

Montana Sunset



L. R. Wards

Montana Sunset

L. R. Wards

Free Evaluation Edition from obooko.com

© Copyright 2010 L. R. Wards

Published by the author. Distributed worldwide by obooko

This is an authorized free edition from www.obooko.com Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author and Obooko.

For more free ebooks and to list your fiction or non-fiction book for free publication, please visit www.obooko.com

Chapter one

Meagan never felt such heat build within her as his mouth moved expertly over hers. He had her pushed up against the wall inside the stable doors with his hard large body firmly against hers. His large rough hands spanned either side of her head, locking her in place in case she had the inclination to run, which had crossed her mind briefly.

That is until he kissed her.

Adam was intimidating at the best of times. He was a cowboy all the way through flesh and bone and tradition. He rode with the cowhands, wrestled steers, broke wild mustangs and anybody who first saw him wouldn't know that he was more than a cowhand himself, if it weren't for the unspoken power of authority he wielded. Of course he was also filthy rich and the middle son of an industrial tycoon, had a Harvard degree in commerce and ran the multimillion dollar cattle ranch with the air of a Russian Tsar, but Meagan didn't see him that way. She saw him as a man. The type of man she fell in love with over the past two months of working for him. He was tall, fit, and ruggedly handsome, yet completely unapproachable even at the best of times. When he wasn't yelling at someone, he didn't say much else. Regardless, the man never had trouble getting women. She knew why. He had that unconcealed self-assurance and arrogance of a man who knew how intelligent and pleasing to the eye he was. It attracted women like bees to honey. He could be dirt poor and still never have a problem with women.

She always watched him with a quiet scrutiny and he always seemed in a temper and until now, she didn't realize he had even noticed her. So why did she fall in love with him?

That was a question that eluded her. Maybe it was because that horrid mean temper he displayed often was never focused on her. In fact he was nothing less than apathetic around her and mostly silent. Maybe he was like that with all women. Not that she would know, because he never brought his women home and her aunt and she were the only women on the ranch besides Jesse, the Wightman's secretary. She was glad he treated her with indifference, because what she had seen and witnessed when he was angry was a force to be reckoned with.

About a month ago, he took his large fists to a new ranch hand that mistreated one of his horses and practically threw the man off his property while he could still walk. She was stunned at his wildness when he found the man whipping a new filly because she wouldn't settle long enough for him to tie her up. Despite his large size, Adam practically leaped over the six foot tall corral fence like a gazelle, grabbed the man by the collar and began to thump him blindly all the while asking him how he liked to be beaten. That must be it, thought Meagan. His softness for animals, or part of it being the reason she loved him. The other part had to do with his sinfully good looks and sexual magnetism. She'd seen him walk down the street in Prosper, the small town around fifteen miles from the ranch, and wasn't surprised to see women stop and gape at him. Oddly enough, she had to stifle her own jealousy. She watched him from across the street and wondered if the man even knew the reaction he drew from her own sex. Through it all, she didn't think he'd even noticed her in the few months she'd been at the ranch, until now.

She was grooming one of his horses, a black quarter horse stallion that he usually rode out on the range by the name of Rapid-fire, when he came in the stables. It amazed her that he was able to move about in such a way without being heard because, the sheer size of him made the old adage 'bull in a china shop' come to mind. It took her a moment to realize that he was standing behind her, looking at her, because she was busy talking to the stallion, soothing him

and telling him how pretty she thought he was when he spoke in that deep baritone voice he possessed. She jumped dropping her comb.

“It’s no wonder that damn horse lost some spunk, when you coddle him so much.” He drawled. It was one of the very few times he had spoken to her. He usually didn’t say more than a few words, even when they took their meals together. If she asked him a question, it was answered in a monosyllable without elaboration. This time however, his voice held something different. It was darkly deep and his words almost caressed the air around her.

Startled, she spun around wide-eyed, to find him lighting a cigarette as his eyes slowly and deliberately travelled down the length of her body then back up to her eyes leaving a searing trail in their wake pausing only momentarily on her lips and her breasts. His eyes were silver grey and at most times they were so piercing they could quite possibly skin the bark off a tree, but now it was something entirely different. His Stetson was pulled low over his brow making him seem even more formidable, but she could still make out that heated gaze. His batwing chaps were dusty and well used and combined with everything else he looked like something worn and weathered that just stepped out of a Frank McCarthy painting with all the charisma of a born and bred cowboy from seventeen hundreds.

Adam stood erect and hooked the thumb of his free hand in his belt. He took a long drag and centered his eyes on hers, “Then again, I think I understand.” He lifted an eyebrow and nodded his head ever so slightly towards the horse, “If you caressed me like that, I’d be as docile as a well fed kitten.”

What did he just say? Did she hear him right? A wave of emotion went through her from her head to her toes that she never felt before. *Oh boy*, she thought. Then she saw something darken in his eyes causing her to take a step back forgetting about the comb she dropped. “Mr. Wightman?”

“Sorry to startle you honey.” He said softly in a tone that meant the opposite as his eyes glinted at the nervous movement she made.

Suddenly she felt like a trapped animal with that unreadable emotion in his gaze. She eased her way out of the stall, trying to act casual despite the racing of her heart. This was the first time she’d ever been alone with him, and it was not only causing excitement in her, but nervousness that went through her that causing heat to rise into her ears. It was a feeling she never had to deal with before. “Can I help you?”

“I’m sure you can.” He tossed his smoke on the cement floor and tamped it out with his boot causing his spur to jingle. Then he started walking toward her with a lazy powerful stride in no big hurry just to prolong his effect on her and he knew he affected her. Her lips parted and her eyes widened slightly causing him to fight a grin of satisfaction.

Adam knew she watched him. There was no mistaking the curious desire in her large blue eyes when she thought he wasn’t looking. In fact, more and more, he found himself thinking about her.

Meagan began to back up and ended up against the wall where he had her pinned now. That same dark look in his eyes intensified and his mouth twitched at the corner as if resisting a smile. Maybe it wouldn’t have affected her so much if his eyes weren’t that piercing grey. Every time they centered on her in the past few months, she felt her heart skip a beat then thud in her chest like a charging stallion. The feel of the cool wall behind her made her sharply inhale.

He flattened his palms on either side of her head against the wall and stared down at her. “Afraid of me?” he said with amusement allowing a smile to grace his features.

“W—what do you want?” She stuttered breathlessly. To her utter surprise he smiled as his eyes slid over her expression. She never thought she’d seen him smile in the whole time she been here, but now he did. However, it wasn’t a humorous smile; it was slow and sensuous as it drew across his tanned face and literally made her breath freeze in her throat. Her gaze went to his finely chiselled lips, then back up to his eyes. She could tell that he knew exactly how he affected her, and all women for that matter. Adam was rugged, muscular, and undeniably gorgeous and he knew how to use every inch of himself to influence a woman

“I think you know what I want.” He said deeply, dropping his gaze to her mouth.

The space between them seemed to crackle with a forbidden excitement, “Mr. Wightman?”

He framed her head in his large hands and locked his gaze with hers, “My name is Adam. Say it.” he said deeply while his eyes penetrated hers.

“Adam.” She breathed barely above a whisper.

“That’s better.” He said as he bent his head and slanted his mouth over hers. She was too stunned to respond. The movement was so smooth and sudden that it took her by surprise. This was the last thing she expected from him. He stopped at her lack of response and lifted his mouth from hers a fraction while his eyes sought hers.

“Open your mouth honey; I’ve *got* to taste you.” He whispered huskily against her lips.

She didn’t know what he meant, but his warm breath against her skin felt unexpectedly delicious. When she didn’t respond, he placed his rough calloused thumbs on her jaw and gently urged them to part. Her hesitation was short-lived when his mouth expertly enticed hers. He smelled of sweat, expensive cologne and leather. Every now and then she could feel his tongue begging for access. Suddenly, a roaring heat formed in her pelvis when she finally opened her mouth enough and their tongues met. Then abruptly as a light switch going on, she discovered desire. After murmuring something against his mouth she wouldn’t remember later she instantly wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

Obviously no one had kissed her like that before. It took some urging, but he wasn’t disappointed with the result. He didn’t think he would be. It was obvious that she was inexperienced. Despite that fact, the passion in which she responded to him was a surprise. Ever since the foreman hired her as a groom, and her aunt as the cook, he hadn’t been able to take his eyes off of her. Two long aching months had passed with her constantly hanging around the stables and his house. He couldn’t very well put her in the bunkhouse with the men, but that only left more open for temptation. The big sprawling ranch house he lived in was big enough to get lost in, but they still managed to bump into one another like a bad habit.

The first time he saw her walk to the stables from the house, he was over at the corral on a bit of a break branding. He was leaning on the top rail smoking a cigarette with his boot hooked into the bottom rail when that incredible sight caught his attention. He saw her as did the four others that stood around him.

You could have heard a pin drop between all of them as they soaked up her image. She had on a pair of snug blue jeans that left no curve unnoticed and she had curves! Her white t-shirt was tucked into her small waist causing her breasts to strain against the fabric. Perfect round mounds that were slightly more than a handful. Her golden-copper hair was braided and hung to her waist which swayed slightly in time with her hips. That drew his eyes to her bottom. It was a piece of art, a perfect pair of curved cheeks, like an upside down heart. He actually was so distracted he had forgotten about the other men who had fallen deathly silent at the sight, until one spoke.

“Damn!” Said Ian, one of his ranch hands who was sitting on the top rail beside him, “That should be illegal.” He followed his statement with a long low whistle of appreciation, and then grinned.

Adam turned to him trying to conceal the anger he felt at that statement, even if it was true. “Break’s over! Get your ass over to the holding pen and separate those calves.”

Ian snapped out of it, “Yes boss.” He hurriedly scrambled off the rail dropping his grin. He knew not to dally, or Adam would cut into him and no one wanted to be the brunt of the man’s anger. He didn’t think he could handle the job after the first time his boss tore a piece out of his hide, but he paid so well, that he hung in. Henry encouraged him to stay because of the experience he’d get, but there had been several times that he nearly quite regardless. Adam could scare the crap out of the devil himself when he got angry.

“You too!” He barked at the rest of them.

They quickly scattered except Henry, the ranch foreman who had been with his family for more than twenty years. He must be almost sixty by now, thought Adam, but it didn’t slow the man down. Although most times Adam seemed to be in a fowl temper these days, Henry never seemed intimidated by him.

“Little possessive son.” Drawled Henry as he turned and walked away to avoid the glare he knew he was going to get.

His gaze narrowed on the man’s back. Was he?

It had been years since he’d felt in such a way. He’d sworn no emotional attachment to women since he was practically left at the alter twelve years ago. He only used them for physical satisfaction and companionship nowadays. His eyes guided back to the doors of the stable. That girl could definitely give him some physical satisfaction. Images of her naked underneath him in a pile of hay flashed in his mind. He shook his head; she was young, way too young. He wasn’t quite sure of her age, but he was thirty, and she may have the body of a woman in her twenties, but her eyes and lovely face said she was younger. That was a problem. He usually liked older and more experienced women because it decreased complications. Young girls were emotional and clingy. Yet, would he mind if that body clung to him? Probably not. He found himself grinning. That aside, she was his employee and although it wasn’t an unheard of thing to get involved with employees nowadays, it just added to the list of things why he shouldn’t pursue her. He sighed heavily. Not only that he was dating someone at the moment, but lately he was thinking about ending the affair. The woman was wearing thin on his patience and he didn’t have a hell of a lot to begin with. Although he’d only been dating her for several months, usually that was his limit before they tried to drag him to the alter or he tired of them.

Despite his rules, that pretty little thing that just entered the stables could definitely cause him to break a few, she was that tempting. In his arrogance, he never even considered that she would snub him. He was used to women, all kinds. And even though she was younger than what he wanted, she was still a female who probably already knew how to try and manipulate a man. He should know, because it was a woman around her age that turned him off emotional attachment to her sex. Pondering his thoughts for a minute, he shook his head.

Nope, he didn’t need complications. He stamped out his cigarette. Was Henry right? Was he being possessive? The sudden surge of it was unlike him and unfortunately it just made him angrier. In disgust he turned away and went back to work himself. He would stay away. That silent promise lasted less than two months.

Before he knew what he was doing he was standing behind her watching her caress his stallion wishing it was him. It gave him all kinds of images of her whispering huskily in his ear

as he made love to her. When her lovely bowed mouth opened in a startle, he wanted to kiss her and he was going to. It had been driving him crazy to see what those lips tasted like.

She felt good, more than good. Soft, warm and silky and fresh as a newborn lamb. He thought if he sampled her, he would be satisfied, but it only increased his desire. She smelled like lavender and tasted so sweet that his arousal was almost immediate. Now after kissing her, he was surprised he lasted two months. He raised his head and looked at her. Her sapphire gaze held bewilderment, maybe even wonder, but there was no doubt about the unshed passion. “The things I could do to you—” he started to say when he was interrupted.

He heard his name and turned his head toward the open doors. They were concealed enough that no one could see them. He looked back down at her, and stifled a groan. Her eyes were dark with desire, her lips were slightly parted and her skin was flushed. Stunning, was as close as he could come to describe her at that moment, and even that couldn’t do her justice. “This isn’t over yet sweetheart. Not by a long shot.” He said huskily and released her.

Meagan was too stunned to speak. Never in all of her life did she expect her first kiss to be so mind blowing. Her lips still tingled with the memory of the heat of his mouth on hers. Her heart increased it’s pace when he spared her another long smouldering glance before he turned and walked out the doors in that unhurried swagger that she’d come to love while answering whoever called him. She brought her fingers to her lips. He actually kissed her! Never in all of her life could she have thought it would feel so wonderful. He was big and rough most times, and something that tender just didn’t seem to suit him. Just the thought of what transpired between them sent a shiver through her. He smelled like smoke, leather and sweat. Although it may not sound appealing to someone else, it was to her. She turned and went to the door to lean against the jam and watch him talk to Ian, one of the young ranch hands. Ian was blond, blue-eyed and charming, but he seemed a little young for her, even though he was twenty-two. He was one of the ranch hands that had asked her out several times, and she might have said yes, if Adam didn’t spoil it for her. Nothing could compare to the appealing masculinity of that cowboy. Everything about him was soaked with sex appeal and even with her lack of experience, she couldn’t stop herself from falling for him. Her eyes roved over his powerful form slowly.

Twice she saw him glance at her and she felt a twinge in her belly. She folded her arms under her breasts and watched him dreamily. She had never been in love before and now that he kissed her, she was more than ever. Ian walked away after flashing her a handsome grin and a wave, then Adam turned around to look at her. She smiled and he returned it causing her belly to twinge. *That’s twice*, she thought happily.

She didn’t even meet him when she was hired. Old Henry, Adam’s foreman, hired her and her aunt Helen after a brief interview. Helen was the one to ask why Mr. Wightman wasn’t present. Henry gave her a smile showing several missing teeth. He was an old cowhand, with dusty boots, worn plaid shirt, jeans, and a suede vest. His old Stetson looked more like a door mat than a hat, with the rim falling down all around his head, except on his brow where he bent it back. He reminded Megan of an old prospector sort, but when he stood up, he was a tall lean old man with perfect posture. It was obvious that he had strength in him despite his age.

“Adam doesn’t get involved with hiring employees.” His eyes guided to the pretty young thing next to the cook, “And we’re in desperate need for a groom. We boys don’t have time to rub down our horses like they need. Our time is precious and needed elsewhere. Your resume is impressive Miss Callahan. I know of this Thoroughbred ranch in Kentucky that you trained at.”

She gave him a shy smile. “My father would rodeo in the summer, so I spent three years there training under the best when he was gone. Aunt Helen cooked for the King family.”

“They have nothing but praise for you two. But why Montana?”

She glanced at her aunt for a minute, hoping not to give anything away, “My father passed away and I wanted a change.” She felt tears well up in her eyes, “there were too many memories.” The tears were genuine, but she didn’t tell him the whole truth and hoped he or Mr. Wightman didn’t find it out. Helen knew why they had run. The King family only knew exactly what she told Henry except the patriarch Maitland. She didn’t even tell her best friend Mandy. Thanks to Maitland, they gave both of them a praising letter of recommendation. She didn’t want to mention that her mother remarried six months later to a man who was determined to have his way with a naïve eighteen year old girl. Maitland offered to help, but she refused saying she could handle this on her own. He wasn’t too happy and made it known that he was even less happy about her leaving, because his youngest child Mandy and she were best friends. Meagan asked for his word on secrecy, too embarrassed to let the truth out. He reluctantly agreed, but made sure she and Helen had his private number in case they ever needed him.

“Fair enough sweetheart.” He saw the tears in her pretty blue eyes that threatened to fall and felt guilty for bringing it up. A change of subject was needed, “One thing you should know about Mr. Wightman, that’s Adam, not Jasper. He can be slightly...temperamental.” The puzzled looks prompted him to continue, “I mean he can be mean as hell sometimes.” He grinned causing the older woman to give him an amused smile.

“I’m used to temperamental ranch hands Mr. Henry.” She said confidently.

“Just Henry please. We’re not that formal around here.” He chuckled, “And I’m glad to hear that, because those of us that have been here for more than five years are probably in for life, being able to cope with his temper and all, but there are those that can’t handle Adam’s wrath if things don’t go as planned.” His eyes guided between the two of them, “He can’t stand laziness, sloppy work or mistakes. So if you work hard there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Then there won’t be.” Said Helen with confidence.

Meagan didn’t feel it. The way Henry described her knew boss, wasn’t the least bit appealing. He sounded like a complete brute compared to her last employer. Maitland King had always treated her almost as well as his own daughter, which made her realize that this was going to be a big adjustment. Of course she always worked hard, but Maitland had definitely made her job more enjoyable.

“He can be quite rough around the edges too. I mean he’ll say things that may offend, but that’s just Adam. I’m just warning you not to be upset if he starts hollarin’ for some reason, because he sort of does that a lot.”

Helen’s smile widened, “I’ll be sure not to let that bother me. Now, what time do the men rise?” Helen needed to know so she could begin planning breakfast.

“There’s the three of us in the house. Me, Adam, and Jasper, the youngest Wightman. The oldest is overseas somewhere...special forces. Also, Liam, their father comes from the city every other month or so, but he doesn’t stay longer than a weekend. Then there’s Jesse, she’s our secretary and works three days a week unless we need her more, but she doesn’t stay the night. She lives with her brother in town and she will be eating lunch with you on those days. We rise around five-thirty, and come in around ten, or later, during roundup.” He guided his eyes to Meagan, “He curses a lot too, so I’m apologizing ahead of time for it.” he paused scanning his eyes over her face, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.” She averted her gaze shyly.

Henry tried to hide his surprise, he thought she was around twenty, because gave off a sense that she was a little older. Not only that, she was well shaped. “Well, you’ll like Jesse,

everyone does. She's twenty something." He tried remembering, "Twenty-two I think, but sweet as hell."

"What about Lunch?" Helen continued not the least bit bothered by his statements.

Henry chuckled diverting his gaze back to the older woman. She really didn't seem to be the least bit affected at all about his warnings. The last cook they had tore out of there only after forty-eight hours because Adam didn't like the way he cooked the beef. Hopefully this one would last. "Depending on where we are, there's a cook in the bunkhouse that deals with our meals on the range. Otherwise, we usually let you know ahead of time. Although, there may be a few surprises."

"I don't mind. I can always have cold cuts and biscuits or a daily stew made just in case."

Henry flashed her an appreciative grin, "I expect we will be quite satisfied with you." His eyes turned to Meagan, and his expression changed slightly as he studied her for a moment before speaking, "And you, of course. Now, there's the question of residence. Unfortunately we don't have a woman's quarters, but there are eight rooms in this house." He nodded to Helen. "The cook's quarters are directly down the hall from the kitchen. The house was designed that way several generations ago. But for you, young lady," He glanced at Meagan, "I can give you one of the guest rooms with your own private bathroom. Don't look so worried, the Wightman's are already aware of this."

"I can stay with my aunt," she protested not wanting to put anybody out. Henry seemed to know what she meant. She noticed the laugh lines around his eyes deepen with his knowing smile.

"No need to try and make things easy on us. No one uses half of these rooms and it seems awfully empty most times because of the sheer size of it. You're a welcome addition. The Wightmans are too busy to throw parties anymore, and the rooms just gather dust. Not only that, you're not a child, you need your own space." He saw a blush enter her cheeks and she thanked him shyly.

He stood up, "Now if you come with me, I'll show you around."

The house was in a word, beautiful, and she was surprised to see the state of the art kitchen

"Oh my." Said Helen as she grazed her fingertips across the granite surface of the countertops, "A convection oven, a real indoor grill and—"

"Adam had this upgraded last year. He knows that to put out good quality, you need good equipment and that goes with cattle too."

"He's right." She answered without turning around while opening the large fridge.

"Now, your turn little one," he said to Meagan, "The barn and stables are this way," he opened the doors of the kitchen that they just came through inviting her along with a sweep of his arm.

Meagan took a glance over her shoulder at her aunt and smiled, she was already exploring the cupboards and pulling things out for dinner. The woman was in her own private heaven.

Just when she thought things couldn't get better, she saw the stables. The king ranch had a stable master and two dozen grooms and trainers under them, but this was hers. All hers. The stable had twenty stalls, attached hay storage and a tack room. It wasn't grand by any means, but it was perfect, very clean, and almost new.

“A cowboy is only as good as his horse.” Henry said while watching the smile spread across her face, “So the Wightman’s like the horses taken care of when they’re not worked to the bone like us. There’s a couple of young fellas from the high school that work after school mucking the stalls, so there’s no need to worry about that.”

She looked up at him, “I love it.”

“I can see that.” His eyes glinted at her fascinated expression. Henry knew having her around would do wonders for them all. She was refreshing and honest and the Wightman boys needed a female around to keep them decent. They were a rowdy bunch at the best of times.

She blushed, and tried changing the subject, “Is it true that Mr. Wightman is moody?”

“He is, but you may not even run into him for a few days, it’s a big house and he works harder than all of us. So don’t you worry you’re pretty head sweetheart. He only seems to come around for meals these days.” He patted her shoulder, “Now let me show you your room.”

Henry chose the one right across the hall from Adam. He may be an old man, but he was as sly and cunning as a fox. In the past year Adam seemed to have grown more foul tempered. And Henry had an idea why. The man was almost thirty and he’d yet found someone to share his life with. The women he dated were senseless and selfish and although they served their purpose, it wasn’t what the man needed. Now, as he stared down at the pretty new groom he had an idea what Adam really needed. Maybe if he put her in the man’s path he’d finally see it too. It was true that she may be a little young, but she was definitely a woman. It wasn’t a secret that Adam didn’t trust women and besides his family and Henry, not many people knew why anymore. Maybe this young gal could influence him a bit. She was very refreshing.

Henry watched as she walked over to the window and looked out, “Oh you have a pool?” her naïve eagerness was refreshing.

“Like I said, Adam’s all about modern amenities. You can use it anytime you like.” The look of awe on her face was enough to make Henry smile too. Adam was bull-headed and stubborn so it won’t be easy for him, but even spending an hour with this woman let Henry know that any man would easily fall for her, even a hardened man like Adam. Well, hopefully.

She cast him a worried look, “About your boss—“

“Don’t worry honey, Adam’s temper has never been aimed towards a woman. Not only that he’s usually up and out on the range before I even get my old cranky ass out of bed.”

But it didn’t work out that way. She was coming out of the dining room into the darkened hallway after lunch the very next day in a hurry to return to work and ran right into him, literally. Her first impression is that she ran into a wall because she was still trying to find her way around the big house. That’s how solid the man’s form was.

Strong large hands gripped her shoulders and pulled her back. In a way, she was thankful because she near toppled backwards after bouncing off the large solid form until she looked up into piercing gray eyes that narrowed with no less than annoyance on her. If she was the least bit self-assured, that gaze sucked it out of her. She felt like running.

“What the hell!” he said irritably.

“I’m sorry.” She blurted out. “I didn’t see you.”

“I noticed.” He replied in the same annoyed tone. “But as you can see, I’m very obvious.” He said referring to his height and width.

Even though he sounded irritated, he didn’t release her right away and she began to grow more nervous by the second. Especially when he began roving his eyes over her face studying her quietly. The next time he spoke the previous anger in his voice was gone.

“You the groom?”

She nodded too stunned to speak. His hands were large, warm and gripped her firmly, although not enough to hurt and quite frankly, coupled with that deep baritone voice, began to affect her. The warm stirring in the pit of her stomach was completely unexpected. This was odd, because she worked with many men in the past at the King's thoroughbred ranch, and she had never reacted in such a way. Maybe it had something to do with his alluring scent of male sweat, leather and the outdoors. Usually she wouldn't even find it the least bit pleasant but somehow it was and it caught her completely off guard.

"Interesting." He said quietly and finally released her.

The hallway was dark and she really didn't get such a good look at him, but his enormous height was unmistakable. Not only that, she was too shy to stare. He was definitely over six feet and compared to her five foot four height, she felt like a mouse next to him. "Excuse me." She asked, trying to ease around him.

"Of course." He said with amusement in his tone but not moving at all.

She waited a few moments, but he didn't move aside. Slowly she lifted her head to meet his pale stare and realized by the wry smile on his face that he wasn't going to. *Fine*, she thought, *that's the way he wanted to play*. She could do this. Sucking up her courage she started around him. Suddenly the hallway seemed quite narrow, but she still managed to brush her breasts across his shirt causing her to suck in her breath quickly at the close contact and the tingling sensation it caused in the same area. *It was the heat, the incredible male heat he gave off* she thought. Slowly, she guided her gaze back up over his shirt, to the opened buttons of his chest revealing a dark mat of hair, then to his tanned neck, and stubble dusted strong chin, thick masculine lips, and perfectly straight autocratic nose not missing that all humour was gone from his expression and his eyes. He obviously felt the reaction to the contact too. She quickly moved by him and let the air out of her lungs and couldn't get out of there quick enough, it was like meeting a hungry lion on a lonely path. Then as time passed, she knew she wasn't far off. Somewhere behind her she thought she heard a deep chuckle.

She began to wonder about him and watched for him sometimes. Then he started joining them at breakfast. She thought Helen had something to do with that, because she never did like men to go hungry and she could be very convincing. Not only that, her cooking was out of this world. Regardless, he was such an enigma to her. He rarely said anything at the table unless Jasper or Henry addressed him and he seemed to be in a foul mood at all times. Yet there were times when she looked up to see his eyes on her and she quickly ducked her gaze back to her plate. When she saw him around the ranch, he never looked her way but she was captivated by his long powerful stride. Even at a distance among other men, he was easy to pick out. There was no mistaking that the power of him was throughout his body by the way the material of his shirts stretched over his muscular form as he moved. The only people that didn't seem to be disturbed by his temper was old Henry and his brother Jasper. Even Helen took him in stride, but he'd never raised his voice to her, ever. Then there was the odd time his piercing gaze would settle on her, and something strange would flash across his eyes. Something she didn't recognize until today.

A gusty breeze brought her back to the present and the kiss that they had just shared. Now as she was reliving the fantasy in her mind a red sports car pulled up and one of the most beautiful women Meagan had ever seen got out. She was a brunette with a dainty figure that advertised wealth and prestige. The woman was definitely overdressed for a ranch, but her movements were completely graceful. She wore a tan skirt that came above her knees and hugged her body tightly, with a cream revealing blouse and high heels.

“Adam darling!” She said as she walked around the car and embraced him.

Meagan’s mouth dropped when the woman kissed him soundly on the mouth. The same mouth that was on hers only moments ago. All her dreams were shattered. Of course she knew of his reputation, but he’d kissed her! Does that mean he just flitted back and forth from one woman to another without a conscience? She felt her heart breaking at the scene. Meagan knew she never responded to him with such fervour as that woman did. She didn’t know how. It was obvious to her at that exact moment that she was way out of her league. She went to go back to her work when she heard the woman’s voice practically sing in her direction making her pause.

“Who is that?”

Meagan saw the woman looking pointedly at her. The condescending tone in her voice made her angry. Instead of going back to work, she lifted her chin and stared back at her. As the conversation between the two wore on, Meagan found herself growing more angry by the minute. They spoke as if she wasn’t even standing there.

“The groom.” He answered indifferently not even looking her way.

“Groom?” Heather eyed the young lovely woman suspiciously, and then Adam to see if he noticed what she did. The young woman was stunning and curved in all the right places and the way she was eyeing Adam when she drove up was unmistakable. Satisfied she saw nothing indicating that he was interested in her, she made a show of hanging off his arm and cooing to him. “Aren’t stable boys male?” She raked her gaze over Meagan in a display of contempt.

He eyed her expression, “She’s not a stable boy, she’s a groom Heather.”

She gave him a false smile, “Of course darling, but still, aren’t they male?”

“Most of them are, but she’s exceptional.” In more ways than one. He didn’t know why he felt the need to defend her. “Not only that, being a groom takes years of training. It’s not an easy profession.”

“Really?” Heather looked intently at him again, “She looks fourteen.” She lied. From a distance, the young lady looked at least twenty. “Do you like her?”

Definitely not fourteen, he almost laughed at the woman’s jealousy, “She’s my employee. I wouldn’t have hired her if I didn’t like her. She does good work. Too good, my horses are spoiled.”

“I don’t ever remember you mentioning her. How long has she been here?”

He released an impatient breath, “Three months and my employees aren’t any of your business.” He answered with obvious irritation.

“She’s not your type.” She blurted out before she could stop herself.

“Don’t read into it Heather.” He said firmly narrowing his gaze. “And don’t presume you know my type because if you did, you would know I despise jealousy.”

She was going to say something but clamped her mouth shut. Adam was one of the most eligible rich bachelors around and she fought long and hard to get him to notice her. Spending a fortune on designer clothes and occupying the salon two days a week in town to primp up at any occasion in case she ran into him. Her eyes flitted back to the young curvy woman who obviously never been in a salon in her life and felt a nasty wave of jealousy toward her bordering on hatred. She obviously didn’t need to visit a salon she thought as her eyes guided over the younger woman. She had a natural beauty about her that would appeal to any hot-blooded male. And Adam was definitely hot-blooded.

Heather’s eyes studied Adam’s expression. even though the young woman was just an employee, she was female. A beautiful female that seemed moulded in all the right places. Adam would have to be blind not to notice her even though his expression remained impassive,

It was too close for her comfort, but she knew not to say anything to him for fear of pushing him away. Adam didn't like to be possessed. He also didn't care if a woman was rich or poor as long as they met his personal needs and of course, was beautiful.

He had always made his intentions clear about commitment, but she would put up with it until she could get some sort of assurance from him. She had given herself to him in many ways, and he was an attentive and experienced lover despite his lack of devotion to a relationship. In fact, he was the best lover she'd ever had. Not to mention he was very handsome and filthy rich, and to be seen with him was a status booster. Right now she was the envy of all the single women in their circles. This was the first time she showed up unannounced without him inviting her, but she wanted to see if she was able to push things a little. Maybe if she started coming around more and he didn't object, she could weasel her way into his life a little more. Now there was this other obstacle, a gorgeous young woman who proclaims to be a groom. Obviously from the way that young lady was eyeballing Adam, she had other intentions. One thing was certain, she wasn't getting him. Her eyes narrowed at her, she would make sure of it.

Disgusted and feeling rejected Meagan turned away from the couple before the conversation turned bitter and went back to the stallion. He didn't seem like the type that approved of a woman like that, draping herself all over him like white on rice. But what did she know of the man's preferences. She only now discovered that he noticed her. When all along, she honestly thought she was invisible to him. Now, he seemed to have completely forgotten that he had kissed her with that socialite clinging to him like a wet rag. He hadn't even spared her a glance since she arrived. It just showed her how unimportant she was and that she was probably no more than a means to pass the time. She picked up her comb and brushed the stallion with frustration causing him to prance a little. "Sorry boy. It's not your fault I should have known better." She felt stupid at letting him kiss her when it meant absolutely nothing to him. She was just another skirt in a very long line of skirts. Obviously he only kissed her because that woman wasn't around, but now she knew better. Meagan took a deep breath and bit her bottom lip fighting the hurt she felt at his rejection. Never would she let herself be so vulnerable to him again.

Adam knew Heather was jealous and she had every right to be. Meagan was prettier and younger than she was. She also had that air of innocence about her that he found wholesome and desirable. However, he also knew that it was dangerous to entice her. And he had fought long and hard over his conscience over her. First, she was his employee. Second, she was young. And third, people like Heather would eat her alive. He liked his life, being free of commitment and Meagan was too naïve for him. However, her innocent little response to him haunted him even after Heather's unmistakable I-want-you-in-every-way kiss. Fact is, there was no comparison. Meagan won hands down. She felt better, tasted better, and he wanted her. He turned his head toward the stables and frowned at the empty doorway. He purposely avoided looking at her in front of Heather, not wanting to give the older woman fuel. He didn't doubt for a second that Heather would make Meagan's life difficult even if she thought nothing was going on. He knew women, and he knew what women like Heather was capable of. Now, after she shown up uninvited to his home plus a few other things that were beginning to bother him about her, he had decided to soon end this affair and move on. His eyes roamed over to the empty door again.

Meagan was a little crestfallen that he didn't come to dinner that night or breakfast the next morning. Obviously he spent the night with that woman that showed up the day before.

Maybe it wouldn't have bothered her so much if he hadn't kissed her, or maybe it would. Adam was such a mystery, even after the two months of working for him.

Jesse showed up the next morning and Meagan couldn't help thinking that she was thankful to find a friend. Over the past few months, they had grown close. Of course she wouldn't confess to her about her feelings about her boss, but at least she distracted her enough to keep her mind off of Adam and that kiss. It wasn't that she didn't trust her, it was just that Meagan never really had a close friend besides Mandy King and opening up for her wasn't easy.

When she first met the woman, she was in the kitchen with Helen. Jesse walked in like a fresh breeze and introduced herself. She had a natural grace and kindness about her that made her and Helen instantly like her. Furthermore, Jesse was gorgeous and what surprised Meagan is that she was very selfless. She made them feel as welcome as if they were family. Most women that Meagan met that came close to her looks were usually snobs, but Jesse was more down to earth than anyone she met.

She was just coming out of the stable when she saw Jesse's jeep pull up.

"Hi." Said Jesse spotting Meagan as she was closing the door to her vehicle, "You just going in for lunch?" Every time she saw her, she swore Meagan got more beautiful. Maybe it was her personality that made her seem that way, but her outward appearance certainly didn't lack either.

"Yes," she grinned, "My belly is growling." She rubbed her hand over her flat stomach, "the pains of working hard is that you work up a large appetite."

"Amen to that." She laughed and looked over to the corrals, "Where is everyone?"

"I don't know, but Helen usually keeps food warm for them anyway."

"She's a nice lady," said Jesse walking beside her as they went into the house, "I wish I had someone like her in my life."

Meagan had learned that Jesse's parents had died in a car crash ten years ago. Her brother Jarrett had raised her and he was only twenty at the time. Now he was thirty and was the town's local physician. Apparently he was part of the group that Adam had gone to school with since kindergarten and they were still close friends. She had never met Jesse's brother, but if he had Jesse's family looks, he had to be handsome. "I am very lucky." Said Meagan not wanting to elaborate.

"She's lucky to have you too Meagan, don't knock yourself at all. Helen told me she doesn't have any children."

Meagan's cheeks pinked up at the compliment, "thanks." They made their way into the kitchen as Helen was pulling a pan of lasagne out of the oven.

"Oh heaven!" said Jesse inhaling deeply, "Can you come live with me?"

Helen laughed, "Come and eat." She placed the pan on the stove and began slicing portions.

"I wasn't hungry when I came, but wow." She looked at Meagan, "I'm very surprised you are able to keep your figure with her around."

Meagan just laughed, "Maybe I've had time to build immunity. I've known her longer."

Just then the sound of masculine voices reached their ears.

"Looks like your food is good enough to bring the boys in from the range. Helen, I swear, if they clone you I want a copy." Said Jesse as the voices came nearer.

Helen just chuckled as she told Meagan to set the table.

"I'll help." Said Jesse and gathered the silverware.

“Is that Lasagne I smell?” Said Jasper as the three women emerged from the kitchen just as the men were sitting down.

“It figures you would recognize it first with that gut and nose of yours.” Said Jesse with a smile as she laid out the silverware following Meagan around the table.

“I think I smelled it two miles out.” Said Jasper as he scooped a healthy portion on his plate as soon as Jesse handed him his silverware.

Meagan felt a thrill go through her as Adam actually spared her a glance. Although it seemed no less than disinterest, it was something after several days of not seeing him. However, it took her a moment to realize that one of his brows lifted ever so slightly but subtly. Also, did the corner of his mouth twitch like he was resisting a smile? She paused in setting the table trying not to look too obvious and looked at him but now he was sitting down and serving himself lunch as if nothing happened. Did she imagine it?

Then she felt a sinking feeling as Jesse placed her long slender hand on his shoulder and said something in his ear making him nod and turn toward her. She didn't miss the warmth in his eyes when he spoke to her. It bothered her a lot more than she thought it would. In fact, she was disturbed enough that she missed giving Henry a plate. Unfortunately, Jasper and Henry were talking and their deep voices drowned out whatever words were exchanged between Jesse and Adam, so she didn't have a clue what the exchange of affection was about and it was killing her. However, Meagan knew then, that she'd never see that warmth from him and it shattered her. Of course Jesse would be perfect for Adam, she was beautiful, smart, very kind, and incredibly sexy, but wasn't he with that other woman, the one that she didn't like that drove the red convertible? The man seemed to go from one extreme to another, and didn't Jesse know that he was seeing the other woman? Jesse seemed so confident in herself and Meagan was sure she wasn't the type of person to share a man. Although Adam wasn't just an ordinary man to Meagan.

Halfway through lunch she glanced at him again just to find Adam's pale eyes on hers until Jasper took his attention. The warmth wasn't there, but there was that dark look again, the one she come to recognize from the day in the stables and she felt her stomach flip-flop. Soon the men got up and went back to work as did Jesse. Meagan helped her aunt tidy up while grinning at the empty pan. She had to admit, the woman was talented with food.

Chapter Two

Later that day, Meagan caught a ride with Jeb into town. He had to go to the hardware store and she needed to go to the vet clinic which was only a few blocks down the road for some antibiotics. Not only that, it would distract her from constantly thinking about that cowboy. Yesterday she constantly chastised herself for letting him kiss her and today she was still thinking about it. So a trip to town would be distracting. She hoped.

