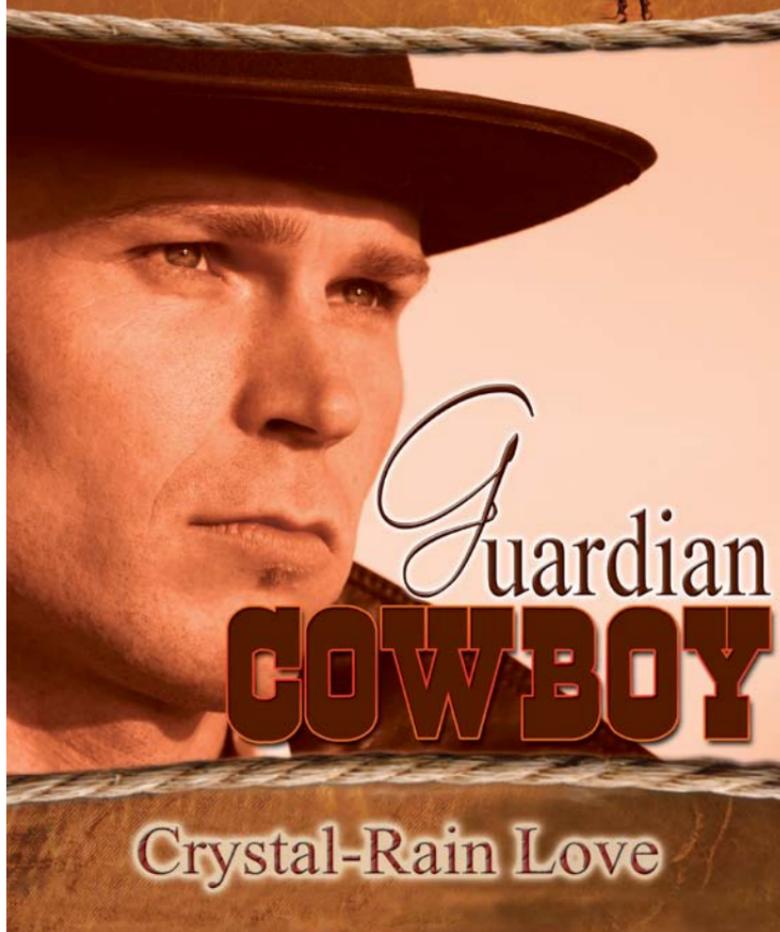


From the Series  
**WAYBACK TEXAS**



*Guardian*  
**COWBOY**

Crystal-Rain Love

Amber walked forward until she could see the gun. The cowboy hadn't set it on the hood like she'd thought, but had placed it under a windshield wiper to keep it from sliding off under the onslaught of rain. Staring at the weapon, she felt stupid holding the rock and let it fall to the ground. There were four miles between her and the next town, and she had no working vehicle. No shelter. No food. No water. Her clothes were soaked through, and her only protection from the elements was a Stetson. "What do I do?"

As if answering, lightning streaked across the sky followed by a deep roll of thunder, then rain came crashing down harder. Amber grabbed the gun, double-checked it was in firing condition, and trudged toward the passenger side of the truck.

She jerked the door open and aimed the gun at the cowboy, who looked at her with raised eyebrows. "I *will* shoot you, cowboy."

He nodded his head, still looking at her sideways. "Fine, but can you get in and close the door first before you let all the rain in?"

Amber let out a huff of breath, irritation from his lack of fear easing back a little of her own. She could feel the warmth coming from the vents in the dashboard and craved more. She swung inside the truck and closed the door, keeping the gun steadily pointed on the large man next to her. "I mean it, cowboy. One wrong move and there goes a testicle."

# Guardian Cowboy

by

Crystal-Rain Love

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

Guardian Cowboy

COPYRIGHT © 2010 by Crystal-Rain Love

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: [info@thewildrosepress.com](mailto:info@thewildrosepress.com)

Cover Art by *Tamra Westberry*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0708

Visit us at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

Publishing History

First Yellow Rose Edition, 2010

Published in the United States of America

## **Dedication**

For my mom, whose Elvis obsession rivals  
Miranda's.

Another great addition to Wayback, Texas!

~Cindy Spencer Pape, author of  
*All the Way Back* and *After the Rodeo*





## Chapter One

“Come on!” Amber kicked the side of the blue Omni and let out a scream of frustration. “Not now, you piece of shit. Not now!”

Rain fell softly from the sky, mixing with the tears leaking from her eyes. It had been coming and going in spurts for the last twenty minutes, at one point falling so heavily the windshield wipers had barely been able to keep up. Amber had managed to keep the car on the road through it and the need to curl up and sleep, not that it mattered now. The damn thing had died.

“Shit!” She brought her fists down on the roof of the useless car and rested her forehead on them, ignoring the beads of water pummeling her. What was she supposed to do now? Carmen had loaned her the car and enough money to get by until she made it to Mexico and could get a job to support herself. If she paid for a rental she’d be left with nothing. Not that she had much left anyhow.

She couldn’t call Carmen. Richard would surely be waiting for her to screw up and do just that. Then the demon she ran from would track her down and drag her back to hell.

Thunder rolled through the night sky and for a moment the darkness was chased away by a powerful burst of lightning. “Of course.”

Amber looked both ways down the interstate and gasped on a sob. The car was stuck on the side of the road and nothingness stretched in both directions. The last sign she’d seen had mentioned a town. Way-something. She couldn’t see the sign clearly through the rain, but she saw enough to

know it was a good number of miles down the interstate. And those were long miles to be walking in a storm. The only available option was to sleep in the car and wait out the storm. Amber grabbed the handle of the door and pulled. It didn't open. "What the—No!"

She wiped the wetness from the window and peered inside. The keys were in the ignition, and the lock was pushed down, just like the locks on the other three doors. It was sealed up good and tight. "I just had to get out of the car and throw a hissy-fit." She could break a window, but that would let the rain in, not to mention any psychos who happened to travel down the interstate. Amber was walking to the nearest town, whether she wanted to or not. The only other option left was lying down and waiting to drown. As tired as she was, that option almost looked good. But she'd come too far to give up on freedom now.

Resigned to her misfortune, she took a couple of steps forward, and halted at the sound of an oncoming vehicle. Turning back, she caught sight of two headlights cutting through the night and stepped off the road.

The vehicle turned out to be a big, black truck. It slowed as it neared, and pulled off the road to park a few feet in front of the Omni. The driver's side door opened and a tall, masculine silhouette with a Stetson on climbed out. Amber tensed as the stranger rounded the side of the truck and approached. He was at least six feet tall, maybe more, and the black T-shirt he wore stretched over powerful shoulders and a chest that had to hold as much muscle as his corded arms. The black Stetson hid his eyes, and that frightened Amber more than anything. The eyes showed many things about a person, and without seeing his, she had no clue what kind of person was under that hat.

“You having car trouble, darlin’?” His voice was deep and thick, as formidable as his stature.

Amber didn’t think, just reacted. The closest weapon to her was a big rock. She scooped it up and drew her arm back, ready to throw. “Stop right there, buddy.”

The man abruptly stopped, raised his hands up to show nothing rested in them. “Whoa there, hon. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Jeez, was that drawl for real? Well, she *was* in Texas. “What are you, some kind of a cowboy?”

The slash of mouth she could see in the dark curved upward. “Something like that. I also know a thing or two about cars. I can look at your engine and see if I can get you going.”

Sure he could. He could also hog-tie her and take her right back to Richard. Amber risked a quick glance at his license plate and saw he was from Texas. Well, the truck was from Texas. The man could be from anywhere. “Where you from, cowboy?”

“Wayback. It’s a town about four miles that way.” He jerked his head to his left. “Were you coming in for the rodeo or passing through?”

Amber opened her mouth to answer, then snapped it shut. The man didn’t need to know her story. They’d both be a lot safer that way. A loud boom of thunder ripped through the night, and Amber jumped, nearly dropping the rock. She clenched her hand around it tighter.

“Why don’t you sit in the car, sweetheart, while I take a look under the hood? There’s no sense both of us risking getting struck by lightning out here.”

If only she could. Amber started to tell him the doors were locked, then thought better of it. It just didn’t seem like a good idea to tell the big stranger she had nowhere safe to lock herself away if he turned out to be a psycho. With her teeth starting to chatter from the cold seeping through her blouse,

she shook her head and stepped back a few paces. "I'll stay out here and watch."

The cowboy shook his own head and stepped forward. When he was within a good grabbing distance of her he raised his arm. Amber flinched.

"Relax, darlin'." He removed his Stetson and set it on her head. "I'm just trying to keep a little rain out of your eyes since you're too stubborn to get out of it."

Lightning crashed, illuminating the world long enough for Amber to get a good look at the cowboy. He was a good-looking man with sharp cheekbones, a straight nose, and eyes the color of dark chocolate with a few pieces of caramel worked in. Eyes that could make a woman melt like chocolate. *Don't go there. He could still hurt you. Richard was good-looking, too.*

The cowboy tilted his head to the side, letting water roll off his dark hair as he studied her. Amber could feel the weight of his perusal all the way to her bones. After a short, tense moment, he shook that attractive head and took the two steps that put him before the car. "Can you pop the hood for me?"

*Crap.* Amber had forgotten about the hood release.

"Never mind. I'll do it myself." He sighed and took a step toward the driver side door.

"Wait!" He cocked his head, raising a dark eyebrow as Amber wracked her brain for a way to keep him from knowing she was locked out of the car. "The hood release doesn't work."

"You're kidding me."

"Sorry." She shrugged. "Can't you just open it from out here?"

He stared at her for a moment, shook his head, and walked over to his truck, muttering under his breath. There was a big silver tool box in the back, just behind the cab, and he opened it. When he re-

turned to the Omni, he held an out of shape coat hanger.

Amber watched as he twisted the wire and, with the rain showering him, he worked it under the hood. It seemed to take forever, and the man let plenty of mild expletives slip, but eventually he managed to get the hood raised. "You need to get your hood release fixed," he muttered as he leaned over the engine to investigate. "Tell me what problems you were having before she died on you."

Amber told him which lights had lit up on the dash and how the car had sputtered before stopping completely. While she spoke, he poked around the engine, frowning. "Did you try to restart her?"

"It's completely dead." She sent up a silent prayer that he wouldn't ask her to try again.

"Well, darlin'." He lowered the hood. "This is going to take more than what I can do in a few minutes out on the road. You're probably going to need a new alternator, and that's just a start. Can I call someone to help you?"

Amber thought about it. She didn't have enough money for a tow truck, much less repairs. Disgusted, she shook her head. "No, thank you. I'll find my way into town."

"I can drive you."

"No."

Glancing up, she caught the frown lines spread across the cowboy's forehead, but couldn't make out the emotion in his eyes. It was too dark. "Are you telling me you're going to walk for miles in a thunderstorm?"

Amber raised her chin, pretending the toughness she didn't quite feel. "I'll be fine." And she would. She'd taken worse beatings than what the rain could do.

"Well, that's just stupid, and I won't stand for it. My mother would kill me if I left a woman stranded

on the roadside in the middle of this.” He stomped toward his truck, tossed the coat hanger in the back, and jerked open the door. He reached in and then called out. “Stand back and put the car between you and me.”

Amber frowned. “Why?”

“Because, darlin’, you’re skittish as hell and I don’t want to have to go running after you in the mud with my new custom boots on. But I will.” The last was a warning.

Both curious and scared, but unable to think of anything else, Amber did as she was told and positioned herself at the side of the car farthest from the road so it served as a shield.

Seeing she’d followed orders, the cowboy withdrew his upper body from the truck and slammed the door shut. Lightning struck as he approached and Amber saw the glint of metal in his hand. She immediately braced herself for takeoff.

“Don’t run,” the cowboy commanded with authority. “Just watch.” He approached slowly, moving no farther than the front of the Omni. He held the small gun so it was pointed away from Amber and opened the chamber, showing her the bullets inside. “Do you know how to shoot a gun, darlin’?”

Amber looked from the gun to the cowboy, then back to the gun. “Yes.”

“Good.” He closed the chamber and placed the gun on her hood. “I have no intention of leaving your stubborn behind out on this interstate all alone. I’m wet and cold so I’m going to do the sensible thing and go sit in my nice, warm, dry truck. You can either sit in your non-running—therefore not warm—car and have me watch you ’til morning, or you can be sensible and get in my truck so I can take you to shelter.” He nodded toward the hood of the Omni and water slid off his head. “Take my gun, and if I do anything wrong, well, you just go on ahead and

shoot me.” With that said, he turned and walked back to his truck, glancing back once before climbing in and slamming the door behind him. Then he just sat there, waiting.

Amber walked forward until she could see the gun. The cowboy hadn’t set it on the hood like she’d thought, but had placed it under a windshield wiper to keep it from sliding off under the onslaught of rain. Staring at the weapon, she felt stupid holding the rock and let it fall to the ground. There were four miles between her and the next town, and she had no working vehicle. No shelter. No food. No water. Her clothes were soaked through, and her only protection from the elements was a Stetson. “What do I do?”

As if answering, lightning streaked across the sky followed by a deep roll of thunder, then rain came crashing down harder. Amber grabbed the gun, double-checked it was in firing condition, and trudged toward the passenger side of the truck.

She jerked the door open and aimed the gun at the cowboy, who looked at her with raised eyebrows. “I *will* shoot you, cowboy.”

He nodded his head, still looking at her sideways. “Fine, but can you get in and close the door first before you let all the rain in?”

Amber let out a huff of breath, irritation from his lack of fear easing back a little of her own. She could feel the warmth coming from the vents in the dashboard and craved more. She swung inside the truck and closed the door, keeping the gun steadily pointed on the large man next to her. “I mean it, cowboy. One wrong move and there goes a testicle.”

He chuckled. “Well, thanks for the warning, darlin’. I do value my testicles so I’ll be extra sure to keep both hands on the wheel.” He glanced down at her wet clothes. “Don’t you want to get a change of clothes or something out of your car?”

Amber sighed, seeing no way to hide the truth now, and, hell, she was in the man's truck. "Locked the keys inside."

He shook his head and laughed. "Damn, darlin'. It's just not your night. Lucky for you I was headed back in from out of town. Rodeo crowd doesn't start coming in until tomorrow night, and at this time of night, you'd probably been stuck out here 'til daylight. Get your seatbelt on."

The cowboy twisted to grab his own seatbelt and pull it on, so Amber did the same. Still, she kept the gun pointed at him. He seemed nice enough, and he had given her the weapon, but she'd been led into a false sense of security before and wasn't about to make that same mistake while on a deserted stretch of interstate with a man who could overpower her without much effort at all.

The cowboy angled the vent nearest him so it was aimed in her direction. "You getting warm, darlin'?"

"Do you call every woman 'darlin'?" Even to her own ears, Amber's tone sounded bitchy, but she didn't care. The best way to ensure survival was to stay defensive. And the way the man next to her said darlin' weakened her knees. In another time she would have welcomed the feeling. Not anymore. It just added to her reservations.

The cowboy grinned at her. "I probably do use it quite a bit, but if you tell me your name I'd be glad to call you by it."

Amber looked at his expectant eyes and grit her teeth. He didn't need to know her name. All he needed to know was that she definitely would shoot him with his own gun if he erased any of the space between them. To send the message, she tightened her grip on the weapon.

"Darlin' it is," he said after a long tense moment passed, and put the truck in Drive. "I'm Presley

Guardian Cowboy

West. Welcome to Wayback.”

## Chapter Two

What the heck kind of name was Presley? The image of Elvis Presley wiggling his pelvis flashed through Amber's mind and she quickly reminded herself she was in a strange man's truck in that strip of time one couldn't really define as night or day. Now wasn't the time to be thinking of Elvis. It was time to stay on high alert.

Cowboy Presley kept his eyes forward, navigating the big truck carefully through the rain. The sky had really opened up, and Amber was glad he'd come along, even if she was still a little wary. She'd have never made it into town through the storm. If by miracle she did, she'd have had one doozie of a case of pneumonia by the time she got there.

Confident she'd have time enough to shoot him if he made any sudden moves, Amber allowed herself to glance out the window on her side of the truck. A large hotel sat on the side of the interstate. A sliver of renewed fear slid up Amber's spine as the cowboy rolled right past it.

"Why are you passing up the hotel?" She cocked the gun, and Presley frowned down at it before returning his eyes to the road stretching out before them. "For one, I said I was taking you into town, not leaving you right outside it. And for two, you don't want to stay at The Corral."

"Oh, I don't, do I?"

"Trust me."

Amber snorted. "I'm supposed to just trust a stranger?"

Presley—if that ridiculous moniker was his real

name—grinned. “Sweetheart, you’re the one holding a gun on me. I figure if I can trust you, then trusting me shouldn’t be that far of a stretch. Especially since I’m the one who gave you the gun in the first place.”

Well, he had her there. And he’d given her his hat, too, to shield her from the rain. Thinking about it, she couldn’t recall a man ever doing something so sweet and downright chivalrous. She warmed at the thought, then quickly bit down on the inside of her cheek to snap herself out of it. For all she knew, the man was a snake, toying with his prey before going for the kill. “Why did you give me the gun? Why didn’t you just leave me?”

“Because, darlin’, we’re raised a whole lot better than that in Wayback.” He pulled off the interstate, passing a “Welcome To Wayback” sign, and reduced the truck’s speed to a crawl as the rain really started to assault them. “Wow. I can’t remember the last time it came down this hard here.”

As they crept along the streets of town Amber strained to observe her surroundings, but found the task too difficult through the heavy sheets of rain. There were a few neon signs glaring from adobe and barn-style buildings, but she couldn’t make out the names of the businesses. She swore one of the signs was in the shape of some kind of bug with a cowboy hat on. Maybe she was more tired than she thought.

Just as quickly as the floodgates had opened, the rain let up, allowing her to see as they reached a more rural-looking area. They passed one big ranch house and a field of cattle, then another. By the third one, she let out a yawn too great to stifle.

“When’s the last time you got a good night’s rest?”

“When’s the last time that was some of your business?” Amber popped out the rude question before she had time to consider not to, but Presley just chuckled.

“Darlin’, you are about three handfuls.”

*Handfuls of what?*, she wanted to ask, but ignored the impulse as Presley directed the truck up a long driveway, passing a fence that divided two fields from the main, ranch-style house sitting at the end of the pebbled drive. The house itself was a large, two-story, white brick structure with a wrap-around porch hosting a swing on one side. Beautiful roses in shades of red and yellow lined the base of the house, highlighted by the lights adorning the porch railings.

To the left was what looked like stables and another fenced off field, circular in shape. The right boasted a big red barn and a smaller house. It was all beautiful, but it wasn’t a hotel. According to the sign she’d noted at the end of the drive, the property was called Greener Pastures.

“Where the hell is this?” Amber’s hand gripped so tightly on the gun, her knuckles showed white with pressure.

