

Lietha Wards



The Devil in a Stetson

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CHAPTER ONE

Cassie swore her legs were just about done for. The diner was crazy all day. Maybe it had something to do with the amazing food that came out of the kitchen. Today Molly had made an incredible beef stew with homemade bread for lunch as a special and there wasn't an empty seat in the place since it opened at six o'clock this morning. Her boss comes in to open, set up the diner then goes home until two. Her husband, on the other hand, stays most of the day and works the grill. Besides her father, she'd never seen people who worked that hard. Not only that they were always cheerful. It was a great atmosphere to work in even if her legs were screaming by the end of her shift.

She'd only been here for three weeks but it seemed that every day was the same, busy as ever. It wasn't just the food either; Molly and Garnet were wonderful people and were really easy to work for. She figured they were both in their sixties, but still were young at heart, always smiling and cheerful to everyone they knew. They had one son Dylan, who was away at college. They had tried for years to have kids, then in her late thirties after being told that she couldn't have any children, she got pregnant. Cassie hadn't met him yet, but Garnet and Molly were very proud of him. He was going to be a lawyer.

She gathered up some dirty plates off a table and went into the kitchen shaking her head because it was noon and not once was there an empty seat. Garnet, Molly's husband laughed at her expression of disbelief.

"Get used to it honey." He patted his protruding belly, "I didn't get this way by drinking beer. Molly was always a great cook. That's why I married her." he wiggled his eyebrows causing her to laugh.

"There are some perks," Cassie said setting the dishes in the rack for the dishwasher. "I get great tips."

Garnet watched her push the rack into the dishwasher and turn it on while absently brushing a loose tendril of fair hair behind her ear. It wasn't the food that was getting her the tips and he and his wife knew it when she walked into the diner three weeks ago asking for a job. Cassie was stunning. If he was thirty years younger and single and not still in love with his wife, he'd be chasing her like a man obsessed.

She was only just twenty, but she acted ten years older. From the bits and pieces he and his wife got out of her without prying, she had a pretty hard life. Her father had raised her and had just recently died, leaving a lot of bills and she'd lost her mother early in life. From what Cassie had told them her father tried to be the best he could to her and run his own ranch, but soon became bankrupt. He died shortly after of a broken heart she said. He had loved ranching and losing it just took the life out of him.

It made him and Molly feel very protective of her. Cassie was a sweet girl and they took to her immediately. Molly especially. There had been several times that she'd warned the patrons off of her with a threat of banishment from their establishment after they'd made inquiries about their newest employee.

They'd listen if they wanted a home cooked meal, but sooner or later, someone wouldn't care about the food when it came to that filly. Garrett cared about her, but he was more relaxed about it and new that she was old enough to look after herself. If it was something she couldn't handle he'd certainly step in, but he didn't believe in interfering unless he had to.

He cast another glance at her. Maybe she was still young in a lot of ways. She'd been there three weeks and he and his wife had noticed that she hadn't dated anyone but there'd been loads of offers. She turned and walked out of the kitchen and he silently prayed that if she found someone here, they would be

good to her.

“Cass.”

Cassie turned at the sound of her nickname that she somehow adopted since she started working here. Marla, another waitress that was about four years older than her rushed toward her with an odd look on her face. The reason why it was odd was because Marla was always laughing and teasing the customers no matter how rough a day was. She could also take banter like no one she'd ever met and toss it back to them.

“That’s the perks of growing up local.” She told her once when Cassie asked her how she could handle some of the comments that practically bordered on sexual harassment.

Now, however, she looked a little worried.

“What’s wrong?” she said darting her eyes around the diner thinking someone actually offended her.

She indicated with a nod toward a truck through one of the front windows that had just coasted up to the curb. It was large, shiny black and loaded with chrome. On the door was an insignia of a cobra inside a circle with the words *Cobra Head Ranch* underneath. “That’s Blake Eckert’s truck. I just want you to be aware of him. He is mean to the bone and *I* wouldn’t even try and joke with him.”

“Oh dear.” She said. If the truck wasn’t intimidating, the size of the man that just rounded the back end of the truck was. If Marla wouldn’t joke with him this had to be serious.

“Don’t try and talk to him, “ she continued quickly, “just get his order. He’s very abrasive and doesn’t have any use for women except maybe Molly. I don’t know why, but he seems to respect her.”

Cassie hardly heard anything she said after that because the man stepped into the diner to several ‘hello Blake’s’ before returning to their meals. But that wasn’t what caught her attention. He was the size of a bloody mountain and she couldn’t

take her eyes off of him! The breath of his shoulders were enormous and seemed to fill the doorway. Although she couldn't quite see his face from across the room because his Stetson was pulled low over his eyes, his sheer size was intimidating enough.

She watched as he nodded his own greeting, but never returned words before he stepped in the door and walked down the aisle with a lazy walk that told her he was in no apparent rush. Then he sat in her section with his back to them.

"Cass."

She averted her gaze to Marla who looked more worried. "He's not pleasant to many people, so heed what I said. If he offends you just go and get Molly. Like I said she seems to be able to handle him well enough."

"Gosh, you're making him sound like a psycho." She said wide eyed before glancing back at the man.

"He's a bit wild, yes, but rich, and a temper to match every penny he's worth. He'd probably be a handsome man if he didn't look so mean all the time."

"If *you're* scared, *I'm* terrified." She said not taking her eyes off of him as he lifted his Stetson off his head and placed it on the table beside his coffee cup and ran his fingers through his thick dark hair to ruffle it a bit to eliminate the Stetson's imprint.

"You'd better hurry. He doesn't like to wait." Marla patted her arm.

"Oh." She snapped into action and grabbed the coffee pot to head toward the new customer. Taking a deep breath she forced a smile as she approached. She wished Marla didn't say anything and she wouldn't be nervous, but she would treat him as she treated all others that came into the place, with respect and a smile. But when he lifted his head and settled his eyes on hers, her breath froze in her throat. Marla said he *would* be handsome if he didn't look so mean, but he was *really* gorgeous!

Except for a few grey streaks at the temples, he had pitch

black hair and frightfully intelligent pale green eyes. His skin had the tan of a man that was used to hard work on the range, like her father did, and about a day's worth of stubble on a nicely proportioned strong square jaw. His nose was straight and she already knew he was filled with arrogance. Even his casual walk into the diner said so. Then one of his dark brows rose as he let his eyes move over her face in the same perusal that she was doing to him.

"Are you done woman?" he said in a tone of abrupt annoyance.

"P-pardon?" she darted her eyes to his. Even though his voice was terse, it was still husky and deep.

"Are you done staring long enough to offer me coffee." He explained in the same tone.

Even before she said anything she flushed, "Sorry." She mumbled filling his cup.

"Now a menu would be a start." He continued not taking his eyes off of her, "Unless you mean to read my mind. Good luck with that. You won't be the first woman to try."

Oh lord, she forgot a menu and now she felt completely incompetent. Also, he didn't seem to be the least bit concerned at how uncomfortable he was making her.

"I suppose you flash those blue eyes at any man and they are on their knees in an instant so they don't notice your lack of skills."

Now that was an insult. She jerked her eyes to his and flushed for an entirely different reason. She was angry. She was good at her job and if he wasn't so darn distracting and Marla didn't tell her stories, she'd have been with him. She did her best to steel her temper, "I'll be back with a menu."

"Don't bother, I'll have Molly's special, thanks for telling me what it is." He added with more irritability this time.

He was completely infuriating! She set the coffee pot on

the table resisting the urge to scald his lap, and pulled out the notepad while gritting her teeth. No one was so rude to her before and she really didn't do anything to deserve it. So what, she made a few mistakes, but it wasn't cause for that attitude.

"Just because you look the way you do, don't expect to go through life not working for something." He continued.

She stopped writing and set her eyes on his blazing with anger. She wanted to tell him that she was going to college for two years because she finished high school a year early and was going to be a doctor until hardship fell on her father, that she had a very high IQ and her looks had nothing to do with it. Then she thought of Molly and Garnet and how good they'd been to her by hiring her right off the street when she came in for a job. Insulting one of their customers wasn't an option. She couldn't take business away from them. Instead she fought for a smile showing her straight, even teeth, "Sour dough, wheat or white?" she nearly choked out through her fury.

Oddly enough, that made him pause and look at her as if he didn't expect her sweet reply despite her inner fury. Then he leaned back against the booth lazily and ran his eyes over her slowly with definite appraisal.

His handsome face may have even revealed a glint of approval, but he was a man made of stone and it didn't take her longer than a minute to realize it. Now the arrogant man thought he had the right to look at her in such a way that it was obvious what he was thinking. She placed one hand on her hip and stared right back at him refusing to be intimidated. Then she raised her brows still waiting for his answer.

"Whole wheat." He finally said resisting a smile. To someone who didn't know him, it wasn't the least bit noticeable which was his intent, but he was amused. This gal had spunk.

For the first time in a long time, he was intrigued by a woman. Most people would have been intimidated, frightened,

or maybe even shocked at his attitude. Yet he could see fire flash in her sapphire gaze in anger and he had to give it to her, she didn't act on it.

He wasn't easy to get along with. He had friends, but he didn't trust many people and those who knew him knew to stay out of his way when he was annoyed. His anger was a different story. People crossed the street to avoid him when he was in that kind of mood. Yet, here was this little gal who acted ten feet tall in standing up to him and she was little. He guessed that she was about five foot four. She wasn't scrawny though, she had curves, nice curves. The uniform was a little to snug for his tastes. It was easy to see the outline of an hourglass figure and if he were her boyfriend, he certainly wouldn't want someone to be staring at her the way he was right now.

She scribbled his order down then stopped and looked back at him.

When he realized she didn't move he lifted his eyes to hers again, "What?"

"Well, I'm just waiting for another insult, something I possibly missed in reading your mind that you wish to throw at me." He actually smirked for the first time. It was a sloppy sideways one that actually made her toes want to curl. *Oh dear*, she thought to herself

"No."

She swallowed to try and regain her breath that suddenly seized up in her throat. What the hell was wrong with her? She was supposed to be mad at him, but that sinfully sexy look just wiped it clean.

He couldn't stop the outward show of amusement. He had to admit that he admired her guff. Yet, she obviously wasn't from around here, because not many people could speak to him like that knowing the mood he was in. He had also seen Marla take her aside and talk to her prior to her serving him. He knew

she was warned, but here she was openly defying him.

She nodded curtly and turned to walk away not seeing his eyes guide down to her backside before he gave his head a subtle shake and take a gulp from his coffee cup.

“How was he?” Marla asked with concern. The Diner was noisy and she could see that he wasn’t happy about something but he never was.

Cassie shrugged thankful that her blush had dissipated, “He’s fine.” She wasn’t one to tell stories about people no matter how rude they were.

“Fine?” she stared at her in disbelief, “Last time I served him he made a point of telling me I’d make a better living on my back then as a waitress because my skills were better that way.”

Cassie handed her ticket to Garnet through the window not hiding the wince she felt at those words. If he’d said that to her, she would have slapped him. “What did you say to that?”

“I told him he was probably right, but then I wouldn’t meet such wonderful customers like him. I acted tough but inside I was screaming. I didn’t want to give him ammunition.” She stared at her friend thoughtfully. “I suppose he said something about your looks.”

Cassie nodded, “How’d you know?”

“Because you’re gorgeous.” She beamed, “Blake knows how to hit to home every time.”

Cassie was slightly confused, “Close to home, but—“ she was going to say something about Blake’s comment toward Marla, but Marla interrupted.

“I have a reputation Cassie, if that’s what you’re wondering.” It was her turn to shrug, “I grew up with an alcoholic parent, I know it’s not an excuse, but when you’re young you sort of look for love elsewhere—don’t worry about it.” she said seeing Cassie’s sympathetic look, “Blake is a nice looking man. His comment was probably justified. I may have thrown

myself at him a few times—“ she glanced past Cassie to see him drinking his coffee casually and sighed, “Okay, I threw myself at him a lot, I mean, look at him. He’s gorgeous—all big and muscle bound. Even as mean as he is, he’s still yummy. If he offered I’d still sleep with him no matter what he said to me. I have a feeling it would be well worth it.”

“Marla you are just too bold!” she said wide-eyed.

She giggled, “And you just figured that out?” then her eyes guided past her to Blake again and she made a sound of satisfaction, “Like I said, who cares if he doesn’t like me.”

Cassie laughed at her friend’s dreamy expression then shook her head, “I don’t think I like him at all so there’s no problem there.”

“Yeah but in the sack who cares.” She added with a wink before turning away.

Cassie flushed, she didn’t want to say that she’d never been with anyone and sound old fashioned, but she was saving herself for that special someone even though it seemed bleak that she would find it now. She had bills, lots of them from her father’s death even though they lost everything, he’d taken out loans to try and save the ranch. So that someone would have to wait a few more years until she was back on her feet and had time for a relationship.

He fell over from a heart attack three weeks ago and what little money she had ran out so she quit college and had to find a job. She was on her way through town on the bus when she saw the sign in the diner window and took that as a sign, especially when they hired her on the spot.

“Order’s up honey.” Garnet said.

Pulling herself out of her own self pity she focused on her job. Marla had gone back to her section.

She reached for the platter containing the stew bowl and bread but Garnet had a hold of the other side to get her attention,

“Is Blake behaving?”

She smiled at his concern, “He’s fine.”

“Sure he is.” He said releasing the platter and grinning at her poor attempt to lie.

Shaking her head she took Blake his order and as she walked toward him, he watched her over the rim of his cup as he took a drink of coffee. At some point he actually switched sides at the table and sat facing her. Didn’t he care that he was making her uncomfortable? After knowing him for a few short minutes she already knew the answer to that. Probably not.

“You’re order sir.” She said setting the large bowl of stew down in front of him.

“My name is Blake.” He added absently while lifting his cup, “More coffee would be nice.”

So would a thump over the head, she thought, but forced a smile, “Of course.” And turned to go get more coffee.

This time he frowned while watching her, but still kept his eyes on her when she came back and filled his cup.

“What’s your name?” he finally said for the first time without cynicism.

She wasn’t going to answer him but decided that it was probably wise to do so. She was sure there weren’t many people didn’t reply to his questions. Normally she wouldn’t even bother but she didn’t want it to get back to Molly and Garnet that she was rude to a customer, “Cassie.”

He nodded before turning his attention to his stew without another word. She stared at him for a moment in frustration and confusion before turning and walking away. Maybe she shouldn’t have answered him. He seemed bored by it all.

“You okay hun?” Molly said after seeing her expression. “Blake can be rough.”

“Is that what you’d call it?” she finally showed her

exasperation.

She laughed, "Everyone seems afraid of him because of his size and demeanour, but he's not that bad. He's just a little lost."

"Lost? Molly, he insulted me several times and I don't even know him." She cast a glance over her shoulder at the foreboding cowboy who seemed to be enjoying his stew.

"Yes, well you had parents who loved and cherished you, Blake didn't. His mother abandoned him at a young age and his father was a very hard man. He was determined to make him into a man at an early age." She nodded toward him, "He earned every inch of that masculinity through hard work. His father never gave him a break despite being his son, if anything he worked him twice as hard. He broke his arm in a steer wrestling contest here at a local rodeo and his old man refused to take him to a doctor telling him to tough it out."

"That's awful!" despite how he treated her moments ago, she felt bad for him.

"I took him after I gave his father an earful."

"you?"

She nodded, "Ever since then he seems to respect me." She studied Cassie's expression, "He was fifteen."

"Oh dear." That did sound like a hard life.

"I just thought you should know. Don't let him get to you. He's tougher than Garnet's beef jerky—and that man could make tough jerky." She laughed, "And one hundred percent male." She added, "the type you think died out with the turn of the century. He can still wrestle steers, ride bulls and break any rank bronco around."

He certainly was all man, thought Cassie taking in his size and air of arrogance, but rude.

Molly eyed him carefully, "He has no problem getting women when he wants them either, but he doesn't keep them

around.”

She turned her attention back to her boss, “Gee I wonder why.” She said sarcastically.

“Because it’ll take an amazing woman to claim his heart and he hasn’t found her yet.” Molly answered, “Trust me, it’s not the women who end them. Blake may seem harsh, but he’s old school in the way he treats women. He may believe that they belong in the kitchen, but he’s big on chivalry. He’ll open doors, and pay for dates, none of that Dutch treat stuff. Believe it or not some ladies like to be treated that way even in this day and age. Believe it Cassie, he’s had more than enough of them fall in love with him.”

Cassie bit her bottom lip and stared at him. He was involved in his meal, but try as she might, she couldn’t deny that he wasn’t attractive and she was sure that there were many broken hearts in his past. She may like that old fashioned chivalry herself, but she also didn’t like to be told to stay in a kitchen even though she liked to cook. She wanted a career besides. There had to be a healthy balance.

Molly chuckled seeing her concentration while looking at Blake and held out her hand, “Give me your apron and go home honey. I’m here now. Your shift is over. Don’t wear out that young body of yours any more than you have to.”

Nodding, she set the coffee pot back on the burner and untied her apron. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

Molly watched the younger girl walk toward the back to thinking that if she had her way she’d try her best to match the two up. Blake was in his early thirties, and Cassie may be young, but she was older in many ways. She was very sweet natured, intelligent, pretty and most importantly, full of love. Just what Blake needed.

Cassie groaned as her car complained noisily while turning it over for the third time. She paused and said a silent

prayer before turning the key again. Another sputter, but no start.

That's all she needed to end a crazy busy shift. Her feet hurt, she met the most infuriating man in her life, and her car was complaining. A car that probably had about as much life in it as she had energy at this point. For the second time today she felt like weeping. It wasn't like her to feel sorry for herself, but everything seemed to be piling up at once. Bills, car trouble and most importantly, she missed her father.

There was a tap on her window and she screeched. Looking through the dirty glass there was none other than Blake standing there. He looked a little annoyed. Then after a moment she was sure he swore but it was muffled through the door. She gave him a questioning look and he made a motion with his hand for her to roll down the window followed by an impatient look.

Gosh, why was she so darn stupid around him? She rolled down the window.

"Pop the hood, or do I need to spell it out for you." He said referring to her delayed response.

"I'm preoccupied." She said flustered.

He shook his head and turned toward the front of the car.

She reached down and pulled the latch before getting out and following him.

He hiked up the hood with a creak of metal. "Jesus, what a piece of shit." He said bending over the engine and using his large fist to pound on the top of the distributor cap.

"It's all I can afford. I'm trying to make do."

"Go see if it'll start." He said without looking at her and ignoring her statement.

She felt like screaming as she did as he asked. She turned the key and it sputtered to life. "Oh thank God."

"It's interesting that people thank God and not who actually did the good deed." He said stepping up beside the door.

“Thank you.” She said feeling embarrassed.

“You can thank me by putting this thing out of its misery.” He said bluntly before he shut the door of her car and walked away.

She watched his broad back as he headed across the street to his truck. He seemed angry and annoyed with her, but he still fixed her car. She reflected on Molly’s words. Maybe he wasn’t as mean as people thought. Well, he certainly didn’t give much to go on.

The car shuddered as she shifted it into gear and again she said a silent prayer hoping like she did every day for the past three weeks that it would keep running for the drive out of town to the place she rented.

The car was purchased for a hundred bucks from some teenager when she found a place to live. She needed transportation to get to and from her job. It was cheap and it seemed reliable, but it probably wasn’t meant to be going so far every day.

It served her right for renting a room so far from town. The old lady was a widow and she lived on a big spread but it was run by her son. Besides it was available on short notice and the woman took her without references and rented a room to her cheap probably because she liked the companionship. After meeting her son, she understood. He was a little creepy. Not anything physically visible, it was just a feeling she got and when he came to visit his mother because he watched her. It gave her chills. She knew he was married, and that’s probably what made it worse.

She was halfway home when she saw an enormous chrome bumper approaching in her rear view mirror, then a few seconds later the vehicle roared by her with curtain of dust and several angry honks. She knew she drove slowly, but she was babying her vehicle because it was August, hot, and her car kept

overheating. When the truck moved in front of her and disappeared down the gravel road in a billow of more road dust she recognized it to be Blake's polished truck. That must have cost a fortune for all of the custom work done on it. If she had something like that, she could have sold it and got out of debt instantly, that's how expensive it looked. Obviously he had money and lots of it. No wonder he was so arrogant. People with money never had any worries. If they broke something, they could afford to have it fixed, if they didn't have it, they could buy it. Well at least he wasn't frustrated enough to run her off the road, because after meeting him, she was sure he was capable of such behaviour.

He may have had a rough upbringing but he certainly didn't seem to be suffering from it now. He was very self confident and obviously knew how good he looked to the opposite sex. Everything about him practically screamed that. Even his walk spoke volumes to his masculinity. It was a lazy confident swagger that completely enhanced his sex appeal.

As hard as it was for her to admit, she found him nice looking and loaded with everything a man should be like. A man that women dreamed about. She even liked his confidence. It was too bad his attitude was so offensive. If it wasn't, and if he'd asked her out, she definitely would have gone out with him because they would have had a lot in common, but as it was, she hardly liked him.

She pulled into the driveway of the small house that Mrs. Watson lived in and noticed that the older lady's car was gone. She must've gone to town. Smiling to herself knowing that the woman was in her late seventies but still drove made her know that she was still young at heart. The only problem with that was her son Ernie made frequent visits to see her. Not that visiting his mother was wrong, it just seemed that he did it more often over the past few weeks while she'd been there.

Turning off her car she saw steam escape out from under the hood and silently cursed. Grabbing her bag she went into the house and changed into jeans and a t-shirt with the intention of taking a look under the hood to see if there was anything she could do.

When she came back out she saw Ernie's Cadillac pull into the driveway behind her car. It was almost funny seeing him just after she was thinking of Blake because they were exact opposites. Blake was large, muscular and unbelievably masculine and Ernie sort of looked like a human weasel next to him. He was about five ten, and a little skinny with exception to the pot belly that started to form and bulge over his belt buckle. His nose was too large for his face, and his lips were quite thin. Obviously he tried to look more masculine by growing a moustache, but it was slightly crooked and it didn't look too good especially since he was going bald. Normally she didn't judge people so harshly, but he actually gave her the willies. Taking a deep breath she came down the stairs as he got out, "You're mom isn't here."

"Well, maybe I'll wait for a bit." He dropped his eyes to the healthy mounds of her breasts visible just above the v-neck of her pink t-shirt.

She bit her tongue to stop from saying something. He didn't even bother to hide his interest.

"What's wrong with your car?" he said nodding toward the steam coming out from under the hood.

"Just a belt." She lied. She didn't want him to offer to look at it because of what he may ask in return. Even so belts didn't release steam but she was hoping that he didn't know that. It was bad of her to think that he wasn't mechanically inclined, but from the look of extra weight around his middle, she assumed he wasn't much of a physical worker unlike Blake who was chiselled from solid muscle by the look of his thick shoulders

and flat stomach under his western cut shirt.

“I can have my mechanic look at it.”

“No thanks, I already have it taken care of.” She was going to hike up the hood and have a look, but not now. Certainly not while he was looming around her. “How’s your wife?” she felt the need to ask because every time he spoke he stepped closer to her. At least that stopped him cold and he dropped his smile.

“She’s in Hawaii with her mother.” He answered in a less enthusiastic voice.

She just smiled and he stepped back.

“Tell mother I’ll call her.”

“No problem.” She answered glad that it worked, but that doesn’t mean it will for next time. He was getting bolder each time he came over and it began to worry her.

The next day she pulled her sputtering car up in front of the Vet’s office. Mrs. Watson asked her to pick up insulin for her diabetic cat and since she had to go into town to make a payment on her father’s loan she didn’t mind. She cut the engine and the car actually ran for another few moments before it died. *Oh lord*, she thought, it wasn’t much longer before it left her stranded. Already her day wasn’t going right, but it started this morning when she woke up with thoughts of Blake in her head. Then as she was leaving Ernie was pulling into the drive way. She quickly got in the car, said the ritual prayer and wanted to shout for joy when it started because she certainly didn’t want him offering her a ride. Then to top it off her mood was already in the dumps because every time she had to go put money on her father’s debts, as weird as it seemed, she missed him.

She opened the door with a creak of metal and got out.

Then to her surprise of all people to be at the Vets, she saw Blake standing just outside of the door of the building talking to

another cowboy, she made a point at trying not to meet his eyes knowing he'd say something. Instead it was the man he was with who spoke.

"Hello sweetheart." He said tipping his hat and giving her a handsome grin.

She nodded, knowing that he was just being friendly like everyone else in this town but not wanting to encourage him. In the process she couldn't help herself and glanced at Blake whose expression said nothing but he did offer a brief yet subtle nod. Still those pale green eyes of his were almost mesmerizing and she was so proud of herself that she managed to tear hers from them because they were sinfully hypnotic. It was obvious to her that he was an intelligent man and like everything else, he knew that too.

The other man stepped forward and opened the door for her, giving her another smile.

She thanked him and stepped through the door.

"Bill." Blake said after the door closed. "Leave her be." He didn't know where the urge came to protect her but maybe he felt like he was a little harsh yesterday. Truth of it was, one of his ranch hands was gored by his prize bull and ended up in the hospital with twenty stitches in his side. No one knew but those that worked for him because he never talked about things, but his foul mood spilled over onto her and she really didn't deserve it. Regardless she did hold her own fairly well.

"Hell Blake, what a number." He said staring at the closed door.

"Yeah well, with looks like hers you'll need to take one." He said with a bit of a scowl.

Bill wasn't fazed by Blake's tone or deterred by his words. He had known Blake for ten years and knew how to read him a bit better than others. Like everyone else he knew the man had a temper, but it didn't emerge often which was probably a good

thing. Also he knew he was one of the few people that Blake respected so it gave him a little bit of a free pass when it came to his irritability. “I don’t care.” He released an appreciative whistle. “I’ll wait until mine’s called.”

Blake shook his head. He knew what women were like when they looked like that and unless he felt like he needed some companionship, he wouldn’t bother to show appreciation even though it was warranted. He wondered though, why she was waitressing when she could be some man’s mistress. Despite her occupation, she had an air of sophistication about her. She worked hard to. He noticed that even for the short time that she served him. She was always rushing around and getting more than appreciative smiles from the male patrons. Yet beyond a brief return of one herself, there was no blatant flirtation that Marla was known for.

“Have you forgotten that I don’t have a sense of humour?” He said.

“Hell no I haven’t.” Bill laughed. “Just checking to see if you have dibs my friend, because I certainly wouldn’t want to tread on your territory.”

“By all means.” He said with a wave and walking away. Bill was a good man. He owned a couple of feedlots and was five years his junior. Blake respected a man who worked hard to make a living. Still, he couldn’t help but feel a little irritable over his attraction to Cassie.

He got in his truck and reflected back on Bill’s comments. Bill liked women—a lot. For some reason him asking Cassie out bothered him. It shouldn’t. He didn’t know her from a hole in the ground even if she was a stunning beauty. Furthermore, he knew the consequences and price tag attached to a woman like that and he wasn’t willing to pay either. He’d played the field quite a bit in his younger years and had a lot of research to base his judgements on.

Grinning to himself he started his truck.

Meanwhile Cassie had just walked out of the Vet clinic to be met by the Cowboy with Blake again. Yet, Blake wasn't around. She stopped abruptly when he stepped in front of her.

"My name is Bill Tipton."

"Hi." She said with a slight smile.

"I know this is sudden ma'am but I was wondering if you'd come with me to the dance this weekend."

