



LETHA WARD

WILD HEART

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Lietha Wards

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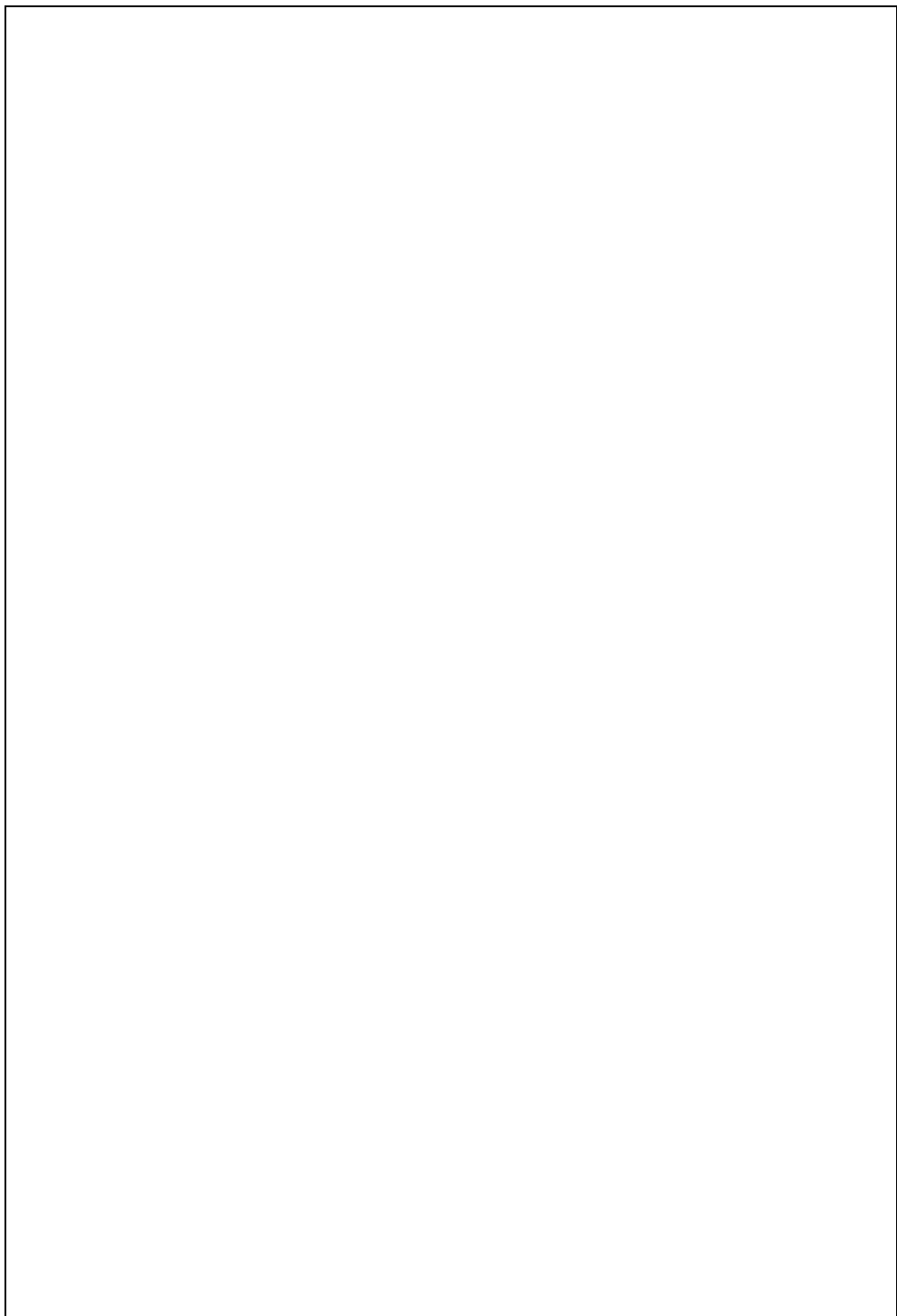
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PROLOGUE

Colt sat up quickly on the side of his bed and wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. He slept in the raw, but still managed to sweat like he wore a fur coat. It was over that bloody dream! His eyes sought out the red glow of his digital clock and he cursed. It was only three in the morning. At least twice a night that god damn dream woke him up. It was no wonder he drank.

A noise came from the corner of the room and he shifted his gaze to his English Mastiff, Peter who was cocking his head staring at him in confusion.

"Same old shit, boy." He said with a sigh and running his fingers through his hair.

Peter let out a huff and laid his head back on his massive paws while staring at him with dark brown eyes. He was used to this routine from his master and obviously accepted his explanation. There was nothing to worry about.

Colt shook his head at his dog. A dog that should be outside with the rest, but Peter was smarter than most and had managed to find a spot in Colton's bedroom since he was a pup. Not even Colt could ignore those sagging pathetic eyes when they asked to stay. It didn't help that at the time he was about eight weeks old and all paws making him completely adorable. Now he was three and fully grown. In fact he was huge. Hell, he probably weighed more than him.

Tossing the blankets back off his lap he got up and walked to the washroom while scratching the lower part of his abdomen below his belly button. He flicked on the light and stared at his reflection in the mirror noticing his bloodshot eyes. This wasn't getting any better. The dreams used to wake him up once a week, then once a night, now it was at least twice. After he used the washroom, he splashed some cold water on his face he ran his fingers through his messy hair again and went back to bed. Something would have to be done about this or he was going to go crazy.

Sprawling his large naked form back on his mattress, he left the covers tossed aside and stacked his hands behind his head to stare at the ceiling. Why the hell did these dreams plague him? As far as he was

concerned it was out of his hands, yet he felt guilty. Because of it, he'd spent too many nights screwing women he would never risk a relationship with. They all started looking the same, acting the same and feeling the same. It was getting old, and he was unhappy.

He cursed again and turned his head to look out the window. The moon shone through the parted curtains and illuminated part of the bed and his thick chest. Something wonderful about living out in the country is the beauty of the night skies. He wouldn't trade it for the world—well there was maybe one thing, but that would have to be kept to himself.

CHAPTER ONE

The deep bellow of laughter reached her ears again. It was noisy in the bar but that table was quite rowdy tonight.

"Elaina, that large hunk of a cowboy is in your section again," the slender blonde beside her said while turning around and leaning her elbows and back on the bar so she could appraise him with unrestrained admiration.

"Yeah, he's hard to miss." She said to Leslie, knowing that she was talking about the six foot four inch hunk of muscle that always showed up on the weekend. If it wasn't his height that got your attention, it was his boyish looks adorned with a masculine dimpled smile, and dark blonde hair. Then there was his charm. Charm that didn't work on Elaina. She had built up an immunity over it, at least that's what she kept telling herself. Anyway it was more than likely he was there to aggravate her. She tossed a quick look over her shoulder at the rowdy group of men. Her eyes followed the same downward movement Leslie's did, but it was brisker and no emotion showed on her face while she did it.

Leslie was the other barmaid she usually worked with. She was new to town so Elaina didn't quite know what to make of her yet.

"How I would *love* a piece of that." The other woman said enunciating every word slowly while guiding her eyes over his large muscular form.

“Get in line.” She mumbled, but wasn’t heard. Leslie was still involved with ogling Colton Hartley.

“I wonder if he’s single.” She grinned, “Not that it would stop me.”

Elaina looked back at Leslie and stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Not at Leslie herself, but the situation all together. It didn’t surprise her how she reacted to that particular customer, all women did. However, unlike herself, Leslie was new and didn’t know about Colt’s reputation with women, “Very.” She said knowing where this was going.

“That’s good news.” Leslie said focusing on the handsome cowboy again. “Look how he bulges in all the right places.” She licked her lips while moving her eyes down to the area of his jeans that indicated his gender, “Lord *help* me, does he *ever*.”

Oh, yuck, she thought to herself wishing some people would just keep their thoughts to themselves. “He’s always single. I’m warning you Leslie, he’s not into commitments.”

“I don’t care.” She said winking and tossing her shoulder length blonde hair flirtatiously while turning toward her, “Let me take their order to them. Please.” She fluttered her lashes flirtatiously.

“It’s all yours.” Elaina said pushing her tray full of drinks toward her gratefully. She’d already been there half a dozen times and every time it was the same thing. Colt tried to talk to her, and the one named Darcy tried to grab her bottom. She’d been able to evade both of them. She was pleasant as usual because she had to be for her job but she wasn’t going to fall all over herself like all the other women in here, including the four at the table that suddenly appeared as soon as Colton entered the building.

“I’ll owe you.” She said taking the tray and with an exaggerated sway of her hips headed toward the table. Leslie was nice to her so she tried not to judge her. She wore clothes that were way too tight, but it did bring in tips. Also her hair was bleached blonde, when she knew with her green eyes it would be nicer if she stayed a brunette which was indicated by the roots. Elaina on the other hand still made more tips than her even though she didn’t dress like Leslie.

Tonight she wore a knee length black skirt and pink blouse. Her ebony hair was pulled back in a pony tail which she purposely did

so when some drunk cowboy spilled his drink on her, it wouldn't get sticky. Washing stale beer out of your hair wasn't a pleasant task neither was working with it all night. She'd done it more than once over the past six months since she started working here.

Leslie on the other hand, wore a tight white tank top and short denim skirt. She was slender so it sort of suited her, but Elaina could never bring herself to dress like that. She needed the tips too, but she had a sense of pride.

Elaina shook her head seeing Leslie bend over in front of Colt and display her already too revealing chest through her low cut top while she set the drinks on the table. He was interested as usual. It never ceased to amaze her why women went out of their way to impress men like Colton Hartley. He was such a rounder. She knew firsthand what he was capable of.

"You okay baby?" The bartender asked seeing her frown.

She pasted a false smile on her face and shook her head, "Fine Lenny, I'm just tired is all." She wanted to ask him not to call her that pet name. It felt too intimate to her, and as far as she was concerned her boss didn't know her on that level, but he seemed to use it more and more lately. She began to wonder if he was attracted to her in some way. That was too bad really, because she wasn't interested in him. He was nice, and not homely or anything, but she really wasn't interested in a relationship at this point in her life.

He nodded toward the group that Leslie was still flirting with, "She seems to have settled in well."

Maybe too well. She thought to herself. Again she chastised herself for being judgmental. It wasn't too long ago that she was that person trying to impress a good looking charismatic man, but never again. "We have a lot of friendly folks around here." She answered absently.

He studied her expression for a few seconds before he spoke again. "Well as long as Colton doesn't wreck the bar again, I don't care what she does as long as it keeps the orders coming." He said shaking his head, "That man is as volatile as hell when he drinks and gets riled."

That was true, even though she didn't say it out loud. She took her order and left.

Lenny was a big man, but not muscular like Colton, but he could also be quite intimidating to people who didn't know him because of his size. He must be around six foot five, or six, where Colton was a few inches shorter than him. Yet if they both stood side by side, people would probably choose to fight Lenny over Colt. Unlike Len, Colt was used to fighting.

She remembered that someone that had gotten in a fight with him told her once that it was like getting struck with a sledgehammer. Then he didn't remember a thing. Moreover, Colton had that look about him that said he welcomed a challenge and he would most likely win. It wasn't just the fearlessness in his eyes. His whole physique was a warning. He was solid muscle. In contrast, Lenny would rather reason with someone before he knocked their teeth out. It probably had something to do with the bar. Sal's Country and Western Stopover was actually his father's place and Lenny inherited it when he died so he wasn't about to wreck his livelihood.

Unfortunately, Colton had no problem with destroying the establishment. He was wealthy and always gave the proprietor more than what the damage was worth. Then to top it off, Lance, his older brother was a lawyer, and a damn good one. He could just about talk anyone out of a lawsuit which came in handy many times for Colt.

Her eyes went back to Len. It was odd that he'd not only own a country western bar being the son of a Sicilian immigrant, but that he didn't even drink, but he said time and time again, that it was a living.

Elaina didn't drink either. She had a bad experience when she was nineteen because of it. It was something she never told anyone. Not even her mother who was the closest to her heart. Furthermore, she didn't have any brothers or sisters, and besides a few close friends, she was pretty much a loner.

"So let me ask you something." Lenny said when she returned to the bar to fill another order.

She shook her head and told him what the order was instead.

He chuckled and started to pour drinks, "You don't even know what I was going to say."

"I do so." She said giving him a slight smile as she took the bourbon and the two beers he put on the counter. She lifted her tray on her hand and turned to leave, paused and looked back at Lenny, "you

were going to ask me why I don't fall all over myself for Colton Hartley. I don't because I have more self respect than to endure a one night stand that will get me nowhere. As you already know, I don't have time in my life even if it worked out because of my mother. And lastly, what makes you think he'd fall for me? He has his pick." She said before she turned away.

Lenny watched her move through the crowd and frowned. She actually did know what he was going to ask. Maybe she got asked that often. If he thought he had a chance with Elaina, he'd try. In fact every man in here has at least once.

Ever since he hired her last year, she must've been asked out by every single male patron and at least two women. He chuckled at that last thought. However Elaina was adamant that she didn't want a relationship or a man even though Colt seemed to always sit in her section. It was odd that she didn't seem affected by it. Every other female within sight was, even Leslie who he heard begging her a moment ago for that table and who hasn't come back from it yet. She was bending over, with elbows on the table and face in her hands as she stared dreamily at Colt.

His eyes guided there and narrowed. She knows the policy on flirting. He'd have to enforce that. With Elaina he never had the need, but all the other women he'd had over the years seemed to require it. He watched Elaina again as she politely conversed with the customers while setting the drinks on the table. Normally he would insist she wear tighter clothes to bring in patrons, but she seemed to attract them without that extra effort. She also didn't get pawed as much as the other women he had on staff. It took him some time to figure out why. She gave off an aura that drew respect from the opposite sex and normally even the most drunken customer actually listened to her. That included an ornery man like Colton Hartley. Come to think of it, when Elaina worked Colton never got out of hand.

Colt's table erupted in laughter again and Leslie's laughter followed. He shifted his gaze back and saw her hand Colt a piece of paper before leaving.

When she finally came back to the bar he spoke, "Leslie, I don't pay you to flirt."

She sighed as if his tone was annoying, "Yes I know boss, but come on. Look at that guy." She said with a toss of her head in the direction she just came from.

"That *guy* has a different gal every week and he's not secretive about it, so don't get your hopes up."

She gave him a look of mock shock, "Why boss, what makes you think I want a relationship?" she finished with a grin, "Thanks for the warning Lenny, but Elaina already told me." She waved a dismissive hand and walked away.

Of course she did, he thought seeing Elaina make her way back to them, *because she was sweet*. Maybe she was a little naïve too because he was sure that Elaina hadn't noticed that Colt always sat in her section even if she didn't have the same one every shift. Also, his eyes were on her a lot more than they were on someone like Leslie. Maybe it was because Elaina was oblivious, or didn't fall for him that made him watch her. Who knew? Of course it didn't help that she was beautiful. He'd never seen hair that looked so soft and with her bright grey eyes, it was a stunning contrast to ebony hair. Her skin was flawless and fair, but her body, even under the moderate clothes she wore, was nicely proportioned.

Oblivious to the two men's scrutiny Elaina was tired, and her feet were sore. Usually a Friday night was busy, but it was crazy tonight. Probably because it was on a double payday; month end and on a Friday. Not only that, she was up with her mother a few times the night before and it was getting more and more exhausting. She wouldn't trade the time she had left with her for anything in the world but sometimes she wished she had a few days to herself. She wished that Lenny would let her go early tonight but from the look of the place that would be a lost cause. There was a good band playing too so the dance floor was packed, and people got thirsty when they danced.

She set her tray on the counter and bent down to run her finger along the inside heel of her shoe. A blister was starting to form. She should have worn these shoes around for a few days before wearing them to work.

"A beer Len." Came a deep masculine voice beside her.

She knew exactly who it belonged to and the quick glance sideways to see expensive handmade cowboy boots was a dead

giveaway. She took her time straightening up as if somehow she hoped he would disappear before she stood straight. Even if she didn't take her time Colton was a long way up there compared to her five foot four height so she still had to crane her neck to look at him. When her eyes guided up to his, he was looking down at her with an unreadable expression, but his eyes said plenty.

As usual he was very handsome and even if he was dressed as a pauper, there was no mistaking his masculinity. Tonight he was wearing a cream Stetson pulled low over his brow in a way that was completely alarming to the opposite sex. His eyes were honey brown framed with thick lashes to match his dirty blond hair. Right now they were centered directly on her and unwavering.

All three of the Hartley men were gorgeous. The oldest got married last year, but Colt, the youngest and Lance were still single. Lance and Jacob also had the same eyes but unlike Colt's blonde hair, theirs were closer to her color. She turned her head away. He was leaning his arm on the bar while he hooked a boot on the foot rail at the bottom, looking totally at ease and completely and utterly irresistible. Especially when he topped it off with one of those visceral melting sloppy grins.

"Coward." He said deeply.

Her eyes glanced off of him, but she still refused to meet his gaze again. Thankfully Lenny finished her order and she took the tray and left without a backward glance.

Colt watched her leave and let out a long appreciative whistle.

"Leave her be Colt." Lenny said uncapping his beer and handing it to him.

Colt took a long swig from the beer, leaned back against the counter and spoke without taking his eyes off of Elaina, "Too late for that Len."

"I'll ban you from here Colt and even that lawyer brother of yours won't be able to help you get back in. You leave Elaina alone, she's got enough on her plate as it is."

"Yeah, I hear you Len." He said even though he still had no intention of listening.

The evening went by quite quickly and Elaina was thankful for last call. That is until Leslie came up to her and begged her to go tell Colton that he was too drunk to drive.

"He won't do it." Elaina said confidently while collecting empties off a vacant table without looking up. Colton may appear irresponsible, but he was one of the most level headed people she knew when it came to things like that even if he was inebriated.

"He said he was going to and some guy named Tom told me that he normally listens to you. And Elaina, I got his number, so I don't want him to die in a car accident before I get a chance to have him at least once." She begged in a tone that bordered on an irritating whine.

Elaina paused and stood erect taking a deep breath to calm her temper. She wished that some people would just keep their private lives private, but again, that's what she got for working in a bar. It was really hard not to wince at Leslie's confession. It even angered her a little but she quickly squashed it. As for the rest of what she said, Tom was Colt's lead hand and more than once they got rowdy together, but Colt was only doing this to aggravate her and get her attention. She knew he was. "Fine." She said straightening up and placing her hand on her hip in annoyance, "Can you finish this?" she gestured toward the messy table strewn with empty glasses and beer bottles.

"No problem." She grinned as if she didn't notice her coworker's irritation.

Elaina walked over to the table with the four loud men and several women and held out her hand, "Keys Colt."

He looked at her for a moment then that sloppy smile spread across his handsome face again as he reached up and tipped his hat back on his brow so he could see her better. "Frisk me." Bellows of laughter followed that statement.

Elaina ignored the others. "I'll get Len to frisk you first." She warned, "Now hand them over and I'll call Lance to come and get you and Tom." She looked around the table, "the rest of you are taking a cab." She was answered by a few drunken 'whatever you say sweetie's'. She did her best not to let her eyes linger on him, but the short amount of time she did look was enough. She could have drawn a picture with what she took in. His hair was getting long because it was just covering his brows and he had a day's worth of stubble on that nice

square jaw and when he smiled like he did now, those two mouth-watering dimples appeared on either side of that nice firm masculine mouth.

He stood up and looked down at her from his towering height keeping the grin, "Honey, one of these days you're going to say yes to me."

She shook her head and kept her hand held out. It was hard holding his gaze knowing that he purposely did it to goad her, but she wasn't going to give in. She never would. She also refused to embarrass herself in front of his friends by falling for that charm visibly. Even if she blushed a little, it would mean that he affected her and she knew him well enough to know that he'd use it against her.

Taking his time and keeping his eyes on her, he dug in his front jeans pocket and fished out his keys before placing them in her outstretched hand.

They were warm in her palm and she actually stared down when he placed them there, not because they were warm but because he had circled his long fingers around her hand when he did so.

Then he jerked her toward him causing her to release a small gasp of surprise, "My house key is the brass colored one." He said deeply.

"Let go of me Colt." She said tossing her head back and meeting his gaze struggling to regain her composure. Her chest was just about touching him and her body was close enough that she could feel the heat off of him. Even if she wasn't close, he gave off enough heat to melt sand into glass.

He leaned down to move his mouth close to her ear and his other arm slipped around her back, "Honey, you and I both know that this ice queen image you have going is a farce."

She took a step back and pulled her herself free while glaring at him. "I'll call Lance." She said turning and walking away briskly while clutching his keys so tight in her hand she was sure it would leave a mark.

Colt just smiled as his eyes guided down her back side. Maybe he should be a little worried if Lance showed up. His brother may seem like the socially acceptable one, but he could still put a fist through his jaw if he needed to.

“Damn boss, how come that one doesn’t fall at your feet? You’re losing your touch.”

Colton just gave him a look that said more than spoken words could, “I doubt it.”

Tom tried his best to read it, but he was really drunk and even though Colton was, he still acted sober. “What the hell does that mean—“

Just then the waitress that practically threw herself at him earlier appeared.

“I get off in twenty minutes.” She said.

Tom chuckled and Colton looked over her head for a moment at Elaina and frowned before he set his eyes back on her. She was pretty, but not drop dead gorgeous like Elaina, however he was needing a little release so he nodded, “I’ll wait.”

She gave him an excited grin and practically jumped, “Okay, give me a few more minutes.”

Elaina had just hung up the phone when Leslie rushed up. “Can you finish up for me? I have a date.”

She looked past her to Colt who was standing with his friends, hands in pockets looking totally at ease. She hated him for being so darn handsome and sure of himself at that moment. Why couldn’t he just go home alone once in a while? “Have fun.” She said without any sort of enthusiasm that Leslie displayed. Leslie didn’t even notice.

“Thanks! I owe you again.” She beamed before rushing over to Colt who threw his arm around her shoulders and left the bar without a backward glance.

Elaina kept her feelings hidden like she always did. Colt had infuriated her more than once over the years and you’d think she’d be used to it by now. He constantly paraded women around her like a fashion show. She was tired of it. Tired of everything.

It was four o’clock in the morning when she got home and thankfully her mother was sleeping when she checked on her. She had a shower before getting into bed but even though she was exhausted she had so much on her mind that it took another hour before she fell asleep.

It was noon the next day before Colt made it home. Normally he was up with the sunrise, but he'd drank too much and went back to that new barmaid's apartment. Unfortunately he couldn't even remember her name or really what they'd done. Already he knew he'd catch hell because his behavior had been getting worse and as it was he missed church the last three Sunday mornings. Not just because he missed it, but because he was doing every bloody sin under the moon while he missed it. He'd already made himself a silent promise to go tomorrow, but Lance had already been giving him that disapproving look and it would only be a matter of time before he gave him the lecture to go with it. Although they lived hard at times, they still believed strongly in religion. Yet, Colt seemed to have let that slip among other things.

So, it was a surprise to see his older brother Jacob sitting on the front porch swing and not Lance waiting for him when he approached the house, which actually wasn't a good thing. It meant that Lance was too angry to deal with him. Possibly because Elaina phoned him to come and get him, and when he got there, found out he was off womanizing. Without waiting for the invitation he just took the empty seat next to him. "Hey."

"Hey." Jacob answered

"Lance call you?"

"Yeah." He said

"How mad is he?" he asked casually while fishing his package of smokes out of his shirt pocket.

"He'll calm down by supper." Jacob answered.

"Where's Tess?" Tess was Jacob's wife. She'd grown up on the ranch because Charlie, her father, was their vet. Colton and Lance saw her as a little sister, but apparently his older brother hadn't. They had gotten married the year before last and had a daughter Emily.

"With her father."

"So, what do you want to talk about?" Colt said offering his brother a cigarette which he refused.

"No thanks, I promised Tess I'd quit."

Colt tucked the pack away without a word and waited. Jacob was never much of a smoker anyway. It probably wouldn't take much

for him to quit. He was probably thinking of Emily too and not having cigarette smoke around her.

Jacob waited until Colton lit his smoke and took a drag before he answered his question. "Lance thinks you're headed down a troubled road. He doesn't know how to help."

"I'm fine." He said absently.

"You drink too much Colt." He said bluntly.

Colt wasn't affected by that. Jacob was a physician and none of his brothers beat around the bush when they had something to say. He actually appreciated that. Not only that, they were right. "I know, and I smoke too much and I have too many women." He answered honestly.

"Something troubling you?" Jacob said studying his younger brother's expression. "Because this seems to be getting worse."

He looked at his oldest brother seriously, "Not sure."

Jacob nodded, "I'm here for you." Obviously his brother didn't wish to talk about whatever it was, but he'd put the help out there just in case.

"I know." Colt acknowledged. Jacob, like Lance was a good man, and only concerned for him. He definitely would talk to either one of them first if he felt like talking about what was troubling him, but he just couldn't bring himself to it.

Jacob saw Tom through the field in the distance mending a fence with two others and smirked, "You took Tom out last night."

He followed his brother's gaze, "Yeah, how do you know?"

"He's weaving all over the place like he's still drunk. He walked down the drive about an hour ago. It's gonna sting when he starts to sober up."

Colt laughed, "He's young and thinks he's tough."

"Yeah well so do you. Tomorrow you'd better be at church." He added with a bit of authority.

It wasn't often that his older brother pulled rank so Colton would listen. "I will."

"And slow down on the alcohol. I'm not sharing my liver if you screw yours up."

He chuckled, "All right. I'll do my best."

‘I’ll see you at supper tonight—sober.’ He added before he got up and went down the steps.

Colt stayed there for another half an hour skimming over the events of the last year and what was bothering him. He wished there was a quick easy fix, but there wasn’t. It wasn’t as if he tried to deal with it himself and although his brothers offered help, he knew this was something he needed to come to terms with on his own.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon when Elaina woke. She slept like a rock. It was the first time in months that she did that so it was obvious that she’d been exhausted. She swung her legs over the side of her bed and threw her slippers on. It worried her when she slept like that because her mother could be in trouble and she wouldn’t know. However when she opened the door the aroma of breakfast hit her. It smelled like—frying eggs?

She grabbed her robe and went downstairs to see her mother setting the table, “Mom?”

“Hi honey!” she greeted with a smile and adjusted her cane so she could move around the table. She looked at her daughter and smiled as she set the silverware. “How’d you sleep?”

‘Like a rock—you must be feeling better. How long have you been up?’

“I am feeling better and about three hours. It took me at least an hour to dress myself, but I did. I even put my underwear on right side out.” She said grinning and motioning a hand down her body while striking a pose, “surprised?”

Elaina laughed at her mother’s rare display of humor, “Yes.” She felt hope for the first time in a long time. Her mother usually waited for her to get up so she could help her dress. She was able to make it to the washroom by herself and wash up, but dressing took more effort. Now to see her dressed and making breakfast warmed her up inside. “This is so wonderful.”

“I agree. So I figured I get to look after you for a change, come and eat. I made bacon, eggs and toast.”

“Wow.” She smiled back at her mother feeling relief for the first time in months. Taking a seat she folded her hands on her lap

while her mother hobbled back to the stove and dished out the food. "Are you on different meds?"

"Well doctor Hartley gave me a new muscle relaxer last week and I finally took one last night. It seemed to help me sleep and like you, I don't think I slept so well in months. I have more energy this morning to because I got a decent night's rest."

"I'm so happy for you, mom." Elaina said trying not to cry. It was as if they were worry free for the moment, and she wanted to cherish it.

"Me too, now eat your breakfast." She said setting a plate of food in front of her, "I finally get to look after you for once."

"I really love you mom." She said softly, "And you've looked after me your whole life, so you sit down too."

She did when she filled her own plate and leaned her cane against the table before taking her napkin and putting it on her lap. "So how was work?"

"The same." Elaina said taking a bite of eggs, "These are good."

"Was Colton Hartley there?"

Elaina stopped chewing and looked up at the older woman, "Mother." She said in warning.

