

## The Hawk Point Romances



*Take a Chance on Love*

*Perilous Promises*

*Clay's Quest*

Christi Williams

## HAWK POINT ROMANCES: THE COLLECTION

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# Take a Chance on Love

by  
Christi Williams

## Chapter One

Chancie de Leur glanced at the two studiously casual men once more before dismissing her assistant for the night. Neither of the big, broad-shouldered men showed outward signs of awareness that they were being watched. Instead, they stood at military ease in matching green and beige uniforms. Hands folded in front of their belts, each of them held a right elbow hovering over the dull black butt of a holstered gun.

Judy Weinrich eyed the two troopers blocking the exit. “Are you sure, Chancie?” she whispered. “I can stay if you want.”

Chancie considered the two men glancing from the corners of their eyes at Judy. Their training would lead them to be suspicious of Judy’s spiky blond hair, baggy jeans, and pierced nostril. Judy looked like a teenaged rock fan instead of Screening Services’ ace assistant, but Chancie couldn’t have stayed in business without her. She’d become so used to Judy’s presence, she sometimes forgot how other people reacted to her appearance.

Chancie sighed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *Cops*. Always ready to judge.

Then, she brought herself up short, doing an abrupt mental about-face. She herself was judging by appearances. So they were cops. So they wore uniforms. They also represented the new contract that would pay next month’s rent on this office.

She shrugged and grinned at Judy. “Get out of here while you have the chance. Go on your hot date before I change my mind and chain you to your desk.” She pointed through the open vertical slats of the wide front window, toward the glow of headlights penetrating the December dusk from the parking lot. “Parker’s waiting.”

Magic words. Judy grinned back, swooped a plaid flanneled arm over her desk for her coat, and nudged the two troopers aside in her hurry to get out the door. They gave ground unwillingly, but stepped back in tandem when a chill gust of night air hit them. The heavy wood entry door slammed shut and Chancie was left alone with two armed men.

She tore her eyes from the window and the sight of Judy’s slim form scrambling eagerly into the passenger seat of Parker’s shiny new sports car. What a mismatch: traditional, well-groomed Parker and music video-inspired Judy. Neither truly belonged in Hawk Point, Wyoming. But they seemed happy together, and Chancie realized she was a bit jealous of Judy. How long had it been since Chancie herself had so looked forward to meeting a man? For at least the last year, all her contacts with the male gender had involved business. With a jolt of longing, she wished that just once she could spend a minute with a man she hadn’t booked through Screening Services.

Shivering, Chancie turned from the window that sparkled around the edges with cold. She pasted on her professional smile, showing off the straight, white teeth that she’d finally been able to get fixed. So much had changed about Chancie de Leur in the last couple of years. She couldn’t afford to jeopardize any of her hard work now because she felt a little winter mooning for someone to love her.

“Young love,” she said brightly, nodding after Parker’s departing taillights. She tried to draw the patrol troopers into a friendlier stance, and also, she realized, a lighter attitude toward Judy

Weinrich. Chancie knew she succeeded, with one of the troopers at least, when he raised nearly electric blue eyes to hers and smiled back.

The other remained distant, aloof, his dark brown eyes following the low slung car swinging out of the parking lot. Make, model, and license number duly noted, Chancie thought. Parker had better drive with extra care tonight.

“Well, gentlemen, who’s first?”

At last she had the second trooper’s attention. His dark gaze swung from the window to her, and suddenly she didn’t like him looking at her. His brown eyes drifted from her soft kid boots to the top of her highlighted bronze curls, and that unreadable blank stare sent a chill through her. She much preferred the bright blue gaze of the first cop. His sapphire eyes didn’t remind her of Kenny.

But she liked the dark-eyed trooper even less when he opened his mouth. “I guess I’m first, honey,” he said.

Chancie stiffened, her efficient calm threatening to snap. She didn’t like being called honey, and especially not in her office, the office she worked darned hard, long hours to keep going.

Self-doubts she’d thought long buried made her throat tighten. Had she done something to indicate to this oaf it was okay to call her little pet endearments? She fast-forwarded in her mind from the moment of the troopers’ arrival to Judy’s departure, reassessing each movement and word. Her review turned up nothing out of order. But then little usually was out of order in her carefully detailed life. She made sure of that.

No. She was tired, that’s all. The cop’s behavior was rotten, not hers. She retreated behind an icy wall of professionalism, taking a couple of steps backward to round the corner of Judy’s desk. Snatching up the top two forms from a stack of the proper five-part documents, she seated herself with a flick of her chocolate suede skirt.

“Name?” she said with as much frost as she could muster.

“Arthur Brinegar, honey,” he drawled. “What’s yours?”

She clenched her teeth. She didn’t grind; the orthodontist had drilled into her during months of work in her mouth that grinding one’s teeth was a nasty, immature habit one could break if one really tried. And Chancie tried, for the sake of a perfect smile. She still wore her plastic retainer at night so she wouldn’t inadvertently gnash her pearly white molars, even in sleep.

She locked gazes with the dark-eyed cop. How did Judy deal with it day after day? All the men, with their insufferable inflated male egos. The testing procedure that should have been humiliating instead seemed to bring out the lurking beast in some men. Chancie thought she’d seen it all when it came to male boorishness, and she was glad she didn’t have to test on a regular basis anymore. Judy did most of the testing. Poor Judy. She deserved every penny of the raise she’d been hinting she wanted for Christmas.

“My name is Chancie de Leur, Trooper Brinegar. I own Screening Services. Please remove your hat, coat, and the belt with all your paraphernalia.”

“The owner, huh? That’s what I call personal service. I’m real impressed.” Brinegar placed his dark green campaign hat atop his coat in one of the reception area chairs. Then he moved deliberately into her line of view, the black patterned handgrip on the heavy gun at his belt directly at her eye level. Raw power emanated from the man, from the gun. Chancie wondered if Brinegar got his kicks from trying to intimidate all people or just women.

“Knock it off, Artie.” The second trooper had sunk into one of the midnight blue bucket chairs lining the rough wood walls. Legs casually spread, he’d removed his uniform Smokey Bear hat and placed it with Brinegar’s on the seat next to him. He raised a hand to brush back glossy black hair before casually crossing his arms.

His hair color contrasted strikingly with his blue eyes. The planes of his face fit his skull tightly. Maybe a hint of Indian there, Chancie thought, as she stared at him. His broad chest tapered to slim hips and long, powerful legs.

She found herself drifting, assessing what she shouldn’t be in her line of work. Her gaze kept straying up those rangy limbs to his crotch. Her cheeks heated.

The trooper with the striking coloration smiled as if he hadn't noticed where she was looking. He had gorgeous white teeth, she thought, as he said, "Quit hassling the lady, Art. Let's just get this over with."

Chancie yanked her attention back to business, struggling to keep her face professionally blank. Brinegar, deflated a bit by the tone of the other cop's voice ruining his fun, removed his laden belt. The cop with the arresting blue eyes nodded. She could almost read the thought directed her way: It's okay, lady.

Killer smile, Chancie thought. I wonder if he's married. She caught her thoughts almost roving into mooning territory again, and pulled her attention back to her work. Judy had the forms all properly filled out. She said, "May I see a photo I.D., please, Trooper Brinegar."

Brinegar reached for his wallet, his movements slow and deliberate. He reminded her of a predator, of Kenny, actually. Same build, same coloring. He even wore a similar cologne, and Chancie breathed through her mouth to avoid inhaling the familiar scent. She dreaded being alone with Arthur Brinegar and wished the other cop, the nice cop, had volunteered to go first.

She asked Brinegar to confirm that the name, address, and employer on his form were correct, even though his entire appearance confirmed he was employed by the Wyoming Highway Patrol. As he leaned to comply, she consulted the name on the second form: Micah Taylor. Micah: a nice, old-fashioned name. Micah Taylor seemed like a *Nice Man*. Also a *Sexy Man*. She risked another peek at him from behind Judy's computer screen before she rose to escort Arthur Brinegar to the restroom. Micah Taylor caught her looking and smiled again.

Well, he'd spied her giving him a second looking-over. But at the same time she'd caught his blue eyes studying her. She wondered if the exchange meant anything. She was rusty at these boy-girl games, but felt a definite flutter in the pit of her stomach. She was happy she could still recognize the pieces of the game even if she didn't remember all the rules. Her knees trembled as she rose to precede Brinegar down the hall, but not from Brinegar's nearness. It was the thought of Micah Taylor that had her shaking. Suddenly she had the most vivid picture of Trooper Taylor naked: all tall, lean muscle. She had a lot of trouble making the vision go away, even though she knew she *had* to make it go away. It was imperative that she keep her mind on what she was doing.

"If you'll follow me, please." Her voice quavered. She refused to turn her head to see if Micah Taylor watched her walk across the short-napped gray carpet, even though she could feel the heat of his eyes centered on her ass. She could feel Arthur Brinegar's eyes as well through the suede fabric of her drop-shouldered shirt, and forced herself not to shudder at the definite contrast of hot and cold.

Micah Taylor watched the woman with the dark honey-gold hair give the cold shoulder to Artie. He admired the way Chancie de Leur handled herself, all cool and collected. He liked the way she looked too, that soft brown outfit reminding him of Taos and sunshine, chasing away the winter chill. He especially liked the way she filled out what she wore, breasts nice round mounds in front and ass very nice round mounds swinging most invitingly in back. Not to mention that wild tangle of honey gold hair cascading down her back. Yeah, he definitely liked looking at Chancie de Leur.

He wanted to fuck her.

*Whoa. Whoa.* Wait. Where had *that* come from? He usually had an extremely taut rein on distracting thoughts during working hours. But suddenly, without any warning, all the synapses in his brain were firing with sex signals aimed in Chancie de Leur's direction. And once the picture of her naked presented itself, he found all his concerted effort couldn't make it go away. In a matter of seconds she had imprinted on the most primal part of his brain.

His hands clenched with effort. Maybe he could override her nude image by thinking of other things. He looked around the office, trying to calculate how much money she had sunk into the plush office furniture, expensive looking carpet, and computers and fax machine and printers and

intercom telephones. So she owned this business. A woman like her could afford to sniff at a highway patrol trooper's salary, he thought.

Usually, rich women put Micah off. Money attracted money, and Wyoming highway troopers were historically underpaid, although since the latest energy boom and the resultant loosening of state purse strings he didn't exactly qualify for food bank rations anymore. Still, he didn't think he made anywhere near what this woman obviously made.

But even if he didn't have a hope with Chancie de Leur, he remained acutely interested. He couldn't help himself. There was something about her, a slight hesitancy that made him think the cool veneer was an act, something she'd learned in order to operate this kind of business.

He mused while he waited. That assistant of hers. Dressed like a gang member. Probably bad for business.

But if that were true, why would Chancie keep her? There was more to this stimulating woman than met the eye, Micah was sure. He stared down at the floor as he waited for his turn, hands knotted, eyes unfocused, thinking about Chancie de Leur.

He was lost in thoughts of a deeper exploration of Chancie de Leur, thoughts that, despite his resolve, had her shedding the pieces of that velvety brown getup. For him. Slowly. One-by-one.

Chancie halted at the end of a short hallway. Brinegar almost knocked her over, using the excuse to grasp her elbow and pull her way too close.

She extricated her arm. "I'm fine, really, Trooper Brinegar." She opened the door to the restroom. She would follow the testing script precisely, and she would be safe. "Please wash your hands."

Brinegar complied, looking over his shoulder at her, but she didn't encourage small talk. She laid the form she carried on top of a stack of plastic bins in the hall. She opened one of the bins and removed two small white boxes, extending both. "As you can see, these kits are both sealed in plastic wrap and unopened. Please choose one."

From now on, the client would do as much as possible of the touching of his chosen box and its contents. Chancie hated this part of the business. Judy seemed to handle it with nonchalance, but Chancie found the actual bare bones of what she did for a living distasteful and had been more than glad to hand it over to Judy.

Brinegar shrugged. "It's for your own protection, sir," Chancie insisted. He picked, and she laid the other aside, reclaiming the form from the top of the stacking bins. "Please unwrap it," she said as she donned a pair of latex surgeon's gloves. Brinegar grinned at the sight of the gloves, reaching to undo his pants.

Oh, boy, one of those, Chancie thought. A latent exhibitionist. I knew it; I could see this one coming. She held up a warning finger. "Please unwrap the kit, Trooper Brinegar."

Brinegar complied, exposing a plastic cup wrapped in a plastic bag, along with two small bottles and caps. She checked the restroom. No wastebasket. The doors under the sink cabinet were locked, fresh blue dye stained the water in the toilet bowl. She explained the procedure while Brinegar's hands hovered restlessly over his unbuttoned fly. "Fill the plastic cup to the line if you can. Put the cup on the shelf, and open the door as soon as you're finished. Do not run any water. Do not flush the toilet."

In one swift motion, she twisted off the faucet knobs, grabbed the dispenser of liquid soap, shut the door and whirled into the hall. "You can begin now," she called through the door.

She let out a breath. She'd done it. Arthur Brinegar was safely inside until he produced the specimen that would allow him to return to work. The government regulations on drug and alcohol testing had been a godsend for Chancie, who'd jumped at the opportunity to go into business for herself. Industries from trucking to railroads to giant chain stores now had their employees tested regularly at random intervals. She held many small, local contracts, but lately had begun chasing the big ones. Screening Services had grown to cover ten states, with five satellite offices. Just last month she'd landed the Wyoming Department of Transportation contract. Brinegar and Micah

Taylor were the first highway patrol troopers to be tested without having been involved in a traffic accident.

At first, Chancie had done it all herself: pursuing the contracts, answering the phones, doing the actual testing. But it had become too much, snowballing beyond her ability to handle Screening Services alone. When Judy Weinrich had applied for the job, Chancie had been so desperate she'd hired her on the spot, nose-ring and all. Chancie and Judy had grown into Screening Services together, and as a result, she overlooked Judy's personal shortcomings, such as her fondness for flannel shirts and cargo pants as office attire.

She liked Judy. Outward appearance aside, Judy was sharp and dedicated, a rock in a crisis. Judy also had a wild sense of humor that cut through the tension of running a business where a lawsuit over a test result was always a distinct possibility. Somewhere along the line, Judy had begun cataloguing all the men who passed through the doors of Screening Services. In one code word, a man was summed up, pegged for future reference. Chancie already knew Arthur Brinegar's designation: *A*, for Aggressive. There were worse: *F*, for Flasher; *G*, for Groper. She was hoping Arthur Brinegar wouldn't graduate from an *A* to an *F* or a *G* while he was in the restroom. There were also better designations: *N*, for Nice; *E*, for Easy to Deal With; *W*, for All-Around Winner. Micah Taylor, so far, was an *N*. Neither she nor Judy had reason before to include an *H*, as it was totally against the rules to even think of fraternizing with clients, but Chancie was willing to bet Judy would agree to add a category of *Hot* for Micah Taylor.

The single letter designation would appear somewhere in the man's computer file. It wasn't fair, Chancie supposed, to measure a person in one word. On the other hand, forewarned was forearmed. Any edge in this male-dominated business helped. No one except she and Judy knew what the innocuous letter meant, and it was certainly better to know what to expect than to be stuck alone after hours with an unanticipated Groper.

Brinegar opened the door a crack. He didn't come out; he merely stood there with the door partially opened.

"All finished?" Chancie asked.

Brinegar's mouth worked. He flushed from his stiff dark green collar up to his hairline. He said quietly, "I, uh, I can't."

A changed man. Chancie stifled a sigh in favor of the impersonally friendly approach. "Quite all right. It happens often. Would you like to wait while Trooper Taylor tests? Sometimes just a little wait time will do the trick."

Chancie could see Arthur Brinegar resented being lumped in with the *happens often* group, as if his masculinity were somehow in question. His jaw clenched, and he preceded her rigid-spined down the hall to wait. But at least his chagrin kept him from progressing along the alphabet, as she had feared he would. If Arthur Brinegar followed Judy's tongue-in-cheek guidelines, he'd be docile as a pup from now on. She grinned behind his back as she walked behind him, discarding his unused test kit in the reception area's trash. Maybe they'd have to add a new designation just for Brinegar: *P* for Puppy.

But she changed her mind when she tested Micah Taylor. Maybe this man deserved two letter designations. Besides *H*, he could also be a *P*. *P*, in her private shorthand from now on, would stand for Perfect Gentleman. Taylor listened attentively and followed directions. With him, she wouldn't have to worry he'd snuck someone else's specimen in under his armpit or tucked in the waistband of his pants. She doubted she'd have to defend herself against untoward attention, because he was all business. When he finished and opened the door, his plastic cup filled right to the mark sat on the laminate shelf.

She felt his nearness as she checked the temperature of the specimen, then watched as he poured the specimen into two separate bottles and capped them tightly. She asked him to verify that the numbers on the gummed strips she signed and placed over the caps matched the numbers on his chain of custody form. All very proper and by the rules of the Drug Test Manual. Extremely unromantic.

So why did her stomach flutter whenever he raised those blue eyes to hers, liquid heat instantly spreading between her legs despite telling herself she was inching toward trouble every time she looked into his eyes? If he just said the word, she thought, she would willingly be spreading her legs. Could the raw attraction she felt merely be that of the man in uniform that all women were supposed to fall for? Was she dazzled by the brass on his chest and collar, flustered by the seven-point gold badge with the state seal on it?

This was getting ridiculous. She had to concentrate on the task at hand. She told him to return the bottles to their cardboard holes in the white box. Then she tore off two sheets of the five-part form and placed them inside with the bottles, replaced the faucet handles, and asked if he wanted to wash his hands. He nodded. She took custody of the box and returned to the hallway, shutting the door.