One of Adam's horses got caught in barbed wire the day before so she had an excuse to go and get away from the ranch for a few hours. She sighed inwardly to herself because she'd tried not to think of him after that display yesterday, but she couldn't help but re-examine the feelings he stirred in her over that kiss. Could she possibly ignore these feelings? Could he? Well, it was obvious after the way he was with that woman that he could. She blew out a frustrated breath pushing her bangs momentarily off her brow and stared at the passing scenery. Her experience with attraction was next to nothing so she certainly didn't understand his sudden change of preference. Were all men like that? She was sure her father wasn't although being

married to her mother would have turned any man in another direction. Cringing she shut the thoughts of her mother away.

Even though she'd grown up around cowboys, none of them affected her like Adam did. Maybe she was a terrible kisser and he quickly dismissed her after that episode. An ache in her gut developed over that thought. But didn't he tell her that it wasn't over? Oh why couldn't she just forget about that darn kiss? Jeb's voice cut in then and she was thankful for the interruption.

"You gonna be long honey?" He said sparing her a sideways glance from the road.

"No, I just need to see Doc Jenkins about an antibiotic."

"Alright then," he pulled up to the curb in front of the town's only vet office, "I'll be down the street at the hardware store. If I finish sooner, I'll come back, if not, just walk over and meet me."

"Sure." She shot him a smile grabbed her purse and hopped out of the truck. "I'll end up meeting you because I'll only be a few minutes."

"No problem."

She shut the door and went into the building.

Jeb watched her and shook his head before pulling a u-turn and driving a few blocks down the street letting a slow whistle escape his lips. *That was one fine female*, he thought to himself.

When she was leaving the vet's she stopped to survey her surroundings and thought Prosper was a nice town. It was clean, the people were quite friendly and seemed to accept her and Helen easily enough. She turned and walked across the street to the Hardware store where the ranch truck was parked. Unfortunately the town bar was half a block from there and several patrons were lounging outside and she drew a lot of cat whistles walking across the street.

Red-faced and wishing she was invisible, she did her best to ignore them as she walked by, but one man stepped in front of her. She would have moved to avoid him but because her gaze was averted she never saw him approach.

"Hey baby, where are you going in such a hurry?"

His words were slightly slurred and she glanced at the other two who were leaning against the wall grinning. So much for asking them for help. The man was large and she actually began to get frightened. "Move please."

"Please? Aren't you the sweetest little thing?" He reached up and cupped her chin to make her look at him

She pulled back like she was burned and stared at him wide-eyed.

He didn't even seem to notice and leaned down toward her not relinquishing his grip on her arm. "Come on honey, what's your name?"

She could smell alcohol on his breath he was so close and went to step back when he grabbed her arm. Despite the fact that he was drinking his grip was quite strong, "Let go." She said tugging on her arm starting to feel fear rise. It was too familiar, a man grabbing her without permission and dread began to wash through her. Images began to flash in her mind of similar instances with her stepfather. "Oh God, let go!" she repeated feeling the prickly feeling of panic creep in. the man's eyes weren't cold like her stepfathers, or they didn't hold that look that made the hairs on the back of her neck raise, but just him grabbing her started the fear in her all over again. The fear that she ran from almost three months ago.

"Just a minute—" he started to say until the sound of screeching of tires brought both of their heads to the big dodge dually truck. It had stopped in the middle of the street and Adam was getting out of the driver's side. But that isn't what drew her attention; it was the deadly look

on his face. He didn't even bother closing the door when he strode over, grabbed the man holding on to Meagan by the collar and punched him in the jaw sending him flying to sidewalk with a grunt of pain.

"Adam!" Meagan screeched. Then he turned to her. The look on his face was menacing, then it softened along with his voice when his eyes settled on her.

He saw the paleness of her skin and knew something had her spooked. "Are you all right honey?"

All she could manage was a nod darting her eyes from him to the man flat out on the ground in complete surprise.

"Good." Then he turned back to the man on the ground and stabbed a finger in toward him. His voice laced with a fury, "You touch her again Charlie, you'll be drinking your supper through a straw!"

Charlie was holding his bleeding lip, "Jesus Adam I wasn't doing anything wrong."

"The lady didn't give you permission." He growled. "And if you hadn't noticed, you scared the hell out of her!"

"I wouldn't have hurt her. She was just so pretty—I—"

"Shut the hell up! You frightened her. That's enough." He spared a glance at the other two men who held up their hands in surrender. Neither one of them wanted to mess with Adam. He shot another look at the man on the sidewalk. "Apologize!"

"I'm sorry." Charlie said without hesitation flicking his eyes to Meagan, then back to him, "I didn't know she belonged to you, I'm really sorry."

"Now you know." He reached behind him and grabbed her hand pulling her away from the three. Without looking at her he hauled her along at a fast pace down the sidewalk toward the other ranch truck, "Who the hell are you with?" he shot over his shoulder angrily.

"Jeb—." she said exasperated while trying to keep up with his long legged stride.

"What the hell were you doing near the bar? Don't you have any sense?"

"I came from the Vets and..."

"By yourself? Where the hell was Jeb?" He said not breaking his pace.

"Are you going to let me finish an explanation?" she said, her voice rising, "And slow down...my legs aren't as long as yours." Although the other man had grabbed her and frightened her, Adam's grip was warm and welcoming. She didn't understand why she reacted differently with two large men, only that she somehow *knew* that he would never hurt her.

He stopped and turned to her suddenly realizing he didn't give her time to catch up or explain herself, but he was angry. He didn't like her being touched by anyone because he knew how she felt and tasted, and he wanted to leave it that way. Staring down at her for a moment, he began to notice a rising pinkness to her cheeks. It was obvious his looking at her embarrassed her to a degree. She blushed the same way when he'd kissed her and found himself liking that look on her. Maybe too much. In retrospect, he really shouldn't fault Charlie, because just looking at her, poor Charlie didn't stand a chance. He looked over her head as Charlie was being helped back into the bar by his two buddies and grinned feeling somewhat satisfied at the busted lip he gave him. They would think twice before touching her now. His eyes darted back down to her upturned face. She looked very kissable at that moment and he nearly obliged her when Jeb came out of the store holding several buckets of nails.

"Boss?"

Snapping out of the spell she seemed to weave on him yet again, he practically thrust a wide-eyed Megan at him, "Do not let her wander around town by herself again." He said angrily.

Again, he found himself falling under her spell without even knowing it. His temper flared again.

Jeb looked at Adam then Meagan, seeing the expression of surprise on her face, “What happened?”

“Charlie thought about playing with her.” Adam gritted out.

“Really? The fool!” he looked at her with concern, “You okay?”

She nodded, but her eyes were still on Adam. What the hell just got into him? One minute he seemed so tender, and then in another, it was like he was ready to push her off a cliff.

Adam had already turned and headed back to his truck still idling in the middle of the street with the door open, but not before calling over his shoulder, ‘Take her back home *now* Jeb!’ He got in and slammed the door.

Jeb watched him get in the truck and tear out of there before he spoke, his eyes following the truck as it disappeared around the corner, “How’s Charlie look?”

“Adam hit him.” She said in disbelief. “He just got out of the truck and hit him without any warning.”

“Once?” He said with surprise finally settling his eyes on her.

“Once what?” she said not understanding what he meant.

“He only hit him once?” he suppressed the smile at the sight of her wide innocent blue eyes. She really didn’t understand what he’d meant. Truth was, he wanted to burst into laughter. Adam’s temper was not to be tangled with and everyone in Prosper knew that, but Meagan. Actually he thought Adam held great restraint considering what just had occurred. He remembered the way his boss barked at all of them that first time he saw her walk to the stables and since then he only looked at her when Adam wasn’t around or looking. He could only imagine how angry he was if someone *touched* her. The woman was completely naïve on how beautiful she was, and it just added to an already perfect package.

“Yes.”

“Lucky bastard.” Chuckling, he hoisted the buckets into the box of the truck. “Charlie’s a bit of a drinker, he wouldn’t have hurt you, he just gets a little carried away.”

“Then why Adam would hit him.”

Jeb looked down at her for a minute, smiled and shook his head, “You are a cutie Meagan.”

Her eyes widened, “Jeb...”

“Don’t worry...unlike Charlie...I’m not stupid.” He grinned and opened the door for her, “Get in.” he said with a nod.

What the hell did that mean? She thought as Jeb closed the door after she got in. Whatever it was, she somehow knew it would embarrass her from the knowing look in his eyes, and decided to let it go.

For the next two days after the incident in front of the bar Meagan hadn’t seen Adam. However, she was down in the library in her housecoat on the third night and he strolled in well after everyone else had gone to bed. It looked like he’d been out on the range from the dusty and ragged look of him, but it still didn’t take away from his raw masculinity, if anything he was more appealing to her. Knowing that he was working, and not with that woman like she originally thought, gave her a sense of relief. He had taken her by surprise, because she didn’t expect anyone to be up at that hour, but she couldn’t sleep and was looking for a book to read.

When she saw him she completely forgotten what she'd come into the room looking for. Not only that she was just standing there gaping at him like an idiot. It seemed like she hadn't seen him forever and the image of him striding into the room was quite powerful.

At first he didn't see her, because he was so tired that his mind was a little slow on the uptake. Actually, he'd wandered in there for a drink, but felt as though he was not alone. When he spotted her, it felt as if every cell in his body was instantly electrocuted. Adam let his eyes rove heatedly over her body. She was wearing a light blue satin nightgown and matching robe that was untied and both of them fell just above her knees. She might as well be wearing nothing for the protection it gave her from his expert assessment. His eyes were automatically drawn to the thrust of her breasts through the thin material and the obvious outline of her pert nipples. Her long coppery hair hung in a tumbled mass around her delicately beautiful face accentuating her large sapphire eyes. Hell, she looked like she just stepped out of a Victoria Secret catalogue! Apparently by the look on her face he had caught her by surprise also, but it certainly didn't do anything for the heat in his groin.

He remembered what he told her in the stable last week, that this wasn't over. At the time he'd meant it because her scent and feel was fresh in his mind. However, he had time to reflect on her age, his habits and their arrangement. Now, he realized while staring at her, that previous reflection was a complete waste of time. She was a picture of desire, an incredible specimen of a sensual female in every sense. Every sensual curve of her body was enticing him at that moment. She'd let her hair down and it was longer than he thought as hung like a shimmering waterfall around her face and shoulders. In fact his legendary composure near gave way to show complete awe. He could sum her all up in one word—sensational.

He kept himself busy as to avoid contact with her, telling himself over and over again that this was not even an option for him, but then again, he didn't expect to find her half naked standing in his library. He was instantly aroused and with it came his anger over the fact that she was able to do such a thing to him. "Meagan, you do not walk around this house full of men with half your clothes on!" he saw her beautiful lips part in a gasp and her large sapphire eyes widen, "What the hell are you thinking! Don't you realize that my ranch hands could walk in here at any time?" He didn't mean to be so harsh with her, but her catching him by surprise left him totally defenceless. He wanted her so bad he could taste it.

She knew of his temper and had seen it, but she never had it directed toward her, "I—I was just looking for a book."

"Book! Hell, get your ass to bed!" He shouted while resisting the urge to grab her, throw her on the rug in front of the fireplace and bury himself within her.

She scrambled out of the room as fast as her legs would carry her.

Adam swore and waited a few minutes before he followed the same path. A new emotion began to nag him—guilt. Maybe he shouldn't have been so hard on her, but that woman was not made on this earth! Christ! Nothing could be that damn sweet. Raking his hand through his dark dust filled hair, he knew he needed a shower. Only now it would be a cold shower. He heard her door slam and cursed again as he walked by her room. He was as hard as a God damn rock just thinking about her in that outfit. Hell, there would be no sleep tonight either. Did she have any idea of what she did to a man? To him? He was hardly sleeping since he was stupid enough to kiss her, feel her soft body against his and it left him wanting more. It burned in his memory like a hot branding iron. That's why he'd been spending a few nights a week in the bunkhouse with his men. The woman was driving him insane. He thought maybe he'd forget it

with the passage of time, but nothing was helping. If anything, things just got worse and now after seeing her wearing that little outfit, he was in trouble.

The next day over breakfast she wouldn't even look at him. He had obviously frightened her and felt another little twinge of guilt over it. He really hadn't meant to, and try as he might, he couldn't get the image of her body in that slinky thing. Already he was in a mood and without realizing it, he'd been glaring at her. When he finally caught himself he forced an expression of indifference. It wasn't her fault. For a minute he didn't doubt that she was telling the truth last night by the shocked look on her face, but it certainly didn't ease his sleepless nights. Unfortunately, Jasper noticed her silence also and the more he talked to her the angrier Adam found himself getting.

"What's wrong kitten?" Jasper said. She looked absolutely forlorn. The girl was usually quite bubbly and Jasper was genuinely concerned about her. He actually looked forward to her cheerfulness at breakfast. It was a nice contrast to Adam's constant moods.

"Nothing. I just didn't sleep well." She said avoiding Adam's eyes. It was the truth. It wasn't as much as Adam's anger but his heated gaze that bothered her last night. At first she thought it was because he hollered at her, but after some reflection she knew it didn't even come close to the way he looked at her instead. It was the same look he had given her in the stables right before he kissed her and at lunch the day after. Yes, he had never yelled at her before, but after she had time to think and she realized he was angry because he was just protecting her from his men like he said. She knew she was naïve in a lot of ways and had never considered that someone would walk in and see her dressed the way she was. Truthfully, she didn't think anything was wrong with her nightgown, but after he'd pointed it out she was embarrassed and couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"Are you not feeling well?" He reached up and touched her forehead with the back of his hand. "No fever little miss." He grinned. "Bad dreams then?"

Adam near came out of his chair over that gesture surprising himself completely. Brother or not, he didn't like Jasper touching her and wanted to physically remove his hands with his fists. Henry was right, he was being possessive. He felt his foul mood return, "Jasper, go check on the heifers."

Jasper gave him an odd look before nodding, "Whatever you say big brother." He stood up, ruffled Meagan's hair and walked out of the room leaving the two of them alone.

Meagan had never felt more uncomfortable in her life. The silence was deafening and she knew he was sitting there staring at her. Her feelings were all in a jumble. First he kissed her, then he yelled at her and now she was embarrassed. It never occurred to her that her night clothes were so revealing until she got back to her room and looked in the mirror. He was right, you could practically see everything through them. Yet, she'd never noticed before until he pointed it out. After taking the nightgown and robe off, she tossed them in the garbage over her humiliation.

"Meagan." He said quietly, "Are you ill?"

The softness in his voice near made her jump. Only seconds ago he was practically shouting at Jasper. She shook her head.

"Did I frighten you last night?"

She finally brought her eyes up to meet his. "A little."

He wasn't ready for the vulnerability in them, "Hell, you should know better than to walk around in a little outfit like that in front of a man." He said gesturing with his hand.

“I didn’t think you’d be home. I haven’t seen...”

“I’ve been staying away.” He interrupted while frowning, “You don’t need me pawing you.” He said tersely not liking explaining himself, his voice roughened, “You’re too young.” He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette and lit it. “I’m too old for you.” Normally he never explained himself, because the confession itself was unsettling for him; however her response erased all of that.

That was why? She swore she could feel her heart leap for joy over his confession. All along she had it wrong. One couldn’t blame her, the man showed as much emotion as a statue, when he wasn’t angry. She tilted her head and stared at him finally finding her courage, “I don’t think so. I never thought so.”

He stilled, focusing his eyes on her for a moment before he reached up and took a drag off his smoke. A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth as he eased back in his chair and ran his gaze over her, *how could something so sinfully gorgeous be so naïve? Damn*, he thought, as the heat started in his groin again, *this has got to be a sickness*. Despite his growing desire, he managed to keep his voice completely calm, “You really don’t huh?”

She shook her head.

“I’ll be damned.” He said looking at her in a different light, “I’m sorry I frightened you honey.”

She nodded, “I’m not use to you yelling at me. It’s alright.” It didn’t seem like he was a man who apologized often so she was more than willing to forgive him. Not only that, the man couldn’t look any sexier than he did with his relaxed pose and allowing his eyes dip over her sensuously. He was so confident in his ability as a man, it disturbed her.

Amusement lit in his eyes, “Good thing.” He put out his cigarette and stood up while looking at her, “No more of those flimsy things while I’m in this house because in case you haven’t noticed I’m a man too. You got that?”

Oh boy, did she ever. It certainly didn’t escape her that he was a man. Her eyes guided down his long legs encased in denim as he was disposing of his cigarette in the ashtray and she was sure he could hold lessons on how to be a man. The man was more masculine than a room full of them.

“You get fully dressed next time you come out of your room, even for a glass of milk in the middle of the night, or I’m not going to be able to keep my hands off you.” He turned and walked out of the room without a backward glance leaving her gaping at his bold confession.

She was so happy that it was *him* he was referring to last night, not his men that she could have forgiven him for anything. She felt a thrill of excitement go through her. All of this time she thought she was just an experiment, but she really affected him as much as he affected her.

All morning she’d kept busy with the horses, and as the day went on so did the temperature. It was going to be a hot day. But nothing could shake her good mood at Adam’s confession this morning. She was singing to the radio while she was rubbing down a sorrel mare.

Right before lunch, one of the boys brought back an overheated horse and she had to bite her tongue from chastising him over it and instead got out the hose. She would cool the poor gelding down. She went back in and changed into a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a blue button up shirt that she tied off showing her belly button. She topped the whole thing off with a pair of tan cowboy boots and straw hat.

Four of the young ranch hands were just making it back to the bunkhouse for lunch when they stopped dead in their tracks bumping into one another. They weren't watching the horse tied outside the stables, but the scorching woman who continued to hose it down to cool it off. She stood with her back to them as she let the water flow over the horse's back flinging droplets in the air around her catching the glistening sun like crystals.

"Oh..." said Jeb

"..My.." Added Arnie.

Ian finished with an explanative.

Red couldn't find his tongue to say anything. It seemed to have suddenly been glued to the roof of his mouth.

Adam had been working on the baler behind the barn when he saw the four of them gaping toward the stables. He could hear the radio from the stables playing Pat Benetar's *Hit me with your best shot*. Dropping what he was doing and wiping his hands on a rag from his back pocket he walked around the side of the building curious to see what their gazes were fixated on and if his boots weren't on so snug he would have flown out of them. There was Meagan in possibly the sexiest outfit he'd ever seen soaking down a horse with a hose and in the process getting herself wet leaving whatever was left covered, undeniably visible. The scene was sinfully erotic and if his ranch hands weren't ogling her, he would have been. Instead, he became instantly furious and first turned his rage on the men, barking at them in a string of epithets that sent them running. He then marched to Meagan in a long legged determined stride who came around the side of the horse with the hose still in her hand to see what all the noise was about. "What the hell did I tell you this morning?" He bellowed. She just stared at him in confusion and he continued to cut loose on her for the next five minutes.

Meagan did her best to stand there while he hollered at her. First of all, she didn't know why he was so riled. Second, he kept mixing curses in with the things he was telling her and she began to lose track of what it was he was saying causing a blush to slowly fill her cheeks. However, she did remember to blink every now and then with him towering over her like a great oak tree flinging his arms in rapid succession as he bellowed down at her. She finally flinched when he grabbed the hose out of her hand and flung it away from them. Then he yanked on her shirt, unknotted the tie in front and pulled it straight over her hips covering up her midriff while swearing another long line of epithets. This time she finally figured that he was speaking French.

"Did you get that? Why the hell are you still here?" he barked.

Her eyes widened, "Quit yelling." She said finding her voice and her courage. "And speak English. I don't understand anything you just said!" It actually caused him to pause.

He stared at for a moment, took a deep breath, placed his hands on his lean hips, and muttered something in English that certainly understood by the way it made her blush, before he addressed her directly again, "Go change!"

She jumped wide-eyed

"Now!" he thrust his arm in the direction of the house.

"Okay," she shot at him before turning and stomping back toward the house. She didn't know what the problem was. All she really got out of him was 'wet', 'striptease' and something about 'flaunting assets' and 'shooting the ranch hands' before he switched to French. She was so preoccupied by how handsome he was when he was angry that she missed half of what he said even if it was in French. It somehow made her almost immune to his temper, just taking the

opportunity to stare at him. Not only that, his confession this morning made everything come into focus. Two months ago, if he yelled at her like that, she would have ran for cover, but he didn't seem as menacing anymore. Yet while she made her way back to the house, she finally let his actions sink in she was beginning to get angry. Every time she turned around he seemed to be yelling at her over what she thought were silly things.

Jasper came out of the dining room at that time with a toothpick clasped between his lips, "What the hell was all that noise?"

"Your brother," stated Meagan with obvious frustration, tearing the hat off her head and flinging it against a wall, "He just started yelling at me. I was just washing down one of the horses to cool him and he showed up spouting at me in French." She held her hands up in exasperation while staring at him with her wide blue eyes, "Jasper, I don't even speak French!"

He stared at her dipping his eyes over damp attire for a moment with obvious amusement while pursing his lips to keep from smiling, "And you don't know why?"

"No!" she blurted angrily kicking off her boots in a vigorous movement.

He pressed his lips together again, "I'll talk to him Meagan, he's just having a rough few days. Round-up is just around the corner. It's tense for all of us." He bit off trying not to burst into laughter. She really had no idea why Adam was so angry. She looked like a centerfold for sports illustrated, even though she still had her clothes on, the way they clung to her made it seem like a mute point.

"Thank you." She said through her teeth and went upstairs to change missing Jasper's grin.

As she shoved her legs in a pair a jeans in frustration she was still at a loss on what set the man off. Henry had always warned her that he was moody, but he seemed more so these past few days. He also told her that he didn't usually yell at women, but obviously he did. Of course she was still crazy about him, but he kept throwing mixed signals her way. One minute he was telling her he had problems keeping his hands off of her and the next, he was yelling at her over her shorts and shirt of all things. She could almost understand the nightgown from the night before, but not her summer clothes! If he kept yelling at her over her everyday wardrobe she wouldn't have anything to wear.

Donning a light blue t-shirt she stared at herself in her mirror and blew out a frustrated breath. There was no way he could find fault with this. What she needed was an afternoon ride just to get away and clear her head. That idea seemed to be the best one she'd had all week so she left to saddle one of the horses.

When Adam walked in the door six hours later Jasper met him in the foyer still in his range clothes. He was sure he mentioned something about heading in to try and get the attention of Sara before she got off work when he left him over an hour ago on the range.

"Is Meagan with you?" he said with worry in his tone.

He eyed him for a moment, "No." his eyes went to Helen who'd just burst through the kitchen doors with a panicked look on her face, wringing a dishcloth in her hands, "What's wrong?"

"She's been gone since you cut loose on her this afternoon." Jasper said.

"The hell she has." He said with some surprise. Did he frighten her again? What the hell was wrong with him around her? He snapped at the smallest issue. Things that wouldn't affect him with any other woman. Yet, seeing her that way today pulled the most possessiveness he'd ever felt towards a woman before. He'd already admitted to himself that she was his. Now, as

he studied Jasper's expression of concern, he wondered if maybe it was because of him that she left, "Do you think I frightened her?"

"Honestly? Not enough for her to run, she was more pissed off than anything." He would have chuckled over the memory when she came in the house if he wasn't so worried.

Just then Henry came in with a worried look in his face. He was out searching around the barn and stables for her after Helen couldn't find her to help with supper. "Jeb said he saw Meagan ride out on the paint around three this afternoon."

"Which way?"

"Toward the east mountain trail." Henry said. "I got Red saddling up three horses right now."

"I'll go get the first aide kit." Said Jasper.

"Maybe I'll call my brother," said Jesse from the doorway.

The three turned not realizing she was there.

"Good idea." Said Adam, "I have a bad feeling." Meagan had gone riding before, but she was always back before supper to help her aunt. Something had to be wrong.

"I'll stay with Helen. I won't go home yet until you find her." said Jesse crossing her arms under her breasts, "I hope she's all right."

"Thanks honey. We'll find her." Adam said before he shifted his attention to his brother, "Jasper, I'll meet you and Henry at the stables." He turned and left but couldn't stop the worry that filled him. She didn't know the territory as well as he, Jasper and Henry did and if she got stuck somewhere, she wouldn't know how to find her way home in the dark.

For several hours they tracked the paint's trail by flashlight. The sun had gone down several hours ago so besides the moon, which thankfully was full tonight, they had trouble keeping the trail as it was. It was slow going and frustrating. Thankfully the three of them knew the country well or it would have been more painstaking.

Adam was doing his best not to get too worried, but he reluctantly admitted he was very worked up with concern. Obviously she was in serious trouble and as far as he knew the paint hadn't returned home either, or they would have crossed his path. The woman didn't have a cell phone either, they had already asked Helen, but he would remedy that as soon as he found her. *If he found her.*

Just as he was thinking it, their horses pricked up their ears and one of them nickered as the paint came through the trees neighing at the familiar scent of his stable mates. He was riderless. Adam swore, got off and easily caught gelding checking him over.

"Anything?" said Jasper.

"No." he said looking up at the other men, "No marks, injuries or anything."

"Well she can't be too far." Henry said, "Maybe the horse stayed with her until he caught our scent."

"Hopefully." He tossed the reins of his horse and the paint to Jasper and walked through the trees that the gelding came through calling her name.

Meagan opened her eyes and became aware of an immense throbbing in her head. Reaching up she felt something wet and sticky and moaned. It was blood, her blood. She blinked a couple of times, it was dark and things seemed a little blurry. How long was she out? She couldn't even remember what had happened. Struggling to recall she tried to sit up and the throbbing in her skull grew along with a wave of dizziness and nausea causing her to groan and lay back down trying to breathe it away. A noise caught her attention and she could see the horse she rode standing not too far away. It looked like the reins were caught in a branch. Maybe if she

could get to him, she could make it home. Unfortunately as soon as she thought that, he reared up freeing himself and tore away from it. Now she was alone and unable to help the tears that started to well up and fall. *Get a grip*, she scolded herself, *No one is going to help you. You need to help yourself.*

Steeling her courage and gritting her teeth through the throbbing, tears and nausea she rolled over onto her stomach and managed to bring herself to her knees. Again she breathed deeply hoping at least the nausea would pass and it did. However, the throbbing began to center on the gash in her head making it more of a sharp pain. Releasing a sob she pushed herself up on a log and then lowered her face in her hands to try and control the pain again. Deep down she knew that there was no way she could make it home like this. The pain in her head was phenomenal now and the nausea returned.

“Meagan!”

Adam’s voice echoing in the darkness was like a light from heaven. “Here!” she called despite the increase in pain at yelling, “I’m here!” she placed her hands on either side of her head to try and still the pain again when the light from Adam’s flashlight pointed on her face.

“For Christ sake!” he hollered, “Do you have—“ he was going to say ‘—any idea how late it is,’ But stopped yelling when he saw the blood caked all over the side of her face, “Ah hell!” When she started to cry again he did the only thing that he knew and got her angry again, “I swear to God Meagan I’ll leave you here if you start whining.”

“Whining?” she gaped at him, “I’m covered in blood!”

“It’s barely a scratch.” He said in his most calm voice when he wanted to grab her and hold her. “I was thrown from a horse when I was six, and walked two miles home with a broken leg. Don’t make such a big deal about it.”

“A scratch?” she showed him her hands, “I’m bleeding all over the place.”

He turned and yelled over his shoulder when he heard Henry and Jasper calling for him. Then he turned his attention back to her, “We found your horse. You’re going to get back on him and ride him back.”

“Adam—“

“I swear to God Meagan, I will leave you if you shed so much as one tear!” he said just as Jasper and Henry broke through the trees. He spoke before Jasper and Henry got a word out so they wouldn’t comfort her. He needed to get her off the mountain before he let that happen. She had to stay strong. If she could really see what she looked like, he knew she would give up and there was no way they could manage their horses and her through the rough terrain without hurting her more. She needed to ride out on her own. Half of her face was swollen and purple and covered in blood. It was startling to him and he’d seen some pretty bad wrecks with his men and the rutting bulls or cows that were calving, but just because it was Meagan, it affected him more and he was determined not to let it show. “Jazz, get down and help me get her on the horse before she decides to sit there all night and cry.” He was thankful that Jasper caught on quickly and nodded getting off his horse.

It was some task to say the least. She could barely stand and Adam knew he was being horrible to her, yet he needed to get her home and him carrying her like he wanted to would make her give up. He knew her well enough to know that this girl didn’t need pity to get her through this. Hopefully she would stay together until he got her out of there. “If you don’t stay put Meagan, I’ll tie you to the bloody thing.” He glared at her before mounting his own horse telling Henry and Jasper to lead and he’ll follow behind Meagan.

Meagan was angry and hurt. The man treated her like she was a burden and she'd put them all out. She had a few choice words for him and it took a lot of effort not to tell them to him. She began to sway and gripped the horn as hard as she could not to fall. If she did, he was sure to give her hell again.

Jasper saw her tilt in the saddle and felt his chest tighten. He knew she was hurting and from the look of her injury, she probably wasn't thinking with a full deck either. Hopefully, it's just a concussion and nothing more serious.

The ride back to the house was a lot faster than the search and they were home in less than an hour. Adam quickly dismounted before his horse even came to a stop and reached her horse in a flash with his long stride to help her down out of the saddle as Helen, Jesse and her brother came out of the house.

Meagan refused to speak because she knew she'd burst into tears from the pain and the shock seeing the blood on her hands. When Adam reached up to help her down, she didn't hesitate and let him. As her feet hit the ground she realized she didn't have the strength to stand.

"We're home honey." He said to her surprising himself that his voice was as gentle as it sounded as he held her against him. He relaxed his hold a bit and she started to slide, causing him to tighten his hold. Meagan never said a word. He knew she was trying not to weep like he'd told her, because he could easily feel her tremble and her face was buried against his chest.

"Oh dear!" said Helen seeing her niece's face, "Meagan are you okay?" she hurried over and placed her hand on her niece's shoulder.

"She'll be fine," said Adam who shot a worried look to Jasper before turning his attention to Jarrett over Meagan's head, "In the living room." He told the Jarrett as he bent over and lifted her into his arms without a word.

"Jesse, get my bag out of the jeep. I'll need my suture kit by the looks of it."

"Okay." Jesse turned and hurriedly did as her brother asked.

Henry took the horses back to the stables and Jasper pulled Helen aside to tell her what had happened.

Despite Meagan's previous anger at Adam, she felt safe in his arms, and relief at being home and began to weep again.

"It's all right baby, your safe now. Cry all you want." He murmured to her so she could only hear. He felt his heart clench as she gripped his coat and buried her face in it.

Meagan finally figured out what he was doing and began to sob. He was trying to get her to stay focused and now he allowed her to release what she was feeling. He wasn't being cruel at all. He was protecting her.

"Jesse's brother is here Meagan, he needs to look at you." He said as he bent down to put her on the couch.

"Don't leave!" she wretched tightening her grip on his jacket.

Adam could feel her tremble and something inside his chest let go. Her fears were genuine as was her need for him to be with her. She looked completely vulnerable and lost at that moment that he wanted nothing more than to protect her. "Meagan, Jarrett needs to look at you." He explained softly. He didn't like clingy woman at all, but he wouldn't have traded that moment for anything in the world.

"Please." She said not relinquishing her grip.

"Look honey, I'll stay if you want but you need to let go so the doctor can examine you."

She finally nodded and reluctantly released her grip as Jarrett asked her to lie down on the couch so he could take a look at the gash on her head. Her eyes went to Adam who was standing behind Jarrett, "I'm sorry I put everyone out."

"You didn't put anyone out." He reassured actually giving her a bit of a smile, "Lie still."

"Okay." She sighed closing her eyes as Jarrett prodded at the wound on her skull making her wince.

"Were you unconscious for a bit?" the other man said.

"I think so. It was dark when I woke up." He eyes guided to him. She had never seen Jesse's brother before, but there wasn't any doubt that he was. He had blonde hair and green eyes just like his sister, and was undeniably handsome. He certainly wasn't what she expected, in a faded Kiss t-shirt and jeans, but she supposed it was after clinic hours and he was probably phoned at home.

"Any dizziness, nausea?"

"Yes." She said darting her eyes to Adam for a few seconds, "I feel very dizzy."

Jarrett's eyes searched hers and he gave her a reassuring smile, "Well, you're lucky you didn't end up with an intracranial bleed and not wake up. Apparently you have a hard head."

"I second that." Came Adam's voice.

"You two think you are so funny." She groaned glancing back and forth between the two, "I must look like a troll."

"Don't worry darling, you'll be your cute little stubborn self in no time." Adam reassured sitting next to her hip and placing his hand on her other side to lean over her, but not enough to get in Jarrett's way, "so lie still."

Darling? Maybe she should get hurt more often. Her eyes guided to Adam who may have said the endearment, but there was no trace in his expression as he watched the doctor poke her head and face. *So much for hope*, she thought.

Unknown to either one of the Jarrett brought his head up with an odd look on his face before recovering and returning his attention back to Meagan.

"You need half a dozen stitches. But we need to get you washed up first." He stood up, "I'll go get Jesse and she can come in and clean you up. She has some experience with this from working at my clinic. It's a good thing that laceration is in your scalp because it's going to leave a scar." He indicated to Adam to follow him before he walked out.

"I need to go talk to him for a bit Meagan I'll be back all right?"

Without thinking she reached out and covered his hand, "Thanks for coming to get me." She saw something odd in his expression before he gave her hand a squeeze between both of his, got up and followed the doctor out of the room passing Jesse on the way with an armload of supplies.

"Nice to see you're still with us." Jesse grinned as she pulled the coffee table closer to the couch and laid out her supplies, "Everyone was worried sick. Helen was nearly inconsolable."

"Poor Helen." Said Meagan.

Jesse began to clean the gash, "Wow you really did a number on yourself. What happened?"

"I don't really remember. I was going at a good pace up the side of the mountain and I don't know if that Paint got frightened and tossed me or I just fell."

"I doubt you fell." Jesse said looking pointedly at her as she started cleaning the wound.

"Why?" Meagan winced as she hit a tender area.

"I've seen you ride." She said with a glint in her eyes, "I doubt very much you fell. Sorry about the pain."

Meagan blushed at her compliment, "I'll tough it out."

When Jarrett and Adam were outside where Helen and Jasper were waiting, he shut the door and turned to the others. "Who's this girl's guardian because she doesn't look twenty-one?" he said glancing around the group.

"I am," said Helen almost too quickly and out of the corner of her eye she could see Adam give her an odd look. She chose to ignore it and keep her attention on the doctor, "I've been her guardian for three months since her father died."

"Well, I can tell you that she's really lucky that the men found her. There's a lot of wildlife in the hills and from the way she was bleeding, she would have definitely attracted something. However, she still got a very nasty concussion and needs to stay off her feet for several days until the dizziness passes."

"No problem." Said Adam, "I'll make sure she does."

Jarrett shifted his gaze to Adam after that. Despite the older woman's confession, he didn't miss the tone in his friend's voice. It was obvious who was taking responsibility for her. "I'll write her a prescription for some pain killers, and obviously she'd been out for a while so it's okay if she needs to sleep. Someone just needs to keep an eye on her. Also, I need her insurance to—"

"We don't have any." Helen interrupted.

Adam was an intelligent man and it only took him a minute to figure out that she was hiding something from the sound of her voice and her nervous posturing. When she first answered Jarrett he was suspicious, but now he was sure. Whatever it was, Helen thought it necessary to keep from them and knowing her, there was a good reason for it, so he continued to act as if he knew nothing, but that didn't mean that he wouldn't find out, "No need," said Adam, "It'll be cash."

"I won't take money from you Adam, you know that." Jarrett said, "If she has insurance, it doesn't cost anyone anything. Not only that, she needs to have several follow up visits and tomorrow I wouldn't mind some x-rays."

"I have some money," said Helen, "Mr. Wightman you are not paying my nieces hospital bills."

"I am." He said sternly, "Don't argue. She got hurt on my property with my livestock."

She went to argue again and he promptly held his hand up and cut her off, while turning his attention back to Jarrett, "It's not too serious?"

"No. She's just a little thing, and it's precautionary. If she did have some sort of intracranial bleed she wouldn't have woken up out in the woods." He flicked a glance at Helen who gasped, "But there's no worry now, so let her rest tonight and bring her in tomorrow. I'll suture the gash and give her some painkillers to last the night, just make sure she takes them."

"I will." Said Adam.

"Mr. Wightman—" Helen moved to protest again just to be stopped by Henry who had just arrived from the stables and caught part of the conversation. He gently led her away from the two men.

"Leave him be Helen. Although he doesn't let on, he feels guilty. He wasn't too nice to her today, so let him make it up to her. Why don't you feed us hungry boys." He added with a wink. "Chasing that young girl through the wilderness has made me hungry for your stew."

Helen managed a bit of a smile, "alright Henry. I'm on to you though."

Jarrett cast a glance over Adam's shoulder to the older woman and Henry before centering it back on him, "She your girl Adam?" From the way that young thing was clinging to his friend and the concern in the large cowboy's eyes, it was easy to see. At least it was for him. He'd known Adam forever.

Adam kept his expression unreadable, "Yes."

Jarrett just nodded like it wasn't a surprise as he pulled out his prescription pad and pen and started to write, "Well then, I should give you a call tomorrow and see how she is, but I still want x-rays." He glanced at Helen for a moment again, "You don't want her to know about you and her niece?" he said quietly.

"No one needs to know." Was his answer.

"Can't say I don't blame you, she's stunning, even with the swollen face." He said truthfully, "However, you know what small towns are like. One thing's for certain if the rumour starts, it wasn't me."

Adam knew the man was completely trustworthy. They had been friends since he could remember. However, no one knew what Adam had decided, not even Meagan.

He tore off the sheet and handed it to Adam, "I wrote the instructions on the bottom." He said while tucking his pad and pen away in the back pocket of his jeans. He then reached into his front pocket and pulled out a little paper envelope, "there should be enough Tylenol three's in here to last her until tomorrow morning." He gave the envelope to Adam.

"Thanks for everything." He said tucking the packet in his shirt pocket.

"Did Jesse tell you about going fishing this weekend?"

"I'm all for it," he nodded toward the closed door of the study, "But I'm kind of tied up now. I'll have to take a rain check, if that's all right with you. I want to keep a close eye on her."

"Makes perfect sense. Maybe Duncan's free. Are you going to invite me to the wedding?"

"You want to lose some teeth?" Adam's expression darkened.