"It's an innocent question honey. You used to be crazy about each other."

"That was a long time ago."

"Things like that never fade."

"He's a jerk."

"No he's not, Tess Hartley can't say enough about him. And, as I recall, he was practically on his knees around you all the time because he worshiped you so much."

"That's because she's his sister in law and has more patience than I ever will, and, again, that was a long time ago."

"I know he hurt you honey—" she held up her hand because Elaina opened her mouth to speak again, "—don't deny it. I heard you crying at night for months."

"Oh god." She said averting her gaze, "I was young and stupid."

"It wasn't that long ago for a woman like you who loves deep to forget."

"I suppose." She said trying to downplay it so her mother would stop talking about him, but it didn't work.

"I bet that if he knew how you felt about him at the time, he wouldn't have been so callous. I also bet that you didn't tell him that all of your spare time is spent looking after me."

"It's no one's business." She defended.

"Sweetheart, you can't give up your life because of me. You're father's death left me with a little money after we bought the house. I can afford a part time caretaker."

"I don't trust other people with you, mom." She said honestly, "I worry."

"Tess said that Tammy only works part-time at her husband's office—"

"—okay, I'm beginning to see your plan—"

"Just hear me out." Her mother argued. "You need a life."

"When exactly did you talk to Tess?" It sounded as if she'd been thinking about this for days, even weeks.

"Last week at my doctor's appointment. She came to get him for lunch." She explained, "She swears by Tammy. She can come in three days a week including Saturday and Sunday morning."

"Mom—"

She cocked her head with a sharp look only a mother could give and be obeyed "I'm still of sane mind Elaina and your mother. I can make these decisions. You gave up so much for me—including Colton. I bet if he knew why—"

"—can we just not talk about that." Elaina interrupted. It still hurt too much, and Colton moved on as easily as the weather changed around there. She had done her best to put it behind her, but now she had to endure him at work and it was taking its toll. To top it off, her mother had to bring him up. She just couldn't escape.

"I'm sorry honey. I just want you to be happy."

"You think that you are a burden. You're not. You *are* my mother and I'm grateful for every day I have with you."

She smiled, "You are possible the best thing that ever happened to me, but you need a life."

Looking at her mother's familiar determined expression made her know that she was adamant in this decision. It was hard but she'd honor it.

CHAPTER TWO

Elaina made sure she bandaged her heel this time before she put those shoes on and went to work. She was reflecting heavily on what her mother said earlier that day. She didn't know that she'd heard her cry. It was true, Colt had broke her heart, just like he did every other women who dared to love him.

She was eighteen when he first asked her out. At first she refused him, but he was persistent, charming and downright irresistible.

She was crazy about him, she always was, but she also knew of his reputation. Finally after two months of receiving flowers, chocolates and incredibly romantic handwritten notes, she relented. Looking back on it now, she was so naïve. Anyone who took a moment to look at that big handsome man, wouldn't think that he had such a soft side. She never knew that he could write such amazing poetry but it completely won her heart. Then there was the way he treated her. Even if he wasn't as good looking as he was, just the gentle way he'd touched her treated her would have had her professing her love for him. He was a true gentleman. He'd open doors for her, pay for dates, and he never really pushed her intimately.

At the time she was working part time at a beauty salon in town and everyday something was delivered to her by him. Her boss and the hairdressers encouraged her, but she knew they were all living through her and didn't realize that she had so much responsibility.

Then everything changed.

Her father had died and no one knew how much care her mother required.

However, she tried her best to have a relationship with him and her mother wasn't coping well with her father's death. She ended up really ill and instead of telling Colton that she needed to care for her, she just started not answering the phone or the door when he stopped by. It wasn't intentional. She was busy trying to look after her at the

time and in the process ended up setting her relationship with Colton on the back burner. She was physically and mentally exhausted. Her mother ended up with pneumonia, and unknown to both of them her father had a life insurance policy. If she'd know that she would have taken her to the hospital, but instead she looked after her for several months. It took around the clock care and she would sometimes just fall asleep in the chair at her mother's bedside. The illness had wiped her mother out and it was a slow painful recovery. Before she knew it he stopped phoning or ringing the bell and several weeks later she'd seen him with another woman.

She was devastated.

Of course she didn't realize how much time had gone by until that day. It was one of the times she was able to leave the house and get her mother's prescriptions. She had left her in the care of their elderly neighbor for an hour.

She was standing on one side of the street when he came out of a local restaurant with a sexy blond on his arm. Even if she tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, the way the woman was ogling him told her everything. A few days later they got a call from a lawyer about her father's life insurance.

She was brought out of her thoughts when he swaggered into the bar just before midnight, but the odd thing was, he was alone. Of course it didn't last. He was rich, handsome, and likable. As usual he sat in her section after he cast a glance around the busy place, then saw her, grinned and made his way to one of her tables.

"That sucks." Leslie said watching him and narrowing her gaze meaning that he never sat in her section.

Elaina never said a word, but went over to get his table's order. Leslie had told her earlier that Colton was so drunk that he just passed out on her couch. For some reason she felt incredibly relieved even though her coworker was fuming about it.

"I had the sexiest man alive all to myself last night and he had the gall to pass out." She blurted at the start of their shift.

"He was pretty inebriated Leslie." Elaina said trying to hide her smile.

"Well, he certainly didn't seem like it!"

“No, he usually doesn’t.” She knew Colton better than Leslie did and didn’t elaborate.

As she made her way over to his table, several other cowboys and one woman that was a regular there sat with him. However, beside a slight nod as they greeted him, he didn’t pay attention because his eyes were on her. She really thought about quitting her job then, but she couldn’t. Even though the insurance policy gave them some money, she still needed to work. Yet, she couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable under his stare.

“The usual?” she asked trying to keep her expression masked.

After everyone else called out their orders he answered her. “No, I’ll have a soda.”

That surprised her because since she started working there, he never ordered a soda. Yet, she managed to keep it out of her expression and instead nodded and asked him what type without looking at him. It was hard to keep his steady gaze because it was loaded with self confidence and there always seemed to be several unspoken statements in it that made her feel vulnerable.

He shook his head letting an amused smile spread across his handsome face, “You know what I like.”

She averted her gaze to his and tipped her head slightly in warning. His tone held a cue that only she could recognize. She shook her head subtly and narrowed her gaze before she turned and walked away. Of course she knew what soda he liked. She did know a lot about Colton Hartley. More than she liked to admit.

When she got to the bar Len was looking past her instead of at her when she made the order, “What?” she finally asked.

He nodded in a direction over her shoulder. She turned and saw Colton walking toward her. What was wrong with him tonight?

“We need to talk.” He said as he stopped in front of her with his hands on his hips while looking down at her.

“Colt—“ Len started but was interrupted.

“Shutup Len, you don’t know us, so don’t get in my business.” He said glaring at the other man. He also didn’t like the way that he’d been looking at Elaina lately although she didn’t seem to notice.

To Elaina’s complete shock, Len didn’t say another word about it.

“Take it outside then.” He said casting a glance at Elaina.

Elaina twisted around and gave him a look of disbelief, but before she could say anything Colt had taken her hand and practically dragged her out the door right by Leslie whose mouth was hanging open.

“Colton, Let go!” she said trying to free her hand from his vice like grip.

He didn’t say a word as he led her out the front door and around the side of the building so they were alone.

“What is wrong with you?”

“I want to hear you say it.” He said stopping and turning her toward him.

“Say what?” she answered completely confused.

“I want you to tell me you still care.”

“I don’t.” she shot back quickly trying to get her arm free. There was nothing more on that planet she wanted then her will to get away from him. Being alone with him was making her feel so insecure it unsettled her to the core.

He shook his head and pushed her up against the side of the building gently, “You’re a shitty liar. You go out of your way to avoid me every time we cross paths. Yesterday you gave your section to you—ah hell, what’s her name?”

“Leslie, and she begged me for it.” She defended unable to help the wave of relief that went through her over the forgotten name.

“Whatever. I’m sick of this charade.”

“I’m not lying. You had a chance—“

“If I recall—“ he bent his head slightly to lock gazes with her, “—you shunned me first.”

“You ran around with every other woman in town.” She shot back.

“I only did when you refused to see me.” He paused studying her carefully, “You refused to see me Elaina. I tried to talk to you for three weeks.” He repeated more softly, “It wasn’t me who ended it.”

“Let it go Colt, it was a long time ago.” She turned her head away, but he gripped her jaw and turned it back.

“No, it wasn’t, or you wouldn’t go out of your way to avoid me day after day.”

Her eyes darted back to his. Even after all of this time his touch still affected her like no other man could. In fact she hadn't dated since she had her heart broken two years ago. She didn't like it, not one bit and instead felt herself get angry. It was that or cry and that was not an option. Not since she'd found out about him and the woman he started seeing did she last cry.

"I refuse to take the blame for this. You need to get over me or—"

"Of course you do, because you're an absolute bastard!" she spat, "Let me go!"

"What could I have done to make you reject me so easily?" He continued, "Was it because I took your virginity. Look—"his words were cut off by a stinging slap. In that instant he did release her. It was completely unexpected. Normally his automatic reaction would be to strike back, but this was a woman, not any woman, it was Elaina. Not only didn't he hit a woman, Elaina would be the last person he'd ever try and hurt physically.

"I hate you." She said on the verge of tears. Then she turned and walked away but not before she gave him one last look.

Colt watched her go and cupped his jaw.

For a little thing she certainly had a good right hook. The whole incident puzzled him. The time they had together was unforgettable and at the time he thought she felt the same way. Soon after she wouldn't answer his phone calls, and almost eight weeks had passed. Then he got drunk and picked up the first woman that paid him attention. Elaina heard about it and finally returned one of his calls to say that she hoped he rotted in hell.

He'd see her downtown and she would cross the street to get away from him. At the time he was positive he was in love with her. She was hell on a pair of great legs and at the time he thought she was perfect for him. He even thought about proposing. Yet two years had passed since they had that earth shattering night together, and he still couldn't hardly get more than a sentence out of her. To this day he didn't know what happened to the two of them, but it had to be more than just taking her innocence, but she wouldn't talk to him so he could find out.

At first he thought she'd believed rumors about his reputation because she was a good girl and the women he used to date before her weren't. She was wholesome, honest and loaded with self respect. Yet after a long period of reflection he knew that wasn't in her nature to listen to gossip, so what the hell was it that took her away from him?

Yet, that look, that final one she gave him was different. Oh hell, she was raging angry, maybe hurt, but there was a deep sorrow there. Even as thick headed as he was, he had a glimpse of it before she turned away. It was profound too, he felt it all the way to the bone. What the hell happened to them?

When Elaina went back to work, Leslie came up to her. She expected her to be angry at that episode but instead she was wearing a bigger smile than the night before.

"Hey that guy named Tom invited us for a swim tomorrow. I guess that there's a great spot on the Lansdowne ranch—I think that's what he called it—that is supposed to be the best swimming whole around."

Elaina knew exactly where that was. After all, she'd gone there many times with Colt. "I don't know." The Lansdowne Ranch was owned by Colt, Lance and Jacob. Mostly people just called it the Hartley's, but obviously Leslie didn't know that.

"Oh come on Elaina, you're the only friend I really have here."

"I thought you had your sights set on Colt." She heard herself say.

"Yeah well, " She cast a glance in his direction as he came back in the building, "He doesn't seem to have his sights set on me." She returned her gaze to Elaina, "By the looks of it—and I may be slow, but I think I'm beginning to understand, that he wants you."

"No, he doesn't." she defended quickly, "He's just being persistent because I don't fall all over myself for him.

"You could have fooled me." She said looking past her again, "Because he's always looking at you."

She turned and looked over her shoulder just to see him take a seat at the table again and as Leslie said, he was staring directly at her. She felt guilty about striking him. She never hit anyone in her life, but it was that or burst into tears. She really shouldn't fault him because he didn't know why she was still so upset about their history together. She

never told him that she loved him at the time even though they'd been intimate.

"Please come." Leslie said bringing her attention back to her.

"Is Colton going to be there?"

"No, Tom said something about taking his sister in law riding."

"Tess." She said out loud to herself, "Okay then." If Colt wasn't going to be there what was the harm in hanging out with someone. Her mother had Tammy in to look after her on Sunday's and maybe she was right in a lot of ways. Elaina should try and have a life. However, it had been so long, she'd forgotten what it was like to hang out with people her age. Tess and she went to school together and even though they were the same age, they weren't close. She really liked Tess Hartley, but Elaina never had time for a close friendship. Colton was the closest she'd ever gotten to someone who wasn't a relative.

Leslie gave her a hug making her feel a little awkward but she eventually returned it.

Colt nodded toward the two women, "What's with that?"

"We're going down to the river tomorrow." Tom offered. "I asked the other barmaid because you said you weren't interested. Is that all right boss?"

"Fine." Actually he did tell Tom that when he asked how his night went. It took him half the day yesterday to recall that nothing had happened between them. When Tom heard that, he asked Colt if he minded that he could ask the girl out. Colton's answer was "I don't give a shit."

"It looks like Elaina is going too. That's her name right?"

Colt just nodded and finished his soda without saying a word. Then he stood up.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"Home."

"Are you serious?" Tom said in disbelief then looked at his watch, "It's not even half past midnight. You just got here."

"Yep." He reached into his back pocket, removed his wallet to retrieve some bills and tossed them on the table.

"Are you ill?"

"No, I promised Jacob I'd try to behave for a bit." He said flicking a glance to Elaina who had gone back to work. "I also

promised Tess that we'd go riding tomorrow. Jake wants me to go with her because she's pregnant and he couldn't seem to talk her out of it. It's just a precaution and Charlie's looking after Emily." Emily was Jacob and Tess's little girl. She was nearly two now and a genuine peach. Colt and Lance showered her with attention.

"Why don't you give Tess a call and tell her to pack her suit. Come see us." Tom suggested. He always liked Tess. In fact he tried dating her a couple of times until Jacob and Colt threatened to fire him. Well actually Jacob threatened to fire him and Colt threatened to bust his jaw.

Colt glanced at Elaina again, "Yeah that might be a plan. Don't stay out to late Tom."

"Naw, it's no fun without the boss. I'll be home in a few hours. Besides I'm still sporting a headache from last night. I don't know how you manage to work with a hangover like that."

Colt chuckled, "Practice."

Elaina watched him go from across the room. It was odd because every weekend for the last three months he'd make sure he'd stay until closing. Also he didn't have a drink, not one. She began to wonder if his brothers had spoken to him. Lance had shown up for Tom the night before and she knew him well enough to know that he was angry even though it hardly showed. Lance wasn't big on expression. It must've been the lawyer in him.

The next day when she awoke she actually felt a little excited hanging out with friends. It seemed so long since she actually had done anything like that.

She wore her swimsuit under her clothes and threw some essential supplies in a large bag before rushing downstairs.

"Honey is that you?"

Her mother's voice came from the kitchen. When she went in there she saw Tammy working over the stove, "Hi."

"Hi Elaina." Tammy said, "You look like you have a hot date."

"no, just going to the river with some friends." She quickly said.

"River?"

“Yes, the Hartley’s have a great swimming spot that actually has a nice sandy shore and when we were kids we used to go there after school and on weekends.”

“I didn’t know.” She said seeming to force a smile then took a deep breath, “do you want some pancakes?”

“Oh heaven!” she said quickly taking a seat, “I would love pancakes.”

They all sat down to eat together and Elaina had to admit that she really was glad to have Tammy there. She had a great sense of humor and actually was able to get her mother to do things that she’d fight with her about like using her cane more so she would keep from falling. She had this way about her that was strict but made people want to listen.

“So who are you going with?” Tammy said pouring Elaina some coffee.

“Tom and this girl I work with Leslie.”

“Tom Styles.”

“Yes I think that’s his last name.”

“He works for Lance.” She said returning the pot to the coffee maker.

“And Colt and Jacob.” Elaina added giving her an odd look. Out of all the men, she only mentioned Lance.

She turned back and smiled, “of course.”

“Excuse me.” Her mother said getting to her feet, “Washroom calls. Tammy makes great coffee.”

“Here.” Tammy said picking up her cane and handing it to her hilt first, “use it.”

“Spoil sport.” She said taking the item and leaving the room.

Tammy sat down and spread butter over her pancakes.

“So how do you like working for Doctor Hartley?”

“He’s the best. Tess is the best, and I love my job.” She said honestly before taking a bite, “Wow, I *am* a great cook.” She teased with a wink.

Elaina laughed, “I’ll agree. These are better than my mom’s.”

“Don’t let her hear that.” Tammy said in a whisper and ended it with a sly smile. “She’ll make the rest of my day miserable thinking that I can cook better than her.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Elaina said moaning while taking another bite. “If you weren’t a nurse, I’d tell you to open a pancake house.”

“My you’re full of compliments today.” She giggled. “Tess said you don’t smile like you used to.”

Elaina paused and looked at her, “Tess said that?”

“She wasn’t being mean Elaina.” Tammy quickly corrected, “She actually sounded concerned. I suspect she knows how much you’ve sacrificed for your mom because you don’t have any time to yourself.”

“Tess wouldn’t say anything negative. I don’t know her as a close friend, but I’ve known her most of my life and I don’t think there’s a mean bone in her body. I’m just surprised that she knew this.”

“She is married to your mother’s doctor.”

“That’s true.” She sighed heavily. She supposed that there was some talk there somewhere.

“Maybe next time you go to the river and I’m not working, you’ll take me along.”

“I’d like that.” And she meant it. Tammy would be fun to be around, she was sure of it.

At that moment her mother called from the bathroom and Tammy told her she hoped she had fun before she got up and went to help her.

Elaina drove her old ford through town to Leslie’s apartment. She was waiting just outside the door to her building when she pulled up.

“Oh gosh, I’m so excited.” She started gushing when she got in the truck and stacked her bag in between them, “I got this tiny little bikini that Tom is going to faint over.” She said excitedly.

Thank god Colt wasn’t going to be there, thought Elaina. Leslie may wear a tiny bikini to get attention, but Colt didn’t need any help drawing that out of the opposite sex. He was positively gorgeous half dressed.

“What did you bring?” Leslie asked a little more hesitantly. If Elaina brought a bikini, no man was going to notice hers. Elaina’s body was way better than her own though she’d never admit that out

loud. She breathed a sigh of relief when Elaina lifted her tank top and showed her a black one piece. Then she grinned widely. "Nice."

It took almost twenty minutes to drive down the rocky road to the river's edge. It wasn't a normal road, but sort of formed by people going down there over the last decade. She was sure it was a cattle trail at some point.

When they arrived, there were at least a half a dozen other vehicles there and it looked like there was already a fire going. Some people were sitting around it drinking and others were swimming. Elaina couldn't help but feel glad that she came.

"Oh my." Leslie said, "Look at him." She pointed to Tom who was just removing his shirt and tossing it aside before he waded in for a swim.

Elaina hated to admit it, but Colt's body was better, way better. It was like the man was chiseled from marble by Michelangelo. Complete perfection all bulging muscle and in tan precision proportion. It ruined her for other men. Tom was handsome, but nothing compared to Colton. She gave her head a shake to refocus and at the same time was grateful that he wasn't there.

Leslie was already out of the truck and practically running over to drop her clothes by the fire before she rushed into the water with a screech.

The afternoon seemed to rush by but Elaina was completely contented with being there. Leslie had thrown her charms on Tom and they were working effectively. At that moment, he was tossing her about in the water and she was playing it up well. In a way she was glad. Maybe that would keep her away from Colt. She bit her bottom lip at that thought. Why should it bother her if other women threw themselves at him? It was out of her control and he could do what he wanted.

To help her forget she got up and went in for a swim herself. She loved swimming and was actually quite good. Yet she'd forgotten how wonderful it felt. The better part of an hour went by and soon everyone was in the water and they played a game of tag. It probably would have been more effective if Leslie and Tom quit chasing each other when they were it.

Elaina figured she had about enough of the swimming and made her way to shore to get a towel. Some people started to leave already and soon there was just the three of them left.

Then Leslie came to tell her that she and Tom were going to go to town and grab a bite to eat.

“Did you want to come?”

She looked past Leslie to Tom and shook her head, “No you two go ahead, have fun.”

She looked relieved that Elaina turned her down and said goodbye as she quickly packed her stuff up and ran over to Tom who was finishing loading up one of the ranch trucks.

Elaina didn’t mind being alone. She was used to it. She waved goodbye, grabbed a book that she’d brought with her and spread her towel by the remains of the fire to take in the last of the sun before she headed home.

About a half an hour later the familiar sound of a horse snorting got her attention. She turned to see Colton and Tess burst through the trees on horseback.

“Hi Elaina!” Tess said reigning in her mare about twenty feet away.

Elaina set her book down and stood up shading her eyes from the sun.

Colt just grinned and dismounted casting her a glance.

“Hi.” She returned, not acknowledging Colt who was unfastening the top of his saddle bag. His look was loaded with deviance and she was refusing to acknowledge it. He’d planned this whole thing. Tess confirmed it with what she said next.

“Colt suggested we come down for a swim. I haven’t been down here this year, and Emily’s with her grandfather, so I thought what the heck. Where is everyone?”

“they all left. I was just reading.” Oh lord. This wasn’t going to go well, thought Elaina. And she was right. After he pulled several towels out of the saddle bag, It only took a few minutes for Colt to remove his clothing and leave his trunks on. He was a vision of the perfect fantasy man, with rippling tan muscles. He moved with a fluid grace as he walked over to the bank and climbed a rock before diving in the river.

“He actually wanted to see you Elaina.” Tess said behind her.

Elaina startled forgetting that Tess was there. Colt completely distracted her. She turned to her with a look of disbelief.

“I’m not kidding.” She said seeing her expression and smiling, “He said it.”

“He’s horny.” She said before she could stop herself, then slapped a hand over her mouth while staring wide eyed at Tess. She was embarrassed that she said that out loud. She was even more worried that she offended Tess, but to her surprise she didn’t.

Tess burst into laughter.

“gosh, I’m sorry, he just seems to set me off.”

“Don’t apologize, you’re honesty is refreshing.” She looked past her to Colt who was ducking under the water, “Besides, he needs to relax. When he’s not working himself to death he’s drinking too much.”

“You noticed that too?”

“We worry.” Tess said bringing her eyes back to the other woman with genuine concern in them, “He won’t talk to us.”

Her eyes went to Tess’s slightly swollen abdomen, “I should congratulate you.” She needed to change the subject. All this talk about Colt was getting to her.

Tess smiled and placed her hand over it, “We’re ecstatic. Jacob seems to be more happy than I am. This time, I think he’s the one that’s glowing.”

“Well, if this one looks anything like your daughter, he should be. She’s so pretty.” She said honestly.

“Thanks Elaina, I will agree with that.”

Even though she tried not to, Elaina guided her eyes to Colt who was now swimming against the current with powerful strokes from those thick arms. He was an amazing swimmer. It didn’t seem that long ago that she would sit and watch him when they came here to be alone. She took a deep breath and released it slowly. Why did he have to be so darn beautiful? Then she thought about him as a father. She’d bet he’d make an amazing father. He didn’t have any kids of his own, yet he had no problem looking after his niece. It wasn’t often that a man could do that.

It was a few weeks ago that she'd seen him come out of the ice cream parlor with Emily. She must be about a year old now. He didn't see her watching him because he was too busy doting on the little girl. It was a picture worth a thousand words. She was perched on his large forearm while licking an ice cream cone, as was he, and she'd gotten a smudge on her cheek. Colt brushed it off with a napkin he had. It was done so adoringly that she felt her heart twinge at the sight. Anyone walking by who didn't know them would instantly think that she was his daughter. She knew then that he'd make an amazing father some day.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she heard a cell phone. Although she didn't carry one everyone else seemed to.

"Hello?"

It was Tess's.

Tess walked off a bit to talk in private while Elaina continued to watch Colt.

She was thinking about what Tess had said. It hurt her to see him like that. He was such a proud seemingly indestructible man, but then she had seen that tender side of him. She did miss him. Every day her heart seemed to constrict in her chest when she thought about him. He was her world at one time.

"Hey Elaina." Tess said coming back, "Could you tell Colt I had to leave. Dad has a bit of an emergency at the ranch and I need to go get Emily. Jacob's working in town today to get caught up on his patient load so he can't."

She quickly masked her expression and smiled. "I don't mind." Yes she did. Speaking specifically to him was a challenge all the time.

Tess mounted up on her horse, "It was really nice seeing you again."

"You too." She said waving as Tess turned and nudged her mare into a full gallop up the road while her long blond hair blew behind her.

"Emily sick?"

Elaina jumped at the sound of that deep voice. Colt had somehow managed to come up behind her unheard. She turned and looked at him, "No, her dad needs to go doctor something for you."

“Really?” He walked back to his saddlebags and took out his phone to check the messages.

Elaina watched him even though she tried her best not to. He was wearing dark navy swimming trunks that hung low on his waist and showed the tops of his nicely sculpted hips and his flat hard abdomen. Beads of water were running down his evenly tanned skin and her mouth actually went dry. Quickly she averted her gaze before he noticed her admiring him.

He tossed his phone back in his bag, “Well, if it’s an emergency, no one thought it was important enough to notify me.” He said turning back to her.

“Maybe it wasn’t that bad.”

He placed his hands on his hips and stared at her. Then he lowered his gaze over the front of her body slowly.

“Colt, stop it.” She said in barely a whisper.

“Why?” he grinned, “Honey, you could ignite the ground you’re standing on with that body.”

She wrapped the towel around herself and glared at him. “Go back in and soak your head.”

He narrowed his own gaze, but not in anger, more in deviousness. “That’s a great Idea.” In several strides he reached her, picked her up and easily tossed her over his thick shoulder while running toward the water.

“Put me down—“ her screech cut off her words as she was tossed unceremoniously into the cool water. Then when she surfaced, she couldn’t help it and found herself laughing. It had seemed like forever since she actually had fun. God that felt so good to laugh again.

Besides her beauty, Colt almost forgot why he fell for the woman in the first place until she laughed. She was radiant and his heart swelled at the sight of her. So he honestly didn’t think he could be blamed for what he did next. He reached for her and before she could say anything, kissed her.

Fireworks went off inside his head as soon as his mouth took hers. When she responded, he gripped her head in his hands slanted his own and took her mouth completely. It was as if there was no time separating them from the last time he’d kissed her. She never forgot anything and knew exactly when to open her mouth and accept him.

He released her head, moved his arms around her and pulled her tight against him. His movements were urgent and may have been a little rough, but she didn't protest.

The water was cool but he was sure that they just heated it up a few degrees. He reached down and cupped her bottom and moved one of his legs in between her milky thighs while moving her up on his own. She moaned and he was sure he was close to release from that sound. It was sinful how sexy she sounded. His fingers found the edge of her bathing suit at the top of her thigh and moved the material aside and before he slid them into her. The sound she made at that caused him to harden painfully, but the whole time he kept her mouth occupied. He could have sworn on god himself that this woman was built precisely for him. Somehow, he knew that if he gave her time to breathe she'd protest, and he needed her more than his next breath at this moment.

She was clinging to him now, digging her fingernails into his shoulders and he took advantage of that to reach down between them and free himself. Jesus, he didn't think he'd had an erection like that in years! He thrust his tongue into her mouth and somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard himself growl as he adjusted her enough to move into her.

"Oh Colt please—" she managed to breath against him.

He stilled thinking she was going to protest, but instead she moved the second time all by herself, tangled her fingers in his hair and took his mouth.

"Oh hell." He groaned and helped her. He had to admit that he never made love in water before, and it was proving to be a task but worth every damn second.

The trickling sounds of water off the rocks surrounded them along with their own rhythmic splashing. Her breaths came in rapid pulses on his cheeks and coincided with these sinfully sexy little mews she was making against his lips.

Then he felt it. The earth moved under him. With a deep throaty growl he felt himself spill into her. It was so painfully exquisite. Her muffled sound of pleasure against his mouth let him know she felt it too.