“This, darlin’, is my home,” Presley answered as he pulled the truck to a stop at the left side of the driveway, next to a candy pink Cadillac.

Amber blinked, making sure she was seeing the vehicle correctly, but quickly refocused her attention to the man beside her in the cab of the truck, watching her with a face devoid of expression. “Why am I at your home?”

“Because it’s after three in the morning and you are wet and worn-out tired. You need a place to stay, don’t you?”

Amber blinked again, and shook her head, sure there was water lodged in her ears. “A place like a hotel. Not a... What exactly is this place?”

“A retirement home for horses. And, now, a shelter for you until you get a good rest and figure out your next move.”

Amber narrowed her eyes on the man, unease

coating her stomach with nausea. Had she been picked up by a psycho after all?

“Look, darlin’. You’re pretty much ass-out in the rain, and at the wrong time of night to be out looking for someplace to stay. I have a spare room with some warm blankets, a hot shower you can use to clean up, and food if you’re hungry.”

“And let me guess. Nobody can hear me if I scream?”

Presley laughed, a twinkle lighting his dark eyes. “My mother would hear you scream, and trust me, if I did anything to scare you like that she’d skin my hide long before you could get off a shot. Come on.” He removed his seatbelt and stepped out of the truck, slamming the door shut before running around to open hers.

He stood there at the side of the truck, one hand on the open door, his gaze on the gun pointed at his chest. His eyes warmed with compassion. “I don’t know who spooked you, honey, but I promise I won’t lay one finger on you.”

Amber breathed deeply, trying to sort through the tangle of decisions crowding her mind. Should she trust him and enter his home, or just shoot him and flee in his truck? Could he really be a decent man just trying to help her? Had Richard soured her view of all men? Surely there were some good ones. Her daddy had been a wonderful man. If he’d been alive, she’d have never ended up with Richard in the first place.

The sound of a screen door jangling open caught her attention and both she and Presley turned their gazes toward the house. A woman, not very big but slightly thick around the middle, stood in the main doorway, her silhouette highlighted by the light pouring out from behind her. “Ya’ll coming in or not? I got chicken and dumplings almost ready.”

“Be right in, Mom,” Presley called back toward

her. "I'm just trying to convince this nice lady not to shoot me."

"Well, don't take all night. You both look like you need a good, hot shower."

The screen door banged shut behind the woman as she retreated inside and Presley turned toward Amber, holding out his hand. "Come on, darlin'. It's a whole lot nicer inside the house."

Blown away by the exchange, Amber stepped out of the truck, ignoring the cowboy's hand. "Is your mother used to women holding guns on you?"

"No, but while I was sitting in the truck waiting for you to come to your senses and get in, I sent her a text explaining that I'd found a skittish filly on the side of the road and was bringing her home. I mentioned I might be held at gunpoint." He turned to lead the way to the house.

"I'm not a filly," Amber said in indignation, catching up to him.

"Just as stubborn as some I've come across," he teased, "but it's good for women to be stubborn when traveling alone. You did the right thing out there. Not every man's going to be as decent as me."

Amber frowned, puzzled by the man's behavior, and more than a little curious about his intentions, but when he opened the door for her, she stepped inside, pausing long enough for him to remove the Stetson from her head and shake out the water before they entered the warm, dry house.

He hung the hat on a peg at the side of the door and directed her to take off her sodden sneakers and place them next to his boots on the shoe rack directly beneath his hat. Amber was hesitant, but gave in. As soaked through as the shoes were, she'd probably run just as well in stocking feet if it came down to it.

Presley led the way through a large sitting room, decorated in warm brown, with several art prints of horses, and horse statues scattered about.

There was a hallway after that and light spilled from the right. They walked through the arched doorway and the aroma of hot food hit Amber's nose. Her stomach growled in response, which was to be expected considering she'd barely stopped on her long trek from Chicago, even to eat.

Presley looked at her out of the corner of his eye, but said nothing. The room turned out to be the kitchen and Presley's mother, a woman about her own height of five foot six, bustled about, scooping up bits of celery and onion from the counter, and flinging them into the garbage container next to the refrigerator. She had reddish blonde hair piled into a bun and wore scrubs decorated in bright colors. When she turned to face Amber with her hands on her rounded hips, laugh lines splayed around her warm, hazel eyes. "Well, hi there. Don't you look a mess? Where's your change of clothes, honey?"

Amber cut a glance at Presley, who was now leaning against a counter, arms folded, watching her intently. His wet hair hung over his brow. It was a little longer on top than the bottom, which just barely reached collar-length.

"I locked my keys in my car," she muttered.

"Oh, dear." Presley's mother raised a hand to her cheek and shook her head. "Well, you look about my size, just not as thick in the middle, fortunately for you. I'm Miranda, by the way, and welcome, honey." She stepped forward then glanced down at where Amber still held Presley's gun. "Well, if you promise not to shoot me I'll get you some of my spare scrubs and show you where the bathroom is so you can get cleaned up and dried off."

Amber glanced down at the gun and felt her face grow hot. Jeez, these two strangers were actually helping her and she'd walked into their home armed. Presley held out his hand and she deposited the gun there, earning a little grin from him.

“Good,” Miranda commented, and bustled past her. “Follow me, honey,” she called over her shoulder. “Keep an eye on those dumplings until I get back, Presley.”

“Sure thing,” he called back, “and maybe you can get a name out of our guest.”

Miranda looked back at her as they reached a set of stairs and started up. “You got a name, honey?”

Amber almost responded with, “Of course. Doesn’t everybody?” but caught herself. These people genuinely appeared nice; southern hospitality and all that, she supposed. It would be uncalled for to be rude.

Miranda swung around when they reached the second floor. “We’re good people, honey. No one here will hurt you, so why don’t you give us something to call ya?”

Why not? It was just her name, and judging by the sheer size of the property, this was a house that had been lived in a while. The man who’d picked her up on the interstate wasn’t one of Richard’s hired goons. He wouldn’t take her back to him. “My name is Amber. Amber Barlow.”

“Well, Amber Barlow, welcome to Wayback, Texas.” Miranda turned and opened a linen closet in the hallway. “What brings you this way?”

Amber didn’t say a thing, which earned her a curious look from Miranda as the woman turned and placed a couple of clean towels in her arms and a set of scrubs with pastel hearts all over the top. The bottoms were light pink. “Are you a nurse?”

“I work over at the trauma center.” With a nod of her head, Miranda guided Amber down the hall, which held even more prints of horses, and a few hanging plants. “That’ll be your room,” she advised, tilting her head in the direction of a bedroom they were passing, “and I’ll be staying right across the

hall tonight. Here's the bathroom."

Miranda stopped outside the door and stretched her arm out, allowing Amber to precede her into the white, tiled bathroom. There were no horses here, just a basic bathroom decorated in peach and white.

"Soap's in the dish, and there's shampoo and conditioner on the rack. You'll find spare toothbrushes in the cabinet and if you're in need of aspirin or anything like that, feel free to peruse the medicine cabinet."

Amber looked around the room, didn't find anything scary lurking in any corners, and lay her towels and scrubs on the spacesaver over the toilet. "Thank you, Mrs. West."

"It's Miranda, sweetie, and you're very welcome. Just leave your clothes on the floor when you're done and I'll get them washed and dried." She started to go, but paused at the door. "You know, honey, if you're running from someone or something, you couldn't have been found by a better man."

Amber frowned, unsure what to say, and curious how the woman knew so much. "I don't know why you think I'm running."

Miranda smiled knowingly. "Well, just the same. My boy's a professional bodyguard. You're safe here." With a quick nod of her head, she left, closing the bathroom door behind her.

Amber locked the door and let out a sigh of relief, her shoulders sagging. She was so tired. And sore. Taking Miranda's suggestion, she perused the medicine cabinet—no poison was found, which was a good thing—and swallowed down a couple of Tylenol with water from the sink.

Looking into the mirror, she blinked at the stranger in the reflection. Gone was the blonde, care-free girl of her past. In her place stood a woman with mousy brown hair cut to just below her shoulders, far shorter than she preferred it, and haunted green-

blue eyes framed with heavy bags, who felt much older and far more tired than any twenty-five-year-old should. Maybe one day she could be that carefree blonde again, but not until she was completely safe from Richard's grasp.

\*\*\*\*

"Well, that poor child is definitely running scared," Miranda announced as she entered the kitchen. "I'm supposing that's why you didn't drop her off at The Corral?"

"You get her name?" Presley asked around a bite of chicken and dumplings cooked to perfection, ignoring his mother's question. Despite the fact that The Corral charged by the hour, he should have dropped her off there if she'd wanted. He would have done that with anyone else, but something in his gut told him she needed protection. Even his mother could see that.

"Amber Barlow."

He nodded and took another bite of dumplings. Amber. Beautiful name for a beautiful woman. Even in the dark of the night, he'd been able to see she was a pretty little thing, with those alluring green-blue eyes and defiant little chin. She had a nice figure, too. It'd been all he could do to keep his eyes from straying to where her pale yellow blouse molded to her breasts in the rain. He hadn't missed the slight bump on the bridge of her nose, either, that little mar to her otherwise perfect face. It suggested the nose had been broken at some point, and despite damn good plastic surgery, it still hadn't set back exactly as it should have.

"I hope you're not inviting trouble to your own front door, bringing work home with you and all."

Presley glanced up from where he was eating his late dinner at the table to see his mother frowning at him while washing dishes at the sink. "I'm not a bodyguard anymore."

“Could have fooled me.” She turned her head back toward the sink to concentrate on her current task. “Frankly, I think that girl needs a bodyguard. The way her eyes are full of fear, you’d think the devil was on her heels.”

“May be.” Presley speared a chunky dumpling on his fork and chewed it slowly, damning himself for a fool. The woman wasn’t his responsibility. He could have gotten her to shelter and wiped his hands of her with a clear conscience, but something just didn’t feel right about it. He knew deep in his gut that he wouldn’t just let her walk away in the morning either, not with that much fear in her eyes.

“So what do you think—” The sound of soft footsteps caught Miranda’s attention and she discarded her question as their guest appeared in the doorway, looking a little better, but still wary. “Well, hey there, honey. You look a little better. Sit on down at the table and get some food in your belly.”

The woman—Amber—looked at the plate of warm food and her eyes dilated with longing before narrowing once more. “That’s all right, I—”

“Now, honey, we pride ourselves on our cooking skills here in the south, and if you don’t eat, I’m going to be highly offended.” Miranda stood with her hands fisted at her hips, a stern look Presley knew all too well etched on her face. It was the same look that got him to finish his homework during his school years and make sure he always brought protection when going on dates.

It was hard to suppress a grin when the hardened look managed to get their reluctant guest to the table with a muffled, “Thank you.” She picked up her fork and after a pause scooped up a piece of chicken and chewed. Sitting across from her, Presley had a clear shot of the look of utter satisfaction in her eyes when she swallowed down the first bite. Judging by her pallor, he was guessing she needed a little iron

in her system.

He was tempted to ask her where she'd been headed before her car broke down, but instinctively knew she'd again refuse an answer. Instead, he sipped his sweet tea and sat back to observe her while she bulldozed through the plate of food as if she hadn't eaten good in days. She must have felt the weight of his stare because she glanced up from her plate to raise her eyebrows, eyes lit with irritation. He just grinned right back at her; something about that bravado he knew was false as hell tickled him. "There's plenty more if you'd like another plate."

She glanced down at her empty dish and her cheeks tinged with red. "No, it was really good, but that was enough." Damn. The embarrassment in her voice fisted around his stomach and wouldn't let go. She must have thought he'd been amused by the way she'd wolfed down the food, but he wasn't, and he hadn't wanted to poke fun at her with his comment. He just didn't want her to go to bed hungry, which she'd apparently been doing for a while now. Ah, well. If his instincts were correct, he could use her stubbornness to make sure she got her stomach full.

"Yeah, I had you figured for one of those women who only orders the salad and if, Lord forbid, you do eat something of substance, you just throw it up any—"

She stood up so fast her chair screeched over the floor, and carried her plate to the stove, loading it up with a hefty second helping before returning to her seat and angrily slamming her fork into the dumplings. After swallowing her first bite she gave him a "So you were saying?" look and dug in for more.

Presley winked at his mother, who was shaking her head at him, trying not to laugh, and continued to make progress through his own heaping plate.

His mother's basset hound barreled into the room, yapping like crazy while nipping at her heels. "Settle down, Elvis," Miranda reprimanded the small terror and cut off the faucet, done with the dishes. "Ya'll eat up while I take Mr. Impatience out to do his business. Come on, boy."

Presley watched the troublesome hound follow his mother out the back door and turned his attention back toward his guest, who now looked at him with a hint of amusement. "Presley and Elvis, huh?"

He shrugged and scooped up another bite of food. "My mother is a big Elvis Presley fan."

"That explains the pink Cadillac, I guess. So does she have a closet full of blue suede shoes?"

"No, but there is a velvet Elvis hanging over the mantle in her living room." He glanced up and was momentarily surprised. The woman who'd been trying her hardest to stay defensive was smiling. Figured. Even in death, The King could charm the ladies.

"You don't have a couple of sisters named Lisa Marie and Priscilla running around, do you?" she asked before taking another bite of her meal.

"No sisters," Presley responded after swallowing. "I did have a brother with an Elvis related name."

"Did?"

He nodded. "Twin, actually. He was stillborn though."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." And she did look genuinely sorry. It made Presley's gut clench in a way he wasn't expecting. "So what was his... Oh."

The look of horror on her cute little face had Presley laughing into his glass of tea, making it difficult to swallow the sweet drink. "Relax, darlin'. My mother has issues but she's not tacky enough to name her stillborn son after Elvis's stillborn brother. His name was Red."

“Red?” She frowned, a forkful of dumplings halfway to her mouth. “How’s that an Elvis name?”

“Put Red with the last name West and what do you get?” He sat back and eyed her, curious how extensive her knowledge of Elvis Presley was.

“Elvis’s bodyguard.” She rolled her eyes and brought the fork to her mouth, trying to chew and laugh at the same time. “That’s really bad,” she said after swallowing.

“You seem to know your Elvis trivia.”

“My mom was a fan, too. Not nearly as...”

“Crazy?” Presley supplied.

“I was going to say devoted.” Her eyes twinkled with amusement. “Not nearly as devoted as your mother.”

“Count your lucky stars. That damn dog is her fourth hound dog, and they’ve all been named Elvis.”

He’d caught her drinking her tea and she laughed, choking a little. “Seriously? All of them?”

“Every yapping one.”

She sat back in her chair and let out the kind of sigh one only got after completely stuffing themselves. “You don’t like dogs?”

“I love dogs. Those things just aren’t my definition of dog.” Presley angled his head to the side, studying his mysterious guest. For some reason she seemed more trusting of him now. “So, are you going to tell me where you were headed tonight?”

Just like that, the humor fled, leaving skid marks in its wake. “Is there a good reason for you to know that information?”

He sighed, damning himself for being impatient. “Look, sweetheart. Your battery is shot and you need a new alternator. Those parts are going to cost. Do you have the means to take care of that and still get to where you’re headed?”

She looked down at her now empty plate and her shoulders sagged. Her body language gave him

the answer he needed. "I'll get the parts, and you're more than welcome to stay here until you get back on your—"

Her head shot up. "I do not need to be taken care of by ano—by a man. I'll get by just fine."

Presley frowned. She'd tried to catch herself, but not quick enough. She'd almost said "another," meaning some man had taken care of her, and acid churned in Presley's gut at the thought of what exactly that meant. Did that man pay to fix her nose after it was broken? Had that man been the one to break it?

"If you're looking for a new start, Wayback is just as good a place as any."

Now she angled her head at him. "Why do you say that?"

He sighed, hoped he wouldn't scare her. "Darlin'..."

"My name's Amber."

"Right. Sorry." He wiped his mouth and tossed the crumpled napkin back to the table. "I was a professional bodyguard for over a decade. I've developed the ability to spot folks in trouble, and you, sweetheart, are running from something big and bad, aren't you?"

She bit her lip and closed her eyes. "If you're looking for a job, I don't have the funds to cover a professional bodyguard."

Presley grinned. "In case you haven't noticed, I have a big spread here to take care of, and I said I *used* to be a professional bodyguard."

"Why do you want to help me?" The baffled, leery look in her eyes said a thousand words. This was a woman who hadn't been shown genuine kindness in a long time.

"Because you look like you've been running on pure fear and adrenaline for about as long as your body can handle. You're crashing, honey, and if you

don't have anyone to help you, your troubles are only going to get worse."

Her shoulders slumped in defeat. "And I'm supposed to just trust you to help me out?"

Presley nodded, reading a wealth of information in her green-blue eyes. They were as turbulent as the ocean waters they matched. "I think you do trust me, Amber. You just don't trust yourself to make a good judgment call because at some point in your past, you made a really bad one."

Those turbulent eyes opened in surprise before quickly narrowing. "So you're suggesting I stay here with you?"

"You can, if you like." He shrugged, going for nonchalant, though his heart revved at the thought of her being near him. It was a strange reaction, and one he didn't exactly welcome. "Or if you have the means to support yourself there's a bed and breakfast here in town. All I'm saying is that you might want to quit running. Plant your roots here where there're plenty of good people to watch your back."

"This isn't my town, and the inhabitants aren't my people. Why would they watch out for me?" The sadness in her tone made Presley's gut clench again.

"No, it's my town, and that's why I know it and the people so well. We'll watch out for you because that's what we do here." Presley rose to clear the dishes from the table, and noticed the sizable yawn Amber failed to stifle. "Why don't you go on and get some rest, darlin'?"

She nodded and stood, crossing the room in his mother's pastel scrubs. He'd never imagined the things could be so sexy. Pausing at the doorway, she turned to ask, "What, exactly, is expected of me in return for the room and board here tonight?"

Presley placed the dishes in the sink and faced her, his jaw clenched tight as he bit back anger. Boy, someone had done a hell of a number on her. He

blew out a frustrated breath and crossed the kitchen in three quick strides. She flinched as he raised his hand and his gut twisted with raw furor, but he went right ahead and tilted her chin up with his fingertips. "Trust me, Amber. That's it, nothing more."

She looked up at him, her breath hitched in her throat. Presley had the strongest urge to kiss her, but before he could give in to it and totally obliterate the slim strand of trust she'd developed, she turned and made her way down the hall and up the stairs.

"Well, good thing I'm staying the night," Miranda commented from behind him. He turned to see her standing in the open door, grinning from ear to ear. "Someone's got to play chaperone."

"Funny." He glared at his mother who, judging by the twinkle in her eye, was thinking of something he probably didn't want to know about. "I'm long overdue for that hot shower. Can you get those dishes washed?"

"Sure thing."

Presley nodded his thanks and walked down the hall to his private bathroom, the longing for Amber's mouth under his still there, much to his dismay.

