding up a sheet of cotton, she said, "Here, climb out. You're going to have to run around in the sunlight to get rid of the rest of the scent."

After barely wiping the water from his body, Kent stepped into his trousers. "They were really cute Kendra. Looked just like Matilda's kittens. But their mama wasn't happy when she saw me chasing her babies."

Despite the smell, and the amount of clean up she'd have after giving him two baths in the tub beside the barn, Kendra smiled. "I'm sure she wasn't."

Kent shook his head again, and Kendra held the towel up to keep the water droplets from splaying her. "She was a hissing just like a snake 'afore she spun around and lifted her tail," he said.

"Yes, well, you just stay away from the pond for a few days. Hopefully your mother skunk and her babies will move on." She rubbed the towel over his still dripping hair. "And stay out of the house until Mama calls you for dinner."

"I will Kendra." He glanced around, looking at the pile of tomato skins and other rubbish from his bathing. "You want me to help you clean this up?"

"No, I'll get it, you run along. See if the sun and wind will make you smell better."

"Thanks, Kendra!" he said before disappearing around the side of the barn.

She took a deep breath, coughing at the smell still lingering in the air. Thankfully, if Kent had to have a run in with a skunk, it had happened today and not next week when the yard would be full of guests to observe her and Sterling exchanging their yows. A satisfying, intense sigh fluttered out of her chest and warmth pooled in her pelvic region. As it had a million times the past few weeks, her mind went to Mrs. Swanson's article, and how she'd soon be experiencing everything on those pages with Sterling. Not that she'd read it again. Sterling still had it. Which didn't really matter, she didn't need to read the scribbles to conjure up the images that showered her mind night and day. And it wasn't just desire. The simplest thought of him brought a smile to her face and happiness to her soul like she'd never known.

She'd paid a visit to her sister, to see how

Kimberly was settling in, and to discuss this overwhelming bliss she was experiencing. Kimmie assured her it was love she felt, and together they compared the joy of it all. Kendra, of course, had not shared Mrs. Swanson's article. That was her and Sterling's secret, which seemed to heighten the images that played in her mind.

The thought of the article made her flop the towel over the corral rail and tip the heavy tub of water. Papa had said he'd ride with her to Mrs. Swanson's this afternoon after their chores were done. He, of course, didn't know about the article, thought her wanting to visit the widow was to extend a wedding invitation. That was true, but Kendra also wanted to explain her delay in editing.

She gathered tomato skins out of the water quickly disappearing into the dry ground and threw them into a bucket half full already. Seeds scattered the ground. Her mother would have a patch of volunteer plants next spring whether she wanted them or not.

After disposing of the skins, she towed the big wooden tub back to its rightful place near the wash line and went in the house to heat water for the wash she was about to start when Kent had run in smelling to high heaven. Her mother was busy, once again sewing a wedding dress. Both of her parents had seemed shocked at first by her announcement, yet, both had said they felt she had made an excellent choice. Said they felt Sterling was perfectly suited for her personality. She'd agreed, not willing to tell them it was not her personality she wanted suited. Nope, not her personality at all.

The smile on her face still pulled on her cheeks when an hour later, while she pinned clean sheets on the line, Kent came flying across the yard like there was an Indian party after his scalp.

"Kendra! H-he's here, and h-he's gonna get ssprayed!" he screeched between gasps of air. "Who? Who's here and who's going to get sprayed?"

"Major Marlow!"

Her heart leaped and began to race like the Indians were now chasing her. "Sterling's here?" She glanced about. "Where?"

"I just told ya! He's heading for the pond. He's gonna get sprayed! That mama skunk's still down there. I know she is!"

"Oh, goodness," Kendra exclaimed, hooking a final pin over the line. "I told you to stay away from there."

"I wasn't down there. I was in the barn loft and see'd him riding across the field. He's headin' straight for the pond." Kent gestured frantically with both arms.

She hitched her skirt, and as she started to run across the yard, shouted over her shoulder. "You stay here. I'll go warn him."

The pungent smell filled the air long before she turned the final corner. She had no idea if it was new, or still lingering from Kent's earlier escapade. Lifting the bottom of her apron over her mouth and nose, she watched the underbrush for the angry critter and hurried toward the pond.

The sound of water splashing drew her attention. As her gaze settled on the water, her heartbeat pounded from head to toe, and her legs once again forgot she needed them. Locking her knees, to keep from collapsing, she accepted the heady happiness swirling around her, and shouted, "Shall I get a bushel of tomatoes for you, too?"

Sterling swirled around. The water droplets flaying from his dark locks splashed about in the pond. Waist deep in the waves with the sun bouncing off his skin, he looked like a Greek god rising from the ground. Kendra melted at the glorious sight.

She wasn't sure what or how it all happened,

but the next thing she knew water filled her open mouth, and every bit of her, shoes, petticoats, apron, and all, was soaked, wet, and sinking. The hold on her waist hefted her upwards. Gasping for air and peeling wet tendrils of hair away from her eyes, she dug her feet into the thick slippery creek bottom. "What on earth—?"

Sterling's mouth, wet, hot, and more desirable than she remembered, stopped her shriek. She didn't think, didn't worry about the condition of her clothing, instead, thoroughly accepted his kiss and responded in kind. Flames of that unknown craving that came to life when she was in his arms rose up to lick at every inch of her body. She wrapped both arms around his neck, clung on lest she topple beneath the water in a sizzling mist if the band of steel holding her upright let loose.

Her body was on fire, grinding against his with uncontrollable want, when he broke the kiss and glanced over her shoulder. The reality they stood in waist deep water returned along with the ability to breathe, and she twisted her neck, following his gaze.

Near the shore, the exact spot from where she'd shouted her question about tomatoes stood a large, quite ruffled, skunk. Tail straight up and twitching in the wind, the animal glared at her and Sterling as if daring them to make a sudden move.

"That, my dear," Sterling whispered, "is what on earth made me pull you into the water. *You* were about to need a bushel of tomatoes."

She managed to whisper a slight, "Oh."

"Who already got it?" he asked.

"Uh?"

"The smell's in the air. Who got sprayed?"

Twisting about slowly, sincerely not wanting to irritate the skunk any further, she met his handsome face smiling down on her. "Kent."

Sterling nodded, and keeping her glued to his

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side, he began to creep through the water, as far from the skunk as possible. They came to the boulder damn her father had built to create the pond, and Sterling took her hand, pulling her over the rock wall. The stream grew deeper. "Come on." Sterling gestured with his hand before diving into the flowing water.

Kendra followed, but soon found her clothing too cumbersome to swim and made her way to the shallow water near the shore. Ever watchful, Sterling gracefully dove below the water and reached her side within seconds. He rose to stand beside her, the water now flapping around his thighs. Her eyes couldn't be controlled. They trailed up and down his form, settling on the one thing that had piqued her curiosity for weeks.

His manhood stood out like a flagpole, and the size impressed her, made her wonder how his britches covered it. She then recalled the article, where Mrs. Swanson said it only became erect when the man was aroused. Her eyes lifted, and a smile covered her face as she encountered Sterling's knowing gaze. A flash of heat, hot enough to scorch cotton, blazed through her system.

"Come here," he said, deep and throaty.