It was a good five minutes before either one of them moved, or spoke. It was Elaina.

“Let me go Colt.” She finally said in a slightly defeated tone.

He cupped her head and made her look at him. They were both wet so he couldn’t tell if those were tears in her eyes. “Not so soon Lanie.” He said using her nickname that he gave her. One that he only new about and used. “We need to talk.”

“No, you need to let me go.” She said moving off him slowly, “It shouldn’t have gotten that far, but—“ she stopped and looked at him while adjusting her swimsuit, “I think I’m glad it happened. I probably needed that.” She moved away from him and out of the water without a backward glance. If she did, she’d see him gaping at her, but worst of all, he’d see her tears.

“Holy hell, I think I was just used.” He murmured to himself while watching her as she stopped to pick up her towel that had fallen off her when he threw her over his shoulder and then carry on as if nothing had just happened. He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that despite the mind blowing episode. One thing was certain, if she thought there was nothing going on between them, she was dead wrong.

CHAPTER THREE

That night at dinner, Colt didn’t say much. As usual for Sunday dinner, Tess and Jacob came with their daughter. They lived about fifteen minutes away in a gorgeous cabin that overlooked a lake, but Jacob still insisted on Sunday dinners together as a family. Charlie, Tess’s father usually joined them but he was checking on a set of thoroughbred twins that were born earlier that day.

“You’re quiet Colt.” Lance finally said.

He just nodded while stuffing a roasted potato in his mouth. He didn’t feel much like talking. Today had him knocked completely off balance and he couldn’t stop thinking about her.

“How was the swim today?” Tess asked.

“Swim?” Said Lance.

“We went riding down to the river and a bunch of people were there swimming. Tom, Elaina—“

“Didn’t you used to date her?” Jacob asked.

Colt swallowed his food to clear his mouth before he spoke. “Yes, several years ago.”

“She was really nice from what I remember. Why’d you two break up?”

“She just stopped answering the door.” He said honestly taking a sip of his coffee.

“That’s odd.” Said Lance.

“She just lost her father,” Jacob interjected, “and her responsibilities with her mother were huge.”

Colt shifted his attention to his oldest brother. He knew about Lanie’s father, but the mother was a different story. His brows rose. “What was that?”

“Her mother.” Jacob said looking back at him.

“What about her?”

He gave him an odd look, “She has Multiple Sclerosis.”

“And?”

“After her father died, there was no money. Elaina had to become a full time caregiver to her mother. With the added stress of her husband’s death Debbie’s MS got really bad and required twenty four hour care.”

Colt set down his mug and gaped at his brother.

“You didn’t know?”

He shook his head.

“I thought because you were dating her that she’d confide in you.” Jacob said with surprise.

“She’s not like that. She’d obviously rather cope with things on her own. As it is, you need to strangle that woman to get any of her feelings out.” Something he felt like doing right then. He stood up and tossed his napkin on the table. “Excuse me. I need to do just that.”

Tess gave her husband a wide-eyed look, “He really wouldn’t strangle her, would he?”

It took him under a half an hour to reach her house and he had no problem pounding on the door.

Elaina answered, "Colt?" she said in surprise. After the way she treated him at the river, she was hoping he'd leave her alone then. She'd purposely acted as if it was nothing, but used him to satisfy her needs. She was sure that he didn't see her crying as she walked back toward her vehicle. Yet, what he said next made her think he did.

"We need to talk."

She quickly cast a look over her shoulder before she stepped out and shut the door, "My mother just laid down for a nap."

"Your mother who has MS?"

She looked away for a moment, "Jacob?" It seemed to be a relief on both subjects. One that he didn't see her vulnerability toward him and two, that he knew about her mother.

"He thought I knew."

She shrugged and folded her arms under her breasts.

"You should have told me."

She brought her gaze back to him, "so that would have stopped you from sleeping around?"

He took a deep breath while staring down at her, "I got rip roaring drunk. I didn't even remember what happened." The guilt he felt at the time ripped him in half. He was stupid. Honestly though, he thought they were through. It had been over two months and she had refused to talk to him. He went out, got into whiskey and didn't remember a thing except waking up in bed with a woman who he to this day, couldn't remember her name.

"that's no excuse."

"Maybe not, but you wouldn't speak to me."

He was right, "I—I didn't realize that so much time had passed Colt." She said honestly.

"I did. I felt everyday to the teeth." He admitted.

She searched his eyes, "Maybe it just wasn't right for the both of us."

"That's a line of shit Lanie." He said glaring down at her, "You should have told me. I could have helped you if you set aside that damn pride for a moment. I had a right to know."

She returned his glare, "You have no rights!" she turned and went back in the house slamming the door.

"God dammit Lanie!" he yelled. "Talk to me!"

“Go to hell!” came the muffled response.

“Ah hell.” He growled, removed his hat and turned away to stare out at the street while running his fingers through his hair. The woman was driving him crazy!

Elaina stood inside and brushed the curtain aside to the window that viewed the front porch. It was easy to see Colton’s tall broad back as he mussed his hair with his fingers. Did he even realize how adorable that look was for him? He always looked so boyish and lost when he gave that dimpled smile and when you add his finger arranged hair he was downright irresistible. Watching him now made tears poured down her cheeks. Was she being stupid? Should she confide in him? She hiccupped and wiped her face with the back of her hand. No, she couldn’t possibly! He only knew the half of what she’d been through if he knew about her mother. She was so ashamed of herself. The truth of the matter was, that no matter how angry she acted around him, there were times that she didn’t feel worthy of the attention he gave her.

Unable to look at him anymore she turned away and flattened her back against the wall falling her face in her hands and crying. She’d lied to him. Tammy had taken her mother shopping in the city and she couldn’t have him in the house. She just didn’t like to be alone with him. It would be too tempting like it was earlier in the river.

If she had any resistance it certainly took a day off. She just couldn’t get close enough to him—and the way he touched her—just set her on fire. They had only been intimate once before, and even though he was gentle and tender with her, it was her first time, and it wasn’t anything near what she’d experienced earlier. This time it was scorching and downright mind-blowing. It was no wonder some people got addicted to it.

Being angry worked well for her around him so she was going to keep it up.

She heard his heavy steps on the stairs then a moment later the start of the diesel engine of his truck. She was tempted to watch him pull away with the fading sound of the big motor reached her ears, but she didn’t.

Wild heart

She turned and walked back up the stairs to her room like a person who had the weight of the world on her shoulders. Some things just had to be kept to herself.

Colt went home and worked himself to death to get his mind off of her. She would never let him know what was in her head and he was getting tired of trying to figure her out. He'd never had to deal with a woman the likes of her. She wasn't the least bit selfish except when it came to her feelings. It was hard to read her and he was used to anticipating other women. Maybe that's why he was so attracted to her, because she always kept him guessing. He was never bored. Although she was also beautiful, oh, and Christ almighty, she made love like a goddess! Usually he chased blondes, but her exotic looks had him hooked the first day he laid eyes on her.

She was working at the beauty salon in town when he walked by the window. Instantly he was captivated. At the time she was cleaning up one of the stylists stations. Her hair was unbound and reached halfway down her back. She hadn't noticed him yet which was fine by him, because her sweet innocent gestures were captivating. He stood in that large front window and watched her sweep her hair back over her shoulder. He was certain he was hooked in that moment. Then one of the other employees said something to her and she smiled. Now he was in love. She wasn't just beautiful, she was gut wrenching gorgeous and he wanted her.

He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair to try and neaten it a bit before he went through the front doors.

"Hey boss!"

A loud bellow in warning brought him back to the present. Colt snapped his head around as *Hartley's Pride*, their top stallion, came tearing toward him, well most likely the mare he was leading back to the barn. It was unfortunate that she was prime for breeding. "Oh shit, this is going to hurt."

Monday, Elaina didn't have to work. Sunday was her other day off. She heard Tammy come in several hours ago, and was very grateful for that. She didn't feel like facing anyone that day so she took a book and stayed in bed.

About an hour later, she heard the phone ring. Soon after, there was a knock on her door.

“Elaina?”

She sat up at the sound of Tammy’s voice. “Yes?”

“It’s Tess on the phone.”

Tess? Why would she call her? “One moment.” She got out of bed and pulled on her robe before opening the door.

Tammy had the mouthpiece covered, “Are you okay?”

Elaina didn’t realize that she probably still had swollen eyes and a flushed face from the night before. She rubbed her nose, “I’m fine. I’m just not feeling all that great. That’s all.”

“Did you want me to bring you a Tylenol?”

“No, I’ll be fine. Thanks.” She said taking the phone.

Tammy gave her a reassuring smile and shut the door for her.

“Tess?”

“Uh—yeah, hi Elaina. I hate to call you under these circumstances—“

“What circumstances?”

“Colt broke his arm—“

“Oh God, is he okay?” Despite her outward appearance toward Tess’s brother in law, there was no way she could have hid the genuine concern in her voice.

“Uh-huh.” She said in an amused voice, “But unfortunately Jacob and I need to go to a conference in Nevada, and Lance is leaving tomorrow for some lawyer thingy in Washington. Sadly he’s cracked a couple of ribs too and grumpy as all get out.”

She felt herself smiling into the phone.

“Jacob has forbid him to be around the horses, since it was a stallion that knocked him over while trying to get at one of the mares in season.”

What did this have to do with her?

“I’m sorry, I’m taking long enough to get this out, but it leads up to what I’m going to ask you. We were going to bring in someone to look after him, but he won’t have it.”

“I thought you had a housekeeper?”

“Maria’s on vacation.”

Now she could see where this was going. "Any girl would jump at the chance to get near him."

"Yes, but he only wants you. In fact he insists on it."

"I'm not a nurse Tess." She defended, "I don't know the first thing about—"

"Yes, that's fine. He doesn't need nursing. Just some meals cooked, maybe gentle reminders to take his pain pills. Jacob is practically pulling his hair out. He worries about him and we're all going to be out of town."

"I can't, I work nights."

"Lance will speak to your boss, besides he's willing to offer you twice your wage—"

She actually hesitated, the money was needed, but then she came to her senses. "I can't possibly—Colt's such an ornery man!"

There was a pause on the other end, "Elaina, he listens to you." She said softly.

"He's stubborn, obstinate and completely unreasonable!"

"And you are able to curb that in him. He'd do anything for you—"

"Oh lord, I wish he'd quit telling people that."

"He didn't say anything. It's the way he looked at you yesterday."

That set her back. Tess would never make anything like that up. Yet, she couldn't deal with all of that. So she pushed it out of her mind. "Look, I can't. My mother needs me."

"Tammy said she can move in with her for the few weeks that we're gone. Since she's my husband's nurse, she'll be at home anyway while we're gone."

Well she just had all the bases covered. She shouldn't be surprised, Doctor Hartley was quite a catch and he fell head over heels for this woman. There was no way he'd fall for a stupid one.

"Elaina?"

"Can I have some time to think about it?"

"I'll give you an hour." She said and hung up before Elaina could protest.

Jacob stood beside his wife waiting patiently with his hands on his hips looking down at her and grinned after she hung up, "Wow sweetheart you are the most amazing woman."

Her brows rose, "Don't I know it." She smirked, "You know this is going to cost you. Maria's going to insist on first class when you send her to the Caribbean with her sister."

"No problem."

She gave him a sly smile, "Now it's your turn. You need to go and tell your brother that he's going to have a visitor for a few weeks."

"Hopefully they don't talk about how she ended up here."

"After the lies I just told—you'd better pray she doesn't."

He chuckled bent down and gave her a devastating kiss before he sauntered out of the room.

Tess watched him. She was just as much in love with that man as she was the first day she discovered she was. He was a large handsome man, a loving husband, and an amazing father. Soon to be a father of two. She placed her hand on her swollen abdomen and smiled. A boy would be nice but as long as the baby was healthy she didn't care. Emily was completely spoiled by her uncles, and they did need a boy to dote on also.

Jacob found Colt in the TV room with a beer in his good hand while watching a football game.

"Hey I told you to lay off that."

"yeah well, it dulls the pain a lot better than the drugs you gave me." He said not looking at his brother.

"It probably does considering that it exacerbates the effects of a narcotic you took barely an hour ago. Now give it to me before you stop breathing."

He glanced at him, "really?"

"Honest." He said sitting beside him and taking the beer away from his brother just to take a long drink of it.

"I didn't drink that much."

"Yeah, I see that." He held it up to see how much was missing before he turned to look at him, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm pissed off."

"I expect you are." He said studying his expression.

“Six weeks huh.”

“Yes. If you behave.”

“Ah hell.” He cast his eyes toward the ceiling in frustration. You might as well hold back the tide then tell him not to do anything active.

“Look, we want to bring someone in to look after you while we’re gone.”

He started shaking his head.

“Hear me out Colt.”

“I don’t need babying. I’m twenty eight.”

“I know that, but Tess is worried—“

“You are a bastard pulling that card.” Colton would do anything Tess asked of him. He loved her like a little sister and it was no secret that all three of the men were severely protective of her.

Jacob grinned, “I’m not about using that as often as I could. But it’s true.”

“Give me my beer back.”

His brother chuckled and took another swig, “So you would rather end your life than have someone here looking after you?”

“It’s a thought.”

He cast him a sideways glance. “As your brother and your doctor I’m telling you that you need someone here. You can’t manage cooking over a stove, or cleaning up after yourself with a couple of cracked ribs and a cast on your arm.”

“I’ll get Tom in the house.”

“Yeah, that’ll go over well with the rest of them men when you bring in our lead hand to be your maid. Not only that, we’re not paying a man with a degree in animal husbandry top dollar to cater to you when we can get someone more experienced in care giving to help.”

“so you’re talking about a woman then.” He said a little irritably, “Jacob you should know better than have a woman come under this roof.”

“Tess practically lived here.”

“That’s different. We’ve known her since she was a baby.”

“So? What’s the difference?”

He turned his head and looked squarely at his brother with an expression of annoyance, "I won't have some woman around here with her things everywhere and—"

"Tess talked Elaina into it."

It was probably a full minute before Colton spoke. It took that long for it to sink in. "the hell you say?"

"She did. Ask Tess."

His brows popped up and buried themselves in his long bangs, "Elaina hates me."

"Obviously not." Jacob's eyes guided to his brother's hair, "You need a cut."

"Yeah I know—back to what you were saying—So she's going to stay here—under our roof—"

"Yes."

He chuckled and leaned back against the couch, "It must've cost you a lot of money considering how she feels about me."

"Some." He said with a sly smile.

He grinned widely. "Well as long as it's your money and not mine. " he folded his hands across his chest in thought then winced at the pressure it caused on his ribs and set them on his thighs, "This may not be so bad."

"Of course there's no fornicating in this house." Jacob added, "You're not married."

"Oh don't you dare give me that speech you bloody seduced poor Tessa in this very room—"

"I had my fingers crossed."

"You son of a—"

The clearing of a throat stopped him. They both turned their heads toward the door to see Tess giving them a warning stare before she turned and walked out.

Jacob chuckled and proceeded to finish his brother's beer.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

“Honey. Tammy said she’ll come over after work. Just think of it this way. She’s with me during the night when you’re usually at work, and you’ll be making a good wage out at the Hartley’s.”

“this isn’t easy for me, but we do need the money.”

“You can save for college with it.”

She shrugged while continuing to pack. There was no way that she could go to college, money or not. She just couldn’t leave her mother. She may be doing that now, but she would only be a half an hour away and Tammy would be there.

The money was too good to turn down though. She started thinking that she could take her mother on a trip, maybe a cruise or something she would like to do.

The phone rang and her mother answered it.

“I’ll see you mom.” She said heading toward the door.

“Just a minute—“ she said covering the receiver with her hand, “It’s Colt.” She said to Elaina with her eyes slightly widened.

“What’s he want.” She mouthed.

“He’s coming to get you.”

She gave her mother an irritated look, “Tell him I can—“

“—you tell him.” She said thrusting the phone at her.”—and be nice.” Then with a smile she turned and left the room.

She glared at her mother’s back for her bit in this whole travesty before setting the phone to her ear, “Colt I can drive—“

“That bloody truck of yours needs to be put to sleep. Anyway—“ the sound of his big diesel engine reached her ears, “—I’m here.”

She removed the phone from her ear and glared at it as if he could feel her eyes boring through the receiver at him. Then she hung it up without another word. This is going to be a trying two weeks.

Colt tossed his phone on the seat grinning. There was just something about this woman that drove him wild. Besides how damn gorgeous she was, that temper was definitely an asset.

He adjusted himself in the seat because his position was uncomfortable for his cracked ribs. He couldn’t be more thankful for having a doctor in the family. Jacob had made sure he’d taken his pills this morning before he left for his conference. Broken ribs weren’t unfamiliar to him, he’d taken more than a spill off a horse or dealt with

an angry mare protecting her newborn foal, but it still pissed him off that he was laid up for a few weeks. The broken arm wasn't painful at all. His only solace was spending two of them with Elaina, by themselves.

After that incredible moment in the river, he was determined to keep up his pursuit of her despite her protests. Only one thing was clear to him

He wanted her.

Elaina stepped out on the porch at that time with her bag. He did his best not to smile when she centered her gaze on him through the windshield, raised her chin and came toward the truck. Hell, he felt like an ass not helping her but as he went for the door handle she shook her head and walked to the passenger side and opened the door.

"Don't do that Colt. I know you mean well, but the sooner you get better, the sooner I can come home."

"Spoilsport." He teased.

She rolled her eyes and tossed her bag in the back before getting in. "I'm just there to help." She said staring at him, "Nothing more."

"You just keep telling yourself that honey." He said shifting the truck into reverse and glancing in the review, "Turn around and let me know if I hit something." He added casting her another glance filled with amusement, "I can't turn around, my ribs are killing me."

"Oh, you stupid man! You should have stayed home."

She did what he said but he noticed even though she disagreed with him coming to get her, her tone was loaded with concern.

Once on the highway he spoke again, "so are we sleeping in the same room?"

Her jaw fell and she flushed crimson, "Colt, you have the manners of a—"

"A man." He finished with a chuckle glancing down her front, "A man, I might add, who knows what you feel like."

"I'm sleeping in one of the guest rooms." she said adamantly.

"My bed is much more comfortable." He added.

"Yeah, and I suppose you're perfectly capable of having sex?" She didn't know where she got the guff to say that but she certainly couldn't take it back.

Wild heart

He threw his head back and burst into laughter.

“Colt it wasn’t meant to be funny.” She said feeling more and more stupid.

“Oh, don’t worry I’m not laughing at that statement. You just keep surprising me. However, to answer your question. Sex can be done in more than one position.” He said with his eyes glittering golden brown.

Now her cheeks felt like they were on fire. She quickly turned her head to stare out the window so he wouldn’t notice.

“There are ways that a man can—”

“Colt!”

“I mean, take our moment in the river the other—”

“Oh Gosh! Just stop!” she shot at him before averting her gaze again. She should have known that he wouldn’t let that go. Although she’d never admit that one minute hadn’t gone by since she got in the truck next to that sexy man that she didn’t think about it. Or that she had been thinking about it nonstop since then.

He howled with laughter again and winced at the pain that went along with it.

“Serves you right!”

He held his casted arm across his midsection and groaned, “I suppose it does.”

She glanced down at the gesture, “It really hurts doesn’t it.”

“Is that concern?” He cocked a single brow.

She flicked her eyes back to his before she shook her head and looked out the side window again.

“Come on Lanie, I’m only teasing. And I’m broken, give me some courtesy.”

She didn’t answer. Although she did manage to hide her smile.

He just grinned to himself. Sooner or later he was going to get through that cool curtain she placed around herself. He knew he could because of what happened at the river a few days ago.

The rest of the ride was in silence, but he didn’t mind. She kept her attention out the side window and because of that he was able to look at her.

She hadn't changed at all except for the way she made love. Of course the last time he was with her, she was a virgin, but it seemed as though she'd had some experience from the way she was reacting to his touch. He narrowed his gaze. She'd better not have.

His eyes went over her, she sure as hell better not have!

Elaina was relieved when he pulled up in front of the ranch house. She was getting increasingly uncomfortable with the silence and she could feel him looking at her. She went to get out and had the door partially open when he spoke.

"How many men have you had since me?"

Her mouth fell open as she looked at him, "You're kidding right?"

"The other day at the river. It seemed as though you had some experience—"

"—oh no you don't." she cut him off, "you have absolutely no right Colt."

He narrowed his gaze, "I'll find out Lanie and when I do, I'll beat the living shit out of him."

"I don't believe we're even having this conversation! You are such an arrogant jerk!" she grabbed her bag, gave him a scornful look and slammed the truck door. What the hell was she thinking coming here? No amount of money could make her feel good about this decision.

She marched up the stairs into the house without even waiting for him. She'd find one of the guest rooms on her own, then she was going to lock the door whenever she was in there.

Colt knew he was being unreasonable as he watched her storm into the house. He couldn't expect her to be loyal to him when he certainly wasn't but it bothered him a lot more than he liked to admit. Someone else touching her raised his ire.

He carefully got out of the truck trying not to pinch his ribs and went in the house. Taking his boots off was a task. He should have waited until after she helped him with that before he pissed her off. It served him right.

After Elaina finished unpacking she went downstairs to see if Colt needed help with anything. She was getting paid to do a job, and she was certainly going to do just that. There wasn't a time in her life

that she didn't work for every cent she earned, and despite how infuriating he was, she wasn't going to start now. She found him in the TV room watching a movie.

He turned his head hearing her in the door.

She stopped at the sight, "What the heck is *that*?" She pointed to the English Mastiff that lay at Colton's feet.

"Peter."

"That's Peter? He's the size of a bear." She said in wonder.

"Yeah, turns out he was a big dog."

She actually felt herself smile as Peter lifted his head and started panting in a doggy greeting.

"Gosh he's huge! I guess that explains why he was all paws when you found him." She remembered him bringing home a puppy that he found on the side of the road when they started dating. He was so cute that even Colt couldn't drive by him. He was half starved and soon he'd settled right in on the Hartley ranch.

"He's spoiled." Colt said reaching down and petting his enormous head.

"He's adorable."

Colt put a finger to his lips, "Don't say that out loud, he'll use it. He should be outside, but he's been clingy these past few days. I think he knows I'm hurting."

She chuckled and turned her attention back to him, "Can I get you anything?"

Well that was a loaded question, he thought. However, he had some time to think and knew he needed to be a little more restrained around her especially if she was going to stay for a few weeks. It would give him a chance to try and win her back, "I'd love some coffee."

"I'll make some." She said turning away and went to the kitchen. She did feel bad for him because Colt was very active and sitting idle was not in his nature. So that is probably why she whipped up some biscuits to go with the coffee. It only took her about forty five minutes. When she walked back in with a tray of coffee and biscuits, he sat erect.

"Wow." He said as she set the tray in front of him.

"You probably haven't eaten yet today."

“I had a sandwich at breakfast.”

“Well, I’m going to go get supper started.”

“God Elaina, you’re a man’s dream come true.” He said while reaching for a biscuit.

She paused and looked at him while he reached for his coffee and a biscuit. In the back of her mind, she wished he’d elaborate on what that meant. Did it mean because of the way they were together intimately? Maybe he meant that it was because she was a good cook. She knew she was in that department, but the sex thing, she wasn’t so sure about. She certainly hadn’t had as much practice as he had. One thing was certain, if she asked him what he meant, he would tell her and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to know.

Taking a deep breath she turned and walked out of the room. Dwelling on something like that would drive a woman mad.

Colt was impressed with the woman’s cooking skills. Usually the brothers did their own meals, except during foaling season, they would hire a cook to come in. They were all exceptional in the kitchen, even Colton. Yet Elaina’s homemade biscuits and shrimp fettuccini just eliminated that. He actually loved seafood.

He cleaned his plate and sat back staring at her, “Where the hell did you learn to cook like that?”

“Home.”

“Really? Lanie that’s really good.” He said nodding toward his cleaned plate.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m going to get fat in two weeks.”

She actually smiled, “Seafood is not fattening.” She stood up and collected the plates, “Besides I doubt you could fatten up even if you tried.” She gave him an appraisal before she turned and left.

Colt just grinned as she disappeared into the kitchen. Then he reached up with his good arm and rubbed his shoulder. The repercussions of his injury were being felt in his upper arm and shoulder blade.

Just then Elaina came back out to refill his coffee, “What’s wrong.”

He shook his head and stood up, "Just some muscle strain from the break." He saw the pot of coffee, "No more honey, I'm done with caffeine tonight." He just knew that it would keep him awake and he already had problems with those reoccurring dreams.

"Do you want me to massage it?"

He stilled his rubbing and stared at her in surprise. Did he just hear her right? She actually wanted touch him without his encouragement.

She gave him an exasperated look at his expression, "Colt, my mother has MS, I rub her down twice a day to relax her muscles and help keep tone. It's not that same as—" she cleared her throat, "—intimacy."

"I'll meet you in the TV room then. I'd love one." He had to turn away because the smile he got from her statement was impossible to control. It may not have been intimate for her with her mother, but she had another thing coming when she touched him. He knew how they reacted to one another and if she thought she could be completely detached during that, he had to see it.

Colt wasn't going to make this easy for her. He removed his shirt and tossed it over the sofa before he sat down. He winced during the task. Already he knew he was going to get cranky and restless being idle and he hoped to hell he wouldn't take it out on Elaina.

Twenty minutes later, Elaina was done cleaning up the Kitchen. Then she went in search of some cream or oil that she could rub into his skin. She found some baby oil in the bathroom and placed it in a pot of warm water to heat it up. She used it on her mother, and it was almost as good as the real thing. However when she walked into the room she was met with an incredible sight. Colt was sitting on the couch leaning back completely relaxed while watching TV, but his shirt was stripped off him and his belt buckle and snap of his jeans was undone. His position completely defined the six-pack that he possessed. It was really hard to forget what a gorgeous body he had when he kept removing his clothes around her. It was equally as hard not looking at him. He was such an impressive male specimen.

She pinched her expression while pausing in the doorway. This was possibly the most stupidest thing she'd ever suggested. What

the heck was she thinking? There was no way that she could remain impartial during this. Just then he turned and looked at her.

“How do you want to do this?”

“P—Pardon?”

He smiled, “the massage.”

“Oh, just sit forward if you can and turn slightly. I’ll just get in behind.” She walked up to him as he was doing as she asked. He did it slowly because of his ribs but not once did he let on that it hurt. Colt was tough. More tough than most people probably knew about him. There was no way that he wasn’t in pain. She saw the bottle of painkillers on the coffee table in front of him and it looked as if the bottle hadn’t moved at all meaning that he didn’t take any of them since she’d been there. So he was probably feeling the full brunt of those cracked ribs. She couldn’t help but admire him. “Where’s it the worst?” she said trying not to let her voice crack as her eyes guided down his bare back. God he had a terrific back! Starting at his broad shoulders it was solid with muscle and perfectly curved with that attractive little dip that disappeared below the loosened waistband of his jeans.

“Right shoulder.”

She took a slow deep breath hoping he didn’t hear it and poured some of the warm oil on her hands, rubbed them together and then started working the muscles on his shoulder first, “You’re tense.” She said softly.

He leaned his head forward with a sigh. “Can you blame me? I have a gorgeous woman applying oil to my bare flesh. This would work better if we were both naked.”

She paused slightly. Then rubbed a little harder, “Be quiet.”

He chuckled, “Hey, you said it was plutonic.”

“I didn’t expect you to be half naked.” She explained helplessly.

“So you were expecting to apply this to my clothing?” he smirked to himself.

“Oh for gosh sakes Colt, shut up, or I’m going to dump this bottle on your head.”

“I’m definitely going to listen, just don’t stop doing that.” He groaned.

She felt herself smile. It wasn't often that she won an argument with Colt Hartley.