Good lord, she couldn't even go a block in this town without being asked out. You'd think there was a shortage of women, "It is sudden." She said with a hint of laughter in her tone while heading toward her car. For some reason his asking her out made her feel better. She'd had an unappealing day so far and Bill was really handsome. He had brown hair and blue eyes and was obviously charming, but despite that, she couldn't date. She just didn't have time.

Bill removed his hat and walked beside her, "I promise on my mother's grave that I'll be a perfect gentleman."

Cassie heard herself laugh while stopping and turning to face him, "Is your mother even deceased?" she asked with a sly smile.

He grinned, "No but it does count, doesn't it?" He bent and opened the door of her car so she could get in.

"No." she said smiling and got in behind the wheel.

"Would you think less of me if I begged?"

She laughed again, "I'll think about it." She said reaching over and shutting the door knowing she just couldn't. In the side mirror she saw Bill put his hat over his heart while giving her a handsome grin as she drove away.

Why shouldn't she go out with one of the local cowboys? She thought to herself. He seemed quite nice, but most of them did and she really didn't have time for a relationship, but his attention sure felt good after being at the bank. Blake's pale stare

came into her mind and she shook her head to get rid of it. One thing was certain, that man was all raw cowboy, tooth and nail. There was nothing unreal about him. What you see is what you got because he wasn't one to make himself out to be something different. She admired that.

Her happy mood didn't last long. An hour later Cassie was leaning over her car engine with the hood up while steam poured out of the radiator. It was as dry as a bone. She was on the side of a dirt road over twenty minutes drive from town. "Unbelievable. Could this day be any worse?" She said out loud while rubbing a grease covered hand over her forehead.

Heat rose off the engine and the lonely gravel road she was stuck on. It distorted the distant scenery as she silently prayed for help before she leaned over it again trying to figure out where the leak was. It seemed that she was doing a lot of praying lately. She actually felt guilty because she hadn't gone to church since her father's funeral. But when did she have time?

A hiss from the car brought her mind back to what she was doing. She wasn't completely stupid when it came to cars. She could change the oil, spark plugs and things that required a little bit of knowledge, but this was serious. At least she was smart enough to figure out that the large pool forming under her car meant that. She didn't even know where she'd find the money to fix it. All her tips went to the bank for her father's debts and her small pay checks paid her rent, bills, and insurance.

The sound of a vehicle drew her attention. She leaned to the right to see by the raised hood. A vehicle was coming up the road in a cloud of dust. It was a pickup. Maybe she could catch a ride home then ask her landlord for a ride in the morning. She may have been elderly but still got up early because she'd been farming her whole life.

When the vehicle came closer she began to think that God

was punishing her for some unknown event. It was Blake Eckert. The sheer size of the black truck was unmistakable along with the large chrome push bar on the front.

As he neared, he drove by her slowly and she knew he recognized her. The windows of the truck were tinted dark so she couldn't see in, but she knew he could see her easily. Now she looked like some dumb female who didn't know how to look after her car. She knew him well enough now to know that he'd make a comment.

Placing her hands on her hips she watched the truck swing around in the road and come back. Was there a reason he needed the thing so high in the air? She felt immediately intimidated when he pulled alongside of her and rolled down his window to look down at her.

"You're out of gas." He said bluntly.

"Give me some credit." She answered knowing he had something smart to say.

"Is it in park?"

"I do know it won't start in any other gear besides neutral or park for crying out loud. I'm not a complete idiot and I don't need to be nice to you after work. Just go away." She said with exasperation.

"You'll die of heat exhaustion out here before you make it anywhere, so maybe you should be nice." He answered in the same curt tone while cutting the engine and hopping out of the truck as if it was perfectly natural to talk to people so abruptly.

He also just parked in the middle of the road like he had every right to do so. As for her car and her predicament, he may have had a point, so she took a deep breath trying to still her temper, "I think it's a hose."

"Uh-huh." He said in that way that meant women knew nothing about engines.

She narrowed her eyes on his back as he bent over the

radiator. Normally she wasn't easily riled, but he knew exactly how to hit those soft spots on a person.

"Well, well, I think it is a hose." he finally said.

"Score one for the chick." She mumbled causing him to pause, straighten and turn to her.

She expected some belligerent comeback, but he never said anything and just looked down at her.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you can even offend people by staring?" She eventually said feeling completely uncomfortable under that pale stare. She did her best to try and keep hers steady with his refusing to be frightened if that was what he was trying to do. She wasn't sure, because he was so unreadable and Cassie thought she had met all types. She might have been all right if he wasn't so nice looking, but he was and she actually liked the way he looked.

Then what he did next floored her.

He actually grinned. If she thought that sloppy smile the other day curled her toes, this one near knocked her off her feet. *My God*, he was gorgeous. A single dimple appeared at the corner of his mouth and he had straight even teeth.

"Yes honey, all the time, but not from someone like you." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a phone but as usual kept his eyes on her.

"Like me?"

"Be quiet." He said with less of an edge to his tone while he dialed a number.

"Be quiet?" she said insulted.

"Yes." He added without the least bit of apology to his tone.

How could someone be so darn abrupt? She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms under her breasts while watching him as he spoke to the other person on the phone like he spoke to everyone else—bluntly with an air of command attached to it.

She found herself studying his features again hardly unable to imagine that grin moments ago. He was a hard set man, she could easily tell that. As much of an understatement it was no wonder why Marla said that he was handsome when he smiled. It was obviously very rare, and it made him completely jaw dropping. Suddenly she heard the words tow truck and she started waving her arms. He ignored her by turning away and presenting her with his expansive back.

He was so obstinate! “Blake.” She interrupted trying to get him to listen.

He continued to ignore her and flipped his phone closed after issuing the last of his orders before turning back to her, “Get in the truck. I’ll give you a ride before you overheat like your car did.”

“I didn’t overheat my car first of all, it’s a hose, and secondly, I’m fine in this heat and third, I can’t afford a tow truck.” She added with embarrassment. “I just started working at the diner—“

“No savings.”

“No, my father died a few weeks ago, I—“

“Well at least it makes sense you owning this hunk of junk. I’ll take care of the tow, get in the truck.” He said as if listening to her explanation was a chore.

“You can’t pay for my—“

“It’s that or you get fined for leaving it on the side of the road. They’re sticky about that around here. Now if you’re done being so darn stubborn, get in the damn truck.”

“My god, are you always this bossy?” She’d never met anyone like him. He was abrasive, authoritative, rude, and quite frankly, a bully.

“Yes. Get in the truck.” He repeated without even the slightest hesitation as if he’d been asked that a million times and he expected her protest.

She threw up her arms and did as he asked. She really had no choice and walking home in this heat to spite him would only hurt herself. She was sure he'd just drive by her body on the side of the road if she did collapse. Worst of all, she had no money, no car and he was right, she'd bake to death before she made it home despite her earlier statement. At least she was intelligent enough to put aside her pride for survival even if she had to share a vehicle with an offensive man.

Climbing in the tall truck was an event in itself. She was thankful for the step on the side below the door and a handle on the frame level with the window.

She watched him latch the hood of her car before he got in behind the wheel, started the engine and turned on the air conditioner, "For your delicate skin." He said.

"I'm not a fragile flower." She shot back unable to help herself. She had never been so short with anyone before in her life, but Blake was unique and managed to hit every sensitive area of her character. She wasn't pampered princess. She was used to working on the ranch side by side with her father but somehow she knew that if she said that to him he wouldn't believe her and from what he said next she was right.

"No? enlighten me. The way you look says something different." He looked at the hair she had neatly piled on top of her head, to her carefully made up face and perfect complexion.

"The way I—" she shifted in the seat and looked at him, "I need to look nice for my job, I need the tips and Just because I waitress doesn't mean it was my career choice. I told you my father died, I had to quit college."

"Beauty school." He added unaffected by her outburst.

"No." she argued, but stopped. She wasn't going to tell him what because she didn't feel the need to prove herself to anyone, least of all him. "And normally I spend a lot of time outside, but I've been in school, and that's why my skin isn't

tanned.”

“What were you doing then?” he said with a hint of curiosity.

“None of your bloody business.” She shot back turning back to look out the window.

“Suit yourself.” He added still unmoved as if her defensive reaction was typical.

When they didn’t move she looked back at him.

“It would be nice if you weren’t so guarded and let me know where you live.”

“Oh for gosh sakes.” She blurted. He had her so upside down. *Oh lord, there was that Grin again.*

“I assume it was in this general direction but the only ranch out here besides mine is Ernie Watson’s.”

“That’s the place.”

“You live with Ernie?” He said in disbelief.

“No, I live with his mother. I rent a room from her.” To her surprise he actually looked relieved.

“You don’t like him?” it was the only time she’d seen something different in his expression that made her come to that conclusion.

“Nope.” He added casting her a sideways glance while shifting the truck into gear.

“Why?”

“Because he chases anything with a skirt and he’s a married man.”

Well obviously the feeling she got from him wasn’t wrong. She couldn’t suppress the shiver that went through her and he saw it.

“I see you know what I mean. It’s nice to know you’re not sleeping with him.”

She gaped at him. “My God, do you always say what’s on your mind.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t’ you worry about offending anyone because ever since I met you, I’ve been offended nonstop?”

“Would you rather I lied to you?” he asked with a sloppy smirk.

He had a valid point. “No, but maybe you should think about things before you say them.”

“Why?”

“Because some people are sensitive about the things you say to them.”

“You want me to be careful about hurting someone’s feelings? Look at me honey.” He said with an arrogant lift of his chin. “Do I *look* like I give a shit what people think?”

Again, he had a point. This man was the epitome of masculinity and not one drop of respect would be given, only earned.

“I’m just saying. Some people can be a little insulted.”

“I don’t care.”

“What a surprise.” She mumbled causing him to smile.

“Now back to Ernie Watson.”

“I’m not interested in him.”

“I never said that Cassie, I just want you to stay away from him.”

The use of her name on his lips made her guide her eyes to them. He had nice masculine lips.

“I’ll tell you right now that if you look at him, like you’ve been looking at me for the past few minutes, you’ll make him think that you like him.”

Her eyes snapped up to his, “Conceit is a sin.” She said coolly not denying that she was, because she really *was* looking at him and appreciating the way he looked.

“So is vanity.” He countered noticing that she didn’t protest his observation.

“I’m not vain!” she protested, “And isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black.”

“You put a lot of attention to your looks, so that tells me different.” He added ignoring her comment.

“good lord, why do I even talk to you.” She huffed and crossed her arms again. “You jump to conclusions too easily.”

He studied her profile for a moment thinking she was quite pretty and probably would be even better looking without the makeup. She didn’t really wear much but he suspected that underneath was a raw beauty that you rarely saw with women anymore.

“I like his mother.” She finally said to change the subject. It bothered her that he was looking at her because she knew he was judging her again.

“Everyone does. No one knows how that thing came from her.” He added with a little more venom.

“Well, don’t hold back on my account.” She returned referring to his mood. This man had no qualms about voicing his opinion and sounding as if he was welcome to it.

He smirked again, but kept his attention on the road. “No problem.”

Cassie wondered how he deemed himself so righteous when he was obviously offensive to a lot of people, herself included. “So I take it you’re not married.” Where she found the guts to say that, she didn’t know. She already knew from Molly that he had no trouble getting women and she supposed that despite his scorpion’s sting, his looks and money were probably to blame for that.

“Not until hell freezes over. Women are trouble.” He answered as if it was no secret.

“Not all women.”

He cast her a speaking glance, “All women.”

“You judge too quickly, you know.” She said offensively.

She never considered herself in a category and really didn't like to be put in one at all.

"Do I?" he gave her a surveyed look, "And how old are you?"

"It doesn't matter." She said stiffly knowing he was going to reference her maturity and she was right.

"It does. You're young, even though that mouth you have says you're around twenty seven or eight, from the looks of you I bet you're only twenty one or two."

She took that as a compliment. She liked the fact that she seemed older than she really was. "I'm twenty." To her amusement he looked surprised. She was sure he didn't show that expression often.

"Wow, completely off limits." He said almost to himself while pulling into the Watson's drive.

What did that mean? She stared at him thinking he'd elaborate, but he didn't. Instead he shifted the truck into park and turned to her.

"If Ernie tries anything with you, you just tell him I'll have words with him. You got that?" he said abruptly.

"And that's supposed to scare him?" she was sure Ernie wouldn't be put off by threats. He wasn't as big or as muscular as Blake, but he was a man with a lot of money and he had that scary appeal about him that made her know that she shouldn't be caught alone around him.

"he knows what I'm like when I'm angry honey, don't doubt it. Other than me, there's probably not much that will deter him from putting the moves on you. He's in his mid forties and should leave you alone. He's old enough to be your father and should know better even if he wasn't married."

"Oh." She said wondering why so many people called her honey around here, but more importantly why did he? He didn't act as if he had any affection for her. As for Blake's attitude, he

was intimidating when he wasn't angry. She couldn't even imagine what he was like in a rage.

"Even I know better and I'm thirty two."

Somehow that statement bothered her. She was more mature than her age and men her age seemed completely immature. It was the second time he made reference to it and this time she was going to defend herself without realizing how she sounded. "Thirteen years isn't that far apart Blake. My father always said that age is a number. There's nothing wrong with me dating an older man and he should know, he was fifteen years older than my mother. I think men my age are immature." It wasn't until after the words left her mouth that it sounded like she was offering herself to him when in fact she was just defending her beliefs. She was hoping he didn't take it that way, but then his eyes guided down her pink waitressing uniform to her breasts then back up to meet her gaze with a darkening glint. "—wait—" she said trying to recover, "—I didn't mean—"

"Sweetheart, I've had women throwing themselves at me since I hit puberty," he interrupted, "Don't play games with me, I've seen them all."

"Games?" what game?

His expression darkened, "Let me elaborate. Just because you look the way you do, doesn't mean that every man will fall at their feet in front of you—"

"The way I—" her mouth fell open. What was so wrong with her looks?

"You're a natural blonde aren't you?"

"What does that have to do—"

"Everything, and trying to use those looks of yours to get your way will only last as long as your pretty face."

Was it possible to feel like every cell of your being was on fire with rage over that insult, "Why should I even bother to defend myself!" she shot back, "You think every women falls into

the category of a seductress.” She threw up her arms, “I should have walked and baked to death, it would have been less painful. I suppose you think I sabotaged my car after meeting you earlier just so I could catch a ride and be alone with you because your wonderful personality is just so appealing!” She just couldn’t believe his gall! He’d made it sound like she was coming on to him and she certainly wasn’t—never!

He held up his hand and released a chuckle not even the slightest surprised by her outburst, “Okay, enough—my ears are ringing.”

“Good!” she glared at him, “Your superiority is making my head hurt, so we’re even.”

Although Blake didn’t show it on the outside, inside he was intrigued. No one, man or woman spoke to him like that before. They weren’t brave enough. Maybe she was more mature than her age, but she was still too young. “About your car—” he said looking past her out the window as old Mrs. Watson came out on to the porch. He lifted a hand and waved at her accompanied by a nod. He needed to change the subject because he didn’t like the feeling he was getting around her.

“My car?”

“I’ll have my mechanic look at it and have it hauled back in the morning. What time do you work?”

“I open tomorrow morning.” She offered not understanding what he was getting to, “And you shouldn’t fix my car—”

This time he held his hand up to cut her off, “I’ll come and get you for work in the morning—don’t argue. Your car should be ready by tomorrow afternoon so you won’t have a ride and I’ll be awake anyway. I’ll have it hauled to the diner before you get off work.”

“I can’t possibly pay you—” she said gaping at him. Marla said he was mean, but here he was offering to do her a favour

even after her outburst. Well he was more like telling her what he was doing, but she was broke and had no reason to refuse him. "And I really don't want to put you out." She meant it. He'd already done too much for her and she wasn't used to charity.

"First of all, I'd have been awake for an hour or so by then and as for the other, I'll think of something. Around here we do favours for one another when luck is down. Maybe I'll have you come and wrestle steer." He didn't mean a word of it. He really didn't expect her to pay him back, nor care if she did. She was going through a hardship and it wasn't much to have his mechanic look at the car. It didn't cost him anything at all.

"I can drive a baler." She offered.

"No kidding." He said the same way he talked about her knowledge of cars.

She felt herself get angry again, "I told you that I knew about things, but you seem to like to categorize women. Geez, who raised you?"

Blake fought for a straight face. He'd have to give her credit, she had guts. "A good man, and I think they have their purpose." He said with an undertone that she didn't mistake.

"You're a chauvinist." She said having visions of him expecting a woman to be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.

"I am." He admitted easily.

She shook her head, "you think we can't accomplish anything."

"I think that women have a place and they accomplish plenty there. Just like a man has his."

She released a frustrated noise and opened the door, "Thanks for the ride," she said not meaning a word of it.

"Tomorrow, five thirty." He said before she shut the door and walked away without a backward glance. He actually grinned at her angry receding backside and shook his head subtly before he drove off. She wasn't boring. He'd have to give her

that.

She could hear him drive off as she approached Mrs. Watson. "Hi."

"I was getting worried dear." She said looking past her to the receding truck, "That was Blake Eckert, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he gave me a ride when my car broke down." Admitting that seemed a little painful because it certainly wasn't a pleasant ride. She'd put her foot in her mouth several times and he was smart enough to catch it. Make a pass at *him*? How ridiculous!

"Oh you poor dear. Maybe Ernie should look at it." She suggested.

Now that was a little more painful. She really didn't want that to happen. She could only imagine what he wanted in return. Now she was thankful that Blake offered to have it fixed. At least she didn't feel threatened when Blake told her he'd figure something out, "That's okay Mrs. Watson, Blake said he'd have it fixed."

"He's a nice boy." She said with a smile. "Somehow my Ernie and he never got along, but I think that was his father's fault, always pushing him to be the best. Blake never had an idle moment in his life."

That's the second time she heard that and both times it came from women and sounded very respectful. He had no problem thinking women had their place, but they obviously didn't let that bother them. No wonder he was so darn arrogant.

"did you want to help me weed the garden?"

"I would love to." She said. She liked her landlord. She was a very kind person and she liked gardening even more. It seemed to wash away the stress of the day when she did that.

"We can pick some fresh peas for supper."

"That would be great. I'll just wash up and meet you out back." She said going in the house. It was unfortunate that she

didn't get to meet any of her grandparents, but her parents had problems conceiving and when she was born her father was almost fifty. Both of her grandparents had been dead for awhile and her mother died when she was barely three.

She changed into shorts and a tank top then went into the bathroom and washed her face and hands to try and hide the tears she felt forming at the thought of her father. He'd been dead almost four weeks, but it was so fresh in her mind that she almost picked up the phone and called him twice. She had chastised herself for going away to college, but he insisted. Now she wished she fought him more. Those could have been precious moments that she'd been able to spend with him.

Content that the tears had stopped she went out and helped Mrs. Watson weed the garden for two hours, then they had a wonderful supper with fresh vegetables. Thankfully there was no more talk of Ernie or Blake.

While Cassie was helping Mrs. Watson weed Blake was parked behind Cassie's car waiting for Dusty's tow service. When he'd gotten back to it, he'd taken a more thorough look under the hood. It was in a nutshell, a piece of junk that was at least twenty years old and he was surprised it still ran by the looks of the engine. She had a terrible oil leak and the motor was coated with it. No wonder it overheated, it was just a matter of time.

Ten minutes later the tow truck arrived and backed up to the front of the car to hook it up. Blake got out to greet Dusty Lambert, who was also a good friend of his.

Dusty took off his hat and wiped his brow looking at the old car, rusted wheel wells, and faded blue paint while letting out a long slow whistle, "this looks like an escapee from my scrap pile." He directed his attention to Blake, "How hot is she?"

"Very. It lost a rad hose."

Dusty grinned at him, "No, the girl that drove the car."

Blake just looked at him with his expression revealing

nothing, "Tow it to my place. I'll have Brad see what he can do with it."

"You're avoiding my question. That means she's really hot." Dusty said turning with the same grin and grabbing the chains out of the back, "And before you deny it, I've seen the blonde that drives this car."

"She's a kid Dusty."

"Nope, not even close." He hooked up the chains and stood up to pull the hydraulic lever to lift the front in the air. "Not that girl."

"twenty."

He stopped and looked at him, "Wow, I wouldn't have guessed. She's got the body of a woman several years older." He paused and smiled again, "I'm a little younger than you, so I guess I can—"

"You'll have to get in line, Bill Tipton said he was going to ask her out." Blake said feeling that same irritability again.

"No problem." He said meaning every word. "That was a prize worth waiting for."

Blake narrowed his gaze. Why is it that every single—and married man wanted this woman? He already answered his own question because she was beautiful and actually seemed sweet despite what he originally thought of her. Also, she was intelligent even though he didn't give her credit. "Just hook up the damn car." He heard himself say irritably.

The tone was enough to let Dusty know not to push him. However that still didn't mean that he should stop smiling. He just nodded and finished securing the car.

"Do I bill the girl?"

"No, I'll pay for it. She's down on her luck, just getting started here."

Dusty hid his grin this time knowing Blake's patience for teasing was at its limits. It wasn't that he didn't rescue a damsel

in distress, it was the tone of his voice that told him there was something more. “Just offer me a beer when I get to the house and we’ll be even.”

“Deal.”

If Blake thought that was the end of it, he was wrong. His Mechanic, who happened to be an eighteen year old runaway that he took in four years ago just stood there scratching his head when Dusty lowered the car to the ground outside of the shop with a series of metallic protests from the vehicle itself.

“Blake—is this a joke?” he said in disbelief. When Blake phoned him a half an hour ago to tell him he was bringing a car home to get fixed, he thought it was actually a real car, not a piece of scrap metal.

“Just fix it Brad.” He answered getting more and more angry. His patience was running thin and he didn’t have much to begin with. Maybe it had something to do with the blonde bombshell that he rescued from the side of the road and this useless car. Normally he would have just had Dusty tow it to the junk yard after dropping her off, not insisting Brad fix it. That thought alone made him irritable because he didn’t go out of his way for women often.

The younger man looked at him incredulous. “Fix *this*? It’s a piece of crap and I haven’t even looked under the hood yet.”

“It’s a girl’s” said Dusty ignoring the glare from Blake.

“Of course it is.” Brad said without thinking otherwise. “Because we’ve pushed better looking things off the cliff into the gully to scrap them. All I can say is, she’d better be something else.”

“She is.” Dusty offered unable to contain that grin again. “She’s got this nice little pouty mouth that—”

“You don’t say—” Brad perked up.

“It’s the only reason I go to Molly’s diner now. She’s got this killer body.” He made a gesture with his hands.

“You two are asking for a busted jaw. Show some respect.” He said glowering at Dusty particularly.

Brad cast him a wary glance knowing he usually didn’t warn before he struck. He’d been the recipient of one of those large rock solid fists when he came home drunk at sixteen and ran the ranch truck through the corral letting out more than a hundred of his cattle. It took him all night and day to round them up after Blake near broke his jaw and wouldn’t let him sleep until every last one of them were back in the fence and it was fixed. Blake also wouldn’t let any of the other ranch hands to help and he stood nearby supervising the whole event with his arms crossed over his thick chest expressionless which for Blake was worse than showing his anger. It was unpredictable to wonder if he was going to thrash him more or fire him after he finished rounding up cattle while hung-over, sick and exhausted. He hadn’t had a drop to drink since then. It was a hellish experience that near made him quit working for him, but after a few days of rest and perspective, he respected the man more than any other in his life for making him own up to his mistakes. Not one word was said about that day since then. Of course Blake’s little sister probably had something to do with that decision too. Emma was sixteen and Brad was nuts about her. If Blake found out he’d probably plant one of those granite fists into his jaw again because he was very protective of her.

Blake was a hard man, but if you admit your mistakes he was only half as angry than when you tried to hide them. Then there was the side not many people knew about. Blake was a righteous man and lived his life with those strong beliefs. His own father was hard on him, but because of it made him probably the toughest man he’d ever met and Brad admired him tremendously. He also had strong beliefs about family and despite how hard he pushed him, he knew Blake was looking out for him in one way or another; after all, he took him in after he

ran away from home when his mother remarried an abusive man. His stepfather didn't want him around and his mother was lonely for someone, so he left. Blake picked him up hitchhiking, took him home and put him to work. That was four years ago.

Dusty just chuckled at Blake's warning, but Brad wouldn't dare. "All right Boss, " he said opening the hood and shaking his head seeing the condition of the motor, "This isn't going to be ready by tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know." When Blake went back to the car after dropping Cassie off, he had a closer look under the hood. The hose was just one problem it had.

He cast the large man a glance. *Of course he did*, Brad thought. He taught him everything he knew about engines.

"Change the oil, spark plugs, wires and check the compression for me."

"Chances are the gages won't even pick it up." He said with a pained look centering his attention back on the motor. It must have fifteen years of oil caked on there. It'll take something short of a miracle and a chisel to make this piece of junk reliable.

"Do your best Brad, and I'll let you take the plane up by yourself."

"Honest?" he said switching expressions to one of delight.

"God's truth, but make sure it's reliable for her. She lives at Ernie's and drives to town for work to make an honest living, when Ernie would easily offer her another way to make money, so help her out."

Brad made a face of disgust, "That guy is a letch."

"Well she lives with old Mrs. Watson, more than likely she's got a soft spot for the woman like the rest of us."

It was well into the evening and she was just about ready for bed when there was a knock at the door. Mrs. Watson always went to bed several hours before her, so she didn't know who it

could be.

She felt her insides curl when it was none other than Ernie. “Your mother’s in bed.” She said not offering to let him in the house.

“Oh, I wanted to catch her before then.”

Sure he did.

“I brought these.” He said holding up a bouquet of flowers. They were beautiful and obviously very expensive, “but since she’s sleeping I guess I’ll give them to you. Doesn’t every pretty girl want flowers?”

“I’ll tell her you bought them for her.” Cassie said taking the flowers thinking every man in this country was chauvinistic.

“It’s a nice night.” He added.

“Yes, it is, and too bad I can’t enjoy it. I need to get up to work early in the morning.” She said trying to get him to take the hint and leave. She noticed he looked slightly annoyed but didn’t say anything to that fact.

“You shouldn’t be working like that. You’re too young and pretty. You could have a job at my feedlot if you like.”

“No thanks, I like the tips and Garnet and Molly are really good to me.” She tried to sound pleasant even though she started to feel uneasy.

“Where’s your car?” he turned and nodded toward the empty area on the driveway where she usually parked.

Oh lord, what if he insisted on driving her to work? Then she remembered what Blake said and felt a little better. “It broke down. Luckily Blake Eckert came along. He said he’d fix it and have it returned. He was also nice enough to offer me a ride tomorrow morning.”

His brows went up, “He did?”

“Yes. He’s a nice man.” She lied through her teeth and almost laughed when Ernie suddenly looked like he was in pain.

“Well, if I guess there’s nothing else I can offer you.”

Definitely not, she thought, “Anyway, I should get to bed.”

“good night then.”

She shut the door not wishing him the same and sighed relief. Even the mention of Blake’s name seemed to make Ernie a little wary. Maybe there was something there after all.

She was just grabbing her purse when she heard Blake’s obscenely large truck pull up. She snatched her sweater off the sofa and headed out the door before the sound of it woke up Mrs. Watson. She was probably up already because she made coffee and went back to bed, but she didn’t want to bother her if she laid back down. It was a sweet thing for her to do and Cassie didn’t have the heart to tell her that she didn’t drink coffee. For some reason the taste of it never appealed to her.

It took her a bit to get in the truck and she actually slipped managing to grip the hand rail and pull herself in before she fell.

“Jesus.” Blake said watching her struggle.