Jarrett laughed, holding up his hands in surrender, "Don't get pissed when I say I told you so in the future then."

Chapter Three

After Jarrett and Jesse left, Adam lifted Meagan back into his arms to carry her upstairs.

"Put me down Adam, I'm not an invalid." She breathed. If her head didn't hurt so much she'd relish the feel of his arms on her.

"Until the doc says I can let you walk around, I will. For now, you get carried." He said abruptly as he headed toward her room.

"Leave him be Meagan, I can't carry you." Helen said following them up the stairs.

"You probably could," he said over his shoulder, "She weighs nothing." *But she felt like heaven*, he thought.

"Oh yeah, pick on the cripple." She groaned, causing him to actually chuckle.

After he set her on her bed and gave her two tablets of the pills Jarrett left for her he left Helen to help her get ready telling her he'd be back in an hour to watch her for the night.

Meagan didn't want him to watch her. How was she supposed to sleep with him sitting next to her bed all night, "Helen, why don't you stay instead?"

“Because honey, I have a house full of hungry men to feed and clean up after tonight and tomorrow and although I love you Mr. Wightman can work an eighteen hour day on four hours sleep and I can’t.” she smile reassuringly, “Not only that he’s sweet on you.” Helen retrieved a nightgown from Meagan’s dresser.

“That’s not true!” She burst as Helen handed her the nightgown. If it was true, wouldn’t he say something? The only indication of his affection was that day in the dining room since the kiss. Since then she was concerned that he lost interest. Especially when she saw the look he gave Jesse and how beautiful his girlfriend was.

“It is. Do you need help undressing honey?” she watched her niece wince as she began to remove her shirt.

“No, I’m not an invalid and I’ve seen his girlfriend Helen. I can’t even touch what she has.”

“Don’t kid yourself Meagan.” Helen said narrowing her eyes on her, “You can knock any woman out of the park with those looks of yours.”

Meagan was about to protest but Helen interrupted her.

“We can stay here all night and argue, but even though I may not be an expert on what a man likes, Mr. Wightman is all man, and it hasn’t escaped him how beautiful you are.”

“Helen *please!*” she said feeling her cheeks heat up.

“If you could have seen his face when he was carrying you into the house, you wouldn’t doubt it either. He cares about you.”

“Like an employee.”

“Not even close. It’s beyond that. He’s just too ornery and stubborn to see it himself. Now you finish getting ready for bed. I have to go clean my kitchen and he’ll be in soon to keep an eye on you. Not only that but those pills you took should be kicking in soon. So get under the covers or he’ll be yelling at you over that nightgown.”

“Oh for gosh sake!” Flushed Meagan, “Does everyone know?”

“No, but I heard him in the house just like Jasper did.” She grinned, “Do as I say.”

“Yes ma’am.” She saluted her and was able to smile with only some discomfort, letting her know that the pills were kicking in.

Helen left and Meagan crawled in bed thinking of how wonderful it was to be back home. Home? It suddenly occurred to her that she never remembered calling any place home before in her life. Even at the King’s ranch in Tennessee. Was it because she actually felt like part of a family now? It was the thought that she fell asleep on and didn’t even hear Adam come in a half an hour later with a book in his hand, or even stir when he brushed the back of his hand across her bruised cheek tenderly before he took the seat next to the bed. If she was awake and maybe not drugged, she would have felt the heat of his eyes on her for the next few hours while an unreadable expression stayed on his face.

When she cracked her eyes open later it was Jasper in the chair.

“Hey.” He said with a smile, “You hurting again?”

She nodded, “Yeah, I think it woke me up.” she said groggily.

He got up and sat down on the bed beside her, “Here.” He said picking up two more tablets and a glass of water from the bedside table, “Adam said to give you these if you wake up.”

“Oh,” she adjusted herself to a sitting position and took the pills chasing it with a drink of water, “I don’t like things like this.”

“Medication?” Jasper asked, retrieving the glass and setting it back on the table beside her bed.

“Yes. It makes me feel funny.” She lifted her head to meet his gaze.

“There are some people that don’t take to it to well, but it will help you.”

“Was Adam here earlier?” Somehow she knew he was even though she was sleeping.

He looked at his watch, “Yeah, he went to bed about a half an hour ago after he woke me up to take watch.”

“What time is it?”

“Four in the morning.”

“Wow, I sure slept. I didn’t even know he was here.”

“Good drugs.” He teased.

“I don’t doubt it.” she looked at him, “I feel terrible that you guys are doing this. I don’t like to be coddled.”

“It’s better than doing without a damn good groom.” He grinned, “Now settle down and go back to sleep.” He pulled her blankets up over her shoulders as she lay back in bed.

“I look terrible.” She said solemnly looking up at him.

“Yeah, you do.” He grinned

She giggled, “At least Adam told me I’d be back to my cute self in no time. You’re not the least bit encouraging. You could lie.”

Jasper didn’t know what to say to that. Luckily Meagan wasn’t looking for an answer and shut her eyes again. It was a good thing because his mouth was practically hanging open. His brother’s name and the word *cute* in the same sentence just didn’t seem possible especially when it was him saying the word.

The next few days were trying for her and she was bored to the tips of her toes staying in bed. The only time she was allowed out was when Jasper took her to town the next day for x-rays like Jesse’s brother asked. When they came back clear she was ordered back to bed for the rest of the day. Unfortunately there was no sign of Adam the whole time. She figured that he was with that socialite again. Despite the anguish she was feeling over it, she still couldn’t forget how tender he was with her. At least she’ll have that to keep her company for awhile

On the third day she was so relieved that she was out of bed, despite Adam telling everyone that she wasn’t allowed near the stables, or to do any work whatsoever. Yet, she still hadn’t seen him. She eagerly dressed and went down for breakfast when Jasper told her of Adam’s orders.

“Don’t look so crestfallen doll. Think of it as an overdo vacation. Adam’s right, you do work too hard.”

“He said that?” her eyes widened in surprise.

Jasper studied her expression for a moment as a glint of humour entered his eyes, “Not in those words.”

“Oh.” She could only imagine how he said it, probably in a temper and along the lines of ‘keep that damn girl in the house before she kills herself’ she smirked thinking of it.

“You’re starting to understand I see.” Said Jasper grinning as he saw the amusement in her eyes, “You’ll fit in yet.”

“Don’t put too much faith in that. I’m thinking of ways to do myself in if this continues.”

He chuckled, “We’ll all miss you.”

“Gee thanks for the concern.”

He continued to chuckle as he left the kitchen.

After she ate breakfast she made her way into the kitchen to see if Helen needed help, but her aunt shooed her out of there as soon as she saw her.

“God Helen, I’m not completely useless!”

“If you want something to do, go dust Adam’s study, it’s a mess and it won’t be too laborious.”

She reluctantly agreed needing something to do. Closing the door behind her, she couldn’t help but notice that his tastes were very elegant. She’d been in there several times, but felt as though she was intruding and didn’t pay much attention to the décor. The scent of smoke hung in the air along with what she recognized as his cologne and it just added to the masculine surroundings. It was pleasant to her because she knew it was probably the closest she’d ever get to him again. Sighing heavily at the thought, she began to busy herself with dusting.

Five minutes later, she accidentally knocked over a vase busting it on the floor. Hopefully it wasn’t too valuable, she thought bending down and beginning to pick up the pieces, noticing that some ended up behind his couch. The very couch she was sprawled on several days ago after her mishap. She crawled on her hands and knees behind it to retrieve the pieces, just as the door opened and she heard the distinct sound of his deep voice. She realized at once that he was on his mobile and by the tone of his voice, angry. She almost revealed herself from behind his leather couch when she heard him mention Heather’s name.

“I’ve asked you not to call me Heather—no we’re done. I’ve told you before I don’t like jealousy or the gossip that you spread behind my back—what! That’s none of your damn business—and I’m warning you to leave her alone. She had nothing to do with my decision and it was this type of jealousy that I despise. This conversation is over.”

Meagan heard the sound of him flipping his phone closed followed by several choice words that she was certain he wouldn’t have said around her causing her to actually blush. She held her breath for a moment and heard the door open and shut again. Then she got up from her hiding spot, turned and went to leave when she felt like someone was watching her. It was then she realized that Adam didn’t leave the room at all. When she faced him he didn’t look happy at all to see her. In fact he looked furious. By the look of it, he was getting a folder off his desk. He must’ve remembered what he’d come in there for when he was leaving again, and she mistakenly thought he’d left.

“Spying seems a little beneath you.” He said angrily,

She instantly flushed, “I’m so sorry! I broke a vase—“ she held the shattered pieces up as evidence, “I didn’t mean to intrude—“

“Sure you didn’t.” he said not believing her, “Do you usually crawl around on a man’s floor breaking vases?”

“I was dusting!” she defended.

“I told everyone not to let you do anything!” he burst angrily, “Who the hell told you to dust my study!”

“I’m going crazy!” she shot back, “I can’t just sit around.”

“you’ll do what I tell you Meagan. You had a bad fall and I—we don’t want to complicate the injury.” He stated angrily gesturing at her with his hand, “And toss the damn glass in the waste basket. With your luck you’ll end up accidentally slicing your wrists.”

“Oh for gosh sakes!” she fumed doing as he asked, “I’m not accident prone!”

“Sure.” He said with amusement at her guff while reaching for a cigarette, “How’s the noggin’?”

She took a deep breath seeing that his temper was fading, “I’ll live.”

He bent his head to light his cigarette, "I'm glad." He brought his eyes back to hers, "So did my phone conversation interest you?" he raised a brow.

"I wasn't listening," she lied.

"Liar."

She narrowed her gaze on him. "I was trying not to, but you were bellowing at her too."

"She deserved every word." He said harshly.

"You were kissing her just last week." Meagan reminded him. Could men really switch their feelings on and off so quick or just him?

I shrugged a large shoulder, "I kissed a few women last week if I remember." He said with his mouth twitching as his eyes guided to her mouth.

She knew he was trying to intimidate her, but she wouldn't back down. Oh, but he was doing such a good job. The man towered above her while looking down at her with those silver grey eyes seeming to study every feature on her face. Every now and then she got a scent and it was completely unnerving her. He was definitely all male, she thought staring up at him. "You remember too, don't you Meagan." His voice dropped to a husky tone.

It wasn't a question and Meagan wanted to run from him. He smelled really good and she could almost feel the heat of his body from where he stood. "Did you really break up with her?" she finally asked.

He nodded.

"Why?" she said watching him intently

"I had my reasons." He said nonchalantly with a shrug as he turned and crushed out his cigarette before turning back to her.

Her eyes followed the movement as she thought about his answer which she should have expected. Adam never explained himself to anyone. Her eyes guided to the ashtray, "You smoke too much." To her surprise he didn't take offense at her.

"Yeah, I do. More than usual lately it seems," he said looking down at her and she quickly averted her gaze, "Look at me honey."

"No." she said softly. She was afraid to look at him, because every time she did, it was as if she was hypnotized.

He smiled, "Don't be afraid of me Meagan." He said deeply.

She never said anything and he hooked a finger under her chin and forced her to look at him. His eyes searched hers, "Heather seems to think I have affection for the new groom and that's why I broke it off with her."

"Obviously she's crazy." She said with some cynicism. There's no way in hell any man would find her attractive over that socialite.

He chuckled. "Is she?" his eyes searched hers, "She was too damn jealous. I can't stand jealousy."

"I'm sure she knows your reputation."

"I have a reputation?" he said with mock surprise.

She searched his expression. The man was actually amused. He knew he had a reputation and he was teasing her. It was the first time since she started working there that he had joked with her. She blinked twice in disbelief.

"You are a very sensual woman Meagan."

She could feel heat rising to her cheeks from that compliment.

"And that, makes you more attractive." He said as his eyes guided to her flushing cheeks. He reached for her.

“Don’t please—“ She may have said the words but her eyes dropped to his sensuous mouth and he didn’t miss it.

“Oh, I will.” He said with complete certainty as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Meagan couldn’t—didn’t forget the first time he kissed her, but it was even more affective this time. Within seconds she’d dropped her dusting rag and flattened her hands against his hard chest. This time she knew to open her mouth and let his tongue access and when she did her knees turned to rubber. Thankfully his arms circled around her holding her against him.

Adam knew he could do just about anything to her and she would let him, and he wanted to. The woman tasted too sweet to be real. She felt like warm soft satin in his arms and he couldn’t ignore his reaction to her. “Baby you got me so worked up, I’m losing my mind.” He murmured against her lips. His answer was a soft feminine sigh. Even that sounded so damn sexy he felt himself harden to granite. Framing her face in his hands so he could look at the vulnerability in her large sapphire eyes, he smiled, “I’ve got to stop or I’m going to have you on my couch over there, and I didn’t lock the door.”

That seemed to bring her out of her trance, “Oh.” She blinked again and actually glanced at the couch.

“Unless—“ he continued in a husky tone misreading her look at the inviting leather cushions, “You want to lock the door.”

What the heck was she doing? Instantly she stepped back as if stung, “I don’t—ever!” she said waving her hands in front of her.

“You could have fooled me.” He said wondering at her quick change.

“No, that was a misunderstanding.” she tried to explain.

He furrowed his brow, “Now you’re not making any sense. One second you’re ready to take my shirt off, now you act as if I slapped you.”

Without another word, Meagan turned and made a beeline for the door.

“Oh no you don’t!” he reached out and grabbed her, “You need to explain this to me. One minute your hot, the next your cold. I don’t play these games little girl!” His face darkened in anger.

“Let me go.” She tried to dislodge his grip but it was like her wrist was encased in cement.

“Meagan?” Came Helen’s voice outside the door, “Are you still in there?”

Adam instantly released her as Helen came in, “Oh? So sorry Mr. Wightman, I didn’t realize you were home.” Her eyes darted to Meagan, “I made you some tea.”

“Thanks Aunt Helen she said ducking her eyes so the older woman wouldn’t see her rising blush as she walked by her out the door.

“Is everything all right?” she asked Adam after she was out of earshot.

“I thought I told everyone not to give her anything to do?” he said curtly. The last thing he wanted to do was let on what they were doing in there. Helen may seem like a gentle soul, but she was very protective of Meagan. Not only that, she seemed embarrassed enough, and it wasn’t like him to embarrass her further despite how confusing that whole scene was to him. That was the second time she responded to him like she was on fire for him

“Mr. Wightman,” Helen lifted her chin, thinking that he’d given Meagan hell which explained her discomfort as she walked by her, “I know your concern for her is real even though you act like a hell bent bear at times, but I know her better than anyone. Asking that girl not to do anything is like taking the wild out of one of your mustangs. Now, you heed me sir, I won’t let her feel useless no matter how much I’m concerned for her.”

“All right, point taken.” He said standing straight and looking down at the older woman, “However, you give her light duty. Is that clear?”

Helen wasn't the least bit intimidated by him because he meant well. “Crystal.” She smiled before leaving.

Christ, he thought running his hand down his face in frustration, *these women are making me soft*. He marched toward the door, plunked his Stetson on his head and went back outside.

Later that evening, Meagan helped her aunt set the table for supper. She took on several duties besides just taking care of Adam's horses. Jasper was a hard cowboy like his brother, but at least he had a sense of humour and could be charming at the worst of times. He was chasing some ebony haired beauty from town who worked with her mother at the local café. By the sounds of it she wouldn't spare him the time of day. Maybe that's why he pursued her so hard, because from what she heard around Prosper, his reputation wasn't too far from Adams.

Meagan sat down at the table just as Henry, Jasper and Adam came in the dining room. They usually ate late in the evening because of the ranch hours. Henry was part of their family and because he had no family of his own, he took his meals with the boys. Meagan began to realize over the past few months that he was sort of a surrogate father to the two when Liam was away at work. He sure acted like they were his sons and to her utmost surprise they actually listened to him at times. Her eyes guided to Adam who didn't even acknowledge her as he removed his hat, but she couldn't deny the twinge in her belly at seeing him again. It seemed like forever, but it was only a few days, and she was beginning to wonder if he'd left town for a bit. She was too worried that someone might figure her affection out for him if she did.

“I'm as hungry as bone skinny rattler.” Henry said removing his hat, and guiding his eyes over the feast, “Meagan that aunt of yours could make a sirloin steak out of a ham hock.” He gleamed with appreciation as he sat down and dug in.

“Amen to that.” Said Jasper plopping himself down next to Meagan and winked at her. She grinned at him. “Best thing that kitchen has ever seen, was your aunt.”

As usual, Adam didn't say anything. He just leaned over and started filling his plate.

“She'll appreciate the compliment. She always does.” Meagan smiled at Henry. She was very fond of him. Flicking her eyes to Adam, she quickly averted her gaze. He still didn't seem to notice she existed around anybody else, except maybe to yell at her over her choice of clothes. Yet, when they were alone, he showed her tenderness, and earlier that day, desire. Ever since she had been struggling with her emotions. She knew she loved him, but did he just want her for sex? Did he care at all for her? What bothered her the most is that he probably would have gotten his way with her on his couch. That's how caught up she was when he kissed her. Ever since he kissed her in the stables she'd been thinking about it. Is that normal? To think about their naked bodies—together—*oh god, what is wrong with me?* She could feel the heat rise to her cheeks. Never in her life had she thought so graphically about something so intimate. Her eyes slowly guided back to Adam who was enjoying his meal, or at least she thought he was. His face remained impassive as Henry was talking to him.

“Adam, you taking Heather to the dance tonight?” Jasper asked absently while stuffing a slice of steak in his mouth, then made a moaning sound of satisfaction as he chewed.

Meagan looked up at him for the first time and saw his eyes on her.

“No, I promised Jesse.” He said casually.

She looked away not surprised. Heather was very pretty, but Jesse was a knockout buxom brunette. Again she felt her heart being crushed. Did the man have every skirt at his

beckoned call? It actually surprised her because Jesse didn't strike her as Adam's type, but then again she really wasn't sure what his type was. But Meagan knew from talking to her that she wasn't interested in ranch life at all and as far as Meagan knew, she'd never been on a horse. Adam practically lived on one. Although Jesse was very likable and Meagan thought highly of her.

"You be careful there boy, she's a shark. Heather I mean." Henry said glancing at Meagan and giving her a smile. "Land shark." He added causing her to giggle.

"She may be," Jasper said in between bites and moans, "But she doesn't need to talk, 'cause she's got a body that..."

"Jazz, there's a lady present." Henry scowled at him while hearing Adam chuckle at Jasper's observation. He turned his attention to the oldest, "Yeah, laugh away Adam, but someday you're gonna get bit and I'm gonna be the one to say 'I told you so'." Adam stopped chuckling and flicked a gaze to Meagan.

Jasper gave her a surprised sheepish look, "Sorry doll. I keep forgetting that you're here."

Big surprise. Meagan just stared at her hands folded on her lap. She actually liked Jesse and it hurt her to know that Adam was dating that woman too, because again, she didn't seem like his type. Not that she really knew what his type was, but she was hoping it was her. Although if she were to choose between either woman for Adam, Jesse won hands down.

He seemed to realize that his comment sounded more like an insult, "I meant, we think of you as part of the family already. I keep forgetting that you're a lady."

"Shut up." Adam finally spoke after seeing Meagan's expression of hurt. Why it bothered him, he didn't know. What he did know was that she stirred feelings in him that he thought were long dead and buried and when it came to her, he found himself reacting more than he should emotionally. Quite frankly it disturbed him, but he couldn't seem to help himself but feel possessive. After tonight, he would be free to pursue her. He had already broken things off with Heather and he'd promised Jesse months ago that he would take her to the dance because they were good friends, but he wanted Meagan. It wouldn't have been fair to take Jesse to the dance and make the moves on Meagan.

Jasper didn't miss the crestfallen look on her face after Adam spoke, "I seem to put my foot in my mouth more often than not." He leaned toward her, "Sorry honey, you are a pretty little thing. I just think of you more like the little sister I never had."

She managed a smile and nodded. "Thank you." She knew she wasn't pretty by any means, and after seeing the woman that Adam was dating she felt as exciting as wallpaper.

"Right." He said not believing that she was convinced. He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before he spoke, "You know Meagan. Why don't you come to the dance with us?"

"What?" Meagan and Adam said at the same time.

"Well, you've been here for what...two months now? I have never seen you go on a date. There's a lot of single men your age there and..."

"Jazz...do you ever shut the hell up?" Adam sat back in his chair dropping his fork, and stared at him with a blatant glare, "She's not the type to take to the dance." Not only that, he didn't want her dating anyone else despite the fact that he was. He knew that as soon as Jasper walked in the dance hall with Meagan, the single men were going to be swarming around her like bees. The thought of it made him ripe with anger.

Jasper was about to answer him when Meagan beat him to it surprising him and by the looks of Adam and Henry's expressions, them too.

“What kind of type am I?” She shot. She was angry. There were talking about her like she didn’t exist and Adam insulted her just as much as Jasper did. True, she wasn’t all faked up in high heels, piled on makeup and designer clothes like that woman she saw a few days ago, but she was a woman, was she not? Truth of it was, she was still angry at the fact that he went from her to the socialite without batting an eye. It had hurt her since he said she wasn’t the type, and now that she was insulted, it just opened the door to her temper. She saw his brows rise as his eyes guided back to her.

Jasper grinned after releasing a long slow whistle, “Honey, you are a firecracker.”

What do you know, the gal had grit, Adam thought. In the past few months she seemed to be just a shy timid little thing, but now that he thought of it, her head never bowed around anyone. She kept her chin high and walked around with confidence unbecoming her sex. The other day when he’d cut loose on her she just stood there barely batting an eye while his hollered at her in French of all things! His mother’s language. He didn’t even know he’d switched until she brought it to his attention. All three of them were fluent in French and English thanks to their mother, but never before had he alternated like that without knowing it. She had him all upside down and backwards in the way he was reacting toward her and he didn’t like it. Not one bit. He shifted his glare to her, “How old are you?”

“I don’t think....”

“How old!” he almost yelled.

“Adam.” Henry said, “Take it easy.” Although in about three seconds Meagan barked back bringing three pairs of eyes back to her with looks of surprise.

“Eighteen....old enough!” She heard Jasper laugh at her sudden burst of bravery.

“It’s settled then.” He turned back to her, ignoring the angry retort coming from his brother. “Go find a pretty little dress. I’ll take you. It’s the least I can do after I made you feel bad. You deserve a night out.” But she wasn’t looking at him. She was glaring at Adam who returned her look in spades.

“She’s not going.” Said Adam as if he had complete authority over the matter.

“Adam...” Henry repeated in a warning of his own which was completely ignored by the two pointlessly glaring at one another.

“I said no.” he repeated with more force in his tone ignoring him.

She stared directly at him with a look that said, *watch me*, while she stood up and tossed her napkin on the table, and without saying a word left the room.

Henry let out a long slow whistle, “That gal’s got spunk.”

Adam waited a bit giving her time to get out of earshot before he turned his eyes now full of darkening menace on his brother, “She is not going to be exposed to those vultures and not be damaged. What the hell were you thinking? The other day she looked like a something out of Playboy washing down that roan with four cowhands watching her like a pack of wolves stalking a newborn calf! Then I found her in the library wearing some slinky thing when there are men marching in and out of this house all day and night!”

“Christ Adam, she’s a young woman, of course she’s going too...” Jasper tried to defend her when he was interrupted; obviously Adam wasn’t done yelling at him yet. He set down his fork and knife and leaned back in his chair. He was used to Adam’s temper so it rarely affected him these days. What he wasn’t used to was this. Adam’s temper over a woman. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to him about yelling at Meagan earlier over her choice of wardrobe and listening to him now made him realize that he was going to keep his mouth shut. It was like watching a stick of dynamite with a lit short fuse. He knew if he even mentioned anything about her right

now that argued with him over her, Adam would be over the table quicker than he could blink. Jasper was a big man, but his brother was bigger than him and coupled with his temper, he would lose if a fight started. Past experience gave him that knowledge. Jasper could hold his own against most, but not Adam. Although Adam and he were close as brothers, they didn't share their personal lives in regards to their women and as he studied his brother's expression, he knew the man was in trouble over the new groom.

"Dammit! I broke up with Heather a few days ago, and she'll swallow her whole because she thought it was because of her. She saw her earlier this week when she sprung a surprise visit on me and mentioned something about her. Any woman that Heather thinks has a slight edge on her in looks is fair game to her."

"Hell, if you thought that, why didn't you say anything earlier?" Jasper said exasperated. "I felt like an ass making her feel like garbage."

"Because I didn't think she'd go. Now she thinks *I* have a low opinion of her!" He shouted.

"That's crazy! Look at her! She's a beauty." Jasper defended.

"She doesn't know that Jazz...Jesus!" He ran his hand through his hair. Then he pushed his chair back and stood up, placing his hands on the table palms down, leaning toward his brother with a warning stare. "You keep a damn close eye on her, because if she gets hurt, I'll take it out of your hide." Ignoring Jasper's look of surprise, he stomped out of the room noisily.

"Well, well." Said Henry, unmoved, "Something happened. I thought I might have to get between you boys."

"I'll say." Jasper started shovelling food into his mouth again, not letting the exchange affect his appetite, "I don't think it's other people we have to protect that little filly from."

Henry nodded, "I think you're right."

Meagan had a couple of dresses in her closet, but never had a chance to wear them. When she ran away from her mother and step father, her aunt took her in and they didn't have much money so she had to get rid of most of her fancy clothes to enable them to move around easier. However, she pulled out a royal blue silk dress with a flared skirt that made her look vibrant and put it on. The skirt ended above the knees and showed her shapely legs. She combed out her braid and pinned her long hair off her shoulders, letting it cascade down her back to her bum. She then found some silver strappy heels.

"Look at you honey," Said her Aunt Helen walking in the room, "You look beautiful. Henry said you are going out with Jasper."

"It's not what you think." She defended.

"I'm not thinking anything; he looks at you like a little sister. It's the older boy that looks at you like a hungry man meal."

"Helen!"

She winked, "Go, have fun. I didn't say anything." She kissed her cheek not missing the blush that rose. Then hurried out of her room.

Jasper let out an exaggerated cat whistle when she descended the stairs causing her to blush and grin. He offered her his arm and she took it. "Who knew you could clean up so well."

She gave him a mock pose causing him to roar with laughter, "You don't look to shabby either." She didn't fail to notice the charcoal grey western suit, white shirt and double string

grey tie. She glanced around the parlour. Obviously Adam went to get Jesse already and didn't bother waiting for them.

He put on his cream colored Stetson and led her out the door. "They'll meet us there." He said answering her unspoken question. She shrugged like it didn't matter to her, but Jasper knew better...now.

She was delighted at the dance and Jasper was very attentive and danced the first four dances with her before Adam and Jesse arrived.

"Wow doll, where did you learn to dance?" he said with surprise.

"I'm not all without talent." She grew up with cowhands, and dances as elaborate as this. Her mother was a socialite through and through, and did her best to mould her into her image.

"You're not kidding." He said as he spun her around grinning impressively.

The only person that noticed Adam stop and take in the sight of the young lady that Jasper was on the dance floor was Heather. Although his look didn't give anything away, she knew enough what caused him to pause when she followed his gaze to the gorgeous woman in the blue dress. She felt a surge of rage. It couldn't have possibly been the groom. She was styled so well that she fit right in with the rest of them. Upon closer inspection, she knew damn well it was her! The nerve of the little chit coming into her territory. What made her more angry is that there wasn't a trace of the stable girl in her while she moved around the floor with Jasper. In fact, it looked like she had been doing this for years and fit right in. She quickly worked her mind to find a solution to this. Adam was attracted to her, now there was no doubt. Even though he didn't show it besides the brief pause at first seeing her, a man would have to be dead or gay not to notice the blond and he definitely was neither.

Although he let her down as gracefully as any man could when he broke up with her she was still dumped no matter how you looked at it. She was angry and she suspected it had something to do with his so called groom. While they both agreed to remain friends, it still didn't change her plans to get him back. Jealousy even set in to see that Adam was accompanying Jesse who was no threat at all. The latest gossip was Jesse was in love with the oldest Wightmans who was overseas.

"Isn't that Adam?" Said Justin Heather's last minute replacement.

"yes."

He looked down at her thoughtfully, "You guys are still friends right? I wouldn't mind saying hello."

"I don't mind." She forced a smile. Justin Lang was considered quite a catch, but he wasn't Adam Wightman, so any excuse to be near Adam made her more than agreeable. She looped her arm through his and pasted a false smile on her face as they made it through the crowd to the couple. While Justin and Adam exchanged greetings Heather gave Jesse a once over making sure she didn't catch her. Jesse was beautiful, but thankfully not interested in Adam.

She forced a pleasant expression and tried to keep the malice out of her voice, "Oh my, isn't that your groom?" she said nodding toward Jasper and Meagan.

Adam stared down at her and forced a smile, suddenly finding her trivial. Jealous women were always such an aversion to him. "Yes. Jasper brought her."

"Oh, well, that's good. I mean, she probably doesn't feel like such a subordinate then."

"Pardon me?" he found his temper flared a notch. Again, if it was over any other woman it wouldn't bother him, but the degrading remark toward Meagan did.

He wasn't the only one that heard. Jesse's beautiful green eyes narrowed on the woman too.

"Well, Jasper obviously feels sorry for her. She's poor and works for you to make a living. It's nice of him to make her feel good about herself."

Adam bit his tongue to stop his response. Meagan sure as hell didn't look like a groom tonight, she was all woman. She was stunning with her voluptuous body encased in blue silk. He swore under his breath as he looked around. Every pair of male eyes was on her as it was. Silently he cursed Jasper for bringing her here and for her wearing that provocative dress. One thing was for sure, he was going to show Heather just how 'poor' the groom was by dancing with her at the first opportunity.

Jasper saw them and took Meagan's hand to lead them through the crowd.

"That woman looks like a model." Meagan said looking at Heather.

He leaned over and spoke in her ear, "Leave it to you to give a compliment; I'm sure she won't reciprocate. Don't worry your pretty head about her Meagan. She's a passing fancy."

She stared at him wide-eyed, "I wasn't worrying."

"Weren't you?" He grinned as they approached the couple.

Heather looked at Meagan, "Well, it looks like you're fitting in."

"Hi Meagan," said Jesse giving her a genuine smile.

Jasper introduced her to Justin.

"Hi." She reciprocated before turning her attention back to the other woman, "I've never felt so welcome, why everyone seems so friendly."

"Maybe it has something to do with your wardrobe." Heather said with a sweet voice and forced smile.

"Pardon me?" Meagan said thinking she hadn't heard the woman right. Regardless, that comment made her smile falter.

Justin cleared his throat, and held out his hand to Meagan, "Can I have this dance?" He knew Heather's reputation, but he didn't think she'd be so insulting. Not only that, the woman Jasper came with was absolutely breathtaking especially when she gave him a wide generous grin.

"I would love to." She answered ignoring Heather's angry rush of air and audible gasp.

Adam took a deep breath and released it slowly trying to control his temper and purposefully avoiding speaking to Heather about her behaviour. They were through and not too soon obviously. He should have gotten rid of her weeks ago when he lost interest. His eyes followed the couple through the crowd and narrowed. Justin was one of Prosper's most eligible bachelor's and he certainly didn't appreciate him dancing with Meagan. Especially after he saw her in that blasted dress. She could've stopped traffic. Even her legs were perfect, smooth and long and brought forth the image of them being wrapped around his hips. There was no doubt that she was beautiful and he felt a twinge of ire when he noticed that Justin was holding her hand tightly.

"I think I need a drink," Jasper spared Adam a knowing glance.

"Me too." He turned to Jesse.

"I'm fine Adam, you go ahead." She answered his unspoken look.

Adam waited until they were out of earshot before he turned to Jasper, "I told you to watch her."

“I was,” Jasper shot after telling the bartender what he wanted. “Besides, let her have a good time.”

“She’s too young to be with Justin.” He said darkly watching the couple.

“He’s the same age as you.” Jasper said handing him a glass of whiskey. “Besides they’re just dancing.” He added while turning his head to hide his smile.

“Hell.” He said and downed the contents in a single gulp drawing his eyes back to Justin and Meagan.

“Are they sleeping together Jesse?”

Jesse’s eyes widened, “Who?”

“Adam and the groom.”

Jesse narrowed her eyes on the other woman, “I’m not even going to justify that question with an answer. Unlike you, I like Meagan and if you knew her, you would know the answer.” Jesse wasn’t wealthy like Heather by any means, but she was popular and self-confident. Her looks made her such a way, but she was also honest and compassionate. There wasn’t a devious bone in her body and she didn’t care what people thought about her. The Wightman’s treated her well and she enjoyed working with them. Although she had gone to the dance with Adam, they were only friends and he may have seemed rough, but he was always very courteous to her. Usually his reputation preceded him, but obviously he didn’t think she was interested in him or he would probably be more defensive around her. Anyway, it was obvious that he had something for Meagan, who to Jesse’s humour, seemed oblivious to the whole thing. Anyone who had gotten to know her, could easily see how sweet she was, and Jesse wasn’t going to stand by and let Heather insult her. She didn’t mind Heather, but then again, she never had to deal with the woman’s wraith either.

Adam and Jasper ended up back at the table the same time Justin and Meagan did.

“Don’t sit down little girl, I’m next.” Said Adam, not giving her a chance to protest as he took her hand and led her onto the floor.

Meagan shot an apologetic look over her shoulder at Jesse who just smiled at her and gave her a forgiving wave of her hand before she leaned over and started speaking to Jasper. Hopefully she wasn’t upset that Adam practically dragged her onto the floor because she liked having her as a friend.

As luck would have it a slow ballad just started and Adam pulled her against him. She couldn’t help but gasp at the close proximity. Then all of those aromas that made him seem so attractive hit her nostrils. When he splayed his large hand over the small of her back and pressed her more firmly into him she was thankful because her knees suddenly weakened.

“Are you going to look at me at all?” came his deep voice.

She heard the humour in his voice, “No.”

“Afraid of what you might see?”

She didn’t answer as he turned her around. God she could barely concentrate where her feet were, he unnerved her so much.

“Meagan.” He said deeply.

The sound of her name on his lips finally made her lift her eyes to his.

“Every time I do you end up yelling at me.” She said softly.

“Not this time.” He said deeply causing her to blush. “And why do you think I yell at you.”

“I don’t know.”

He gave her a sensual grin, “No?”

“I just think it’s part of your moods.”

“Not as much.”

She blinked at him.

“You’re driving me nuts.” He admitted. “You’ve got me all off balance.”

Just then the song ended and he took her hand to lead her off the floor, but before they approached their table he leaned down and spoke low in her ear, “And if you dance with Justin again, I’ll break both his arms.” He released her while she gasped and took his seat next to Jesse.

“Whoa, not yet.” Jasper jumped up and took Meagan’s hand, “My turn.” Causing her to laugh, “I came with you, I think I would like to at least get some attention from you.”

“Where’s Heather.” She said as she followed him noticing the seat beside Justin was empty.

“Sharpening her claws.” He answered causing her to burst into laughter just as he spun her about. Heather stomped off after she observed Adam holding Meagan on the floor. She wasn’t the only one, there were a lot of eyes on them. *Now the gossip starts*, he thought with a slight shrug. Not that it mattered, Adam was no stranger to gossip. In fact Jasper was already asked who she was more than a dozen times and was she single? He answered the questions the best and as most honestly as he could. She was their employee and no she wasn’t single. Looking at the way his brother acted around her, he was glad he said that. There was no way he felt like fighting a dozen bucks tonight just to back Adam up when someone came on to her if he said she was single.

The whole time Jasper danced with Meagan Adam’s eyes was on the couple even though Jesse was speaking to him. He was no stranger at multi-tasking but for some reason he couldn’t concentrate on anything but her.

“She’s very pretty Adam.” Jesse said following his gaze and nudging his shoulder at the same time with hers. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to see what was going on. Adam finally turned his attention to her and gave her a slight nod before returning his attention to Jasper and Meagan.

Jesse had known the boys all of her life, and not once had she seen him so infatuated with a woman. “Adam, why don’t you ask her out?” This brought his attention back to her.

“She’s too young Jesse.” He confessed. Then sighed heavily, “I’ve been thinking about it.” Jesse was easy to talk to an completely trustworthy. He always treated her like a little sister and never once felt threatened by her being attracted to him. It wasn’t like him to have female friends, but Jesse had been around as long as he could remember.

Smiling she shook her head, “No she isn’t. She’s very mature for her age.” She nodded toward the couple on the floor, “Something made her grow up quick Adam. I know, because I can recognize a fellow woman who’s had a tragedy in her life.”

“Her father died a few months ago.”

“That’s not it Adam. There’s something else.”

“She’s too damn naïve.” He said studying Jesse’s expression.

“In some ways she is.” Jesse answered with one of her stunning smiles, “But she’s seen a world of hurt.”

“You really thing so?”

“Yes.” She watched him nod slightly, but his expression revealed nothing, before he turned his attention back to Meagan.

Smiling softly to herself she turned and started talking to Justin.

Jasper was turning Meagan about when he spotted Sarah Nelson, the café owner's daughter walk in with a man he recognized. She was stunning.

Meagan felt him stiffen and turned to see why. "Isn't that the pretty girl you've been head over heels about?"

"Sarah." He offered.

"Wow. She is pretty."

"She's with Chad Matthews." He gritted out.

"Why didn't you ask her?"

He looked down at her and humbly smiled, "I did. Five times."

"Oh." She looked back at them and noticed Sarah looked in his direction. The look she was getting from her wasn't one of indifference. "Hmmm..." She thought, feeling brave with all the attention she was getting, "I have an idea."

"What?"

Before he could say anything Meagan leaned up and kissed Jasper on the mouth. They were turned just right for her to see Sarah's expression of utter shock and then distinct jealousy.

"Oh shit." Said Jasper, when he lifted his head and looked over hers in an entirely different direction.

She turned to see Adam striding across the dance floor in their direction with a menacing scowl on his face.

"I think I'd better get you out of here before he makes a scene."

He wouldn't!" She cast a worried glance over her shoulder.

"Yes. He would." He quickly took her elbow and walked by Sarah who had a look of outrage on her face. He couldn't help himself and winked at her causing her cheeks to flush in rage. They had barely made it outside when he heard Adam's voice behind them.

"Jasper!" He thundered.

They stopped and turned just as Adam's fist connected with Jasper's face flattening him back onto the ground.

"I warned you!" Adam towered over him shaking a fist at him.