### Chapter Three

Amber stretched, raising her arms over her head while letting out a yawn. On her side now, she opened her eyes and frowned, trying to place where she was. She lay in a big, comfortable bed in a room decorated in warm yellow. The door was open, giving her a view of the hallway with its horse portraits and hanging plants. That's right. She'd been rescued by a real live cowboy, brought in from the storm.

A grin tugged at the corners of her mouth as she rolled onto her other side with eyes closed, enjoying the comfy bed too much to vacate it just yet. The sense that she was being watched made her crack her eyelids open. Her gaze rested on a pair of shiny, black shoes attached to a set of strong legs. Her cowboy sat in a chair by the window, watching over her. She allowed her gaze to travel up the length of him, but the smile died on her face as her gut screamed out a warning. Cowboy Presley should be wearing boots, not shiny black dress shoes. Before her tired brain could rationalize why the shoes were setting off alarm bells, she was looking into the cold dark eyes of a monster. She gasped, panic sending her heart into overdrive. "Richard."

He leaned forward, a sneer stretched across his mouth as he spoke. "Did you really think you could leave me?"

Popping up onto her elbows, Amber looked him over from the mass of slicked-back black hair on his head to the goatee below his cruel mouth. He was really there. He'd found her. So much for her guardian cowboy. *Oh, God. Her cowboy.* "What did you do

to them?”

Richard grinned, if the malicious gesture could be called such. “The old bag and the cowboy you probably serviced for the room?” His dark eyes grew even colder than before. “You know no other man can have you, unless I say so.”

Amber kicked back the covers and raised her knees, preparing to run. He’d killed them both, but she couldn’t break down over the loss of the nice people who’d tried to help her. She had to focus on escape or she’d meet the same fate.

“Look at you, getting ready to run again.” Richard stood, towering over her. Moonlight spilled through the window, casting him in shadow. “I told you. If I can’t have you, no one can.”

His arm raised and Amber caught the glint of metal in the moonlight before the blade swung down in an arc, speeding toward her stomach. She kicked out and swung her arms wildly to deflect the blows, and let out a bloodcurdling scream in hopes that someone somewhere could hear her.

The blows kept coming, ripping her flesh and painting the walls with her blood. Through the pain, she flailed and screamed, begging for someone to save her.

“Amber!”

Presley? He was alive!

“Amber! It’s all right.”

She batted away Richard’s arms and tried to escape, to get to her cowboy’s side and check his wounds, but as she leaped from the bed, steel bands encircled her waist. She bucked against them, screaming at the top of her lungs.

“Sweetheart, stop! It’s Presley. You’re fine. Come out of it, darlin’!”

Wait. The chest she was trapped against didn’t smell of expensive cologne and cigars. It smelled of leather, sweat, and horses. The bands of steel

wrapped around her waist weren't hurting her, they were restraining her. As she snapped out of the nightmare's clutches, one large hand rubbed her back in circles. "Shush, darlin'. I've got you."

Amber leaned into the cowboy, welcoming the warmth of his body against her sweat-soaked skin. She buried her head into the crook of his neck, taking in the smell of hard-working man, and let the scent soothe her.

"Is she all right?"

Amber jerked her head up at the strange voice and saw an older, dark-headed man with gray mixed into his mustache leaning against the door jamb. She instantly stiffened, but Presley made soothing noises in her ear and gently massaged the tension out of her shoulders. "She's fine, Ray. Looks like our guest just had one humdinger of a nightmare."

"I'd say so," the man agreed. "I'll tell the boys everything's okay. She gave us all one heck of a scare. Ma'am." He raised his hand as if to tip his hat, realized he didn't have one on his head, and nodded instead.

Amber listened as his footsteps traveled down the hall, and took in her surroundings. She was still in the bed the Wests had offered her the night before, but Presley was situated between her and the headboard. He'd apparently positioned himself at her back while pulling her out of the nightmare. Judging by the twisted state of the covers, she'd put up one heck of a fight. The chair by the window which now let in a steady stream of sunlight was blessedly empty, the walls yellow and blood-free.

Presley leaned back against the headboard and tugged her to him so her back rested against his chest. It was an intimate position for two people who'd just met, but she didn't fight him or the feel of his hands as they worked out the knots in her shoulders. "You wanna tell me about that nightmare, dar-

lin'? You scared my men half to death. Spooked my horses, too."

"I screamed that loud?"

"Mm-hmm. Sounded like somebody was up here killing you." He sighed deeply. "It's time to quit hiding. Tell me what's going on, and who's after you. Who's Richard?"

Amber gasped, swung her head around to meet the satisfaction in Presley's dark eyes. "You said his name, darlin', and the way you said it didn't make him sound like a friend."

"I bet it didn't." Amber sighed, waited a moment for the last of the tremors wracking her body to leave, and wiped a sweaty lock of hair away from her brow. "You seem like a good person. I don't want you mixed up in my trouble."

A deep, throaty laugh vibrated Presley's chest against her back. The chill that came after had nothing to do with fear. "Darlin', no woman-beating wimp of a man is going to do any damage to me." He raised an eyebrow when Amber spun her head to look at him in surprise. "I recognize the signs, honey. When I did the bodyguard thing, a lot of my clients were abused women."

Rich, high-class women, she was sure. Not like her. Amber bit her lip, debating how much she could tell Presley. She liked the way she fit in his arms, the way she could get close to him without feeling repulsion. How long had it been since she'd last felt anything other than fear or disgust for a man? Too long. She'd begun to worry she'd never feel anything for anyone again. And why bother? Why would any decent man care for her after what she'd become? "You and your mother were very kind to offer me a place to rest, but—"

"Where do you have to go, darlin'?"

*Nowhere.* She pushed Presley's hands away and stepped away from the bed. Her clothes from the

night before lay folded on the dresser.

“My mother washed them and brought them up here before she left this morning,” Presley said, “and I had your car towed here. You have no spare clothes, hardly any money, certainly not enough to support yourself for long all alone.”

Cold, icy fear fisted around Amber’s heart. “And I suppose you’re going to offer me a job to go with this roof over my head, a way to earn my keep?” Maybe he was like Richard, after all. Maybe they all were.

Presley frowned as she turned her gaze back toward him. “Well, actually, that’s not a bad idea if you can type well.”

Amber returned the frown. “Type?”

“Yeah.” Presley ran a large hand through his messy, windblown hair. “My office manager up and eloped last weekend and moved out of state with her new husband. My mom’s been taking care of her work until I find a replacement. You think you’d be interested? It’s really simple.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly the same type of offer she’d received from Richard. Relief flooded her system, but with it came a nervous tension. If Cowboy Presley was as decent a guy as he seemed, she had to be extra careful to hide her soiled past. A man like him wouldn’t stick his neck out for a woman like her.

“Well?”

She blinked, brought his handsome face back into focus and realized he’d made her a job offer and she had yet to respond. “I can type. I... Thank you, Presley.”

He nodded, then rose from the bed and jerked his head toward the clothes on the dresser. “Get dressed. I’ll take you into town to get some boots, and you’ll need more clothes than just that one outfit and a set of scrubs.”

“Ok,” she agreed, “but take me somewhere inex-

pensive. I'm afraid the cash you found in my pockets really is all I have."

"It's on me, darlin'." He winked at her surprised face. "Consider it a hiring bonus." He inclined his head in the same way the older man had, and stepped out of the room, leaving her to get ready.

Amber walked over to the dresser and picked up the jeans and pale yellow shirt. She could get dressed, but she wasn't sure exactly how else one was supposed to prepare for a day with Presley West.

\*\*\*\*

*Hell and damnation.* Presley washed up quickly in his private bathroom and slipped into a fresh white button-down shirt, the trembling in his hands making the act of sliding the buttons through their respective holes much harder than it should have been.

He could still hear her screaming. The sound jumped off the walls of his mind, echoing over and over, tap-dancing all over his battered nerves. The last time he'd heard a scream like that was the last time he'd worked a job. It was the first and last time he'd had a woman die on his watch.

Nina had been a sweet woman, far too nice to have fallen in with the slimy creep who'd repeatedly abused her before finally stabbing her to death, with Presley right in the next room. It had been his job to protect her from the monster and he'd failed. He'd broken the promise made to her and to himself.

Now he was making the same promises. God help him keep them. He had to, if he ever wanted another decent night's sleep. Keeping Amber safe would redeem him, chase away Nina's ghost once and for all.

He left the house, grabbing his Stetson off the wall hook before stepping outside into the warm Texas sun. The plates on Amber's car were from Illi-

nois. She'd driven an awful long way to get away from the demon on her heels, which in itself told him she had good reason to be scared. The blood-curdling scream she'd woken with and the evidence of a broken nose solidified his theory she'd been abused. And she hadn't denied it.

He muttered a curse and ran a hand through his hair before setting the Stetson on his head. He hadn't lied to Amber. There wasn't anything a chicken-shit woman beater could do to him, but they had a way of tracking down the women they terrorized. That was his only fear. One wrong move. One glance away from her a minute too long...

"What's the girl's story?"

Presley glanced up to see Ray leaning forward on the fence watching Diablo, a beautiful chocolate brown mare they'd just acquired, test out her new surroundings. He walked over to the fence and joined the older man. "Running from a man."

"That explains the nightmare." Ray spit over the fence and turned his head to look Presley in the eye. "You bodyguarding again?"

"No." Presley practically growled the word, self-disgust and anger rising quickly. "This isn't a job. She's just a woman with nobody to care for her. Wouldn't be Christian to not help her."

Ray made a grumbled noise in his throat and spit again. "I know you, boy, and you ain't protecting that little gal to earn brownie points with Jesus. You're trying to redeem yourself."

"And?" Presley wrapped his hands around the fence post, his jaw clenched tight.

"You can't blame yourself for what happened to that woman, Presley, and if something happens to this one—"

"Nothing will happen to this one."

Ray looked at him as if he wanted to say something, but shook his head and changed the topic. "I

see you changed clothes, washed the sweat off. Going into town?"

"Yeah."

"Taking the girl?"

"Yes."

Ray grinned. "Have a good time."

Presley frowned, a knot growing in his stomach. "I think you're reading too much into this, Ray."

The graying man laughed harder, shaking his head. "Oh, I think I read the look in your eyes just right earlier today. Good luck."

The screen door banged, snagging Presley's attention. He glanced over to see Amber coming down the porch steps. She wasn't the sopping wet mess he'd rescued the night before, but she still seemed wary, and way too fragile. Then she raised her gaze to his, and in those ocean blue eyes he saw the strength of steel behind her fear and his breath momentarily caught in his throat. He remembered the way she'd tried to hold him off with nothing but a big rock and pure spunk, and couldn't hold back a grin. No, this woman wasn't like Nina. She had a strength inside her Nina had never possessed. It made him want to protect her even more.

"You ready, Cowboy, or are you just going to stand there staring?" She stopped before him and tapped her sneaker on the ground, her eyes darting all over the property, taking in the horses wandering about and the men who worked for him.

The men noticed her, too, dipping their heads appreciatively. Presley clenched his fists involuntarily, and Ray laughed behind him before walking away, muttering something about being hog-tied soon.

"Ready." He walked over to the truck and opened the passenger side door for her. He caught a ranch hand staring at her butt as she climbed into the cab and delivered a glare that made the young

man swallow hard and quickly turn his face away. He slammed the door closed behind her and made his way around to the other side of the truck, reminding himself he was supposed to be protecting her from the man who'd hurt her, not the whole male species.

"All these men live on the property?" Amber asked as he climbed into the cab and pulled his door shut. Her eyes were wide, tainted with fear.

Presley reached out and touched her cheek with the back of his hand. "Nobody will hurt you on my land."

She looked at him and a ghost of a smile whispered across her pretty, bow-shaped mouth. She nodded and her eyes were warm and ... trusting.

God help him.

## Chapter Four

Presley opened her door and Amber slid out of the truck, resting her newly booted feet on the pavement. Presley had insisted she throw away the old, nasty-looking sneakers she'd had on after completing their purchases at Cow Patti's Custom Boots.

The owner of the shop, Patti Pie Murphy, had helped her pick out a cute pair of brown leather boots with pink trim and a cute little set of embroidered angel wings enclosing a horned "A" on the sides.

"A little bit devil, a little bit angel," Presley had said as she tried them on. "I can see that."

She'd grinned. "Well, they do have my initial."

"Yep. Made just for you." He'd winked and her insides had gone all gooey. Her legs still felt shaky as she stepped out of the truck in front of Beulah Belle's Boutique and allowed Presley to escort her inside.

"Presley West, I haven't seen you in a good while!" exclaimed an attractive redhead who appeared to be somewhere in her fifties. She squinted at Amber from behind wire-rimmed glasses and stepped out from behind the counter. "Who do we have here?"

"This is Amber Barlow, a good friend of mine," Presley answered. "She's going to need some new clothes. Can you help her out?"

Presley handed over a credit card and the woman's eyebrows rose into her hairline. "Sure thing, honey. I'm Beulah Belle, and you, my dear, are going to be too cute in my clothes!" She beamed a

bright smile Amber's way and Amber couldn't help but return it, despite her disappointment with being referred to as Presley's friend. It was silly, she knew, but a girlish little part of her would have preferred something more significant. The realization gave her pause. She'd fallen for a man's niceness before and it had bitten her in the end. Presley seemed like a genuinely nice man, but she should be careful. She hadn't escaped one trap to get tricked into another.

"Well, you ladies should have fun." Presley looked down at her and gave a warm smile. "I have some business to take care of over at the arena, but Beulah will help you get everything you need and I'll be right back."

Amber sucked in a breath, but quickly schooled herself. She'd made it all the way to Texas by herself without incident. She didn't need Presley standing guard over her twenty-four/seven, but she had to admit it felt good to have him near, even though it wasn't wise to depend on someone else to keep her safe. That's how she'd ended up in hell before. Inside she knew Presley wouldn't leave her with someone unless he completely trusted that she'd be fine. He seemed way too concerned with her safety to leave her in danger. She didn't know him well, but she trusted the sincerity in his eyes when he told her no harm would come to her. She had faith in him, which came as a complete shock to her considering she hadn't had faith in anything in a long time.

"I'll be fine."

He nodded, held her gaze a moment longer before turning for the door.

"Presley," Beulah called after him, and waved his credit card as he turned. "Are we working with a budget here?"

Presley smiled and gazed directly into Amber's eyes, warming her deep inside. "She's already the prettiest gal in Wayback. Might as well have the

clothes to match. Go crazy.” With that, he walked out of the boutique, leaving Amber standing there slack-jawed. Her legs wobbled and she gripped the counter to keep herself upright.

“Honey, what in the world did you do to snare that cowboy like that?” Beulah asked, fanning her face with the credit card. “Women have been trying for years to get that fine man roped.”

Amber blinked and shrugged. “I don’t have him roped. It’s not like that. He’s just a nice man.”

“Nice men open doors for ladies, they don’t send them on shopping sprees with their credit cards,” Beulah clarified with a chuckle. “My goodness, this is so romantic, just like that scene in *Pretty Woman*. Oh, except for the whole hooker thing, of course,” she quickly amended, and turned away before she could see Amber blanch.

It was just like that scene in *Pretty Woman*, except Richard Gere knew what Julia Roberts was.

“So what all do you need?” Beulah asked as she made her way to a display table stacked high with piles of jeans. “I’ve got some sexy new jeans, plain and embellished, and I just got in the most adorable dresses.”

Amber stepped forward and a sharp pain ripped through her abdomen, doubling her over. She cried out and gripped the counter to keep from falling to her knees.

“Oh my!” Beulah was at her side the next second. “What’s the matter, honey?”

“Cramps,” Amber said through gritted teeth, and sucked in a breath. Richard had really done a number on her this last time. The final kick to her stomach was still giving her pains. “I’ll be fine. I just need some aspirin.”

“I have Advil. Is that fine?”

“Yes.”

Beulah ran to the back, quickly returning with

painkillers and a cup of water. Amber swallowed both greedily and pushed away the last remnants of pain. An inner voice told her she should see a doctor, but she pushed the pesky little voice away, too. She'd be fine.

"Are you all right, sweetie?" Beulah rubbed her back gently, concern in her light green eyes.

"I'm sorry." Amber straightened herself to a full stand, offering a weak smile. "I hope I haven't scared you. I just get the most awful cramps this time of month."

Beulah waved a hand through the air. "Say no more, honey. My daughter has the hardest time with those. That Advil will hopefully kick in pretty quick. It works for her."

A twinge of guilt gnawed at Amber's conscience for lying to someone being so nice to her, but she assured herself that her shameful past wasn't something she should have to share with the world. Ready to change the subject, she pointed toward a soft pink blouse hanging on a rack a foot away. "This is pretty."

"Isn't it?" Beulah's eyes lit up. "And just wait until you see the skirt that goes with it!"

By the time Presley returned to the boutique, Amber felt she had been thoroughly educated about the town of Wayback. Beulah explained how the town's big moneymaker, the Yellow Rose Corral, drew in cowboys every weekend from March through November to compete in the rodeo. She learned about many of the locals who were somehow affiliated with it, and was surprised to hear that a member of the boy band she'd had a huge crush on during her younger years had actually competed.

"Wow." She recalled the cute teenager who'd adorned the many posters in her childhood bedroom. "I would have never pictured him as a cowboy."

"He did an interview on television after he was

discovered here. Married one of the locals, actually. It was so crazy around here, with paparazzi and everything.” Beulah finished putting the last of Amber’s purchases into a big pink shopping bag as the door chimed. “And here comes another of our famous cowboys.”

Amber turned from the counter to see Presley enter, a grin plastered to his face. “There you go exaggerating, Beulah.”

“There you go being too humble,” Beulah corrected. “Our Presley makes eight seconds on a bronc look like a simple trot through the park.”

“You compete in the rodeo?” Amber recalled him mentioning business at the arena. She hadn’t thought her cowboy rescuer was an actual, real life cowboy.

“Sometimes.” Presley shrugged. “I used to. Nowadays, I take care of the horses once they get too old for the arenas. Did you get all you need?” He glanced at the three large bags and frowned. “That doesn’t look like a whole lot. I thought women liked to shop.”

Amber laughed at the confused look on his face, and was relieved he didn’t seem upset with the number of bags sitting on the counter. “I think three bags are more than enough when it’s someone else’s money I’m spending.”

He smiled at her and signed the credit card slip Beulah presented to him. “Did you get something nice to go dancing in?”

A flurry of butterflies came alive in Amber’s belly. “Dancing?”

“I thought you might enjoy a dance or two at the Blue Bug Saloon,” he responded with a shrug and gave the signed slip to a giddy Beulah.

The storeowner clapped her hands together. “The pink blouse with the denim and pink rhinestone skirt!”

Amber grinned at the older woman's enthusiasm, but couldn't ignore the sick feeling in her stomach. It was one thing for Presley to help her get some much needed clothing, but now he seemed to be asking her out on a date. Surely he'd expect something in return for that.

"Tell you what," he said, breaking into her musing. "You think about it while we get some lunch and let me know. I'm starving. How about you?"