She just looked at him. She wanted to blast him but he was going out of his way for her even if she had to put up with his razor sharp attitude.

“Nothing to say?”

“I’m thinking if I did say anything you’d abandon me on the side of the road, and I can’t be late. Besides not everyone is eight feet tall.”

He actually chuckled at her sarcasm, “I’d never do that to a lady.” Then he shifted the truck into gear and focused his attention on the road.

Cassie just stared at him. *Lady?* She really didn’t expect that especially after what Marla told him what he had said to her about earning a living on her back and what Molly told him about his women. However, Molly also told her that he was old school

in the way he treated women. She took a deep breath, this was one man she'd never figure out. One moment he was mean, then meaner, then to throw her off he threw her a compliment, but made it sound like an insult. Shaking her head she slumped in the large leather seat and resigned to staring out the windshield.

"How'd your dad die?"

She looked at him again. One thing she didn't expect was for him to be curious about her life. He actually seemed quite disinterested.

He flicked her a sideways glance letting her know there was no hidden meaning in those words, "My father died three years ago. Left a widow and a thirteen year old girl for me to raise."

It was the first time his tone had completely softened. Despite what Molly said about his father, it was obvious that he respected him a great deal. After a moment she nodded. "It was a heart attack."

He shook his head while watching the road, "At least he went quick. My father lasted six months," he glanced at her again, "Cancer."

"sorry." She said and meant it. Losing her father was devastating. If he felt the same way about his, she could only imagine how hard it was.

His eyes went to her then back to the road but he didn't say anything else.

"You have a sister?"

He nodded, "My step mother is too busy enjoying her inheritance to raise her. My father was very wealthy."

"Oh." Well it made sense now why he had issues with women.

He saw her expression, "She's a good woman Cassie, she was just young and unable to deal with raising a thirteen year old."

Her eyes went to his, “So that’s why you said that yesterday.”

“Said what?”

“That I was way too young for you.” She said without thinking.

His eyes studied her face for as long as they could without him hitting the ditch, but even during that short time he saw a slight pinkening of her cheeks. She wasn’t used to being stared at, which was odd, because she was unfairly beautiful. That modesty alone made her attractive to him. It actually bothered him that he was finding her attractive with each passing exchange because he did think she was too young for him. He liked older women, experienced women, and already he knew from the short time of knowing her that she had about as much experience as a newborn lamb. Yet, her personality was likable despite the way he spoke to her because she had the gall to stand up to him where not many people would. So not only did she look amazing, she was obviously more self confident than most women he knew to not let his prickly temper bother her. She also as sweet as hell but totally naïve. A relationship with her could only spell trouble because she seemed immune to his attitude and for some reason, God help him, it was very appealing. “You are.” He finally said.

It was then she realized her mistake. Again she made it sound like she was interested in him, but she wasn’t. Was she? He was so darn handsome. Even today wearing a striped western cut shirt, faded jeans adorned with a large belt buckle and a cream Stetson, he looked good enough to pose for a western magazine. Her eyes guided down to the buckle and the bulge of denim under it before averting her gaze to the scenery outside the window to hide her rising blush. Never in all of her life was she so blatant in her staring. She couldn’t have been more thankful that his attention was on the road.

But it wasn't. Blake was good at multitasking and he saw where her attention was, and the blush that followed. *Oh hell*, he thought to himself. *If I have to drive her to work every morning for the next few days it was going to be easier to change professions and being a cowboy is in my blood.* Despite her spitting fire, that look right there let him know that she was curious about his masculine attributes. It was attraction. He knew the signs as subtle as they were and this was an attraction that he couldn't have.

Molly and Garnet had just finished firing up the grill and loading the cash register when the familiar sound of Blake's truck caught her attention. You could have picked her jaw up off the ground when that big cowboy got out, walked around to the passenger side and helped out no other than Cassie. "Garnet." She said without turning and looking through the window to the kitchen.

"What hun?"

"Come see this." She said in the same tone of disbelief.

Garnet came out of the back and shook his head as Cassie took Blake's hand so he could help her out of the tall truck. "I'll be damned."

However Cassie's expression didn't look pleased. She looked angry. And after she cast a glare at Blake who stood there with his hands on his hips watching her, she turned and came through the diner.

"What a jerk." She mumbled.

"Jerk?" said Garnet.

"Jerk?" repeated Molly. Now she was really confused. That whole event looked like an act of affection but Cassie looked fit to kill.

Cassie brought her head up and her eyes widening seeing that she was being watched.

Garnet cleared his throat and quickly left knowing this was a female conversation.

“What happened—why is Blake—“

“My car broke down.” She said just as Blake roared away from the diner. She winced at the loud sound of the motor before continuing, “He gave me a ride home and said he’d fix my car.”

“Blake?”

Cassie was a little taken back by that, “Is that not like him?”

She shook her head. “Not for someone like you. Maybe me, his sister, or old Mrs. Watson. I mean he’d give you a ride home, have your car towed, but not offer anything beyond that.”

Cassie gestured toward the window that Blake was parked outside of moments ago, “Well don’t go and think that he has a thing for me Molly. He can be so darn obtuse!”

“It looked like he was being a gentleman.” She offered.

She widened her eyes at that suggestion, “Him? He only helped me out of the truck because I near fell getting in it. You didn’t hear what he said to me when he was helping me out.”

This time Molly smiled, “Enlighten me.”

“Gosh, he’s so—“ she made a frustrated noise, “He told me that he didn’t want a lawsuit on his hands because of my clumsiness.” She walked around the counter and removed a clean apron from underneath to tie around her waist a little roughly, “Ever since I met him, he’s insulted me by making snide comments about my looks. The only reason I accepted the ride and the help in the first place is because I’m broke and more than likely I would end up having to get Ernie to drive me—“ she shivered, “—and he gives me the creeps.”

Molly laughed, “Don’t let Blake fool you Cassie. He does have a soft heart in there somewhere. He’s crazy about sister Emma, and raises her. Not once has he said anything against that mother of hers who’s travelling all over the world and living

the good life while leaving her daughter here.” She said with an expression of disapproval,

“He wouldn’t say anything about his step mother,” Cassie said in exasperation, “Because he’d be insulting his sister and he’s too—honourable that way. I’ve learned that much about him in this short time. But it still doesn’t stop him from making assumptions about me.”

Molly nodded interested in the fact that Cassie could read Blake so easily after a short time. “And as for Ernie, you make sure he knows that you’re not his toy.” She added shaking a finger at her, “I’ll take a frying pan to his head if he so much as touches you.”

Finally Cassie smiled with Molly’s concern, “Blake already mentioned that he’d have words with him if that happened, I sort of let Ernie know that last night when he showed up.”

She shook her head angrily, “That slime ball. He’s a married man, you should be lucky that Blake took it upon himself to fight for your honour.”

“he only said he’d have words.” She defended.

Molly grinned, “Which in Blake means he’ll pound the devil out of him if he so much as looks at you.”

She threw up her arms, “Whatever, I give up. The man is so exasperating.”

Molly never said anything as she watched her go set up the tables. She suspected something was starting in Cassie for Blake or he wouldn’t affect her so much. That wasn’t a surprise, all women mooned over him, what was surprising is that Blake seemed to have taken it upon himself to look out for her.

CHAPTER TWO

That afternoon it was Blake and Brad bent over the motor of Cassie’s car while it ran—roughly, but it ran.

“See?” said Brad, “This may have a few weeks left in it.”

“Yeah, I hear the knock.” He said straightening and rubbing the back of his neck, “Just try your best Brad.”

Brad stood straight and thrust his hands in his pockets while looking up at his Boss, “If you mean replace the rings, flush the tranny and spend more money on the car than it’s worth, I’ll do it, but even for a girl this doesn’t seem logical no matter how hot she is.”

“Lay off about that.” He cast him a warning look.

“Yes boss,” he said a little more apprehensively especially under that pale menacing stare.

“Just fix the damn car.” He added before he turned and walked away.

Brad shook his head thinking that Blake finally lost his mind. He watched as he stopped to yell at one of the ranch hands sitting on the top rail of one of the corrals. The cowboy hopped down and went back to work as quick as a blink of an eye. Brad knew it wasn’t uncommon to take unscheduled breaks but Blake was irritable. What was uncommon is Blake’s temper in regards to a woman. This gal must be something else. He glanced back down at the knocking engine that was now emitting a blue cloud from an exhaust leak under the manifold and decided he’d just phone Dusty and see if he had a rebuild for this model, it would be cheaper than trying to rebuild it on his own.

Cassie’s feet hurt and she was exhausted, then to top it all off Blake walked into the diner just before she got off shift. She was busy with a customer and didn’t see him, but a familiar “hey Blake” caught her attention. Even though he was as loveable as a cactus people seemed to respect him. She looked up to see his eyes on her and nodded while tipping his hat slightly. She already knew what that look meant. Her car wasn’t fixed and more than likely he came to get her. That unnerved her. She’d

ridden in the truck twice now and it was just as intimidating as he was. Not only that, her insides seemed all over the place whenever she got near him. In fact she near spilled coffee on her customers lap because her eyes were on him. She watched him remove his hat and walked over to the counter where Molly was and took a stool to wait.

Cassie quickly apologized for her clumsiness, gathered the dishes and her coffee pot from the table and went into the back to put them on the rack for the dishwasher.

"I see Blake's here." Garnet said flipping several burgers while giving her an amused look.

She knew what he was getting at. "Don't read anything into it. I think my car is still not working."

"He's a good mechanic honey. He'll get it fixed or that boy of his will."

"Boy?" she said turning to him. "He has a son?"

Garnet shook his head, "Bradley's not his son." He answered while tossing some buns on the grill to toast them. "He's a kid that Blake took home a few years back. Had no place to go."

"He took home a homeless kid?" Just when she was forming an image of the man, something would blow it off course. Now she found herself admiring him along with everyone else. She gave her head a shake.

Garnet nodded , "Parents didn't want him. Blake picked him up hitchhiking so the story goes. Taught him all about engines and things. Turned him into a damn good mechanic. A lot of people take their cars to him. In turn, the kid thinks the sun rises and sets on him."

"It seems a lot of people do."

"Some, yes. He does some charity work and despite his reputation for being mean. It's helped a lot of people."

"Wow, just when you get an opinion of him, it changes."

Garnet loaded the burgers up and turned to place them on the ledge for Molly to take to the customers and rang the bell before turning back to Cassie. "Don't let his thorns bother you hun. I figure he's got a soft spot for you already or he wouldn't be here."

Cassie made a sound of disbelief. "I think he gets his kicks out of riling me up."

Garnet grinned, "Most people would have run in the other direction after the way he was when you first met him. I think he's interested."

"He already told me that he doesn't like women playing games and that I'm too young for him, so that's out of the question." She actually heard disappointment in her voice and bit her lip hoping Garnet didn't hear it, but he did.

"Ah, so there's attraction there?"

She rapidly shook her head, "Absolutely not." But her denial seemed too quick and Garnet just chuckled turning back to the grill.

"He hosts an annual local rodeo. It brings in a lot of money for the homeless shelter and soup kitchen." He continued casting a quick glance in her direction to see her perk up.

"Really?" Cassie loved rodeos. Her father always took her to them. He was a good bareback rider in his day.

"He also participates in the events. He usually wins too." He said without looking at her.

"Oh? What does he do?" she asked with peaked interest. She could easily seem him steer wrestling with that large well built body of his.

"everything." He added with a smirk. It was hard to believe, but it was true. Blake's father drove him hard to be the best at everything. He could have went pro, but his interests lie with ranching and he was already wealthy enough and confident enough in himself that he didn't have to prove anything to

anyone.

Her eyes widened, "Everything?"

Garnet grinned and nodded. "Well most everything. Bull riding was hard for him because of his size, but he managed."

Cassie thought heavily on that while she removed her apron and tossed it in the laundry. What cowboy participated in every event at a rodeo? He'd have to be superman. She grew up on a ranch and thought she'd met the toughest cowboys around, but this man kept stumping her. No one could be that good. The people she talked to about him seemed to hero worship him but he was so darn harsh. She sighed heavily. She'd bet her father probably would have liked him a lot.

Even Marla who had been insulted by him in probably the worst possible way, still thought he was gorgeous. She studied him for a moment while he was deep in conversation with Molly. He was striking because he was self confident and gave off this strong cowboy image without even trying. The problem was, he is a tough cowboy. The toughest she had ever met. Even the way he wore his Stetson was really sexy. But, he knew it, heck, everyone knew it and she had problems of her own, especially when he smiled. Only he didn't seem interested. Actually he seemed annoyed most times she had talked to him.

Suddenly he guided his eyes toward her while listening to something Molly had to say. Gosh, he had the most beautiful eyes she'd ever seen, but they also seemed to see through her very soul. Pale green, circled with a dark rim around the iris, just to make them look even more heavenly. Forcing a smile she tried to act like she wasn't gawking at him a moment ago and walked over to the two.

"Ready?" he said getting lazily to his feet to tower above her.

She tilted her head up at him. There was no explanation about her car, why he was here, or what she was going to do with

no money or vehicle to get to work. Yet, she couldn't just demand to have her car back. After all, he was having it fixed after he paid for the tow. It would seem so selfish. So instead she nodded, "I'll just grab my purse." She reached under the counter.

"See you tomorrow Cass." Said Molly with a wink that was directed at her.

Cassie shook her head subtly as she walked back around the counter where the behemoth stood.

"Thanks Moll." Said Blake as he took Cassie's elbow which got him a surprised look from Cassie among many others in the diner.

Not once had he touched her before, except to help her out of the truck, but it came with a sharp retort. Now it was ingrained in her and she expected it, but he never said anything else until he led her out of the diner toward his truck.

"Your car isn't ready." He finally said.

"I worked that out." She answered trying to hide her disappointment. He was trying to help her and she really had no right to make him feel beholden to her.

He opened the door and helped her in, "Maybe in a couple of days."

She went to say something but he shut the door. He had the manners of an uneducated beast. It ignited her temper. A temper she never knew she had until she met him.

He got in behind the wheel and started the engine, "Are there any stops? Do you need groceries or anything?"

Her irritation dissolved instantly. Good lord he was offering to take her grocery shopping? She couldn't possibly accept any more of his charity without some reciprocation. She turned to him, "I can break horses, drive a baler, muck stalls and catalogue cattle among other things. I was born and raised on a ranch until three weeks ago." She said feeling more and more

indebted and guilty about her temper moments ago.

He just stared at her with those stunning pale green eyes.

Her stomach clenched under his stare. How could anyone possibly match that? It made her insides leap all over the place. "Blake?" why did everything about this man have to be such a mystery? She couldn't read anything in his expression or his eyes and more and more she found herself getting lost in them.

He took a deep breath knowing that she was feeling guilty about what he was doing for her. It was a first actually. Women he knew took and except for giving him what he needed sexually, it was unusual for someone to offer themselves to do chores for a rare act of kindness. For some reason he knew she meant every word, but he also knew that she worked like a dog at the diner besides keeping Mrs. Watson company. She was too young to work so hard and he wasn't about to add to it. "It's not necessary."

She clenched her jaw. She never took charity especially when she could be useful in some way, "Then return my car today."

"That's impossible." He said simply turning away while pulling out onto the road.

"Impossible?"

He cast her a glance, "You said you knew a bit about cars."

"A bit, not a lot." She said and waited for an elaboration on what he meant, but she didn't get one. This man could frustrate the devil out of her, "Blake, what exactly is wrong with my car?"

He cast her another glance accompanied with a slight pulling up of the corner of his mouth, "Well I assume your car is in about four hundred pieces in my shop while my mechanic is rebuilding the motor."

"W—what did you just say?" Again he didn't answer her,

“Will you please pull over, I don’t feel so well.” The impact of her situation hit her all at once. No money, no family, nothing of her own.

Blake instantly complied. She hopped out of the truck even before he shifted it into park, “Cassie—” she shut the door cutting him off. Obviously she needed a moment, so he would give it to her.

When she didn’t come back after a few moments he looked in his side mirror but couldn’t see her. Clenching his teeth he tapped the steering wheel for a few moments in indecision. He knew she was upset and needed time, but did he go and see what was wrong? Christ, he wasn’t the best choice for consoling a woman, or anyone for that matter. Hell, he had trouble enough with his sixteen year old sister when she got emotional.

He twisted his head around and could see her blonde head by the tailgate. “Ah Hell.” The decision was made and he got out of the truck.

When he walked around the back he was surprised by what he saw. She wasn’t crying, not one tear. Instead she was just leaning against the bumper with her arms folded across her middle while staring at the Colorado Mountains in the distant. He placed his hand on the top of the tailgate and just watched her. He didn’t have anything to say because he wasn’t sure what she was feeling. Not only that, he really didn’t know what to say. His eyes moved down her form while she stared off into the distant. Bill and Dusty were right about her being beautiful. She really was. As he thought before, that uniform was a little snug for his tastes, but, it showed off all of her finest curves and she had *incredible* curves.

“You’re a nice man Blake.” She finally said after a few minutes but didn’t look at him. She was afraid that if she did, she’d burst into tears. There were not many things in her life that she cried over. Her father taught her to face adversity and

she always thought that she could handle anything because of her upbringing, but now she felt so alone, horribly alone.

He really didn't expect that statement at all. Then again he expected her to be an emotional mess and was surprised that she wasn't. "No I'm not." She certainly wouldn't think that if she knew the images going through his head right now while she was vulnerable.

She gave him a small smile, "You are, but for some reason I get the feeling you don't show it often." She reached up and brushed a strand of blonde hair off of her face to see him better. "I have no one now. No one at all but for some reason I always thought I'd be fine. My father raised me to be independent and deal with crises such as this, but there's just nothing left in me."

"We all think that when we're at our wits end."

She glanced at him, "I don't think you've ever been there. Molly said you were rich and some sort of magnet for women."

"I am and—" he grinned,—"perhaps, but it doesn't mean I haven't suffered getting there. My father never handed me anything without a price."

She pinched her lips together, "Sorry, I assumed."

"Never assume honey, it only gets you in trouble."

She nodded. "yes I know the saying."

He cocked a brow, "Are you sure you're twenty?"

She gave him a small smile at the compliment. It was the first time he said it without any sort of sarcasm in his tone. "yes, but I feel twice my age right now."

"Have dinner with me tonight." He heard himself say.

She just stared at him resisting the urge to drop her jaw. "You don't even like me."

"I never said that." He countered, "You're assuming again."

"You didn't need to." She explained, "It's the things you say and I also remember you saying that I was too young."

He shrugged, "I never said I wanted to marry you Cassie."

She thrust her hands on her hips and tipped her head defiantly, "You can be very offensive Blake." She said narrowing her eyes at him.

"Yes, and you take every word and sling it back at me. Now if your done being obstinate, I swear I have the best cook in the state."

The obstinate statement was vaporized at his last statement as it dawned on her what he was asking. "T-to your place."

"Nervous?" He cocked his head in a challenge, "Afraid to be alone with me?"

Quickly recovering she scoffed and he actually laughed.

"That's more like it." He said acknowledging her brave response.

She waved a finger toward him, "Just know that I'm not trading *those* kinds of favours for my car."

"You're breaking my heart." He said drolly as if it was the exact opposite, "Don't worry, I'm not starving for love."

"I don't doubt it." She said giving him a once over before turning away to get back in the truck.

He just shook his head smirking while watching her go. Obviously she didn't have any idea what that look could do to a man like him. He never forgot the way she looked at him yesterday. There was attraction there, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to encourage from her yet. Every red flag in his head was waving frantically. He could get in deep easily with this girl and he knew it. She was smart, sweet and unfortunately too vulnerable right now despite the courage she'd just shown him. He knew that vulnerability led to neediness. It was a complication he didn't want. He liked short no nonsense relationships that satisfied him in bed besides the social aspect. This girl didn't have much experience or if any at all in that area.

Cassie made a sound under her breath when she saw Ernie sitting on the porch swing beside his mother when Blake pulled into the yard.

"This is interesting." Blake said frowning. He knew exactly why Ernie was there, and didn't like it one bit. Suddenly he felt a surge of protectiveness, and maybe a bit of possessiveness along with it.

She turned and looked at him as he pulled up to the house, "I can handle him Blake."

"No, you probably can't." he said almost to himself while looking at the other man. He may not be willing to take advantage of Cassie's vulnerability but that didn't mean Ernie wouldn't. "I'll see you to the door." He said after a moment.

She nodded and went to get out but his hand covered hers bringing her eyes to the gesture than to him in question.

He suddenly had another idea. "Kiss me now while he's watching."

"K-kiss you." She whispered as if the two on the porch could hear through the sealed doors and windows of the truck.

"Let him think we're involved. Then he'll leave you alone." It was a good suggestion, but Blake couldn't admit to himself it was done in total innocence. Part of him really wanted to taste that incredible mouth she possessed.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because he's angered me before—" he smirked, "More than once and he knows better than to cross me."

"My God, you are so darn arrogant."

"Of course I am." He said as if it was common knowledge, "Now come here and kiss me."

She bit her bottom lip and his eyes were drawn to them.

"Jesus Cass, it's a simple kiss. He'll leave you alone if he sees us." He added irritably at her hesitation.

She still never said anything.

He started to get annoyed with her lack of response until he suddenly realized that maybe there was something else going on here. “You have kissed a man before haven’t you?” he said not understanding her apprehension. Any woman he knew would take his offer if not to deter Ernie, than just to have the opportunity to kiss him. He knew his reputation and it was well earned but all he was doing was offering her a way out. It didn’t seem like that hard of a decision.

“Of course, what a silly question.” She blurted out the lie, “It’s just—well, like I said before, you don’t find me attractive and it feels weird.”

Without another word he gave her a hard look, gripped her hand and tugged causing her to jerk toward him taking the decision away from her.

Now Cassie would remember this moment for the rest of her life. When she looked back on it numerous over the next few days, it appeared in slow motion in her mind. Everything about it seemed so perfect.

As she fell toward him his other hand slid around the back of her head and he tilted his just as their mouths met. When that happened, time stood still.

Her lips were already parted from the sudden unexpected jerk on her arm and his was already there. His mouth was firm, warm and God help her, he knew exactly how to use it. In the next moment she felt his mouth open wider and his tongue slide between her lips and caress hers without any warning. It was so smoothly done that she was bewitched within seconds. After the brief shock of intimacy she felt warm inside, then hungry for more.

Unexpectedly her fingers entangled in his hair knocking his Stetson off behind him and she could feel his arms contract around her back pulling her closer. Was a man supposed to taste so good? Her whole body riveted with that first contact and it

had yet to finish vibrating. Instead heat swelled up in her core and she could feel her cheeks flush from it but still, she didn't want this to end. She wanted more. Through her haze she felt his hands move to her waist and push her away.

"Cassie, we need to stop." His voice was husky with desire.

She nodded but it still didn't comprehend what he was saying.

"Honey." He repeated. Yet he still gripped her small waist not moving her further away. *So much for his resistance.*

Finally she inched back and just looked at him, "Oh oh." She blinked her eyes twice locking them on his. Part of her still hadn't comprehended that he separated them. She felt his large hands on her waist and the strength in them were unmistakable. His grip was steady and firm and if it was an indicator of what the rest of him was like, she was in really big trouble.

"Yeah, that's an understatement." He said in the same tone not even trying to hide it this time.

"This shouldn't happen." She mouthed barely hearing her own voice.

"No, it really shouldn't," he locked gazes with her for a moment before lowered his head to hers again. He didn't tell her that Ernie's mother tapped him on the arm and dragged him into the house to give them privacy when he first kissed her because he never thought she'd taste as sweet as she did. Hell, she was probably the sweetest thing he ever kissed. At first he only meant to give her a brief kiss on the mouth, but that parted pouty moue of hers was too damn irresistible. This time he kissed her slowly, deliberately and if the sexual aura of that kiss turned into physical heat it would have melted the interior of the truck. Then she released this little sexy moan and he pulled back from her again, "Okay, that's enough." He said sounding a little harsher than before.

She was unaffected by his tone because she was on another planet with the feelings running through her. Somehow she knew he was having as much trouble as she was resisting the effect that kiss created.

“You’d better go. I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning, same time.” He needed to get the hell away from her or things were going to get really heated.

“Okay.”

“Go.” He repeated.

She gave him a smile and jumped out of the truck leaving him rubbing his forehead with his hand.

“stupid fool.’ He said to himself. “I shouldn’t have kissed her.” He ran his fingers through his hair, cursed to himself what he was about to do, and rolled down the passenger window with the push of a button, “Cassie!”

She stopped as she was going up the porch steps and turned back to him with her head tilted in question.

“I said dinner, remember?”

She nodded.

“I’ll be back in three hours.”

Slowly she grinned and nodded again before turning and going through the door.

He shook his head and groaned while driving away. This was insane! He wasn’t one to get involve with Cassie’s type. Yet something swayed him and he already knew what it was especially when she turned and looked at him from the porch. She was completely breathtaking. The problem was, she was young, and had way too much baggage. Blake liked uncomplicated relationships and Cassie was the furthest from that.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled up next to his shop where Brad was working on Cassie’s car.

“Hey boss.” Brad said looking up for a moment seeing

Blake set his Stetson back on his head.

It actually took him a while to realize that it had been shoved off his head. Damn, he didn't even realize that. "How's the car?" he said while adjusting his hat properly.

"I think I'll have it running the day after next." Brad said watching the gesture, "What's wrong with the hat?"

Blake ignored him. He certainly wasn't going to tell him that he spent fifteen minutes seducing a twenty year old in front of their elderly neighbour. He glanced passed him to the motor laying on the shop floor. "What's this?" he said gesturing toward it.

Brad set down the socket he had and looked at him with clear determination, "What you told me. Fix it. So I am." He expected an argument so he was going to stick to his guns. Blake told him to fix the damn car so to do that he had to get another motor for it. To his surprise Blake just nodded and walked past him.

He walked over and looked at the motor now sitting under the hood. "Dusty."

"Yeah."

"How much?"

"You don't want to know." He said wiping his hands on a rag he pulled from his back pocket, "But that one was shot and you know it." He nodded toward the motor sitting in the corner of the shop.

"This isn't the right motor." He said looking under the hood again.

"It is." Brad said with a straight face. Well, as straight as an eighteen year old could keep it.

Blake knew and just stared at him finally causing Brad to chuckle.

"Well, at least it is for the make." He grinned, "It's from a charger."

“She’ll know we switched it out as soon as her foot hits the accelerator!” He said angrily.

“You didn’t want her to?” he said raising his brows.

“No, I didn’t want her to know that we rebuilt her car from the ground up. She already feels beholden to me.” He cursed out loud after that statement.

“Gee boss, a sexy hot woman that feels like she owes you something? What the hell was I thinking?” he said with a mock look of innocence. Brad honestly didn’t know what the problem was. According to Dusty this girl was gorgeous and being a man himself, he wouldn’t have any problem helping her out. Even Blake who had no shortage of female company was acting out of character toward her so Brad knew Dusty must’ve been telling the truth.

His eyes narrowed on the younger man. Of course he didn’t see anything wrong with it. He was eighteen and loaded with hormones. He was also a nice looking kid with dirty blonde hair and deep brown eyes. Blake was sure he’d already had his share of women. If it wasn’t for his looks, his charm was highly effective. He was tall for his age too and still had some growing left. Despite his harshness toward him, Blake was highly protective of Brad but he wasn’t going to coddle him.

Shaking his head he turned and walked away but not before he abruptly told him to pull it into the shop so Cassie wouldn’t see it when she came for dinner.