Chapter Ten

She went, wrapped her hands over the hard muscles of his biceps, her palms caressing the slick, wet skin.

He smiled, and his eyes held her captive. "God, sweetheart, I've missed you."

The heat of his palms, cupping her hips penetrated her dress, and her heart began to tick rapidly. "I've missed you, too," she whispered.

Unable to resist it any longer, she ran her lips and tongue over his shoulder, tasting and feeling at the same time. He dipped his head, ran fluttering, delicate kisses along the side of her face and then down the length of her neck. A sigh of pleasure escaped her lips. "Sterling?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

She stepped closer, pressed her lower torso against his hard, upright staff. His kisses climbed back up her neck, over her chin, and then met her mouth as his hold crushed her to him.

A bolt of lightning shot up her, exploding a need so strong in her center she rolled her hips, needing his erection to grind against her. His hands went to her backside, guided the movements of her hips to continue. The sensations wracking her were overwhelming, made her want to tear her clothes off, feel his hot, silky skin meshing with hers. Pulling her lips from his, kissing his chin and neck, she moaned, "Sterling." Her voice was filled with a severe plea.

He took one step back, separated them enough

for his hands to explore the front of her dress and tug on the buttons. She nipped at the tight skin along his collar bone. "Yes," she whispered. Her breasts ached, begged for him to touch them.

"Yes?" he murmured with a teasing hint, brushing kisses along the edge of her ear.

His playfulness made her smile, or maybe it was the ultimate pleasure rippling through her veins, or the knowledge of what they were embarking upon. The last button separated, and she shrugged her shoulders as he peeled the sticky wet fabric from her skin. Alternating her arms, she tugged out of the sleeves as well as the thin straps of her camisole.

A breeze blew across her nipples, intensifying their heightened state. His hands followed, first softly brushing, then more boldly, holding, fondling. Kendra tightened her thigh muscles in response to how his actions created a whirlpool inside her that made her quiver. She reached down and wrapped one hand around his erection. Hard, yet soft, and pulsating with extreme heat, the shaft filled her palm as she began to stroke it.

He groaned and lowered his head. A gasp escaped her lips as his mouth settled on one breast. He licked, suckled, and teased her nipple with the tip of his tongue. A thousand little eruptions burst in her core, made her squeeze her legs together. Sterling ran kisses across her breasts before he took the second nipple into his mouth. The action made her pump his shaft harder.

Her mind was unable to comprehend it all. It was like nothing else on earth, as if she would explode. "Sterling. Oh, Sterling," she groaned.

His lips left her breasts to encompass her mouth. He crushed them together, forcing her hand to release him and wrap around his back, clinging to him as throbs in her body meshed with the world swirling around them.

Whether they fell, or Sterling pulled her into the

water with him, Kendra had no idea. But one second they were locked in the passionate embrace, the next she was sputtering and dragging her trembling limbs through the water. Giving up on the ability to stand, she plopped onto the bottom of the creek, the water swishing around her shoulders and searched the flowing creek for Sterling.

He surfaced a few feet away, brushing dark hair out of his eyes with both hands. "You, my dear," he said, pointing at her, "could tempt a Saint."

She sputtered, shook her head to check her hearing. "What?"

Sterling took a deep breath, trying to gain control of his pulsating body. He'd had no thoughts of seducing her, well, not immediately upon his arrival anyway. His plan had been to get cleaned up, then pay a visit to the house. Start courting her properly. But seeing the skunk charging up the trail behind her, had forced him to snatch her from the bank prior to her being sprayed. Once he'd touched her, smelled her pleasant, exhilarating scent, heard the sweet song of her voice, his best laid intentions had blown away. The faint fleeting thought anyone could mosey down the trail at any moment had been what made his good sense return, and at that moment he knew only a good dowsing would stop the path they were racing down.

Heaven help him, but she was gorgeous—sitting there in the water, the tiny, rippling waves flowing over her shoulders and splashing bits of water onto the chin of her startled face. He took a deep breath, crouched down to balance on his knees. "Fix your dress and climb out. We don't know who might come along."

Her chin dropped, but she snapped it up moments before water flowed into her mouth and tossed her head left and right, searching for any invaders to their private haven. With cheeks as rosy as a china doll's, she slapped her arms into her sleeves, and then flipped around to straighten her clothes.

Sterling twisted about and glided back through the water. After climbing over the rock wall, he checked for any black and white critters before quickly exiting the water and gathering his clothes from the bank. He was dressed, all except for his boots, when Kendra walked up behind him, her shoes squishing with each step. One look at her, dripping wet from head to toe and glowing like the sun, made him turn around and dive back into the pond.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked, as he surfaced and walked to the bank.

He wiped away the water dripping into his eyes. "Making it look like I had to rescue you."

"What?"

Water squeezed out of his socks with each step. Stopping in front of her, he leaned forward, brushed a quick kiss across the pouting lips he couldn't resist. "Hello, my sweet."

"Hello?" she asked, glaring at him like he'd lost his mind.

Taking her hand, he thought how amazingly perfect her hand fit in his, like it was made to fit. He rolled her hand so their palms met and their fingers entwined. "Yes, hello."

She fell into step beside him. Stood still while he pulled on both boots, and then laced her fingers with his again as they began to walk toward the homestead. He glanced down and his heart somersaulted when he saw the smile on her face. With a wink he said, "Good thing I rode in when I did and pulled you out of the path of that skunk."

She squeezed his fingers. "Hmm, yes, a very good thing."

Leaving a trail of water quickly soaking into the dried earth, they meandered along. Before rounding the first grove of trees, they met Kincaid Parker and a very worried looking young Kent.

"Good, heavens! What happened?" Kincaid asked.

Kendra glanced his way, eyes twinkling, and then met her father's solemn gaze. "Kent told me he saw Sterling riding in, and I came down to warn him about the skunk that had sprayed Kent earlier today."

Sterling figured he'd better butt in before she had a chance to continue. "I saw the skunk, tail waving, sneaking up behind her and didn't have much choice but to jump in and pull her in with me."

Kincaid started laughing. "Good thing, Suzanne would hate to lose another bushel of tomatoes." He stretched out his hand. "Good to see you, Major. Welcome home."

Sterling clasped the man's hand, and only a tinge of guilt tickled his belly at the white lie they'd concocted. It wasn't so much a lie, more of a little twisting of the truth. One he'd pay for by wearing dripping wet clothes the rest of the day.

"Did you see the baby skunks?" Kent wanted to know, eyes agog.

"No," Kendra answered, "I didn't see much of anything before St-Major Marlow pulled me into the water and dragged me across the pond."

A hint of happiness glittered about in Sterling's chest. They held a secret just between the two of them.

"Well," Kincaid said, waving an arm. "Come on up to the house. I'm sure Suzanne has some dry clothes you can wear.

Kendra squeezed his hand, and Sterling reciprocated, tightening his hold just enough to let her know the secret was theirs alone. Together they fell into step beside Kincaid, answering Kent's non-stop questions about skunks as they strolled along the path and into the yard.

