

# Christi Williams

*Was Noah and Perris's  
divorce a mistake?*



## PERILOUS PROMISES



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# PERILOUS PROMISES

by  
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## Prologue

Perris Dalton climbed the flight of steps to the third floor of the county courthouse, the sound of the heels on her stylish new leather boots echoing in the empty stairwell. She didn't know why she'd felt compelled to go out and buy all new clothing for today's appearance before the judge, but she had: cropped, close-fitting cowhide jacket, black wool pants, and perky plum boots.

Head to toe, she knew she looked good. She'd had her short black hair styled the day before. The untameable curls, which grew in place of the long, straight locks that had fallen out in clumps, had now been straightened and framed her face in delicate wisps. She had taken extra care with her makeup, but she thought the effect was worth it. The hot little number reflected in the mirror certainly didn't resemble the pallid, sickly creature Noah had pitied so much.

That woman, that poor, overwhelmed woman bowed by sickness and surgery and chemo, had vanished. In her place stood the new Perris Dalton. The Perris who'd taken control of her destiny, wrenched it forcefully away from the doctors and Noah, and decided once and for all to flee the man who threatened to smother her with sorrow.

If no one else understood her sudden decision to divorce him, not her family, friends, or even her lawyer, she knew Noah did. As her foot descended to the final riser and she saw him standing there in the hallway with his lawyer, she knew that he had at last accepted that she was leaving him. From the defeated slump of his broad shoulders to the muted glint of dim lighting off his blond hair as he lowered his head to peer glumly at some legal document his attorney held out for his inspection, Perris read acceptance of her decision in every line of Noah's tall, powerful body.

As she studied the man she was still married to for the next little while, the man she loved with every fiber of her being and yet couldn't bear to live with any longer, she began to shake. The quaking got so bad, she shot a hand out to grasp the railing to keep herself from toppling backwards down the stairs.

She had thought determination alone would see her through. She hadn't realized it would be so hard to finally go through with it. She hadn't known just how much she'd come to depend on Noah. She loved him, this man who was still unaware that she studied him so intently, while she grieved so fiercely, longed so desperately for things to be different. She wanted to stop this farce, this divorce, this halving of what had once been a wonderful, marvelous melding of two into one.

Their marriage. Their blessed union. Gone up in smoke, and blown away by the wind. Their marriage that had dissolved into a horrifying routine of patient and caretaker, the well and the sick, amidst a blur of doctors and operating rooms and bottles and bottles of medication.

Perris would do this, divorce Noah and dissolve their marriage, in order to live. When the choice came down to her husband or her life, being smothered in pity or taking her destiny back in her own hands, she chose life. She wanted to live. She desperately wanted to live. And if that meant leaving Noah, her other half, behind, she would do it.

She would cut herself in half in order to live. She loved Noah Dalton with all her heart. But she would leave him. In order to live.

Noah turned, his wife's intent scrutiny causing the short hairs on his neck to rise like internal radar.

Perri was almost unrecognizable already, still a little gaunt and pale but her hair had grown back some and her careful efforts at makeup hid most of her pallor.

He was sorry, damned sorry that things had come to this impasse between them, but at this late date he didn't know how to even begin going about fixing it. He felt he truly didn't know anything anymore. He didn't know how he and Perri gotten into this mess, how their life had devolved into nothing but a round of doctor visits and hospital stays, and her steady deterioration from her healthy bounce and curves and sass into a tiny, wizened person he didn't recognize when he came home after work.

Cancer. Just the dreaded, awful word was enough to make his stomach clench and his palms and forehead break into cold sweat. Along with Perri's descent into illness came his own inability to handle the changes the invading disease wrought in his wife. All of a sudden his vital, loving Perri had become this deathly ill, pitiable waif. And as a consequence big, capable Noah Dalton had disintegrated into a blubbering, helpless baby who'd been unable to handle it, unable to help her, unable, finally, to love her as she deserved to be loved.

He didn't blame Perri for leaving. At this point he didn't blame Perri for anything. He wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to live. And if living meant leaving her big lump of an impotent husband, so be it.

Noah loved Perri. He would always love her. But he would let her go, precisely because he loved her.

## Chapter One

The protesters were back.

Perris slammed on the brakes of her shiny new crossover SUV. Pounding her fist on the steering wheel, she watched the picketers link arms and form a line to stop her from getting through. It wasn't yet seven in the morning on a cloudless spring day. She'd thought that by leaving early she could avoid the protesters, but overnight a tent city had sprung up in Wyoming's high desert.

Blustery March weather had previously held the demonstration at bay. But during the first two weeks of April the weather warmed and the protest against Red Bluffs Mining had gathered steam, led by a young environmental guru who'd appeared out of nowhere to attract lurid, screaming headlines that had begun to immeasurably complicate Perris's life.

Raptor season started in the middle of March so this was her busiest time of year. She really didn't have time to deal with Benjamin Collins and his so called protest this morning. And yet there he stood, blocking the road, chanting the catchy slogans he'd coined, and smiling at her.

Smiling at her. Benjamin Collins was ruining her life for the sake of getting his name in the news, and he thought it all highly amusing.

Perris would admit the situation was ironic, if not humorous. At one time she might have found herself in agreement with Benjamin Collins and his negative opinion of open pit coal mining. But she'd matured since her college days, concluding she really needed a job in order to continue living and paying the bills, and it was probably a bit much to ask the world's populace to live without cars or central heating or electricity while waiting to catch up to carbonless power generation.

Reality had set in for Perris with the need to earn her own living. She had scrambled for three years to get this job of environmental services officer at Red Bluffs Mining, moving from one lowly position to the next, one power plant to the next, until the job she wanted finally opened. Her duties entailed mitigating the impact the mine made on the environment, and she was proud of her role in protecting her birds of prey. She thought she'd found a way to put her

beliefs to work in the business world, something she'd never thought possible in her college days when everything was more simple, all black and white.

But Perris's efforts weren't good enough for Benjamin Collins or his group, One Natural World. Whenever he sporadically appeared at the mine site over the last month, Collins and she had come to vociferously agree to disagree. In her opinion, Benjamin Collins was a dangerous fanatic. He'd threatened her, but only at a distance. So far he'd kept his attacks on her and the mine where she worked to the media.

She gritted her teeth as a uniformed officer approached her SUV, his face shaded by the wide brim of his brown Stetson. The Powell County Sheriff's Department did a passable job of keeping the peace, although she couldn't count on them twenty-four hours a day. Most of the officers remembered her or at least knew who she was, they were distantly friendly, and when they did show up in the mornings on the road to the mine they got her through the picket line.

As angry as she was, something about this officer's gait caught her eye. The tall, muscular man in the uniform approached with a familiar confident stride. Perris pushed aside dawning recognition along with an accompanying dizzy rush of gladness.

But she wasn't sure. The finger she used to press the window button wasn't shaking yet. She expected the officer to say something diplomatic like, *It will be a few minutes before we can get the road cleared, ma'am.*

Instead the voice said softly, "Hello, Perri. It's been a long time."

Once she heard the familiar timbre that still haunted her dreams, she couldn't fool herself anymore that it wasn't really Noah standing there. Her whole body commenced trembling.

Noah pushed the brim of his brown Stetson back. His lengthy perusal brought him to the realization that Perri looked good this morning. Real good. Anger had always given a tinge of healthy color to her cheeks and made her green eyes sparkle, almost akin to the look she had after a vigorous session in bed. She was as beautiful as ever. He knew a hello kiss with a tongue-mating session to get reacquainted was probably out of order, and so he meant to just drink his fill of the sight of her while he had the chance.

Perris gripped the steering wheel to still her quivering fingers. She remembered all too well the familiar intimacy in Noah's voice. For a moment she forced herself to keep looking through the front windshield at the yelling protesters as she fought to control her breathing. Her heart beat frantically, like a sparrow trapped in her chest. That low resonance in his voice had once been enough to have her eagerly shedding her clothes while he grinned and tugged off his own. She could still feel his hands on her, hot on cool flesh, and the memory of what his hands had once done to her was enough to make beads of perspiration pop out and begin to trickle down between her breasts.

She turned her head slowly, as if afraid her rigid neck would break if she made too sudden a move in Noah's presence. She looked at a familiar brawny chest straining the seams of a crisp white uniform shirt, and then her eyes traveled up the column of his corded neck. A square, smooth-shaven jaw framed generous lips curved into a smile tilted at one corner. Above a slim, straight nose were light blue eyes gone steel gray in the early morning sunlight. She remembered those odd, changeable eyes. Eyes that could glint silver with concern, or melt her with a baby blue gaze. Their present flat steel tint indicated strongly to Perris that Noah, too, was hiding his true feelings.

She hadn't expected to see those mercurial eyes up close ever again. Or that lean jaw, thick blond hair, strong arms and long legs...Dammit, would you stop it! she chided herself. Just stop repeating that litany right now. You don't miss Noah. You don't need him, or *any* man, in your life.

Noah stared at Perris across a distance of years and two much changed lives. But five long years weren't enough to prepare her to meet him once again. She realized with another jolt to her

battered heart that if she told the truth, maybe the rest of her life wouldn't be long enough to forget Noah Dalton.

She dropped her eyes again to his immaculate white shirt with three stars on each collar point and the big silver star over his heart. She knew the significance of that shirt. Why hadn't she seen its crisp whiteness coming toward her, recognized the meaning of the color that distinguished his rank from the tan shirts of his deputies?

Probably because Noah hadn't been wearing white when she decided to leave him. When Perris divorced Noah five years before, he'd worn tan. He hadn't yet been elected sheriff of Powell County.

She realized she still didn't know what to say. She had no words, even after all this time, to explain the hurt panic that had sent her into precipitate flight. And maybe it was too late for explanations. If Noah wasn't the same person she had left, Perris wasn't the woman who'd been Deputy Noah Dalton's wife either. A lot of changes had taken place in those years, not the least of which was that she was her own woman now.

A woman who took charge, got her way, bulldozed her way through if she had to. Without help from any man. Especially a big, strong, blond lawman who had thought it his duty while married to her to rescue her at every turn.

Perris didn't want rescuing, didn't need rescuing. She cleared her dry throat. In the most authoritative voice she could manage, she rasped, "I need to get to work. If those people don't get out of my way, I'm going to drive right over them."

Sheriff Dalton stared at his ex-wife as he tried to recover from the churn of feelings engendered just by seeing her again. He let his law enforcement training take over automatically when he was under stress, and he was almost sure nothing on his face betrayed the fact that he wasn't handling this encounter very well.

Noah had heard Perri was back in town. Most weekdays one or another of his deputies had some news to report about her run-ins with Benjamin Collins and his ragtag group of protesters. The Powell County Sheriff's Office was a regular beehive of information anyway, sometimes useful and sometimes just plain gossip. He'd tried to keep the lid on the gossip part of Perri's homecoming since it couldn't help but include his name. But despite his efforts at damage control, the speculation had started up again, the questions about why she had left him in the first place. As far as he knew, she had never breathed a word about the reason he'd given her for running off.

He still wondered why she had never told.

She could have hurt him badly, ground his reputation into the dirt. She could...but he was pretty sure by now she wouldn't. He still wasn't exactly certain what she'd said in divorce court. Since it was uncontested his presence wasn't required, and after seeing her at the top of the stairs so obstinately determined to go through with it he'd turned on his heel and left the building. But he was absolutely positive she'd kept silent about his failures during those few months before she finally gave up and left him. Because not one word of it had ever got back to him.

She had been as fragile as a china doll. So frail and delicate he'd been unable to continue treating her as a woman, his wife. All he could see was her delicate bones under her skin, and he couldn't bring himself to subject her to the rigors of lovemaking. But Perri had negated his misguided pity by one simple act: she divorced him.

But this morning he saw her as her own person, all right.

He attempted to carefully keep his eyes on her face, not letting his curiosity or the avid memories he had of the rest of her show. But he couldn't help noting she looked to be in excellent physical shape, her muscles toned and tight. She had done exactly what she said she would. She'd made the long haul back from pale, sick, and skinny, and she glowed with good

health. Finally he gave up and gratefully drank in the sight of her, unsuccessful in his attempts to take his eyes off her dark haired beauty.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked, in a strained voice that told him she definitely was not glad to see him.

“Just checking things out. I heard the demonstration’s been heating up.” He leaned an arm on the door of the crossover, feigning a nonchalance he certainly didn’t feel. “I’m up for re-election in the fall, and how this situation is handled could affect my chances.”

“I see,” she said coldly. “In that case, if the *situation* is so precarious to you personally, couldn’t one of your deputies have come out instead?”

Noah saw her jaw clench. He had made it seem he’d come out here purely on sheriff’s department business. He had given the impression he wasn’t glad to see her, which definitely wasn’t true. He was very glad to see her. In spite of her chilly reception, he found himself remembering things he probably shouldn’t. Early mornings had always been their best times, and he found himself truly missing waking up next to Perri. The feel of her warm skin under his hands, her sleepy smile as he rolled over toward her, the way she willingly opened her legs to welcome him into her woman’s heat.

Even five years hadn’t been enough to make him forget how he could get hard just thinking about her. A lifetime probably wouldn’t be enough to erase her imprint from his head or his body. She might as well have opened his chest and branded his heart as married him; what she left behind was just as permanent.

“It’s true I don’t get out here much,” he said, tamping down the old hot, hopeless memories. “I’ve got good people working for me who bust their behinds to be accountable to the citizens of the county. But I’m getting daily phone calls about this demonstration. I can’t take sides; the reports I get say the protesters are staying off company property and not hurting anyone. I just thought I’d come check things out for myself.”

He rubbed his jaw. Was that really what had possessed him today, of all days, to come out here in the middle of the desert and see what was going on? It certainly wasn’t to see the sagebrush bloom. The thought came unbidden as Noah gazed at Perri: Why didn’t he just admit he wanted to see her again? That he saw a ready opening, took his chance, and intentionally sought her out this morning.

Maybe, just maybe Noah and Perris Dalton had unfinished business.

He saw the hard glance she gave him, making him think twice about where his thoughts led. But it was too bad she couldn’t know what he was thinking instead of what he said.

Perri always hated it when he tried to protect her. He might seem cold and officious to her now, but he’d hate to have to arrest her later if things heated up out here at the protest. He thought it his duty to warn her not to lose her temper.

“I *know* you can’t take sides,” she said, as if speaking to a child. She was angry, and he was sorry to have started off so wrong with her again. She was glaring at him. “But you convince Benjamin Collins to get out of my way, Sheriff. Otherwise I’m telling you I will ram my way through.”

She’d always been headstrong, but now she seemed brittle. Noah was a little taken aback. He said evenly, “I heard a news team from Salt Lake City was coming in today to cover the hubbub.” He stifled a sardonic twist to his lips as he added, “The news people claim to be balanced, and would maybe like to talk to both of you, Perri. It probably wouldn’t look good if Collins was squashed under your tires.”

“Very funny. Don’t try smoothing my feathers, Noah. I’m really angry. I’ve had about all I can take of these people trying every single day to stop me from going to work and doing my job.”

He watched her give her shiny black bob a confident shake. Noah had always loved her hair long; it had reminded him of the flying manes of the wild horses that roamed the West,

generations after they'd escaped their Spanish owners. He'd thought that one day after she finished her treatments she would grow it back, but she had—defiantly, he was sure—kept it short.

And she continued to hold him off from getting any closer. Perri obviously wasn't ready to give one inch. There was no sign at all from her that Noah Dalton had ever been any more to her than a local lawman. He stifled disappointment.

Her green eyes flashed fire as she pointed out the window at lead protester Benjamin Collins. "That idiot has been dogging me off and on for a month now, and I won't have it. You hear me, Noah? I'm proud of what I do. I'll fight back."

In spite of a fierce urge to run to her protection when he had realized, from the talk around the office, how much trouble she was in, Noah was delighted with her strong stance. She had said when she left him that she would fight her own battles. Now she had picked one where he actually couldn't step in and shield her.

"I saw your editorial in the Casper and Hawk Point newspapers," he said. "You seem to know what you're talking about. You're doing a good job of presenting your viewpoint."

She turned blazing emerald eyes back to his. His heart knocked hard in his chest as it always had when she pinned him with that fierce green gaze, but he held his face immobile.

"Yes, I do know my business," she declared, as if he'd questioned her qualifications. "My credibility is on the line. What Benjamin Collins is saying could finish me here at Red Bluffs Mining, and I've only just started here. I want to do my damned job. I want that man out of my way, Noah. Now."

"Perri." Noah hesitated, then changed his mind about what he'd started to say. He knew all about hurtful gossip. He wanted to tell her to back down and stop challenging Collins, give the heated charges and counter-charges a chance to blow over. But he looked at her expression, and couldn't do it. He didn't want her more annoyed with him than she already was.

He wasn't sure how this disagreement at the mine had gotten so blown out of proportion any more than he was about how Perri's illness had spiraled into divorce. If anyone had asked him, he'd have sworn his ex-wife and Benjamin Collins were on the same side, their politics were so closely aligned. But apparently the chief demonstrator and Perri didn't think their politics matched.

And she hadn't asked for his advice. With nothing more to say that she wanted to hear, he reluctantly withdrew his arm from her door. "I'll talk to Collins. Just give me a couple of minutes."

Another car pulled up behind Perri's, and Noah groaned. Just what he needed this morning: Miss Maisie Merritt, the rumpled, nosy Southwestern Wyoming Bureau reporter for the statewide Casper newspaper.

Noah took a long, last look at Perri before making a deft escape from snoopy Maisie Merritt. He wanted to put his hand out, to touch Perri and soothe her. Just looking at her made him want to haul her out of her shiny new crossover and kiss her a proper hello, but he couldn't do that. He had to remain strictly neutral in this controversy, especially with the reporter's eagle eye on him. Powell County Sheriff Noah Dalton couldn't be caught mooning about how bad he missed his ex-wife and how much he wanted her back.

And Perri didn't want his interference, anyway. She had made it perfectly clear she didn't want anything from him. She certainly didn't want him. The only thing he could do for her was clear the road, just like she asked.

And she was probably right. He had to keep his mind on his job, because he could readily picture this situation spinning out of control. Benjamin Collins hadn't publicly advocated violence. Yet. But from the research Noah had done on the protester, he knew Collins admired the actions of the more radical fringe of environmentalism. The men and a few women who came to work each day at Red Bluffs Mining were, for the most part, a rough humored,



easygoing bunch who had taken the inconveniences of this protest in stride. But let fists start swinging and the burly Red Bluffs shift workers would be right in the middle of the fray. Where Perri already was, if only thus far in the media and not physically.

He would like to avoid open warfare in his county, and he especially wanted his ex-wife kept from inciting a riot that started a war. Since he hardly recognized Perri anymore and couldn't predict whether she actually would run Collins down as she threatened, he could only hope she continued to keep her battles in the media. He took one last look at her, this woman he didn't know at all and yet knew so intimately, and then turned toward the line of yelling protesters.

As he fully expected, Maisie Merritt with her ubiquitous notebook and pocket recorder trotted right on his heels, hollering, "Sheriff! Sheriff Dalton!"

Benjamin Collins waited for the sheriff—and the reporter—with an expectant grin on his face. His cohorts moved in closer to their leader as the sheriff approached, their chanting growing louder as the expected confrontation neared. The lawman, however, didn't give them the satisfaction. He waited a few moments for the swell of shouted slogans to die down, then held up his hand for silence. The reporter snapped a quick picture.

Noah ignored the reporter and her camera and recorder. "I'm Noah Dalton, Powell County Sheriff. I'd like to talk to you." He fixed Collins, a short, stocky man with nothing to distinguish him except a penchant for stirring up trouble, with a steely official gaze.

"I've talked with you on the phone already, several times." Collins smirked, apparently undaunted by Noah's official tough Western pose. "I'm Benjamin Collins, director of One Natural World."

"I know who you are, Mr. Collins," Noah said flatly. "Will you and your friends please step off the roadway."

"We have the right to assemble." Collins set his jaw. He looked to his followers and they muttered agreement. The line seemed to contract more toward a mob as they moved protectively closer to Collins.

Noah could feel his own body wanting to tense up in instinctive response, but he fought the urge. "You have that right," he agreed mildly, letting his arms hang loosely at his sides so Collins wouldn't interpret his body language as confrontational. At the moment, he just wanted to talk to the man. "But you can't lawfully block access on a county road, no matter your motivations. I'm asking you to step aside, and to confine your activities to places other than a public thoroughfare."

Collins didn't answer. In the silence, his ample stomach suddenly growled loudly. In response he grinned sheepishly, an uncharacteristically boyish expression, and a few of his followers laughed, the tension in the morning air suddenly easing as their leader calmed down.

"Oh, all right, Sheriff," Collins agreed, adding more for his grinning cohorts' benefit than to Noah, "since I seem to have other priorities at the moment, we'll move. For now." He shot Perri, still waiting in her distinctive purple crossover SUV, one long glance of malevolent glee before leading his followers off into the sandy soil and sagebrush beside the road.

That purple vehicle is an open target, Noah thought. If Perri wanted to avoid trouble, she should at least drive something less flamboyant. But then she had no intention of avoiding trouble, did she? No, there she sat, ready to confront Collins and his whole bunch alone if she had to, just to make the point that nobody was going to stop her from doing what she wanted to do.

Stubborn woman. Beautiful woman. Elusive woman.

Noah brought himself back to the present situation, which kept threatening to spin out of his tight control. "I'm warning you once again, Mr. Collins. Keep your activities off the road," Noah said.

Collins turned his back on Noah, pretending he hadn't heard. The other protesters also ignored the sheriff. Voices drifted back as they headed for the tents hastily erected in the sagebrush: "Let's have breakfast. Anybody run into town for food yet?"

Noah turned away, thoroughly disgusted. The members of One Natural World were having a picnic while their activities threw half of his county into tumult. Still ignoring the reporter hovering in the background, he started back toward Perri's car.

To his surprise and secret chagrin, she didn't wait to thank him. As soon as the demonstrators cleared off, she spun her tires in loose gravel and sped the crossover past in a choking cloud of tan desert road dust.

Noah was left looking at the rear of the departing vehicle, feeling as if he'd accomplished absolutely nothing this morning. Despite Collins's disingenuous grin of harmless devilment, Noah had a bad feeling about the environmentalist. He'd wanted to warn Perri in stronger terms, get her to promise that she wouldn't deliberately rile Collins and the rest of the demonstrators. But she hadn't given him the chance. And, he admitted privately, it would probably have been a waste of breath.

"Just another boring day on the picket line, huh, Sheriff?" Maisie Merritt asked, eyes squinted as she watched Noah closely.

He sighed. He really didn't feel like facing the reporter's misleadingly innocent questions this morning. The woman was a dried up old prune whose only pleasure seemed to be feeding on the misfortunes of others. Noah had heard that at one time Ms. Merritt had been a real looker, with a personality and an actual boyfriend. But something had gone wrong with the romance and Maisie had slowly let herself go until nothing remained of youth and beauty, only a sharp nose for news.

"Nothing about this job is boring," Noah assured her in what he hoped was a misleadingly blasé tone, shading his eyes to watch as Perri drove away.

Maisie's eyes followed the direction his had strayed. "Say, wasn't that your ex-wife?" she asked. "How do you feel about her being embroiled in this protest?"

Noah lowered his hand and fixed the reporter with a bland gaze. "Why don't you ask her how she feels?"

"Oh, I already have," Maisie assured him. "Now I'm asking you."

Noah tried hard and often not to remember how he felt about Perri. Of course he didn't like the fact that she had to face the protesters every day. He didn't like that she answered Collins's charges openly, in print, and therefore brought more of the protesters' wrath down directly on her dark, curly head. Perri would do better to let the mine's PR people handle Collins and the media. And it would be better all around for Sheriff Noah Dalton to deflect Maisie Merritt's question rather than answering it. Better especially for him if he didn't admit to anyone, and especially a reporter, the feelings he still had for his ex-wife.

He gave some diplomatic answer that seemed to flow to his lips these days without conscious thought. He brushed off Maisie Merritt like he brushed at the fine brown grit drifting down on his white shirt from Perri's spinning tires.

Let Maisie Merritt continue to wonder about Noah and Perris Dalton, he thought. After all, why should a reporter know any more about Perri than he did?

Driving toward the mine, Perris talked to herself, a habit she deplored but indulged in anyway when she was under extreme pressure.

"Collins probably only moved because the newspapers were there to record the pearls of wisdom dripping from his mouth," she grumbled to herself. "I didn't need to thank Noah."

But she knew better. Her own rudeness in driving away without a word of appreciation nagged at her. Even when pushed to the limit, she wasn't normally impolite. She kept her cool

while being interviewed by newspaper reporters she thought hostile to her, and when her superiors at the mine unjustly criticized her for not doing more to deflect Collins.

She had left her ex-husband standing in the road eating her dust. She knew darned well why she didn't stay to talk to Noah. She didn't want his advice. She hadn't wanted him riding in like a white knight to save her. She especially didn't want him feeling sorry for her.

Perris parked in the lot, clapped on her white hard hat, and got out of the crossover SUV. She greeted Coral Peterson in the guard shack as she signed in. Late once again, she noted.

"I saw the tents out there this morning," Coral said. "Collins give you any trouble?"

"Stopped me for almost half an hour. Good thing the law was out there." Perris didn't add that the lawman who had assisted her coincidentally had the same surname as hers.

"That Collins guy really has a thing against you." Coral, a big redhead who rode a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and didn't seem to fear much of anything, hesitated. "I don't trust that little turd. You be careful, okay?"

Perris experienced an involuntary shudder at Coral's warning. So Coral, too, had noticed Collins's verbal attacks turning from general to personal. "I'm not afraid of Benjamin Collins," Perris declared with false bravado.

"Well, maybe you should be, hon," Coral insisted. "I've seen his type before: quiet, mousy little jerk-offs who get a taste of power and feed on it until they end up going ballistic. Benjamin Collins is just starting to realize that he can hurt you. I hope the creep never realizes how much he really enjoys it."

"Boy, I feel so much better! Thanks for the pep talk, Coral," Perris said drily. She gave her friend a twisted smile. But she couldn't help putting stock in Coral's words because Coral spoke from experience. She had lurched from one bad relationship to another with violent men before obtaining the job with Red Bluffs Mining that gave her a measure of independence and self-esteem. Coral paid her own way now. But the problem was, she had a big thirst for Moose Drool Brown Ale and she still had lousy taste in men. Once a month or so, she showed up at work with a cut lip or black eye courtesy of her latest boyfriend. Her only consolation, she told Perris ruefully on those occasions, was that she was capable of giving as good as she got.

"I know you don't like to take anyone's advice," Coral called as Perris headed across the lot toward the squat building that housed the Red Bluffs Mining offices. "But I'm asking you anyway to be careful, Perris."

"I will." Perris waved off her friend's warning and kept walking. She entered the building, greeting the secretarial staff as she passed their cubicles, and let herself into her windowless office after traversing a dim hallway with one wall made up of connected office dividers. She plunked down wearily in her swivel chair. For a moment, before her day really kicked in, she gave herself time to think.

And what she thought about was Sheriff Noah Dalton. She'd never been able to eradicate his blond good looks from her mind, even though she'd tried for five long years. Perris remembered everything about Noah, from the way his little fingers crooked inward at the tips to the way his white teeth flashed and one deep dimple appeared in his left cheek when he smiled. She knew Noah's favorite foods and what kind of books and TV shows he liked. She knew how often he clipped his blunt nails and what brands of soap and shampoo he preferred.

She knew what turned him on: the sight of black lace and garters got him every time. And she knew how to take care of them both when she tripped his On switch.

She covered her eyes with one hand, leaning back in her chair, trying to blot out the vivid memories. She'd divorced Noah for one reason. A lot of things led up to the one sad detail that caused it, but the fact was that big, sexy Noah Dalton couldn't make love to his wife. It got to the point she couldn't look into his tortured gray eyes and see the truth of how things had changed between them. She couldn't live with a man whose only feeling for her was pity. Ultimately, what she couldn't live with was the reality of seeing herself through Noah's eyes.

Her assistant, Mike Eversoll, walked in. A brawny, bearded young man, his bulk made the tiny office feel even more cramped. Perris swung her feet to the floor with a thump and tried to eradicate thoughts of Noah.

“What’s up for today?” Mike asked.

“Pit patrol for you. A meeting with the engineers for me.” Perris brightened as she added, “Maybe this afternoon we can rappel down the wall and see if there are eggs in the nests. Then we’ll know better what to do. In the meantime, keep an eye out for birds carrying sticks for new nests. Especially here,” she rose to indicate an area of the thirteen-mile long pit on the laminated wall map, grateful for something to take her mind off Noah, “and here. Two of the more persistent pairs try to nest in those areas every year.”

“Starting to get predictable, are they?” Mike’s darkly bearded face split in a grin. While he didn’t get all mushy about what they did for a living as Perris sometimes did, he secretly loved the beautiful birds of prey as much as she did.

“They’re showing up within a few days of the same date every year.” Perris and Mike had federal Fish and Wildlife special purpose permits to deter, whenever possible, the raptors from nesting on the wall. But if the birds got by them and deposited eggs in a nest the whole plan changed from deterrence to mitigating their impact on the mine’s operations.

“The observations we’ve put in the computer the last couple of summers help,” Perris said. “It helps even more that I’m full time now.” She grinned. “Besides furnishing me a steady paycheck, being able to predict the date of the birds’ return will aid us a lot.”

Few people outside the mine environs were aware that this was Perris’s third summer working with the raptors. She didn’t think even Noah knew she had worked at Red Bluffs two summers in a row before being hired year round. And that was the way she had wanted it. It was only sheer dumb luck she ran into Noah this morning. And it was Benjamin Collins’s fault that she’d been forced out from obscurity into the glare of the headlines, thereby letting Noah know she was around at all. If she had her way, she’d do her job without making a public spectacle of herself, thank you very much.

Mike didn’t need to hear Perris’s reasons for striving to maintain her full time position. They spent a lot of time together out in the pit and he’d heard it all before. He gathered up the laptop computer, his binoculars, the cooler containing his lunch, and headed out to one of the company’s four-wheel drive trucks.

Perris sat in the office with a stack of reading material on Clean Air Act regulations, which she never seemed to whittle down, for another aspect of her job, air quality monitoring. The regulations remained in a state of flux, and she tried hard to keep up with all the changes that might impact Red Bluffs Mining. One day the EPA would probably succeed in shutting down coal fired electricity generation altogether. But not just yet. There wasn’t any other power source capable of completely taking coal’s place except perhaps nuclear, and the waste question there had never been answered to the American public’s satisfaction.

She found she was having trouble this morning keeping her mind on what she was reading. The shock of slate gray eyes meeting her startled gaze kept intruding and wouldn’t let her concentrate.

Would she never be free of the memory of Noah Dalton?

At last the hands of the clock swept around toward ten, and she rose for her meeting, coffee cup in hand. She talked with engineering a lot this time of year. The mine sequencing plan, although pretty rigid, wasn’t set in stone: a dragline could go down and take a couple of days to fix, hawks could be nesting with eggs right under drill holes ready for explosives. Perris had to stay flexible, deal with issues as they came up, and reduce the consequences of any conflicts with the birds.

When she walked into Engineering, she was surprised to see the highest mine administrators in attendance. Besides the manager of engineering and his crew, two other men sat in front of

steaming coffee cups at the conference table. Neither Carl West nor Pete Barker would meet Perris's eyes.

Everybody was under a tremendous strain since the protest started, and Perris guessed she couldn't blame West, the mine manager, and Barker, the production manager, for coming down on her so hard lately. Especially since Benjamin Collins had started to narrow his attacks on open pit coal mining to just her department, Environmental Services—and specifically to her, the environmental specialist.

But as she'd tried to explain time and again it wasn't only her fight. She'd supported Barker and West when Collins began his protest against coal mining in general and she expected that same backing when Collins zeroed in on her. Besides, she was the new kid on the block at Red Bluffs Mining. She felt the older, more experienced administrators could offer her valuable guidance in handling Collins if they would just put their heads together instead of leaving her to sink or swim alone.

But so far the two department heads disagreed on how to confront Benjamin Collins. Barker wanted to back off and take cover until things cooled down, while West opted for an all-out media blitz to counteract Collins's misinformation. Until the two concurred on a plan of action, Perris Dalton was left more or less marooned. It was an uncomfortable state of affairs when she had to work so closely with the other departments inside Red Bluffs Mining. Nobody wanted to take sides until they could see which way the wind blew, so she was more or less left spinning in place like one of those multi-colored windsocks.

"Morning," she said to the room at large, scraping an aluminum-legged chair out from the table that sat in front of a wall-sized map of the mine, a larger duplicate of the one in her office.

Several of the engineers replied, but Barker and West stared into their cups as if they'd never seen coffee before. Neither said a word as the engineers brought everyone up to date on production. The engineers wanted to know about the two nests Mike had located. One, Perris was informed, lay in a dangerous position, directly under already buried explosives.

"I'm going out this afternoon," Perris assured them. "I'll know if we have eggs in that particular nest then and we can decide then what to do."

The meeting started to break up, but as she rose from her seat, Pete Barker stopped her. "A moment, please, Perris."

She sat back down, eyeing the two managers who remained seated while everyone else left the room. Several of the engineers shot Perris covert glances as they gathered papers, pens, and calculators from the table top. Barker cleared his throat, looking at Perris with pale blue eyes from over the tops of his horn rimmed glasses. He glanced at West, and Perris didn't think she liked the look that passed between the two.

Barker turned his head toward her. "Uh, we don't generally pry into our employees' private lives, Perris," he began. "But in this case, we were wondering if, uh..."

He trailed off, and the more assertive Carl West took over.

"You have the same last name as the county sheriff," West said without preamble. West closely resembled Albert Einstein in appearance, and Perris had to force herself to remember the mine manager was no endearing eccentric. Like a pit bull, West believed in going for the throat. She could feel a blush spreading from her jacket collar to her hairline, and wondered angrily what she had to feel guilty about. But Carl West had that effect on people, causing them to feel cornered without legitimate cause. It was just the way he operated.

"We're divorced," she said, choking on the admission.

"But how does he feel about you? I mean, was the divorce amicable?" West relentlessly pursued his line of questioning while Perris squirmed.

"Carl." Perris was extremely uncomfortable with this outrageous breach of her personal life. To what lengths would these two go to insure they could continue to do nothing while she took

the brunt of the protesters' ire? It was none of Carl West's business how Noah felt. Besides, she couldn't begin to explain how Noah felt. She'd made it her business not to know.

Barker cut in, "We were wondering if Sheriff Dalton would be willing to help us out with Collins, Perris. If he'd do it for you, I mean. For, uh, you know, old time's sake."

"I don't believe this." Anger winning out over guilt at last, Perris shook her head, sitting up straighter in the uncomfortable chair. She fixed her superiors with a determined glare. "First of all, Noah's the most honorable man I've ever met in my life. He'll uphold the law, no matter what. He can't arrest Benjamin Collins just because Collins makes our jobs harder."

She found herself shaking, whether with anger or some other powerful emotion she wasn't sure. The last thing she'd expected to be doing this morning was allowing her ex-husband to dominate her thoughts, let alone find herself defending him to the two highest ranking supervisors at the mine. Usually, her work took precedence in her life, soothing her and making the old sadness recede. But her meeting with Noah on the road, and now her meeting with her superiors about Noah, had forced him back into the forefront of her consciousness.

Noah Dalton had apparently reentered her life with a bang, and she wasn't exactly sure how she felt about that yet. But one true thing: her feelings for Noah, and his for her, were absolutely none of Carl West's or Pete Barker's business. She couldn't believe the sheer gall of the two of them.

"Secondly," she said, her gaze shooting ice at the two men seated across from her, "I would never presume to tell Sheriff Dalton how to do his job. Even if I were still married to him."

Barker mumbled, "Uh-huh, well..." He seemed flustered, and Perris was suddenly sure he'd been bulldozed into this confrontation by the more assertive Carl West. She glared at West, training all her anger and disgust on him.

West stared back at her coldly. "You won't talk to the sheriff even if it means keeping your job?"

Perris felt her hackles rising. Her fists clenched under the table. She hadn't really believed she could lose her job over the demonstration. But she would not be blackmailed into compromising her own, or Noah's, ethics. "Is that a threat, Carl?" she asked quietly. "If it is, you'd better have grounds."

West abruptly backed off. "Of course it's not a threat. What I meant was, Collins is putting pretty intense heat on you. If you couldn't stand the scrutiny, if you lost the confidence of the agencies that issue your raptor permits, you wouldn't be able to retain your position with us anymore. We're only thinking of you, Perris."

*Right, she thought caustically. You're thinking of ways to keep your own heads safely in the sand.*

Getting to her feet, she said aloud, "My loyalties lie with the guys out in the pit who are trying to do their jobs; to making sure Red Bluffs Mining complies with Department of Environmental Quality standards; and to the eagles, hawks, falcons, and owls that consider these hundred square miles their territory."

She leaned across the table, balancing herself on her clenched fists. "I do my job. I do an excellent job. I assure you Noah Dalton will do an excellent job. Benjamin Collins can't hurt me except by telling outright lies. *But* I would appreciate a little public support from this company."

The irony of the situation didn't escape her. So determined to stand on her own two feet, it exasperated her no end to have to beg her bosses to bolster her position.

West and Barker also looked uncomfortable at her insistence that they help her. Barker ventured timidly, "What would you like us to do, Perris?"

"Pete." Perris sighed, standing up straight again and beginning to pace the length of the conference table. "Go with Carl's original plan. Act like you know what I do to earn my paycheck, and that you support my efforts."

When the two men continued to stare blankly, Perris elaborated: "Write letters to the paper. Take out ads. Explain our operations and what we're doing. Tell people you have every confidence in me and in my ability to abide by all federal and state regulations."

She stopped pacing to confront the two men head on. "Counteract some of Collins's accusations that I'm hurting the birds! You know for a fact the number of nesting places has increased since I've been here."

"Our confidence in you isn't in question, Perris." West stared at her. His hair stuck out at crazy angles from his head, but his face held no hint of warmth or humor. "Have you talked to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife people?"

"Of course." Perris held her ground. "We have a good working relationship. So far, they have no qualms about my handling of the birds."

"So far," West repeated, and Perris felt a renewed shiver of apprehension snake up her spine.

It didn't really matter how long she held her permit to take raptors. *Take* was so broadly defined in the federal regs, careless handling of so much as a feather and she could lose everything. West started to argue privately with Barker about how to proceed again, and Perris began to hope they'd consent to giving her some public support.

But finally Barker concluded, "We're sure you can stand up to whatever is thrown at you, Perris. We have every confidence in you."

Furious, and powerless to let her wrath show, she turned her back on them and stalked out. She was no further in her relations with the two administrators than before. Neither was willing to stick his neck out for her, even West once again backing off his original desire to blanket the state with positive news releases about Red Bluffs Mining.

Perris didn't understand it. Both men were near retirement. Maybe they were too afraid for their own jobs to risk a major battle this late in their careers. Or maybe word had come down from the distant corporation that owned the mine to sit tight and hope Collins's tempest of a protest would blow over. She would probably never know precisely why she'd been cast out on her own against the demonstrators, but it was clear that was exactly the case.

"So. Okay." She stalked back into her tiny office. She was talking to herself again, but she was so mad at the moment she didn't care if the secretaries overheard her. She'd fight Collins on her own. Without help from Noah Dalton, who couldn't choose sides. And without help from the mine administrators, who wouldn't come out openly on her side even if it was in their interest to do so.

She hadn't chosen this fight, but she'd take up the battle because she believed with all her heart in the cause. She plunked herself down in her well-worn office chair. She knew what it was like to fight alone. She'd done it before: when she'd left Noah to live in Salt Lake City to be near the hospital, and later when she'd left him for good, returned to Utah, and finished her master's degree in biology before she'd even fully healed from her surgery. She'd chosen to fight her battles alone.

She had done it then. She could fight alone now too.

Her eyes resting on the mine map on the wall, Perris willed herself to think of her work and not her personal battle. She would immerse herself in her work, and not allow herself to think of Noah. She would marshal all her willpower and control, and defeat Benjamin Collins just as she'd conquered the disease that had once threatened to kill her.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she dashed them impatiently away with a shaking fist. She wouldn't allow herself to recall what a painfully long and lonely climb it had been back to health, all on her own without Noah. She'd lost the love of her life, but she wouldn't cry, ever again, over love that could never be rediscovered. She'd go it alone, no matter how hard her solitary road became, and finally stop crying over the one man she'd never stopped loving.

## Chapter Two

The phone in her office rang, startling Perris. She picked it up, little expecting the voice she heard on the other end.

“Howdy, sweetheart.”

Was this the day for people from her past to be popping up out of nowhere? Perris hesitated slightly before saying, “Hi, Daddy. What’s up?”

She could picture Big John McLean at his desk in the old ranch house, hat tipped back on his head to accommodate the receiver of the old fashioned rotary dial phone at his ear, big belly straining the buttons of his shirt over a silver belt buckle. He lived barely forty miles from his daughter, but Perris rarely saw him. Big John’s life revolved around the ranch, and Perris’s life had taken a very different path.

This phone call out of the blue put her on guard. It was lambing season, one of Big John’s busiest times of the year. What was he doing calling her at work at this time of day?

“Been hearing you got some trouble down your way,” her father said, unspoken question in his voice.

Perris didn’t want to get into the usual argument with Big John McLean, a sheepman like his father before him, and the original McLean in Wyoming even before that. Big John was a traditional sheep rancher, one of the men whose flocks grazed the checkerboard of private and government lands and who bid good riddance to the wolves that had been wiped out in Wyoming long ago. The reintroduction of wolves in Yellowstone National Park had sent John McLean into fits of rage. He had predicted that the study group of wolves wouldn’t stay inside the park boundaries, and he’d been right. Recent reports had witnesses spotting single young male wolves and newly matured pairs hundreds of miles away from their reintroduction site. She pointed out that wolf kills had actually gone down in Oregon with the introduction of nonlethal controls on the big animals. He just shrugged and continued hoping he’d have his chance to shoot at least one. While she hadn’t talked to her father lately, she was aghast at the recent allowance for wolves to be shot on sight in Wyoming. But she would bet the old man was cheering the right to protect his flocks.

Eagles and hawks had very nearly followed the fate of the original wolves into extinction in the West due to DDT poisoning, and McLean would have considered that eventuality a blessing also. Now here was his own daughter protecting the raptors that preyed on his lambs. The old man had a difficult time coping with his daughter’s traitorous defection from her upbringing. She was always reminding him of the golden eagles they’d both seen along the road to the ranch, sated with a road kill meal and unable to take wing because their bellies were too full. How, then, she demanded, and *why* would they carry off a lamb when modern modes of transportation provided them with such easy pickings on the pavement? His historic hatreds didn’t make sense to her.

And her logic might be sound, but it couldn’t begin to sway Big John. He had sheep ranching in his bones. He knew eagles were more than capable of depredating his herds; he’d seen it with his own eyes in his youth. But Perris wouldn’t listen, and he couldn’t be dissuaded, and they’d argued themselves to such an impasse that they rarely spoke anymore.

“Have you been reading the papers?” Perris knew the question was ridiculous. Her father considered all newspapers outside of the *Wyoming Agricultural Newsletter* nothing more than mouthpieces for liberal Washington politicians. But she would have been thrilled to learn her father had unwound so far as to actually study and consider her side of the controversy.

“Just been hearing stuff. Mostly from your brother, who’s been bending my ear about you until it’s sore,” Big John admitted gruffly. “Thought I’d call you and find out for myself what’s going on.”