Brad watched Blake’s receding back. Dinner? He invited her to dinner? Blake never brought women home even for that. He kept his love life and family life separate. He was sure it was because of Emma in not wanting to expose her to the type of women that he usually dated.

Gorgeous, carefree Emma.

Brad’s thoughts turned elsewhere as he bent back over the engine. The only reason he hadn’t made the moves on her was

because he actually liked the way he looked and despite Blake's affection for him, he wouldn't hesitate to rearrange his facial features if he did go after Emma. Not only that, she acted as if he didn't exist and he lived in the house with his bedroom just down the hall from hers. Beyond a brief 'hello' she wouldn't give him the time of day.

When Blake walked into the house he was met with several female voices shouting from the direction of his study. Upon opening the door, there was his sister with several other girls her age bouncing around in Cheerleading uniforms.

"Hi!" she said breathlessly when she saw her older brother causing the other two girls to stop moving.

"What the hell is this?"

Despite his reputation Emma was immune to his tone "Cheerleading practice. This is Amanda and Janie, you've met them before."

He nodded a hello. "Cheerleading?"

"I told you last week I was going to try out. Janie's older sister was the captain last year and lent us the uniforms to practise in. Isn't that exciting?"

"profoundly." He said in a tone that said the opposite. Having his teenage sister hop around the sidelines half dressed in front of a football team wasn't settling well with him.

She gave him a ravishing grin, "You played football in high school Blake."

"My point exactly." He scanned the other two teenagers, "Don't be bounding out on the front lawn like that in front of my men." He directed his eyes back to his sister's, "Especially Brad."

She narrowed her gaze and placed her hand on her hip, "As if."

"And don't wear that to dinner, we're having company."

"Who?"

"Just change before six."

She just stared at him.

Nodding he shut the door leaving the three of them to their practice.

Amanda, her friend turned to her, "You're not interested in Brad? I thought you might be."

"He thinks he's god's gift to woman." She answered with a roll of her eyes.

"So? He is." Amanda argued, "Very dreamy. I'd like to see him work over a hot engine with his shirt off. I mean he looks yummy either way."

"I second that." Said Janie. "But your brother is just as hunky. I never seen arms that big with muscle." She added with widening eyes and a tone of awe.

She held her hand up cutting her off, "Okay can we stop talking about my brother's employee and my brother." She said growing more and more annoyed that her friends found Brad attractive.

"Do we have to?" Amanda said laughing.

Cassie was nervous, no, she was a wreck. At least Mrs. Watson went to Ernie's for dinner so she wouldn't have to endure his company any longer. She was invited but was relieved that Blake invited her over because she had a valid reason for not going. Otherwise she felt obligated. Again, he rescued her, even though he didn't realize it.

She changed into a simple shoulder strap pale green eyelet dress. It was casual yet dressy, and she let her hair down. It always felt good to take it down off her head when she was done work. Her blonde curls tumbled down her back and she rubbed her scalp in relief.

She could hear Blake's truck awhile before he pulled into the yard. It seemed that her heart beat in time with the noise of the engine and maybe just as loud. What was wrong with her?

He parked the truck and got out. She didn't understand why until he walked around and opened the passenger door for her.

She was about to tell him not to worry about it, when she looked down at her dress. She'd forgotten about how hard it was to get into his truck to begin with. Now she had a dress on. Obviously he noticed. Her Waitressing uniform came to her knees and she had leg room, but this one went to her ankles and it took some managing to hike it up and climb in.

"Thanks." She mumbled as he gripped her elbow and helped her.

"No problem." He answered.

She actually expected some sort of retort and never got one, but the evening wasn't over.

He got in and turned to her, "Ernie left?"

She nodded, "He took his mother to his house for dinner."

"How was he after I left?" He couldn't help it and dropped his eyes to her mouth remembering that scorching kiss they shared.

She flushed, "Fine." Then she averted her gaze. Just thinking about that heated kiss had her all out of sorts. Obviously it didn't bother him at all and why should it? The man probably had women swarming all over him.

As for Ernie, he was only there about ten minutes after she got dropped off. Thankfully he didn't try and talk to her, but spent his time speaking to his mother until they left together.

He grinned at her shyness and started the engine. What she didn't know, is that whole incident had him out of balance too. He didn't expect her to taste so good, or feel even better. The problem with that is he was already feeling protective of her and he didn't like complications—at all. The way she was dressed now really suited her. First of all, he didn't expect her hair to be so long and soft looking. He was right though, she was a true

blonde. Her hair was an exquisite color that was almost platinum near the tips. The dress she chose was conservative and completely reflective of her personality. It was like he was seeing her in a new light. She was one of those women that you'd take home to your mother, not the type that he usually filled his time with. However, he'd also seen her temper and had touched her. He knew what passion lie underneath that contemporary exterior. Thankfully her voice brought him out of those thoughts because it was getting harder to ignore her affect on him and he'd rather not think about it.

"Oh Gosh!" Cassie sat forward in the seat when he pulled down a long paved drive to his house. As it came into view she was set back. The house was beautiful! It was a two story neo-Mediterranean style with white stucco, terra cotta shingles, and high arches with decorative accents around the eaves.

"You like it?"

"Unbelievable." She said in awe, "It's so beautiful."

"My grandfather liked the Spanish-Italian styles."

"He has good taste." She said missing his look of pride because she couldn't take her eyes off of the house. "It's so big."

"We have twelve rooms and thirteen bathrooms." He explained, "My grandfather was a hard man, but he always believed that when it came time to take your boots off at the end of the day, a man needed a good home to do it in."

"Good is an understatement. If I took my boots off there, I'd never find them again."

He chuckled, "He wasn't one to brag about his wealth, but he liked to live well." He pulled up around an intricate pave stone drive, cut the engine and turned to her. "Wait for me or god forbid, you'd fall on your face." He said before he got out and walked around to help her out.

She was still so overwhelmed with the beauty of this place, that she didn't argue. Even when he took her hand to help

her out of the high vehicle her attention was on the colourful flowers around the front of the house and hanging from baskets. She wondered if there was a woman around that did those things. She knew about his little sister, but when she was sixteen she was more interested in her barrel horse than flowers. When she went off to school at eighteen, her father sold her horse to make a mortgage payment. It was devastating, but she understood why he did it. Also, she was away at school and couldn't work him like he was meant to be, but she still missed him. She felt her eyes water remembering her father again.

Just then a nice looking lean tall young man came walking up the driveway with grease on his faded blue t-shirt. "Hi."

For some reason Blake hadn't let go of her hand yet and the young man noticed with a telltale lift of one of his blonde brows followed by an amused look at Blake.

"This is Cassie." Blake said introducing the two, "this is my mechanic Brad."

"Hi." She said with a genuine smile.

"I'd shake your hand, but I still have grease on mine." Brad said with a charming grin. *And I don't think Blake would let go of yours*, he thought to himself.

"Are you the one working on my car?"

He shot an unsure look at Blake before answering, "yeah, I should have it ready by tomorrow." He wasn't sure how much Blake had told her about what'd he done to it yet. He was certain from his reaction over the motor that not much had been told to her.

"I really appreciate everything you've done."

"Well, talk to Blake, he's the one that's insisting it gets done."

She turned and looked up at him as he conveniently released her hand and turned away, "come on, I'll show you the

house.” Obviously this wasn’t open for discussion. She wanted to bring up a trade for things she could do again, but he must’ve sensed that and quickly changed the subject. She sighed and walked through the door that he just opened. Brad followed them.

The architecture carried on the inside with that Spanish influence, and she instantly fell in love with it.

“You like it?”

“I love it!” she said without hesitation completely forgetting about her protest a moment ago.

For some reason he enjoyed hearing that from her. “My great grandfather built it. My ancestors came from Spain. My father joked that we were about one of Columbus’s ships, but it was several hundred years after that.” He stared down at her.

She smiled at him knowing that his current mood probably wasn’t seen by many people. “my mother was from the Netherlands.”

“Ah, the fair hair and blue eyes makes sense then.”

So did the dark skin and hair on him. Suddenly she had an image of how beautiful children from him would be and felt herself blushing.

“What?”

She shook her head and was thankful in that very moment for the interruption of a pretty young girl. By the looks of the black hair and green eyes, his little sister.

She came rushing into the room and stopped dead at the sight of her. Her eyes guided to Blake then to Brad in question before settling permanently on her.

“Hi.” Cassie said.

“Cassie, this is Emma, my rude sister,” said Blake seeing her standing there gaping. He felt his mood darken again. What the hell was wrong with people? So he brought a woman home, so what?

“Oh, sorry.’ She flashed a pretty smile, “I was just so surprised.” She walked up and shook Cassie’s hand. Purposely avoiding Brad’s gaze.

“Surprised?” Cassie said.

Emma saw Blake give her a warning look so she fumbled for an excuse on why Blake would bring a woman home, “Yes, wow, you’re so pretty!”

Cassie blushed further, “Thanks.”

It wasn’t a lie at all. Emma was setback for that reason too.

“So are you.” She offered.

“I know.” She grinned teasingly still ignoring Brad’s obvious stare. Then Blake took Cassie’s elbow saying he was going to show her the courtyard and walked away casting a disapproving look at both of them for their obvious behaviour. But neither one of them saw it because Emma turned to Brad.

“Stop it.” Emma said glaring at him, “You act like I have a wart on my nose.”

“That wasn’t what I was looking at honey.”

Her eyes widened slightly, then narrowed, “Don’t you have some skirts to chase?”

“Jealous.”

“You wish! Save it for your bimbos.” she shot at him before storming off.

Brad grinned watching her backside. Today she was wearing these cute little khaki shorts and a yellow tank top that showed off her curves nicely. She had a great ass.

Interestingly enough that was the first time in weeks she’d spoken to him. Years ago they were quite close, but in the last year, she wouldn’t give him the time of day. As far as he knew there wasn’t anything he did to offend her. Truth of it was, he missed her. Then one day about six months ago she came out of the house wearing a yellow bikini with a sarong tied about her

waist and got into a convertible with a couple of her friends. She saw him as she tossed her bag in the back, and for a moment all they did was look at one another. One of the other girls said 'hi' to him with a flirtatious wave and that's when she hopped in the car. Although she still was looking at him when they drove off, it took him at least ten minutes to pick his jaw up off the ground. Somewhere in that time, she was no longer his pal. At least not along the lines of the things he was thinking.

Since then he'd tried talking to her, but she avoided him, or just plain snubbed him. If he was any less self assured, he'd have given up, but he had motivation. He wanted her—badly. Everything she did now had him spellbound, and since that day he hadn't slept with anyone. There had been plenty of offers, but none of those girls appealed to him. Emma was special to him because she knew him for who he really was. Not only that, they had a lot in common, they liked fishing, boating, hiking, and she used to help him in the shop, but now she seemed to avoid it like the plague, or him for that matter.

He was thankful that Blake hadn't noticed the way he looked at Emma too. He knew about his boss's temper first hand, and also knew that Emma was completely off limits. Everyone on the ranch knew that, but Brad couldn't help it. He was in love.

"Oh Gosh, Blake this is stunning." The courtyard that he'd led her to was full of glorious vegetation and colourful flowers. "I feel like I'm in a different country."

"My housekeeper is Italian, and she's really big on gardening."

"I was wondering who kept up the flowers," she grinned while looking up at him, "Because you don't seem to be the type to play with flowers."

He made a face, "Woman's work."

“sure it is.” She said not letting that comment affect her. More and more she was figuring him out. He wasn’t as mean as she originally thought. There was a righteousness in him that she was admiring more and more.

For a moment he just stared at her.

“What?” from the look on his face he was thinking about something.

“Are you going out with Bill?”

“What kind of a question is that?” first of all, where on earth did it come from and who was Bill?

“It’s an honest question. He said he was going to ask you out.”

She furrowed her brow trying to think of who Bill was. Surprisingly he laughed at her expression.

“Forget I asked.” It was a relief to know that she didn’t expect a date with him, and even more that she didn’t even remember who he was.

“Let’s.” she said feeling stupid. *Who the heck is Bill?*

Blake shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and stared down at her as she bent over to smell a rose. No woman could possibly be as kind as she is. Especially with her looks. If she was pulling one on him, she was really really good. He needed to be cautious because he’d actually let her in a little. Now he was wondering if he made a mistake bringing her into his home. He never brought a women home before. He kept his personal life away from Emma because she was young and personable. Normally the women he dated were sophisticated and experienced, not young and naïve like Cassie. That’s what changed his mind. She couldn’t possibly influence Emma at all. Yet there was still a nagging in the back of his mind over her.

She was broke, poor, and was in quite a predicament. She already knew he had money from gossip, so it was possible that she was working him.

That thought left him unsettled, because he really found himself liking her, more than any other woman. He also couldn't get the feel of her out of his mind.

He made up his mind then and there that he'd return her car tomorrow and that would be the end of it. He couldn't risk getting involved and find out that she was duping him.

"Dinner senior!" came a woman's voice from the door.

Cassie erected herself still smiling at how pretty this place was to see a large woman with grey streaked hair standing in the arched doorway of the house. "Who's that?"

"My housekeeper Sophia."

She darted her eyes to him. It wasn't what he said, it was the tone he used. It was said abruptly. Was she crazy? What just happened? Suddenly his mood took a downward turn with no warning. "Blake?"

"come on—supper." He said walking ahead of her.

She ground her teeth together. What the heck was wrong with this man? As soon as she started to like him, he grew horns.

At least dinner was fun despite his mood. Emma was a treat and she instantly liked her. It was obvious from the way she teased her older brother that she was spoiled but Cassie didn't care because she was fun. However, she was really surprised that Brad hardly said a word. In fact his eyes always seemed to be on Emma except when Blake was speaking to him. At least he was speaking to someone because he certainly didn't say two more words to her since that switch of moods in the courtyard.

"So are you new to our town." Emma asked.

"I've been here for three weeks."

"Wow, so you're really new. That's great! We can show you so much. Blake sponsors a rodeo at the end of August, in a few weeks."

Her eyes darted to his, "Garnet told me, but I wasn't sure if it was all true."

He shrugged, not saying a word.

“It’s for charity. It’s not a big event like with the pros but it’s big around here.” Emma continued sounding very proud of her older brother.

“Do you compete?” she asked Emma who laughed and shook her head.

“No, in the last year I’ve hardly ridden. Although I might compete in the barrel event this year, but I’ve got to get my butt in gear and practice up. For now I’m concentrating on my school work. I’m in the advanced class and I’m trying out for cheerleading in September.”

Blake frowned.

Blake may not have said anything, but Brad’s eyes instantly shot to her, “*Cheerleading?*”

Emma ignored him, “All of my friends are going to try out, so I figured—why not?”

Brad turned to Blake, “You’re letting her tryout for cheerleading? Are you crazy?”

“Apparently.” Blake answered significantly less enthused than Emma who was glowing.

“Didn’t you play football?” he lowered his voice as Emma was excitedly telling Cassie all about the perks of being on the squad.

“I did, and I’m going to discuss this with her.” Blake said.

“Jesus boss, look at her, she’s practically a bullseye for those guys.” His voice raised with his angst. A sweet girl like Emma would be like dangling a worm off a hook in front of a bunch of piranhas.

“I’m sitting right here!” Emma burst catching the last of that conversation. She didn’t appreciate being discussed like she wasn’t in the room.

Finally something dawned on Blake. Why he didn’t see it before, he never knew. “What’s really going on here Brad?”

Brad heard him but his anger and jealousy towards Emma won out. Unlike Blake who had maturity on his side and could keep his emotions out of his expression, Brad couldn't. He stood up and pointed a finger in her direction, "I'll kill any of them that come near you Emma! Even if you so much look in the direction in one of those empty headed Jocks, I'll pound the crap out of them!"

"Jesus." Blake said watching the two.

"You don't own me!" she shot back.

"Like hell!" he burst angrily.

Emma snapped her mouth shut and flushed completely red.

"Brad outside." Said Blake. "Now." He tossed his napkin on the table and stood up.

Brad shoved his chair back and kept his eyes on the younger girl until he left the room. Blake was right behind him.

Cassie sat there with her mouth hanging open. Then she looked over at Emma who was still embarrassed but had her bowed as she fidgeted with her hands on her lap. "You didn't know."

She finally looked up at her and shook her head. "He has girls all over him—all the time Cassie—really pretty girls too. I can't compete with that." She waved an arm toward the door the two men just went through.

"You like him though."

She released a long breath and looked completely vulnerable before she nodded, once. "I think since I was fourteen, but this last year has been so hard. I feel like my heart is going to leap out of my chest when I see him. Blake won't let me date until I'm seventeen, but there's no way he'd let me date Brad. He's got this strict rule about dating employees."

"Brad seems to care about you."

"He obviously also wants to control me. It won't happen."

She raised her chin defiantly.

Cassie smiled, "I think I'm really going to like having you for a friend."

Once outside Blake grabbed Brad by the collar of his shirt, "Out with it." He said bringing the younger man's face inches from his.

"If you let me breathe I'll talk." Brad said. He knew he was going to get a beating no matter what, but he might as well come clean.

Blake nodded and released him. Then he placed his hands on his hips and waited.

Brad straightened his shirt and stared at him, "I can't help it."

"The hell you can't!"

He was used to Blake's abrupt temper, so he didn't flinch, but inside was a different story. "I love her."

"You're full of shit, Brad. You're only eighteen—"

"I had to grow up fast Blake, you know I did! If you asking me to stop feeling for her, I can't."

"Then you pack your damn things and get out of here!"

Brad expected his anger, and maybe even a bit of a beating, but not that. Blake and Emma were the only family he had. His face softened, "Blake—"

"I won't have you ruin her future. She's going off to college after school and there is no option for a relationship."

"I wouldn't expect her to put her life on hold—I was thinking that when she was ready we'd get married—"

"Jesus, you're eighteen! Emma is sixteen!"

"Not today! Hell Blake, I'm not stupid!" he shot back.

"Ever!" he reached for him again, but this time his sister's voice stopped him. He turned to see her and Cassie standing at the door. Emma ran over and placed herself in front of Brad.

“Don’t—please.” She pleaded, “Don’t hurt him Blake.”

Brad was just as shocked as Blake was at Emma’s actions.

He looked over her head to Brad, “I took you in and treated you like family and this is what I get for it?”

“It’s not like that.” He said helplessly feeling guilt wash through him, “I couldn’t stop it. It tried.”

He said something that made both of them flush, then he waved an angry arm before settling his piercing gaze on his younger sister, “You’re going off to boarding school.” Then he thrust a finger in Brad’s direction, “And you are moving to the bunkhouse.”

They both started protesting fiercely as he turned away, then he stopped and turned back to them cutting them short with his sharp gaze, “it’s that or Brad leaves town, and you get shipped off to Europe. I’m too damn angry to finish this conversation now, but when I calm down we will.” He turned to look at Cassie, “I’m taking you home.”

She gathered that. Without a word she walked toward the truck feeling him right behind her.

Neither one of them said a word until he pulled up in front of Mrs. Watson’s house.

“They’re both to damn young.” He finally said.

Cassie sensed his desperation. This was a dilemma and he obviously loved his sister deeply. Her eyes guided to him, “They are young.” She agreed, “But I think what they feel is real, or think it’s real.”

His eyes narrowed on hers, “And how the hell would you know little girl? You’re only a few years older than my sister.”

“four.” She returned sharply, “And a lot of living and learning can be done in four years Blake.” She turned and shoved the door to his truck open before he got out to help her, and near fell getting out of it but she didn’t want his help.

Blake just let her go. His original thoughts stood on her

because there was no other explanation that suited him. Otherwise he'd have to admit that she got under his skin.

He cursed to himself and gunned the motor, tearing out of there in a curtain of flying dust and gravel.

Cassie had a terrible night trying to sleep. She kept thinking that maybe she could have approached the subject better about Emma and Brad. Now Blake was furious with her.

It was hard to get out of bed the next morning, but she did it, showered, and put her hair up. She kept tossing and turning thinking she could have handled that parting better with Blake yesterday. He was upset and she certainly didn't help. Maybe she should apologize after all it really wasn't her business, but he did make her angry too. yet, she should be more understanding, because this must've been a blow to him. It certainly set Emma back.

She was pulling on her sweater when she heard the familiar roar of his truck. Part of her was quite worried about his temper this morning. Who knows how it went when he got back home. She walked out to the truck and noticed that the didn't get out to help her in, which was fine for her. She didn't want him touching her today, he'd probably be too rough from the mood he was in yesterday.

She climbed in and he didn't even look at her when he shifted the truck into drive and gunned the motor. Obviously his mood hadn't changed. She saw his jaw clench several times showing the strength in it from the muscle that bulged continuously.

"Quit staring Cass, I'm in a pissy mood." He finally said after a few minutes.

When wasn't he? She turned and looked out the windshield without saying a word and crossing her arms under her breasts. She wasn't going to say anything—nope, not a word,

even if he begged her, because she knew it would only result in a fight.

He dropped her off still not saying a thing and drove off leaving her standing on the sidewalk in front of the diner staring at his receding tailgate. Yes, he was angry and yes he had a right to be, but he could still be half civil to her.

She gritted her teeth and went to work. She couldn't spend any more time trying to figure him out because no one could.

The day was longer than usual because she was tired. Marla was very cheerful and friendly and that picked her up a little until she asked about Blake.

"Molly says he's been giving you rides to work?" Marla hedged.

Cassie was preparing a fresh pot of coffee and wouldn't turn around to look at her when she spoke, "My car broke down, he's just helping out." She said trying to sound like it was no big deal.

"Are you kidding me? Blake Eckert? Lucky gal."

Keeping her expression blank she finally looked at her, "It's not like that."

"sure it isn't honey. He's a stud through and through. Why that man could start his own stud farm and just have himself on it to—"

"Gosh Marla!" she interrupted wide-eyed, "that's too personal."

Marla laughed, "I just love you honey, you're so darn sweet." She squeezed her hand before taking the coffee pot that Cassie just made and walked off.

Cassie shook her head and turned to make another pot.

At noon, Blake came in and to her complete chagrin sat in Marla's section. Marla froze in mid walk and cast a glance at Cassie that spoke volumes.

Cassie ignored it and continued to do her job but soon

Marla caught up with her, “did you two have a fight?”

“No, there was no fight.” She said honestly. “I don’t own him Marla.”

“Well, I talked to a few people and they said that you two were an item.”

“What? That’s not true. He gave me a ride to work twice.”

Marla shrugged, “What can I say, you live in a small town now.”

“that’s horrible how things spread.” She said in disbelief. “There’s nothing going on.”

“Well half the town thinks so.”

She stared past Marla to Blake who was having lunch with another cowboy now. Actually it was that same man that asked her out at the Vet clinic a few days ago yet she couldn’t remember his name.

“Well if there’s nothing going on—“ she handed her two menus and the coffee pot, “—you can take my section, because that man scares the hell out of me.”

Before she could answer Marla had gone. Cassie was standing there feeling like a complete idiot. She practically asked for this. She took a deep breath for courage and walked across the diner to the table. “Menus?”

Blake looked up at her, but it was the other man that spoke. “Hello doll. Is this where you work? I guess I’ll be eating my meals here from now on.”

She forced a smile feeling Blake’s eyes boring a hole in her skull, “Menu?”

“Molly’s special. Two of them.” Said Blake finally.

“You never did answer me about the dance this weekend.”

Bill. Cassie finally remembered who this was and who Blake was asking her about that night of the dinner. She could feel Blake’s eyes on her face still as Bill was waiting for an answer

while she filled their coffee cups. "I can't." she finally said.

Blake shifted in his seat feeling relief.

"I promise to behave sweetheart. No pressure."

She gave him a slight smile, "I just don't have time. Sorry. I'll get you those burgers." She turned and walked away.

"God damn that woman is something else!" Bill said following the sway of her hips.

Blake's mood went from bad to worse. He should have felt better knowing that she turned Bill down, but he didn't. Sooner or later she was going to say yes to someone.

Bill turned his attention back to Blake, "Dusty says you got her car."

He should have known that gossip would get out, "Yeah." Was all he said.

Bill eyed him carefully while taking a drink from his coffee. "So what's she paying you with. I heard she hasn't got any money."

"Be careful Bill." He answered with a darkening of his eyes. "Shit like that doesn't need to be started, especially if it's not true."

"I was just wondering if there was another reason that she turned me down."

"Maybe you're just too damn ugly."

Bill burst into laughter.

Cassie turned at the sound to see Blake scowling at his friend. Then his eyes lifted to hers and she felt her breath freeze in her throat. Quickly she averted her gaze and gave their order to Garnet.

"Something wrong?" he said as he glanced from her to Blake.

"No." she said giving him a smile.

"Liar." He grinned.

She released an exasperated sound, "He's just so frustrating Garnet. I don't know if he hates me or what because sometimes I get a glimpse of a good man, then he goes and ruins it by turning into the darn devil."

"He is a good man Cass, if you remember that always, then his temper is nothing. He'd never lay a hand on a woman in anger even though his words can tear them to shreds. He's respectful to Molly and I and others that have done him right over the years."

"I'll try and keep that in mind." Somehow it still didn't make her feel better. It was all too clear to her why. She liked him, maybe more than she wanted to admit to herself, and as far as she could tell, he didn't like her beyond being chivalrous. Now gossip was starting to spread about them, and she was sure he was going to blame her for that too.

Just as their order came up Brad walked in tossing her keys in his hand. She grinned seeing him. To her delight he slipped in the booth beside Blake. Maybe they made up after all. She was glad for that because that way he wasn't homeless again which was another thing that just kept her up the night before.

She walked over and set the plates down, "did you want something Brad?"

"No, I ate already." He handed her the keys, "purrs like a kitten."

"Thanks so much, both of you." She said genuinely.

"Just-ah, well, don't punch the gas or anything until you get used to it."

"Sure thing." She smiled darting her eyes between them. This wasn't over, she was going to pay Blake back somehow. She wasn't raised not to make things even when there was a debt owed. "I'll call you later." She said to Blake.

"I'll be busy." He added without looking up.

She felt her face flush, took a final look around the table

and walked away. Why did he always have to be so damn brutal? He treated her like she was nothing in front of people. It was humiliating. Obviously she was right, he didn't care. The problem was, she started to.

Brad watched her go knowing that Blake just cut her hard. He'd dealt with it many times, and he certainly dealt with it last night when he returned from dropping her off at home. He threatened to castrate him if he so much as touched Emma—with the dull end of a spoon. He also moved his things out to the bunkhouse like he ordered him to. At least he wasn't kicked off the property. He was really sure that Blake was going to do that after he found out how he felt about his sister. Emma was grounded and not allowed within ten feet of Brad or he threatened to send her to Europe that day. The thing was, he knew this was hard for Blake. He was sure that Blake cared about him or he'd be tossed out on his ear, and that's all that kept him from doing it despite how angry he was. Unfortunately it didn't stop him from being angry with everything else as Cassie just found out. What she didn't know, is this was the way Blake operated with people he cared about. He had a lot on his mind right now and Cassie didn't know him as well as he did.

Brad glanced at him. The hard lines were showing on his face. Yes, he thought, *he was definitely still angry*. Maybe in time he'll see that his intentions about Emma were honourable and he was patient so he'd wait, to a point. He may be forbidden to be near Emma, but that wouldn't change anything. He still loved her. He was willing to prove to Blake that this wasn't some adolescent crush and to do that he would obey his rules.

"That was a little harsh Blake." Bill said.

"Mind your own damn business." He answered in the same tone.

Bill never said another word. He did glance at Brad who just raised his brows as if to say, 'and that surprises you?'

