

Rosette

Cactus Rose

HEART'S DESIRE



LEANNE KARELLA

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by

Leanne Karella

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Chapter One

“When will Papa be home?”

Ella Slater turned from scrubbing the black iron pot to see little Hattie standing near, her ragged baby doll clutched in her right arm, her left thumb tucked into her mouth.

“I thought you were in bed, sweetie.”

Hattie shrugged. The five-year-old had the same startling blue eyes as her father, but the rest of her must have come from her mother. Pale blonde hair, skin the color of fresh cream, and she was as frail as a dove.

“Well, he should be home any minute.” Night had fallen over an hour earlier, and it was past time for Carson to be in for the night. She tried not to worry about him. But with each day she spent cooking and cleaning for him and his precious daughter, it became more difficult to keep her emotional distance. And little Hattie was the most precious child she’d ever happened across.

“I want Papa,” Hattie said in a small voice as tears sparkled on her lower eyelids.

She held her arms out to the girl, and Hattie moved into her embrace. “Come on, I’ll tuck you in. When your papa gets home, I’ll have him come see you, okay?”

Hattie nodded against her shoulder, but her little snuffle of disappointment broke Ella’s heart.

“Don’t cry, my love,” Ella whispered as she carried her into her small bedroom. “Papa is out with the animals, making sure they’re okay. That’s why he has me here for you. Just as he cares for his cattle and horses, I take care of you.”

Hattie nodded again, and Ella set her down on the soft feather bed. “I miss Papa.”

“I know you do, love. He should be in shortly.” Soft light from the hall cast a gentle glow over the sleepy child.

Ella brushed the feather-soft hair away from the girl's cheeks. Not for the first time, she wondered what Hattie's mother had been like. She must have been beautiful—exquisite—to have produced such a tiny, perfect, baby girl.

"Ella?" Hattie said slowly, dragging out her name.

"Yes, love?" She snugged the handmade quilt around Hattie's shoulders, tucking it around her as the girl liked.

"Why don't I have a mommy?"

Ella's knees buckled, and she sat down hard on the edge of the bed. She wanted to scoop the child into her arms and tell her she'd gladly be her mommy forever.

"You do have a mommy," she answered, her throat thick with emotion. "But she's in heaven with God now."

"Can I go see her?"

Sorrow tightened Ella's chest, and she shook her head. "No, my sweet. You cannot. But she's watching over you. She sees you, and I bet if you want to talk to her, she'll listen."

Ella lost her own mother when she was only fourteen. Though little Hattie might miss what she'd never known, she'd never experience the sorrow of watching her mother died slowly of consumption. On the other hand, Hattie's father tried to drown his pain in whisky. If he didn't stop that soon, Hattie might lose him, too, and then where would the little girl be?

The same place Ella went when her mother died? To work in a brothel, making just enough money to survive?

No. She wouldn't let that happen. Not ever. If something happened to Carson, she would take the child away and keep her safe. She could move away from Dover Creek, start new in another small town in the territory where no one knew her, and claim Hattie as her own.

She would never let Hattie wind up selling her body for a bit of coin. Not ever. Little Hattie deserved so much better.

If it hadn't been for Carson, Ella would still be in that brothel. He'd saved her from a life which had been no life at all.

Hattie closed a tiny hand around Ella's and tugged it up to her cheek. "Pet me."

Ella smiled even as her heart broke. "Roll over and I'll rub your back."

With much wiggling and bouncing, Hattie rolled onto her stomach. Ella tugged down the covers then scooted into bed next to the child. When she ran her hand over Hattie's head, through her hair, the little girl sighed. This was Hattie's favorite pastime, it seemed. Ella assumed Hattie needed the physical touch of a woman. Ella loved the quiet time, too, when she could dream this sweet, little girl was hers alone.

She couldn't have a child of her own. Hattie was the closest she'd ever come, which was why Ella was so careful to never do anything to provoke Carson. She never wanted to leave the Lazy K Ranch; never wanted to leave Hattie. And Carson needed her, even if he would never admit it.

"Ella?"

"Hmm?" she murmured as she stroked the little girl's back with gentle sweeps of her hand.

"I wish you were my mommy."

Hot tears burned her eyes, but she blinked them away. Crying had never accomplished anything. She wrapped her arm around Hattie and snuggled her warm little body against her own. "That would be nice, little love," she whispered.

She wouldn't tell the child wishes were for fools. She wouldn't admit that no matter what she'd ever wished for, none of them had come true. Her mother had died, the baby she'd once had inside of her had died, and Carson never gave her a second glance no matter how hard she wished for him to notice how much she loved him.