Several hours later, while wearing borrowed

clothes and after he'd inspected several new horses Kincaid had acquired, Sterling made his way into the house in search of Kendra. Lips tight, holding in the ire that had formed while he'd been conversing with Kincaid, he scanned the empty kitchen, and then moved into the parlor. The rest of the family was in the garden plucking vegetables from their vines before the sun dried them on the spot.

"There you are," he all but snapped.

A frown puckered her brows as she looked up from the sewing in her lap. "I've been here for some time." She held up what he now recognized as his shirt. "You're clothing was in desperate need of mending." After looping the thread around a neatly sewn on button, she bit the thread with a quick snap of her pearly white teeth and set the bundle aside, securing the needle in an apple shaped pin cushion. "Why? Were you looking for me?" she asked.

The teasing, fetching sound of her voice almost made him forget his anger. Almost. "Your father told me Art Blackwell was here."

"Hmm, yes." She nodded, rising from the rocking chair. "He told us to stay close to the house since the bank robber is still roaming about."

Once again Sterling wanted to punch Art's nose until it bled. The imbecile didn't seem to have an ounce of brains. He'd not only told the young man to keep quiet about the bank robber, he'd told him to stay the hell away from Kendra.

She stepped closer, laid a hand on his forearm. "Did you find him? Have you captured the man who robbed the bank in Lamar?"

He clenched his back teeth. Damn, he'd rather have every tooth in his head pulled by dirty old Doc Robins than tell her no. Jarvis Smith was still out there. A quick passing but thrashing-mad, hail storm had put a halt to the chase, erasing any trail Jarvis had left behind.

"Sterling?" A slight tremble marred her lovely

voice.

It snapped him to attention. "I'm sorry to say he's still out there."

She moved closer, as if his presence provided protection. The action warmed his chest like someone had given him a thick blanket in the middle of winter. He curled his arm around her, molding soft curves to his side. "Don't fear. He's most likely miles from here. Probably spending the money he stole on fancy women and cold brew in Denver."

"You're most likely right," she agreed, nodding her head against his shoulder. A little sweet sounding sigh escaped her lips, before she said, "So what did you need? Why were you looking for me?"

His anger had disappeared. He no longer wanted to know what she and Art had done while the young man had visited. The way her eyes twinkled and her cheeks grew pink as she gazed up at him was all the assurance he needed to know nothing had happened. He tipped his head, brushed his lips over her forehead. "Your father said you've wanted to ride over to Mrs. Swanson's."

"Yes, I..." She paused, squirmed a little as if nervous.

He tightened his hold. "I still have her article. Do you need to finish your editing so you can take it back?"

"Yes," she sighed. "But I won't have time before the wedding." She leaned back so their gazes met. "I want to ride over so I can invite her to the wedding. I was going to earlier, but once Art told us about the robbers, Papa wouldn't let me go alone."

"Good, you shouldn't be riding that far alone. But if you want to go now, I'll ride with you."

"You will?" she asked, but her eyes and smile said she already knew the answer.

"Yes, I will," he replied, and then bent to satisfy the need growing within his frame just a touch. What he really required was complete coupling, but he'd convinced himself that wouldn't happen until after the nuptials. Breaking the kiss was hell, left him throbbing and questioning his sanity. He grasped her hand and tugged her through the house. "Let's go," was all he could say.

The sun was hot and beat upon the dry ground below the horses, frying the stubby blades of grass with the intensity of an egg tossed onto a sizzling skillet. Sterling wiped the sweat from his brow and tugged the brim of his hat lower, blocking the sun meeting them head on. He glanced left, wondering how Kendra fared. A stitch caught in the center of his chest, locking the air with such force it made sitting straight in the saddle painful.

She wore a dusty-blue bonnet, protecting her fair, delicate skin from the heat, but her hair hung loose beneath the head covering. Long straight stands flowed down her back and fluttered in the breeze. He liked it. Was glad she didn't take to twisting the cascade into a tight bun like so many women did. There was so much about her he liked. So many little things that stuck in mind and tickled a center inside him he'd never known existed.

He tugged his eyes away, gazed over the desolate terrain. For some reason the brown grass and the limp squat brush even looked prettier. It appeared anything surrounding Kendra all of sudden took on a magical beauty. He drew a deep breath, felt it flow all the way to his stomach. When had it happened? When had this inner core appeared within him? Along with it came this encompassing desire to be near her all the time. Had it happened at her sister's wedding, or had that just been the seed, and now a vine, thick and strong, had grown from his heart to hers?

"It's a hot one today," she said, interrupting his trail of thoughts.

"Yes," he answered. Thought clouds still hung in his head, wouldn't clear away and make room for small talk to form.

"It's not much farther," she said, but he didn't respond. He knew how far it was to Mrs. Swanson's. He'd stopped in to check on the widow many times over the years. A frown twitched his brows. He couldn't quite believe the sweet little old lady who made the best baked apples he'd ever eaten could be the same woman who wrote the highly sensual article tucked deep in his saddle bag.

"See that grove of trees?" Kendra asked, waving a hand.

He nodded. "You want to rest a moment in the shade?"

"Yes!" She slapped her reins over the rump of the docile mare she rode. Instantly, the horse shot forward, and Kendra shouted over her shoulder, "I'll race you."

It took a moment before the challenge entered Sterling's befuddled mind. In those seconds, before he spurred his gelding into a gallop, he caught a glimpse of a magnificent sight. The horse and woman had became one, gliding over the country side as majestically as an eagle soars through the sky. His horse picked up speed, and another registering thought made him lean over the animal's neck, encouraging the steed to put all of its effort into the chase. The docile mare was as much of a chameleon as its rider. The tiny brown and white paint was skilled and fast.

Sterling caught up with them due in part, he had to admit, because she pulled the mare to a slower pace near the grove of cottonwoods. Her face glowed, and her intense blue eyes glittered with delight as the horses walked the last few feet.

He dismounted when the animals stopped and reached up to lift her from her saddle. The horses, well-trained, took several steps to slurp at the crystal clear water of the small creek weaving its way around the trees. Drawing her body close to his,

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keeping both hands on the curves of her hips, he asked, "Do you have any more surprises up your sleeves?"

She rested her hands on his shoulders and smiled. "Secrets?" she asked coyly.

"Yes, secrets. That was some riding you just demonstrated."

"That's not a secret. I've been riding since I could walk."

"What else have you been doing since you could walk?"

Chapter Eleven

Kendra didn't have time to respond before his mouth covered hers. Hot, hungry, his lips coupled with hers. Her hands slipped up around his neck, and her body leaped to life. A fierce burning need pulsed in her veins and hunger grew in the base of her torso.

Tasting, savoring his lips, she arched forward when he pulled them away.

He grasped both cheeks of her hind end and pulled her forward, grinding their hips together. "I'm trying, Kendra. God knows I'm trying," he whispered, sounding like he was in pain.

Her mind had become little more than a hazy blur. She struggled to recall what they had been talking about, but it was no use, the bulge in his britches pressed deep into her stomach sent a scattering of intense pleasure rippling through her that overrode everything else. She wiggled, delighting in the connection, and slipped her fingers to his shirt, wanting to expose the flesh of his chest, dying to press kisses over the area.

Air wheezed as he gulped it in. "Kendra," he moaned, "that's not helping. I said I'm trying."