"I guess I could eat."

"Take her to Telli's," Beulah suggested. "Or Cranky Hank's. Best barbecue in the world," she added for Amber's benefit.

"Fine choices, Beulah, but I have something a little different in mind." His lips parted into a gorgeous, white-toothed smile and Amber's stomach did a flip. "Come on, darlin'," he added as he grabbed the shopping bags and inclined his head toward the door.

Amber thanked Beulah for her assistance and followed the tall cowboy out the door, never saying a word about his continuing use of the name "darlin'." Despite the many reasons why she shouldn't, she found herself melting a little bit more each time he used it.

\*\*\*\*

Presley pulled the truck onto the shoulder of the road and got out before he lost his nerve. The fraction of a minute it took to walk around the truck and open Amber's door seemed to last an hour. An hour filled with 'whys.' Why was he here at the lake instead of home, working? Why was he spending his hard-earned money on a stranger? Why did he get the crazy idea of having a private picnic with said stranger instead of just getting her something at Cranky Hank's, or better yet, the Waffle House outside of town?

Why were his palms sweating so much?

“Where are we?” Amber stepped out of the truck and looked around in confusion as Presley closed her door behind her.

“I thought you needed a little relaxation so I brought you to the place where I can always find just that.” Presley reached into the back of the truck and scooped up the picnic basket he’d hastily grabbed at the Dixie Pig grocery and stuffed with a variety of food, and a picnic blanket he’d also found there. He felt a little silly, having never actually had a picnic before, much less organized one, but the idea had hit him out of the blue as he passed the grocery on the way back to Beulah’s and it had just seemed like the right thing to do.

Amber blinked at him, her pretty blue eyes sparkling with interest. “You arranged a picnic?”

He shrugged, wondered if the idea was as silly as he felt, and led the way to a shady spot under a huge pecan tree. “If you’d rather grab something elsewhere, or just go back home, we could.”

“No, it’s fine,” Amber quickly said as he lowered the basket and spread out the blanket for her. “I’ve never actually had a picnic before.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Really?” Amber asked, her eyes inquisitive as Presley extended his arm, gesturing for her to sit first. He nodded as she situated herself on the blanket and sat across from her.

“I hope it doesn’t show in my preparation.” Presley grabbed the basket and emptied its contents: Two pre-made sandwiches from the Dixie Pig’s deli, a bag of plain potato chips, two still-cool bottled colas, a big container of pre-washed strawberries and a white pastry box from Daisy’s Down Home Delights. He hoped Amber would enjoy the rich chocolate cake he’d picked up there.

“Wow.” She licked her lips. “Looks great to me.”

Presley swallowed heavily, and forcibly pushed

the image of her licking her lips out of his head before he did something stupid like crash his own against them. “Good, then. Let’s dig in.” He handed her a paper plate from the pack he’d bought and plastic cutlery.

“Good, you got ham and cheese.” She inspected the sandwich. “My favorite type of sandwich, unless a cheeseburger counts.”

Presley smiled, doing his best to tamp down the reaction so he didn’t look like a fool grinning from ear to ear. The woman had said she liked his choice in sandwiches, and he felt like he’d won a frigging contest. There was something about Miss Amber Barlow that made him feel like he was in junior high again, awkward and insecure. The insecurity was tougher to deal with in his older body than the young one.

“So why don’t you participate in the rodeo anymore?”

Presley sighed, took a long draw from his bottled cola. “I grew up here in Wayback, and during my younger years, participating in the rodeo was the quickest way to fast cash, provided you were good at it.”

“And you were?”

“Natural ability, or so I was told.” He smiled, remembering the time he spent training with Ray. “It was fun for the most part, but you can get pretty banged up doing it, and I’ve seen quite a few cowboys get tossed off a bronc and never get back up again. I figured the military was safer.”

Amber choked on her cola, emitting an inelegant snort. “The military was safer?”

“Maybe that’s not the right word.” Presley laughed. “I don’t know. I loved the horses, and the rodeo was exciting, but I still felt like I was missing something. I thought I might find it in the army.”

“Did you?” Amber popped a strawberry into her

mouth and tilted her head, listening intently.

“In a way.” Presley tore his eyes away from her mouth, once again feeling the urge to claim it. “I realized I enjoyed protecting people, had a need to do it. I was actually offered a job as a secret service agent after I got out, but chose to be a bodyguard with a company out of Dallas.”

Amber’s eyes widened. “You were offered a job protecting the president and turned it down? Isn’t that pretty big?”

“Pretty much,” Presley answered with a chuckle. “It wasn’t me though. The president has a whole team of people protecting him. I wanted to protect the little guy, you know?”

She smiled sweetly and Presley could feel it right down to his bones. “I sensed that about you. Can’t say I’ve met a whole lot of people like you, Presley West.”

“What? Old, washed up cowboys with crazy, Elvis-obsessed mothers and an uncontrollable urge to tame wild fillies found drenched on the roadside?”

“No, I mean you’re an actual decent man, and I’ve already warned you about referring to me as a filly.” She laughed. “And what do you mean by old and washed up?”

“I’m not ready for the retirement home, but I’ve still got some years on me,” Presley answered, reminding himself of the fact. Amber may have lived a tough life, which tended to age people well beyond their years, but she was still young regardless. She would want a young man, not him.

“And just how old are you?”

“Thirty-nine.”

Amber widened her eyes in mock surprise. “My goodness, grandpa. Did you remember to put in your teeth this morning, or should I puree your strawberries?”

Presley laughed heartily, feeling foolish.

“Funny. Just wait until you hit my age, young’un.”

“Women stop having birthdays at twenty-nine,” Amber retorted impishly, and looked past him to the lake. “This really is a pretty spot. Did you spend your high school years necking here?”

“No, that went on at old man Farmer’s abandoned barn.” Presley glanced around the area, trying to take it in through her eyes, from the abundance of pecan trees to the small, crystal blue lake that provided a decent amount of fish for a lazy day of fishing. “This is kind of my thinking spot. If I have something deep on my mind, I come here and fish or just lay in the shade and kind of meditate. It makes me feel better.”

“And you think I need that?”

He looked at her, took in the slight bump on her nose. “Don’t you?”

She smiled weakly, and nodded. “You’ve already figured it out. I was running away from a cruel man. I didn’t even have a real plan. I just set out with a half-baked plan of getting to Mexico and finding work. I figured he couldn’t get me there.”

If he really wanted her, he could get her anywhere, Presley thought, and the remainder of his sandwich landed in his stomach with a heavy thud. He wiped his hands on a napkin and tossed it back in the picnic basket, bracing himself for the question that had haunted him the whole night before. “This man you’re running from, do you share his name?”

Amber blinked. “You mean, am I married?”

Presley nodded, his jaw clenched tight.

“No.”

His breath broke free from his lungs in a whoosh of relief. “So what’s his story? Who is he, and what happened?”

“Is it necessary to know?” Amber’s eyes narrowed, considering, or maybe just trying to figure out his motives. Always on guard, this woman had a

lot more going for her in the safety department than Nina.

“Amber, I may not be a professional bodyguard anymore, but I’ll still do all I can to protect you from a threat. If this man is still a threat to you, I need to be prepared.”

“Why aren’t you a bodyguard anymore?”

Man, the woman really knew which questions to ask. Presley took a fortifying sip of his cola and twisted the cap back on, debating all the while. He could lose her faith in his ability if he told her the truth, but he could lose her trust if he didn’t and she found out elsewhere. In the small town of Wayback, she would find out the truth, or some version of it, eventually.

“I failed to save a client.” He took a deep breath and glanced up, expecting to see one of three things in her eyes: fear, loathing, or disappointment. He saw none of those things swirling in the blue depths, just plain curiosity as she cocked her head to the side.

“What happened?”

Presley shook his head, a little wave of amusement crashing through his discomfort. “For a woman who doesn’t give up a whole lot of information, you sure like to poke and prod.”

She grinned. “It’s part of my charm. Now, be a good boy and answer the question. I might just answer one for you, too.”

“Deal.” Presley bundled up his trash and tossed it into the basket, clearing the way for the chocolate cake. “My client’s name was Nina Garcia. She was a sweet thing, wouldn’t harm a fly. Twenty-four years old and full of life despite the fact her husband had tried to beat it out of her on several occasions.”

As he spoke, Nina’s pretty face filled his mind, her sweet smile torturing him mercilessly. How anyone could do anything to take away that smile was

beyond him. He served Amber a slice of chocolate cake, earning a smile of thanks.

“So you were hired to protect her from her husband?”

Presley cut himself a wedge of the rich, gooey cake and nodded. Normally, he wouldn't have much of an appetite while discussing what had happened with Nina, but chocolate had a way of making the bitter truth easier to swallow. No wonder women loved it so much. “Her mother hired me after finally convincing Nina that she'd be better off without him. I was supposed to get her to Spain, where she had family to keep her safe, but despite my best efforts, I didn't get her there.”

“What happened?” Amber poked at her cake, more focused on listening to him.

“Nina wasn't very strong. She was a wonderful woman, beautiful inside and out, but she didn't seem to see it. Her confidence was non-existent. The hardest part of that particular job was convincing her she'd be all right without her husband. He'd brainwashed her so heavily.”

“He told her no one else would ever want her because she wasn't good enough?”

Presley raised his gaze from his plate to see Amber staring off past the lake, her brow furrowed. Remembering. “I take it you've heard the same thing?”

“More times than I care to recall.” She let out a sigh of regret. “Go on. What happened to Nina?”

“I got her out of the house and traveled with her from state to state, making our way to Canada. Her husband was a cop and could easily catch up with us if we traveled by plane or any other mode of public transportation. We'd planned on avoiding airplanes until we reached Canada. I knew a guy who owned a private charter service there and could get her straight to Spain.” He finished his cake and cleaned

up his mess. "I tried to work on her confidence as we traveled, encouraging her to believe in herself more. I thought it was starting to sink in, but on the last night before we would have hit Canada, her husband found her." Presley pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, a headache starting to form between them.

A soft weight settled on his arm. "What happened?"

Presley looked down at Amber's hand on his forearm and gathered the strength to tell the hardest part of the story. "We shared an adjoining room at a hotel that night. I thought it was safe since I was so close to her, and her husband hadn't picked up our trail. But around three in the morning, I woke to the sound of screaming. It was Nina."

He took a deep breath, forced himself to press on. "I tried to get to her, but the adjoining door was locked. I tried kicking it down, but an armoire had been pushed against it. I ran to the hallway and tried to get through that door, but it was blocked by a heavy dresser. I still kicked and rammed against it while she screamed. By the time I had it torn down enough to crawl in over the dresser, Nina had stopped screaming. She was lying in a puddle of blood, her eyes froze open in terror. Her bastard of a husband stood over her with a satisfied smirk on his arrogant, blood-streaked face. 'No one can have her now,' he said before shooting himself in the head. The monster didn't even give me the satisfaction of beating him to death."

"I'm sorry, Presley." Amber rubbed his arm. "I'm sure you did your best to keep her safe."

"No, I didn't." Presley swallowed bitterly. "She'd been calling him almost every day. What kind of bodyguard doesn't even realize the person he's protecting is calling the enemy? She was so damn weak, I should have known. I should have expected that

and planned for it.”

“Presley?”

He looked into eyes full of compassion. “Yeah?”

“What exactly was your job?”

He frowned, unsure why Amber wanted him to basically repeat himself. “To protect Nina from her husband while getting her to Canada, where I was to put her on a plane to Spain.”

“Right. You did that to the best of your ability. It sounds to me like the only thing you failed to do was protect Nina from herself, and you weren’t hired to do that particular job.”

He’d been told something similar by Ray and his mother for the past four years, but still he couldn’t let go of the guilt. “It was my job to protect her, plain and simple. I didn’t do it.”

“Well, it’s not your job to protect me,” Amber responded adamantly, “so if you’re offering me a job and place to stay out of guilt for what happened with Nina, you can get over it.”

Presley stared open-mouthed at the little spitfire and then barked out a laugh. “You sure do have some sass in you, you know that?”

“Refreshing, isn’t it?”

She’d made the remark as a joke, but she didn’t know how right she was. He’d seen her on the roadside, wet and worn, by all appearances a frail damsel in distress. Then he’d approached her and she’d grabbed the first weapon she could find. He’d seen the fear in her eyes, the knowledge that she couldn’t possibly outfight him, but behind that fear he’d seen pure determination. He’d seen a will to survive. It was damned refreshing after spending the past four years wallowing in guilt over not defending a weak woman who hadn’t had the slightest will to live. Nina Garcia had almost seemed to want to die rather than leave her abusive husband.

“Presley?” Amber raised a pale eyebrow.

“Where’d I lose you to?”

“Nowhere.” He gave her a warm grin, taking in her stubborn brow. “I was just thinking how right you are. You are very refreshing, Miss Barlow.”

Her brow creased as she considered his statement, and her breath visibly caught in her throat as he pushed a tendril of light brown hair out of her face. “We made a deal, remember?”

“We did?”

She batted her lashes innocently and Presley chuckled at her attempt to pretend obliviousness. “I answered your question, Amber. It’s your turn.”

She sighed heavily, and pushed her hair back over her shoulder. “My parents died in a car accident when I was twelve. I ended up in foster care, and went from one bad home to another. When I was fifteen, I met Carmen. We banded together while staying with this wretched old lady who thoroughly enjoyed beating our knuckles if we so much as spoke above a whisper. She was two years older than me so she got out of the system first, but she always kept in touch with me, promising me we’d be roomies when I was eighteen and free.” Amber looked down at the hands she twisted together and Presley held back the need to reach out and cover those hands with his own. He had the feeling if he did, she wouldn’t continue with the story, and he needed her to because the background check on her turned up zilch. However, the background check on the owner of the Omni, a Carmen Hernandez, turned up enough to worry him, especially if Amber had lived with the woman.

“Carmen kept her word and once I was free to leave foster care, she took me in and got me a job with her. But we could barely keep up with the rent.” She glanced up, met his eyes for a quick second before averting her gaze, and Presley instinctively knew she wasn’t giving him the complete

truth, but let it slide. He already knew what type of job Carmen had. He also knew what the woman did on the side thanks to her arrest record, and hoped for Amber's sake that she hadn't been involved in that. "I was young and naïve when I met Richard. He had money and he offered me security. I'd never had security, much less someone lavishing me with compliments. He sucked me right in and next thing I knew, I was a prisoner in his home."

"He hit you."

Amber nodded. "The first time I disagreed with him. It was ironic because when we'd met, he'd said my spunk was what attracted him, but once he had me my will was intolerable."

"Because he wanted to break you like a damn wild mare," Presley said, his hands balled into fists. One of the reasons he enjoyed riding broncs was because the horses were allowed to maintain their wild, free nature. He despised seeing a beautiful creature's spirit broken, and the thought of someone trying to do that to Amber caused acid to churn in his stomach. "You're still strong-willed. He didn't succeed."

She raised her head, jutting out her stubborn chin to display her smug grin. "I don't break that easily. I may have taken the beatings for way too many years, but I wasn't about to just lie down and give up my life. The last time he beat me was the final time. I'll never go back."

"Damn straight." Presley knew this woman had the guts to stand on her own. She was small and physically not much of a threat, but he had her covered there. The problem he'd had with Nina wouldn't happen with her. Amber was too strong to go back to someone who would only try to break her down. It made him want her more. "Will he look for you?"

"I'm sure he has been since I left Chicago. It's why I barely made any stops, until you found me,

and I'd had no choice in that stop."

Presley nodded, taking in the information. It explained why Amber hadn't had anything with her. She'd most likely escaped right after Richard's last attack. He pushed the ugly image that created out of his mind. He needed to focus on keeping Amber away from the man if he caught her trail, not actively seek the creep out for retribution, despite how good the idea sounded. "What does he do for a living?"

Amber averted her gaze again. "Illegal stuff."

Presley shook his head, even more disgusted. He had a feeling Richard was more than a former boyfriend to Amber but knew he couldn't voice his suspicions yet. "I'm guessing this means he's a shoot first, ask questions later if ever kind of guy?"

"Pretty much, which is why I don't want you involved." Amber looked him square in the eye. "I mean it, Presley. I appreciate all the help you've given me and the kindness you've shown me, but this is my problem."

"It became my problem the moment I met you," Presley cut her off, returning her gaze with absolute sternness. "I'm ex-military and an ex-bodyguard. I can handle a man with a gun, darlin', just as long as I'm prepared, which is why you're giving me this intel."

"Intel?" She smirked. "You make this sound like a mission."

"It damn well is. No one, and I mean no one, is going to harm one hair on your head while you're under my protection."

## Chapter Five

Amber looked up at the blue neon sign shaped like a dancing bug with boots and a cowboy hat on, and cringed. “Jeez. It’s so ugly, it’s kind of cute.”

Presley laughed, and placed a hand on the small of her back, guiding her inside the Blue Bug Saloon. He greeted an older man by the name of Barney as they entered and paid the cover charge before guiding her deeper into the saloon. A live band performed music which washed over them as they made their way through the crowd of bodies to the mirror-backed bar. “Make sure you stick close to me,” Presley leaned in to say directly into her ear, his warm breath teasing her neck to induce a shiver. “The rodeo cowboys start coming in tonight and they can be rowdy. A woman as good-looking as you is mighty tempting. I’d hate to ruin our night by getting into a bar fight.”

“You’d fight over me?” Amber teased as she slipped onto the stool Presley indicated.

“Well, I’m not as possessive as your ex,” Presley answered, taking a seat at the stool next to hers, “but I’ll be damned if any other cowboy thinks he can dance with my date.” He winked, the gesture softening the threat of his words and Amber was surprised to find herself melting a little bit more for the cowboy.

Richard had said similar things to her, but there’d never been any underlying humor, just raw possessiveness. Even the men who’d worked for Richard had looked at her as if she were mere property, something to be owned but never appreciated.

She'd thought all men were like that on some level, but Presley could say things to her that no other man could. What would cause her to cringe and back away from any other man actually made her want to draw closer to him. It was because of his eyes, she realized, studying the chocolate brown orbs. There was no hardness when he made such comments to her, only desire. A desire she returned full-heartedly, much to her surprise.

"A penny for your thoughts."

"That's pretty cheap, don't you think?" she shot back, aware Presley had caught her staring at him, deep in thought, and he laughed.

"What can I get you?" a busty brunette asked and Presley ordered a bottled beer, inclining his head to ask her what she cared for.

"I'll just take a Coke."

"You sure?" Presley asked, grinning. "I promise I won't get you drunk and take advantage."

"Because you know you wouldn't have to." The words slipped out before Amber could consider them, earning her a pair of raised eyebrows, but Presley didn't say a thing. An utter gentleman, he surveyed the inside of the saloon until the bartender came back with their drinks. "Thanks, Rita Mae."

"You're welcome, hon."