Carson Kinsey's shoulders slumped as he stood in front of the door to his cabin. How much more of this could he take? His daughter looked at him as if he were a stranger. Beautiful Ella gazed at him like a love-struck doe with big, brown eyes, and a gentle smile he longed to taste. He couldn't take it. He had nothing left to give. Not to his daughter and definitely not to a woman.

Stella took everything good inside of him when she left him with a squalling baby and a falling-down ranch.

When news of her death had arrived just days later, he hadn't even cared. Had said good riddance. Now, five years later, the ranch was turning a profit—if the weather held and didn't pull anything unexpected—and his little girl was growing. That was all he had, though.

His heart had broken beyond repair when Stella stood on the doorstep waiting for him to come in one night, travel bag by her side. His Stella. The girl he'd loved since childhood. The baby cried as if the world were ending, and Stella told him she was going back to Boston, back to her father, where she should have stayed.

Ten years they'd been married, ever since they were little more than children themselves. Yet here he was, barely thirty years old, alone and empty. Her death hung over his head like an executioner's axe.

He hated that bitch for what she'd done.

Carson shoved the door open. The scent of beef stew made his mouth water. He hadn't eaten in hours, and he'd worked his tail off all day riding and repairing fences in the north pasture. The candles still burned in the kitchen, but Ella wasn't in sight. He scowled. She knew not to waste wax candles. He shut the door, checked his rifle for moisture, and then slipped it into the holder over the doorframe. Then he unbuckled his gun belt and did the same to his pistols before sliding them back into the holsters and hanging the belt on the peg next to the door. He removed his boots and left them on the rug by the door before he headed to the oven and lifted the lid on the small, cast iron skillet.

Stew and dumplings. His favorite. Not bothering with a bowl, he grabbed the towel sitting on the counter, wrapped it around the handle, and carried it to the scarred table. He went back to the kitchen for a spoon and a cup of coffee. He'd just scooped up his first bite when Ella came into the kitchen from Hattie's bedroom.

"Oh. I didn't hear you come in," she said in her soft, English accent. "I must have dozed off with Hattie."

He grunted in response and took another bite. He never knew what to say to her.

"Would you like a cup of milk?"

He shook his head. "Coffee's fine."

She paused a moment at the side of the table, and he glanced up to see her brow puckered in a slight frown. Her mouth opened as if she were about to say something, but then she turned away without a word and went to the sink.

He ate in silence but couldn't keep from glancing at her back as she scrubbed a pot. She wasn't a beautiful woman by anyone's standards. She was tall and strong, with hair the color of a field mouse. Her nose was a little too small for her round face, and her eyes too large, her chin pointy. But her lips were full and pink. She had a habit of flicking her tongue out to moisten them when she spoke, which stoked his lust as nothing ever had.

He dreamed of kissing those lips. Of tearing away her worn, calico dress to find out if all those curves were real or a product of a corset. Her breasts were full and high, her waist narrow, her hips wide. If they were real, she'd be so soft to sink into.

Turning his attention back to his stew, he ducked his head to keep from staring at her. He had no business thinking of her that way. She was a fallen woman. A whore. He shouldn't even let her around his daughter, but when he hired her, he'd been desperate for the help. In the four years she'd been on the Lazy K, she'd never done anything to make him worry. She was a good caretaker for his daughter, kept him well fed, and his house spotlessly clean.

"Hattie would like you to tuck her in when you've finished eating."

"She's asleep, isn't she?" he asked as he scraped the bottom of the pan with his spoon, trying to get the last bit of sauce.

"Yes, she is now, but she was asking for you tonight."

How could a child who barely saw him ask about him? He shook his head and lifted his coffee mug. "Then she won't know the difference." He drained the scalded drink in one long swallow.

He stood up and carried the pan and his mug to the sink.

Ella set down the scrub brush and turned to him. Being this close to her was dangerous. His heart might be

dead, but his cock wasn't. It wanted her. Had ever since he saw her coming down the stairs of the Sleepy Eye Saloon wearing a red and black dress made of shiny silk and teasing lace.

He still didn't understand why Ella was the only whore Madame Chloe would part with.

"It does matter," Ella said in her lyrical accent. "That little girl needs her daddy. She cries when you're not here to tuck her in at night."

Guilt shot through him like a lightening bolt, followed closely by broiling anger. "It's not as if I can tell the cattle I can't mend the fence until morning and would they be so kind as to not leave."

Ella tilted her chin up. She only stood a few inches shorter than he, but when she looked down her nose at him, it made him want to...haul her into his arms and kiss the stubborn from her.

"I did not say—" She literally bit her tongue and dropped her gaze. "I was passing on a message is all."