The buttons slipped freely through their holes, and she set about making a trail of small pecks down his breast bone. "Trying what?" she asked against his hot, tasty skin.

One of his hands kept their waists connected while the other traveled about, slipping, sliding up her side, down her back, and then it stopped, molding the side of her breast.

The touch made her quiver with anticipation, and she lifted her face, molding her lips to accept his. The kiss continued, small hot connections and long languid ones that were enough to make her take flight without wings. It was during one of those kisses, when she was all but unconscious, that his hands moved and released the row of buttons running up her dress. Her breasts, screaming for more attention, insisted she draw her arms down and let the material fall. She did, and then tugged his shirttail out of his waistband. "It's only fair," she whispered, pushing the material off his shoulders.

"You," he proclaimed against her lips, "do not play fair."

She giggled and pulled her lips away to run them down his chin and along his neck. He grasped both breasts, weighed them in his palms, and then lowered his face to lick at her nipples through the cotton of her camisole. It was as if a thunderstorm built in her, sent lightning bolts to shoot out her toes. "It's you who doesn't play fair," she stated inbetween gasps.

His hands slipped into her pantaloons, and his fingers spread wide. Each tip caressed the tender skin of her bottom and sent a new wave of pleasure surging through her. Once again, Kendra figured fair was fair, and wiggled her fingers under his waistband.

Sterling paused for just a moment, and then his fingers glided between her legs, worked at her folds. A million tiny sparks exploded in the area. She closed her eyes, reveled in the moment, and moved one leg, giving him freer access. His mouth continued to work at her breasts, and the heat screaming across her body had nothing to do with the sunlight blazing overhead.

Slowly, exploring his skin with each fingertip, she moved one hand around to cup his shaft.

Sterling let out a deep, low moan that vibrated his body and hers. A hunger, deeper and stronger than any she'd known before, billowed within her like a thick encompassing cloud. "Sterling," she whispered, clearly a plea.

His body went stiff, and his mouth and hand stilled.

She continued to stroke his manhood. "Sterling?" she asked, looking at his face as he straightened before her.

He kissed her, deep and long, and gently pulled her hand from his pants while doing so. When his lips left hers, she frowned, and met his gaze with confusion.

"Oh, God, sweetheart. You make me lose my mind."

"I know the feeling," she admitted, flames still licking her insides.

He cupped her face, ran a thumb over her cheek. "I told myself we'd wait."

"Wait? For what?"

"Our wedding night. I thought I could do it. But you're more alluring than a creek full of gold."

His admission splattered her with happiness, mingled with the already heady sensations rippling her insides. She stepped forward, pressing her torso to his again. His chest caressed her nipples, made them tight and sting in a delightful way. "Then let's not wait." Craving the taste of his mouth like a moth craves light, she tilted her head upwards.

He leaned back, wouldn't let their lips meet, and shook his head.

"But I want you," she moaned. The overwhelming need racing through her made the junction of her legs burn and twitch. She yearned to have his hands back where they'd been, his lips on her breasts again.

He smiled—a drop-dead grin that made every muscle in her legs tighten. "And I want you." His

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hands went to her waist, softly kneaded her flesh. "But what is it you want, Kendra? The act of sex as in Mrs. Swanson's article, or do you want more?"

She frowned, not quite sure what he asked. The ache inside her had become painful.

His eyes roamed her face. "It's your choice, Kendra."

She moved her hips, rubbed her pelvis against his. "I want it all."

One hand went to her back. "It's a choice." Forcefully he pressed her core against his groin, held it still. "Sex or more?"

His eyes, deep and dark, gazed at her with a gleaming light. Not following his train of thought, she bit her bottom lip. "Or?"

"Yes, or. It's your choice. We can either have sex, right here, right now. Or we can wait until our wedding night, when we'll make love."

It felt as if her heart pounded outside her body. "Right here, right now?" she asked.

A slight frown tugged at his brows. "Yes, right here, right now," he repeated.

Something in his eyes made her heart flip and slip back inside her body. Understanding flooded her mind, and a new kind of joy overtook her system. They could satisfy their need for each other, right here, right now. Or they could wait until the night was theirs—when there would be no fear of someone stumbling along and nothing would be hurried or rushed. The burning need eating at her inner core was just as strong, no stronger, than it had been the night of Kimmie's wedding, but in the days and weeks since, a new desire had formed. One that went deeper, held more merit, and told her their first time together would be much more than just the act she'd been so curious about. It would be a coupling of soul mates destiny had brought together. She hadn't read about it somewhere, nor had anvone told her about such a thing, but somehow she knew it to be true. Gazing deep into his eyes, to the point she could see her reflection, or perhaps the love he held for her, she asked, "You said it was my choice?"

His face went lax, just a touch, but she noticed it nonetheless. "Yes," he said, sounding worried.

Kendra stretched on her tiptoes so she could brush her lips to his. "Then I choose to wait." He sighed, a deep lung-emptying release that matched hers, and she added, "It's hard though, isn't it?"

His eyes held the deepest kindness she'd ever encountered. "Without a doubt."

She pulled his head down, gave him no option but to kiss her long and hard. When they separated, breathing heavy, she agreed, "Without a doubt."

He bent down, lifted her dress over her hips, and held it wide for her to slip her arms in. After buttoning the last button, which was hard because her body still screamed for an unknown release, she reached up to cup his cheek. "Just so you know, when I finally get you in my bed, I don't want anything to disturb us for hours on end."

"My thoughts exactly," he said, and then added, "come here," as he folded her into a tender, loving embrace.

She snuggled in, savoring the position she'd forever want to be in. Resting her cheek against his chest, she inhaled and held the air in an attempt to cool the fires of passion eating away at her insides. Her mind swirled imagining the years they'd have together, forever holding onto one another in both good times and bad.

It was moments later, when the muscles in her upper thighs quit twitching and the air flowed comfortably in and out of her chest, when she opened her eyes. Once again her breath caught in her throat.

Sterling must have felt she was startled because he asked, "What? What is it?"

She eased out of his arms and peered around the

trunk of a cottonwood, confirming it was the black and white cow she knew so well. "That's Mrs. Swanson's cow, Mirabelle."

One of Sterling's hands fell to rest lightly on her shoulder. "We're almost at her place. It must have wandered away from the house."

Kendra shook her head. "Mrs. Swanson wouldn't let that happen."

"Honey, a cow can wander—"

"Not Mirabelle," she interrupted. "She's blind, was born that way. Mrs. Swanson is very protective of her." Twisting about, she glanced up at him. "Sterling, something must be wrong."

He squeezed her shoulder while brushing a quick kiss to her brows. "I'll get my rope." Shrugging into his shirt, he moved toward the horses standing in the shade of another tall tree.

She eased toward the cow. "Hey, Mirabelle, it's me, Kendra. You remember me, don't you girl?" she asked, softly, walking cautiously to not startle the animal. The cow turned her head, cloudy blue eyes rolled about, and Kendra kept moving closer, speaking quiet.

Mirabelle let out a low moo as Kendra slipped a hand around the cheek strap of the halter Mrs. Swanson always kept on the cow. There was no frayed rope dangling from the metal loop beneath the chin strap. That's when a cold shiver raced up Kendra's spine.