When he came out, she forced herself to smile coolly. "All finished."

"Not quite." Micah Taylor looked down into her eyes, the blue of his irises thinning as the pupils enlarged. Chancie had read somewhere, probably in one of those gushy teen magazines years ago, that the human pupil dilates when looking at something pleasurable. She wondered if her own green irises had given way to wide black pupils as she looked back at Micah Taylor. She unconsciously licked her lips, and could have sworn she heard him stifle a groan.

He said, voice gravelly, "I noticed you're not wearing a wedding band. Are you married?"

"No. Widowed," Chancie said slowly. She couldn't encourage this man, in this place, her business office. No matter how much she might want to.

"Well, that's good. No, wait. I don't mean being widowed is good. I just meant—"

"I think I know what you meant, Trooper Taylor," Chancie said. She still held the white box. She couldn't indulge in anything even resembling flirting.

"I'm not either. Married, I mean." He reached out as if to touch her, changed his mind and snatched his hand away. Chancie thought it was a good thing he didn't touch her, and not just because it would compromise his test. If he made a move toward her she just might melt right in to him, liquefy into a pool of chocolate suede at his feet if he so much as put a hand on her. She needed touching so bad she thought she'd die from it sometimes.

"Are you engaged?"

"No."

"Seriously attached?"

"No."

"Seeing anyone?"

"No."

"Would you go out with me?"

*Oh, yeah.*

Chancie strained to keep her composure. "Trooper Taylor, to avoid suspicion over the accuracy of your test, which could affect your job, I don't think we should be discussing this right now."

He studied her intently, blinked, then backed up a step. "You're absolutely right. I apologize."

Relieved, and also disappointed, Chancie turned to precede him toward the reception area, where she locked the box in the refrigerator.

Brinegar sat in one of the bucket chairs, eyeing the two of them suspiciously. Chancie supposed they might have taken more than an ordinary amount of time to get back. But Micah Taylor didn't react to Brinegar's curious glance. He merely buckled his heavy black webbed belt back on. Then he retrieved his Montana-creased green hat, took the seat next to Brinegar and folded his arms across his chest, straightening those incredibly long legs out in front of him.

"You ready yet, Artie?" he said, with a hint of a superior smirk from beneath the brim of his hat.

"Yeah, I'm ready," Brinegar said sourly.

Again Chancie had to face being alone with Arthur Brinegar. She hoped he wasn't one to take his failures out on others, like Kenny used to do.



But Brinegar cooperated woodenly. He went through the motions as mechanically as Chancie, and when it was over neither trooper looked at her as Brinegar re-donned his gun belt, hat, and jacket in the reception area. But Micah Taylor did glance at her once more before shutting the door on his way out. His startling blue eyes sent a veiled message, and with a jolt of what she thought might be happiness Chancie knew the flame that sizzled low in her had likewise been kindled in him.

She watched the twin black patrol cars pull out of the lot and drive away. She shut down Judy's computer and her own, and then went around turning off lights. When she'd done everything she could think of to pass some time, she stood for a moment in front of the darkened window. As she waited, the December night settled on the high desert of Wyoming with diamonds of frost that spread on car windshields and sparkled on pavement beneath street lamps. Christmas lights twinkled on the houses in the new subdivision across the road. The thought occurred that she hadn't even taken time to put up her own tree yet.

The phone she'd been waiting on rang.

She picked it up with trembling fingers. "Screening Services."

With no preamble, the male voice said, "I'm glad you're still there; I was afraid I'd miss you. From now on, I'll get tested at the urologist's or the hospital. Would that take care of ethics considerations between us, Chancie de Leur?"

She hesitated. "You'll have to take that up with WYDOT, Trooper Taylor. I have a contract. They may require that you pay the testing fee yourself if you don't use us. It's not an inconsiderable sum."

"Call me Micah. I'll do what I have to do. My test is over. Now will you go out with me?"

Again she paused, and he rushed to fill the electric silence humming between them. "I know you probably get asked out a thousand times a week, but would you please just consider seeing me?"

She stuttered. "N-no, I don't."

The silence stretched again. "Did you say no, you won't?"

Chancie hastened to correct, "No. I said, No, I don't get asked out much. And yes, I would like very much to see you, Micah."

She could hear his surprise when he spoke. "You don't get asked out much? I find that hard to believe."

"I'm very busy, and most men find that I'm too cold and businesslike."

This time he paused before saying softly, as if to himself, "Fools." Then he said, "Cold? There's a furnace burning in you, lady. I could feel it from ten feet away."

Chancie didn't know what to say. Was she so obvious? Did her loneliness flash like an inferno, advertising her availability? Please, no. She'd worked so hard to present a competent exterior, to wear a poker face like the rest of the big boys, to hide her easy feelings and never, ever, cry when she lost.

"I'm sorry," Micah said in a low voice. "I probably shouldn't have said that. It's just, you make me feel like I know you, like we're already friends." He added in a more normal voice, "Hey, don't worry. Nobody else can see it. Just me. Sometimes I can sort of read people, if you know what I mean."

"That's spooky," Chancie said, shaken. She remained unconvinced she didn't have a sign flashing *Lonely Heart* in big red neon letters on her forehead.

"I talk too much sometimes," he said quietly. Holding the phone away from his mouth, his voice was almost drowned by background traffic noise in whatever parking lot he'd pulled into in order to make his call. Then he must have moved it back near his lips because she could hear him clearly again. "No, listen. It helps, in my line of work. It helps to know if the guy in the car you've just stopped is thinking of pulling a gun. It's not spooky. Hey, I know another thing. I know there's no real harm in your assistant. You like that, don't you? That I can see she's a good person under the trash she wears?"

“Judy isn’t trash, she’s just very young.”

He said, “I apologize, yet again. I get the feeling I’m getting off to a very bad start with you, and that’s not what I want at all. I want you to say yes. Please just say yes, you’ll go out with me, and end this wordplay.”

Chancie smiled. “I just did.”

“That’s right. You did.” She could hear relief in his voice. It made her feel better to know Micah Taylor was nervous too. “When?” he added.

“When did I say it?”

His voice lowered intimately. “Don’t tease, Chancie. When will you go out with me?”

She shivered at the low tone of his voice. “W-what time do you get off?” she managed to stutter.

It was his turn to hesitate. “Tonight?”

“Yes. Tonight.” Was she pushing? He was absolutely right about what he’d sensed in her: she burned. Chancie half expected the telephone to melt in her hand. At the same time she was frightened out of her mind. This sudden fire for Micah was terrifying: a leaping conflagration could certainly warm her on cold, lonely nights. Or it could burn her to cinders.

“Midnight,” Micah Taylor was saying. “If you want me to change out of uniform, give me half an hour. There’s a restaurant down the street that’s open all night. The Inn. Meet me?”

A restaurant, not a motel. He hadn’t, she noticed, asked her to meet him at his house or apartment or wherever home was. She was safe enough. If what she really wanted was safety.

“The Inn, twelve-thirty.” Chancie drew a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he agreed, and disconnected.

Chancie found herself shaking again. She felt supremely sexy, terrified and excited all at once. She had a date. For the first time in a long time, she had a date with a wonderfully attractive man. Her ankles felt like butter and her hand trembled, but she was able to get the receiver back on the hook without dropping it.

The whole episode with Micah Taylor seemed unreal to her already, as fleeting as the twinkling lights outside haloed with frost. But she knew with deep down certainty he’d show up at the Inn at midnight. He wouldn’t leave her hanging, he wasn’t that kind of man. She already knew that about him.

But the last thing Chancie needed right now was a man, even one as compelling as Micah Taylor. Over the Christmas holidays and into the new year, the plan was for Screening Services to begin operations in all forty-eight contiguous states. She and Judy would be swamped. The very last thing she needed was to start a new relationship with a new man.

And yet. And yet she’d waited a long time for somebody to recognize the spark that burned in her. Micah Taylor had seen it in a few seconds.

*Hold back.* Hold back; be safe, she told herself. Emotions were dangerous. Kenny had taught her that. It was a lesson learned hard, but one she didn’t dare forget.

She started to leave the office, then remembered and turned back. Efficiency. The edge that kept her skating on the edge between disaster and success. She placed a minute A in ink next to Arthur Brinegar’s name.

She thought a moment, pen to lip, and then laid it down on Judy’s desk without making a one-letter notation on the second form. She hadn’t yet made up her mind about Micah Taylor. She decided she would leave Micah’s secret classification blank. For now.

## Chapter Two

Chancie unlocked the front door of her bi-level house and stood in the darkened hallway removing her coat. The soft murmur of the television came from the living room, and yellow light from the table lamp there pooled out into the hall.

Sneaking on stockings feet, she walked to the back of the sofa. She leaned to kiss the top of Jamie's head. Without looking up from the screen and his new video system, he said, "Hi, Mom."

"Can't fool you, huh?"

"Nah, heard you coming. Mrs. Benson won't let me turn the volume up."

"Don't start, Jamie. You know how lucky we are to have her. Otherwise, I'd have to leave you alone way too much."

"She won't even let me go outside." Jamie swung his legs off the arm of the sofa, ready for another full-blown argument about the rules and Mrs. Benson's enforcement of them.

Chancie sighed, rolling her head from side to side on her tired neck, trying to work out the kinks that sparring with Jamie always brought on. "Did you do your homework?"

"I don't have any." Jamie stood, throwing the video controller on the sofa, hands balled on his hips. He stood almost eye to eye with her now, and Chancie still couldn't believe how darkly handsome he was becoming. But along with growing up came the inevitable rebellion, and it broke her heart to fight with Jamie. He still hadn't gotten over her refusal to let him get a tattoo, at *ten*, like everybody else did.

She couldn't believe it herself when she replied, "You're not everybody. You're my son." Such inanities reminded her of her own mother, whose favorite line had been, "Because I said so, that's why!" Chancie had sworn she'd never use the tired old phrases on her children, and yet, when logical explanations failed to sway Jamie into compliance she found herself using the same power plays as her mother. She knew Jamie resented Mrs. Benson and the authority the older woman had over him. What Jamie needed was a father. But in the absence of anyone willing to take on a ten-year-old boy, what else could she do? Let her son run loose on the streets with no supervision?

"Jamie," she said tiredly, drawing the name out.

"I don't have any homework!"

"I bought you a computer. I never see you use it. You told me last week you have a big project for Language Arts due before Christmas break. And your math could use some extra effort. I'll help you after dinner."

"I don't want your help. I don't want to do math. And I don't want any dinner. I just wanted to go to the mall after school and hang out with the guys, that's all. But no, I have to come straight home like some big baby and sit in front of the screen with Mrs. Benson. She doesn't watch me, Mom. She's so damned old, half the time I'm babysitting her!"

He stalked out, slamming the door to his bedroom for good measure. Chancie sank onto the sofa, cradling her head in her hands. She honestly didn't know what to do with Jamie anymore. Should she run after him and cry, "Watch your language, young man, or I'll put soap in your mouth." How Victorian. How utterly useless in the face of what Jamie was bombarded with every day, from the influence of his friends at school, to the junk available on the Internet, to the garbage programming she tried her best to limit on television. She was endeavoring to raise her son with good values in a hedonistic society, and oftentimes felt she was losing the battle.

Alma Benson entered silently from the kitchen and perched on the opposite end of the sofa. Her face lined with worry, she said softly, "Should I have let him go, Chancie?"

Chancie rested her head against the back of the sofa and looked sightlessly at the ceiling of her living room, where a cobweb wouldn't dare dangle now Alma lived here. "You know I don't like the mall, Alma. If they were old enough for the information to be printed, several of Jamie's friends would have had their names in the newspaper police report already. I won't have my son hanging out at the mall and getting into trouble. He can go to the library to work on his project, he can go across the street to Brandon's, or he can have friends over here. He knows the rules."

Alma hesitated, rubbing the prominent knuckles of one hand with the fingers of the other. "Truth to tell, I haven't seen Brandon for weeks. I don't think Jamie has much to do with him anymore."

Chancie rolled her head sideways on the back of the sofa to look at her housekeeper. Alma's expression was hard to read because she sat backlit by a crimson ginger jar table lamp, but Chancie didn't like the tone of the older woman's voice.

"I'm afraid to ask. Is there something more going on?" She lifted her head to face the older woman.

Alma bit her lip. "Well, I heard Brandon got caught at school with some marijuana."

"You're kidding. Brandon and Jamie are in elementary school. Brandon's dad's a lawyer; his mother's a nurse. Where would he get marijuana?" She stared at Alma in alarm.

Alma hesitated. "Brandon's father doesn't live at home now; they're getting a divorce. His mother works long hours at the hospital, and the boy is alone a lot of the time. The world's a different place, Chancie. Eight-year-olds act like teenagers; twelve-year-olds act like college kids. It's tough to grow up right with nobody to show you the way except movies and television, where everybody's a smart-aleck with a sassy mouth."

"You're not making me feel better, Alma," Chancie said with a tinge of bitterness. "I am what the sociologists call a single parent, you know. What are my chances my own son will grow up free of emotional problems?"

The housekeeper's hand crept across the blue-and-red print sofa to grasp Chancie's. "You do the best you can for Jamie. He knows that, even if sometimes it makes him feel caged. Children need limits even if they don't like them."

"So they can push against the limits we set." She sighed.

"That's right." Alma nodded, prominent strands of gray in her hair reflecting the light. "A bit at a time, you'll have to let Jamie go. It's only natural that he fights you, especially when he sees everyone else being set free to do their own thing, as the kids say. Those parents letting their kids do whatever they want aren't helping them any."

Chancie squeezed the veined hand that held hers, gently because of Alma's arthritis. "Thanks, Alma. It's just, it's so hard sometimes. I look at Jamie and expect to see a two-year-old with mischief in his eyes, racing around the room on his fat little baby legs. Instead I'm greeted by a sullen young man who has hints of a mustache. He's so headstrong. It seems like we're always shouting at each other. I don't want it to be like that."

"Time is a funny thing, isn't it, dear? The older you get, the faster it goes. Jamie has too much free time on his hands, and you don't have enough. My days are such a blur, I need a nap in the afternoon just to keep up. And, oh, by the way, that's what Jamie meant about babysitting me. He caught me napping when he came in from school."

Concerned, she leaned forward to peer into Alma's face. "You're feeling all right, aren't you? Are we wearing you out, Alma? Do you think you should see a doctor?"

"Don't be silly, dear. I'm sixty-six years old and Jamie's ten, that's all. It's a big difference."

Chancie sighed. "The difference between ten and thirty is big too. I thought if I had him while I was young, there wouldn't be such a gap between us and we'd speak the same language as he grew up. The joke seems to be on me."

"You'll find that Jamie will get closer and closer to speaking your language as he gets older, Chancie. The trick is to get through these next few years with a good relationship intact. Go talk to him, dear. Don't punish the boy for being unhappy."

She rose and stooped to kiss Alma's dry cheek. "What would I do without you?"

Alma's eyes twinkled. "Why, Chancie, I don't know. You'd be in a real pickle, wouldn't you?"

Chancie, already crossing the carpet to Jamie's door, laughed in agreement. She knocked. Getting no response, she opened it a crack. Her son lay on his bed with his eyes closed, cordless earphones clamped over his head. Chancie could hear the bass from where she stood and shook her head in dismay. The floor was littered with Jamie's discarded clothing. Drawers hung open from the bureau, spilling more wrinkled clothes. Toys and games were piled haphazardly on shelving units lining one wall from floor to ceiling, a layer of dust coating every surface.

Alma had been banned from Jamie's room, and Chancie agreed that the young man needed his sacrosanct space. Chancie could come in, but she couldn't look in drawers or closet, or read his personal stuff. The deal had been that Jamie would keep the place picked up and cleaned, which duty he was obviously disregarding. Chancie's one offer to help clean his room had been rebuffed. Now, with the marijuana business so close to home, she wondered if she should trust Jamie quite so far as she had been doing.

The boy opened brown eyes so like his father's and stared blankly at her. He didn't remove the earphones or turn down the volume.

She stepped over a pile of wrinkled jeans, and reached to pull one of the black headphones away from Jamie's ear. The boy didn't twitch a muscle. She shouted, "I told you you're going to go deaf if you don't knock it off! Turn it down!"

Slowly, defiantly, Jamie reached up to peel the headphones from his dark wavy hair. He didn't bother to stop the music, which sounded tinny coming at Chancie from a distance but which she knew wasn't the case because the darned things were of the highest quality and therefore the most expensive.

Chancie sat on the edge of his twin bed. Jamie neither attempted to make room nor moved to get away from her. "I can show you a picture of what kind of damage repeated loud noise does to the ear, Jamie," she said.

"I don't want to see any stupid picture in your damned biology book, Mom."

When had her son started cursing on a regular basis? She hadn't noticed before. It made her feel even more like a terrible mother.

"You resented my leaving you to go back to school, didn't you? I'm sorry. It was something I felt I had to do. Do you resent me now, for spending so much time away on business?"

Jamie's lip curled. "I don't *resent* anything. You're making big bucks, aren't you? You can buy me anything I want, right?"

"Jamie, you know you can come down to the office after school if you want. We could spend a little more time together."

He closed his eyes again, shutting her out. "Mom," he said tiredly, "if you're not on the phone, you're opening new offices or training new people in Houston or Orlando or Saudi Arabia. You don't have time to talk to me."

*Guilty.* Jamie could sure push her buttons. She forced herself to smile. "I've never been to Saudi Arabia."

"Yeah, well, wherever. It doesn't matter. Wherever in the world you are, I'm locked up here in the house, alone."