Meagan shot a glare to Adam before bending down to Jasper, "Oh Jasper are you all right?" To her surprise he was rubbing his jaw and grinning. She was sure a knock from Adam's fist would have the opposite affect.

"So that's how it is?" Jasper said looking up at his brother.

"You're damned rights! Get up!"

"Hell with that. I'm staying right here." He said in an even tone, "I like my teeth."

"Suit yourself Jazz, but this is the only warning you'll ever get from me."

"Oh dear!" Said Jesse suddenly appearing behind Adam.

Ignoring her, Meagan fumed and stood up and stepped in front of him, "What the hell's the matter with you! How come you keep hitting everyone around me?"

"I warned him to keep an eye on you, and instead his hands were all over you!" His eyes raked over her, "What the hell possessed you to wear that dress?"

Her eyes flew wide and her face flushed. "I can wear what I please! Every time I turn around, you're yelling at me about my clothes! You're not my father!"

“No I sure as hell am not! That thing looks like a second skin on you; every man in there was dragging their chins on the floor! What the hell’s wrong with *you*?”

“Hey Adam.” Said Jasper from the ground, “Don’t be....”

“Shut the hell up Jazz, I swear to God I’ll pound you senseless.” He glared at his brother who snapped his jaw shut at that warning, before centering his angry eyes back on her, “Are you trying to give the impression that you’re easy?”

Jasper did as he was told, but wow, watching his older brother and Meagan suddenly intrigued him. Henry and he were right. Adam got bit. The sight of that little gal standing up to his towering hulk of a brother with her hands on her hips and her head tilted up meeting his gaze, was almost comical. Apparently he wasn’t the only one, Jesse and he exchanged the same look.

“*Easy!* You’re one to talk!” Now she felt equal rage. She stuck his finger in the middle of his thick chest, “You do not own me, and from what I seen a few days ago, you had your body parts all over that snake you call a female! How dare you tell me what I can and can’t do!” If her dress was so revealing, how come he didn’t bring it up when they were dancing together a minute ago?

And apparently, thought Jasper, Meagan was bit too.

To anybody who was within earshot would have thought this was a lover’s quarrel. Thankfully the parking lot was empty of people at that moment. Regardless, she was so angry it wouldn’t have mattered to her at the time.

“you don’t own me!” she added poking him again.

“Like hell.” He answered glowering down at her for about thirty seconds before he bent over and threw her over his shoulder causing her to let out a screech. He spared a glare at his brother ignoring Meagan’s struggles, “Take Jesse home.” He said before he turned and walked away.

Jasper grinned at his brother’s receding back. Then he jumped up, rubbed his jaw, and dusted off his clothes, “Well that took long enough.”

Jesse was stunned, “Wow.” She said as she watched Adam carry off a squirming Meagan, “That was really impressive.”

“I’d say.” He grinned while watching his hulk of a brother march off with a struggling Meagan over his shoulder before bringing his eyes to Jesse, “Now,” he held out his arm, “It looks like you and me.” He grinned.

She smiled back and took his arm, “It does.” She stared at his jaw, “Are you all right?”

“Ah hell, I’ve taken his lumps before, I’m used to it.” he said as he slid his bottom jaw sideways and winced, “At least I used to be.” he chuckled as he led Jesse back into the dance hall.

“Put me down!” she wriggled, but it was useless, his arms were like steel bands.

“You’re going home, now.” He opened the driver’s door, tossed her in his truck, got in making her glide over to the passenger side. He started it, and roared out of the parking lot. “Put on your seatbelt.” He said harshly.

“I might have if you didn’t take off so quick.” She shot back.

He flashed her a sideways glance, “If I had hesitated you would have jumped out of the truck.”

She never said anything, because he was right.

“As I thought.”

“Where’s your girlfriend?” she said sarcastically. “I thought you were so happy together.”

“I don’t have one.”

“Heather or Jesse?”

One of his brows went up, “I broke up with Heather a few days ago if you recall that phone call, and Jesse is only a friend.”

Trying not to show the elation that went through her, she scoffed, “Regardless, I hear you have replacements already.” Although a sense of relief that was close to being euphoric flooded through her.

“Who the hell told you that?” He said with surprise evaporating his anger.

“There’s—rumours.” She said with less conviction and a little embarrassment, because she’d never listened to gossip before in her life, but Adam was a sensitive subject for her.

He studied her between glances at the road in front of them before he answered her, “Meagan, if you’re going to listen to every rumour about my sex life, you are in for a huge awakening..”

She shrugged feigning indifference and turned away to look out the side window trying to ignore the thrill of happiness go through her. Turning her gaze back to him, she asked, “Heather’s beautiful. I don’t understand why you broke it off with her” Her voice was free of malice now and she was genuinely curious.

“I told you.”

“Because she was jealous? That seems so trivial.” She said studying his profile.

He remained silent and stared out the windshield.

“Fine then.” She turned away and looked out the window again, not like she could see anything in the dead of night on a country road.

“She wasn’t you.” He finally said.

She swung her head back to him, “What did you say?”

He pulled onto a side road, cut the engine and turned to face her, placing his arm across the back of the seat, “I said, she wasn’t you. The woman was shallow and selfish. She told lies about me in our social circles to try and get a wedding ring on her finger. I make sure that the women I date understand the circumstances and that I’m in no hurry to marry anyone.” He didn’t want to tell her that his main reason was that he wanted Meagan in every way a man wanted a woman.

“I didn’t know.”

“I don’t talk about my personal life, no one knows.”

She stared at his handsome face thinking that was the most he’d ever said to her. He also seemed sincere and all the anger drained out of her, “I can’t compete with women like that.” She said softly.

“I’m not asking you to.” He studied her face intently, knowing that she didn’t have to. There was no competition.

“I can’t sleep with you.” She finally said feeling twice her age and embarrassed over it. What brought on her sudden brazenness? To her ultimate surprise he wasn’t the least bit set back by her announcement, in fact, he seemed disappointed.

He straightened, “Why the hell not?”

Didn’t he know? He’d had plenty of women and he couldn’t tell an innocent when he kissed one. Not only that, where does he get off thinking that all women just want to hop into bed with him. *Probably because they did*, she surmised. “I’m not like Heather and your other

women. I can't just hop into bed and have sex with someone." This conversation was entirely too intimate for her, and she must've blushed clear to the roots of her hair, and Adam didn't miss it.

A wry smile spread across his handsome face, "Do I intimidate you?"

"Yes." Damn rights he intimidated her, but not in the way he thought. It wasn't his temper that bothered her at all anymore. It was her unbridled reactions toward him. Every time he touched her, she lost control. He was sexy from his hair to his toes. Everything about him was sinfully masculine and it coated her like a blanket drawing her into his spell. How the hell could she possibly resist him? He was a man who knew his affect on the opposite sex and used every inch of it to his advantage. Even though she was inexperienced she couldn't deny the attraction she had for him and the way he kissed her. She lay awake that night just thinking about the feelings of desire he created in her over it.

He sighed and looked away for a moment, "I know you're not very experienced Meagan. I'm not asking for a commitment, just some fun. We share a physical attraction. Surely you know when a man and woman share that, it's usually explored."

She shook her head.

"Is it my age?"

"No, of course not!" she defended, "I told you it didn't bother me."

"Then what is the problem? I'm tired of playing this game." He said tersely not understanding her in the least. If this were any other woman, he would have her pegged by now.

"I won't. I work for you."

"You're fired."

Her mouth dropped. "You can't be that much of a jerk."

He shrugged, not the least bit bothered by her response, "I'm not usually, but if that is what it takes..."

"You're saying that if I don't sleep with you that you'll throw my aunt and me out on the street."

"I'm saying you want me. I know you watch me. I've seen you when you think I'm not looking, and you need a bit of a nudge to get over that pride and accept the fact that we want each other. If this is the way I have to do it. I will. I thought I could get you out of my mind by taking another woman to the dance tonight, but it only made me want you more." His eyes glided down to her chest, "I know you want me. This thing we share is rare and it took me a bit to come to terms with it."

"You are so arrogant to presume what I want! I don't." she lied feeling the increase in her pulse.

"You're lying."

She stared at him with an expression of surprise. Of course she was, but how did he know?

"Before you deny it again, I can tell by the rapid pulse at your throat and the hardening of your nipples through that sexy dress."

"Oh my God!" She covered her chest with her hands.

He reached over and tucked a stray hair behind her ear, "Say it."

She shook her head looking wide-eyed. "Is it so shocking that a woman doesn't hop in your bed when you want it?" she fought for control but he totally ignored her.

"Say it." He said more huskily. "I'll make sure I'm gentle. I know you're inexperienced honey. I promise I won't frighten you. I won't do anything to you in bed that you don't want."

His voice dropped an octave more, “There’s nothing wrong with this. We are two consenting adults.”

Just the sound of that deep sensual voice nearly made her agree to anything he asked of her. There was absolutely no doubt that he was an expert at seduction, but she fought for control trying not to show him how he affected her. “You flit back and forth between women like ice-cream flavours!” she shot, trying to deter him again and gather some resistance of her own. Despite that, she couldn’t suppress the heat that started in her belly and spread low into her pelvis.

“If you mean that kiss a few days ago, I didn’t expect her to show up. Technically, I was straying from her not you. I regret that, because I don’t overlap girlfriends like people think, but you...” His eyes lowered to her lips, “...were just too damn tempting.”

Her breath caught in her throat at his deeply voiced confession. Did he mean that? No wonder he was so damned irresistible! She practically forgave him with that flattery in that voice that she learned to love. However, he still didn’t know how inexperienced she really was, but his words made her tingle all over. Was that normal?

When she didn’t answer, he sighed in frustration, withdrew his hand and started the car. “I’m going to give you a couple of days before I make due on my threat. You know where my bedroom is and I expect you there by the end of the second day.” He threw her a firm look before paying attention to the road.

She was too stunned to speak as he eased the car back out onto the road. The man was too arrogant for his own good! Just because she desired him, he assumed she would drop everything and hop into his bed so easily. She should tell him that she was a virgin. Somehow she knew he wouldn’t believe her and would accuse her of trying to avoid him. Her body betrayed her. She did want him. She should tell him that Helen and her had no place to go, that her stepfather had been looking for her because he couldn’t keep his hands to himself. Funny that it didn’t bother her when Adam touched her, but she was literally terrified to the bone when her mother’s husband did. Legally they were her guardians, but after she explained everything to Helen, she’d taken her in without hesitation, drained her meagre bank account and took off. The patriarch of the King ranch in Tennessee knew of her problem and swore secrecy over the event. He’d offered help, but she’d refused. Unfortunately she’d left all of her friends behind. Mandy, was her best friend. They were the same age and she was the youngest child of Maitland King. Which is probably why he offered to help her in the first place, and would probably take them back, but she didn’t want pity.

When they reached the house and went inside he grabbed her arm and told her quietly, “Two days.” Before he released her and she ran up the stairs as fast as her legs would carry her.

He watched her with a chuckle. Of course he didn’t mean a thing he said to her. He would never blackmail his employees, but he knew she wanted him too. He knew she was young and inexperienced, but he would teach her and together they could really enjoy one another. Normally chasing a woman as young as her would deter him, but Meagan was all woman, more sensual and beautiful than anything he’d ever been with and she had a naïveté about her that was utterly irresistible. He knew she wanted him, especially after her confession at breakfast the other morning about him not being too old for her. That statement totally tipped the scales and he nearly got to his feet, walked around the table to kiss her like he did in the stables. Actually he wanted to carry her up to his bed and show her how hot that innocent little statement got him. Then that outfit! Soaping down a horse with barely any clothing on just wiped out every cowboy’s fantasies to be replaced by that erotic image. Only he was so furious

that she was on display for his cowhands, that his possessiveness took precedent over his desires and he took it out on her. Surprisingly, she hardly seemed affected. Of course it didn't help that he was yelling at her in his mother's tongue, French. Then there was what Jesse said at the dance that night.

Chapter Four

He didn't think he'd be as impatient as he was for the night to come. He was in a temper the whole day and his ranch hands made themselves scarce. Even Henry who had braved his worst ranting. He knew why. Meagan had been avoiding him. When he entered a room, she would make excuses and leave. He began to wonder if she wasn't going to come to his bed tonight and the thought alone made him very irritable. He busied himself out on the range and came in late the first night, skipped breakfast the next morning and as he was riding his stallion in for lunch he noticed Helen and Jasper standing in front of the house. Her arms were waving while she was talking as Jasper seemed to be listening intently.

Instead of tying his stallion up at the barn he nudged him toward the two. Jasper turned to him as he approached and there was no mistaking the worried expression on both of their faces. "What is it?"

"Meagan's gone." Jasper said with genuine concern.

"What the hell does that mean—gone?" he dismounted and glanced back and forth at the two and couldn't help but feel the same as Jasper and Helen.

"I went to wake her this morning, and her bed wasn't slept in!" Helen released in a panic, "I don't know when she left, or—oh dear!" She became too choked up to continue. Jasper put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Helen said her clothes are gone." Helen released a sob then and Jasper pulled her into his embrace. "We'll find her Helen." He glanced up at his brother with a look that was almost accusing, "won't we?"

"Ah hell." He swiped his hat off his head and looked past the two to the house before returning his gaze to his brother and nodded. Was it because of him that she ran? Was she really as frightened as she seemed? "Bus depot?"

"I was just going until you showed up," he tossed the keys at his brother with a little more force than usual, "But seeing as you're here. You go."

Adam caught the keys easily and didn't miss the reproachful expression on his brother's face. Yeah, maybe he did deserve it. He walked over to the railing and slapped the reins around it. Without turning around as he headed toward the truck, he called over his shoulder, "See to my horse after you're done with Helen." Then he hopped in the truck and was gone.

Meagan was just about to get up from the booth at the café the bust stopped at when she felt a large hand on her shoulder followed by the familiar voice that shot dread through her.

"Sit down." He pushed her back down.

She froze as he took the seat across from her, leaned back and centered his gaze on hers.

"You running little girl?"

"You didn't give me much choice." She managed to say in a tone barely above a whisper.

"what are you so afraid of?"

"How did you find me?" she said avoiding his question.

“Heading back to Tennessee was your only option according to Helen. The bus depot in Prosper was quite obliging.” What he didn’t tell her is that he had the man by the throat until he confessed to seeing a gorgeous copper-haired young woman board the bus to Tennessee at four in the morning. Fortunately, he drove faster than the bus and managed to catch her. It help that the bus stopped for an hour for breakfast and lunch allowing him to catch up by suppertime.

Her eyes widened. Helen wouldn’t tell him anything else, would she?

“Why so worried?”

“It’s nothing.” No she wouldn’t.

“You are a shitty liar, but—“ he stood up and held out his hand, “come on, we’re going back. Whatever it is that you and Helen are hiding from is not really my business—yet.”

“Adam--?” she wanted to tell him it was nothing, but she couldn’t lie to him.

He waited patiently.

“I—can’t.” she finally said.

“That’s fine Meagan. I won’t push you into telling me something as long as it isn’t illegal.” Adam had his own secrets and certainly wouldn’t like anyone prying them out of him. Also, he couldn’t even consider that Meagan and Helen had don’t something remotely illegal, they were both too damn honourable.

“Of course not.” She blurted.

“That’s all I need to know—come on.” He made a motion with the fingers of his outstretched hand.

She shook her head.

His expression darkened, “Meagan, I will drag you home if I have to. Helen would skin me alive if I didn’t come back with her baby. Now get up before I embarrassed you in front of everyone in here and toss you over my shoulder—“ he placed the palms of his hands on the table in front of her and leaned down so his face was inches from hers, “—again.” He finished with a determined stare. He saw her shoulders sag in defeat as she reached over and grabbed her backpack. “Here.” Adam held out his hand.

“But the bus driver—“

“Already taken care of.” He said cutting her off. After a look of confusion he continued, “I told him you were on the way to visit your sister when your mother fell ill, so I came to fetch you. So smile when you walk by him.”

“And he believed you?”

“I told him I was your husband.”

“Oh!” That sudden phrase made her pulse race.

“Don’t get all excited honey, I’m no way near marriage.” He corrected seeing her expression of surprise.

“I never said that.”

“You were thinking it, you’re a woman.”

She released a frustrated breath, “Think what you want.” She knew there was no way she was going to try and change his mind. Adam was completely set in his ways and if he had an opinion, it would take something shy of an act from God to get him to change his mind. “I was thinking,” she corrected narrowing her gaze at him, “That I’m surprised he believed you.”

He gave her a look of amusement, “have you *met* me?”

“Oh Gosh, I just give up.” She blushed furiously. She doubted very much that the little man who drove the bus would argue with a man of Adam’s looks and size or the undeniably confidence he carried.

“Yes you should.” He said more amused, “Now, you’ve dragged this out enough, we’ve got to get on the road and get going. It’ll be late when we get in.”

Meagan looked up at him and handed him her bag as he cupped her elbow and helped her up. “You aren’t going to yell at me are you?” She saw him clench his jaw as he stared back at her.

“I’m very tempted, but I think I’ll wait until I get you home.” He tipped his head toward the door and released her elbow, “After you.” Having had him holler at her over the past few weeks, she could only imagine what this latest stunt of her would get her. It was something she wasn’t going to look forward to.

She remembered to smile at the bus driver as the large cowboy marched her toward his truck with his hand on her arm possessively. From his expression, he seemed satisfied and tipped his hat at her as she went by. The last thing she wanted to have happen is Adam thumping the little man, and there was no doubt that he would.

Once at the truck, he opened the door for her so she could get in and tossed her backpack in the back seat before shutting the door and without a word walked around to the driver’s side and got in, and started the motor.

She stuck her elbow on the armrest of the door and rested her cheek against her fist as she looked out the side window, but after a minute she realized they hadn’t moved. When she lifted and turned her attention to him he was just staring at her. His expression was unreadable.

“I’m not going to yell at you over this escapade Meagan.” He said softly but his voice was full of authority, “but if you ever scare the shit out of me like that again, I’ll turn you over my goddam knee. Is that clear?”

She didn’t know what to say. The man was used to dishing out orders and having people obey them. There was no way she was going to argue with that statement. She was smarter than that.

“Meagan?”

“I heard you.” She took a deep breath and turned her head away. “We can go now.”

“I don’t think so. Look at me.” He added in the same terse tone.

Slowly she brought her attention back to him. Just the way he looked at her with those silver-grey eyes washed her with guilt. Although he kept the anger out of his expression, she knew he was probably more than furious and was having trouble keeping temper in check by the way that muscle in his jaw kept bulging. Maybe she was running, but he really didn’t give her much choice. Only he completely shocked her by going after her. She wasn’t sure if she should feel exhilarated or frightened.

“Why did you run?”

“You know why.” And he did by the lift of a single ebony eyebrow.

“So, at the first sign of trouble you run?”

“Don’t turn this back on me.” She blurted, “With me gone. You’d wouldn’t make due on your threat. Helen would have a place to live and—“

“Meagan, no one is possibly as naïve as you. I wouldn’t have followed through on that threat. I know you desire me. I know women—“This time Meagan interrupted.

“I’m not one of your women!” she flustered, “My God, do you think I’m just some floozy—“

“Floozy?” a smile pulled at the corner of his mouth and both his brows went up.

“Yes. You know—one of those tarts that hop into bed with you just because you show them that handsome smile and—“

“Handsome am I?”

“Oh God! I can’t even talk to you.” She blushed throwing up her hands in frustration. Then in a move that totally surprised her, he reached over and took one of them in his.

“Meagan, you are not a tart,” he smirked at the use of the word, “Or a floozy. I never thought that.” He almost laughed at the comical puzzlement she displayed at his confession.

“You don’t?”

“hell no.” He adjusted himself to face her better, “So you see, you ran for nothing.”

“Are you still going to—“ she cleared her throat through her embarrassment and continued, “Expect me in your bed.”

“Yes.”

Her hand slapped her thigh in frustration, “So nothing’s changed!”

“Meagan, look me in the eye and tell me you haven’t thought about it.”

She couldn’t and he knew it from the snort of satisfaction.

He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles causing a sharp intake of her breath. His eyes locked with hers, and he spoke against the skin of her knuckles, “See?”

“Yeah, “ she breathed in complete defeat, “I do.” There was no denying that her feelings were openly displayed on her face at that moment.

“Good.” He released her and shifted the truck into drive tearing out of the parking lot.

She gaped at him. How could he switch back and forth so easily? Just when she thought he was showing her some affection he instantly shut down. Releasing a frustrated breath she sat back lazily in her seat and turned her head to look out the side window.

“Helen’s going to kill me.” She mumbled.

“Quite possibly.” He said casting her a sideways glance. “I’ll serve you right for putting us through hell this past few hours.”

“It’s your fault!”

He ignored her, “If you take off like that again Meagan, I swear to God, I’ll kill you myself.”

Angrily she folded her arms across her chest and turned her head to look out the passenger window, “You don’t take the blame for anything.”

“Not when it wasn’t my fault.” He added, “I don’t run when I can’t face something.”

“Adam, you are intimidating when you are in a *good* mood,” she explained in aggravation, “My God, you could split an oak tree in half when you’re angry. Then—“ she swept her arm in an exasperated gesture, “—you demand me in your bed threatening to toss my aunt and me—“

“—Meagan, you can’t possibly be that naïve!” he gritted out, “Anyone who knows me, knows I’m not that callous.”

“I don’t!” she shot back

“Calm down honey.” He flicked a stern glance in her direction, “If someone should be yelling, it certainly shouldn’t be you. I should take the hide off your bones for what you put us through. How the hell did you expect to survive? I’m sure you don’t have much money saved.” He cursed under his breath and reached for a cigarette, “Damn woman, I’m doing my best trying not to explode over this episode—“ he paused to light his smoke and take a long draw off it, “—I suppose you were going to hitchhike the rest of the way not being smart enough to know what

people are capable of when they see a vulnerable young woman, alone.” He was barely able to get the words out he was so angry.

Meagan didn't miss the tone, “I didn't have much of a choice.” She defended and knew she pushed him to far when his eyes flicked to her loaded with anger.

“That's it!” he swerved the truck so quickly that she placed her hands on the dash to stop from falling over. Pulling over on to a side road he cut the engine and looked at her, “I already told you that I wasn't going to make due on that threat! To even consider I would was outrageous!” he gestured angrily toward her with his arm, “Who would think such things? Meagan you are not that naïve. Look at you! There's no way on God's green earth that you don't realize how sensual you are—“

“Sensual?” she stared at him wide-eyed. This was entirely out of his character. Adam usually approached subjects like a bull in a china shop, but compliments were totally unlike him.

“Damn sexy to the teeth!” he added causing her mouth to fall open and her cheeks to flush, “Hell—“ he said studying her expression, “—maybe you are that naïve, regardless this is not how you handle your problems. I want you Meagan, I've made that known and I know you want me. I know this could complicate things around the ranch for people and that's probably why you took off, but I'm not one on talking about my love life, and I'm certain you aren't either. We could easily keep this between us.”

Is *that* what he thought? This was about making their relationship complicated for the working environment? My God he really didn't realize that she was a virgin. She figured he would have worked it out, but as intelligent as Adam was, he didn't. He knew she was naïve obviously, but not to the extent. Yet, he was right on one count. She wanted him, badly. Never in her life did she feel such an attraction to a man. She ached all over when he was around and even when she thought about him. It was actually more than an ache, she was hungry for him and unfortunately as she thought it, it was evident in her expression. Maybe it was the way she reacted to his touch that kept him thinking that she had some experience after all, every time he laid a finger on her she responded like she was on fire.

“I see the desire written on your face as plain as the day Meagan. So know this—“ he dropped his eyes to her mouth, “You belong to me and I'll be damned if I'm sharing—“

“—Adam!” She said in utter astonishment.

“Don't deny it Meagan.” He said stabbing a finger in her direction, “If you so much as look at another man from now on, I'll tear him in two. Do you understand?”

“—I—“

“That also means—“ he continued not waiting for her to respond, “—You dress appropriately.”

“Listen to yourself!” she shot, “You act as though I'm your possession!”

He cast her a knowing look before he turned and started the truck, “Now you know.” He said.

“Adam can't we just be friends! What about Jesse?”

“Jesse?” he cast her a puzzled look.

“I don't two-time!”

“What the hell are you—“ then it finally dawned on him and he burst into laughter, “You think that Jesse and I—Christ Meagan, I was dating Heather a few short days ago. You think that I was with Jesse too?” she shrugged, “You certainly do wonders for a man's conceit.” He chuckled causing her to blush, “I already told you that Jesse Was just a friend.” It was obvious

she didn't believe him by the look on her face, "For Christ's sake Meagan Jesse is in love with Mitch, my older brother. She has been since she was barely in her teens."

"Oh." She flushed thoroughly ashamed of what she was thinking.

"You should take my word for it. I would never lie to you." He searched her expression before smiling, "I'm flattered though." He continued to chuckle. "Thinking that every woman out there wants me."

"Stop it," she fumed completely ashamed of thinking it. Now she looked back, Jesse was always very friendly to her and never acted the way Heather did when she was around. Also, it finally dawned on her about the warmth in his eyes when he looked at her compared to the dark smouldering looks she was getting. He really didn't think of Jesse that way.

"I like the fact that you are jealous over me," he said seeing her expression, "It just confirms what I thought."

"I thought you didn't like jealousy." She shot back at him.

"Quit trying to pick a fight to ignore the obvious." He said causing her to flush and evading the question at the same time, "Now, when we get home." He added, "We'll act as if nothing's happened and carry on as usual, but you heed my warnings about other men."

"Fine." She said giving up. He was dead right, she did want him. More than anything else in her life. Only she wanted more from him. Not marriage, but maybe some sort of acclamation of affection. Something she knew was nearly impossible for him.

"No argument?" He raised his brows at her, "that's a first."

"What's the point! I'll just lose." She added in the same tone.

"True." He said with confidence, "Hands down."

Meagan laid her head back against the seat and despite her inner turmoil, she actually fell asleep. The lack of sleep she had over the past few days caught up with her. She actually slept through the entire five hour drive and only awoke when Adam opened her door and spoke softly to her.

"Meagan, honey, we're home." He reached over and caressed her cheek with his hand causing her eyes to flutter open. That moment brought a yearning in him to see her in his bed awaking with the same look of vulnerability. "You must've been exhausted."

Slowly she nodded. His touch always seemed to have her speechless.

It was then Adam realized that he probably did have her more upset than he originally thought. Especially the way she took off. Now, looking at her, he saw the circles under her eyes and knew she wasn't sleeping either. Still, he didn't think he was being selfish, because he knew they shared the same yearning for one another, but she didn't want to complicate their employee employer relationship. In as much as he wanted to agree, his desire for her eliminated that concern. Just looking at her now, vulnerable and looking at him with a degree of sensual desire made him bend down and take her mouth with his.

Despite her earlier protests she couldn't help but respond to him. His whole being was spellbinding, and when his warm mouth moved expertly over hers, she only became aware of him and nothing else. The strong scent of masculinity he gave off coupled with the strength of his arms as they circled around her and pulled her tight against him made her want more. Then he lifted his head and stared into her eyes while his hand came up and brushed her hair back off her cheek. He smiled in what Meagan would later remember as triumph and took her mouth again. Even if she wanted to resist him she couldn't. She loved him.

“Come on honey.” He lifted his head to watch her with an expression of desire, “I would love to finish what we’ve started, but I know everyone is waiting in the house for you.” He looked at his watch, “Despite the late hour and you’re still exhausted.”

“Okay Adam.” She took his offered hand and allowed him to help her out of the truck. Then she watched as he retrieved her pack sack without letting go of her. He was right; she was too exhausted to protest anything. Releasing her to shut the door of the truck, he then took her elbow and led her up the walk into the house. To her ultimate relief Helen was too elated to see that she was unharmed and just sobbed and hugged her making her feel completely guilty but at least she didn’t ask any questions. Jasper ruffled her hair and Henry just nodded but the relief in his expression was evident. Adam was right; she was completely careless in not thinking of the repercussions of what she put everyone through. Only she wasn’t used to so many people caring about her either. After Adam left her with the other three he left. Obviously not to lead to the suspicion of why she ran in the first place. Still, she couldn’t help but wish he stayed. Helen went to her room with her and made sure she settled. After she left, Meagan just started at the ceiling in the dark, too wound up to sleep after Adam’s confession and trying to come to terms with her own feelings toward him.

About an hour later she heard his heaving footsteps in the hall then pause. A moment later the door across the hall opened and closed and she sat up in bed. Would he come to her? Quietly she got out of bed and walked over to her door putting her ear against it. she could hear him moving around in his room. Undressing no less. That brought images of his powerful naked form which started that warm stirring in her again and she flattened her palm against the door as if it could make her feel him. Imagining all of his sinewy muscle encased in tanned flesh moving about freely as he got ready for bed was almost too much to bear. Before she realized it, her hand was on her doorknob. Suddenly she jerked back finally coming to her senses. The man was certainly from the devil with that kind of pull over a woman. She brushed her fingers through her long hair and turned to go back to bed. He was making her insane. She crawled in and pulled the covers up over her head as if hiding would stop her from thinking about him.

The Next day, Adam was changing the alternator in one of the ranch trucks parked in front of the house while he thought about the events over the past few days. He always thought that when he spoke, he took great consideration in what he said. Although he was not a man of many words, the things he said were well thought out. Except when it came to Meagan. After reflecting on what he’d told her yesterday when he brought her home, he realized he did sound like a possessive brute. Never in his life could he remember acting in such a way. Even the woman who left him for another man over twelve years ago, never elicited such possessiveness in him. What the hell was wrong with him? The woman had him all backwards. Although he promised her that they would keep their relationship a secret, he wasn’t sure if his moods would give it away because he was hardly able to control them. Even now as he watched the stable door way and saw Ian exiting with a grin on his face his irritation exacerbated to anger. Immediately his mind started concocting all kinds of scenarios with Ian and Meagan. With that grin something had to have happened. Tossing his tools on the ground, he strode toward the building with a dark intent.

Meagan was finishing wiping down the Dunn that Ian used when she heard Adam’s voice bellowing down the stalls bringing all of the horses’ heads in his direction and causing her to flinch.

“Meagan!”

Good Lord, she thought, *his voice could tumble the walls*. She stepped out and closed the stall door, "What is it? You are trying to wake the dead." It was the first time she had spoken to him since yesterday. She was terrified of being around him after that close call last night of her going to him. She knew she couldn't avoid it much longer. Every possible way out of it crossed into her mind, and she hadn't come up with a single solution to avoid him or the pull he had on her. Now he strode down toward her with a look of rage on his face. There was no mistake in the awesome power that his muscular form was capable of, and if she wasn't so intimidated from the look on his face, she might have found him enticing. Despite that fact she held her chin high refusing to show him a weakness.

"Did he touch you!" he bellowed.

Her eyes flew wide, "What? Who?"

"Ian!"

It took a moment for his accusation to sink in, "No! Quit shouting at me I'm not deaf!" she answered in the same loud voice surprised that it didn't shake.

He stared at her for a moment to see if she told the truth.

"I'm not lying!" she said exasperated, "He was here for five minutes. That's it. God, do you think I'm *that* easy? If I was, I would be in your bed now." She blurted that last bit without thinking.

Her confession seemed to calm him. What did that mean she would be in his bed now? The only thing that stopped her, was her. No he didn't think she was easy at all. He stood straight and stared down at her, "No one touches you."

She raged suddenly forgetting her fear, "Except you, you mean."

"Yes. Except me."

"Can you even listen to yourself? You sound like you own me."

He ignored her, "What did he want?"

"Who?"

"Meagan...so help me..." He took his hat off and ran his hand through his hair in frustration without taking his eyes off of her.

"God! Alright! He asked me to a show tonight."

"You're busy." He stated tightly.

"I already told him no." This caused him to straighten and look at her.

"Did you want to go?"

No she didn't, she wanted Adam, "I would have liked the choice." She saw his face darken.

"Did you tell him why?"

Horrified, her mouth fell open and she hurled the brush at him before she could stop herself. It hit him in the chest and bounced off. He remained unmoved like he didn't even feel it. 'No...I didn't tell him that I couldn't go because my boss wishes to have sex with me, and would throw me out of the house if I didn't perform!'"

He was incredulous at the way she twisted his offer making it sound like cheap blackmail. He knew women and he knew Meagan wanted him. What was all of this fuss about? Now there was the display of her temper and quite frankly it turned him on. No woman ever stood up to him the way this young thing did. She didn't even seem slightly intimidated. Most people would be running and hiding about now. He could part grass with his temper and he knew it. Damn it! He knew she wanted him and he was going to prove it. He reached for her and she tried to avoid him, but wasn't quick enough. She squealed as he wrapped a solid arm around her

waist and carried her easily as a sack of flour into the back hay storage without breaking his long potent stride. “Quit squealing or you’ll have an audience. Every one of my employees will be in here seeing what I’m about to do to you.” That shut her up.

He lofted her body on a soft pile of loose straw and latched the gate behind him. She scrambled back against the wall in a crab crawl.

He was angry when he turned to her, “I don’t play games Meagan. You act as if I’m the plague, yet you send off signals that tell me something different.”

“Stop reading them.” She saw a puzzled expression pass over his handsome features, then his eyes slowly grazed down her body and his expression changed to something entirely different.

Adam’s anger completely dissolved at the enticing image in front of him. She had bits of straw in her hair and her clothing and she was sprawled in the pile of hay seductively with her knees bent, her arms supporting her upper half behind her and her chest rising and falling with every breath she took causing her breasts strained against the fabric. She was positively delicious. Releasing a hungry growl, he started toward her and she tried to get away from him by rolling over on all fours and crawling over the straw, but grabbed her ankle, hauled her back, flipped her over like she weighed nothing and brought his body down on hers before she could catch a breath.

Before she could yell for help his mouth came down on hers and she completely forgot even thinking of it. Electricity shot through her like a hot steel rod and before she knew it she softened in to him and her hands flattened against his muscular chest and curled into fists taking the cloth of his shirt with them. Her whole response was almost instantaneous after their bodies came in contact with one another.

“See baby, “ he whispered against her lips, “You want me. I knew you did.” He captured her mouth again and moved in a sweet rhythmic motion. He felt the hesitation and continued with his assault. When she moaned and relaxed under him, he knew he had won her over, shredding the last of her resistance. Then she began to respond to him fully and he bit back his own groan delving his tongue between her parted lips. Everything about her was sexy sweet and desirable. His hands moved to her waist and pulled out her t-shirt to explore her silky flesh. Then reaching behind her, he unsnapped her bra and slipped his hand over one of her breasts causing her to gasp. She actually tried to pull away until he started to tease the nipple with his thumb and coax her with his mouth to respond. Seconds later he felt a wash of arrogance as she arched toward him. “Take this damn thing off.” He mouthed against her lips while working her t-shirt over her head. She listened raising her arms and then he removed her bra leaving her bare to the waist down. He lifted himself enough to stare down the length of her and groaned, “God, you are perfect.” She tried to cover herself up and he stilled her arms by grabbing her wrists, and pinning them beside her head, “Don’t.” his eyes met hers, “I want to look at you.” And he did. Slowly and deliberately his eyes roamed down the length of her and then back up to hers. A sensual smile appeared on his face as he stared down at her, “Desire looks good on you honey.” Her lips were parted and swollen as her chest rose and fell with her rapid breathing. Her cheeks were flushed with passion and her eyes were dark with desire. Before she could respond he took her mouth under his again. Reaching down her flat stomach he undid the snap on her jeans and slipped his hand inside. Sweet God, she felt so damn good! When her hands gripped his shoulders and she cried out, arching toward him as his fingers slid in her moist warmth, he thought this was too good to be true. The woman reacted to his touch like she was on fire. Her eyes shot open and focused on his and he could see the complete surprise and wonder in their

sapphire depths. When he spoke, he was surprised how hoarse his voice sounded, “Hasn’t anyone done this to you before?” He asked while his fingers were moving inside her. Her head arched back and all she could manage besides a moan was a shake of her head. His own arrogance expounded. How could her previous lovers not play with her like this? She was a treasure trove of desire! It didn’t take much more than a kiss to make her mad for him, and those noises! God, the sounds coming out of her were enough to make a priest wild. It was unbelievable how hard he was for her, but he knew he needed to take his time. He’d promised her. He lifted himself up and used his other hand to work her Jeans down her hips while his other continued the assault. “Look at you...” he groaned, “so perfect.” *And mine*, he added to himself. He came back on top of her and took her mouth with his again. Her hips were moving against his hand now and she was moist and ready for him. With a rattle of metal Adam quickly undid his belt buckle and zipper freeing himself.

One of his legs nudged hers apart so he could bring his hips directly against hers and sink between her thighs. There was no doubt how aroused he was with her under him and she felt it.

The blatant physical hardness against her hip startled her back to her senses. Meagan started shoving at him, “....Adam please.”

He didn’t miss the desperation in her tone so he stopped and looked at her, “What is it?” He normally would have ignored her because of her reaction to him, thinking it was some coy game, but there was some genuine pleading in her tone.

“Please....”

Suddenly something deep inside of him sent a warning. He stared down at her lovely passion flushed face studying her smooth skin, graceful lines, then her wide expressive eyes with her thoughts easily read as clear as day. It was then he finally realized the sincerity in her voice and everything started to make sense; the avoiding, the resistance despite her desires, the inexperience. It couldn’t be....! He quickly lifted himself off of her and swore a string of epithets that would make a sailor blush. He reached over and grabbed her shirt, “Here, put it back on.” He said shoving the shirt at her before doing up his jeans.

After pulling up and refastening her jeans, she obeyed quickly donning her bra and t-shirt. Feeling ashamed and completely exposed she was unable to stop the tears that started.

“Oh sweet Christ, Meagan, don’t cry....I don’t do good with that.” He reached over and embraced her, bringing her head to his chest, “Why didn’t you tell me you were a virgin?”

“I-I didn’t think you would believe me.” She sobbed, “You said you would toss me out!”

Her confession made him feel like a heel. He swore again, “I wouldn’t have. All the signs were there from you. I just didn’t realize that you didn’t know you were sending them.” His hands smoothed through her hair, catching bits of straw. “Shh, stop crying damn it.” He felt like the lowest worm possible. “This is nothing to be ashamed of. You are beautiful and it’s a natural act between a man and a woman who desire one another.”