Cassie was relieved that Molly showed up and took over the shift. Without another word she left the diner. Unknown to her Blake saw her leave. Molly also watched the young girl then guided her eyes to Blake. Something was wrong. Cassie was a tough gal but she suspected that she had a soft spot for Blake. Well most women did, but the difference here was, Blake seemed to like her too.

Blake saw Molly's look of disapproval and like everything else, chose to ignore it. He didn't promise Cassie anything and quite frankly, his sister was his priority right now. It was true that Brad promised to behave, and he actually believed him, but Emma might be a different story now that she knew Brad's feelings.

"come on we're leaving." He said to Brad.

"sure thing. Catch you later Bill."

"How about the dance Brad, are you coming. I'll be you already have some hot date lined up."

Brad would have answered him if Blake didn't grab him by the back of the neck and push him out of the diner leaving Bill staring at him in surprise.

"Hell boss, I was going to say no."

"Sure you were." He released him after a slight shove, "Get in the damn truck."

They were half way home when Brad shot erect in the seat focusing on something beside the road, "Oh shit!"

It took less than a second for Blake to see the familiar faded blue paint of the car overturned in the ditch about twenty feet down with all four wheels in the air still spinning. "Sweet hell." He slid the truck to a stop beside the car and hopped out. "Cass!" he slid down the embankment with Brad right behind him, "Cass!"

When he reached the car, he knelt down by the driver's

side and saw her inside, unconscious and upside down still in her seatbelt. Blood was pouring from a gash in her head. “Brad, get the crow bar out of the truck!”

“I smell gas.” Brad said worried the car was going to burst into flames at any moment.

“Get the damn bar!” he said harshly knowing what he was talking about and feeling anxious about the same thing. He began to heave on the door but it was wedged tight, “Cass wake up!” she didn’t move.

Brad was back in under a minute. After a few good pries the door popped open. Blake reached in, undid her seatbelt and pulled her out. “You drive.” He said going back up the bank with Cassie in his arms.

Brad didn’t even have to ask where. To the hospital.

Cassie felt like she’d been run over by a truck. She opened her eyes slowly and realized that she was in a room, flat on her back in what felt like a bed. She moaned and brought her hand to her head where the source of pain was coming from just to feel a bandage just above her right temple. Then there was the all too familiar smell of hospital. She heard a movement then a scrape like someone getting to their feet from a chair. A moment later Blake Eckert’s face was leaning over her, “I died and I’m in hell, you’re my punishment.”

He grinned at her sarcasm, “No, but it was close.”

“What happened?”

“you flipped your car into the ditch.”

“I did?” she said in surprise then tried to remember what had happened, but it wasn’t coming back to her.

“I take it you don’t remember.” He said seeing her confusion.

She shook her head and it started to throb. “Oh lord.” She winced.

“You have a concussion from your head hitting the steering wheel but no broken bones. You’re really lucky.”

“Sure I am. Now I don’t have a car.” His expression actually looked guilty, “What?”

“Brad may have done too good of a job. He feels like a heel.”

“He told me to be careful. I was—well, I didn’t listen.”

“I upset you.” He offered.

She wanted to, but couldn’t lie. “Well, you didn’t make me drive my car off the road.” She was upset and gunned the accelerator when she turned off the highway to their back road when she lost control.

“I’ll replace the car.”

“you will not.” She argued trying to sit up, then groaned and grabbed her head again just to have a strong hand grip her shoulder and push her flat.

“Stay put.” He said sternly.

“You’re so bossy.” She narrowed her gaze at him.

“I’m responsible.” He countered.

“No, you’re not Blake. Quit saying that!” she winced again.

“I think that’s enough,” came a feminine voice from the doorway, “Blake leave her be. You’re upsetting her.”

Normally he’d tell the woman to mind her own business, but it was obvious he was upsetting her. “All right Tracy,” he answered before bringing his eyes back to hers, “I’ll be back tomorrow to take you home.”

“Don’t bother.”

“don’t argue.” He said abruptly before he left.

It turned out that the feminine voice belonged to a nurse, “He’s frustrating at the best of times.” She said with a smile walking into the room and around the bed so she could see her.

“You don’t need to tell me twice.” She answered.

“He’s such a dish though, isn’t he?”

“I don’t care.” She replied.

Tracy laughed, “Sure you don’t honey. You’d have to be dead not to notice that hunk of meat. Besides, he seems to have claimed to be your protector.”

“I don’t need enemies with a saviour like that.”

“He paid the hospital bill.”

Her eyes popped wide. “Oh, please tell me you’re joking!”

Tracy dropped her smile and looked concerned, “Miss Jensen, you shouldn’t get upset.”

“He already upset me. I need to talk to him.”

“Maybe tomorrow. Visiting hours are over and I wouldn’t let him back in knowing that he upsets you so easily.”

“sure spoil my fun.”

Tracy smiled again, “Just for tonight. How’s your pain?”

“My head hurts but I’ll live.”

“Do you want something for it?”

“No, please, I’ll be fine.”

“Brave gal.” she said with a wink and turned to leave.

“Tracy?”

“Um-hmm?”

“How do you know Blake?”

“We dated in high school.” She wiggled her brows and left.

High school? She sighed heavily wondering how many of his ex-girlfriends she was going to run into, but really why should she care? He may have felt responsible, but he’ll be his own mean cool self as soon as he thought he made amends. She still didn’t want anything from him. She still felt she owed him from before, but now he paid her hospital bills! This was too much. There was no way in this lifetime that she could make up the things that he’d done for her. Then there was the fact that she was furious with him. Furious for making her take his help. She

didn't have a choice and he knew it.

CHAPTER THREE

Then next morning Blake arrived carrying a bouquet of flowers. "They're from Emma." He said looking uncomfortable.

"That's sweet," she said managing to sit up. She'd been up several times to the bathroom in the night and it got easier to manage the upright position without her head pounding and a wave of dizziness.

Blake stopped cold. His eyes darted to her chest. The hospital gown obviously wasn't tied properly and slipped off her shoulder to rest on her left breast when she sat up.

Cassie was rubbing her forehead and didn't seem to notice, but when she brought her eyes to his, she saw where his gaze was directed. However, she didn't move to adjust the cloth. She was too mesmerized by that heated look.

Instead he turned and set the flowers down on a nearby table, then stepped up to her and took the cloth between his fingers while staring down at her, "I hate these things—"

"so do I." she added quickly nearly stuttering out the words at his nearness.

He smiled,—"I was going to say, normally I hate them, but—" he glanced at the soft looking skin of her shoulder, "Not today." he ached to run his fingers along it but instead lifted the material back up onto her shoulder.

"don't say things like that." She whispered.

"Why?" he said deeply looking down at her.

He was so close that she could smell his cologne and feel the warmth off of his body. "Because it unsettles me."

"good." Before he could stop himself and before she could even think about protesting, he bent his head and took her mouth under his.

If she thought sparks flew last time, she was on fire this time. His mouth was warm and gently coaxing her to respond and it only took a moment for her to open hers more. As soon as his tongue found hers she moaned involuntarily.

Blake's arms went around her and one hand cupped the back of her head and tilted her head so he could take her mouth fully. He urged her to accept him more and more by increasing the pressure of his mouth against hers. Finally he felt her jaw relax and he showed her exactly what he could do with his.

His other hand pulled the material from her shoulder that he just replaced and at the same time he stepped in between her parted knees bringing her breasts against his thick chest. His hand slipped under the material and cupped one of them. "God sweetheart you taste and feel like heaven." He growled.

"Hmm." She said taking the effort to lift her mouth to his. She didn't like the separation at all. He met her halfway. Now his mouth was urgent, hot, and it managed to pull something out of her that she didn't know she possessed. Her hands pressed against this thick chest. Then his hand moved and brushed over her nipple causing her to separate her mouth from his and release a shocked gasp of pleasure, "Blake!"

"Let me take you home." He murmured in her ear.

She shook her head and he caressed her breast again causing her to release that sexy little moan again.

"I—we can't."

"I can."

She covered the hand on her breast with her own, "You need to stop." She sounded completely unconvincing.

"I know I do baby, but you're addictive." He said huskily right before he kissed her again.

The sound of someone clearing their throat made him snap his head up. Thank god his body was large enough to shield her and what he was doing to her from view.

“Blake, if you’re done seducing my patient. I need her to sign the release papers.” Her voice held a laughing tone.

“Sure thing Tracy.” He said over his shoulder not the least bit embarrassed.

Cassie however, wished she could die in that moment. Her hands twisted in the material of his shirt hoping he wouldn’t step aside.

When Tracy shut the door and they were alone again Blake cupped her chin and tilted her face up, “Don’t worry about it, Tracy doesn’t gossip.”

“It’s not just that—“ she stopped talking. She was going to say that he had her so worked up she completely forgot where she was.

He waited for a moment seeing she wasn’t going to continue he spoke, “What is it?”

Suddenly feeling vulnerable and exposed, mainly because her gown was still off her shoulder, he was still standing between her bare thighs, and she was still feeling the heat between their bodies. She shook her head and averted her gaze.

“If it helps this isn’t normal for me either.”

That brought her eyes back to his to see if he was lying. He didn’t seem to be. However she was sure that he’d probably done everything at least once with a woman, so it surprised her. “So where do we go from here?”

His face became masked for a moment then he nodded subtly, “I suppose I started this, so I owe you some sort of an answer.” He stepped back and covered her shoulder with her gown. “I can’t promise you much of anything, but after that moment, I know we’d be good together.”

“Good together?” she didn’t understand that statement.

He could see her confusion, “In bed honey.”

If she could beat a record for blushing, she just did. She was pretty sure she glowed in the dark. She knew he was blunt,

but that just beat everything she could have possibly fathomed coming from him. Her mouth fell open.

He tilted his head slightly, “you disagree.”

“Yes—I mean no—oh darn it.” She stammered, “I mean I’ve never been propositioned like that.”

“Propositioned?” he chuckled, “that’s a poor choice of words Cass, It sounds a little cold. What we just shared could set the world on fire.”

She flushed again, “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then enlighten me.”

She shook her head again.

He cocked a brow, “did you need a reminder.” He took a step toward her and she held up her hand.

“Maybe it’s safer if you stayed there.” She slid off the bed and grabbed the corner of her gown that started to slide again while keeping her eyes on his.

He chuckled, “Go get dressed, I’ll wait.”

Of course he will, she thought. She grabbed her clothes off a chair and went into the bathroom.

Blake looked at the bed and the imprint in it from her bottom. Her breasts were just about bloody perfect, and there was no doubt her bottom was just the same. His eyes guided to the closed door of the bathroom. She had set him on fire in a matter of seconds. Not once in his life had he felt that desire so quickly. She may have been young but she was able to take what he offered and handle him so soon. He liked passionate sex and he knew she was more than capable of satisfying him. It had been a long time since he felt like that.

Just then Cassie re-emerged with a bit of a blush still remaining. Blake held out his hand and to her own surprise she took it.

He led her out to the nurses’ station and waited patiently while she finished the paper work. Tracy cast her a wink before

she took the papers from her.

“I’m thinking about killing you.” She whispered to him as he led her out of the hospital.

“I already told you Tracy doesn’t gossip.”

“And you know this because you dated her?”

He looked down at her, “don’t get jealous of past girlfriends Cassie, it was a long time ago.”

“I’m not Jealous at all.” She said meaning every word, “It was an innocent question.” Blake didn’t belong to her, or anyone for that matter and never could she hold his past against him.

After a moment he nodded. He actually believed her. Maybe it was looking down into those sea blue eyes of hers that convinced him, or maybe he was falling under that spell she seemed to weave over him again. Regardless, he found it very refreshing that she wasn’t jealous. Jealousy was abhorrent to him and he’d experienced it with every other woman he’d been with. “Yes, because I dated her.” he finally answered, “many years ago.”

“we need to talk about what I owe you Blake.” She added.

“later.” He said tightening his grip on her hand and pulling her toward his truck in the parking lot.

Again, she knew that tone so she dropped it until they were in his truck. “I need to make this fair Blake. I’ll start giving you money out of my paychecks—“

He held up a hand, “It’s not happening.”

She took a deep breath to try and contain her anger, “Blake, I can’t keep taking from you. This is unfair!”

He finally turned and looked at her. It was a first for him, a woman feeling guilty for taking. “Look, you and I both know you can’t afford to do that. Secondly, you wouldn’t be in there if it weren’t for me, so by rights, I’m obligated to take care of it—shush let me finish,” he said when she opened her mouth to speak, “Thirdly, I can afford it—really.” He added with one of

those salivating sideways smirks.

“That’s not the point.” She protested, “At least let me drive the baler, or help out at the rodeo for a few days for a start. I feel like a charity case!”

He stared at her for a long time actually considering her words, “What can you do for the rodeo?” He finally asked. They could always use volunteers, so maybe she was on to something.

“I used to barrel race—” she paused finding it difficult to continue but managed, “My father had to sell my horse to make a mortgage payment. So I can keep time, if you like. I understand the event really well.”

“He what?” his expression darkened at her confession.

She knew what he was thinking and defended her father, “We didn’t have a choice. I was going to college and it was costly. He tried to make ends meet but it was getting hard.”

“He sold your horse?” he just couldn’t seem to get past that.

“He had no choice.”

“there’s always a choice.” He’d starve before he sold his child’s prized possession. He knew he would despite hardship.

She narrowed her gaze at him, “you can’t judge someone unless you’ve been there Blake, he was losing the ranch.”

“He lost it anyway.”

He had a point, “It was still an option we had.”

“From the look on your face, this horse meant a lot to you.”

She shrugged, “I hadn’t ridden him in eight months. I wasn’t really good enough to go professional because I didn’t practice enough. College was my priority.”

Blake just shook his head and pulled out of the parking lot. He could never bring himself to selling his little girl’s pride and joy no matter how desperate he was. Yet, she was right, he’d never been poor even though his father made him work hard for

everything, he still never had been desolate.

She stared at him for a moment before turning away knowing he seemed to always know when she was looking at him.

When he pulled into her driveway he spoke, "I'll have Brad run a vehicle over for you for work."

"I told you—"

"There's no argument here Cass. Think of it as a loner, whatever, but you need a vehicle to get to work. I won't have Ernie drive you. Unfortunately, I'll be too busy at home to help for the next few days. I can't spare a man either, so it's that or you walk, or Ernie."

He was right she did and she really didn't want to accept help from Ernie. She also didn't miss the possessive 'I' statement either. A thrill shot threw her over that. Finally she nodded, "A loner."

"Agreed." His eyes moved over her face.

"What?" How come every time he looked at her like that her knees went weak?

"I was just thinking that I'd like to give you a kiss, but considering the last two times, I'd prefer that we were somewhere else."

She flushed, "I'll see you later."

"You bet you will."

As she watched him drive away she wondered what just happened between them. Were they dating now? She had no idea on how to interpret that. She felt so stupid. Hopefully she started understanding him better and when he said he wanted her in bed the actually meant more than that. Who knows! She threw up her arms and went in the house.

When she got up to go to work the next morning she didn't know what to expect. In all of her confusion about the day before, she forgot to let Blake know that she had to work today.

She was just about to go and see if Mrs. Watson was awake when there was a knock at the door.

It was Brad standing there dangling a set of keys from his finger.

“What is this?”

“the boss said you needed a car—a loaner.” He quickly added remembering what Blake had told him.

She took the key and looked at it, then bent slightly to look past him to the driveway. It was a sleek black car with shiny chrome rims, tinted windows, and it looked just as expensive as his truck. “A Mercedes!”

“Cassie, it’s the cheapest thing he owns.” He offered.

“You mean he has more?”

“Yeah, he has three large fully equipped shops housing his collections. Why do you think he trained me to be a mechanic?”

She tried to give him the key back, “Now I know why he didn’t come because I’d kill him.” She said angrily, “Brad, I can’t take this.”

“He sent me because he’s working. Honest.” He said holding up his hands refusing the key. “I do the mechanic stuff, but Blake does the ranching. I’m not good on a horse.”

“I’m a waitress, who’s going to show up to work in a Mercedes. Doesn’t that seem a *little* insane to you?”

“Yeah.” He grinned, “But completely cool.”

She shook her head and dropped her hand, “Are you sure you’re not his long lost son?”

This time he laughed, “I’m sure.” The sound of another vehicle pulling into the drive made him turn his head. “I’ve got to go. That’s my ride back. See you Cass.” He said with a wave and he was gone, leaving her gaping as the ranch truck drove away.

She looked down at the key and was trying to figure out where she could hide the car so people at work didn’t see her

with it. Gossip already started and this was just going to make it worse.

As it was she was able to park in back of the diner next to Garnet's ford. It was barely light out so at least she had that cover, but leaving with a fancy car like that through this town midday was going to be a task and how long could she do this?

Blake didn't show up that day in the diner, and she half expected him to. She wanted to give him his car back. She even considered asking Ernie to drive her to work, that's how desperate she was. But it was only a fleeting thought before she remembered how he made her feel. A shiver ran up her spine. After that, she'd take the Mercedes over Ernie any day, but it just seemed so wrong.

Several more days passed and she still hadn't seen him, but on the third day Marla saw her parking the Mercedes in the back of the diner. Her shift started at noon that day and she thought she'd been lucky in not being discovered so far. She cringed inwardly when she saw Marla standing at the back door having a cigarette when she pulled up.

She let out a slow whistle, "Tell me you won the lottery."

No matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't lie, "its Blake's."

"Of course it is." She said with a grin.

"It's still not like that."

"Uh-huh, a gorgeous man gives you a Mercedes, and there's nothing going on."

"He felt guilty about my accident and it's a loner, not a gift."

"I got news for you Cass, Blake doesn't feel guilty about anything. He likes you."

She shook her head, "I told you he feels obligated. Brad fixed my car and I guess I underestimated the power of the motor

and went off the road.”

“Yes, I remember, but still, this is a Mercedes.” She said waving her arm toward it, “What guy lends a Mercedes to a woman he hardly knows?”

“Brad said it was the cheapest car he had.”

“Wow, he’s *really* rich.” She said in awe, “I mean I always knew because of rumours and because he always had some expensive truck, but if he has a bunch of vehicles, he can afford to buy them. It was then Marla wished she’d tried harder to gain his attention. However, if he had his sights set on Cassie, there’d be no breaking that attraction. When Blake wanted something, he got it and no one or no thing could sway him. He was a male predator in his prime and Cassie had no idea what she was in for. Oh how she wished it was her!

Cassie stopped to stare at her friend. Money never mattered much to Cassie because she never had any and she was usually happy despite her poverty.

“Are you sleeping with him?”

Her eyes shot wide, “Of course not!”

Marla laughed, “I had to ask.” She indicated the car, “he must have it bad if he gives you a car and you’re not putting out.”

Cassie flushed and walked past Marla without a word. This was infuriating and embarrassing. People were going to think that she was because of the stupid car. Marla thought that and she knew her better than others. She had to think of a way out of this.

The day went from bad to worse. Bill showed up and asked her out again. She politely refused.

“I’m not giving up on you honey.” He said with a playful wink.

She gave him a shy smile and took his order.

“Blake said you were in an accident.” His eyes went to her forehead and the still visible scar.

“Yes, I was foolish.”

“Well, Brad is a good mechanic. Who knew how powerful that old impala of yours would be with a charger motor in it?”

“What did you say?” she stopped writing and gaped at him.

“Dusty said that Brad bought a rebuild from him to put in your car—from the look on your face, you didn’t know.”

“He put a new motor in my car?”

He grinned, “A very large one.”

“I’m going to kill him.” That was the second time she said that in a week. This man was driving her insane.

“Does that mean you’re going to say yes to tomorrow night?” he beamed.

“No,” she said smiling, “But thanks—again.” She turned and walked away to give his order to Garnet. She was feeling some frustration and anger toward Blake for going overboard. She never asked him for help yet he was pushing it on her and the thing that angered her the most is that she had no choice but to accept.

“Oh oh, I know that look.” Garnet said taking the order.

“Do you or Molly have Blake’s number?”

“I think Molly does, she’s on the Rodeo committee. What did he do?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” She said sweetly through her anger.

“Uh-huh.”

She placed her hand on her hip and looked at him. She wasn’t one to talk about her feelings, but maybe it would help this one time and she trusted Garnet. “Apparently he had Brad put a whole new motor in my car. No wonder I lost control of it—I mean I don’t blame him, but he should have at least asked me before he did it, or told me.”

“This is Blake Eckert we’re talking about?” he raised his

brows.

She knew exactly what he meant by that. Blake didn't ask anyone for permission to do anything. "It's a courtesy." She responded.

"This is Blake." He repeated with a grin.

She released a sigh.

"Honey, Blake isn't one to sit and ponder someone's feelings or their reaction about things. He was helping you out the only way he knew how. He wouldn't have done it if he didn't want to."

"He paid my hospital bills to."

Garnet just nodded, "He told Molly when she asked if you needed help in that department, but he felt responsible."

"It was entirely my fault. Brad told me to be careful."

"According to Blake, he wasn't very nice to you that day and figured you were upset when you left."

She nodded. She was. The way he could switch on and off really did bother her, maybe even hurt her a little. Yet she was surprised that he mentioned it to Molly.

"He was right I see."

"He's so darn hard to figure out."

"Yes he is. Blake's a complicated man. He's used to doing things his way and doing them well. He's not afraid of much if anything at all because of the way he was raised, and people always know where they stand with him. A lot of people admire him for that, and a lot dislike him for the same reason."

She shrugged, "He's got me all turned around."

"I don't think you're the only one," he looked past her and nodded.

She turned around to see Blake walk in the diner, spot her and start in her direction. Already her heart started drumming harder. Not seeing him for the last few days actually bothered her, now how easily her body reacted to this tall masculine

cowboy! If only she could control it then maybe she wouldn't be so darn susceptible to him.

"Hey." He said with a slight smile, "What time are you off?"

She looked at her watch, "Two hours. Can we talk then?"

"Oh-oh." His sloppy smile grew to a grin. "You don't like my car."

"It's not funny." She said in a harsh whisper so no one would hear. "People are beginning to talk."

"So?"

"You may not care, but you're a man." *God* was he ever, every inch of him advertised that and he *smelled* amazing. Today he was wearing a black western cut shirt, jeans and a black Stetson. The dark contrast was catastrophic to her because of those hazel eyes of his. They were even more seductive than before. "But I'm a girl and new to town."

"We'll talk about this after work."

"I don't have your number, so how?"

"I'll come back." He answered looking down at her.

"You will?" she said with surprise. She hadn't seen him in what seemed like forever, but it was only a few days.

"Yeah, we'll deal with your problem."

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head, "It wasn't my problem until I met you." She poked a finger in the middle of his thick hard chest.

He grinned again and she made a frustrated noise before grabbing the coffee pot and leaving.

Blake's eyes went to Garnet who seemed to be watching them closely through his window. He nodded a greeting to which Garnet gave him a wave before turning back to his grill. Brad had told him of her reaction when he dropped the car off several days ago and for some reason he didn't really consider the repercussions for her. He was used to not caring what people

thought about him, but he was also not used to being concerned for someone outside of his family. For some reason he ended up worrying about her. It was true he felt responsible for her accident, so he paid the hospital bill, but then he furnished her with a vehicle. A very expensive vehicle but the least expensive of his collection. What she didn't know is that nobody drove his cars but him and maybe Brad. Yet after some consideration of her predicament, he thought maybe he'd take her to Dusty's to see what he had in his yard that suited her better. Only he'd been caught up with work at the ranch and several days had passed. Maybe he should have called her. He actually thought about it to the point of picking up the phone, but changed his mind at the last moment. After that heated kiss they shared when he picked her up at the hospital he knew he would need to go and see her, so he put it off until he actually had time to spend with her.

He already knew she'd fight him on buying her a car, even an older car, but it was probably a better option than the limited edition model she had now. Obviously his generosity didn't work the way it would on other people, but he was sure that someone or some people had already made comments to her. They sure as hell wouldn't make any to him.

Cass was tired and cranky when Blake came back. Then to top it off she was mad at the fact that she was cranky. She was never moody, but he seemed to draw that out of her.

"There's your stud." Marla said with a wink as she passed her with an armload of dirty dishes.

And that didn't help. Cassie spun her head and watched her just to get a wink. She was sure that she looked angry but it never affected Marla.

Blake took a seat at the counter while waiting for her, not even sparing her a glance and Molly went over to say hello while Cassie went into the back and pulled off her apron to throw in the laundry.

“That man never hung out as here as much as he does now.” Garnet said watching her.

“I told you why.” She said tossing her apron in the bin.

“I know what you said.” He answered with a glance before turning back to his tasks of flipping burgers.

She watched him for a moment thinking that he’d elaborate, but he didn’t. In the past few weeks Cassie had come to know a few things about Garnet. He seemed like a jolly type of man without a care in the world because Molly was so outgoing and boisterous, but she knew he was also highly intelligent. It was almost as if he was his wife’s compliment. She wasn’t so sure their son’s brains came from Molly as much as she loved her. Garnet had a quiet humility about him and she actually thought heavily about his advice earlier even though she didn’t act like it.

When she came out of the kitchen Blake saw her, nodded to Molly and stood up holding out his arm. Without a word she walked ahead of him and he placed his hand on the small of her back to lead her out of the diner.

Unbeknownst to both of them you could have heard a pin drop in the diner. Cassie was too busy concentrating on how she was going to talk him into letting her pay him back and Blake’s mind was preoccupied with the memory of how she felt a few days ago.

Cassie turned to him once they were outside the door, “The car is parked in the back.”

“No it’s not. I brought Brad with me to pick it up when I first showed up today.”

She took a long deep breath, “Blake you have me so messed up. I have no idea what you’re going to do next.”

“I was going to take you over to Dusty’s so you could find something that suited you more.”

She stared at him for about a full minute, then without a word she turned and walked down the sidewalk.

It took Blake twice as long to realize that she wasn't coming back. He released a curse and followed her. It was easy to catch her with his long legged stride.

Oddly enough neither one of them noticed the dozen faces pressed against the glass of the windows to the diner.

"Damn it Cass, what's wrong now?"

She threw up her arms but kept walking.

He easily gained on her and grabbed her arm turning her around. She glared up at him.

"What's wrong? I can't do this anymore. You won't let me pay you back. I know you don't need money, but I can do other things Blake."

He placed his hands on his hips and stared down at her.

She waved a hand at him, "then you do that. Stare at me like I'm crazy."

"I'd say you were half way there by the way you're acting." He said furrowing his brow.

She clamped her mouth shut. Actually he probably had a point, but these last few days had been really insane. The frustration and anger she was feeling really wasn't his fault. Garnet was right, Blake had been helping her and she'd been angry because she was feeling helpless. She lowered her head and rubbed her forehead.

Blake didn't say anything because she was obviously dealing with some emotional thing that women go through. Not only that, this wasn't in his comfort zone. It was far from it. Whenever Emma resolved into a fit of tears over something she wanted, he'd relent instantly. After speaking to some of his married friends who have children, apparently that wasn't the thing to do, but Emma was a nice girl even if he spoiled her. Finally after a few minutes she lifted her eyes back to his.

"I think I'm stressed out."

"Gee, you think?" he said with a bit of a smile.

“I know you’re trying to help, but I’ve never been a charity case.”

“Who says you are?”

She tilted her head, “I feel it.”

He nodded, “you work too much, and you’ve had a lot happen over the past few days. Anyone would crumble under that, but you still try and come out on top. You’re not super woman Cass.”

His insight was touching to her. All along she felt so alone and although Molly and Garnet tried they didn’t know the whole picture. She managed a slight smile, “You wouldn’t crumble.”