Colt felt as though someone slipped him a muscle relaxer when she was done. She never said anything just got up and left the room. He hardly noticed because of how good his shoulder felt. It was days since that tightness was gone and it usually took those drugs that Jacob left him to do it. Hell, if he could paten Elaina's hands, he'd be rich. Well, he was already rich, but really rich. He smiled as he rolled his head around and stood up, retrieved his shirt and turned off the television. It was late and he was exhausted. His eyes went toward the door wondering if she turned in too. It was a goddam shame he couldn't crawl into bed with her, but physically maybe she was right. He doubted he'd be able to hold back and end up hurting himself more. She was just too damn tempting.

Sighing heavily he shut the light out, called Peter and left the room with the large dog at his heels.

Elaina was used to sleeping light because of listening for her mother when she was having problems. A noise woke her. This time it took her a moment to remember where she was. She quickly sat up trying to get her bearings.

She was at the Hartley's.

The noise came again. She quickly hopped up and went out to the hall. It was Colton's room. She went down the hall and pressed her ear against the door listening. She heard a moan. Immediately she thought he might be in pain because he hadn't taken those pills at all. She went downstairs and got them before returning to knock lightly on his door. "Colt?"

There was no answer.

She opened the door and peeked in. there wasn't any light in there except for the illumination of the moon through the window. It took her moment for her eyes to adjust. She noticed that his bed was empty and the covers were tossed back. Where the heck was he?

Peter whined a greeting from his big cushion in the corner and lifted his head. It actually startled her that he was sleeping in the same room as Colt. Well, he was quite a cute puppy and she supposed that he couldn't turn the big brown-eyed creature out either.

She stepped into the room to survey more surroundings when a light appeared.

What she saw next had her frozen where she stood. The bathroom door opened and out stepped Colton—naked. She screeched.

“What the hell—“

“Put some clothes on.” She said covering her eyes with a slap of her hand.

“Me? It’s my room!”

“Oh heaven!” She turned to leave but forgot to uncover her eyes and ran into the edge of the open door knocking her down. She dropped the pill bottle in the process.

“Ah shit! Elaina—“ he rushed over and knelt down, “Jesus, Are you okay?”

“My nose.” She said feeling the warm stream of what could only be blood.

“Here get up.” He said taking her arms.

“Gosh Colt put some underwear on first please!” One hand now covered her nose and the other covered her eyes.

“You’re bleeding and you’re worried about my nakedness. Christ Lanie, you are a pain in the ass. Have you forgotten that you have seen me naked?”

“Not really.” She answered in a muffled voice. When they first made love, it was in the dark in her bed. The second time in the river, that part of him was underwater. “Please Colt.”

He made a frustrated noise and got up and went to his dresser pulling out a clean pair of boxers and put them on before going back to her. “Come on now, I’ve got some underwear on.”

She let him help her up. She probably could never understand how he acted as if it was nothing to walk around naked. Then again from what she saw and felt, he actually had every right to.

He led her to the bathroom, “Tilt your head back.” He said patting the counter, “sit here.”

“There?” she said looking at the marble countertop.

“Yes so I can look at you.” He meant her nose but the rest of her didn’t escape him. He turned and went to a cupboard to remove a cloth while she struggled to get on the counter. He would have lifted her himself but he knew it would probably hurt, but considering the

little nightie she was wearing, it might have been worth it just to touch her. He tried not to make his staring obvious, but she was so damn sensual in that little satin piece and when she got up on the counter it slid up her thighs a little. He always thought she had fantastic legs.

She took the opportunity to look at his thick shoulders and down his back side. He wore navy blue boxers and for some reason they were incredibly sexy. She could easily make out the nice firm shape of his bottom and felt herself heat up a couple of degrees. An image of her digging her nails into it flashed in her mind. Quickly she averted her gaze when he turned back to her. Then he wet the cloth under the tap with cold water and placed it on her nose.

"Breathe through your mouth." He smirked at her when she looked at him. She held the bulky cloth to her nose obliterating the view of her face except for those large gorgeous grey eyes of hers.

"It's not funny." She said nasally.

"Cute accent."

she narrowed her eyes past the cloth while keeping her head tilted back.

"I'm joking. Hold that there for at least five minutes."

"Sounds like you have experience with nosebleeds."

"Plenty."

He answered leaning back against the wall and folding his muscular arms across his thick chest. The stark whiteness of the cast on his right arm was a striking contrast to the tan of the rest of his body.

"Enlighten me. I feel stupid sitting here."

He grinned, "Two brothers."

"Oh." She gave a muffled chuckle, "I should have known." Her eyes glanced away and focused on some unseen spot on the ceiling. Seeing him there with that charming visceral grin, mostly naked, looking so relaxed was enough to turn the most stubborn woman into a submissive wanton woman. Those boxer shorts might have well not been put on for the feelings raging through her right now.

"Feel better?"

Her eyes flicked to him again, "Yes." *No.* She was warm everywhere even though the counter she was sitting on was ice cold.

“So,” he smiled slowly, “Tell me honey, why were you sneaking in my room in the middle of the night. You know I have an open door policy when it comes to you?”

She tossed the facecloth in the sink and hopped of the counter. “And every other woman.” She went to walk passed him not careing if her nose started bleeding again. She was getting more and more unsettled being there with him and they were both barely dressed.

“Hold on.” He stood straight and grabbed her arm.

“Let go Colt.”

“Wait a minute. You think that I’ve been running around with every woman that I look at.”

“Haven’t you?”

“No.” he said tersely, “I haven’t.”

Her brows shot up, “And that woman that you cheated on me with—”

“Elaina, we talked about that. You refused to see me.”

“I know.” She held her hands up helplessly. “I was—‘ she paused and looked away, “I didn’t realize how much time had passed. I probably shouldn’t have gotten involved with you in the first place. I just didn’t have time in my life. I still don’t.”

He nodded, “I understand that. I also explained that I got rip roaring drunk. Stupid, drunk. I don’t remember her name, or if we even did anything at all.”

“That does not make me feel better.”

“Look, I have nothing to lose. I’ve already lost you. I have no reason to lie.”

“I don’t think you’re lying Colt.” She said looking up at him, “I’ve seen your behavior.”

“I haven’t had a drink in six days.”

Her lips parted in shock, and his eyes guided there. “six?”

“six.” He confirmed.

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t like the hole I was heading into. Jacob, Lance and Tess started to get worried about me.”

So was she, but she wasn’t going to tell him that, “Are you feeling okay?”

He chuckled, "you mean am I feeling withdrawal. I wasn't that bad. I only drank when I was at the bar, and the occasional beer here."

"I was just wondering." She mumbled.

"You were worried." He confirmed.

"All right. I was." She admitted. Then because of the vulnerable feeling that gave her, she quickly changed the subject. "I brought you your pills because I thought you were hurting."

"I am." He said looking down the front of her meaning something totally different. "Very much. Is that satin?"

She shook her head narrowing her eyes, "I've got to get to bed."

"I could join you."

"And do what?" she gave him a smirk. "As far as I can see you're all busted up." She poked his chest.

"You're killing me baby." He groaned.

She turned and walked out of the bathroom scooped his pills off the floor and tossed them too him. He caught them easily. "Maybe those will help." She shot before she left the room shutting the door behind her.

He swore under his breath and glanced down at the bottle. Maybe she was right. He popped the lid and swallowed two of them before he removed his boxers and went back to bed. It was interesting that such a small exchange gave him a raging erection. Of course it didn't help that she looked downright sexy in that light pink satin lacy nightgown either. God he could slide that off her skin like water off a silk plant.

Jesus, so much for sleep tonight. If it wasn't the bloody dreams it was knowing that the possibly most sexy woman was just down the hall from him.

"Damn!" Colt growled as he tried getting out of bed forgetting that he had a couple of cracked ribs. At least they weren't broken. He had a broken rib before and it felt like someone was stabbing him every time he breathed. This was a little less painful. He ran his hands through his hair and stood up. The bottle of pills was on his nightstand and he honestly considered taking a couple, but they made him foggy headed and he didn't like to feel that way around Elaina. He'd come to

several conclusions last night. One of them was making sure that he did everything in his power to get her back. He'd even hire several around the clock care workers for her mother just to make sure that she made time for him in her life. Not that she'd take easily to that, but he was sure he could try and convince her.

He made his way to the shower trying to work out how to present this whole idea to her without pissing her off.

For breakfast, she'd made him pancakes that pretty much melted in his mouth. Her coffee was enough to kill someone over too.

"I can't believe you cook like this with no training."

"I like cooking." She said nonchalantly as she took his plate to the sink. They ate at the breakfast counter in the kitchen which he didn't mind because he could see her work. He liked watching her.

"Why don't you stay after Maria gets home?" he suggested. "She's getting arthritic and could probably use the extra help."

She paused and turned to look at him, "My mother needs me."

"Honey I need you."

She shook her head trying to ignore the rapid beating of her heart at those words. "You'll be fine when Maria gets back. If I remember her well, arthritis is never going to slow her down."

"That's not what I meant." He wanted her around him. He wanted a relationship with her.

She stared at him for a moment before she started shaking her head, "I told you I can't—"

"Look. How about I hired someone too—"

"Absolutely not Colt." She interrupted holding up her hand, "I will not accept that. I am responsible for my mother and nothing you can say will change my mind. It's about spending quality time with her. She's not always going to be able to do the things she does now."

"No? What about if I offered you more money?"

"Are you insane?" She glared at him, "If you think that money means that much to me, then you've listened to nothing I've just said. We're done here." She tossed the cloth on the counter and left the room.

"Wait dammit." He said as she stormed out of the kitchen, "Dammit Lanie! That came out wrong." he struggled to get off the

stool before following her out. She was heading up the stairs to her room, "Where are you going?"

"To pack. I'll send Tammy out to look after you." She said not slowing down.

"Like hell you will."

She ignored him and disappeared upstairs.

He cursed several times while following her path. He didn't even knock when he went in her room, "I won't have another bloody woman out here except you."

"Then you should have considered that before you thought to buy me."

"I didn't mean for it to sound so damn cold."

"And cheap," she added while stuffing clothes into her bag, "Well it did."

"Just stop, Elaina, just for a minute." He softened his voice.

She glanced at her wristwatch, folded her hands across her chest and stared at him, "One minute."

He gritted his teeth, "I swear to god there isn't another woman as stubborn as you—"

"Is this how you want to spend your minute?"

He took a deep breath to calm his own temper, "Let's give us a chance."

She shook her head.

"At least try."

"I can't handle the women."

"There aren't any. I'm in between relationships." He grinned, "Actually it's been a long stretch."

"You? I can't believe that Colt."

"Lanie, there hasn't been women like there used to be before you. Only when the urge drives me crazy do I do something about it."

She stared at him in disbelief. "You never go home alone. I see you leave the bar all the time with a woman on your arm."

"Yeah well, then I drop them off, or pawn them off on one of my buddies. Those aren't the type of women I'm interested in anymore."

She ran her fingers through her hair then glanced at her watch, "You're minute is up." This conversation was hitting her deeply and

making her very uncomfortable. She started stuffing her clothes back in her bag.

He knew it. “Why is it so hard for you to be close to someone—more importantly—me?”

“Because it hurts too much to lose them.” She said without looking up. Normally she would have never told him that, but again the man made her vulnerable.

He walked up to her, “Lanie look at me.”

Paused at stuffing her clothes in her bag and slowly straightened guiding her eyes up to his.

“You’re crying.”

Was she? It shouldn’t have surprised her. Every time she got around this man, she cried.

“Ah hell.” He gathered her in his arms and held her, “Hush baby, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

She shook her head, “It’s not you.” she choked out.

“Liar.” He said softly contracting his arms despite the discomfort to his own body. It was breaking his heart hearing her sob like that. Never in all of the years that he’d known her, had he seen her cry.

She shook her head again.

“You do a lot of that head shaking but it doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

“It’s supposed to mean ‘drop it’.” She muffled into his chest. Oh gosh he smelled so terrific.

He chuckled, “That’s not happening. Please stay. I won’t bring it up again.”

She lifted her head and looked at him. “Promise me.”

He clenched his jaw, “You know I would do anything for you honey. If you make me promise that, it’ll tear me up because I have to go with it.”

“I need to make sure that you understand that we can never go back.”

“I don’t want to go back. I want to move forward. We were both young, you were very naïve. However, we both have matured, and I know we can handle this. I just need you to talk to me more. It’s not healthy bottling up all those emotions Lanie. You are a very

passionate woman, and you're absolutely vibrant when you smile. You don't do that enough."

"I can't. Look what happened last time. I ignored you and you got tired of waiting."

"Now that I understand why, I'll wait."

"Colt, I don't have time for you still."

"At least let me hire a part time care giver." He offered again.

"No, Mom had to fight with me to bring Tammy in. I think that's enough."

"It's not. Between your job working nights and the days with your mother, it doesn't give you any free time for a life."

"You sound just like her." She said stepping back out of his embrace. It felt too good to be held by him.

"She has a point." He said looking down at her.

"It's my choice. I choose to spend time with her."

"Lanie, there's nothing wrong with that, but you need to balance things out."

She wiped her eyes and nodded, "I know, but I'm not sure how long she'll be with me."

He lowered his head to center his honey brown eyes on hers, "that doesn't mean you give up your life."

She turned her head away, "Look, I've got to get this mess cleaned up if I'm staying." She indicated to the clothes tossed carelessly on the bed and in her bag.

He smiled, "You're sure?"

"Just lay off me okay?"

He resigned. He knew not to push her. "I'll go check on the men." He said turning away.

She watched his broad strong back and started thinking. He wasn't trying to pull one over on her, he actually cared. He was willing to give up some things to make her happy and that meant a lot to her. No one else had ever done that. "Colt—"

He paused and turned back to her, "Yeah."

"thanks."

He smiled, nodded, and left.

Colt thought that if he gave her a few days then asked her again about coming out to the ranch to work, she might relent. It seemed as

though he had a bit of a victory no matter how small it was. For a brief moment she softened toward him. He had a week and a half to get her to open up to him a little more.

"Hey boss." Tom said as Colt went into the stalls to check the twins that were born the other day. "How's the injuries?"

"Painful." He said honestly fishing out a cigarette.

"Your stallion has become masterful at unlatching his stall gate."

"yeah, did you padlock it this time?" Pride was always to darn smart for a horse, but it had been common for him to pick away at the sliding latch with his mouth and get the gate open. That's what had happened when he'd run him over to get to the mare he was leading back to her stall. He wasn't mad at the stallion. He should have seen this coming.

He chuckled, "Yup, and he's pissed about it."

"Serves him right."

"Well, that sweet little barmaid must be making you feel much better."

Colt just nodded not saying anything.

"She sure is a little hottie. That girl Leslie is one hot number too. I need to thank you for that. She kept me up all night. Rode me like a rabid monkey."

Colt smirked and shook his head. Tom was likable, but he was young in a lot of ways.

"Hell, I know you guys don't like to kiss and tell, but something like that deserves bragging."

"Congrats." Is all Colt said.

"I thought you were partial to blondes?" Elaina had long dark hair and usually Colt left with blondes. However, she was gorgeous and probably would make any man change his mind.

"Nope." Colt only dated blondes because they were the least likely to remind him of her.

Well, he could have fooled him. "So, are you going to let me in on how things are going with Elaina?"

He turned his eyes directly on his lead hand. There was no mistaking the warning in their darkening depths, "Elaina's not that kind of girl Tim. Even if she was, I wouldn't disrespect her like that."

Tim looked away for a moment, "All right boss. I hear ya." He scratched his head and looked back at him.

"We've gone through this before with Tess." He reminded him.

"Yeah, but I didn't realize that you liked this girl." He explained.

"I do—a lot, so don't get spreading shit around that we're in the same house. She has enough stress in her life that she doesn't need the added gossip. Tess hired her to come and give me a hand. Not only that, I assure you that she has her own room." He added with a firm sideways glance.

"Okay boss, I'll keep that all in mind."

"You mind yourself around that woman you've been with too tom, I've seen a lot of women like that."

"Like what?"

He took a drag off his smoke, "Just remember what I said." He turned his attention to the foals tired of this subject, "That's quite a nice set."

"Dark chestnut with four white socks. Jacob was impressed."

"I bet he was." He smirked.

"You thinking of selling them?"

"I'll have to talk to my brothers, but it'd be a shame to separate them from each other."

"It would."

"How's the haying coming?"

"We've still got three sections to bale. The straw and rolled green oats are all done."

"One week earlier than last year."

"Yeah. It helps that you sprung for new equipment." He gave him a smirk.

He shrugged, "Well, that shit we had when My dad was alive needed to be replaced."

Tim knew that Colt was responsible for the ranch, however, all major decisions had to be passed through all three of them. He actually envied the relationship Colt had with his brothers. Tom was an only child and his parents had him late in life. They were both still alive, living in happy retirement in Arizona. He really didn't have any excitement in his life until he moved onto the Lansdowne ranch.

There was always something exciting there. Either with the brothers themselves or raising prize winning thoroughbreds. He loved it. He actually was raised on a cattle ranch and compared to horses, he didn't realize how stupid cattle were. One thing was sure, no cow ever opened a gate. He chuckled to himself getting an odd look from Colt. He just shook his head.

Colton actually liked Tom as did his brothers. He was young in a lot of ways even though he was only around four years younger than himself, but knowing some of his history, it made sense. "turn the mare and the Colts out this afternoon in a paddock."

"Sure thing." He studied Colt's profile while he watched the foals, "Did you quit drinking?"

He nodded without looking at him, "Yeah, I had to."

Tom was about to ask him why when Elaina walked in. The surprise of seeing such a beautiful woman surrounded by the ambience of a ranch was quite startling. She was wearing jeans and a checked pink and white shirt. The jeans weren't tight, but they were snug enough to tell that she had a kick ass figure. Her long ebony hair was unbound and came almost to her waist. Tom felt himself catch his breath at the sight. For some reason Tom didn't really look at her before because of the bleach blonde with the low cut blouse, but now, there's no mistaking how gorgeous this woman was. At least he had his answer. Colt immediately straightened and tilted his Stetson back on his brow giving her a charming smile. "Oh, no need to answer that question." Tom mumbled under his breath with a smirk.

"Keep quiet." He said in the same low tone as he stepped forward to greet her, "Did you come to see the twins?"

"Actually I just needed to get out of—wait—did you say twins?" She lit right up.

"Come see." He said stretching out his arm.

She rushed right over to peer into the stall, "Oh gosh! They're beautiful!"

"They were born that day we were at the river." He said looking down at her with his eyes glittering, "That's why Tess had to leave in a hurry."

She gave him a warning glance and he just grinned.

“Do you want to touch them?” He loved to see her glow like she did when she spotted them. It wasn’t often that she did, so he treasured it.

“I’d love to.” She answered quickly erasing all trace of her annoyance.

“Step back then.” She did and he opened the door. “Don’t worry about the mare, she’s quite spoiled by people.” He took her hand and led her in to the straw cushioned cubicle.

Tom clicked the latch shut behind them.

“They’re still shy but they’ll come around.” He said as they both ducked behind the protection of their mother’s legs.

“Are twins common?” she asked quietly while reaching around the mother to brush her fingers down a velvet nose.

“No. but if a mare throws twins, they usually reoccur. We’ve had a few sets here, and a set of triplets once.”

“Wow.”

“Let him smell your hand Lanie. They say once a foal smells a scent they never forget it.”

“Gosh they’re so sweet. I could just about cry.”

“I think I’ve had enough of your tears honey, they break my heart every time.” He said huskily.

She erected herself to see if Tom was still standing there. He wasn’t.

“I wouldn’t advertise that Elaina. What happens between you and me stays there.”

She cast him a glance and nodded, “I should know better.” As far as she knew, Colton never discussed her with anyone. No sort of gossip ever got back to her after they broke up. She had to admire him for that. It just proved her point that he was a gentleman.

He grinned, “Is that a bit of trust I hear?”

“Don’t push your luck mister.” She said slyly.

He stared down at her for a moment, “go out to dinner with me tonight.”

She started shaking her head.

“I told you how I felt about that.” He said about her head shaking.

She went to leave and his arm shot out and blocked her path bracing it on a post across the exit.

Her eyes shot to his. "Don't start."

"Then say yes. What's dinner?"

"a whole lot of trouble where you are concerned."

"I promise to behave."

"And I thought I lied badly." she said knowingly.

He chuckled, "Okay, I promise to try and behave."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Hell, what am I saying? I can't—won't behave. I want to be all over you like a bad habit."

She tried desperately to be serious and angry with him, but after that statement she burst into laughter, "You will be the death of me."

"I'm desperate enough to accept that as a compliment."

She laughed again. It took her a moment to compose herself this time. When she did, she sighed and looked away for a second considering his offer. When she brought her eyes back to him she nodded, "one dinner." She knew she shouldn't have, but he made her feel so good about herself, just like he did with all women, but maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to have that once in a while.

He still hadn't removed his arm. His eyes were glittering, "Maybe if you are a good girl I'll let you kiss me."

"I guess I'll have to be very very bad then." She said ducking under his arm and leaving the stall.

It took him a moment this time to compose himself. Those words turned him on. She probably didn't mean them to sound so damn sexy, but they did.

CHAPTER FIVE

Colt glanced at his watch again. He was beginning to wonder if she'd changed her mind when a noise brought his attention to the top of the stairs. He reached up and removed his cream Stetson, "Wow."

She was wearing a black velveteen v-cut off the shoulder dress that came to her knees.

She flushed a little at the look on his face.

“You look amazing.”

He didn't look so bad himself. He wore a navy western cut suit, white high collar shirt and black western tie. The suit just accentuated his elegance and his broad shoulders. The sleeve with the cast was rolled back to expose the pale yellow fiberglass on his forearm. He still looked remarkable. She wanted to compliment him too but held back. It would make her look vulnerable, and she'd done enough of that lately. “Thanks.”

“Shall we?” he turned and opened the door for her.

“I can't believe I agreed to this.” She mumbled walking by him.

He just smirked and guided his eyes down to her backside.

“Quit looking at my bottom.” She added as she walked out onto the porch. She knew he was without turning around, after all, this was Colton.

He grinned.

She stopped at the smoke grey car in the driveway, “The Jaguar?”

“I'll only have the best for you.”

She looked over her shoulder at him, “Where are we going?”

“I thought I'd take you to the Black Lantern.”

“Colt that place is really expensive.” She said with widening eyes. All the town's elite went there. Colton had taken her there on her nineteenth birthday and then they ended up back at her place in bed afterwards. Her parents went out of town for the night and they had the place to themselves.

“Is that the only thing you remember?” he said huskily behind her.

“Yes.” She said abruptly.

He chuckled and reached around to open the door for her. “Liar.”

She got in and didn't say another word or even look at him as he shut the door.

The restaurant was only half full, possibly because it was only Thursday. Usually the place was packed on the weekends. The hostess gave them a nice private seat in the corner.

“Did you make a reservation?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

He paused, “Yesterday.”

She looked at him accusingly as he pulled out the chair for her, “I didn’t even say ‘yes’ yet.”

He shrugged and took his own seat, “I could have easily cancelled.”

“Sure you could have.” She said picking up the menu. “It’s just once Colt, don’t get too sure of yourself.”

He eased back in the chair and looked at her, “Tsk tsk, Lanie, when have I ever misled you?”

Actually, he never did. He was always honest with her. Well, as far as she knew. She set the menu down and looked at him, “No, I can’t think of a time that you have.”

He gave her a lopsided smile and it early melted her heart. It pleased him a lot that she admitted that.

Just then the waiter came with a bottle of expensive wine.

“I don’t drink—” she said holding her hand over her glass.

“Indulge me Lanie.” He reached over and removed it. “How long has it been since you’ve gone to dinner with a man?”

She never said anything. It was him. To avoid the question she accepted the wine. “All right, this once.”

The waiter filled both glasses and left.

“I thought you said you quit.”

“Well, this one glass, isn’t going to cause me a relapse. I’m not a drunk. Just a stupid Cowboy. I see a pretty girl that I can’t have so I have a drink to make me feel better.” He said looking pointedly at her, then he smiled, “Besides it helps me sleep at night.”

If it wasn’t obvious who he was talking about, that look said plenty. She felt herself flushing and focused on the other thing he mentioned. “You’re not sleeping?”

“I’ve—had some trouble lately.” Was all he said.

“I didn’t know.”

“It’s not something I advertise. Lance lives in the same house he doesn’t know. Peter does, but it’s hard to understanding him most times.”

She smiled back at him, “Cracking jokes over your problems? My turn to tsk tsk.”

He took a gulp of his wine, “It’s not much of a problem. I already know how to stop it.”

“Really? Enlighten me.”

“Nope.” He grinned setting the glass down.

“Come on Colt. I hate secrets.”

“You keep enough of them.”

That shut her up.

“if you told me about your mother, I would have waited forever.” He said seriously.

She took a deep breath and stared at him, “That’s a lot of water under the bridge Colt.”

“It’s a small bridge Lanie, and as you recall, I like swimming.”

She flushed, “Maybe, just maybe I’ll admit to being young and stupid about things, but you had your pick of women.”

“I only had my eyes on one.”

She shook her head, “They’d fall all over you when we were out together, they’d call your house all the time when I was there, stop you on the street—“

“All right, I guess I didn’t realize it was that bad.”

“Bad? That’s like saying the plague was a slight illness. It was unbelievable how popular you were.”

He laughed.

“I just didn’t see why you dated me, when you could have had any of those other women.”

The laughing ceased at that statement and he sat straight in his seat, “You’re *joking* right?”

She shrugged one shoulder.

“Have you *looked* in the mirror?”

“It’s not just that. Some of those women—well—they were professionals. I mean, there was a boutique owner, a real estate agent—“

“So?”

“I never went to college, in fact I barely graduated high school. My family is a little better than dirt poor and—“

Colton felt sick to his stomach at her confession. She actually felt like she wasn't worthy of his attention, worthy of him, when all along he felt like she was too good for him.

He knew he was nice looking and he was arrogant over that, but Elaina had him running around in circles the first moment he laid eyes on her. She was different, intelligent, pretty, and full of humility. The women he dated weren't. It was that simple. A college degree was a piece of paper and someone's intelligence shouldn't be judged by it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered if that's why she just stopped answering his phone calls. Oh he was certain her mother was ill, but it could have been a combination of both of those and he fell for it. He went for the first woman that paid him attention out of spite and hurt.

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard, from possibly the smartest woman I've ever known." He said abruptly, "I was sure you knew how much I cared."

"You do realize that I never had a steady boyfriend before. I had no idea what to expect."

That's right. It was odd that he never even thought about that. However, he never fell so hard as he did with her and he took it for granted that she understood that. Especially since she gave herself to him.

"Are you ready to order?"

The waiter came at that time interrupting them. Colton ordered a steak and Elaina ordered the fish.

Colton waited until the waiter left, "We should go fishing tomorrow."

"Because I ordered fish?"

"Actually yes."

"I'm not getting near that river with you again."

He laughed, "chicken."

Elaina couldn't believe that she even brought the subject up. Why couldn't she just act normal around this man?

"We could go to a public river where other people go fishing, like Trout Creek."

"I warn you that I'm a terrible fisherman."

"It doesn't matter. If I catch something, can you cook it?"

She grinned, "I can. My father used to fish a lot. He taught me how to clean and cook fish."

"Great. It's a date."

She stared at him, "Colt—"

"Too late you already agreed." He interrupted.

"I didn't think you'd take it like that."

"I did and as far as I'm concerned, you can't take it back—" he lifted his hand when she went to protest again, "—Look Lanie, I won't push you. I promise. I meant what I said before about going at your pace."

"I have told you many times that I don't have time for a relationship."

"And I recall telling you that if I'd known the hell you were going through I would have waited. I'm not making that mistake twice."

"We're not dating."

"We are."

She released a frustrated breath then glanced past him to the door.

"If you leave, I'll follow you."

"right now I hardly like you and you think we're in a relationship."

"Right now you're pissed off at me. It'll pass."

"you arrogant—"

"If you try and slap me again, I'll stop you." He tilted his head with a slight air of amusement.

She snapped her jaw shut, took another deep breath and spoke, "I should apologize." She still felt horribly guilty about it.