“I can’t help it.” She was soaking the front of his shirt but he didn’t seem to mind. “No one has seen me like that or did things like that to me.” Her complete vulnerability raised a fierce protectiveness in him. Even if she was eighteen, there were women giving themselves away much younger than that. He tried to avoid the fact that he was ten years older than her, but whenever he looked at her, he became aroused. It wasn’t as if she had the body of a teenager either, or that she responded to him as one. The woman had passion that would match his if it was unleashed properly and that wasn’t an easy thing to attain. He sighed half in frustration and half in guilt. Christ he was like a rutting bull around her. Combined with the way he’d been hollering at her for the last few weeks, you’d think she’d be running for the hills, but she stood

up to him. Inwardly he smiled. This little thing didn't seem as intimidated by him half as much as his ranch hands were and despite his reluctance to admit it, she intrigued him.

Even though the revelation of her chastity was now in the open he still wasn't going to stop himself from having her. He was too far gone. If anything it just increased his need to claim her for his own. Virgins were never his style, but for this one, he'd make an exception. He just had to change the way he dealt with her. Deep down he was relieved that she had never been with another man. Although he wasn't chaste by any means and never expected a woman to be, Meagan was different.

He kissed her forehead and held her again, "Look honey. I can't tell you how much I want you, but I won't force you okay? The last thing I wanted to do was frighten you."

She nodded against his chest.

"I'll wait for you, until you're ready. I won't take anything from you that you don't offer." He continued to soothe finally feeling some relief that she had stopped crying. He knew it wouldn't take much longer to bed her from the way she responded to him already. It was time he was willing to do just to get her there.

There was another nod.

"I know I get temperamental and may get a little irritable, but that's just because you're driving me crazy. You walk around here with that perfect body, kissable mouth, and that tight sexy little ass in blue jeans and I'm a man. Men behave like brutes sometimes when they see something so desirable dangling in front of them. Now dry your eyes, you're killing me."

She lifted her head and looked at him with red-rimmed, watery sapphire eyes, "you think I'm desirable?"

"Can't you tell?" He nodded to the obvious bulge in his jeans that had grown to the point of being painful. She instantly flushed. "That doesn't happen for nothing and every time I see or think of you I get hard."

"That isn't normal with other women?" her eyes were full of bewilderment.

Only after some dirty talk, some petting, and maybe a show of nudity, but not just watching her walk across the yard. "No. Why do you think I'm so possessive?"

She shrugged. "I thought it was just part of your moods. You get like that sometimes."

"I *was* angry. I thought you and Ian had a tryst in here. At the dance, I thought you and Jasper started to feel something for one another." He didn't add that he went insane with jealousy, especially after the way she looked in that dress. Regardless of what he said to her that night about it, he loved the way she looked in that clingy material, he just didn't like the way every other male stared at her. She outshone every other woman in the place, and he knew how she tasted, how she felt, and how she responded to desire. At that precise moment, he didn't want anyone else to find out what he did and when she kissed Jasper, he literally saw red. Some sort of primal instinct took over and he knew then that he wouldn't let anyone else touch her, ever.

"Is that why you hit him?"

"Yes. But he told me later the next day that you kissed him to make Sarah jealous and it worked, because he didn't come home that night. Obviously you didn't count on making me jealous too." He'd left out the fact that he had Jasper up against the wall by his throat because he was still raging over the kiss they shared when he confessed what really happened. Regardless, he still wanted to hit him because the whole time he was grinning at him.

She actually smiled, knowing that Adam didn't confess his feelings to anyone, "I can't believe you were jealous."

“Now that we got that out of the way.” He said with chagrin, “I’m telling you now that I don’t want to see that again. You stay away from other men, all men.” His hand rubbed her back.

She pulled back and looked at him, “Adam, you can’t possibly have the pretence to tell me what to do after all of the women you date...”

“I’m not going to date anyone. I’m setting my sights on you. I’ll be loyal to you as you are to me. Contrary to your suspicions, I do not overlap girlfriends.”

“I can’t sleep with you Adam.”

“Yeah, you said that. Are you saving yourself for marriage?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing, but you are not a commitment type. If I could expect something...”

“I can’t make promises I may not keep. I can only tell you that I will be honest with you.” He adjusted himself so she could fully see his expression, “Meagan, do you have any idea how rare the connection is between us?” She shook her head, “Honey, what we share isn’t common.” His finger traced down her jaw and his eyes followed the gesture before settling back on hers, “I know I could easily persuade you to reconsider after what we just shared. You are a tight package of unleashed passion. We could be very good together.”

She may have been a virgin, but those words made an unusual heat appear between her legs.

“I can see it in your eyes, feel it on your body and your responses to me.” He said deeply, “Give us a chance,” his lips grazed her forehead, “I will be faithful. I won’t stray, I promise.”

She could barely find her words. No, she wasn’t saving herself for marriage. Her father’s marriage was a disaster. She was saving herself for love, for Adam, but she didn’t want to tell him that. It would make her too vulnerable toward him. If he knew exactly how she felt, he would finish what he started in the straw, she was sure of it. She lifted her head, “Adam...I don’t know. I need someone who’ll...”

“Don’t say it!” He squeezed her tight, “I’ll kill anyone that touches you.”

“That’s not fair... You expect me to give you myself and have nothing to base this on.” She breathed through his embrace.

He loosened his grip a bit, “I won’t cheat on you. I give you my word. Sex and relationships aren’t always forever honey. I can only tell you that I will be devoted to you as long as we last. It may be weeks, months or years. And you will give in to me sooner or later Meagan. That desire you have all pent up inside of you is begging me for release. I’m willing to oblige you.”

She didn’t deny anything he said. The man knew women well, and knew her even better. She did want him, and if he kept kissing her and touching her the way he was, she didn’t doubt that she would give in. “You don’t put too much faith into love, do you?”

“No.”

“Someone must’ve hurt you really bad Adam.”

He stared down at her while brushing the wet strands of hair back of her cheek. Jesse was right, her young years didn’t seem to fit her sometimes, “It was a long time ago and if it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have realized how doomed my marriage to her would have been.”

“Not everyone is like that.” She paused, “I’m not like that.”

“No honey, I suppose not, but I seem to find the winners.” He brushed his lips gently across hers, “I won’t lie to you and say that I’ll marry you, but I can say that I’ll protect you and look after you for as long as we’re together.” To convince her he leaned down and took her

mouth with his in a deep searing, tongue delving kiss. When he finally lifted his head she stared at him breathless. He almost smiled at his ability, but then he realized he was as hard as granite again. She was just as talented. Those gorgeous blue eyes of hers didn't reveal anything to her knowledge of the talent she had. "So what do you say honey?" Not that she had a choice. He would do everything in his power to make her his, even if she did say no. After all, he wasn't the kind of man that took rejection well and he was used to getting what he wanted, especially from women.

Meagan thought about this, or tried to. His hand was cupping her breast while his lips were tickling her neck crushing every resistive thought she had. He was giving her a means to an end. Helen and she would be able to keep their jobs if she agreed to his terms. Otherwise they would have to find somewhere else to go. Just the thought of leaving him and the ranch hurt her deeply. She knew he wouldn't love her, but maybe over time he would learn to care about her. She already knew she would agree to whatever he asked her and wrapped her arms around him hearing him sigh and tighten his embrace at her acceptance. "Okay Adam."

"Like I said before, we'll need to keep this between us. We will have trouble being discreet here. I'm having a hard time concealing my need for you as it is. I don't want the men gossiping about you. You are too sweet and I don't want to see you hurt." He said that last bit tenderly meaning every word. Normally he didn't care what was said within reason, but she was naïve and didn't need to be the subject of a poor reputation that could easily ruin her.

"Okay."

"It means, that we may have to do some acting. Are you okay with that?"

"I think so." Why wasn't she protesting? He wanted physical pleasure from her, not a relationship, but for the life of her she couldn't tell him no. Apparently she was willing to have a part, any part of him than nothing at all. Now she was in the category of the rest of his women.

"Good, now kiss me again." She did just that. He pulled back from her with a glint in his eyes, "God you are a treat. I could spend all day here and taste you." He grinned, "Come on honey, let's set you right before I throw you down in the straw again." He stood up and held a hand out to her which she took. He spent the next twenty minutes pulling straw tenderly out of her hair and clothing. "From now on. Wear your hair down. I like it that way."

She smiled up at him, not seeming to mind the firmness in his voice at the order. "Okay."

"And wear more dresses, I like your legs."

"I don't have more." She confessed, "I only have the two."

"Then I'll buy you some. We'll take a weekend and go to the city...just the two of us." The thought of being alone with her for the weekend just heated his groin all over again. He could take her to his apartment that he had there, and not be interrupted. They could spend all weekend making love, and he could show her the sights, take her out on the town and show her off.

"No you won't and I can't go. Everyone will know what's happening if we disappear together." She quickly made an excuse. Honestly she never did care what people thought of her, but she was hiding, and if she was recognized, her whole world would unfold.

"Don't argue. We'll figure something out." He opened the gate and slapped her jean clad butt causing her to jump, "Get going. I don't pay you to dally with the boss."

She laughed and walked out ahead of him not realizing the view he had from behind.

Chapter Five

The next two weeks went well. They continued to keep the façade of disliking one another. Once Adam called her useless at breakfast and she dumped a plate of eggs on his lap before leaving the dining room. Jasper burst into a fit of laughter telling him it served him right. Then when she was walking down a deserted hallway a large steely arm shot out of a doorway, pulled her into a room, pushed her up against a wall and kissed her senseless. “You made me change my clothes.” He said huskily threading his fingers in her hair, pulling her head back to run his lips down her neck.

“You deserved it.” She breathed as her knees simultaneously weakened.

He chuckled and released her walking away.

Everything was going just like a dream. She was so much in love with Adam she thought she would burst. He kept his promise and never touched her except for a brief intimate caress or a quiet interlude of kissing in a dark hallway. He was right about other things too; she wanted him so badly it hurt. She tingled from head to toe when he brushed by her in front of others acting as if he hadn’t noticed. When he kissed her, she couldn’t get enough, and when she watched him secretly, she admired his powerful form. Whether it is on a horse, walking, or just plain standing still.

One day before dinner he’d cornered her in one of the stalls in the stables. Even though he was a big man, she didn’t hear him coming and screeched when he grabbed her, shoved her up against the wall and took her mouth with his. Now she was becoming accustomed to him and responded with wild need, flinging her arms around her neck and within seconds he took it farther by hauling one of her legs over his hip while rocking against her. She could feel the length of his arousal through both of their jeans and it wasn’t such a shock as it was two weeks ago. Now she found it very exciting.

“God, baby, you’re killing me!” He groaned, taking possession of her mouth again. His hand reached up under her shirt caressing her breast making her gasp out loud while his other cupped her bottom to hold her hips tight to him, “I want you.”

“I want you too!” she was barely able to get the words out.

He crushed her lips with his after her confession before releasing her and letting her slide down his body until she touched the floor. His hands came up and cupped her head, “Come to me tonight.”

“I—I...” she stuttered staring at the dark desire in his eyes.

“Shhh...just come to me.” His lips brushed across hers, “I can’t take much more of this abstinence when I know what you’re capable of.” His hips pushed against her making his meaning known, “I can’t get my damn jeans on in the morning because I’m thinking of you when I wake up and near castrate myself in the zipper.”

She knew how he felt, although she didn’t have the difficulties he had, she hadn’t slept very well knowing he was across the hall from her. He’d been staying out later and later to avoid her too, she noticed. If anything in her life mattered at this point, it was Adam and how much she cared for him. She came to the conclusion that she belonged to him and no other man would stir such feelings in her no matter how long she lived. Her eyes sought his still soaked with desire and she slowly nodded.

“Thank God.” He said with profound relief and kissed her again, giving her bottom a squeeze with his large hand, “You have a great ass. Quit blushing sweetheart, you’re perfect.” He grinned. “Until later then, all right?”

“Okay Adam.” She finally voiced.

“Let’s go for supper. I’m starved.”

The look he gave her told he was hungry for more than just whatever Helen was serving. When she’d sent him out to find Meagan for supper, he took one look at her bent over that oat bin and couldn’t help but put his hands on her.

He took her hand but released it before they went in the house. There was no moon out that night, so they were protected under the cover of darkness.

The only one at the dinner table was Henry and he was doing night shift on checking the calves, so he was just in for a bite to eat. Jasper had already eaten and went to town to see Sarah. Henry and Adam talked about cattle like nothing had transpired between them. He didn’t even spare her a glance. She wondered how he could bottle all of that sexual aggression she experienced in the stall and not let it show, because she was having a hell of a time not staring at him. Quietly she excused herself saying she was tired and going to bed early. It was the only time Adam looked at her throughout dinner and she didn’t miss the dark look in his eyes or the faint twitch of a smile of his mouth.

“Goodnight little dove.” Henry said. “Sleep tight.”

“Yes, sleep tight.” Said Adam brushing his hot gaze over her form while Henry’s attention was on her.

She turned away to hide her blush and as soon as she was out of sight rushed up to her room. She found a light cotton nightgown that came to her knees and put it on. When she opened her door, she looked down both sides of the hall before tip-toeing across the hall to his room.

There was a small desk lamp on in the corner of his bedroom, but it still made her feel naked and vulnerable. She turned it off and crawled into his bed. The whole time she lay there waiting, her heart pounded in her ears. What the hell was she doing? Everything immoral flooded through her head at that moment, and she found herself doing a balancing act with her own conscience. In the end, her desire for Adam won out. She was going to give herself to him because there was no one else on God’s green planet that stirred these emotions in her and she knew it. Although part of her knew it wouldn’t last, and he had been honest about his feelings, but she loved him. If she only had him for this one night it would be a night she cherished forever.

Time began to pass and Adam still hadn’t come to bed. She knew from his confession earlier that there was no way he would be avoiding her, unless maybe he was having second thoughts? She lay in the dark for what seemed like hours when she finally fell asleep.

Dawn graced the sky when Adam dragged his sore and tired body back to the house. Ian had come in after Meagan had gone to bed. One of his longhorns gouged a ranch hand. He and Henry rushed the man to the hospital in the back of his pickup truck. By the time they had gotten there, he’d lost a lot of blood and had been rushed to surgery. He couldn’t leave until he knew the man was going to pull through. Unfortunately, his mind kept going to the lush little creature he knew was waiting for him in his bed.

Just as he thought she was there, and she was curled up in his bed like a contented kitten. He groaned out loud, pulled back the covers and lifted her body to him, she murmured something and snuggled into his chest as he walked back across the hall and tucked her into her own bed. It wouldn’t do her any good to be found in his by her aunt. She must have waited up for him for awhile, for she barely stirred when he moved her. He stood tall staring down at her for a moment feeling aroused despite his fatigue. His eyes dropped to her mouth and the thin little

nightgown she'd chosen. At that point he thought life just wasn't fair. The delicious little morsel had finally come to him and he couldn't have her. He let out a frustrated sigh through his teeth and left the room. A long cold shower was what he needed before he went to bed.

The next day all of them were at breakfast, and Meagan kept flicking glances in his direction which he didn't return wondering why he didn't come to her last night. Yet, he sat casually drinking coffee while Henry and Jasper discussed today's plans.

Finally when she felt the last of her self confidence wavering he looked up at her for an instant and winked at her as he set his coffee mug down causing a wave of elation to go through her. Then he turned to Henry.

"How's our man doing?"

"Doc says he'll live Adam, but we're a man short now, and if you want to cut those yearlings from the herd this week, it's going to take another man."

This brought her brows up, "What happened?"

"Poor Jeb got horned last night." Jasper told her.

"Oh no, is he going to be okay?" She said with genuine concern.

"Missed his lung, but gored him in the side and cost him a lot of blood, it was a long night." Said Henry, "But Doc says he'll be back in four weeks."

"I can help with the cattle." She volunteered

Then the three of them laughed.

"What?" she said narrowing her eyes.

"That's a man's job," said Jasper.

Megan felt the hair go up on the nape of her neck, "Is it?"

He managed to grin at her indignant expression, "It's not easy."

"I know it isn't." she said defiantly, "I'm no weakling."

"you're an elf, honey." Said Adam.

"I'm not that little." She protested causing them to chuckle.

Adam leaned forward, "You are too little. I don't want you hurt."

She lifted her chin slightly, "I can handle a horse as good as any cowboy." She said before she could stop herself.

Jasper just stared at her for a moment, "Where did you learn to cut cattle?"

She gave a simple shrug. She'd said too much already

"You're not doing it Meagan." He said in a tone that many of his men didn't dare defy.

Her eyes darted to Adam, "Why not...afraid I'll show you up?"

Jasper and Henry both laughed then and there was definitely amusement in Adam's eyes, "You think you could show me up? Hell, honey...I'm game."

Meagan's father never had the son he wanted, so he ended up teaching Meagan everything he knew. During the Rodeo season, she worked on the King's ranch, during the off season her father worked as a ranch hand and took her with him. She could cut cattle because he'd taught her. She never learned much else, but she was confident with that.

Adam wasn't prepared to see that woman on a horse. Pausing, she reined up to remove her hat wiping her brow with her forearm and the sun glistened off the perspiration running down her neck to the vee in her shirt. The whole bloody thing seemed like it was in slow motion and he was gaping at her. He wasn't the only one. He spent more time bellowing at his employees than he did cutting cattle. Turned out, she was pretty good, but they got less done if she wasn't there because of the distraction she caused. Hell that whole scene got him sweating more than he

usually did under the hot sun. Henry reined up next to him; obviously he noticed what Adam did.

“Adam, she’s proven she’s good, now get her out of here before we lose another ranch hand in the herd because they certainly aren’t paying attention to the cattle.”

“Yeah.” He nudged his stallion towards her. He was his own worst enemy. She had left her hair down like he’d asked her to and it just added to the erotic image she displayed. Her attention was turned to him and she circled her gelding around twice to control him.

“Honey, you’ve got to go home.” There was that innocent sapphire gaze again laced with confusion, “Look, you’re distracting everyone. You’ve proven your good, now go home, all right?”

“What do you mean?”

He nudged his stallion sideways so his thigh was rubbing hers. Then he reached up and tipped his hat back so she could see his expression as he leaned toward her, “If you want to see me start pounding the crap out of my employees just keep doing what your doing, because in a few minutes I’m going to just because they’re staring at you like you’re the last woman on earth.”

Her eyes widened and she tilted herself slightly in the saddle to look past him and see the rest of the men just sitting astride their horses and staring in her direction, while the cattle were making an escape down the slope of the hill, “Oh dear.”

“And you’re absolutely killing me.” He added guiding his eyes to her dampened shirt and the obvious thrust of her breasts. Christ, he didn’t know a woman could possibly look any more desirable.

This time she blushed, “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t. Now go.” He said pulling his Stetson back over his eyes, “Before I drag you into that bush over there and ravish you myself letting this little secret of ours out.” He swung his stallion away but not before he seen her smile.

That night he dragged himself in the door with Jasper and Henry behind him. Meagan heard them come in from the Library and set down the book she was reading to rush out and meet them, “Helen left some stew warming on the stove, I told her I would see to it if you’re hungry.”

Jasper groaned and shuffled past her like every muscle was aching, “Sounds good honey, how ‘bout some whiskey to aide digestion.”

“It aides digestion?” she said causing Jasper and Henry to chuckle.

Adam chucked her under the chin, “Just get the bottle sweetheart.”

Feeling foolish she turned and went to the liquor cabinet while they dragged themselves into the dining room. She took three glasses and the bottle to the dining room and went into the kitchen to get the stew. She wasn’t gone that long but they had the bottle half finished before she served them the stew.

“Damn I should just marry that woman.” Henry said after one mouthful of Helen’s stew. “Her cooking is heaven.”

“She wouldn’t have you,” said Jasper between chews, “You’re too damn ugly.”

Henry howled with laughter.

Meagan guided her eyes to Adam who to her complete surprise, had his eyes on hers. His stew remained untouched and he was swirling his liquor in his glass absently.

“Hell with this,” he said quietly and stood up and disregarding the other two men, walked around the table to take her hand and pull her out of the chair, “We’re going to catch the late

news.” He said looking down at her. He didn’t care anymore what his brother and Henry thought. He needed to touch her more than his concern for their reputation.

Embarrassed she cast a glance at the other two men.

Jasper and Henry looked up at him and almost comically they both nodded in unison before returning their attention back to their food like it was a common occurrence for Adam to hold Meagan’s hand.

“Come on honey, cleanup can wait.” He led her out of the kitchen to the living room where he turned on the television and flicked the channel to the news.

“They didn’t seem too surprised.” Meagan said casting a glance over her shoulder to the kitchen door.

“Nope.” He answered turning and grabbing the blanket off the back of the sofa, “Come here honey.” He said as he sprawled his large frame out. Don’t worry about me taking advantage of you tonight, I’m so sore my teeth hurt.”

She laughed, “Are you sure?”

“Entirely. He moved over and patted the cushion, “Come here, I just need to feel your soft body next to mine for a bit.”

“Okay.” She was a little hesitant but he quickly caught hold of her and pulled her tight against him so they both faced the television and tossed the blanket over both of their bodies.

Adam laid his head on his arm and his other tightened around her midriff while resting his chin on the top of her head, ‘I’ve got to give it to you Meagan, I’ve never seen a woman handle a horse the way you can.”

“So does that mean it’s not a man’s job anymore?” she teased.

“No it’s definitely a man’s job. I’m too damn stubborn to change my mind about that. Not only that, you distracted my men so much nothing got done, so it’s definitely a man’s job.” He said huskily.

“I think you are tired. So tired you’re delirious.”

He chuckled, “Ah hell, I may be tired but you still got me aroused. Imagine that?” He sighed heavily.

She giggled, “so I guess Henry and Jasper know about us.”

“I think they knew before I did.” He said as he adjusted himself beside her, “There should be a law against a woman being so damn sexy.”

“Adam!” came Jasper’s voice interrupting.

“In here!” he called to Jasper.

Jasper came in and handed him the phone, “It’s pop.” He smiled at Meagan who instantly blushed at the position they’d been caught in and when she tried to sit up Adam tightened his hold. A moment later he was gone.

“Hi pop.” Adam said into the phone while sitting up enough to be able to use his other arm because he didn’t want to let go of her, “One moment,” he covered the mouthpiece, “Quit squirming against me or you’re going to get more than you bargained for,” he whispered. When she suddenly stilled, he chuckled and returned his attention to his father.

Meagan reached for the remote and lowered the volume so he could easily converse on the phone. Just listening to him talk on the phone made her realize that as rough and hard tempered as Adam was, he certainly loved his father. It made her miss hers terribly.

“Thursday, next month? Yeah, I can do that. See you then.” He hung up.

“Are you and your father close?”

He paused before answering her. Henry told her about her father, "Yeah I guess we all are." He released her waist and brought his hand up to brush her hair off the side of her face so he could bend over and kiss her tenderly there, before he lay back down. Soon the fatigue overruled his desire and he was asleep and with such a warm hard body pressed against hers she was too.

No one heard Henry close the sliding doors to the room a half an hour later on his way to bed.

Jasper took Meagan to town with a list from Helen for groceries. He wanted to take her so he could stop and see Sarah. Despite her act of jealousy a few weeks ago, she was very warm to Meagan and for the first time in months Meagan thought she had found a friend besides Jesse. She watch her and Jasper together. It was obvious that the affection between them was mutual. It was a reminder that she could never reveal what was happening between her and Adam. She wanted everyone to know how she felt about him but she was his employee. She sat back in the tall back of the booth and watched Sarah nuzzle Jasper's nose twice with hers before she went back to work.

He turned his mile wide grin on her, "Isn't she great...hey Kitten what's wrong?"

She forced a smile, "Nothing, really. And yes, I like her, a lot. Did she ever confess to you why she avoided you?"

His grin widened, "My reputation seems to travel in more than just our circles."

"Oh." She laughed, "That makes perfect sense then."

He raised his brows, "Really? So tell me then. Why it is my short tempered, meaner than a badger hell bent on revenge brother, not affect you in the least?"

She quickly worked a response, "He's all bark."

Jasper looked incredulous, "All bark....Meagan, I've seen the man take on four men his size and whip them all. He wrestles steers just for the hell of it, and sees women as a desert buffet."

"He's your brother...shame on you." She said in mock anger.

He lowered his head to gaze at her, "Yes he is. I suppose I know him better than anyone."

She felt an odd tingling sensation in her skull. *This must be what spider-sense feels like*, she thought as the warning came through. "What does that mean?"

"Absolutely nothing." He stood grinning down at her, "Now I'd better get you home before my brother, who *only* has a fierce bark, knocks a few teeth loose on the *other* side of my jaw." He didn't miss the blush flushing into her cheeks.

When they walked to the curb a familiar red sport scar pulled up behind them and Meagan groaned as Heather got out of the driver's side slamming the door. She walked up to them, "I thought I recognized this truck. Why hasn't your brother called me?"

"I'm not his keeper Heather." He answered with an uninterested tone.

"I'm sure you aren't, *right now*." She made an emphasis on the last two words while her eyes set on Meagan.

"What do you want?" Jasper said, ignoring her insinuation and not missing Meagan stiffen. Like Adam, Jasper was confident where his abilities lie. He knew women wanted him and had not problem getting them in the past except with Sarah. On the other hand he never liked Heather and didn't make any secret about it when she was rude as she was to Meagan.

Normally he would have just treated her with indifference, but Meagan didn't deserve her viscous attack.

"People are starting to talk."

"I'm sure you had nothing to do with it." He said curtly.

She lifted her chin, "I might have been concerned for his well-being. After all there are plenty of gold diggers out there." Her eyes lit on Meagan again.

Jasper looked down at Meagan who started to flush again, but not from embarrassment this time. He saw her fists clench. Heather had upset her, and like Adam he was protective of her, not in the sense that his older brother was, but had come to think of her as a little sister. "Watch your tongue Heather." He said glaring at her, "You don't know what you're talking about."

She looked back at Jasper and tossed her hair over her shoulder, "You tell your brother to return my calls or I'm going to say more than my share..." that was the last word she got out before Meagan drew back and punched her in the nose.

"Good God!" Jasper blurted, watching the woman fall on her ass with a wretched screech.

Meagan stood over her, "I think you'd better think twice before you start spreading lies, you tramp! If you even think about saying anything about Adam or me, I'll find you and lay you out again." She couldn't contain her fury any longer. It was the third time the woman insulted her and it would be the last. She wasn't her father's daughter for nothing.

"I'm going to sue you!" she screeched nasally.

"Go right ahead and I'll start spreading my own lies about you." She knew she shouldn't stoop to the older woman's level, but she was so angry!

Heather's eyes flew wide, "You wouldn't dare!"

"I don't give a rat's ass about my reputation, but I know you do." the woman's eyes went wide with horror.

Jasper barked in a round of laughter.

Heather struggled to her feet, "You're crazy!"

"Keep it up, and you'll find out." She clenched her fists at her sides and took a step toward the older woman.

Heather couldn't get away fast enough rushing around her car to get in the driver's seat, leaving black tire marks on the pavement.

Jasper spun her around, "That was amazing!"

"I don't know why no one did that to her sooner." She grumbled.

He hugged her, "because little doll. In our circles, we don't speak to people like that. It's considered rude."

She pulled back, "But the manipulative backhanded garbage she was spouting is?"

"In a way. They do things behind each other's backs not face to face." He grinned at her, "I'm going to enjoy having you for a sister in law."

She was speechless.

"I'm not stupid...maybe blind sometimes, but sooner or later I get it. Don't worry your little secret is safe with me. However, the half a dozen people watching might find something to say about it. Now, lets get home. I like my teeth and I'm sure the phone is already ringing off the hook." He wasn't wrong.

Chapter Six

“Mrs. Nemeth from the bakery phoned and wanted to know why you laid out a girlfriend of mine.”

She had been met at the door by a livid Adam. He half dragged her into the study and closed the door. Jasper tried to follow but he locked him out. He even pounded on the door for a bit until Adam let loose a string of curses that were finally answered by silence. She was sitting on the couch with her hands clasped on her lap not looking at him.

“Damn woman! Answer me!”

“Quit your yelling then!” She finally blurted. “I hit her because she was threatening to expose us...”

He glowered at her, “Well, there’s no chance of that now is there!” He said sarcastically.

“I lost my head!” she shot to her feet, “You’re not the only one allowed to snap around here!”

“Damn rights I am!” he stopped and glared down at her, “Gossip spreads like wildfire. People are going to think I seduced a young innocent employee.”

“There’s no chance of that because I quit!”

“Hell! You’ll listen to me and you’re not quitting! And rein in that damn temper!”

“Rein in yours first!” she hollered back.

Jasper’s muffled voice came from the other side of the door.

“Damn it Jasper, I’ll start putting bullets through that bloody door if you don’t leave! She’s my damn girl if you hadn’t noticed by now, and I’ll tell her anything I please!”

There was a distinct curse word from the other side that Meagan recognized and made her blush. Then silence again. She suspected he was still out there worried over Adam’s reaction toward her.

He turned back to her and took a deep breath to calm himself down, “Sit down.”

“I’ll stand.”

“God dammit woman, quit being so stubborn.”

“Ask me without raising your voice. My ears are ringing from it.”

He put a hand between her breasts and pushed her gently enough to make her lose her balance and land back on the sofa, “sit down...*please*.” He added cynically.

“I don’t know why you’re so worked up. We haven’t slept together.”

“No but you’ve given them the pretence, and not everyone knows that I dumped her yet..” He let out another heavy sigh and sat beside her, “Meagan. I’m twelve years older than you...”

“Eleven.”

“You said you were eighteen?”

“I had my birthday last week.”

“What! You didn’t say....”

“I didn’t wish to celebrate it or anything. I already told Helen not to make a big deal of it..”

He ran his hand down his face in frustration, “You are driving me insane.” He lifted his head and looked at her for a long while.

“You want to call it quits don’t you?” She swore she could hear her heart ripping in half.

“No.” He answered without hesitation, “I don’t.” He watched her shoulders slump in a sigh of relief. He had to catch himself again. He had done nothing but verbally attack her since she came home and she stood strong but now he could see the real affect he had on her. “Come here.” He held out his arms and she leaned into him. “That’s crazy talk. It wasn’t even on my list of how to deal with the gossip. I couldn’t let you go honey, you make me feel so alive sometimes it hurts.” He smiled resting his chin on the top of her head.

“We yell.”

“Foreplay.”

She laughed, “You would think so.”

Jasper heard the distinct sound of Meagan’s laughter and finally was able to relax. He had seen Adam in rages before but this was toward Meagan. Previously his temper usually resulted in some poor fool getting his jaw busted. She was defenceless against his towering idiot of a brother and he wasn’t quite sure what he was capable of in that state. In fact, he didn’t doubt for one minute that he would have pulled out his forty-five and pull off a couple of shots over his head through the door. He was only a few seconds away from putting his shoulder against it when he heard the yelling stop and Meagan’s distinct laugh. He turned and walked away thinking how wonderful it would be to have her for a sister-in-law.

“So what do you think we should do?” She lifted her head and looked up at him.

“There’s one solution I can think of.”

“What’s that?”

“Why don’t we give them something to talk about?”

“What?”

“I have a business meeting in Vegas next weekend. You are coming with me. From now on, where I go, you go.” He wanted nothing more than to show her off to the rest of the world. Something he could never say about another woman.

“Adam, I can’t go. It’ll look like...well...I mean...” She really didn’t care what it looked like at this point. She loved him, but she didn’t want to tell him the real reason she couldn’t go with him.

“That we are together.” He finished, “Just like any other female acquaintance I’ve taken with me.”

“But I’m an employee.” She honestly didn’t care about that, but it was the only excuse she could come up with.

“I know. There have been worse scandals; men having affairs with their secretaries and such. This is no different. I’ll tell people I liked you, I chased you for months before you finally agreed to go out with me.”

She laughed, “A lie.”

“No, it’s not.” Before she could respond, he continued, “Now you need to pack.”

Everything dreadful fell on her at once. In Vegas everyone knew who her father was. The championships were always held there and having someone recognize her may be small, but there was still the risk. She would be exposed to the public and maybe someone would recognize her because of her father’s fame, then her stepfather would find her, “Adam, I can’t go.”

“Why not?” He sat back and looked at her.

She turned her head away, “I can’t tell you.”

He studied her posture for a moment, “We shouldn’t keep secrets from one another.”

“It has nothing to do with you.” She stared at him closely, “If we’re not keeping secrets, then why don’t you tell me why you’re afraid of commitment?” She saw his face darken. “As I thought.” She stood up. “When you are honest with me Adam, I’ll be honest with you.”

“Meagan, sit down.” He said with that air of command that his employees obeyed without hesitation.

She took a deep breath and let it out to gather her courage. “I wish you could trust me. I haven’t done anything to make you think otherwise. Just because I had something happen to me in my past that I can’t talk about, doesn’t mean I don’t trust you. However, it’s obvious that you don’t trust me. So I can easily figure out that it was a woman who hurt you, but you aren’t ready to let go of that issue. How can I get close to you?”

He raised a brow, “I’ve told you.”

“Not funny.” She said, catching his meaning.

“I wasn’t being funny.” He answered in a voice completely without humour.

“Just the same. You claim physical attraction, but my stake in this is much higher. I’ve known you for three months now, and I can’t deny what I feel. I think you’d better consider that before you ask me to be in your bed again.” She turned to walk away.

Adam stood, grabbed her arm and spun her around. He was angry, “You are in no position to demand anything of me.” He glowered. “And you know it!”

Trying to ignore the biting grip he had on her arm, she steeled herself against his temper, “It goes both ways.” She felt her heart drum in her chest but she remained undeterred. She also knew exactly what he meant. She desired him and he knew it, but she also knew his desire for her.

He released her, “Fair enough.” He straightened to his full height to stare down at her. His gaze steeled over, “I can’t promise you anything more.”

There went the barrier again. The one she was certain was gone. “Fine then,” she swallowed feeling her heart shatter, “I guess that tells me everything. I will continue to work for you unless you find it unbearable and toss me...”

“...don’t be ridiculous!” He shot, “Are you hiding from some one? Is that why you don’t want to be seen in public?” His eyes narrowed suspiciously, “A lover?”

“Oh-my-God!” she blurted, “I can’t believe you would think that. I’ve told you no man has seen as much of me as you have!”

“Christ Meagan, what the hell did you expect? You won’t tell me what it is you are so afraid of? How serious can it be?”

“From now on, it’s none of your business!” she yelled at him.

“Unless you have a ring on your finger?” he glared down at her.

She was speechless. Is that what he thought? That she was manipulating him for marriage? Her parent’s marriage was a disaster and her mother’s second marriage brought a chill through her. She didn’t want marriage either, or did she? Her temper softened, and she found herself reaching up and brushing an unruly lock of hair off his forehead, “I really don’t know what I want Adam.”

He stepped back from her, his eyes bored right through her like a pair of steel stakes, “I think I do and you already know my views on that.” He pointed an accusing finger at her, “If you think that your chastity is worth marriage to me, you put too much into your worth honey.”

That hurt. Never once did she think she was worth much of anything and with those few words he crushed her. Her arm fell to her side in defeat while she struggled to hold back the tears. There was no point in trying to convince him anything. Women traditionally did want

marriage. That's the big stigma attached to a woman keeping her virginity. The only reason she still was a virgin was because no one had ever appealed to her like Adam. Obviously, he thought different. She averted her gaze unable to hold his angry stare.

"Meagan, why can't you just be happy with what we share?" He knew he had hurt her, yet for some reason he couldn't tell her he was sorry. He couldn't admit to himself how much she actually meant to him. So instead, he became angry and deflected it onto her.

"It isn't enough." She thought she could accept the physical attraction to be near him, but she couldn't. It felt as though she was losing a part of herself and gaining nothing.

"It is for other women. They seem to accept my conditions." He saw her eyes shoot up to meet his and he almost regretted saying it from the hurt and defeat he saw there.

"They accept you conditions because they have ulterior motives! I don't!" She shot at him. He had hurt her again. He consistently compared her with his other women and experiences. No matter what she said or did to show him different, he was unbending and unwilling to accept her as she was. "Alright then. I see your point. You're free to do whatever to whomever. I won't stand in your way." She fought the tears that threatened to fall, "If all you want is a physical relationship, I hope you can find fulfillment in it...but I won't be another conquest." She turned and left the study slamming the door behind her.

He let her go despite the tears he saw in her eyes. He couldn't give her what he wanted which he was sure was marriage. Maybe it was a good thing he didn't take her to bed with him because he had to use all of his willpower to resist her as it was. He stared at the closed door with his hands resting on his hips. Maybe in time the possessiveness he had for her would fade, or would it? He had never felt this way about a woman before, so why the hell did he about her? The more he stood there in his own silence, the more he started thinking. It didn't sit well with him that she was now free to date who she wanted either. Just thinking about another man touching her body the way she only let him touch her made his vision blur with violent anger. He cursed for about five minutes while pacing inside the room. When he was done he stopped and stared out the window catching a view of her leaving the house. About ten seconds later he saw Ian follow her until they were both out of sight causing him to let loose another string of epithets. He went to the door and flung it open. To hell with this! She was going to listen to him come hell or high water. He stalked across the yard just to be intercepted by Henry.

"You'd better calm down son." He said in a voice that got Adam's immediate attention. It was the same voice that his father used to warn them before he took a stick to them, "If you could see how you look, you would frighten the poor girl half to death and peel the paint off the barn in the process. Now, she doesn't need you breaking her heart any more and you know it."

He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair in frustration while staring at Henry, "She's driving me crazy. Henry, I can't think straight anymore."

"I see that. However, you can't expect her to give up everything for you, and you give nothing. Let her go Adam, or marry the girl." Henry placed his hand on his shoulder briefly before walking past him leaving him to his thoughts. Henry was right; he was being entirely selfish where she was concerned. Meagan wasn't the type of woman to give herself partly. She was unique and God help him, he loved every bit of that about her. With Meagan, what you see is what you get. There wasn't any deceit in that perfect little mind of hers. In all of his selfishness, he had overlooked her feelings and concentrated solely on his own need to possess her completely. Swearing a blue streak, angry at the whole situation, he slammed his hat back on his head and changed direction to his truck. He had to get out of town for a few days and away from her so he could sort out his thoughts.

Meagan heard the big one ton dually tear out of the yard and knew it was Adam driving. She brushed the tears from her eyes and decided to busy herself rearranging the tack room. The smell of leather and horse always made her feel like she was in her element and it was relaxing. She was hurting over their argument. It would have been worse if she'd given herself to him though. He would have taken from her and not given anything back and she would have willingly gone to him. She knew he wouldn't marry her, and she understood that, but she needed something from him to claim more than just a physical attraction.