He grinned, “My father raised me hard and because of it, I take everything in stride. You need to relax.” He paused studying her face for a moment, “After we get you a new—old,” he corrected, “car, you and I will go for a ride.”

Again he didn’t ask, he just told her what they were doing, but the prospect of riding a horse again set a thrill through her. “Horseback riding?”

He nodded.

She actually brightened, “Oh that sounds wonderful!”

Somehow that meant a lot to him and seeing her excited expression near had him kiss her in public.

“On one condition.”

“No one dictates to me Cassie.”

“Tough.” She said narrowing her eyes, “You’ll let me work it off—” he started shaking his head, “—fine, I’ll hitchhike to work and home—”

“Like hell.”

“I drive a mean baler.”

“I already have someone for that.”

“I cook.”

“That position is filled.”

She frowned, "I can train horses."

"Also filled."

She threw up her arms, "there has to be something!"

This time his expression changed. He could think of a dozen things that she'd be good at and it had nothing to do with chores. He reached up and fingered a curl that escaped her tight chignon. "How about I take some time to consider it."

That, at least, was something. She reached up took the strand of hair from his fingers causing him to grin again. Her knees were already weak from such a simple gesture, then that grin nearly liquefied them, "you're very bold."

"Yes." He said dropping his grin, but his eyes still held that familiar look that turned her knees to jelly. "I like your hair down."

It was said deeply and it warmed her insides the moment the words left his mouth—*such a nice hard masculine mouth*. Her eyes guided there before she blinked trying to regain her composure. She *was* crazy. He never gave any indication that he wanted to start something with her despite the two kisses they shared. She looked around and although it was nothing obvious, she felt a little exposed, "Can we get out of here."

"My chariot awaits." He said with a sweep of his arm in the direction of his truck.

She scoffed, "That thing is a beast."

"Yeah." He grinned as they started walking back toward the large vehicle side by side.

"Why do men always put so much into their trucks?"

"Because, it's a statement of who we are." He said with a sly smirk.

She stopped beside the passenger door as he opened it for her while staring at the slick black custom paintjob, chrome rims, huge tires and expensive accessories thinking he had that completely right. Blake was big, masculine and downright sexy,

just like this darn truck. "Forget I asked." She mumbled.

He chuckled and helped her in before he shut the door.

For some reason she expected Dusty's garage to be this run down dilapidated building to go along with the small town, but it was pretty much state of the art, with a tall chain link fence around the property and all sorts of cars within the enclosure.

"Wow."

"Yeah, Dusty's a good businessman." He said knowing what she meant as he pulled up in front of the large metal sided building.

Just then a nice looking man with brown hair and eyes came out the front door. He was younger than she thought he'd be. She actually expected someone like Uncle Jessie off of Dukes of Hazard. "Is that Dusty?" Even in his blue coveralls she could see he had a nice build.

Blake turned to her before he got out of the truck and studied her expression for a moment, "don't get any ideas little girl."

She brought her eyes to his, "what ideas?" she said innocently.

"You heard me." He said with a frown before he got out meeting his friend leaving her staring at him perplexed.

She watched as the two men talked wondering if she should get out and introduce herself, but usually Blake helps her out of the high truck. Maybe he was bargaining on her behalf, so she thought she'd wait a minute.

"Wow, I keep forgetting how hot that gal is." Dusty said casting his eyes over Blake's shoulder to the stunning blonde in the truck. "Maybe I was sick the first time I saw her or I would have asked her out."

"She's off limits Dusty." He practically growled.

Dusty's eyes came back to his and he grinned, "So that's

how it is.”

“Something older, that runs sound and tough enough to drive on the back roads.” Blake said as if Dusty hadn’t said a word at all.

Dusty thought about cracking a joke along the lines that he just described himself, but from that look he knew when to stop. Instead he kept his grin and nodded, “I have an older Pontiac coupe that would suit her fine. It’s cheap on gas and very reliable.” He glanced at Cassie again before continuing, “I take it this is coming out of your pocket?”

“She doesn’t have anything, besides, she probably wouldn’t have totalled her vehicle if Brad hadn’t turned it into a super car.”

Dusty chuckled, “That kid is too darn talented for his own good. You should let me hire him.”

Blake reflected on how his sister defended him when he was going to tear him to bits and nodded for an entirely different reason. There were no doubts where his talents lay. “He’s needed where he is.”

He expected that. Brad was a damn good mechanic and he doubted anyone would let him go if he had him. However Blake had dibs because he trained him. His eyes guided past him again to the blonde still sitting in the truck, “So—are you going to introduce us or are you going to keep her hidden from every male in town.”

“Remember what I said,” Blake added in warning before he turned away to go and help Cass out of the truck.

“How could I forget?” Blake’s warnings didn’t go unheeded by anyone who had a half of brain.

Cassie waited until Blake opened the door and held out his hand to help her out of the truck. Obviously she did the right thing staying where she was until they finished discussing

business. "Well?"

"He says he has a little car that's very reliable." Blake said knowing what she meant.

"Blake, this is really hard for me." She said actually feeling more and more helpless.

"I know." He squeezed her hand, "We'll even this out somehow if you have the need to feel that way."

"Do you mean that?"

He shut the door as he nodded, but didn't look at her. He honestly didn't want her to feel beholden to him, but he could understand why she felt that way. Truth of it was, she didn't have anything, and he had plenty. It was nothing to him to buy a cheap car for someone in need, but this was different. He still didn't know her as well as he knew others in this town, and it wasn't like him to help out a complete stranger, unless you count Brad, but he was part of the family and he never gave him money that he didn't earn. "I told you I would consider it." He finally answered.

Cassie followed just behind Blake, letting him lead the way. She did feel vulnerable about the whole thing. At least he said that he'd consider her offer for help. Suddenly he stopped and turned to her causing her to halt abruptly before she ran into him, "What?"

"Don't be so nervous Cass."

"I'm not."

He took her hand again, "Sure you aren't. I know for a fact that you aren't one to stay two steps behind anyone."

Dusty watched the conversation with interest. He couldn't hear what their saying but that small exchange looked completely intimate. Blake was tall and when he turned and took her hand, he bent his head closing the height distance while he said something to her. There was no mistake in his posturing. As it was that pretty girl tilted her lovely face up and listened

intently. As far as Blake knew or didn't know, he'd already laid claim to the striking blonde.

Cassie was unexpectedly pulled beside him and again he didn't release her hand but kept a hold of it as they walked toward his friend.

"My name's Dusty." He said as he extended his hand, "I have a feeling that Blake won't want to share yours or you for that matter."

"Don't be an ass." Blake scowled.

"Cassie." She said grinning and shaking his hand liking his sense of humor. He seemed slightly immune to Blake's temper.

"Are you going to the dance tomorrow night?"

"Dusty." Blake said in the same tone.

"No, I don't think so. I –"

"She has plans." Blake interrupted.

"Sure she does." Dusty said with a chuckle, "Come on honey, I'll show you your car before your boyfriend busts my jaw."

Boyfriend? She glanced up at Blake but he didn't even look at her. His expression looked like he was close to tearing Dusty apart with his bare hands. Well that solved that. Obviously he never even considered anything with her from the look of anger on his face. Not that she was. She sighed heavily. Who was she kidding? He set her on fire when he touched her.

"Oh Gosh!" she stood there looking at the pretty little red coupe.

Dusty grinned and dangled the keys, "Here, take it for a drive."

She smiled and took the keys. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me." He nodded toward Blake who was still scowling.

She turned her grin on him before she went to the car.

“I’m going to turn you inside out if you don’t shut up.” Blake said when she was out of earshot.

“Come on man, you act like she belongs to you.” He explained.

“I’m a little protective because she has no one else.” He said tersely.

“That’s a line of bullshit Blake. You don’t sound convincing at all. Even if you did, one look at that hot piece and anyone would know you were lying.”

“She doesn’t need the stress of gossip. You and I know that I couldn’t care, but she’s new and people don’t know her. Sometimes they jump to conclusions—” he paused while staring at him so he got his point, “—without understanding the circumstance.”

Dusty held up his hand in surrender, “Okay, I get it. You are protective, she’s hot, and it’s all in my head what I saw.”

“That’s right.” Blake said while watching Cassie get in the car.

Dusty just smiled.

At the same time Cassie was getting a car, Emma was standing beside hers looking toward the open doors of the shop. She knew all too clearly what Blake had told her and she knew that she should listen and that Brad certainly would because he didn’t want to be kicked out of the family. But she really wanted to go and talk to him and know exactly what he meant the other night over dinner.

She had some time to think about his abrupt reaction at dinner. Was it just out of severe protectiveness instead of affection, the type of affection she felt, or was he just acting like Blake. She wasn’t able to ask him, because Blake forbade him to even look at her when he came back from dropping Cassie off.

She took a deep breath and tossed her purse in her car

before heading across the yard to the shop. She had to know.

Blake followed Cassie home so she could drop off her car, change, and go with him to the ranch so they could go riding like he promised. Only things didn't go so smoothly. He pulled up into his driveway and after he helped Cassie out of the truck his sister came out of the shop in a fit of tears.

"What the hell!"

To Cassie's complete surprise Emma went to her and she ended up holding her while the young girl cried. When she looked up Blake was already half way across the yard. His walk alone said enough. "Emma did Brad hurt you?"

She shook her head and sobbed.

"Oh oh, Blake just went in there and I have a feeling he mistook your tears."

"Oh Cassie, you have to go and stop him!"

Without another word Cassie released the younger girl and ran in the direction Blake just went. When she went through the doors of the shop Blake had Brad by the collar of his coveralls and it looked as though he was about to hit him, "Don't!" she yelled managing to rush up and grab a hold of his thick arm, "Emma said he didn't do anything."

"I didn't, I swear!" Brad said keeping his focus Blake's large fist.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said looking down at her.

"She said he didn't hurt her." she repeated, "Don't hit him Blake."

"I didn't!" Brad blurted.

Blake averted his dark gaze to Brad, "Did I tell you to talk?"

Brad clamped his jaw shut.

He then looked back at Cassie, "What did she say?"

“She never said anything else, she was too upset.”

He returned his gaze to Brad and released him at the same time, “Now, talk.”

He gave an unsure glance to Cassie and cleared his throat before flicking it back to Blake. “I can’t.”

Blake reached for him again, and again Cassie wrapped her hands around his large forearm but it didn’t even seem to faze him, “On the count of three—”

“Jesus boss, it’s personal!”

“Not my sister!”

“I didn’t touch her, I swear to god! That was the problem. I wouldn’t go against you, you know that!”

“The problem?” Brad just told him that his sister made a pass at him? He released him slowly and took a step back, “If you’re lying I’ll remove a limb.”

“I swear.” He said holding up his hands in surrender. “It was one of the hardest things I had to do in my life. I told you how I felt. She just wanted to see for herself. I’ve never told her.”

“Never?”

He shook his head, “It tore me up to lie to her.”

“Ah hell.” Honestly Blake was at a loss. Seeing his sister devastated was hard to take, but Brad was being an honourable man.

“I think I’ll go check on her.” Cassie said. Blake nodded but kept his eyes on Brad.

“We need to talk anyway.” He said.

Emma was sitting on the front steps with her face in her hands when Cassie found her. She was not longer crying but there was still the escape of dry sobs every now and then. She seemed to know it was her.

“He’s such a jerk.” She said muffling the words in her

hands.

Cassie put her arm around the younger girl, "He cares about you Emma."

"I feel so stupid." She said lifting her head and looking at Cassie. Her face was flushed and her eyes were wet and puffy. "I thought he cared about me, but he told me that he didn't. I went in there—I, oh Cassie, I tried to kiss him and he pushed me away." A tear slid down her cheek. "I felt like an idiot. He could have any girl at my school and here I thought he liked me more than just a friend."

"He does." She said smiling. She didn't care if Brad and Blake wanted to keep this a secret. Emma was hurting and she understood how a girl's heart could get crushed easily, "He's trying to be respectful of your brother. He knows you're young too and doesn't want to have you give up anything for him."

She was appalled, "Can't those two just believe that I'll try and make good choices, and if I make a mistake then I'll deal with it? Gosh why do I have to live in a house full of men?"

"I think you're lucky Emma, I don't have anyone and you have two men who love you enormously."

She gave a sheepish smile, "I do sound selfish don't I?"

She shook her head, "You sound loved."

"You make feel this isn't as bad as it seems." She took a deep breath, "I'm crazy about Brad Cassie."

"I know."

"He's so darn handsome. All of my friends think he's a gift from God."

Cassie laughed at that. It wasn't that long ago that she was that age.

Suddenly Emma's expression changed like she just had an amazing idea, "Why don't you talk to Blake and ask him if we can see one another—what?" Cassie had already started shaking her head.

Her eyes widened slightly, "Have you *met* your brother?"

Emma laughed for the first time that day, "But he has a soft spot for you—aren't you two dating?"

"No." she said quickly.

Emma grinned, "Boy, you got it bad, don't you Cassie?"

"We're not dating." She enforced with a pinched expression. How come it felt painful to admit that to everyone lately?

"Well maybe you should tell my brother, because he's smitten."

"That's crazy." She argued, "He's never given me any indication that he likes me."

"My brother wouldn't give the time of a day to anyone, even a gorgeous woman like you if he didn't. You must know that about him by now because he's not secretive about what he thinks."

"Cass!" it was Blake.

"Oh dear, I don't think his mood has improved." Cassie said seeing him emerge from the shop.

"He didn't hurt him did he—Brad?" she said seeing her brother's angry scowl.

"No." she said giving her a reassuring smile, "I think he cares about him more than he lets on."

Emma nodded, "I was hoping." She sighed heavily. "I wish he'd just trust me not to do anything stupid."

"Cass!" he repeated now halfway across the yard.

"Gosh, he bellows like a bloody bull." She said looking at him.

Emma smiled, "And expects you to jump like everyone else."

"Well it's not happening." She frowned then turned to her, "Do you want to make me a cup of tea?"

This time Emma burst into giggles, "I like you more and

more. If you can resist my brother's barking orders, then you can stay."

Cassie grabbed Emma's hand and together they went in the house leaving the tall angry cowboy standing at the end of the driveway with his hands on his hips and a glower on his face.

"What the hell—" he said watching the two go in the house like he didn't exist. *Goddam women*, he thought. Then he waved and angry arm and turned away. He needed some time to cool down anyway. Chances were he'd take it out on Cassie again. Last time he did, she wrecked her car. He was bellowing at her because he promised her that they'd go riding, but maybe this was a better choice. He'd go out and work his anger out on the range. Emma would most likely give her a ride home if she wanted to leave.

Four hours later the sun long since set and he was virtually exhausted. When he came into the house he inhaled deeply smelling the most amazing aroma coming from the kitchen. It was rare that Emma cooked, and Sophia had left for Italy the day before yesterday for a month because her father was ill.

Feeling a little puzzled, he removed his hat, chaps and boots before heading to the kitchen. What he saw had him frozen at the door.

Cassie was setting arranging silverware on the breakfast nook. She hadn't noticed him yet and Blake was glad because she was a dream to watch. Her hair was pulled up on top of her head and she absently reached up and brushed one of those unruly curls back behind her ear before she surveyed the place settings with a serious expression. Then she turned and pulled what looked like a roaster pan out of the oven. When she took the lid off the heavenly aroma went tenfold and he groaned causing her to screech and jump.

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack?" she said

spinning around to see him.

“Did you cook that?”

She nodded, “Emma said your cook was gone for a month or so.” She grinned, “I think I found a way to start paying you back.”

“I’d have to agree to that Cass, and I didn’t.”

“That’s too bad, because I’ve already decided.” She turned back to the roast, “Sit down and I’ll get you something to eat. From the looks of you, you’ve been busy.” She turned away for an entirely different reason. He looked tired, dusty, sweaty, and absolutely irresistible. She heard a stool creak as he sat down.

“What did you make?”

“Roast beef with potatoes and carrots,” she turned around and set a platter in front of him, “With gravy.” She grinned.

“Oh hell, I’m dreaming.” He said spearing a healthy slice of beef.

“You said you had the best cook in the state?”

“I lied.” He said stuffing a healthy piece in his mouth.

“I thought her pasta was amazing the other night.”

“Honey, this takes the cake hands down. Sophia’s Italian so we get a lot of Italian dishes.”

She grinned, “So am I hired.”

He took another bite and made a sound of satisfaction closing his eyes to savour the taste. Then he popped them open and centered them on her, “No.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake Blake!”

“shush, let me enjoy this.” He said ignoring her rising voice.

“I should dump it on your lap.” She said standing up and turning to clean up the mess.

He smirked but continued to eat until he was practically bursting at the seams, “Where’s Emma?” he finally said pushing his scraped clean plate back.

“she said something about staying at her friend Amanda’s

tonight.” Cassie answered without turning around.

He studied her back as she loaded the dishes in the dishwasher. She sure seemed at home here. Then he had an image of children around her feet. Dark-haired and blue eyed. He got to his feet and approached her.

Cassie didn’t hear a thing until she felt a hand on her neck. At least she didn’t screech and jump this time but she did inhale sharply. “W—what are you doing?”

“I like your hair down.” He said deeply.

She stilled as she felt his hand pulling her hair out of the makeshift bun she’d put it in.

“Shouldn’t you be getting washed up?”

“Care to join me?”

She shook her head slowly.

“I have one of those fancy jet tubs Cass. Do you have any idea what I can do to you in there?”

From the images flashing in her mind, she could only imagine. “I can’t.”

“Sure you can.” He added in the same sexy drawl. He released the last of her hair so it spilled down her back. Then he took a strand between his thumb and forefinger, “I don’t think I’ve ever felt hair this soft.”

She turned around and looked up at him, “You need to make up your mind what you want from me.”

He gave her a slow deliberate smile, “Honey I thought I made myself clear.”

“If you just want sex, I can’t oblige you.”

He smile grew, “If I just wanted sex, I’d go somewhere else.”

Her heart throbbed in her chest just to match the rest of her body, “You would?”

He nodded as his hands smoothed over her shoulders, “Stay with me tonight. We have the house to ourselves and with what I have in mind for you, we’d be as noisy as hell and no one will be

here to hear us.”

“Oh lord.” She breathed.

He cupped her face in his hands and stared down at her, “Stay.”

“Blake, I really shouldn’t.” she reached up and removed his hands, “It’s just another burden I’d have to bear. I don’t have time for a relationship.”

“Make time.” He said right before he covered her mouth with his.

He smelled like sweat and male and for some reason it ignited her desire. No one could ever mistake Blake for anything less than a man because he was that in spades. Large, hard, and masculine sexy to the bone.

He kissed her like he did before, but there was more passion there, more aggressiveness and heaven help her she was hypnotized with it. It was obvious that he was the aggressor and confident in the way he was with women in this context, because there was no hesitation and no uncertainty. Her hands spanned over his hard abdomen and moved up over his chest. He was so muscularly solid that she had to pull back and look where her hands were to see if it was real.

“Take my shirt off.” He said seeing where her attention was.

“I shouldn’t.” she said not even convincing herself. She wanted to see him, all of him.

He released her and started undoing the buttons himself starting at the top while her eyes remained fixated on his action. Then he stopped at the third one down. “your turn.”

She looked up at him and he took her hands and placed them back on his chest, “Honey, show me you want me to.”

Oh, she did, she really did. Unsure, her eyes guided back to her fingers as they flipped out the next button, then the one after until they were all undone.

“Now—“ he took her hands and placed them on the inside,

“—touch me.”

It was like the man was chiselled from warm marble. He was so perfect. Every contour and muscular mound he possessed was intricately formed to the ultimate male specimen. Her hands moved over the front of him trying to memorize every curve.

“My turn.” He said huskily claiming her mouth again. At the same time his fingers moved over the front of her blouse. She barely felt a thing until the brush of his tips against her flesh as he pushed the edges of her blouse apart. His hands were calloused and rough. They were the hands of a man who wasn’t afraid of hard work, and from the feel of him everywhere, it was true. A moment later she felt her bra loosen, then his hands on her breasts. She moaned against his mouth at the feeling. He may have been aggressive, but he was gentle in touching her. She may have actually thought about stopping him, but again, as soon as his tongue slid past her lips, she even forgot her own name.

Blake bent down and swept her up in his arms, turned, and headed to his room. She was so sinfully perfect and the kitchen was no place to take a woman like her. He wanted her in his bed where he could take his time with her and show her how desirable she was.

Cassie felt the soft mattress against her back when he laid her crossways on his large bed bringing his body on top of hers. She could feel one of his large thighs move in between hers and the skin of his chest meeting hers. All of this felt so right, so wonderful that she didn’t want it to end.

Then he bent his head and took one of her breasts in his mouth and she cried out and tangled her fingers in his hair. Within seconds one of her thighs was over his hip and she was arching toward him. This couldn’t possibly be normal. She was half insane when he lifted himself off of her. She reached for him.

“One moment. We still have clothes on.” He said in a voice deep with desire. He didn’t even wait for her response but just leaned down and undid her jeans. In the next second they were on the floor and his were on top of hers. However he didn’t make a move toward her but just stand there and look down at her.

Cassie started feeling insecure and moved her arms to cover her naked body just to have him bend over and grip her wrists. He flattened them out on either side of her head while hovering just inches above her body, “Not a chance. Don’t you dare cover that beautiful body. I want to look at you.”

Without realizing it she started to tremble.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m a little scared.” She admitted softly.

“I wouldn’t hurt you.” *Because I adore you*, he thought to himself.

“I know.”

“then what are you scared of?”

Her eyes looked into his. Then she shook her head.

He grinned, “I also know that you haven’t been around the block much Cass, so I don’t expect anything.”

“At all.” She added looking up at him.

He dropped his grin, “At all?”

She shook her head.

“Are we talking about the same thing?” he lifted himself a little farther off her to study her expression.

“Definitely.”

He released a curse and rolled away from her like she scorched him.

After a moment she realized that the mood was gone and for some reason he was angry. Ashamed she pulled her blouse across her chest and sat up.

Blake was already off the bed and had pulled his pants back on and walked out of the room without another word.

Cassie did up her blouse and pulled her jeans back on biting her lip to hold back the tears. She was humiliated. Blake had completely rejected her. Obviously her inexperience revolted him. He didn't want anyone as experienced as Marla, but he also didn't want a virgin. There was just no pleasing him!

After a few more minutes realizing he wasn't coming back she made her way out of his room and went into the foyer where she heard his big truck start up. When she went to the door she saw that he was just sitting there and then she realized that he was waiting to take her home. Again she found herself biting her lip as she got in the passenger side. She couldn't even look at him. At least she was getting better at getting in and out of the monster.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled into her driveway and she was out of the truck before he even had it in park. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she thought she heard him say her name before she shut the door and went in the house, but he just gunned the engine and tore out of there so she must've imagined it.

She felt like a fool! Who was she kidding in the first place? Despite what she'd been telling people, she did fall for him and she fell hard or it wouldn't hurt like this. Blake was the only man she could ever care about because he was the real deal; an honest, hardworking man, who her father would have admired without a doubt. Men like him were not easy to come across.

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She wasn't what he wanted and how could she blame him? She didn't have anything, and what she did have was little. She wasn't experienced in the ways he wanted, she had no money, no place to call her own, and he'd been carrying her financially for two weeks since she first met him and all she did was fight him at every turn. It was no wonder he rejected her.

She felt tears spill down her cheeks as she went into her

room. She had to make some decisions for her survival and her future and none of those plans could include Blake Eckert.

CHAPTER FOUR

Several weeks had gone by before Blake finally made it into town. He had some thinking to do and not only that, a business to run. Cassie was always on his mind but after that night he needed to stay away from her so he could clear his head. He wasn't quite sure what had happened, any normal man would have taken her virginity and not thought twice about it. That announcement alone set him back on his heels and one look at her during that confession made him know she wasn't lying. However, if she thought she could offer herself as payment for what he'd done for her, she was mistaken.

He knew she felt beholden to him, but what she did was no better than a prostitute and quite frankly, he wasn't desperate. Oh he wanted her. He wanted her so much that he could feel it to his teeth, but she needed to offer herself to him on her own.

Somehow he'd expected her to phone him, but she didn't. Maybe it had something to do with the way he humiliated her that night. She was vulnerable and he walked away from her. He had to, or he was going to take the prize that was offered. He was dealing with a mixture of anger and desire. The anger won out. It was safer.

He pulled up in front of Molly's diner without even realizing it. Well, he had to get this over with. Besides he missed her glowing face. Maybe those two weeks gave her perspective and she'd apologize. Regardless, he was going to clear the air and tell her that she didn't owe him anything and they were going to go their separate ways.

However, when he went in the diner, she wasn't there and surprisingly enough it was less than half full. He took a seat at

the counter and thought maybe she had a day off.

Just then Molly came over and tossed keys on the counter in front of him.

“What’s this?”

“That car you bought Cassie.” She said tersely, “It’s out back.”

“Hell, did it break down?” it was surprising because Dusty was very reliable.

She shook her head.

He brought his eyes to hers letting it finally dawn on him, “She didn’t want it.”

“No Blake, she didn’t. She said that she couldn’t take any more of your charity.”

“How the hell is she getting to work then?”

“She doesn’t work here anymore.”

“What? Where is she?”

“She took a job with Ernie Watson. She catches rides with him in the morning.”

He stood up, “The hell you say!”

“What did you expect Blake? I don’t know what happened between you two, but Cass is a strong gal. She needed to make some decisions for her survival. I couldn’t pay her what she was worth and she couldn’t make her debts on what I was paying her.” She leaned forward, “But I’m sure Ernie—“she never got to finish. Blake swiped the keys off the counter and headed out the door.

Molly watched him get in the truck and roar out of there. Garnet came out from the kitchen just as Blake’s taillights disappeared around the corner, “You told him?”

She nodded, “I don’t think he was very happy.” She smiled.

Cassie was entering accounts into the computer when she heard the familiar roar of Blake’s truck. Even if she doubted it,

the rapid beating of her heart told her she was right. As usual she had no physical control of her body when he was near.

She'd honestly didn't think she'd hear from him again. Two weeks had gone by and not one word. She also knew that he'd be busy with the upcoming rodeo that was this weekend but the way he was with her that night made her think that she'd never really see him again.

Unexpectedly Ernie had kept his distance regardless of the subtle hints, which she ignored. He'd bring her coffee in the morning, which she never drank, even though there was another two girls in the office. At first she got suspicious looks but after getting to know the older one, Sally, she felt better. The other woman, named Debbie seemed to be distrustful of her. Although she never said anything, it was the way she looked at her. She found out from Sally that she was a friend of Ernie's wife.

Of course it didn't help that Ernie picked her up every morning and took her home after work either. She never told him that Blake tossed her aside and she hoped that it didn't get around because she doubted he would keep his distance if he knew.

Then the door flew open and as large as life, there was Blake filling the doorway looking fit to be tied. Without a word he came in the office rounded her desk and grabbed her arm hauling her out of her chair.

"Blake—!"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he practically bellowed as she hauled her out of the front door.

"Let go! You're hurting."

Once out in the yard, he released her and spun around to glare down at her. "Are you insane!"

He was so loud that she swore her hair blew back with that bark.

She narrowed her gaze, "I have no choice!"

“There are always choices Cass!”

“I won’t owe anyone! I have—“

He glared down at her. “Just because I didn’t take what you tried to pay me with, doesn’t mean that Ernie won’t, or did he?”

She slapped him. It didn’t even move him at all, but she could see the red mark on his cheek starting to form and his jaw clenching in restrained rage.