Amber watched the busty bartender sashay away, unaware she was scowling until Presley's deep chuckle caught her attention. "Why do women always look at poor Rita Mae that way?"

"I don't know what you mean." Amber sipped her Coke and spun around to check out the dance floor. "You weren't lying about there being a lot of cowboys here." Everywhere she looked, she saw men in cowboy boots and Stetsons, and draped across quite a few of them were women in short skirts or tight jeans, and boots. She also wore a skirt, a denim and pink sequined number purchased at Beulah's

boutique, and the boots she'd got at Cow Patti's Custom Boots. Speaking of which, Patti Pie Murphy sat at a table surrounded by friends, enjoying the evening.

"They roll in Thursday and take advantage of the free ladies night."

"So the ladies take advantage of the free drinks, and the cowboys take advantage of the drunk ladies?"

Presley grinned. "Most of the ladies here are smart enough not to get drunk, and believe me, it's not just the men doing the prowling."

She could believe that. More than a few scantily-clad women had openly ogled her cowboy since they'd walked in. Wait a minute. *Her* cowboy? Amber shook her head. Despite his niceness and clear flirtation, Presley wasn't hers, and would never be. A man like him deserved a decent woman.

The band started an up-tempo song and people started pairing off on the floor. Amber watched, fascinated, as they dipped and turned, having a wonderful time.

"Shall we?"

She turned her head toward Presley and was sure her eyes portrayed her horror at the idea of joining up.

"It's easier than it looks," Presley said with a wink, and held out his hand. "Trust me, darlin'."

Oh, hell. She'd follow him right down the flaming path to Hades as long as he called her darlin'. Amber laughed at her foolishness and placed her hand in his larger one, momentarily forgetting how to breathe when a tingle from the connection rocketed right up her arm.

He guided her onto the dance floor, greeting a couple of his friends along the way, and then they were dancing. Amber followed his lead, twisting and turning, all the while hoping she didn't do something

to embarrass herself. A sharp pain hit her in the side as the song came to an end and she winced.

"You all right?" Presley asked, looking down at her out of the corner of his eye as he clapped for the band along with the other people on the floor.

"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Positive." Amber put on her brightest smile and nodded confidently.

The band settled into a slow song, the melody familiar. Amber knew she'd heard it somewhere before, but of course the band didn't sound like the original singer and it threw her off. "I've heard this before."

"It's a Garth Brooks song," Presley advised, pulling her in close for a slow dance.

It hit her as she fit her body against Presley's that the song came from one of her favorite movies, *Hope Floats*. She'd always thought Harry Connick, Jr. was sexy as sin in the movie and chuckled. Never would she have thought she'd find a small town full of good-looking cowboys, and wind up dancing close to the finest in the room.

"Let me in on the joke?"

"Not on your life, cowboy."

Presley sighed. "Keep your secrets then, as long as you're not laughing at my dancing."

"No worries there." Amber rested her head against the curve of Presley's neck, inhaling his scent. Richard had always smelled of money and sophistication, designer clothes and expensive cologne. Presley's scent was more manly. Leather and warm, spicy male. She could wrap herself in that scent and just forget the rest of the world existed.

"You enjoying yourself?" Presley's deep voice whispered past her ear.

"Immensely." She might have purred a little bit, and didn't care. This, just this simple slow dance

with Presley, was the most satisfying thing she'd done in ages. The picnic with him earlier wasn't so bad, either.

The song ended much too quickly and with a sigh of regret, Amber pulled back. She'd have rather stayed pressed tight against him all night but imagined they'd be quite the spectacle if she gave in to her desire to do so.

"Hey, Presley, this one's for you and the knock-out," the lead singer of the band announced, catching the attention of both of them, and started strumming his guitar in a familiar rhythm. He jerked his head toward his left and started singing the first line of Elvis Presley's *Burning Love*.

Amber followed the direction the singer had indicated and saw a good-looking man in a dark Stetson with his arm draped around the shoulders of a pretty woman with long, ink-black hair. He raised his bottle, toasting them.

"Damned Nash," Presley growled, but his tone was laced with amusement.

"Show us how it's done, King," a burly man called out and the people around them laughed.

"My mother just had to name me Presley. Come on, darlin'." Presley shook his head and guided her to the center of the room. "Should have known they'd do this to me, the jokers."

Amber frowned, but realized those laughing were laughing with Presley, not at him. Apparently he didn't mind the teasing over his name, and it wasn't done in mean spiritedness.

With all eyes on them, they danced to the Elvis tune. Amber moved her feet to the rhythm, managing to keep up with Presley as he led. Dressed in a dark blue, western-cut shirt and jeans that fit like a second skin, he looked good enough to eat and Amber felt a surge of pride knowing the graceful cowboy was dancing with her.

Applause greeted them as the song ended, and they took a playful bow. The hunky cowboy who'd requested the song for them sauntered over and clapped a hand on Presley's shoulder. "You know I had to do it, Pres."

"Yeah, I know you did, Nash." Presley laughed and wiped a hand down his face, swiping the trickle of sweat sliding down from his brow. "Allow me to introduce you to—"

Pain ripped through Amber's abdomen, and sent her crashing to her knees. A cry escaped her as she clutched her belly, sure it'd be torn to shreds if she didn't.

"Amber!" Presley dropped to his knees beside her. "Darlin', what's wrong?"

"I don't know. It just hur—" She couldn't finish, pain sending another cry to her throat. Her lower belly twisted, torturing her mercilessly. She bent forward, on all fours.

"Oh, God, she's bleeding," came a female voice. "Get her to the hospital now!"

"Hold on, darlin'."

Amber became weightless, lifted in strong arms that trembled with fear, and then air whooshed across her as Presley ran with her. Unable to speak through the blinding pain, she dug her fingers into his shirt and whimpered against his chest.

Cooler air hit her skin as they exited the saloon and she heard the screeching of tires. "Get in. You can't drive and take care of her at the same time."

Amber recognized the voice of the man offering assistance as that of Presley's friend, Nash.

"Hold on, darlin'," Presley whispered into her ear as he lifted her into his friend's truck, cocooning her on his lap, and told Nash to step on it.

\*\*\*\*

*"You'll never have anything without me. You're nothing, and it doesn't matter where you run. You*

*will always be nothing, just a used-up tramp. No one who knows what you are will ever care for you. You'll come running back to me once they cast you aside, begging for me to take you back and put you in your place."*

Richard's cruel taunt wrapped around Amber's heart, squeezing it until she feared it would burst. She jerked upward and pain tore a whimper from her throat, sent her collapsing back down against the pillows mounted behind her.

"Oh, honey, you have to relax." Miranda West loomed over her, motherly eyes filled with concern as she gently lay a hand on Amber's forehead, then ran the back of it down the side of her face in a soft caress. "Bad dream, sweetie pie?"

Amber started to say yes, but her throat was so dry and sore she only managed a croak. Miranda had a paper cup filled with water in front of her in the blink of an eye.

"Here, baby. What they give you to knock you out always leaves such a soreness in your throat when you wake."

Amber sipped gratefully, and while the cool liquid soothed her throat she recalled what she was doing here in this sterile white hospital room. She'd been dancing with Presley at the Blue Bug Saloon, having a wonderful time, when the pain she'd been experiencing since Richard's last beating ripped through her ten times as badly as it ever had and Presley had rushed her here.

There'd been so much blood. She'd felt it soaking through her skirt and sticking to her legs. Presley hadn't let her go, not even when that blood spilled onto him. He'd held on to her as if his own life was on the line, barely managing to give her over to the doctor. She could still remember the sound of the nurses restraining him, ordering him to wait outside the examination room.

She remembered Miranda's calming voice, telling her everything would be all right. Presley's mother had been on duty when she'd arrived, and had stayed with her for as long as she could remember, holding her hand as she breathed in the gas that had put her to sleep. She'd undergone surgery to stop the bleeding caused by a pregnancy in her fallopian tube, an unviable pregnancy that had gone undetected until it reached the point at which it could have killed her. Would have killed her if Presley hadn't gotten her to the trauma center.

"Where's Presley?" she asked as Miranda pulled the cup away from her mouth.

"Cleaning up. We couldn't talk him into leaving you long enough to go home and get changed, so one of his friends brought him some clothes. He'll be in soon."

Amber frowned, wondering how long Presley had worn the clothes she'd bled on rather than leave her. She'd known he was protective, but the thought of him not wanting to leave her side made her heart fill with a strange sensation that was half happy and half sad. He was such a good man. Too good for her. "He shouldn't worry so much for me."

"He can't help it." Miranda sighed, a distant look in her eyes. "Did you know you were pregnant?"

"No," Amber answered honestly. She'd only been with Richard for the past year, and they'd always used condoms. She made a mental note to ask the doctor for an HIV test since at least one condom had obviously been faulty. The thought of what else could have slipped through terrified her. "I'd had pains, but I thought they were from..." She let her voice trail off, unsure how much to say.

"From the beating? You still have bruising on your stomach and side."

Amber shook her head. "Why couldn't I have met someone like Presley sooner?" Realizing what

she'd just said out loud—to the man's mother—and how the question could be taken, Amber sputtered. "Not like that, I mean, not him exactly."

Miranda chuckled. "It's all right, dear. There's something about the cowboys in Wayback, isn't there? You won't find finer men anywhere else."

"I'd have to agree." Amber relaxed, sensing no reason to be wary of Miranda. "The saloon was packed with good looking men, and from what I've seen so far, very nice men."

"They are that. My heart will always belong to Elvis, but Presley's daddy..." Miranda shook her head. "That man owned my soul. A tall, dark, and handsome cowboy with a heart of gold. Presley's so much like him it hurts me sometimes."

She sighed, a wistful smile on her face. "There's definitely something about a man in cowboy boots and a Stetson. I used to fantasize about Elvis giving up the stage to become a bull rider and making his way to Wayback. Could you imagine him on the back of an angry bull?" Miranda shivered. "Why, just the other night I had a dream of him riding through town on horseback, nothing on but boots, a Stetson, and a set of chaps. As he passed he scooped me up and sat me right on his l—"

"For the love of all things holy, Mom, don't finish that sentence or I'll be in therapy for the rest of my life." Presley entered the small room, his face stricken with horror, or disgust. It was hard for Amber to tell.

Miranda waved him off. "It's so hard for my boy to realize I'm a grown woman and he didn't exactly happen by me being bashful."

"Mother, please."

Miranda laughed, and Amber couldn't help grinning herself. "Oh, all right. I'll leave you two be until the doctor comes in." She paused as she passed Presley and squeezed his arm, sending a caring look

Amber's way. Then she left them alone.

"I think it's time to up her meds," Presley joked as he approached the bed, but his eyes didn't hold the spark of humor that usually went along with a quip. They held the sorrow of a thousand grieving widows. "I'm so sorry, Amber. Had I known you were carrying a child, I'd have never pushed you."

"Pushed me?" Amber frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The dancing. The shopping." He ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. "I didn't even feed you until late afternoon."

"It's not your fault." Amber reached out to touch his arm, but he stepped away, guilt etched into every line of his face. The reaction sucker-punched Amber in the gut. "Presley, it's not your fault. I didn't even know I was pregnant, and it was an ectopic pregnancy. The baby had no chance."

A tear slipped from her eye as she made the statement. She'd heard the doctors tell her what was happening to her body, and had consented to the emergency surgery, but until now she hadn't allowed her emotions to wake up. They'd lain dormant through it all, but with one statement they'd come to life. She wished they hadn't. She'd had a child inside her, a poor child with no chance of survival.

A warm finger swept away the tear and Amber looked up into eyes burning with shame. "You were in pain. I remember. I shouldn't have danced with you again."

"Presley, it wasn't your fault. It would have happened anyway. I had an unviable three-month-old fetus in me." She sucked in a steadying breath. "I'm the one to blame. I ignored the pains and the missed periods, thinking it was stress and just physical repercussions from the things Richard did to me. Even when it got so bad I could barely stand it, I ignored it."

Presley's jaw clenched, locked as tight as his fists. "You could have died. You could have died on my watch."

Amber remembered the story he'd told her during their picnic, the way he'd lost Nina Garcia when her abusive husband had found them, and realized why he was taking her loss so badly. "I didn't, though. You saved me, Presley. Can't you see that? You are the one who carried me in your arms all the way here. You saved my life."

He shook his head, unsatisfied. "It was too damn close. I swear on my life, it won't happen again."

He looked at her with eyes so full of regret her stomach clenched painfully. "The doctor said we could take you home in the morning and care for you there. Do you want to stay with me or would you rather—"

"I want to stay with you." Amber's tone was sharp, but she couldn't hide her frustration. "I trust you, Presley. Do you realize how hard it is for me to do that, how decent a person you have to be in order for me to do so?"

He shook his head and looked away.

"Damn you, Presley West. Don't do this."

"Do what?" He turned his head back toward her, the pain still there in his eyes, pulling a matching emotion from her.

"I really enjoyed spending the day with you, and tonight at the saloon was the best time I've had in a long time. You're the most decent person I've met in ages. Don't take the blame for something you had no part in. I can't bear it."

"It doesn't matter if it would have happened or not. It happened, and it reminded me how fragile you are. How..." He ran a hand down his face, and swallowed hard. "It reminded me how wrong it was of me to even consider being more than a bodyguard or boss to you. I'm sorry if I started something with

you tonight, Amber. I'll protect you to the best of my ability, and give you a job and place to stay, but that's all I can give you. It's all I'm worthy of giving you."

"Presley."

"I'm sorry, Amber. So sorry." He turned and walked out the door, leaving her alone to wait for the doctor.

## Chapter Six

When Presley West had rescued her outside Wayback that dark, stormy night, Amber had thought of him in a few different ways. A psychopath. A cowboy. A knight in shining armor. Never had she thought of him as a coward, so it was surprising to find out that was exactly what he was.

He'd brought her home from the trauma center, deposited her in her bed, turned on his heel, and walked out of the room. At no time during the trip home or arrival did he speak. When she attempted to, he shot her a dark look and told her it was best for her to rest, as if the simple act of speaking could harm her health.

Miranda had seen to all her needs during the three weeks she was ordered to rest, taking vacation and moving into the house to be readily available. It was during those visits that Amber had gained a little insight into why Presley had been so freaked out by what had happened to her. Nina Garcia had been pregnant when her husband had killed her. The baby hadn't survived, and Presley blamed himself for that death as well. According to his mother, it still haunted him, though he wouldn't confess that truth to anyone. Miranda had been surprised he'd even told her about Nina, having known her such a short time.

Amber would have liked to have had the opportunity to speak to him during those three weeks, to hopefully reassure him he wasn't to blame for the loss of Nina's child, or her own, but he hadn't come to her room.

Given his scarceness, it was no surprise when on the twenty-first day after her surgery, Miranda met her in the kitchen instead of him.

“You ready for your first day of work, honey?”

“Yes, ma’am, and more than ready to get out of this house,” Amber responded.

Miranda smiled and led the way through the back door and down the steps. The sun beat down on them despite the morning hour, but its warmth was welcome after three weeks doing nothing but lying in bed worrying about a man instead of her own health. Amber shook her head, amazed at herself. She’d just escaped a cruel, merciless man. The last thing she should be concerning herself with was another member of the male species. She’d been given a place to stay and a job that didn’t involve her degrading herself. She should take what she was being offered, run with it, and let Presley take care of himself. But as she caught sight of the man in question atop a gorgeous black horse, dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt stretched over sculpted muscles she could still feel under her hands from their night of dancing, she knew she couldn’t.

“What’s he doing?” she asked Miranda as she watched Presley slide off the horse and hand the reins to a man who was making notes on a clipboard.

“That’s Midnight Crusader, a stallion that just arrived this morning,” Miranda answered, nodding her head toward the horse Presley had finished riding. “Presley tests out all the new arrivals to evaluate their temperament. Sometimes they can be adopted despite their age, especially the racing horses like that one. Horses used for bronc-busting are a bit harder to place since they may appear to have lost their desire to buck, but could possibly still do it.”

Presley glanced up and caught Amber’s eye. Her breath hitched in her throat at the intensity of the

scowl on his face as he directed a dark look toward Miranda, spoke a few words to the man with the clipboard, and climbed over the fence holding in the horse. Just as she expected, he walked in the opposite direction of her, not bothering to offer a greeting.

“Good morning, Presley,” Amber called out before she lost her nerve, and quickly strode over to him. He’d stopped at the side of Ray, the man who’d been outside her room the morning she’d woken from the nightmare, and turned to glare at her. “Lovely day, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.” The response was for her, but his eyes focused past her shoulder, to where Miranda was catching up. “The office is attached to the other side of the house, Mother.”

“Is it?” Miranda asked, fluttering her lashes. “However did I forget that? Must be my old age.”

Something akin to a growl sounded from Presley’s throat, and Ray chuckled. The older man quickly turned around when Presley’s glare fixed on him.

“Why don’t you show me the office?” Amber smiled sweetly. “You are my boss. Who better could show me the ropes?”

“That’s a great idea,” Miranda agreed, and Amber could see the spark of mischief in her eyes. Presley’s mother had deliberately led her to him.

“Mom, she needs to be trained how to do the office job, which you’d be best at.”

“Oh, horse crap,” Miranda replied, waving her hand dismissively. “You’re the one who showed me what to do and you did a fine job of it. I’m supposed to be at the trauma center in twenty minutes anyway. You’d be doing me a favor.”

Presley’s eyes narrowed. “You said you still had a few days off.”

“Yes, sweetie, but I’m taking Jennifer Santiago’s

shift today. She's got a bad flu."

Presley rubbed his hand along the back of his neck. "I've got a lot of work out here to do."

"Don't worry," Ray jumped in, winking at Miranda secretively. "I've got everything here under control. You go on and show Miss Amber what she's supposed to do in the office."

Presley opened his mouth to protest and the frustration growing inside Amber boiled over. "You know what, I'll figure it out on my own," she snapped, allowing her voice to rise. "Jeez, Presley, for someone so big and imposing, you sure are a chicken-shit."

The work going on around them came to a stand-still, Miranda stifled a chuckle, and Ray's jaw dropped. Even the horses dared not utter a sound as Presley's nostrils flared, his unrelenting glare sharp enough to slice her in two. She raised her chin defiantly despite the nerves churning in her stomach, and held Presley's stare for what seemed like an eternity until he angled his head toward his employees and barked, "What the hell are you gawking at? Get back to work!"

Without waiting to make sure they followed the direct order, he snatched Amber's wrist in his big hand and stomped toward the house. She lurched forward, half-jogging to keep up with his anger-fueled strides.

He led her over the pebbled drive, passing a pair of horses in the pasture at their left. The gorgeous animals neighed as they passed, and shifted, seeming to pick up on the fury rolling off Presley in thick waves. Amber felt it like a sting against her skin and was reminded of the times Richard dragged her down the hall by her hair, how many times he'd hit her before all the anger inside him drained. She swallowed hard against the fear clogging her throat and pushed the memories away. She'd escaped Rich-

ard, and despite how angry Presley was, he was not Richard Carnales.