Perris smiled. Her father distrusted book learning. He had a hard time grasping all the new methods his son learned at the university in Laramie and brought home to try to convince his father to apply to the family ranch. Big John's children were trying to drag him into a future where he didn't comfortably fit, although Perris's brother Randy had more success convincing their father to succumb to the inevitable than she did. All she seemed able to do was raise the old man's ire.

"You know about the protest, then?" she asked.

"More of those fool Easterners come out West to try and tell us what to do. Think they know what they're talking about, when they're just running their mouths. Think animals are better'n people." Big John's voice dripped with contempt. "Wish I could give that guy who's bothering you a good piece of my mind."

"I'd pay to see that happen, Daddy." Perris smiled at the thought of Big John McLean going head to head with Benjamin Collins on the evening news. The last time she had been out to the ranch, her father's ancient console television picked up one snowy channel, and maybe he didn't even get that one anymore. But both her father and Benjamin Collins were so rigid in their views, the resulting fireworks might be downright entertaining to watch, even in the jarring fluorescent colors of Big John's old TV screen.

She sighed. They were dealing with serious issues, after all, issues that might affect the future of the West. In the tug-of-war between the old mind set and the new, Perris was a kind of referee. She tried her best to explain the importance of what she did to Collins and the readership of the state's newspapers. Coal was under siege, and Collins had a huge built in environmental backing. She didn't know how successful she could ever be convincing him that until it was replaced with another dependable source of energy, coal had a place in power generation. But she would try one more time to convince her father of her job's significance in mediating the mine's impact on wildlife and vice versa.

"Collins claims I'm hurting the hawks," Perris went on. "There are two red-tailed hawk nests started on the walls of the coal pit, which the birds think are ideal nesting cliffs. Mike, my assistant, and I head off conflict between the raptors and the dragline. Or try to mitigate the situation so the birds get to hatch their babies while the mining goes on. Collins would like to see the whole mining operation shut down. I'm just a sideline to his main protest. I'm doing my best to make everybody happy, Daddy. Which isn't always easy."

"Aw, I know that, sweetheart." Big John sighed. "Your brother says I got to learn to go with the flow. Guess I feel it's okay for me to give you grief if I want to; I'm your old dad and I'm entitled. But it's not okay for some sprout-eating stranger to harass you. In the old days, we would have run that Collins guy out on a rail. Now we got laws and more laws that are fencing ranchers in so tight an honest man can't make a living anymore."

"Daddy, you make a living," Perris countered softly. She wouldn't get into the fact that the sheepmen in Wyoming accepted wool subsidies from the government and grazed their flocks on government land for mere pennies per year in rental. Such reminders only lit Big John's short fuse. Besides, on her last visit home she'd been surprised and pleased to see that her father had fenced off from his hungry flocks the cottonwood saplings lining the creek. The creek bed itself had much improved without all the trampling of muddy hooves, and the water ran clear for the first time that she could ever remember. The riparian venture might have all been Randy's idea, but still she was touched that her father made the effort.

But Perris also held off because she still felt guilty after all this time about leaving her father and little brother alone on the ranch when she'd gone off to college the first time. Gone off to get her brain washed, according to her father. Perris's defection from the ranch, coming directly on the heels of the unexpected death of his wife, had changed Big John McLean almost overnight from a vital husband and father into a rigid, unyielding old man.

Still, Perris had a job to do. She couldn't stay on the phone all morning tiptoeing around the issues that divided her from her father.

"And I'm making a living, too," she added, even if it made her father hang up on her, "by upholding the Endangered Species laws."

Big John hesitated, probably on the point of doing exactly what his daughter expected him to do. But he couldn't hang up without having the last word. "The *rancher* is the endangered species," he declared. "But I'm not a-gonna argue with you about that again, Perris. The doc says I've got to watch my high blood pressure. I just wanted to know you're all right. I've gotta get back to work now. You call me if you need any help down there, you hear?"

Tears stung Perris's eyes. Her father was trying so hard to reach common ground this morning. She resolved to get out to the ranch and see him more often. Maybe if both she and her brother kept working on him, Big John would eventually come around. "I will. Thanks for calling, and for thinking of me. Tell Randy hi for me when you see him." She added softly, "I love you, Daddy."

She wasn't sure if he heard, but his quiet reply came before he cut the connection: "I love you too, little girl."

Perris returned to her paperwork, her mind on Noah's sudden reappearance in her orbit and her father's unexpected phone call, until Mike Eversoll returned from the pit a little after noon. He and Perris stowed all their mountain climbing gear in the back of the battered Dodge pickup and headed out on the rutted dirt road toward the pit. About three miles from the office building, Perris spotted one of the jumbles of sandstone rock she had requested the miners set aside for her. The rock pile abutted a man-made butte, and except that her rock lacked the colorful lichens of the cold-desert basin ecology it was almost indistinguishable from any other natural rock outcropping in southwest Wyoming.

The miners had at first been disconcerted by Perris's pleas to save the stone for her. At the time, two summers ago, they'd probably thought she was crazy. But it pleased Perris to see the results of her plan, the overburden of a previous coal pit returned to some semblance of the rugged landscape it had originally been.

The hillside was covered with a dense carpet of halogeton, a low growing pioneer plant that, although an introduced species and capable of spreading unchecked, thrived in disturbed soil and helped keep erosion to a minimum. Except for the absence of sage, rabbitbrush, saltbush, and other climax colony foliage that would take ten years or more to establish, the dun hill contours looked almost the same as the undisturbed landscape outside Red Bluffs Mining's boundaries. So long as Big John and his cohorts kept their flocks away from poisonous halogeton for the duration, no lasting harm had been done to the land.

Farther along the road, Perris could see on her left the huge piece of equipment called a dragline, with its twenty-three cubic meter bucket cutting the overburden along a pit where the topsoil had already been graded off and saved. This was the highwall, where no blasting had yet taken place. To the right was the present mining operation, the bituminous coal being blasted and dug for use at the adjacent power plant.

Mike turned his bearded face toward Perris as he brought the truck to a halt. "Ready?" he asked, grinning.

Perris knew her assistant felt the same exhilaration coated with fear she did at descending to look into the red-tailed hawk nests. Neither of them would ever get over a wide eyed, almost childlike admiration for the raptors. Or the thrill of pure adrenaline that shot through them each time they had to descend the pit face on a thin-looking rope.

She'd learned to rappel in college, the second time around. Noah would have a fit if he could see her now, preparing to risk her life once more for the sake of her birds.

Noah. He probably had no idea what her life was like now, or how far she'd come in her quest for independence. There were times she still missed him so fiercely she thought she'd die

of it, but she also knew there was no way on this earth Noah Dalton would support the idea of any wife of his deliberately putting herself in danger for the sake of a mere job.

But. She wasn't Noah's wife.

These days Perris did as she pleased. It might be a lonely life, but it was her life.

They unpacked their gear, Perris coiling the rope while Mike drove the long stake into the ground that would anchor her. She checked the length of the rope and the sling for weak spots before tossing the coil over the rim, then belted herself in and stood for a moment poised on the lip of the pit. She gave Mike a thumbs up and then swung backwards out into space.

While Perris descended with her backpack full of gear, Mike drove back around the pit and down to the bottom to retrieve her. They were checking the nest below the implanted explosives. All the way down, Perris prayed the female hawk hadn't laid yet. She bumped the wall several times with her booted feet, each time swinging back into thin air as the rope played out between her gloved hands. One of the nesting hawks had spotted her, its sharp, one-note cry echoing as it took wing and circled nervously overhead.

Perris felt like the mammalian predator the hawk probably took her for as she descended near its stick nest. Unfortunately, her fears were confirmed. The female hawk had already laid her spotted eggs. Now the real work would begin as the nest was numbered on the computer and the welfare of its shelled occupants tracked in tandem with the progression of the mine's operations. Every hour of field work generated at least two hours of paperwork. While she didn't necessarily enjoy all the related record keeping, she understood its necessity for the protection of the raptors.

She and Mike headed back to the office after scraping a second nest start from the mine wall that luckily didn't contain eggs. Perris had to consult with the engineers briefly to see when the mine sequences might impact the hawk eggs, and Mike began plotting the nest's location on the computer. By late afternoon they were done for the day, and headed out to the parking lot.

Perris was pleasantly tired. The discovery of the eggs had a two pronged effect on her: the nest was in a bad place, but evidence that the birds were increasing their population despite the mining activity going on around them always cheered her. She couldn't help respecting the persistent, plucky birds who insisted on carrying out nature's directives right in the middle of man's unnatural endeavors.

And she wouldn't admit that the memory of her brief encounter with Noah had helped energize her through her day.

She whistled a tuneless air as she drove the county road toward the I-80 interchange, the last in a long line of Red Bluffs workers heading home. She looked forward to a soak in the tub and a leisurely dinner alone in front of the television. She didn't want to think about how the shock of seeing sandy lashed gray eyes this morning would intrude on her lonely nighttime routine. Noah, unfortunately, had re-entered her life in the flesh, making it all the harder to ignore the glaring fact that she still loved him.

Keep whistling, Perris told herself. She wouldn't admit that she was probably whistling in the dark when it came to eradicating Noah Dalton from her thoughts. Or her heart.

But the song she'd been whistling died on her puckered lips as she neared the tent city of the protesters.

Perris frowned, slowing the crossover SUV to take a hard look before she approached. Alongside the motley collection of protesters' vehicles stood a news van with a Salt Lake City television station logo emblazoned in big letters on its side. The demonstrators milled around a perfectly coiffed woman dressed in a stylish sea green linen suit. One man pointed excitedly at Perris's purple ride before the whole lot of them swarmed across the road to once again block her way.

"Here we go," Perris muttered. If she'd sped up instead of slowing down, she probably could have got past before they stopped her. An equipment laden cameraman hustled the smartly

dressed newswoman through the protesters surrounding Perris's car. Perris recognized the wide smile and sharp blue eyes from the Salt Lake evening news. The woman yelled over the protesters, "Ms. Dalton, could I speak to you, please?"

Perris pushed a button to roll the window partway down. The newswoman's eyes gleamed with triumph. She said, "Ms. Dalton, I'm Merilee Kramer, of *Channel Ten Nightly News*."

Perris nodded slightly in recognition. A few steps behind Merilee Kramer, Benjamin Collins grinned, licking his lips in anticipation. He had every right to be happy, Perris thought sourly. He'd finally broken out of the backwoods of Wyoming news and into the big time of Utah's. Maybe the story would go national, get picked up by the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post* or *USA Today*. Wouldn't Collins be thrilled then?

Perris was aware the camera caught every nuance of her expression as she tried not to glare at Benjamin Collins. Abruptly she opened the door of the SUV, forcing the demonstrators to back off slightly, and climbed out. She would face the news crew and the protesters on her feet, not hiding in her vehicle.

Merilee Kramer gestured for the protesters to be quiet and they complied like puppets. She turned smoothly toward the camera, saying, "I'm Merilee Kramer reporting from the site of an environmental protest against Red Bluffs Mining company's coal mining operations in southwest Wyoming. I'm talking to Perris Dalton, Red Bluffs' environmental specialist."

Then the newswoman turned back toward Perris, letting the cameraman focus in close-up on her expression, and said, "Ms. Dalton, Benjamin Collins of the environmental group One Natural World has asserted that you personally are worse for Wyoming's raptors than the notorious pesticide DDT, which resulted in eggs too soft to hatch and whose effect took years to overcome in the environment. Do you have an answer to that charge?"

Noah, where are you when I need you? Why wasn't the sheriff here right now to clear the road? Well, it was Perris's own fault she now had only herself to depend on: She had made it pretty clear she could take care of herself.

She took a deep breath, trying to gather her thoughts. She centered her eyes on Merilee Kramer's face, forcing her gaze away from a cocky Benjamin Collins. She couldn't think straight when she was looking directly at Collins. Anger always muddled her logic.

"As Mr. Collins is no doubt aware," Perris began, her voice shaky, "the raptor population in this area has doubled or even tripled each year, depending on availability of prey species."

"And isn't it true that the population of prey animals like ground squirrels and rabbits is directly affected by mining activity?" Merilee Kramer interrupted.

"More often their numbers are affected by available food supplies and the number and types of species preying on them." Perris felt herself rapidly losing control as Collins continued to smile nastily over the newswoman's shoulder. It had been a long day, and she wasn't up to any more of Collins's accusations. Merilee Kramer, appearing to read Perris's mind and less willing to cede control of her precious airtime, subtly nudged Collins out of camera range.

"Tell me, Ms. Dalton, how many pairs of hawks are nesting on the pit wall this year?"

"At the moment, one pair."

"One?" Merilee Kramer seemed puzzled. "My informants tell me there were four nests out there this morning."

"Your sources are misinformed."

"But there was more than one nest out there today?"

Perris couldn't bring herself to lie. "Yes."

"How many are there now, Ms. Dalton?"

Perris gritted her teeth. "One."

"What happened to the other nests?"

"There was only one other nest, just the beginnings of a nest, actually."

Merilee Kramer showed her teeth in what couldn't actually be described as a smile. "I'll take your word for it, Ms. Dalton," she said smoothly. "What happened to the other nest?"

Perris said, "I scraped it off the wall. Because—"

"Scraped it off the wall." Merilee Kramer interrupted, looking prettily stunned for the camera. Then she turned away from Perris and looked directly into the camera lens. "And there you have it. This is Merilee Kramer, reporting for *Channel Ten Nightly News*."

The camera panned over the protesters, who obligingly took up their yelling and waving of signs again at a signal from Benjamin Collins. Perris rolled her eyes in exasperation.

When the man flicked the camera off, Merilee Kramer turned toward Perris. "Thank you very much, Ms. Dalton," she said, dismissing Perris from her exalted presence.

Perris said sharply as the newswoman started to turn her back, "Just a minute!"

Merilee Kramer was suave, Perris would give her that. Without turning a hair at Perris's tone, she inquired, "Yes, Ms. Dalton?"

"You didn't let me finish. I don't think I've been given a fair chance to portray what's happening with my birds," Perris said through stiff lips.

"Your birds, Ms. Dalton?" Merilee Kramer arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow.

"Okay, the birds," Perris amended. "The raptors. I'll give you an exclusive look inside the Red Bluffs Mining operation. In return, you give me a chance to present a balanced view of the mitigation going on to save birds of prey from extinction. It really is a success story."

"Oh, I don't know if I have time to tour the mine. We were heading back to Utah." Merilee Kramer smiled prettily. "You'll be on the ten o'clock news, Ms. Dalton."

"Come back this weekend," Perris invited. "I'll give you as much time as you need."

Benjamin Collins, who'd started to drift away with the cameraman, shouldered back through the crowd. "Hey, I demand balance! My protest is the main issue here and I'll be present for any television interview." He glared at Perris.

"I really had plans this weekend. The ski season is almost over," Merilee Collins said, tapping her glossy lips with a mauve fingernail but shrewdly assessing the electric jolts of enmity that passed between Collins and Perris. "Tell you what," she continued with another smile showing off her perfectly aligned teeth, "I have a weekend news hour also. Perhaps you've seen it. *Sunday Morning with Merilee*?"

Perris nodded agreement, although she didn't watch television much on the weekends and in truth had never seen Merilee's Sunday show.

"Well, it's actually taped during the week and shown on the weekend," Merilee informed her. "But *Sunday Morning* gives me a chance to delve more deeply into topics that interest me and my audience. If we could get back together, say, one week from today?" She looked more toward her cameraman for confirmation than to Perris. When he nodded, Perris agreed also.

Collins pushed forward, interjecting, "Wait a minute here! I insist on being included. You can't leave me out. I'm the one who started this whole thing."

Merilee Kramer shot Collins a cool glance. Perris could almost read her thoughts: Merilee had gotten the footage she needed from the environmentalist for that evening's newscast, and now she looked at him as she would a pesky fly alighting with germ laden legs on her lunch.

"Should I need you, Mr. Collins, I know where to find you," Merilee said.

Collins's face flushed angry red, but instead of the logical target of the newswoman he threw Perris a scathing glance. "This isn't finished. I'll get you for this," he warned in a low voice. His eyes glowed with a zealot's light under lowered brows. "You won't get away with dismissing me."

Collins turned on his heel and stomped away, the crowd of protesters breaking up in his wake and starting to follow him back toward the tents. They looked like a bunch of naughty schoolboys heading to the principal's office after having been caught fighting on the playground. Perris's lips twitched, but she didn't smile. Collins's threat was too real for her not to take it

seriously. She was sure that for a moment she had been looking into a psychopath's soulless eyes.

Merilee Kramer extended a perfectly manicured hand toward Perris. "I'd watch out for that man if I were you. With environmentalists fighting on so many fronts, he can choose his battles. One is as good as another, and he feels he's on a mission to save the world. You should take care." The newswoman seemed to catch herself actually being kind, and added in a more breezy tone, "Well, I'll be in touch, Ms. Dalton."

Merilee lifted a languorous hand in a half-wave. Then she and her cameraman disappeared into their van while Perris got into her car and they both pulled away from the tent town.

Perris didn't know what to think on the hour's drive home from the remote site of Red Bluffs Mining. She was happy because she was finally getting the chance to present her side of the controversy, an entire hour on Salt Lake City television. But she still had reservations about thrusting herself so forcefully into the limelight, especially since she knew how the media could twist and distort. And she shivered at each recollection of Benjamin Collins's parting shot: *I'll get you!*

What did he mean, he'd get her? That he would get back at her in the news?

Or something more personal?

She was beginning to be afraid Coral might be right about Collins. Even Merilee Kramer, utterly detached professional, had warned her. Perris herself shivered every time she thought about the look she had seen in his eyes. How far would Benjamin Collins go to keep the upper hand? He'd swiftly narrowed his attacks on the mine down to Perris. Had he picked his victim, his sacrificial lamb?

She should call Noah, get his take on this situation, see if he thought she should be worried. She could imagine his strong arms around her, as they'd once been, his voice saying, "It's all right, Perri. Nothing's going to happen to you. We'll get through this together."

At one time she'd been able to depend on Noah Dalton for anything. To back her up, prop her up. To love her to distraction.

Stop it! Perris scolded herself as she took the Hawk Point exit that would lead her home. She didn't need Noah. Not his arms, and not his badge either. She could handle Collins. She assured herself once again she wasn't in personal danger. Collins was after her job, and really not even her job. He was just making things uncomfortable for her because she happened to be in the right position at the wrong time. His crusade wasn't a vendetta against her. She was an available vehicle to advance his cause.

You're equivocating, a voice inside her said. You know better.

You looked into his eyes. Call Noah!

Perris couldn't remember the color of Collins's eyes—only the cold, reptilian quality of his gaze. She pulled up in front of the tiny house she rented north of the city limits of Hawk Point, turned off the ignition, and shut her eyes as memories once again flooded in.

She could remember the color of Noah's eyes, all right.

*Call Noah.*

"No." Perris groaned, covering her own eyes with one hand. It was going to be another of her bad nights, she could tell. One of those long, torturous nights where she twisted in damp sheets, getting absolutely no rest while she visualized details of her lost life. She missed Noah so much, she actually ached sometimes.

Why had she run into him today? Why did she have to set eyes on him again, bringing the memories back stronger even than before? Now that she was alone they surged in with a tsunami force she hadn't felt since the day she'd decided to divorce him.

Why the *hell* had she come back to Wyoming?

Why else—except to see Noah? Perris clutched at the door handle, toppling out of the crossover and stumbling toward the front door of the little clapboard house. Her fingers fumbled with the key, and she rued the necessity for locks.

She needed a lock on her heart, instead of one on the door to guard her few possessions.

She finally got the door open, and stood leaning against it for support before shoving herself forcefully away. She'd take a bath, clear her head, get something to eat. She would get herself under some semblance of control. She wouldn't think of Noah Dalton again. She had enough problems.

She stared at her fingers, willing them to stop shaking. She had nearly succeeded when her phone rang, its summons shattering what little calm she'd so far managed to exert over herself.

Noah Dalton punched in the first digits of Perri's telephone number, hesitated, and then broke the connection. He sat a few minutes more where he'd been sitting since he came home from work at the Rock Creek sheriff's office. He stared at the top of the gleaming mahogany desk Marla had picked out for him as a peace offering at some point during the seven months of their short and disastrous marriage.

Poor Marla with her satin cocktail dresses and filmy negligees had never been a match for Noah's memories of Perri in black lace and garters—or even Perri in torn denims and a T-shirt. He'd married Marla Paxton on the rebound, knowing she was no rocket scientist. But he had badly misjudged her intelligence level if he thought she wouldn't soon realize she was forever competing with Perri for first place in her husband's heart.

"You're in love with your ex-wife. You'll always be in love with Perris. Why don't you just admit it, Noah? Everybody would be a lot happier if you owned up to your feelings. Then you could stop messing up other people's lives."

Marla's insightful parting words still rang in Noah's head. But was she right? Would he be happier if he admitted he loved Perri and always would?

Say he did admit it. Whom should he admit such a thing to, anyway? Perri?

Was that why he had his hand on the phone, half the numbers punched in before he chickened out and disconnected? No, he was worried about Perri, that was all. Benjamin Collins could complicate her life. Noah just wanted to talk things over with her, see if she had any more trouble with Collins today. The county commissioners were getting edgy with all the negative publicity, pushing him to step up patrols in the Red Bluffs area, and he needed to know if there was valid reason to pull his people away from their regular duties.

Or at least that was the reason Noah Dalton, Powell County sheriff, gave himself to complete his call. He re-dialed Perri's number, and this time let the phone ring.

But he had no official reason, when she answered, for his voice to get all husky. Noah Dalton sounded needy, even to his own ears, when he choked out, "Perri?"

"Noah?"

Perris forced herself to breathe. Noah had been so real in her thoughts just a moment before that she wondered if she'd conjured a phone call from him because she wanted to hear his voice so badly. Maybe this call wasn't real. Maybe she needed him so much she was making it up.

"Are you all right?" He sounded worried. Worried—and something else. Something vibrated across the phone connection, hummed beneath his everyday words of concern. Noah's emotions were tough to read even in person, but Perris knew him well.

Too well? Perhaps she was giving his simple consideration more weight than it merited. Why should Noah Dalton care if she'd had a bad day? And worse, what would he do if he knew exactly how bad?

"I'm fine," she finally said. "May I ask where you got my cell phone number?"

"Cops have ways of finding out things."

“Yeah.” At one time she would have blasted him for invading her privacy, although she knew for a price he could have bought the information on the Internet like anyone else. But she had been wishing to talk to him, and here was her chance. “Noah, about this morning: I didn’t stay to thank you for clearing the road. I hope you realize, I wouldn’t have really run over anybody.”

“I know, Perri. Forget it. I understand. I wouldn’t want to stick around that bunch either, if I were you. How did it go with the Utah news people?”

The familiar timbre of his voice over the telephone made her inner ear, and something deeper inside near her heart, vibrate in tune with his words.

“How did you know about them?”

“They called the sheriff’s department for information.”

“Oh. Well, I offered Merilee Kramer a day with me at the mine, and she countered with a spot on her Sunday news show. I really think the tide might be turning in my favor.”

“And Collins? Where’s he going to be while you’re commandeering a Salt Lake City news crew? Or are you going to Salt Lake for the interview?”

Noah sounded really concerned. Maybe she was right to be afraid. Perris drew a breath, remembering Benjamin Collins’s threat. “Merilee hasn’t really said if she’s coming back or wants me to go to Utah. And she sort of excluded Collins from the whole business. He wasn’t very happy.”

Here was the opportunity she’d wanted, the chance to talk over Collins’s threat with Noah. So why was she holding back? Why didn’t she pour out her worries and let him help her?

Five years was a long time, that’s why. She was afraid Noah would once again want to smother her with protectiveness. The distance between them gaped wide. The distance she’d put between them because she needed to do things on her own.

She had to remember they were strangers now. Not spouses. Not even friends.

But Noah was a cop. He didn’t let euphemisms like *not very happy* slip by him.

“What did Collins do?”

“He...” Perris hesitated, a pause just a bit too long for Noah.

“Perri?” he barked into the phone. “What did he do?”

“He threatened me. It’s nothing. He was angry.”

*He looked at me.*

She couldn’t add that. How stupid would it sound, telling Noah that Collins had looked at her? On the other hand, she was afraid Noah would put too much stock in her instincts. Maybe he’d believe she was right to be afraid. It might make her feel even worse to have the county sheriff reinforce her fears.

“Perri, I want to come over.”

Noah’s voice was soft, deceptively soft. Everything in Perris fought against giving in to that familiar tone. She knew he wanted to be near her. And she wanted it too. She could feel herself weakening. He was too much temptation; some secret part of her still considered them married and always would. They had once been more to each other than mere vows.

But she could say *no* to him now, where before she never could. No other man had ever made her so trembly in the knees she toppled backward into bed from a few kisses. She couldn’t let him get near. She had no willpower when it came to Noah Dalton. She was well aware that that much, at least, had not changed.

“No, you can’t come over.” She should never have told Noah about Collins. She didn’t know what her ex-husband could do, caught as he was between her troubles and his re-election. But he would find a way to come riding to her rescue if he truly wanted to. The question was, did she want him to?

Possibility hung heavy in the silence between them. She was grateful for the cold plastic of the phone, and the distance it put between them.



"I hate this," Noah said. "I want to know what Collins said. I want you to look at me while you tell me exactly what happened today."

"No. I don't think it's a good idea." She repressed a deepening shiver. She'd detected the same undertow all during the conversation, running beneath the surface of Noah's words. A deep current that she'd felt tugging at her, tugging her under. He wanted to see her again. He wanted to start the cycle all over again. The vicious cycle of saying he loved her but treating her like a wounded little girl. *No.*

"Why not?"

*Because I want you too much.*

Because I'm thinking that maybe you want to try again. And I can't go through it all again. I can't face the pity in your eyes when you look at me.

"There's really no need for you to come all the way over here." She tried to sound calm, confident, assured. The modern, independent woman she prided herself on being since she had no man in her life to depend on.

"Less than twenty miles." She could hear the smile in Noah's reply. "Fifteen minutes on the highway, Perri."

Her knees started to grow watery at the familiar quality of his deep voice. She closed her eyes against the image of a flash of his white teeth when he smiled. The idea of how much fun they'd had together, how close they'd been.

Once upon a time. Long ago.

She moaned. "Noah. Please. Not tonight."

"Okay." His voice grew guarded, as if he thought she had a date or something. She hadn't had a date since their divorce. But let him think so if it kept him away.

"Tell me exactly what Collins said and then I'll let you go."

Grateful to have the conversation turned from where she'd been afraid it was going, she spoke without thinking. "He said he would get me."

Noah paused. "How do you think he meant that, Perri?" His voice was his hard cop voice. She could picture a frown drawing his sandy eyebrows together as he formulated a plan to defend her.

She had to throw Noah off the track, or he'd have the twenty miles separating them driven in ten minutes. Her words tumbled over each other as she tried to regain lost ground. "I told you, Collins was just angry. He doesn't mean anything, Noah. Really."

He paused. She could picture his hand clenching the phone as he fought to get his warrior instincts under control. At last he sighed, a forced exhalation of breath that she knew all too well. "All right. I'll let it go this time, because that seems to be the way you want it," he said. "But promise me you'll call if he does anything more. And I mean anything outside the legal limits of his protest."

She had won. He was giving up. He would stay away. He'd learned his lesson about stepping in where he wasn't wanted.

So why didn't she feel happy about it? Why did she feel bereft? She felt as if she stood alone in a blinding snowstorm, cut off from the warmth of a blazing fire.

"I'll let you know. I really have to go now. Thank you, Noah." Her hands were shaking again, but luckily her voice betrayed none of her inner turmoil. She only hoped she could disconnect before she blew it completely and ended up begging him to come over.

"Good night, Perri," Noah said quietly, and hung up.

He still didn't say goodbye, she noted as she laid the cell phone down with shaking fingers. After all she'd put him through, Noah Dalton was still refusing to say farewell. He left the metaphorical door open for her and the symbolic night light on in case she wanted to come home.

“God help me.” Perris groaned, as if the sound of her own voice could banish Noah’s veiled appeals from her head. What did she have to do before the man would finally let her go? She’d come back to Wyoming, she now realized, to have Noah Dalton conclusively and completely and finally set her heart free. Why couldn’t he just say the one simple word, *goodbye*, that would let her go forever?

Why couldn’t he admit that there was nothing between them anymore? He had to have retained the same painful memories she had, of their love falling to ruin while she focused all her attention on overcoming her disease.

He was the most stubborn man she’d ever met in her life. She wasn’t fooled by his backing off, by his giving her a little space. He was serving notice that he intended to move back in on her. He wanted to see her? What a joke! He wanted to give her help she didn’t need. He wanted to shield her from living.

She’d seen the way he looked at her, his silvery blue eyes traveling over her while his face remained impassive and the emotion in his eyes shuttered. He remembered. He remembered what the doctors had done to her. And yet he still wanted to try again.

But she couldn’t. She remembered too, so very well. And the memories were set loose now, running amok where they’d been so safely locked up. She put shaking hands to her head as if to contain the memories flying free, to trap them back inside their rusty cages in her mind where they belonged.

She swiped at the tears flowing down her cheeks.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to hide. She wanted to run.

She had run from nothing in the last five years, faced everything head on with all the strength she had. Only one thing could make Perris run now. And that was the thought of finally facing Noah Dalton.

### Chapter Three

Why couldn’t he just tell Perri goodbye?

Noah carefully laid down the phone after talking to his ex-wife, mulling over his inability to finally end it with her. It wasn’t fair to either of them to be left hanging.

Well, he was still hanging at any rate. Perri had taken matters in her own hands and simply divorced him, a very effective way of saying, *So long, goodbye, I don’t want you in my life anymore.*

Was he so dense he couldn’t he take a hint? Or a slap in the face, which was what her divorcing him had felt like?

Noah Dalton had never considered himself a stupid man, but at the moment he felt pretty thick. It was obvious Perri didn’t want anything more to do with him. She wanted to live her own life her own way, no matter the consequences. She’d take whatever came, Benjamin Collins and his threats included, and handle it herself. She didn’t need a burly lawman of an ex-husband hanging around, trying to protect her and failing, like he’d done once before. How much clearer did she have to make it that she wanted him to stay away?

She’d sounded uncomfortable talking to him. Evasive. Maybe she had someone else now, someone who was listening while she talked, waiting for her to get off the phone so they could resume whatever it was they had been doing.

For a moment, jealousy consumed Noah. He considered jumping in the car and going right over to Perri’s to see if she had company. Male company. That might well finally put a stop to his fantasies about her, if he could see for himself that she had someone else.

But he couldn’t act on the impulse. How could he, the Powell County sheriff, go spying on his ex-wife to see if she had a boyfriend? And what if she did? Would he be able to meekly swallow the knowledge and turn around and go home? Even if he didn’t go over in his official

vehicle, it wouldn't fit with the image he'd built up of himself over many years in law enforcement to go prowling around the roads near Perri's house. There were laws against stalking.

After all the talking he did to himself, the urge was still strong. To avoid acting on the urge, he listed all the reasons not to approach Perri again. He was up for re-election this year. The campaign wheels had already started turning. He had enough of a political time bomb with the protest at Red Bluffs Mining threatening to blow up in his face. And it was bad enough on the moral front that two different women had divorced him. He didn't need any new talk about himself and his first ex-wife adding ammunition to his opponent's arsenal.

But the biggest deterrent was the fact that Perri would have a fit if she found out. He knew exactly what she'd say if he went spying on her. In the past she'd accused him of overprotecting her. He'd thought they were fighting side by side, but Perri felt overwhelmed. She said he smothered her, when all he was trying to do was help her. He'd never dreamed his urge to shield her would lead to divorce.

What would it lead to this time? What, exactly, would happen if he and Perri ever faced each other again?

He loved her. Always had, and probably always would. The problem was, he didn't understand her. But that didn't mean he didn't want to try.

He wanted to see her again. Campaign for re-election or no campaign. To hell with that political tiptoeing around stuff. Misunderstandings between the two of them could be forgotten if they tried. Despite all the reasons he should stay away from her, he could make Perri see that they were meant to be together.

But not tonight. He'd give her a chance to think about it, to remember. Afraid of getting her guard up against him any higher than it already was, he'd back off for a little while. He'd touched base with her twice in one day. So she had to be remembering all the things he was remembering, all that they'd once meant to each other.

He sighed, rubbing his chin, feeling the thick beard stubble that required shaving twice a day. He looked at his surroundings, the den that held a few reminders of Marla and many reminders of Perri. Two failed marriages. And if he was truthful with himself he would guess he hadn't really learned a thing from either of them.

He wanted to go over to Perri's right now. He didn't care if she'd had a hundred lovers in the five years they'd been apart, or even if she had one in her bed at this very moment. He loved her. He longed to go over there right now and see her, take her in his arms and make sure he was the one sharing a bed with her.

Heaving a huge sigh, he got up and went to the bathroom off the master bedroom to shower and shave, dropping the brown tie, white shirt, and mocha uniform pants along the way. He would put in the expected appearance at the Ducks Unlimited dinner and auction tonight. He would bid on some donated wildlife art that he didn't need and find space to hang it on his crowded office walls. A little public mingling with hunting enthusiasts would be good for his fledgling campaign.

Noah grinned ruefully in the silence of his empty house. Maybe he had learned one thing in five years without Perri. Maybe he'd learned a little bit of restraint. Attending a banquet with his constituents would be ever so much better than bungling a stakeout of his ex-wife's love life.

Perris forced herself to follow through on her plan to take a long soak in the tub. She poured scented bath oil in the claw-footed tub and ran enough water to reach her chin without quite spilling over. She shed her clothes quickly and sank into the luxurious warmth, closing her eyes and trying to blot out thoughts of Noah.

The old tub had been installed in the days before people became concerned about water consumption and the fuel required to heat it. Perris thought she could probably wash a horse in a

tub this size. Her arms and legs floated dreamily in the depths of the warm water while she replayed her earlier phone conversation with Noah. Despite herself, she felt better, safer, for having talked with her ex-husband. She only regretted that she needed his male support. She'd been on the verge of inviting him over, and had had to bite her tongue hard to stop herself. What was wrong with her lately, anyway? Did she really want to start the vicious cycle of love/protectiveness/dependency all over again with Noah?

She stayed in the water, thinking, until it began to cool, then washed quickly and stepped out. She didn't linger over lotioning her legs. She never paid much attention to her body anymore beyond its basic needs, and so she avoided looking in the warped mirror over the sink that cast a wavery reflection of her nudity.

But when she stepped out of the bathroom and into the combination bedroom-living room, she couldn't bring herself to put on her usual evening attire of baggy sweatpants and T-shirt. Instead she flipped through the clothing hanging on a dowel suspended from the ceiling until she found something that might help elevate her mood: a long empire-waisted dress printed in bold yellow sunflowers. She'd already decided she didn't feel like going for her usual two-mile run tonight. She slipped the dress over her head without stopping to don a bra. No one would be looking at her to see if she wore one, so why bother?

The dress swished around her calves as she walked from the twin-sized mattress draped with an India print throw that served as both bed and sofa, to the kitchen area on the other side of the same room. The tiny old refrigerator hummed, building up more ice in the freezer compartment that she'd soon have to defrost again. She sighed as she checked the contents of the fridge. It was either bean sprouts and scrambled eggs for dinner, or scrambled eggs and raw carrots.

She really should go to the grocery store, but she didn't have the energy. With a wry smile she decided on scrambled eggs. She flipped on the burner of the old gas stove.

When a knock sounded at the door, Perris stopped stirring the eggs, but didn't answer immediately. No one except Coral Peterson had ever visited her at the little house. She didn't expect anyone.

Well, except maybe Noah, who never could take a hint. Maybe he decided she wasn't serious when she told him to stay away. Maybe he decided to come over anyway. Maybe he had a romantic candlelight dinner for two in mind in some expensive restaurant. Afterward they might come back here, relaxed and sated with food, and it would be like the old days between them when they could undress each other and sink languidly to the mattress....

At the second, more forceful pounding on the door, Perris turned the burner off and set the pan aside. Her first thought was for the pink latex prosthesis left lying on the bathroom floor along with her bra. She didn't have time to put on either of them if she meant to answer the door. She automatically looked down at the bodice of the dress, trying to gauge whether her lopsidedness was very noticeable.

The pounding continued, overly loud in the confines of the tiny house. Would Noah be so impatient, so demanding? Surely not, not after all these long years of thinking about her wish for autonomy, for independence. Noah's knock would be softer, more tentative. Wouldn't it?

Perris walked to the door and engaged the chain before unlocking the deadbolt she'd installed when she moved in. She hadn't been a cop's wife for nothing. Even for Noah, she wouldn't just throw open the door.

She opened the stout wooden door the two inches allowed by the chain, her body protected behind it. Benjamin Collins stood on her front porch, hand raised to continue his hammering.

They eyed each other for long seconds before Perris said, "What do you want."

Collins lowered his fist. "I want to talk to you. Can I come in?"

As if they were friends or something. Perris couldn't believe the man's presumptuousness. "So you can get more dirt to use against me? No thanks, Mr. Collins." She started to shut the door.

Benjamin Collins stuck the toe of his shoe inside the crack between the door and the jamb. "I said I just wanted to talk," he grated. Something frightening sparked in his eyes again. He added, "There are two ways we can get together: the easy way or the hard way. Why don't you pick?"

Perris could feel anger roiling up inside, despite a very real fear of what she'd already glimpsed in Benjamin Collins's eyes. She was sick of being hounded and threatened by this man. She didn't have to take his harassment, his bullying. Not in her own house. She'd put a stop to this nonsense right now.

"It's too late for us to reach common ground. I have nothing to say to you. Now get your foot out of my door." She glared at him through the gap, sorry she was barefoot instead of wearing her steel-toed work boots. Maybe if she stomped his toe good, he'd move it.

Collins smiled, but the coldness in his eyes grew more prominent. "I wanted one more chance to convince you. We really should be on the same side." Instead of removing his foot as she asked, he leaned his weight against the door.

Perris shuddered. She wondered if the chain would hold.

Noah had offered to come over. Why hadn't she let him? He could have been here by now, his strong presence a deterrent to the likes of Benjamin Collins. Collins was a bully. He thought he could pick on a man-less woman and get his way. He thought she was defenseless. Like a bully, he'd turn tail and run in the face of a more powerful opponent.

Well, Perris Dalton meant to be that powerful opponent. She didn't need Noah. She wouldn't roll over and play dead to any man, and especially not a coward like Benjamin Collins.

She said from behind the concealment of the door, "Mr. Collins, I have a gun. I suggest you get off my porch and off my property. Right now."

His eyes widened in surprise for a moment, before narrowing to hide the growing coldness Perris had detected before. "I'll go this time. But when push comes to shove, I want you to remember that you were the one who brought a weapon to our discussion." He grinned, but there was no warmth in it. "See you around, Ms. Dalton."

Perris sighed with relief when he removed his shoe tip and backed away, the old boards of the porch creaking under his stout weight. She shut the door and leaned her forehead against it, afraid to move until she heard the engine of his car. What she heard instead was the crash of her recycling materials. Collins had apparently stumbled over, or in a fit of pique kicked over, the bins of carefully separated cans, bottles, and plastic.

But if she thought that was the end of the episode, she was mistaken. As Collins started to pull out of the yard he halted. A large rock came hurtling through the door's sidelight. Glass shattered with the sound of a gunshot. Perris jumped, heart thumping. When she whirled to get away from the exposed front windows she stepped on a shard with her bare foot.

The sound of Collins's car receded in the distance.

She sobbed in frustrated anger and fear, sliding down to the floor to survey the blood dripping from her toe and the mess of broken glass she'd have to clean up. She hadn't expected Collins to retaliate so quickly. The two tall, narrow sidelights to either side of the front door had offered him an unobstructed view inside her house. He had known all along she was alone, known he could scare her. Perhaps he'd seen her naked, debating what to wear. Probably he had even known she didn't have a gun.

Perris tried to decide what to do. She couldn't even get to the bathroom for a bandage for her bleeding toe without stepping on more glass.

Thoughts tumbled inside her head. She should call Noah. She should report this. She hated being so feeble, the sight of her own blood making her woozy. She pushed her black curls out of her eyes; her hands were shaking again.

Unable to make up her mind how to proceed, unaware she was on the verge of shock, Perris stumbled to the phone. Now she was bleeding from the sole of the other foot as well as from her toe. She pushed numbers from memory.

Coral Peterson, her friend from work, answered on the first ring. Perris could hardly remain coherent enough to identify herself.

"I can't understand you. Calm down, hon," Coral said gently. "Now tell me again what happened."

A wave of dizziness swept over Perris as she stared down at the blood pooling beneath her bare feet. She closed her eyes and recited the events of the evening again.

"That son of a bitch Collins," Coral said savagely when Perris finished. "Are you all right, Perris?"

"My feet are bleeding a little," Perris admitted. "But I feel better just for having told somebody about it. I'm going to get cleaned up now, Coral. Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder."

"Cry on my shoulder, my ass. Call the cops! If you don't, I will. You hear me, Perris?"

The cops. Where she lived, that meant the call being routed to the sheriff's office. Noah would know. Perris resisted that. She couldn't call the county dispatcher, couldn't ask for help from the sheriff. Once she did, she was lost. She and Noah would start all over again and before she knew it she'd be right back where she was five years ago, dependent on big, strong Noah Dalton for life itself.

She couldn't call the sheriff.

When she didn't answer, Coral said, "Shit. All right, then, don't call the cops. But I'm coming over. Get in the bathroom and get the bleeding stopped. Then put on some shoes so you can open the door when I get there."

"Coral, that's not necess—"

"You called me. I'll decide what's necessary. I'll be right there and I'll bring my peashooter." Perris could hear the resolve in Coral's voice. "Then we'll see if that rat bastard Collins breaks any more windows tonight." She hung up.

Perris disconnected and dropped the phone. Then she went obediently to the bathroom and began picking glass out of her feet.

Noah got the word from dispatch just as he was stepping out the door on his way to the banquet. As he answered the phone, he wondered if he'd have to go out on a call dressed in a western-cut suit, boots, and string bolo tie. But he'd trained his staff over the last four years to keep him informed, and he could hardly resent a missed dinner when they were only following orders.

"I wouldn't ordinarily have bothered you with this until morning, Sheriff," the dispatcher apologized, "but it's about Perris."

Noah drew in a ragged breath. He'd just talked to Perri barely forty minutes ago. "What about her?"

The dispatcher, a middle-aged woman he'd kept on from the previous sheriff's staff, knew the story of Noah and Perri's marital history. "Well, she had a break-in. I couldn't get all the details, because someone else called it in."

"Is she hurt?" Noah's hand tightened on the receiver.

"Apparently some cuts from broken glass."

"On my way," Noah said shortly, ready to hang up.

If Noah sometimes acted the father figure to his deputies, the dispatcher, Barbara Beckstrom, sometimes fell into a motherly role. Now she said, "I sent Clay Thorpe out, Sheriff. I was just letting you know. You don't need to miss your dinner."

What Barbara was trying to say was, ‘It might not be a good idea for you to go rushing out to your ex-wife’s rescue, Noah, not with all the media attention centered on her.’ The dispatcher meant it in all kindness, but Noah Dalton wasn’t about to be deterred. “Clay’s a good man,” he agreed. “But I’m going out there anyway. Bye now, Barbara, and thanks for calling.”

Barbara hesitated a moment, then apparently changed her mind about the wisdom of adding any more to what she’d already said.