Chancie studied the face that was so like Kenny's, even down to the full, pouting lower lip. Kenny had pulled this *poor me* act on her, and she'd fallen for it. For years. According to Kenny everything that had gone wrong in their marriage, and very much had gone wrong, had been her fault.

"I've never left you alone, Jamie. I have always been, and will always be, here when you need me. You know that."

He opened his eyes and stared hard at her. "No, I don't know that, Mom," he finally said.

"You're gone more and more all the time. All I've got left here at home is Mrs. Benson, and she's *old*. She doesn't understand me, and she won't let me do anything. You treat me like a baby. Why don't you buy me some diapers if you want to buy me something!"

Jamie rolled over violently, thrashing and kicking to cover the fact that he had begun to cry. Chancie almost landed on the floor from one of his knobby knees shoving her aside. Instead she knelt, running her fingers through the curly hair on Jamie's neck. He needed a haircut. She thought, How in the world am I going to tell him I'm going out tonight when he feels so abandoned already? It's selfish and greedy to be thinking of Micah Taylor's eyes, his mouth, his long, lean body and my own adult needs, when Jamie needs me so much.

"We have an evening, Jamie," she said. "A whole, long, uninterrupted evening, and we're wasting it fighting. I'm sorry you feel bad. What do you want me to do to make up for it? Huh? Come on, talk to me." She tickled his neck, a favorite when he was a little boy.

He stilled, as he always did at the touch of her fingers on his neck, almost hypnotized. She halted so he would talk.

"Don't stop." His voice was muffled in his pillow.

"What do you want, Jamie?"

"Tonight, or do you want my lifelong goals?" He rolled his head slightly so he could see her expression.

"Don't be sarcastic. Let's start with tonight. Want to do some math? Why did I take three semesters of algebra in college if I can't help you?"

He rolled his big dark eyes and wrinkled his already short nose. "Sheesh. Okay. I don't understand what we're doing in class anyway. Maybe you can explain it."

"And then what?"

"And then what else do I want? Jeez, Mom, an hour out of the house at night, okay? Is that so much to ask? I'd like to see my friends once in a while when we're not chained to our desks at school. We never have time to talk or anything."

Chancie paused. "At the mall? Honey, you know I don't like that idea."

"Because two ditto-heads got caught kiping stuff?"

Chancie frowned. "Ditto-heads?" she asked. "Is that something you picked up from TV?"

"The word really isn't *ditto*, it's worse. I just can't say it in front of you." He had the grace to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I came down on you so hard. But I want out of this house sometimes, Mom."

Chancie's hands clenched. Where in the world was Jamie picking up these expressions? Her first instinct was to clamp down on him even harder. But that wasn't working, was it? Against her better judgment, she said, "Okay. One hour, a couple times a week. Not every night. And don't make me sorry I agreed to this, Jamie."

He rolled completely over toward her and they reached simultaneously to hug hard, the way Jamie had always insisted on. No little sissy hug for her son but a big bear hug, or else it didn't count.

When he finally pulled away, leaving her nearly breathless, Chancie said, "What's going on with Brandon?"

Jamie stiffened, looking away. "Brandon's a ditto-head too," he said quietly.

Despite what Jamie called his former best friend, Chancie was slightly reassured. Jamie showed sense in not wanting to associate with Brandon if he was in trouble. But she felt bad that the long relationship between the two boys had apparently ended. "Can't you talk to him about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about. Brandon tokes and I don't." He rolled back over.

Tokes? What kind of knowledge was being passed around elementary schools these days? She sighed. Jamie could be so hard, so unforgiving. So much like Kenny, who had held a grudge like a miser with a hoard of gold. But she, of all people, would not encourage her son to associate with drug users. Brandon, apparently, was past tense in this house.

"Tickle," Jamie demanded, arching his neck in anticipation. "For five minutes."

She laughed. Jamie seemed so young when he commanded her to tickle, the Jamie she'd always known and always would know. She felt she'd won her son back, at least most of the way. She couldn't think about how far Jamie really had gone from her, or how far he would go yet. He was growing up way too fast, and she, the businesswoman, missed out on most of it. "My fingers will go numb."

"I don't care. Do it, Mom. Please?"

Her son. Did he have to beg to be touched? Not from her, not ever. She brushed at his neck with her fingertips until her hand actually did go quite numb.

After a lasagna dinner, Jamie's favorite, Chancie did the dishes and let Alma sit on the sofa and watch television. Examining her nails while Jamie did homework across the shiny oak table from her, Chancie thought she'd have to touch up the damage done to her polish job by scrubbing pots before going out to meet Micah.

Jamie finished the last problem without her help, and slammed the book shut. Before he retreated to his room and Alma to hers, she'd better break the news.

"Jamie, I have something to tell you," she said. She reached across the tabletop to halt Jamie's exit and signaled to Alma, who was on the verge of leaving them alone. "Please stay, Alma."

Her eyes wandered around her cozy kitchen. A lacy Boston fern flourished in a window, Alma's baby. Chancie had what she called a brown thumb. All her own plants died either of neglect or from too much fussing and water. The appliances gleamed; Alma couldn't stand grease or fingerprints, and bought more glass cleaner than Chancie would have thought one person could use in a lifetime. The hardwood floor was burnished to a high gloss.

She rose to pour herself and Alma another cup of coffee. Coffee after dinner was Alma's habit, not Chancie's, but for tonight she joined her housekeeper in the acidic vice. Tonight she wanted to stay awake, and Alma's strong brew should keep her alert until at least two in the morning.

She pulled her ladder back chair across the bright rag rug under the table and re-seated herself. Jamie looked leery, probably afraid he was in for a lecture. His eyes dulled, shuttered without closing, already thinking of ways to defend himself except he didn't know yet against what. Alma looked curious, her blue-veined hands curled around the steaming cup after she added sugar and lots of milk.

"Well?" Alma prompted.

"Well," Chancie repeated brightly, a false cheery smile on her face. Inside she trembled, afraid Jamie would repeat the scene from earlier tonight once she said what she had to say. "I met a man. At work. I've got a date tonight."

"Tonight?" Alma glanced at the clock. It was already after nine. "What time is this date?"

"He gets off work at midnight. He's a highway patrol trooper."

"A cop? You're meeting a pig at midnight. Jeez, Mom." Jamie's voice was flat.

"Jamie, I absolutely forbid you to use that word. Don't think of him as a cop. Or a *pig*, young man. And where do you get this awful language, anyway? He's nice. We're just going for coffee, that's all."

Chancie felt like such a hypocrite. What had she first thought when she'd laid eyes on Micah Taylor and Arthur Brinegar? *Cops*. With a bad taste in her mouth, her lip curling. It was odd how people, even ordinary law-abiding people, cowered at the thought of the police. Did Micah have anyone to explain to, a daughter perhaps to whom he'd have to expound "She's not a drug tester, she's a nice lady." Society had become way too complicated, the supposed defenders of justice and the law somehow come to be viewed as oppressors.

A lock of wavy brown hair fell across Jamie's forehead. He looked so much like Kenny, Chancie wanted to cry. She had to remind herself that he wasn't Kenny, Jamie was her son. She mustn't fall into the trap of making Jamie pay for Kenny's sins just because he looked like his father. Jamie had always been her boy, her son, as opposed to their child. Kenny said so, and it was true. "*Your* kid," he said, sneering, whenever Jamie did something he didn't like.

Now Jamie was beginning the approach to manhood, and she couldn't lose him by falling into old habits and shutting out the pain he caused as she'd done to Kenny.

"Jamie, your dad's been dead two years."

"I know that, Mom."

Maybe Jamie had learned that chilly tone of voice from her. She hoped not; she hoped she hadn't taught her son to freeze his feelings. "Cold bitch," Kenny had said, over and over again until she believed it. "You're such a *cold* bitch, Chancie."

"I just get lonely for adult company sometimes, Jamie. You know, we discussed earlier how you need time with your friends. Well, I need friends too. Please try to understand."

“A cop,” Jamie said under his breath. He shook his head, tousling his dark locks further. “I’m going to bed. Have fun on your *date*, Mom.”

Shocked, Chancie let him get up and walk away before reaction set in. “I’m not marrying the guy, Jamie,” she yelled at his retreating back. “You don’t have to be so damned snotty!”

Why had she said anything? It was a date. One date. She confided too much in Jamie, relied on him too much for adult conversation and responses he couldn’t provide. He was just a kid.

She’d ended up yelling at him again. Would she never learn? Well, now she knew where Jamie had picked up his favorite new cussword, didn’t she? Right here at home, although the origin of dildo-head, which is what she was sure Jamie had been inventing a euphemism for, was still a mystery. Chancie put her forehead in her hands. Her eyes ached, and her shoulders felt as if ten-pound weights rested on each of them.

“I should just go to bed and forget the whole thing,” she muttered.

Alma patted her arm. “Don’t you dare. It would be a big mistake to let that boy get his way on this one, Chancie. Lie down for an hour, put cucumber slices on your eyes. Get up and fix your face, and then go meet your young man. Have some fun for once.”

Fun? Did Alma really think the fancy maneuvering and churning feeling inside when a woman got interested in a new man was *fun*? It felt more like panic. Chancie really didn’t have the time or the room in her life for dating.

So why had she agreed to a date with Micah Taylor within minutes of meeting him?

Oh, lighten up, she told herself. You’re just meeting him for coffee. You’re not starting a heavy romance.

But as she rose, silver concha belt tinkling, she admitted she knew better. She didn’t know much yet about Micah Taylor, but she’d be willing to bet everything she had invested in Screening Services that he didn’t go around asking women out for coffee or anything else if he didn’t mean for something more to happen. Sooner or later.

And Chancie herself? She hadn’t accepted a date with a man in the two years since Kenny’s death because she hadn’t wanted anything to happen in the romance department. Sooner *or* later.

Yet she’d accepted Micah’s invitation. And she still didn’t know how she’d let him slip past her defenses, despite the obvious inducements of wide shoulders, extra-long legs, and the definite bulge of a nice-sized package in his uniform pants.

She headed for the stairs and her bedroom, saying, “Good night, Alma.”

When Alma didn’t answer, Chancie paused with her hand on the newel post. She turned around to see Alma watching her with amused, calculating eyes. She wasn’t fooling Alma into thinking she wasn’t going out tonight. She never could fool Alma about anything.

“Um, have we got any cucumber?” Chancie asked.

Alma laughed. “I’m sure we have, but I’ll be glad to check the refrigerator for you, dear,” she said fondly.

### Chapter Three

Chancie couldn’t make herself go upstairs without trying to patch things up with Jamie. She knocked on his door again, and at his muffled “Yeah,” stuck her head inside. She would say nothing about the state of his bedroom. That could be left for another time. She said only, “Good night, son.”

His back turned stiffly to her, Jamie stood with clenched fists beside his rumpled bed. But he wished her a good night in carefully controlled tones, and Chancie gently clicked the door shut.

In her own bedroom, decorated in country rose and green floral, she turned on the bedside lamp and pulled down the spread. She undressed to panties and bra, set the alarm in case she should fall asleep, and climbed in the big four poster bed. After tossing and turning a while, she got up and washed her face in the connecting bathroom, then stood appraising the figure reflected in the dresser mirror opposite the bed.



Not bad, not for thirty. She turned sideways, tightening her stomach muscles and lifting her breasts with her hands. The soft light, barely enough to read by, flattered her. Her hair shone with golden glints, and shadows at thigh and cleavage made her look even more curvy than she really was. She arched her back, assessing. In this light she couldn't detect her stretch marks. Candlelight could actually make me beautiful, she thought, and giggled nervously.

She eyed the dish of cucumber slices on the bedside table, and wished she could lie still long enough to enjoy them. Perhaps she could make use of the calming exercises she'd learned years ago in Lamaze class. She lay down again and plopped two cool green circles on her eyes, then tried to empty her mind of all but pleasant, serene thoughts. She pictured a pastoral scene: a copse of leafy green trees and a meadow where orange coneflowers grew. She imagined birdsong and flitting white butterflies in the sunny meadow. She began the massage, lightly rubbing hips and belly with the tips of her fingers.

Into her fantasy, a man and a woman appeared. The woman wore a wide-brimmed straw hat with flowers in the ribbon band, and a long, flowing summer dress that clung to hip and breast. The man carried a picnic basket, and he bent to spread a blanket beneath one of the trees at the edge of the meadow. The woman removed her hat. Dark gold curls spilled down her back. She bent to pick a coneflower, laughing at something the man said.

The man straightened and turned toward the woman. Chancie could see his bright blue eyes soften as he gazed at her. She bent her head to the flower. The man approached her and drew her into his arms. She looked up into his eyes, electrified, mesmerized. She lifted her own arms over his broad shoulders, and he bent to kiss her, a long, lingering kiss that plumbed the depths of her mouth. His hands encircled her waist, thumbs drawing tiny circles at the swell of her breasts. The vermilion coneflower loosened in her hand, fell heedlessly as the kiss deepened and her fingers sought the silky hair at the nape of his neck.

Chancie groaned in frustration at her inability to relax and stop worrying every detail of her life. Imagining herself as some Scarlett O'Hara figure and Micah Taylor as Rhett Butler was pointless, and probably self-defeating. No man could live up to a digital Hollywood hero. Instead of soothing, this little exercise had aroused her. Her skin felt sensitized, electric. Her nipples stood in hard peaks that hurt inside the confinement of her bra. The pit of her stomach ached, and lower still she pulsed with emptiness between her legs.

If she didn't stop, she'd throw herself on Micah Taylor the moment she saw him again. Tear his clothes off in the parking lot of the Inn and beg for release from this torment right then and there.

She ripped the now limp and soggy cucumber rounds from her eyes and sat up. She needed a hot bath. Or a cold shower.

She padded to the bathroom again and turned on the tap. She couldn't bring herself to actually step into the icy spray, so she compromised with a warm shower. She washed her hair, shaved her legs, and then stood in the spray until the water began to run cold.

She toweled dry, rubbed all over with scented lotion, and dusted herself with bath powder. Then she returned to her bedroom, opened the top drawer in the dresser, and stood debating.

Satin, lacy, cotton, plain.

What difference did it make what she wore? But she caught her own eye in the mirror. She wasn't fooling anyone, least of all herself. She said in a stern whisper to her reflection, "You are not going to do anything you'll regret, Chancie de Leur." Seized with determination, despite the lingering throbbing of blood-infused flesh that refused to go away, she donned the plainest pair of white bikinis she owned along with a serviceable cotton bra. The thought that white cotton stripped off just as easily as black lace tried to come to the forefront of her consciousness, but she shook her head and pushed it away.

She blew her hair dry, reapplied make-up, fixed her nails. She checked the time on her digital clock. Almost midnight. She threw open the closet, chose a soft pair of trousers, a black wool blazer with fawn whip stitching, a cotton ecru sweater, and her favorite pair of black leather boots.

She crept down the stairs, gathered coat, purse, and car keys. On her way out, she flicked on the outside light. She would need its amber glow when she returned.

Micah Taylor cruised in the passing lane of I-80 east toward Hawk Point. He had some paperwork to do at the office, and then he could go home and change out of uniform. This had been the longest shift in memory. Usually nothing distracted him from the highway and his work. But tonight it wouldn't have surprised him if he'd slid heedlessly beneath the oversized tires of a tractor-trailer while he was busy woolgathering.

Later, as he sat and tried to fill out reports, he could see nothing but pistachio green eyes with a hint of uncertainty in their depths, a pair of full lush lips, and a mass of deep honey-colored hair that fell in riotous curls.

He was intrigued by Chancie de Leur's looks, all right. But what had really interested him was how she responded to his clumsy attempt to wrangle a date from her. She had a sense of humor hidden under that cool exterior, an inclination to tease and be teased. Under the right circumstances, of course.

A lady. A business lady with a rigid façade and an aching loneliness that apparently no one had yet recognized, let alone been able to meet. An enigma. A challenge.

Sharp intelligence and soft beauty all wrapped up in a package of severe control. Somebody, somewhere, had taught Chancie de Leur to hold back, to bury her volcano under a glacier. Micah Taylor was a man who liked a dare. He couldn't believe his luck. He imagined again the lush body hidden under the touch-me clothes she wore. He wanted to undress her. He wanted to caress her. He wanted to be the man to cause her volcano to erupt, to bathe in the molten lava that he sensed boiled inside Chancie.

There was no getting around it with pretty words and euphemisms. He wanted her naked in his bed as soon as possible. Tonight would be good.

He got back in the patrol car that he took home with him in case he got called out at night. He thought, How to approach Chancie, what strategy to use? That sounded so calculating, but he didn't know how else to put it. One wrong move with that lady, he felt sure, and he'd be kicked in the ass and sliding down the ice away from her so fast he'd cause an avalanche that would bury any hope of ever getting to know her better.

His fingers tapped the steering wheel of the cruiser as he pulled up in front of his darkened apartment building and parked next to his personal vehicle, a full-size Dodge Ram pickup. He had no feeling one way or another for his present living arrangement. His apartment complex, in one of the characterless developments put up during the previous oil boom in southwest Wyoming, was a handy place to hang his uniform and lay his head at night, and that was all.

His ex-wife had sold the nice little house they'd bought, and disappeared after their divorce. They had no kids, so he guessed it didn't matter if the house was gone. He'd been mildly attracted to a few women between Mariah and the present, and dated a bit, but had found nobody he cared enough about to start paying attention to the real estate ads.

Now Micah appraised his sterile apartment in the harsh light of an overhead fixture, and shook his head. No pictures decorated the walls. The apartment manager had chosen the crooked, cheap, motel-quality drapes and sickly-looking, sagging furniture. It was fairly clean and he'd recently changed the sheets on his bed, but those were about the only things in the whole place that might appeal to a woman. What would make Chancie de Leur want to visit here?