"There's no need. I did sort of blind side you." He said studying her features carefully for some sort of indication he was right. She did give a slight wince and he took that as the sign he was looking for. "Tell me you don't care about me and I swear to God this is the last time I'll chase you."

She stared at him from across the table. He could tell when she told a lie, and right now she was feeling that same vulnerability that he seemed to create in her so lying would be fruitless.

"No answer means yes."

“Please just leave this be.”

“Nope.”

“Okay, fine. Let’s discuss this since you won’t let it be.” She said angrily, “That incident in the river was a mistake. I don’t know what happened between us, but it shouldn’t have gotten that far. Its not like me to have sex—“

“Honey, that wasn’t sex. Sex doesn’t make my blood boil like that. It just goes to show me that you’re still as naïve as ever.”

She stopped talking because she really didn’t understand the difference. The subject was really embarrassing also, but she seemed to keep bringing things like that up. He, of course, had no problem discussing intimacy, but she had no experience in that area.

“I see that I have your attention. Let me tell you something else. I have had a permanent hard on since that day—“

She was sure that her face was as red as a beet from the heat she felt rush there. When his eyes went to her cheeks and then back to hers followed by a devilish grin, she knew she was blushing.

A dawning realization hit him. “You haven’t been with another man have you?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

He could have shouted with joy over that discovery, “It’s been two years.”

She looked away, “Well, some people have no problem jumping in the sack with the opposite sex, I do.”

He dropped his grin. He’d hurt her. It was the last thing he ever wanted to do, but after eight weeks of trying to get her to talk to him, he seriously thought it was over. Then he hit the whiskey. He never touched hard liquor, but he was hurting too. In all of it he thought she just didn’t care as much as he did. That she could so easily turn him away. It was true that he knew he was a nice looking man and that women did find him attractive. He also knew his accomplishments as a lover. Yet, that whole incident knocked him down a few notches and as conceited as he was, he started to doubt himself.

Even though he’d thought they’d broken up, he felt like a louse the next day over that woman. Then Elaina finally phoned him a few days after that and told him off before hanging up. It was the first time he’d heard from her in over two months. Who does that? It threw him.

Now he understood it was because she was exhausted and preoccupied with her mother. However, she wouldn't talk to him. Even now it was like pulling teeth to get anything out of her.

In his family, if there was a problem, it was sorted out no matter how big or small. They always had each other and things were discussed. Secondly, he'd never been with a woman who kept her emotions and thoughts to herself as much as Elaina did. It was obvious that she was the one responsible for her family and tried coping as best she could with the situation of her mother and father, but someone as young as her shouldn't have to deal with that on her own. Knowing that just expounded his guilt on what he did.

"I'm sorry I hurt you Lanie." He said sincerely.

She shrugged, "It's not all your fault." It wasn't. How could she expect a man to wait around for that long while she refused to acknowledge him? Maybe she should have confided in him about everything, but she wasn't sure how he'd react. Her mother's condition was just one thing she kept from him. There was something else that was much worse.

She always thought that everything about Colton Hartley was so perfect and he did have his pick of women, yet if he found out how flawed she was, would he have stayed? She really doubted it. Then there was the intimacy. She actually thought she'd disappointed him after all he was used to someone with loads of experience and she was too embarrassed to ask him how she was. It seemed like he did all of the work, but she didn't know anything. Was she supposed to do more?

After their moment in the river, she realized that there was more. A whole lot more. She also discovered a side of her she never knew existed. When he kissed her it was different than the last time they were together. A fire grew inside her. A hungry, voracious fire. She couldn't get close enough and the evidence was on his shoulders from her fingernails. She never realized that she'd scratched him until she'd given him that massage. That's why she got up and left the room without saying anything. Well, that and she felt the familiar embers burning when she touched him. As for the scratches, there they were as plain as day. She never thought she had that in her and she had to admit, that she really liked the way it felt.

He was right. It had been several years and someone can grow up a lot in that time. Of course she never thought she was immature, but time gives perspective and she'd done a lot of thinking about him—them, and knew now that she should have at least given him the option of understanding what she was going through.

He stared at her. It was obvious that she was reflecting on it all, but as usual she wasn't sharing.

Just then their food came and they ate in silence.

Afterward, he paid the check and got up to help her out of the chair.

Elaina saw him wince, "Gosh Colt, take your painkillers."

"I can't now."

"Why not?"

"Jacob said that I can't drink and take them and I had a glass of wine."

"Oh that's so stupid. Why did you do that?" she scolded.

He smiled at her temper, "I wanted to enjoy a glass of wine with a beautiful woman. That's why."

She averted her gaze and flushed, "Okay enough said."

He chuckled and led her out of the restaurant. "I love this whole concern thing you have going for me."

"Well, I know you must be miserable not being so active."

"Is that it." He bent down and opened the car door for her.

"Yes." She answered quickly.

He smiled and shut the door. Sure it was.

There was only small talk exchanged while he drove home. As usual he opened the door for her and helped her out of the car. When they got in the house it was a different story. Elaina turned around to thank him and before she knew it, he'd bent his head and kissed her. That wasn't really the problem. The problem was, she kissed him back—hard.

He groaned and pulled back. They must've stared at each other for a good five minutes before someone spoke. It was Colt.

"So now you see. This is more than a friendship Lanie."

She fumbled around in her mind trying to figure out how to respond to that. She was still in love with this big ape no matter how she tried to ignore that. It was easier to play numb, and angry than

admit that to herself. However, she couldn't possible get hurt like that again even if she was the cause of it all.

"Lanie?" he said with a knowing smirk. He knew that kiss rocked the ground they stood on and if she tried to deny it, he was going to kiss her again. Only as usual, she didn't react like he expected. She stared up at him with those beautiful grey eyes of hers then without a word turned and went up the stairs. He stared up at her incredulous, "For christsake Lanie!"

"Go to bed." She answered before disappearing at the top of the steps.

"Yeah, easy for you to say." He growled knowing that tonight would be another sleepless night. He whipped off his hat and threw it on the floor before he made a beeline to the study and the liquor cabinet. She couldn't possibly deny that kiss, or the way they were together in the river. In fact even being around each other charged the air with sexual static. Yet, as usual she wouldn't talk to him. He was angry and frustrated over this woman and didn't give a shit how, but he was going to sleep tonight, drunk and with a bloody erection.

CHAPTER SIX

It was two o'clock in the morning when a noise woke Elaina. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. At first she thought it was Colton wandering around in her room, but it was a scratching sound. She got out of bed and remembered to pull on a robe this time before opening the door.

There was Peter sitting outside her door. "Peter?"

He released a deep 'woof'.

She laughed, "gosh, what's wrong boy? Did Colt forget to let you in his room." She stepped past him and went down the hall to Colt's room and knocked. Peter followed her with his tail wagging.

"Colt?" She opened the door and looked in the room. There was enough light from the moon to see that his bed was neatly made and therefore not slept in. She stepped in the room, "Colt?" Where was he?

Peter followed her as she went into the bathroom, flicked on the light, then came back out and looked around the empty room. Did she anger him enough for him to leave? She really hoped not, but she would have heard the truck start up, wouldn't she?

Peter sat down beside her and stared up at her with droopy eyes. She looked down at him and placed her hands on her hips. "Where's your master boy?"

'Woof'

"Where's Colt?"

Peter stood up and wagged his tail before heading to the door.

Wow, she thought, he actually understood her. She followed him out of Colt's room and downstairs to the study. The door was open and Colt was sitting at the desk working over a stack of papers. His hair looked as though he'd run his fingers through it again. He'd shed his jacket and tie and the top few buttons of his shirt was undone with the cuffs of his sleeves rolled back. He was very distracting in an untamed sort of way and she would have probably stood and watched him for a bit admiring him if she didn't see the whiskey bottle beside him.

Peter trod in the room noisily and he looked up seeing her.

"Hi." She said a little embarrassed at being discovered watching him.

He set down his pen, "Can't sleep?"

"Peter seemed to be worried about you."

"He woke you?" he said in disbelief as the dog padded over to the fireplace and plunked himself clumsily on the bear rug in front of it.

She nodded and glanced at the bottle of whiskey again.

He saw what she was looking at and leaned back in his seat, "I didn't have a drink Elaina."

She could see that the bottle looked untouched, "I don't remember you ever drinking Whiskey."

"I don't. Well there was one time." He said glancing down her body. "When my girlfriend wouldn't talk to me."

She flushed, "You weren't kidding about getting drunk then."

"No, I don't even remember that night." He replied. "I like the pink satin lacey thing that you wore last night better honey."

She gathered the robe closer around herself, "I'm going to wear a full body flannel nightgown if you don't quit with the suggestive comments."

"I'll still see your body through it. It would be pointless."

She rolled her eyes, "Somehow I don't doubt it."

"It's branded in my mind."

"I'm going back to bed." She turned to leave, "Peter will keep you company."

"Stay." He said softly, "I'll show you how to make love on a chair."

She paused and slowly turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. From the heated look in his eyes, he wasn't teasing at all. She didn't know what made her think that, or what actually made her stop to look at him once more, but she knew she should have kept walking after what he said next.

"I was thinking—" he added huskily, "—about those sexy little noises you make when I'm in you."

She felt her body heating up and it had nothing to do with embarrassment this time. Also there was this little hot pang deep in her pelvis that followed.

"Your skin is like warm satin—"

She turned toward him, "Colt, you have to stop talking—"

He stood up and walked toward her and she backed up a few steps. "I wish you would stop running from me."

"I can't help myself, you're very—" she waved a hand up and down indicating his large form, "—noticeable." It was a stupid choice of words, but she couldn't say drop dead gorgeous.

He laughed, "Noticeable?"

"Don't make fun of me. I'm not good at this whole attraction thing."

"Is that right?" he looked down the front of her, "Well, I'd say you had it down pat."

She brushed her hair back off her shoulder and stared up at him, "There's some things you don't know about me."

"I don't care." He said stepping closer.

"You probably will. You don't know me as well as you think you do."

“Honey, I know your body, what makes you moan, and as for the rest it will come.” He said bending his head.

Her knees weakened, “You’re wrong.”

His hand came up and cupped her chin, “You think so?” he murmured.

“I—“ her voice was cut off by his mouth. His hand threaded through her hair at the back of her head as his mouth moved over hers. She loved his mouth. Besides being warm, sensual and deliciously male, he tasted like heaven. Her hands went between them and moved up his chest. He was thick and hard, and she never knew that a man could be so powerfully built unless she’d seen it, felt it. In the back of her mind she heard him grunt when her hands circled around him. Instantly she moved back knowing she’d hurt him. “Oh gosh! Colt, I’m so sorry.”

“Are you kidding me?” he tightened his hold on her, “That was pain well earned.”

“I have to go to bed.” She said breathlessly.

“I’ll come with you.”

“No.” she said totally unconvincingly.

He kissed her again before lifting his head, “Say yes.”

She took another breath, “No.” she gushed out weaker this time.

He grinned gripped her head and took her mouth again.

Elaina might have had some resistance in her until he used his tongue. He was a masterful lover with his mouth and he knew it. He was aggressive yet, not enough to frighten someone. Only when she responded did he take it to the next step. When she opened her mouth to receive his deepening kiss that’s when she felt it slide past her lips and caress the inside of her mouth so smoothly, it was like liquid velvet. A strangled surrender came from deep within her throat and she moved her arms around his neck. She was sure he grunted again as he moved her back against the wall, but she wasn’t convinced because the noises she was making were pretty loud.

Colt ran his hand down her side and gripped her thigh to pull it high on his leg while pinning her body against the wall with his. God she was so perfect the way she fit to him. In one smooth movement he lifted her up on his hips pushing himself between her thighs. However

when she linked her ankles behind him he had to stop. "Jesus." He lifted his head suddenly.

"What?"

"Christ, I can't." he reached back and unlinked her legs, "Hell, I'm fucking cursed."

"Oh—" It was then that she finally realized that he was in a lot of pain especially with the use of the swearword. She was sure she'd never heard him swear. He was always a perfect gentleman. "Gosh! Poor Colt."

"Hell yes poor me." He agreed while carefully lowering her to the ground while grimacing.

She giggled and then slapped a hand over her mouth. It was possibly the first time she'd seen him look so helpless. A man like Colt never even had it in his vocabulary. So it took her by surprise and she let a giggle escape.

He groaned looking down at her. They were still touching each other chest to chest and he was as hard as granite, "I want you so bad I can literally taste it, but I can't," he grinned, "I'm in agony."

She reached up and ran her hand down his cheek. "Maybe it's for the best."

He arched his brows, "for who? I'm dying."

"Well there's nothing that can be done about it."

"Really?" He bent down and whispered in her ear.

Her eyes popped wide but she listened if not out of sheer disbelief, for the curiosity.

When he was done he erected himself and stared down at her.

"You're not lying to me are you? People really do that?"

He grinned and nodded.

"Wow. I am naïve." She said rubbing her forehead while looking at him.

He laughed at her astonished expression, "For some reason I was expecting a slap on the cheek again. It's uncanny how you keep surprising me."

"I think I'm too astonished about what you just told me to be offended."

He made a rough noise under his breath, "when I heal, I'm warning you right now that you'd better watch out because I have a

growing list of things you're going to be doing for me to make up for this and none of them have anything to do with baking biscuits."

"Colton Hartley!" she admonished, "You shouldn't say things like that."

"Hell, I will, because I'm holding back from saying what's really on my mind," He turned her toward the door, "Get to bed before I convince you to do what I just told you."

Her eyes shot wide again and she rushed out of the room.

Colt's gaze guided down to that firm bottom that she had, clenched his hand still feeling the shape of it in his palm, and turned back toward his desk. He briefly glanced at the whiskey bottle then shook his head and went back to the books. This was going to be a long night.

The next morning Elaina whipped up a hungry man's breakfast for Colt. She actually thought he'd sleep in because it had been a long night for him. She couldn't believe that she let him touch her like that again and those things he told her. Well, they kept her up for another hour after she went to bed. Funny thing was, she still wasn't offended at the things he told her. She should be—shouldn't she? But he wasn't being crass, he was informing her of different types of sexual gratification. If anything she was possibly impressed with his ease at discussing things, but she wasn't used to them. Furthermore, she was aroused when he was telling her in that deep husky voice he possessed so there were a few factors that prevented her from being insulted.

She'd had men say some pretty crude things to her where she worked, but nothing encompassed what he told her, and she did get offended because of the cheap references they used.

Colt never made her feel cheap. Even when they were together the first time and she knew nothing, he was patient, understanding, and tender.

She stopped what she was doing and turned around to lean back against the counter reflecting on that thought. He really was all of those things and that time they had in the river, and that brief steamy moment last night had none of those traits, not that she minded, it just made her think about it. Over and over again lately he told her he cared about her back then and she finally realized that he must have. She was

pretty sure no other man who looked like him would be so perceptive to her needs when it would be her first time. From what she heard in school from her friends at losing their virginity, they said it was a forgettable unpleasant experience, but Elaina never forgot about her and Colt. Another thing was certain, it wasn't unpleasant.

The phone rang and she jumped. She laughed at her foolishness and answered it.

"Elaina?"

"Len?" she recognized his voice instantly.

"Yeah, sorry to be calling you out at the Hartley's but I was just wondering if you could come back to work sooner."

At that moment Colt walked in the kitchen and gave her a look that asked her who was on the phone. He was wearing jeans and a khaki colored western cut shirt that seemed to bring out that honey color in his eyes. She shook her head and turned away not wanting to answer his question and unable to maintain a steady look at him because he was completely gorgeous. It didn't help that she was still embarrassed from way she acted night either. She would never let a man get that far with her, but he seemed to be able to every time they were alone. Even now she could feel that familiar heat rise in her just from him standing there.

"Elaina?"

She scolded herself silently forgetting that Len was on the phone "Work? I can't. I made some promises."

"I know. I hate to ask you but, Leslie's driving me nuts and that girl I hired to cover for you quit. I'm in dire straits."

"Tell him no." Colt said walking around the front of her and leaning his shoulder against the wall not giving her any privacy.

Covering the receiver, she mouthed a 'shh' and turned away again. "I told Tess I'd help Colt out."

"Even if you can come in this evening for a couple of hours it would make a big difference."

"A few hours?" she paused thinking about it.

"Hang up Lanie." Colt said irritably.

That made the decision for her, "I'll see you at ten." She turned and hung up the phone while glaring at him. "You are not my keeper."

"He's sweet on you. I don't like the way he looks at you."

“That’s not true.” She said with a degree of surprise, “He’s my boss.”

“Then what the hell is he doing calling my house.”

“He was in a bind. He’s a friend and he asked me for help.” She explained with exasperation.

“He’s crazy about you and as you said, he’s your boss is not your friend. He’s using that lame excuse to get you back where he can work on you.”

“You’re out of your mind.” She said feeling her ire rise.

“I am? I bet you that as soon as he gets you alone, he’s going to make a pass at you. He’s been thinking about it for several months.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Oh, big shot, enlighten me.” She was growing more angry by the minute.

“Because I know what a man is thinking when he looks at a woman like you. He’s taken his time and is trying to figure you out before he takes a risk.”

“Like you?”

“No hold on, I’m nothing like that guy. I let you know from day one that I wanted to get to know you better. I never had any secrets from you Lanie.”

“No?” she narrowed her gaze, “Then why aren’t you sleeping at night.”

He clenched his jaw, “That happened after we were over so it’s not open for discussion.”

“Then neither are we—“

“Now hold on—“

“go sit down Colt or you’re going to get a frying pan upside of the head.” She said angrily as she turned back to the stove.

He ground his teeth together. One step forward and two back. That’s all he seemed to get with this damn woman. He knew if he pushed her, she’d leave. Yet what he really wanted to do was ring her pretty little neck. “I’m not hungry.” He said tersely before he turned and walked out of the kitchen.

A few minutes later Elaina heard the front door slam. She actually winced as the vibration seemed to go through the large house.

She knew he was quite close to losing his temper with her, but she wouldn't be bullied. He was acting like a jealous lover. Lenny was harmless and she was sure he was sincere in needing her, not biding his time like some sort of ravenous predator. Len was a nice looking man, and he had no problem with women, so if he had his eyes on her, he would have spoken up already. Wouldn't he? Well, it was obvious that they weren't going fishing now.

Colt parked his Jaguar in his garage. He'd left it in the driveway last night and usually put it away when he was done with it, but he was preoccupied. Now he was just plain pissed off. How could anyone be as naïve as she was? Len was drooling over her for months. Even Tom, as thick headed as he was, commented on it several times.

The one night she was bending over and checking her shoe, he got up and went over to Len to order a beer because he was sitting watching the man practically drool over her for at least two hours. He was getting angrier with each passing minute. Then she shunned him and he became spiteful and took her coworker home, even though nothing happened. He was grateful because he'd have never gotten as close to her as he did in the past few days if something did.

He knew he was spinning out of control then. The late nights, the women, alcohol and the dreams. Jacob just gave him that final nudge. It was interesting that the cause of it all was in his house making him possibly the most heavenly breakfast he ever smelled. However he had to get out of there before he said or did something he regretted. He had a bit of a temper and it was getting harder and harder to control around her. One thing was certain, if she was going to that damn place tonight, he was going with her.

Inside the house, Elaina was feeling guilty about that whole incident. She was supposed to be helping out Colton, but he always seemed to set her off. Also, he missed breakfast, and the man had an appetite like a hungry bear. She knew she made him angry, but she didn't belong to him, and she didn't like him telling her what she could and couldn't do.

After she cleaned up the breakfast dishes she sat down with a cup of coffee at the breakfast nook and rubbed her forehead. She'd been out here for three days and she was already half out of her mind. How was she going to last the rest of the week? She also felt like she

was deceiving him by not telling him everything that happened when her father died and her mother fell ill. She was so in love with him at the time, that it hurt. Even now she knew those feelings hadn't changed. She did her best to try and squash them because she honestly didn't think she was worthy of his attention. He was so popular, rich, handsome and women flocked around him like lint to a t-shirt. She felt so intimidated by all the attention the opposite sex gave him. It was funny though, now that she looked back on it. He always made sure she was the center of his attention.

Was she completely stupid?

Did he really mean all of those things about rekindling their relationship?

Part of her really wanted to, but there were so many barriers, mostly hers. She needed to be truthful with him and she didn't think she could do that, it hurt too much. She was also afraid of his reaction, given his temper. Also there was still the free time issue. She didn't have any. Even though he offered to hire another care giver, she just couldn't give up that responsibility. This was her mother. She loved her. There wasn't a day that went by that she didn't miss her father and wished she took every opportunity to spend extra time with him. She wouldn't make that same mistake twice.

"I have to quit feeling sorry for myself." She said under her breath. She glanced up at the clock and thought maybe she'd do some housework and bake. Colton was too angry to come back in the house for awhile, so she knew she had time to do those things.

As it was, Colton didn't come in for lunch either, and she started to worry that she really upset him. She continued to make herself busy cleaning and baking trying to keep her mind off of it. She did hear the truck start up around noon and when she went to the window, she saw Tom and him leave. She was hoping he at least went to get something to eat in town because that was two meals he'd missed.

Despite that she was going to make a killer supper and made a pot roast with homemade gravy and potatoes. She baked several apple pies for desert and hoped that he would show up. She'd heard the truck return several hours ago, but he still hadn't come in the house.

She'd vacuumed the living room and saw his pain pills on the coffee table so she knew he hadn't taken any that day.

Relief went through her at five thirty when she heard the front door open. She was in the kitchen and without realizing it, was ringing her hands in the dishcloth she held. Tossing it on the counter, she quickly ran her fingers through her hair to neaten it and straightened her blouse. She could hear him removing his boots and moving around in the entrance way. It was hard to not run out there and see him. Then it occurred to her that she'd actually missed him.

Her heart started beating hard in her chest hearing him walk down the hall then practically stop when he walked in the kitchen. He was filthy! He was covered in head to toe in dust and his hair was matted to his forehead in sweat. "What were you doing?"

"Working." He grumbled.

"Colt, Jacob said—"

"To hell with Jacob." He growled, "What's that I smell."

She could see that his temper hadn't changed. He also looked like he overdid it. His expression was taut, like he was in pain.

"Roast and—"

"I'll have a shower and be back in ten minutes." He left.

She just stood there staring at the empty doorway. Now she felt like a complete ass. She'd made him angry and he kept himself busy to work it out.

"Lanie!"

The shout came from down the hall. She rushed out of the kitchen and followed, "Colt?"

"Where the hell are my stinkin' drugs?"

"coffee table. Living room—" she answered finding him in the study rooting roughly through the drawers of the desk.

"Ah hell." He straightened himself, winced and walked out of the room right by her like she didn't exist.

She turned and watched him go down the hall and disappear into the doorway to the living room. Then he reemerged and walked by her again without looking at her as he was fishing a few pills out of the bottle. He went into the hall bathroom. The door was open so she could see him in the reflection of the mirror, pop the pills back and get a drink from the tap. He came back out a few seconds later.

‘Colt, I—“

“Save it honey.” He said abruptly while walking by her, “I’ll be down in ten.” He went up the stairs.

She wanted to apologize. She felt terrible seeing how he was. He must’ve been in a raging temper when he left to work himself like that despite the pain he was in. She went back to the kitchen to get supper set out and started thinking. It wasn’t like she made him act stupid. He managed to do that on his own. Still she felt bad.

She had just finished setting the silverware when he walked in. He was wearing newer jeans and a black chambray shirt. With his contrasting blonde hair, he was startling to her senses. “D—do you feel better?”

‘Not really.” He said taking a seat and finally looking at her, “This smells delicious.”

She sat opposite of him, “I spent all day on it.”

‘I can tell.”

At least he seemed to have calmed down. She watched him as he bowed his head and said grace before digging in. Elaina couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone to church, but this was a common thing with Colt whenever he ate and she had to admit that she admired him for his beliefs. “Do you feel better?”

He filled his plate before he looked up at her, “I’m taking you to work tonight, and I’m staying until your time there is up.”

First of all, he completely evaded her question. Secondly, here he was telling her what she was doing again. She narrowed her eyes, “And what are you expecting? Len to leap on me and ravish me on the bar?”

He pointed his fork at her, “Don’t get smart little girl. I told you how I felt about that situation. I don’t trust him.”

“And I see your mood hasn’t improved.” She shot back.

‘I don’t like you working there.”

“tough.”

He set his fork down and leaned back in the seat while staring at her.

This is probably the look his employees got most times, she thought to herself. It was intimidating, but she refused to bend under it. “I’m not a child Colt. You have no right to treat me like that.”

"I know you're not a child Lanie," he said evenly, "But you are my lover and as far as I'm concerned, I have rights where that's concerned."

She flushed instantly at that word and it rendered her speechless. In actuality, she couldn't argue with that because she was what he said she was. They'd been together and it probably would have reoccurred last night if his injuries didn't stop them. As for the 'rights' statement, she didn't know anything about lover's rules and was unable to respond to it.

"Now that I have your attention, I'm letting you know right now that if Len so much as winks at you, I'm going to tear him in half."

"Colt, you can't just go around beating people up because they look at me." She said in exasperation, "It's barbaric."

"So?"

"Len said he'd ban you from there next time if you wrecked the bar again and there was mention of a restraining order. You're going to get in trouble with the law."

"Nothing new." He said easily. What she didn't know is that he'd easily go to jail for her. Besides there were perks to having a lawyer in the family.

She fumed, "You have got to be the most frustrating person on the planet."

"I'm taking you to work and you're leaving with me." He said ignoring her statement.

She glared at him, shook her head and then proceeded to put food on her plate. There was no use arguing with this bullheaded, obstinate man.

They ate in silence, and when it was over, he excused himself and went the study. She knew he was responsible for running the ranch and that he had some degree in finance from somewhere so he had bookwork to do. Yet, she still didn't like leaving things like that. He was still a little miffed with her. Well, she was mad at him too, but it still didn't make this living with him easier.

She cleaned up the kitchen and called her mother to see how things were going with her and Tammy. She was relieved to hear that they got along great and cut the call short when she started asking about

how she and Colt were getting along. She swore she heard her laugh when she hung up.

Before she knew it it was time to leave. Colton was waiting by the door with keys in hand and a black Stetson on his head when she came down the stairs. She didn't even have to remind him. Gosh he was so darn appealing. How was she supposed to work when she knew darn well that the regular groupies would be vying for his attention. He turned and opened the door for her and repeated the gesture at the truck. Neither one of them said a word.

It wasn't until the drive in to the bar that he spoke.

"Dinner was absolutely amazing by the way."

"thanks." She said keeping her gaze out the side window.

"that apple pie was unbelievable." It was. He'd gorged himself on supper. He skipped breakfast and he and Tom went to town for lunch because he was still mad about earlier. He purposely stayed away and kept himself busy so he didn't lose his temper on her. He already was struggling to get closer to her and that would have undone everything he was striving to accomplish with her.

"I'm still mad at you." She mumbled still not looking at him.

"Yeah, I know." He cast her a sideways glance. "I'm right about Len."

This time she turned her head, "Colt, please don't go there."

"Why don't you just ask him? Put us both out of this misery."

Her mouth fell open, "What? You want me to say, 'hey Len, Colt says that you have the hots for me'?"

He chuckled, "That's not what I meant. Ask him how he feels."

"I can't do that."

"Why not." He glanced at her again, "Lanie, how do you feel about me?"

She brushed her long hair back off her face and his eyes followed the gesture. That alone made her feel that heat low in her pelvis. His eyes were so darn hypnotic. She took a deep breath and looked away again.

"I'm beginning to think that your silence is an agreement with everything."

"Think all you want." She answered.

He chuckled again. "Now you know what kind of reaction to expect when you ask him."

Maybe Colt had a point. She was in love with this arrogant hunk of masculine muscle and she couldn't answer his question because she didn't want him to know. She didn't want to feel defenseless to him. If she did, he'd use it to get closer to her, and she needed to keep that barrier up for her sanity. She was positive he knew she cared about him, but not how much. If she posed the question to Len, and he laughed or shrugged it off, he would be wrong, but if he closed up like she did and didn't answer, Colt would be right. "Fine I'll do it."