Noah went out to his car, hurriedly attached the magnetic silver star decals to the doors since he would be on official business, and sped out of the driveway. Without the identifying Powell County Sheriff decals, his car remained an anonymous white Chevrolet SUV on the outside. But inside, the vehicle resembled any other official unit, with police radio, cell phone, and pager. But the vehicle lacked the identifying light bar of marked patrol vehicles. Noah used a single flashing red light on the dashboard instead, hoping he was noticeable enough with a single light and the siren on the highway that traffic would get out of his way.

His heart beat irregularly as he moved east on the Interstate at speeds exceeding one hundred miles an hour.

*Perri.* Something bad had happened to Perri. He knew he should let Deputy Thorpe handle this. Like doctors and lawyers, it was almost always better if cops let others not so close to the situation handle family business.

But he couldn’t stay away. He should have been there for her. He’d offered to come over earlier, and she wouldn’t let him. Stubborn woman. Always insisted on doing things for herself.

If only she was all right.

Noah took the thirty-mile-per-hour exit into Hawk Point at near sixty, running a red light at the foot of the exit and another two on Pronghorn Drive on his way to the county road north of town where Perri lived. He monitored the radio, and knew when Deputy Thorpe arrived ahead of him.

By the time he reached the tiny house with all its lights ablaze, he also knew Perri was refusing an ambulance. He cut the siren and parked in the dirt road. Another car pulled in behind, blocking anyone from exiting. Noah cursed softly as Maisie Merritt got out of the car parked haphazardly behind his, alerted by her scanner to trouble at Perri’s. Maisie probably lived and breathed and took all her lonely meals by that scanner, her lifeline to the county’s pulse.

But Noah didn’t have time to worry about Ms. Merritt, ace reporter. Besides Perri’s crossover SUV and Thorpe’s patrol vehicle, there was another distinct shape angled in the small space he could hardly call a front yard, a gleaming, heavily chromed Harley-Davidson.

The sight of that motorcycle halted Noah for a moment. He had no idea what sort of company Perri was keeping these days. For all he knew, maybe she went for big, unwashed hog riders now. The thought of Perri with any other man, now that he was confronted with the reality of it, sickened Noah. She was his wife, no matter what. No divorce, no separation of years’ duration, could change that. Perri was his, body and soul.

He couldn’t let the thought of any boyfriend stop him. This was official business. Noah leapt up the front steps, landing on the tiny porch. At the open doorway, he stopped his headlong rush, wiping his damp hands on his pant legs and attempting to get his speeding heart under control. He looked in on a scene familiar to a police officer: in the midst of destruction sat the victim at a small kitchen table, being comforted by a friend as the officer in charge wrote something on a notepad.

But in this instance, the victim was Perri.

Maisie Merritt bent sideways behind him, crowding him in the doorway and trying to peer around Noah to get a good look, her notebook and pen at the ready. Noah gazed in at Perri, asking silently with his eyes if she was all right. She gazed back. And everything else—the broken glass, the murmur of Thorpe’s voice, the tall redhead with her hand on Perri’s shoulder—

receded, until Noah was only aware of a tunnel of silent communication between the two of them.

Perri looked so fragile and small. With that haircut and her fine bone structure, she resembled a frightened street urchin sitting in the wooden chair. But she was no teenaged ragamuffin. He remembered her too well to ever mistake her for anything but the tough little hardhead she was.

Yet, once again as she had been during her illness, Perri was badly frightened. He wanted to rush across the glass shards and take her in his arms, pick her up and carry her to the bed and tuck the outlandish hippie blanket under her chin. The sight of her white face brought out a protectiveness in Noah that he knew Perri would fight with every ounce of her being. She didn't want to be sheltered. She wanted to solve her own problems, live her own life. She didn't need him. Didn't he know that by now? For God's sake, what would it take to get that concept through his head?

So Noah hung back, blocking Maisie's persistent efforts to get past him and inside the house. Thorpe and the redhead kept glancing at him questioningly, and Perri looked at Noah while she stuttered her answers to Thorpe's quiet questions. The big redhead glared in Noah's direction when she looked at him. He remained in the doorway until Thorpe finished, unaware of what a forbidding shadow he cast over his deputy and his ex-wife as he stood with arms crossed and his considerable bulk balanced on one boot heel, ready to spin and shove Maisie off the porch. His only thought was to keep the reporter away from Perri.

Thorpe finished up and walked uncertainly toward Noah. The deputy probably wondered what about this particular call warranted the attention of the sheriff. Thorpe hadn't been a deputy when Perri was Mrs. Dalton, and Noah couldn't discern if the young deputy had made the connection yet. At last Noah dragged his eyes away from his ex-wife. "Was it Collins?"

Thorpe nodded.

Maisie Merritt hurriedly jotted something in her notebook. Noah muttered under his breath. He'd known instinctively the environmentalist had a few marbles rattling around loose inside his head. He should have been more forceful in warning Perri. He said quietly, "Pick him up. And, Clay—Ms. Newshound here is blocking your exit. Tell her to go on home now."

Thorpe nodded, escorting a protesting Maisie Merritt back to her car and following behind her in his official vehicle to make sure she didn't circle back to Perri's house.

The redhead was harder to eliminate. Thrusting out her chin along with her prominent chest, she stated, "I'm staying until I get this mess cleaned up."

"No, really, Coral," Perri said wearily. "I'm all right. You can go home now."

"I'm staying," the redhead said flatly, eyeing Noah as suspiciously as if she thought he'd been the one who threw the rock through Perri's window.

Perri seemed to gather herself together. She gave Noah an unreadable look before turning her gaze back on her friend. "Coral, this is...Noah Dalton, the county sheriff. Noah, Coral Peterson."

"The Harley's yours?" Noah asked.

Coral nodded slightly. Relieved, Noah said, "Nice bike."

They stared at each other, taking measure. Noah wanted to say to Coral, "You really can go now. I won't hurt Perri." But he didn't. Why should he explain anything to Perri's zealous friend when he could hardly explain to himself why he felt as compelled to stay as she apparently did?

Perri jumped up, nervous as a canary between two cats. "I'll get a broom," she said.

"Sit." Coral laid a beefy hand on her shoulder. "Tell me where, and I'll get it."

Perris indicated a darkened porch attached to the back of the house. Coral hesitated, shot Noah a glance, and then went out.



Noah approached the enameled drop-leaf table where Perri perched on the edge of a chair. He pulled up the only other chair available and sat down beside her, taking her hand in his. He was amazed when she let him.

"You're all duded up tonight," she said dully. Her expression remained closed.

"The banquet," Noah explained. "I didn't want to go, but I thought it might be politically expedient. Now I have an excuse to miss it."

"I don't want to be your excuse, Noah," Perri began. But whatever else she might have said was interrupted by Coral coming back in. Perri withdrew her hand.

"I'll have this cleaned up in no time," the redhead said. Perri kept her eyes on her friend. Noah looked at Perri. He knew she was embarrassed by his presence, made uncomfortable by the ghost of a relationship between them that neither desired to explain to Coral. Perri wanted him to leave but she also didn't want to make a scene in front of her friend.

Coral swept glass into a dustpan. Perri said quietly to Noah, completing what she'd been on the verge of saying before Coral came in, "You should go."

"I want to stay." Noah gazed at Perri in the sleeveless sunflower dress. She looked very young and defenseless. With the evening breeze coming in the broken window, she was probably cold. "Do you want to go change clothes?" he asked.

Perri's eyes widened, and then she glanced self-consciously down at her chest. Noah's gaze followed hers, and he could have cut his tongue out. One side of Perri's dress sloped normally with the shape of her breast. The other was empty.

He honestly hadn't noticed. It kind of shocked him that he hadn't noticed. Then the guilty thought crept in that he wouldn't have expected her to grow so comfortable that she'd let others see her this way. He felt agonized heat creep up his neckline and into his face.

When Perri looked back up and met his eyes, her cheeks were flushed, too. "I obviously wasn't expecting company," she said coldly.

"That's not what I meant. At all. I didn't even see it. It doesn't bother me." But it was apparent to Noah from the clench of Perri's jaw that she thought otherwise. He felt big and clumsy and stupid. He had to do something, so he went on bungling. "You have goosebumps. I'll get you a sweater." He rose awkwardly.

Coral finished her sweeping with a final clatter of broken glass into a trash can near the kitchen sink. She went to where Perri sat and they whispered together for a moment, excluding Noah. He saw Perri shake her head, and then the redhead said, "Well, if you insist, I'll be moving along then."

Coral gave Noah a last, unreadable glance before crossing to the front door and shutting it behind her. The Harley roared to life in the yard. Noah was at last alone with Perri. He wrapped a sweater around her shoulders. "What was that all about?"

Perri's green eyes met his. "She wanted to give me a gun, a tiny little thing she calls a peashooter that she wears strapped to her leg."

"Maybe you should have taken it."

Perri turned sideways in the chair, away from him. "Oh, Noah. You know how I feel about guns."

"Yeah. And you a cop's wife."

Perri gave him a look, and again he could have sliced out his tongue.

"Nobody's wife," she said firmly. She got up from the table.

"Where are you going?" Noah felt a wave of panic. He was blowing it. After Perri asked him not to come in the first place, he was driving her even farther away. His intentions were good. Why the *hell* did he always do everything wrong?

"I'm going to fix that window." She headed for the back porch, casually discarding the sweater he'd thought she needed. He followed. She pulled a ladder away from the wall, clearly delineated little biceps in her arms flexing.

What if she looked outside? She now had an unobstructed view of the area around her house. What if the lookout he'd secretly ordered for her had parked outside, and she spotted the car? She'd flip, that's what.

"Let me help you." Noah reached desperately for the ladder.

"I can do it, Noah." Perri tugged on one side of the ladder while Noah gripped the other. She glared at him. "You're all dressed up. You'll mess up your clothes. Go on to your dinner, why don't you?"

"I don't give a rat's ass about my clothes. And I *know* you can do it alone." He wondered if she got the message. He was admitting Perri Dalton could do a whole lot on her own, including living without a husband. He'd admit anything...if only Perri would give him another chance. Why had she left him? He still didn't fully understand: One mistake with her and that was it? Adios, amigo, and don't let the door smack you in the ass on your way out?

Why hadn't she given him time to adjust to the changes in her? Why had she been so eager to leave him, end their marriage, and go off on her own?

These were questions he'd asked a million times, and never got any real answers. Now he wanted answers. He wanted compensation.

He wanted Perri.

He wanted to grab her instead of the ladder, grab her and shake her maybe, or grab her and kiss her. Either way he'd probably get his arrogant face slapped for trying to manhandle her. He loosened his grip on the ladder. "Perri, I just want to help, that's all."

"Noah," she said softly, her green eyes going glimmery in the muted light from the kitchen, "I don't need your help."

She tried to move past him with the ladder, but there wasn't nearly enough room in the doorway. He had her trapped at last. She couldn't get away this time.

He took a chance. He touched her arm. "Then," he said quietly, "will you help me?"

Perris went completely still. In the old days he'd always been the strong one, the one to rush in, metaphorical guns blazing, and settle everything. The Noah Dalton she knew didn't ask for help. "Help you do what?" she asked slowly.

"Help me understand," he said simply. He was a desperate man. All his brave blustering was being blown to the winds by her stubborn refusal to meet him halfway. Perri was shutting him out, turning aside all his efforts, pushing him away. Again.

And maybe she was right. About one thing. Maybe she didn't need him, but that didn't stop him from needing her. Noah Dalton didn't ordinarily ask for anything, but this case called for extraordinary measures. This was Perri he was talking to. Perri and the second chance he'd dreamed about. He'd do anything Perri asked, if she'd only let him back into her life. He'd get down on his knees and beg if that's what it took.

"We should have been able to hang on long enough to work out our problems. I want to try again. Get counseling or something. Whatever it takes. Please. Help me understand what happened to us, Perri." He put all the loneliness of five long years into the plea that he hoped would at last bring down the barriers between them.

And Perris definitely wavered. Looking into his gray-blue eyes, she thought: I need help. He's doing it again. Noah Dalton, my love, is going to ease his way back into my heart.

## Chapter Four

Noah's big body blocked her way in the enclosed space of her tiny back porch. But Perris wasn't afraid; she'd never been afraid of Noah, despite his size. And he wasn't just tall and muscular; he possessed an impressive cock whose length and girth had made her almost faint when she first saw it erect. Noah had claimed once, laughing when he said it, that he married her because she could take a pounding from his big dick and come back for more. Just now she

didn't think that statement so hilarious. She found herself fighting a strong urge to let go of the ladder and grab hold of him instead. What she wanted to do then, she wasn't quite sure. Either slug him—or knock him down and unzip his pants and have a hard ride on that well-remembered dick just for old times' sake. He looked very tempting all dressed up. And he smelled so good freshly shaved. And she had been alone so long.

He could bully her until the end of time and she'd stand her ground. But plead with her, and her knees started knocking.

*Help me understand what happened to us.*

Hell. After all this time, what did it matter? Could she even explain the unreasoning terror that she would die if she stayed with him any longer and let him fight all her battles for her? That she had had to leave him in order to survive?

But as Perris looked into Noah's gray eyes, she knew without a doubt the day neared when she would have to live it all again, because this time he wasn't going to stop until he got what he wanted. But she didn't have to face her fears right at this moment, did she? She would put the day of reckoning off as long as possible because the pain was still too raw to touch. She had lost too much in too short a time, and still mourned the damage.

"If you insist on helping me, get that hammer." She indicated her small stock of tools hanging neatly on a pegboard attached to the wall. "There are nails in a coffee can on the shelf behind you."

Noah's eyes lost the spark of hope they'd held when he thought she was going to finally talk to him. His face carefully blank, he backed away to let her pass. He was restraining himself admirably, but Perris didn't want to admire him. She didn't want any feelings at all about Noah Dalton that would allow him to slip-slide back into her life.

Did she?

He had already done a very effective job of getting her to let down her defenses, and Perris was afraid that, all too soon, the last barricade would fall and he'd be right back inside. As if he'd never left. And, in truth, he never had fully left the secret recesses of her heart, so it would be way too easy to just open the door and let him all the way back in.

But he didn't know that, did he? And he didn't have to know. If only she could keep up the pretense that she didn't care. If only she could pretend he didn't affect her at all, that she hardly remembered what their days and nights together had been like, soon he'd tire of the game and go.

Soon she would be all alone. Again. She shuddered.

In the kitchen, Perris set down the ladder to rummage beneath the sink for some garbage bags. She slit the bags open and carried them and the ladder toward the broken window. She didn't hear Noah come up behind her and jumped when he spoke.

"I don't want to bring up the matter of your clothes and hurt your feelings again," he said hesitantly, "but, Perri, you're hardly dressed for home repairs."

Perris turned, assessing his taupe western-cut suit and highly polished boots. "Neither are you, cowboy. But you're right. I'd have a time on the ladder in this dress. Don't move while I go change."

She saw the relief in his rugged features that she hadn't taken offense again. Then again, maybe it was relief that she was really going to change clothes and get herself all back together again. On the way to the bathroom she picked up her sweatpants and T-shirt, which she proceeded to don atop the pink synthetic breast inside her bra. At last she felt clothed, and better able to face Noah's probing eyes.

Noah waited obediently beside the ladder. He'd removed his suit coat, and stood with arms crossed over his broad chest, apparently willing to let her do things her way. But as she climbed the ladder and he automatically reached out to steady it for her, he said, "This plastic looks

mighty flimsy. A good wind will blow it down. Let me run into town and get you something heavier.”

“It will do for tonight, Noah.” Perris began hammering the plastic to the window frame.

“You’re going to be cold.” He paused. It was one of the most difficult things he’d done to stand here and hold this ladder without reaching a hand up to steady Perri. He wanted to protect her, but she was deep into self-sufficiency after five years on her own. If he pushed her too hard now he’d lose her before he ever found her again. But he had to tell her about the lookout across the road. He had to. Starting out with her on a sneaky, dishonest basis would only lead to more trouble between them.

“I don’t want to worry you, but you’re not safe here. Anyone could break in now. So I’ve stationed a deputy out back to watch out for you.”

Perris stepped off the ladder. She stared at Noah. She was aware of each ripple of muscle beneath his shirt when he moved. She was painfully aware of his strength. She was also suddenly, unreasoningly, aware that she was furious with him.

“Call him off.”

“Perri—”

“I said, call him off, Noah. It’s my life, and I don’t want a watchdog.”

He hesitated. “Can we make other arrangements, then? I’m worried about you.”

“Anyone could break in at any time, if they wanted to,” she pointed out. “What are you suggesting, Noah? That I spend the night with you so you can watch over me?”

She held her breath. Why had she said that? She wasn’t ready to leap the barrier between them yet. What would he say? Yes? No? If she pushed, would Noah topple? If he pushed, would she? This was a dangerous game they played, because it involved their hearts, even though neither of them was ready to admit that.

It was physical, yes. The attraction was still there, the electric jolt at the juncture of her legs when she looked at him and thought of him nestling there. But the danger lay in losing her heart again. Could she trust Noah this time? Had he changed at all?

He ran a finger under the collar of his shirt, as if it were too tight. Perris watched a dull flush suffuse his cheeks. “If that’s what you want,” he said in a low voice.

He was embarrassed. He specifically was not inviting her to stay at the house she’d once shared with him, even if her life was in danger. She hadn’t suggested anything sexual, although she was sure he had taken her question that way.

Wait. He was probably already married. Why hadn’t she thought of that? Why had she assumed Noah would still be alone just because she was? Five years was an awfully long time for a man like Noah Dalton to remain single. She’d been thinking like a silly schoolgirl, assuming Noah was still attracted to her and would wait for her forever.

“You have someone else now, who wouldn’t understand if I showed up at your house? Congratulations.” The words had to be forced out and choked around the knot in her throat. She almost gagged on them.

Noah shook his head, his ash blond hair catching glints from the overhead light. “No, there’s no one. Not anymore.”

“Not anymore?” Perris looked at her ex-husband quizzically. So he had been remarried? If so, was it any of her business? She had been the one to cut Noah loose. It was no skin off her nose if he married again. But she wished she wasn’t so uptight and angry around him all the time. She was wound as tight as a coiled spring, ready to burst with unasked questions, unanswered needs. Why had he come here when she’d asked him not to? The questions and confusion were almost too much to bear with him so close, the man smell of his freshly washed hair and the aftershave he’d splashed on nearly unbearable in their familiarity. She needed to be alone, to sort it all out.

Noah burst out, “It’s hard to talk about. Perri, can we sit down or something?”

“Do you want to talk about it, Noah? We don’t have to if you don’t want to.” But it was a relief that he found it just as difficult as she to calmly discuss shattered lives. Maybe his, definitely hers, and now, perhaps, someone else’s.

In answer to her question, he seized her by the hand and started dragging her toward the drop-leaf table. Perris tugged her hand free, preferring to walk toward the kitchen area under her own steam.

Five years of constant battling memories of Noah, she decided, had finally driven her out of her mind. She knew better than to sit here and let him start talking; she *knew better*. It was the opening he’d been seeking. All she had to do was give him the tiniest little crack in her defenses and he’d be back in her life and definitely in her bed before she knew what was happening. He’d swept her off her feet the first time she’d ever laid eyes on him. Didn’t she remember that? Well, of course she remembered, every tiny detail in fact. But couldn’t she keep it in mind?

As they sat, Noah recaptured her hand. He gazed at her, his blue-gray eyes stormy with emotion, his long fingers caressing the calluses on her palm. He’d never seemed to mind that she, the ranch girl, didn’t have the soft hands of a lady. He swallowed, then began harshly, “I married someone to forget you. It lasted seven months, three of those after she moved out. I couldn’t put behind me...what you and I had together. You ruined me for anyone else, Perri.”

“I’m sorry.” Perris looked down at their clasped hands. She didn’t know what else to say, so she mouthed the lie. She was not truly sorry Noah’s second marriage hadn’t lasted. She was especially not sorry that he apparently found it difficult to make love to anyone else.

“Marla was beautiful. But she wasn’t you,” Noah continued.

Her hand jerked in Noah’s as her eyes snapped back up to meet his. “Marla?” she asked incredulously. “You married Marla Paxton?”

“Yes.” Noah looked at her with his eyes gone baby blue. “Is there something wrong with Marla?”

Perris had been away a long time from the small town of Rock Creek where Noah was now sheriff. Apparently a whole lot had happened that Perris hadn’t known. She tried again to pull her hand away, but Noah wasn’t letting go.

“Only that all through high school, Marla was everything I could never be. Tiny. And blond. Sweet. Popular. A cheerleader. And then there was me, the little country bumpkin, bused in from the ranch to go to school with the likes of her. For pity’s sake, Noah. Did you have to tell me you married her?”

“Why? Are you jealous?” He sat back, smirking as if that eventuality would please him. A lot.

Damn! She *was* jealous. The mere thought of Noah fucking Marla made her blood boil. Marla with her perfect platinum hair, her perfectly straight white teeth, her two perfect pert breasts. In high school every boy the serious, studious Perris McLean had ever been slightly interested in had panted after Marla Paxton. That old conflict was compounded a thousand-fold by the thought that Marla had ended up with Noah too. That just wasn’t fair.

Perris could detect a glint in Noah’s eyes. Would he dare laugh at her? She struggled to bring herself under control. High school was a long time ago, and Perris had come a long way since then. She’d finished her education, gotten a decent job. She’d done it all on her own. What did she care if her old rival Marla had stayed in Rock Creek and married Noah—*after* Perris herself was done with him.

“I’m not jealous. You’re certainly free to marry whomever you wish.” Perris stated this firmly, trying to believe it, whether Noah did or not. She ignored his grin growing wider, the dimple in his cheek appearing, and his grip on her hand growing tighter. She should have left it, but she couldn’t help adding, “I just never would have thought Marla was your type.”

Noah sobered and the grin faded. “You’re right about that. She wasn’t. Marrying her was a mistake from the get-go. She bored me silly after two weeks.”

“But for those two weeks, you didn’t have any trouble with her, did you? She had nice breasts, as I remember. Two of them. A matching pair.”

That was mean and low-down and nasty. But it was also the foundation of all the old friction between them, the cause of Perris running away and divorcing him. Noah wanted to talk? Okay, let him talk about how the sight of her after cancer surgery disgusted him. Perris glared challenge across the table.

Then she could have curled up and died on the spot. At the sight of the effect of her cruel words in his expression, she wished she could take them back and go into hiding again. They had both been hurt. What was the sense of dredging it all up again? Why couldn’t she let it go? What did it matter at this point?

But Noah wasn’t ready to let it go. Instead, he went on the offensive. “Perri, let me ask you: Would you have married me if I had only one leg? Or say there was an accident. Would you have stayed with me if I’d lost one of my testicles while we were married?”

How could he turn things around on her so? The problem between them was his, not hers.

“You’re being ridiculous,” Perris said. She finally got her hand back and crossed her arms.

“I’m not being ridiculous. You didn’t give me a chance back then. You will now.” He reached out and clutched at her hand again. His eyes turned a color somewhere between steel and granite, and she knew he wasn’t going to give this up. “Answer the question. Would you have loved me if I had only one leg, and/or only one of my balls?”

“Of course. You’re being silly.” Perris’s lips tightened.

“How about an eye? Would you have fallen in love with me if I had only one eye?”

His beautiful, changeable eyes. But Perris would have loved Noah Dalton if he had no eyes.

“Yes,” she said shortly. Tears pricked her own eyes; she was afraid Noah wouldn’t ever stop. “Please, Noah! Don’t you think I’ve had enough for one night?” Perris covered her eyes with her free hand, furious that he could still make her cry. She was more furious that he should sit here and watch her cry. Tears could only indicate to him that she still cared.

“You’re right. I think I’ve made my point, but my timing is lousy.” Noah finally, reluctantly, let her go of her hand. “Collins upset you enough without me coming over to badger you. I’m sorry, Perri.”

Her flesh burned where he’d been holding her fingers. After a long silence where she refused to lower her hand from her tired eyes, Noah asked, “Are you hungry? I could go into town and get us some food. What do you say?”

So he’d noticed the cold scrambled eggs still in the pan. She should have known Sheriff Noah Dalton wouldn’t miss a detail.

“If you’re ashamed to be seen with me, why don’t you just pick up something for yourself on the way home?” As soon as the words were out, she could have bitten her tongue. What was wrong with her? Certainly she didn’t want to go out with Noah, not even for something as innocent as a fast-food meal. So why did she act so bitchy about him stopping for a burger on his way home?

She hated that defensive note in her voice. She hated being so insecure. And she especially hated the thought that Noah would leave her to go home—alone, she presumed—to the house they had once shared.

Noah straightened in the chair as if she’d slapped him. The tell-tale flush creeping up his collar told Perris she’d hit her intended target.

“It’s not shame, Perri. Don’t you *ever* think I’m ashamed of you. I’m proud of what you’ve become, what you’ve done for yourself.”

“That I didn’t just roll over and die when I had cancer?” There, out in the open, the dreaded word that had hardly ever been spoken between them. She hated this parrying of words, but felt she must defend herself.

Apparently, Noah felt he had to continue to attack her.

“Yes, Perri, I’m more glad than I can say that you did not die. And more than that, proud that you went on to finish your degree. That you’re working with birds of prey just like you always wanted to. That you’re as proud and free and beautiful yourself as any one of your hawks. It makes me happy to see you still fighting for the life you want.” His voice hushed. “I’m just sorry you thought you had to do it all alone.”

“Oh, Noah, I just couldn’t—” She halted. She was so damned mixed up.

She wanted to reach out to him, to touch him, to say how deeply she was affected by his pride in her. But something still stood between them, the real issue between them, the fact that the sight of her naked body made Noah’s cock shrink in aversion. They’d approached it, but once again skirted the subject. Was it up to her, then, to ask him straight out if he now thought he could be a real man with her?

“I’m glad you’re proud of me. But you’re evading the issue.” Perris gazed at her ex-husband across the small expanse of the drop-leaf table that might as well have been a million miles.

“I don’t want to hurt you any more, Perri.”

She recognized the stubborn set of his square jaw. He wouldn’t tell her unless she forced him. And she still couldn’t do that. So she approached instead the issue they pretended to be talking about—his campaign and his reputation. Or hers. By now Perris couldn’t remember exactly which they were discussing.

“How could being seen in public with you possibly hurt me? Out with it, Noah Dalton.”

He raised guilty silvery-blue eyes to hers. Whatever it was, she knew she wouldn’t like it.

He sighed. “It’s political. My opponent likes to sling mud in his campaigns. You’ve had enough bad publicity lately.”

“I see.” Perris raised an eyebrow. Did Noah really think gossip about them would hurt her? Or him?

“Being re-elected is very important to you.”

“You bet it is. I’ve tried hard to live down all the hoopla in my first term about the youngest sheriff ever elected in Powell County, blah, blah, blah. As if I didn’t know what I was doing, and my age made any difference.” Noah grimaced. “I’ve changed the sheriff’s office so much my predecessor wouldn’t recognize it. It was like forming clay. The materials were there, but they lacked shape. I’ve instituted a dress code. I’ve cut supervisors from forty percent of the force to fifteen. My officers are out in public, where they’re supposed to be.”

“I can see where running around with one of your ex-wives might be bad for your image.” Perris tossed her head. Noah had changed all right. He had transformed into a political animal who thought only of the next election. Perris had been fooling herself when she thought something else was going on here tonight.

“Listen to me. Say we go out together, and Maisie Merritt sees us and assumes you’ve got the county sheriff in your pocket. Yes, that would hurt me, but it how would it look for you? You’ve fought a fair fight against Collins’s accusations so far, and no one can question your ethics or your integrity. That could change, however, if we give him the ammunition. I’m trying to protect you, Perri.” Noah’s eyes glinted silver.

“Maisie Merritt has already seen us together. I can’t help whatever conclusion she draws about us. So don’t bother trying to protect me. I can take care of myself.” She gave him back the squinty eye.

After a long silence where she hoped Noah got the message that she wasn’t his to protect anymore, and she got the message that he really was in no hurry to go yet, she said in a more neutral tone, “I noticed you got some new people.”

“Yeah, Thorpe for one, the deputy who was here tonight.” Noah warmed to his subject, smiling now and expansive as he leaned back in his chair and lifted his muscular arms behind his head while she tried not to notice his chest straining the buttons of his dress shirt. Or his thighs,

rigid with muscle under the fabric of his pants. Or the considerable bulge at his crotch. Stop, stop, stop! Right now! she warned herself.

“Thorpe came from the State Game and Fish,” Noah continued. “Burned out on law enforcement. But he saw that the good old days are gone in my department. There isn’t any more Good Ol’ Boys’ Club, only professionals who believe in a progressive force responsible to the public. The new image of the sheriff’s office got Clay Thorpe enthused again. I’m proud of that, Perri. That I can inspire somebody who had previously flat-out quit the law.”

He paused, an embarrassed grin creasing his lean cheeks. Then he dropped his elbows and leaned toward her. “You got me going there for a minute, honey. I thought we were talking about food. And about us.”

“Don’t call me honey. And I like to hear you talk about your work, Noah.” She did. She’d always known he wouldn’t stop at sheriff’s deputy or even detective in his climb to the top. He was meant for a career in management. They were, in many ways, two of a kind: ambitious and eager and proud of a job well done.

“Sorry, it just slipped out. You’re a good listener. Always were.” Noah studied her face. “But I’d like to let you do some of the talking, about your work this time.”

Perris hesitated. “Where is this leading, Noah?”

The nowhere road of a broken marriage led only to more heartbreak. Why encourage him when there was no future for them? Maybe if she cornered him, he’d back off. Neither of them was ready for promises given or promises received. If she pushed for promises, maybe Noah would leave.

And then you’d be all alone again, that inner voice reminded.

“Where do you want it to go with us, Perri? Do you know?”

She sighed. “There’s nowhere we can go, Noah. Not anymore. We blew it a long time ago.”

Noah’s face hardened again as he clenched his jaw. “Fine. If taking you out in public is what it takes to get past your line of defense, we can do that. It’s your reputation.”

“Let us not forget it’s your reputation as well, Sheriff Dalton.”

“Yeah, it is.” He looked hard at her once more before he rose from the chair and extended his hand. “To hell with it. Come on.”

But when push came to shove, she refused the hand he offered. She’d maneuvered him into a corner, and she couldn’t feel good about that kind of victory. She wanted him to come to her of his own free will. If she truly wanted him at all, that is. “Let’s be friends, Noah. Just bring me a hamburger. I really don’t feel up to going out tonight.”

He gazed at her, as if trying to gauge exactly what it was she wanted from him. But, Perris thought ruefully, he might be surprised to know she herself, who always proclaimed she was so sure, was in the dark about that.

At last he said, “I hesitate to leave you alone so soon, even for a few minutes.”

And what did that mean? Surely, considering his concern for his reputation, he wasn’t planning on camping out here to protect her? Perris shook her head slightly, suddenly too tired to deal with it.

“Don’t be silly, Noah. Your watchdog is right across the road in back. Just go. I’ll be all right.”

He went, grudgingly. While he was gone, Perris put away the ladder, the hammer, and the can of nails. The pause gave her time to think what a long night it was going to be, wondering all the while if Benjamin Collins would manage to elude capture and come back to get her. She shivered at the thought.

She wondered what Noah would say if she asked him to stay. For the sake of appearances, she couldn’t go to his house, what used to be their house, but could he safely stay at hers? She lived out in the middle of nowhere, her neighbors to either side an acre or more away. But the



two Powell County Sheriff's vehicles had arrived within minutes of each other, lights flashing and sirens screaming. Her neighbors could hardly fail to be aware if one of those cars stayed parked in front of her house an awfully long time. Like overnight.

Yet she wasn't friendly with her neighbors; she hadn't had time to develop friendships with them. Maybe they didn't know her name. Maybe they didn't care. Which was mostly why people lived out in the unincorporated lands north of Hawk Point, anyway: to get away from zoning laws and nosy neighbors who told others what to do with their own property.

Perhaps Noah could come back, tonight or any other night, and no harmful word would reach his opponent's campaign.

Which left Perris with the question she didn't want to answer. Could she accept Noah's visits without becoming involved again? Could they remain only friends? Maybe he saw her as only half a woman, but she very definitely had all the feelings and longings of the whole, healthy woman who had once been married to him. If they were thrown together all the time, how long could she resist him?

And Noah? How did he feel about her? What did he want from her? Maybe she worried about nothing. Maybe he still saw her as a creature worthy of pity. She definitely couldn't live with that.

An explanation, he said. He said he wanted her to help him understand what had happened to the two of them, when he knew very well why she'd taken off in such a hurt frenzy in the first place.

And suppose she stopped baiting him long enough to cover all the old ground again. Then what? Would they be free of each other at last, all the old wounds healed, so they could go on hale and hearty? And separately?

Maybe Noah blamed her for his marriage to Marla not working out. Maybe Noah blamed her for a whole lot of things that Perris thought were his fault. He'd even suggested counseling. Did that mean he was willing to begin again? Was he willing to remarry her if they both tried hard to forget the past and start over?

*It would be so much easier if only I knew what I really want.*

She heard the crunch of tires on the gravel road in front of her house again, then the slam of a car door. Noah had been gone, she realized, an inordinately long time. He knocked before poking his head inside, saying, "It's just me."

He knew she was jumpy from the broken window incident, and knocked like a stranger instead of just opening the door and coming inside. Well, maybe they were strangers now. A very long time had passed since they had anything resembling a partnership. She looked at him, all dressed up as he set out hamburgers and fries and colas on her table, comparing his attire to her baggy sweats. While in some ways they were much alike, in others they'd always been so different, even down to his preferring dressy clothes to her being most comfortable in jeans. Did she even know this man now, the sheriff of Powell County?

He casually laid a handgun down on the table beside the paper sack of food.

"It's loaded. Your own personal weapon, not the county's property. I went back to the house for it. I want you to keep it."

Perris stood frozen, looking at the gun. So that's where he'd been. He had driven forty miles to get her a gun. She recognized the rosewood grip, the tiny steel snubnose barrel. It was the Smith and Wesson LadySmith .38 Special five-shot revolver that Noah had given her when they were married.

She'd bluffed Benjamin Collins that she had a gun, but she'd never really expected their disagreement to come down to her possessing a real gun with real bullets.

"Come on. Sit down. It won't bite you." Noah beckoned with one hand. "And I know you know how to shoot and how to reload, because I taught you myself." He took a box of extra ammunition out of his pocket. Did he expect her to hold off an invading army? Did Noah know

something about Benjamin Collins that she didn't? Should she be more scared than she already was?

"Now, where were we?" Noah changed tactics abruptly, as if to get her mind off the weapon. She sat woodenly beside him, trying to cooperate. But her eyes kept straying to the LadySmith. Noah had to sit sideways because of the drop-leaf hanging down on his side of the table. His long legs and big feet adorned with fancy snakeskin boots almost touched hers, and she scooted her chair far enough away that they wouldn't touch.

"We were talking about how you've changed the office since you were elected sheriff." Perris squeaked out the words. Noah never forgot details. He knew exactly what they'd been discussing. But if he wanted to play the chit-chat game, she'd play along for a while.

"Oh, yeah. Did I tell you about the dress code? When I came into office, I had paper servers going out in uniform with high heels, fake fingernails, and those dangly earrings down to their shoulder blades."

In spite of herself, Perris laughed at the picture he painted. Noah dipped a fry and bit off the end. Perris watched him, thinking ketchup wouldn't dare drip on Noah Dalton's immaculate suit.

"Quite a sight," he continued. "And that was just the women. The men came in wearing partial uniforms or street clothes with tennis socks, whatever they could dig out of the closet that morning. They had long sleeves, short sleeves, undershirts with frayed collars, whatever. You wouldn't believe what I've spent on uniforms to get them to look sharp and as if they all belong on the same team."

"You always had good taste." Perris was subdued, her thoughts straying where they shouldn't be, her stomach tied up in knots. Thinking the word *taste* almost had her slithering down to the floor to crawl on her knees toward him. She remembered way too much: how the bulk of him felt in her hands, how he filled her up when inside her. How his skin tasted. She could smell him again.

It was too much; she was on the verge of sensory overload just from thinking about him. She was actually considering letting Noah Dalton back into her life, if just for tonight. Collins had backed her into a corner, narrowed her choices. Noah's strength was looking more and more appealing, and the last thing she wanted was herself and Noah thrust into their old roles of damsel in distress and knight in shining armor.

Her eyes strayed back to the LadySmith. Had Noah finally accepted that she was capable of taking care of herself? Had he agreed he'd eventually send the guard away? She couldn't remember. It would be the height of irony if now that she had talked herself into being afraid to be alone, he expected her to take care of herself. Just what she said she wanted.

She jerked herself back to neutral territory, the polite conversation they were supposedly having while her mind seesawed from object to subject. "But your age is showing, Noah. You know, casual Fridays and all that. You must seem ancient to the younger officers with your insistence on a professional dress code." She smiled to take the sting out of her words. She was being facetious. He wasn't old. In fact, he looked wonderful.

Don't go there, Perris warned herself, or you're letting yourself in for a world of hurt.

She tried to loosen up in spite of the cold metal lying on the table between them and the past that kept them oceans apart. How could she let herself fall into old habits, comfortable camaraderie, when Noah was obviously worried enough about her to supply her with her old handgun?

A silence fell. He cleared his throat. Then he tapped the rosewood grip of the LadySmith lying between them with one finger. "Perri, what I really wanted to talk about is Collins and the demonstration."

"Do we have to?" Perris sighed. For a little while, she'd thought about relaxing in Noah's presence. He'd made her laugh. Now he wanted to bring Benjamin Collins and his threats to the dinner table with them, along with the suggestion that she keep a gun.

"I think we should," Noah insisted. "I just want to stress why I'm not at Red Bluffs protecting you more often. It's not that I don't want to be. It's just that, as sheriff, I can't take one side over the other. Having you out there in the middle of it makes my position just that much worse."

"I'm sure sorry about that, Noah," Perris said archly, before she could stop herself. She set down the half-eaten hamburger. She had her own job made harder by Collins. She couldn't spare much sympathy for Noah's position in the matter. Still, she would have preferred not to be thrust into the center of such a visible controversy. She modulated the snippy tone of her voice when she sighed and added, "But I understand."

"I don't think you do, not completely. In the old days, when I was a deputy, I would have been taking pressure just from the sheriff." Noah's eyes bored into hers. "Now that I'm sheriff, I have the county commissioners right there in the same building always stopping by to try and persuade me to do something, the county attorney bugging me, and Collins and his bunch on one end and the mine officials on the other, all calling to try and pull me this way or that. No matter what I do or don't do, I end up being that no-good, worthless so-and-so in the sheriff's office."

Perris poked at a slice of dill pickle. "I thought I made it clear I don't expect twenty-four hour protection, Noah."

"Well, a lot of people do expect it, including your superiors out at the mine. Then there are others who'd prefer that my deputies just stayed away altogether. I've got to try to be fair, and that doesn't make me popular." Noah lowered his voice. "If Collins gets the idea that I'm only out there to protect you, and spreads that malarkey to the local papers, I'll be in trouble come election time."

Politics. His re-election. Would Noah deliberately pull back if Perris needed him, just so people wouldn't say he was playing favorites? Already the mine brass had abandoned her to handle the situation with Collins on her own. Was Noah saying he'd do the same, leave her dangling when she needed help, just to protect his reputation?

And how she hated being in the position of expecting Noah, or anyone, to protect her in the first place. She wished she'd never heard the name of Benjamin Collins. Why had the protester picked her to make his media play, to get his name in the news?

Noah laid a warm hand over her tightly clenched fingers. "I'll do what I can to keep the demonstration under control. But I can't pull people off patrol, communications, guarding the jail, serving summonses—all just to stand out there and make sure Collins behaves himself. I don't have enough deputies to babysit the protesters all the time."

"What about tonight? The deputy?" Perris shivered. The words slipped out despite all her efforts not to utter them. What if Collins came back? She'd hate to have to shoot him. She really hated being cornered, feeling trapped. She was on the verge of asking her ex-husband to stay with her because she was afraid. *Damn it!*

"It's your call, Perri," Noah said softly. "You told me to send him away."

All the old ghosts of their dead relationship rose up, howling. She and Noah were dangerously close to where they'd been when he became so overly protective of her that he couldn't see her as a woman. She didn't know what to do. The situation with Benjamin Collins had brought her and Noah together again, but the situation brought out the champion in him and positioned her as the helpless female. Too close to the situation that had cleaved their marriage in two, and just exactly what she wanted to avoid.

When she neither repeated her demand that he withdraw the guard nor asked that the deputy remain in place for the night, Noah shifted in his chair. "I'll put extra patrols by your house for tonight, then. Even if we find Collins and pick him up, he can make bail for simple property destruction and be out in a couple of hours." He hesitated. "Is there somewhere else you could stay?"

“Maybe at Coral’s.” But Perris was doubtful Coral’s current boyfriend would appreciate her camping out at their place.

Noah looked relieved, though, and Perris’s resolve suddenly hardened. She wouldn’t be run off her own property. She would remain in her own house and face Benjamin Collins if he came back.

After all, wasn’t that why Noah had given her a gun?

Noah watched the conflicting emotions chase each other across Perri’s fine features. He knew very well what she’d decide to do: stay here and gut it out. He admired her strength and resolve, while at the same time her willingness to put herself in danger drove him batshit crazy.

“Well, I guess that about covers it.” He balled up the paper wrappers from his meal and stuffed them back in the sack he’d brought them in, tossing the package across the room toward the trash. He felt he’d pushed Perri enough for one night. He wanted to take her home with him so he could keep an eye on her, but he knew she’d balk. He’d been using his re-election as an excuse not to ask her back to the house they’d once shared. Which he wanted to do very badly. His campaign was falling farther and farther down the order of his priorities. He should leave before the words tumbled out, before he asked Perri for too much and she lost all patience with him and sent him packing for good.

“I guess it does.” Perris couldn’t hide the bitter tone in her voice as she stood, almost knocking Noah’s long legs aside. Inexplicably, she felt let down, as if she’d paid for a balloon ride and been dumped out on the ground after only skimming the tree tops. But what else had she expected? “Thanks for dinner, Noah. Maybe we’ll see each other around sometime.”

He stood abruptly, facing her. She looked as if she resented having to tilt her head back to look at him.

“We never got around to talking about you, or about us,” he said. He had the urge to run a fingertip along her tight jaw but he restrained himself. “But it’s getting late. And I guess that gives me a good excuse to come back another time. Doesn’t it, Perri?”

“Noah,” she said tiredly, “there isn’t any *us*.”

His breath froze in his throat. He couldn’t accept that. He wouldn’t. Not when she’d so suddenly reappeared in his life after he’d begun to lose hope he’d ever see her again. He’d obviously made a mistake somewhere along the line tonight, but he wasn’t sure just where. He was only sure Perri was upset with him again, and that was the last thing he wanted.

“Sure there’s an *us*,” he insisted softly. “There’s always been the two of us, no matter where we are physically. We’re eternal, Perri. Maybe you just don’t realize that yet.”

Noah placed his long-fingered hands on her shoulders. He took it as a hopeful sign that she didn’t immediately shrug him off. He leaned to kiss her gently on the forehead before he picked up his Stetson and in three long strides, reached the front door. “Good night. Keep safe for me,” he said, before shutting the door quietly behind him.

Across the road, in the shelter of three leaning spruce trees, a car still sat concealed, engine silent. Noah raised an arm in acknowledgment of the hidden officer’s presence, and the car’s headlights flashed once in answer. Noah hurriedly gained the front seat of his own car and backed out of Perri’s yard before she detected the hidden patrol car. She hadn’t answered when he asked her the second time if she wanted the officer sent away. But he was afraid Perri would absolutely come unhinged if she found out he’d allowed his so-called guard dog to stay.