He'd have to think carefully about that. He wanted to spend a lot of time with that lady, get to know what made her tick. The thought of the chase excited him, but only because it was Chancie he thought of pursuing. Nobody else in a long, long while had been worth the trouble.

Chancie was special. She was also leery as a doe in the crosshairs of a high-powered rifle.

Then it came to him. He hung up his uniform and threw on a pair of Levi's so worn and comfortable they fit like a second skin. He pulled over his head a sweatshirt with the Denver Broncos logo emblazoned across the front, tugged on his boots.

He'd let Chancie make all the moves. Whatever Chancie wanted, whenever she wanted it. For a woman like her, Micah could wait. He grinned. Well, he was almost sure that he could wait and not rip her clothes off at the first opportunity. He pocketed his keys and wallet, shrugged into a shearling lamb coat, plopped his Stetson on his head.

On second thought, he wasn't so sure about any of the choices he'd made tonight, including his wardrobe. He was pretty certain Chancie wasn't the kind of silly woman who couldn't make up her mind, or worse: the kind of woman who made stupid decisions like showing up for coffee in a cocktail dress and spike heels at the Inn on a night of icy cold air and frozen streets, thinking she was going to impress. Still, what he knew of Chancie and what he was guessing about her could be light years apart. He could only wait and see.

Chancie waited in her car in the parking lot alongside the Inn as the engine cooled and the windows began to ice over. The lights from the restaurant windows glowed, and inside she could see a lone server and the heads of two customers in a booth directly in front of her. She checked her phone once more for the time. Could Micah have gotten past her somehow and already be inside, waiting?

She reached for the ignition to warm up the car, but waited as a battered four-wheel drive truck pulled up next to her. She rubbed a spot clear in the freezing steam on the car window so she could see. A cowboy hat emerged from the pickup; the door slammed. A man in a dun leather coat rounded the front of the truck, halted, and tried to peer into the fogged front windshield of her car. Chancie hesitated. Was it Micah? He was tall enough, and sinewy enough, but she could see nothing of the man's features in the shadow of his hat brim and through the ice crystals already reforming on the windshield.

He walked between the two vehicles, leaned to tap on her side window. Chancie couldn't get the power window down without turning on the ignition, so she hesitantly cracked the door open, ready to slam it shut again if the man were a stranger.

Micah's friendly smile greeted her. "Hello, Chancie," he said, his voice soft as a caress. He grasped the door handle, pulling the door open for her.

She swung her legs out and stood. Micah shut the door then paused, looking at her. "You showed up after all," he said.

Chancie put her gloved hands in her coat pockets. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I wasn't sure. You had second thoughts about it, didn't you?"

How did he intuit so much about her? She shivered.

"Are you cold? Let's go inside." He started to reach for her arm, hesitated, seemed to reconsider and dropped his hand. He wasn't wearing gloves, even in this bitter cold. He stood aside for her to go first in the narrow space between the parked vehicles and the outside wall of the restaurant.

Chancie, quivering, hugged herself inside her coat. She found herself wishing he'd reached for her, wrapped her inside his warm leather coat. She wanted to know the contours of his hard chest under her gloved hands, feel the length of those long denim covered legs against hers.

He held the glass door of the restaurant open for her. Overly warm, slightly grease-scented air washed over them. He stood close behind her but not touching while they waited for the hostess to seat them, took her coat and hung it up before seating himself in the corner booth.

The server brought glasses of ice water, two menus. Micah said, "Hungry?"

"No, thank you. I ate with Jamie and Alma earlier." At his questioning look, she hurried to explain, "Jamie, my son, and Alma, my housekeeper-slash-cook-slash-lifesaver."

"Sure you wouldn't like an appetizer or something? I'm starved, myself." He paused while she shook her head. "Your son, you said? How old is he?"

"Jamie's ten."

Micah looked at her appraisingly, and she knew he wondered just how old she was.

"I'm thirty. I was married at sixteen," she said in answer to his unasked question, before deflecting his curiosity back at him. "Do you have children?"

An unhealed pain entered his blue eyes, vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "No," he said shortly. "I wanted kids, she didn't. I lost."

She told herself she should let it drop. Yet she heard herself saying, "Was your marriage unhappy, then?"

"You might say that." Micah smiled, a grim stretching of lips.

The server reappeared. Micah gestured to Chancie, who ordered only a diet soda. He ordered a meal by number with coffee, black. They handed the menus back.

"If you ever became interested enough in someone to want to marry again, would you still want children some day?" She took a sip of ice water, gulping and almost choking on her own audacity. She'd been out of the dating loop for too long. She couldn't believe she'd asked such a personal question immediately after hitting such an obviously sore spot.

Micah leaned back, resting his shoulders against the vinyl booth, studying her, weighing his answer. Somebody like Chancie probably wouldn't want to start all over with diapers and midnight feedings. He couldn't let her see how much Mariah's refusal to have his baby had hurt him. At last he said, "It's been a long time since I even thought about having kids. I'm thirty-three years old. I guess that's not ancient yet, but I can't realistically see babies in my future at this point."

"You're not saying it's too late?" Chancie's fingers clenched around the cold glass. What's wrong with me? she thought. Why can't I stop asking such probing, personal questions?

Micah sat up straighter. The talk of marriage made him skittish. He tried not to show it. "Something like too late, yeah," he said. "I can't see getting involved with someone young enough to still want children, if you know what I mean." He paused, then added, "Not biologically too young, but emotionally too young."

"You could change your mind."

Micah stared at her, trying to gauge her intent. "Maybe. I doubt it. How about you? You have one child, right? Ever think of having more?"

The spotlight of her own untoward curiosity turned back on her just as she deserved for being so snoopy, she wiped some of the condensation from the outside of the glass. "Jamie, I think, will be my one and only. I've got Screening Services now, and I don't think I could give another child the required time and emotional commitment. It wouldn't be fair to have a baby I couldn't give my very best."

So, Micah thought. All wrapped up in her business. No marriage, no babies. Chancie de Leur was setting down the rules for him right out of the starting gate. He guessed that was fair enough.

She felt Micah's blue eyes assessing her. What must he think of her, talking about babies right after she'd met him? She had always wanted another child, but hadn't been brave enough to defy Kenny about it again after she had Jamie. But now certainly wasn't the time to explore her feeling of loss, and she couldn't explain why she kept pursuing the subject. Micah had slipped lower on his spine in the booth. He looked, in contrast to her, so relaxed. She was nervous, that was all, so she babbled.

He said, "I'm guessing you're a very good mother."

She laughed, a strangled sound. "Jamie might beg to differ. He's at a difficult age."

"He doesn't like the idea of Mommy seeing anyone, is that right?"

Chancie stilled. "How did you know?"

"I was his age once. I remember I had this picture in my head of my mom, an idealized portrait of perfect womanhood that no one could live up to. She couldn't step one little toe outside what I thought she should be or I had a fit. It took years to find out that inside that discount store picture of the ideal mom was a real, live, breathing lady with as many hopes and fears and insecurities as anybody else. I think when I realized she was human, just like me, that was when I could finally really love her."

“You didn’t love her before? That’s a little frightening to contemplate, that Jamie might not love me.”

Micah smiled reassuringly. “You can bet he loves you. He just doesn’t understand you any more than you probably understand him. He’ll have to mature into some empathy. Give him time.”

“Alma said just about the same thing tonight.”

Micah shrugged. “Alma sounds like a smart woman. I’m not so smart. I have to learn things the hard way.” He paused. “Let’s talk about something a little lighter, agreed? How’d you get a name like Chancie?”

His meal came, and while he dug in hungrily she explained how her father’s penchant for blackjack and her older brother’s inability to pronounce Chelsea had resulted in her lifelong nickname.

“A gambler, huh?” Micah grinned. “Is that where you get it, from your dad?”

“I never gamble.”

“What do you call starting up the kind of business you’re in if it’s not a gamble?” He looked at her from above a laden fork raised halfway to his mouth, eyes like blue lasers on her, demanding absolute truth.

“The money. When my husband died, he had some life insurance. The drug and alcohol testing opportunity was there, and I took it. It still surprises me how fast it all grew, and is still growing. I was in the right place at the right time, that’s all.”

“I admire your gumption.”

Chancie watched him pack away his meal, wondering where he put it all. At last the ferrying of food to his mouth slowed a bit, and he said, “Sorry, I told you I was hungry. Want a bite?”

She shook her head.

“You sure? It’s pretty good.” He indicated a small portion of chicken cordon bleu remaining, with a spoonful of rice and some steamed broccoli.

She smiled, more relaxed now, even the residual sexual fluttering in her lower belly starting to fade. Apparently Micah was willing to overlook the uncomfortable start to the evening she had caused. “Go ahead. I’m not hungry, really.”

“How about dessert? Want to do the ice cream bar with me?”

“Maybe a small sundae,” she agreed. He signaled the server for more coffee.

As they stood at the dessert bar, he urged her to take more of everything: another scoop of vanilla, more gooey marshmallow I, more hot fudge.

Chancie laughed. “You’ll make me fat.”

“Never. I just want to watch you eat.” His blue eyes serious, he studied her face, gaze lingering on her lips.

“You’re going to watch me eat?” She stiffened defensively. Maybe he wouldn’t let her earlier interrogation of him pass. Maybe he planned on punishing her somehow. Kenny would have thought of a way.

He smiled, his eyes hooded. “I’m going to watch. I’m going to enjoy it too. You can learn a lot about a person just by watching them eat.”

Chancie shuddered. What fetish was this? Was Micah a little strange in the sexual fantasy department? “I don’t think I’ll be able to eat then, if you’re watching me.”

He escorted her back to the table, waited until she seated herself before sitting on the padded bench across from her. She couldn’t pick up her spoon, merely sat eyeing her sundae. He stared at her, and she could feel the heat of that blue gaze.

Then he said, “Look. I’m teasing you, a little. We don’t know a whole lot about each other. Relax, okay? I made myself a promise, and now I’ll make it to you. If you’d like to keep seeing me, I won’t push you. Until you say so, I will never make a move toward you. Do you understand? What’s between us will be on your terms. In the meantime, I can only dream. So eat your ice cream, Chancie.”

She gazed into those scorching blue eyes. His words touched something deep and secret within her. She hadn't been aware of the tiny openings in her armor Micah Taylor found and effortlessly widened. His request unsettled her, but she couldn't deny it also excited her. Without taking her eyes off his, she picked up her spoon.

Dreamlike, obeying a wordless command from inside herself more than Micah's plea, she dipped into her ice cream. She opened her mouth. The first bite slid across her tongue and down her throat. He watched hungrily: the fit of her lips around the spoon, the smooth withdrawal, the flick of her tongue to the corner of her lips in search of a stray bit of chocolate.

She ate, and he watched, a lazy smile curving his lips while his own ignored ice cream oozed into a white lake surrounding a fudge island. She'd never realized eating could be such a sexually fraught pastime, but this slow devouring of each other with only their eyes could be described as nothing else. Chancie felt an intense heat rising in her as she continued to bring the spoon to her mouth and withdraw it, miming licking and sucking Micah without touching him. She wanted to devour every inch of him instead of this icy dessert, and she knew he knew that too. She'd played along with his fantasy and become caught in it herself.

She already realized Micah Taylor was a dangerous man. Dangerous to her self-image and her sense of command. Oh, he might say they would go at her pace but he was leading her nevertheless. And she was finding she craved his guidance. But where did he lead her? And did she want to go? What insights into herself might a man like Micah Taylor help her discover?

She knew now what Micah Taylor wanted from her. No marriage. No babies. No messy entanglements beyond two bodies entwined in passion. Just pure pleasure beyond imagining, whenever she felt like indulging herself with him. Micah Taylor apparently wanted only sex. And maybe that's all she wanted as well.

But not tonight. She would be given time to think about what physical delights Micah Taylor offered, because at that moment the cell phone in her purse went into its buzzing and vibrating routine, bringing her back to the realities of her life.

Chancie took a look at the number, sighed, and said regretfully, "I'm sorry, Micah. I have to go. It's Judy. She wouldn't bother me at this hour unless it was an emergency. Call me, won't you?"

"No."

She looked at him questioningly, suddenly unsure of the rightness of what she'd done here tonight. Maybe she'd completely misjudged him, gone temporarily insane, acted like a wanton moron with a stranger. Maybe he'd been testing her, like Kenny always, always tested her. She'd forever failed Kenny's tests and maybe now she'd failed Micah's. It wouldn't surprise her.

"No, Chancie," he said, reading her thoughts again. "I won't call you. You call me. Whenever you're ready, whenever you want to see me. It's all up to you."

She found she couldn't open her mouth; she couldn't move. She'd never met a man like Micah Taylor, hadn't known such a man existed outside her own solitary, fevered imaginings. Pictures of herself and Micah together flooded her brain: *tearing their clothes off, clawing at each other as they tumbled to the floor, his cock demanding rough entrance and she welcoming that first plunge, her legs spread far apart, crying out his name.*

*Oh, yes, Micah!*

"Go on, honey," he said, bringing her crashing back to reality. She noticed she didn't mind him calling her that at all, unlike slimy Arthur Brinegar. "Make your call, take care of business. But you get back to me, Chancie. Here's my number. Call anytime. If I don't answer right away, I'm in the middle of something or on the road. Leave a message." He jotted numbers on a napkin.

She took it with trembling fingers, stuffed it in her purse along with the cell phone. "I-I will. Thank you for, um, the ice cream. And everything. Good night, Micah."

She started to walk away on wobbly legs.

As she left, she heard him say so quietly no one else except she could hear, "Thank you, Chancie de Leur."

And she knew he watched her every movement, the same hot images flooding through him as she was imagining. Imagining what they could do, together. Until darkness swallowed her and they couldn't see each other anymore.

## Chapter Four

"Chancie." Judy's voice came with some unidentifiable emotion through the cell phone. "The trainmaster called. We've got a probable cause in Douglas. I haven't been able to raise a collector."

"What? You left messages?"

"Yes. Nobody returned my calls. I've tried landline, I've tried cellular. I've left voicemails and texts. I even checked everybody's online status to see if I could contact someone by chat. Nobody's available."

Chancie went cold. Judy had used every backup, in the proper order. With all the technology Chancie had invested in, Judy couldn't find one collector within driving distance of Douglas. The railroad employees would have to be tested within two hours of whatever might have happened. She and Judy might possibly never know the details and didn't need them. The important thing was the testing. Chancie had contracted to have a collector within two hours of any point on the rail line. In the open spaces of Wyoming, where one could drive the interstate for hours without encountering a settlement of any kind, posting a tester every two hours along the track had proved to be a tall order. And Douglas was nearly five hours from Hawk Point by car, if the roads were clear and there was no traffic delay.

Chancie's carefully built system of recruiting and training collectors had broken down. Her body temperature shot instantly from cold chills to hot anger. "Who's the primary in that area, Judy?"

There was a short pause as Judy searched for a name. Her voice came quietly over the phone. She had encountered that intensity in Chancie before, and it could be quite frightening. "John in Casper, then Cherry in Rawlins."

"Log the call for invoicing. I've got to get off the phone and see if I can reach Jeff."

Judy said, "Maybe if we just wait a few more minutes."

"I'll call you from Douglas." Chancie disconnected. Time was too precious. She passed the exit to her house and kept going; instead of stopping she called and left a message for Alma and Jamie. She'd take the interstate to the airport. She had a breath analyzer kit in the trunk of her car, along with a box of vinyl gloves and several unopened test kits in a canvas tote that she carried just in case. She punched another number into the phone.

A sleepy voice answered. "Speak."

"Jeff, this is Chancie. I have to be in Douglas right now. Can you meet me at the airport?"

One of Jeff's shining virtues was that he could change from lethargic to alert in a split second. The war had almost ruined Kenny emotionally. But, although Jeff Miller had been scarred too, his wartime experiences left him with the instincts of a puma and an amazing skill with anything that could be flown.

"Right there," he said, and hung up.

She tried to control her anger at the breakdown in her carefully built system. Sometimes, with no explanation, things just didn't work. It was Chancie's job to pick up the pieces and salvage what she could. In this case, she had the niggling feeling she was so angry because the call had taken her away from rapidly escalating sexual fantasies involving Micah Taylor and not really because of any misconduct on the part of her employees.

She'd sworn upon getting into the testing business that her personal life would never be allowed to interfere. At the time she made that silly vow she didn't have a personal life, but that wasn't the point.

Her breathing slowly calmed on the drive to the airport. She didn't know how he did it, but Jeff Miller actually beat her to the hangar. The rattletrap old pickup he drove looked like a pile of scrap,

but ran like a race car. His plane, a twin-engine Cessna, looked in much better condition, and flew like a soaring eagle.

Jeff still moved with the grace and speed of a cat, even though middle age was fast overtaking his body and turning his slim musculature to a slight paunch. His long blond hair tied into a ponytail with a handkerchief and bobbing behind him, he sprinted from his truck to the hangar. Chancie followed, puffing and hauling her equipment. It wouldn't occur to Jeff to offer to help; that wasn't his job. They climbed into the Cessna and belted in. Chancie chewed her fingernails while Jeff did a preflight systems check, talked with someone on the radio, then circled toward the runway and take-off.

She hated those moments, getting in the air and then getting back safely to earth, but she liked the flight itself. She always felt so free in the air, safe in Jeff's steady hands on the controls. It gave her time in her busy life to pause and think.