He scrubbed his hand over his face. Ella was not a meek woman, but she never really let him have it, either. Even when it was obvious she wanted to. He wondered if she'd been hurt by a man.

He stared at her for a long moment, wanting to shout at her, wanting to kiss her. Instead, he said, "Finish up here and go to bed." Then he turned on his heel and headed for Hattie's bedroom."

Ella's softly spoken, "Yes, sir," followed him.

He found Hattie asleep on her stomach, facing the wall. She was bundled in the blankets like a bug with only the top of her pale blonde head peeking out. Her hair was the same as her mother's had been. Soft, fine, and the color of corn silk. She looked so much like her mother he sometimes couldn't stand it.

He touched her head, and she let out a soft sigh. He shouldn't hold her mother's sins against her. It wasn't her fault he'd let his wife go without a word, let her walk away from him. Hattie couldn't help that he was all she had in the world, and it terrified him to be responsible for her. It certainly wasn't her fault her mother had died a horrible death at the hands of bandits. And it wasn't

Hattie's fault her mother had fled the life he'd tried so hard to build for her.

"Papa?" Hattie rolled over, her eyes half closed.

Maybe his heart wasn't dead. When she called him papa in her sweet, little voice, something in his chest tightened. "I'm here."

"Love you, Papa." Her eyes drifted closed, and she sighed again.

He sat on the edge of the tiny bed and stroked her cheek with his finger. "Ah, pumpkin. I love you, too." *I just don't know what to do with you.*

Chapter Two

Ella rolled out of bed and peeked out the window. A soft blue glow lit the eastern horizon. She quickly rinsed her body with cold water from the bowl on the dresser and pulled on her dress. With disgust, she ran her hands over the faded, worn cloth. She needed to get material to make a new one, but she hated to part with the few coins she had to her name.

Carson didn't pay her much beyond room and board. Not that she minded. She had a soft bed to sleep in every night and warm food to fill her belly. More than she ever got working for Madame Chloe. If she ate anything other than bread from the saloon's kitchen, it had come out of her pay. And the bed at the whorehouse had been no more than a mattress stuffed with straw which poked and chafed.

She splashed a bit more water on her face to help wake her up, pulled her hair back, and pinned it in a neat knot at the back of her head.

Hurrying into the kitchen, she grabbed up her apron and tied it around her waist. She picked the tinder from the box near the fireplace and set the stove to heating. Then she took the egg basket from the pantry and headed outside to the henhouse, but a soft noise caught her attention. She stopped and cocked her head, one hand on the door latch. There it was again. She pinpointed the sound. It came from the loft. She turned and looked up but couldn't see anything in the deep shadows. The loft served as Carson's bedroom.

The sound came again. The distinct glug and slosh of a whisky jug being tilted. Her heart twisted, and she clamped her fingers tight around the egg basket. She'd seen him drinking in the morning only once before. One morning two years ago, as she'd made her way to the henhouse, she'd happened across him in the barn. Sitting

in a corner of an empty stall, he'd had a half-empty whisky bottle next to him. When she approached him, he'd shouted at her to leave him be. But she'd seen the tracks of tears on his rugged cheeks.

The scars he carried ran deep. Even deeper than her own. She'd learned long ago to bury her anguish and put on a smile so no one would ever know how she suffered deep inside. It had become habit while working for Madame Chloe. *No one wants a crybaby whore*, Chloe had said to her on more occasions than she could count.

The distinctive glug-slosh came again.

Oh, Carson. Why do you do that to yourself? She opened the door and stepped out into the crisp morning air. She'd tried to drown the horrors of her life in a bottle a few times, but it never worked. Soon enough the alcohol wore off. When it did, she was sick to her stomach and still remembered everything she'd wanted to forget.

The whisky touched his lips, but he couldn't swallow. He set the jug down and crammed the cork into the top. He wanted oblivion. Wanted to drink until he felt nothing. Until his mind went blank. Lately, though, whisky wasn't enough. He still remembered his failures as a husband and father no matter how drunk he became. And when the haze of booze wore off, the guilt was even worse.

Emptiness seemed to consume his soul, sucking the life out of him. His child was too young to have a conversation with. The woman keeping his house and cooking for him was hired help. A fucking whore. He couldn't talk to her. She shouldn't be living under his roof, tending to his daughter.

A hot tear blazed a trail down his cheek, but he swiped it away in an angry motion. Ella was kind and gentle. She'd never done anything untoward against him or Hattie. She treated his child as if she were her own. Hattie needed a mother.