Sterling arrived with the rope, looped it through the metal hold. "I want you and Mirabelle to wait here. I'll go check on Mrs. Swanson and be back as soon as possible."

"You want?" Kendra flinched at the annoyed sound in her voice, but Sterling just offered her one of his dazzling smiles.

"Yes, I want," he said, chucking her under the chin. "I won't be long. I promise."

She really wanted to tell him just what she

thought of his order, but quickly decided her mother was probably right, one gets more bees with honey than vinegar. "All right."

"All right?" he asked a little leery.

"All right. Go." She waved a hand before her mother's teaching left her.

"I'll be back." He kissed her, mounted, and was riding across the prairie before the warmth of his mouth had left hers.

She waited until he topped the small rise, and then led Mirabelle to Sundance. The mare gave the cow a guarded glance then turned away. Kendra mounted, and with Mirabelle trotting behind the horse, rode toward the hill. Mrs. Swanson's place was on the other side of the rise, a small clapboard house and large barn. Both were painted a bright red because, Mrs. Swanson had explained, when Mr. Swanson bought the paint for the barn there had been a mistake in the order. One hundred gallons of paint had been delivered by wagon from Denver, and since Mr. Swanson had already paid for the paint, after grumbling over the extravagant price of ten gallons of paint, they kept it all. Every five years for the past twenty years the house and barn got a new coat, and there were still several gallons in the root cellar.

Slowing Sundance's pace so Mirabelle wouldn't get tired, Kendra let out a gust of frustrated air. Sterling could *want* all day long, but Mrs. Swanson was her friend. She'd been the one to take care of the elderly widow and wasn't about to sit under a tree while he went to investigate. Whispering a quick prayer for health and well-being, she topped the hill and squinted to see if anything was out of order.

The homestead sat as it always did, shockingly red amongst the dried brown of summer prairie grass. A faint swirl of smoke fluttered out of the chimney, signaling the cook stove was in use. Kendra glanced toward the barn, expecting to see Sterling dismounting, or possibly walking across the yard. There was no sign of him. Perhaps, he'd already put his gelding in the barn and gone in the house.

She nudged Sundance and slowly they made their way down the hill. As if sensing her home, Mirabelle let out a bawl. The sound was one Kendra had heard before, probably every day of her life, but for some reason the sound made the eerie sensation tickling her spine grow stronger, grip tighter. Stiffening in the saddle and squaring her shoulders, she once again searched for Sterling, his horse, or any such sign that would prove he was near. It was to no avail and sweat beaded her temples. It was as if he'd disappeared in broad daylight.

When they were halfway across the yard, the front door of the house opened, and Mrs. Swanson made her way onto the porch. A small bit of relief oozed off Kendra's shoulders at the sight. The woman appeared to be fine, her paisley print dress fluttering about her short legs as she made her way across the porch and onto the packed dirt of the front yard.

"Kendra Parker, what on earth are you doing here?" Mrs. Swanson said, without a note of joy at having company.

A tight knot instantly formed between Kendra's brows. Mrs. Swanson was always happy to have company, no matter when. The knowledge made her glance around, searching for why the woman was annoyed. Mirabelle bawled again, and Kendra slipped out of the saddle. Gripping the lead rope, she answered, "I brought Mirabelle home. Found her roaming about."

It was clear Mrs. Swanson had been completely restored to good health by the way she stomped forward and wrenched the coil out of Kendra's hand. "I'll take her. You run on home now, it'll be dark soon."

Upon closer inspection, Kendra noticed something in the woman's eyes, fear or perhaps panic. She peered about the homestead again—nothing, other than Mirabelle tied to the end of Sterling's rope, appeared out of place. "It won't be dark for hours yet," she said needing to make some kind of a comment.

"Well, you run along anyway," Mrs. Swanson said.

"Mrs—"

"Kendra!" Mrs. Swanson whispered harshly, "Get out of here."

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" The voice, deep and gravely, reminded Kendra of a snarling dog. She whipped her head around, took in the image of a wiry grubby-looking man strutting across the front porch. The flap of the holster on his hip was undone, and his hand hovered near the wooden handle of the pistol sticking out of the pouch. She glanced back to Mrs. Swanson, and all out fear gripped her spine as she read the dread in the older woman's eyes.

Kendra went ram-rod stiff and took one step to put herself between the approaching man and the widow. "Who are you?" she seethed. The man was most certainly a foe, and her mind screamed an alarm he'd been terrorizing the older woman.

He let out a loud obnoxious laugh. "My, my, you get purtier the closer I get."

"I asked you a question." Kendra planted both hands on her hips, making the barrier between the man and Mrs. Swanson wider. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm thinking..." He stretched out his words until he stood directly in front of her. Then snatching her arm, added, "You!" With a painful grip, he pulled her forward. The smell of his breath, reminiscent of rotten eggs, spewed about as he nodded toward Mrs. Swanson, saying, "Take that

cow to the barn and don't come back."

Kendra went wild. Kicking and scratching. The smell of him made her stomach burn. The sight of his teeth, as yellow as egg yolks, made bile rise in her throat, but it was his touch that drove her insane. She felt as if there were a thousand snakes crawling across her. "Let go of me!"

He laughed again, grabbing her with his other filthy hand. Her twisting and kicking led nowhere, for when she took the time to gulp for air, she realized she was locked against his disgusting frame from head to toe.

"Get out of here, old woman," he shouted above her head, and Kendra bucked, breaking his hold enough to twist about to peer at Mrs. Swanson.

Her mind fought for a cohesive thought. She didn't want the other woman hurt, but she didn't want to be alone with the man either.

"Let her go, Jarvis!" The shout came from the barn.

The man's hold squeezed her harder, but it had been the sound of Sterling's voice that made the air lock in her lungs. Over Mirabelle's pointed hips, Kendra watched Sterling step out of the barn, gun drawn.

"Oh, this just gets better and better," the man said. One of his arms was now wrapped across her chest and one of his long legs pinned both of hers between his thighs. His other hand now held his pistol. The gleaming end pointed directly at Sterling. She started to squirm, and the man growled. "Hold still, girlie, or the major gets it."

Kendra froze.

"I said let her go, Jarvis," Sterling repeated, slowly walking across the yard.

"If it isn't the mighty major. I thought I'd lost you in that storm," Jarvis yelled. And then he chuckled. "I think I have you over the barrel this time, Major. You can't get a clean shot, not with this

cow in front of me. Nothing like when you killed my brother."

Kendra stiffened. Felt the hate oozing off the man behind her. She glanced around, searching for anything she could use as a weapon. The flat-head shovel Mrs. Swanson used to cut the heads of snakes when they got too close to the house leaned against one of the porch poles, but it was several yards away.

"I didn't kill your brother, Jarvis. You did that by involving him in your robberies. Now, let the girl go, and you and I will face off," Sterling said, having stopped halfway across the yard.

Kendra squirmed again. Jarvis shifted his hold, planted a palm over her breast and squeezed. She yelped at the pain and struggled in protest of the nasty, dirty touch.

Sterling bolted forward. "Let her go!"

Jarvis clutched her breast, painfully squashing it, and turned his pistol from Sterling to point at the side of her head. "Stop right there, Major. Or she gets the first bullet."

Sterling, eyes snapping with fury, stopped in his tracks.