She sat quietly beside Jeff in the dark. He disdained chitchat and preferred absolute silence. Jeff loved flying, probably the only thing in the world he did love. Chancie remembered once, when Kenny's mood swings had been particularly bad, exhorting unswerving love and obedience from her and Jamie and shoving them away when they opened their arms, she'd gone in desperation to consult Jeff.

"Why, Jeff," she had asked through scalding tears. "Just tell me why he acts like he does. Sometimes I think he hates us!" Jeff had looked coldly at her, just as Kenny did, as if he looked at a dead animal in a steel trap, while he swigged straight from a bottle of Jack Daniels. "Because you're the enemy, Chancie," Jeff said at last. "Just like everybody else out there."

"But I'm his wife. Jamie's his son. He can't go on fighting that damned war forever," Chancie had cried. But Jeff would say no more despite her pleading. Her timing could have been better. She realized Jeff had a problem with the bottle, just like Kenny and just like almost every other vet she knew. But he tested clean for drugs and refused to fly if he'd been on one of his periodic binges, even giving her the name of another pilot to call if he should be impaired when she needed him. She suspected she could have had Jeff's pilot's license yanked until he got help with his alcoholism, and her conscience bothered her on that point every time she called him to come to her rescue. But he'd never given her a moment's anxiety about his sobriety at the controls, and so Chancie let the matter slide.

She couldn't have lived with Jeff for five minutes, but she trusted the taciturn vet completely in the air and so said nothing about his problem. It was ironic that she, the drug tester, felt that way. But at some point, she had to separate her occupation from the concern for a person's right to privacy. Jeff Miller's problem would remain his own affair unless and until he tried to mix drinking and flying.

The darkened Wyoming landscape drifted swiftly away beneath them. They ghosted over the Red Desert, following the interstate, and then turned north toward Casper. Lost in thought, Chancie was surprised when the lights of that other oil-boom town on the opposite side of the state came into view. Jeff spoke a few words into the microphone, and then the landing gear came down and they glided on to the runway.

"Need me to wait?" He didn't take his eyes off the glowing panel lights to look at her.

"I don't think so, Jeff, thanks. I don't know how long I'll be. I'll rent a car here and turn it in at the Hawk Point airport."

She thought of her over-extended credit card, and stifled a groan. A few more expenses like this and she'd be bankrupt. This particular job was going to cost her a bundle she could ill afford, but she didn't have any choice unless she wanted to lose the whole railroad contract. "Give your bill to Judy. I'll take care of it when I get back."

"I'm not worried about it. You've never stiffed me yet." Jeff waved her and her equipment off his plane, already dismissing her from his thoughts as he readied for the return flight to Hawk Point.

Chancie cursed the single available rental car all the way to Douglas. She'd expected a little economy car with good gas mileage, but got a monster Cadillac full of unfamiliar buttons and



knobs she didn't know how to operate. She could barely reach the gas pedal with the seat belt unbuckled, but she found the headlights and the window defroster and she guessed that was all that mattered.

She reached the railroad crossing with nearly twenty minutes to spare off her deadline of two hours. Police cars with flashing lights still surrounded the scene, and she introduced herself to the nearest man with a badge while a tow truck backed ponderously up to the rails to attach a badly crushed vehicle. The police assured her no one from the train had left the site. Broken glass littered the ground, sparkling in the train's headlights and the flashing police lights. The train crew followed woodenly while Chancie crossed the tracks to speak with the night manager of a nearby convenience store about commandeering his restroom for the next several hours.

She worked fast to secure the location, taping off the toilet tank and depositing a package of blue colored drink mix in the bowl and removing the trash container.

She went through the checklist and the testing with each man in turn, none of whom gave her the slightest trouble. They acted dazed, but they'd all been tested before and knew what to expect. If they resented the fact that she treated them as clients and not individuals, they didn't show it. The law said they couldn't have the opportunity to get near alcohol for the next eight hours to prevent them from using the excuse that they'd needed a drink *after* the accident. This lame explanation had been offered by the captain of the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* and a New York City subway driver, whose resulting disasters had led directly to the congressional Omnibus Testing Bill that now affected eight million transportation workers.

Chancie got into this business because she thought she could do some good, prevent any more accidents that caused untold human suffering and horrendous environmental damage. If the people responsible for public safety resented her, she could live with their opinion.

At ten in the morning, when the train crew finally left her custody and she stood alone outside the deserted convenience store, she was exhausted. Her breath plumed in frozen puffs in front of her face, and her feet hurt from standing so long.

She donned her leather gloves and packed away her test kits for a lab urinalysis later. No matter what the cops decided to do with the crew now, she had her samples safe.

She climbed in the Cadillac and headed back toward Casper. Nodding dangerously over the steering wheel, she made it to the package delivery office, where she air freighted the samples to the lab. Then she checked into a cheap roadside motel, where she slept restlessly for four hours.

She hadn't let herself think about what was really bothering her, a niggling under her surface thoughts that wouldn't let her rest. At the checkout desk, she glanced at the day's local paper lying folded on the counter. The headline above a picture of the crushed car from the night before brought the memory she'd been trying to repress rushing back into her consciousness. The newspaper article said four teenagers had died in the accident. She reserved the room for another night and spent the afternoon on the lumpy bed, crying her eyes out at the senseless loss of young life.

That evening, she called on John, the area supervisor who'd failed to answer his phone, failed to have his collectors coordinated to take over if he was unavailable, and cost her two days she couldn't afford away from the main office. Driven by a picture in her mind's eye of broken glass and blood, she chewed him out for a good half hour. She couldn't fire him until she'd found and trained a replacement, but in her mind John was as good as gone.

It surprised her when John, normally a burly teddy bear of a man, lashed back as she finally wound down. "If you'd waited another fifteen minutes, somebody would have been there. Myself if it came to that. You're so hell-bent on having all your fingers in the pie, you won't trust anyone else to do their jobs. I know you're going to fire me, but I won't give you the satisfaction. I quit!"

Stunned into speechlessness, she reclaimed the motel room she'd been planning to give up and spent the next day trying to find a replacement for John. With no luck as it turned out. Chastened, she went back to his house and apologized. He accepted his job back more graciously than she probably deserved, and she could now go home.

She debated whether to stay in Rawlins, a sad little town with only the dubious honor of the state penitentiary to recommend it, and talk to the area supervisor there. She checked the time and decided against it. Why have Cherry reiterate John's opinion that Chancie didn't have enough trust in her own people? Chancie had been given her lesson already. She could learn from her mistakes. She could be back in Hawk Point by dinnertime, spend some time with Jamie. And call Micah.

She had been running so fast and hard the last couple of years, she hadn't taken the time to set priorities. Apparently everyone around her, except Chancie herself, had noticed. She had to stop giving every detail in her life the same identical level of attention, every snafu the same almost obsessive concentration.

What was important to Chancie de Leur? She had to decide.

She drove the Caddy as fast as she dared across the most desolate stretch of the state, with the window down exposing her to the frigid air in order to keep her awake. The barren high desert and the white line lulled her; she was afraid even to use the car's cruise control in case she should nod off from lack of anything to do but steer. At least the roads were clear; she could be thankful she didn't have to watch for black ice. She flipped the radio dial back and forth. She couldn't find anything on satellite and only country stations on regular radio, so she turned up the wailing about lovers done wrong accompanied by twanging guitars and hoped it would keep her awake.

She tried to blot out memories that wouldn't go away: of Kenny telling her she was stupid and worthless, of John's round owl face as he told her she was consumed with control, of Jamie's thin shoulders slumping each time she missed a parent-teacher conference or Christmas concert at his school.

Instead she tried to listen to the music and keep her thoughts on the modern breed of cowboy epitomized by today's country western singers, with Wranglers so tight nothing was left to the frenzied imagination of female fans. From there, her thoughts automatically turned to Micah. Her own sexy cowboy. *Maybe*. Maybe he could be hers. If she wanted him, like she thought she did, and if he wanted her, as she was darn near positive by now he did.

She could steal a few hours in Micah's arms tonight and make up the sleep in her own bed. She concentrated on thinking of his body, his lean torso and broad chest. She thought of their date for ice cream, licking cold sweetness from a spoon as she'd wanted to lick his heated cock. She wondered if he would taste as good as he looked. She couldn't wait to try. The thought kept her wide awake, and the rest of her warm enough, that she could bear the icy blast on her face from the open window.

She called from the airport after turning in the car. She wanted to leave the message now, before she could change her mind. She was running on empty emotionally. She needed Micah Taylor, and neither Jamie nor anything else she had any control over would keep her away.

She claimed her own car, shivering violently until the Lexus warmed up. Then she checked in at the office by cell phone, drove home and spent the afternoon and evening trying to smile and act her ordinary self.

At midnight she drove to the Inn parking lot and waited.

Micah pulled up in his truck a little after twelve-thirty. This time she got out of the car to meet him. He said in a soft voice, "Hello, Chancie."

He wore the cowboy hat and fleece-lined coat, open despite the cold to show a denim shirt cut to fit his lean frame. He looked wonderful, like every Western girl's dream cowboy, and Chancie wondered if he actually owned horses. She herself, born and raised in Wyoming, had never ridden a horse.

As she stood looking at him, all her bravado vanished. The two days on the road, the horrible train accident, and the phone call she'd placed to his voicemail had dried up her store of courage. She just wanted to drink in the sight of him.

But after a minute or so of that, the puzzled grin left his face and he said, "Chancie, I'm real happy to see you. But it's cold out here. What do you want to do?"

Her lips felt frozen. She said, "Could we just drive somewhere and talk? I don't feel like sitting in public tonight."

He didn't seem surprised. She detected no flicker of emotion one way or the other. He said only, "Your car or my rig?"

Still hesitant, she said, "Mine, I think."

"You driving?"

At last she relaxed a little. She was unused to asking for exactly what she wanted in a relationship. Maybe Micah really would let things happen at her pace. "I'm driving. Get in."

Micah tossed his Stetson in the back seat. Chancie got in, put the car in gear, and started to back out of the parking space.

"Stop," he said.

She turned her head to look questioningly at him.

"Seat belt."

"I never wear one. I had a car once whose belt wouldn't unbuckle. Scared me to think I couldn't get out if I needed to." She smiled ingratiatingly, expecting to have her way.

He didn't smile back. "I don't mean to be a hardass, Chancie. But I've seen too much damage done in wrecks to sit here and let you drive without a belt. I insist you buckle up."

She drew in a breath. "Would you arrest me?"

He grinned. "I could. But I wouldn't. I'm asking you nice, though. Please buckle up. For me, if not for yourself."

"All right, Micah." She reached for the belt, clicked it into the lock. "Better?"

"Much." He faced forward again, leaning his head back against the rest.

She finished backing up, then drove through town and out past the city limits. At a little turn-out called Fourteen Mile that featured a spring fed pond, frozen over now into a solid sheet of ice, she pulled off and parked. She let the car idle, hands on the steering wheel and eyes straight ahead. A glow suffused the bluff overhanging the pond, and soon the moon began to rise, a sliver of gold that seemed so close she could almost reach out and touch it.

Even though the little traveler's stop featured restrooms, Micah doubted if they'd be disturbed at this time of night. As she sat and said nothing, he began, "Chancie."

"This isn't as romantic as I thought it would be," she said.

He felt a laugh rumbling deep in his chest. "Honey, we haven't done anything yet. You want me to hold you, meet me halfway over the console."

Chancie wanted him to hold her so much. She quickly unbelted and twisted over toward him, running her hands under the shearling jacket, seeking his warmth. The full winter moon crept slowly upward as she lay as closely against Micah's chest as she could. His arms curled around her, and she could hear the thump of his heart in his chest. They were alive, she and Micah, and those four kids in Douglas who'd tried to beat the train were dead. She should grab every moment she could with this man, squeeze each second of joy while she could. She could have suggested they meet at his place tonight but she held him off like a teen-aged virgin. Why?

Tears bathed her face. The moon glittered, its circumference trembling from her tears. A sob rose in her chest, and she held her breath, trying to stop it. Micah caught on to the fact that she was crying, and lifted her upper body by the shoulders for her to straighten up and face him.

"Chancie." He brushed her hair back, wiped at her tears. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She shuddered. "Micah, they're dead. Four kids in Douglas." She broke off, unable to continue.

"Is that where you've been the past two days? Why didn't you call me?" He tipped her chin up. In the moonlight, she couldn't distinguish the color of his eyes, but his forehead puckered in concern.

"I-I didn't think. I'm so mixed up. All I could concentrate on was getting the job done before I collapsed. Then I found out what happened—and that I didn't even have to be there—and on the way home all I could think of was you. I didn't want you long-distance. I wanted you with me. And now that you're here, all I can do is fall to pieces and cry. I'm so sorry, Micah."

He stroked her cheek with a fingertip. "So tough and so soft. I'm glad to know you're human, Chancie. I'm real glad you called because I've been wanting to see you too." He combed strong fingers through the curls fanning her cheeks. "You'd have made a good cop. You wait until the crisis is past to break down."

"Don't say that. I couldn't be a trooper like you. I can't even do my own job properly." She curled her upper body back over the hard plastic console to lean against his chest, where she suddenly felt she belonged. Micah didn't know all the details, but he was the most reassuring thing in her life right now. She clung to his strength, his support.

Micah stroked Chancie's head, then her back through her winter parka. Beneath the crackly parka, she wore a soft cashmere sweater that begged for the caress of a man's hand. He wondered if she was aware of the texture of the clothes she wore, their sumptuous feel under his fingers. Beneath her rigid manner, she pleaded silently for someone to touch her. It nearly drove him crazy to sit here and stroke her sweater and not her full breasts pressing against his chest. Did she think he was made of steel, a Superman? He said softly in her ear, "Do you think cops don't cry, Chancie?"

She held her breath. Could she tell Micah the truth? Kenny had always gotten extremely defensive and angry when she tried to explain what she thought or felt, as if her feelings didn't count. Kenny had taught her to lie about what she really thought, because the truth brought only raging tantrums and binges with the bottle. The truth hurt.

She had to know how Micah would react to the truth of what she thought. She had to know now. She expelled a breath, inhaled another, gathering her nerve for the plunge. She said, "I guess I thought cops became inured to human carnage."

His hand halted momentarily in its soothing massage, before he took up the feather-light circling again. "Inured to human carnage. The bigger the words, the farther away the blood is, huh? Don't worry, I understand what you're trying to do. But you mustn't think that because I've seen more bad accidents than you, I've become used to it. You never get used to it. If you don't believe me, I can get you statistics on police suicides."

She stiffened beneath his hand, almost pulled away. Micah tried to glide over her sudden withdrawal. "Ah, Chancie." He squeezed her lightly, drawing her back to the warm spot she'd created where his coat lay open to her heat. "Do you think I don't know people's stereotype of cops? I see it reflected in their eyes all the time when I'm in uniform. I saw it in yours that first night in your office. People are almost more suspicious of cops than cops are of them. You should know what I'm talking about. You're in the suspicion business yourself."

She raised her head, lower lip trembling. Hadn't she faced this most basic of truths about herself yet?

He smiled, trying to draw a return smile from her. "Well, you are. What is it that you think you do? What service do you perform? You try to catch people using illicit substances at work, or screen potential illicit substance users applying for a job. Sometimes we're in the exact same business. That lonely stretch of highway called I-80 is the biggest drug pipeline in the United States, and I also catch a hell of a lot of drunk drivers. I have to be suspicious in order to stay alive. It kind of goes with the territory."

She whispered, "How do you separate what you do from who you are? I've seen so much of the bad side of people, Micah. Sometimes I lose hope that there are good, decent people out there who aren't always trying to sneak something by. I try to, I thought I could, prevent some of the waste of lives. But I can't. I don't. The horrible accidents still happen."

He could see she was about to begin weeping again. He curled his hand around her neck, forcing her to look at him. "You have to believe we're the good guys, Chancie. We do what we can to stop the damage, but there are forces out there beyond our control. Accidents do happen. Roads get icy. People fall asleep behind the wheel. The best we can do is trust that most folks are honest and conscientious and doing their best, just like us."

“Is that what you really believe?” She took a deep breath, gathering her courage. Then she looked him straight in the eye. “Micah, I’ve always wondered, if you really believe there are good people out there, then tell me why cops associate only with other cops?”

“For a girl, you fight dirty, you know that?” His white grin faded for a moment before returning full-strength. “Yeah, cops fraternize with cops. Those are the people we know, the people we see every day. The people we know we can trust. But I’m trying to break that habit. Lately I’ve been seeing one really sexy woman in particular who is not a cop.”

He ran his hands back under her coat and she willingly returned the favor. She found she loved the feel of the washboard of his ribs through denim. She smiled tentatively, looking deep into his eyes, her somber mood eased. Micah had helped immeasurably to restore her lost equilibrium.

His teeth sparkled in the moonlight when he smiled.

“Getting warm in here.” She straightened, drew off her heavy parka, and tossed it in the back with his hat. Then she looked again into his eyes.

His eyes were heavy-lidded as he returned her gaze.

Something inside Chancie responded instantly to that look, her own needs suddenly washing to the forefront on a wave of heated desire. She bent her head slightly, and he raised his own to meet her. His lips were soft and warm, gentle against hers and just slightly open. Only the tightening of his arms around her told her that he held back for her sake. She kissed him tentatively, softly, expecting at any moment that he’d drag her over the console and take what she so timidly offered. But he took what she gave and no more.

His containment challenged her. She increased the pressure of her lips on his, tilting her head sideways and catching his lower lip with both of her own. She gave that sensuously full lip her attention for a while, running her hands lightly up and down his ribs and sides. Micah let her do what she would, his own hands kneading her spine from neck to waist. She straightened her head a bit and parted her lips to meet both of his. Then she impishly pulled her mouth away.