They reached the front of the house and Amber was tugged up the steps. Presley veered toward the right of the wraparound porch and stomped toward a door at the side of the house labeled Office. Presley jerked it open with more force than was necessary, ushering her inside.

A dark maple desk was centered in the room and atop it sat a computer and telephone. Gray file cabinets lined the right wall and three gray-cushioned chairs sat before the desk. A large framed print of Presley and Ray posing with a stunning black horse adorned the wall. The other décor consisted of a large potted plant in the far corner and small framed snapshots of other horses lining the other three walls.

Amber barely had time to take it in before Presley whirled around, yanking her close and leaning in so his face hovered just over hers. “I don’t appreciate you putting on a show in front of my employees. Do you want to keep this job or not?”

Amber swallowed. In her frustration, she’d forgotten Presley could actually withdraw his offer of employment. He wouldn’t be wrong to do so. It was unacceptable for an employee to call her employer a chicken-shit, even if he was being one. “I’m sorry, Presley. I was out of line.”

He held her gaze a moment longer, then stepped back to rake a hand through his tousled hair. “You’re a guest in my home, Miss Barlow, but I still expect you to act like an employee when you’re working.”

*Miss Barlow?* Amber fisted her hands tightly. She was just Amber when he surprised her with the picnic, just Amber when they danced at the Blue Bug. Or darlin’. “Yes, sir, *Mister West*.”

He raised an eyebrow at the exaggerated enunciation, but didn’t comment on it. “Sit down and boot

up the computer. I'll show you what to do."

Amber bit the inside of her cheek to refrain from letting a sarcastic thank you slide out, and took a seat in the worn leather desk chair. She pressed the button on the computer that would bring the machine to life and turned on the monitor. The screen glowed with a blue hue and then a box popped up, the cursor blinking inside it.

"The password is R-U-N-0-7-F-R-E-E," Presley said as he leaned over her from his position behind the chair and keyed in the password, his arms engulfing her. The scent of hard-working cowboy swirled around Amber, jumbling her senses.

"What you'll be doing is ..."

Amber somehow managed to keep from reaching out to touch the sexy cowboy at her back as Presley explained her daily tasks to her, showing her which files on the computer she needed to access, when, how, and why. All the while he hovered around her, his scent in her nose, his deep, commanding voice in her ear as his warm breath tickled her jaw. It was absolute torture trying to focus on what he said rather than how he sounded saying it, and learn about her job when all she wanted to do was learn about him.

"Pretty simple, huh?" he asked as he straightened to his full height and stepped around to the front of the desk. "Any questions?"

Amber looked into his chocolate brown eyes and swallowed. She had hundreds of questions, but none about the job came immediately to mind.

"Amber? Did I lose you?"

She blinked, shook her head to clear it. "No, you didn't lose me." She lowered her gaze away from his and found it easier to concentrate. "It seems really easy. I'm sure I won't have any problems."

"Good. If you do..." He leaned over the desk and tapped on the phone. "My cell is the first number on

speed dial, Ray's is the second. If you're fine here, I've got things that need doing."

*I'm not fine, you idiot. You acted like you were interested in me, then dropped me like a rock and now expect me to act like there wasn't a spark forming between us. "I'm good."*

He nodded his head, opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, then snapped it closed again. "All right then. See you at supper."

He left the office without another word and Amber let out a frustrated sigh, wondering why she felt such an aching pain in the vicinity of her heart. *Because he's a good man and he liked you. He was right there within your grasp.* Amber clicked on a file she needed and started working, desperate to take her mind off Presley and what could have been, but she couldn't seem to push the sexy cowboy out of her head. It didn't help that her job gave her insight into the man. The Greener Pastures Retirement Home for Horses may have been backed by generous donations but Presley still put quite a bit of his own money into the operation.

Amber clicked on the spreadsheets showing where money came from and how it was spent. Apparently, Presley had invested money from his body-guarding days into a variety of stocks and ventures which paid off well. She could also see where he'd won quite a few substantial purses in the rodeo, and used those funds to maintain the retirement home, too. She checked the incoming and outgoing logs and determined there had never been a horse turned away, even if it was highly unlikely to be adopted.

No, Presley West wouldn't turn away any creature in need. That hard fact made it even more trying for Amber to understand why he seemed to be running scared from her now. He'd been practically courting her before her dash to the hospital. Then she'd lost the baby and...

Amber gasped, her hand automatically traveling to her belly. As gentlemanly and respectful as he'd been... She thought of the way Ray and the other cowboys employed by Presley tipped their hats in her direction and called her "Miss." These people weren't like the people she knew in Chicago. They treated her like a lady of class, and probably frowned upon a single woman being pregnant.

"No, he's just relating what happened to me to the incident with Nina Garcia," Amber said aloud, desperate to chase the errant thought away, but it stuck there along with her insecurity. Richard had been right about one thing. No matter how fast she went or how far she got, she'd never outrun the shame of her past. And she'd never be able to get a good man like Presley West.

\*\*\*\*

"Here, let me get that."

Amber wasn't allowed time to open her mouth to refuse Presley's help before the man was taking the casserole dish out of her hands and placing it on the table. Without potholders or oven mitts on. He jerked his hands away after setting the dish down and muttered an oath.

"Hot dishes hurt." Amber rolled her eyes and turned back to the stove where she had potatoes boiling. "I'm perfectly capable of fixing dinner, you know. Lifting meatloaf isn't that strenuous."

"What's with you?"

Amber cringed, realizing she'd been snippish. She really wasn't mad at Presley, but after weeks spent analyzing all the reasons why she'd never have him, she couldn't help but be angry. Being in his presence made the emotion even stronger. "Nothing. I'm just trying to get dinner on the table. I know you've worked hard today."

"Why are you cooking? I thought my mom was supposed to come over and cook tonight."

Amber drained the water off the potatoes and edged around Presley to get to the refrigerator, studiously avoiding direct contact with the sexy cowboy's eyes, or any other body parts that made her long for something more than he was willing to give. "She called from the hospital to tell you to take care of Elvis while she's away. Your cousin, Lila, has taken another turn for the worse and she's going to stay with the family for a while."

"Damn."

Amber caught the concern in his eyes as she turned from the fridge with a jug of milk in her hand, but said nothing. She'd learned enough from Miranda to know that Presley's thirty-five-year old cousin had cancer and hadn't been doing well. She wanted to offer him support, or comfort, but feared his refusal too much to try. She focused on mashing the potatoes.

"I'll go get the dog," he muttered and turned for the door he'd just entered a moment before.

"I already got him." Amber still couldn't get over the fact that people in Wayback left their doors unlocked. Even though Miranda lived on the same property as the Greener Pastures Retirement Home and there were plenty of men nearby, she couldn't imagine leaving her house open for intrusion. "He's sleeping on the couch."

"Thanks for getting him." Presley ran a hand through his hair and stepped over to the stove. "I'll finish the food. You're a guest."

"A guest who's been staying here a month already. I don't need special treatment," Amber snapped before she could stop herself and took a deep breath. "Look, I've just about finished. Why don't you go wash up?"

Presley narrowed his eyes at her, but didn't say a word. The sound of his boots moving over the hardwood floor was angry and Amber cursed her

temper. She'd always had one and despite the numerous times Richard had tried to beat it out of her, it just wouldn't leave.

\*\*\*\*

Presley stepped out of the shower and promptly tripped over the fat hound dog lying on the bathroom floor. "Dammit, Elvis."

The lazy mongrel just looked up at him with his sad eyes and laid his head back down, dismissing him with no concern.

"Stupid mutt." Presley dried off, using more energy than was necessary to towel the water off his body, and jerked on a pair of dark gray pajama bottoms. The insufferable woman he'd rescued off the side of the road had him all shook up.

She'd cooked a good meal, but had provided pitiful company. Despite his intention of not getting any closer to her, he'd tried to start a conversation at supper. Ignoring her while sitting right across from her would have been just plain rude. No matter what questions he asked, her answers were clipped, her tone icy. He'd walked away from supper feeling like a villain. His only concern was protecting her, doing right by her, and she acted as if he'd done something wrong. As if he'd done something to hurt her.

Twisting the towel in his hands, Presley growled. Damned women. Never could understand them. But, man, did he want to understand this one. That was the main thing worrying his mind as he tossed the towel into the hamper and stepped out into his bedroom to plop down on his big, king-sized bed. His big, lonely, king-sized bed. "Don't go there, West."

He laughed at himself, amazed by his stupidity. The last time a woman on the run had been in his care it had all gone wrong. He'd let his guard down, and that's exactly what he'd be doing if he started

thinking of Amber as his while she was still another man's target. That's the only way to think of her if he wanted her to stay safe, and breathing.

A scream cut through the air and Presley jerked up, his heart in his throat. Amber! He raced out of his room and up the stairs, taking them two at a time to the top. He pounded down the hall and threw open her door.

Amber twisted in the sheets, her mouth open in a scream as she flailed her arms about, defending herself from her nightmare attacker. She wore a white camisole and pink and white striped pajama bottoms. Her small but round breasts were in danger of popping out of her top and Presley found himself staring. Disgusted with himself, he shook off the longing inside him and jumped into action, scooping Amber up and securing her flailing arms with his own as he leaned her back against his chest.

"Amber! Wake up, darlin'." He shook her gently. "Snap out of it, sweetheart."

"Presley?" She turned her face toward him, relief in her ocean-blue eyes. "You're safe."

"I'm always safe," he reassured her, his voice gruff as she lay her palm on his jaw, sending his nerve endings into a frenzy. He forced back the urge to turn his face into that palm and plant a kiss there. "I'm too ornery to get hurt."

"You're not ornery at all," she whispered, her fingers caressing his face. "That's why these nightmares scare me so bad. If he gets you..."

"He won't."

"Promise?" Her eyes were pleading, so full of emotion Presley had to swallow hard to get out a response.

"Promise."

She sighed, a soft little sound that reminded him how fragile the little spitfire really was, and then tilted her head toward his.

He should have avoided it. One quick shift of his body, a slight pull away, and the kiss wouldn't have happened, but as her lips parted and came closer to his, he found himself frozen in place, too curious, too needy to back away. He'd wanted it from the time he'd seen her drenched on the roadside, so he caved.

Her lips met his, soft and pliant. Timid but sure. A low groan crawled up through his throat and Presley slanted his mouth to gain better access, exploring every inch of Amber's mouth as his hand twisted in her hair, holding her closer.

It felt so good, so right, to be kissing her. Presley breathed in her sweet womanly scent as he tasted her and knew he'd do whatever it took to protect her. "Aw, hell," he muttered as he ripped his mouth away from hers and turned his back to her. What the hell was wrong with him, getting involved with someone he was guarding?

"Presley?"

He winced at the sadness in her voice. He didn't want to hurt her and knew he'd pulled away abruptly, which could only come across as a rejection. "I'm sorry, Amber. This can't happen."

"Why not?"

"It just can't," he snapped, angry with himself for losing control, and rose from the bed. He crossed over to the window, determined not to look at her. He couldn't stand whatever he'd find in her eyes. "Was your nightmare about Richard?" Bile rose in his throat with mention of the slimeball's name.

"Yes," she answered, her voice small. Hurt.

Presley balled up his fists, wishing he had the man in front of him to take away Amber's fear once and for all. "He won't get you," he promised as he lowered himself into the chair beside Amber's bed and stretched out best he could. "Go to sleep, darlin'. No nightmares will get past me."

She blinked, and in the pale light creeping in

from the window, Presley thought he saw the sheen of tears. "All right, Presley."

She lay down and pulled the sheet to her chest. Presley took a deep breath and tried not to think about how tempting she looked as she settled in for the night. Elvis chose that moment to lumber in and lay at his feet, looking up at him with a face as pitiful as he felt. He reached down to scratch the hound's head and settled in for a long night with what he knew would be poor sleep.

"Presley?" Amber asked long after he'd thought she'd fallen asleep.

"Yeah?"

"You loved her, didn't you?"

Presley frowned, sure he'd heard her wrong. "Loved who?"

"Nina Garcia," she responded and yawned softly. "It's why you're scared to care for me."

Presley shook his head, his hands tensing as Nina's smiling face filled his mind. "I didn't love her. She was a married woman."

"So it is..." She trailed off, and Presley leaned forward, his curiosity piqued.

"What were you going to say, Amber?"

"Nothing." Her response was muffled, as if the word barely fit through her mouth, and she turned on her side, her back to Presley. He took it as his cue not to press any further and leaned back in the chair.

"But you did care for her," she inquired a few minutes later.

"Go to sleep, Amber," Presley practically barked, not sure why the line of questioning frustrated him.

Elvis whined and he growled at the mutt, shutting him up so he could get a little sleep before morning.

## Chapter Seven

“How’s everything going down there?”

Amber tightened her grip on the phone, unsure how to answer Presley’s mother, who’d just called to check in. She’d checked in several times since she’d been gone, but she’d always spoken with Presley. Three weeks had passed since the amazing kiss Amber had shared with the gruff cowboy, and they’d barely spoken unless their conversation involved business. Yet he still watched over her every night, attempting to sleep with his long body in that horrible chair in order to make her feel safe. She couldn’t understand how he could do something so sweet for her, but not want what she freely offered.

“Amber?”

“Oh, yes, Miranda. Sorry. I’m still here.”

“Is my boy treating you all right?” Concern laced the older woman’s words.

“He’s being a perfect gentleman,” Amber reassured her on a sigh.

“Still being a gentleman? Well, damn. I’d hoped with me out of the way, you’d have been able to get your hooks in him by now.”

Amber’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

Miranda’s laughter filtered through the phone. “Honey, a blind man could see the sparks flaring up between you two. Don’t sound so surprised.”

Amber chuckled, realizing nothing got past the woman. “Well, I’m afraid no fire will become of those sparks. He won’t give me a chance.”

“What?” Miranda made a clucking noise. “That man looks at you like Elvis looked at Priscilla. My

Presley is just scared, honey. He's been scared of caring about someone for so long I'm afraid if he doesn't get over it now he might just spend the rest of his life alone."

"He did care for Nina Garcia, didn't he?"

There was a long pause.

"Miranda?" Amber prodded softly.

"Honey, I don't know. He says no, but part of me thinks he might have. He took her death hard. He blames himself."

"I know." Amber leaned back in the desk chair and chewed on her bottom lip. "I wish he didn't feel so responsible for me. Maybe I should save up to get my own place, or just leave Wayback."

"You'll do no such thing," Miranda commanded. "I thought you were strong, Amber. You can't just quit."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You want him, go get him. Trust me, my boy may be big and brawny, but deep down he's a scared little baby when it comes to matters of the heart. You're going to have to be aggressive with him."

"Aggressive?" Amber frowned.

"Show him you're not a weak little victim he has to fear for. Show him your strength. I know you have it in you."

Amber's eyes watered, touched by Miranda's high opinion of her. "I don't know, Miranda. I don't think I'm his type."

"And why is that?"

"Because..." Amber swallowed to ease the roughness in her voice. "I was pregnant, and unmarried."

"So?"

"So he's acted funny around me since that night at the hospital. Maybe he..." Amber took a deep breath, hating herself for the choices she'd made. "The people in this town are so respectable. I can

imagine what you all must think of me.”

Miranda let out a hearty laugh. “Honey, nobody cares that you were pregnant out of wedlock. Presley’s hurting for you because you lost a child and in his stubborn mind, he believes he should have been able to prevent it. And as far as what I think of you...” She snickered. “If you could have seen how far my wedding dress had to be let out to accommodate my growing belly you’d realize how absurd your statement was. We aren’t saints in this town, just decent people.”

Amber smiled, relief bringing fresh tears to her eyes. “Thank you, Miranda, for everything. You’ve been so kind to me.”

“Well, I’m going to quit being kind and kick you in the rump if you don’t get through to my son. He needs a good woman in his life.”

Amber closed her eyes. If only they really knew her. “I’m not—”

“Shut your mouth, missy. I know people, and you are good people. I don’t care what that man you were with said to make you think otherwise. You’ve survived hell, and you deserve a good life with a good man. My Presley deserves a good life with a good woman. I hope you’ll help him understand that.”

A tear slipped down Amber’s cheek. “Thank you, Miranda.”

“No problem, sweetie. Tell Presley that Lila is stabilizing, and I should be home soon. Make sure he doesn’t fuss at poor Elvis too much.”

Amber thought of the way Presley referred to the pudgy dog as a fat, lazy mutt, but still fed him leftovers after dinner, and smiled. “I will.”

“Good. Now get out of that office and go work your wiles on that stubborn man.”

\*\*\*\*

“Come on, Presley. You can’t say no to charity.”

“What’s going on?” Amber asked, inching her way into the empty stables where Presley, dressed in a brown T-shirt and snug worn blue jeans, and Ray were talking.

“What are you doing out of the office?” Presley turned angry eyes on her.

Amber raised her chin, Miranda’s words still in her head. He was just stubborn and scared, and he’d stay that way if she didn’t show him she was tough enough to not break on him. “It’s late, and my work is done. What were you two discussing?” She directed her question at Ray, in case Presley refused an answer.

The older cowboy grinned, realizing her trick. “There’s going to be a rodeo event to raise funds for a little girl with cancer. She’s the daughter of a bull rider from here, and her medical bills are real high so we’ve pulled together as a community to put together a fundraiser. A large portion of the proceeds from ticket sales and concessions will go toward her care. Plus, we’re taking bets on best in each category with half that money going to the winners, half going to the little girl. If Presley rides, we’ll be sure to rake in some good money for her.”

“That’s such a wonderful thing to do!” Amber looked at Presley, expecting him to nod in agreement, but he was staring at Ray, his jaw tight. She frowned at the sight, knowing Presley was hurting over his own cousin’s ordeal with the horrible disease. Surely he’d want to participate. “Presley? Aren’t you going to help?”

“I can cut a check,” he said.

“Can you cut a check for as much money as you’d bring in bronc-busting?” Ray asked sarcastically. “Come on now, son. You’re one of the best and sure to draw a good crowd.”

Presley’s stare darkened. “I already told you I’ll be too busy.”

"I can guard Amber while you do it."

"Guard me?" Amber questioned the same moment Presley let loose an expletive. "What's going on?"

"Dammit, Ray!"

"Sorry," the older man said, "but she should know."

"I should know what?" Fear seized Amber's heart, increasing its beat until it felt it would fly out of her chest, but she forced herself to maintain a calm appearance. She had to show Presley she was strong, despite whatever news he had for her. "It's Richard, isn't it? He's found me."

Presley removed his Stetson and raked a hand through his hair. "He hasn't been spotted here." He hung the hat on the handle of the shovel next to him and sighed, a rough, frustrated sound. "I did get in touch with some contacts I have from my bodyguarding days, some investigators, and it looks like he's tracking you. He's been steadily traveling south."