She didn’t care because those words crushed her. Is that what he thought? That she was paying him with her body? How could he think that? “I hate you.” She spat before she turned around and walked back toward the office. Every inch of her body was vibrating with rage. She would never sell herself so cheaply. When she gave herself to him, or tried, it was because she’d somehow fallen in love with him and he just twisted that into something cheap and ugly. He didn’t know her at all.

She could feel the other two ladies eyes on her when she came back in the room and chose to ignore them. She was on the verge of tears as it was. If anyone said a word to her she’d crack, but thankfully they didn’t. She winced when she heard Blake’s truck roar to life and tear out of the lot.

After work it was Sally who actually came and asked her if she was okay.

Cass just nodded, “it was a misunderstanding.” She offered.

Sally just nodded, but there was something deeply intelligent in those dark eyes of hers, “Molly said he was sweet on you.”

“Oh lord.”

She gave her a reassuring smile, “Don’t worry honey, Molly doesn’t gossip. She only told me so I’d keep an eye on you.”

She rubbed her forehead, “I just don’t understand the man. One minute he’s as sweet as all get out, and then he turns as cold as an ice cube.” She said in frustration.

Sally grinned, “And they say women are confusing.”

“Do you know him?”

Sally shook her head, “Just to see him around. I probably wouldn’t have recognized him, but his reputation precedes him. I heard he has a temper of a trapped boar.”

“That’s a mild statement.” She said frowning.

Sally laughed, “Well at least he’s made this day interesting.”

Not for me, she thought to herself. At least at the diner she had Molly and Garnet who always leant an ear and they both knew Blake. Then again she couldn’t rely on them forever, she had to do some things on their own.

Ernie drove up then and rolled down his window, “You ready kitten?”

Sally raised her brows as she walked past her and Cassie fought the shiver that went up her spine. “I just need to get my purse.”

When Ernie pulled into the driveway the car that Blake had bought her was sitting there—and so was Blake. He was sitting on the porch swing next to Mrs. Watson.

“Oh,” Ernie said seeing him, “I see your boyfriend is here.”

Her eyes shot to him and she wanted to tell him the truth, but the reason Blake had kissed that day was to mislead Ernie, so she kept her mouth shut, “Thanks for the ride again.” She said instead before she got out.

Ernie waved to his mother before he drove away.

Cassie went up the steps slowly keeping her eyes on him. She wasn’t sure what to be ready for after that confrontation earlier today. Of course nothing was revealed in his expression.

“I’ll make you some tea dear.” Mrs Watson said getting to her feet and going in the house.

Cassie watched her for a moment trying to figure out how she knew she liked tea.

“I told her.” Blake said answering her unspoken question.

She turned her eyes on him, "How did you know?"

He tapped his head with his index finger, "I pay attention."

She didn't doubt that for a moment.

"You never drank coffee on your breaks at work."

Gosh he really did pay attention.

"Obviously you have a problem telling her the truth because you don't want to put her out."

This man just kept surprising her. However, that still didn't deter her. She needed to talk to him about the car. She took a deep breath, "Blake—"

"Save it, I'm not taking it back." he said nodding toward the car while keeping his eyes on hers.

"You are not my saviour." She swallowed hard wishing so much that he was but he never gave her any indication of *what* he was to her.

"I was harsh earlier."

Her eyes focused on his and she nodded.

"You're not sleeping with him." It was a statement, not a question.

"I wouldn't." she said honestly, "How could you even suggest something after—" she snapped her mouth shut unable to finish. She was going to say after what they shared, but obviously he didn't take it so personally like she did.

He nodded, "All right then." He stood up causing her to crane her head up again.

All right then? That's it? "You should apologize Blake." She said crossing her arms under her breasts.

He placed his Stetson on his head that was on a side table before he turned to her, "Yeah, I should." He said looking down at her. Then he gave her a smile, "I'll see you later." He went down the steps just as one of his ranch trucks pulled into the driveway. Brad was driving and waved at her.

She was too angry to wave back and just stood there tapping

her foot. He was driving her completely insane! Didn't he know that? Not once did he give an indication that there was something going on between them, but he consistently showed up and ordered her about.

"Take the car to work from now on Cass." He said over his shoulder before he got in the passenger side of the truck.

"No." she said before he shut the door completely ignoring her.

Mrs. Watson came out of the house then and handed her a cup of tea as Brad drove away, "Oh, your man left?"

Again, people just assumed. Fighting her anger she forced a smile and turned to her, "Thank you so much Mrs. Watson."

"You should call me Dorie. I think you've known me long enough to do that."

"Okay."

Then all of a sudden the older woman dropped her pleasant expression, "Is my Ernie behaving?"

Cassie's mouth fell open. She really didn't know what to say or if she was referring to his lecherous behaviour, "I—I—"

Dorie patted Cass on the shoulder, "I'm just checking. You're such a sweetie Cassie, I'd hate for him to try and pressure you into something. That's why I'm so glad you and Blake are together. He won't touch you knowing that."

"You know—about Ernie, I mean?"

She shrugged and took a seat on the porch swing, "His father was the same way. Could never keep that old buggar away from other women. So one night I threatened to cut his pecker off if he so much as touched another woman again. Do you know what that old coot said to me? He said 'you can try Dorie, but I'm tougher than you'. I smiled sweetly and told him he had to sleep sometime."

Cassie stared at her for a full minute in stunned silence before she burst into laughter.

“Just because I’m old, doesn’t mean I’m stupid, but it sure helps me out a lot when people think you’re this helpless old woman.”

Cassie sat beside her, “You are a sly gal Dorie.”

“Don’t I know it. Now—“ she pointed at the car in the driveway, “—you take that car and drive it to work from now on. Blake broke my Ernie’s arm once when he was thirty and Blake was hardly even twenty.”

“Really?”

“Ernie made a pass at that second wife of his father’s. Stupid fool!” she frowned. “One thing people know around here is that you leave Blake’s family be.” She looked her over, “And they’ll leave you be too.”

“We’re not dating Dorie. He just kissed me that day because he didn’t want Ernie making a pass at me.” She couldn’t lie to her, she liked her too much.

The woman snorted in disbelief, “Sure he did.”

“I swear.”

She smiled slowly while looking at the younger woman, “My, my, you are quite naïve aren’t you.”

Cassie blushed and looked down at her tea cup but didn’t say anything.

“Blake seems to think you belong to him.” She said after a minute.

“He said that?” Cassie brought her head up abruptly.

“No.” Dorie said getting to her feet with her eyes glittering. “I’ve got to get to bed honey, I’m not as young as I used to be. I made you dinner, it’s warm in the oven.”

“Thanks.” She said still trying to absorb her words.

“Are you going to the rodeo tomorrow?”

“Oh I forgot all about it.” Which was a half truth. She remembered it this morning, but after that episode with Blake it flew her mind. She had too much going on in her head right now,

but it seemed to be the only thing people were talking about for the last few weeks.

“you should go Cassie, you need to relax a little.”

She was right. Now that she was working at Ernie’s feedlot, she didn’t work weekends anymore and it gave her some free time. Then again who knows how he’d be to her tomorrow. Should she even risk running into him?

“Maybe you should get that man of yours to take you. He said that he’s bronc riding and roping this year.”

“He’s really competing? I mean, I heard he does, but doesn’t he have enough to worry about with putting the whole event on?”

“He has a volunteer committee that helps arrange that now. Blake just writes the cheques and they pass all major decisions through him.”

“That’s really smart.” She said.

“That’s Blake.” Dorie chuckled to herself when she turned and went in the house.

Cassie sat there for a long time after Dorie left. What if that woman was right and Blake did think that? After a minute she made a sound of disbelief. Sure he did. Blake let everyone know what he wanted, and never did he mention anything to her or everyone else.

The next day she actually slept in, and probably would have slept longer if it wasn’t for the sound of a large wrecking ball on the front door. She knew that Dorie got up early on Saturday and went into town to the farmer’s market. She groaned getting out of bed, throwing on a robe and answering the door. Of course it was Blake, only his fist could make such an enormous sound. It was surprising that his truck didn’t wake her up. It just made her realize how tired she was.

His eyes went down the front of her and he frowned, “You’d better have been expecting me.”

She looked down at the knee length blue satin robe she wore

before looking up at him, “what? Why?”

“Cass, you can’t possibly be that innocent.” He said bringing his eyes back to her.

“Are you here to lecture me, or do you have a question?”

“Get dressed. The rodeo starts at noon.”

She blinked up at him, “So, does that mean I’m going with you.”

“You’re not funny sweetheart—go get dressed—” he paused looking down the front of her, “—or I’m coming in and that thin sorry piece of material is coming off.”

Her eyes shot wide, “I wouldn’t let you touch me again.”

“Care to test that theory.” He said deeply while stepping through the door uninvited.

She glared at him as she turned and went back towards her room to get dressed.

“Something that you can move in Cass, like jeans, not those slinky skirts like the one you wore yesterday.”

She stopped but didn’t turn and look at him. Gritting her teeth she went into her room and shut the door. She wore a grey knee length skirt that wasn’t tight nor slinky. It was meant to be professional to suit her job. She knew better to wear something revealing around Ernie.

Then she leaned against the closed door and actually placed a hand on her chest and took a deep breath. She may have seemed angry but every inch of her was wide awake and craving him after his comment. Even answering the door and seeing him there set a fire through her. She couldn’t be vulnerable around him again. She just couldn’t risk it.

“today Cass.” Came his voice on the other side of the door.

God, he was so exasperating! “I’m sure you realize that a woman needs time.”

“Uh-huh.” There was silence for a moment, “Let me in. I’ll help.”

She pinched her eyes shut for a second then quickly started getting dressed trying to ignore his deep throaty chuckle muffled through her door.

She pulled a pinked checked blouse and a pair of clean newer jeans. Then she went into the bathroom to put up her hair. In the middle of pinning it up his voice vibrated through the door.

“If you’re messing with your hair Cass, leave it down.”

She released a frustrated noise and went and opened the door just to find him leaning lazily against the wall in the hall across from her room waiting for her. “Care to add anything else?”

“Yeah, no makeup, you don’t need it.”

“You have to be the most frustrating man on the planet.”

“Probably, are you ready?”

“Blake can you at least be honest with me?”

“I always am.” He said

“I haven’t seen you in two weeks, then you show up out of nowhere and act like I’m running around with Ernie, then you show up here after—“

“Why do women need to talk about everything?”

She placed her hands on her hips, “And why do men expect women to just go along with everything.”

“Because we’re men.” He grinned, “And you’re going to make me late. Let’s go.”

“Late?”

“I have stock for the events.”

“Why didn’t you say so?”

“Because you were talking non-stop.” He said turning away and heading for the door.

She followed him while boring holes into his back with her glare then come to a sudden stop at the door. There was a large very long gooseneck trailer attached to a big dually ranch truck

with the same cobra symbol on it, “Wow, you weren’t kidding.”

“Calves in there for the roping event, the rest of the stock got delivered yesterday.”

“Why are you here?” she said looking up at him.

“I recall you saying you’d help with timing the events.”

“That was before.” She protested, “You’ve been treating me like—”

“So you want to back out?” he interrupted with a raise of his brows.

“Yes—I mean, No!” she made a frustrated noise and stomped by him to the truck.

Blake cast his eyes down to her backside and shook his head before following her.

Brad hopped out of the passenger side and told her to sit in the middle.

“Next to him?”

He grinned, “It looks a little funny if I’m practically sitting on his lap, besides, I like my teeth. Cowboys don’t sit next to one another.”

Of course it was a man thing. “I can sit in the back.”

Brad shook his head, “If you look we have a lot of tack in the back seat. Quit being a chicken.” He chuckled.

“Look who’s talking.” She rolled her eyes and got in.

Blake easily turned the large combination of truck and trailer around like he’d done it a million times. He looked down at her and as usual didn’t show any indication in his expression what he was thinking. Then to shock the hell out of her, he reached over and took her hand.

She never said anything for the whole ride because she was too darn stunned. Yet, she couldn’t deny how wonderful his large, rough, warm hand felt engulfing hers.

“Blake said that you’re working for Ernie?” Brad said.

That's all it took for Blake to release her hand and a frustrated breath to go with it.

She sighed inwardly and turned her attention to Brad, "It's temporary. I didn't want to leave the diner, but it paid more and I needed the extra income."

"Be careful Cass, Ernie will find a way to come on to you." Brad said casting a glance over her head at Blake and wincing as if he glared at him.

"I've heard that."

"He won't touch her." Blake said abruptly while pulling in the stock yard, "I've already spoken to him."

She swivelled her head to look up at him, "you what?"

He looked at her before he shoved the gear shift into reverse and backed up against a loading gate. "You heard me."

As soon as he shifted it into park and cut the engine Brad was out of the truck mumbling something about unloading the trailer. Neither one of them heard him. Blake was staring down at her while she flushed with anger.

"You had no right—when did you do that?" she said in a mix of fury and confusion.

"After you tickled my cheek yesterday afternoon."

"You deserved that." He was ribbing her with the tickle statement and she wasn't falling for it. However, it was probably true, there was no mark there now and he was as tough as rawhide.

"I know I did, but I still won't have Ernie touching you Cass."

The *I* statement again. "Why the heck not? You made yourself clear—"

"Because—" he interrupted, "I'm the only one that gets to touch you."

"It didn't go so well last time." She breathed erasing all anger at that confession.

"No, but there'll be more."

She shook her head, "It was humiliating."

He stared at her for a moment before nodding, "I'll be back, I have to help Brad with the stock."

She was sitting there wondering if there was another man as confusing as this one on the planet. Then again, there probably wasn't another man who was like him at all. He was so appealing to her sex and had every right to be.

The day was exhausting but exhilarating. The rodeo was packed solid with the town's people. However, she couldn't help but let the excitement get infectious. Yet to her disappointment, she hadn't seen Blake all day. Once she saw him at a distance but with the passing crowd he was gone. Unfortunately there were a lot of events going on at the same time and she missed his bronco ride because she was keeping time at the barrel races. To her ultimate delight, it was Emma who won the event. It was funny because she didn't seem to be the type to ride because she had a feeling she was into all those typical teenage girl things, but like Blake she surprised her completely.

After she congratulated her she went looking for Blake. *Why?* She thought, *because I'm a fool.*

She found him a half an hour later. He was mounted on his stallion in the chute for steer wrestling.

When the buzzer went she could only stand there looking between the bars at the awesome display of power, muscle and grace. It was almost as if the entire thing was in slow motion as his horse raced along side of the steer, he leaned down and took the head in his powerful arms flipping it on its back.

Now she'd seen the event many times before, but never did it look that appealing to her. there was no doubt, as if there was before, but that man was solid, one hundred percent sexy.

She watched him stand up and brush the dirt and sawdust off of his shirt when he spotted her and nodded.

How he saw her through the crowd, she'd never know, but a thrill ran through her when he settled those eyes on her. Feeling like a giddy school girl she lifted her hand and waved. Several people near her followed Blake's acknowledgement and turned to look at her.

The cheers were deafening when the time came up. He was in the lead. Then he turned, got his horse and left the arena.

She made her way around to where he exited and found him talking to Bill and shaking his hand. Bill spotted her first and gave her one of those charming grins.

"Hi Cassie."

She smiled and said hello.

Blake reached over and actually put his arm around her causing Bill to raise his brows but not say anything to that. It looked as if he wanted to from the amused expression on his face, but obviously he knew Blake.

"I was just congratulating Bill for winning the saddle Bronc event." Blake said as if there was nothing wrong with his sudden affection.

"I thought you were in that."

"He was. I actually beat him. If I didn't know better I think he was feeling sorry for me and let me win. That's if I didn't know him."

"You won fair and square." Blake said.

"By a fraction of a point, but I'll take it!" he beamed.

"Sure you will," he replied with one of those sexy smirks that Cassie loved.

His eyes went to Cassie, "So honey, I see you made up your mind."

"Lay off." Blake said turning away, "Join us later at the house for a beer."

"I'd love to." He said with an ongoing grin, "I guess I'll bring a date."

“Yeah, you do that.” He added over his shoulder a little more abruptly.

Bill chuckled, “All right then.”

“Blake you can be so darn blunt.” She said as they worked their way through the crowd. “You keep up the pretence of us being together.”

“Don’t kid yourself Cass, we are.”

Now that was the first time he gave a solid answer. She stopped and looked up at him.

“This isn’t the place to discuss it.” He continued as several people walked by and patted him on the shoulder while congratulating him.

“No, I think it is. You can’t make an announcement like that in front of a million people and not expect me to respond to it.”

He gripped her upper forearm and led her through the crowd and the continued congratulations. She actually tried to pull free, but should have known better, he had the grip of forged steel. Then he led her across the parking lot to his truck pulling her behind the cover of the trailer before he turned her to face him and released her. “Okay talk.”

“Me? You’re the one should be explaining yourself.”

“Honey, my actions have spoken volumes.”

“What actions?” she said holding her arms out from her sides in helplessness, “The threatening of my boss, showing up at my place, forcing your car on me.”

“Your car.” He corrected.

She dropped her hands, “See?”

He put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back against the cool metal of the trailer ever so gently while he bent his head to look her in the eyes, “Tell me that you don’t feel that.” He said lowering his voice to that sinfully seductive level that she had no will to resist.

Her mouth parted and his eyes flicked there for a moment

before centering back on hers followed by a slow sensual smile. Oh yes, she did feel it. All the way to her bones. "You kicked me out." She said softly.

"I had to. I wasn't sure if you were trying to deceive me."

"I couldn't ever do that Blake."

"Yeah well honey, women like you aren't common around here, or anywhere for that reason. I was knocked off balance by it."

"Really?"

"Really."

Gosh he smelled so good.

"I'm a rich man and a woman who is in your circumstance may try and deceive me."

"I told you I'd work it off."

"I know you did, but again, I wasn't sure if you were trying to con me." His hand moved to the side of her neck and his thumb pressed up under her jaw to tilt her head back.

"Blake—"

"I love the way you say my name."

"This really isn't fair." She said referring to how easy he could tame her temper.

He grinned, "Probably not, but I'm taking complete advantage of it. I said I owed you an apology."

"Actually *I* said—" his mouth cut off her words.

A short distance away, Ernie was finishing the last of his cigarette while he watched the couple through narrowed eyes. He wondered if those two were serious, now he had his answer. Although he was scared of Blake's temper, Cassie was gorgeous enough to make him risk it. He was hoping to win her over with kindness, but obviously she liked aggressive men. Blake was like the official poster boy on aggressiveness. He should have figured that out to begin with then she'd probably be his mistress before

she'd been Blake's because he would have been just as forceful.

He crushed out his cigarette and watched the two a moment longer. Blake wasn't known to be possessive about women at all, but from the way he was acting with her, it was obvious this was different. He was protective of her. Blake had an arm braced on either side of her head while he kissed her. Compared to Cassie, Blake looked like a giant. Ernie was barely five foot ten, but he told people he was six feet. Blake on the other hand, was a full head taller than him, and full of muscle. He was any girls dream and Ernie always wished he had a body like his, but hard work wasn't in his nature. That's how Blake got that hard earned form.

Now Blake's hand disappeared between them and it was obvious he was touching her. Ernie gritted his teeth. He never thought that Cassie would let someone near her so easily from the way she acted towards him and as rumour had it, every other man in town. He actually started to think she was frigid until now.

He retreated a little further in the shadows to watch the two. The sun was setting and it was hard to see him where he was, but he wanted to see what she liked.

Somehow Cassie found her will and placed her hands on his thick chest and started pushing.

He moved back from her.

"Not here Blake." She said in a rush of breath, "And apology accepted."

He framed her face in his large hands searching her eyes with his, "Stay with me tonight."

"I can't." she flushed, "I don't know what got into me last time."

He bent his head and brushed his mouth across one of her soft cheeks stopping beside her ear, "I did." He said thickly in her ear.

“Oh gosh.” She moaned.

He chuckled sending a shiver through her.

“All right , I’ll stop—for now.” He threaded his hand in hers and pulled her toward the truck, “Get in.”

“I’m not going home with you.”

“Yes you are, there’ll be at least thirty people at my house in less than an hour and you’re coming with me.”

“Oh.” She laughed, “You are such a dog.” She thought he was taking her home alone, but again, she should never assume anything with this man.

He winked while opening the driver’s door, “Get in.”

She did and slid over so he could get in behind the wheel.

“Are you going to take your trailer home to?”

“Yup. Brad can catch a ride with someone else, then come back to get the stock.”

“You work him too hard.” She said looking up at him.

“No, I don’t if he has time to ogle my baby sister.” He said tersely while shifting the truck into gear.

She smiled not the least bit affected by his tone this time.

“Just keep smiling honey.” He said flicking a gaze at her, “Because I’m going to wipe that off of your face as soon as I get your clothes off—yep that worked.” He chuckled at how quickly she dropped it.

“Blake you shouldn’t talk like that to me.” She stared wide-eyed at him.

He just grinned and focused on the road thinking that he’d much rather show her. Ever since that one night he near had her, he hadn’t been able to get her out of his mind. At first he was angry over the way he reacted around her because it was almost as if he was enslaved whenever she was near him. He couldn’t stop thinking about that night and came to realize he was more angry at himself for turning her away.

He’d come to the conclusion that if he did have her then the

spell would be broken. However, just the little bit of attention Bill gave her made him raging with jealousy. What she didn't know is that he'd never been jealous in his life over a woman. His eyes glanced over her as she was focused on something outside and he thought no wonder why, she was a raving beauty. In fact she was probably the most beautiful women he'd seen in a long time and he had his pick. Yet there was something always lacking with them which is what he thought with her in the beginning. However, she was smart. That was all too obvious from the way she talked. Also, she reacted to him differently. She stood up to him and not many people were willing to do that. He actually admired her just as much as it turned him on. The passion in her defiance lit her up.

When they pulled up to the house, there was already another dozen vehicles there.

"Wow, you weren't kidding."

"It's an unspoken tradition. Those involved in the rodeo come for a midnight buffet." His eyes went over her face thinking that he'd like to have her to himself, but it'd have to wait.

"You can be a nice man Blake." She said looking past him to the several people just going in the house.

"Sophie helps."

"Is she back?"

"Yes, a couple of days ago." He answered while looking at her thoughtfully, "Are you wondering about us having time alone?"

Her eyes widened, "No."

He smirked, "Sure you weren't. I can easily fly us to the city. I have an apartment there for business."

"Blake intimacy may be easy for you, but not for me. That night—" she swallowed feeling embarrassment flood her cheeks, "—well, I've never let someone touch me like that."

He felt a fire burn inside of him over that confession. He

knew she was a virgin, but being the first one to explore those incredible curves she owned made him want her more. “I apologized.”

“That really wasn’t an apology.” She said.

“I never apologize. That’s as close as I could get.”

That stunned her, “Never?”

He shook his head slowly.

“Really?”

He shook his head again but this time a slow salacious smile formed, “I was wrong to do what I did and I know because of it you have reservations, but it won’t happen again.”

“Maybe I don’t want anything to happen between us.”

“That’s possibly the worst lie I’ve ever heard.”

She pursed her lips. “You’re arrogant, pushy, and sometimes you can be really mean.”

“And you’re my exact opposite.” He chuckled, “so we fit perfectly together.”

“Or we’re like water and dirt and that makes mud.” She offered unable to help her own slight smile.

“I like mud.”

This time she laughed, and held up her hand, “Okay Blake, but on my terms.”

He released a scoff, “Honey, have you *met* me.” He said getting out of the truck and helping her out, “Patience is not my middle name.”

“Point taken.”

The evening was long, but Cassie had a blast. Blake barely let go of her for five minutes, and she loved every second of it. For the first time in a long time she felt a part of something and didn’t feel so alone.

Brad came in about a half an hour before the last person left, and Emma had already gone to bed. Cassie could see that he

scanned the back courtyard where everyone was gathered to look for her. He shoved his hands in his pockets and left after that. Cassie felt terrible for him. It was obvious that he really cared about her.

Blake had just shut the door as the last of the guests left. Cassie went to help Sophie clean up the tables in the courtyard when he came out. "Cass, I'll take you home."

"Leave that, " Sophia said in her thick accent, "Go with the senior."

"I don't mind."

"Yes, I know, but I think he does," She nodded toward the man standing in the archway with his hands on his hips.

"Oh for heaven's sake." She said in a rush of air as she turned to him, "This is a lot for Sophia to do on her own. Can't you wait a moment?"

"No." he said.

"It's all right seniorita, I don't mind. It's only one day a year." She smiled and cast a look at Blake, raised her brows and returned to work.

Cassie saw the glitter in her dark eyes and shook her head. She set the dish down that she was holding, "Well, then next year I owe you."

Sophia just laughed.

Cassie made her way over to Blake, "I hope you pay her well."

"Like a surgeon." He answered looking down at her.

"Well you should at least let me help."

"Not today." He said taking her hand. "I have plans for you."

"Plans?" she said starting to feel a little nervous, "What plans?"

"Scared?" he said with a mischievous glint.

She shook her head.

He leaned down as Sophia walked past him with an armload of dishes, "I want to taste you again and it's hard to do with an audience." He paused, "then again, who gives a shit." He gripped her waist and pulled her against him at the same time he lowered his head.

Normally Cassie would have stopped him like she did in the parking lot of the fairgrounds earlier, but it was only Sophia, and she had yet to come back out to the courtyard. Not only that, she loved the feel and taste of him too. Involuntarily a moan tore from her and he deepened his kiss.

Suddenly he turned pushing her against the wall bringing his solid form against hers. "God baby, I could take you right here couldn't I?" he rasped in her ear while moving one of his legs between her thighs.

She didn't answer him but moved her hands up over the hard contours of his chest and around his neck. Her heart was beating in her ears and she was hot everywhere.

"Stay the night with me."

"Your family—I can't." she breathed burying her face in his thick chest.

"Hell—I forgot."

She smiled.

His hands moved over her back, "Your place."

"Mrs. Watson."

"A hotel." He would have never suggested it to a woman like Cassie, but he wanted her so bad that he was going to suggest the seat of his truck.

She looked up at him.

"Sorry, forget I asked."

"No, I understand why, just which one?"

Now that wasn't expected. Without a word he took her hand and led her out of the house to his truck.

Almost forty five minutes later he pulled off the highway to a

motel. “no one knows me here. I’ll be right back.” He got out and went into the office.

She was getting more and more nervous, but this was something she wanted more than anything in her life. Blake may have been belligerent at times, but she found that attractive on him and only him. Also, he was a gentleman like Molly said, he had gone out of his way for her more than once. He was one of a kind, and she was completely crazy about him.

He was back in less than ten minutes, opened the door and helped her out.

He’d barely got the door closed when he pushed her against it and pressed his large body against hers. “Take my shirt off—again.” He said against her mouth.

She obeyed and started undoing the buttons of his shirt. She didn’t need encouragement this time. In a few seconds it was on the floor at his feet, and hers was open up the front. He separated the edges and looked down at her, “I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of look at you Cass.” He said.

She tried her best not to cover herself this time and he erected himself while reaching behind her and unsnapping her lacy white bra with such dexterity she didn’t even know he’d done it until she felt the material loosen, “Wow, you are good.”

“You have no idea.” He grinned.

“I’m nervous Blake.”

“You won’t be in another few minutes.” He bent his head and ran his mouth down her neck brushing the material of her shirt away just to follow it with sensual kisses. “I’m going to make you enjoy every moment.”

She tilted her head back against the door completely forgetting that he had just pulled off her shirt and bra. Then she felt his rough calloused hands at her waist and soon the material of her jeans slackened as he undid the button. She stiffened and he must’ve felt it because he paused, moved his hands back to her

waist and pulled her away from the door toward the bed.