“How was that for a first kiss?” she whispered.

“Real nice, baby.” His voice sounded raw, and she regretted continuing to tease him.

“I can do better,” she offered.

“I don’t mind playing for a while if that’s all you want.”

“I love playing with *you*, Micah,” she said.

His eyes closed, he shook his head slightly as if swallowing back a rejoinder to her double entendre. She took the opportunity to begin kissing him again while he wasn’t looking directly at her. This time she kissed him like she’d wanted to since she first laid eyes on him, pressing her breasts as close as she could to his hard chest and bringing her hands out from beneath his coat to wrap them around the column of his neck and entwine her fingers in his thick, straight hair. She pulled his head closer, opening her mouth and grinding her lips to his. Her tongue sliced across his teeth to meet his, and the kiss softened instantly.

Their tongues tasted each other, dancing sweetly together inside his mouth. Then she slowly withdrew hers to its own warm cavern, darting back once or twice to invite his to follow. It did, and suddenly it was Micah kissing her, his hands massaging her jaw, rotating her head until her neck bent like a willow to rest on one of his broad forearms.

Clasped in his arms, she gave herself to his searching kisses, learning what pleased him, showing him by her response what roused her, murmuring wordlessly into his opened mouth when he groaned in frustrated passion. She drowned in the taste of his mouth, his hands tangled in her hair. Hot pangs of frustrated desire shot through her at each movement of his lips against hers.

Suddenly his arm stiffened inside the leather coat sleeve. He stopped kissing her and drew his head back to look sharply at her.

Dazed from his kisses, it took her a moment to decipher the look on his face. In the heat of her ardor, she’d unconsciously unbuttoned his shirt and slipped her hand inside. His flesh singed her palm now that she realized what she had done. She’d stepped outside the boundaries of her own rules. She guiltily withdrew her hand from its warm nest inside his shirt.

He whispered into her hair, "Are you sure this kissing in a car is all you need, Chancie?"

Pain burst in her. No, this wasn't all she needed. But it was all she'd allow herself. She closed her eyes against the ache of what she really wanted, and said, "I need so much, Micah. I need this closeness so much. But I need time. Give me time."

He waited until she opened her eyes. Then he said, "Tell me one thing true, Chancie. Do you want me?"

She ached with the need to be caressed, the secret places within her throbbed with longing to be filled with Micah's cock. She'd been married for more than a decade, and in that time her body had been taught that this kind of kissing led to hot banging that made the mattress squeak and the crown of her head knock the wall. But her cool, analytical side wouldn't stop reminding her of the pain that followed pleasure. She'd been taught to mistrust the closeness of lovemaking.

To trust was to hurt.

Still, it was unfair to confuse Micah with Kenny. Up to this moment, Micah had more than proved she could trust him. He kept his word about letting her temper the speed of their union. He hadn't led her straight to his place. He hadn't become impatient with her, cursed her, slammed a door in her face or gotten drunk to call attention to what an inhibited bitch she was.

She had to tell him the truth and take her chances. She said, "Micah, I fantasize about you. In my dreams I don't carry around the baggage of a bad marriage. But in real life, I do." She touched his cheek, ran the pad of a finger over his lips. "Yes, I want you. You can touch me."

"Chancie." He rocked her gently. "It's enough just to know. Sorry I pushed when I promised I wouldn't."

She sighed. "Micah, I already decided you're a perfect gentleman." She snuggled up against his chest, thinking of Judy's classifications. She knew now where Micah Taylor fit in.

He growled. "A gentleman, huh? I've apparently left a misimpression here tonight. Allow me to alter your opinion a little, ma'am."

He bent his head to kiss her again. He hadn't blamed her, called her names, rejected her. Micah Taylor, she realized with a rush of emotion, offered no threat, posed no danger. He wasn't a vengeful man. Infused with delight that perhaps she'd found the man she'd been looking for at last, she wanted to crawl all over him, bestow kisses on every part of his firm body, devour him until they fell exhausted from each other.

So she kissed him. Her hand had found its way back inside his shirt, to the steel hardness of his chest. In response, his fingers inched under her sweater until his hand encountered the elastic of her bra. Tugging gently, he released one breast to cool air. Her nipple hardened instantaneously, and he rolled it between his thumb and one finger, groaning into her open mouth. His hand left her breast to trail down her side and seek the waistband of her pants. They unsnapped and unzipped easily, and she maneuvered to allow him easier access, arching against the steering wheel. He paused.

"Touch me," she whispered. "Micah, touch me."

His questing finger slid down her belly, along ready wetness, and encountered her clit. The merest contact and she was coming, almost blacking out from the intensity of the sudden orgasm.

He held her while she slowly relaxed. Soon he was tugging her sweater down, while she stared at him with eyes still glazed with spent lust. She didn't understand what was happening.

Condensation fogged the windows of the Lexus, dimming the moonlight. She tried to read his expression by the dashboard lights, but finally had to rely on his voice to get some clue about what he was feeling. "Zip your pants up, baby," he said. "I think we should go."

"Micah?" she asked, dazed.

He buttoned his shirt while she clasped the steering wheel with trembling hands. Then he retrieved her bulky parka and his hat, setting the big gray Stetson like a chaperon on the console between them.

"Put your coat on, Chancie. Please." The trembling that showed in her hands started deep inside and shimmied up her whole body. She didn't think she could drive yet. She'd stopped too soon, way too soon, and her yearning body punished her for it. She'd had merely a taste of what she

wanted to experience at the hands of this man, and he couldn't actually be serious about stopping now. When she didn't react to his plea, Micah said, "Come on, honey. Put your seatbelt on, put the car in reverse and let's go before I throw you in the backseat and we do something you're not ready for. I don't want any regrets between us, Chancie."

She shook her head, trying to clear it. Finally she gained enough control to do as he asked. She belted herself in, slipped the car into gear and pulled out of the lot at Fourteen Mile. She was grateful Micah had enough wits about him not to want to go any further in the uncomfortable confines of a car in winter. But then he insisted he wanted to go home. Alone. What did that mean? Had she done something wrong, something that turned him off so much he wanted her to go away?

All the way back to town, and after she'd dropped him off at his truck, and into the wee, weary hours of the morning when she should have been sleeping, the thought badgered her: He thought they might regret what they'd done, or that she would regret doing more. Maybe he was right. Maybe she wasn't ready. But her unfilled secret recesses continued to harass her the rest of the night, and wouldn't let her sleep. Her thoughts churned while she tossed alone in her bed, wide awake. *Would you have regretted making love with Micah, Chancie? No matter what, if that's all there was and all you'd ever get, would you regret it?*

She knew she would not. She only hoped, when the time came that Micah thought she might be ready, he wouldn't regret it either.

## Chapter Five

"Hi, Micah. This is Chancie. It's about six, and I know you're not home. But I was wondering if you were off on Sunday, and, um, if you'd like to go Christmas shopping with me. I'm truly sorry I can't see you before then; I have to spend some time with Jamie. Call and let me know. 'Bye."

His voicemail warned "end of messages," then gave him a menu of choices in case Micah might want to save it. He did. He would want to listen to it again to see if he could clear up his confusion.

He thought he'd understood Chancie's ground rules: sex only, when she was ready, no emotional entanglement or promises, thank you very much. He rubbed his eyes and sighed. Now she wanted no contact for days, supposedly because of her kid. He had his doubts about her excuse.

He called voicemail again and punched in the number to re-play the message while he mused. Maybe things had gotten too hot, too fast, for Chancie. Sunday was three days away, a long time for them not to see each other. Maybe she wanted to cool off, take time to think before she took the next step toward where they both knew they were headed. Maybe she had as much trouble as he enduring searing kisses that led only to some heated foreplay. While it was nice, it had been an odd encounter for a couple of adults. It kind of made him feel like a teenager again.

He listened to the message once more. Maybe she really did feel she had to pay some extra attention to her son. She'd hinted that the boy was a challenge, and her difficulty with him was probably compounded by having a new man in her life. He wished there were something he could do to help Chancie with Jamie, but probably the biggest help he could give her would be to stay away as she asked.

Which wasn't the easiest thing ever asked of him. Micah hadn't, by any means, forgotten Chancie's ripe body or torrid kisses. Every waking moment his own body longed for hers in a lingering, aching response that hadn't plagued him quite this urgently since he had actually been a horny teenager. But now he found that the invitation to go shopping opened an endless vista of possibilities he thought he'd been blinded to long ago: hinting of making a home together, sharing a family, building a future. These and more dangled before him, frightening him with their illusive three-dimensional reality.

Damn! He'd closed off that part of himself, declared it dead a long time ago. What was hope doing rising from the grave now, a shambling carcass he'd just have to seize by the throat one of these days and shove back down the dark hole?

He was falling quickly, crazily in love with Chancie de Leur, tumbling into an all-encompassing love that terrified him with its promise, and its peril. He'd opened his heart once before, and had it smashed flat as the copper pennies which as a boy he used to lay on the tracks, waiting for the screaming iron wheels of the huge passing freight trains.

Did he dare open up again?

He dropped his head in his hands. No. Chancie was right. He should just back off and take things as they came, not letting himself feel hurt if she didn't want to see him for half a week at a time. He'd admired her cool head from the start, her unemotional sensibility. He should try for that restraint himself. Maybe he wouldn't even return the call, let her think he didn't care one way or the other.

And whom did he think he was kidding? Micah raised his head and stared at the hulking outlines of his sorry living room furniture. Even in darkness the chair and scarred coffee table looked like sulky discards from a second-hand store. His apartment smelled stale, the air thin and uncirculated, as if the door and windows were never opened. He was seldom home. About all he had was work. And he didn't care. He'd closed himself off from more than his own emotions after the divorce, he'd basically closed himself off from life.

Well, maybe he'd had enough time to heal. Maybe he wanted his life back. Maybe he wanted a life with Chancie and her grouchy young son and a housekeeper named Alma.

He realized how little he knew about Chancie's life, just a few facts he could count on one hand. She was right to try to get the two of them away from their unthinking, heated desire for each other, to explore unknown facets of themselves that couldn't be revealed in bed. So okay, he'd call and talk to her, tell her he'd *love* to go shopping on Sunday, even though he despised shopping.

He looked at the illuminated face of his cellphone. Damn and double damn. Almost one in the morning. Micah used to like night and swing shifts, and now he hated them, everybody sleeping while he was wide awake. Chancie had a rough couple of days, only the previous night staying out with him until almost two. He couldn't call and wake her now, no matter how he hankered to hear her voice, longed to picture her in bed in her nightie, curled to the phone and the sound of his voice in her ear. He'd catch a few hours of rest himself, set the alarm, and call her in the morning before she left for work.

If, after what had happened in her car, Chancie could wait three days, he could wait a few hours. He rose and crossed the darkened apartment toward his cold, lonely bed. He undressed and climbed between the sheets, and then lay sleepless, counting the minutes ticking away. A few hours of that and he began to admit that waiting for Chancie de Leur would perhaps be the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

Micah called Chancie at seven-thirty. He figured even if she didn't have to be at work until nine, she'd need time to breakfast and shower and put on her make-up and all the other things women did in the morning.

A young male voice answered.

*Uh-oh.* The legendary Jamie of the bad temper.

Micah said, "Hello. Is your mother there?" Anonymous. That was a good idea, he thought, pleased with himself.

"Who's calling, please?" The boy's voice cracked slightly. Micah sympathized. He could remember that awkward, emotionally rough age that the boy was just starting to enter, even as he cringed that Jamie and his polite rejoinder had outwitted him already.

"This is Micah Taylor, Jamie, returning her call." That should do it, let the kid know that Chancie had called him first.

"She's not here." *Clunk.*

The brat hung up on him! Micah punched in the number again.

"Jamie, I'd like to speak to your mother, please. And don't ha—"

"She's not here." *Clunk.*



Damned jealous, insolent, little... Micah left the thought unfinished, waited half an hour and tried again.

"I would like to leave a message for your mother, Jamie."

The boy hesitated.

Micah hurried to fill the momentary vacuum. "Tell her I called back. Will you do that?"

"She's not here. I don't know when she'll be back." *Clunk.*

The kid had to go to school some time. Micah would outwait him and give the message to Chancie's housekeeper, Alma. At eight-thirty he tried again, getting only Chancie's sweet, somewhat mechanical voice as his call was forwarded to her cell phone's voicemail. He disconnected.

On the dot of nine, he called Screening Services. A female voice answered, not Chancie's.

"Judy?" he asked. He didn't know the assistant's last name.

"No, this is Brenda. Judy's busy right now. May I take a message and have her call you back?"

Brenda? Who the hell was Brenda? Micah thought Chancie had made clear her office staff consisted of only herself and Judy.

Perplexed and becoming thoroughly frustrated, he said, "My name is Micah Taylor. I've been trying to reach Chancie de Leur. Is she there?"

"No, Ms. de Leur is out of the office until Monday. But I'll leave the message that you called, Mr. Taylor."

"Wait! Monday's too late." Micah found himself almost shouting into the phone. He tried to modulate his voice. "It's important that I reach *Ms.* de Leur today. How can I get a message to her?"

The woman's voice grew guarded. "I'm just a temp, called in to help out until Ms. de Leur returns. I'm not supposed to bother her unless it's an emergency."

Micah's voice grew smooth and slow with simmering frustration, each word enunciated clearly. "Let's just agree this is an emergency, okay, Brenda? How can I reach Chancie de Leur?"

"Uh, what is the nature of your emergency, sir?"

He halted. Chancie's temp guard dog had him over a barrel on that one. Could he say, "I'm supposed to have a date with her on Sunday, but her son won't let me talk to her to confirm it." That would be sure to impress Brenda. How about "The emergency is that I've fallen like an avalanche in crazy love with your boss, only I don't know her well enough to discover how to reach her to *tell* her that."

Ridiculous. The whole situation would be laughable if he weren't so eager to reach Chancie and tell her, *Yes*, he wanted to see her, and *Yes*, he couldn't wait for Sunday. He could say nothing of this to a temporary employee who'd probably assume he was out of his head. And maybe he was. It certainly felt like he was.

"Never mind," he mumbled into the phone, and disconnected.

He'd find her himself. He seized his tattered telephone directory, one of five or six he periodically found in plastic bags on his doorstep. He ran his finger impatiently down the columns. De Marco, de Sienna, Dewitt. No de Leur. Chancie's landline home number wasn't listed in any of the numerous directories, so he could get no address for her.

A cop had resources lay people didn't, and Micah thought instinctively of using those sources. He considered calling the dispatcher at the Highway Patrol office. He had his finger on the button of the phone, and then rejected the idea. He didn't think Chancie would appreciate him using avenues open only to cops to find her and might resent it. He couldn't afford to play detective with her and lose her in the process.

Frustrated, he slammed the phone book down on the laminate countertop in the tiny apartment kitchen. He had to cool down and think. If Chancie wasn't at the office, maybe he could reach her at home now that Jamie had left for school. He dialed her number again.

He got voicemail. He waited for her phone to go through its spiel, then said, "Chancie, this is Micah. If you can, call me back." He waited after he disconnected. No one called back.

Well, maybe if he stalled a while, the temporary secretary at Screening Services wouldn't recognize the voice of the demented caller who said he had an emergency but refused to leave a message. Perhaps the wait would give him time to settle down and make some sense. He'd take a shower and shave, give himself a while to regroup.

A half hour later, hair still damp and dressed only in a pair of baggy sweat pants and a T-shirt, he tried Screening Services again. A woman answered.

"Brenda?"

"No, this is Judy."

*Who's on first?* This whole morning had been like the old Abbott and Costello comedy routine. Something Micah had taken for granted would be easy had become ridiculously difficult. Take a deep breath, Micah told himself, and speak calmly. Funky Judy with the earring in her nose is the only one who knows how to reach Chancie. Be nice to Judy, Micah.

"Judy, my name is Micah Taylor. I had a date with Chancie on Monday, and another night before last. She called and left a message for me, but I've been unable to reach her. It's important that I talk to her. Can you help me?"

He heard Judy suck in a breath. "You did not. You've had two dates with *Chancie*?" Then suspicion slowly replaced surprise. This news about dates apparently didn't fit the Chancie that Judy knew. "Who did you say this was?"

"Micah Taylor. I'm a highway patrol trooper. Check your list for Monday. I was in the office then, and asked Chancie out, and she said yes." He grimaced at having to beg Chancie's offbeat assistant for a way to get through to her. "Do you remember me, Judy? One of the two troopers who came in as you were leaving? You also had a date on Monday evening, as I remember."

"And Chancie went out with you." Judy's voice was flat. Unsaid were the words, *a cop*. "I don't believe you. It's against the rules."

"It was all done outside the office. And she did see me. Twice."

"Uh-huh. Well, Trooper Taylor, I'll be glad to leave the message that you returned her call."

"Judy, please listen to me. If I don't get the message to Chancie by Sunday, I'm dead in the water with her. Do you understand me? That kid of hers won't let me talk to her. I must reach her. Please help me."

"Jamie, huh?" Judy said. He could hear a smile in her voice, and it was as if sunshine suddenly broke through a blinding snowstorm. "What's he doing, blocking your calls?"

"No, he's answering the calls. He was hanging up on me. Now I just go straight to voicemail."

"Yeah, sounds familiar. He hates Screening Services too. Drives Chancie crazy. You probably got her landline. But she has several numbers just so I can avoid trying to leave a message with Jamie. Tell you what, I'll try calling her. If all else fails, she won't go the full day without checking in at the office. Sooner or later she'll discover Jamie has turned off all the phones again. I'll make sure to tell her you called as soon as I hear from her."