On more than one occasion he'd come back to the house in the middle of the afternoon to see Ella and Hattie on the porch. While Ella shelled peas or snapped beans or churned butter, Hattie jabbered on about bugs and flowers or whatever it was little girls talked about.

Ella was the epitome of patience with the child.

Once, when he came in especially late at night, he'd found Ella asleep in Hattie's bed, snuggling the girl against her bosom as if she were the girl's mother. His child was safe and secure in Ella's arms. Safer than she'd be in his own. In the soft moonlight streaming through the window, he'd seen tears sparkling on the edge of Ella's dark eyelashes like tiny dewdrops.

Not once in four years had he seen her cry. But he'd heard the sweet music of her laughter. It was a sound he wished she expressed more often. She never let loose around him. Her smile was polite and warm, but when he was around, she never laughed. Only when she thought she was alone with Hattie. He wondered how often she cried when she was alone. Every night? What would make a woman like her sad?

It wasn't his business. She worked for him. Just as she'd worked for Madame Chloe.

He stood up and glanced at the whisky jug. He'd drunk himself to sleep, but the nightmares had still plagued him. He hadn't been there, but the sheriff told him what happened to his wife. He'd never been able to erase from his mind the vision of the horrors she'd suffered. She'd been so small, so frail. And the men had used her body until she died.

His stomach twisted and nausea roiled. Swallowing back the bile, he pulled on his pants. He couldn't go back and change the past. He just wished his future held more for him than...the nothingness.

Ella set the tin plate on the table in front of Carson, along with a mug of coffee. He'd come in early enough to tuck Hattie into bed, and Ella missed the motherly activity. She knew it was important for Carson to spend more time with the girl, though, and was glad he'd made the effort, even if it had taken him a few days to build up to it.

"Thank you," he said, his voice low.

His thanks surprised her, and for a moment, she didn't know how to respond. As far as she could remember, he'd never thanked her for cooking a meal. Or

anything else for that matter. "You're...welcome."

He gave a brisk nod and set into his food.

Returning to her cleaning, she wiped down the countertop and drew a pan of water from the pump to heat for a bath. "Would you like me to heat water for you?"

After swallowing, he raised his head and pierced her with those brilliant blue eyes. His hair was overly long, hanging to just below his collar. He didn't answer, just stared.

"I could trim your hair for you, if you like."

Her heart thudded against her breastbone. She'd never been so forward with him. He normally went into town once a month for a haircut, but it had been a while. Ella never stepped foot in town. She was afraid of what would be said about her living on the Lazy K. She could handle the gossip—she'd heard enough from working in the saloon so long—but she wouldn't bring the nasty tongues of the church women down on Carson's head.

His eyelids flickered briefly, and his expression softened the tiniest bit. "I'd like that."

Her heart soared. "I'll get my things." She rushed to her small room and opened the top drawer of the bureau. She had a pair of barber scissors that had once belonged to her father and a tortoiseshell comb her mother had given her for her twelfth birthday. The only possessions she had from her parents. The only things that had been overlooked—probably by accident—by the women who worked for Madame Chloe. Everything else had been nipped over the years she worked at the saloon.

When she returned to the kitchen carrying a sheet to drape around Carson so he didn't get hair down his shirt, he stood at the sink rinsing his plate.

"I can do that later," she said, excited to get her hands on him. To run her fingers through his hair. She'd dreamed of this moment for four years. It was as close to him as he'd ever permit, and she didn't want him to waste time doing her job.

He pulled a chair away from the table and sat down. His jaw was set firm, and his hands fisted against his thighs.

"I know how to cut a man's hair," she said, trying to allay his fears. "My father was a barber and taught me when I was very young." She set the sheers and comb on the table then spread the cotton sheet around him and tucked it into his collar. Her fingers brushed over the warm, smooth skin of his neck, and tingles raced up her arms. When the back of her hand skimmed against his evening whiskers, she had to squeeze her thighs together.

Never in her life had she craved a man's touch until she met Carson. From losing her virginity to a rutting pig when she was only fourteen, until the last man she'd been paid to bed four years ago, she'd loathed them all. Stinking, filthy, sweaty swine who used her body in ways she still couldn't believe. From sex that had hurt to a few beatings she still didn't know how she survived.

But Carson always smelled clean. He bathed outside every night before he came into the house. He shaved almost every morning after breakfast before heading out to work the cattle. And not in four years had he laid a hand on her. He'd never beaten or even raised a hand to her or his daughter. Not even when he'd been stumbling drunk.

Picking up the comb, she ran it over the crown of his head. His hair was still slightly damp from the rinsing he'd given it before coming inside. Cool and smooth as silk. She ran her fingers through it and closed her eyes for a moment, reveling in the sensation of being able to touch him for the first time.