"Now, drop your gun, Major. Nice and easy, toss it aside."

No! Kendra's mind screamed. The gun was their only hope. She had no doubt the man would kill them all. She and Sterling would never grow old together. Would never watch their children run through fields of spring daisies or catch brown trout in the pond. They would never have the chance to explore the treasures of love.

At the site of Sterling's gun slipping from his fingers, she snapped. Bucking, kicking, scratching and screaming, she fought Jarvis with every ounce of her being. His hold slacked enough for her to scramble out, and without conscious thought she flew to the shovel, grabbed the handle, and flung the

metal end through the air.

A deafening thud sounded, and with a yell of pain, Jarvis hit the ground. Kendra pounced forward and kicked the pistol out of his reach. She thrust the sharp square end of the shovel against the back of his neck, forcing his face into the packed dirt, and planted one foot into the middle of his back. "If you want to keep your head, don't move," she seethed.

Jarvis quit squirming, and she lifted her head, shaking the hair out of her eyes. She was somewhat surprised Sterling stood in front of her. And then, realizing what she'd just done, her body began to tremble from head to toe.

The shovel left her hands, and in a fog she let Mrs. Swanson lead her to a chair on the porch, while a hazy looking Sterling bound Jarvis with the rope she'd used to lead Mirabelle home. That complete, he moved toward her, and the closer he grew the more clear his image became. By the time he stood before her, the fog was gone.

She leaped to her feet and wrapped her arms around his neck. His kiss wasn't overwhelming with passion, like all the others had been. It was more, and filled her with deep, awe-inspiring feeling of a homecoming. She melted against him, and let the kiss consume her with emotion so clear and pure, tears slipped from her eyes. The fearful incident she'd just encountered floated away, leaving her clean and refreshed.

Sterling pulled away, cupping her face. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, and then the smile growing from the center of her heart formed on her face. "Yes, yes, I'm fine." Placing a kiss on the point of his chin, she added, "Never been better."

Chapter Twelve

Kendra turned and stood up in the wagon, placing one hand on Sterling's shoulder as she used the other to throw the bouquet of flowers toward the crowd gathered around the wagon. She had no interest in seeing where the flowers landed and twirled around to plop down on the seat beside her husband. "Get these horses a moving, Major Marlow," she instructed.

"Yes, Mrs. Marlow," he chuckled, slapping the reins over the buckskins.

She looped an arm through his, hugging the thick muscled limb. The crowd still cheered, and several kids ran beside the wheels, whooping and hollering. She waved at them, pretended interest in their honeymoon antics, but in all reality, the man at her side had been her only focus for the past two hours. "You, Major Marlow, owe me an apology."

"Oh?" he said, lips tipping into a wide smile.

"Yes." She stretched up and took a little nip at his ear.

He laughed. "For what?"

"For what?"

He nodded.

"You, Sterling Marlow, know damn well what for," she stated. Not really angry, but wanting him to think she was at least a touch miffed. "Half the wedding guests arrived before you did. I was beginning to think I would have to choose another groom." She pressed his arm against her breasts, which were screaming for his attention, had been

since he'd walked out of the barn only moments before the wedding was due to begin. "Art offered to stand in for you."

The look he settled upon her could have been considered a glare, if the twinkle in his eyes hadn't defied it. A smug smile formed on his face. "I was here long before the guests."

"No you weren't. Some of them arrived last night," she argued.

"As did I."

She leaned forward so she could see his entire face. "You did not."

He winked one eye, and the action was enough to make her squirm on her seat. "Yes, I did," he replied.

"When?"

"Actually, it was yesterday afternoon."

Her chin dropped hard enough to dislocate her jaw. She snapped her mouth closed as he laughed. "Why didn't you—"

Sterling leaned over and kissed her. "I told you, you're too tempting. I had to stay clear of you."

Now, more than a touch miffed, she folded her arms across her chest. After the incident with Jarvis, Sterling had loaded the robber onto his horse and hauled him to Lamar, and she hadn't heard hide nor hair from him since. By yesterday afternoon, she'd been fit to be tied, fearing he wouldn't arrive home in time for their wedding. Her father, as well as other family members, had tried to assure her Sterling would be at the event, but she'd fretted herself into a good vault of steam by nightfall. At that point everyone around had acted as if she had the plague.

Her bottom lip wanted to jut out and tremble. She bit on it, saying, "You could have at least sent word you were here."

His arm stretched out and folded her to his side. "I was busy," he said, brushing a kiss over her hair.

"Doing what?"
"You'll see."

She settled a serious glare on his handsome face. "You do know you're irritating me, don't you?"

He laughed as if she'd just told a joke, but when she didn't join his mirth, he pinched his lips together. "My intention was to surprise you."

She stared straight ahead. The setting sun streaked the sky with shades of pink and orange blending together with perfection, and behind them, faint strains of music began to fill the air. Her wedding had been flawless. The groom, dressed in his starched smart uniform, was more handsome than any dozen men combined, and the yard was full of well-wishers from miles around. She and Sterling hadn't stayed for hours of dancing. Instead, shortly after the meal, and after sharing one dance, they'd piled into the wagon and were on their way to the soddy, where they'd spend their wedding night.

It had come as no surprise to the guests. Kendra had informed most everyone of her plan before the ceremony. It had only been Sterling who'd looked a bit astonished when her father hitched up the team right after the meal. She'd waited long enough and didn't really care if someone raised a brow at her actions. Now, she wondered if they should have stayed behind, enjoyed the music for awhile, maybe then she wouldn't have been as irritated as she felt right now. She huffed out a breath of air. "Showing up five minutes before the ceremony wasn't the type of surprise I wanted."

He tugged her back to his side, pressed the side of his head onto hers. "Good, because that's not your surprise."

"Oh? Then what is?"

He brought the wagon to a halt beside the soddy. The structure only stood about four feet high, just two rows of sod squares, covered with a thick growing roof. The wooden door opened and Art, as

well as Kathleen Hooper, walked out of the squat building.

Sterling jumped from the wagon and spoke with them in a hushed tone she couldn't hear before he turned back to the wagon and held out his arms.

She put her hands on his shoulders, glancing at Art and Kathleen. Sterling grasped her waist, but he didn't lower her to the ground, instead, he flipped her about to cradle her back and legs across his chest. He turned around and walked toward the open doorway, carrying her.

"Congratulations, again, Kendra," Kathleen said, blushing red.

"Yes, congratulations," Art said, taking Kathleen's elbow. "We'll take the wagon back for you."

"Thanks," Sterling said, but Kendra was speechless.

He ducked to make it through the doorway, and she wrapped both arms around his neck, holding tight as he began to descend the steep stairs down into the sod dugout. When they reached the bottom, Sterling touched her lips with his, not once, but with several gentle kisses that made her head swim. Then he lowered her to the floor and led her to the center partition wall.

"This," he said, "is your surprise."

Kendra stepped around the support wall, and gasped. Candles of every shape and size had been placed about the room and lit. Their tiny flames filled the room with a majestic glow. A full size bed had been assembled where the tiny one she'd placed fresh linens on the day before yesterday had sat, and this one had a canopy stretched over the tall posts of the head and foot boards. Flimsy curtains hung from the canopy. She stepped closer, pulling one aside to peer at the mattress.