Micah knew there'd been a reason he hadn't mistrusted Judy completely. An ally at last.

"Thank you, Judy. Very much. You're a lifesaver."

"Tell Chancie when you see her on Sunday that I deserve a raise, okay?"

Micah laughed. "I'll do that."

He didn't hear from Chancie before he left for work, and then had such a busy shift he didn't have time to check his personal voicemail. But he was already speed-dialing voicemail as he got out of the cruiser in front of his apartment.

Then he was listening to her sweet voice. "Micah, this is Chancie. I'm sorry you had such a bad time with Jamie. I'm going to work hard on changing his mind about some things. I may need help with that eventually. Would you maybe be interested in the job?"

She paused, apparently thinking about what she'd said. "Wait. Erase that. I don't have conditions attached to what I hope is *us*. You and me, I mean. Jamie and I aren't a package deal if

that's not what you want. I'll be in front of the mall at two on Sunday. Hope to see you there. Good night, Micah. I'll be thinking of you and missing you."

Micah saved the message and played it again, listening for nuances in her voice that might tell him what she was really thinking. She was worried about the kid and his temper tantrums. She offered Micah the probably thankless job of becoming a father figure to a young boy with hormones beginning to stir which apparently caused his moods to fluctuate wildly. Meanwhile, Micah's own hormones would be in constant turbulence over the boy's mother. And the mother would be caught between the surly resentment of the boy and the raging lust of the man.

Yippee. What more could a guy ask?

Just last night Micah wished he could begin living and feeling again. Now Chancie offered the possibility to plunge headlong back in to a complicated relationship. *Not a package deal. Riiight.* Micah Taylor would not only have the opportunity to make ruinous mistakes with the mother, he'd have extra chances every time he encountered her kid.

He wanted to run away from the two of them as fast as he could, and at the same time he wanted to grab the opening Chancie offered with both hands.

Micah had only to fail to show up on Sunday and he could safely bet he'd never hear from Chancie de Leur again. If he showed up, he may as well ask her to marry him on the spot, because he doubted he'd be able to extricate himself from her so easily again.

He played the message back once more. Chancie extended a third option: sneaking around behind the kid's back.

The idea rankled. Even though Micah had enjoyed Chancie's sweet, stolen kisses in her car and very much enjoyed sending her over the edge into mindless ecstasy, he couldn't see the two of them building any kind of relationship in the bucket seats of her Lexus. And if he could have her, eventually, in his bed, he didn't want her getting up in the middle of the night and leaving him, in order to sneak back across town to wake in her own bed.

He wanted to wake up next to Chancie in the morning, maybe sometimes sweet-talk her into a little extra loving in the middle of the night. He wanted to sit across the table from her and eat his meals, wash his clothes in the same load as hers.

He wanted a home. He wanted a wife. Specifically, he wanted Chancie, however he could get her. If he had to take her rotten kid in the bargain, so be it. He'd win that little brat over too. Some way. Somehow.

Micah went to bed on an optimistic high. He didn't let himself think how smart and obstinate Jamie had showed himself today. In truth, the boy had almost beaten him at the phone game.

No, Micah thought, once Jamie realizes what's good for him, he'll never hang up on me again.

He drifted into sleep. He didn't stop to think that he had yet to meet the real Jamie de Leur, in person.

## Chapter Six

Chancie spotted Micah crossing the crowded parking lot, checked the time, and smiled. They'd both arrived early. The sun shone brightly for December, but that wasn't why she felt warm inside. The good feeling came from the fact that Micah seemed as eager to see her as she was to see him.

She remembered once, after they'd been married a year or so, Kenny had stopped the car on the way home and said he had to see a friend. He left Chancie sitting alone for a long time, seething. When he finally returned, she'd said, "Don't ever do that to me again, Kenny. I'm not your dog." He had brushed her anger off, unable to understand why she was mad, or else happy that he'd succeeded in making her mad. But all these years later the incident stuck in her head, a harbinger, she realized now, of things to come in her marriage to Kenny. She should have seen it then; it would have saved her a lot of grief later.

She shivered, all the good feeling of a moment ago gone. Kenny had chased her and chased her, not giving her a moment to herself, calling and coming over and asking her out every night. For

a short while she'd felt for Kenny what now spread inside her when she thought of Micah, a trickling, honeyed warmth that she had been sure was love.

Kenny had chased her, caught her, then killed her love for him by slow, torturous degrees. Would Micah do the same?

Micah's long stride brought him within inches of her very rapidly. His whole face suffused with gladness. Then he said what she was fast becoming used to hearing after a separation: "Hi, baby."

"Hello, Micah." She had invited him here to the mall, to spend the afternoon with her. Micah didn't pursue or press. He didn't demand her love, or sulk when he didn't get instant gratification of his wishes. He thought only of her wishes and set his own aside, waiting for her to be ready.

Which she thought she was, even if he didn't think so. He looked wonderful. He wore tight jeans and boots and the dun leather coat. His short black hair gleamed with blue highlights in the afternoon sun. She said, "You look nice. I'm so glad to see you."

Micah squinted, checking out her snug denims, turtleneck sweater, and leather blazer in return. "I think I'm supposed to say *you* look nice, and you do. But since we break all the rules anyway, you can go ahead and finish telling me how great I look."

He grinned, preening a bit. She stepped closer and planted a quick kiss hello on his neck, before slipping her arm beneath his. "You smell good too. Would you like to go inside? Everything's melting out here and the snow's turning to a mushy mess. We're going to get splashed if we stand here much longer."

A stream of people entering and leaving the store detoured around them. "Yeah, I guess we'd better."

Chancie tugged him toward the big double glass doors of the discount store. "You don't sound happy about it, Micah. Don't you like shopping?"

"Not very much. And especially not in holiday crowds. I only came so I could be with you."

She smiled. "You're sweet. And it's Christmas. We can't very well avoid the crowds."

She thought she heard him say softly, "Well, we could." The store greeter offered her a basket at the same instant Micah spoke, so she couldn't be sure she'd heard right but she still felt a smile tugging at her lips.

"Here, you push," Chancie said. She had to place Micah's hands on the cart. "It will give you something constructive to do."

She pulled a list from her purse. A methodical shopper, Chancie soon had the cart piled with wrapping paper, ribbon and packaged bows, cards and decorations. They stood in line to pay, Micah glumly fingering all the junk from keychains to gum at the checkout, and then Chancie helped him unload it all into the trunk of her car.

"Now for the real shopping," she said, and grinned at the look on his face.

"That wasn't it?"

"That was wrapping paper, silly. I have to get presents to wrap inside the paper."

"What kind of presents?" he asked, apprehension written in his tense stance.

"Oh, Micah. The kinds that really put a man through the wringer. Blouses and purses and jewelry, robes and slippers and sweaters."

"You're kidding. Will I have to sit on one of those little velvet benches and wait for you to try it all on?"

He looked so horrified, she relented. "I'm teasing you. I do have to buy all that stuff, but not for me." She steered him back toward the mall. "I brought you along to help me pick out something for Jamie. He's getting harder to buy for all the time. I don't know what to get him."

"Boy stuff, huh? I think I might be able to handle that." He looked slightly mollified.

"Girl stuff first," she warned. She guided him into a more upscale clothing store than the midprice outlet at the opposite end of the mall. Chancie stopped at the perfume counter, dazzled. Micah wore a look of long-suffering patience as Chancie and the sales clerk discussed the merits of various scents.

Chancie settled at last for a tiny bottle that cost more than a hundred dollars. Micah's jaw dropped at the price Chancie didn't even blink at. "For Judy," she explained.

She picked out a black leather bag and wallet for Alma, slacks and a blouse and sweater. Trying to sound nonchalant, Micah pointed to the gray and white houndstooth sweater, and said, "What size is that?"

Chancie said, "A sixteen. It's for my mother. She's, um, chesty."

"Chesty, huh?" Micah examined the rack of sweaters, then his eyes slid toward Chancie's breasts and quickly away. "What size would somebody wear who's maybe nicely endowed but probably not described as, um, chesty?"

Chancie had never thought of Micah Taylor as cute. Handsome, yes. Sexy, absolutely. But at that moment, she thought his efforts at subterfuge altogether endearing. "Well, it depends. Who are you buying for?"

"Maybe my mother," Micah said swiftly, coloring at the fib.

Chancie, secretly glad he was such a poor liar, couldn't resist teasing him further. "Have you ever bought clothes for your mother, Micah?"

"I don't remember. I might have." His attempt at looking her in the eye failed, his gaze alighting somewhere on her forehead. A beefy woman, arms laden with shopping bags, tried to squeeze between Micah and another rack of sweaters close behind him.

"Well, what size did your mother wear then? Is she built like that?" Chancie pointed toward the broad back of the large woman making a beeline for the fifty-percent-off rack. "Or more like that?" She indicated a very tall, willowy sales clerk returning an armload of fitting room rejects to the floor racks.

Micah looked briefly at the two women she pointed out, then back directly at Chancie. His brow furrowed. "No, she's more like you, I guess."

Chancie raised her eyebrows in disbelief. "Hmm."

Micah's mouth twisted, and Chancie took instant pity on him before he became thoroughly discouraged. "I wear a ten, Micah. Try a ten, but save the receipt in case it doesn't fit your, um, mother. In some clothing lines a ten fits like an eight, and then I wear a twelve instead. And also the opposite can be true, a ten fitting like a twelve."

"Good idea. I'll do that." Obviously immensely relieved, Micah smiled broadly. "Thank you, Chancie."

As always, Chancie's knees turned slightly to water at the sight of Micah's smile. She noticed, not for the first time, the two deep dimples in the bronzed skin of his cheeks. He probably wasn't aware his own feelings played openly across the handsome planes of his face. Micah Taylor seemed devoid of guile and she wondered if he had a hard time on the job. Police officers had always seemed a rigid lot to her.

But she liked Micah very much, just the way he was. She knew he possessed an inflexible discipline, and gave a lot of ground just to please her. The urge to touch him surged too strong to deny. She ran her hands beneath the flaps of his jacket and hugged him hard, right there in public in the middle of the store. "You're welcome, Micah."

Caught by surprise, his hands full of clothes and ludicrously, a black leather purse, and wedged between two heavily laden racks of colorful sweaters, Micah couldn't move to hug her back. But she felt his chin touch the top of her head in a benevolent return effort.

She had never done such a thing to Kenny, grabbed him in public and hugged him. She had never felt the least desire to do so. Micah made her feel good, about him and about herself, and she followed instincts with him that she didn't know existed. And Micah always found some way to show approval of her impetuous urges to show him that she liked him.

She felt herself beginning to bud under Micah's sunny regard. A Chancie she had thought crushed under the weight of Kenny's constant disapproval, instead survived and burgeoned anew with Micah's careful tending.

“Let’s go someplace fun,” she said, seeking acquiescence in Micah’s bold blue eyes. “Let’s shop for a ten-year-old boy. I’ve put you through enough torture in women’s clothing for one day.”

“I appreciate that, Chancie,” he said honestly. “But I’d force myself to shop all day with you, if that’s what you really wanted. Even groceries.”

“Groceries are the worst, huh?” She grinned at him as she headed for the checkout counter.

“I can’t cook worth spit. So I hate picking the stuff out, since I know it’s all going to end up burnt beyond recognition and tossed in the trash.”

“But you like to eat. I know that from watching you gorge yourself at the Inn the other night.”

He looked pained. “Wait a minute. Gorged? I didn’t know I gorged.”

“Sorry. But, honestly, where do you put all the food you eat? You’re so well-built.” Chancie withdrew her credit card, refusing to think of her outstanding balance, and extended it toward the clerk.

“Well-built, huh?” He puffed out his chest. “If you tell me more about what an Adonis I am, I’ll forgive you for saying I gorge.”

Micah teased along with Chancie, but the amount rung up on the register for her few purchases made his eyes feel like they wanted to bug out. The way she threw money around caused him some moments of extreme unease, especially since he was aware he could never compete in the rarified air of her financial world. The thought put a damper on their casual bantering, for him at least.

Chancie noticed the young sales clerk giving her and Micah disapproving glances. No more than seventeen, she probably thought old people like Chancie and Micah shouldn’t be making eyes at each other and flirting in public.

The girl’s reaction made Chancie dread her own child’s response when he saw them together. She’d have to plan Micah’s meeting with Jamie carefully.

Micah drew a deep breath, once freed from the racks of women’s apparel. In the tiled concourse between shops, his arms laden with string-handled bags, he said, “What’s Jamie like? Tell me about him, so I won’t pick him out a size sixteen when he needs an eight.”

Chancie laughed. “I’ll tell you one thing: Jamie hates getting clothes for presents. He feels he’s been cheated out of a real gift if he gets a shirt or pants. Yet he’s getting too old for action figures. And, oh, by the way, don’t ever mistake his extensive collection, if you see it, for *dolls*. Dolls are for girls.”

Micah shifted the bags from one hand to the other. “He’s at the age where there’s suddenly getting to be a big distinction between boys and girls, Chancie. Does he seem kind of hovering between being a boy and being a man?”

“You got it. He’s interested in girls, but from a safe distance. He’d rather spend time with the guys. Most of his old toys are in boxes on the floor of his closet, but he won’t let me get rid of them or even store them away. I think he spends time in the bathroom practicing shaving even though he hasn’t got hair on his face to shave. Yet he wouldn’t miss cartoons on television on Saturday morning for anything.”

“Ten is a rough age. Twelve is going to be harder. And sixteen harder yet.”

“Can’t wait.” Chancie rolled her eyes. They walked the entire length of the mall, stopping in every store that didn’t sell clothes. Books? Jamie wasn’t much of a reader, to Chancie’s great regret. A computer? He had one, almost new, a new slimline laptop that he could use at his desk or in a chair. They looked at everything from video games to outrageously expensive high top sneakers, finding themselves retracing their steps without having discovered the perfect gift for Chancie’s son.

Everything Micah suggested, Jamie already had or wouldn’t like. His anxiety over the way Chancie apparently bought Jamie anything his little heart desired grew by leaps and bounds.

Chancie was beginning to feel desperate when Micah suggested, “A gun?”

She went completely still. Jostled from all sides by the throngs of people, she stood frozen. “No guns,” she finally managed to say.

"A nice .22, perfect for a ten-year-old. With supervision. It sounds like he's already got everything else a boy might want."

"No guns, Micah," she repeated. "Please don't mention them again. And if you're trying to say I spoil Jamie rotten, you're probably right."

Moisture glistened in her eyes. Micah could have cut his tongue out. It appeared he'd hit two of Chancie's sore spots at once. Nice going, Taylor, he told himself. He said hesitantly, "Chancie? What's wrong?"

She could barely speak. Her whole body trembled. "Jamie's father killed himself at Christmas time two years ago. Not with a gun. But the season brings it all back. Micah, I couldn't give my son a gun for Christmas."

He dropped the bags, just let them fall to the floor. He took her upper arms in his hands and rubbed them. Then, seeing that did little good, he seized her and hugged her to his chest.

Passersby looked at them curiously, but Chancie shut them out by closing her eyes. It felt so good to lay her cheek against Micah's broad chest. She had forced herself to tell. The Christmas season was a grueling endurance test for her and Jamie both. The memories were too horrible for them to enjoy a spirit of giving. The hard glass bubble in her chest that contained the secret of Kenny's death dissolved a little in the telling. She had thought the shards would kill her if the bubble of keeping the secret ever exploded. But she had survived talking about it with Micah.

She unclenched her fingers from his green and cream wool shirt, forcing herself to stand erect without his support.

He searched her face worriedly. "You okay?"

She blew out a breath, shook her head. "I'm okay. I pretend a lot, just to get through this time of year. So does Jamie. You had no way of knowing. I'm sorry if I scared you."

"I'd do anything except hurt you, Chancie. Sorry I brought up bad memories."

"Don't blame yourself, Micah." She bent to pick up her bags before they got kicked away by the milling horde. She straightened, and he reached to take them from her, watching her closely. "It's just something that's always there. It's worse at Christmas, and I never know when it's going to rear up and bite me."

"Do you want to talk about it, Chancie? Go somewhere and have a cup of coffee and talk?"

She thought about it, about what she wanted to do. She looked into Micah's blue eyes, squinted in concern. Concern for her. For her problems, her fears, her worries. She didn't want coffee. She didn't know if she wanted to talk. She did know she wanted the comfort Micah offered.

Before she could take the thought back, she said, "Can we go to your place for a while, Micah?"

He stood quite still, looking at her. Then he slowly nodded. "Sure," he said. "If that's what you want, Chancie."

Again Chancie had to be reminded to buckle up when they took her Lexus, loaded with packages, to his apartment. The apartment house sat on the rocky desert floor, surrounded by asphalt and concrete. Apparently no one lived here long enough to plant a lawn, or care if there were no trees.

Chancie said, "Is it all right if I dump all my Christmas stuff here at your place? Maybe come by after work and wrap presents where Jamie can't snoop?"

She took in the atmosphere of the place as she sat in the car, accented by late afternoon sunlight reflecting off badly streaked windows. It looked so unloved and lonely.

Micah hesitated only fractionally before saying, "Sure. I'll give you a key."

For Pete's sake, Chancie thought. He'd faltered when she asked. Was he just being a cop, afraid she'd steal something, or look in his bureau drawers?

Or was his hesitation more basic. How far would he let her push before he said, *I think that's enough*. Chancie was becoming uneasy about taking all the initiative. She thought she sounded bossy, instead of assertive as she'd been taught in management classes. If Micah minded her

aggression, and there were times when he seemed to pause and reflect, yet he didn't stop her. He let her do what she wanted, at her own pace. She wondered what he was really thinking. She wished she had his ability to read people just so she could read him.