He cleared his throat, making her jump. Her face heated with guilt for her indulgence, and she tried to focus on her task.

Snip, snip. Snip, snip. The room was silent save for the oil lantern's soft hiss and the sound of her father's scissors as she shortened Carson's hair.

"Was your father a barber here in Dover Creek?"

His words startled her, and she dropped the scissors with a clatter. "Sorry," she muttered and picked them up, grateful she stood behind him so he couldn't see how flustered he made her. He'd never asked her a personal question before. Not a single one.

"Um. No. In Denver. Mother and I moved to Dover

after he died when I was ten. My uncle lived here."

More silence. Her hands trembled as she cut. She sucked in a deep breath, trying to still her thudding heart. When the hair at the back of his neck and on top was the length she knew he preferred, it was time to move around in front of him and trim his sideburns. She swallowed around the lump in her throat.

She stared at his wide shoulders and wished she had the right to lean down and press her cheek to him. To bury her face in his hair. To be able to claim him as her own.

She exhaled a slow breath and then moved around in front of him. He looked up at her, his expression hard, his eyes glittering in a way she'd never seen before. The lump in her throat seemed to grow. Had she done something wrong? The lines bracketing his mouth seemed deeper than normal, his lips pressed into a thin line.

She licked her dry lips. "Is—" She cleared her throat. "Is it okay if I do your sideburns now?"

With a quick nod, he looked down, taking his intense gaze from her. She raised the comb and sheers. *Snip, snip. Snip, snip.* He adjusted his leg, brushing it against hers. Her hand slipped, and she poked his earlobe with the tip of the scissors.

He jerked to the side and raised his hand to his ear, his eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't mean—"

He grabbed her wrist. Fear blossomed in her gut.

"Why so nervous?" His eyes were as blue as the evening sky and as hard as granite. "It's not as if you've never touched a man before."

She'd never touched *this* man before, though. The man she loved. The father of the child she longed to call her own.

With a tug of her arm, he pulled her between his thighs. The comb tumbled to the floor when she was forced to lay her hand flat against his chest to keep from falling against him. He felt as hard as rock. All lean muscle.

"Do you miss your job at the whorehouse?"

The words were spoken in little more than a whisper,

but they cracked like a whip over her. She shook her head. "It was a saloon."

"But you were a whore working for Madame Chloe."

She couldn't deny it—wouldn't bother. It was where he'd found her.

"Did you look at all the men the way you look at me?"

Her eyes widened in horror. Had he seen her lusting after him? Did he know her private thoughts? She shook her head in denial. She hated those horrible men.

His grip loosened around her wrist, but as she tried to stand upright, his other hand swept up the back of her thigh to cup her bottom. The lightening bolt of pleasure that shot through her pulled a whimper from deep in her soul. Even now he was tender. His long, strong fingers kneaded her flesh through her thin dress and underthings but caused no pain, only delight.

"Why have you never offered me your body? Don't you think I'd offer a bonus if you did?"

The pleasure fled and humiliation returned. She dropped her gaze, only to see the ridge of his arousal pressing against his slacks. Her stomach turned in disgust. She was once a whore, and she'd always be a whore. Four years of scrubbing and cleaning and caring for his child couldn't change the fact that he'd rescued her from Madame Chloe. Found her selling her body to men. If she stayed here in Dover Creek, she'd never be anything better.

As much as she loved Carson and Hattie, she couldn't do it. Couldn't sell herself to this man. She wanted more out of life than sex for coin.

"Answer me," he demanded, his voice strained, hard. He still caressed her bottom, though, and it felt too good.

Tears blurred her vision, but she struggled to blink them back. She didn't want him to know how much his questions hurt. He couldn't ever know how much she wanted him to see her as a good and pure woman. The one thing she was not.

He grabbed her chin and tilted her head to look him in the face. A tear trailed down her cheek, and she cursed herself for the weakness. She jerked out of his grasp, turned away, and tried to make it to the front door, but he

grabbed her around the waist. He spun her, pinning her between the hard wood of the door and the solid muscles of his chest. With a jerk, he pulled the sheet from his collar and dropped it on the floor, still holding her with one hand.

"Answer me," he demanded.

Another tear slipped from her eye, and she closed them, trying to shut him out as she'd shut out hundreds of men. But when big, warm, callused hands cupped her cheeks, and when his thumb brushed away the trail of moisture, the fight left her. His tenderness was her undoing. She'd so long dreamed of his touch and now that she had it, she didn't know what to do. What to say.

"Why haven't you ever offered yourself to me?" he asked again, his voice softer this time.