Then he sat down and pulled her between his thighs before he continued to undo her jeans and pull them down her hips. The whole time his eyes were on hers and for some reason it didn't bother her that she was half naked. Then she was naked except for her panties.

"Step out of them." He said.

She did.

"God Babe, you're magnificent." He said bending forward and pressing his mouth against her flat abdomen. The feeling of his facial stubble on her belly was very exotic to her.

She moved her hands around his head and bent over him. Everything about this felt so right. She made a promise to herself that she would not regret any of it, even if it doesn't work out between them. She couldn't have asked for a better man to be her first.

He erected himself and stood up, "Your turn." He said sitting her on the edge of the bed and standing before her.

Gosh he just seemed so darn large looking up at him. Every inch of him was thick and tanned. Her eyes guided to the large belt buckle he wore and she forced herself to find some courage to undo it. Her motivation was easy, she wanted him and she wanted to see all of him.

She pulled down his jeans and saw that he wore black Jockey shorts. It was sinful. They were tight to his form and didn't hide a damn thing. "Oh dear." She said as her eyes guided down his muscular torso to the bulge in his underwear.

He grinned bent over and flattened her out on the bed bringing his body down on top of her while taking her mouth.

This time it was different. There was a hunger in his kiss now, and she fed every bit of it.

She was hot, and her senses were alive. She could feel every inch of his hard flesh against hers and without realizing it she

slid her leg up over his hip. His hand moved down the smooth lines of her thigh and cupped her bottom.

The woman did feel like heaven. She was as soft as silk and seductive as warm velvet. His fingers moved under the material of her lacy underwear and pulled them down her legs. Then he removed his own before he covered her again.

“Oh lord!” she breathed arching toward him.

“do you feel how much I want you.” He murmured against her mouth.

“Yes.” She gasped. There was no mistaking that part of him against her abdomen.

“Jesus Cass, you’re so damn hot.” He brought his full weight down on her. She moaned in response.

“Tell me you want me.”

“I do.” She said opening her eyes and focusing on him.

He shifted himself and pulled her other thigh over his hip, “Say it again.” He said.

“I—” she cried out as he thrust into her.

He stopped but his mouth moved over hers with his tongue teasing and coaxing her for a response. It wasn’t long before he got one. When his hands moved to her breasts he felt her thighs tremble then relax. Only then did he start moving within her. God help him that he was able to hold back. She fit him perfectly and if she said she didn’t want him, her body betrayed her because she was wet with desire. Then to further boost his ego and his own passion she started making the sweetest little noises against his mouth. Only when she started moving under him did he change tempo. His hands framed her head and he lifted himself off her enough to increase his rhythm and force. Her sweet little noises changed to the sexiest moans he’d ever heard, “Honey—” he groaned as she shifted under him to try and match his movement, “I’m going to come if you keep that up.” He growled against her mouth.

He wasn't the only one. Somewhere in between the words 'honey' and 'I'm' she exploded in a wave of excruciating pleasure. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders so much that they left marks.

With a shout of his own he arched above her, thrust twice more and went slack. He fell off to the side and gathered her in his arms kissing her softly before he pulled back and look at her, "Are you all right Cass."

Her eyes widened. "Oh lord—I mean, I don't think I prayed so much before in my life."

He chuckled, "What did I tell you about thanking the wrong person?"

She giggled, "Oh, you definitely deserve credit this time."

He grinned, "I meant—are you sore?"

She nodded, "I'm starting to feel it but it was so worth it."

"sweetheart don't add to my conceit."

"Can we do that again?"

He grinned, "Not tonight, but soon and as many times as you want." He rolled onto his back and pulled her half way onto him, "Christ honey, I'd take you again, but if I do, then I wouldn't be able to touch you for a week because you'd be so sore."

She lifted herself above him and her hair cascaded down her shoulder onto his chest, "Well worth it."

His hand came up and caressed her jaw, "Where the hell have you been all my life?"

She laid her head on his chest, "right here." She said softly. She was asleep soon after to the soothing rhythm of his heartbeat.

Blake wasn't. His hand roamed over her bare shoulders and upper back. He knew he'd be different in the morning. He knew himself well. He'd feel trapped on how he felt about her and most likely lash out. Something he was famous for. So the

longer he stayed awake the better. It kept what they just shared fresh in his mind. It also made him think of other things he could do to her. As hard as it was, he held back. There was so much he wanted to teach her, but it wasn't right for her first time.

It was his phone that woke him up in the morning. Opening his eyes it took a moment to remember where he was, and the feeling of a soft body on his brought back the memory all too clear.

She made a soft feminine sound when his phone rang again.

"Cass, I need to get that." He said rousing her enough to move off him. He got out of bed and took picked his phone up off the floor by his jeans. "Yeah."

Cassie blinked and rubbed her eyes sitting up. She pulled the sheet over her breasts and looked around. Daylight was streaming in through the parted curtains, but that wasn't what got her attention. The gorgeous specimen of a man standing beside the bed naked as a blue jay while talking on the phone did. Obviously he didn't possess an ounce of modesty where his body was concerned, and why should he? She couldn't take her eyes off him.

He gave her a wink and scooped up his underwear before he went into the bathroom.

Flushing a little at that sensual display, she pushed her hair behind her ears and started to get dressed not knowing what he wanted to do. She felt different, but it was a good feeling.

Then it all changed.

She heard a roar come out of the bathroom before the door flung open.

"What?" she jumped to her feet.

"Them goddam kids!" he grabbed his clothes and started shoving his limbs into them.

“Kids?”

He just finished doing up his jeans and was buttoning up his shirt before he centered his eyes on hers. He was raging and it was clearly shown in that pale stare, “they ran off together.”

“Brad?”

“And my bloody sister!”

“Blake, you need to calm down.”

He cursed for a good five minutes causing her to blush, “The hell I do!”

She placed her hands on her hips, “This doesn’t help.”

“Yeah well neither are you. Get in the damn truck.” He said coolly.

“Blake—“

He stuck a finger in her direction, “If I wasn’t off with you, I could have stopped them.”

“Me? You can’t blame this on me!”

“The hell I can’t.”

It was her turn to try and calm down. He was upset. His sister was all he had and she’d run off with someone he trusted. So she clamped her jaw and kept silent.

He stared down at her seeing her expression, “Jesus, Cass, just get in the truck!”

She turned and walked out of the room keeping her head high.

Blake flipped his phone open and made a few more calls before he followed her.

He never said a word when he drove her home. He was irate. His sister was sixteen and ran off with a boy—a goddam boy! Only once did he glance at Cassie knowing he’d hurt her and felt a twinge of guilt over it. He couldn’t think of that right now. He had to find Brad and kill him and bring his sister home.

Cass got out of the truck when he pulled up in front of her place and as usual Blake tore out of there in a flurry of flying

gravel.

She turned and went in the house hoping he didn't see the tears slip from her eyes. She promised herself that she wouldn't feel regretful, but that whole thing just showed her how unimportant she was to him. She loved him and he treated her like a complete nuisance.

Then her phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket not recognizing the number. However, when she answered it, it was Brad.

"Cassie?"

"Where are you?"

"How mad is he?"

"fit to kill."

"Well, I just couldn't take it anymore Cass. Emma needed to know. It tore me up to lie to her that day."

"Well, everyone probably will know by morning with how loud he is."

"We're in the city. I took the plane so he'll probably end up tracking it down, but we'll stay out of sight until he promises not to harm me and Emma."

"That's probably wise. What are you going to do?"

"Her mother is coming in tomorrow. She said she'd give us permission to marry and—"

"Brad!"

"Look, I won't touch her I promise. Not until she's done college. We made that pact."

Cassie thought that was possibly the most romantic thing she'd ever heard of. "You should wait and see what Blake will say before you take that step Brad."

"I know I should."

"At least wait a day and see if he'll come around."

He released a frustrated breath "I know she's too young and I respect Blake more than my own family. I would never betray

him. Cass, would you please talk to him. If he's reasonable, we'll wait. Emma does want to come home."

"What about you?"

"I do to, but I'd rather she was happy."

"I don't think he's listening to me right now."

"Not yet, but he'll calm down. He's nuts about you."

She really doubted it.

There was a knock at the door then and she was worried it was Blake possibly apologizing for his behaviour. If it was she certainly didn't want to be caught talking on the phone to Brad. "Look I'll do my best."

"Thanks Cassie. You are a doll." He said before he hung up.

When she answered the door it was Ernie. "Your mom's not here."

"I know." He said stepping in causing her to move back. Then he turned and shut the door locking it.

"What are you doing?" She said seeing the action.

"I saw you yesterday with Blake."

She nodded. Ernie had a strange look in his eyes that she hadn't seen before and it actually frightened her.

"I saw him touch you Cassie."

She flushed, "Th-that's none of your business."

He stood straight and smirked, "See that's where you're wrong."

Her skin started to prickle at his tone, "pardon me."

He started walking toward her and in turn she backed up. "I've decided that I'm not going to be nice anymore. Obviously you like aggressive men."

"I don't!" she protested.

"Ah, see I think you're lying. A big fucking tease!" he spat

A wave of fear coursed through her, "That's not true." She backed into the wall and overturned a vase on a side table there causing it to crash to the floor.

“I saw you first therefore you belong to me. Now, this once I don’t mind Blake’s seconds—“

She went to slap him but he was quicker and grabbed her hand twisting her wrist causing her to scream.

Blake hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand in rage. He had images going through his mind of gutting Brad like a deer. His phone rang and it was Skip, his lead ranch hand.

“did you find him?”

“The plane is gone Boss.”

“find out what flight plan he filed.”

“Sure thing.”

“I’m almost home. Send out—“ he nearly said ‘Brad to warm up the other Cessna and he clenched his jaw.

“Boss.”

“Forget it. I’m almost home.”

“Sure thing.” Skip repeated.

He hung up. He loved the kid almost as much as he’d love one of his own and he was hurt and angry over the betrayal. When Brad said he’d leave Emma alone, he believed him. He felt like he was played for a fool and that’s probably what set fire to his anger. Unfortunately, he’d taken it out on Cassie. It was probably the worst thing to do with her after what they shared and he knew it’d have to be something earth shaking to get her to forgive him. However, this wasn’t something he could think about right now. His sister was a priority.

Before he realized it, he’d pulled over on the side of the road.

It wouldn’t take much to go back and apologize before the damage spread. She’d given herself to him that in itself was a rare gift, but everything about her was. He’d made some mistakes with her and he recognized that after he practically kicked her out of his room. Yet she’d forgiven him. She was exactly as she portrayed despite how he kept finding ways to

misread her intentions. She was very soft hearted and he should have known from the way Emma took to her.

Dammit!

He looked at his watch and saw that a good half hour had passed since he dropped her off. That's how long he'd been sitting there letting it drive him crazy.

He gunned the engine and pulled back onto the road.

Emma would have to wait. Brad would take care of her, until he hunted the young man down and killed him.

He turned the truck around and headed back to the Watson Ranch.

Ten minutes later he was met by a shocking sight. There was a police car and an ambulance in the driveway. At first he thought maybe Mrs. Watson had a heart attack but she was standing on the front porch talking to a policeman.

Blake hopped out of the truck by the police car and saw Ernie in the back seat holding a bag of frozen vegetables to his temple. He wouldn't look at him as he walked by the car.

If Mrs. Watson was okay then where was Cass and why was Ernie—"Cass!" he yelled walking by the policeman.

"Hey!" the man stepped forward and place his hand on Blake's chest blocking him from going in the house.

"Do you really want to try that?" Blake said looking down at the younger man.

"That's her fiancé." Mrs Watson said stepping up beside him, "She'll want to see him."

Blake didn't protest that, in fact is sounded pretty good. The cop stepped aside and Blake rushed in the house, "Cass!"

"She's in here." Came another male voice.

Blake went toward her room to see another cop.

"Who are you?"

He shoved by him to see Cassie sitting on her bed and a paramedic taking her blood pressure and she had a cut on her

lip. That's not what really drew her attention. Her blouse was torn. "That son of a—"

"I'm fine." She said.

"I'm going to kill him!" he turned to leave and the second cop stood in front of him, "sir, the lady is going to press charges. If you beat the hell out of him, it won't look good in court."

"but *I'll* feel better." He said glaring at him.

"Mr. Eckert, I know who you are," said the uniformed man, "I appreciate the things you've done for this town, but I'll have to arrest you if you go after Mr. Watson."

"Blake *please*."

Cassie's tone near melted his heart. He turned and looked at her. Her expression was as open as a book. She had just been through something very traumatic, and he'd treated her no better than garbage right before that. She was close to falling to pieces from the look she just gave him.

In two long strides he was beside her on the bed and gathered her in his arms, "I'm sorry baby."

She nodded and for the first time since her father's death, wept in front of someone.

He knew it took a hell of a lot to break this woman, and he also knew that he was the cause of some of it, "Are you hurt anywhere?"

She shook her head.

He looked at the paramedic.

"She's in a little shock, no other injuries except for the split lip." The man said answering Blake's unspoken question.

"Does she need to go to the hospital?"

"She'll be alright if someone stays with her."

"I will." He answered looking down at her.

The paramedic nodded and left following the two cops out of the room.

"What about Emma." She said.

“We’ll find Emma together.” He answered.

She pulled back from him. Her eyes were red and swollen with tears, “Really?”

“She’ll be safe with Brad. He loves her. He wouldn’t hurt her.”

“Are you still going to kill him?” she said with concern.

He frowned, “Ask me tomorrow.”

She nodded. Despite evading the answer, that was a milestone for him.

“Now pack some things, you’re not staying here anymore.”

“But—”

“No argument.” He said sternly.

“Blake, Mrs. Watson—”

“Will be fine by herself Cass, she has been for many years. At this moment I’m more concerned with you and you’re coming home with me. Now get packed, while I go and talk to her.”

“Be nice to her, she hit Ernie with a rolling pin.” Cassie explained, “I can’t imagine how hard that was for her to do. He’s her son.”

He traced a finger down her petite nose, “You are too darn kind honey. Don’t worry. I like her.” he stood up, “Pack.” He said before he left. He may have seemed fine, but he really wanted to rip Ernie’s limbs off and beat him to death with them. At least he had some satisfaction that he was hurting.

“He wasn’t a bad kid Blake.” Dorie said when the large cowboy came out on the porch. In a way she was glad the police left already or Blake would haul her son out of there and taken things into his own hands.

“Not until today.” Blake said abruptly, “He hurt Cassie.”

“He was obsessed with her.” she answered taking a seat on the porch swing. “I’ve seen the way he looked at her. My husband was the same way with other women.”

“Sorry.” He said and not meaning a word of it. He didn’t have much use for Ernie’s father either when he was alive.

Dorie eyed him for a moment, “I cracked him upside the head with my mother’s rolling pin.”

Blake couldn’t help himself and grinned, “Yeah well, it’s a good thing you came home in time, because I might not have been so generous.”

“I know.” She said. “You broke his arm when he went after your step mother. I know you would have killed him over Cassie.”

He turned and looked at her, nodded and changed the subject, “Cassie’s coming home with me.”

“I understand.” She said nodding sorrowfully, “I’m going to miss her. She was so kind to me.”

“I can send Sophia over if you need someone here.”

“That’s very kind of you Blake, but I’ve lived this long on my own, so I’ll be fine.”

“Ernie will be out on bail tomorrow.”

“He’ll stay away from her.” she said with conviction, “As much as an idiot he was, he was remorseful when he gave her that cut on her lip and the blouse was an accident. When I hit him he had a hold of her and they both fell down. Her blouse ripped and his head hit her lip. He didn’t hit her.”

He felt better knowing that. It tore him up inside thinking that someone had hit her. His Cassie.

“But your right, he shouldn’t have touched her. Once I tell his wife, he’ll be busy with the divorce.”

Blake grinned, “You are a card Dorie.”

“Don’t I know it.” She said with a sly look. It was about time she made Ernie owe up to his responsibilities. The truth of it was, his wife was usually gallivanting around and if there was love there once, it was over a long time ago.

“I’ll go get Cass, thanks.”

“Take care of her Blake, she’s a gem.”

“Yeah, don’t *I* know it.” He said using her words.

Cassie had a bag ready when Blake came back in. To her surprise he took her into his arms for another tight embrace. “I’m thinking that I have a lot of apologizing to make up for.”

“This wasn’t your fault.”

“Not this.” He pulled her back slightly.

Her brows arched, “Are you saying you’re wrong?”

“Don’t get smart little girl.” He said narrowing his gaze.

She actually smiled, “I’m fine, except for the bruise and my good shirt ripped.”

He released her and took her bag, “I’ll replace it.”

“No you won’t. I can’t take much more of this. I wasn’t raised to accept charity and that’s all you’ve been doing for me.”

“You do realize that you’re out of a job.”

“Oh.” She stopped, “I guess I am.” Then she shrugged, “Molly will take me back.”

“Nope.”

She looked at him, “No?” She started wondering if she upset her old bosses by quitting. If she did Molly wouldn’t have asked Sally to keep an eye on her. However, what he said next explained everything and just about stopped her heart.

“No wife of mine is working as a waitress.”

It was probably a full minute before she found the will to speak, “What did you just say?”

“No wife of mine is working as a secretary either.” He continued with the most serious expression he could muster, “Especially when my wife is possibly the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Any man would risk what Ernie did just to get near you and I’m letting you know right now that the only man touching you from now on is your future husband.”

“W—what?”

“I meant,” he continued with a growing grin, “with you bearing me numerous children, cleaning my house, and tending to my needs, that you just won’t have time.”

She just gaped at him.

“Don’t forget my socks might need darning.” He added with a glint of amusement.

Finally pulling herself out of her stupor, she placed her hands on her hips and stared up at him, “Is that right? Well a woman has needs too. While I’m darning your socks, I’ll expect a foot massage and while I’m pregnant, you’ll have to run to town to get me my favourite ice cream.”

“Honey, that is a compromise that I could only make for you.” He smiled.

“somehow I think I believe you.”

He chuckled and put his arm around her. “Lets go home so I can find my sister.”

When they got to his place he took her bag to his room.

“Blake.” She said as she followed him, “this is your bedroom. Don’t you think—”

“If you think that I’m sleeping alone while your gorgeous ass is in the next room, you’re out of your mind.”

“But this is your house.”

“And you will be my wife. From now on you sleep with me.” He added a little more sternly.

“You really meant that?”

He tossed her bag on the bed and turned to her, “Yes, I know. I’m not a very reliable resource, but yes, I meant it.”

She brushed her hair behind her ear and looked at him with an expression of vulnerability, “I have nothing to offer you.”

His grin was her answer.

She narrowed her eyes trying to ignore the weakening of her knees, “Blake I’m trying to be serious. I’m poor, I have no

belongings, and I owe the bank so much money—“

“I’ll pay them.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is as simple as me writing a check.”

“My problem with that is, I don’t want you to think that’s why I would marry you.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

“I haven’t given you much to hold on to in that department, because I don’t say what’s on my mind—ever, but I’ve had enough experience with women to know when I’m being lied to.” He saw her expression close up. It was obvious she wasn’t happy. Women weren’t interested in a man’s history, but it was the only way he could explain it.

“That’s not what I meant.” She grimaced.

He grinned, “If it makes you feel better, you’re the best thing I’ve ever put my hands on in bed.”

Well, that’s probably quite a compliment coming from him. Blake didn’t sugar coat things or flower them up. Despite on how bluntly he put it, she felt a thrill go through her. She even flushed a little, “Thanks, but I can’t have you pay my bills.”

He smiled, “I tell you what, for every child you give me I’ll deduct ten grand.”

She burst into laughter.

He grinned, “Feel better.”

“Only you could make a joke like that and get away with it.” She looked down at her hands for a moment then back up at him. “Can you give me a few days to think about it?”

“Absolutely not.” He grabbed her and hauled her against him. “I have a better way to convince you.”

Two hours later she said yes. Actually she said it quite a few times.

The next morning Cassie's phone rang. Blake opened his eyes and looked down at her. She didn't even move. He couldn't help but feel arrogant in his talent at exhausting her the night before. He looked over at the bedside table and stretched a long arm out grabbing her phone and looking at the number before flicking it open.

"Cass?" It was Brad.

"No, it's Blake."

"Ah hell."

Cassie woke up at that moment and lifted herself up to look at him.

"Bring my sister home Brad." He added tersely.

"Yeah and have you kill me."

"I won't."

There was a long pause, "Really?"

He took a deep breath for patience, "Bring her home, let her go back to school and we'll talk." That was different for him, and he blamed Cassie for it. However, her kind ways were rubbing off on him. His eyes guided to her and she smiled. That alone made the compromise worth it.

"Just talk?"

"If you follow my rules, yes."

"I didn't touch her Blake."

"You bet your ass you didn't."

Another pause, "I promised you."

"Yeah, you did." Blake was impressed if Brad was able to keep that promise, because knowing that he loved his sister it must've been hard.

"I told her I'd wait until she's done college."

"That's a good choice." He said with a threatening undertone.

"She's not cheerleading this year either or any year." Brad added mimicking Blake's tone.

He actually smiled himself, "Well, you'll have to talk to Emma about that."

"I sure as hell have, but she's stubborn."

"Hey, you want her, so don't blame me. Now bring my bloody plane home too." He hung up.

"That was so sweet." Cassie said looking down at him.

"Christ, I'm such an idiot. I really should kill him." He set her phone beside his on the bedside table before turning to her.

"No, you're being very understanding. Brad can't help himself. Besides Emma's beautiful."

"So are you." He said looking at her. Even first thing in the morning she was absolutely ravishing. His hand came up and cupped her cheek and she smiled and he swore his heart swelled in his chest.

Cassie felt this was as good as a time as any. "I love you Blake." She expected him to hop out of the bed and throw her out of his room again, but he didn't he just looked completely serious while studying her expression.

"You mean that."

She nodded.

He smiled and pulled her head down so he could kiss her. "Come here baby." He gripped her upper thigh and pulled her on top of him, "ride me."

She needed some instruction but once she got the hang of it, it felt so natural. Then looking down on him while she was moving with his guidance of his hands on her hips, she felt powerful, beautiful, and *lord* did it feel good!

"You have no idea how turned on I am." Blake said roughly releasing her hips once she got her own rhythm going. He lifted his hands and cupped her breasts causing her to arch back with a very sexy moan. He took advantage of that and sat up, cupped her bottom and pulling her toward him so he was completely buried in her. "Jesus, honey you're so wet!" He said taking her

mouth under his.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and renewed her movements.

He could feel his orgasm building and flipped her onto her back like she weighed nothing and moved forcefully within her until the climaxed together with mutual shouts of release. He released a sated groan and brought his full weight down on her. Both of them were covered in perspiration and breathing rapidly.

“Wow.” She murmured.

“Hell.” Said Blake. He lifted up and kissed her gently. “Like I said, the best thing I’ve ever put my hands on.”

She smiled, “You say the most wonderful things.”

“We should get married as soon as possible.”

She dropped her smile, “Are you so sure?”

“Like I said, I know what I have.” He kissed her again, “I’m not letting you go and secondly, Brad and Emma will give me the hypocrite lecture if they know we’ve been together and not married.”

She smiled again, “good point.”

“Besides, I don’t want to bring a child into this world out of wedlock. Are you on the pill?”

“No.” she breathed, “I didn’t even think about it.”

“well, I did, and I probably should have used protection but in case you tried to change your mind, I needed another excuse.”

“You cad!” she laughed.

“Call me what you want, but I want a baby with you.”

She stopped laughing, “You’re serious.”

“Never been this serious before in my life.” He added kissing one cheek and then the other. “No other woman in the world could brag about the way I covet you Cassie.” His expression became serious. “My heart stops whenever I lay my eyes on you.”

A tear escaped one of her eyes and fell down her cheek into her hair.

“You drive me completely insane and I honestly can’t see myself living without you. There’s nothing that you do that irritates me, and I irritate easily.”

She smiled, “Another nice thing to say.”

“You actually get me to.”

“It takes some time though.”

He nodded, “I expect it does.”

“God you’re so damn conceited,” she smiled.

His expression turned devilish and he pushed into her causing her to gasp, “So tell me I don’t have a reason to be.”

Her arms went around him, “No way.”

He chuckled cutting it off as he covered her mouth with his.

The next day Cassie was making breakfast with Sophie when she heard a plane overhead. Then she heard Blake’s heavy footsteps in the hall.

“You’d better go with him *senorita*.” Sophie said, “He’s not a nice man when he’s mad.”

“True.” She undid her apron and rushed out of the kitchen just making it in the truck as he started the engine. He gave her a look, shook his head and shifted it into gear with a smirk, “You don’t trust me, do you babe?”

“We’ll see.”

He chuckled and drove toward the airfield.

They were both waiting on the ranch runway when the plane landed.

Brad got out and helped out Emma.

“You promised.” Cassie said under her breath as the other two walked toward him.

“Quit reminding me.” He said casting her a glance.

She crossed her arms and raised a brow.

“All right.” He said in surrender giving her a once over look, “you look kind of sexy.”

She rolled her eyes and dropped her hands.

Blake held out his hand and Brad shook it a little hesitantly. Then he looked at his sister, "You've got some explaining to do."

"I know." She said sheepishly, "But Brad said—"

He shook his head, "Not now, and don't blame Brad, you have a mind of your own."

She snapped her mouth shut.

"*And* you're going to school when it starts next week." He said pointing a finger at her.

She was just about to say Brad had already told her that but from the look in her older brother's eyes, it was wise to just nod.

He seemed satisfied with that and turned to Brad, "And you're going to school too. If you're going to marry my sister, I want you to have a decent education. Is that clear?"

Brad lit up like a Christmas tree, "Are you serious! Oh damn! Cass, I don't know what you did, but thanks."

"I didn't do anything." She protested looking quite innocent.

"You may not think so, but you did."

"My rules still stand you two." Blake said a little more abruptly bringing the younger couples eyes back to him. "Brad's staying in the bunkhouse, and if you take my sister out, she's home before midnight." Emma nodded but couldn't keep the smile off of her face, then she just threw her arms around Blake and gave him a hug.

"Thanks big brother."

"I don't forgive you quite yet."

"Uh huh." She answered.

Cassie never felt as happy as she did right then since her father and her hit hard times. Blake may have been abrupt, obtuse and even a bully at times, but one thing was sure, he loved his family. She felt tears come to her eyes. Now she would have one of her own. She would no longer be alone.

Blake released his sister, "Now if you two are done aging me,

we have a wedding to plan.”

“Wedding?” Brad and Emma exchanged a confused glance.

Blake took Cassie’s hand, “Preferably in the next few days.”

“Are you serious!” It was Emma’s turn to flush with excitement, “Oh wow! Cassie, I’m so happy for you!” She threw her arms around her, “I’ll have a sister. Someone to defend me.”

“Don’t count on it.” Blake answered with an amused smile.

She released her, “She has you wrapped around her finger already big brother, because there’s no way you wouldn’t bust Brad’s jaw.”

He frowned, “The day isn’t over yet.”

EPILOGUE

The wedding was held in a small church with only half a dozen guests. Brad stood up for Blake, and Emma did for Cassie. Molly, Garnet and Mrs. Watson were there.

Almost nine months later, Cassie gave birth to a baby girl, which they named Cherish. When she was born and her large husband had the infant in his arms he leaned over and told her that he loved her for the first time. She always knew he did, but some things weren’t easy for him to say and she was a very patient woman.

Brad did get his high school diploma then he joined the army so he could have them pay for his education. He said Blake looked after him enough. It was hard leaving Emma, but they promised to stay true to each other.