Perris fumed after the door shut behind Noah. He made her so furious! How dare he go off and leave her alone like this? She picked up the paper sack that hadn’t made it into the trash and threw it at the door he’d shut behind him. So what if she’d told him to go away? He didn’t have to listen to her, did he?

Then she forced herself to calm down and pick up the wadded paper and empty cardboard cartons. There was a smear of ketchup like blood down the door, and she wiped at it with a napkin.

What was she so mad about, anyway? Noah had only done what she said she wanted. Both of them realized there was no future for them.

Then why had he made all those veiled references to coming back, to keeping herself safe for him? Why couldn't he have just left her *alone*?

She'd known when she drove up to the house tonight it was going to be a bad one, but she'd had no idea then just how bad. Now she had much more to keep her awake: thoughts of Benjamin Collins returning, and thoughts of Noah Dalton leaving.

What a mess. And it was getting worse all the time.

She threw the sack in the trash, and wet a rag to wipe the ketchup off the door and some small blood spots from the floor which Coral had missed.

At the thought of her friend, Perris briefly wondered what it was like to be Coral Peterson. The obvious didn't bother Coral much. She would rush over to Perris's and clean up glass but leave the blood spots. Coral went blithely from man to man, ignoring the fact that she chose one as bad as another every time. But it must be nice to be able to fall in and out of love so easily, without fighting it and dissecting it down to the last kiss like Perris did. The sad part was Perris still, no matter what, believed in 'til death do you part.' There would never be another man for her. She'd married Noah in a church, and as long as he was alive, she would never look at another. And it was hard being a one-man woman, especially since the only man for her was the one she had divorced five years before.

She was angry with Noah, or maybe more than angry with herself. At least he'd had the decency to explain and tell the truth. He was a strong, honorable man. He always did what he thought was right, or else made up for it later, if he found he'd been wrong.

She had wanted him to kiss her. All night long, while she watched him talk and move around her house as if he owned the place, while he made her so furious she threw things, she'd wanted to feel his hard chest against hers and his lips against her own. Instead she'd gotten a chaste kiss he would have given his mother or his sister. If he'd had a sister.

Disappointed in Noah, and especially in herself, Perris flipped the bloody rag into the sink. Then she went in the bathroom to remove the bra and the prosthesis before she went to bed. For a long time she stood staring at her reflection in the old mirror, at the rounded breast on the right side of her chest and the thin scar on the left. She told herself, as she'd done over and over at least a million times since the surgery, that a breast didn't make a woman.

She wondered if she could make love with Noah again. What kind of woman was Perris Dalton, really? She put on such a brave face for the world, but did she possess the courage to try one more time with Noah?

She should admit it. For all her brave talk she was a coward, that's what she was.

## Chapter Five

Perris was dressing at a little after five the next morning when the phone rang. Stumbling with only the bathroom light on to illuminate her way, she succeeded in answering after only three strident rings.

"Perri?"

"Yes, Noah." She tried to will her heart to slow, it was suddenly hammering so hard. Both of them had always been early risers, so she guessed she shouldn't be surprised at a call from him at this hour. She tried to convince herself he was merely acting in his official capacity, checking up on the welfare of a recent crime victim. She knew better, of course. The sheriff didn't contact

every woman who had a crime committed against her. But it made her feel better to put some kind of distance between them.

“You’re at home now, aren’t you? I thought I knew you well enough to be pretty sure you wouldn’t follow through with staying at your friend’s house. I wish you’d take better care of yourself.”

She wasn’t in the mood for a lecture on personal safety. She’d awakened in a bad temper after a nearly sleepless night. His idea and hers of how she took care of herself had always clashed. It was none of his damned business what she did or didn’t do.

“I’m perfectly fine.” Perris rubbed gritty eyes. She had expected to spend the night tossing and turning until the wee hours, but still she felt snarly, as if she’d had no sleep at all. When the alarm went off, she wanted to throw it across the room. She had been awakened from a vivid dream of a hot sexual romp with the very person with whom she was now speaking. She wanted either to go back to sleep and resume the fantasy, or speed over to Noah’s for a bit of the real thing. Since neither option was possible, she was experiencing a touch of crankiness.

“Collins was picked up a little while ago at the tent city. I just wanted you to know.”

“That’s good news. Is it legal for the protesters to camp out like that?”

“They’re on public land. It should be up to the Bureau of Land Management to move them if there’s an occupancy issue, but I’ll give the local office a call, see if they’re aware there’s almost a small city out there. Although I doubt that they could fail to know, with all the hoopla in the press.”

“I’d appreciate your checking into that.” Her voice was clipped. “I have to go now, Noah. I need some breakfast and to pack a lunch.”

One minute she wanted him near her, the next she wanted to hold him off. She really didn’t know anymore what she wanted. She hadn’t felt so unbalanced since the early days of her cancer diagnosis.

Noah seemed not to be put off by her crabby mood. Maybe she had always been this way in the morning and he was used to it. “Try to have a decent day, Perri. I might see you later on tonight. Call if you need me.”

Right. *If* she needed him. Perris had to forestall him for her own protection. Last night she’d thought she was just being tested by fate, to see how strong her resolve was or something. This morning she was all tied up in knots of doubt again. Maybe she was just paranoid when it came to his motives, but Noah needed to remember he had his precious reputation to think about. For both their sakes, she didn’t want him assuming he could just drop by whenever he felt like it.

“I might be late tonight, Noah.”

But he wasn’t to be deterred. “Okay. Maybe tomorrow, then. See you soon.” He hung up before she could get in another excuse.

Perris stood for a moment, listening to the dead air. How many ways did the man have for signing off without actually saying goodbye? Noah was playing with fire and he had to realize it. He wasn’t stupid. If he didn’t stay away he’d be making a collision between them inevitable. She sighed. She didn’t have time for this. If she didn’t get a move on she’d be late for work again.

She made a pot of coffee while she hurriedly ate some high-energy oatmeal bars. She filled her Thermos, thinking she drank more caffeine than was good for her, between what she took from home and the pot of syrup-like brew that was always on the warmer at work. She knew many cancer survivors who swore by a macrobiotic diet for their continued good health, but she couldn’t abide brown rice and ate mostly what she pleased. She privately thought her own cancer-free checkups were due to sheer force of will. But she made a mental note that if she ever took time to get to the grocery store, she should start buying fruit juice instead of coffee.

She went outside to get into her SUV before the sky began to lighten. Pushed for time, she barely glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure there was no traffic before backing out into the road. But a tiny glint at the edge of the mirror caught her eye, and she stopped, staring at the

reflection of her brake lights winking off the bumper of a car hidden in the trees across the road from her house.

She repressed a shiver. If Benjamin Collins was in custody, who was parked in the trees across the road? Maybe Noah hadn't canceled the lookout after all. Had he promised he would, or only given the impression that he would? She'd been afraid to be alone last night, and perhaps he had not been willing to leave her completely alone after all.

The more she thought about it, the more sure she became that he had probably ignored her in order to protect her. Again. In this instance should she be angry or grateful? Was the deputy's presence a sign that Noah loved her, or only that he still thought she wasn't capable of taking care of herself?

She shrugged. It was too early in the day for this soul searching. She didn't, at the moment, know how she should feel. But she did know if she didn't get to work, she was in danger of losing her job. She threw the crossover into gear and drove off, pushing the new evidence of Noah's chauvinist tendencies to the back of her mind.

And she had at least an hour to stew. The long drive out to the mine and back at night was really the only aspect of the job she disliked. She'd bought the all-wheel drive utility vehicle specifically with her daily commute in mind. There was no way she would contend with Wyoming roads in winter in a regular car, and it got decent, if not good, gas mileage.

She supposed she should have car-pooled as many of the miners did. Driving alone every day was a waste of energy resources, and she felt guilty about it. But most days, she enjoyed her own company and didn't want to listen to, or engage in, chatter in the early morning hours. Besides, her schedule was often too erratic for carpooling or riding the bus.

Still, some days she longed for someone to talk to on the drive, and this was one of those days. Perhaps it had been Noah's phone call starting her day that got her thinking about her lonely existence. She tried hard not to admit she was lonesome. But wrapped in darkness with only the beams of her headlights merging into a bright spray of light on the darkened highway, it was difficult to deny that she had effectively isolated herself from the rest of the human race.

From men especially. From Noah in particular.

The thought of driving brought up memories she would have preferred to remain buried. She remembered road trips with Noah, vacations they'd taken to Yellowstone and neighboring states and even farther up into Canada. Those vacation trips had been lovely, lazy days of just being together and exploring the country with no particular destination. Happy days. But the memories brought only tears now, and Perris took one hand off the steering wheel to angrily swipe moisture from her cheeks.

She'd been crying a lot lately. Too much. She had nothing to cry over. She'd made her bed and now she'd make herself happy to lie in it. The choice to leave Noah had been hers alone, and she wouldn't spend time and energy crying about it now.

Or wondering if Noah often traversed the same memory paths she did. Or torturing herself with the thought that he had sexy memories of her old rival, Marla Paxton, as well.

The sky had lightened with the rising sun, and Perris hadn't even noticed. Passing the deserted-looking tent city, she allowed herself a relieved sigh that the protesters were quiet and inactive this morning. She couldn't let herself get too complacent about them; they'd probably be back in full force tomorrow morning. Or maybe even this afternoon, as soon as Collins raised bail and got out of jail.

At the guardhouse, Coral waited. Perris set down her lunchbox to sign in, hoping Coral would notice how grumpy she was and refrain from asking questions.

It wasn't to be her lucky day. Coral asked, "How did it go last night?"

"They got Collins," Perris answered shortly. "But he'll be out in a couple of hours."

"I meant with the cop, your ex," Coral said, leaning over the tiny desk toward Perris. "Did you let him stay over?"

Perris looked up sharply. It really wasn't any of Coral's business what had or hadn't happened with Noah last night.

Some of Perris's thoughts must have shown on her face, for Coral held up placating hands. "I know what a private person you are. I'm just worried about you, hon," she said. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

Perris took a deep breath. She was the one, after all, who had called Coral last night. Though she and Coral were the most casual of friends, not socializing much outside the mine environs, she supposed the woman now had a right to know something of the outcome. Still, Perris couldn't seem to bring herself to discuss Noah calmly. "How did you know he's my ex?" she asked instead, the defensive edge still in her voice.

"Well, I may have big dyed hair and more in the tits department than one person needs, but I'm not a total dumb bunny. I can put two and two together and come up with five," Coral said with an arched eyebrow and a grin.

Perris found herself smiling back. She could certainly agree that Coral, who readily admitted she hadn't finished high school, was still pretty sharp.

"He left me a gun," Perris admitted. Let Coral deduce on her own that Noah didn't spend the night if he thought Perris needed a weapon for protection. She also wouldn't divulge that one of the officers from Noah's department had probably spent the night in a car, mere yards from her back door.

Coral nodded her hard-hatted head. "That's good. Guess he's got some sense, anyway, even if he is a man. But Perris, it's plain as day what he's really after."

Perris shook her head. Coral had it all wrong. It was what Perris was after from Noah that had her worried. The idea that any man, including Noah, could give her back her self-esteem was frightening after she'd worked so hard to attain it on her own. But the truth was that a huge, gaping hole still existed inside her. A hole that could only be filled by a certain look of appreciation in a certain man's eyes. What she craved was for that certain special man to accept her fully and without compromise. Just the way she was.

But she had no faith that day would ever come.

Perris left the guard shack before the urge to spill all her insecurities to Coral could be acted upon. She didn't know why Coral didn't like Noah, maybe it was just the fact that he was a cop, but she wouldn't stand there and defend him. Coral had a history of choosing the wrong man. Maybe she didn't even recognize a good one when she saw one. Perris had never questioned her own loyalty to Noah, even when she'd been in the midst of their painful divorce. She didn't know how she herself felt about Noah at the moment.

Mike Eversoll waited for a distracted Perris in her office. His presence, as always, made the already tight space seem overcrowded. Perris had to climb over his outstretched legs to get to her own chair.

"Heard you had some trouble," Mike said.

"Talked to Coral on the way in, did you?" Perris removed her jean jacket and laid it over the back of her chair.

"Yeah. Listen, Perris, you ever have any trouble like that again, you call me, okay?"

Mike had succeeded in gaining her full attention. She turned around slowly to face him. They worked well together, but neither had ever made any move toward contact outside the mine setting. Now she looked at the broad form of her assistant lounging in a chair that could barely hold his bulk. Mike had said he body-built in his spare time. Muscles bulged from his neck to his ankles, and Perris could well imagine that any woman would feel safe with him around.

"I wouldn't want to get you in trouble with your girlfriend," Perris said teasingly.

"Ain't no girlfriend. She took off for greener pastures." Mike grinned. "I'm free as a bird now, so you can call me any time."



No broken heart there, Perris thought. Was it some idiosyncrasy peculiar to Wyoming that allowed both men and women to breeze from one relationship to another without the least sign of regret? Maybe Perris was the only oddball in the state who couldn't make herself walk into a public venue and pick out a cowboy for the night. But she wasn't built that way, and she knew it. She and Mike were friends, and she'd prefer it if they remained merely friends.

"Let's say I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble, then."

Mike's brown eyes turned serious above his bushy beard. "You wouldn't be any trouble, Perris. I'd be glad if you called me."

*Uh-oh.* Perris eyed her assistant, who had never in their intermittent acquaintance of three years suggested by word or action that he might be interested in her. The last thing she wanted was Mike thinking there was some chance of an office romance. Besides the fact that she was already tied up in knots over a man, even thinking such a thing could spoil their easy working relationship.

Yet she had to admit she was flattered. Mike was rugged and handsome in a mountain man sort of way, besides being not yet twenty-four years old. The thought that the younger man might find her attractive boosted Perris's ego.

Still, she had to let him down. And she'd better keep it light and friendly. She touched Mike on the shoulder to soften her words. "If I ever need a grizzly bear like you, I'll be sure to call."

His teeth flashed again. He took a lot of flak over his physical bulk from the miners and even occasionally the mine bosses, but he just smiled and let the comments roll off.

"How about just riding with me to work in the mornings, then?" he asked. "I could hold off Collins and his whole bunch of little city sissies, if it came to that. And they wouldn't be able to spot that purple outfit of yours a mile away and be waiting for you on the road."

"Now that's a tempting offer." Perris considered, fiddling with some stacks of paper beside the computer. Maybe she'd take Mike up on it. She'd have company on the long ride to keep her thoughts off Noah, and she could slip through the protesters unnoticed in Mike's faded old green pickup.

"Well, think about it and let me know." Mike hauled his solidly muscled mass out from where he was wedged tight between the arms of the chair. "Pit patrol today?"

"Sure, go on," Perris said. "I'll stay here and talk to the engineers. I think I'll try to keep the nest we numbered yesterday at its present location as long as possible. If we move it now, the parents will abandon the eggs. If we can hold off moving it until the babies hatch, the adult hawks might still feed the babies from one of the platforms we built last year."

"It's a long drive to Sheridan, isn't it?"

Perris nodded. She'd been forced to take eggs from nests that stood in the way of blasting before, and the only person licensed to incubate raptor eggs lived in north central Wyoming, almost on the Montana border. It took two days to drive to Sheridan with the eggs in a homemade incubator on the seat beside her and then two days back. Later, biologists had to find hawks of compatible species, with chicks within days of the same age, to foster the babies so the older chicks wouldn't kill the fostered nestlings. The process of removing nests with eggs was much more legally complicated than the simpler act of leaving them alone, which is what she preferred to do whenever possible.

She and Mike tried everything they could think of to deter the raptors from nesting on the highwall in the first place. Besides hanging swaying canvas sacks to scare them and doggedly scraping off nest starts, they used the boom of propane cannons called Zon guns. Last summer they'd built twenty platforms on poles to try and attract the birds to alternative nesting sites. But despite their efforts, at least one or two stick nests appeared each year on the thirteen miles of mine wall.

Mike picked up his equipment and lunch and went out. Perris kept busy answering the phone, catching up on her reading, attending the meeting with engineering to update her on the mining sequences, and studying the mine maps.

She had some bumps in the road to get over before she saw a smooth ride in her future: the interview with Merilee Kramer, seeing the nest safely through the season until the baby hawks could fledge, and deciding exactly what she wanted to do about Noah Dalton. Those were the big bumps, enough to jar her teeth and maybe knock the bottom out from under her. Other assorted smaller bumps included Benjamin Collins's harassment and Mike Eversoll's newly professed interest in her. Perris didn't know yet how bad those two irregularities waiting on the horizon might be.

Well, one thing at a time. She just couldn't focus right now on what she might do in the future, and it was useless to fret. She'd take one day at a time and see what happened. For the moment, she'd worry about her red-tailed hawks. The latest meeting with engineering resulted in the decision that the nest with eggs could stay for now. She wanted to see those babies learn to fly. She'd keep her mind on that hopeful note, and not on whether or not she wanted to try flying again...with Noah Dalton.

All day Noah had Perri in the back of his mind. He'd spent a restless night debating with himself whether or not to just go back and relieve the officer staking out her house. His second call that morning had been to release the deputy when he was finally sure Collins was in custody and Perri safely off to work.

Since he'd laid eyes on her again she had never been far from Noah's thoughts. But listening to her voice first thing this morning had been a mistake. He shouldn't have called her. It brought up memories of other early mornings they'd spent together.

It hurt to think of the special way she used to have of sending him off to work. Somehow they'd both come to believe implicitly that if they made love in the morning before he left on patrol, Noah couldn't fail to come safely home to her at night.

It was one of those crazy lovers' superstitions that had no basis in fact: He always seemed to make it through the day even if for some reason they couldn't keep their pact each dawn. But the important thing had been their unquestioning belief in the cherished bargain. It had been one of the unbreakable ties that held them together.

Unbreakable, that is, until the first morning after Perri's surgery that Noah had been able to talk her into making love.

He'd thought he was ready to accept the change in Perri. He'd tried his best to put his own feelings aside to support her during the horrible days between the diagnosis and the actual surgery. Later, as her flesh healed, he bought a wig for her when her hair fell out from the effects of chemotherapy, standing behind her and choking back tears while she tried on the fall of lifeless ebony that looked nothing like her own prior curtain of rich black waves.

He'd gone with her to the cancer support group meetings where she learned the exercises that would give her back full use of her arm and keep the swelling down. He'd helped her pick out the silicone breast that filled out the left side of her bra and made it look to all the world that she was still the same woman she'd always been.

But she wasn't the same. The agony of having to face death at the age of twenty-five had changed Perri beyond Noah's comprehension. Because he'd stood by her through so much of what she endured, he thought he got it. But it became crystal clear the morning he forced her to undress—and then couldn't finish what he started—that he didn't understand at all, and never could. He'd failed Perri. Not just that once, either. And she had never forgiven him for it.

Noah shook his head. He still couldn't believe what had happened. Or not happened. As much as Perri's body had betrayed her and made her sick, his had betrayed him and made her leave him. The memory alone was excruciating. He'd made her feel mutilated and ugly when she

needed acceptance and support. It had been entirely unintentional, those ego-deflating little episodes, but it had made the pair of them question themselves and each other. What if it kept happening? He started out hard as a rock, but too soon became as soft as something extruded from a giant caulking gun. He tried tucking his organ of betrayal inside her, sure that it would stiffen up like always. But the effort had been unsuccessful. They kept trying. But forced attempts only seemed to make the situation worse, the shock of his initial bout of impotence become a maddening self-fulfilling prophecy.

So they had started putting off making love. He should have tried therapy. He should have tried chemical enhancement. Those little blue pills were ubiquitous these days. Hell, they even made vacuum pumps and thick rubber bands to artificially inflate problem floppy dicks like his. But he did nothing. In the end Perri had simply gotten sick of waiting and left.

He'd married Marla Paxton solely to prove that he could still fuck. And he could. No problem. The only trouble with poor Marla was that she was a shallow, silly woman, concerned only with clothes and make-up and jewelry. She was a fragile china doll, and for fear he'd hurt her he never dared lose himself in the sheer exultant joy of fucking like he used to do with Perri. If he ever did get Marla to agree to a session in bed, she had to get up immediately afterward and fix her hair and her lipstick. In the end he not only couldn't make himself love the woman, he didn't even like her.

But. In the final analysis, the failures had been all his. First he couldn't make love to the woman he loved, and then he wouldn't do anything about his dysfunction. Then he proceeded to compound his errors with a second woman.

He loved Perri. Somehow he would have to make up to her all his shortcomings. Somehow he would find the way to get her to forgive him. Five years was a long time to live with such overwhelming guilt, and he had to rid himself of the burden and heal them both before they could go on.

Go on to what, though? What did the words *go on* mean in their case? To go on to new relationships, new loves? Or, the option he preferred, to repair the one they had before. To resume, to continue, to get beyond.

Noah knew what he wanted, but not what Perri wanted. He gazed at the double rows of portraits of previous Powell County sheriffs on his wall. Maybe there were parallels between what he was trying to do in the office and what he wanted to go on to with Perri. As sheriff, he'd inherited fifty years of tradition unhampered by progress, as he liked to say. The way to do things was the way things were done every day for all of the history of the sheriff's department. Noah had turned the office upside down and given it a good shake. He tried to uphold the traditional image of the Old West sheriff that people could instinctively trust, mixed with a new police philosophy that embraced not only progress, but responsibility and professionalism.

It was like re-inventing the office of county sheriff, and some people didn't take to it. In the process, he'd lost fifty percent of his original staff. It was a better department, but it had cost him.

Would he lose with Perri, too?

It was a gamble to try again with her. A big gamble that might end up showing them more hidden facets of each other they didn't know and didn't like. They'd both changed in five years, grown into mature people who demanded quality in others and tried their best to give back excellence. Mediocrity and failure and half measures weren't good enough anymore for Noah Dalton. Or for Perris Dalton.

Perri wouldn't make getting back together easy on Noah. He'd have to work his way back into her confidence. But for the sake of living inside his own skin with some sort of tranquility, he had to give it one more try. He could only hope his efforts weren't too late.

He stood, tucking his white shirt neatly into his pants before opening the door to the outer office. "Collins out yet?" he asked the officer on duty.

The woman looked up. "His lawyer's with him now."

"I want to see him before he goes."

"With the lawyer?"

"Doesn't matter to me," Noah said, returning to his office but leaving the door open. While he waited, he made a few phone calls, some of them concerning the background of the environmentalist who appeared at his door about fifteen minutes later, another to a certain young man attending the Agricultural College of the University of Wyoming in Laramie.

Noah sat in his leather chair, surveying Collins for a moment, just seeing how the man would react. But if he expected Collins to wilt under his stern gaze, he was disappointed. Collins turned to his lawyer. "Do I have to do this?"

"I just want to talk to you, Mr. Collins," Noah said mildly.

Collins turned on Noah with a snarl. "That's all I wanted to do with her, too! Perris Dalton." A sneer twisted his lips. "She shut the door in my face like I was some mangy dog. She pulled a gun on me."

"I think she has good reason to mistrust your motives, Mr. Collins." Noah wouldn't inform Collins that Perri had been unarmed when she turned him away. He was glad now he'd left the little LadySmith with her, glad he'd kept the lookout across the road, and glad he'd made the phone call to her brother. He only wished he had left her a semiautomatic pistol, but he knew Perri would fight him to a standstill on more advanced firepower. They'd been through it before: the daughter had inherited Big John's disdain for any gun not available in the Old West, when men were real men and didn't see a need to blow everything to shreds of bloody meat and gristle.

"Perris Dalton. Sheriff Noah Dalton. Just what's the relationship between you, anyway?" Collins shouted. "Is she your sister or what? Why are you so interested in her?"

Collins's lawyer put a hand out to restrain him, but Collins jerked his arm away, his eyes boring twin holes in Noah's forehead.

Noah glared back. "My interest in Perris Dalton extends to the fact that you put a rock through her window, Mr. Collins. I warned you to keep your activities legal, and you chose to ignore me."

"I can find out why you're so interested in her," Collins shot back. "This is a small town. People will know about you."

"Yeah, they will. If you can get anyone to talk to you." Noah rose, all six feet three inches of him. He towered over Collins, and outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. The protester's weight was all fat; Noah's was muscle. He stared down into a pudgy face. "People know I'm the sheriff of this county, and that I keep the peace. Step out of line again, Mr. Collins, and you'll be right back for another visit here in the county facility."

Collins's lawyer murmured something. All Noah caught was "harassment." Noah turned his steely gaze on the man, a junior partner recently hired to handle the scut work in a local firm.

"You'd better advise your client to keep his nose clean, counselor." Noah didn't add *in my county*. He didn't have to.

The lawyer quailed under Noah's steely gaze, tugging on Collins's arm to signal it was time to go. Collins allowed himself to be dragged out of Noah's office. But he stopped at the door, looking back one more time. His eyes assessed, estimating his adversary. Noah knew with certainty he hadn't seen the last of Benjamin Collins, and neither had Perri.

Noah placed his hands on his hips, the right one balled above the wood handgrip of his government model Colt .45. He saw Collins's eyes drop to the weapon, and then the man's gaze came back up. Collins got the message, all right, but there was no sign of retreat in his truculent expression as he turned and followed his lawyer out of the glass cubicle.

Suddenly Noah was very afraid for Perri. He'd handled the confrontation with Collins badly. Threats, real or implied, didn't deter Benjamin Collins. Rather they spurred him on, gave him the juice he needed for the next round of escalation.

Perri wasn't safe in that isolated little house, even with the precautions Noah had taken.

His heart tripped faster. He had to talk some sense into her, get her to go somewhere more secure, at least for the duration of the protest. And he had to talk to her face to face, and not on a cell phone.

She said she'd be late tonight. A date? And how late was *late*? Noah unballled his fists, letting them hang at his sides, forcing himself to let the tension of his meeting with Collins go. He'd wait. He'd wait in Perri's yard, if he had to wait all night. And if he had to confront her when she arrived home with company, if he had to circumvent all the new obstacles she threw in his way, it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered except this one thing: Noah Dalton would do what he had to in order to protect the woman he loved.

Even if she ended up hating him for it.

## Chapter Six

Perris drove the dirt road toward her house, past the motley collection of double-wide mobile homes, expensive new houses, and horse corrals that made up the unincorporated Mountain View subdivision where she lived north of Hawk Point City. Bottles clanked together in the sacks of groceries she'd stopped to buy on her way home, and she slowed her speed on the rutted road so she wouldn't end up with a soggy mess of broken glass and spilled juice in the back of the SUV.

She slowed even more as she approached the tiny anomaly of a house she rented, sitting all by itself on an acre of yellow clay. There was a car parked in front of the house. Even at this distance, and without all the police paraphernalia like light bars and door decals, she could tell it was a cop car. Police cars just had that official look about them whether they were marked or not, and she knew Noah sat waiting for her to come home.

She pulled up next to the white Chevrolet SUV, unsure about how she felt at the sight of it. Was Noah spying on her? Should she be angry at his presumptuousness, when she'd told him she would be late tonight? This was the second time he'd ignored her request to stay away and leave her alone. He just wasn't listening to her, and she knew from experience what resulted from Noah's refusal to accept her need for independence.

But maybe this was an official visit in his official vehicle. Maybe he had something to say about Collins and the protest, although things out at the mine site had been preternaturally quiet all day.

Should she act cool and distant? Or should she give in to Noah's persistence, as something inside urged her to do, and just be glad to see him?

She stepped out of the little purple crossover. As she rounded to the hatchback to get her groceries, Noah approached her from between the two vehicles. The sun was setting, its last long rays falling over Cedar Mountain to cast a rosy tint over the land and the man who stood before her. Noah dressed casually tonight, in jeans tight on muscled thighs and a soft chambray shirt that strained its seams over a hard chest and bulging biceps.

"What are you doing here?" Perris didn't mean the words to sound cutting, only curious, but she was afraid the harsh note she tried to suppress came through anyway.

Noah leaned casually against the car, studying her. "I wanted to see you."

Perris unlocked her gaze from his. How could he be so cool and collected when she felt each cell of her body waiting to fly apart if he so much as touched her? She reached for the latch to open the back of the car, but Noah's big body blocked her.

At last he decided to move, saying as she reached for the first of the bags, "Let me help you with those."

His long-fingered hand closed over hers, and she shuddered reflexively, closing her eyes. Thoughts of Noah had been too close to the surface lately, and the real thing was just too much to bear. He was much too attractive for Perris's own good.

If she'd admit it to herself, as much as she professed to hate it, half of his appeal was his candidly male assertiveness. The other half, as she knew perfectly well, was his infinite capacity for tenderness. There were times she just couldn't win when it came to Noah Dalton.

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying my own groceries," she grated, close to tears of pure sexual tension.

"I know you are, Perri. You're probably the most capable woman I've ever encountered in my entire life."

Well, that was an admission she'd never thought to hear from this particular man's lips. His fingers remained on hers. She could smell his distinctive scent, the aftershave he always preferred layered over the familiar fragrance of his clean skin, freshly washed hair, and shaving cream. The combined aromas had been imprinted on her a long time ago, and now they brought fresh sensation cascading in. Her skin prickled with longing and her nipple hardened to a painful nugget. He stood much too close for comfort, and she suddenly jerked her hand away and backed up as if burned. It was just a chemical reaction between them, she assured herself. Noah's personal pheromones or something calling to her and her own answering, *Why, yes, here I am, Noah. All damp between the legs and ready for the fun to begin.*

He glanced at her over his shoulder as he bent to finish retrieving all her groceries: three bags to each hand was no strain for him. Then he straightened, looking at her intently as if he could sense her longing or perhaps even smell desire for him coming off her in waves. And she could see perfect awareness of why she'd recoiled from him written in his eyes. "Maybe you're being so contrary and jumpy with the wrong person," he said quietly.

"And maybe not," Perris muttered darkly as she turned her back and walked toward the front porch of the little house. A note was attached to the door: the landlord had been out to measure the broken window, which he intended to fix the next day. Perris crumpled the note and tried to fit her key in the lock. Noah stood close behind her again, waiting, and she denounced the trembling fingers that betrayed her nervousness.

At last she got the two locks open, reaching to switch on the interior lights. She stood aside for Noah to enter. The first thing he laid eyes on was the LadySmith revolver still lying on the kitchen table where he'd left it.

"I don't believe it, Perri! How do you expect me to help you if you refuse to help yourself? You left the gun here all day, with the front window already broken out so anybody could be in here armed and waiting for you when you got home?" He stomped over to the table and set the groceries down before turning to face her.

Perris shut the door behind her, drawing up her shoulders and jutting out her chin. "Don't you yell at me, Noah Dalton," she said with a return heat of her own. "I hardly think I need a gun to get to and from work."

"It hasn't even been moved. If you insist on sleeping here alone, you could at least have kept it by the bed." He covered the floor space between them in a few strides.

She didn't tell him she would have had plenty of time to get to the gun last night. Yes, she'd been alone, but not sleeping. She had been aware of every noise all night long because she hadn't slept—for thoughts of him. Instead of telling him she'd sat up sleepless because of him, she glared up into his unwavering gray eyes.

Noah put his hands on her shoulders and leaned his face close to hers. "I talked to Collins today," he said. "The man is trouble, Perri. Get that through your head." He didn't add that he'd also had another interesting phone conversation. One thing at a time.

Perris leaned against her hands still lying flat on the door. Her throat tightened but she wasn't sure if it was from Noah's nearness or the fact that he agreed she should be afraid of Benjamin Collins. Her voice was raspy as she said, "Take your hands off me."

She saw the urge to shake her come over his face as he slowly moved his hands. But he only removed his big paws to the door on each side of her head so he still leaned over her, trapping her with his powerful body.

"Listen to me," he said, nose inches away from hers. "I want you to start taking care of yourself. I'm asking you to promise me you'll be more careful. I couldn't stand it if something happened to you."

She knew he was going to kiss her. She recognized all the warning signs in the tensing of his body, the slight lowering of his head. It was she who held Noah off with her words, her body language, her abrupt manner. He was pushing her because somewhere deep inside he knew she couldn't resist for very long. She'd never been able to resist the sheer physicality of him. She was a complete pushover when it came to fucking and Noah. Or fucking Noah. Damn it! Whatever!

She ducked quickly out of the circle of his arms, heading toward the groceries beginning to thaw in the bags.

Behind her, he still leaned against the door, resting his forehead on the painted wood and gnashing his teeth. She couldn't hear his words, but she knew quite well what he was muttering.

From the relative distance of the other side of the room, she said, "You don't have to bully me, Noah. I know exactly how tall you are and how much you weigh. But you can't browbeat me into submission."

"I'm no bully and you know it." Noah moved swiftly to stand near her. "I'm concerned for your safety. Just as you would be if you weren't so busy fighting me. And besides, I never had to force you to submit to my attentions and you know that very well."

Trying to avoid meeting his penetrating gaze, she turned away and began rummaging through the plastic bags, their rustle the only sound in the sudden silence.

"Perri, you've been running from me for five years," Noah said. His voice was even, reasonable. "Don't you think it's time to stop?"

"Are you here to talk about Benjamin Collins or about us?" Perris bent to put some mushy-feeling boxes in the tiny freezer compartment of the old refrigerator, her back safely to Noah.

"About us," he said. "But it all comes down to the same thing. You won't take proper care of yourself, and it makes me want to do it for you. But you won't let me, so I end up doing the wrong thing. I'm always doing the wrong fucking thing with you."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. His posture was militarily erect and his breathing rapid. His eyes glinted like quicksilver. He was really getting pissed. Was that what she wanted? To push him to the point where he'd do something to rouse her own anger, anger enough that the decision about what to do would be taken out of her hands and she could go on blaming him?

Why don't you grow up! a voice inside her head shouted. You're the one pushing him into superhero mode. Take responsibility for yourself, why don't you. Find someplace safe to stay. Find a carpool ride to work. Whatever it takes, just *do* it.

Except carry a gun. She wouldn't go that far, because that would mean admitting her overwhelming fear of Benjamin Collins.

"Do you ever buy anything that isn't frozen?" Noah gestured toward the TV dinners she'd just put in the refrigerator with a tilt of his head, making an abrupt turn in the conversation that threw her off balance again. "What about fresh fruits and vegetables?"

"Stop fussing about me," she warned.

"Fine." His shoulders straightened, looking even more broad if that were possible. "Have you finished putting away all the frozen stuff?"

When Perris nodded, shutting the refrigerator door, he asked, "The rest can wait?"

She nodded again, swallowing hard.

“Then would you come here and just let me hold you? You’re stiff as that fridge door.” His voice lowered with emotion as he added, “I’ve missed you so much. I’m knocking on the door, Perri. Please. Let me in. We can help each other if you just let me back in.”

One step. That’s all it would take. One step and she’d be in his arms where she belonged. His big hands hung loosely at the ends of arms roped with muscle. She knew if she even leaned toward him he’d immediately lift broad forearms and enclose her. Why didn’t she do it? Just step forward and rest her head against him, let this big, strong man carry some of her burden.

And then what? Would all the hurt between them magically go away? Would the memories of rejection they shared, his of her and then hers of him, just fade away as if they never happened?

He didn’t realize how much courage it would take for her to do as he asked. He was risking his reputation, but she was risking her whole concept of herself, the core of who she was that she had nurtured and protected for five long years. Faith and trust, insofar as her ex-husband was concerned, had been stripped from her long ago.

“I have to take a shower,” she muttered, looking down at his pointy-toed cowboy boots, deliberately avoiding his eyes.

Noah stood absolutely still for a moment, not even a muscle twitch betraying his emotions. She knew she probably had no idea what it had cost this strong man to ask her to trust him even so far as a hug. He was a proud guy. She believed he would stop asking if she just kept pushing him away. At last his hands curled, clenching, but he kept his voice even as he said, “All right, Perri. Have it your way. Take all the time you need.”

She knew he wasn’t referring to the shower she said she needed, but she slipped past him to head toward the bathroom. For once, the fact that the little house had no interior walls except those enclosing the bath bothered her. She could feel Noah’s gaze following her as she crossed the room and then stood picking out clean clothes. It was a relief to shut the bathroom door on that compelling gaze.

She pulled her T-shirt over her head. He was right. There was nowhere to run anymore. Showering and shampooing her hair and changing her clothes were delaying tactics, not an escape. She clung as if to a lifeline to the plastic curtains that ran on an oval rod all the way around the claw-foot tub. There would be no leisurely bath for Perris tonight.

Get on with it, she urged herself, but dear God, she was scared. If things progressed between them to the point they agreed to resume a sexual relationship, what would she do if it happened again, Noah’s involuntary rejection of her? Would she be able to take it, the failure of his that told her she was Ugly, Disfigured, Unlovable? Worse, he could now compare her to Marla, perfectly shaped Marla, and once again find Perris repugnant.

She thought she was so brave. How much courage did she have? Enough just to step into the shower and start soaping her lopsided body and look down at her own self?

The knock at the bathroom door made her jerk around, eyes wide with terror.

“Are you all right? I don’t hear water running,” Noah commented in a neutral, friendly tone. Her knees trembled. She’d thought he might walk in. Her hands had automatically flown to cover her chest.

When she didn’t say anything, he went on, “Perri? What do you want for dinner?”

She lowered herself to the edge of the tub, almost crying with relief. She had to clear her throat before answering, “Are you...offering to cook?”

“Sure. I’ve had lots of practice, and I’m getting pretty good at it. Your secret is revealed: I found steak in the bag still on the table and realize now you do eat meat. I could apologize for my snide remark about TV dinners by cooking a meal for us.”

“Whatever you like, Noah. Steak sounds good.” *Anything. It doesn’t matter. Just don’t open that door.*



“Steak it is,” he said, his voice already receding toward the kitchen area.

Perris clung to the cold, rounded lip of the tub for a moment until dizziness passed. How would she ever face Noah if the mere thought of him coming into the bathroom had her almost passing out in fright? And what was the matter with her anyway? She was the one who’d picked up two steaks, not one. The only difference between herself and Noah was she hadn’t expected him until tomorrow night. So he was twenty-four hours early. Who did she think she was fooling, getting cold feet now? She forced herself to bend and untie her bootlaces with nerveless fingers, then stood and kicked off her jeans.

She turned on the taps and stepped in. She avoided looking at her body. Once under the stinging spray, she began to feel better. They’d have dinner, talk a little bit, and then Noah would leave. He’d said to take all the time she needed. He wouldn’t force her to confront her demons, which were still legion, all in one night.

Would he?

She had to admit she didn’t know for sure. And she didn’t know if she wanted him to force her to confront her fears. She toweled off and reached for the clothes she’d picked out, almost weeping when she realized she’d blindly grabbed a V-neck, calf-length dress of clinging electric blue that she hadn’t worn in years. Since before the surgery, in fact. All she needed was a white straw hat with trailing ribbons, a bouquet of daisies, and she’d be all set for a romantic twilight picnic for two.

But she’d still be missing a breast to fill out the left side of the bodice.

What had come over her to choose this particular dress? What happened to her usual sweatpants and clean, baggy T-shirt? Well, it was too late now. At least she’d had the presence of mind to pick a lycra sports bra instead of a regular one. The bra would fill in the low neckline of the dress and give her some decent cover.

She took a last look in the mirror before running a comb through her hair and opening the door. She inhaled deeply and stepped out. Perching on the edge of the bed, she slipped on a pair of blue canvas espadrilles. In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought as she tied the laces of the sandals around her ankles. She must resemble a subject for an Impressionist painting by now, and Noah would probably think her romantically ridiculous.

She stood, only to find Noah’s eyes searching her out again. They’d gone all crinkly soft and shone baby blue.

“You sure look pretty,” he said, as pleased as if she’d dressed just for him.

Well. And she had, hadn’t she? What would it hurt to admit it? Perris smiled back, pulling the dress out from her sides in a clumsy curtsy. It had been a long time since she flirted. She’d missed that appreciative look in a man’s eyes. No, acknowledge it, not any man’s but only in Noah’s eyes. “Thank you, sir,” she replied.

Noah removed the kitchen towel he had tucked in the waistband of his jeans, folding it over his arm like a waiter in an old black-and-white film. He pulled out a chair with a flourish, saying, “If *madame* would care to be seated?”

Perris could approach a playful Noah. Much more so than a big, grumpy, bossy Noah who flung orders at her and used his bulk to try to intimidate her. She felt herself responding now as she sashayed obediently to the table, looking up into his laughing eyes as she seated herself with a flourish of her neon blue skirt. Noah helped her push her chair in, then went to the sideboard of the sink where he’d been busy washing romaine lettuce. He patted several of the wine-tinged leaves dry with his handy tea towel, then tore them and placed them in bowls.

“*Et voilà.*” He placed one of the bowls before Perris, along with a newly opened bottle of salad dressing. “It is to be hoped madame prefers ranch dressing,” he murmured in his best French accent, which was atrocious, while theatrically smoothing the ends of a nonexistent mustache.

Perris couldn’t hide a smile. “Madame herself picked out ranch,” she reminded.

Noah wagged an eyebrow in response and seated himself across from her. The steaks grilling under the gas flame in the stove smelled delicious. Perris herself had never used the broiler because she hated cleaning the spatters afterward. It just didn't seem worth all the work for one person.

"How's it going with the birds?" Noah asked, reverting to his normal flat Western accent and a presumably safe topic.

Perris appreciated his efforts to put her at ease, and talked easily about the eggs she had discovered and her hope that she and Mike would somehow be able to leave that particular nest alone.

"Mike?"

Noah rose to check the broiling meat, trying to seem nonchalant. But as she laughingly described Mike Eversoll, her co-worker, unable to keep the fondness from her voice, Noah's attention wandered from what he was doing. He inadvertently touched the broiler pan with his bare hand.

"Ouch!" he yelled, pulling back from the heat. He stuck two burning fingertips in his mouth to cool the pain.

"What's the matter, Noah? Are you jealous?" Perri was laughing at him, and Noah guessed he deserved it after he'd more or less taunted her about Marla. But he didn't like the dangerous feeling coiling inside him whenever he thought of Perri with another man, and he glared at her over the tips of his burned fingers.

She rose gracefully from the table, rescuing the burning steaks before turning to the refrigerator for ice. She gently removed his fingers from his mouth and laid the cold ice against the burns. Then she looked up into his eyes and crooned, "Ooh, poor baby."

Perris knew patronizing Noah was a mistake as soon as the words left her mouth. He jerked his injured hand away from hers, whipping it around her neck before she had a chance to back away. Then his lips descended on hers in a crushing kiss that stole her breath, punishing her for holding back so long and then teasing him about it.

To her own surprise, she kissed him back, meeting his voracious lips with an answering hunger that seemed to begin taming his anger. His kiss softened, became searching, exploratory. He opened his mouth, slanted his head. His tongue nudged her lips in silent question. The powerful arm slung around her neck loosened, his fingers twining in her hair as his other hand came up behind her, spread to nestle her hips closer to his erection.

He broke the bond of their lips to kiss his way across her cheek, to her ear. "I've wanted to do that since I first saw you again," he confessed, trailing kisses back toward her mouth. "Open to me now, Perri. Give us a chance."

His last words were murmured against her lips, and Perris found herself obeying, opening her mouth to the assault of his tongue against her teeth, the soft inner moistness of her lips. Her tongue rose of an old accord to meet his, thrusting and receding, the recesses of her mouth a warm facsimile of the lower part between her legs that throbbed for equal fulfillment.

His kiss promised. Noah swore to her with his tongue and lips and grinding pelvis that they could become one again. As much as their mouths melded in soft heat, so would their bodies—if she allowed it to happen.

She broke the kiss, turning her head aside. "The steaks..."