When she looked up into his beautiful eyes, the harsh lines of his features had eased. He looked at her with concern, gentleness. He would never hurt her, she realized. He didn't have it in him.

"I...I never wanted to be a whore." She swallowed hard, the sound loud in the silent room. "My mother lived with my uncle—my father's brother—and there was talk around town. When mother died just a few months after my uncle, I tried to get work, but no one would take me. They thought my mother and uncle..." She shook her head and another tear slipped out. Her bottom lip trembled. "I was alone, and starving, and...I slept in the livery because I could sneak in late at night." A sob broke free. "I ate scraps from the garbage behind the saloon. I had to fight the dogs for the few morsels." Her tears blinded her. "That's where Madame Chloe found me. If I hadn't...hadn't..."

Carson's strong arms closed around her. His big palm smoothed over the back of her head, and he rocked her gently back and forth, pressing her cheek against his shoulder.

The tears flowed freely, and she couldn't stop them. She'd been so cold and alone for so long. This was the first embrace she'd experienced since her mother fell ill.

"Shh, Ella. Shh. I'm sorry."

She sniffled and tried to get herself under control.

But when his hand coasted down her back, much the same way she did to Hattie when the little girl was upset, she couldn't stand to draw away from him. Instead, she wound her arms around him and pressed herself tight against his safe, sheltering body.

Chapter Three

Shame engulfed Carson for bringing Ella to tears. He'd had no idea of her past. The life she'd been forced to live in order to survive was beyond his comprehension. When he moved his bride west, following the gold rush at Pike's Peak, there had been a couple lean years for them, but never had they needed to resort to selling anything as personal as their own bodies. He'd never have allowed his wife to do such a thing. He'd always assumed the women at the whorehouses wanted to be there. They made money in their profession, didn't they?

Then why had Ella shown up on his doorstep a day after he'd talked to Madame Chloe with nothing more than a small bag containing her worldly possessions?

He'd been a fool, a cold, heartless ass for thinking Ella had willingly done the things she had when she'd only been trying to survive.

"I'm sorry," he said again, unable to come up with anything more to say for the way he'd acted.

Slowly, Ella's tears ebbed, and her hiccupy breaths smoothed. She felt soft and warm against him. So very right. How many nights had he fantasized her in his arms? Beneath him?

His cock surged to fullness once again, and he closed his eyes, burying his face against her hair. She smelled of fresh air and sunshine. Everything pure. Yet, he knew she was anything but.

Her breath caught, and her arms tightened around him for an instant. She'd obviously felt his hardness against her belly. But then she leaned back and tipped her face up. Her small nose was red, her eyes slightly swollen from her tears. "I don't want to be your whore," she said, her voice low and rough.

"What *do* you want?" He brushed a stray lock of hair from her cheek.

She closed her eyes as if looking at him were difficult. "I want you to see me as I am." Her full, pink bottom lip trembled slightly. "I want you to want me because..." She met his gaze. Her eyes were dark in the low lantern light, filled with longing and sorrow.

He knew he hadn't misinterpreted the gazes she'd sent his way since she moved into his house and took over Hattie's care. Until now, he'd assumed they were an invitation. Until tonight, he'd been able to resist. He hadn't wanted a whore, no matter how much he'd craved a woman's touch.

"Tell me," he whispered. *Tell me you want to be...* His heart—the organ he'd thought long dead—flipped onto its side and beat too hard. *Tell me you want to be loved.*

"It doesn't matter what I want," she said and dropped her gaze to his chest. "You'll never see me as anything but a woman you found in a whorehouse." She shook her head. "I'll always be a dirty thing to you. What I want I can never have."

"No." He cupped her face in his hand and tilted her head up, forcing her to look him in the eye. "No. I didn't understand. I didn't know. You're not a dirty thing." Her skin was so soft, so warm. "Tell me what you want. What do you need?"

Her brow puckered slightly as she held his gaze. He smoothed his thumb over her trembling lip, and her mouth opened slightly, enough for him to feel her warm, moist breath against his skin.

"I want..."

She stared into his eyes as if searching for his soul. He hoped it wasn't as black and as bleak as it felt. He wanted to be whatever she needed. Holding her so close, her soft curves against his body, her warm cheeks in his palms, and knowing that she'd lived in his house, cared for his child and him for so many years... She was everything he'd once hoped his wife could be. A good mother to his children. A good wife. Strong and steady. Loving and nurturing.

"Tell me, please."

"All I've ever wanted was for you to look at me and see someone...else."

He frowned. "I don't understand."