"Hi Sweets!" Ian suddenly appeared.

She was glad that she was able to conceal the tears and he didn't seem to notice that she was crying, "Hi." She managed.

"I need to go to town and get some propane for branding tomorrow. Want to come. I'll buy you an ice-cream."

She smiled at him unable to resist the gorgeous grin he gave her. He was charming, she'd give him that, but she wasn't attracted to him. However, a good friend is always needed and so was the distraction. "I like ice-cream." She knew it would take her mind off of Adam and the crushing pain her heart was enduring.

During the ride to town Ian bluntly asked her if she was dating anyone on the ranch.

"Why would you ask such a thing?" She kept her face as unrevealing as she could.

"Well, for one, none of us have been able to get you to accept a date. I hear I'm not the only one that has asked you." He eyed her suspiciously.

"Oh." It was true. There were five men on the ranch a few years older than her, including Ian. She had turned them all down because she was in love with Adam. Adam, the only one who didn't want a commitment of any kind. The only man who was furthest away from her emotionally, but the only one that she wanted.

"There's some rumour that you flattened the snob Heather Chatworth in town." He grinned, "What a treat that must've been."

"You shouldn't believe gossip."

"So it didn't happen."

"I didn't say that." She said coyly causing him to burst with laughter, "you're a tough little thing sweets! Remind me not to piss you off."

"She kept making terrible remarks about me." She left what the woman said about her and Adam out of it. "She was out at the ranch about three weeks ago and made no secret that she didn't like me then."

His gaze flicked to her again, "anything worth repeating?"

"No." she said without hesitation. "Nothing at all. I just let her get to me and lost my temper."

"It must've been awful enough to irk you to snapping though Meagan." He glanced at her sideways, "I didn't think you had that in you. You're awfully sweet."

She smiled, "Maybe so, but I shouldn't have done it."

"If she was a man and said anything about you I would've hit her too." He looked at her for a reaction and only got a thank you. He sighed when he didn't get what he wanted. He squirreled up his confidence for his original intent of getting her to go to town with him.

"There's a barbeque at the Collins ranch next week. I want to take you."

"I don't think..."

“Come on Meagan. You need to get out more. I promise I won’t paw you or anything, unless you want me to.” He added with a wink, “ It’s one of the few days the boss gave me off. I told him I had a hot date.”

She burst into laughter, “And you didn’t?”

“I was hoping you’d say yes. You’ve been turning me down for a month.”

“And you kept asking.”

“I know what I like.” He answered deeply sparing her a knowing gaze.

She flushed and turned away, “I don’t want a relationship Ian.”

“Fair enough,” he lied, “I’ll be happy just taking you as a friend.”

Over the next few days she thought that Adam had been avoiding her again, because he didn’t come home that night, was absent from meals all the next day and night, but then she found out from Henry that he’d left for the city for a few days. “Business.” He said giving her a wink. Her response was a blush. It was obvious to Henry that something was going on between them but he respectfully kept it to himself.

Unfortunately she was hoping that Adam had come home and tell her that he didn’t want her to go to the barbeque with Ian. That he cared about her more than just on a physical level. Now she finds out that he’s not even on the ranch or anywhere near town. What did that mean? Did it mean that he went to console himself in the arms of another female like she told him to? God she felt sick.

Several days went by and she seemed to be in a haze, not being able to think straight. She’d forgotten to close one of the stalls and Adams horse got out and it took the men two days to find him. Finally Jasper found her sitting on one of the straw bales in the tack room.

“Okay sugar, fess up.” He said coming in and sitting opposite of her, “Henry and I are worried about you. You’ve hardly touched your meals; you walk around with your mind somewhere else. Do you want to talk?”

“No.” she said softly.

He reached over and took her hand, “Okay doll, just know that we care about you.” He stood up, “If it’s any consolation, Adam is in the same shape you are.”

She brought her head up, “Really?”

“Yeah. I called him today regarding a few things here, and he sounds down.” He bent down and kissed her on the forehead, before straightening up again, “I’ll let you in on a secret. Adam doesn’t get like this about women. Ever.” With that he turned and left.

Jasper’s words made her feel a little better, but she wasn’t sure if he was just trying to placate her, because she was obviously upset over the fight they’d gotten in. Truth was, she regretted every bit of it, and missed him terribly. She rubbed her palms on the thighs of her jeans. Enough was enough, she wasn’t going to sit around and mope anymore. She was hired to do a job and she was going to do it. Not only that, she was going to the barbeque with Ian tomorrow, still as friends, but she couldn’t wait around and wait for Adam to decide what he wanted.

Chapter Seven

It actually surprised her that she had enjoyed herself at the barbeque. Ian was very much a gentleman and treated her just as she wanted, a friend. He introduced her to everyone very politely and encouraged her to dance with other men during the event. Before she knew it time turned late and they had to return to the ranch. They laughed and shared jokes on the way home, but she still couldn't seem to feel like something was missing. Before she knew it Ian steered the truck off the main road and pulled off into a field

"Where are we going?"

"There's a view up here I want you to see. There's nothing like it around." He reached over and touched her hand briefly, "Trust me. You'll love it." He drove for about a quarter of a mile and stopped on top of a steep grassy hill. The sun was setting over the horizon casting warm red-gold colors on the greenery below.

He gave her no reason not to trust him. Ian had always been polite and after today she felt she could trust him. "Wow! This is beautiful."

"I thought you'd like it." He turned the truck off and turned in his seat laying his hand across the back of it catching a lock of her long hair and rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger.

She suddenly became still. The look in his eyes and the gesture made her think that this hadn't anything to do with friendship. It occurred to her that he'd just parked the truck and they were alone. "Ian—"

"Before you say anything, please just hear me out. I want you to know that I've been watching you for months now, and frankly you are very sexy."

Sexy? She thought. It sounded so corny coming from him, especially when Adam made it sound like a caress. She almost groaned when he continued to try and flatter her.

"In fact, everything about you is hot. I would have been more adamant about chasing you, but the boss seems quite protective of you, so is Henry and Jasper. I know you want to be friends, but you look so damn good in that little dress. It was torture watching you dance with those other men today. Now I finally got you to myself and I'm going to take advantage of it." He leaned toward her. He knew what she told him earlier about being friends, but he thought if he got her alone, she would succumb to his charms.

"Ian—wait!" His intention suddenly became clear to her. He was going to try and kiss her. She tried to push him away but he still managed to touch his lips to hers. It seemed sloppy and eager and she didn't like it at all. Her hands fumbled for the door latch and unfortunately the way they were leaning on it caused both of them to spill to the ground with him landing firmly on her knocking the breath out of her.

"Oh God...Meagan. Are you alright?" He raised himself above her and saw the pain in her eyes.

She could barely breathe. Despite the size difference with Adam and Ian, he was still heavy and he landed full force on her. She had trouble catching a gulp of air.

Unfortunately neither one of them had seen the other ranch truck pull up behind them. Adam must've seen fifty different shades of red. Here was Meagan on the grass with Ian sprawled on top of her. He got out slamming the door causing them both to look in his direction. Even through her struggle Meagan could see the deadly cold look on his face. To say he was in a rage was an understatement.

“What the Hell!” He bellowed and saw Meagan pale and Ian scrambled up off of her. “Get up!” He shouted at her gesturing with his arm violently reaching them in a few long strides Meagan was still stumbling to catch her breath. Ian bent over to give her his hand.

“You touch her, “ He said with a voice of barely contained rage, “ and I’ll cut your damn hand off Ian!”

This made the young man freeze and pale at the same time, “It’s not what you think boss.”

“Like hell it isn’t. Get your ass home, before you find yourself out of a job. If I didn’t need you with one man short, I would have fired you already or better yet, tear you to pieces for even coming near her!” He took a step toward him. “If you weren’t so damn dense, you’d have it figured out that she belongs to me.”

Ian took a step back and held his hands up in surrender, “Boss, she fell and I...”

“Couldn’t help but oblige her?” He glared, “Get out of my sight, before I loosen your teeth.”

Ian looked horrified. He sent an apologetic glance to Meagan who rolled on to her side to catch her breath. She nodded at him that it was all right before he turned, got in the truck, and tore up sod to get out of there.

She stared up at Adam whose face was wrought with fury, “A whole week before you console yourself in another man’s arms!” He made an angry noise, “I thought I told you to get up! The ground is soaked from last night’s rainfall. For the life of me I didn’t think you were as cheap to be taken on the ground like a two-bit tramp!”

She still couldn’t find her breath to speak but managed to bring her gaze to his which spoke for itself of the deep hurt that registered on it.

He didn’t miss it, and it actually bothered him to say those things to her. He dropped his temper a notch, “Hell Meagan. What am I supposed to think finding you two like this...and what the hell are you still laying there for?”

She sucked in a breath that hurt her all the way to the toes, “I fell out of the bloody truck, and I can’t get up!”

“You fell?”

She took another breath nodding.

Through the haze of his fury, he saw the pain in her features and the paleness of her skin. It finally dawned on him that she was actually hurt and he’d been standing there like a bastard screaming at her. “Aw hell—“ He kneeled down, “Is anything broken?” He started running his hands over her limbs, “Answer me.”

“I—I don’t think..” she didn’t finish. He picked her up and carried her to his truck, placed her in the passenger side and got it the driver’s door. The man never did let her finish speaking.

He turned and stared at her. She seemed to be able to breathe better now, “He made a pass at you, didn’t he?”

She glared at him, “No. I jumped him...that’s why *my* door flew open and we landed on the ground together. Apparently he was trying to escape my amorous attack and decided the only way out was to toss me on the ground by opening my door to escape.”

He narrowed his gaze, “Don’t get short with me. How the hell do you think that looked? Not even a week goes by after our fight and I find you in the arms of another man.”

“I think you should trust me for a change. The only reason I went out with him was to try and forget about you. I’ve been moping all over the place. I already told him I only wanted to be friends.”

“I’m going to speak to him.” She didn’t realize that men like Ian didn’t have girls like Meagan as friends and she was too naïve to know that. He would set him straight.

“Don’t dare. I know how much you talk before you hit, which is not at all. If you struck Jasper over a small peck on the mouth, I know you’re going to pound Ian senseless.

“Yeah.” He said without hesitation and grinning without emotion.

“You will leave him alone.” She said more adamantly.

” I told you I’d kill any man that touched you.” He added glaring at her, “I’m positive that he touched you.”

“God Adam we fell it was a given! And don’t you dare touch him, you’ve embarrassed me enough. Besides we’re through. I can let anyone I want touch me.”

“Like hell we are and like hell you will!” he shouted back at her.

“Adam!” she said in astonishment at his possessive outburst.

“Enough Meagan. You want commitment? Fine! I’ll give you that ring...!” he shouted. He’d spent a week alone in his apartment trying to figure things out. He visited his father several times who had tried endlessly to find out what bothered him. Adam just told him it wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle. The week he’d been away gave him nothing to clear his thoughts. The only thing he could clarify was he wanted her with him more than anything. It made him realize that his high school sweetheart was no more than an adolescent crush. What he and Meagan shared went beyond borders of physical attraction. Not once did he run from his temper and at times he could be quite vicious. Also she understood him. Although he ranted and raved about his possessiveness of her he was sure she saw it as affection not obsessiveness. She was very special to him and for the first time in his life he never felt more sure about making this permanent. First they had to get everything out in the open and talk.

“I don’t want your ring!” She shouted back at him, “I never claimed to want one from you! You just assumed like a big dumb ape! I don’t want to be married!”

“What the hell do you want?” He bellowed, shocked and angry at the same time. Every time he turned around she was surprising him with one thing or another. This woman confused the hell out of him.

“I want you to care about me! I love you!” she burst into tears at her confession, cursing him for making her feel so vulnerable. “I only want a promise that you see me more than a physical object of affection.” She sobbed, “those things you said—“ she couldn’t continue as her emotions spilled forth like her tears and choked her up.

He swore and reached for her. At the same time all of his anger flooded out of him at her words. She struggled against him but he held tight, “Quit crying. I told you I don’t handle that well—settle down, I’m not going to hurt you.” He added softly.

“Oh, yes... Woman’s tears.” She said sarcastically while sobbing and trying to ignore the comfort of his powerful embrace. She missed him.

“No... just yours.” He confessed, feeling her finally relax against him, “They drive me crazy. Now shush.” His lips brushed her forehead, “Those things I said were harsh Meagan. I didn’t mean them. My temper gets the best of me sometimes,” he explained, “You have me all unsettled.” If it were any other woman that said that to him, he’d be done with her, but a warm feeling washed through him at her confession. It took him totally by surprise, that he wanted her

to love him and just hearing those words made him feel a thousand times better than spending a few days on his own trying to clear his head.

She lifted her tear stained face and focused on him, "I do?"

"Hell yes." He managed a smile at her surprised expression, "I'm at a total loss in what to do with you. Now, about this promise you want. You would believe me if I gave it to you?"

"I would." She squeezed out between sobs.

He sighed, "of course you would." He kissed the top of her head, "Meagan, I do care about you. I should have told you that last week, but I'm pigheaded in a lot of ways. You need to be patient with me."

She looked up at him, "You really do care about me?"

Her tear stained face made her blue eyes radiant. His hands framed her face as his thumbs brushed the wet hair off her cheeks, "Of course baby. Why do you think I go insane around you every time you get near another man? I told you I'm possessive around you. Hell, I've never been possessive like this about another woman in my life. I don't know why I thought you knew these things. I'm not very good with words. I never have been. Short of giving you that ring and offering for you, it's the best I can say or do to let you know how much I care about you."

She hiccupped causing him to chuckle. "Really?"

"Yes. Did you mean it?"

"What?"

"You love me." He nuzzled her hair with his face and drew back to look at her.

She studied his handsome face memorizing every line and feature he had before slowly nodding.

He gave her a striking grin, "I'm flattered." He bent and kissed her forehead, "But you don't want to marry me?"

"You said you didn't want it."

"True. I don't think I would make a very good husband. In case you didn't notice, I have a bit of a temper. I like to come and go as I please, and it's really not easy for me to explain myself to anyone. I was ready to do it for you." He held her tight, "Is it true, you don't either?"

She nodded her head. She had already promised herself that she wouldn't trap him into an unwanted union. Her mother didn't love her father because of that circumstance, and he made himself scarce because of it. She wouldn't make the same mistake. "I am happy that you told me you care. I can accept that, I think. You don't talk about your feelings Adam. I thought you saw me as another conquest like Heather." Her confession caused a look of disgust to cross his face.

"Honey, you are nothing like Heather. In fact, you are nothing like anyone I've met. You're unique. I'm crazy about you. It took me a few days to get my thoughts together about us and I'm asking you to let's try *us* again. I miss you something fierce. "

"Really?" Adam never explained himself like he just did to her so she knew he wasn't lying. She could definitely forgive him in spades for telling her how he felt. Honestly she didn't care if he didn't want to be married, she just wanted to be with him.

"Yes." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a long velvet box, "I got you something when I was in the city."

She gave him a stunned look. Then she saw a bit of color rising in his tanned cheeks, causing her to smile, "You don't get gifts for women often do you?"

"No." he said curtly, "Certainly not like this."

She slid closer to him, and took the box. A sharp intake of her breath could be easily heard in the silence of the cab as she opened it and gazed at the necklace, "It's *beautiful*." She suddenly felt choked up and swallowed hard to try and dissipate the lump in her throat.

"I missed your birthday. I wanted to get you something." He said softly removing the necklace and clasping it about her neck. It was a single large sapphire surrounded by diamonds on a platinum chain. "It's the same color as your eyes. It's called a midnight sapphire." He saw the tears threatening to fall as she brought her eyes up to his, "Don't Meagan, I already told you I don't handle your tears well."

She gave him a sweet smile, "No one ever..." she took a deep breath, "...Bought me anything so beautiful." Her small fingers curled around the stone against her breast adoringly.

His hand lingered at her nape playing with a lock of hair, "You deserve to be showered in jewels honey."

"Adam...about what I said the other day..."

"Don't apologize. What you said was right. I wasn't honest with you, but when I get you home, we are going to talk." His pale grey eyes searched hers, "Okay?"

"I don't know if I can."

"I don't know if I'm ready either, but I think it would help us both especially if we have some sort of hope for a relationship."

"Alright. About Ian..." she saw his eyes glaze over in anger. "Don't be angry with him."

His face darkened, "He's lucky I don't bust his jaw for touching you."

"He didn't know. We didn't tell anyone." She pulled herself tighter against him, "Please Adam."

He groaned, "How the hell am I supposed to resist that sweet plea?" She was right, they hadn't. Only Jasper and Henry had an idea, and Heather suspected. It still didn't calm him down. When he saw the man sprawled on Meagan, he wanted to shoot him. No, he wanted to beat him to a pulp and then shoot him. Meagan didn't know that Ian had been bragging about this hot date he had all week and the vulgar things he was saying to the rest of the men about her. Then when he came home he found out it was her he'd taken. He quickly hopped in his truck and went to the Collins' just to find out they had left shortly before. He near missed the fresh tracks turning into the field and if he was a few minutes later, who knows how far Ian would have gotten. He knew the young man wasn't a leech, but he was young, and lusty. Meagan didn't have a clue how to handle herself around a man like that. He himself had almost taken advantage of her innocence but had the experience and willpower to pull back. Ian might not have before it was too late.

"Adam?"

"Just stay away from him." He repeated tersely.

"I'll try." She suppressed a smile at his tone. Now that she knew he genuinely cared about her, nothing could bother her.

"No, you will. If I catch his paws on you again, I'll take his head clean off his shoulders. Don't be alone with him again Meagan. I mean it."

"Yes boss." She managed with a small smile at his assertiveness. Whether she listened to him or not made no difference. She was just so happy she had him back.

Her amused agreement sent a wave of happiness through him. It was too much. "I've missed touching you." He said thickly lifting his hand from her nape and threading his fingers through her hair, bringing his mouth to hers.

She was going to answer him, but it was lost in his heated assault. It was only a week that they had avoided each other, but it seemed like a lifetime and now they were making up for it. He pulled her across his lap and turned her so she straddled him. He'd been slowly urging her into intimate positions over the past few weeks so she would be used to anything he suddenly did to her. It was a good thing, she didn't even notice the close proximity of her hips on his and in the past, the pressure of his arousal against her usually caused her to pull away except that last night in the stables. This time, however, the intimacy didn't seem to alarm her and he knew she could feel it. His hands smoothed up her back and undid the zipper on her dress and in the same fluid motion he tugged on her shoulder straps easing the material down her arms to reveal her full perfect breasts. Seeing his necklace between them, near had him come undone along with the smooth silky feel of her warm naked skin. He felt her shiver in anticipation of his caresses. "You are so beautiful, baby. Never in my life have I seen a woman so perfect." He murmured as his mouth travelled down her neck to her breasts. "so soft, like velvety satin."

"Adam!" She groaned arching toward him while her hands thrust in his dark locks.

His hands slid up her skirt, gripped her thighs and pulled her fully against his arousal as his mouth captured one of her nipples. The throaty feminine noises she was making was driving him crazy with want for her. He felt her hands fumble with the buttons of his shirt and he released her long enough to help desperate to feel his bare skin on hers.

Meagan had absolutely no resistance in her. She wanted him, more than anything else in her life.

Jasper met Ian when he came back to the ranch, the poor man was as white as a ghost.

"What happened to your hot date?" he said while grinning.

"The boss has her?"

His smile dropped slightly, "Pardon me?"

"It was Meagan."

Jasper gave him a look of shock, "You took out Meagan?"

"She said she wasn't involved with anyone, but Jasper, he was in a rage!"

Jasper shook his head, "Ian a blind man could see that he had interest in her. Are you on a suicide mission?"

"She said there was nothing!"

"She didn't lie, but Adam had other designs." Jasper felt the need to defend her. He knew about their recent blowout and the return of Adam's full blown temper. It was obvious that they had called it quits although neither one of them said anything. "There wasn't anything going on at the time." He wouldn't divulge that they had broken it off a week ago.

"Sure as hell fooled me." He muttered.

"Where are they?"

Ian blushed, "I parked above the wash..."

"You parked!" Jasper fumed, "With Meagan! That girl's as green as grass. What the hell's wrong with you?"

Ian gaped, "What do you mean? A girl that looks like that ain't green!"

"She is, you dumb shit." Jasper glared at him, "You're lucky he didn't thump your skull."

"He wanted too. He was yelling enough for the both of us. Scared the shit outta me."

"So you left Meagan with him in that temper?"

“He threatened to kill me Jasper!” He said defensively, “He meant it. You should’ve seen his face. I never seen him that mad. When I left he was still yelling at her.”

Jasper swore, turned and hopped in the truck. He didn’t ask either one of them what had happened that day last week when Adam took off. It wasn’t his business, even if he felt protective of Meagan. Although he knew Adam would never hurt a woman, he’d never seen him so angry and possessive of one before and when he got in those moods the men scattered away from him for a reason.

“Here.” Adam grabbed one of her hands and put it between their bodies, “Touch me here.” He hissed between his teeth when her hand found his arousal through his jeans. She hesitated only slightly until she saw his reaction and felt powerful that she had caused it. A whole new light of knowledge hit her and she rubbed her palm down the length of him causing him to groan. The rigid feel of him was fascinating and frightening at the same time.

“Let me see.” She whispered against his mouth.

“No...not yet...not like this...” His restraint was at its limits. He could easily undo his jeans and slide into her with the way she was positioned on his lap quicker than she could blink.

“Please...Adam...I ache so badly.” She pulled his head toward her breasts and heard him say “this is insane,” followed by the faint clink of a belt buckle then the distinct sound of his zipper. A thrill of pleasure went through her that she could easily bend him to her will over the passion that they shared.

Suddenly he brought his head up and looked in the rear-view mirror, “Get dressed!” He shoved her wide-eyed off of his lap.

“What...?”

“There’s a vehicle coming.” He started doing up his jeans, belt and his shirt shooting her a look, “Hurry up honey. I don’t want anyone to see you like that, it’ll embarrass you.” All the while he was cursing himself for losing his restraint against her. He didn’t want to take her so cheaply. She deserved to be made love to, slow and easy in crisp clean sheets. Not a romp in the seat of his truck. “I’m too damn old for this shit! Making out with a virgin in the truck like a damn lusty teenager.” He swore again while doing up the last button on his shirt.

“Oh!” She finally snapped out of it trying to hide her smile and slid her arms back into her dress. She revelled in the knowledge that he found her desirable and by a mere caress and a few words she was able to entice him. A wicked grin spread across her face.

He saw the look of triumph and tried not to smile himself, “Yeah, you hold on to that, cause it isn’t going to happen again.” He said trying to keep the laughter out of his voice, “Now, turn around before I let someone get an eyeful.”

She did and he zipped up her dress just as another ranch truck came into view.

“Who is it?” she looked out the back window while trying to straighten her hair.

“It’s Jasper.” Adam looked in his side mirror recognizing the familiar face, then flashed her a look that was not to be countermanded, “Stay here, you look thoroughly ravished.” To make his point his eyes raked over her slowly and he groaned.

She gave him a shy smile accompanied by a blush as he shook his head slowly and got out of the truck. Jasper pulled up behind them while Adam took out a cigarette and lit it. He walked up to the driver’s window.

Jasper rolled down the window and his eyes went to the dishevelled mess of hair on his brother’s head before meeting his gaze with a glint of knowledge in his own eyes, “I take it you didn’t kill her?” He leaned his elbow out the window.

“Is that what this is about?” Adam placed his hand beside Jasper’s elbow.

He nodded flicking a glance at the figure through the tinted window of the other truck, “Ian came home ready to join a religion just to get away from you.”

Adam couldn’t help but chuckle, “Little bastard.”

Jasper nodded, “He wasn’t too bright about the whole situation, and you don’t need to worry about him anymore. I let him in on your secret.”

“I made sure on my end too.”

“Yeah you did that. He’s as white as a ghost despite his tan.” He studied him seriously for a moment, “You make up your mind yet big brother? This whole back and forth bullshit is wearing us all thin.”

“Me included.” He looked off into the distance for a moment before returning his attention to Jasper.

Jasper grinned, “I suspect that too. Just take it easy on her Adam. We are all fond of the filly.”

He took a long drag from his smoke before he answered, “I know.”

He started the truck, “maybe you should take her to the city for a few days and spoil her. Let her know you care.”

Adam grinned at him, “Advice from the Casanova?”

He shifted the truck in reverse, “Free advice too. Let her know you care, all right? That’s all she needs.”

“I hear you. I don’t intend to let her go.”

“Good to hear you came to your senses. You going to marry her?”

“She doesn’t want to get married, but I’ll keep trying.”

“Maybe you just haven’t asked her right Adam. You’re not a man of many words and when you do speak you usually cause offense. She probably doesn’t realize that you want her that bad.”

He watched Jasper pull away wondering if he said was true. That he just didn’t come across right. Tossing his cigarette on the ground and crushing it out, he got back in the truck.

“Is everything okay?”

He turned and looked at her beautiful face studying every lovely inch of it, “Yeah, Jasper thought I was going to kill you.” She laughed.

“You’d never hurt me Adam.”

“Come here and kiss me.” He reached for her when she leaned toward him and gave her a short but thoroughly passionate kiss. “Okay, enough of this. We have to talk about some things first.”

“If you want to.” She said solemnly.

He grinned, “I don’t, neither do you, but we need to clear the air.”

“I know.” She sat back in her seat.

He turned the key and started the ignition.

When they got back to the house, he got out and opened the door for her in clear view of the ranch hands that were milling around the bunkhouse and helped her out by taking her hand and led her up to the house through the doors.

“Well,” Said Jeb, “I see the boss has finally staked his claim.” This brought several chuckles.

“Shit, do you mean everyone knew about this, but me?” Said Ian from behind him.

Jeb turned to him, “You were too busy trying to get her for your own and didn’t notice.”

“Why didn’t someone say anything?” he said exasperated. “He was going to kill me tonight when I took her out!”

“The first week someone did Ian,” Jeb grinned, “It was when that gal walked to the stables and the boss snarled at you for making a comment about her body being illegal.”

“And don’t forget the way he threatened to cut our balls off when she was washing down that roan.”

Jeb groaned at the image, “Well worth it.”

Ian let out a breath of air remembering the fierce look in the man’s eyes, “Man, I am a dumb shit.”

Jeb howled with laughter, “Naw, you’re just younger and newer than the rest of us. We know the boss long enough to know his moods. He ain’t possessive about any woman. When he started getting possessive about that one, we knew that if we liked our jobs and our body parts all in one place we’d leave her alone.” He winked, “However, there’s nothing that says we can’t look when he ain’t around.”

“Amen to that.” Came another masculine reply.

Chapter Eight

Adam led her into the study and shut the door behind them, “I’ll get you a drink.”

“I don’t need one.”

“Maybe I do, and you can indulge me. Okay?”

“Okay.” She smiled at his firm expression causing his eyes to twinkle.

“Enough of that,” he tried to sound firm, but it was unsuccessful. He poured them both a snifter of brandy and handed one to her while he sat next to her. “I’ll go first. Maybe it’ll be easier for you if I do.”

She nodded shakily.

“My distrust of women goes back to after I graduated from high school. I was the star quarterback and the captain of my team.”

“No doubt.” She roved her eyes over him.

“Keep it up and I’ll stop and do to you what I’ve been burning for over these past few months.” He slanted her a sensual look.

“sorry.” She said like she didn’t mean it.

He smiled and continued, “At the time I was dating a cheerleader and it became serious after graduation. We had plans to marry. She came from a decent family and both of ours approved of one another.” He took a large gulp from his glass. “I won’t lie to you Meagan, she was beautiful, and everyone wanted her, but I got her. I got accepted to Harvard and had plans to leave in the fall. We made a pact that we would get married when I came home next summer. The plans were made right down to the cut and design of her dress. I bought the rings already. When I came home she was not so eager to wed. She made excuses, wouldn’t let me touch her anymore, and finally, after a month, I figured out why. She had met someone else.”

Meagan reached over and covered his hand with hers, “How horrible.”

He lifted it to his mouth and kissed the back of her hand, “Not just that, apparently, she’d been seeing him our last year of high school. He was an older man and married at the time. I foolishly thought she had been loyal. She played the part well, acted like the devoted girlfriend. She accepted all of my gifts with enthusiasm. The whole thing of our being a couple was to cover up her affair with the married man. When I came back, he had left his wife and was going to marry her. He was old enough to be her father.”

Meagan was taken back. “How old was she when she started seeing him?”

He gritted his teeth, “She was seventeen, he was thirty eight.”

She shivered. That was the same age as her step-father.

“It wasn’t the worse part. She admitted that she cared for me, but didn’t love me. She had the gall to tell me that she was sorry she used me, but it was necessary because her parents wouldn’t approved.”

“Where is she now?”

“Far from here. She married him, he was filthy rich and they moved out of town because of gossip.”

Good thing, she thought. Meagan wanted to kill her.

He reached up and caressed her jaw with his thumb seeing her expression, “Don’t get angry on my account sweetheart, I’m over her as much as I can be with your help. I was angry for twelve years after and now there’s you. Maybe it was the betrayal more than my affection for her, but either way it left me bitter.”

She smiled, “I can’t help being angry at her. You are so good to me. Although, if it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t be here.”

“True.” He finished his glass and got up to fill it, “Ever since then, I’d been mistrustful. If my high school sweetheart, who seemed so innocent at the time, deceive me, then why wouldn’t another woman who had some experience under her belt.” He came back to her seeing that she had finished her glass when he filled his. Reaching over he swapped hers with his and went to refill it.

She liked this drink. It was smoother than whiskey and it made her feel instantly warm all over. He joined her back on the sofa. “A lot of things make sense now.”

“I thought so.” He reached over and pulled her into the crook of his shoulder. “He was some big hotshot lawyer too. Unfortunately he left a wife and two kids with nothing, not even a pot to piss in. She left soon after. I don’t know where they are now.”

“Did you love her?”

“I thought I did. Now, I’m not so sure. She played me good by acting vulnerable, bringing out my protective instincts. That’s why I’m so steeled up all the time around woman.” He looked down at her and lifted her chin as his silver eyes searched hers, “Except for you. I would fight tooth and nail to keep you.”

She felt a thrill go through her.

“Maybe that’s why I’m so insanely possessive over you. You were her age when she left me.”

“I would never leave you Adam.” She turned to face him, “Never!”

“I’m trying to believe that. So you need to be patient with me.” He took her hand and kissed it, “Your turn.” She paled. “Take your time.”

“Okay.” She swallowed the contents of the glass and handed him the empty one.

He got up and retrieved the bottle this time, filling both of their glasses and leaving it on the table beside him, “Here baby...take your time.” Obviously this was painful for her.

She sipped the liquid and was thankful that he kept feeding it to her, it did give her a false sense of bravery, “My father’s name was Angus Callahan.”

Where did he hear that name before?

“The three time world champion bull rider.”

“The Angus Callahan?”

She nodded. “He died two years ago, then six months later my mother suspiciously remarried.”

“Meagan, it does happen.”

“I know, but the reason I worked at the King’s ranch was because she didn’t want me around when my father was touring with the PBR.”

“I see.”

“She was a spoiled socialite, and when I didn’t conform to her mannerisms and play the pretty perfect daughter, she dumped me on my aunt during that time. For three years I spent most of my summers at the Kings.” She sighed, “I missed my father, and he tried his best to be there for me. He would phone me at least one a week to see how I was doing, my mother never called.”

Despite Adam and his brother’s strict upbringing, they never lacked for love, even though their father never said the words, it was always there. He couldn’t imagine her as a young girl without parents. Little girls were supposed to be indulged and spoiled. He felt boiling anger and as she continued, it turned to violent rage.

“My stepfather, seemed nice enough. After my mother married him, she decided that we need to be a family. It wasn’t until later that I discovered that it was his decision to come and get me. At first he showered me with attention and gifts. I thought maybe my mother would begin to love me as time went on, but when he began to visit my bedroom...” she started choking on sobs.

“Oh my God!” he went to embrace her.

“Don’t...I have to finish.” He stopped and she polished off the brandy, “It was nothing in the beginning. He just would lie on top of the covers and hold me. I was too terrified to move. I started avoiding him, skipping school, staying out late. My mother confronted my about my behaviour saying that he was concerned for me.”

“Did you tell her?”

She nodded quickly, “she told me I was jealous and wanted him all to myself.”

He was so full of fury he could barely see straight, but he did his best to keep his expression free of it. More than anything he wanted to hold her, but she was already weeping and she was right, if he made a grab for her she would lose it. Instead he stood up and walked around the back of the sofa and started pacing out of rage while she continued.

“I was hurt at first, but then I became numb towards her. Meanwhile I began to wedge a chair under the doorknob at night to keep him out. I couldn’t sleep, lost weight, and then one night I was so tired I forgot the chair...” She swallowed the contents of her glass, and he quickly refilled it. “He didn’t lie on top of the covers this time. I screamed, and my mother came rushing in accusing me of trying to sleep with Brian. I left the next morning with what little money I had. I ran to Helen. She was a cook on the King’s ranch at the time and together we made our way here right away. I—she was all I had left.”

“three months ago.” He stopped and said from behind her.

“Yes,” Turning around, she brought her eyes up to his, “My mother is my legal guardian. They’re looking for me, because my father left me a trust. It’s mine when I turn twenty-one. I think he wants to get his hands on it.”

“Meagan...did he...I mean...”

“No! I didn’t give him the chance.” She said wide-eyed.

This time he made his way around the sofa, sat down, grabbed her and crushed her in his embrace, “You don’t need to worry about anything anymore, I’ll take care of it and them.”

“Adam, you don’t understand.”

“You’re wrong. I’m going to make sure they leave you alone.” He pulled her back and looked at her.

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Are you kidding me? Baby, I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, but like hell I’m having those two vultures get near you. First thing in the morning I’m calling my lawyers to see what we can do about getting you away from them and keep your trust.” He paused before continuing, “You should marry me. As your husband, I would have legal rights to protect you, and your mother and stepfather wouldn’t be able to come near you.”

Tears began to fall for a different reason this time. It seemed like forever that someone was genuinely concerned about her, besides Helen. “You said you didn’t want marriage.”

“I also said I’ve never cared about someone as much as you. I meant it.”

“I—I just don’t know.”

“Well, sleep on it and let me know tomorrow.” He looked at his watch it was almost one in the morning, “Come on Honey. We’re going to bed.”

She stood up and had to grab the sleeve of his shirt to steady herself, “Oh oh.”

He chuckled looking down at her, “I’m afraid I got you drunk.”

She didn’t notice the heat in her cheeks despite the wetness of the tears.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, “Come on Meagan, lets get ready for bed.” He led her up the stairs and took her into her room and made her sit on her bed. She watched him go to her dresser and pull out a nightgown, and then he proceeded to crouch in front of her undress her gently and slide the gown over her head. She turned to get under the covers.

“No. Tonight you sleep with me.” He bent down and scooped her up into his arms trying to ignore how perfectly she fit into him. “No argument.”

She should have protested but she was feeling the effects of the alcohol and she really didn’t want to be alone. He seemed to know her apprehension.

“No sex, honey. I’ll just hold you okay?” God did he want to hold her. Hold her like she was meant for. He wanted to encase her in his arms and protect her from all of the evil in the world and he told her so.

She barely heard him as she turned her face into his chest.

He pulled back the coverlet and slid her easily under it then disappeared from view for a moment to undress.

“Adam?” She murmured.

“Just a moment sweet. I need to put pyjama bottoms on or I’ll be sorely tempted.”

She heard the sliding of drawers and the rustle of material before the bed shifted with his weight. A moment later he was pulling her into his powerful embrace. She turned and buried her face into the warmth of his neck as he stroked her back with his hand. Thanks to the rather exhausting day and the overindulgence in alcohol she fell asleep soon after.

Helen was in the kitchen cooking breakfast when Adam came in. She turned, “Good morning Mr. Wightman, breakfast is almost ready.”

“I need to talk to you.” He said solemnly.

“Oh?” She slid the pan containing the scrambled eggs off the stove and set down the flipper, “You took your time.” She turned to face him with a stern expression, “Meagan is a good girl and from the guilty look on your face I expect her to have an engagement ring on her finger.”

“First, let me explain. I just don’t want to upset you to know that she slept in my bed last night. I’m aware that you go and check on her in the morning.” He had to give it to the older woman, she didn’t even flinch and when she spoke it was as if she was talking about the weather.

“Well then. I do expect you to marry her Adam.” She said using his name for the first time. “She’s too good for what you’re used to.”

“Nothing happened Helen. She was upset and needed someone. I know about her stepfather.” He may not have gotten a reaction before, but he certainly did now. That affected her. She paled. “I’ll take care of it. I wanted to let you know so you don’t need to run. You are welcome to stay as long as you like.”

She nodded briefly while studying his hard features, ‘you really care about her don’t you?’

It was his turn to nod.

Helen almost smiled, the large man seemed oddly uncomfortable with that confession no matter how subtle it was, “Don’t hurt my baby Adam. She seems well put together and strong, but she isn’t always. She’s all I have of my brother and this last week has been trying for her.”

Me too. “I’ll do my best.” He turned to leave when she called his name.

When Meagan awoke the next afternoon, Adam was gone. She groaned and brought her hand to her head. This is what a hangover must feel like, she thought to herself. She crawled out of bed and went across to her own room to shower and dress for the day. Obviously Adam was out working even though they must’ve consumed the same amount of brandy. Actually she was sure they polished off the bottle. Yet, he was able to function normally. Did anything faze that man? She smiled to herself as she dressed and made her way downstairs. Adam was different now, she thought. He told her things that he hadn’t told anyone before and tenderly held her last night, all night. A warmth stirred low in her pelvis over it. “Helen?” she called as she walked into the kitchen

“It’s about time you’re up child,” she chided.

“Sorry.” She looked around the kitchen.

“He’s not here.” She cast her a sideways glance as she dished eggs onto a plate.

Meagan tried not to blush, “Is it that obvious?”

“Honey if it were anymore obvious, you’d have a neon sign over your head—here—come and eat.” Helen said setting the plate on the breakfast counter. “He came and spoke to me early this morning and let me know what was going on.

Meagan sat down and started eating, but stopped and looked at her aunt when she spoke, “He what?”

Helen took a seat across from her, “I told you that man was sweet on you.” She managed an apprehensive smile, “He wanted me to tell you that he’ll be home in a few days. There’s some things he needs to take care of and he didn’t want to wake you.”