"Will wait," Noah insisted. He danced her backward far enough to turn off the stove. Then he took her mouth again, groaning. He bent his long legs at the knee and dropped one hand under her butt to lift her up, carrying her toward the India-print bed in the corner without breaking the kiss that sent surges of hot desire pulsing through her.

He fluttered kisses over her eyelids, her temples, his tongue circling one ear before setting her gently down on the bed. Perris's heart pounded so hard she thought it might come bursting through her skin. She had felt the answering drumbeat in Noah's chest. He laid her gently down,

leaning over to unbutton the first of the blue buttons on her dress. Last chance to say no, Perris's mind screamed, while her witless hands reached out to tug the chambray shirttails from his jeans.

Noah knew he was moving fast, horning in on Perri before she had time to think about what they were doing. But he was afraid if he slowed down she'd back off yet again, and maybe they'd never reach this point in the future. He knelt beside her, his hands working at the buttons of her dress while he kissed her, giving her no quarter and no chance to retreat.

And they weren't virgins, they'd been married. He could read her like a book; she wanted him now as much as he wanted her, desire throbbing between them with each rushing pulse beat. He couldn't give her a moment without the contact of his hands, his mouth, his pounding heart against her breast or she might remember it had been five long years since they'd last approached this dangerous point together.

Her hands hovering at the waistband of his jeans nearly drove him wild. Was she still trying to make up her mind? Let her say so now, by God, because if she succeeded in her quest to unzip his pants, he didn't think he could turn back.

He'd cheated a little on the raging hard-on; he would admit it if she asked. The doc had given him a six-pack sample of triangular blue pills when he confessed the limp dick problem he'd encountered in the past. And boy howdy, did the solution work as advertised. His cock was so hard it hurt. Except for everything having been painted a weird shade of chemical blue, the hot woman under his questing hands included, his sexual world was definitely back to rocking again. There would be no failure tonight.

Perris's fingers worked feverishly at the buttons of his shirt while Noah worked on the multitude of tiny blue ones on her dress. He wanted to rip the damned thing off her, but he persisted until he had all the buttons undone.

Perris felt the bed sag beneath them as he kicked off his boots. They were moving fast, feverishly, and she was surprised at his restraint, at the fact that the floor wasn't littered with tiny blue buttons.

He lifted himself from her side to stand in front of her so she could get at the tab of his jeans. When she reached for it his hips jerked reflexively toward her. She pulled the tab slowly, feeling the hard heat and familiar musky smell of him emanating from beneath the zipper. Noah gazed at her as she carefully freed his erection, its familiar huge size and silky contours at home in her hands. His eyes reflected silver in the light from the window as he raised her up, sliding the dress from her shoulders.

Perris tried to drown in his eyes, to forget all her fears and the long years of frustration. But he saw her tiny hesitation, and slid a forefinger slowly, sinuously, down the line from her covered chest to the top of her panties. After the heat of his initial assault, she had a hard time believing he'd hesitate now. But he was delaying in order to give her the choice: continue, or stop.

Her choice. All along it had been her choice, and she was beginning to feel she'd made some bad decisions.

She had denied herself the pleasure only Noah could give. She'd closed off and tried to forget the place only he could fill. She looked into his eyes, finding answering awareness and the heated desire she'd missed for so long. She had wanted him to want her, and now he very obviously did. Everything of her he could get.

"Fuck me fast," she whispered. "Don't slow down. Don't stop to think about it." She closed her eyes, lying back on the pillows, raising her hips to help Noah get the scrap of nylon panties down her legs.

He took her at her word. Smoothly and swiftly he was lying beside her, with only the lycra sports bra between her sweet honeyed skin and his rougher textured body. He lowered his head to her right breast, sucking the nipple through the slick material.

Heat pooled and then spread inside her as her nipple rose to a hard point in his mouth. Then to her utter astonishment his lips grazed the artificial breast too.

“Off or on?” He growled the question low in his throat, his chin resting on her sternum. Somehow he’d settled his body between her legs, and his erection strained against her. His gray eyes burned, demanding her answer before he gave her what her body wept for.

Off or on. That was the only question now, wasn’t it? Not whether they’d go through with this madness—it was too late now and they were too swiftly afire for each other to question the rightness of it. The only consideration, and it was up to Perris, was whether she wanted the concealing sports bra on or off.

He’d hold off on giving her what she craved, drive her crazy with need, until she answered the damned question.

And she just couldn’t do it. She wanted to be filled to overflowing with him too badly to risk having the hot promise stolen away now. The look in his eyes, deep desire tinged ever so slightly with another emotion, told her he was just a little bit uncertain too.

“On. Damn you, Noah—on! Just fuck me, would you?”

He raised himself over her, still looking into her eyes. He wanted her to make the next move. He needed to know she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Perris reached between them with one hand, guiding his hot heavy hardness inside her, and with the other pulled his face down until their lips met once again.

“Damn you,” she said again, cursing him for making her choose to maintain the fiction between them. Or for making her want him in the first place. She whispered into the warmth of his open mouth, and at last Noah closed his eyes. He slid fully into wetness, and Perris enclosed him in sleek, welcoming warmth.

It was like coming home. Noah began to move sinuously inside her, watching Perri bite her lip to keep from crying out with the sweet, familiar heat of it. Her nails raked his back, his neck. She clenched her hands on his shoulders so she wouldn’t inadvertently draw blood.

She wrapped her legs around his toned body and gathered him in, moving with him in remembered rhythm that rocked them both to the core. She’d missed him so much, dreamed so often and aching of making love again with Noah, and now it was real.

Too real. Too fast. The fire he built inside her roared rapidly higher. It had been smoldering a long time and quickly flared to overpowering sensation. She panicked as she reached the precipice too quickly. She’d wanted their first time back together to go on and on. Slight disappointment mixed with fierce exaltation as orgasm overtook her and she tumbled over the edge.

As she exploded, the fast climax clenching inside her, Noah lost control and joined her. He tensed, the eruption bursting from him like a fireball with a trailing tail of smaller electrical shocks. They quivered together for a moment, and then he collapsed, rolling with her, still welded together as if they could never be parted.

“Sweet Mother Mary,” Noah said when he could draw breath again. “I almost forgot what it was like with you.” He held Perri close, his hands splayed across her as so she couldn’t think of moving away. He kissed her gently, sweetly on the mouth and then the tip of her nose.

“Perri?”

She wouldn’t open her eyes, keeping them tightly closed. Then a tear slid out from beneath her quivering eyelid, and Noah raised a hand to wipe it away. Her chest heaved, and he felt a stab of fear. What had he done wrong? He’d thought giving her fast and furious was right—what they both wanted and needed. She’d said just to give her everything he had, and dispense with the foreplay. He knew she could take it, take all of him, without fingers stretching her or tongue wetting the way. Plunging in and riding hard was how she liked it, or how she always said she did. The decision to make love again had been abrupt, but maybe they had to blow that barrier down fast or else it might never have happened at all.

“Baby, don’t cry.” He cradled her in his arms, holding her close and kissing her tears away. At last she opened shiny emerald eyes.

“Oh, Noah,” she said on a sigh. Her arms tightened around him, and all was suddenly right again. “I was so afraid we would never reach this place again.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said softly, abrupt pain stabbing him. “About those other times, when I couldn’t make love to you. You don’t know how sorry I am, Perri.”

“That’s not entirely what I meant.” She raised a finger to his lips to silence him. “I meant because I’d stayed away so long, I thought you wouldn’t want me anymore.”

He moved his lips away from her finger. “Maybe it’s time to talk about it, sweetheart. Stop avoiding the subject and just get it out in the open. We’ve still got a slight problem.” He tugged at the top hem of the sports bra with his teeth.

“Did you want me to take it off?” Perris held her breath.

“I’ll be honest with you, Perri,” Noah said softly. “I don’t know what would happen. But I think we need to get past that.”

She released the breath she’d been holding. After all her protestations about facing Noah with no restraint between them, what she felt right now was relief. Even though it was the relief of the sneak thief who once again hadn’t been caught.

She lay on top of him, with him still inside her. They were still pussyfooting around, and it didn’t feel quite right. But maybe this was all she would get. Maybe in the end Noah had to sneak around his constituents. And she had to sneak around Noah.

“Can we try with it on...for a little while longer?” Weakling! Her mind screamed at her. Coward!

Noah sighed. “I don’t like it, Perri. Putting it off isn’t the answer. Taking it off probably is.” He ran a finger beneath the offending bra, beneath the latex breast. His fingertip hovered on the point of encountering the scar, while his eyes delved into hers, seeking permission.

Perris stiffened. She couldn’t help it.

Noah’s eyes closed. He drew the questing finger back down over her ribs. Raising up to lean his damp forehead against hers, he murmured, “All right. Maybe another time.”

She seized that desperately, the promise that they could go on from here. Take it slowly, build up resistance to the shock that had formerly called a halt to lovemaking.

*You coward!*

Noah tried to ease the tension for her. For himself? “It’ll be like practice,” he whispered, sliding her up his torso to nuzzle her neck and earlobe. “We’ll build up to it. Is that what you want, sweetheart?”

“Promise, Noah,” she pleaded. “I couldn’t live with the thought that this might be our last time.”

“Promise,” he whispered gruffly. His hand reached to capture hers. “I already told you. I’ll want you forever, Perri. Only you.”

She could feel him growing hard inside her once again. He began to move slowly, suggestively, inside her, while licking her neck and raising goosebumps on her arms. Then he was sucking her earlobe and massaging his long fingers rhythmically into the base of her spine. Perris raised one leg, kneeling on the opposite knee and opening wider for him. He obligingly pulled all the way out, almost to the tip of his long cock, before easing himself back inside. All the while his eyes searched hers, seeking, probing. Offering up secrets and asking that she reveal hers.

She loved sex slow and deep. After fast and fiery, the next best loving resulted from melting into it, into a slow drip like honey of entry and withdrawal. Into deep, velvety kisses that would soon have her quivering like jelly. She closed her eyes again, her breathing slowing so her chest barely rose and fell. Noah knew how she liked it, remembered everything, and he wasn’t above

using that knowledge against her. She knew he watched her, a lazy grin on his face, enjoying the expression on hers brought about by his languorous, lengthy pleasuring.

But by now she didn't care if he was watching her. She promptly forgot everything but losing herself once again in sensation, in loving the feel of Noah's body against hers, his rock hard cock inside her. Her raised leg began to tremble and Noah slid a hand along her calf to help hold her open for him as he slid in and out of her slick wetness. His head shifted on the pillow, and Perris slitted her eyes to see his head bent, enrapt in watching himself moving in and out of her. She leaned until her forehead touched his, watching their joining along with him, until sharp stabs of quivering pleasure made her eyelids clench tightly shut again.

Only there, wrapped in passion with Noah, could Perris forget. Forget that they still hadn't settled anything, that their problems loomed as large as they had before they'd tumbled back into bed together. She was still hiding from Noah, and he was letting her hide, just as scared as she was to finally bare it all. Or dare it all.

## Chapter Seven

Perris awakened sometime in the night to the ringing of her phone. Rubbing her eyes, she attempted to sit up, only then realizing that a heavy arm lay across her middle, trapping her.

Noah. She and Noah lay naked in her narrow bed, arms and legs entangled in a warm heap under the India-print quilt. She started to get up, but Noah stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Let me get it. It might be for me."

Of course Noah Dalton was the county sheriff. He had to leave a number where he could be reached. But the implications of Noah getting a phone call at her house in the middle of the night, on her phone, were a little too much for Perris to grasp at the moment.

"Hello," Noah said, and raising his voice, "Hello?"

Perris watched the play of moonlight across broad shoulders, the shadows in the hollows of his muscular butt cheeks as he stood by the bed. Noah's hair was tousled, touched with silver in this light, and he looked faintly ghostly, unreal. Maybe he existed only in her fevered imagination? Maybe this was all dream. Maybe they hadn't had sex, twice, tonight.

He put the phone down and stalked back to the bed, his legs in complete darkness as if only his rock hard torso moved toward her. Perris shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. When she discovered the sports bra slipped all sideways and the synthetic breast out of place, she automatically raised her hands to straighten herself out. It was all real. The residual tingle between her legs told her their tumble into bed was certain.

No, Noah was the genuine article, all right. This silvery-glinted Noah getting back into her bed was no figment of her overheated imagination. What they'd done together was definitely not just another erotic dream she'd had starring Noah Dalton. What must he think of her now, after she'd so eagerly and easily fallen back into bed with him? It was embarrassing what a pushover she had always been for him.

"Who was it?" Perris hated the squeak in her voice.

"A hang-up call," Noah muttered, drawing her back into the circle of his arms. "Do you get them often?"

"No, never." Perris held herself very still, too aware of Noah's long, reassuring length against her side. He raised a hairy leg and rubbed it against her silky calf.

"Well, I don't like it," he said, looking down into her face. "It's too much of a coincidence, coming on the heels of Collins's threats. I'm going to stay the rest of the night, be here with you. Just in case."

Perhaps Noah expected that because they'd had sex, everything was all right between them now. He could interpret an innocent wrong number as a threat to her, his protective instincts kicking into high gear, giving him an excuse to move in and take over.

“You’re not staying.” Perris thrust out her chin. He could have asked.

“But you feel so good. So soft,” he murmured, leaning over her to nuzzle her ear. “You smell good too. Let me stay, Perri.”

Perris pushed at his chest, ineffectually, starting to get angry that he didn’t realize she was feeling hemmed in again. Maybe she had wrongly expected that once they made love Noah should automatically be back on her wavelength, understand intuitively when he pushed too hard.

He didn’t. Once before he hadn’t understood her, and she’d ended feeling scared and alone. His warm breath on her neck came evenly and deeply, making Perris shudder. His heavy weight on her chest was stifling, making it hard for her to breathe. She stared helplessly over his shoulder. Now their upper halves were in darkness, only their lower limbs delineated in the moonlight. She’d been seven kinds of fool tonight, to think that having Noah naked beside her again would automatically make everything okay.

She said, too loudly, “Noah, did you tell the office to call you on my phone?”

“Um-hum.”

She poked him in the ribs with an extended forefinger. “Did you know you were spending the night, then?” Was he that sure of her?

“Huh-uh,” he said, grunting from her elbow. “Emergency.” He tried to snuggle in closer, his leg wrapping around hers so his ankle rested against her far knee, trapping both her legs.

He lifted his head and chest, giving her the leverage she needed to finally shove him away. “Did you tell them whose number you were providing them?”

He propped himself up on one elbow, his head and shoulders popping into the shaft of moonlight. His eyes were open, and he was frowning. “No. If it’s so all-fired important to them to know exactly where I am, they can track me with the GPS on my phone.”

“Don’t you care that the dispatcher might know you’re here with me at,” Perris glanced at the digital readout on the bedside clock, “two in the morning?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched and he sounded as if his teeth were clenched. “They all know how I feel about gossip. In my office, personal lives stay personal. None of my people would talk about where I spent my night. Okay?”

“It’s not my reputation I thought we were concerned about.” Perris could grit her teeth as well as he could.

Noah withdrew his leg to his own side of the bed. Perris felt the chill of its absence, but she couldn’t seem to stop badgering him. “So you feel safe here?”

“In a manner of speaking. Perri, what’s this all about? I don’t understand why you’re so mad all of a sudden.”

“I’m not mad. I just want to get some things straight.”

Noah drew a deep breath, let it out. Then he collapsed flat on his back. “All right then. What things?” he asked, apparently speaking to the ceiling.

Perris dug her nails into her palms, trying to control her temper. Might as well come straight out with it. She leaned over Noah’s prone form. “Do I embarrass you?”

“What a question. Of course not.” Noah flung a forearm across his eyes.

“But I can’t come to your house.”

“Perri, I explained why. The guy I’ll be facing in the fall is the ex-sheriff I defeated in the last election. He runs a dirty campaign. He’ll hold you up as an example, and you’ve already got enough of being held up to the limelight with Collins and the demonstration,” he said tiredly.

Perris lifted his arm away from his eyes so he would look at her. “You’re not making sense, Noah. What difference does it make if you come to my house. My bed. Or I go to yours?”

“Aw, hell. You’re probably right.” He lifted the hand she’d removed from his eyes to brush the hair away from her temples. “I just feel I have to protect you, Perri. Any way I can. Even if it doesn’t make much sense.”

"I don't want to fall back into the trap of being helpless just so you can rescue me. Dammit, Noah, I'm a grown woman." Perris took a deep breath. "I want to be able to solve my own problems. I want you to come to me, if and when you come back, as an equal. I'm not a child. I don't need to be sheltered."

Noah's expression hardened, that stubborn look she knew so well. "You may not think you need shelter, Perri. But admit it: We're both hiding." He flicked meaningfully at the band of the silky lycra sports bra.

Perris recoiled.

"I'm sorry." His expression softened and his voice lowered, a tender note she'd missed creeping in. "Tonight was probably a mistake, and I'll bet you're thinking so, too. It was too soon. But I can't seem to stay away from you. And I don't want to hurt you." He traced the line of her jaw with one finger. "So what do you want me to do, sweetheart?"

It was Perris's turn to flop helplessly on her back. What did she want from him? What did she expect? He was right, she was still hiding. From him. "Maybe it was a little too soon. But I'm an adult, Noah. I could have said no."

A laugh rumbled out of him as they lay side by side, the small distance between them a cold chasm of disagreement. "Could you say no? I think we're a force of nature, like the desert winds, hot and cold, that get trapped in a dust devil until they whirl themselves out. You could no more have resisted me than I could have stayed away from you, once I set eyes on you again."

There was a truth if she ever heard one. He had only to touch her, and she headed right for the bed. She had a few personal weaknesses she would probably never overcome. "Leave me some dignity, would you, Noah? I'd like to think I at least have a choice in the matter."

"Nah." He raised himself on an elbow again, his biceps bulging as he leaned his head on his hand to look at her in the moonlight. "Neither one of us has a choice. We're fated. We can't fight it. I'll be back, and you'll let me in. You know you will. You like what I give you too much."

"You're insufferable." She turned her head away from his teasing, cocky grin.

"I think the word might be insatiable." He drew her limp hand toward his mouth and kissed it. Then he lowered her fingers to his cock beginning to rise to renewed attention from a tangle of curly hair.

He tilted her averted face back toward him with one finger. "We leaped a barrier tonight, Perri. The rest will fall, given time and patience. I don't want to fight with you about Collins. I don't want you to get so defensive and stubborn you'll do something reckless just to show me that you can take care of yourself."

"And I don't want you so over-reactive to the least little hint of anything out of the ordinary that you leap on me bodily to defend me from a phone call!"

Noah's chest burned as he held his breath, counting to ten before he said anything else to set Perri off. He had some confessing to do, but this wasn't the time. He stared into her eyes, reading the determined resolve there. If she only knew the steps he'd already taken to make sure she was safeguarded, she'd kick more than his ass out of her bed.

"Okay," he said at last, hoping she wouldn't read the deception in his eyes. But he was more than the sheriff. He was a man, and a man protected his own.

"Okay," Perris agreed, relieved. "I'm glad that's settled. We'll behave like two adults. I don't want to hurt your campaign, and you don't want to hurt me. So what do we do now?"

She sounded so reasonable, and Noah wondered if that was how she really felt. Her voice trembled a little, betraying an uncertainty she wouldn't admit.

But there was one thing they agreed on, one way he could declare his intentions, affirm his place with her.

"How about if I leap on you bodily?" Noah tried on a grin.

Perris's heart hammered at the sight of that familiar crooked smile. His hand tightened on hers, pressing it against his thick rod. She wanted to cry. Did he understand what he did to her,



how confused she was that she could be so attracted to him while they fought over all the old differences that still divided them?

But now he was fully aroused against her palm. And she couldn't deny that it excited her that he wanted her. Again.

She was one mixed-up girl. "I guess we can agree on insatiable too," she admitted.

"See? We belong together. We're two of a kind." Noah leaned over Perris, claiming her mouth once again as his hand sought the nipple of her soft right breast inside the bra.

Any protest she might have made died in her throat under Noah's sensual onslaught. His mouth demanded, sucking and nipping at her flesh. Against her better judgment, answering heat rapidly spread to pool like liquid fire in the cradle of her pelvis. With hands, mouths, bodies, they again gave and took, sought and found.

This third time lasted and lasted, Noah unable to gain the release he sought until he'd brought Perri to the edge of climax again and again. Sweat sheened their bodies, gathered in beads on his forehead and upper lip, but he wouldn't stop until he had the satisfaction of seeing her completely out of control.

Their lovemaking took on an aspect of punishment as Noah drove them both to exhausted completion. He wasn't exactly sure why he wanted to punish Perri or why she seemed just as eager to totally drain him. But this intense, brutal mating certainly fit the definition of retribution, continuing the argument they'd just had with a physical quarrel to see who would win. She met each deep thrust with equal vehemence. He fastened his lips to her neck above her collarbone and slid a hand down between their bodies to roughly finger her clit, demanding her response.

Perris arched, gasping, fighting Noah even as she gloved him tightly inside. At last she was spun burning over the precipice, still resisting him, flinging her head back on her neck with a scream almost of pain.

Her fingers clenched into the muscle of his ass, and Noah could finally let go, in what felt like an endless stream of molten heat.

He collapsed on her, his trembling arms unable to hold his weight even at the risk of crushing her. His breath burned in his throat. Yes, they were insatiable, both of them, as if they could make up for a five-year drought in one stormy night. He breathed in great gulps of air, thinking he might never truly catch his breath again. Still inside her, he felt all the muscles that had clenched him so tightly slowly relaxing around his flaccid cock.

She wouldn't...surely she couldn't make him leave her now.

He said softly, pulling some of his weight off her, "Perri, are you awake? I'm sorry."

"I'm not." She lay with arms out-flung, head still tipped backwards, breathing slowly and shallowly as if she'd passed out from extreme pleasure. At last she raised her head to see him crouched once more between her legs, as if that were all the farther away he could get. His chin dug into her breastbone and both arms wrapped beneath the small of her back as if he would never let go. And some part of her, some small and powerless part, didn't want him to.

"You have to go."

Noah watched her.

"I honestly don't think I could move," he said slowly, hopefully.

Perris watched him as well, his eyes all silvery and asking for permission she could not give. She saw his eyes steadily darken with determination when she wouldn't say the words to ask him to stay.

He might go, yes. But he would be back.

She kept her head raised as he reluctantly detached himself from her and then stood stretching for a moment by the side of her bed, giving her a good long look at what she would be missing by sending him away, before bending to retrieve his scattered clothing. When he was

dressed, boots and all, he walked toward the table on the other side of the room and then returned. Wordlessly, he placed the LadySmith on the bedside table beside the clock.

"I have some things to do the next couple of days. Some appearances and speeches, a dinner at the Senior Citizens, stuff like that. But I want to come back. I mean that. If you need me in the meantime, call."

He stood looking down at her for a moment, his earlier swift anger with her drained away to sadness. Perri had a great body, hard in some places but soft in all the right ones. She was intensely, femininely beautiful, and he was glad she wasn't prone to such false modesties as pulling the sheet up to cover herself when he wanted to look at her.

Of course, she did still wear the stretchy top that covered her from shoulders to ribs. But they'd broken a few of her rules tonight, maybe come to some kind of understanding.

He leaned to kiss her, and almost against her will she wrapped her arms around his neck. Then she determinedly pushed him away, bidding him silently to go. Perri had been, after all, a cop's wife. She was used to watching him walk out the door.

Noah wondered if her thoughts paralleled his: they had once more enacted their early-morning sendoff, even if this one had been a little earlier and a tad rougher than in the old days. He knew they'd been walking the same psychic pathway and that she wasn't mad at him anymore when she whispered, "Be safe, Noah."

"Always." He kissed a finger, laid it to her lips. "You too, Perri. Be safe for me."

He made himself turn and leave her, carefully locking the door behind him.

Perris lay sprawled as Noah had left her, a spent soreness invading all her muscles and leaving her weak. She hovered on the edge of sleep, too tired to question anymore if making love with him again was right or wrong. But as soon as Noah's car pulled away, the phone sounded, startling her into complete awareness of her self-imposed solitude.

The cell phone rang and rang, while Perris lay with nerves screaming and body tensed for flight. She'd forced from her mind the hang-up call earlier in the night, determined not to dwell on it and fiercely resolved Noah wouldn't. Now Noah wasn't here to answer. And she was afraid to answer.

At last she dragged herself out of bed and over to the telephone where Noah had put it down. She picked it up, unable to make her voice function. She listened to silence, a long, dragged-out pause without even the sound of breathing to fill the empty stretch. Someone whispered her name. Then there came a series of loud clicks, the noise of the trigger of a gun pulled repeatedly on empty chambers.

Perris gasped. One last click sounded. She pushed the button to end the call with madly trembling fingers.

She cursed herself for letting Noah leave, for dismissing the earlier call without a thought. Had the caller been watching for Noah to leave? Did the caller know she was alone now? Was he watching her?

Paranoia. She was paranoid, that's all. Yet she found herself walking the length of the little house, checking the window latches, peering out of each. There was a car parked across the road under some spruces. She frowned, unable to determine if it were empty or occupied, and finally threw the deadbolt on the front door. The plastic sacks she'd tacked up to the broken window flapped in a sudden breeze as she stood by the door, and Perris hurriedly jumped back.

The walls of the house seemed to loom, closing in on her. She retreated to the bed. She picked up the LadySmith, all she had left of Noah since she'd forced him to go, its cold steel reassuring in a house with too many tall windows and not enough heavy drapery. There was a window right over the head of her bed, the one that had allowed the moonlight in, throwing Noah's face into relief as she had gazed at him in passion.

Had the caller seen that too? Was he privy to her secrets, even to the fact that she couldn't bring herself to fully undress in front of Noah, her husband?

The thought brought her up short. Let's get at least one thing straight, Perris told herself. Noah is not your husband. If he was, he would have insisted on being here.

And, hell, that was so unfair. She couldn't blame Noah for doing what she asked. She just wasn't thinking rationally. She scooted to the side of the bed where Noah had lain, as far away from the window as she could get. She turned her nose to the pillow, breathing in Noah's lingering scent, hugging the LadySmith to her breast.

What was the matter with her? A middle of the night phone call, and she crumpled like foil. She'd thought herself so strong. So secure in the shield of knowledge she could take care of herself. Did one night in the arms of the sheriff convince her she was helpless without him?

Oh, she had much to damn Noah Dalton for now. And much to damn herself about as well. She'd thought going to bed with Noah might cure her of some old terrors, but instead it seemed to have brought new ones to the forefront. Maybe she'd been better off before, when she was so sure she was going to live she didn't pay too much attention to personal safety.

Now, when she thought she might be in danger, she started to fall to pieces. Where had her strength flown? Was it only that she couldn't bear to face her own mortality again?

Perris thought that might be it. Cold comfort, but if she had an answer to why she was panicking so badly she was certain she'd feel better.

The phone started to ring again. Perris forced herself not to tense. The metal of the LadySmith warmed slowly against her skin. She let the phone ring, trying not to let the insistent throbbing scatter the thoughts she'd just started to put in some order. She hadn't completely healed from what had been done to her to save her life, and wasn't psychologically ready to take on any new threat. That was why she couldn't take her bra off in front of Noah, and why a phone call from Benjamin Collins—and she *knew* it was Collins—could cause her to jump right out of her skin.

She'd been damning Noah and herself, when she should have been cursing Benjamin Collins. What she and Noah had shared tonight might have been precipitous in light of the fact that they'd been divorced so long and only back in each other's orbit for a few days. But it had felt so right. Nothing in the five years since she'd run away from Noah had felt quite that right. Facing up to Noah again, even if she had to work herself up to total nudity in front of him, was a part of her healing process.

And if healing could feel so good, how could it be wrong?

She turned on her back on the bed she'd so recently shared with her ex-husband. She might be fooling herself. People talked themselves into all kinds of things that weren't good for them. But Perris thought, in her case, she'd beaten the odds and talked herself into taking the final step that would put her at peace with her body and her self-image. If she was right and she'd whipped the cancer for good, she might have to live in this body a long time. She may as well learn to like it again.

For sure Perris liked what Noah could make her body do in response to him. She allowed herself a small, victorious smile, like a contented cat with yellow feathers stuck in its teeth. Let Benjamin Collins play his little games on the telephone. Perris Dalton had come out the winner this night, and she could even expansively grant a teeny bit of pity for the pudgy protester and his miserable little life. Imagine being so alone, one had an entire night to spend making prank phone calls.

The phone quit ringing, and Perris turned her head to glance superciliously at its oblong outline in the darkness. *I don't have time for your games, Collins.* She released her hold on the LadySmith, placing it on the windowsill over her head. Then she slowly fell deeply, contentedly asleep, curled up in the India-print coverlet on the side of her bed where Noah had lain.

Perris woke late the next morning, exclaiming when she saw the readout on the clock. She rushed around getting ready for work, and almost ignored the phone when it started ringing

again. But since she didn't have to wait for the coffee to perk, planning on taking a bottle of fruit juice instead, she decided to answer.

"Guess what I've got here in my hand?" Noah said by way of greeting.

"You're such a dirty old man," Perris retorted, smiling despite her need to hurry. "If this is an obscene call, I'm reporting it to the sheriff."

Noah yawned. "Go ahead. I'm sure he'd be mighty interested in what fantasies you inspire in men that they call you on the phone to tell you *at length* about their innermost desires. Pun intended."

"You and the hang-up man." Perris could have bitten off her tongue as soon as the words were out.

Noah was instantly alert. "He called again?"

"Once," she admitted hesitantly. "Right after you left. Which by my watch was little more than two hours ago. I've got one of your damned love bites on my collarbone, by the way."

"Shit." Noah paused, distracted, which was what Perris intended. "Sorry about that."

She grinned. She was rather proud she could make Noah lose control. Sometimes she felt he was too careful of her. "It's very small," she assured him. "Hardly noticeable."

"That's good." Noah sound embarrassed and quickly changed the subject. "Was it Collins on the phone? Did he say anything?"

"Hey, what happened to my obscene call?" Perris didn't know if she was teasing. She never got exactly what she wanted from Noah, even if she herself didn't know what it was she wanted. "I was just getting interested."

"Perri," Noah warned.

"Okay, okay. You don't need to get grumpy. I heard a series of clicks, and then I hung up. No words, no heavy breathing...unlike the present caller."

"Cut the cute," Noah said, insisting on being a cop. "What kind of clicks?"

Perris put down the bread knife she'd been using to spread fat free mayo on a sandwich for her lunch. She put the speakerphone on. "Like a trigger on an empty revolver. Okay, Noah? Like a gun with no bullets."

Noah knew she was scared, but she wasn't going to admit it. That was why she was so prickly this morning, and not because she was still angry with him. Which she maybe should be. Noah was feeling more and more like a heel for not insisting that he stay with her the previous night, no matter that she insisted he go. He cursed softly. Nobody but Perri could make him feel so off balance. He never knew what would turn out to be the wrong move with her. "I hate like hell leaving you there by yourself."

She rushed now to insist, "I'm not alone. I have friends besides the LadySmith. If I can get off the phone, I can catch a ride with Mike. Gotta go now, Noah. Bye."

She hung up. He cursed aloud, turning off the phone and tossing it to the foot of his bed. Mike. The guy Perri talked about so fondly.

He felt thoroughly disgusted with himself: Noah Dalton, sheriff, allowing his ex-wife, whom he'd spent most of the night making love with, to ride off into the sunrise with another guy whose name brought a smile to her lips. Wasn't that a fine how-de-do and a great way to start the day. She was riding with someone because she was scared. She thought Noah Dalton couldn't protect his own, so she turned to some guy she worked with named Mike.

Noah rubbed his bristly jaw with an agitated hand. On top of that, she'd left the thought of Benjamin Collins gnawing at him again. Of course, they had no proof that the previous night's calls had been from Collins. But nobody else that Noah knew of had been threatening Perri lately.

And on top of *that*, Noah still had a raging morning hard-on. The little blue pills had broken the barrier, all right. He now got an erection just thinking about Perri. He shoved the sheet and

blanket back, their weight a discomfort that he couldn't stand. His need for her hurt with unrelenting intensity.

He was pissed off at her, and at the same time he wanted her so much he couldn't think straight. He hadn't felt like this since he didn't remember when. Probably since their honeymoon when they'd barely been able to bring themselves to climb out of bed for the entire two weeks.

He knew, in his head, that what he was attempting to do was re-stamp Perri as his property. It was a sort of caveman reaction that he couldn't help, and that would have him inside her every chance he could get until he felt absolutely sure she'd be so full of him she wouldn't think about anybody else.

Then maybe she'd act like a proper cave woman and accept his need to protect her.

He laughed, a grating sound in the silence. While he was making shit up, he would envision her being *grateful* that he wanted to protect her. Yeah, that would happen. But this need for her was something ancient and primal in men that made them carry on like this with a new woman. Every man Noah knew who started a new relationship went through this almost torturous first few weeks.

He'd been through it before with Perri. So he had hardly expected the wild urgency to claim her twenty-four hours a day with which the instinct hit him again. He was a civilized man, not an animal. He should be able to control this craving to fuck her, again and again and again, until they were sated and saturated with each other and she was lulled into acceptance.

The thought sneaked in that Marla had never affected him like this. Or at least not with this uncontrollable voraciousness. And it was dangerous to feel this way about Perri. The last thing Perri Dalton wanted was to be claimed by any man. In any way, shape, or form.

Noah swung his legs out of bed, but didn't actually rise because just then another thought slammed into his head. Speaking of protection. Huh. They hadn't used any.

He hadn't been prudent. He'd used no birth control, and he didn't know if she still took pills, or anything about her sexual history since she'd left him. What an ironic twist of fate: him forgetting to protect her.

Had it been subconsciously deliberate? A child would tie Perri down. A child would give him the excuse he needed to force her to be more cautious. He didn't think he'd forgotten on purpose, he just hadn't been thinking of anything except making her his again. But still.

He'd better quash that line of hopeful thought. Perri would probably blame him if she ended up pregnant. She'd think he deliberately forgot protection.

What got into him when he was around Perri? Or rather, what left him, besides all his sense and self-control? There must be some lesson in that, that she and only she drove him to such distraction.

And the lesson he should take away from all this was that the choice between his ex-wife and his profession, or the mixture of Perri into his professional life with the advent of Benjamin Collins into the stew of emotions running rampant between ex-husband and ex-wife, just might drive him crazy.

"Get down, why don't you!" he harshly ordered the brainless appendage that completely ignored him, swaying stiff and proud as he walked toward the shower. "If nothing else, pal, you can think about her being on her way to work with some guy named Mike."

And to think he had gotten up early just to hear her voice, only to have her drop that bombshell in his lap. If he truly had any control over where they were headed, he should be driving her to work himself.

Noah sighed, easing into a cold shower which didn't help at all. He dressed in his white shirt and chocolate brown pants, straining this way and that in front of the mirror to see how bad his condition showed with his shirttails tucked in. He concluded it was pretty bad, all right. He wanted to blame the little blue pill but knew that was bullshit. He hadn't stayed continuously

hard all night as the accompanying literature warned against. If he'd just stop thinking of Perri, his present problem would go away.

But how to do that? She was now going to always be with him, her smell and her taste and the feel of her skin. A few weeks of this kind of tension, Noah thought, and he might have to lock himself in one of his own jail cells. Or he had to have Perri back where he could keep an eye on her, and then this crazy urge to be close to her all the time would cease.

He was almost glad for the distraction of the ringing phone. But his relief turned to caution when he recognized the voice on the other end. It had been a long time since he'd had reason to talk with Big John McLean. But Noah had started this snowball rolling in an effort to protect Perri, and he shouldn't be surprised if it ended up knocking him on his ass—as almost all his dealings with the McLeans had always done. He just could not win with the members of that family, and he didn't know why he kept trying.

If Mike Eversoll was surprised to see Perris parked in front of his trailer waiting for a ride to work, he didn't show it. She was grateful for Mike's composure, and could only hope he wouldn't take her acceptance of the ride as a sign that she was interested in his more personal offer.

"What's up?" Mike asked as he exited Hawk Springs for the interstate.

Perris didn't want to tell Mike the whole story. Not that Noah had stayed more than half the night, and not that she had almost lost it after she made him leave. Mike wasn't pushy about asking what had changed her mind about accepting the ride, but Perris supposed he deserved some sort of explanation.

"I've been getting phone calls. Hang-up calls. It's giving me the creeps."

She wouldn't say that she hadn't actually decided to accept the ride until she'd talked to Noah. Noah who blithely assumed, like Collins apparently did, that Perris was without resources. She'd wanted to show them both that she did have friends, people who supported her. Riding with Mike had nothing to do with making Noah jealous.

"Think Collins is calling you?"

She shivered, covering her instinctive reaction by reaching to the floor of the pickup for a bottle of juice. "Probably. I don't know for sure," she said as she uncapped the bottle.

"Perris." Mike hesitated. "I could stay over a couple of nights. Be there to show whoever's bothering you that you're not alone." He hurried to add, "As a friend. Camp out on the couch or something."

She didn't know what to say. That she would be keeping her evenings open from now on in case Noah showed up? The truth, hard as it was to admit, was that a single night with Noah had driven all thoughts of any other man completely out of her head, if there had ever been leftover room in there to begin with.

She didn't want to encourage Mike. She liked him a lot, but she didn't know if she could ever tell him the truth about herself. If she couldn't face Noah, who knew all about her, she couldn't imagine facing Mike without her clothes on. Noah had, in a few hours, effectively ruined her for any other man.

Yet she might be selling Mike short too. She had a habit of doing that with men. Mike was a nice guy, easygoing and easy to work with. Maybe he would surprise her by accepting how she looked naked. She covertly observed him in the light of the truck cab, his hairy face and the thick column of his neck. She just couldn't. She couldn't even imagine parading naked in front of him.

"You're awful quiet this morning," he commented.

Perris shifted in the seat. She hadn't acknowledged his offer. "Oh, Mike, thank you," she hurried to say. "But..."

"But, no thanks? Perris, hey, is there somebody else in this picture? I mean, you never talk about anybody. I just assumed."

Why beat around the bush? There was Noah Dalton. And until Perris figured out exactly how she felt about Noah and what she wanted to come of those feelings, she couldn't move forward. With Noah, or Mike, or any other man.

"There is somebody. Uh, but I was alone when the call came, so that's why it's bugging me so bad, I guess."

"He wasn't there? Why didn't he stay with you? The guy's not married, is he?" Mike's voice was incredulous, but he kept his eyes on the road. "That doesn't seem like you, Perris, carrying on with a married man."

She almost choked on her orange juice. Noah was married to his job, maybe. Perhaps it was better to let Mike assume she was seeing a married man than to blow Noah's sterling reputation.

Which Noah himself didn't seem too concerned about last night, and she questioned whether anyone else in Wyoming would worry too much about where the young, unattached sheriff spent his nights. Still, Noah had made a point of bringing up his re-election several times. Perris would protect him, even though it bothered her that her assistant should think she was running around with a married man. She valued Mike's opinion, and his good will. She'd lose more than a few notches in his estimation by protecting Noah.

Mike seemed to accept her silence as a tacit confession. "I'm sorry, Perris," he muttered. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. It's none of my business." He took the mine exit off the highway smoothly, slowing at the bottom to make the turn under the interstate bridge.

Why didn't she just tell him? Coral Peterson already knew Noah had been coming around, and Mike talked to Coral. If they ever put two and two together, they'd come up with five, as Coral put it. It was Perris herself, her natural reserve, that held her back from telling Mike the truth. She was as uncomfortable talking about her personal life as she would be as the subject of mine gossip. Now she couldn't bring herself to clear up his misconception, and she'd only made things worse.

Noah had put her in this position. No, she had let him get her here. Oh, she didn't know anymore whose fault it was and it hardly mattered. But she had to say something.

"No need for you to apologize," she told Mike. "I went into this thing with my eyes open. I think." She tried a rueful grin now that the sun was rising and Mike could see her expression. She hoped her T-shirt collar was high enough to cover the evidence of the passion between herself and Noah. The love bite was very small, but she would be embarrassed if anyone saw it and remarked on it.

"It's tough, huh? You can't talk about it. I understand. I think it's kind of sweet that you'd protect this guy. Oh, hey. It is a guy, right?" Mike smiled back.

"Yeah." Perris wriggled miserably on the pickup seat. She wished she'd sent Noah to work with one of his bite marks on his neck instead of protecting him. Noah deserved the same discomfiture she was experiencing. She felt as if he'd branded her, claimed her, while he got off without so much as a fingernail scratch on his butt cheeks. It made her extremely uncomfortable to mislead Mike this way.

But she was saved from further prevarication when her eye caught something new on the road ahead. Across from the protester's tent city, another little town had risen overnight in the dust. But this competing town consisted of pickup trucks, horse trailers, and a few camper trailers in a neat semi-circle.

Mike slowed so they could both take a good look. The protesters milled about their tents in the early morning light to one side of the road, and to the other side a group of young people dressed in cowboy hats and jeans had taken up waving signs with pictures and various slogans on them such as *No Nukes!* They began shouting as soon as Mike's truck approached.

Mike looked at Perris. "What the hell? What's going on? Who are those people?"

Perris covered her eyes with one hand. Just when she'd thought things couldn't get any worse.

"It looks like a counter-protest," she mumbled. "That big guy in the front waving the sign with the picture of a sheep on it is my baby brother."

## Chapter Eight

"I don't believe it. Don't stop." Perris ordered Mike. "Drive through before they recognize me."

"Who? The protesters or your brother?" Mike seemed thoroughly confused.

"Either. Both. Go on, Mike!"

But it was too late. Randall McLean had already spotted his sister, and now with a grin he swung his tall, lean frame into his own pickup. As Mike let out the clutch and continued on toward the mine, Perris's younger brother followed. She was sure he would be stopped at the guard shack, but to her consternation Coral waved him on through behind them.

Randy caught up to them in the parking lot. As Perris got out of the cab of Mike's truck, her brother approached with a big smile on his face.

"Hi, sis!" Randy exclaimed, quivering with delight like an overgrown puppy. He grabbed Perris up in a hug and twirled her around. A rangy masculine version of Perris, Randy looked enough like her he couldn't have been mistaken for anyone but a close relative.

"Randy, what are you doing here? Put me down!"

Randall McLean complied with his sister's demand, but as always he was too irrepressibly hyper to worry about her grumpy greeting. He planted his hands on blue-jeaned hips. "Glad to see me, huh? Bet you've missed me."

Perris couldn't put her hands on her hips, what with her lunchbox in one hand and her juice bottle in the other. Instead she glared at her little brother. "Randy. What. Are. You. Doing here."

"It's spring break. Us McLeans stick together. I thought I'd get up here and help you out. I, uh, brought a few friends along too." Randy grinned again, straightening his gray felt Stetson on his jet black curls and gesturing to the shotgun in the back window of his pickup.

Perris preferred to pretend by bringing help he meant his friends still milling around on the opposite side of the road from Collins's group, and not munitions. "Those people out there are all from the Ag College at the University?"

"Uh-huh."

"Rancher's kids, like you?"

"Yeah. I rounded up as many as I could, but it's difficult, with lambing season and all."

Perris freed one hand by shoving her juice bottle in her jacket pocket and seized her brother by a forearm, attempting to drag him toward the guard shack so she wouldn't be late for work. In reality he could have done the dragging; she had to take two steps to every one of Randy's long-legged strides. "Why aren't you at the ranch, helping Daddy? He could use you at home, since, as you've pointed out, it's lambing season."

Randy pulled his arm away, planting his legs wide apart as he dug in the heels of his cowboy boots and faced her. "If you're so worried about Big John, why aren't you at the ranch helping out?"