Another fat tear rolled down her cheek. "I want you to see a woman who loves you." Another tear. She sniffled. "I love you, but I'm not your whore. I'll never be that. I want your love, not your money. Can't you see that?" She jerked from his embrace and scooted out from between him and the door. "I love you." She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I love Hattie. I want you both to be mine, but I'm not good enough. I'm a dirty whore! I'll always be a bloody whore."

She ran then, down the short hallway into her room. Her door shut with a resounding click.

Carson stood there and stared at the lantern burning softly on the table.

He'd thought he wasn't man enough for any woman because he'd let his wife be raped and murdered. When he hadn't stood up to her and forbid her from leaving, he'd thought it was his fault she'd been killed. His heart was empty, as was his soul. But Ella showed him it wasn't.

Ella didn't think she was good enough for him because she'd sold her body to survive.

Were they so different? Two damaged, hurting people? Was he good enough to love her? To deserve *her* love?

How did she hide her pain so well? She never tried to lose herself in a bottle as he did. She didn't curse God for her lot in life the way he had. She was stronger than him. He needed her strength.

She said she loved him. He already knew she loved Hattie. Could a real relationship between them work? Would she be willing to try? Would she want to be the wife of a man who hadn't protected his first wife? Why would she? What if he let her be hurt, too?

He sank down on the chair by the table and shook his head. No, he'd protect her. Love her. He *could* love her. Perhaps he already did. Seeing her tears had hurt him as nothing ever had. His wife had used tears to manipulate him into bending to her will. Ella would never do that. She'd tried so valiantly to hide her pain from him, but he'd pushed too hard. His actions shamed him, but if he hadn't done it, they might never have had this

conversation.

Ella's bedroom door opened, and she stepped into the light cast by the lantern. She carried a small potato sack in one hand and her worn, knitted shawl was over her shoulders. She avoided his eyes as she bent to retrieve her comb and scissors from the floor next to him. She slipped them into the bag.

"Goodbye, Carson," she said softly as she turned toward the door.

His gut clenched. She was leaving him?

She reached for the door latch. "Please tell Hattie..." A soft snuffle came from her. "Tell her I said goodbye."

"No!" The word burst from his soul as he bound out of the chair and grabbed her arm. "You're not leaving me."

Big, dark doe eyes stared at him. He gentled his grip on her arm. His wife had grown to hate him, the ranch, Dover Creek. She loathed motherhood. When things got too difficult, she cut and run back to Daddy. Only she hadn't made it.

"Do you like it here on the ranch?" he demanded, unable to keep his voice calm.

Ella nodded.

"Do you like Dover Creek?"

She shook her head. "I haven't set foot there since coming to work for you. The church women..."

"Where do you want to live?" He could sell the ranch. He'd made enough money and could turn a sizable profit after the fall roundup. If she didn't leave, he'd go anywhere for her, even taking her back to a city if that was what she wanted. He couldn't let her go. She loved him—an unconditional love he'd always longed for from his wife. Ella had seen him at his worse, yet she loved him. He'd do anything to be able to keep her, cherish her, nurture that love and pray it blossomed.

Ella's lips parted, but she didn't answer.

"Anywhere you want, Ella. I'll take you anywhere. Just don't leave me."

Her gaze shifted away, landing on spots around the small cabin. Was it not big enough? He'd build her whatever she wanted. He'd do anything. *Dear God, don't let her leave.*

She licked her lips, and he felt that small stroke of her tongue like fire in his veins.

"Why?"

"I..." The words stuck in his throat. He'd never said them to a woman other than his wife. For an instant, terror ripped through him. What if Ella turned on him someday? What if she walked away later? Would he survive another betrayal by a woman he loved?

"Why?" she demanded, her voice rising. "If you want a whore—"

He jerked her hard against him and brought his mouth down on hers. A groan pulled from deep inside of him, and he wrapped his arms around her soft curves. She was sweeter than he'd ever imagined. Her lips were warm and sensual, moving against his as she returned the kiss. Her sack dropped to the floor with a soft thud.

Sweeping his tongue into her mouth, he palmed her bottom and held her tight against his arousal. He needed her more than he needed his next breath. Needed to sink into her and hear her soft cries of pleasure. He didn't care about her past, and he'd do everything in his power to make her future a happy one.

He broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against hers. Her harsh pants warmed his cheeks, and her hands had tangled in his hair.

"You're not a whore, Ella."

She nodded.

"You're not. I never want to hear you say that ever again. Do you understand me?" He brushed his lips over her cheek. Then the other. "I won't have the woman I love call herself that."

Ella sucked in a breath so fast she choked on it. "What?"

"I love you, Ella. I think I have since I saw you in the saloon four years ago." He touched her chin and raised his head to look into her beautiful eyes. "Stay with me. Stay with us. Make us a family."