Amber swallowed past the lump of bile in her throat and willed her legs to remain firm. "So he could be headed here."

"Possibly," Presley said with a nod, his eyes dark and feral. "I want you in the house or office at all times, and no way am I participating in a rodeo and leaving you behind."

"I didn't escape one prison to enter another." Amber's voice was strong and forceful, much stronger than she felt on the inside where she was quivering like a leaf, but a surge of fresh anger overruled her fear. She wasn't going to spend the rest of her life hiding from Richard, especially if it meant Presley would keep looking at her as if she could be taken away at any moment. "You should do whatever you can to help that little girl, and if you do compete, I want to watch."

"Watch? Out in full view of everyone while the

man looking for you is headed this way?" Presley's eyes widened with incredulity, then narrowed. "Do you want him to find you?"

"Hell, no!" Amber snapped. "I'm not some stupid woman who's going to go right back to a demon after finally escaping, but I'm not going to hide away either. I'm tired of being scared. Aren't you?"

Presley's eyes blazed with fire. "I'm not scared of anything! I'm protecting you."

"Are you? It seems to me like you're protecting yourself an awful damn lot, too," Amber yelled back.

"Um, I think I'll leave you two alone," Ray said as he backed away from them.

"Stay here, Ray. We have to get these stalls mucked out," Presley commanded, never taking his smoldering eyes off Amber's. His voice had taken on a dangerous evenness that caused sweat to trickle between Amber's shoulder blades. "As for you, Amber. I think we're finished with this conversation. Get in the house and try to behave like a good employee."

"Why? Are you going to fire me?" She spread her arms wide. "Who would you protect then? Who else's misfortunes could you find a way to blame yourself for?"

Ray inhaled sharply but kept his head down as he shoveled straw out of an empty stall. Amber had obviously hit the nail on the head, but looking into Presley's eyes, the anger there barely contained, she wondered if she'd gone too far.

"Get in the house, Amber."

He spoke in a voice that brooked no room for disobedience, but Amber managed to square her shoulders and tilt her head defiantly. "No. I don't feel like it. I want to help the two of you."

Presley glanced down at the shovel propped beside him, then over at Ray, and shook his head. "Mucking out stalls isn't something a lady should do,

especially one who has recently had surgery.”

“Looks simple enough,” Amber replied, having observed Ray perform the task, “and I’m fully healed from the surgery.” She turned and grabbed a shovel off a peg in the wall and entered one of the messy stalls. The scent of manure assaulted her harder than it had upon entering the stable, but she breathed through her mouth and pressed on.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Presley barked from behind her, still standing where she’d left him.

“Mucking out a stall, apparently,” she responded sweetly as she scooped up hay with the shovel and moved it into a pile outside the stall. She ground her teeth together, determined not to show the strain of lifting the heavy shovel. She’d never had much upper body strength. “Why don’t you get your own ass in gear and help, or do you only bark out orders?”

Ray chuckled despite the quelling glare aimed his way by Presley. The stubborn cowboy bodyguard crossed his toned arms over his chest. “My, my, you have quite the potty mouth for a lady.”

“Who the hell told your stubborn ass I was a lady?” Amber shot back and Ray laughed out loud, joining Presley.

“She’s a cute little spitfire when she’s mad, ain’t she?” the older man asked.

“Adorable,” Presley agreed. “She’s like a chihuahua imitating a pit bull. Quit playing around, Amber, before you hurt yourself.”

“Playing around?” Livid, Amber slammed the shovel into the hay harder than necessary. A pungent smell hit her nose and she glanced down to see she’d scooped up a sizeable lump of horse excrement. A sly smile twisted her mouth as an idea formed. “Playing?”

“Yeah, play—” Presley’s eyes widened as he noticed the contents of the shovel she held precari-

ously. "You wouldn't dare."

"Actually, I would." And she proved it by flinging the lump of crap at him.

Presley ducked under the mess so it sailed over him and advanced in a speedy crouch. Before she could draw enough wind to scream, Presley had her draped over his shoulder and was stomping out of the stable.

"Put me down, you jerk!" Amber wailed, hitting his back.

"Enough out of you!" Presley swatted her rear and barked out a command for one of his workers to help Ray finish mucking out the stalls as they passed the young man, leaving him amused and bewildered.

Amber's face warmed, realizing what a spectacle they were as Presley finished stomping his way to the back of the house and through the kitchen door, kicking it closed with his boot before lowering her to the floor. He pinned her against the wall, her hands held over her head. "You threw horse shit at me," he said, eyes full of anger and disbelief.

Amber swallowed hard and willed herself not to cave under his hard stare. "You should be used to the smell considering you've been acting like a horse's ass."

Presley's eyes widened in surprise, his mouth twitched at the corners, then finally he allowed a deep laugh to rumble from his throat as he brought his forehead down to rest against hers. "You're something else, darlin'. What am I going to do with you?"

"Finish what you started three weeks ago." Amber loosened her hands from his grasp and gripped his chin, forcing him to hold her gaze as she leaned forward for a kiss. "I promise you I won't break."

Presley accepted the kiss, parting his lips to allow Amber access, then pulled her tight against him,

running his fingers through her hair as he returned her passion. Abruptly he broke the kiss, panting heavily. "We can't do this now."

"Why not?" Renewed anger coursed through Amber. He clearly wanted her. Why wouldn't he just give in to it?

"My men saw me haul you in here. If I don't go back out there they'll know what's going on and trust me, they gossip as bad as the women in town."

Amber froze inside. "So I'm an embarrassment. Fine, I understand."

She broke free of Presley's embrace, intending to flee to her room, when she was tugged backward to face the harsh lines etched into the cowboy's gorgeous face. "Woman, you don't understand a damn thing," he growled before scooping her into his arms and carrying her into his bedroom.

"Get out, Elvis," he ordered the dog, forcing the pudgy animal off the bed and into the hall before lowering Amber to his king-sized bed.

Amber looked around the room, taking in the earth tones and inhaling the scent of Presley permeating the soft sheets she rested on, while he closed the bedroom door in Elvis's whining face. She'd just kicked off her boots when he turned to consume her in a molten hot lingering gaze.

"I'm only considering your feelings," he explained as he crossed the room to kneel at the foot of the bed, his big hands resting on Amber's jean-clad thighs. The warmth emanating from them sent a shiver of longing through her body. "If you're concerned about your reputation or what others might say, stop me now."

Amber leaned forward, laid her palm against his jaw and ran a thumb over the smooth skin. "I only care what you think of me. If we do this, will you respect me tomorrow morning?"

"You're a strong woman, Amber." Presley turned

his face and pressed a kiss into her palm. "There's no way I couldn't respect that."

While her nerve endings still tingled from the kiss to her palm Presley loomed over her and kissed her mouth with a fierce hunger before starting a trail down her throat and chest, undoing buttons as he went.

Sex could actually feel good, Amber thought some time later as she lay naked beside Presley, who had one muscular arm holding her in place. She'd always been told so, but had never really believed it with the experiences she'd had. The trick, apparently, was caring deeply for the one you were with, and being with someone who actually cared about your own pleasure. She sent up a prayer of thanks that the tests she'd requested had come back negative, or she would have never been able to share such a beautiful experience with Presley. Even though they'd used a condom, she wouldn't have taken a chance of infecting him with anything had Richard given her an STD.

"You all right?" Presley asked, his thumb stroking her arm as she played with the dark smattering of hair on his rock-hard chest.

"Mm-hmm. Wonderful." She bit her lip to hold back all the adjectives she wanted to use to describe how he'd made her feel, unsure if it would send him running to the hills. She'd always heard men were spooked by terms of love, and as edgy as Presley was about anything romantic between them, she didn't want to push her luck.

"That's the first time I've found out a woman was a natural blonde that way. Usually sex is when you find out a woman is a natural brunette."

Amber frowned, realized what he was referring to, and laughed. "I dyed my hair this mousy brown right after I ran, to alter my appearance in case Richard or any of his goons tracked me down. I've

been touching it up before anyone could notice...just in case.”

“Nothing about you is mousy,” Presley murmured, pulling away to turn on his side toward her. He brushed a lock of hair off her face, running his fingers down it. “You’re beautiful now, but I bet you’re breathtaking with your natural color.”

“Have a thing for blondes, do ya?”

“Apparently I have a thing for women who sling manure,” he responded drily as he lay on his back, drawing her closer. “I want you to feel safe enough not to have to hide. Really, I do, but—”

Amber placed her fingers over his mouth to shush him. “I feel safe with you, Presley, safer than I’ve ever felt, and I need you to trust that. I’m not Nina Garcia. I’m not going to call my attacker and invite him to kill me. But if he finds me, I know you’ll protect me. I just can’t give up and hide.”

“Amber.”

“I believe in you.”

Presley’s grip on her arm tightened, then slowly, he began brushing his fingers along her skin in slow, lazy circles. “You asked me if I loved Nina Garcia. I didn’t. I just felt it was my duty to protect her and I failed. I became her friend and lost my professional edge. I trusted her enough to let her out of my sight and she paid the consequence.”

“So now you feel that if you care for someone you’ll quit thinking like a bodyguard?”

“I don’t know. I guess that was my fear with you, but actually...”

“What?” she prodded after a drawn out silence.

“The closer I get to you, the more I want to be right there looking over your shoulder, looking out for the enemy, and that scares me even more. If I failed to protect you I couldn’t handle it.”

Amber angled her head to plant a soft kiss beneath his jaw. “I have faith in you to protect me,

even if it's not your job." Amber snuggled closer, wishing she could do something to take away the tension in his hard body, or at least understand where his inner turmoil came from. "Why do you have this need to protect people? What happened to make you carry such weight on your shoulders?"

Amber waited with baited breath for a response, but after several minutes passed and none came, she gave up and closed her eyes, hoping she might get an answer another day. Then he spoke.

"My father loved the rodeo. He did really well in the bareback bronc-busting category, but one day..."

His whole body tensed, and Amber instinctively snuggled closer, feeling his need to be comforted. "What happened?"

"He got thrown off the horse, slid off the back right as the horse bucked."

"Oh, God," Amber gasped, chills racing down her spine as she could imagine what happened.

"He was kicked in the temple and died before he hit the ground. I was fourteen years old." He wrapped Amber tighter in his embrace, seeming to draw strength from her. "I remember crying so hard I couldn't see in front of me at the funeral, and afterward back at the house. A bull rider my dad was good friends with snatched me up and told me to suck up my tears and act like a man. He reminded me that my mother had just lost her husband and that I was the man of the house now. It was my job to take care of her and I couldn't do that if I was crying like a baby."

Amber wiped away the angry tear sliding down her cheek and wished she could throttle the bull rider.

"I took care of my mom, but she was always pushing me to get out more and enjoy my childhood. I'd always loved horses, and had wanted to participate in the bareback bronc-busting competitions in

the rodeo, but my dad's death spooked me. I decided to face my fears and when I turned seventeen I trained with Ray."

"How'd you meet Ray?" Amber asked.

"He was a high school buddy of my dad, and a bronc-buster. Until his wife threatened to divorce him if he got on another horse."

"Ray's married?"

"He was then. Nancy left him about ten years ago." Presley yawned before continuing. "He trained me and I picked it all up pretty quickly. I won some good purses in competitions, and right in the nick of time since Mom was struggling with the mortgage. It was fun, but after a while I had this nagging sense I should be doing something to help those who needed it."

"So you joined the military?" Amber asked.

"Yes. I joined the army and did well there, but by the time I got out I was restless. Joining the army didn't give me the sense of fulfillment I needed. I needed to help people more individually."

"So you became a bodyguard," Amber interjected. "I'm guessing your clientele were primarily women."

Presley chuckled. "You know me well. They weren't all women, but those were the cases I gravitated toward. Beaten women, stalked women, women fighting with their exes over custody of the children. I liked my job, and was good at it, but then Nina Garcia died on my watch."

"And you left bodyguarding behind to rescue horses from slaughterhouses."

"At least I'm still protecting those who can't protect themselves," he said softly, wrapping his other arm around her so she was completely cocooned.

"Who takes care of you while you're taking care of everyone else?"

"I can take care of myself," came his soft re-

sponse.

Amber shifted until his hold loosened and propped herself up so she could lean over him and make him look in her eyes. "Yeah, and you do it at your own expense. I care about you and I want you to be happy and carefree, not always worried about someone else. Shit happens to good people and sometimes you can't stop it. That's life."

"Amber."

"No. You listen to me." She leaned down and planted a soft kiss on his stubborn mouth. "I promise you I will never do something as stupid as Nina Garcia did, but I am tired of running. I want to live my life without fear, and I want that for you. You got in the arena after your father died there and you faced that fear. Now face this one. Don't be afraid to care about someone just because you might lose them. We all lose people we love, but why waste the time we could have with them while they're here?"

Presley sighed. "I knew you were going to be trouble when I saw you on the roadside," he muttered before drawing her down for a deep kiss that left her dizzy. "I don't think I could stay away from you if I tried, darlin'. Now go to sleep so I can get up in the morning and start practicing my broncbusting skills."

"You're going to participate in the fundraiser?"

"If a certain woman would let me get some sleep," he grumbled, his mouth turned up at the corners in the beginning of a grin.

"I want to watch," she said sternly, ready to argue the matter.

The grin tugging at the corners of Presley's mouth fled. "I want your promise that you will sit with Ray and do whatever he tells you to do."

"I promise I will do whatever it takes to stay safe so I can give you a big congratulatory kiss right after you win."

Guardian Cowboy

“What if I don’t win?” he asked seriously.

“Then I’ll give you a kiss that’ll make you forget all about that damn rodeo.”

“Language, young lady,” he teased.

“I’m not a l—”

“Yes you are, Amber.” He drew her down for another scorching kiss. “Yes you damn well are.”

## Chapter Eight

“You feeling confident?” Ray asked as he approached Presley by the truck.

Presley breathed deeply and nodded. “Eight seconds on the back of a bucking bronc ain’t nothin’.”

“Don’t get cocky now,” Ray teased. “I’ve got my money on you for the win.” He looked up at the house, in the direction of Amber’s bedroom window—not that she’d slept in it since the day she’d thrown manure at Presley—and his expression grew serious. “You hear anything else about that Richard guy?”

Presley smiled. “Bastard got arrested just outside Texas.”

Ray’s gray-flecked eyebrows shot up. “No kidding?”

“Nope. I won’t have to worry about him a bit while I’m out there in the arena.” The sound of the screen door clanging shut caught his attention and he turned to watch dry-mouthed as Amber bounced down the porch steps in her custom boots, a mini-skirt designed to slowly kill him, and a white tank top that showcased her soft curves, curves he’d come to know like the back of his hand in the past two weeks.

“Roll that tongue back in your mouth before you make a fool of yourself, son,” Ray ribbed him, slapping him on the back before turning toward his own truck. “I’m picking up your mom at the trauma center and then we’ll be at the arena.”

Presley barely registered Ray’s words as Amber approached him, the sun highlighting her gorgeous

blonde hair. Determined to not hide anymore, she'd gone to the beauty salon and had it colored back to its natural hue. The result was just as Presley had imagined. Breathtakingly beautiful.

"Well, are you just gonna stare at me, cowboy, or can I get a compliment?"

He grinned at the mischievous sparkle in her green-blue eyes and shook his head. "I can't quite find a fitting adjective, darlin'. You're too stunning for words."

He punctuated his statement with a deep kiss that left them both breathless and yearning. "Damn, darlin'. You make me want to go right back in the house and forget about this whole rodeo."

"Hey, a little girl's medical care is dependent on this rodeo," she reminded him, stepping back out of his embrace. "Besides, we have all tonight to celebrate your win." The sparkle in her eyes dulled. "Promise me you'll be careful, Presley."

She'd been concerned about him since learning how his father had died. He'd gotten her on a horse and taught her how to ride in order to familiarize her with the animals, but she still worried about him on a bucking bronc in the arena. Her concern warmed his heart. The fact that she didn't try to demand he not do it—like many women tended to do once they fell for a bull or bronc rider—made him love her all the more. And he did love her, he realized with sudden clarity, despite the short length of time they'd known each other. The realization that his feelings ran so deeply made him want to run, but the thought of her unbreakable spirit kept him at her side.

"Darlin', I wouldn't blow my chance on waking up with you in the morning by getting thrown off a horse," he reassured her. "I don't even think getting hit by a bus could stop me from coming home to you."

He kissed her softly when she seemed to fumble for words, and straightened. "I have good news."

She raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"Richard Carnales was arrested outside of Texas yesterday."

Amber's face paled. "Arrested for what?"

"Hit and run," he answered, noticing the color creeping slowly back into her cheeks. "He hit a pedestrian and didn't bother to stop. Police officers in an unmarked car witnessed it and he tried to outrun them when they gave chase. I'm glad for his stupidity. The longer he's locked away, the longer I can breathe easy knowing you're safe."

He didn't mention the fact that Carnales had several outstanding warrants that would keep him tied up in jail for some time, if not put away indefinitely. Some of the things he'd discovered about the man gave him more insight into Amber's life than he thought she wanted him to know.

"You ready to head out?" he asked, noting the way her gaze had fallen to the ground.

She nodded meekly so he wrapped an arm around her waist and led her to the truck, wishing there was something he could do to take away the tension in her small frame.

\*\*\*\*

The arena was packed. It seemed the entire town of Wayback was at the rodeo, along with quite a few people from neighboring towns and cities.

"I can't believe the turnout," Amber commented as she, Miranda, and Ray looked over the selection of boots Pattie-Pie Murphy had on display in the concession area. Many of Wayback's business owners had set up booths in the concession area, with a portion of the proceeds going toward the fundraiser for Annie Green's medical care.

"Johnson Green's been riding the circuit for a while now," Ray advised, "and he's well known by

anyone who follows the rodeo. We put word out about what we were doing here and it made the news in Dallas and Houston, among other cities. The hotels near here are all booked up and I'd say there are people here from even outside of Texas. One look at that little girl's smiling face, and people wanted to do whatever they could to help."

"Oh, look!" Miranda squealed, holding up a pair of blue boots with a swirly black design. "Aren't these just perfect?"

"Oh my goodness." Amber laughed as she peered closer. "Are those blue suede boots?"

"How'd I know those would catch your eye?" Pattie-Pie Murphy winked in Amber and Ray's direction as she walked over. "What can I say? *Blue Suede Shoes* came on the radio and inspiration hit."

"Do you also have them for men?" Miranda asked, and Amber burst out laughing, imagining the look on Presley's face if his mother gifted him with a pair of blue suede boots.

While Ray paid for Miranda's boots—under the condition she would not order a pair for Presley—Amber's stomach started doing flips. She'd never been to the rodeo before, despite the weeks spent in Wayback, and the knowledge of how Presley's father had died had her so nervous she'd not eaten all day. It'd been hard to leave Presley when he'd went off with the other competitors, the fear of him being hurt clawed at her insides, but she'd had to. How could she convince him to not worry so much about her safety if she acted like a ninny over his?