He didn't think she'd actually go through with it, but he had to admit, he was glad she agreed.

A few minutes later he pulled into the parking lot, cut the engine and turned to her, "so you're really going to ask him."

She looked at him, "Yes."

"You never answered my question."

"It was a stupid question." She shot before letting herself out of the truck followed by his laughter.

When she walked in the bar with Colt directly behind her Leslie instantly saw her, rushed over and gave her a hug, "I'm so happy to see you." Then she glance up at Colton who towered behind Elaina. "Hi Colt." He just nodded and excused himself after a few calls from a table caught his attention.

"Gosh, he's so dreamy—are you sleeping with him?" Leslie asked.

"Leslie!"

"Well, a girl can dream right. I bet even a little miss goodie two shoes like you couldn't resist that man's sexy body. I mean look at him!" she gestured in his direction, as Colt was taking a seat with his friends. He was a big man and tonight he looked particularly handsome in black. "I bet he's loaded with stamina like a rutting bull—"

"Len says the new girl quit." Elaina stated trying to change the subject. Thank God it worked.

"Yes, she was overwhelmed I think. She didn't like to be manhandled."

"Who does?"

“I do.” She laughed.

Len waved her over then, and Elaina told Leslie that she catch up with her later.

“Thanks so much Honey. I appreciate this. It’s been crazy around here lately. We have a good band and the place has been packed for four straight days.”

“No problem.” She said walking behind the bar and getting her tray. He’d called her Honey again and Colt’s words rang in her head about him liking her. So instead of stewing over it all night she decided to outright ask him then and there. “Len, how do you feel about me?”

He gave her a confused look.

She cleared her throat, “I mean—not as an employee boss thing, but do you feel something more for me than that?” She felt a heaviness in the pit of her stomach as he paused in wiping out a glass to stare at her. Then he gave her a slow smile and she thought he was going to laugh like it was a funny question, but he didn’t. Instead he glanced at the table that Colton was seated at before looking back at her. “Len?” she said hoping upon hope that he’d make a joke, or deny it.

“Well, since you asked, I suppose I should give you an honest answer.”

Please, she thought, just say, no more than a boss cares about his employees. But he didn’t.

“I’m pretty sure I’m in love with you.” He finally answered setting the glass down and placing his hand on the bar while studying her expression. “Possibly from the first day you walked in here.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Why did Colt have to be right?

“Now, I need to ask you something. Did you ask me this because you’re interested in me?”

Oh lord, she didn’t anticipate that. What could she say? He was a nice looking man, a good man to work for and he had a good business head on his shoulders, but he was no Colton Hartley.

“If you’re willing, so am I.” he continued taking her silence as an agreement, “I can be patient. I know you have obligations with your mother, but I’m fine with that. I can help out financially if you need it.”

She felt herself glance at Colt in that instant, and he was looking right back at her. It must've been her expression because he said something to the man he was speaking with and got to his feet and started coming toward them. She shifted her eyes back to Len who was waiting patiently, "I—"

"I know you and Colt have some sort of history Elaina. I'm fine with that. I know your staying out there to help him out while his family is away, but from the way you react around him, I can see that you're not interested."

Is that what it looked like? She supposed it did. She even told Len that she wasn't interested in him, "things changed." She heard herself say.

He tilted his head in disbelief, "What did you say?"

"She said, we're together." Colton interjected, "And If I see you so much as breathe in her direction I'll tear your limbs off."

Elaina fell her face in her hands. What the heck was she thinking asking that of Len? Now Colton was here and she knew this wasn't going to go well. She should have just let things be and not have let him talk her into it. Now she wasn't sure if she could feel comfortable around him anymore.

"Don't you think you should let the lady decide?" Len threw back at him.

"She has. Tell him Lanie." Colt answered without taking his eyes off of Len.

Lenny glanced down at her, "Is that true?"

She lifted her head and looked at him, "No—yes, I mean, maybe."

"Close enough." Colt said challenging Lenny with a unwavering stare..

"Jesus, Elaina, he's got a temper like an angry cobra."

"Not around me." She responded softly, "He's actually a gentleman."

He reached for her hand, "Look, I—" that's all he got out before Colt went over the bar.

So much for the gentleman statement.

After the police took Colt and a few others away in cuffs, Elaina sat down at one of the unbroken tables next to Len who had an icepack on his black eye. His head was tilted back and there was dried blood on his face and shirt.

"Gentleman?" he said darting his eyes in her direction.

"I'm so sorry." She said sincerely. "I've never seen him like that."

"I have, but usually it's the patrons getting the ass kicking, not me."

"At least your nose stopped bleeding." She said trying to find something positive in this whole mess.

"I think he broke it."

It did look broken. She never said anything.

He nodded toward the door, "Aren't you going to go bail him out?"

She shook her head, "No. It'll serve him right for doing this. Besides, there's probably half a dozen other people he can call."

"I thought he had a couple of broken ribs?"

"Cracked, not broken all the way through." Len was right though. The way Colt leapt over that bar was impressive. You'd never know he was injured except for the cast on his forearm.

Lenny tossed the icepack on the table and looked at her. "I'll be closed for a week."

"He'll pay for it." She volunteered.

"Probably. And he'll cover my losses as usual, but Elaina there's a problem here. I can't have him doing that every time some man looks at you."

She nodded, "He knew. He said that you liked me. I told him he was insane. That's why I asked you."

"Well just the same, I can't have him pounding on every man who comes in here and falls in love with you because that's just about all of them."

"Len!"

"It's true. I was probably the only brave one to say it. Now I know why. He's got it worse than I do."

"I doubt that." She looked down at her hands folded on her lap.

“Do you? Do you know that business has picked up twenty-five percent since I hired you six months ago?”

“That’s not true.” She shot him a look of disbelief.

“It is. However, even with that increase in profits, it doesn’t do well for my psychological well being to know that he’s going to keep destroying the business that my father built.”

She waved her arm at the destroyed interior that was now empty, “It’s not like he did all of this. There were at least another dozen cowboys involved, and a few women.” She defended.

“No, but when a fight starts in a place like this, in a town like this, it’s easy to get involved.”

She brushed her hair aside and looked at him, “You’re going to fire me aren’t you?” it was hard to stare at him because of his injuries. She felt so bad about it all. All Len was doing was trying to tell her how he felt. She could kill Colton right now.

“Well, I could ask you to marry me, but I already know the answer to that.” He paused hoping that she’d deny it, but she didn’t so he continued a little more firmly, “I’m willing to say it was an amicable agreement. I think it’s harsh to fire such a good employee. You could keep your job if you break up with him—“

“Len, that’s the problem. We’re not even together!”

He shook his head, “Obviously he doesn’t know that.”

“I’ve told him.”

“Well, he doesn’t seem to listen to either one of us.”

“Of course he doesn’t!” she said starting to get angry again. Not at Lenny, but at Colt and this whole mess he caused, “He’s an egotistical, self-centered, big-headed—“

Len actually chuckled, “You’re in love with him, aren’t you honey?”

“Of course I am!” she waved an arm in frustration, “I must be the stupidest woman on the planet. He bosses me around—“ she looked at him, “Beats up my boss, womanizes, drinks—I’m an idiot.”

“Actually, I think I got a few licks in.”

She took a deep breath and looked up at him, “Sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am.” He said looking around his business, “for this, and for letting you go.” He said looking at her, “I’ll give you an excellent reference Elaina.”

She shrugged, "Once word gets out, I'll never get a job anywhere."

"I can do a lot of things Elaina, but I can't stop that. Half the town was here."

"I know. I don't blame you." She looked around, "I should help you clean this up."

"No, I'll hire a team and send Colt the bill."

Just then Tom walked in, and let out a whistle. "Wow." He said looking around.

"I think that's your ride."

Tom reached up and tipped his hat at her.

"I suppose." She got up as did Len.

"If you change your mind about me, you know where I am."

She gave him a slight smile, "Thanks."

Once in the truck Elaina asked Tom if someone was going to go and bail Colt out.

"Yeah it's being worked on." He glanced at her, "Are you okay?"

"You mean do I have this incredible urge to commit manslaughter?"

He laughed and started the truck, "Colt said you'd be pissed."

"that's an understatement." She said tersely.

Tom dropped his smile and cast an unsure look in her direction. He was pretty sure he'd never met another woman as angry as this one. Well there were a few broken hearts he'd caused, but he could easily walk away. Colt had told him, through jailhouse bars, that Elaina wouldn't because it was Jacob who hired her and she was going to honor that agreement. The fact that she came with him just proved Colt right.

He was curious though, what was really going on between these two. She didn't show his boss any outward display of emotion beyond an acquaintance, but Colt was really tightlipped about it all. It wasn't like he talked about his women, but he was exceptionally secretive about this one. He gave her another scrutinizing glance while she was looking out the side window. He really couldn't blame him, she was well built. A fine female.

Twenty minutes later he pulled into the drive. She thanked him and got out just to be greeted by Peter.

Tom rolled down the window and told her that Colt was thinking that he'd be another hour or so. He smirked as she just turned and went into the house with Peter at her heels. Then he let out another whistle, "What a wildcat."

Elaina went into the house and desperately wanted a hot bath hoping to release some of the stress she was feeling. She lost her job, Colt was a complete jerk, and she was chastising herself for actually taking this job in the first place.

She went to her room and took her anger out on her clothing as she removed them leaving a trail into her bathroom. Peter somehow ended up in her room and made himself at home at the foot of her bed. She let him be. He was harmless and obviously liked human company.

She tossed some bubble bath in the tub and turned on the tap thinking she needed to calm down. No one else came to mind that could fire her up as easily as he could. It didn't help that she was feeling incredibly guilty about Len either.

An hour later Tom pulled into the Hartley's driveway for the second time that day and cut the engine.

"Mad, you said?" Colt asked looking past Tom to the house.

"Steaming." He chuckled.

"Ah hell. I'm not looking forward to this." He opened the door and got out of the truck slowly. He knew he was in the wrong. First of all, he just reinjured whatever healing his ribs had done over the past few days, and secondly he ended up destroying Lenny's establishment yet again. Lance was going to kill him. First he had to get through Elaina's wraith.

Tom chuckled, "You sound like you're married to her."

Colt cast him a warning glare that cut off Tom's laughter before he went into the house.

He sat down on the bench in the hall and grimaced taking off his boots. This pain would be a reminder of his stupidity. He had to lean against the wall for a moment and breathed in and out slowly. His ribs were killing him. It was too bad he didn't know where he left his bloody pills. He lifted his watch and looked at the time. Half past

midnight. He doubted she'd be sleeping because if he knew anything, he knew she'd be too damn angry to sleep. "Elaina!"

No answer.

He knew she was here. Her shoes were on the floor in the closet. He got up slowly and made his way up the stairs.

Meanwhile Elaina was submerged in the tub to her chin. She was listening to relaxing music on her iPod. Suddenly the ear pieces were plucked out of her ears. She popped her eyes open and screeched. Colt was sitting on the side of the tub staring down at her. She immediately covered her chest with her hands. "What are you doing in here!"

"I live here."

"God Colt! I'm naked." She said struggling to cover herself. There were suds in the water but she was sure that he could see through the layer of them. At least it felt like it.

"Yeah." He grinned.

"Get—out!" she seethed.

He held up his hands, "All right, I just came in here when you didn't answer me. I was worried."

"Sure you were," she said sinking lower in the tub, "Get out!"

"I don't remember where I left my pills."

"Kitchen table—out!"

He got up carefully and strolled out of the room like he was in no hurry at all. He even cast a glance over his shoulder with an assessing stare that said plenty.

She pointed abruptly in the direction of the door with a scorching look.

He grinned and left shutting the door behind him.

She slouched back in the tub and slapped a hand to her forehead.

His pills were right where she said they were. He popped the lid off and took three of them. He knew that Jacob said two maximum every four to six hours, but his side was killing him.

Elaina stayed in the tub for another half an hour, without her earphones and a watchful eye on the door of her bedroom. The only reason she got out was because Peter came in and gave her a droopy eyed look. "Why don't you hang out with Colt?"

He tilted his head.

"All right. Give me a minute." she said getting out of the tub. Peter seemed to wait patiently while she dried off and pulled on a robe.

When she opened the door to her room Peter stepped out but then she noticed that the door to Colton's room was shut. She mumbled how inconsiderate he was and went down the hall to open the door enough for Peter who immediately trotted in.

She was about to shut the door when she paused and out of sheer curiosity, opened it wider. As usual it was dark in the room, but the curtains were parted enough to let some light in. She peeked around the edge of the door and felt her breath catch in her throat.

She should have known better to check in on him. He was laying on his stomach, naked and fast asleep. All the blankets were tossed aside and one of his legs was slightly off the bed with his toes nearly touching the carpet. From the looks of the clothes on the floor, he just striped and fell face forward into bed. She guided her eyes over his form. It was shameful, but she couldn't help herself. Gosh, he was so beautiful! From the broad expanse of his shoulders, the sensual curve of his lower back, and perfect round curve of his bottom, all the way down those muscular legs. Suddenly her lips went dry and she ran her tongue over them.

Of course she'd noticed what a magnificent body he had, but for some reason, having him sleeping peacefully gave her the opportunity to really admire him. There was no arguing, no teasing, no sexual tension—well, maybe there was a bit of that.

Who was she kidding; there was a load of it.

There was nothing more that she wanted to do in that moment than go up to that man and run her fingertips along his form all the way from his head to his toes. In fact it crossed her mind to dig her nails into that firm bottom of his.

He lifted his head suddenly and she stilled thinking he'd woken up but he just turned it the other way and went back to sleep. She took that as a sign and quietly shut the door. Only then did she release the breath she held. "Oh lord." She placed a hand on her chest, "That's about the most incredible thing I've seen in a long time." She whispered out loud. Then she raised her chin and marched down the hall to her room. She realized then that she was doing exactly what he

did this afternoon when he came in during her bath. The only difference was that he didn't care if she looked at him naked. Now she was completely turned on.

Even though she was aroused when he had her hoisted on his hips the other night, she didn't understand what he meant when he explained to her about not having a release. Now she did. Oh boy, did she ever. She already knew that she was going to lay awake half the night thinking about that gorgeous man in the next room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning she made him a big breakfast of cinnamon French toast and bacon. She was no longer mad; she was feeling shameful at her behavior the night before. She had no right to go in his room and gape at him the way she did. She never acted so wanton and shameful. Of course she still intended to give him hell about what he did to Len's place, but that could wait.

She glanced at the kitchen clock and noticed it was getting late in the morning and he wasn't downstairs yet. Maybe because of the pain he was in, he didn't sleep well.

She dug around in the cupboards and found one of those lap trays and proceeded to pile his breakfast on it.

A few minutes later she was knocking on the door to his room. She was sure she heard him talking.

"Yeah Lanie come in." came the muffled response through the door.

She opened it and saw him on the phone. He was sitting in bed bare chested with the sheet pulled up just below his waist. In a way she was thankful that he covered himself, but in the same thought she knew that five minutes with the naked upper half would still probably be her undoing.

"Hey Lance I've got to go." He said into the phone looking at Elaina, "It seems I'm forgiven—hell yeah, I won't forget. See you Monday." He hung up.

"Not completely forgiven." Elaina said approaching him, "How's your ribs."

“excruciating.” He grinned eyeing up the tray, “What the hell did I do to deserve this?”

“I’m hired to look after you.” She said setting the tray across his lap while doing her best not to notice the areas of his gender that were easily recognizable through the thin material. This time she couldn’t prevent the blush.

“Well, well, honey, how much have you forgiven me?” he said seeing the blush.

“be quiet. I should poison you.”

He chuckled, “Well, I probably deserved it.” He patted the bed by his hip, “Sit down and visit with me while I eat this incredible feast.”

She shrugged and sat down as he dug in.

“hell I’m so damn hungry.” He said through a mouthful.

She directed her eyes to the sky outside. She couldn’t look at him. His gorgeous thick muscular chest covered in a spray of dark blond hair that trailed down to a rigid flat abdomen was heating her up.

“You like it huh?”

She glanced at him with a questioning look.

“My body.”

“Colton!”

“Here.” He adjusted himself and moved the tray aside. Then he surprised her by taking her hand and placing it on his chest. She tried to pull back but he wouldn’t let her. “Lanie, you do not need my permission to touch me.”

“I’m mad at you.” She heard herself say.

“Yeah I can tell,” he said with a sloppy arrogant grin. “I had this incredible dream last night about a woman with damp ebony hair, and grey eyes, coming into my room.”

She blushed, did he see her? She watched his expression carefully and she came to the conclusion that he honestly did think it was a dream. “Colt—I mean, aren’t you hurting?”

“I can still fool around a bit.”

Her eyes widened, “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?” he said still smiling.

“It’s broad daylight.”

“I know,” he paused, “Are you still shy about this?”

"I can't help it Colt, I've never been with anyone but you. It's hard for me."

"and that's going to stay that way," he said narrowing his gaze, "now come here." He jerked on her arm causing her to fall across him.

Before she could protest, he tangled his fingers in her hair and turned her head to kiss her. Once that started, she was lost. Now both of her hands were pressed against his upper chest and her fingers curled into the dark blond matte of hair there.

"Just a moment honey." He murmured against her mouth.

She lifted up slightly as he reached over and took the tray to put it on the floor beside the bed.

"Colt—"

He knew she was going to protest so when he turned back he gripped her head between his large hands and took her mouth again.

"Your ribs—" she managed to get out as she absently moved ontop of him.

"Are happy with the narcotics Jacob left me. I took two this morning." He whispered back against her lips.

"We shouldn't." she continued.

"Oh yes we should." He rolled her over onto her back. The sheet he wore fell away and her hands roamed down his back. He groaned and slipped his hand under her shirt to caress one of her breasts.

She arched toward him moaning.

"I love the way you respond to me sweetheart, it's like heaven." He murmured against the skin of her neck while caressing it with his mouth.

"I can't help it." She breathed, 'you set me on fire whenever you touch me.'

"This is nothing compared to what I'm going to you when I can really make love to you again."

She sighed heavily as his mouth moved to her earlobe, "I should be running in the other direction."

"I'd chase you." He whispered huskily in her ear.

"Oh Colt, you need to stop."

He chuckled deeply, lifted his head and kissed her softly and looked at her. "We both probably should. Now, tell me we aren't in a relationship."

"You don't play fair." She breathed. He was using his large muscular naked body to persuade her because he knew how he looked to the opposite sex. Worse, it was working.

"No, I never claimed to." He grinned.

"I'm still mad at you."

"Yes, I remember you saying that. I also remember how you mew when I—"

She put her hand over his mouth and glared at him, "Please quit embarrassing me."

He kissed her palm and looked at her with laughing eyes. "I don't think I'm embarrassing you as much as turning you on." He muffled through it.

She ignored that because he was right. "You will pay for all of the damage you did to Len's place right?"

He nodded smiling at her avoidance.

"And you will promise me that you will not lay a hand on him again."

He narrowed his eyes and she removed her hand so he could speak. "Only if he doesn't touch you again."

"He wasn't doing anything wrong." She defended.

"he *touched* you." He tilted his head by design, "And I did warn him."

"Oh for gosh sakes Colt. It wasn't as if he was molesting me."

"I was right about him." He explained, "And I know how a man's mind works. He's playing the sincere passive friend, but it's just to get close to you. I told you that I've seen the way he looks at you."

She shook her head denying it.

"What do you know?" he said a little more irritably, "you have no idea how a man's mind works."

"He fired me."

All trace of irritability was gone with that confession, "The hell you say?"

"He said that you aren't going to stop thrashing people for touching me and he can't afford it."

He started laughing.

“That’s not funny Colt.”

“Yes, it is.” He stopped laughing and stared at her with a smile, “I just means that money means more to him than you do. Whereas, I would never fire you dove, even if I’m broke.”

“You can say that because you’re rich, he isn’t.”

“Oh?” he said with amusement in his voice, “do you think that’s the reason?” he moved on top of her suggestively and she gasped.

“Colt please—it’s unfair.”

“For whom?” he kissed her again, harder this time. He felt her fingernails digging into his lower back and groaned, “Okay, okay, I’ll stop.” He took a deep breath to try and calm himself down. He was so hard it hurt. Then he adjusted himself on her trying to ease the weight of his body and the discomfort on his ribs and she pinched her eyes shut. He grinned again, “Darling, I think you’re trying to seduce me.”

she smiled.

He bent down and kissed her before speaking again, “So, as for this whole incident. Have you forgiven me?”

“If you make things right with Len I will.”

“I will.” That was a little harder to say but he would do it for her.

“Then I forgive you.”

His grin widened, “good.” He moved again.

She could easily feel his need for her against her thigh and her eyes widened.

“See what you do to me?”

“You can’t possibly—“

“No, I can’t, but—“ he lifted up a bit and looked down her front, “I can certainly enjoy this moment. The only problem is, that you still have clothes on.”

Her eyes widened, “And they are staying on.”

“Honey, this shyness thing is really adorable, but I’m dying to see the rest of you.”

“They’re staying on.” She said again. Her voice cracked that time and he chuckled, “You said you can’t do anything, and I’m not stupid enough to be responsible for your injuries no matter how—“ she

was going to say ‘no matter how tempting you are’ but decided to cut off her words and clear her throat, “—get off me.”

He laughed and did as she asked. “How *what*?” he prompted.

“I’m leaving.” She got off the bed and straightened her clothes while flicking him a look and rolling her eyes, “Oh lord.” He was sprawled across the bed naked and she felt her whole body heat up. Quickly she left the room shutting the door cutting off his laughter.

Colt stopped laughing and stared at the ceiling for a moment, “Ah hell, I’m in hell.” He released another chuckle then rolled over and retrieved his breakfast.

An hour later Colt came into the kitchen with the empty tray. Elaina was just taking something out of the oven. “You know that Maria will be jealous if you keep spoiling me like this.”

She jumped at the sound of his voice and dropped the pan. The pie landed upside down on the floor, “Oh no!”

“Ah shit, was that cherry?” he said looking down at it.

“Yes.” She fumed glaring at him, “Why are you sneaking around in here.”

“It’s my kitchen.” He said incredulously, “And you change moods like the wind.”

She made a frustrated noise and grabbed a towel off the counter to clean up the mess. In her frustration she burnt her fingertips on the hot pan.

He was kneeling beside her, “Jesus Lanie.” He took her hand and looked at it.

“I’m fine.” She said feeling stupid at her clumsiness. Of course she changed moods like the wind. He had her wanting him so bad that she had no control over her emotions. She couldn’t even stay mad at him for what he did to her place of employment.

“no, your fingertips are turning red.” He stood up pulling her with him to turn on the cold water and run her fingers under them.

She hissed when he put them under the tap.

“Maybe I should get you to see the doctor.”

“It’s not a bad burn, I’m just being a baby.” She said sheepishly. They were red but not blistering.

He turned and looked down on her, "Well, seeing you hurt, no matter how small breaks my heart."

She stared up at him, "Did you say lance will be home Monday?"

"How come you always change the subject when I get close to you?"

"How come you insist on it." She pulled her hand out of his grasp.

He placed his hands on his hips, "Because little girl, I know who you need to belong to, and despite your continued protests, which I'm getting tired of, you need to realize that to."

"I'm not a piece of furniture."

"Lanie, just give in."

She rubbed her forehead with her good hand, "I can't Colt."

"The hell you can't." he didn't care if this was going to hurt. He reached for her.

He moved so quick that she couldn't even get a word out. He'd pinned her back against the breakfast nook trapping her while at the same time seizing her mouth with his. A moment later she felt her t-shirt being pulled out of her jeans and lifted over her head. After that, her bra pants and underwear followed.

Without realizing it she had unbuttoned his shirt and her hands were everywhere on him.

He reached behind her and hoisted her up on the countertop. Then he shed his shirt, grabbed her thighs and pulled her tight against him. Now her height was level with his.

Elaina felt powerful completely forgetting about her nakedness, the broad daylight, and even his injuries. Only one thing consumed her mind.

She wanted him.

His arms encircled her and he moved his head lower. She cried out and threw her head back when he took hold of her breasts in his mouth.

"Colt!"

"Tell me you want me." He breathed against her chest.

"I do." She rasped out.

"Louder." He murmured.

“I do!” she near shouted.

That’s all he needed to hear. She clung to him as he reached down and undid his jeans.

“Now.” She said scraping her nails down his back.

“Oh Christ.” He groaned while freeing himself. She thought she was impatient. He was sure he had her beat. Just having her naked body wrapped around his was enough to make him come.

He lifted his head and took her mouth again. She was making those sweet little noises that he fell in love with. They only got louder when he was in her. He coached her forward on the counter so she was completely against him and positioned himself before he thrust upward and buried himself deep in her with a guttural groan.

She gasped, “Oh lord—again.”

“Baby you don’t need to tell me twice.” He flattened her out on top of the counter and began to move in her with a steady rhythm. He could see her, all of her in the daylight streaming through the windows of the kitchen and honest to god nothing looked as magnificent as that. She had one of those bodies that could stop traffic on a rainy day. A perfect hourglass figure that fit to his body like a glove. She was definitely made for him.

She reached for him and he gripped her hands and pinned them beside her head while their mouths met in rasping breaths. Perspiration started forming between them which eased the friction of flesh on flesh.

He was right, she did increase those sweet sounds when he was in her, and Christ did it turn him on! Releasing one of her wrists, he reached under her bottom, “tilt up a little—Oh God—that’s it!”

She felt it too. She may not have had any experience, but his was making up for it.

Exquisite pressure started building low in her pelvis and shot out to her limbs, then it ruptured into a million pieces and she swore she might have blacked out until she heard his own roar of release.

He moved his elbows up beside her head to ease the weight of himself on her while looking down at the most beautiful satisfied expression of awe he’d ever seen.

“This is crazy.” She finally said.

“Of course it is. That’s what makes it so incredible.”

She turned her head sideways looking around then back at him.

“What?”

“I forgot that we were in the kitchen.”

“I’ll never be able to look at this counter the same again.” He said with a sly grin.

She laughed, “Colt, you are crazy.”

“Only for you honey.” He kissed her softly before erecting himself and pulling her up with him, “We should perhaps get dressed before Tom or someone else comes in here.”

“Oh lord!” she hopped off the counter and started to snatch her clothes of the floor.

“Of course,” he grinned down at her, “If you want to do housework like that, I have one stipulation. I want to watch.”

“You’ll be the death of me.” She said with a shy smile before running out of the room to the bathroom down the hall.

“And you me.” He said to himself while placing a hand against his ribcage. In his excitement, he was able to ignore the pain, but now it was catching up to him.

She was back in about ten minutes and paused at the kitchen door while looking at him. He’d just started buttoning his shirt and glanced up at her. Gosh, he was so startling. Even more so because of what had just occurred, then he grinned. She turned away unable to look at him anymore. “How are your ribs?”

“Agony.”

She brought her eyes back laced with guilt, “Oh Colt—“

“But worth it.” He said shaking his head, “Don’t you dare feel bad.”

She looked away again, “What the heck am I doing?”

He approached her in several strides. His shirt still wasn’t tucked in, his jeans were zipped up but not buttoned and his belt hung loosely below his shirt, “Hey, I don’t think I gave you much of a choice.”

“This is so messed up. I just can’t get involved with you.”

“Is there another man Lanie? I mean I know you haven’t been with anyone else, but is there someone you—“

“Of course not.” She pushed her hair off her face so she could look at him without any obstructions. He needed to see that she was serious, “I really don’t have time for this.”

“Well, you don’t have a job anymore. I was thinking htat you could come work for us.”

“And this thing between you and me, do you expect it to continue?”

“Tell me you didn’t feel the earth move under us.”

Of course she did.

“Again the silence.”

She waved a hand and turned away, “I just wish this was less complicated.”