She licked her lips, the motion innocent, yet so arousing, he groaned with need of feeling that tongue on his body.

Her breathing sped again as she stared into his eyes.

“You...mean it?”

He nodded. “I do.”

Her hand trailed down from his shoulder and rested over his heart. “I have nothing to offer you,” she whispered as tears welled in her eyes, making them shimmer in the lamplight. “Not my virginity, not...anything. How can you love me?”

“You already gave me more than I ever thought possible.” He laid his hand over hers against his chest. “You gave me unconditional love when I didn’t deserve it. Without you, I would have crawled into a jug of whisky and never come out.”

“But you do that every night anyway.” Her brow puckered. “So many nights I’ve heard you sitting out here by the fire drinking and cursing. I always wanted to come to you, but I feared...”

“I’ll never touch another drop. I swear it. I was trying to fill the hole in my soul.”

She licked her lips again. “What is filling it now?”

“You,” he whispered as he leaned down and touched his lips to hers. “My heart’s desire.”

She wound her arms around his neck and pressed against him. Delving his tongue into her mouth, he swallowed her moan of pleasure. He stroked her back as she molded her body to his, her full, soft breasts pressing firm against his chest, the cleft of her thighs cradling his erection.

She broke the kiss and buried her face against his neck. “I want to stay here with you.” Her voice was thick and muffled against his skin. He held her close against his heart. “Here on your ranch, the place you love.”

He shook his head. “Anywhere with you would be home. I want you happy. I never want to make you cry again.”

“Then love me, Carson,” she said as she leaned back and looked him in the eye. “Show me what it’s like between a man and a woman when they love each other.”

With a slow smile, he willed the flow of blood through his body to slow. Ella needed tender care. She’d never been thoroughly loved before. She only knew the groping of sex-starved men who’d had too much to drink. He

snuffed out the lantern, sending the cabin into darkness. "Come with me, then," he said, taking her hand and leading her to the ladder of the loft.

She climbed up ahead of him, her lovely rounded ass swaying in his face with each step. As he stood in front of her and slowly opened the tiny buttons on the front of her dress, she stared at him through the dim illumination coming from the moon outside the window.

He splayed open the collar of her dress and leaned down to kiss the hollow at the base of her throat. "Tonight I will show your body what it is to be loved. Tomorrow we see Reverend Johnson, and I make you mine forever."

Ella clasped her hands in his hair and leaned her head to the side as he nibbled at the silky flesh of her neck. "Wait. You have to know...oh, that feels good."

He slipped the dress from her shoulders and it fell at their feet. Her thin chemise did nothing to hide her peaked nipples when he cupped her breasts in his hands. "Know what?"

"I can't have children. I'm barren. I lost a baby and..."

"Shh. I want you, my love. None of that matters. We have Hattie. And now Hattie will have a mother to love her."

"I love Hattie."

He skimmed the pad of his thumbs over her nipples, and she jerked with a small cry of arousal. "I know you do."

"I've dreamed of her being mine since the day I met her."

He nibbled his way over her collarbone then pulled the shoulder straps of the chemise down her arm, letting it pool on the floor with her dress. "Lord above, you're gorgeous." No corset. All soft, curvaceous woman. He spanned her waist with his hands then pulled her against him as he captured her lips with his.

She tugged his shirt from his pants, and then her warm hands were on his back. He shivered. "Yes," he moaned against her mouth when she lightly scored his flesh with her nails.

"I've dreamed of you being mine since the day I met you," she whispered against his lips. "You saved me from

that place. You gave me a better life.” She nipped the side of his neck, and he groaned. “I’ll never ask for anything more than your love.”

Her words set his heart free to soar. She’d willingly given a promise his wife never had. She’d always wanted more. Nothing was good enough. But Ella had fallen in love with him during his worst times. From now on he’d give her and Hattie only his best.

He swept her into the bed and came down over her, fitting himself against her giving body. “I’ll never ask for more than your love, either,” he promised. “I could never survive losing that.”

Her lips curved into a tender smile, her eyes shiny. “You are my heart’s desire, too.”

He kissed her then. A slow exploration of her lips and tongue. His heart beat heavy and steady inside his chest—possibly for the first time since his wife walked out the door leaving him with a crying baby.

“I love you,” he murmured as he kissed a path down Ella’s sweet body. “I’ll always love you.”

“Please...keep...that...promise,” she said, her words interspersed with soft, breathy pants.

She arched against him as he licked her nipple then drew it deep into his mouth.

He lifted his head and met her eyes through the moonlit night. “Trust in me.”

She laid a warm palm against his cheek. “Always.”