Half a dozen pillows stood near the headboard, and flower petals of every shape, color, and size were

sprinkled over a quilt made of pure white silk. She ran a hand over the material, scooped up several soft, lightweight petals. "Sterling," she whispered, unable to think of anything else.

"Do you like it?" he asked, kissing her shoulder.

"It's..." She swallowed the lump in her throat, blinked at the tears in her eyes. "It's beautiful." The word didn't begin to describe the scene, nor the emotions colliding inside her, but it was the only one she could think of.

"Just as you are," he whispered. "Beautiful." His lips trailed up her neck and across her cheek. She twisted, and when their mouths met it was as if her soul left her body and entered his.

Immediately, she grew as anxious as the day under the tree and knew she needed more than kisses. Her fingers tore at his clothes. She wanted to feel him. Her lips raced across his face, his chin, and neck, tasting him. But Sterling gently, leisurely forced her to slow.

His fingers went to the row of buttons running down the front of her dress. He took his time, lingering to run his tongue, lips, and hands, over each inch of skin exposed as her dress separated.

She eased her hurried movements. Let the full extent of his kisses be cherished, and then repeated his actions, unbuttoning his suit jacket and shirt.

They continued, removing clothing from one another, and the world ceased to exist. She felt as if it were just the two of them on the earth and stared in awe when his last bit of clothes landed on the floor. The fluttering candlelight bounced off his glistening skin like miniature bolts of heat lightning.

Sterling lifted her and then laid her upon the soft petal-covered bed. Caressing and kissing, he stretched out beside her. His fingers roamed her breasts, stroked until her nipples were alive, vibrating. She moaned and he groaned, pulled his mouth from hers to trail small kisses down her neck.

When his mouth, hot and wet, grasped one nipple, a whimper fluttered her lips. The sensations he caused made her dizzy and overwhelming desire seeped from her core. He continued, moved from one nipple to the other. His hand floated over her stomach, then lower.

An inner tornado swirled deep in her. His hand cupped the area, made her gasp at the delight. Invitingly, his fingers flit about. One entered her, slipped to massage her inner workings. A tiny explosion made every muscle in her legs tighten with ecstasy.

She ran her hand through his silky hair, encouraged his mouth to continue suckling her breast as his fingers made her hips roll to match his delightful prodding. One of her hands lowered, searched to wrap around the hardened shaft pulsating against her hip. She closed her eyes, seeing with her hands. Velvet soft and filling her palm with extreme heat, his manhood throbbed. She wrapped her fingers around it and glorified in stroking the supple skin, let her thumb caress the rounded top.

"You're driving me insane, my love," he whispered, bringing his mouth back up to hers.

"Oh, Sterling, I can't even think. All I can do is feel," she admitted.

"Hmm...and how do you feel?"

"Glorious, heavenly...Oh, I can't even explain it."

His mouth left hers, trailed down her neck again. Her breasts quivered, waited for his lips. After a short suckling, he moved lower to spread kisses down her stomach. His shaft slipped out of her hand. She reached for it, but her hands flayed, and she gasped when his mouth settled between her legs.

Wet, hot, his tongue took over where his fingers left off. *She melted*. Heat surged through her, made

Kendra's Choice

her body wither with unimaginable pleasure.

"Sterling!" she cried with reverence as her body began to buck. He continued his assault until sweat covered her body and waves of convulsions rolled all the way down to her toes.

His mouth left. Her hips reared, and before they lowered to the mattress, he entered her. The thrust was tender and firm at the same time. Throbbing with pleasure, she stretched to absorb him. A quick shot of pain made her catch her breath, but it was so swift she wondered if it was imagined. He kissed her nipples as his lips raced up her chest and caught her mouth intensely.

Plunging deeper, his shaft filled her to the core, teased the already pulsing area with new and extremely enchanting sensations. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, matched his movements with her own. It was as if she galloped across the prairie, gaining speed with every thrust.

Her mind had left her. Completely incapable of thinking she had no idea how long she rode the turbulence. It was so intense, so completely encompassing when the detonation happened, she screamed.

"Sterling, oh, God, Sterling!"

His body, rock hard, bucked with a final thrust. "I know my love, I know," he groaned.

Chapter Thirteen

Sterling collapsed, rolled on his side to hug Kendra's trembling body. His release had been so powerful, so extreme, just the thought of it made him quiver. He kissed her temple, caressed the soft skin beneath his fingers.

"I'm sorry, my love," he whispered.

She tilted her head, smiled upon him. Passion still swirled in her eyes. "Sterling, darling, why on earth would you be sorry?" she asked.

He leaned forward, kissed an eyebrow. "For hurting you." The ability to go slow, to ease into her the first time had become clouded with his overwhelming desire.

Her fingers ran over his face, softly tickled the area beneath his chin. "You didn't hurt me, not by any means." She scooped up a handful of petals and sprinkled them over his head. "And I love my surprise."

He picked up a few, laid them over her breasts. "I wasn't trying to irritate you. I just knew that as soon as I saw you, I would have to have you. I couldn't wait any longer." Leaning down, he licked the petals from her skin. "Especially after that escapade with Jarvis." He shivered at the remembrance of Smith holding the gun to her head. He'd almost gone mad at that moment. Every ounce of control he'd ever owned had shattered. And then she'd flown into action. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never forget how she burst out of Jarvis' hold, snatched up the shovel, and knocked the man to the

ground faster than a rattler's strike.

"Is he incarcerated?" she asked, somewhat meekly.

"Yes, in Denver, and will most likely never be released," he said, kissing the lobe of her ear.

She twisted, snuggled closer to his side, and shivered.

With the crook of one finger, he lifted her chin. "What's wrong?"

One tiny tear slipped out of the corner of her eye. "The thought of not living the rest of my life with you made something inside me snap. I don't even remember grabbing the shovel."

He wiped at the tear with one finger. "I can't imagine my life without you. From the moment I saw you, brushing your hair away from your face"—he paused to mimic the movement and let his fingers flay into her hair—"I've been so deep in love, I couldn't even think straight." Brushing a kiss to her temple, he admitted, "When Jarvis had you I went completely cold."

She wrapped both arms around him. "I had dreams afterwards. Terrible, awful dreams that—" A tiny sob escaped. "That he killed you."

"Shh," he murmured and increased their embrace. "I'm sorry, love. I'm sorry I wasn't here to hold you. But they were just dreams. I'm here now."

She nodded. "I know, and I'm so very thankful."

He kissed her head, her temple. "And I'll be here forever. I'm not going anywhere. Not without you."

"I love you." Her statement was clear and concise, and full of the strength he knew she was made of. He held her tight, relishing in the thought of their future together.

They lay like that, simply savoring the love they'd found for sometime before she wiggled. Sterling relaxed his hold, and Kendra, plastering little kisses on his chest said, "I never imagined love would be so fulfilling." "Oh?" he asked.

"Hmm," she murmured. "I feel as if I have enough energy to run all the way to Denver." Her eyes met his, a teasing glint sparkled. "Which I thought I might have to do."