"You all right, honey?" Miranda rested a hand on her shoulder. "You're awfully pale."

Amber took a deep breath and gazed at the entryway which would take them away from the hall filled with concessions, and into the actual arena. "I don't know if I can watch."

Miranda smiled gently. "It terrified me when

Presley started participating in the rodeo, especially after losing his father in one, but Presley knows what he's doing and he had a darned good teacher." She turned loving eyes toward Ray. "Trust me, honey. Presley has a true talent for bronc-busting and once you get over the initial fear of him getting hurt out there, you'll be awestruck by his ability."

"Well, if you can watch him, I guess I can, too." Amber squared her shoulders and walked into the arena, her knees wobbly as she saw the large dirt oval.

"He'll be fine," Miranda reassured her, ushering her toward their seats dead center where they could see all the action.

Despite the nerves wracking her system, Amber found herself enjoying the rodeo. A funny clown entertained the crowd, and Amber laughed at his antics. The steer-roping and barrel racing events were fun to watch, and the whole crowd seemed to be enjoying themselves. The excitement in the air took away some of Amber's edginess, but when the announcer stated the bareback bronc-busting competition was about to begin, her stomach took a dip.

"Relax, honey." Miranda patted her hand softly. "Just enjoy the show and be ready to give Presley a congratulatory kiss."

Amber swallowed hard and focused on the show.

A different song played for each rider, and the music varied from country to hip-hop. The gate opened, the horse came out bucking, and the rider held on for dear life with only one hand. Amber was fascinated watching them, amazed how their bodies could snap back and forth so quickly without injury as they tried to stay on the horses.

Ray explained the mechanics of it all so she could understand the way points were given. She couldn't believe how slowly the eight seconds seemed to go as she watched each rider try to reach the

mark. Two fell off before the eight second mark and quickly rolled away from their horses. Amber's breath caught in her lungs for both of those cowboys, but there were two other men on horses in the arena at all times, and it was their job to keep the cowboys safe and remove a strap from the broncs, effectively stopping their bucking motion. Once that was done, the horses actually seemed quite safe.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen," the announcer's voice boomed, "the moment we've waited for. Wayback's own King of the Bareback, Presley West, will ride atop Roll of Thunder. Can he make the eight-second mark?"

A cacophony of "hell yesses," hollers, and cheers resounded through the arena, Ray among the loudest, and Amber felt Miranda's hand squeeze tightly around her own. She stared at the stall where Presley stood poised over the bronc, his feet on opposite slats, waiting to drop onto the untamed beast. She wanted to close her eyes and not watch, but couldn't take her eyes off the sexy man in the white and blue Western style shirt and dark brown Stetson, terrified it might be the last time she saw him in one piece.

She vaguely registered the remixed version of Elvis Presley's *A Little Less Conversation* start playing as the gate opened and Presley flew out of the stall on the back of a big, angry brown horse. Amber stood up in response, too enthralled to sit.

"He marked out!" Ray yelled in glee, letting her know he'd come out of the stall with his heels raised in the right position. Not doing so would disqualify him.

The horse bucked viciously and spun in circles trying to dislodge Presley, but he held on with one hand, the other raised in the air as his upper body was flung back and forth.

Oh, God, Amber thought and must have spoke

because Miranda ran a hand over her arm, soothing her.

“He’s doing great,” she reassured her. “It’s almost over.”

The buzzer sounded and the crowd cheered louder as the two other men in the arena steered their horses toward Presley. Instead of allowing one of those men to saddle up next to the bronc so he could swing over to their horse like the other riders had done, Presley jumped off the bronc and rolled safely out of the way before standing in the ring and raising his Stetson, igniting another series of whoops and whistles. He looked right at Amber and winked before running out of the arena.

\*\*\*\*\*

“I knew you’d come in first!” Ray exclaimed as they exited the arena after the entire event was over.

Presley’s arm snaked around her waist, and Amber snuggled in closer to his side as Ray counted his winnings. The sun had gone down and the air was nice and warm, with a cool breeze blowing by.

“So?” Presley queried softly so only she could hear. “What do I get for winning?”

Amber chuckled. “I’ll tell you when we’re not so close to your mother.”

“She’s too busy oohing and ahing over those ridiculous boots to pay us any mind.”

“Hey, Presley!”

They glanced ahead to see Johnson Green approaching, hand outstretched. “Awesome ride, man.”

“Thanks.” Presley shook the other man’s hand. “I just wish the circumstances for tonight’s event were different.”

“Well, ya’ll really came through for a hometown boy. With the money raised tonight, my little girl is going to get high quality care.” The blonde cowboy’s eyes glistened as he cleared his throat. “I’m really

touched by what the town put together here, and I know you don't really compete anymore, so for you to come out tonight and help draw a crowd like this... It touches my heart. I can't thank you enough."

Presley nodded awkwardly. "I didn't do much of anything. The people came for you and your little girl. We take care of our own here. You know that."

Johnson nodded. "There's definitely no place like home when you have the fortune of hanging your hat in Wayback."

A crush of people joined them, congratulating Presley and giving their best wishes to Johnson. After several minutes of accepting the congratulations, Presley squeezed Amber's hand tightly and led her out of the fray.

"You're like a hero tonight," she commented, then realized the depth of the statement. "Of course you are all the time."

He grinned at her as they continued walking. "Nah."

"Yes, you are. You're a good man, Presley West."

"I'm nothing special." He tugged her closer so he could wrap an arm around her waist. "I think we lost my mom and Ray."

Amber glanced around and couldn't find the two in the crowd of people spilling into the parking lot. "So we did. They were leaving in a separate truck anyway."

"So... Do I get my big congratulatory kiss now?"

Amber looked up into mischievous brown eyes and inhaled, taking the scent of sexy cowboy with her. "I don't see any reason why not."

She tilted her head back and leaned forward, ready to give him a taste of what was to come when they got home.

"Kitty Barre?"

Amber's blood froze in her veins as she whipped her head around and saw a tall, mustached man ap-

proach. His hair was on the long side, and greasy. The dark red T-shirt he wore stretched across a broad chest and showed the corded muscles in his arms. Despite the muscular build, he still had a beer belly. She had no clue who he was, but he knew more than she was comfortable with about her. She cursed herself for going back to her natural hair color and stepped back as he neared.

“You know this guy?” Presley asked, his voice low and predatory.

Amber licked her lips, a ball of nausea forming in her stomach. “No. I don’t know who he is.” But she could guess. Judging by the name he called her, he’d obviously met her in Chicago.

“I’ll be damned,” the man said as he stepped before them, letting his eyes rove over her body with an intensity that left her feeling naked and dirty. The scent of alcohol wafted off his breath and the ball of nausea grew. “Never would expect to find Kitty Barre in Texas. I thought you were back in Chicago with Carnales.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken,” Presley said, moving Amber behind him. “We don’t know any Kitty Barre.”

The man looked at Presley and blinked, seeming to recognize him. Then he laughed. “Hell, dude. You just won a bronc-busting competition. Women should be throwing themselves at you and you’re paying for it?”

The man’s voice had grown louder and his remark caught the attention of people standing nearby. Presley squared his shoulders, standing at his full height, which put him even to the man. “I told you, mister. We don’t know any Kitty Barre. I think you ought to leave my lady alone and go—”

“Lady?” The man’s eyes bulged as he laughed. “The last time I saw that bitch she was charging by the hour with Carnales’s other—”

Presley's fist smashed into the man's face before he could finish his statement, knocking him backward so he fell on his butt in the gravel. "I told you you've got the wrong person. Don't bother us again."

"What's going on?" Miranda asked, cutting through the crowd with Ray at her side.

Amber opened her mouth to answer but couldn't speak. Fear had stolen her voice and nearly seized her heart.

"Amber?" Miranda frowned, looking between her, Presley, and the man lying on the ground.

"A misunderstanding," Presley snapped out, turning away from the man. He grabbed Amber's hand and she struggled not to pull away and run. He was smart. He had to realize the man spoke the truth. She kept her head lowered as they walked through the crowd toward the truck.

"Man, you sure get testy over a whore!" The man yelled behind them. "Or are you too stupid to know what you picked up?"

Presley was gone in an instant, charging toward the man.

"Presley, no!" Amber yelled, running after him, but he was too quick. By the time she reached him, he was pummeling the man like a punching bag.

Ray and a few other men raced forward and tried to pull him away, but his fury made him dangerous. He broke away from anyone who put hands on him.

"Don't you ever talk about her like that," he yelled, slamming his fists into the man, who tried to fight back, but seemed to only get in one punch for every four of Presley's.

Miranda wrapped her arms around Amber and they held onto each other as two uniformed police officers rushed forward to break up the fight.

Ray joined them and they watched as the police officers managed to break up the fight and put both

Presley and the man in cuffs. “Dammit, Presley,” one of them growled. “You know I’m gonna have to arrest you.”

Amber gasped and Presley looked her way, blood seeping from his lip. The fury in his eyes mellowed as he looked at her, then he directed his gaze to Ray. “Take Amber and my mom home, Ray. Then come bail me out.”

“I’ll bail him out.” Nash Logan stepped forward from the crowd and nodded toward Ray. “You take the ladies home.”

“Presley!”

“It’s all right, Amber. Just go on home,” he ordered as he was led away.

“What was that all about?” Miranda asked. “Who was that man?”

“I don’t know.” Amber shook her head and burst into tears, realizing the crowd of people drawn by the fight had heard the man’s taunts and had to know what she was.

## Chapter Nine

After convincing Miranda and Ray she was fine, Amber found herself alone in the place she'd come to love. The place she'd wanted to stay.

There was no chance of that now.

She'd watched in horror as Presley was taken away. She could imagine him being put in a cell close to the man he'd fought. The guy would surely fill him in on just what he'd picked up on the roadside. She didn't intend to stick around to see the disgust in his eyes when he returned home and ordered her out.

She spent some time in the office, making notes of everything Miranda would need to know when she found herself taking over the office job again. Amber looked around the office and choked on tears before stepping back through the door that divided it from the house. As far as jobs went, it was the nicest one she'd ever had.

She spent a moment staring at Presley's bed and remembering the love they'd shared there. At least it had been love on her part, which was amazing considering the way she'd felt about men after the things they'd made her do. Amazing and stupid. She'd known all along that Presley was too good for her, but she'd wanted the fairy tale so she'd kept the truth from him. He would surely hate her for it.

It shouldn't have taken her long to pack, especially since she didn't plan on taking much—Presley had given her most of her clothes and she didn't feel right taking them all—but she found herself dragging her feet, studying the house, imprinting it into

her memory.

She wrote a letter of explanation to Presley, begging for forgiveness, and left it on his bed along with money to cover the cost of what he'd spent fixing the car Carmen had given her to get away in.

She hadn't driven it since Presley had brought her to his home, but it'd been repaired and sat in the driveway. Her heart cracked as she packed her bag into the backseat and started it up.

"Goodbye," she whispered and wound the car down the drive, wiping away fresh tears as she saw Miranda's little white house in the distance.

There was a loud screech and she looked up to see a large black truck skid to a stop in front of her, cutting off her escape route. She slammed on the brake to avoid an accident, and gasped as Presley jumped out the passenger side, his face a mask of outrage. Knowing her chance to escape was shot, she put the car in Park.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Presley bellowed, wrenching her door open to tug her out.

"I...I," she stammered, glancing over to see Nash leaning out the driver side window of his truck, watching them.

"You all right here, Pres?"

Presley waved him off and he pulled back out of the driveway, leaving them to argue in private.

A screen door popped open and they both looked toward Miranda's house to see her and Ray on the porch in robes. "What's going on?" Ray yelled. "What's with the screeching tires?"

"What are you doing coming out my mom's house this time of night and in a robe?" Presley yelled back after doing a double-take, his tone parlaying his surprise.

"You really wanna know?" Ray asked.

"Hell, no," Presley yelled back. He shuddered

visibly. "Everything's fine. Go on back and..." He trailed off and waved his hand, gesturing for them to leave.

"Where's Amber going?" Miranda called out, Elvis whining in her arms.

"Nowhere! Just get back in the house," Presley snapped.

Ray and Miranda went back inside the little house, leaving them their privacy, and Presley refocused his attention on her. "I've got aches and pains all over from bronc-busting, I got into a fight and went to jail where they put me in a cell with a very rank wino who nearly threw up on my boots, I've just found out that Ray is apparently sleeping with my mother." He shuddered again. "Don't tell me you're running away, Amber. Dammit, I don't need this right now."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "Don't you want me to go?"

"Why would I want that?" The question came out as an angry bark.

"Presley..." Tears streamed down Amber's face. "What that man said was true. I was a... a..."

"You were a prostitute. I've known that for a while."

Amber gasped and stood blinking up at the cowboy in front of her. "What? How? Why didn't you say something?"

"I was a professional bodyguard, Amber. I'm not going to take a woman on the run into my home without checking her out. I got in touch with a detective buddy and dug up whatever I could on you, Carnales, and the owner of this car. I knew Carnales was a pimp and dabbled in drugs. Add in your friend's arrests for prostitution and the way you skipped quite a bit about your background, and it didn't take much to figure you probably worked for him." He reached into the car and turned off the en-

gine. "I didn't say anything because I figured you'd tell me when you were ready."

"I'm sorry, Presley. I should have told you."

"I'm not mad at you." He tilted his head to the side, his eyes softening. "I fell for you with the suspicion in mind. Knowing it for a fact doesn't change the way I feel."

Amber shook her head in confusion. "But now, thanks to that man, the whole town knows."

"The town knows some loudmouth drunk was talking about my woman, calling her by some other name. Clearly confused." He leaned forward to kiss her forehead. "Don't you worry about a thing, darlin'. That guy wasn't from here. He came through because of the fundraising event and I'm sure we won't hear from him again."

"But Richard. If that man tells him he saw me here—"

"Carnales has outstanding warrants for some pretty bad stuff," Presley cut her off. "He'll probably be holed up in prison for a while. And if he does get out, I'll keep tabs on him. You're mine to protect."

His to protect. Just like Nina Garcia. Amber laughed at her stupidity. She'd actually, for a moment, thought he might really care for her. "Presley, I appreciate all you've done for me, but I can't be another bodyguarding job for you. I can't be your chance to rectify what happened with Nina Garcia. I don't want you to look at me as some pathetic victim."

"I don't."

"Yeah?" She scoffed. "Then why are you so hell bent on offering me your protection?"

"I reckon because I love you," he spoke softly, adamantly.

Amber blinked. "You what?"

"I love you, everything about you, and I don't see you as a victim. I see you as a survivor and an all-

around good woman. I love you for who you are, and if you'll have me, I'd be honored to marry you."

"Did that man knock the sense out of you?"

Presley threw his head back and laughed. "I think he knocked some sense into me. Why wait when you know you've found a gem. Let's get married, Amber." Uncertainty flickered in his eyes. "Unless you don't love me back."

"Of course I love you!" Amber threw her arms around his wide shoulders, shaking her head. "But how can you... I mean... Presley, you were right. I started as a stripper with my friend, Carmen, but Richard came to the club one night and saw me. He swept me right off my feet, promising me the world, and though I haven't actually been with anyone but him in the past year, there were—"

Presley placed his finger over her mouth. "Darlin', I don't care who or how many came before me. I just want your vow that no other man will come after me."

Amber gasped on a sob and cleared her throat to keep the tears at bay. "You really care for me despite knowing everything?"

"I don't care what that man told you to make you think so poorly of yourself. You are a lady, and I want you as my wife. Please marry me, Amber, and promise me you won't try to run away again."

She looked into his chocolate brown eyes, so full of warmth and honest love, and couldn't believe the perfect man before her saw something worthy in her. "I'd be an idiot not to marry a man as wonderful as you," she murmured, "and a bigger idiot to leave you, knowing I'll never know anyone as good as you."

"So you'll marry me?" His eyes lit up with excitement.

"Yes, I'll marry you." She kissed him softly on the mouth. "But I'm not giving our kids any Elvis names."

Presley chuckled. "That's why I love you, darlin'."

"I heard that!" They looked toward Miranda's house and saw her standing behind the screen door where she'd been eavesdropping on them. "What's wrong with Aaron or Garon? Those are good names for my grandbabies!"

"Oh, for crying out loud." Presley huffed out a breath and chuckled, shaking his head in defeat. "Knock that off before you make her run away again!"

"Miranda, get back in here and leave them alone!" Ray yelled from somewhere in the house.

Miranda waved and closed the door with a smile on her face big enough to see in the dark, and Presley groaned as he buried his head in the crook of Amber's neck. "Ray's doing my mom."

Amber laughed out loud at Presley's child-like disgust with the situation. "Ray's a good man and your mom deserves some happiness."

"She can be happy without doing a guy I have to look at every day." His body trembled in a cringe.

"You like Ray and they make a good couple. She has needs, Presley."

"Ugh." He stood straight and covered his ears. "I really didn't need to hear that."

Laughing, Amber pulled his hands away from his ears and wrapped them around her waist. "Well, how about this? I have needs. Take me home, cowboy."

Presley's eyebrows rose. "Now there's a way to make everything better."

Amber squealed as she was hoisted into Presley's arms and he took off toward the main house as fast as a man could walk. "What about the car?"

"I'll get it in the morning. Right now I'm carrying my bride over the threshold early."

Amber laughed and rested her head on Presley's shoulder. "Do you think your mom heard what I used to be?"

"I think the sly fox heard the whole thing," he answered with a chuckle as he neared the house.

"She didn't seem upset about us getting married, did she?" The realization boggled Amber's mind and she hoped she hadn't imagined Miranda's enthusiasm about her being the mother of her future grandchildren.

Presley opened the door and stepped inside, kicking it shut behind him. He didn't set Amber down until they reached the bed, where he crumpled up her goodbye letter without giving it a second glance and tossed it in the corner. "My mother loves you," he said, pulling her back into his arms. "So do I. No matter how bad your past was, it made you the woman you are today, and there's no reason why we wouldn't want you to be part of our family."

Amber had thought hearing Presley say he loved her was the greatest moment of her life, but hearing she was wanted as part of his family touched her heart even more. No man had ever offered her what Presley offered. Home. Family. Love. A tear slipped from her eye.

"What is it?" Presley thumbed away the tear, his eyes full of concern. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm so happy." Amber kissed Presley until she was breathless and leaned into him as he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight as she rested her cheek against his chest. "You've given me everything I ever wanted and I know you won't let anything or anyone take it away. You're my guardian cowboy, Presley."

"That's right, darlin'." He tipped her chin up and looked straight in her eyes. "And I will be until my last breath."

## **A word about the author...**

Crystal-Rain Love lives in Kentucky with her three children, two monster dogs, and a variety of smaller pets. When not writing, she enjoys reading, watching *Supernatural*, creating wacky 3D cakes, and spending time with her children.

Visit Crystal-Rain at [www.crystalrainlove.com](http://www.crystalrainlove.com)