“this isn’t complicated.” He countered, “We care about each other and we’re doing something about it.”

“My mother comes first.”

He took a deep breath. Truthfully he was getting tired of her not excluding him in her life. Especially after what they just shared. Didn’t she realize that the way they were together wasn’t normal?

She knew he was getting angry with her from his lack of response. Any girl would jump at the chance to be with him, but this was complicated. He just didn’t know about everything! It was too late to let him in on it all. She’d made some stupid mistakes and going back wasn’t an option. “I’m sorry Colt.” She said softly.

“I’m not asking again.” He said tersely. “I’m getting tired of this game.” He left the kitchen while doing up his jeans.

She fought back the tears knowing she was to blame for everything. She shouldn’t have let it get so far but every time that man got around her she lost her head. He was just so darn—potent.

A few minutes later she heard the front door slam. It was just as loud as the other day except it had a profound effect on her today. She felt it all the way through her. If Lance was coming back Monday, she wasn’t going to look back when she left.

As it was he never came in for lunch and when he came in for supper he barely said two words to her. When he was done, he complimented her, tossed his napkin on the table, got up and left the room.

She just sat there staring at the empty doorway. He really was angry this time. Too angry to even talk to her. She couldn’t blame him. She’d let him do things to her, then shunned him. She was hot and cold with him all the time. Actually she was surprised he was so persistent.

After she cleaned up she went by his study to go to bed and saw that the door was closed but there was a light under it. Pausing she put her ear to the door. Nothing. She really hoped he wasn't drinking. If anything she knew that this would make an ordinary man drink. She even thought about taking a bottle of wine to bed. However, Jacob wasn't paying her to drink.

The next couple of days passed and his demenour didn't change at all. On the last night she decided to try and talk to him.

"Colt we can't keep this up."

He tossed his napkin on his plate and stared at her. "Talk then."

"We can be friends."

One of his brows rose, "So you're saying whenever I feel the urge to get laid, I should give you a call."

"No, of course not!"

"Then enlighten me." He said sarcastically, "If you don't want a bump buddy, what is it you're looking for?"

"Don't be so crude."

"There's nothing else to be said then, because you won't talk to me." He accused, "Don't expect me to wait around until you deal with your issues anymore. I've waited two goddam years and nothing's changed."

"I told you from the beginning that I can't have a relationship!"

"Yes, you did. Shame on me for trying to understand."

Her expression softened, "Colt—"

"I'm done Lanie. I'm tired of being hung up on a girl that doesn't give a shit." He got up and left the room.

She watched him leave. What the hell was she doing to herself? She should have never come here, or never even have let him touch her. He may think he was suffering but she was feeling it tenfold.

The sad thing was, is that she really loved him, but she had other responsibilities and she was scared to death to let him near her emotionally.

The next morning Colt didn't come to breakfast, but she knew he wouldn't. Around five in the morning she heard the truck start up

and then fade in the distance. As a result she didn't even bother making him anything besides herself a couple of pieces of toast.

She'd already packed her bag and set it by the door. Around ten she heard the door open and her heart started to hammer in her chest, but it was Tom that appeared in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Colt told me to make sure you got home."

"Oh." She got up and carried her mug and plate to the sink.

"You okay Elaina?"

"Never better." She forced a smile and turned around to look at him.

He tipped his hat back a bit on his brow, "Well, if it's any consolation he's about as happy as a trapped wolverine."

She shrugged, "He'll calm down."

"Only when a few men get canned, and I have to pick up the slack."

"Serves him right." Was all she said as she walked by him.

Him? thought Tom incredulously, *I'm the one that will be pulling double shifts.* These two have to be the two most stubborn people he'd ever known. He picked up her bag and followed her out the door.

Elaina thanked Tom for the ride hardly noticing the fact that he was shaking his head as he drove away.

When she got in the house there was a note there for her from Tammy saying that she'd taken her mother to a social tea in town. She had to admit that Tammy was one of the best people she'd ever met. In a sense she was glad that she was alone. She needed some time to unwind.

After she'd unpacked she went downstairs and made herself some tea when the phone rang. It was Len.

"You're home."

"Yes, I guess Lance is due back today so Colton didn't need me."

"Yeah, he said you'd gone home when I called."

She swallowed hoping he didn't say anything else to Len. "He did?" she hoped her voice didn't falter.

"Yeah, Listen Honey, if you want your job back it's yours. Colt made sure that he was generous in compensating me with what

damage he did. He apologized too. I don't think he's ever done that before."

"he did?" she sounded like a broken record, but she was stunned.

"Yes, he didn't ask me to rehire you, but I figure that all's well, and I do need you."

"I don't know Len. I mean—the things you told me."

"I promise, on my father's grave that I won't make a move towards you unless you tell me to."

She took a deep breath. She needed the job. "okay then."

"Great! I'll schedule you in for tomorrow night."

"Okay. See you then."

"Bye."

She hung up. Back to where she started six months ago, only this time her broken heart was fresh.

Shortly after that she heard the front door open and Tammy and her mother came in. After an exchange of hugs and 'missed you's' Tammy helped her mother lay down. Elaina made some coffee and it was ready when Tammy came back in the kitchen.

"How was your stay at the Hartley's?"

Elaina gave her a mug and a look before turning and getting her own.

"Oh. I see."

"I hate him." She murmured turning back to the other woman.

"did you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

Tammy stared at her for a moment then she nodded and pulled out a chair at the table and sat down. "I've been in love with Lance going on a year now and he doesn't have a clue."

"What?" Elaina said softly taking the seat across from her.

"It's true." She confessed with a smile, "I met him in New York when Tess got in that accident—"

"I remember that. Didn't she get run over?"

"Yes, but she's tough." Tammy laughed, "Anyway, in struts these three drop dead gorgeous men, two dark haired and one blonde. Well you could have heard a pin drop as all the females on the floor held their breath at the sight. Jacob and Lance wore these really

expensive dark suits, and Colt had on jeans and a dark brown chambray shirt. I remember it like yesterday because it was an image that you don't see often. Some of my coworkers thought they were shooting a movie or a magazine spread nearby to see three men like that together. They all wore these cowboy hats, which I know now, are call Stetsons."

Elaina found herself smiling at the image Tammy gave her.

"It just so happened that I was the nurse assigned to their precious Tessa. Gosh she was such a doll, and brave." She added, "Not once did she feel sorry for herself."

"That sounds like her."

"Jacob, I learned his name later, was in there like a dirty shirt making all sorts of demands, with that tall handsome stud Lance standing behind him. If anyone tried to argue, it was the only time he said anything and it usually had something to do with 'lawsuit'."

Elaina laughed.

"Try being on the receiving end. We were afraid to breathe around the three of them."

"I can only imagine."

"It was obvious that they had money, I mean, they dressed like they were a fashion magazine's dream."

"I bet."

"However, I saw how they were around her, they adored her."

"She grew up with them."

"That's what she told me. Anyway, she had a great sense of humor and it was funny that she didn't realize how much Jacob doted on her. I mentioned it several times and she just shrugged it off."

"Sometimes its hard to believe that a man like that could fall for an ordinary girl."

Tammy paused then and looked at Elaina, "You think *you're* ordinary?"

She shrugged.

"Elaina, I think you're one of the most beautiful women I've ever met."

"thanks." She said shyly.

"I mean, I would kill for those grey eyes of yours. Not to mention your flawless skin, long, thick black hair or—"

She held up a hand, "Thanks, but stop—please." She chuckled.

“Colton was off limits then.”

She perked up, “When?”

“When Tessa was in the hospital. He hardly noticed other women,”

“I think we were dating about that time, but we broke up soon after.”

“Can I ask why?”

“My father died, and my mother became really ill from the stress.”

Tammy sat back in her seat and tilted her head slightly.

“What?”

“That’s it?”

“Mom needed a lot of looking after.” She continued.

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

Elaina flushed slightly, “I was exhausted.”

“You’re lying.”

Elaina’s jaw fell.

“I’m sorry Elaina, I’m a nurse. People tell me things all the time and I can see a partial truth as clear as day.”

“I—I can’t talk about it.” She said averting her gaze.

What Elaina didn’t know is the way she said it, narrowed the field down significantly, “Does Colt know the whole story?”

She shook her head still not able to meet her gaze, “I ignored him for two months and he found someone else.”

“Oh gosh,” Tammy said reaching across the table and taking her hand, “how horrible for you. That was a tremendous amount of stress for someone so young.”

She felt tears forming in her eyes. She’d never talked about this with anyone. It was obvious that Tammy knew exactly what it was from what she said next.

“Where’s the baby?”

“I lost it.” She choked out.

“Oh no.” she got up and went around the table to hug her.

“Elaina, sometimes things just happen because they aren’t meant to be.”

She sobbed into Tammy’s shoulder, “I was so devastated—“

“I bet you were. How’d did your mother take it?”

“She doesn’t know.”

Tammy pulled back and looked at her with an expression of shock and empathy, “You never told anyone?”

She shook her head. “now.”

“Elaina, no one can deal with that tragedy by themselves. You are probably still grieving.”

She wiped her eyes with the heels of her hand, “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does!” Tammy interjected. “It’s something that can cripple you emotionally.”

Well that made sense.

“Look, I’ve counseled people who have had miscarriages. I’m not saying that’s what I want to do here, but let me ask you something. Have you had a relationship since then?”

Elaina shook her head.

“Have you had trouble getting close to a man?”

“You have no idea.” She laughed out loud without humor. “I lost our baby and I just couldn’t face Colt. I see how he is with Tess and Jacob’s daughter and it breaks my heart that I took that from him.”

Tammy crouched down in front of her to make sure she had level eye contact, “Elaina,” she said softly, “It’s not your fault.”

Elaina burst into tears.

Tammy hugged her again, “It’s not your fault. I can’t believe you’ve been suffering like this for several years. Like I said, sometimes a baby isn’t meant to be.”

“I kept thinking—“ she hiccupped, “—that if I ate better, tried to get rest—“

“Oh Lord, that’s not the issue here. A perfectly normal pregnancy can handle stress honey.”

“I don’t know.” She said shaking her head.

“it’s true.” She countered, “You can’t keep blaming yourself.”

“I was so stupid.”

She released her again to look at her, “Elaina, I can’t believe that you’ve been carrying this guilt inside for several years. Any other woman would have cracked by now. This is a horrible way to beat yourself up.” She stared at her, “I have to say one thing, you have to be the toughest gal I know.”

She smiled at her. She had to admit, that it felt like a veil was lifted just talking about it.

"There's a group in town." She got up and grabbed her purse to rummage through it. Then she pulled out a card, "I mean, they talk about things like this. It's purely confidential, and it may be helpful." She handed the card to Elaina.

She took it and stared at it, "I don't know if I can discuss this."

"You can go and just listen. There's no pressure to talk." She assured her, "It may help. You will see that other women go through everything that you've just described. It's nice to know you're not alone. It may help with the healing."

"Thanks Tammy. I do feel a bit better." Actually, she felt a lot better.

Over the next few days Elaina did feel better. On Tuesday night she was back to her job, and Len stayed true to his word. The only problem was, every time the front door opened she'd glance there to see if Colt was coming in. She should have known better. She'd never seen him as mad as he was when she left. He had given up on her. A sickening feeling started in the pit of her stomach and she couldn't shake it.

And if things couldn't get any worse Leslie was starting to bother her a bit. It was fine until she approached her halfway through the evening and started talking about the Hartleys.

"How come you didn't tell me that Colt owns the Lansdowne Ranch."

Elaina just gave her a look that said what-difference-does-it-make? "Everyone knows that."

"Well I didn't. And to think that I gave up that stud for Tom."

What Leslie didn't know was that Tom was wealthy too, well, she heard rumors like his parents had a big cattle ranch down in east Texas, "I didn't think it was that important to you."

"Does it look like I want to spend the rest of my life serving drinks?" she shot at her.

Len looked back and forth at the both of them but never said anything as he filled their orders.

"What?" Elaina didn't notice because of what Leslie just said.

“Come on Elaina, who are you kidding? You can’t tell me that this is your career choice. Look at Maryanne,” she pointed to an older waitress that was slightly overweight and wore too tight clothing and too much makeup, “Do you want to end up like her?”

“Leslie, that’s a horrible thing to say. Maryanne is a very nice person. She’s been married for twenty years and has two boys. She’s trying to put the oldest through college.”

She stared at her, “Is that so? Well, I’m only being honest. I don’t want to end up with varicose veins and work like this knowing I can use my looks to get ahead.”

She never thought that Leslie could have turned so ugly. She knew that she liked men, but to be shallow like that and only be concerned for herself surprised her.

“I mean, don’t you have something planned for your future? It’s obvious that Colt likes you. Maybe you should work your way in there.”

“I’m not like that.” She said defensively. There was no way she could compromise her morals for being some man’s mistress.

Leslie snapped her mouth for a second and looked at her. Then she shrugged, “Yeah, you are a goodie two shoes.”

“I’m beginning to resent that phrase Leslie.” Elaina said starting to feel angry.

“I’m sorry Elaina, I’m not trying to offend you. I didn’t mean to sound so negative. I just don’t understand why a girl who looks like you doesn’t use that to secure your future. I mean you could marry Colt and he’d take care of you financially.”

Elaina decided to accept Leslie’s apology mainly because she had to work with her, and she also didn’t know what type of childhood, or upbringing she had to instill those values in her. Furthermore also didn’t want to reveal that he’d offered to do just that and she turned him down. “Colt would sniff someone like that out in an instant.”

“Really?” Leslie said with surprise, “How do you know?”

“Because he’s never really been serious about anyone and there have been a lot of women like—” she paused not wanting to insult her.

“Like?”

“You—sorry.” She winced slightly. The type of woman that would go to bed with a man because of his looks and his wealth.

Leslie didn't take offense, "That's fine Elaina. It's nothing I haven't heard before, yet, usually it comes much worse. You say it like it's a compliment." She added with a laugh.

That just confirmed to Elaina that Leslie probably hadn't had much of a break in her life. "Tom's a great guy." She added.

"I know." Leslie said, "And he's great between the sheets too." She grinned.

Elaina never said anything but collected her order and left.

"Leslie, there's no need to advertise your exploits." Len said setting a beer on her tray.

"Jealous." She grinned.

He shook his head as she walked away. Then his eyes guided to Elaina. It was hard not to say anything like he promised, but she looked even more beautiful than she did last week when she didn't know how he felt about her. Colt had been more than generous this time in paying for the damages and cleanup and he wondered if Elaina had made him feel guilty. He was sure that it wasn't often that Colt felt the need to apologize. Yet, he came to him face to face to do it and handed him a blank check telling him to fill it out for whatever he needed and add twenty percent for himself.

Len just gaped at him. "Elaina put you up to this didn't she?"

"She doesn't know I'm even here." He said, "Sorry about your eye and your nose Len. You're a decent man. I should have been more even tempered, but when someone touches her I see red."

Len actually understood that. He was even tempered and when his customers manhandled her, he got angry, but he knew that she could handle herself most times.

The Hartleys were good people and they gave a lot back to the community and it was true that Colt had a reputation but he never backed out of his responsibilities. So he held out his hand and Colt shook it.

"Once more though Colt and I will have to ban you from here."

He made a pained face, "Yeah, I suppose I should grow up sometime. Thanks for understanding."

A commotion snapped him back to the present. He saw Tom stand up and holler something across the room. He guided his eyes

there just to see Leslie sit on the lap of another man and lean down to whisper in his ear.

He'd spoken to her about this on many occasions, now all hell was going to break loose and he'd just gotten the place open again. He rushed around the side of the bar just to intercept Tom.

"Not here Tom."

"Let her go Darcy!" he shouted over Len's shoulder while trying to push past him.

"Leslie get up and get to work!" Len barked at her.

She shot him a scowl and got off Darcy's lap just to get a slap on the ass. Laughing she walked by the two.

"You're wasting your time Tom." Len turned to him after Leslie strutted off.

"I'm beginning to think so." He said casting a glance in the blonde's direction. "It reminds me of something Colt said the other day."

Len was satisfied that Tom seemed to have calmed down and released him, "You're going to leave this be right?"

Tom finally looked at him, "I guess."

"Good." He moved out of his way just as Tom made to turn away. Then in a split second he swung back and was practically airborne as he piled on Darcy over the table. "Damn it!" Len hollered at Josh, his newly hired muscle to help tear the two apart.

It was Lance that answered the phone at one in the morning when the sheriff called. "Ah hell, how much damage was done?"

"Not as bad as what Colt pulled off last week." Said the Sheriff. "A broken table and some chairs. I think Lenny's gotten wise. He hired a bouncer. Needless to say, the fight didn't last long."

"That's some good news I guess."

"Also, one of the barmaids got hurt."

That perked him up, "Who?"

"I don't know, I was busy wrestling down your lead hand— Just a minute I'll asked the deputy." There was a brief exchange of words before he came back on the phone, "Matt says it's Elenore— Elaine—"

"Elaina." Lance offered.

“That’s sounds right.”

“Shit.”

“You know her?”

“Yeah. She’s a pretty nice gal.”

“Well, your nice gal refused the ambulance and so her boss took her to the hospital.”

Chances were, it’s because she couldn’t afford the bill, thought Lance. “Do you know the extent of her injuries?”

“She was walking, but holding her arm. I think a couple of those big men landed on her by accident. That’s all I know, sorry.”

“I appreciate the news.” Lance wasn’t sure what had happened between Elaina when he was gone but Colt was in a sourer mood than when he left for that week and he was certain it had something to do with her staying there. He knew they had a history and Colton never really seemed the same after they had split up several years ago. He went a little wilder and until lately he was beginning to get more worried about his little brother. Although he did promise to lay off the alcohol after Jacob talked to him and he began to feel better about him, this news, depending on what was going on between the two, would probably set him off. “As for Tom, all of that will come out of his paycheck including the bail.”

“Do you want us to keep him until morning? He did have a lot to drink.”

“I’d appreciate that, I’m in bed. It’ll serve him right.”

“All right Lance.”

“Thanks Doug.” He hung up, and laid back down staring at the ceiling. He had a mind to fire Tom. Well, he really couldn’t fault Tom, he certainly wasn’t learning by example. There was a reason why Lance was on a fist name basis with the law enforcement, and it certainly wasn’t due to having criminals as clients. Colt had pretty much set that standard.

He heard a noise and turned his head toward the wall of his room. Colton’s room was next door. Did he hear the phone and it woke him? He got out of bed and went to check on him. Since he’d been home, he’d noticed that Colt was in the habit of misplacing his pain pills so he wondered if he’d gotten out of bed to find them.

He knocked twice on the door and went in. He spotted him in the bathroom splashing water on his face. "Colt?"

Colt dried his face on the towel and ran his fingers through his hair before facing him, "Yeah Lance."

"Are you hurting?"

Colt reached for something on the counter out of Lance's few and came back with the bottle of pills shaking them, "No, I've been diligent."

"Did you hear the phone?"

"Yeah but I was using the bathroom."

"If it didn't wake you, why are you up? We have clients coming early in the morning."

"Yeah, Tom can handle them."

"Tom's in jail."

That perked him up. "Jail? Tom?"

He nodded toward the phone on his brother's bedside table, "That was the sheriff on the phone."

He chuckled, "That's surprising."

"I'm debating on firing him."

Colt waved a hand, "Leave him be Lance, it was probably over that barmaid. The one Elaina works with. They've been seeing each other and she's—well—"

"No need to explain." He nodded toward him, "What's with the boxers. You sleep in the raw?" Lance himself usually wore pajama bottoms and was bare chested.

"Oh, Lanie came in here once when I was up and butt ass naked. Shocked the hell out of her. She turned to leave and ran into the door." He grinned and rubbed the back of his neck while looking at his brother, "It gave her a bloody nose so I got into the habit of wearing them."

Lance felt himself smiling over the image, "Well I don't need to hear anything else, but there's something you should know. Elaina got injured in that brawl."

Colt's smile dropped and he swore while moving toward his dresser.

"What are you doing?"

“To go see her.” He pulled open the top drawer and started removing clothing.

“She’s probably at home now, and it’s one thirty in the morning.”

“I don’t give a shit.”

“Colt, remember, she looks after her mother.”

He paused, “Dammit.” Then he shut his dresser drawer. He knew that Lanie didn’t sleep well at home because of that. If he went and hammered on the door at two in the morning, she’d be really angry especially if he woke her mother up. “did Doug say how bad she was hurt?” he rested his hand on top of his dresser and turned his head sideways at his brother.

“Sounds like she hurt her arm. Her boss took her to the hospital.”

“Of course he did.” He scowled, “He probably comforted her all the way there.”

Lance’s brows rose, “Jesus Colt, you sound jealous.”

“Of course I’m jealous. He’s been drooling over her for months. It pisses me off.”

“Are you guys together?”

“No.”

“so you like her but you’re not going out.”

“She won’t have me. It’s not the other way around. Apparently her life is too busy.”

It’s not like any of them to talk about their love lives so if Colt was going to, it was obvious that he needed someone to listen. He knew they were dating years ago, but neither he nor Jacob knew they’d broken up until Colt started seeing other women. They all liked Elaina, but it wasn’t their business to ask what was going on at the time. It wasn’t until recently that Lance had found out about her mother when Jacob mentioned it thinking that Colt knew. What surprised him most is that the woman wouldn’t have Colt. Colt never had trouble getting a girl he wanted even if it was short-lived because he got bored with them. Elaina lasted almost a year.

“So I gave up.” He continued.

“Let me ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Does this middle of the night waking happen often?”

Colt never said anything.

Lance was persistent, and worried, “Colt is this common?”

“Sometimes.”

“Is this what’s been bugging you lately—Elaina.”

“Yeah.”

Lance didn’t realize that he liked her that much, so much that he was waking up in the middle of the night. “well, I guess your behavior makes sense then.”

Colt just shrugged. “There’s nothing I can do about it.”

Lance went back to his room thinking about that. Colt was obviously lovesick. He’d witnessed Jacob go through the same thing when he sent Tess to New York. However, unlike Elaina, Tess was madly in love with Jacob and when he went after her and asked her back she followed him. Now they were happily married with a daughter and another child on the way.

This was different. From the sounds of it Elaina didn’t want Colt. Well, he supposed that was retribution for the years of womanizing that Colt had done since he was sixteen. It was only fitting that one woman would rock his world and not return the affection. That’s not to say that Jacob and he didn’t do the same things, but Lance was a year younger than Jacob at thirty five and still hadn’t had intentions of settling down. Although he had been thinking about kids lately. Maybe that had something to do with Emily, his niece. She was a doll. However, you needed to be married to do that, and he hadn’t found a woman he felt he could spend the rest of his life with.

Elaina was still at the hospital when Lance and Colt were discussing her. She was grateful and surprised to see Tammy working in Emergency. She was the one that came in with the paperwork for her to sign when the doctor finished his examination.

“You can’t get enough of me.”

Elaina actually laughed, “I’m beginning to think so. I’m also beginiong to think that you don’t sleep.”

“I work here once a week just to keep up my skills.” She nodded toward the arm, “It’s good to hear that it’s just a sprain.”

“Not really. I can’t work with a sprain.”

“Oh sorry, I never thought of that.”

“It’s okay, I’ll figure out something. I always do.”

“who’s the big fella that brought you in.” she said retrieving the clipboard with the papers on them after Elaina signed them.

“My boss.”

“He has a thing for you huh? I was busy in another cubicle when he walked you in. He’s not bad looking.”

She shrugged then winced and laughed, “Gosh this is going to be hard to get used to. As for Len, I don’t think of him like that.”

“No I suppose not, because he’s no Colton Hartley.” She winked.

Her words exactly.

“Anyway, I’ll be back in a few and fit you with a sling so you don’t move that arm too often.”

“Thanks—Tammy?”

She paused, “Yes Elaina?”

“for everything.”

She smiled, “Anytime.” Then she left.

It was another half an hour before she was able to leave, and Len waited patiently in the waiting room. She didn’t want him to get the idea that she had to have him with her in the examination room. She already knew that he cared about her, so she didn’t want to think that she needed him more than beyond a friend. Already she was wondering if him driving her there would change things. Unfortunately she couldn’t afford the bill the ambulance would have caused so she had to accept the ride from Len. She really hoped he didn’t think anything because of that.

Elaina awoke at two the next day. After she got cleaned up and dressed she went downstairs to find her mother drinking coffee and watching TV. Her eyes went to the sling on her arm. Her brows rose in question.

“There was a bit of a fight at work.”

“And you joined in?” she added with humor.

“I got in the way, but I’m fine.” She smiled, “Thanks for the concern.”

“Honey, you can’t work with a wrecked arm.” She continued, “does Len know.”

“I know. Don’t worry mom we’ll figure something out and Lenny drove me to the hospital to get this.” She moved her arm slightly that was in the sling.

“I’m not worried sweetheart, I know things will be fine.”

“Always the optimist.” She smiled, “Love you mom.”

‘you too.’”

The phone rang and Elaina answered it. Speak of the devil. It was Len.

“How are you today?” he said as soon as he heard her ‘hello’.

At the same time there was a thunderous pounding on the door. “Just a minute Len, someone’s at the door.” Her mother wasn’t able to get up and answer the door as quick as she could. Yet, she should have known that that noise could only be caused by a large fist, but she was caught off guard because she was on the phone. It was Colt.

She paused at seeing him. He was exceedingly handsome in a jeans, a pale blue western cut shirt and tan Stetson. At the same time she knew this wasn’t going to go well. Obviously he heard about the fight. Well, he should have, it was started by Tom, or Leslie rather, who actually thought it was cool that two men fought over her.

His eyes scanned her quickly. He could see she was on the phone, but it was the sling around her left arm that caught his attention. He lifted his eyes back to hers. “Can I come in?”

She sighed and turned away leaving the door open.

“Honey are you still there?”

“Yes Len.”

“Len?” said the deep voice behind her as he stepped into the house.

She pinched her eyes shut before glaring at him over her shoulder to keep quiet.

“Who’s that—Colt?”

“Oh lord—Len what did you want?”

“Just to see how you’re doing and if there’s anything else I can do to help.”

“I’m still alive and it doesn’t hurt that much.”

“How long did the doctor say that you’d be off work?”

“Four weeks.”

“Four weeks?” Colt said behind her, “I’ll kill him.” He was referring to Tom who was bailed out this morning by Lance and when he got home just barely evaded a beating by begging for his forgiveness over Elaina.

“It wasn’t me, I swear to god Colt.” He said, “Another two guys got bumped into and they started going at it. Poor Elaina was behind them. Please just ask her before you take my teeth out!”

Elaina swung around and put her finger to his lips to silence him.

“Hang up the damn phone.” He said tersely.

“Be quiet.” She countered. Didn’t he figure it out yet? She did not like to be told what to do.

“I—uh—better let you go, it sounds like you have your hands full.” Len said. “Can you come by the bar later, I’d like to talk to you.”

“Yes, okay, I’ll do that.” She hung up and swung around to face Colt, “can you not be so rude?” She only agreed to Len’s request because she had to get off the phone to deal with Colt.

He wagged a finger in her face, “I told you how he feels about you and I don’t like you accepting help from him. He’ll make you feel like you owe him.”

Actually she was thinking the same thing and Colt caught it.

“You know what I’m talking about. I know that look.”

She shook her head. “What do you want?”

“Unlike Len, I want to see if you’re really okay and—why the hell didn’t you call me?” he gestured to her arm.

She threw up her arms, “You told me that you were done. I figured you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“I was pissed off Lanie. I tend to say stupid things when I’m irate.”

“Then you must be angry a lot.” She shot back.

He placed his hands on his hips and stared down at her, “Can’t you just go a few minutes without raising my ire?”

“for heaven’s sake you two. You’d wake the dead.” Came Debbie’s voice from the doorway.

“Sorry Ma’am.” Colt said tipping his hat.

Elaina just stared at him incredulous. He told her that she could change moods like the wind, but that charm came so quick that she had to give her head a shake. What's worse, is that her mother fell for it.