He was once again amazed by the treasure he'd been lucky enough to find and snatched her lips, drank her sweet nectar. The stimulating taste renewed his passion, made him grow hard again. He thought it impossible, wanting her again so quickly, especially after how satisfying their first encounter had been.

He lifted his lips, took a fortifying breath. "I'm sorry about that, too. Making you worry I'd not arrive in time."

She pushed on his shoulders, forced him to roll off his side, lie flat on his back. Her body followed, settling enticing hips on top of his. The mounds of her breasts rubbed against his chest, sent ripples of pleasure down his torso.

"That wasn't very nice." She brushed a handful of hair away from her face.

His mind had grown fuzzy from the excitement her body created in his. "You're right, it wasn't," he admitted.

Feather-light, her lips fluttered over his. "I think I might have to punish you for that."

He grasped her face, looked deep into her shimmering eyes. "You do?"

She nodded, kissed him again. "Yes." Her tongue licked his bottom lip. "I think...." She wiggled, lowering her body so she could run soft kisses down his neck, over his shoulders. "I know something I could do." Her tongue roamed along his collarbone.

He went completely hard. His erection jolted against her belly. "Oh? What's that?" His hands cupped her face, and wanting her to find humor in the frightening escape that had been lingering in her mind, so she could be rid of the horror, he teased, "I

hope it doesn't involve a shovel."

She laughed, tossing her head so her hair flew about before it settled to cascade down her back. "No, no shovel."

He laughed as well, and his shaft throbbed with more need. But he couldn't take her again this soon, so he grasped her waist and lifted her to the edge of the bed. Flinging his legs over the side, he stood, and flipped her into his arms.

"What are you doing? I wasn't done punishing you." She flitted kisses along the side of his face, nibbled on his ear.

His heart throbbed as hard as his groin. God he loved her, would for the rest of their lives. "I have one more surprise."

"You do?" Her head snapped left and right.

He walked to where he'd hung a thick curtain and hoped Art and Kathleen had followed all of his instructions. "Pull the curtain aside," he instructed.

She did, and his sigh of relief echoed with her gasp. More lit candles sat on the shelf behind the brass tub and tiny swirls of steam rose from the water. He moved forward and stepped over the high side.

"Oh, Sterling," she murmured against his skin as he lowered them both into the warm water. "I do like your surprises."

"Do you?" he asked, but captured her mouth before she had a chance to respond.

The tub wasn't quite as large as he'd like, and he shifted, trying to make room for both of them. She wiggled, asking, "Could you stand up for just a moment?"

"Sure," he rose, water sloshing over the sides. "That better?" he asked, wondering if he should climb out of the water and give her the opportunity for a leisurely soak.

Her face tipped up, and she gave him a brilliant, teasing smile. "Perfect."

He reached out to grasp the rim of the tub and step over the edge, but he was too slow. Before he lifted one leg, she rose to her knees and took him in her mouth.

Air locked in his lungs, and he almost climaxed, right then—had to constrict every muscle to hold it in. More passionate than imaginable, her mouth ate at his head, and her hands pumped his shaft. An inferno built. His entire frame blazed with devastating, captivating heat. He moaned, groaned, and fought to prolong his release.

It quickly became a losing battle. Moments before he'd have to admit defeat, he gently forced her to release him. Sterling lowered to sit on the flat edge of the tub. He brushed aside the bath sponges and sweet smelling soaps he'd purchased in Denver and pulled her out of the water. "Come here," he almost whimpered.

She stood and straddled his post with her body. Warm, moist, completely ready for him, she lowered onto his erect form and cloaked him with sizzling passion.

He became her steed. She rode him hard, and with such feverish love, he rose to an unbelievable peak, gasped for each breath of air, then thoughts ceased to exist as he luxuriated in the ride.

Her muscles around him tightened. He grabbed her shoulders and clutched her to him. Commanding legs wrapped around his back, thrust him deeper into her, and held him there as they plummeted over the summit together. Screaming at their releases like wild mustangs.

Shaken to the core and elevated to the heavens, he rocked her back and forth as they floated back to earth. He kissed her forehead, brows, and lastly her lips. Locked onto them with all the passion and strength he could muster.

When he finally drew back, let them both come up for air, she threw her head back in a delightful giggle. His kissed her neck. "What, my dear, do you find so funny?"

"Not funny, happy," she stated. "I have never felt so happy in my life."

He slipped from the edge of the tub, lowering them both into the water. With her on his lap, legs still wrapped around his back, they fit perfectly into the tub. "Me too," he admitted.

She leaned her forehead against his. "Mrs. Swanson doesn't have a clue what she's writing about."

Practically able to recite the article word for word, he raised a brow. "She doesn't?"

"Nope." She shook her head, kissed the end of his nose. "There is so much more...so many more feelings and sensations." Her head lifted, and she gazed upon his face. Love sparkled in her eyes. "But we can't blame her. It's impossible to explain, isn't it?"

He had no choice but to agree. "Completely impossible." Tracing a finger over her lips, he asked, "Are you going to help her change the article?"

"And spoil it for every other bride out there? Not on your life. This is something one must experience." She let out a long, satisfying sigh, looked around the candlelit space. "Just as I have."

He chuckled and followed her gaze. "So tell me, Mrs. Marlow, would you rather be married to an Army Major or a State Marshal?"

She twisted her mouth as if thinking deeply about his question. "Well, I believe as long as we are together, I don't rightly care."

The comment filled him with joy. He hadn't yet decided himself, had chosen to wait and discuss it with her. They had time, now that Jarvis was arrested and Kincaid had said they could stay in the soddy as long as they wanted.

Reclined, and holding onto one another, they relaxed until the water lost most of its heat. Then he

reached over the tub and plucked up one of the thick sponges he'd bought. "Would you like me to wash your back, Mrs. Marlow?"

"Sounds heavenly, Major Marlow." Still on his lap, she didn't make any other move to separate their connection.

Squeezing the sponge over her breasts, he asked, "So tell me, Mrs. Marlow, are you and Mrs. Swanson going to collaborate on any more articles?"

She tapped the side of her cheek, as if thinking, then wiggled backwards to release his relaxed manhood. One slanted brow arched as she glanced from it to his face while rising to her feet.

Water sparkled in the candlelight as it cascaded off her skin. It was like watching a goddess rise from the ocean. Blood surged through his body, and as unfeasible as it seemed, he started to swell again.

She stepped over the edge of the tub and with a mischievous grin, commanded, "Come along, my dear husband."

"Are you for real, or is my imagination riding wild?" he asked, stepping out of the water.

"Oh, I'm real all right." Her hips swayed as she stepped backwards, moving toward the bed now full of tousled covers and petals. "And there are a few more things I want to research." She held up both hands, gesturing for him to follow.

He followed like a well-trained pup, panting the whole way. When the ability to think returned, he asked. "Research?"

She lowered herself onto the mattress, curled one finger invitingly. "Yes, research. I think I might have to write a few of my own articles."

He climbed on the bed, straddling her with both hands and knees. "Really?"

She giggled and cupped his face. "Yes really."

"I think I like the sound of that," he admitted.

Her eyes grew serious, and she solemnly whispered. "Thank you for loving me."

Kendra's Choice

He leaned down, kissed her. "It's the easiest thing I've ever done." Kissing her again, he added, "Ever will do."

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