Perris didn't want to get into that old argument again. Nor to recall the guilt that assailed her each time she thought of how she'd left her little brother and her father alone at the ranch to go off to college after their mother died. Their mother, Gabriella McLean, had been raised in the old Hispanic tradition. She never bought a store tortilla. She made her home and her family her life. She wouldn't have easily understood the ambition that drove her daughter away from the ranch and its traditions.



Perris said through clenched teeth, "As you know very well, the ranch is yours, Randy, as soon as you get out of college."

"It could have been yours. You're the one who said you didn't want it when you married Noah and moved into town." Randy's green eyes, so much like her own—and like their father's—glinted. "Besides, Big John said it was okay to come and help you out for a few days. I've only got a week."

Coral Peterson was watching their approach through her little sliding glass window. Mike followed the pair silently, his eyebrows still raised. Perris turned her back in frustration on her brother, but Randy reached a long arm out and opened the door of the guard shack for her. They made quite a crowd when they all finally got themselves stuffed inside the little building.

"This is my brother," Perris said tonelessly to Coral, grabbing a hard hat and yellow plastic clackers from a shelf behind the desk. "Sign your name so you can go inside the building, Randall."

Perris reached up to remove her brother's felt cowboy hat and plopped the visitor's hard hat on his dark curls.

"I don't need those things," he protested at the sight of the yellow half-circles with straps Perris held in her hand. He extended a pointed boot proudly. "These are steel-toed."

"Great, glad you came prepared," Perris muttered, putting the clackers back on the shelf and reclaiming her brother's arm. She caught, and didn't much like, the speculative gleam in Coral's eyes as the other woman openly appraised her handsome little brother. "Come on, then."

"Perris, you're treating me like a baby," Randy protested as she tugged him toward the office building.

"Sometimes I wonder if you aren't still a baby. I didn't ask for your help. I didn't tell you to come here." Perris gritted her teeth.

"No, but Big John got permission directly from Carl West. We wanted to surprise you." Randy opened the door of the aluminum-sided mine office building.

Perris stopped dead in her tracks, trying to ignore the attention they were getting from the secretaries clustered at their desks. Mike, still following them without a word, almost ran into Perris when she halted.

"You and Daddy what?"

"Big John talked to West, the mine manager, after I read all the stuff about you in the papers. Big John said if this was how I wanted to spend my spring break, it was okay with him."

"I know who West is, Randy," Perris grated out. "I can't believe he and Daddy would team up. To do something like this. Are you serious?"

"What are you so mad about, Perris? I don't understand. Mr. West seemed to think you'd be happy with the support. He said you were real upset about having to take on Collins all by yourself." Randy's boyish, open face clearly showed his surprise and confusion at his big sister's growing outrage.

"He did, huh? West thought I'd be happy that he got my whole family involved? We'll just see about that!"

Shaking with emotion at her boss's manipulation, Perris dropped her lunchbox and jacket in her office before seizing her brother's arm again. "Come on."

"Perris," Mike interjected hesitantly as they started out of the office to march back past the divider where the secretaries had their desks, "I, uh, I'm going to head out to the pit, okay?"

"Good idea. Please excuse us," she replied tonelessly. Mike hastily tried to back away in the cramped space of her office, an impossible task considering his bulk. Perris, red-faced, slid her body as best she could past Mike and hauled her brother back down the hallway toward the administration offices.

The secretaries in the front cubicles stood to gape after the good looking, young stranger being towed past them once again by the mine's environmental officer. One sprightly blond

whom Perris had never got on with, only because she reminded her so strongly of Marla Paxton, had the temerity to giggle when she caught Randy's eye. Perris shot her a glance that should have curled her painted toenails inside the expensive red stilettos she habitually wore to work. And which were such a bold announcement of her availability for after-hours companionship that even Perris had noticed.

Randy gave the attractive blond an embarrassed grin and a shrug before he was pulled bodily out of her line of sight and into the interior of Carl West's office, where Perris was at last forced to cool her heels and calm down a bit because West was on the phone.

Perris tapped her foot impatiently, arms crossed while she glared at West. The mine manager ignored her, turning in his chair so he could look out the window while he finished his leisurely conversation. At last he hung up, glancing casually at his two visitors. "Yes, Perris?" he asked in a tone that implied: *I'm a busy man, I don't appreciate being interrupted, so this better be important.*

"This," Perris said through clenched teeth, "is my brother. I found him out on the road this morning, waving a sign with a picture of a Rambouillet ewe on it."

West looked at her blankly with his pale blue Albert Einstein eyes.

"A sheep," Randy offered helpfully. "Rambouillet is the breed that Big John raises."

"Oh, yes. Your father, John McLean. Interesting man. I enjoyed talking with him, and it's a pleasure to meet his son." West steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, hiding the amused curve of his lips, totally unmoved by Perris's thinly veiled fury.

"Randy McLean," Randy supplied, extending his hand.

"Carl West. How do you do. Won't you have a seat?" West shook Randy's hand, then indicated the chairs in front of his desk where Randy obligingly settled his lanky form. Perris paced, grinding her molars, while the two men exchanged pleasantries.

"Perris, won't you sit down?" West asked.

"No, thank you, Carl," Perris grated back.

"All right." He regarded her silently for a moment. "What's the problem, then?"

"The problem is, you okayed a plan for my father and my brother and his friends to make a fool of me. I don't appreciate your deliberately going behind my back to make me a public laughingstock." Perris clenched and unclenched her hands. She didn't know whether she wanted worse to choke Carl West, or Big John McLean.

"Now, wait a minute, Perris," Randy began.

West cut in smoothly, "You said you wanted support. Your father called and offered to help, which I thought was a nice familial touch, and your brother concurred. They thought taking the spotlight off Collins, even injecting a touch of rural humor, would be helpful. I don't see the problem here, Perris."

"The problem is I still haven't got an ounce of support from this company. You're letting my family fight your battle for you, when you have perfectly good funds at your disposal to do some excellent public relations. Instead I've got a bunch of college kids out there waving signs with sheep on them. Think about it, Carl. Sheep have absolutely nothing to do with Collins's demonstration!"

Perris was shouting, and West sat back in his seat, regarding her coldly. She could almost read his thoughts: *hysterical woman*. Her temper shot up another notch toward boiling.

"Wyoming's roots are in agriculture and mining, Perris," Randy put in. "Those environmental folks are attacking a way of life they don't even understand. Suppose they succeed in shutting down the power plant. People from Wyoming to Oregon to California would be without electricity until there was maybe enough wind generation to take over. Which is going to take years. And for sure you've done wonders with increasing raptor numbers in the state. We've also got one of the lowest tax brackets in the country because of mineral extraction.

So we've all got to close ranks and stand up to outsiders who come in here trying to tell us what to do."

"That last bit came straight out of Daddy's mouth," Perris accused, pointing a finger in Randy's face. She knew Western ranchers were becoming increasingly politically savvy and conservative, but the idea of her father teamed up with mineral interests and electric power generating companies was ridiculous.

"So what?" Randy shrugged. "When Big John's right, he's right."

"He'd order you to come down here on your spring break to demonstrate, when he doesn't even believe in what I'm doing? I've had eagles nesting here that supposedly prey on his lambs!"

"Let's get one thing straight, big sister." Randy uncurled himself from the chair, standing to his full height and towering over Perris. "Big John might argue his point of view till he's blue in the face, but he can't *make* me believe anything. I came here because I thought you'd appreciate it. He might be okay with leasing some land for windmills, but Big John is eating a lot of crow among his buddies at the Woolgrowers Association just for getting in the middle of a tree hugger demonstration to help you out like this."

"What? What are you talking about, *windmills*? Since when?" Two truths out of Randy's statement hit Perris with the weight of a sledgehammer. One was that Randy had apparently convinced their father that he could graze sheep beneath wind power generators. The other was the question of what it must be costing Big John McLean in pride to take his daughter's side in a public environmental dispute.

If it were true that her father had taken steps toward the green side, there were a few things with his decision she could take issue with, such as the fact that windmills might be cleaner than coal but they were lethal to birds. But the truth was, all energy had a bigger price tag than most people knew or would care to pay full price for, and so government subsidies for fossil fuels persisted.

One more glaring truth was that a McLean always admitted when he, or she, was wrong. Breathless, Perris sank into the remaining chair in front of West's desk.

Had she become so used to fighting all her battles alone that she couldn't accept honest help when it was offered? No matter what the media might make of the sheepmen's counter-demonstration, Randy had put aside his other obligations to come to her aid. Big John had unbent so far from his own views as to come up with this wacky plan in the first place. It was Perris's turn to unbend, and she couldn't let the inordinate arrogance she'd inherited from Big John stand in the way of doing what was right.

She took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I jumped on you," she told Randy in a small voice.

"It's okay." Randy grinned, resuming his seat. "You know, I always thought you looked more like Mama. But there for a minute, I coulda swore I was facing off with Big John. You ought to call him more often, Perris; then you'd know what was going on."

"Knock it off," she muttered, shooting an embarrassed glance toward West, who couldn't have been aware of Gabriella McLean's legendary beauty or Perris's troubles communicating with her father. Although Gabriella's children had inherited her coloring and Perris had her same slim build, they both resembled big John in temperament. Perris wanted to keep the conversation on track, not have Randy maundering about how pretty she was, or what a poor excuse for a daughter she was, in front of Carl West.

"Don't think that because I'm considering my brother's offer that it lets you off the hook," she quickly warned West, who raised his eyebrows in a *Who, me?* expression. He reached into a desk drawer and brought out several large sheets of paper which he laid on top of his desk.

She eyed the mine manager with distrust, but West said mildly, "Go on. Take a look. I've had Technical Services working on them for a few days now. The computer people aren't trained in advertising, but I think they did a pretty decent job."

She eased forward until she perched on the edge of her chair. What she was looking at were computer generated layouts detailing the history and purpose of Red Bluffs Mining. Along with shots of the power plant and the dragline were two of her favorite photos: one of herself rappelling down the highwall, and a close-up of a nest of red-tailed hawk babies, beaks open as they stared fiercely into the camera.

She stared across the desk at West, unable to bring herself to speak past the lump lodged in her throat.

“Saturday’s papers,” he said. “Full page ads. Statewide. Just like you said you wanted.”

Perris wedged her hands between her body and the arms of her chair, trying to control their shaking. “You just let me go on like that. Why didn’t you tell me? You let me stand there and rant. I don’t need these kinds of mind games, Carl.”

West smiled smugly. “It’s no game. We’re dead serious about countering the charges Collins is making. And you’re welcome. Now, when is Merilee Kramer from Channel Ten coming back?”

“How did you know she’s coming back? I just found out late yesterday that I don’t have to go to Salt Lake City to meet her, that she’s coming here.” Perris felt like she was riding an emotional roller coaster, one minute down and the next minute up. She was getting everything she asked for: another chance with Noah, support from the mine, outside forces coming to her aid. But somehow none of it was turning out exactly as she’d envisioned. She wondered if some higher power had a peculiar sense of humor, or if it was only the adult thing to do, to work with the resources one was granted instead of always asking for something different and more perfect.

“You had to clear the news team’s visit with Security, and the request landed on my desk. Not much happens at Red Bluffs that I don’t become aware of, Perris,” West answered smoothly.

“Merilee will be here next Tuesday.” She pressed herself into the chair, trying to get a grip on this new reality and unable to decide yet if she were feeling defeated or elated. She’d fought alone for so long on so many fronts, she wasn’t prepared for the sudden appearance of a veritable army of knights in shining armor.

“You’ll still be here on Tuesday?” West peered toward Randy, who nodded.

“If I’m needed, sure,” Randy said.

“Good. Could get interesting.” West rubbed his palms together, showing his teeth. He looked shark-like, and he didn’t resemble the famed eccentric scientist in the least at that moment.

Randy followed Perris home that night, parking his pickup next to her little crossover SUV in the scraggly patch of grass she called her front yard. Perris was tired and out of sorts. In addition to more meetings with West and having Randy tag along behind her all day, causing mayhem among the swooning secretaries, she’d had all her regular duties to attend. She would have preferred to run a bath and put on some soft music when she got home, and not have to talk to anyone for a while.

But Randy was still hyper; he hadn’t been talked out yet by any means. Pulling his long legs out of the pickup and standing beside it, he almost quivered with excitement. The age difference between them hit Perris once more: Randy was still raring to go, while Perris dreamed of a bath and some dinner and a hard crash into bed.

“Your house is real tiny, Perris,” her brother said while she opened the front door. “But you have lots of land. Why don’t you have horses? You’ve got the room to keep them. Big John still has your mare. I could haul her into town here for you.”

“I don’t have time to ride,” Perris said wearily, “let alone feed and water her every night. She’s better off where she is.”

“So what were you going to do tonight?” Randy went on, ignoring her patiently listless tone. “Did you have plans? Want to go out and tip a few brews?”

Perris took off her jean jacket and sat beside it on the bed to remove her boots. It was a little late for her brother to be wondering if she had plans for the night, since he was already here and figuring on staying with her. But she didn't have any plans—because Noah was busy somewhere else, and he was the only one she would have liked to plan around. She should get a life, but the last thing she wanted was to go out with a good-looking young man like her brother, who attracted so much attention.

"It's your spring break," she said. "Go ahead and go out if you want. I'll give you a key and you can let yourself in whenever you want."

"And leave you here? What are you going to do all night by yourself?"

"Nothing. Vegetate." Perris pulled her socks off and massaged her feet. "Maybe I'll call Daddy and let him gloat for a while."

Randy had been pacing the floor, his cowboy boots whumping with each step. Now he stopped to regard her. "Aw, Perris. Big John wouldn't hold this over your head."

"Of course he would, and you know it." Perris paused. "But maybe some condescension from him is deserved. As you say, when he's right, he's right. I was backed into a corner, and wasn't sure what my next move was going to be. Or even if I had a next move. It was getting to the point I dreaded going to work."

Randy grinned again at this bending of his sister's attitude, removing his Stetson and placing it on the kitchen table. "Boy, I feel great!" he said. "I feel like dancing. Any place to dance around here, Perris? Anybody two-step?"

"I wouldn't know," Perris murmured. "But you can easily find out."

Randy would have continued urging her to go out with him, but just then a knock sounded at the front door. He fixed Perris with a glance. "You were trying to get rid of me!"

"No I wasn't." She frowned.

Randy started for the door, and all Perris's instincts screamed. "Stop!" she yelled, halting Randy in his tracks while she fumbled on the windowsill for the LadySmith.

It wasn't there.

What if Collins was outside her door again? What if he wanted to do a little more than talk this time? Perris scrambled off the bed, looking frantically beneath it for the revolver Noah had given her. The weapon was nowhere in sight.

The gun was gone, and Randy's shotgun was still cradled in its rack in the back window of his truck out in the yard.

Randy stood near the door, watching her, his expression one of puzzlement mixed with dismay at her obvious panic. For the first time, Perris noticed the broken window had been replaced. Everything looked normal, all traces of Collins's presence gone. Of course Randy wouldn't understand her terror. She said, "Don't open the door. Ask who it is first."

Randy didn't need to ask. A brown Stetson was suddenly framed in the newly replaced window, and slowly Noah's hulking outline was fully revealed. He wore his uniform and his badge, apparently having come straight from work. Perris knew from his expression he could see her kneeling behind the bed as clearly as she saw him standing out on the porch.

Randy said, surprised and smiling, "Well, sis, look at that. It's Noah. I didn't know you two were seeing each other again." He opened the door.

The ex-brothers-in-law exchanged handshakes and slaps to one another's broad backs. Randy had always been one of Noah's favorite people, staying over in town with Noah and Perris when he missed the bus home to the ranch because of sports or other activities after school. Perris and Noah had been in the stands for Randy's football games, and traveled to Cheyenne for the state championships where Randy made the winning touchdown as a sophomore. But by his junior year, Perris had been too busy with doctors and therapy to attend any of Randy's games. When he was a senior, she'd already been living in Utah and attending school herself. She didn't know if Noah had continued to go to Randy's games alone until her

brother graduated high school, and to allow Randy to stay at the house she and Noah had once shared. But she now suspected that had indeed been the case.

Noah looked Randy over. "I didn't think it was possible for you to grow any taller, boy, but you sure have. You match Big John in height now. Damn, it's good to see you."

"It's good to see you again, Noah," Randy said. "I came up to spend spring break with Perris, and to do a little demonstrating."

"Yeah, I heard a rumor about a new ruckus out there." Noah grinned conspiratorially at Randy while Perris watched. Suddenly she wondered if there wasn't something else going on here that she was in the dark about. "So you know what Perri is up against with Collins and that bunch," Noah continued.

Randy shot Perris a glance. She stood up hastily from where she crouched behind the bed, brushing at the knees of her jeans. "I thought I knew all about it," Randy said thoughtfully. "Now I'm not so sure. What's up, sis? Why are you hiding there?"

"I wasn't hiding. I was looking for something. The gun Noah gave me is gone." Perris answered Randy while looking at Noah, waiting for her ex-husband's predictably explosive reaction to her carelessness.

Noah didn't disappoint. His brows lowered fiercely and he demanded, "Gone?" at the same instant Randy asked, "Gun?"

Noah frowned. "She hasn't told you that Collins broke her window after threatening her?"

Randy shook his head, then looked accusingly at Perris. "And you were going to let me go out tonight and leave you here alone. What's wrong with you, Perris?"

She saw instantly that her ex-husband and her brother were going to gang up on her to keep her safe. She knew she should be grateful, but it still galled her that these two big, strong men had to protect poor little ol' her.

She confronted Noah. "I thought you had a dinner at the Senior Citizens. Those folks eat pretty early, don't they? Shouldn't you be going?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll make it, even if I'm late. When did you last see the revolver?" Noah stood with his big hands on his hips, all bristly cop with none of the lover of the night before in evidence.

"Is this an official report, or will I have to go through it again when one of your deputies shows up?" Perris's stance mirrored Noah's as she balled her fists at her sides.

Randy's head swung back and forth as he tried to figure out what was being left unsaid between his sister and his ex-brother-in-law. They were mad at each other, that much was clear, but why? Noah sounded like he only wanted to protect Perris, and Perris was holding him at arm's length. They both had the fur on their necks raised, tension coiled heavily in the air between them.

Realization of what was really going on between the two of them suddenly slapped Randy in the face. He wondered what they might be saying to each other if he wasn't there. Noah looked like he wanted to grab Perris up and fold her into his arms to keep her safe, and Perris looked as if she was holding back from flinging herself into Noah's arms by covering her fear with anger.

Noah had warned Randy on the phone that she was fighting him tooth and nail. As a consequence Big John had hatched the plan for Randy to spend spring break with his sister, and Randy had gone along with the scheme once he understood how worried Noah was for Perris. The sheep placards had been all Randy's idea, and he was pretty proud of them actually. Perris would never have agreed to anything amusing messing up the seriousness of the demonstration against her. She was prickly as a pear cactus. Noah had been right to trick her into getting the help she needed. It was plain she would accept no outward help from her ex-husband.

The grin he wasn't aware he wore grew wider yet. Perris and Noah were fighting just like an old married couple. All of a sudden Randy began to hope that two of his favorite people in the world might be able to work out their differences and get back together.

“What the hell are you smirking at?” Perris suddenly flung the challenge at Randy from across the room.

“Nothing.” Randy hastily tried to wipe the evidence of his thoughts from his face. Perris was apparently in as much trouble as Noah thought, and Randy didn’t want her to think he was taking it lightly by grinning like a fool at her. “Why don’t you answer Noah’s question? He just wants to help.”

“Well, isn’t it peachy that you can walk right in here and, within five seconds, tell me what Noah wants?” Perris found herself shaking, the fear of the night before back and magnified now. She knew it was wrong to lash out at Randy, wrong even to take her anger out on Noah. But she felt cornered again, violated that someone could walk into her house and waltz back out again with the LadySmith, the only protection she could really count on.

“You didn’t take it to work again this morning.” Noah’s voice vibrated with pent-up emotion. He was mad at her. He probably had a right to be mad. He’d warned her, and as usual she didn’t listen.

Perris shook her head mutely. She felt safe at work. It was only here, at home, with her full-grown brother and the county sheriff in attendance, that she felt blind panic.

Noah looked around, assessing his surroundings. “The glass company was here to fix the window today. Maybe the landlord was around as well.” He fixed Perris with a hard gaze again. “Anybody else that you know of?”

Again she shook her head.

“Okay. I’ll get the report filed, have someone check with the neighbors to see if they noticed anything out of the ordinary.” His tone suggested he doubted it. “You’ll stay with her tonight?” he asked Randy.

Perris felt dismissed, a burden that Noah effortlessly shifted onto someone else’s shoulders. He didn’t ask to stay again and ease her fear, and she wouldn’t have let him in any case. It seemed, no matter what Noah did, she ended up mad at him. She really should do something about her temper. And she would, just as soon as Noah did something about his frickin’ hair trigger control response.

“Sure. I’ll stay.” Randy shrugged. “No problem.”

“Great.” Noah relaxed enough to smile. “I’m glad you’re here, Randy. Somebody needs to look after Perri.”

All her resolve to control her temper vanished with that last remark. She stomped into the bathroom, slammed the door, and started running water in the tub. Let Noah see himself out. Or else let Randy show their erstwhile guest to the door. Either way, she was through with Noah Dalton for the night. And he was apparently through with her. He was leaving. She didn’t have any more room for guests, so he wouldn’t be coming back now that Randy was here to babysit her.

“Perri?” Noah pounded on the bathroom door, yelling to be heard over the sound of running water.

Perris jumped, then recovered herself enough to shout back “What!” She refused to turn off the taps to accommodate whatever Noah thought he had to say.

“What are you going to do tonight?”

As if it was any of his business. “Clean the oven,” she yelled. “It’s got steak spatters all over it!”

Noah hesitated. “Good idea,” he said finally. “I’ll call you later.”

Perris held her temper by sheer force of will, and bit back any cutting remark she didn’t mean and would be sorry for later, such as *Don’t bother*. She said nothing, waiting silently and praying for some patience with the guys in her life while the tub filled. Noah added nothing more either. When she turned off the taps, she heard the front door close and assumed he had finally left.

So much for Noah's concern for her, she thought sourly. He couldn't wait to find somebody else to watch over her. So he could get away.

## Chapter Nine

Perris came out of the bathroom wrapped in a terrycloth robe and began searching through her clothes for something to wear. Her eyes lit on her running shorts, and in one split second, she decided a long run might be exactly what she needed.

When she emerged from the bathroom again in a sweatshirt and the clingy shorts, Randy caught on to her plan. "Noah said for us to stick around the house," he reminded.

Perris snapped a sweatband around her forehead, bending to pull on ankle socks and running shoes. "What the big, bad sheriff said was for us to stick together, little brother. I'm feeling trapped in my own house, and I don't like it." Perris straightened, facing Randy. "You coming?"

Randy looked down at his jeans and cowboy boots, then back at Perris. The challenge in her stance was unmistakable. It was a good thing she didn't know that his visit had been prearranged with Noah. Maybe she could run off some of her anger before she found out and really blew up. "Wait right there," he said.

He crossed the room in a few long strides and went out to his pickup. When he returned, he tossed a battered nylon duffel bag on her bed, unzipped it, and rummaged inside. He held up a pair of cross-trainer athletic shoes triumphantly. "You're on, if you can find me some shorts."

While Perris took scissors to the legs of an old pair of sweatpants, Randy removed himself to the bathroom to change, singing "I can't dance" in a fair imitation of Phil Collins.

She handed in the newly shortened sweatpants to him, and Randy soon emerged in them and a sleeveless gold and brown University of Wyoming sweatshirt.

"I'm sorry about ruining your evening," she said. Randy had made his point with his choice of songs. She felt guilty that she was keeping her hunk of a brother from dancing the night away with the single women of Hawk Point. He had grown up, and filled out. He was still lean, but muscle roped his arms and long legs, and corded the column of his neck. His dark hair brushed his sweatshirt collar in back, and fell in thick black waves over his forehead and ears. He would have been a sensation on the dance floor. It was his bad luck he'd arrived just in time to coddle his big sister instead.

"No problem." Randy waved her apology away. "There's other bars and other nights. And other women." He grinned his heart-stopping grin. He really was handsome; if they had gone out she would have had to pull the women off him. "Tonight is all yours. Are you ready?"

"Let's go." She led the way outdoors, where she started warm-up exercises to stretch tense muscles. He joined her after stopping to lock up his truck and his shotgun, and then they took off.

At first Perris held a pretty easy pace, and Randy had no trouble keeping up a conversation on what he'd been doing at school lately. He talked about his friends and his professors, and once in a while dropped a woman's name, but he apparently had nobody special at the moment. The thud of her feet on the dirt road soothed Perris as they matched strides, and she found herself truly glad for Randy's company and his easy chatter that took her mind off her own problems.

The land and civilization fell away behind their pounding feet, and as they began to climb the foothills of Juniper Mountain, Randy's attempts at conversation trailed off. They ran side by side up the trail, puffing with exertion as the grade steepened. Perris had never made it more than halfway up the first of its foothills without being forced to slow to a walk, but Randy pushed on and she kept pace, the muscles in her calves and thighs protesting.

Randy started to pull away from her, and Perris gave it all she had, but three-quarters of the way up the rise of the foothill she gave in. She bent at the waist, hands on her throbbing thighs, trying to catch her breath while Randy struggled on. When she finally straightened, it was to see



her brother conquering the ascent. He reached the top of the foothill and raised his hands, claspings them over his head triumphantly, while he danced a winner's jig.

"Beat you," he called, and then cupped his hands to yell to the dwellings and horse corrals spread out below them, "Perris McLean Dalton is a wimp!"

The sun was setting. Perris stood in the shadow of the mountain while her brother swayed in an orange glow, punching the air and shouting like a little kid.

"I am not a wimp!" she yelled, but couldn't help smiling in response to his teasing.

"Are too! Come on up." Randy stood with his feet apart and his hands on his hips.

"No. You come down." Perris waited a moment, but the conquering hero held his position. "Okay, then," she called, a note of warning in her voice. "I'm going to beat you home!"

She tossed the last words over her shoulder and took off running downhill. She could hear Randy thundering behind her, yelling, "That's not fair. You cheat, Perris! You can't beat me unless you cheat."

It was true she had a head start, but Randy's long legs soon began closing the gap between them. Perris ran flat-out, not letting Randy win, as though outrunning her brother meant she could also outrun all her problems. She forced herself to keep going despite the burn in her muscles, the ache in her lungs. She didn't slow until they reached her yard, where they collapsed side by side on grass just starting to green.

Their breaths came in huge, heaving gasps, and Perris thought her heart would give out from pumping so hard. But at last her racing pulse began to slow and her breathing to regulate a little.

"I won," Randy said, still panting.

"Did not," Perris gasped out.

"Did too." Randy started laughing at their childish rivalry in between gulps of air.

"Stop. It hurts." But she laughed as hard as he did, holding her sides. It hurt, but it felt good too, to let go and laugh with her little brother. The exercise, the camaraderie, and the laughter were balm to her troubled soul. It was easy to just be with Randy, who asked nothing of her except sisterly companionship.

Noah had set her up tonight, asking Randy to guard her. But if she was forced to accept a jailer, she'd gladly take Randy.

He was the first to recover, gaining his feet and holding out a hand to help her up. She took the proffered hand and rose, brushing dirt and grass from her clothes and hair.

"I'm starving," Randy said.

"Me too." Perris thought of the frozen dinners in the fridge. Randy could probably devour three or four and still be hungry. "Want to go into town?"

"Dancing?" Randy asked hopefully.

Perris unlocked the door, and Randy reached around to hold it open for her. "I was thinking of getting something to eat."

"But?" He looked at her with green eyes that mirrored her own.

"But we'll go dancing if you insist." She didn't see Randy very often. She could sleep after he was gone.

"Great. We'll have a good time, you'll see." Randy rubbed his hands together in anticipation, already heading for a shower.

Perris refused to think of how tired she was now, after the run and staying up half the night before with Noah. And with the phone calls. But she never could refuse her baby brother anything, and the gleam of happiness in Randy's eyes was reward enough.

"I have to be back early," she called after him. "Some of us McLeans work for a living, you know."

"Low blow, Perris." Randy stuck his head out the bathroom door, his eyes glinting with mischief. "For that remark, I'll make sure we stay until we get thrown out."

"I can't close the bars! I have to be up early." But her brother had already retreated into the bathroom and closed the door. Perris heard the water running and doubted if he heard her.

While she waited her turn for a quick shower, she did the few dishes from the night before and set the broiler pan to soak in the sink. Then she decided she'd better look through her clothes for something to wear. It had been a good long while since Perris Dalton had gone dancing.

At last they were ready, Randy freshly shaved and dressed in jeans and a patterned Western snap shirt. Perris wore a denim skirt, a turtleneck to hide the imprint of Noah's teeth on her collarbone, boots and a leather vest.

"Handsome date I've had in a long time," she commented as Randy held out his arm.

He walked her out to his pickup, unlocked the door, and helped her inside. He looked quietly thoughtful. As they drove away, he seemed to take his courage in hand to say, "Big John thinks you don't date at all. Why don't you go out more, Perris? You're a pretty lady, talented and smart. You could have any man you set eyes on."

Perris couldn't recall ever talking about her surgery with her brother or her father, beyond the surface comments about how she was feeling and how her recovery was going. Neither of the big, strong men who constituted her family had ever asked how she felt about losing a breast in a fight to save her life. Neither had ever offered to share how they felt about having such a frightening thing happen to their daughter and sister.

Ranchers didn't dwell much on feelings. They were action oriented, take-charge-and-get-the-job-done type of men. If they got hurt, they got over it or dealt with the pain somehow. When their women got hurt, they became silent and ill at ease. They depended on their women like they depended on their horses and four-wheelers. It wasn't that they had no empathy for women's problems. They just seemed unable to decide how to handle the situation, so they ignored it and hoped it would get better without a whole lot of fussing.

Randy was a cross between the old and the new. More enlightened about the female viewpoint, he would ask how Perris felt about things. The problem was, sometimes he didn't seem to know what to do with her answers. He tried to be sympathetic, but the strong, silent type was too deeply ingrained in his psyche for him to be much of a confidante.

It was at times like these that Perris especially missed their mother. She could have talked to Gabriella McLean about her feelings, and the Mexican beauty who had married Big John McLean would have tried her best to be understanding, even if she could never have been completely in sync with her modern daughter.

When Perris let the silence stretch, Randy reached over and clasped her hand. "C'mon, talk to me," he urged. "You gotta let it out sometime, Perris."

But she could not tell her adored little brother that she and Noah had broken up because Noah had problems in bed. No one would ever know that painful fact except Perris and Noah himself. No matter how things worked out—or didn't—between her and Noah, her ex-husband would remain a hero in her brother's eyes. She would see to that.

"I haven't been looking for a man," she said after an extended pause. "I've been too busy, with school and then with my job. Relationships just complicate things."

"Are you saying there's been no one since Noah? What's it been, four years?"

"Five," she corrected automatically. "But who's counting?"

"You are, obviously." They'd reached the turn-off into Hawk Point and traffic was heavier in town. Randy took his eyes from his driving to glance briefly at her. "You're still in love with him, aren't you?"

"Randy, don't go there," she warned. Wasn't it just like a man to cut right to the heart of the matter without any preliminaries. Men saw everything in black and white. *Here's the problem. There's the solution.*

"I'm not blind. Or stupid. I saw the way you were looking at him. The same way he looks at you. You two never could keep your hands off each other. Are you sharing a bed with him again?"

"Randy!"

"Well, are you?"

Perris bit her lip. Her hands twisted in her lap. She couldn't meet Randy's eyes.

"You are," he said in a tone of wonderment. After a pause, he added, "So why are you still living alone?"

"You're not my best girlfriend, little brother. You ask too many personal questions." Perris tried to fix her brother with a stern glance, but Randy blithely ignored her, waiting for an answer. "All *right*," she said at last. "There's a lot going on that you don't know about. We haven't resolved what broke us up in the first place, and now Noah is facing a campaign for re-election. As long as the protest is going on out at the mine, he can't risk being seen as publicly taking my side. Believe it or not, there are local environmental people who might support Collins."

"I do find that hard to believe," Randy commented. "Hawk Point is a mining town. Its roots in the coal industry go back to the steam engine." He glanced sideways at her. "We learned that in one of my Wyoming history classes."

"My point exactly," Perris said. "A lot of the locals don't know the history of this area. Many people who live here now are non-native. They don't really care that this was once a booming coal town and we're now down to the two mines that support the power plant. We're getting real urban sprawl. A lot of the new people work in oil and gas, and don't know jack about steam power generation." She indicated the new housing developments crawling up the hillsides inside the city limits. "People's opinions are formed more from what they read or see on television than from talking over the fence with the neighbors. I've seen yards Xeriscaped to save water, and children learn about recycling in school."

"I would have thought you'd be pleased about those things." Randy looked puzzled.

"I am. Don't get me wrong. I believe very much in the 'reduce, re-use, recycle' effort. I believe we all have to do our part to save what's left of a clean and natural environment." Perris glanced at Randy. "It's my job and it's my lifestyle. Collins is correct in warning people about willy-nilly dismantling of environmental protection laws. But I also believe that we can't stop progress, and despite the consequences, until there's a better answer, we're stuck with carbon. No matter what they might say, people aren't about to sit in the dark at night without their computers."

"Politics and modern life. The global village spreads its tentacles to Wyoming. Sociology 101." Randy grinned, pulling into the parking lot of a Chinese-American restaurant. "Not to change the subject, but how's the food here?"

"From what I hear, pretty good and lots of it. It's been years since I ate here, though. The last time was with N—" She stopped herself before she brought up her ex-husband's name again.

"Well, we'll try it. And then we'll go dancing." Randy opened the door on his side of the pickup and Perris did the same, not waiting for her brother to do the gentlemanly thing and come around to let her out.

"Lock it," Randy warned when he saw her already alighting.

Perris glanced over her shoulder at the double barreled shotgun in the window of her brother's truck. Her father had always carried a gun, and now her brother did. Was it only tradition, or had Randy known how much trouble she was in before he got here?

But he didn't seem too worried about their safety at the moment. He was still insisting they go out tonight. As she shut and locked the door, she called across the hood, "You never give up, do you?"

Randy grinned, coming around the front bumper to take her arm. "About the dancing? We're going dancing. McLeans don't know the meaning of the words give up. Right, big sister?"

Perris looked at her brother. From the expression on his face, his words might have many other meanings. He might be asking her not to give up on Noah. But instead of agreeing outright, she let the comment pass. Inside the restaurant, which looked as if it hadn't been redecorated since the Sixties, a waitress seated them and took their order, flirting hard with Randy. But Perris had heard right about the food: by the time they'd finished eating, empty bowls and plates were stacked on the table, and Randy leaned back with a satisfied groan. The young waitress leaned solicitously over him to remove the remains of his meal, and Perris saw her brother's eyes appraising the round contours of the girl's ass.

"Still want to go dancing with me?" Perris asked, watching Randy adjust the silver belt buckle cutting into his full stomach as the waitress walked away.

"Just give me a minute to let it all settle," Randy said. He reached for his fortune cookie, crumbling the pieces into a small white dish. He read the message, then tossed the strip of paper aside, opting to eat the pieces of the cookie.

"The bottomless pit," Perris said with a smile. "What did your fortune say?"

"What they always say, something like *Fame and fortune await you.*" Randy shrugged.

"You don't want fame and fortune?" Perris teased.

"I'll take the fortune part, if I earn it," Randy said. "I want to live on the ranch; I have some plans for it. I probably won't get rich, and sure as hell not famous. But I'll be happy, and that's what matters."

"I'm glad to hear you want the ranch, Randy. I think it would kill Big John to know neither of us planned to eventually take it over. If it was left to me, I'd probably turn it over to the Wildlife Refuge or the Nature Conservancy and then wouldn't Daddy have a fit?" Perris stood, ready to leave. She seized the bill before her brother, the struggling college student, could lay hands on it.

But Randy wasn't ready to let the subject drop. As they got back in the truck, he picked up the reins of the conversation.

"You know what would really make Big John happy?" Randy speared her with a green gaze.

Perris hesitated, fingering the unopened fortune cookie she'd brought with her from the restaurant. "What?" she finally asked.

"Grandkids. He was really upset and disappointed when you divorced Noah. He was looking forward to some little McLeans."

"Yeah, well, any kids of Noah's would have been Daltons. Not McLeans," Perris said defensively. "Anyway, I can't live my life to please Daddy."

"Don't tell me you're going to leave the grandkids part up to me, too, Perris. I already took the ranch. Don't you want any kids?"

"I don't think about it. I don't have time. Anyway, having a husband before kids would be nice," Perris said. The thought had been niggling under the surface that she and Noah had made love without protection, and now the enormity of what they'd risked struck her. As soon as she got home, she'd check the calendar to see if she'd been safe. If not...well, she didn't know what she'd do then. Worry a lot, she guessed. She went on the attack to cover her sudden nervousness. "Besides, you don't seem to have any trouble with the opposite sex. Every woman we've encountered since you got here has practically torn her clothes off and thrown herself at your feet. All you'd have to do is pick one."

"I'm not ready to settle down yet, Perris. Big John was, what, in his forties when I was born? That makes him almost seventy. I think he'd like some grandchildren while he's still young enough to enjoy them. Can't you and Noah start working things out?"

"Dammit, Randy!" Perris brushed at her lap, crumbs from the brittle cookie she'd clenched so tightly she'd broken it falling to the floor of the pickup. "Can you please let the subject of Noah drop for a little while? I thought we were supposed to be having fun."

“Okay, okay,” Randy conceded. “Don’t get your chaps crossed.” After a period of tense silence, he said, “Well, this looks like the place.”

A flashing sign outside a barn-like structure of varnished logs advertised Western Dance Lessons. “You’ll have lots of company here, so you won’t feel like the only one with two left feet,” Randy said with a snicker as he pulled up to the hitching rail running the length of the building. He was referring to the fact that Perris, in her younger days, would rather ride horses than dance and had never really learned how. The parking lot was full of pickup trucks, some with guns in racks showing through the back window just like Randy’s, and one or two with big dogs in the back waiting patiently for their owners’ return. They were in Wyoming, all right, Perris thought.

She sat with suddenly cold feet while her brother came around and opened the door for her. “Come on,” Randy urged, tugging at her arm. As she stepped from the cab of the pickup, a white slip of paper fluttered to the ground. Randy bent to pick it up.

“*All your dreams will come true*,” he read aloud. “See that, Perris? You don’t have anything to worry about.” He thrust the fortune back into her hands.

“Yeah, sure,” Perris grumbled, grabbing the slip of paper out of his hand and stuffing it in her pocket.

But she couldn’t resist her brother’s infectious enthusiasm as he dragged her across the boardwalk behind the hitching rail and into the building. After a moment of letting their eyes adjust, Randy led her hurriedly toward a tiny table, at the edge of a dance floor where lessons were already in progress. Randy held himself in check long enough to order them both a drink, and then he was pulling her out onto the dance floor.

Country-western music blared from speakers set in the wall, and everyone except Perris seemed to be having a grand time. There were several older couples in Western dress who could show the young people a thing or two as they pivoted around the floor, the ladies’ cancan’s whirling and their partners’ boots stomping in a complicated dance sequence that Perris just couldn’t seem to follow no matter how she concentrated.

When the music ended Randy’s boot tips no longer shined, she’d stepped on them so many times. The crowd had gotten larger, and they had to shove their way back to their table.

“I can’t do this,” Perris moaned, embarrassed. “Ask somebody who knows what they’re doing.”

“You just need to loosen up.” Randy handed her the drink he’d ordered for her. “Relax.”

“I feel like everybody’s looking at me while I make a fool of myself.” Perris sipped obediently, making a face as the fiery liquid burned her throat. Leave it to Randy to order her what tasted like a straight whiskey.

“There’s lots out there who dance worse than you,” Randy assured her. “Everybody’s here just to have a good time.”

“Ask somebody else then. I mean it, Randy. Let me sit here and watch.” She hadn’t missed the glances a couple of the younger women had been casting her brother’s way. If Randy had to keep her in sight all night, she didn’t want to cramp his style by not letting anyone else even dance with him.

The music started up again. Randy hesitated, said, “You sure?”

“Go on.” Perris indicated one of the interested young women with a tilt of her head. “Ask her,” she said. “I bet she can dance.”

Randy said slowly, “Okay. But don’t go anywhere. I’ll be back.”

He unfolded his long legs and stood up. Perris watched him approach the young woman with the blond curls. She smiled up into Randy’s face as he talked, and when he extended his hand she took it. At last, with a real partner, Randy could cut loose and show his stuff. They made a cute couple, Perris thought as the girl followed Randy’s lead smoothly. Even in the dips and turns Perris didn’t once see her step on his toes.

The music segued into a new song without pause, and the girl clutched possessively at Randy's shirt sleeve. He seemed to forget all about his promise to return to Perris as the young woman cuddled up close to his body and they began a slow dance. Perris didn't really mind Randy not returning. Although she found her eyelids fluttering sleepily when the music wasn't so loud it was reverberating in her chest, she'd rather sit alone and watch than make an utter moron of herself while also monopolizing her brother's whole evening.

Just as she was thinking this, a man materialized at her elbow. He was middle-aged, dressed in jeans and boots, his gray-shot hair creased where his cowboy hat usually rested. Attractive for his age, he didn't have a paunch and carried himself well. "Care to dance?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't think so, thanks. I'm not very good," Perris said, shaking her head.

"Come on. Anyone can slow dance, even me," the man insisted. He held out a callused hand, smiling gently at her.

To her surprise, Perris found herself placing her hand in his. As she rose, she wondered what she thought she was doing. But inside she knew. She just wanted a man's arms around her, bodies swaying to the music, safe in the midst of their anonymity and the crowd of people. Someone she didn't have to explain herself to, apologize to, feel her lack with. If she couldn't have Noah and a whole relationship with him, for tonight she'd take this unthreatening substitute and be grateful for it.

The stranger held her as if she were made of spun glass, his hand warm on hers but his body removed that distance of a few inches that indicated he wouldn't intrude unless she indicated she wanted him to. She enjoyed dancing with him, an old-fashioned cowboy gentleman, and when it was over he led her back to her table and saw her seated before releasing her hand.

But the middle aged man's kind gesture toward the wallflower had an unexpected result: all of a sudden, Perris had single men lined up at her table for every slow dance. To Randy's great amusement, they began cutting in on each other to dance with her.

"The belle of the ball," Randy teased as he glided by with his new friend.

Perris pulled a face at her brother over the shoulder of her latest partner. She felt a little like fresh meat on the rack. These men who flocked to the state to work the oilfields and road construction were ravenous for female company, and she happened to be available. She supposed they haunted the free dance lessons just like they haunted the local bars and even the grocery stores, looking for female companionship.

But she also felt a teeny bit flattered by the unexpected responsiveness. There were women who sat out many more dances than Perris did, and it made her feel attractive and desirable to suddenly be the object of so much male attention .

So she danced until her feet ached, trying to enjoy her popularity while it lasted. The problem was, she found herself comparing each partner to Noah. This one had squinty, close-set eyes. That one had a crooked tooth that snagged his lip when he smiled. Another's belly was a little too jiggly, hanging over his belt and brushing annoyingly against her as they danced. They brayed laughter, or spoke too quietly. Their palms were sweaty, or their legs too short and bowed or knock-kneed. They might all be men, but none of them was the right man. The man she wanted had straight, white teeth, strong arms, a wide chest that tapered to slim hips and long, powerful legs. When that man spoke, she responded. When he held her, she melted.