Meagan was crestfallen that he didn't come and say goodbye. She thought they had become quite close after last night, "Where did he go?"

"He said he needed to take care of some business in Billings with his father. Now don't you start doubting yourself." She shook her finger at her reading her expression, "That man is smitten. You take my word for it. Just because he doesn't leave some sappy note doesn't mean he's changed his mind on how he feels."

"Helen please." She pleaded.

"Please nothing. You're sitting there worried he doesn't want you. He came and told me to let you know where he was. Now that man doesn't tell anyone anything, so don't you even begin to think that he doesn't care about you like you do about him."

Although Helens words did make her feel better, she didn't know that she had already told Adam that she was in love with him and he told her he only cared about her. She finished her breakfast and made her way out to the stables to catch up on work. About an hour later Jasper found her.

"Meagan, are you in here?"

She came out from the tack room, "I'm here." She said pulling her gloves off her hands.

He grinned when he saw her, "I meant to be home sooner to see you but I got caught up with Sara," he chuckled, "Anyway—" he walked toward her, "—I promised Adam I would get this for you."

She looked down at what he was giving her and actually laughed when she recognized that it was a cell phone.

"Yeah, he figured you'd either see the humour in it or get angry."

"I have been a bit of a pest." She admitted sheepishly

"Nonsense, if it wasn't for him and his meaner than a wild boar temper, you'd be as docile as a newborn lamb." He nodded toward the phone, "He wanted me to tell you to keep it with you at all times."

"I will." She looked down at it.

"I'll see you at supper Meagan, I've got to get going. With Adam gone I need to try and do everything he did and that's not easy." He turned and left.

She tucked the phone in her pocket hoping that he would call her on it. She didn't have his number and really didn't want to ask Jasper or Henry for it because she didn't want to come across needy. However the rest of the week passed without a word and her insecurities started to seep in again. She tried to keep herself busy by immersing herself in her work. So much so that several of the ranch hands commented that the stables and horses were so clean that they could eat off of either one of them. That made her laugh.

Then as she began to wonder if he meant everything he said to her that last night when they were together because he would have phoned, wouldn't he? The sound of his voice out of the blue made her practically jump with joy. Her heart started thundering in excitement as she dropped the bridals she was rearranging on the floor and turned toward the door.

"Meagan!" the deep voice repeated.

Without even hesitating she tore out of the back room and down the aisle unable to hold back the grin of joy on her face, practically leaping into his arms.

"Hi baby." He murmured lifting her up in his strong embrace as he buried his face into her neck. "Did you miss me?"

She lifted her head with unshed tears present in her eyes, "You didn't tell me you were leaving."

“I see you did.” He smiled, searching her gaze, “—and I told Helen.”

“You didn’t phone me.”

“I didn’t phone anyone, I was busy.” He set her down, “There were some things I couldn’t put off in Billings, if even for you.” He smoothed his hands on either side of her face, “I’m not one for long notes or love poems, you know that.” He explained.

“I know—It’s just—“

“You thought I didn’t care?” he raised his brows, “that’s crazy.” He smiled down at her, “Of course I do.” He saw her relax, “Hell Meagan, don’t jump to conclusions unless you get something concrete from me.”

“I know I shouldn’t, but I’ve never let anyone so close before.”

“I understand,” he bent his head down and brushed his mouth across hers, “Maybe I should have handled this differently, but I’m not used to this either.”

She nodded.

“I want to spend some time with you today, but I have to get some work done before then. So let me hole up in my study for a few hours then we’ll go for a ride together, just you and I. I’ll get Helen to pack us a lunch.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Seeing her eyes brighten and her face light up near had him change his mind and take her right away, but he needed to get some things done first regarding their future together. He gave her a passionate kiss before he left her and went to make arrangements with Helen.

Before he left he had spoken to Helen about what he’d been planning to do. Helen was understanding, probably more than he would be about a niece of his being in bed with her boss.

“Thank you for helping her. It’s been a long time since anyone has had faith in her.” He gave her another nod without turning around and left the room.

Later that same day, by nine o’clock, Adam had been in touch with four lawyers, a detective agency and his father explaining the situation to them. Liam backed him up whole heartedly.

“You doing all this for a girl Adam because this doesn’t seem like something you’d do for a mere employee female or not?”

“Yeah.”

The same girl that had you wallowing in self pity here that week before last?” He asked in his deep gravelly voice.

“Yeah.”

“You thinking about marrying her?”

“Thinking about it. She’s resisting.”

“I see.” He really did. He knew that if one of his sons fell, they would fall very hard and it wouldn’t be for any ordinary woman. Even that little tramp that Adam had fallen for in school never made him sound so protective as he did now. “I should come home. After all, if one of my boys is thinking of getting married, I certainly don’t want anything to happen to a woman who would bear me some grandchildren before I shrivel up.”

“No, not yet dad, I need you where you are. Can you use some of those connections of yours to find out about Meagan’s mother and see if she’s still in Tennessee with that bastard, or if they’ve been moving around looking for her? I’m taking a flight out today to meet with you. Can you set up a meeting.”

“Probably. I’ll get right on it. Another thing, Mitchell called me last night. He’ll be home in less than two weeks. He wanted to surprise you boys, but I don’t think he’ll mind me telling you now. I’ll let him in on this, if that’s alright with you. It sounds like she could use the protection.”

“I can protect her.” He heard his father chuckle.

“No doubt son, but the three of you will guarantee it.”

His father was right. Mitchell, his older brother, would most definitely be an asset. The man was well trained in combat, and he wasn’t sure of how persistent Meagan’s stepfather is on getting her back. “All right.”

“When your plane lands, I should have something for you. This girl must be something else.”

“You have no idea pop.” He said and hung up after hearing his father’s chuckle just as Jasper came in.

“Hey, where’s Meagan? You and she were absent from breakfast.”

“Shut the door jasper. I need to talk to you.”

He arched his brows at his brother’s serious tone, but did as he asked.

Adam told him everything all the way up to their brother coming home.

Jasper was too angry to sit down, “There must be a tunnel to hell that these scum crawl out of.”

“I agree.”

“I’ll tell Henry. In the meantime, is there anything you want me to do for you?”

“Just keep an eye on her while I’m gone. Also go in and get that damn woman a cell phone just in case we end up losing her again.”

Jasper tried not to let the smile grace his face, but he couldn’t help it. Adam was hooked. He really couldn’t blame him, but Adam wasn’t the type to fall for a woman. Although Meagan wasn’t what any of the brothers were used to. She was sweet, down to earth and besides being pretty she wore her heart on her sleeve most times. The best of all, she may have been little, but she certainly could handle his hulking foul tempered brother.

“Get out of here before I slap that off your face.” Adam glared.

“Sure thing.” He chuckled while leaving.

Back in the present, Adam was hoping that things worked out perfectly for what he had planned for her today. Usually he would just take what he wanted, but not this time. Meagan was special and he would take his time with her. He had Red saddle his horse and the gelding that Meagan liked to ride and tie them to the post outside the house. Helen had loaded his saddle bags as he requested with a picnic lunch and he was just fastening them to the back of the saddle as Meagan came out of the stables and saw him. He didn’t miss the expression of delight on her face when she walked across the yard toward him.

“Are you ready honey?” He grinned at her as he came around the side of his horse.

“I should go put my jodhpurs on.”

“You have five minutes.” He said chuckling as she dashed up the steps into the house.

Meagan hadn’t explored the land in the direction he was taking her. They ended up manoeuvring between craggy cliffs along an unmarked path.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.” He said over his shoulder.

“Adam?”

‘Enjoy the view honey.’ He said.

He was right about the view. The higher they climbed the more beautiful it got. After several hours they broke through an edge of trees to a plateau that seemed to overlook the Wightman’s land as far as she could see. She inhaled sharply. “This is incredible!”

Adam smiled at her as he dismounted and tied their horses to a tree after she followed suit. “There’s more.” He tossed his saddle bags over his left shoulder and took her hand, “My brothers and I discovered this place when we were boys. No one else has been up here.”

“You’ve never taken anyone here?”

“Never.” He said casting her a look, “No one was worthy enough. I knew you’d see it as we do.” He led her through a narrow path between two rocky cliffs that the horses wouldn’t fit through. In fact, Adam had to turn sideways a few times where the rocks were almost touching one another to get his large body through.

Meagan stifled another gasp as she came to a clearing with several pools of the deepest blue-green water she’d ever seen. Then she noticed that there was steam rising out of the pools, “These are hot springs!” she said with excitement.

“They are.” He led her over beside the nearest pool, releasing her hand he unshouldered his saddlebags and began to unload a small blanket, and wrapped food.

“Adam—this is amazing.” She said looking at all the trouble he went through for her, “No one has ever done such a thing.”

He stopped and looked up at her, “You’re worth it honey. He patted the blanket, “come sit.”

She sat near him and together they enjoyed an amazing meal that her Aunt put together.

“I was going to bring a bottle of wine, but I didn’t think you wanted another drink for a while.”

She laughed at the amused glint in his eyes, “Thanks.”

“However—“ he said bending over and pulling out a small wrapped package, “According to Helen, your favourite desert is banana bread.”

“Oh you didn’t!” she laughed, “You’d better be careful Mr. Wightman. Someone will mistake you for a gentleman.”

“Not a chance.” He smirked unwrapping a slice for her, “Try this. I had her make it special.” He picked it up and held it towards her mouth.

“I swear you’re trying to fatten me up.”

“And lose that glorious figure. Never!” he said in mock anger, “Now bite.”

She did and her teeth ended up hitting something hard. “What is this?” she pulled the object out from between her teeth and her jaw dropped. Her eyes darted to Adam and back, “Adam, you said—“

“I said a lot of stupid things Meagan.”

Tears started to fall as she stared at possibly the most gorgeous ring she ever laid eyes on. “You seem to have an affliction for sapphires.” She choked out.

“I have an affliction for a sapphire-eyed beauty.” He said softly taking the ring from her and slipping it on her finger, “It’s perfect.”

“I love you.” She said staring at him.

“Why don’t you show me how much.” He said huskily.

Meagan didn’t hesitate and through her arms around him kissing him all over the face.

He lay back down on the blanket with her on top of him and framed her head in his hands, “Does this mean yes?” he said smiling.

“Oh yes—yes—yes!” she breathed kissing him on the mouth.

He kissed her back and rolled her over until she was under him smothering her mouth with his.

“I would like you to stay here forever.” He said raising himself above her.

Her smile stretched, “Hmmm. Come here then.” She reached up and coaxed his head down to hers to kiss him. “I want you.”

He tried to pull back but she was persistent, “We can’t…”

“I didn’t forget what you felt like next to me that last night we had together,” she murmured, “No matter how drunk and tired I was.” She opened her eyes and focused on him. The pleading evident in her liquid cerulean gaze, “Please Adam. I can’t take this anymore.”

He groaned breaking whatever resistance he had with her soft plea. He understood perfectly. He’d lain awake for several hours after her warm soft body snuggled up to his and couldn’t stop thinking about that night since. He knew then that he was going to marry her and began planning his whole proposal after he took care of protecting her as best he could. “Neither did I.”

“Adam I want to see you. All of you.” She told him with absolute certainty in her eyes.

“Are you sure?” he said searching her gaze.

“I am.” She answered, “Please.”

“Honey, you don’t have to beg. Not for that.” He lowered his head and captured her mouth with his as his hands began to undo the buttons on her blouse. Spreading it open he caressed the soft swell of her breasts, “Meagan,” he said against her mouth, “Take my shirt off.”

She obeyed fumbling with the buttons because she was trembling so much.

“Here.” He said sitting up and pulling her with him, “We’ll go slow.” His hands covered hers and stilled them as she continued until his chest was bare before her.

She pushed his shirt off of his thick shoulders. “You’re so beautiful,” she said in barely an audible voice as she lowered her gaze over his chest.

“Touch me.” He coaxed her by taking her hands and placing them on his chest.

Meagan could feel the taught muscles underneath his flesh pulsing and twitching as she traced her fingers over it.

“Do you see what you do to me?” he said looking at her fascinated expression.

“That’s from me?”

“Yes.” He smiled and lowered his face to her neck tracing a path along her soft skin causing her to shudder, “You make me feel just like that.” He said against her flesh.

She arched her neck while he continued to caress her skin with his mouth. Her hands flowed down his hard flat abdomen to his belt.

He felt her trying to undo his belt and released her enough to help her. Then he moved his hands to her shoulders to slide her blouse down her arms. He quickly disposed of the rest of her clothing then his.

“Just when I think you can’t get anymore beautiful.” He fell on her again bringing his mouth back to hers.

The intense feeling of skin on skin made her moan when he came back on top of her. She arched toward him.

“Christ, Meagan I haven’t even hardly touched you and you’re on fire. I’m ready to bury myself inside you.”

“Yes...do it.” Her hands stretched down and cupped his bottom digging her nails into the defined muscle. “Your body is so magnificent.” She breathed while running her hands over his back and shoulders.

He groaned, “No, I have to make this memorable for you.”

And he did. He caressed and enticed her almost to insanity. He tore her lace panties, impatient to get to the treasure they held before his hand when between her legs to ready her for him.

“Oh God!” She arched toward his hand. Then he pulled back and she cried his name.

His breathing was rapid and uneven, “Just a second, I need to protect you.” He reached over and fumbled with his pants to get his wallet pulling out a small square packet.

“What is that?”

“You don’t know?” he lifted his brows in surprise. The woman’s innocence never ceased to amaze him.

She shook her head.

“Birth control, honey, I don’t want to get you pregnant.” He watched her intense stare on the packet then she slowly lifted her eyes to his. Everything about this woman had him reeling in fascination. Just now while she looked up at him, he couldn’t help but think she was the most beautiful desirable woman in the world.

“Don’t use it Adam.”

He paused looking at her, “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I want your baby.”

At that moment he felt a surge of emotion that he could have never admitted to feeling before in his life. Even thinking of her body swelling with his child sent such a wave of joy through him he was unprepared for it. It was then he knew he loved her. Not once had she asked something of him, and she gave herself freely without restriction because she loved him. Now she lay naked and flushed with desire in front of him. Nothing could have surpassed that glorious image for him. Without taking his eyes off of hers he tossed the packet aside.

Gently, he pushed her flat on her back and covered her again. This time his urgency changed to tenderness and his possessiveness was translated into passion. “Put your legs around me Meagan.” She didn’t even hesitate.

She could feel him probing for entrance and it began to hurt and she flinched.

Regardless he needed to be with her and couldn’t stop, but she never asked him to, and in fact clung to him more. He lifted her thigh high against his hip, “I’ll be gentle.” He said thickly and slipped partially in her groaning at the tightness. The barrier of her virginity gave way with another slight push causing her to cry out.

“Adam!” She choked out.

“It’ll pass. Honey, lift your knees I’m not completely in you yet...It’ll help...Oh Christ!” He groaned into her neck as he slid a little further, “That’s it!”

Nothing could have prepared him for how good it felt and he’d had a lot of women in his life. Right then and there he knew he could never let her go. Something inside him let go at that moment, and he knew he could never lose her. Never in his life had he felt like this toward a woman and in that instant he realized it, the last of his wall came crumbling down. He paused to capture her mouth tenderly with his hoping to God he hadn’t hurt her too much. She was so small compared to him and he’d rather cut off his arm before he hurt her.

He started moving in her slowly at first waiting for her responses, and he got it. She began moaning. It wasn’t easy on him, he was perspiring with unspoken restraint. More than

anything he wanted to give in to his pleasure and force himself into her moist depths, but despite his urges he didn't, couldn't bring himself to hurt her more than he already was.

He gently teased her pulling in and out partially until she was writhing and moaning for more. Then when he felt she was ready, he reached down and grasped her hips to lift her for the next thrust that buried himself to the hilt. She cried out in pain and he stilled shaking with restraint. "All right Meagan, I'm all in" he paused to take a ragged breath, "God, tell me you're okay. Lie if you have to."

"No...don't stop...I'm okay." She grabbed his head in her hands and kissed him.

He groaned and pulled back slowly then buried himself just as deep, this time she gasped. "I'm hurting you," He ground out through his teeth as he desperately tried to hold back.

"No...I like it!"

"God Meagan! You're so damn tight!" He pulled out again, "I couldn't stop if I wanted to now!" He started a slow rhythm rocking his body on top of hers while reading her responses with experienced eyes. Without breaking stride he leaned over and whispered endearments in her ear. He knew when she was ready for more and when she tightened her thighs and arched toward him he gave it to her.

"Meagan look at me." The feminine noises she was making every time he sank within her was testing his willpower.

Her eyes shot open and she gripped his shoulders, "Adam!"

"You're so beautiful," he captured her mouth with a furious passion, crushing her lips relentlessly against his while his tongue thrust deeply into her mouth. She matched his movements and then threw her head back shuddering beneath him. He deepened the force and speed of his movements groaning with rising pleasure. He gripped her hips and buried himself as deep as he could shouting her name as he climaxed as she cried her own. He collapsed on her nude body mingling his perspiration with his.

It seemed like an eternity before either one of them said anything.

Adam lifted his head as he adjusted his large form as not to crush her, "Are you all right honey?" he didn't realize how out of breath he was until he spoke.

"uh-uh." She managed in an awed whisper.

He grinned, looking down at her, "I know that was your first time, but if you had any idea." He shook his head, "how damn amazing that was, you would understand why I couldn't wait to get that ring on your finger."

She turned her head and looked at him, "I thought you didn't want to get married."

"I didn't think I did. Then I met you." He took a deep breath, "I'm crazy about you and after what we just did, I don't ever want to let you go. Not only did we just make love, I can't bear the thought of another man touching you. I've been doing a lot of thinking this week. I mean it when I say I want you as my wife." He grinned sinfully, "Not only that honey, but you might be pregnant."

"Oh God," she grinned back, "I hope so."

He groaned and kissed her again before lifting his head to stare at her. "We're getting married next week at the latest."

She laughed. "Shhh, people will hear you. The hard Adam Wightman proposing marriage."

"Me? You practically were shouting from the rafters." He mused

"No I wasn't....oh-my-god...I was!"

He rolled off her and propped his head up on his hand, "You really were." He grinned with obvious superiority.

She hit his chest playfully, "My God, you are so arrogant."

"Are you sorry?"

"No." she blushed, "I loved it." then she smiled, "I love you."

He laughed, "Well, now that Helen has her suspicions on what we been doing up here after I had her make us this lunch, I will marry you."

She flushed further, "I'm a big girl. This is a modern age. You don't need to marry me Adam."

He shook his head seductively while his thumb caressed her lips. His eyes followed it's movement. "No baby, you're a perfect woman, with a great body and a big heart. I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't think I was sure of it."

"You're no ugly hag yourself." She kissed his thumb.

His brows went up, "No?" she smiled and he separated her lips with his thumb.

She licked it before she sucked it in her mouth causing his breathing to suddenly change.

"Oh sweetheart, you have no idea what that does to a man." He growled pushing her onto her back.

She chuckled, "I can guess." Her words were cut off by his mouth. This time there was discomfort but it didn't hurt like before and the waves of pleasure began to course through her right away. Within minutes sounds were escaping her lips like before and Adam seemed to be able to read her mind on when to take her further.

Chapter Nine

An hour later, Adam coaxed her naked into the hot water to help ease the discomfort of their lovemaking only he still didn't release her and continuously caressed and kissed her. Meagan couldn't remember any other time in her life that she'd felt so adored.

"Boy, I am going to have fun teaching you." He said thickly while rubbing his hand delicately up her spine.

She felt a thrill go through her. "I'm a fast learner."

"I must admit, I love the noises you make when I make love to you. Whatever control I have, just disintegrates."

She laughed, "You're not quiet either."

"I used to be...but with you..." he swore and sighed causing her to laugh again. "We've got to get going. If we don't come back soon they'll come looking for us thinking I'm killing you with all of the noise you're making."

"I was pretty sure I *almost* died." She said seductively.

"Meagan!" He curved his hand over her bare bottom burying his face in her neck, "I just seduced you." He groaned, kissing the nape of her neck before lifting his head and the reluctantly climbed out of the pool

"Excuse me!" she called after him, "I'm sure I seduced *you*." She said while stacking her hands on the edge of the pool and resting her chin on it to watch him dress. Every inch of him was pure muscle, strong, and powerful, yet he was no less than gentle and patient with her. There was no way he couldn't have done that unless he cared about her more than he let on.

“Meagan,” he said casting her a glance as he pulled on his shirt, “If you keep looking at me like that, I’m coming back in. Now get out and get dress, we have wedding plans to make and I have to take you into town and get you a gown for the cattleman’s ball tomorrow night.”

She laughed then sighed and got out pulling on her clothes while Adam cleaned up their lunch.

It took less time to go down the mountain and they were home in less than two hours. Adam took the horses to the stables and told her to go and change so they can hit the shops in town before they closed.

When she came down the stairs three quarters of an hour later she still wasn’t ready for how handsome he looked. He traded his shirt and jeans for a navy blue suit and a black Stetson and a matching string tie.

“Hi.” he said holding his hat in his hand.

“Hi.” She managed shyly.

He held up his other hand, “come on sweetheart, nothing’s changed.” He grinned.

She suddenly relaxed coming down the stairs and taking his hand.

“Are you okay.” He leaned down and spoke softly. “Are you sure I didn’t hurt you.”

She flushed, “A little, but oh, it was so worth it.” She laughed at his conceited expression, “I should just shut up.”

“No, honey, you build my ego like no other.” He bent his head and kissed her.

Helen came through the front door at that time with a basket of vegetables from the garden. She stopped and stared at the both of them, “Well, aren’t you two a handsome couple.” She exclaimed with obvious excitement. She focused her attention on Adam, “You set a date yet?”

“Helen!”

“Not yet.” Adam offered pulling her close, “I’m set on next week.”

“So soon?” Helen said.

“It’ll have to be—“ he started but Meagan elbowed him and shot him a warning glance causing him to laugh

“Okay, I don’t need to know why then.” Helen’s face actually reddened, “You two go and have fun.” She said briskly as she walked away.

“Adam! That’s my Aunt. You don’t need to let on.” She said with complete mortification.

“I never said anything, she made her own conclusions.” He embraced her, “Now I can’t help it if your aunt has a dirty mind.”

“Oh God I’m so embarrassed.” She said.

“Meagan, one only has to look at you and you blush. You gave it away the moment she came out of the kitchen.”

“I did not!” she pulled back and looked at him, then guided her eyes to the mirror in the hall behind him. Her face was flushed, her mouth was swollen and she had a look about her that she never noticed before.

He turned and looked over his shoulder to see her reflection, “See?”

“My own body betrays me.” She mumbled making him chuckle again.

Adam led her to his charcoal grey Mercedes and opened the door to let her slide in the passenger seat before walking back and getting in the driver’s seat.

“Now did I hear you say something about shopping?” She vaguely remembered him mentioning it.

He grinned at her and started the car, “Yeah, I think you were distracted.” He watched her blush. “I was going to spoil you. There’s a function tomorrow night I want to take you to and show you off. You need a fancy gown, plus a few more things.”

“Adam, you are not buying my clothes.”

He pulled out of the yard and onto the road, “Yes, I am. You are officially engaged to me as of several hours ago and I want the whole world to know it.”

“Are you really sure about this?”

“I’ve never been more sure honey. Quit asking that.” He said with confidence.

“You are very persistent.” She said, exasperated.

He shot her a serious glance, “I’ve made up my mind. I won’t change it.”

“Adam?” she said with less confidence, “I hope this isn’t because of what I told you that my stepfather did to me.”

He let out a frustrated sigh, eased the car to the side of the road and turned it off before facing her, “I know you haven’t had much faith in marriage because of your past. Neither have I, but my parents were happily married and from that I can actually see now that there are marriages that do work if there is a foundation.”

“You don’t love me Adam.” She said softly, “I can accept the fact that you care but...”

“Enough!” He shot, holding up his hand to cut her off, “You don’t know how I feel because I’ve never given you any indication. Not only that, you don’t know how I am with women.” He framed her face in his large hands, “I haven’t felt this way about a woman like you ever. I know a good thing when I got it, and I’m not letting you go. Now, you will marry me, if I have to tie you, gag you, and drug you to get you to the alter. Do not argue with me.” He just couldn’t find the courage to tell her how he really felt. Adam had never had a problem with telling anyone anything, but for some reason the words would not come out.

She felt like crying. She loved him so much and although he confessed that he cared about her, would it be enough for her to marry him? It had to be. It made her physically sick thinking of him with another woman, or being without him, “I don’t want you to get bored with me and...”

“Bored! Christ woman, you drive me wild to my teeth! How the hell could I be bored? Now that I’ve had you, it put many things in perspective for me. I don’t want another woman, ever! In fact, if you weren’t so dolled up, and if it wasn’t so soon for you after your first time, I’d have you across this consol on my lap and inside you quicker than you could blink.” She flushed, and he lowered his voice a degree making him sound seductive, “Even after finally having you, I can’t get you out of my head. They way you and I were together, I’ve never had anything that good. I thought I was obsessed before, now I’m completely infatuated.” His eyes searched hers, “Now believe me when I say I mean it.” When she didn’t say anything he took her shoulders and gave her a gentle shake, “Meagan?” Her eyes misted up and tears began to fall, but she slowly nodded, “thank Christ!” he bent over and kissed her cheeks, “God you are a stubborn woman! I have to beat them off with a stick, but you, you drive me crazy running around after you like a love-sick puppy! Only you could possibly turn my hellish rage into a docile kitten” This brought a choked laugh. “There now....shhhh honey, don’t cry. You’re pulling my heart out.” He crushed her in his arms.

“I can’t help it.” She sobbed, “Every time I get around you I end up turning on the waterworks.”

He chuckled, "Hmmm, you must love me."

"I do."

He kissed her soundly before releasing her, "Just seeing my ring on your finger makes me know this is more right than anything else I've done in my life. I want people know who you belong to from now on." He eyed her, and recognized her expression, "Do not even think about protesting after that confession I gave you." He said gruffly.

She smiled, "Okay Adam."

"Much better," he grinned starting the car and pulling back out onto the road.

She didn't realize it at the time, but now that she stared at him as he concentrated on the road ahead, it wasn't like Adam to talk about his weaknesses, and he'd just admitted how he felt about her in so many words without saying the words. She studied his handsome profile and powerful features imagining what it was like having his body crush hers into the soft ground, his hands and flesh sliding over hers, filling her. A twinge of heat between her thighs reminded her. He glanced sideways at her.

"Honey, keep it up and we won't make it to town." He said huskily. "I'll pull off the bloody road and take you on the hood of my car if you keep looking at me like that."

She flushed, "Sorry." Not realizing she was staring at him in such a way.

"Hell." He murmured taking out a cigarette and lighting it, "I'm already aroused thinking about it and I've had you twice today already." He released a breath of smoke sparing her a sidelong smouldering glance, "You'd think I'd be satiated. See what I mean? Bored my ass!"

She turned her head away to look out of the side window so he couldn't see the smile on her face. Then she thought, *what the hell*, "What a juicy thought, you and me on the hood of your car." She turned back at him and saw him stare at her with barefaced shock with his cigarette hanging loosely between his chiselled lips. "Adam the road!" she yelled, and he cursed righting the car before he drove it into the ditch.

"That's it!" He pulled off into an old side road and swerved behind a bunch of trees, cut the engine, flicked his smoke out the window and made a grab for her. She screeched, but he didn't care. He did exactly what he said he was going to do. He pulled her across his lap, hiked up her skirt, tore her panties off, undid his slacks, gripped her thighs and was in her before she could catch her next breath. "God baby, you're already wet for me!" he smothered her mouth with his and she moaned. He was so turned on he didn't think he would last until she found her pleasure, but she did and so did he. With a final hard thrust he ended it with a shout and she buried her face in his neck.

Both of them were trying to catch their breath.

"Wow." She mouthed against his skin.

"You're telling me." He put his hands on either side of her ribcage and lifted her back without removing himself from her. His eyes searched her face, "See what you do to me? If I keep at you like this, you won't be walking right for a week."

She laughed.

"You are driving me insane."

She smiled contented, "It works both ways darling."

He grinned at her confession, "I suppose so." He kissed her and she responded willingly causing him to grow hard again. He groaned, "God, will this ever end? I can't get enough of you."

She bent down and licked his throat, “No. Don’t let it.” She adjusted herself and started lifting her hips against him and he obliged her. This time their movements were slower and more deliberate and before long they were both lost in the act until they found release.

He held her for a long time afterward not wanting her to leave his embrace. She felt priceless against him and nothing, absolutely nothing could compare to how much she meant to him. He knew he didn’t say the words, but they were there. His hand stroked her silken, sun-gold hair all the way down her back. She gave herself to him selflessly, not demanding anything in return. What did he do to deserve such a precious gift? She loved him. She actually loved him! Not his money, not just his body, but him. He had thought he’d build up a wall to keep women at bay, and it worked until she came along and it crumbled like ashes. He kissed the top of her head tenderly while tightening his hold.

“What are you thinking?” she said against his neck feeling his arms contract around her. He chuckled, “That the last time I had a girl in a car seat was when I was nineteen.”

She laughed, sitting straight to look at him. “I have no underwear now, thanks to you I’ll be commando around town. You’d better hope there’s no wind. This is the second pair you’ve torn.”

“It’s your own damn fault and you know it.” He grinned. “If you weren’t such a sexy woman, I wouldn’t continuously destroy your lingerie.”

“Hmmm, I think I like this power.”

“Remember what you said, it works both ways.” He lifted her easily off him and set her in the other seat, “Get yourself straightened up. I’ll have to buy you some new panties when we get to town.” He chuckled and stared at her for a moment with his eyes glittering, “Damn baby, you’re something else!”

Their first stop was the boutique. Adam gave her a credit card, kissed her politely on the forehead and told the shop saleslady to give her her every hearts desire. You could practically see dollar signs in the woman’s eyes. “And some fancy under things.” He added much to Megan’s embarrassment.

“Where are you going?” she said as he began to leave.

“I’ll be back in an hour. Just don’t leave here without me okay? I have a few things to take care of.”

She nodded.

An hour and a half later she thought she might have tried on everything in the store, but in the end she did manage to get her fancy gown for his engagement tomorrow night and a few other items including the ‘fancy under things’.

She was at the counter paying for it when the little bell over the shop door tinkled and a familiar voice cut through her like ice.

“I see he’s got you primping up like a mistress now.” Said Heather coldly.

Megan blushed and the saleslady glanced between the two of them. If she didn’t see the way Mr. Wightman was looking at this young lady she might have thought the same thing, but he was obviously in love with her. She also knew Miss Cornick, and her reputation. “Miss Cornick, if you wish to take a seat, I’ll be with you in one moment.” She tried to sound as pleasant as she could.

“I’m not here to buy anything,” She said haughtily, still glaring daggers into the back of Megan’s head.

Finally Meagan turned around and lifted her chin, not willing to give the other woman any satisfaction that what she had said bothered her, “Then what do you want?”

“I want you to leave him alone. I’ve been chasing him for four years. Do you honestly think we haven’t been together in the past few weeks?” She saw Meagan pale. “I’m sure he told you we weren’t. But why would he have a little inexperienced thing like you when he could have a real woman?”

“I would like you to leave Miss Cornick. You are harassing my customer and although I appreciated your business, I find this very inappropriate.”

Heather spared her a glance, “My business and my friends are what keep you open. So I’ll kindly ask you to stay out of this. It’s between the stable girl and myself.”

Meagan saw the woman give her an apologetic look before turning away and going into the back room. “It must be nice not to work for anything in your life and go around telling other people what to do.” She shot at her.

Heather took a few steps toward her but was smart enough to keep her distance, “That’s the difference between my kind and yours. Adam is my kind. He’ll grow bored of you little girl and then come back to me...”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Adam stepped into the shop just in time because he was pretty sure by the look on his future wife’s face that she was getting ready to strike her again. He’d seen her car from down the street and knew the woman saw his Mercedes parked outside the boutique. He’d left it there while he walked down the street to his lawyer’s office, then to the city hall to apply for a marriage license. Unfortunately Heather knew his car.

Heather whirled about to face him and plastered a false smile on her face like she didn’t do anything wrong, “Why Adam, I didn’t know you were in town.”

“Right.” He walked around her to Meagan and tipped her face up to his, “Are you all right?” He said tenderly.

If Heather was telling the truth about them being together, it didn’t show. He publically displayed his affection for her. If he was still sleeping with the woman, he would look guilty. She was sure of it. She gave him a nod letting the relief flow through her. Everything he said earlier came flooding back into her mind. He professed his love for her in his way and she doubted very much that he did that with Heather.

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her close to him turning his steely gaze back on Heather, “I don’t appreciate you coming in here and harassing my fiancée Heather.”

She gasped, “You—you can’t be serious! You can’t marry her, she’s a...”

Meagan held up her hand and showed her the ring on her finger and couldn’t help the smile that spread across her face at the look of shock that entered the older woman’s expression. Heather’s eyes widened then set accusingly on Adam.

“After everything I did for you.”

“Do you mean the malicious gossip you started?”

She thrust her hand in Meagan’s direction, “You told me you weren’t interested in her!”

“That’s not what I said heather,” he reminded her icily, “I said leave her alone. She had nothing to do with my decision. I didn’t lie. She didn’t. I fell in love with her on my own.”

Both Heather and Meagan snapped their heads in his direction in disbelief.

Meagan knew that he was just saying that to get the woman off her case, and it worked because she let out a horrid sound of disbelief and stomped out of the store. However, for a brief moment she was able to imagine it as the truth and for that moment it felt as though her life was complete.

He waited until she was out of view before he turned back to Meagan, “Honey, whatever she told you it isn’t true.”

“How do you know she told me anything?”

“Because I know that woman. We’ve known each other since high school. I know perfectly what she’s capable of.”

“Adam, you dated her!”

“Not for the reasons you think. A man has needs, she satisfied them for a short time.” He saw her look darken, “Before you get angry, these things happened before I became involved with you. You can’t fault me for that.”

“I told you how I feel about you. What if the roles were reversed?”

“Honey it’s different with women.” She raised her brows and folded her arms under her breasts, and he finally let out a breath of air conceding to her question, “Well if that’s the case then. If the roles were reversed, I’d probably hunt down all of your ex-boyfriends and pound them stupid. Does that satisfy you?”

She actually laughed, “Yes. Now you know how I feel.”

He kissed her, “I’ve always known, sweetheart. Haven’t you heard me when I’ve threatened men for just looking at you? Now are you ready to go?”

“Yes.” She grinned at his sour expression.

“Good.” He said not returning it. Her dragging such confessions out of him were becoming a habit. What he told Heather was the truth. He didn’t mean to blurt it out like that, but it was the only way he could get rid of the older woman and it worked. Yet it still unsettled him. That was something he had to get used to, because he needed Meagan to know how he felt about her.

The saleslady came out from the back and apologized while handing over Meagan’s parcels.

“It’s okay, that woman can be intimidating.” Meagan offered causing the older woman to smile.

“You’re welcome back anytime Miss, and next time, I’ll give you a discount.”

Adam retrieved her parcels and his credit card, letting the women talk. Meagan handled herself well, and if she was making friends, he wasn’t going to interfere. He nodded to the woman and took Meagan’s hand.

He put her purchases in the trunk of his car and saw her glance down the street. Heather’s car was gone. “Don’t let her bother you.” He said grabbing her hand in his to lead her toward his car.

“Adam...”

“I meant what I said about marrying you.” He interrupted with a tone he knew she wouldn’t contest. “I know I probably didn’t present it in a way a woman would want it Meagan, but it’s the best I can do.”

“That’s not in Adam. I believe you just saying that is not easy.” She stepped closer to him while looking up at him, “I love that about you. Its just I don’t want you to think you need to protect me.”

“I want to.” He said softly, “Very much. I look at you and I can see a future with a woman and that’s something I’ve never had the pleasure of seeing before. I can see us with children, watching them grow—“

“—Children?” she almost wept. “Are you really sure? I mean I know what we decided to do was in the throws of passion and I was worried you’d change your mind.”

“Not on your life.” He smiled, “I want a little girl with big blue eyes and long blond hair.”

“That has to be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.” Tears started to fall from her eyes.

“Honey, you know what your tears do to me. I’m a big man, and you can bring me to my knees over them.” He murmured, pulling her close. “Stop it.”

She nodded, “I love you.”

They walked hand in hand across the street to his car.

“Heather said something that upset me.” She finally said.

He stopped, turned and looked down at her, “What was that?”

“Heather said you’ve been intimate with her.” To her surprise he laughed.

“When?”

“The past few weeks.”

He grinned down at her, “Honey, the week I was away from the ranch, I was so miserable because of our split, that I drove to the city and brooded in my apartment. My father can attest to that.”

“Alone?”

“Very very alone. I needed time to think. No one has been able to get under my skin and rattle me as much as you have. Then the previous week, I couldn’t take my hands off you long enough to notice another woman.” He sighed, “I’m sorry she hurt you, but Jasper is right, she is a bitch. I didn’t realize how much until she started insulting you. Now believe me when I say, the last time I touched that woman it was well over a month ago. That day in the stable when I kissed you and tasted you for the first time, it ruined me for every other woman. I hadn’t had one until today.”

She stared at him for a moment feeling a surge of elation go through her at his confession. After all this time she thought he was still together with Heather after that first kiss, but he really wasn’t, “I believe you.”

He smiled, “Good. Now, I want to take you to dinner to celebrate our engagement.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds wonderful.” She held out her hand and admired the ring as they walked down the street.

He was pleased that she liked it. He wanted nothing more in that instant to make her happy. To spoil her and make her feel absolutely adored. Suddenly he turned and grabbed her kissing her in full view of everyone around them.

Sarah accidentally dumped coffee all over a patron’s lap causing him to scream as she stood speechless looking out the window at the couple. She sputtered apologies, but then he noticed what she was looking at while dabbing napkins on his wet leg.

“Isn’t that Adam Wightman?”

“It is.” She said, “I’m sorry Mr. Moran, I hope it didn’t burn.”

“It’s alright honey, I’ll live, it wasn’t too bad.” His eyes went back to the couple on the sidewalk, “Who the heck is the woman?”

“Obviously the future Mrs. Wightman.” She smiled.

“I’d say.” He shared her smile, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so affectionate with a woman before in my life.”

“Good. That means he really cares about her.” She turned and went back to work.

Adam took Meagan out to a nice restaurant for dinner and they didn't get home until after eleven. Helen was waiting for them when they came through the door laughing arm in arm.