She nodded and set her eyes on her daughter, "Don't be so stubborn. Invite him in and get him some coffee."

"that's sounds nice." He said with a grin setting it back on Elaina.

She would never argue with her mother in front of him so she glared at Colt and went into the kitchen with him following.

"The only reason I'm doing this is because I don't want to upset her." She said in a harsh whisper while thrusting a mug toward him, "coffee's in the pot."

He smiled and poured himself a cup. "I can offer you a job."

"I'm broken." She said using his words.

He chuckled, "I think you can still cook, light housework. Like I said Maria is getting arthritic and would like the help. I'd offer to just pay for everything out of my good nature, but I know for a fact that you wouldn't take it." Of course Maria wasn't arthritic, but he wanted her with him where he could keep an eye on her.

"You're right." She bit her lip while staring up at him. Len had offered her the same thing, and she knew that he wasn't going to like it.

"And, what is it that you're not telling me?" he said seeing the gesture.

"Len asked me to come by work later, I think he's think of trying to find me something to do so he could pay me."

At those words Colt's expression instantly darkened and he set his coffee mug on the counter in a visible act of restrained anger while staring out the window over the sink.

She could have counted to ten slowly at that pause and she knew it was because he was trying to control his temper. "Colt—" she was going to say 'don't start', but he interrupted her.

"That son of a bitch will think that he can get you on your bloody back Lanie." He said in a low voice laced with fury.

Her mouth fell open.

When she didn't answer he turned to look at her. "If you think I'm going to stand by while he makes a fucking play for you, you are out of your mind."

Her eyes widened. She'd seen him angry plenty of times, but this was pure rage.

"You're in a vulnerable position and like hell I'm going to stand by while he puts the pressure on you."

"I have some integrity!" she defended.

"You are too damn trusting!" he countered, "You didn't even know how he felt until I pointed it out so don't think you know everything that a man is capable of to get someone like you in the sack."

"For Gosh sakes Colt!"

Up came that finger again, "The only one that is ever going to touch you until I say different is me!"

"You have some nerve—"

"Shut the hell up Lanie, I'm not done."

She clamped her mouth shut.

"Now, as of now, you and I—" he darted that same finger back and forth between them, "—are and item and the next time you think you have the brass balls to tell me we aren't you better come armed!" with that he left the house and slammed the door behind him.

She just stood there with a stunned look on her face.

"Well, I guess he laid that out." Her mother said coming in the Kitchen with the use of her cane.

"did you hear that." Elaina said gesturing toward the door.

"Honey, I think half the town heard it," she said with a sly look, "Any coffee left?"

"Mother?" she said exasperated, "Didn't you hear how he talked to me?"

"Yes, poor bugger." She said pouring herself a cup.

"poor *what*?"

"Dear, you need to open your eyes. That boy is in love with you."

Now she was rendered speechless again.

"He wouldn't be that angry if he wasn't." she explained.

"What's the problem with seeing him again?"

She looked away and shrugged her shoulders.

"Now Elaina, I always hated it when you closed up like that. I know you don't want to get hurt again, but you weren't truthful with him over my illness. You can't really blame him for seeking love elsewhere after several months of being shunned. He's a man. They take rejection differently than women do."

"I don't really blame him. I mean—not as much as I blame myself mom, I already resigned to things being over between us."

"I'm sure he doesn't blame you from that display I just witnessed, so the only person you're hurting is you."

"I know mom."

"So stop it."

She looked back at her, "It's not that easy."

"Of course it isn't. Welcome to life. The only regrets you'll have is when opportunities like this pass you by without you trying."

"He's so frustrating. At least Len doesn't make demands on me."

"Yes, but you don't love Len." Her mother said wisely before she left the kitchen.

She leaned back against the counter thinking that as much as she wanted to she couldn't deny her mother's words. Of course she didn't love Lenny, at least not as long as men like Colton Hartley walked this earth. They ruined a girl for anything else.

"Call him." Came a voice from down the hall.

"Oh lord." She said rolling her eyes heavenward.

Several hours later Elaina pulled her old ford into the empty parking lot of the bar. She told Len she'd be by, but she actually should have went when there were more people there. She was nervous around him now that she knew how he felt.

"Oh well, better now than later." She said out loud to herself while shifting the truck into park and cutting the engine.

Len was stocking the cooler behind the bar when she walked in.

At the noise of the door opening and closing, he looked up and grinned, "Hey you came?"

"You said you wanted to see me?"

“Yes, I was thinking. I feel responsible for that.” He nodded toward her arm in a sling. “You know we don’t carry insurance for employees, so you won’t have any income for the four weeks. I could however, put you behind the bar mixing drinks.”

“With you?”

“Yes.” He answered, “It’s been busy enough and I hired another girl earlier this afternoon to fill in for you until you heal.”

She swallowed hearing Colt’s words in her head, “I really don’t want to put you out.”

“You’re not. I honestly need the help.” He stood erect and looked down on her sensing her hesitation, “look, take tonight and think about it. I’ll give you a paid night off.”

She nodded, “I will.” Even though she said she’d think about it, she really had no choice. She was going to have to accept his offer. Already she knew that Colton would be furious, but she couldn’t live her life trying to win approval from him, she had to work.

When she got home she was really tired and found herself falling asleep on the sofa for a nap. Her mother woke her for dinner. “Gosh I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

“Well you’ve been through a lot lately.”

“I guess.”

She got up and followed her mother to the kitchen where they had a pleasant meal with casual conversation. She was thankful that she didn’t push her about Colt again.

After dinner she cleaned up and helped her mother get ready for bed. Usually she watched TV for a bit, but she was still tired and decided to go to bed and read a book instead. That lasted maybe five minutes before she fell asleep.

Colt’s mood hadn’t changed several hours later when he got home. Tom saw him striding across the yard in a pace that said he was still angry. He really couldn’t blame him. From the way he reacted last week when he tried to get information out of him over Elaina, he should know he’d be fit to kill over her getting hurt because of him.

It was that whole issue that made him realize that he didn’t need a girl like Leslie in his life. She’d already called several times

that morning but he'd told her that he was too busy to speak to her. Truth of the matter was, he was blinded by how good she was in bed. The Hartley family meant more to him than a good lay and he wasn't willing to risk his friendship or his job for someone that he was certain would leave at the sign of something better. Several times she'd asked him how much money he made and he never thought anything of it and told her. Now he knew what Colt meant to watch out for women like that. What she didn't know, is that he told her how much he made, but not how much he was worth.

His parents were wealthy, older and now deceased. He was left a small fortune in an inheritance. However, he never liked the thought of having so much responsibility and running their business, so he went to college, got a degree and worked not because he had to, but because he wanted to.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elaina shifted nervously on the chair in the waiting room. Tammy looked up from her place on the other side of the counter and winked at her. Elaina couldn't help but relax a little at that. She was turning into a really good friend.

Last week went well at the bar, but she started feeling ill in the morning and dread filled her. When Tammy came to help her with her mother on Saturday she confided in her. Tammy said she'd get her in to see the Doctor on Monday. Usually you had to book almost a month in advance to get in there, but she was glad that she had Tammy as a friend.

Unfortunately her regular Doctor, Doctor Samuels was away for a few days so the only appointment she could get was with Colt's brother Jacob who came back last week from his convention.

She was terrified.

Tammy assured her that Jacob wouldn't say a word to Colt no matter what happened and made sure that Elaina was the last appointment of the day so no one else was around.

Just then Jacob came down the hall, smiled and motioned to her. She stood up and felt her heart started hammering in her chest as

she followed him down the hall. It wasn't normal for a doctor to come out and get his patients, so she was sure that Tammy had mentioned something.

Instead of taking her to an exam room he led her to his office and asked her to take a seat.

"Is something wrong?"

"of course not Elaina." He said softly, "I just wanted to talk to you without the sterile surroundings of the clinic."

Actually that made sense and it eased her anxiety a little.

Also, he moved the other seat beside her so that it was semi facing her before he sat in it instead of sitting behind his desk. She realized later that he did everything in careful calculation to ease her discomfort and she developed a tremendous amount of respect for him over that.

"Tammy says that you suspect that you might be pregnant." He said studying her expression.

"I—I'm pretty sure I am." She said with a degree of difficulty. It was hard for her to share things with anyone. Prior to her miscarriage when she was nineteen, she never told a soul that she suspected she was, and it wasn't until she dealt with horrible cramps did she go to the hospital. Fortunately it was her regular doctor that was working emergency that night and until recently when she told Tammy, no one knew but the two of them.

"Did you want to talk about this?"

She hesitated before she nodded slightly. He was different from Colt, not just in hair color, but his demeanor was quite welcoming and relaxing and she actually felt she could trust him.

"Now," he grabbed something off his desk. "Tell me when you think this happened."

"The river." She said without thinking causing him to give her an odd look.

"Oh God." She fell her face in her hands and he burst into laughter. He meant when she thought she got pregnant not the location and specifics. She could just die.

"I'm sorry." He said bringing his laughter under control, "I know you're nervous. I just never had a patient tell me that before."

"I'm so stupid."

“No, you’re scared. Now—“ he cleared his throat trying not to laugh again, “When was the incident at the river.”

“About four weeks ago.” She finally said blushing furiously.

Lifted the object he had in his hand which looked like a circle within a circle, and he turned the inner one, “Just checking your due date.” He said seeing her curiosity.

“Aren’t you going to do tests or anything?”

“Yes, but first I thought you’d like to know.”

She did.

“Looks like the last week of April.”

She smiled for the first time.

His eyes went to her pleased that she was feeling a little better. “I had Tammy pull your chart from Doctor Samuels records.” He reached over and picked it up off his desk. “I have a feeling that you didn’t tell Colt that you had a miscarriage several years ago.”

Even though she was sure that Jacob knew that his brother was the father, hearing it just put it all in perspective. She felt her eyes water, “What did Tammy tell you?”

“That you were in love with my lunk head of a brother and pregnant with his child.”

She released a half laugh half sob at that. It was right on the mark.

“I won’t tell him Elaina.”

She nodded feeling a wash of relief go through her and he handed her a tissue because she was crying now.

“you should have never gone through that alone. Colt would have stood by you.”

“I know that now.”

“You’re twenty one and you’ve lived a life time of responsibility. Now history is repeating itself, and more than likely your thinking of doing this again, I mean, coping with this pregnancy on your own.”

She turned her head away, “It’s not like we planned this.”

“I’m sure it isn’t. Tess and I didn’t plan Emily either, but we couldn’t be happier.”

“You love Tessa.” She said. Colt didn’t love her.

“Very.” He smiled, “But I needed to wake up just like Colt does. Do you know that he doesn’t sleep at night?”

“Yes. He—I discovered that when I was out at the ranch.” She said brokenly and blushed.

He smiled meeting her eyes, “Well, did you know it’s because of you?”

“What did you say?”

“He told Lance it’s because of you.”

“Really?” That was news. She just thought that it was normal for him.

He nodded, “do you know this has been going on for at least six months? I’m pretty sure that falls under the ‘he’s crazy about you’ category.

She actually laughed, “You’re a nice man Doctor Hartley.”

“My wife tells me that every day.” He chuckled.

Outside Tammy heard the door open and she looked up to see Colt walk in. “Oh dear.” She mouthed to herself.

“Tam, is Jacob busy. He told me to stop by and get my ribs x-rayed to see if they’re healing right.”

“Uh—yes, but—” she hopped up rooted around in a drawer and came around the counter with a container in her hand, “he wanted a sample.” She couldn’t think of anything else on the spur of the moment. She only knew that she needed to get him out of there so Elaina had an escape route.

“A what?” he said taking the container and looking at it.

“Well, when someone’s on narcotics, we need to check levels in the urine.” She thought she lied beautifully.

“You’re pulling my leg.” He stared at her in disbelief.

She shook her head.

“I’m not pissing in no damn cup.” He tossed it on the counter. “Where’s my brother?”

“He’s with a patient, so you might as well go and do this while you wait.” She continued trying to sound stern and retrieved the cup from the counter. “It’s this or Jacob telling you to do it.”

He took it again and looked at it like it was diseased, cursed out loud and stormed into the bathroom.

Tammy kept the false smile on her face until the door shut. Then she herself released a curse and took off down the hall to Jacob's office.

Jacob was giving Elaina some information pamphlets and going over them thoroughly when Tammy burst in.

"Colt's here." She said in a rush of air.

"Oh no!" Elaina shot to her feet. "How am I going to get out? I can't let him see me."

"I'll talk to him." Jacob said.

"It's okay, I have him in the bathroom getting me a urine sample. We can sneak you out, but you have to leave now."

"A what?"

"Urine sample." She repeated with a smirk.

"How the hell did you do that?"

"I lied like a log." She admitted.

"Oh thank you!" Elaina said while quickly gathered her stuff.

"Remember we have an appointment next week." Jacob reminded her as she was going out the door.

"I won't forget, thanks for everything."

Tammy quickly rushed her down the hall. The problem was, the bathroom doors were right there and as soon as they got by the men's washroom the door opened and out stepped Colt.

"Screw this Tammy I'm not—"

Elaina ran right into him, and because of the size and mass difference, bounced off him and landed on her rump on the floor.

"What the hell—" he looked down and all anger dissipated at seeing her and was replaced with concern, "Jesus, Lanie are you all right?" he bent down and picked her up like she weighed nothing and set her on her feet.

She brushed her hair back off her shoulder looking up at him and tried not to let her fear show.

"What are you doing here and where are you going in such a damn hurry?"

"I—I had an appointment." She fumbled.

Jacob came down the hall at that moment.

Colt looked around at all of them, "What the hell is going on? Jacob's not your doctor."

“Doctor Samuels is away.” Tammy interjected.

Colt took a deep breath and scanned the three again. At first he would have easily thought it was a check up for her sprained arm but everything about this was laced with suspiciousness. “I hate being lied to.” His eyes settled back on Elaina accusingly, “I also don’t like to be told to go piss in a cup so my girlfriend can be snuck by me without my knowledge.”

“I didn’t agree to that.” She said referring to the girlfriend statement. She was trying to get him off the subject of why she was there, but she should have known that it may work on Leslie, but not an intelligent man like Colton.

“So?” he said as if it wouldn’t have made a difference, “Now what the hell is going on?”

Elaina’s shoulders fell, “I—“

“What are those?” Colt pointed to scattered papers on the floor.

Elaina turned and looked down. The pamphlets that Jacob gave her were strewn at her feet.

Colt bent down and picked up several of them and read them while he slowly erected himself. He always prided himself on being an intelligent man, but the information he was reading was sure taking it’s time seeping in.

You could have cut the silence with a knife the tension was so thick for Elaina as he scanned them. Then his honey brown eyes lifted to hers. To her he didn’t look furious, he actually looked shocked.

“A baby?”

“I’ve got to go.” She turned and walked away. Tammy followed her.

Colt went to go after her, “Now wait a minute—“

Jacob grabbed his arm, “Leave her be Colt. She’s got some things she needs to sort out. If you go after her and start making demands, she’ll shut you out completely.”

“Like before.” He said quietly watching her leave.

“Yes, like before.”

Colt looked at his brother, “A baby?”

Jacob smiled, “It’s kind of mind blowing isn’t it?”

“Ah hell, what am I going to do?” he removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, “She won’t talk to me.”

“Be patient.”

“I’ve been patient for two years, she still hasn’t come around.”

“Once the baby starts to grow, she’ll need to turn to someone. Give her some time.”

Two weeks had passed and Colton’s mood got worse with every passing day. He’d listened to Jacob because he was experienced with these types of things. He was older, wiser, and possibly a lot more patient whereas he wasn’t.

The only good thing that had happened in the last week is that Jacob removed his cast and told him that his ribs had healed enough so he could go back to normal activity.

So he did.

He’d be out by five in the morning and didn’t come in until midnight. He was trying to keep his mind off of Elaina, but it was getting harder with every passing day knowing that she was bloody stubborn and his child was growing inside her.

At the same time Elaina was working to try and save money for the baby’s arrival. However, Len’s subtle suggestions about him taking care of her were starting to get on her nerves. In the past few days not once did he call her by her name, but insisted on using ‘honey’ and ‘sweetheart’ instead.

Leslie was also beginning to weigh on her patience. She was constantly asking her if she’d seen Tom. Apparently she’d been phoning him and he hadn’t returned any of her calls, or when he did answer he cut the conversation short. Finally Elaina just told her that she didn’t seem interested in him until he started a fight over her and she’d better just grow up.

Leslie hadn’t spoken to her since.

In some ways she was relieved, in others, she felt guilty for hurting her feelings.

However she decided that tonight was the night that she was going to tell Lenny about her pregnancy. As she approached his office door she was surprised about how nervous she was. Regardless she needed to let him know, he was her boss. She knocked softly and heard his ‘come in’.

When she entered he was sitting behind his desk going over some paperwork. "You feeling okay honey?" he said looking up.

She cringed at the use of the pet name and Len's voice in the same context. "I'm fine."

"You seem a little pale, and I've never seen you speak to anyone like you did to Leslie the other day." She looked at him, "Don't get me wrong. She deserved it. Actually she'd probably deserved it awhile ago."

She turned to him, "Len can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

"It's just that—well, I've noticed that you call me honey a lot and you don't call any of the other girls that."

"I don't?"

She was pretty sure he knew that. "It makes me uncomfortable."

He looked a little put out, "It does?"

"I mean, you told me how you felt, and I told you I don't feel that way, but you still use those endearments."

"That's because I still want you."

She pursed her lips and stared at him.

He stood up and came around the desk, "I offered marriage before, if you remember."

"I didn't think you were serious." She breathed.

"I was. I can take care of you, your mother and I know I promised not to bring up my affections again, but I find it really hard working beside you when I'm so crazy about you."

She took a step back as he moved forward causing him to pause.

"I'd never hurt you hon—Elaina."

"I'm sorry, it's just instinctual. I'm not really used to being touched by the opposite sex."

He lifted his chin slightly, "except Colton Hartley?"

"That's different. We dated when I was younger."

"I see." He already suspected that. "so are you hung up on him?"

She took a big breath, "I'm going to have his baby Len."

"The hell you say." He said completely stunned. "What does he think of this?"

"I—I really didn't give him much time to respond."

"Are you going to marry him?"

She never even considered that. Her concern was for the baby and not experiencing another miscarriage, "I—he didn't offer."

He folded his arms across his chest, "If he asks then, are you?"

"He doesn't love me."

"So the man has to love you? I love you and I offered marriage but you turned me down."

"Len, you really don't know me. You don't know my mother, or the responsibilities I have. It was an unfair offer."

"I think I'm getting a good bargain." He countered running his eyes down her form.

She tried not to flinch under his heated appraisal. Despite how unattached she was to Lenny, she couldn't hurt him for all that he'd done for her. "I can't."

"Because you don't love me, but you love Colt." He said it as a statement not a question.

She only nodded.

He ran the palm of his hand over his bald head, "Christ."

"I'm sorry Len."

He turned away for a moment and placed his knuckles on his desk deep in thought.

"Len?"

He nodded and turned back to her, "I'll still marry you."

Her eyes widened, "What?"

"you need a father for that child."

"I can't—I have to give Colt a chance."

"Elaina! Do you think a womanizer like Colton Hartley is interested in being a father?"

"I don't know." She hadn't heard from him in weeks despite his strong proclamation of them being together. However, it's not like she welcomed him with open arms. He had to fight tooth and nail to get anything out of her. "But this is his baby."

"This offer is not going to stay open forever. I can take care of you."

“I don’t want to be taken care of Len. I appreciate the fact that you are willing to marry me even though I’m going to have Colt’s baby, but he needs to have a chance to adjust to this, just like me.”

“She’s right.” What Elaina and Lenny didn’t realize is that the door was ajar and Colton had come in the bar looking for her unable to stay away anymore. He stopped outside the office door and listened. It was hard not bursting in there and putting his fist in Len’s face again, but he heard Jacob’s words of being patient in the back of his head and decided to listen instead. When Len asked to marry her, he’d heard enough.

Elaina and Len swung their heads toward the opening door as Colt stepped in. She blushed wondering how much of the conversation he heard. From what he said next he didn’t miss anything.

He glared at Len, “I told you to stay away from her. I made myself clear several times.”

Len didn’t back down. He took a step toward him, “Colt, men like you just take from women like her without thinking of the consequences! It’s guys like me that pick up the pieces.”

Colt himself took a step toward Len until they were only about a foot apart, “I heard the lady turn you down, so maybe you should accept defeat.” At the same time he reached over, gripped Elaina’s arm and pulled her behind him concealing her with his large form.

“Colt—“

“Be quiet Elaina, I think you’ve said enough.” He shot over his shoulder. Then he turned his attention back to the other man, “As for my girl and my child Len, you’d better take a step back. She’s giving notice as of now.”

“I’m not!”

He ignored her, “consider this her last day. You can send her check to my address, because that’s where she’ll be from now on.” He turned and gripped her arm dragging her out of the office.

“Colt—Let go of me!” she flushed beet red as he kept a steady grip on her arm while passing the customers and an open mouthed Leslie.

“Not until I get you home.” He seethed marching her through the front doors of the bar toward his truck. “I had your mother moved out there earlier this afternoon.”

“What? You can’t do this!”

“Like hell. I’ve been more than patient where you and my baby are concerned, but damn it, I’ve had it. You are going to marry me as soon as I can get a bloody license and this child will be born with my name!”

She snapped her jaw shut. He was raging mad and she knew not to argue with him until he calmed down a bit. She was also shocked to hear the word ‘marriage’ come out of his mouth.

He opened the door and helped her in before going around to the driver’s side. Without a word he started the vehicle and ripped out of the parking lot sending gravel flying everywhere.

“I can’t go home with you.” She finally said after a few minutes.

He clenched his jaw.

She saw the telltale muscle bulge there and knew he was trying to restrain himself from tearing her to pieces. However, she couldn’t go on lying to him. “colt would you pull over please.” She said softly.

Her tone had changed so abruptly that he darted her a look wondering if she was feeling ill, “Are you going to throw up?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not pulling over.” He said abruptly.

“I—need to tell you something. It’ll change your mind about marrying me.”

Now that got his attention.

In an instant all kinds of horrible things were going through his mind, “Did you have an affair with Len?”

She made a faced of derision, “No!”

“Was there another man? Is the baby not mine?”

“Oh god! I can’t believe—pull over the bloody truck!” she screeched. “Or I’m going to open the door and leap to my death!”

Not only did she never scream at him like that, but she never swore, ever. He pulled onto a side road, went down a few hundred yards, cut the motor and turned to her. “Out with it.”

She glared at him and grabbed at the door handle in frustration, shoved it open and got out.

He cursed and followed suit.

She was standing a distant away with her arms folded under her breasts when he spotted her in the darkness of the night.

“Jesus Lanie, what can be so bad than what I just mentioned?”

She tilted her face up to his and he saw tears spilling down her cheeks.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” his chest hurt at seeing her like that. It was the second time he’d seen her cry and he didn’t like it at all.

“I lost the baby.” She sniffed.

His expression fell and he was totally unprepared for the feeling of dread that went through him, “Oh hell.”

She didn’t realize how she’d put it when she saw his expression, “oh Colt! I don’t mean this baby. Gosh I’m so screwed up! I meant our baby two years ago.”

It took him a minute to absorb that and with it all of the events that went on over the past few years. “You lost a child?” he finally said.

She nodded, “yours.”

“Christ Lanie, you went through that alone? Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” he said softly.

“It was my fault.” She sobbed, “I didn’t use protection—”

“Jesus, that should have been my responsibility, not yours. What the hell did you know about being with a man?”

She shook her head, “Just the same. The baby—I lost it.”

He approached her in several strides and gathered her in his arms lowering his head on hers, “Honey, that wasn’t your fault.” He murmured against her hair, “Sometimes things like that happen and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“It was my fault.” She wretched against his chest.

He thought that he should be angry with her not telling him at the time, but it seemed as though she suffered horribly for it on her own. She’d taken full blame for the pregnancy and the loss of the child. He had to remind himself that she had to grow up very fast with her responsibilities and never had the opportunity to ask for help.

“It could happen again.” She continued, “And you would marry me then lose the baby.”

He lifted his head and pulled her away from him so he could look her in the eyes, "Is that what you think? That I'm just being honorable and marrying you because you're pregnant with my baby?"

She nodded.

He tamped down his frustration. Didn't she get it by now? Obviously not. She was used to handling things on her own and this was just another task that she had undertaken to dealing with by herself, "I was getting set to propose when you were nineteen." He confessed while studying her expression carefully, "but you refused to see me."

"what did you say?"

"Lanie, I was in love with you the first day I laid eyes on you when I saw you through that window in the salon. My heart was yours."

She started weeping again.

"I have never been serious about a woman before that, or after that. I've never written poetry for another woman either. Doesn't that tell you something? I know I was a complete bastard afterwards but I'd never been celibate for a year before. I was willing to wait for you and Lanie, it was worth it. I would have done anything for you."

"No, I didn't know." She said, "I've never been in a relationship until you."

"I knew that at the time, but I didn't realize what it encompassed. You were so naïve. However, so was I. I had never been in a serious relationship in my life." He said sincerely, "Now, as for this baby. We're going to make sure that you take it easy and that Jacob monitors every abnormality. I don't want to lose this baby as much as you don't."

She burst with joy and threw her good arm around him, "oh Colt, I love you! I've always loved you."

"You have no idea how long I've waited to hear that." He held her tight, "Now marry me baby. Say yes and I swear I'll never let you go again."

"Yes!" she rushed out in a breath of air and kissed him all over his face. It felt as though he just lifted the weight of the world off her shoulders with that confession. She thought he'd hate her for not telling him about the first baby. She made a silent promise never to keep anything from him again.

EPILOGUE

“Sit down Colt. You’re making me nervous.” Said Lance.

Colt glanced at his watch, “How long does this take?”

Tess smiled, “Well considering the size of the father compared to the size of the mother, they’re going to need to make a big incision.”

“Tess.” Colt said stopping and staring at his sister in law with a helpless look in his eyes.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry.” She smiled giving him a hug, “You’re just so worried. Jacob’s in there. If anything goes wrong, he would have come out and told you by now.”

“He would, wouldn’t he?”

“Yes.” She enforced, “Now please just relax.”

“It’s just she went into labor a week early and they wouldn’t let me in there.” He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair just as Jacob came into the waiting room.

Everyone stood and stared at him.

His eyes roved the three and settled on Colt.

“What?” Colt said starting to feel that anxiety again.

Jacob grinned, “Congratulations dad, a boy, and almost ten pounds worth.”

“Oh thank God.” He said feeling his knees weaken just as Lance clapped him on the back near toppling him over.

“The baby is healthy.” He continued, “you can see him in a few minutes, but Elaina will be under the anesthetic for a while.” He looked past him to the other two, “Colt only.”

“Jacob!”

“Sorry honey,” he smiled at his wife, “You can see him tomorrow, but we need to monitor him carefully for the first twenty four hours, it was hard on him.”

“How hard.” Colt said renewing his worry.

Jacob held up his hand, “Nothing that your strapping son can’t handle.” He grinned. “Come on, this way.” He swept his arm toward the door.

Elaina heard voices and tried to open her eyes.

“Zane Montgomery Hartley.”

She pried them open to see Colt standing over her. He had a look about him that she never saw on him before. It was profound pride.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it.” She smiled up at him finally figuring out that it was the name he’d chosen, “you didn’t waste any time.” They had decided to hold off on giving the baby names because she was too worried they were going to get ahead of themselves and naming their unborn child would make it more devastating if she lost it. Colt gave her that grace because, as he said, he loved her.

“He’s beautiful.”

“He?”

He nodded, “I must admit he looks as handsome as I am.”

She released a laugh and winced. Her abdomen felt like someone just stabbed her.

“Jacob said you need to hold a pillow there if you laugh, sneeze or cough.” He offered, “You are a tough gal Lanie. You should see the *size* of that baby.”

“I love you.”

He paused and smiled widely. “Baby, you just gave me the world.”