Damn, but she couldn't escape the ghost of Noah Dalton for even one evening. He didn't even have to be near to inhabit her thoughts. Noah distracted her. The thought of Noah caused her body to tingle and pull prudishly away from the stranger who presently held her: an attractive sheet metal worker from Idaho who, from another woman, might have warranted a second or even third glance. But the dark-haired man with the nice smile might as well have been made of smoke for all the interest he elicited in Perris, and she began to notice that very few of the initially ardent men asked her to dance more than once.

But thoughts of Noah and almost every other coherent thought fled when someone else cut in and she found herself in the arms of Benjamin Collins. As she looked into his hooded eyes, a scared rabbit staring into the eyes of the viper, she wished she had paid her previous dance partner more attention so he would have resisted yielding her up so easily.

Her legs felt wooden. Her movements were jerky, spasmodic, and Collins almost had to lug her around the floor. She swallowed convulsively, tugging at her hand held in his but unable to extricate herself from his rough clutch.

“How did you find me here? You—you’re following me,” she stuttered.

“Coincidence,” Collins insisted, his eyes drinking in her fear, enjoying his power. His stocky body moved unevenly, making it impossible to follow. Perris stepped on his toe, and he frowned. His grip on her fingers tightened until she felt real pain. “I want to talk to you.”

Perris looked around wildly. Where was Randy? She couldn’t see her brother in the crowd, could see no way away from Collins. No way out. “My table’s over there.” She indicated the spot with a tilt of her head, her slim fingers still gripped by Collins’s so she couldn’t point the way.

“Alone,” he said, endowing the word with layers of meaning Perris didn’t want to acknowledge.

“My brother’s here.” Perris grasped at straws.

At last Collins smiled, but it wasn’t a friendly expression. “So that’s who he is,” he murmured. “I thought maybe you enjoyed a different one every night.”

“How dare you.” Finally rage replaced the juddering fear she’d been experiencing, and Perris tried once more to jerk her hand from his sausage-like fingers. Again the attempt was unsuccessful. “You’ve been spying on me, calling me on the phone, entering my house when I’m not home and stealing from me. I want you to stop harassing me, Mr. Collins.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Collins stared straight at her, the consummate liar who thought looking her in the eye would make his denial look more truthful. A false sincerity settled over his features like a mask. “I’ve done none of those things. I just dropped in here tonight, saw you dancing, and thought I’d take the opportunity to get to know you better.”

“I don’t want to know you at all.” The ludicrousness of continuing to dance with a madman struck Perris. She tried to stop, planting her feet firmly, but Collins tightened his grip once again until the joints in her fingers cracked.

“Shall we sit?” Another mask descended over his face, this one of a polite smile. “I’d like to buy you a drink and talk...about the television documentary we’re going to do together on Tuesday.”

Perris stood stock still. Her fingers throbbed, warning her that she must be careful around Benjamin Collins. He enjoyed causing pain, and she knew if he ever caught her alone she would be in dire trouble. Still, she couldn’t stop the words that escaped her in a strangled whisper: “You’re crazy.”

“Am I?”

Perris watched his lips move, thick lips that might have looked sensuous on a sane man but only served now to issue words underlain with warnings of peril.

“I prefer to think of myself as driven. Not crazy,” Collins continued. His eyes bored into hers. “The environmental protection laws are in danger of being gutted. You know that from what recently happened with the wolves getting de-listed and shot while still collared for research. I have a mission to protect the earth and its creatures. You should be assisting me. Instead, you’re putting obstacles in my way. And, you see, we can’t have that, Perris.”

The dance ended. Collins stood for a moment, weaving in place. His eyes had gone dreamy, unfocused. His thumb moved to caress the inside of her wrist. The way her name sounded on his lips almost made her gag. Then he seemed to shake himself, coming back from whatever bizarre mental land he thought he shared with her. His gaze zeroed in on her face.

The way he drifted in and out of reality frightened her. She shook so much, her teeth chattered and she couldn't form a coherent thought to assure him how close their philosophies really were. She doubted he'd listen anyway. He was too wrapped up in the idea that she opposed him. Around them couples abandoned the dance floor, while she stood entrapped by the iron bracelet of Benjamin Collins's fingers around her wrist.

When a hand descended on her shoulder, Perris skittered away. But the tether of Collins's grip reeled her back in, and she saw it was only Randy who had touched her shoulder.

"You all right?" Randy's concerned eyes searched her face before settling on her wrist, where Collins still held her so tight he cut off the circulation to her hand. Randy's eyes hardened, raising like twin green lasers to Collins's face.

"The lady and I were just having a little discussion," Collins said mildly. He shook Perris's limp wrist, and her hand flopped like a dead fish.

"Let go of my sister, or you and I might have a little *discussion*." Randy dropped a big hand on Collins's shoulder, leaning in from his greater height to emphasize his words. All around them, people stopped in their tracks to watch, caught by the tension in the lines of Randy's taut body and the defiance growing on Collins's face.

Collins stuck his nose up near Randy's. "Why don't you stay out of things that don't concern you, cowboy?"

It was the wrong thing to say in the wrong tone in a country-Western bar, surrounded as he was by men in Stetsons and Levi's. An angry buzz rose around them. Several of the men stepped in front of their womenfolk, ready to come to Randy's aid against the obvious outsider dressed in olive green cargo pants and fleece jacket. Even Collins seemed to realize he'd made a mistake, withdrawing his belligerent face a few inches. But he didn't let go of Perris's wrist. The muscles of her arm started to ache from the constant effort of trying to pull away.

A hulking bruiser of a bearded man elbowed his way through the crowd, stepping between Randy and Collins. Perris gaped in astonishment at Mike Eversoll, her assistant from the mine. The crowd moved back a little, and Perris had the frantic thought that she was on the wrong side. She had been pulled over next to Collins and not near Randy. McLeans always stood together! Once again she yanked at her captive hand.

"Take it outside, gents," Mike said. "We don't want no trouble in here."

"No trouble," Collins hurried to agree. The hand clasping Perris's wrist started to sweat as he stared at the erstwhile bar bouncer.

Randy said quietly, "There won't be any trouble if this jerk lets Perris go."

Mike turned his tightly T-shirted bulk toward Collins, fixing him with a jaundiced eye that warned the environmentalist to stop messing around. Collins's fingers loosened slightly, and Perris suddenly jerked her sore hand free. She stepped quickly toward Randy, whose comforting arm came around her shoulders. Perris leaned into her brother.

"Okay, it's all over. Break it up now," Mike said, waving his thick arms and dissolving the collective tension. The crowd began to drift away, several of the men muttering and casting dark glances over their shoulders at Collins.

"You aren't a real popular fella here tonight," Mike said conversationally to Collins. "Beat it before one of these boys takes it into his head to wait outside and kick the living shit out of you."

Collins sneered at the retreating backs of the crowd, but prudently decided to take Mike's advice. As he passed Perris he said, "There's still four days left before Tuesday for me to convince you. Think about that, Ms. Dalton."

Randy, Perris, and Mike stood, watching Collins exit the bar. "I sure woulda liked to pound on that guy," Mike said wistfully.

"Me too," Randy said thoughtfully from Perris's opposite side.

Perris still rubbed at her reddened wrist as she turned toward her assistant. "What are you doing here?" she demanded as the fear cleared away and she began to assess the night's glaring



coincidences. She felt strongly that Mike's presence was no fluke. At this point Perris wouldn't have been surprised if Coral Peterson roared up on her Harley to lend support, and Noah to arrive with lights flashing and siren blaring.

"I work here," Mike said easily. "Usually just weekends, but the other bouncer called in sick tonight. I...uh, I gave the number here to the sheriff, in case you needed me and if he needed to find me after hours. I hope you don't mind, Perris."

"What?" Perris sputtered. "What are you saying, you gave this bar's number to Noah. What for?"

"Calm down," Randy said, trying to turn her by the shoulders toward their table.

"Wait a minute, dammit." Perris was fuming, feeling she was being do-se-doe'd by these two to a tune she couldn't follow. She looked around the bar suspiciously, expecting to see her tawny haired ex-husband lurking somewhere in the shadows. She strongly suspected Noah Dalton's fingerprints were all over this timely deliverance from Benjamin Collins, even though Noah was nowhere physically in evidence. Perris knew him too well. The whole rescue effort tonight bore the finessing touch of the man she just happened to once be married to. "What the hell is going on here?"

Randy wouldn't meet her eyes, looking suddenly guilty. Mike's face flushed brick red. Perris stood her ground, feet planted in her leather boots on the planks of the dance floor. She wasn't moving until Randy and Mike came clean.

"Randall McLean and Michael Eversoll," she said menacingly, tapping her toe and folding her arms across her chest, "what are you up to?"

"Uh, let's sit down, Perris," Mike suggested.

"Are you going to tell me what's happening here?"

Mike cast a worried glance at Randy, who returned the look with a shrug. "Yeah, sure," Mike muttered. "Guess we got no choice."

Perris followed them to the tiny table. When they were all seated around it, Mike said, "Anybody want a drink?"

"Beer for me," Randy said. "Perris?"

"No more whiskey. You're not getting me drunk, Randy. I want an explanation," she said through gritted teeth.

She waited while a waitress brought Randy and Mike their beers, and then folded her hands under her chin and stared hard at her brother. "Spill it," she said in her most no-nonsense, big sister tone.

"Noah wanted a watch on you twenty-four hours a day," Randy said. "Mike and I thought you'd be more comfortable with us than a bunch of deputies in shifts, so we volunteered."

"Oh, you did." Perris's voice was flat. "So all this, getting me out of the house, dinner, dancing—everything—was planned? Just so you could keep an eye on me? I suppose all the men who asked me to dance were cops and this whole damned thing was staged?"

Randy's Adam's apple bobbed. "Well, the dancing wasn't planned, Perris. If you'll remember, I thought Noah wanted us to stay in tonight. I guess those guys really liked you, because none of them were Noah's deputies. That I know of."

"But you just happened to choose this place because Mike worked here?" She shot Mike an accusing glance.

Noah, Noah! Why hadn't she realized earlier what was going on? Noah was running her life again, behind her back, pulling strings to make sure she was safe. She felt deflated and used. All the good feeling from her moments of acceptance as a normal woman had gone from the evening. Her hard-won self-confidence was apparently pretty fragile after all.

"Uh, sure, that's right, Perris," Mike said uncomfortably. He took a big swig of his beer. "Randy called while you were in the shower. As long as he was staying over with you, we

figured it wouldn't hurt if he had a little fun. I would watch you here, and then he could take you home."

"I'm all taken care of while Noah attends his dinner at the Senior Citizens to further his campaign for re-election." Perris rubbed tired eyes. "How convenient."

"Well, actually, Noah's probably parked out at the house right about now," Randy said uneasily. "I don't think he actually went to the dinner. He was really upset after your gun came up missing, Perris. He suspected Collins would eventually try to hurt you."

"Oh, Noah's out at my house! Is he staying over too?" Perris asked. "Mike, want to come along? Hell, we could have a pajama party!"

"You're being a real snot about this, Perris," Randy said hotly, his temper snapping as suddenly as hers. "We're just trying to protect you."

"Without telling me a thing about it! I'm not a baby, Randy!"

"No?" Her brother stared at her. "Look how you're acting when you find out we're trying to help you. You wouldn't carry the gun Noah gave you. You won't do anything to cooperate. Collins won't stop until he hurts you. Don't you understand that yet? What the hell's wrong with you? Your so-called independence has gone just about far enough. When you need help, the least you could do is admit it."

"To whom would I admit such a thing? To Noah?" Perris was shouting, and automatically lowered her voice when heads turned in her direction. She still felt she had to protect Noah Dalton and not shout his business out in public, even after she found out how he'd sneaked behind her back to get his way.

"That would work, yeah. Admit you need help to *Noah*. To *Big John*. To *me*. To *Mike*." Randy's finger jabbed the air, his green gaze pinning her to her seat. "You've got friends and you've got family, but you act like you're all alone. Dammit, Perris, we care about you. Is it so impossible for you to trust anybody?"

"Yes! It's h-hard." To her chagrin, tears welled in her eyes and started to spill over. "Y-you...you're all different from me. And I'm different from everybody. Oh, Randy, sometimes I wonder if I'm recognizably human anymore, or if I'm just a disease in remission. Maybe I'll never get over that, over w-waiting for it to c-come back."

Perris put a hand over her mouth. The whiskey and the tension had loosened her tongue, let her feelings rise too close to the surface and then twist their way out. She was shaking. Great. Now she was blubbering like a drunken fool. Mike stared at her.

"Aw, shit." Randy scooted his chair closer so he could wrap an arm around her and pull her close. "You're my sister," he said quietly. "You're Big John's daughter. You're Mike's friend. And you're Noah's wife."

"No, I'm not. Not anymore," Perris said in a muffled voice into Randy's shoulder.

"We'll see about that," her brother said, as if he knew something she didn't. "We all love you, Perris. If we let you down when you were sick, I'm sorry. I really am. But I guess we were waiting for you to talk about it. You never did. You always seemed to be handling it, so we just assumed you were okay."

She snuffled. Randy pulled a folded tissue from his back pocket and handed it to her. Mike was fiddling with his beer glass, staring into its golden depths. He seemed to keep getting dragged into her problems and he never complained. Now she owed him another explanation.

She blew her nose. Crumpling the tissue in one hand, she said quietly, "I think I'd like that drink now."

Mike signaled the waitress, and Perris ordered a beer. She'd have a headache in the morning from mixing her drinks, but right now she didn't care. She reached out and laid her smaller hand on one of Mike's big paws. Then she gathered up all her courage and said, "Five years ago I had a mastectomy for cancer. I don't think I'm over the trauma yet. It ruined my marriage, because it

ruined the way I thought of myself. I've fought ever since to get myself back. And I want to thank you for being my friend even when I made it especially difficult for you."

"Hey, no problem," Mike said, squirming a little. "You were always one of my favorite people, Perris, even if you were a little secretive." His beard split in a familiar grin. His other huge hand came up to cover hers so they made a stack of hands on the tabletop. "I've got to get back to work. To one of my real jobs, not undercover for you." He laughed. "See you in the morning?"

Perris groaned, holding her head. "If I'm not there right on time, go without me. Randy will see that I make it to work."

Mike walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

Perris looked at Randy. "Okay?" he asked.

"Better," she said, nodding. The real test would come in how Mike Eversoll treated her from now on. Would he look at her differently, become a little more deferential or a little less natural? "I think it's time to go, though."

Randy stood, holding out a hand to her. Perris took it, asking, "By the way, what happened to your friend with the yellow curls?"

"She has to work in the morning," Randy grinned. "But later than you."

"Thanks for being so considerate," Perris tapped her brother on the cheek.

"McLeans make sacrifices for each other. I let her go home alone so I could stay with you." Randy jabbed her in the ribs with an elbow. "You repaid me by staying out late so I could meet her."

"So that's how men think, huh? Every favor must be repaid?" Perris followed her brother toward the exit. Randy didn't contradict her, she noticed.

They reached his pickup, and Perris halted. "Is Noah really going to sit outside my house all night?"

"Far as I know," Randy opened the pickup door for her.

As her brother shut her in the cab of the truck, Perris thought, Just great. The favors are really piling up now. What will I end up owing Noah Dalton?

And, she wondered, could she pay the price?

## Chapter Ten

Perris had a lot to think about. Her brother's accusation that she didn't know when to accept help was foremost among the things she wanted to examine. She needed some peace and quiet, and some time to delve inside herself.

She didn't need Noah's worried glances when she and Randy drove up to her house. And she didn't need Randy standing there explaining to Noah that Benjamin Collins had caught up to her again, accosting her on a dance floor in public this time. She didn't need Noah to tell her Collins's craziness was escalating, but she was afraid that was precisely what was going to happen.

Noah's troubled gaze became more dark and his thunderous expression more frightening as her brother continued to talk. She had experience with the result of Noah's vast need to protect and defend what he considered his. She could see the yearning building in Noah to get his hands on Benjamin Collins and mete out the punishment he thought the environmentalist deserved for harassing his ex-wife. Thwarted by the law, Noah would instead smother Perris under a choking layer of watchfulness that would end by destroying the minute stalk of independence, the tiny seed of trust between them that she nurtured.

She could see it coming. She could almost smell it in the air like ozone before a violent storm. Just what she had feared would happen. Perris watched two of the men closest to her heart discuss her as if she weren't there. Randy had leaped out of the pickup and headed toward Noah

before she even had a chance to get the balky door on her side open. Now she sat with her legs dangling out of the truck, half afraid to approach the lawman who had all the marks of a burning vengeance marring his handsome features.

Noah's badge gleamed in the moonlight as he gestured, reminding Perris if not the sheriff himself of the duties and responsibilities he'd taken on when he accepted the silver shield. In the days of the Old West, he might have deputized Randy on the spot and assembled a posse to bring the bad guy to justice. In days earlier than that, he might have taken the law in his own hands and formed a vigilante group, leaving the coward threatening his woman hanging from a tree branch. Perris could well visualize Noah in either role, with Randy playing the part of his young, impressionable follower.

But this was now. And Noah was duly elected Powell County Sheriff. He had to abide by the law and respect the rights given to modern criminals. And Perris could read the resultant frustration and tension in every line of his taut body. Noah had his hands tied by the very laws he'd sworn to uphold. And he didn't like it any more than Perris liked having to depend on these two big, strong males to come riding to her rescue.

Noah turned away from Randy's explanations, closing the distance with a few long strides to the pickup where Perri sat. Agitated, he grasped the roof of the truck, restraining himself from clutching at her instead, and leaned his upper body in the open door toward her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Perris stared back at him with a chilly look he knew well. He'd overstepped her boundaries again by secretly enlisting her brother and her friend Mike to come to her aid, and she was coldly angry. It was a good thing he'd resisted the strong urge to fit himself between her legs and crush her to him, or he might have ended up sprawled ignominiously in the dirt at her feet.

"You were right," Noah admitted at last. "I was jealous of Mike, and looking for a way to diffuse what I thought I saw growing between you two. It seemed perfect to recruit his help in guarding you instead of finding a way to fight him off. He agreed because he thought he was helping you. So don't be mad at him."

Perri's stiff spine didn't relax. "I'm not mad at Mike."

The metal of the pickup's roof under his hands couldn't have been more chilly than Perri's voice. Noah was scared he'd really blown it with her this time.

"I don't want you to be mad at Randy or your dad either, Perri. I'm the one who called your brother in on this." Noah guessed he didn't have sense enough to know when to quit. But as long as Perri was mad at him she might as well know the whole truth, so if she was going to blow, she could get it all out of her system at once.

She chewed on what he said for a while, her eyes fixed on the distant mountain in the darkness behind him. The hurt shock in her eyes as realization finally dawned was like a blow to his solar plexus. She breathed raggedly, her eyes wide as she brought them slowly back to his face. "You...and my father. Randy, and Mike, and even Carl West. All in this together."

Noah nodded. Perri's black eyebrows drew down like shapely storm clouds. Action swiftly followed reaction, like a lightning strike from the gathering clouds of her anger. She kicked out swiftly. But Noah's reflexes were quicker and he grabbed her flailing foot. Holding her by a slim booted ankle, he tried to explain.

"I was afraid you'd get hurt. Perri, dammit, listen to me and stop kicking. I couldn't help, so I wanted you surrounded by people who could. Shit!" She was struggling frantically to get away, her free leg lashing out at his chest as she tried to scramble back across the seat away from him.

She held on to the steering wheel, panting as he tugged at her foot. "You sneaking, underhanded meddler! Damn you, Noah! Why can't you trust me to solve my own problems?"

"Because you won't ask for help when you need it!" Noah made a grab for her free leg, missed, and took a booted toe to the chin for his efforts. He shook his head to clear it, then renewed his attempts to catch hold of both her legs. Perri wasn't very big, but she sure was

strong. Maybe he'd made a mistake when he assumed she was an open target for a physical attempt by Collins. She might actually be able to fight off the wimpy bastard.

"And you know why I won't ask you for help!" Her voice broke as if she would begin weeping from anger and the thwarted need to escape from him. She finally choked out, "Let go of me, damn you!"

Noah turned his head to avoid another kick to the face, and caught sight of Randy standing there watching them tussle. They must make quite a sight, Randy's sister scrabbling across the pickup seat and onto the console, away from the sheriff who shackled one of her ankles, while she tried to knock him out with the other foot. His ex-brother-in-law's slack jawed shock made Noah stop dead in his tracks and once again question the wisdom of ever trying to overpower Perri.

Only she could make him this crazy. Only she could make him completely lose control. She drove him to absolute distraction, to using methods he'd never think of employing on anyone else—male *or* female.

Manhandling Perri and trying to constrain her had never worked. When was he going to learn? Maybe the message would finally get through if she succeeded in knocking him on his ass in front of her little brother.

Cheeks flaming, grateful the darkness covered his hot embarrassment, Noah released his hold on her ankle and backed quickly away before her leather boot could connect with his head again. Perri scrambled onto the driver's seat and drew her feet swiftly beneath her, huddling as far away from him as she could get. Her shoulders shook as she hunched over the steering wheel, crying.

Noah felt like he'd just been nominated Heel of the Century. Perri and Randy arrived home after she was attacked by Benjamin Collins, and how does her sweetheart of an ex-husband react? Why, he assaults her too! Nice Neanderthal-type move, Dalton. A brilliant solution to her problem with Collins, and an ingenious way for the man who loved her to make her see that he loved her.

Randy offered no consolation when Noah self-consciously looked to him. He just shrugged and shook his head at Noah's latest failure with his sister.

"Maybe you better let her cool off. It's late, and she has to work in the morning." Randy walked around the hood of the truck and opened the driver's door. Perri leaned out into her brother's arms, and Randy supported her as she got out on shaky legs. He reached behind her for his shotgun.

"I love you," Noah whispered helplessly, hopelessly. When she didn't look at him, didn't respond in any way, he said, louder, "Don't you understand? Perri, I love you!"

She started to walk off with her brother, and Noah lost all sense. She should be walking off with him, dammit. Not her little brother and his shotgun. Where was justice in the world, where was rightness and reward? He'd only wanted to keep her safe.

"I love you, Perri Dalton!"

Noah bayed the words, his head tilted back and his empty hands clutching at night air. From all sides in the distance, dogs began an answering chorus of furious barking. A floodlight flicked on in the yard of Perri's nearest neighbor's house, an acre or more away but bright enough to illuminate the scene in her yard.

She halted in her flight away from Noah to turn and stare at him for a moment, her face white and her expression bleak. "You might think you love me, Noah," she declared. "But you're just obsessed with controlling me."

Then she dropped her head to her brother's shoulder and resumed her weeping, louder than before. It was a heart-rendingly melancholy sound, the saddest thing Noah had ever heard.

Perri's grief put paid to any thought Noah had of resuming a relationship with her. Her disappointment in him this time had a finality to it, as if she at last acknowledged the feeling between them had died and mourning hit her harder for having denied it so long.

Randy helped her up the porch steps and propped the shotgun against the wall to unlock the door. He flicked on the light, and for a moment Perris stood alone, outlined in the yellow wash of light from inside the tiny house as Randy went inside to check that it was okay to enter.

Noah's heart clenched at the sight. That delicate-looking, courageous woman had once loved him. And he had loved her back with all he had in him.

But all he had wasn't enough. Or maybe it was too much. Perris stepped out of the doorway and followed Randy into the house, like a Renaissance lady abandoning the portrait that should have contained her for eternity.

Randy stepped back into the door frame, looking out into the darkness. He reached for the shotgun, lifting it in farewell when he spotted the shadow of Noah still standing forlornly in the yard.

The door closed.

Noah had never felt so lost, so empty. Not even after the divorce, when he'd been too stunned to believe things wouldn't eventually work out somehow between Perri and himself. Even in the years between then and now, he never lost faith that they were meant to be together. He'd believed for so long, it had become second nature to think if he ever got the chance again he'd make things right with her.

And there lay the trap. Because she had changed, big time, and he hadn't. He'd assumed his old methods would work with her, that he could rush right in and convince her that they needed each other. She had grown up, altered her approach to life, gone on to a new and better and more mature outlook. And Noah was sorely afraid he hadn't.

In the one area that mattered most, his approach to Perri, his love and his future, Noah Dalton had stagnated. He hadn't convinced her to love him back. He hadn't convinced her that he needed her more than she needed him. On the contrary, like a stubborn old bull locked up too long in the same pasture, he sought the safety of fences when the gate was left open to the wild prairie.

He'd convinced Perri only that he was incapable of change or growth, that he was mulishly unwilling to let her have the independence she needed to change and grow herself.

He hadn't the energy left to move, nor the desire even to curse—himself, or fate, or whatever caused him to always and forever screw up with her. For a long time Noah could only stand with his big, empty hands at his sides, staring sightlessly inside himself as the lights around him were slowly doused one by one and people sought their beds.

He stood, finally, alone in the darkness.

Noah slowly drove the miles home. Perri was safe enough with Randy and his shotgun for the night. And Noah had a lot to think about. He'd known when he did it that going behind her back to get help was a mistake. But he just couldn't figure out how to keep Collins away from her by himself. She wouldn't let him stay over, and short of tying her up and gagging her so he could sit by her bedside all night, he couldn't see how else to protect her except to call in Randy.

And, boy howdy, hadn't the two of them done a fine job? Now Perri actively hated him.

Noah would admit including Mike in the Good Ol' Boys Club to protect Perris had probably been a huge mistake. She'd fiercely guarded all aspects of her job from him, even to the point of not letting him know she was back in town. It was as if she needed something in her life that Noah couldn't be included in, something of her very own that she could accomplish without his heavy-handed attempts to help.

Her family would have been enough.

Noah himself *should* have been enough.

But he wasn't enough.

Things just seemed to get worse and worse. So he wasn't surprised, yet at the same time didn't know exactly what to say, when he pulled up in front of his house and found Big John McLean parked in his driveway. Mike had called Noah's ex-father-in-law and explained what had happened at the bar. Big John said he understood how Noah couldn't go after Collins himself, being county sheriff and all. But the sheep rancher would be more than happy to find that damn city slicker and take care of him so he'd leave Perri alone.

After the old man explained his intentions, Noah said, "I can't be a part of vigilante justice, John. This isn't the Old West. I can't condone it, and in fact, I don't even want to know about it. If Perri wants to press it, I'll be glad to add an assault charge against Collins to the suspected stolen weapon investigation."

Big John looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, then, deputize me," he said, "and I'll go after that worthless scumbag without any help."

Noah laughed shortly. "You've been watching too much TV, old hoss. For one thing, Perri would shoot me for letting you get involved. For another, I couldn't justify your salary to the county commissioners."

Big John hooked his thumbs in his belt, rocking back and forth on his boot heels. At last he said, "All right then. I won't tell Perris what I'm a-gonna do. And I won't tell you, neither. I'll just do it, and if you have to arrest me later, son, I guess that's just the way things gotta be."

Noah was afraid he'd end up having to jail every one of the McLeans, and maybe even himself, before this was over. After a short trip down to the jail while the old man waited at the house, Noah tried a bit more to deter Perri's father. But once set on his course, Big John McLean was a force of nature and wasn't about to be sidetracked. Noah didn't know what else to do but let the old man go on his way. As Big John hauled himself into his pickup and drove off, Noah admitted he felt a deep-down yearning to go along with him.

Perris woke with the headache she'd predicted for herself, but she didn't think it was caused by one glass of whiskey and one beer. She'd been up even later than the hour she had finally gotten home from the bar. Her brother wouldn't let her get any sleep until she agreed to see Noah once more and attempt to talk things out. Randy knew that if he could get his sister to give her word as a McLean there was no going back on it. Once he had extracted that promise from her, he rolled up in his sleeping bag and dozed right off. Perris herself had lain awake long afterward, debating the wisdom of what she'd just solemnly sworn to do.

Now this morning her eyes felt puffy and gritty from crying and too little sleep, and when she finally dragged herself out of bed to look in the bathroom mirror she groaned at the reflection of her lumpy, swollen features. She looked like she'd been beat up.

She ran cold water in the old porcelain sink and splashed it mercilessly on her face and neck. When that didn't help, she dunked a washcloth in the icy water and held it to her eyes. She repeated this process, which seemed to help a little for the time being. But she knew by the end of the day her eyes would resemble red balls of fire.

She might as well have gone out and tied one on the night before, got so raging drunk Randy would have had to drag her home to bed. She probably would look, and feel, much the same if she'd done so. And, too, maybe her problems would have receded for a little while.

But Perris Dalton had never been drunk in her life. She'd learned the hard way to face problems head on. She wouldn't even call in sick to work this morning, as a timid little voice inside her urged her to do. The voice reminded that Benjamin Collins was still running around loose, angry with her and the whole world, and in addition was now probably armed with her LadySmith.

She was frightened of Benjamin Collins and what he was capable of in his extremist attempts to save the planet. She was angry with Noah, and maybe a little bit with Randy, and

some with Mike. Not to mention that weasel of a boss, Carl West. None of them seemed to think she had enough brains rattling around in her head to tie her own shoes.

How had things come to this impasse? Or maybe the question was, how had things come to be this shameful morass?

Perris gulped down two aspirin. All she'd wanted was a second chance with Noah, an opportunity to make him see her as a competent woman capable of a whole and complete relationship. Instead she'd somehow become embroiled in a controversy that threatened her life, causing Noah to slip into embattled warrior mode again. It was like reliving a nightmare, only this time her personal pain and fear made headlines.

Perris had two working days and two weekend days to get ready for Merilee Kramer and her film crew. Somehow in that short time she must find a way to get her life back in order. Or at least a way to get some sleep so she wouldn't face the camera on Tuesday resembling some puffy-eyed monster in a horror movie.

Perris smiled ruefully at her wan reflection. She'd better wake Randy and get on the road to work, or she'd certainly have one less worry in her life: her hard-won job.

Randy eyed her balefully from his sleeping bag on the floor when she nudged him awake. Perris preferred to think her brother's grumpiness was due to the combination of a late night and an uncomfortable bed, but Randy continued giving her the silent treatment along with irritated sideways glances for the interminable drive to the mine.

Perris had to do something, and it better be fast. Her life, personal and professional, was in a state of uneasy flux and she was being made to feel it was somehow all her fault. If she didn't soon make a move of some kind, she'd lose Randy's good will as well as Noah's love. And Benjamin Collins, hunted and probably feeling as trapped as she, would intensify his campaign of terror until somebody got hurt.

As they neared the tent city set up alongside the road to the Red Bluffs mine, Perris suddenly said, "Stop the truck."

Randy slowed, looking at her speculatively from beneath lowered brows and the brim of his cowboy hat.

She said again, "Randy, stop the truck."

"What are you up to now?" He put his foot on the brake, but didn't apply enough pressure to completely halt the pickup. It rolled slowly past the opposing camps of the demonstrators to one side of the road and the horse trailers of the kids from the Ag College on the other.

"As you so kindly pointed out, a lot of misunderstanding and hard feeling result when people don't talk to each other," Perris said. "Benjamin Collins wanted to be heard, and I wouldn't listen because I was afraid of him. I'm going over to the protesters' camp and issue an invitation for Collins to join me on Tuesday for Merilee Kramer's documentary."

Randy gaped at her. "Sis, do you think that's wise? The guy's one brick short of a full load. He's been waiting for a chance to get you alone. Walking in that camp, you just set yourself up for him to take a potshot at you."

Perris shook her head. "I don't think he's there. It would be too easy for the sheriff's deputies to find him there and pick him up for questioning about my stolen gun. I'll just leave word for him that I'm ready to deal."

The truck came to a stop. Randy surveyed the protesters' camp in the rearview mirror, silently assessing the danger involved in his sister walking into the middle of a bunch of sleepy hotheads before they'd had a chance to fully awaken. "If you're so damned determined to do this, then I'm going with you," he said grimly.

Perris smiled tremulously. After all her blustering about wanting to do everything on her own, she'd been afraid Randy would allow her to face the demonstrators all by her lonesome just to punish her. She reached a grateful hand out to her brother's arm. "Thank you, Randy," she said quietly.



His green eyes studied her for a moment, a message of unity and forgiveness passing between them. Randy said softly, "What about Noah?"

Perris sighed. "I already said I would. I just need some sleep. Tonight I'll rest and tomorrow I'll call Noah. If he'll even talk to me now."

"He will," Randy said with blithe confidence. "But promise you won't be so hard on him. If Noah has to give a little, Perris, then so do you. The word is compromise."

Perris looked at her younger brother. In Randy's estimation, it was all so simple. He didn't know that straightening things out with Noah could be more complicated and possibly more perilous than facing a half-crazed Benjamin Collins.

"It won't be that easy," Perris murmured, averting her eyes lest she blurt out the truth about what had previously occurred between Noah and herself. She was taking an awfully big chance expecting Benjamin Collins to behave, and a bigger one in expecting Noah not to overreact if Collins couldn't make himself play nice.

"Nothing meaningful is ever easy." Randy flexed his arm and Perris obeyed the silent signal, removing her hand so her brother could shift gears and back the pickup toward the tent city.

Neither of them missed the sullen glances from the milling protesters as Randy invaded their designated piece of the desert with his big four-wheel drive. Perris's hand shook on the door handle when she clutched it. It took all her courage to tug on it and open the door. As she moved to get out, Randy reached for the shotgun behind her head.

Perris halted, chilled. This was how she'd tipped Collins over the edge, by threatening him with a gun. Maybe in the Old West disputes could be solved with drawn six-guns, but in these modern days even the most diehard cowboy had to realize that words were the mightier weapons.

"Leave it, Randy."

"But Perris—"

"No guns. I mean it. And tell your friends to back off." She gestured to the jeans-clad young men starting to cross the road toward the familiar pickup parked just inside the enemy camp.

Randy's jaw jutted, but he finally muttered, "All right. It's your show, big sister."

Perris grinned. "You're right. Merilee Kramer might be the star, but it's my show. Come on, little brother."

The environmental protesters surged forward in a cluster to meet them, and Perris nearly lost her resolve when she saw them coming. Randy's friends also moved *en masse* to cross the road. A day of trading insults back and forth hadn't eased tempers any, and both sides were ready for a good old-fashioned brawl. Randy turned toward his friends, raising a hand and shaking his head to hold them off.

Perris raised her voice to be heard. "Tell Benjamin Collins I want to talk." She addressed a thin young man with greasy blond locks and a face pitted with old acne scars, who seemed to have taken charge in Collins's absence. He stood slightly forward from his comrades. "We have until Tuesday to come up with an agreeable format for the show," she continued. "Tell him I'm open to suggestions."

"Do we look stupid?" the blond man asked with a sneer. "You're trying to set Ben up so your pet cop can arrest him."

"That's a cheap shot," Perris fired back. "If Sheriff Dalton were interested in violating anyone's rights, he would have run the whole pack of you out of the county a long time ago."

The young man shrugged off Perris's defense of Noah, his sneer still firmly in place. "What do you want, Ms. Dalton?"

"I want everyone to start acting like adults." Perris stood with her hands on her hips, hoping she looked sure of herself, while the blond tugged at his lower lip and considered her from beneath wispy eyebrows. "I want a civil conversation about environmental laws, and what we can do to encourage new energy sources, as well as protecting wildlife. I want Collins to settle

down and have his ducks in a row when Merilee Kramer shows up, or he's going to blow his big chance to get his point across on TV.

"Your group has legitimate fears," Perris went on in a softer voice when she saw the young man seemed to be considering her words instead of mocking her. "But you won't convince anybody with ranting and threats. We all need to put our differences aside and work together. Tell Collins I said he's right about that."

She resisted the urge to rub her wrist, shivering as she remembered Collins's death grip on her as he tried to get her to listen. Was the man even capable of rational discourse?

Maybe if she got him in front of the camera. In interviews Benjamin Collins seemed better able to govern his more tactless impulses. If she dangled the carrot of television time, perhaps she could reason with him.

The ball was in Collins's court. Perris had no more to say. She turned to leave. Behind her, the blond said quietly, "Ms. Dalton."

Perris pivoted slowly to face him again.

"Thank you." The young man sounded strangled, as if being polite were so foreign to him he choked on the words. "Thanks for trying. One Natural World needs all the friends it can get. Ben's message is sound, but his methods..." The blond shook his head. "If I see him, I'll pass on your message," he concluded.

"Do that." Perris tried to keep the wry note from her voice as she added, "He knows where to reach me over the weekend if he decides he wants to talk."

Perris got back into the pickup, Randy following at her heels. When he'd shut the door, he said musingly, "Maybe you've come up with the only workable solution, Perris. It's nice of you to offer to share your TV time. If Collins has any brains, he'll go for it."

"We'll see, won't we?" Perris said without much enthusiasm. She trusted Benjamin Collins about as much as she would a diamondback rattlesnake sunning itself against a rock.

Randy waved to his buddies on the opposite side of the road, stopping to let one of the cowboys cross in front of the pickup to talk.

"Keep it light," Randy warned his friend. "There's a peace conference coming up, so no last-minute skirmishes. I'll be back to keep the lid on things as soon as I drop my sister at the mine."

"Gotcha." The cowboy nodded to Perris, touching the brim of his hat with a forefinger in salute before he stepped back so Randy could pull away.

Randy glanced over at his sister several times on the short drive to the mine site. Perris took deep swigs of her orange juice, feigning calmness, her hand slowly beginning to settle its shaking. So she hadn't been as brave as she looked. Randy admired her courage and didn't want to add to her problems, but a few things still nagged him and he wanted them said before she met with Collins.

"Perris," he ventured at last, "you're not caving in completely to those guys, are you? You do have a heritage as a McLean to consider."

Perris sighed, looking at her brother out of the corner of her eye as they neared the Red Bluffs parking lot already nearly filled at this early hour. "You're afraid that, between my viewpoint and Benjamin Collins's, Big John and Western ranchers might not have fair representation?"

"Something like that, yeah." Randy eyed her nervously, knowing how she and their father disagreed, at times rancorously. "It would make the old man real happy if you tried for some balance in the interview, Perris."

Randy braked near the chain link fence so Perris wouldn't have to walk the length of the parking lot. "This whole thing's getting out of hand," she muttered as she reached for her lunchbox and Thermos. "One camera, and all of a sudden everyone wants to be a spokesman. You want to be on TV, too, Randy?"

“Me? No.” Randy shook his head, flushing guiltily. “I thought maybe...the old man.”

Perris paused with her fingers on the plastic handle of her lunchbox, her mouth agape. She snapped it shut. “You must be joking. If that kid I talked to this morning can’t control Collins, how do you think I can begin to handle Daddy? Putting the two of them together on television would be like starting World War III.”

“You’re the one who came up with the idea of everybody talking to each other.” Randy’s lower lip jutted thoughtfully as he gazed off into the distance at the harsh landscape of the Wyoming desert softened just for a few moments by shades of dawn pink. “Letting Big John have his say would go a long way toward healing the rift between you two.”

Perris succeeded in getting completely out of the truck without betraying to her brother how her eyes stung with fresh tears. She’d love the chance to make up with her father, the uncomfortable distance between them ended. But at the price of letting her big chance to defend her mitigation work turning into a fiasco of a televised shouting match between two diametrically opposed radicals? She could just imagine Big John on television with Benjamin Collins, revealing to the environmentalist his fond desire to kill a wolf. She clapped her hard hat on, blinded by the rising sun and the moisture in her eyes. “I’ll think about it,” she said gruffly, turning quickly away and tossing over her shoulder, “Pick me up tonight?”

“Sure,” Randy said, engaging the clutch and putting the truck into gear. He let the truck idle with his booted foot on the clutch, watching his sister walk through the gate toward the guard shack before he let it out and drove away. He didn’t envy Perris the choices she had to make in the next few days. His sister had arrived at the cleft between a rock and a hard place, forced to defend herself on all sides, with the ever-present danger of tumbling into the chasm of unemployment.

He supposed he and Noah weren’t helping her any, pushing her to make personal choices at the same time she had professional problems to contend with.

But. Randy grinned, watching his sister’s stiff back disappear inside the door of the guard shack. But Perris was made of the stern stuff of McLean legends. He felt it was only his brotherly duty to remind her of their shared legacy once in a while. He had all the faith of inexperienced youth that Perris would not only survive her ordeals, in the end he was sure she would win.

Big John McLean finally caught up to his quarry at mid-morning. Benjamin Collins was holed up in a seedy motel on the west end of Hawk Point, so far successfully eluding the law. But he couldn’t fool a big, old, ugly bloodhound/sheepdog mix named Bob, owned by Big John McLean. Not after Noah had provided Bob a good whiff of the orange coveralls Collins had worn while incarcerated in the county jail. What Noah had done in absconding with the garment was probably not strictly legal. The old man suspected giving Bob the Easterner’s scent violated his rights somehow, but John McLean wasn’t worried about it. The sheep rancher smiled as he stopped by the motel office for a key to Collins’s room, which he got for the asking. It paid to have friends, and resources city sissies would never think of. He tied Bob’s leash to an iron trellis in front of the motel room.

Big John’s feet hurt. He was a man used to riding, not walking, and Bob had near run the old man’s boot heels off this morning while tracking Collins down. He wasn’t in a real good mood at the moment, and he hoped to hell the coward who’d dared lay unwelcome hands on his daughter was still sleeping. The fancy Easterner had a surprise coming, and John McLean was just the man to give it to him. He hoped Collins had enough sense to bring along his own boots when he’d come out West to tell folks what to do, because those fancy canvas shoes Big John saw advertised on TV for such outrageous prices would probably be irrevocably ruined by sheep shit.

Noah Dalton was already feeling surly and out of sorts when he walked into the office where one of his least favorite acquaintances awaited him. Lounging against the office wall underneath the FBI's Ten Most Wanted poster was Maisie Merritt, ace lady reporter.

Maisie came to immediate attention at the sight of the person she wanted to see, but her erect posture didn't improve her appearance: her trench coat hung in disreputable folds, its hem torn and uneven. Her hair stuck out from her head in snarls that looked lacquered in place, and she might have slept in her putrid green polyester pantsuit. The only thing sharp about this lady, Noah thought distastefully, was her sense for a juicy story.

But he nodded politely when Maisie greeted him and asked for a few moments of his time. The duties of sheriff included dealing with the media whether he liked it or not, and there was no sense making things harder on himself and his campaign by antagonizing western Wyoming's topnotch reporter.

"Coffee?" he asked after she had seated herself in one of the big leather wingback chairs in his office.

"No, thanks. I'm trying to taper off." Maisie grimaced at the strong smell of the brew wafting from the pot on the hotplate, and Noah absented himself long enough to grab a cup. He didn't really want coffee either, but the pause gave him a few seconds to regroup before facing Ms. Merritt so early in what he already predicted would prove to be a trying day.

As he seated himself behind his desk, he took a sip of hot coffee. The unwelcome acid hit his already sour stomach with a sharp jolt of pain, and Noah wondered if he weren't developing an ulcer.

Maisie had her notepad and pen at the ready, her tiny digital recorder perched on the edge of his desk. She watched him drink his coffee with keen, appraising brown eyes before asking her first deceptively mild question.

"So how are things out at Red Bluffs, Sheriff?"

Noah leaned back in his chair. "Pretty quiet the last week, knock on wood." He smiled at his nemesis. "You know, of course, about the counter-demonstration."

Maisie nodded. "College kids. I've talked to them. There's been no trouble between them and Collins's group?"

"None so far. They're a decent bunch, all Wyoming boys on spring break from the university. I'm trusting that they'll behave themselves until their vacation is over."

"You haven't stepped up patrols in the area of the mine, then?" Maisie peered at Noah over the top of her notebook.

Noah shook his head. "No need. It would be an extra expense for nothing. Have to watch those taxpayer dollars, you know."

"What about your ex-wife's house, Sheriff? Stepped up patrols in that area?"