"Helen?" Meagan said, surprised that her aunt was still up.

Adam looked at her, "I'll get your parcels out of the car, he excused himself and walked out.

"You tell me young lady, that...oh my goodness!" She grabbed Meagan's hand and looked at the ring then back at her, "I didn't think it would look so perfect on you!"

She nodded grinning, "Isn't it beautiful. Oh Helen, he spoiled me today. I don't think I've ever been this happy." She exclaimed.

Helen gave her a warm hug, "I'm happy for you, I like Adam. He does dote on you and he's been looking at you with love in his eyes for months now."

"He cares about me, but I love him."

"You are blind, young lady. Anyway, I'm going to bed. Jasper took Sarah out tonight, so I doubt he'll be home. So I'll wish you goodnight love."

"Goodnight Helen." She made her way upstairs to her room and began to undress when Adam came in unannounced.

"Adam!" she covered her front with her robe.

He laughed, "A little late for that." He set her parcels down and walked over to gather her in his arms.

"I'm still trying to get used to it." She blushed.

He peeled her robe out of her hands and tossed it on a chair, "Something so beautiful should never be covered around me." One of his hands covered her breast making her gasp and lean into him. "I need a shower love, meet me in my bed in twenty minutes. Please wear something sexy that you got today. I would try and wait until we're wed, but I'd lie if I said I could keep my hands off you until then. We'll go and see the Justice of the Peace first thing tomorrow. Unless you want a big wedding."

"And invite who?" she smiled.

"Hmmm. Kiss me then."

She did.

"Screw this," he said picking her up, "I'll shower after." He carried her across the hall and kicked the door shut behind him. Adam took his time slowly undressing her until she stood only in a black lacy thong. "Don't..." he said when her hands came up to cover herself.

"Something so beautiful should not be hidden. Now it's my turn." And he continued to remove his own clothes.

Meagan forgot about her own nudity and focused on his. She lowered her gaze over the length of him, "Wow." She mouthed causing him to release a sensual grin. Everything about him was thick without an ounce of fat anywhere. Then her eyes went lower and a blush entered her cheeks at his erection.

"Now you know exactly how I react to you." He sat on the edge of the bed, "come here."

She walked up to him and he circled his hands around her hips grasping the edge of her thong and slowly, deliberately pulled it down her thighs, passed her knees, and down her calves until she stepped out of it. He leaned forward and ran his mouth over her flat stomach causing her to lean in to him and thread her hands in his hair. Then his mouth moved lower and he felt her shudder.

"Oh God!" she strangled out as his tongue found her most intimate spot.

Adam pushed one of her thighs over his shoulder giving him better access, gripped her bottom and gave her pleasure the likes she had never had. Within two minutes she was making enough noise to wake the dead, had her fingers painfully knotted in his hair to keep herself upright, but he didn't care either way as long as she kept saying his name the deep throaty way she was every time a wave of pleasure hit her.

"My turn!" She gasped, "My turn!"

It took him a moment to figure out what she was saying. Then when he did he quickly shifted positions, placing her on the bed as he was, grabbing the backs of her knees pulling her forward so he stood between her thighs as she took him hesitantly at first, into her hot mouth while he told her in a deep voice what he wanted. Then as natural as breathing, she sucked and teased his member into the back of her throat.

"Oh Christ!" he shouted near buckling at the knees, "I can't take this!" He grasped her head in between his hands and pulled her mouth off him, "I've got to get in you, or I'm going to come." He flipped her down on the bed and came down on her, grasped her hips, entering her swiftly making her cry out her pleasure. He wasn't gentle, possessing and thrusting in to her with reckless abandon, but she didn't protest. She sobbed and cried her pleasure until they both climaxed and lay on each other spent, in ragged breathing and mixed perspiration.

"Now I'm *sure* I died." She whispered, causing him to release something she was sure was supposed to be a groan, but sounded more like an exhausted grunt against her neck. She giggled.

"I know I did." He breathed out a ragged breath when he finally found the strength to speak. Then he shifted to the side and pulled her with him so her face lay inches away from hers, "woman, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were having sex for years before you met me."

"I said I was a fast learner."

"Fast, hell, you've graduated." He ran his index finger along her swollen bottom lip, while his eyes followed the gesture, "And you're all mine." He added softly.

She blinked and smiled,

"And those noises you make drive me completely wild."

"You complain about the noise *I* make..." her eyes widened in mock surprise.

"Yeah, yeah, well, when you took me in your mouth like that, I couldn't help myself and felt like a bellowing bull." He took a deep breath while looking into her eyes, "Honey, you are the most amazing, fascinating, sexy woman, I've ever been with." She blushed and he leaned over and kissed her tenderly.

"I love you" she murmured while closing her eyes.

I love you too. He thought while watching her drift off to sleep.

Chapter Ten

The next morning when she woke he was gone, but she saw a red rose on his pillow and smiled picking it up and smelling it. She wrapped a sheet around her and crept across the hall to her room to have a quick shower and dress. Making her way into the dining room she straightened her shoulders and did her best to keep her chin high knowing that someone would have heard the noise they made last night. From the voices behind the door, she knew everyone was still in there. But when she made her way into the room no one even indicated that heard anything. The only one who managed to embarrass her was Adam himself, for when she made to walk by him, he grabbed her, pulled her onto his lap and captured her mouth with his causing

Henry and Jasper to make excuses and vacate the room. Neither one of the two in the embrace noticed or paid them heed.

Unknown to Meagan, Jasper spent the night a Sara's and Henry stayed in the bunkhouse to give them both privacy. Unfortunately, the ranch hands started to gossip, but Henry put that talk dead when he sunk his fist into Red's face after he made a lewd comment about Meagan not sleeping in her own bed anymore. Henry may have been sixty, but he could still take a man down.

"Has anyone else got something to say?" There was silence. "That's a good thing. Now whatever goes on around here, stays around here. I won't hear of anyone slandering that sweet young thing and if I hear something in town that came back to one of you boys. I'll fire you on the spot. You got that."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"No one meant anything by it Henry," Said Abe, "Red was just teasing." He glared at the young man holding his black eye, "It won't happen again. We're all fond of her."

"Teasing leads to malicious gossip." Henry corrected. "And Adam is very fond of her. In fact, he's marrying her." This brought astonished looks from the group, "Now I know you boys don't want to get on his bad side by speaking about his wife."

There were louder murmurs of agreement.

At the cattlemen's ball that night, they didn't notice anyone but each other. Adam danced with her most of the night while whispering positively indecent things into her ear. She couldn't have been more grateful for his strength because she doubted she could stand with half the things he said to her. He held her tightly to him with his stubby chin against her temple as he guided her about the floor with graceful expertise. It made her feel like Cinderella at the ball and she told him so.

"I've been wanting to dance with you since you went to the last one with Jasper." He said with a sinful smile.

She felt a thrill go through her at his confession. Lately he'd been more than affectionate with her. Ever since they had talked a few nights ago, it seemed to have removed all their barriers. She only wished he could love her the way she loved him.

Everyone who knew the Wightman boys, knew this wasn't usual behaviour, and it didn't escape the crowd that the lovely woman he was with had a very expensive engagement ring on her finger. Not only that, Adam didn't covet women the way he did this one or laugh and smile as much and they began to draw attention. Gossip spread like wildfire and before the night was half over, congratulations were being handed over like hors d'oeuvres.

They almost didn't make it to the ball because when she came down the hall in a royal blue full length velvet dress that complimented her eyes perfectly, he took one look at the tight bodice that shaped nicely over her breasts, accenting her narrow waist and flared hips, and threatened to take her back to bed. The necklace he gave her settled perfectly above them and to any man living she was a sight to behold. She had pinned her hair up in a cascade of curls that elegantly dropped to her graceful neck.

"Stunning." He breathed with pride. *I had her*, he thought as she walked toward him with a sensual sway of her hips, *I am the only one to ever touch her intimately*. She was his. For some reason it really mattered to him even though he always professed wanting a woman with experience. As he raked his gaze over her elegant form, he didn't think he could take it if another

man had touched Meagan before he did. Knowing that her passionate, loving responses were only because he heightened his desire and possessiveness for her. God he loved her.

She gave him a gorgeous smile and held a small box out for him, "For you."

"Really?" He cocked a brow, pulled the ribbon and opened the box revealing a matching royal blue handkerchief.

She took it out of the box and tucked it neatly in the lapel pocket of his tuxedo, "Now, they know who *you* belong to."

He laughed, bent down and brushed his mouth over hers. "I know who I belong to."

As they walked off the dance floor they were met by Sara and Jasper. Sara wore a pale green taffeta with a straight cut bodice, which was elegant for her tiny figure.

"I've heard the rumours," Sara said to Meagan, "And Jasper spilled the beans. Now show me the ring."

Megan lifted her hand and saw Sara's eyes widen, "Wow, Adam you outdid yourself. This is beautiful."

"there's still the wedding ring." Adam teased.

"Wait a minute," Meagan swung her head toward him, "I..."

"Too late honey, I already bought it."

She rolled her eyes, "See? I can't win."

Sara laughed, "I know what it's like." She inclined her head toward Jasper.

"Hey." Said Jasper. Then he leaned over and something in her ear that made her blush completely to the roots of her hair. "There, no don't tell me I don't let you have your way." He added.

Meagan near blushed for her. She could only imagine what he said by the look on her face. Just then a photographer asked for a picture of the four of them. Meagan tried to avoid getting in it, but Adam held her tight to his side. She couldn't help but worry if the photo would make the national news or not. After a brief thought she figured that it wouldn't. Who reads the news of a small town paper right? Still she couldn't shake that uneasiness.

The next few days flew by, and Adam had bought her a lovely cream satin dress to stand up in front of the town judge while he wed them with Helen, Henry and Jasper as witnesses. Adam didn't take his eyes off of her the whole time, even when he slid the ring on her finger.

"You're beautiful." He said right before he kissed her, sealing their vows. Then they signed the papers leaving Meagan in total disbelief that the day had finally arrived that she was married.

"Well Mrs. Wightman? Shall we go home?" He held out his arm and she accepted.

Adam told her earlier that he was going to take her to Europe for a honeymoon, but they couldn't leave during roundup, they would leave next month. By then Mitchell, his older brother would be home to help out. He was supposed to be home today, but got delayed in the city with their father. They would have delayed the wedding but Adam didn't want to wait any longer to make Meagan his wife.

The next day Meagan asked Henry to take her to town when he went because she had ordered some special cigars for him from the specialty smoke shop.

"Where are you going Meagan?" Henry said as she hopped out and started down the block.

"I want to get something for Adam. I'll only be a minute."

“Don’t go too far Adam told me to keep an eye on you.” He warned her with warmth in his eyes.

“I’m just around the corner.” She smiled while walking backwards.

“All right.” He said sceptically. He’d only be a minute in the hardware store, and then he’ll go find her. “Don’t go anywhere else, and don’t talk to strangers.”

“Sure dad.” She laughed and disappeared around the corner.

He chuckled.

Twenty minutes later, Henry was in a complete panic. He couldn’t find her after leaving the hardware store and spent ten minutes searching the stores in the direction he last saw her. Finally, he was able to find that she’d visited the cigar shop and the salesman saw her talking to a woman when she left.

“Did she seem upset?”

“I don’t think so. She seemed startled and dropped her box of cigars, but she went with her.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t watch.” The young man said in defence. Truth was, he was too captivated by the woman to think of anything past meeting her.

“What did she look like?” Said Henry with exasperation. “You must’ve seen something.”

“Geez, I don’t know, that chick was so hot—“, the clerk took a step back as Henry started toward him angrily, “Wait! I think she actually she looked a lot like Mrs. Wightman, except older.”

“Ah Christ! He’s going to kill me.” He dropped his head in his hand trying to collect his thoughts. Finally he lifted his head to speak to the clerk again, “get on the phone and call Chief Duncan, and tell him that Mrs. Wightman has just been kidnapped.”

“Oh...yes sir.” The man picked up the phone and called the police station.

Henry pulled out his cell phone and called the ranch.

Adam made it to town in record time. Chief Duncan had all of his men searching the hotels and asking questions of the surrounding shop patrons when he arrived.

“Duncan!” Adam pushed through the small group of policemen by the shop where she was last seen, “Any word on my wife?”

Duncan almost took a step back at the anguished look on Adam’s face. It was something he’d thought he’d never see. Duncan grew up with the three brothers and they were inseparable all through their childhood getting into more trouble than most boys their age. He even played football with them in high school. Looking at him now, there was no mistaking. He was a wreck, “No Adam. Not yet.” He then proceeded to explain that he had all his manpower on this and he closed the roads out of town.

“When?”

“About ten minutes ago”.

“They could have gotten her out before then.” He felt helpless. He wanted to get into his truck and drive, but he didn’t know what direction they went in.

“I know. I’ve alerted the state police. I’m sorry Adam. My men are searching every unknown vehicle. There was a white van leaving the Aloette hotel about forty minutes ago and my men are trying to track it down, but we don’t have a direction. According to the desk clerk last night. An unknown man and woman checked into the hotel about four days ago, but for some reason no one could tell us what they looked like.”

“They probably kept changing their appearance to confuse people.” Adam lit a cigarette and stared up at the sky for a moment. Baby where are you?

“Is Mitchell in town?”

“His plane lands in two hours.” He answered in an oddly distant voice, “Too late. Way too late.”

Mitchell arrived at the airport and was met by Henry. He briefed him on the situation and Mitchell looked hell bent and furious.

“How’s Adam?” He said throwing his duffle bag in the bed of the truck and hopping in the cab.

“Trying not to implode.” Henry said, “God, it’s all my fault...” he started the truck and screeched the tires while he pulled out.

“Henry, if it wasn’t you with her they would have waited for someone else. You just happened to be unlucky. Do not blame yourself. I’m sure Adam doesn’t.”

“No, he blames himself, that’s what makes it worse.”

“We’ll find her.”

“I sure as hell hope so.”

“Just get me to Duncan and Adam, we’ll figure out something from there.”

Mitchell made his way through the crowd of officers, “Adam!” Henry was right, the man looked like hell. When their father told him that Adam was getting married he was certain that hell had just frozen over. Adam had valid reasons for not offering marriage again, but something about this woman must’ve convinced him otherwise. Henry talked highly of her too. Said she was the only one that didn’t back down from Adam’s volatile temper, and gave as good as he did. Already he admired her. Anyone who could take Adam at his worst and not flinch had to be special. Come hell or high water he would help his brother recover his wife.

“Mitch!” Adam came forward and took his brother’s outstretched hand in greeting, “Henry fill you in?”

“yeah. Duncan catch anything?”

“Not yet.”

“How are you holding up?”

“I feel like I was trampled by a rabid bull.”

“You look like it.”

“thought so.” He missed his brother, but his mind was filled with concern for Meagan. Regardless he was thankful he came, “Any ideas?”

“Yeah. A few.”

“Did Dad tell you about her step-father?” Mitchell’s face couldn’t contain the rage he felt.

“Yeah, he did. Don’t worry Adam, we’ll find her. I kill him for you if you want. Just give me the word. I have friends that can make his death look something different.” He meant it.

“I’d appreciate that task myself if he touched her.”

“No problem. Let’s see what we can put together and get your girl back.”

They met with Duncan and Mitchell suggested that Meagan’s parents would dump the van and maybe pick a car with a large trunk to transport her in. Also, they’d avoid the main roads, and probably find someplace isolated to keep her. “You need to check into her family

history and see if there is some place that they used to visit often when Meagan was growing up. Maybe her family has a place somewhere; a cabin, or some other vacation spot that is away from a population that would draw suspicion.” He turned to his brother, “Did she mention anything like that?”

“She didn’t talk about anything after her mother remarried.” Adam started to feel his temper rise, “Except that he tried to...”

“All right Adam, no need to continue.” Mitch said empathetically, “We’ll need a list of known relatives, living and not living on his and her sides.” He was angry too, but he had to stay in control for Adam’s sake. Also he was sure he didn’t feel one-tenth of what his brother was experiencing toward man that took his wife.

“I’ll call Dad, and get him on it,” Said Adam, “I had him get one of his detective agencies to put together files on both of them. If there’s anything, it’ll be those.”

“Good thing. I’ll call some contacts on my end.”

Several hours later he found Adam sitting in Duncan’s vacant office with his head in his hands. Mitch had never seen anything so devastating. Adam was always strong in the face of adversary, he was fearless and Mitch always envied that about him. Even though he was only ten months older than him, it was Adam who would stick up for him on the playground and Adam who took charge of the ranch after their mother died and their father took his residence to the city because it was too painful to stay. Mitch was older, but Adam grew quicker and towered over him by the time they were teenagers. Eventually Mitch did grow, he was just a late bloomer and now he matched Adam inch for inch. Mitch had joined the service because he wanted so much to have the strength to achieve that fearlessness and self-emanating power that Adam seemed to wield naturally. Instead he had found himself, his own talents and the self-realization that they were more alike than he realized. He realized that Adam never saw Mitch as the weak brother, he never berated him, or made him feel like he was pitied. It had taken him six years in the service to understand that when Mitch was in trouble, Adam protected him because he was his brother, which was exactly what he would do for Jasper if it was necessary. This time, it was his turn. He was going to help Adam. As he stared at the large man hunched over in a chair, all he saw was a man, a human being that lost something he dearly loved and for the first time Mitch wanted to be the one to protect him from this pain. “hey.” Adam lifted his head and quickly masked the anguish Mitch was able to glimpse.

“Hey.” He managed a bit of a smile.

Mitch walked around Duncan’s desk and fished through the drawers. “I remember we used to go fishing down to Loggin’s creek and Duncan always had a bottle of—ah here it is.” He pulled out an unopened bottle of scotch and a couple of shot glasses from the bottom drawer.

“It made fishing more enjoyable.” Adam added solemnly.

“Yes,” he studied the label and whistled, “forty year old scotch, that otta be worth a few hundred bucks.” He grinned as he opened the bottle without hesitation and poured them each a drink. “We never did catch any fish in that creek.”

Adam couldn’t help but smile at the memory, “How’d you know?” he inclined his head toward the bottle as he took the glass from his brother.

“Some people don’t change.” He clinked his brother’s glass and they both took a large swallow polishing off the contents. “Duncan won’t ever change.” Mitch refilled the glasses while his eyes, the same color as Adam’s rested on him, “Tell me about your wife Adam.” This caused his brother to pause and give a grim smile.

Adam leaned back in his chair, "My five foot four blond firecracker?"

"She sounds short. Henry says she can stand on her own in front of you." He mused. "Somehow I thought she'd be taller."

"Yeah. She seems to think my temper is not a serious issue."

Mitch laughed, "I'd pay just to see that."

"She threw a horse brush at me once." That got his brother laughing. "She drives me crazy most times. I don't know right from left, up from down, but she gives herself to me totally Mitch, and doesn't expect anything in turn. I never knew there were women out there like that."

"Sounds like you got it made."

"She laid Heather Cornick out flat one day."

"Hell, you do got it good." Mitch chuckled

Adam gave a short bittersweet laugh at that. "I had it good."

"And you will again Adam. They need her, remember that."

"He needs her." Adam added bitterly then his expression looked pained, "It feels like someone ripped my guts out Mitch. I don't know what I'll do if something happens to her. She's my whole world."

"If he touches her we will kill him for it." Mitchell said with dead seriousness.

Adam's cell phone rang then, "It's Dad." He flipped it open and listened waving at Mitch for a pen and paper to write on, "Okay, I'm ready." He spoke and began writing. He glanced up at his brother, "Yeah, thanks pop." He hung up, "It seems that Meagan's step-father had spent weekends up in Chikonie Lake with his grandfather. Apparently the man has a cabin there."

"He can't be that stupid."

"He quite possibly can. He probably doesn't realize the resources available to us."

"Chikonie is only a few hundred miles from here."

"Yeah."

Duncan walked in at that moment, "We've found the van. It was ditched about fifty miles south of here. There's a second set of tracks... a car. Just like you said Mitch."

Adam stood up, "We may know where she is." He handed the piece of paper to Duncan. "Don't involve the state police Duncan. I want this guy."

Duncan stared at him seriously, "considering that this happened under my nose and we go way back. I'm gong to agree with you. But that doesn't mean you don't owe me four hundred dollars for that bottle." He said flicking his glance to the opened bottle of scotch.

For the first time since Meagan's abduction he laughed, reached for his wallet and left four C-notes on Duncan's desk

Meanwhile, Meagan began to come to. Everything seemed so hazy and it took her a moment to adjust her focus. Wherever they were, it was a dump. From the looks of the interior, the place hadn't been used in a long time. All the furniture was dusty or torn, there were cobwebs in every corner and it smelled dank.

"Finally. I thought you'd never wake up." Said a familiar voice. "I began to worry that Brian gave you too much of—whatever that was."

"Mother." Meagan said with venom as everything began to come back to her. She was going into the smoke shop to pick up the imported cigars she bought Adam. She made her purchase, thanked the clerk and left the shop.

"Meagan."

She froze. Her heart hammered in her chest and she slowly turned around to see her mother standing behind her. She felt all of the blood drain out of her face and she dropped the box of cigars

“Hi baby, can we talk?”

“Get away from me.” Her words came out as a barely audible whisper.

“Just give me five minutes honey, and I’ll leave.”

“You have two.”

“He left me and took everything. I’ve been searching for you forever. I know what he did to you and I’m so sorry.” Tears started flowing down her face, “Forgive me baby. It’ll never happen again. I didn’t realize how important to me you were until you left.”

Out of every thing the woman who was supposedly her mother did to her, one thing couldn’t escape Meagan. She was still her mother. She seemed so sincere.

“Meagan?”

“Okay, five minutes.”

“I’m staying at the hotel down the street.”

“Mother, I can’t go with you.” She still didn’t trust her. She casted a look over her shoulder to see if Henry was around. Her mother’s voice brought her attention back to her.

“I’m all alone Meagan.” She began weeping again, “I’m making a spectacle of myself in the middle of the street.”

Meagan looked around, there wasn’t many people out, and they didn’t seem to be drawing any attention, but she understood what it was like to breakdown and feel vulnerable. Reluctantly she nodded, “Okay.”

Mary to her room, used her key and opened the door. As soon as Meagan stepped in she was grabbed from behind. One strong hand over her mouth and the other around her waist. She tried screaming but it was a muffled sound that didn’t make it out of the room.

“Quiet her Brian, she’ll bring down the house.” Mary made a disgusted face.

“My pleasure.” He leaned down to her ear, “Hi beautiful...remember me.” He said with unbridled leer causing her to increase her struggles.

He reached into his pocket for a syringe and sunk it into her thigh. She struggled for a few minutes before she succumbed to the drug.

“That was a close call. I didn’t think she was going to come with me.”

“I told you honey, she still loves her mama after all you’ve done to her.” He grinned and lay her down on the bed., “Now why don’t you go get the van and I’ll watch her.”

Mary shook her head, “So you can molest her while I’m gone? I’m not stupid. You keep your hands to yourself and go get the van. I’ll watch her.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Sure you weren’t...just go.” Mary saw him look at her daughter with no less than a look of longing before he left the room. Meagan was beautiful and surpassed her own expectations of the girl. She was headstrong and took more after her father than her and this disappointed her, but she had no intention of leaving her for Brian’s enjoyment. Not that she felt like protecting her, but she didn’t like sharing.

Now Meagan awoke to find herself tied to a chair. Her mother was sitting on a sofa facing her. She looked around, there was no sign of Brian. The cabin was less than rustic. It was small with a fireplace, a small woodstove, sofa, two person table for meals, and a small bed in one corner. The place looked like it hadn’t had any inhabitants for decades.

“I told him to get lost for a bit.” She said as if reading her thoughts, “And before you start screaming. We aren’t anywhere near civilization. This is only temporary.”

“How *could* you?” she spat.

“Simply put. I want the money your father left you.” She stood and picked something up off the table. “However, waiting two more years until your twenty-one, when it’s obvious that you don’t wish to be with me as a family, has made me reconsider.” She held something in front of her face and Meagan realized it was her wedding ring, “Who is your husband? I can tell from this that he is very very wealthy. Perhaps he would pay well for your safe return.”

Meagan brought her angry stare to her mother, “I’m your daughter...”

“And you always will be darling. I won’t hurt you...”

“Brian will.” She tried to keep the tremor out of her voice but was unsuccessful. It was then that she saw something odd in her mother’s eyes.

“I won’t let him touch you again.”

Meagan was taken aback by the promise, but something didn’t seem right. It was if her words didn’t match the expression, “So, you believe me?” she said, knowing she didn’t or didn’t care.

“I always believed you. You were not that kind of girl Meagan.” She said sickingly sweet, “Now, I’m asking you for a quick way out of this. Instead of you being with us for several years, we’ll trade you to your rich husband.”

“He’s not rich.” She lied.

“You can’t lie to me Meagan. I know you don’t know much about jewellery, but I do. This wedding ring is worth six figures.”

“What!”

“Obviously he cares for you or he wouldn’t have purchased such a beautiful ring.” She said unable to keep the trace of jealousy out of her voice. “Your father...”

“My father was a great man! If you weren’t so self absorbed, you would have seen that!” Meagan spat letting her temper lose. “I will not give you the satisfaction of defacing him. He was the only person I had that loved me besides Helen!”

“That old crow. Is that who you’ve been hiding with?” Mary’s eyes narrowed, “And you know nothing! Your father made a choice to leave me and tour..”

“He had to make a living mother! Apparently his wife had expensive tastes.”

“Don’t insult me Meagan. Are you going to tell me that you don’t expect anything from your husband? Isn’t that why you married rich?” she countered.

“I married him because I love him. He cares about me, and I can’t expect you to understand what that is. “ she lowered her head and glared at her mother, “I hope he finds you and Brian, especially Brian, because I know what he’s capable of. You should have thought twice before you took me from him.” She felt a glimmer of satisfaction when her mother took a step backward. Then it was crushed when Brian entered with two bags of groceries.

Mary looked at him before she turned back to Meagan, “Maybe I was wrong about you. Maybe I should let Brian have some time alone.”

It was Meagan’s turn to pale at her mother’s words, “You promised.”

“I’ve promised many things in my life, but you’ve just proven that you have no feeling for me by not giving into my demands.”

“How could you! How could you!” The tears started then.

“Like you said Meagan, I don’t know what love is.” She whispered something to Brian before she left the cabin.

A slow steady grin crept across his face, “Well, well.” He tossed the bags on the chair beside the door forgetting them, and started undoing his shirt.

Meagan heard the unmistakable sound of a car starting and pulling away and she felt sick. Her mother was leaving her with him! She began to frantically fight the bonds that tied her.

“Uh-uh, little dove. I’m good at knots.” He reached over and began to undo her shirt. “I wasn’t so good getting in your room with that chair under your door knob though.”

“Stop! Oh God! Just stop!” she cried suddenly feeling nauseated.

“No. I’ve been waiting months to get my hands on you again. I’m going to take my time too and show you how much I’ve missed you.” Kneeling down in front of her, he peeled back her shirt and stared lustfully at her chest. It was easy for him to reach behind her and undo the clasp of her bra. Then he cupped her bare breasts in his hands while she looked away trying to imagine she was somewhere else. “I knew they were nice, but I never fathomed they’d be so perfect, so full and youthful.” She never answered as he bent his head and rubbed his face into them moaning.

Meagan was repulsed and stayed perfectly still while tears streamed down her face as he fondled her. He dug his hands into her flesh none too gently and she cried out.

“that’s what I was looking for.” He breathed lifting his head just inches from hers, “now kiss me.”

She said something that made him blush and he hauled back and struck her with the back of his hand, knocking the chair over with her still tied to it. “Don’t ever say that to me again!”

A sob wretched from her as she felt a trickle of blood leave her nose.

He knelt down beside her again, “Enough Mr. Nice Guy Meagan.” His hands went to the button of her jeans.

“Don’t...!” she started wrenching against the knots screaming.

Then everything was a blur. She heard a loud noise of splintering wood and what sounded like a gunshot. Brian jerked, screamed and fell down beside her holding his shoulder and writhing in pain. There were masculine shouts, many heavy footsteps and she suddenly was hauled upright and someone was pulling her shirt closed. “Adam!” she sobbed as her eyes focused on him. “He—He was—“

“shhh, it’s alright.” His voice shook with rage, but he did his best to keep his eyes on hers and not show it as he did the buttons of her shirt up. Then he leaned forward, and began to untie her hands and feet. She lurched into his arms when she was free and he held her. He removed his coat and wrapped it around her. Then lifted her in his arms and stood up.

There were many voices in the room but she kept her focus on Adam. She heard the distinct sound of fist on flesh and Brian’s screams intensified, but Adam just walked out of the cabin and set her gently in his truck sliding in beside her. He pulled her into his embrace and held her.

“I want to leave here.” She sobbed.

“I know love, in a minute. I have to wait for Duncan.” He paused, “Honey...” there was a distinct choke in his words, “Did...I mean...”

“No...” She increased her vice-like grip around him, “You came for me. You came just in time. I knew you would!” she sobbed.

She let out a rough sound and embraced her hard enough to squeeze the breath out of her, “Thank God!” He was almost too late. A shudder went through him at the thought. He could barely contain his rage when he saw the condition that she was in. Her shirt was open and her jeans undone. It had been Duncan that shot her stepfather, and then Mitch took his fists to the

man while he was tending to his wife. His wife, he reflected. He was regretting that it wasn't him, because he had all kinds of things go through his head that day of what he was going to do to the man when he finally got his hands on him, but when he saw his wife, vulnerable and terrified, all he could think about was her and getting her out of there.

A knock on the glass brought his head around to see Mitch. He rolled down the window.

"You got her Adam? She okay?" All he could see was the top of the woman's head as his brother held her tight to him.

"Yeah." He squeezed her again, "You kill him?"

"No, Duncan wouldn't let me. Not only that we're going to need him for the other one." He nodded to Meagan, not wanting to mention it was her mother.

"Meagan do you have any idea where she went?" Adam asked her softly.

She just shook her head against him.

He started the truck, "Tell Duncan to keep him locked up tight, so I can't get to him. She'll be down to the station tomorrow to give a statement. I won't subject her to anymore of this tonight."

"I will. I'll be home later for supper. Dad's flying in later too."

"Yeah, he said." He looked down at the top of Meagan's head, "I'm going to take my wife home Mitch. I'll see you later. Mind what I said about that bastard."

"I'll tell Duncan."

He carried her into his house and straight to their room. "I'm going to run you a bath. I want his filth off of you." He said unable to keep the irate tone out of his voice. She didn't protest as he led her into the bathroom and filled the tub undressing her in the process. She knew it wasn't her he was furious with. Suddenly he paused and said with distinct pain in his voice. "Does it bother you that I touch you?"

She flung herself at him, "No, Adam." She choked, "I was worried that you didn't want to touch me after..."

"That's crazy!" he held her, "It would take more than that to stop me from touching you. I was worried that he'd hurt you." He didn't mention the bruises he'd seen on her breasts because he didn't think he could handle talking about it. "I died today when you went missing." He added softly burying his face in her neck.

She pulled back stared up at him through tear filled eyes, "I knew you'd come."

"I was almost too late." He said roughly.

"No. you weren't. You were just in time. I knew you would save me." She sobbed, "I love you so much it hurts!"

Threading his fingers in her hair he tilted her head back and brought his mouth to hers, "I'm going to make you forget everything he did to you."

"Yes." She answered him, succumbing to his desperate possession.

He lifted her up against him and went to the bed laying her down gently. He removed his clothing and came down on top of her.

Later they lay in the tub together. She had her back against his chest with her head against his shoulder and one of his legs wrapped around hers while his arms crossed under her breasts.

"I am never letting you out of my sight again." He said softly.

"Good." She answered in the same voice.

He kissed her neck and she tilted her head to allow him better access.

“I love you.” He added rather hesitantly.

She smiled, “I was waiting...hoping.” She turned to look at him and saw that everything about his expression rang true.

“I mean it when I told Heather that day in town. I swear I tried to deny it for the past few months thinking it was just some silly fascination, but that first week you were here I wanted to kill Ian for some silly comment he made about you. Then I was foolish enough to kiss you, and by then it was too late. Henry knew though, bloody hell, he really did.” He smiled, “Like a goddam Jiminy Cricket, every time I turned around he was warning me about my behaviour over you.”

She turned more to face him, “Really?”

“If you could have seen the havoc that I caused over you, you wouldn’t doubt me.”

She stretched up and kissed his chin, “I love you Adam.”

“I get all sickly mushy inside when you say that.” He admitted looking down at her causing her to laugh. “Marrying you was the best thing I ever did in my life Meagan.”

“I agree.” She said and rose up farther to kiss him on the mouth.

He groaned and brought her against him sloshing water all over the floor. “I think we’d better go back to bed. Helen is going to cut me in two if she has to clean up this mess.”

Later she got dressed in a white knee length skirt and a pink blouse.

Adam finished buttoning up his own dark blue shirt, when he noticed her distinct nervousness, “Are you going to be okay?”

She brought her gaze to his, “It’s not what you think. I’m nervous about meeting your father.”

He gave her a rare grin, “Honey, my father already loves you.”

She blew a sigh of relief between her lips causing him to laugh.

“He never thought he’d see the day I’d be brought to my knees over a woman.” He added with a smile.

“I did not!” she protested.

He grabbed her lifting her in the air and kissing her, “Baby, I’d be flat on my back for you if I thought it would please you.”

“Hmmm...”

He set her down, “None of that, we’ve already taken too long. My father should be arriving any minute.”

Liam Wightman was exactly what Meagan expected. He was a large man that obviously his sons took after. He embraced her in a hug that mimicked her husband’s strength before releasing her and studying her face. It was deceiving because of his age, but nonetheless he still had strength in him.

“Wow, you *are* worth brooding over.” Her blush made him laugh heartily.

“Pop, you’re embarrassing her.”

“I see that.” He kissed her brow. “So when are you going to start giving me grandkids honey.”

“Well—“

Adam took her arm and pulled her away from his father, “Enough of that, you old charmer. I don’t feel like sharing.”

The older man's eyes glistened, "No doubt."

"This is my brother Mitchell." Said Adam to the other man.

"Hi," she smiled recognizing his voice from earlier, "Thanks for—"

He waved a hand, "You're family Meagan. I'd do it again in a minute."

She nodded shyly, "Just the same."

"Dinner's ready." Called Helen.

"Just you wait," Said Henry to Liam and Mitchell, "The woman cooks like heaven."

Meagan looked around the table as everyone was eating and talking. Henry was trying his best to flatter Helen who took a seat beside him, Mitch and Adam and Jasper were catching up with their father and laughter floated among the clink of dishes and she thought she could never be happier than she was in that moment. She had a family. Her eyes guided to Adam, and in eight months they'd have another addition, but she was holding off on telling him. She was going to surprise him with the cigars and something lacy. After what had happened today she changed her mind.

She felt her chest tightened as she studied his profile. There was no way she could possibly love someone as much as she did him. Suddenly he turned feeling his eyes on him and gave her a devastating grin. What the hell she thought and indicated with her finger for him to come closer.

Adam leaned down at his wife's request and what she whispered in his ear near made him fall off the chair. "Really?" he said pulling back and looking at her. She nodded with a glint of pride in her eyes. He was accosted by all sorts of feelings at once, all good while he stared down at her.

"Hey Adam, you look pale." Said Jasper.

"I'm going to be a father." He said barely above a whisper not removing his eyes off of her. He couldn't help but swell with pride and a slow grin grew across his handsome face, "A father." He repeated not thinking it sounded real.

"Well Hell, did I hear you right!" Jasper got to his feet and pounded his brother on the back, "A little Wightman? What do you know?" he grinned pulling Meagan to her feet and hugging her.

Everyone lined up after that and congratulated her and Adam. The celebration went late into the evening and by the time she made it to bed that night she was so exhausted she fell asleep. Adam settled her then went back down to his family.

Duncan had called while he was settling her in and told Liam that they still haven't found Meagan's mother, but Brian confessed everything.

Turns out the man crumbled when he was denied a doctor to look at the bullet wound. Even when they gave into his request, it was Jarrett who removed the bullet and absently forgot to give the man an aesthetic. They had hired a private investigator to look for Meagan and he'd discovered the photograph of them taken at the cattleman's ball through the local paper's internet site.

Adam would have to get both of them a four hundred bottle of scotch.

"If it's a boy name him after me." Teased Jasper.

"Not on your life." Said Adam taking a seat across from him in the library, "He'll end up taking on your traits." He grinned.

"That's better than yours." He shot back at him with a chuckle.

"Touché."

“We may never find her mother Adam.” Said his father, “She may realize that we’re a force to be reckoned with.”

“I won’t let my wife out of my sight until I know that blasted woman is behind bars.” Every time he referred to Meagan as his wife, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride. The woman was unsurpassable in his eyes, and she was his and now she was going to make him a father. His heart swelled with love for her. Never could he have imagined his life without her after she walked into his life a little over four months ago.

“You have us too,” said Mitchell.

“Yeah.” Added Jasper, “We’ll watch her too.”

Adam nodded. That meant a lot to him. He couldn’t begin to imagine what it was like for Meagan without such family support. He made a silent promise that he would spend every day showing her how a family should be.

When he crawled in beside her that night and pulled her sleeping form back into his embrace and inhaled her scent deeply. *A father*, he thought to himself. Just when he thought things couldn’t get better, she made him happier than he could have fathomed and he found himself smiling.

“I love you baby.” He whispered into her ear causing her to moan sweetly and turn toward him.

“Finally.” She whispered against his chest as she slid her hand down his flat stomach, “I’ve been waiting forever for you to come to bed.”

He groaned, “Honey, I thought you were tired.”

“Not too tired to celebrate.” She murmured.

“Amen to that.” He said huskily and flattened her out on her back coming down on top of her.

“How do you feel?” he said between kisses.

“Like a million bucks.” She smiled against his mouth.

“You look like a billion.” He chuckled. “You’ve made me very happy honey.” He leaned over and kissed her fully. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She said as her eyes started to water.

Eight months later almost to the day Meagan had a large eight pound baby boy that they named Seth Angus Wightman by caesarean section and the first time Adam held him he wept. As time past his love for his wife and family grew as she gave him two more sons, then finally a daughter. Adam’s temper rarely showed those days and the people of Prosper thought that Meagan was the best thing that ever happened to him. Adam tended to agree.



This is a legally distributed free edition from
www.obooko.com

The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form.