Noah felt his muscles tense, his hand clenching on his cup. He tried to control his reaction before Maisie noted it.

Too late. His infinitesimal hesitation tipped the reporter off to the fact that she'd touched a sore spot. "Come on, Sheriff," Maisie wheedled. "I know Collins broke Perris Dalton's window and you arrested him for it. Those two items have been reported. You must have some feeling about Benjamin Collins bothering your ex-wife. Why don't you tell me about it?"

Noah could just imagine himself saying, "Well, all right, Maisie. I'd love to talk about that. As a matter of fact, I'm still in love with Perri and I would personally like to choke the daylights out of Benjamin Collins for tormenting her. Just the other night, while we were making love, he interrupted with a prank phone call. I also suspect he stole the gun I gave her to protect herself. But don't worry, I've set her brother, her dad, and her friends to watching out for her safety, along with a deputy or two who've been assigned to stake out her house every night. But, unfortunately, just last night after a little tiff, she told me to kiss off. And that's about all there is to that story."

Wouldn't Maisie's eyes bug out if she knew the lengths the local sheriff had gone in order to protect his ex-wife? Noah gagged on what he'd intended to be a casual pull at his mug of coffee. He spluttered, brown drops spattering his immaculate white shirt and his eyes tearing as he tried to catch his breath.

"Are you all right, Sheriff?" Maisie pretended concern while her eyes slitted calculatingly.

"Of course," Noah gasped. "What was the question?"

"I wanted to know how you feel about Benjamin Collins's harassment of your ex-wife, Perris Dalton."

Noah narrowed his own eyes. Did Maisie realize how he resented her repeatedly bringing up his and Perri's *ex marital* status?

"I'm concerned for the safety of all citizens of Powell County, and that includes Perri's," Noah said diplomatically. "The members of One Natural World have been advised to keep their activities legal. I would hope Mr. Collins has sense enough to follow my advice and that of his capable attorney."

"So you've warned Collins to stay away from Perris?"

"I warned him, after his arrest, to remain on the right side of the law. Ms. Merritt, is there a point to these questions?" That's good, Noah cheered himself. Go on the offensive, Dalton.

Maisie leaned back casually in her seat. "I'm after the human interest angle here, Sheriff. I think I hear wedding bells ringing faintly in the background—you seem to be a marrying kind of guy—and my readers always appreciate a happy ending."

Noah's jaw clenched as he wondered exactly what this snoopy reporter thought she knew. Maisie Merritt didn't usually bait her hooks with such meaty chunks unless she thought she was fishing for a trophy-sized catch. A marrying kind of guy! For chrissake. What would Perri do if she read such a quote, in reference to his intentions toward her, and his past mistakes with her *and* Marla, in the newspaper? After last night, she'd throttle him with her bare hands, that's what.

"Ms. Merritt," Noah began.

"Maisie." She smiled, but the predatory gleam remained in her eyes.

"Maisie." Noah hesitated again, wondering how he could get himself and Perri out of this interview unscathed. With Maisie Merritt, there was probably no way. The woman scented blood, and like a shark, she wouldn't be detoured from a feeding frenzy.

"Look, Maisie," he said at last, setting his mug on his desk blotter and rubbing his eyes. Lack of sleep and the wrenching emotional ups and downs he'd been through the last few days were starting to take their toll. He didn't know how much longer he could defend himself against this woman's probing questions without admitting some indiscretion. "It's always harder for an officer to deal with crimes that involve his family or other people he cares about. Strict neutrality is an ideal we try to adhere to, but peace officers are human too. We have feelings, strong feelings, when our families are threatened. But we do our best to abide by the law in any case."

"You keep saying *family*, Sheriff. Do you still consider your ex-wife family?"

"I'm not lucky enough to be able to turn my feelings on and off like an electrical switch, Ms. Merritt," Noah said wearily, just starting to realize how Maisie Merritt had outwitted him on that one. "In my profession, that technique would probably be an asset, but I personally know of no one in law enforcement who has the ability to stop feeling. And the public should probably be grateful for that, because otherwise we'd end up with some hollow, scary people on our police forces."

"I agree, but you didn't answer my question." Maisie Merritt leaned forward again. "How do you feel about Perris Dalton?"

"Give me a break, Maisie," Noah said quietly, looking straight at the reporter.

“No way, Sheriff,” she replied. “I’ve got more dry, boring facts on the Red Bluffs protest than I can use. I want something juicy, something to spark the reader’s interest. A little romance, a little danger, a little hint of what makes your heart go pitter-patter beneath the badge.”

Noah sighed. Who was that idiot who wanted the public to see the Sheriff’s Office as more human and approachable? That fool couldn’t have been Noah Dalton, could it?

“Off the record?” he pleaded.

She rubbed the side of her nose with her pen, probably considering whether she could include the tidbit in her article in some other way than a direct quote. Her little brown ferret eyes dueled with Noah’s tired gray ones, and at last she reached for the stop button on her recorder.

“Okay. Off the record.” She stared hard at Noah. “Are you sleeping with your ex-wife?”

“That information is nobody’s business, and I damn well better not read even a suggestion of it in the paper.” Noah glared back. He was about a millimeter away from kicking her bony ass out of his office.

“Isn’t that a bit unethical, Noah? Considering that you’re both involved in the Red Bluffs protest in different capacities, I think it would be sort of hard for you to remain neutral if you’re fucking one of the protagonists.”

Maisie smiled, even using his name instead of his title as if they were friends, but Noah wasn’t appeased. Hot anger roiled inside him, and he had a hard time keeping the lid on his temper.

“I love Perri,” he grated out, rising to his feet and leaning over his desk until he was within inches of Maisie Merritt’s unattractive face. “Is that what you want to know? Are you satisfied with that answer?”

Maisie didn’t back down one iota, almost nose to nose with Noah across his desk. “And how does Perris feel about you?”

“Ask her.”

“I’m asking you.”

“She wants me to stay out of it. Completely. Out of her life and out of the situation with Collins. So that makes my job easier, doesn’t it, Maisie? Perri Dalton can handle her own problems.”

Maisie dropped her eyes, terminating the tense encounter, and Noah sat back down, willing his shoulder and neck muscles to relax. He closed his eyes, waiting for her to reach for her recorder’s on button, for the interview to continue. But she just sat there.

“She doesn’t know how lucky she is to have a man who doesn’t give up on her. Giving up is easy, isn’t it, Sheriff? It’s the hanging in there, and the trying, that’s hard.”

Noah opened his eyes. Maisie was staring out the window, her gaze on the trees in the courthouse yard but her expression miles and years away. She seemed to shake herself mentally when she felt Noah looking at her, coming back to the present with a slight shiver and a weak smile of apology for letting him catch a glimpse of her carefully hidden wistfulness.

“If you want my advice—for what that might be worth—keep trying, Sheriff Dalton. Sometimes you can get a second chance out of sheer, perverse persistence.” She smiled. Noah was taken by surprise. She really could be pretty when she smiled. Well, *almost* pretty.

She gathered up her recorder, sticking it and her notebook in her coat pocket as she stood up. “Thanks for talking to me,” she added, running a hand over her stiff hair when Noah didn’t respond to her unsolicited advice. “I don’t know what angle I’ll use on this yet, or even if I will use it. Either way, I won’t make you sorry you granted this interview.”

She held out her hand. Noah took it in his, wondering when and how the hardnosed reporter had transformed into something approximating a fellow human being. Maisie Merritt was just doing her job when she asked the hard questions, like Noah was just doing his job when he tried, and failed, to keep his feelings out of the protest at Red Bluffs Mining.

But she wasn't just doing her job when she counseled him to keep after Perri if he loved her. Maisie was right. The person he should be talking to about his successes and failures in the emotional department wasn't the reporter. He should be laying himself bare to Perri. Once he realized where his true attachment lay, an unflattering newspaper article that could ruin his chances for re-election seemed the least of his worries. If it came down to it, if forced to choose, he knew he would choose Perri even over his cherished job.

The title of sheriff was temporary at best. But Noah's love for Perri, *his* Perri, was forever.

## Chapter Eleven

After one good night's sleep, Perris tried several times early Saturday morning to reach Noah by phone. She got switched to voicemail each time, and chided herself for the growing relief she felt at the avoidance of another confrontation. She knew she had to face him again, but the encounter was beginning to take on the aspects of a showdown in her mind and the last thing she wanted was another fight that resolved nothing.

She'd spent the early hours quietly studying the newspapers, the full-page ads Carl West had taken out giving her a new jolt of pleasure each time she looked at them. Her telephone rang at nine, rousing Randy who pulled his pillow over his tousled head and groaned. The abrupt sound startled Perris into spilling her coffee.

Brother and sister had turned in reasonably early, Perris thought as she reached for the phone. She looked at Randy fondly. She didn't know how her brother could remain on the floor so long but guessed it was up to him if he wanted to spend the whole day sleeping. Her own hectic college days weren't so far behind that she couldn't appreciate the allure of a lazy spring break Saturday in bed.

She answered the telephone, only to hear Noah's voice on the other end. He sounded ambivalent, hesitant, as if he thought she would begin screaming the moment she recognized his voice.

"I've been trying to reach you all morning."

"That's funny," Perris said gently, both of them trying so hard to put a tacit apology into the tone of their conversation. Neither of them had ever been very good at outright repentance. "I've been trying to reach you too. I keep getting shunted to voicemail."

Noah paused. "But I haven't spoken to anyone. I'm on the landline, but let me check my cell. You should have been able to get through."

Perris twisted a lock of short, dark hair nervously around her finger. "Did you check your missed call screen? It would be too much of a coincidence if every time I tried to call you, you were on the phone trying to call me."

"Would it be coincidence, Perri?" Noah asked softly. "Or something more like destiny?"

Perris's heart set up a clattering in her chest, making it hard to breathe. So he hadn't given up on her after all. He was getting pretty good at ignoring declarations made in anger that she didn't want to see him anymore. "I think you're right, Noah," she admitted. "I think it's fated for us to be together...and I'm getting tired of fighting it."

She heard him sigh, a long exhalation that signaled he could at last detect the kind of accord he wanted between them. "So can I come over?" he asked.

They both spoke quietly, a breathy, breathless sort of conversation where the pauses and inflections meant as much as the words they were saying. "Randy's here," Perris whispered.

"If that's Noah, bent on a little weekend romance," Randy offered helpfully in a muffled voice from beneath his pillow, "tell him I'm going out to the ranch."

Perris covered the phone to scold her brother. "At your age, haven't you learned it's not nice to eavesdrop on other people's conversations?"

Randy removed the pillow from his face to grin at her. "I can't help overhearing you. There's no privacy in this house. And I'm not sticking around to watch you two kissy-face."

Randy tossed the pillow at her and Perris threw it back, returning his ready grin. He got up and headed toward the bathroom, and she returned to the more important business at hand. "Randy's decided he's going home for the weekend," she informed Noah.

"I always did like that boy," he said. After another short pause, the pitch of his voice changing again, he added, "I'll see you in just a little while, then?"

"As little as you can make it without getting arrested for speeding, Sheriff Dalton," Perris teased. She spoke past a lump lodged in her throat that felt like maybe it was as big as her heart.

For his part, Noah had much the same feeling. The big moment of truth was at hand, and he'd never felt such intense stress. Only a few days before, his need for Perri had been so powerful he couldn't get his pants zipped without straining his arm muscles. Now the pressure to perform without limitations was all on him, and he couldn't—absolutely couldn't—fail her again. Yet he'd sworn to himself he would approach the big trial without chemical help.

But the dread inactivity in his lower regions as he thought of seeing Perri naked again scared the living daylights out of him. Put to the test this very day, the more he thought about the consequences of the last time he'd tried and failed the same ordeal, the more frightened and certain of repeated inadequacy, he became.

It took a good deal of cursing himself for a fool, and an overgrown coward, to get his big body up out of the chair and moving. His sweaty hands slipped on the arms of the swivel chair. He knocked his knee smartly on the edge of the solid mahogany desk, which elicited more cursing and a bit of hopping around on one leg while he clutched his knee until the sharp pain subsided.

At last he made up his mind to cheat if he had to. It was that important. Limping, Noah got himself and his emergency stash of blue pills out to his private car and on the road to Perri's, muttering imprecations and encouragement to himself all the way.

Randy was showered and ready to leave by about nine.

"Don't you want to wait and say hi to Noah?" Perris asked, half hoping her brother would hang around for a while to give her moral support.

"Nah." Randy shook his head of damp, dark curls. "I've got the feeling there will be lots of opportunity from now on for me to talk to Noah." He clapped his gray Stetson on his head, slung an arm around her shoulders and planted a brotherly smooch on her forehead. "Good luck, sis. I know it will work out."

Perris wrapped her arms around his lean waist and squeezed tight. "Thanks, Randy," she murmured. "For everything."

She let him go and he stepped back. Morning sunlight spilled in the open doorway, promising a beautiful spring day. She looked up into her brother's face to add, "Tell Big John if I hear from Collins, I'm calling a meeting Monday afternoon at my office. We can blow off steam there, and maybe by Tuesday we can all act like reasonable adults for the camera."

Randy's face lit. "Atta girl," he said, giving her a thumbs-up. "I'll do what I can to get the old man rehearsed over the next couple of days."

"I'd appreciate that," Perris said, watching her brother walk toward his pickup, get in, and pull out of the yard. She waved, and then shut the door as Randy drove away, nervousness at the thought of what she had yet to accomplish flooding back in as soon as she was alone.

To keep her hands busy, she began straightening the house as she always did on Saturday mornings, wondering as the minutes ticked by where Noah was and what was taking him so long.

At last she heard the sound of a car pulling into the yard. Caution made her check out the front window to make sure it was Noah before opening the door. She caught a glimpse of him,



bent over half inside the white SUV, pulling something out of the back seat. As he straightened, shutting the car door with his hip and beginning to approach the house, his smiling face disappeared behind a mass of dozens of long-stemmed red roses he carried.

Perris felt her heart lighten and seem to rise in her chest, without lodging in her throat this time, as she watched him navigate the front steps without dropping one of the flowers. She had to step aside to allow him and his load of blooms inside the house. When she closed the door behind him, he held the fragrant roses aside as best he could, to lean and brush her lips with his.

"I love you," he said simply, clutching the long, spiked stems wrapped in green florist's paper. He pulled a fuzzy teddy bear from the crook of his arm and held it out toward her. "I have always loved you, Perri. I always will."

His image wavered as tears filled her eyes. "I love you too, you sentimental, extravagant lawman." She wiped at the moisture with one trembling hand. Surely both of them realized that their undying love for each other hadn't solved all their problems in the past. Saying they loved each other now didn't erase the fact that they still had some major difficulties to overcome. But instead of bringing up that thorny issue, she clutched the bear and said, "That's a lot of roses, Sheriff. What am I going to do with them all?"

Noah's eyes twinkled. "You're smart and versatile. You'll think of something."

He followed Perri into the small kitchen area, holding the roses aside so she could precede him and he could follow the sway of her slim hips in tight jeans. His mind was on things other than flowers and vases as Perris searched the cupboards for containers to hold an armful of red roses. Meanwhile she never let go of the bear.

The lemony smell of furniture polish mixed with the scent of the roses. Noah sniffed the familiar Saturday morning smell. "Been cleaning house?"

"You know me," Perris said over her shoulder. "Let it go all week and then clean like a demon on Saturday morning."

"Want some help? I owe you after leaving you with a dirty broiler the other night."

"Oh...housework will wait. It doesn't take me very long anyway, this place is so small." Perris handed him the bear, then raised her green eyes to his, lowering them quickly to begin separating the roses into bunches that would fit in the assembly of jars and tea glasses she'd chosen from the cupboards.

She was nervous, and trying to hide it. "How about breakfast?" Noah offered, gesturing with the bear. "Have you eaten yet? Should have thought of it before I came all the way out here. I could go get us something in town."

"Noah," she said quietly, "just sit down, okay? Relax. We've got all day."

All weekend, he corrected silently, pathetically grateful and also angry at himself for being thankful that Perris was willing to delay the inevitable. If he didn't botch everything again, maybe he could begin to hope for more than just a couple of days together.

He lowered himself to one of the ladder back chairs, her new teddy bear cradled in his lap, watching Perri distribute the flowers wherever she could find space in the tiny house. She wore a small, secret smile as she moved from place to place under Noah's watchful gaze, and he knew despite her protestations of his extravagance that the capriciousness of buying such a number of roses pleased her.

She had just returned to the table, taken his hand in hers, and began, "We have to talk," when the phone rang, altering her briefly contented expression.

She hesitated before answering the telephone, seeming unwilling to break the small contact between them. But Noah nodded toward the phone, echoing with a smile, "We have all day. Go ahead."

Her fingers lingered on his for a moment more, and then she reluctantly pulled them away to obey the strident summons. Her voice was clipped when she answered, warning whoever was calling that she wasn't in the mood for a long chat.

“Yes?” She paused. “Oh...yes. I’m glad you called.” She glanced at Noah, but he couldn’t read the message in her suddenly tense features. She listened, said, “That’s agreeable. That will be fine. Half an hour. Goodbye.”

Noah resisted the urge to ask who her caller was, stepping much more carefully this morning than usual around Perri. He was glad of his restraint when she offered the information anyway. Maybe he was finally learning to let her do things her way.

“That was Benjamin Collins,” she said.

Noah’s fingers clenched suddenly and she seized them to forestall his reaction.

“He’s coming over to bring the LadySmith back. Noah, I want your word that you’ll let him leave in peace.”

Noah swallowed hard. “Perri,” he said in a strangled whisper, “are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

“He says he didn’t take the gun, that one of his followers did out of misplaced loyalty. I choose to believe him.” Perri’s eyes resembled hard chips of jade. “I won’t press charges, Noah. I want you to call your deputies off, so Collins won’t be arrested after he leaves here.”

“What if—”

Perri held up a peremptory hand, shaking her short black bob stubbornly. “I don’t want to hear your worst-case scenario. I’ve given my word. And Collins has given his. We’re calling a truce until the filming is over on Tuesday. I’ve already talked to Merilee Kramer and the whole thing is set.”

“You’re sharing your air time with Benjamin Collins.”

“And Daddy, can you believe it?” A pixie look of smug satisfaction illuminated her features. “Everybody’s going to get a turn to drive home his or her viewpoint. I’m finished running, and I’m finished fighting. I know I’m right and that has to be good enough. From now on, people can decide for themselves.”

Noah sat back. Perri still clung to his hand. She obviously had no idea her father was after Benjamin Collins’s hide. He hadn’t seen or heard from Big John since Thursday night, and had no idea if the old man had caught up with the environmentalist. Nor what he’d done with Collins if he had found him. Noah said in a stunned voice, “I would never have thought to give Collins and your dad air time on the same program.”

“Having them both on the show was Randy’s idea. But I’ve decided. I’m going to have it all.”

“Including me?” Was there any hope? He studied this woman who seemed to grow in stature even as he sat looking at her. His admiration for her tenacity grew by leaps and bounds. This wasn’t the Perri he had known before. This was a mature woman, full-grown and formidable. She could almost make him believe everything was going to come off without a hitch. That the opposing sides would cooperate enough to air their views rationally. That everybody involved in the whole Red Bluffs controversy would shake hands and go off to live happily ever after.

Including Noah and Perris Dalton, who would ride romantically off into the sunset.

But the longer Noah stared at her delicate features set in obstinate lines, the more he came to doubt he occupied a permanent place in her plans, no matter what she had said a few nights ago. The awful thought occurred to him that she had agreed he could come over this morning just so she could tell him to bug off. The faraway look in her eyes frightened Noah badly. He knew she was remembering all the times he’d disappointed and failed her, all the times he’d overridden her desires in order to resolve things his way.

Resolved things, not to anyone’s satisfaction, but just to his own manly methods.

New determination hardened within him. If Perri decided she’d had enough of his interference and smothering, he would respect her wishes. If she said she wanted him to stay away from her, he’d do it. If it killed him, this time he’d listen to her. Maybe love such as he felt for her, ultimately meant just letting go.

At last Perri looked at him, and his heart slowly resumed beating again. He realized he was clutching the bear so hard its head was threatening to pop its stitches. Perri's look was full of hopefulness and trust. The hope that he'd finally learned his lesson and the trust that he now had enough confidence in her to allow her the freedom she needed to make her own decisions.

"I want you in my life, Noah," she said, and the breath he'd been holding whooshed out as he simultaneously loosened his clutch on the poor mangled bear. "But there are strings attached," she warned with an upraised forefinger.

"Yeah, I know."

Perris examined Noah closely. He wore a look of contrition, despite his broad shoulders and the lines of experience etching the corners of his sensuous mouth and serious gray-blue eyes. She reached over to rescue the little teddy bear whose fur was getting all ruffled and whose head drooped loosely to one side now.

"I'll give you the room you need, Perri," Noah said earnestly, clasping both of her hands in his as she set the bear aside. "I'll back off, I promise, until you ask for help. I won't push you any more or step on your toes. I'll respect you. Support you and love you."

"You're going to make a speech, aren't you?" she asked, but she was smiling.

"We could forget windy speeches and just skip to the good parts."

"Whoa, cowboy." Perri leaned away from him, smiling. "I'm not that kind of girl."

"I seem to remember otherwise," he insisted.

She grew pensive, biting her lip.

"Don't withdraw from me, now, Perri," he said in his most soothing voice. "You've got to have faith in us."

"I do. All the faith in the world, Noah."

"Wait. Hold on. You seem to be misunderstanding what I'm asking you," he said, shifting her on his lap so he could reach into his pocket. He held the sparkling diamond in front of her eyes, the engagement ring that she'd left on the dresser in their bedroom the day she took off.

He lifted her from his lap and sat her down in the chair opposite, then got to his knees before her. Formally, with feeling, he said, "Okay. Here comes the good part. Perris Dalton, I love you, now and forever. Will you please marry me?"

Perri closed her eyes, opened them again. Noah Dalton, on his knees, proposing. A proud man, Noah Dalton, a man of strength and principles. A man who had been sent to her—twice now—and she would be grateful for this second chance for the rest of her life.

"I'll marry you, Noah," she said with tears in her eyes. "For better or for worse."

Noah said, "For better. Definitely for better. Forever. Say it, Perri."

"You're getting pushy," she murmured.

"Just say it," he insisted. "I need to hear it."

She gave in. When Noah was right, he was right. "This time, it's forever," she agreed, and a great and beautiful gladness blossomed in her heart like the profusion of roses that surrounded them.

She jerked at a sudden noise, as the knock she'd been waiting for sounded. Even though she expected Benjamin Collins at any moment, she and Noah had been so intent on each other the rapping at the door took her by surprise. Neither of them had heard the approaching vehicle or footsteps on the porch.

Noah tensed instinctively, unused to being caught off guard. Perris withdrew her hands from his and shot him a warning glance before rising. Noah slowly stood, not taking his eyes from her as she crossed the room and opened the door. Every nerve in his body screamed in protest against his continuing to remain there meekly while Perri opened the door. But he managed to force himself to do it, his muscles tense and straining in readiness to leap to her defense even as he took his seat at the table.

But Perri opened the door on a new and improved version of Benjamin Collins. Big John stood holding the protester by the collar of his shirt. Collins avoided Perris's eyes.

Her nose wrinkled at the familiar smell. Collins smelled strongly of lanolin, like sheep.

She looked the question at her father, and then whipped around to stare accusingly at Noah. Noah held up his hands in an innocent gesture.

She turned rigidly back to the two men on her front porch for an explanation, her hands balled on her hips.

"Just settle yourself down, girl. Noah didn't have nothin' to do with this," her father said. "Thought of it, and done it, all myself. This city boy has himself a new appreciation for how things are done out here. He knows now how much work it is to make a living in Wyoming.

"We went on out to the protest this morning, and that other city boy said you were wanting to talk. But Mr. Benjamin Collins here has something he wants to say to you first."

Collins, unsuccessfully, tried to run a finger around the uncomfortably tight collar that Big John still had bunched in one fist. Lifting his other hand, he held out Perris's rosewood-handled LadySmith. "I'm sorry," he croaked.

Perris looked at her father. Then she looked at the protester, whose face was turning purple. Then she sighed.

She might as well just face the fact that there was no controlling the men in her life. They all, every single one, thought of themselves as conquering heroes. White knights or cowboys, she wasn't sure which myth they were living. But they all apparently thought they were living legends.

And, hell. Maybe they were. Maybe she should learn to accept the fact that the men who loved her were larger than life. And maybe she should be grateful for it.

"Let him go, Daddy," she said, taking the gun from Collins's limp hand. "The man can't breathe."

Big John complied, and Collins sagged at the knees, gasping for air. The rancher bent to clap the protester heartily on the back. "Sorry about that, sonny," he said with false cheerfulness. "Guess I don't know my own strength."

Perris rolled her eyes at her father's theatrics. "I'm dropping the charges."

Collins shot her a glance of disbelief as he rubbed his sore neck, followed by a longer, more questioning look in Noah's direction. Perris turned her head slightly in time to catch Noah's brief nod of consent, although his eyes remained steady and watchful. Collins took in the sight of the masses of roses decorating Perris's small house, and then he looked again at her.

"Randy was supposed to tell you we're all meeting at my office Monday afternoon to prepare for filming on Tuesday," she said to her father, but she was careful to include Benjamin Collins in the sweeping invitation.

Her father's tired face lit as he understood what Perris was saying, the truce she was offering. She was suddenly very glad she was a McLean. And also that it was so ingrained that McLeans *always* kept their word.

"Well," Big John said, seeming momentarily at a loss for words. He tried to recover himself, sticking his hands in his hip pockets and rocking back on his boot heels. Then he took out a handkerchief and blew his nose with a loud honk. "Well, I didn't see Randy this morning and I hadn't heard that, Perris. But it's a fine thing, and I thank you."

Then he said more firmly, "I guess I'll get this misguided boy back out to his pup tent at the mine." He shot a wry glance at Collins. "Unless you'd prefer to go with me back to the ranch?"

Collins's eyes widened and he shook his head negatively. But he'd been recovering nicely and now had built up air enough in his lungs to begin, "Ms. Dalton, I just want to say—"

"Shut up, boy," Big John said mildly, taking Collins by the arm and hauling him forcibly toward the steps. As he started to walk away with the protester in tow, he said in a confidential tone, "One thing you need to learn about women is how to quit while you're ahead."

Benjamin Collins attempted to pull his arm from Big John's grip, but he was no match for the old man's work-hardened muscles. Big John succeeded in towing Collins across the yard toward his parked pickup. Perris shut the door with a helpless grin and leaned back against it for a moment.

"You handled that well," Noah said as she walked a little unsteadily back toward the table where he sat with her mauled stuffed bear propped by his elbow.

By that time Perris was laughing so hard she almost collapsed. She laid the LadySmith back on the drop leaf table in the exact same spot Noah had placed it when he first brought it over. Obeying an urge to have Noah's strength surround her now, she perched on his lap and draped her arms around his wide shoulders. "You handled yourself well, too," she said. "I'm so glad you let Collins get away. Your restraint is admirable, Sheriff."

"I don't get it. You're not mad at him?" Noah asked, puzzled.

"Not this time. I figure he got what he deserved." She burst out laughing again. "Did you see the look on his face when Daddy threatened to take him back out to work the sheep?"

Noah grinned, relieved. If he had kidnapped the protester and made him shovel sheep shit for punishment, he suspected Perri would be furious. He'd figure out later how Big John had made his daughter laugh instead. But it was apparent that at the moment Perri had decided to forgive men in general, and he was just glad to be included.

"Let's get back to restraint, or lack thereof," he murmured, nuzzling her ear while his hands encircled her slim waist. He added, "Restrained doesn't quite describe what I feel when I'm around you."

But he was bluffing even as he said the words. Restrained—by his own fear—was exactly what he felt as the moment of truth between them inexorably approached. He felt he'd passed one test, but the big final exam still remained.

"Make your phone call," Perri said, laying the cool fingers of the hand wearing his diamond on his cheek. "Tell the whole world that Benjamin Collins is past tense. I'm going to take a nice, relaxing bath. And then we can have the rest of the day together."

She slid from his lap, hoping she'd successfully hidden her quivering panic at the thought of what was yet to come. Dealing with Benjamin Collins had been easy compared to what lay ahead for her and Noah.

The best she could do right now was try to defuse the tension. She turned the taps on full force, adding bath gel until bubbles began spilling over the sides of the deep tub. She shed her clothes quickly and stepped into the water, closing her eyes while she waited, wondering if Noah would join her. Just how they would go about this encounter was more like a trial than a natural coming together of two people who loved each other.

Out in the main part of the house, Noah completed the call that would halt the manhunt for Benjamin Collins. And then he stood, indecisive, unsure of exactly what his next move should be. In his pocket was his small stash of little blue pills. He could take one and make sure he'd be as hard as a steel rod for Perri. Or he could go without chemical help and hope to hell he got the same result.

Should he join Perri in the bath or wait out here? He didn't know what she wanted him to do, but the waiting was already gnawing at his gut. He'd waited five years for her already, and he really was no good at it. He was through with waiting, he decided, already kicking off his boots and shedding his clothes as he headed for the bathroom, leaving the pills in the pocket of his discarded jeans.

He needed to prove to the woman he loved just how much he truly loved her.

Perris went completely still when the white enameled bathroom door creaked open. Noah filled the doorway in his gilded naked glory, and Perris reveled in the sight. Up to her neck in bubbles, she ran her eyes appreciatively from his calves up his square-muscled thighs, taking in

the curly mat of sandy hair at the juncture there before continuing past his flat stomach and slim hips to his broad chest and neck. She tried to imagine him with some flaw, some slight defect that would allow them to meet on an equal footing. But the vision wouldn't come to her: Noah was and always had been golden perfection.

When her gaze reached his face, she saw he wore a crooked smile of uncertainty, despite the fact that his nudity declared he intended to join her in the water. He didn't have a hard-on and that wasn't a good sign.

"May I come in?" he asked.

Her naked shoulders peeked from the bubbles and Noah knew she'd tossed caution, and every single item of her clothing, to the winds.

"A beautiful man like you? How could any woman in her right mind refuse an offer like that?" She hooked a finger out of the water, smilingly gesturing him in, hoping the finger didn't quiver and betray her nervousness.

Water sloshed over the curved rim as Noah slid in behind her. She scooted forward, facing the old-fashioned faucet, her back to him. For long moments he just sat there, letting his hands float near her but not touching although his legs encompassed the length of hers to either side.

She took the initiative, leaning back against him with her head on his shoulder, hitching her hips into the juncture of his legs, reaching for his hands and wrapping them around her middle.

"I love you, Noah." She lay quietly against him, adding, "Mmm, this is nice."

Despite himself, Noah began in small increments to relax as nothing more happened between them. Nothing was demanded of him. The scent of whatever Perri had put in the water, the warmth of the water and her skin, and her undemanding nearness began to work their subtle magic. If she prepared the tranquil scene on purpose for their long-awaited naked confrontation, she'd chosen well: Noah felt the first stirrings of natural desire awakening against the smooth flesh of her nicely rounded ass.

Instead of immediately taking advantage of his growing interest, Perris lifted herself slightly with her heels and gently slid her backside along his hardening erection in tiny, encouraging movements.

The up and down whisper of enticement, of slick skin on slick skin, sent a thrill surging up through his cock. Perris moaned as he wrapped his arms more tightly about her, the buoyant motions of her body against his beginning to tease a response from her as well.

But she drifted to stillness instead of continuing. He clutched her tightly against his thickening erection and she closed her eyes—becoming rock hard was good, the first hurdle leaped—and then reached as languidly as she could for the soap and washcloth. All of her senses were kindling, the flowery smell of the bath gel enveloping them. Each small movement of lathering the soap caused the skin covering her shoulder blade to slide against Noah's slick chest.

She dipped a hand in the water to lift one of his legs, and as a consequence the two of them slowly slid deeper in the depths of the big tub. Now Noah floated up to his chin while she sat a little straighter to lave his foot, encouraged by the sounds of appreciation in his throat and the evidence of acute desire pressing against the crack of her ass. "I love your toes," she said, lovingly lathering each one.

He chuckled. "My toes are probably the least attractive part of my body."

She let that foot drift back alongside her own leg and lifted the other. The feel of Noah's furred leg descending against the smoothness of her own sent a shiver rippling up her backbone. In response, his hands splayed over her stomach, the little fingers of both hands tentatively entangling themselves in the fine hairs of her mound.

Perris's breath caught, but she continued her prolonged, soapy exploration of Noah's body instead of turning to him and immediately taking him inside her as she wanted to do. Some inner woman's voice of ancient wisdom urged caution, a prolonging of this love play, a protracting of

this warmth and pleasure. She washed the ball of his foot, his heel, his muscular calf. “I love your feet and your legs,” she said.

Noah sighed contentedly. “You’re the one with the great legs,” he insisted, but he had to admit he was enjoying her sultry admiration of his body. Maybe it was shallow of him to want adoration from her. But Perri was making him feel great.

When she finished with his leg, she pulled one of his hands from her taut belly and started on it with the washcloth. “I love your hands,” she murmured. The long fingers were so familiar to her, each golden hair and prominent blue vein a miracle, the clipped nails a paragon of perfection. And what he knew how to do to her with those hands, those long fingers...

She returned that hand to the nest of soft hair between her legs. Her breath was coming in short gasps now, and she captured his other hand, soaping up his arm as far as she could reach without turning toward him. The hand she had returned to the water was starting a bold exploration of the folds between her legs, seeking and almost but not quite reaching her throbbing clit. “I love your arms,” she whispered, while praying silently, *Please let this work. Please. This is might be our last chance.*

As if in answer to her plea, Noah wouldn’t allow her to return his hand to the water when she tried. Finally catching on, he held that hand out in front of her, and Perris dropped the soap and washcloth into his palm. He levered his torso up behind her, sliding her butt resolutely back into place between his legs when she started to float away, holding her there with one bent knee and a foot caressing her silky calf.

He touched the soapy washcloth to the back of her neck, the other hand working the muscles in her neck until Perris thought she might slip lower in the water and drown from sheer tactile pleasure. “I love your skin,” Noah said.

Perris sighed deeply in response. This might work. She tried to relax and let the rest of it just happen. She’d led Noah, but his willingness to follow her lead had made all the difference.

As he lifted each of her arms in turn, exploring the shape and smooth musculature, he began to tell her of his love for her. The slow realization of what Perri had cunningly accomplished made him admire her all the more. She elicited, and got, an appreciation far deeper than the feel of her satin skin, more enduring than her rounded curves and slim legs. As he lavished attention on each separate part of her, he came to the inescapable conclusion that what mattered to him was not any one part but the whole of her.

The woman in his arms was Perri, his own Perri—and he’d been an utter idiot to ever fear getting naked and making love to her. He grasped her, turning her weightless body toward him, murmuring softly, “I love your shoulders.”

She came willingly around to face him, and Noah slid his hands down her arms to her waist and then lower yet. “I love your hips,” he said, gazing into her wide green eyes. He lifted her in the water and slid his own ass forward and underneath her until she hovered over the source of so much sharp pleasure and sweet sorrow. He was thankful his dick still stood at stiff attention, waiting impatiently for some loving of its own.

“I love how you look when you want me,” he said, “your lips parted and wet, your eyes so intensely green it’s like looking into deep summer lakes.”

Bubbles still covered her to her collarbones. Noah lowered her slowly onto his engorged cock. He sighed her name, closing his eyes at the familiar stabs of pleasure that engulfed him as she enfolded him fully in her silky, wet warmth. He opened his eyes to see her watching him, a soft smile tugging at one corner of her mouth.

“I love the feel of you wrapped around me,” he whispered. “I love how you squeeze me when I’m all the way inside you.”

He cupped his left hand over her right breast, his right hand gently palming the scar over her ribs on the left, the fingers of that hand sliding beneath her arm instead of encountering a matching globe. It felt strange for a moment; somewhere deep inside he still expected the

familiar symmetry of two pert round breasts filling his hands. But the shock of the difference between what he expected and what he felt in his hands was gone, dissipated into an enveloping love for Perri that made her all the more endearing for her unique blend of courage and strength.

"I love you, Perris Dalton," he said. "All of you. When I'm alone, I'm less than half. You complete me."

She felt him begin to move inside her. For a second she rested her forehead against his in breathless gratitude, thankful for this stubborn lawman who in the end didn't know what it meant to give up. She said with all her heart, "I love you too, Noah. I've never missed anything like I missed you."

He pressed his hand over her chest more firmly, meaningfully. He wasn't afraid of hurting her now. "We won't be missing anything from now on," he said, his voice starting to crack with the strain of holding back on the physical part of making love until they'd said all that needed to be said.

"You're the part of me that was missing," Perri said, lowering her lips to his.

Noah accepted her kiss and returned it with the passion of five years of pent-up longing. "You've always been the best part of me," he murmured, crushing her to him as he lifted her dripping from the bath. Still connected at their core, he walked carefully, carrying his precious burden toward the bed where they belonged.

## Epilogue

Perris and Noah lay curled together on the big sofa in the living room of their new house, watching the recorded version of Merilee Kramer's Sunday morning program featuring Perris, Big John, and Benjamin Collins.

"Daddy was really in prime form that day," Perris commented, smiling fondly at the image of her father expounding about the vanishing breed of Western rancher.

"So were you," Noah said as the picture switched to Perris rappelling down the highwall at the mine. He nipped her earlobe and then kissed it, wrapping his arms more securely about her slim waist. He couldn't get enough of touching her, of reassuring himself that she was finally and forever his. "But then, you're always in prime form."

Perris smiled at the compliment. Noah had become very adept lately at making her feel good about her body, his hands steady when he reached for her, without ever a sign of flinching. She had been tentatively exploring the possibility of breast reconstruction so she wouldn't need the prosthesis anymore. She had resisted the idea after surgery because she had so much to deal with she couldn't face any more decisions at that point. By now there were at least eight breast reconstruction choices depending on whether she wanted an implant or fat or muscle tissue taken from elsewhere on her own body. Every time she brought up the subject Noah insisted she was perfect just the way she was. The decision was up to her. And now the decision had become immeasurably more complicated because she suspected she was pregnant, which didn't just narrow her choice of replacement breast tissue. She might just put it off until they had all the children they wanted. Surprise Noah with a middle-aged matched set of boobs.

The images on the screen flickered in the muted light. The actual filming at Red Bluffs had been almost anticlimactic to Perris after the perils she'd faced getting Noah back in her bed and her life. The demonstration had broken up soon after Merilee Kramer left the mine site after filming that Tuesday. Benjamin Collins was apparently content that he had accomplished what he'd set out to do, or else Big John had succeeded in convincing the protester that his sojourn in Wyoming was ended.

The only visible cloud on the Daltons' horizon now was the prospect of Noah's re-election in the fall. Perris still felt uncomfortable with the questions his opponent posed in the newspapers and at open forum debates. Noah shrugged off the prying and the former sheriff's attempt to use



his abrupt re-marriage to Perri as campaign fodder and proof that Noah was a flip-flopper who had trouble making up his mind.

"You worry too much," he informed Perri in supremely self-confident tones that got her dander up. In fact Noah had, without her knowledge, instructed his printer to paste up new brochures that included her picture and her education and background. He was confident he'd almost learned her boundaries by now—where he could step in and where he couldn't. He might have the campaign literature made up in secret, but didn't dare distribute it without her knowledge. He would show her the proposed brochures tonight, and hope she'd give him the go-ahead. He was so damned proud of her and what she'd accomplished. He had no doubt that the man he faced for the office actually lessened his own chances of winning by publicly challenging the Daltons' love for each other.

For Noah had discovered an important truth the day he'd let Jackie Merritt in his office. The mystique embodied in the West was far from dead; romance lived on in the hearts of the people of Wyoming's high desert—even in the tough kernels euphemistically called the hearts of journalists. Noah had every confidence in the voters of Powell County, especially after Ms. Merritt went ahead and printed what she knew of the story of his and Perri's adventures on the rough road to marriage the second time around.

But even if he lost the election, Noah knew he was ready for that too. There were other jobs in law enforcement, and even if he went all the way back to patrol he could probably handle it as long as he had Perri's special morning send-offs. He grinned, amazed all over again at how deep down happy he was just to have her back.

"Mike and I are going to band the baby hawks tomorrow," Perri said. "Would you like to come out and watch?"

Noah hesitated. "Seeing you dangling off the pit by a rope on television is enough for me," he finally said. "I don't think I could take it if I was actually out there watching."

Perri turned toward him and slid a finger enticingly over his lips.

After a moment of indecision—it really would be good to reinforce the lessons she'd taught him, by putting himself in a situation where she would be taking her own chances—he said, "Okay. It's a date."

His reward was her wide smile of happiness. "The older babies always bail out," she said dreamily. "Their first flight. It's really not to be missed, Noah. Instead of landing on the ground, some of them actually circle and make it back to the nest."

"And the ones who don't?" Noah took her finger in his mouth. "What happens to the ones that don't fly on the first try?"

"Mike's always at the bottom to rescue them when they flutter down. We put the fledglings back in the nest, where they stay until they're ready to fly on their own." She added, "But they really are big enough to fly. Some actually get pushed out by weary parent hawks who get tired of the demands of a nest full of almost grown youngsters."

"So you're more than willing to rush in and save the ones who aren't ready to wing it alone?" Noah's eyes glinted mischievously. "Isn't that sort of interfering with nature or something? What if they don't want your help?"

She widened her big green eyes, trying to pretend she didn't know that he was teasing her about her own propensities. Noah was the one who sometimes still rushed in where angels feared to tread, but he always told her about it. And she always forgave him.

She realized now that he always protected her because he loved her.

Returning her thoughts to the hawks, she said, "They cry, piteously, when they reach bottom and can't take wing again. Can you handle that?"

"Piteously, huh?" Noah wagged an eyebrow at her. "Will you have to cry that hard before I'm allowed to step in without permission and help you?"

"I think a simple request will do," Perris said, smiling. "Something along the lines of, Will you please make love to me now?"

Noah's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Glad you asked. Will you dress up for me, baby? How about black lace?"

Perris's heart soared. From the television behind her she heard the sharp cry of the red-tailed hawk in the man-made canyons of the mine, the reedy whistle echoing on the wind until it reached the ears of a second bird of prey. The call let the male hawk know his mate was all right, even though he couldn't see her from where he rode the thermals hunting for food. Below the raptors, the harsh landscape of the West spread out in sage covered hills and sharp escarpments of dun rock. The raptors' to hunt, theirs to claim and repopulate so long as they worked together and man continued to care about their future and respect their right to survive.

"All it takes is a little understanding, a little listening to the other person's point of view," the Perris on the television screen was saying. "Small enough gestures for great rewards."

She added to herself, A lifetime of happiness in return for a bit of mutual respect. She watched Noah's eyes darken with lust. He was holding back, trying so darned hard to be the kind of man she wanted. It made tears well in her eyes. He tipped his head to kiss her and what began as a gentle explorations turned to sudden, avid fervor when she returned the pressure.

"Hey, hey," he said softly, holding her away slightly to ascertain why she clutched him so tightly, but gratified by her passionate response. "What's the rush? We've got all night, Mrs. Dalton."

Perris didn't want anything to distract Noah right now, not even the competition of her videotaped self to take his attention away from what they'd only started here on the sofa. She aimed the remote over her shoulder. The TV went dark, and she returned to the here and now, to what mattered most in her life.

For the rest of her life. "Love me now," she urged.

Noah ran his hands over her responsive body, more than ready to comply. He murmured into her mouth as he kissed her, repeating the vow that always kept her coming back, "All you have to do is ask. But, Perri, please don't forget the lace."

*The End*