He escorted her to the door, both of them laden with bags. On a concrete front step, she waited while he slid a key in the lock. He opened the door and ushered her inside.

The drapes were shut, the light dim. Micah moved to turn on a light, but she freed one hand to touch his, stopping him. Very few pieces of furniture lined the walls. She had a good idea of what this bachelor's dwelling looked like already. She thought the atmosphere might be better not brightly illuminated.

She dumped her packages on the couch, saying, "I'll take care of this stuff later. Do you have a candle? Candlelight would be nice."

Micah's laughter rumbled behind her. She knew she'd disconcerted him at the mall, thrown a bucket of cold reality on the fun they'd been having by exposing him to the grim facts of her life. It made her feel slightly better now to hear him laugh.

"I have a flashlight," he offered, depositing his load beside hers on the sofa cushions.

He left her momentarily. Chancie removed her blazer and laid it on the sofa, then sat on the floor, pushing the coffee table away. Micah returned with the flashlight and a tissue. He set the flashlight on end on the coffee table, draping the tissue over the lighted end, and Chancie giggled.

"How's that?" he asked. "Romantic enough for you?"

She was still smiling. "Perfect."

He settled himself beside her on the floor, long legs stretched out beneath the low table. He said, "I'd offer you something, but I wasn't expecting company. I only have beer or coffee. I don't suppose you're a beer drinker."

"Sometimes I drink beer. But I don't want anything to drink, thank you, Micah."

He propped himself on one elbow, looking into her face. "Okay. Want to talk yet?"

"About my marriage? I was lonely while I was married to Kenny, and I've been lonely since. That's about all there is to that story."

He considered that statement before asking, "Any idea why Kenny killed himself?"

She shuddered. "He wasn't happy. He did it with drugs. Prescription drugs, but he got them from several doctors and took them in illegal, and finally fatal, dosages. Now you know the reason I ended up in the drug testing business."

"People do what they do for a lot of reasons, Chancie. If you know what motivates you, you're a step ahead of some of us."

She tried not to sound bitter. "If I can stop even one more suicide, I'd be happy. Kenny did what he did to punish me. I'll probably never get over it."

"And Jamie?"

Chancie sighed, holding her head in both hands. "And Jamie. Kenny never wanted Jamie. I guess Kenny thought I'd remain his innocent little sixteen-year-old bride for life, always ready to drop everything and help him sort out his problems. He liked to raise the stakes, escalate the situation, I think just to test if I really loved him. And Jamie came between Kenny and me."

"But in a good way." Micah's voice was thoughtful.

"Oh, sure, yeah. For me. In the best way, from my point of view. Jamie saved my sanity, made me see, while he was growing up, exactly what was wrong with his father. Kenny refused to mature. And it drove him over the edge when I finally realized that, and tried to climb off his private rollercoaster."

"You were going to leave him?"

"Yes. He said he'd kill himself first. I thought it was just another ploy to get me to stay. But in the end that's just what he did."

Micah ran one finger up and down her forearm. "You're an amazingly level-headed woman for having taken a tour through hell with that guy. How old was he, anyway?"



“When I met Kenny, I was thirteen and he was twenty-seven. He’d been out of the service almost four years.”

Micah’s forefinger paused in its exploration of the nubby texture of her sweater sleeve. He tried to keep his voice neutral, but he felt a rising fury on behalf of a very young and helpless Chancie who had been forced to grow up way too fast. “You said you married at sixteen. Your parents let you marry a thirty-year-old messed-up vet, when you were sixteen years old?”

Chancie laughed raggedly. “Mom said he’d settle me down. I guess I was a hopelessly wild teenager.”

“You were a baby. They should have locked you up or sent you away,” he said, his voice husky with emotion. “Someplace where you would have had a hope of getting sprung eventually. You were blindsided and railroaded, Chancie.”

She settled her fingers over his. “Oh, Micah, I’m not entirely blameless. I was sure I knew what I was doing. I wanted to marry him.”

“How could you know what you wanted, at that age?”

“You’re right, of course. I can see that now, when it doesn’t do much good. I guess that’s why I’m so overprotective of Jamie. I try to make up to him for what he’s missed in his life, like a father and a family life. But I’m gone so much now, I know the situation isn’t good for him.”

“You’re carrying way too much guilt, Chancie. Let it go a little bit. You weren’t responsible for Kenny’s happiness or lack of it. In fact, it sounds like the guy was seriously off center even without his military experience.” Micah’s fingers locked with hers. Then his voice changed to a mock Sigmund Freud. “So when do I get to meet ze young man, eh, Fraulein?”

She hesitated. “I’d like you to meet Jamie, Micah. But I’ve warned you, he’s not easy to get to know. So *when* is up to you.”

“I just said I wanted to.”

“Really?” She smiled doubtfully, but Micah’s face retained its serious set.

“Really.” He looked at her, at her eyes, her hair, her lips. “Right now, if you want.”

She shook her head, her decision made. “Not right now. Right now I have something else entirely in mind.”

Micah Taylor had an amazing effect on her. He lifted her spirits, made her feel blameless and free. He made her laugh, gave her the confidence to believe that she was worthy of a good and decent relationship. She wanted to show her gratitude. She wanted to share this remarkable lightness of being with the man who’d helped generate it. Although she loved talking to Micah, right now she didn’t want to talk anymore.

She raised her hands to the neck of her sweater and tugged it off. Then she leaned over to reach for the buttons of his shirt.

Micah’s hand quickly enclosed one of hers, crushing her fingers together, halting her. His eyes blazed, even in the dim light. His voice rasped. “Set my limits, Chancie. I have to know. Now. Because once we start I don’t want any confusion about trying to shut down.”

“No limits, Micah,” she said softly, and thought she really meant it.

She tugged her hand from his grasp. She knelt beside him and continued unbuttoning his shirt. She urged him upright when she was finished with the buttons, peeling the shirt from his shoulders and arms, then urged him down to the floor on his back. She sat on her heels to admire his body.

He watched her. She regarded the muscular chest and trim abs that tapered to a slim waist. Then as if she could keep her hands off him no longer, she leaned forward, fingers already tracing a journey down the warm path they’d already memorized: strong shoulders, prominent collarbones, square pectoral muscles capped by tiny hard nipples.

She ran her hands down the roped muscles of his arms. Swinging one leg over both of his, she leaned forward to lay lace covered breasts on his chest. His arms pinioned to the floor by her hands, she blindly sought the now-familiar heat of his mouth. She murmured his name repeatedly against his chin, his cheeks, his sensuous lips, before actually kissing him.

His legs moved beneath her and she settled naturally into the notch between them while she nuzzled his lips. His mouth opened instantly, welcoming. She explored daintily the soft inner side of his lips and the ridges of his teeth with her tongue. Heat rose from him to envelop her, the hard maleness of his perfect body enticing against the soft skin of her belly.

His fingers moved restlessly, hands curled palm up against her restraint. He could have escaped whenever he wanted, but he controlled himself and let her explore at her own pace. She ran her hands back up his strong arms as he raised them and curved them over her back, searching for and then unclasping her bra as their tongues mimicked the motions of the ancient dance of love.

She elevated herself slightly so he could slide the straps from her shoulders and free her from the scrap of satin and lace that lay between them. At last she could luxuriate in the sensation of Micah's skin against hers, the smooth skin of his chest brushing her nipples. The rise and fall of his diaphragm under her accelerated as the rate of his breathing increased to match her own. The kiss changed intensity and deepened.

He clasped her to him and rolled them over in one fluid motion. He cupped a breast with his hand, one of his knees positioned between both of hers. He broke the long kiss to look into her eyes, as if to ask again, "Is this what you want?"

She laid her hand over his, pressing his fingers to her breast, and opened her denim-clad legs to allow him to lie between them. He groaned, his head dipping to lave gently one peak and then the other, both tingling in anticipation of the feeling of his lips. While he pulled softly at one breast, arousing sensations that brought a cry to her lips, his finger circled the other nipple in butterfly motions.

She rocked beneath him, maddened by the barrier of the two sets of jeans that held them apart. She could feel the powerful thrust of him between her legs, even through layers of clothing. She wanted him. Wanted him and herself naked. Now.

She tried to slide her hand down between them, but Micah pressed closer, not allowing her to reach his zipper. He slid down her body, away from her questing hand. Chancie whimpered in frustration.

To soothe her, he kissed the length of her belly to the waistband of her jeans. Her hands hovered near his ears, ready to tear the denim at her waist away at the first opportunity. But as he nuzzled still lower, nipping the cloth that covered her, Chancie forgot her purpose, moaning and wrapping her fingers in his thick black hair.

He raised his head, again asking permission before proceeding. Heat and wetness and want pooled between her legs. She could only whisper, "Micah."

"Do you want me to stop?" He pinned her with his gaze.

For answer she reached for his broad shoulders, fingers digging into the muscle. When he didn't respond immediately, she dropped her hands to the offending button on her jeans and ripped it out of the hole herself. But when she scrambled for the zipper tab, he firmly moved her hands away to do it himself, pulling it down over the metal teeth so slowly and soundlessly she didn't know he'd finished until he was tugging at the open flaps to get them off her. She lifted her hips willingly. Boots and socks, jeans and panties, were peeled away and discarded.

Then he raised himself over her again and began kissing her deeply, drawing sounds from Chancie's throat as she begged wordlessly for what his hard body promised. But he moved aside, erection pressed against her hip, as his hand stroked downward to the soft, wet heat at her core.

Discovering her clit, his hand cupped her mound, two fingers sliding wetly inside as his palm pressed and stroked. Once again Chancie simply exploded, the climax that had been building taking her so hard and so fast she lost her breath.

Micah nibbled her ear while she recovered from her quivering, the hand that had given her such intense, explosive pleasure now drawing tiny circles on her left hip.

When she could talk without gasping, she said, "Micah, why?"

He breathed into her ear, "For right now, I will do for you what you won't do for yourself. Just think what it will be like when you're finally ready for all of me, Chancie."

She shivered and he held her tighter. She could still feel the insistent hardness of him against her hip. "Don't make me wait anymore. I'm ready *now*, and so are you."

"No, you're not ready, Chancie. We've barely begun exploring each other."

Was he trying to drive her crazy? She sat up, staring down into his enigmatic eyes. He played her like a maestro, and she sobered enough to wonder if maybe she should be frightened of this man, who uncovered secrets she wouldn't admit aloud even to herself. Her hand rested on the hollow of his stomach, near his navel. She moved her fingers slightly. His eyes glinted. And then she knew for certain what Micah wanted, his secret desire.

She reached for the button of his jeans, and this time he didn't stop her. She repeated his ministrations to her, down to removing his boots and then kissing her way downward from his nipples to his navel. Her hand closed around his velvet shaft, and she raised her head for a fraction of a second to gauge his reaction before continuing.

She knew, from the way he looked at her, he couldn't stop her now if she decided to straddle him and ride him to completion. But somehow she also knew he'd question its rightness for the rest of the time they would be granted together. So she lowered her head, letting her long curls trail across his taut abdomen and muscular thighs. He gasped at the first touch of her lips, arching his back, his hands involuntarily twining in her hair.

Her tongue trailed down his long length before she took the smooth knob in her mouth. Then she was lost in pleasuring Micah, in drawing responses from him that mirrored the sharp ecstasy he'd given her.

They ended some time later with limbs entwined, her head on his chest, as she listened once more to the thundering of his heart. Sometime during their loving the flashlight had been knocked over, its light extinguished, and they hadn't noticed.

## Chapter Seven

Chancie and Micah lay spooned together. Sounding sleepy, he said, "We didn't finish shopping."

"They're open till eleven during Christmas. What's the hurry?" Chancie rolled over, murmuring into the skin of his chest, hoping she could get him to consider further penetration of the sexual situation between them. She snickered at her naughty thoughts, blowing on his nipple in the process.

"That tickles," he said. "And I need fresh batteries for our candle."

Chancie laughed aloud, giving in. She had gotten all she was going to get today from Mr. In-control. Micah obviously was not up to discussing any more sex right now. And he was right. They were in absolute total darkness, able to locate each other only by feel. Which, she thought, wasn't a totally bad thing.

She moaned dramatically. "Oh, dear. It's so dark in here. *However* will I find my clothes?"

"You'd better find your clothes, lady," Micah teasingly warned. "You can't go shopping naked. Nobody else gets to see that luscious body but me." He sat up, pulling her with him. She leaned against him, searching in the darkness for his lips for a kiss. He kissed her back, but without the passion she'd engendered in him a short while before.

She reached for his cock questioningly in the darkness, finding him hard and ready again. He *was* responding. Why didn't he kiss her?

He scooted her none too gently on her bottom away from him, scraping her bare flesh on the cheap carpet. "Get your clothes on right now," he said.

"You're giving me rug burns, Micah Taylor." Chancie grappled in the darkness for her clothes, finding her bra and what might be her jeans. Or maybe they were Micah's, it was hard to tell. "You are the most maddening man."

He laughed low in his throat. "I know. But you ain't seen nothin' yet."

Chancie balled up the jeans and threw them at the sound of his growly laughter in the darkness. He knew exactly what he was doing, holding her off, steadily increasing the tension between them, and he was enjoying it. He must have caught the jeans she pitched at him and they must have been his, because she soon heard him zipping up.

"You like what you're doing to me, don't you? That you can make me come with one touch." She was glad they couldn't see each other, because her cheeks heated at the admission.

"Yeah," he said, and she could almost see him grinning. "I like that a lot. We'll have to do it again soon. Now put your clothes on."

She sighed and got dressed. But she wasn't defeated. He might make her leave now, but she'd be back. He still had possession of most of her Christmas presents, minus the one she would take home in the form of a shiveringly wonderful memory to hug to herself tonight.

She said, "Don't forget my key, unless you want me to pack all this stuff back into my car."

"No need." Micah's voice sounded more certain this time about her invading his apartment when he wasn't there. "I'm going to turn on the light now. We could break our fool necks in here in the dark."

Already on her feet and searching by feel for her jacket, Chancie paused. "Do you think we're fools, Micah?"

The ceiling light blazed on, bathing them in its harsh yellow glare. "Maybe," he conceded, staring hard at her. "At this point, who knows? I like everything I know about you so far, but that isn't really very much yet, is it?"

She sobered at the muted tone of his voice. Maybe she'd made a big mistake here with him. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"Come here." He leaned against a pitted wall that badly needed painting, at the foot of a set of stairs that must lead to his bedroom. She took in the long, lean length of him, and her heart turned over. What if Micah meant to end it now?

He beckoned with one finger, a crooked smile on his lips. Chancie crossed the room and he enfolded her in his arms, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"I met you seven days ago," he said. "A lifetime, and only a short week. Yeah, sometimes it scares me, how fast I'm falling for you. I messed up before. I'd be a liar and a fool if I tried to pretend I don't have any reservations about us."

"Do you want to slow down even more? I'll tell you true, Micah, I have a hard time keeping my hands off you." She raised her head to gaze into his troubled blue eyes.

"How much slower can we go? Days go by when I don't see you. I'm a monogamous man so you don't have to worry about me losing interest or anything like that. It's up to you how long it lasts between us. I climbed on this ride for the duration. I'm going at the speed I think is best for you." He grinned. "Just don't ever think I don't like your hands on me."

She frowned, all the closeness they'd experienced evaporating in the light of his serious tone. "What is this, some point of honor? You say you'll go slow, therefore there's no turning back? I won't hold you to anything, Micah. I won't insist that you continue with me if you don't want to, just because of something you said and didn't mean."

"Oh, no. Oh, baby." He pressed her head against his chest. "Don't misunderstand. I meant every word. It's just, I'm trying to give you time. We've both been burned once. If things don't work out between us, I don't ever want to hurt you, Chancie."

"I'm a big girl, Micah."

His inner elbow pressed intimately into the pillow of her breast. "Yeah, you are. I'm sorry I upset you. Just forget I said anything, okay?"

She caught her lip between her teeth for a moment. She knew it would be nearly impossible to forget how he'd voiced his misgivings. "Okay. Did you still want to go shopping with me, or should I just drop you off in the parking lot?"

"We're going shopping. Get your coat."

He released her, and while she went to retrieve her blazer and purse, she heard him rummaging around in the kitchen. When he returned, he held out a spare entry key.

She hesitated just momentarily, then closed her fingers around it.

They returned to the mall, ending up in the toy store. Chancie had insisted before that Jamie was getting too old for more toys, but now she looked forward to the bright colors and overflowing displays to cheer her up. And besides, she had no idea what else to get for her son.

While Micah wandered the aisles, Chancie stopped to watch a boy about Jamie's age manipulate a remote-controlled car around the front of the store. The car was small, and amazingly fast and agile. The boy seemed totally enamored of the car's ability to spin around cardboard displays and its seeming eagerness to leap away at top speed.

When Micah had completed his tour of the store and joined her, she gestured to the black and neon green car. "What do you think?"

Micah grinned. "I'd like to have it myself." Then he hesitated before adding, "But have you checked out the prices in this place?"

"Expensive, huh?"

He rolled his eyes. "Whew! I might be able to get a full-size model down at the local dealership for what that little bitty one costs."

The clerk, a middle-aged woman who had been busy behind the register until now, joined them. Chancie began to question her, finding to her dismay that purchasing the car of course also meant buying extra battery packs and a costly recharger. Plus it ran on an application on a smartphone or tablet computer, neither of which she had consented to buy Jamie yet. The whole package, if she bought him the tablet he wanted, added up to several hundred dollars.

Each sold separately. Chancie had heard those words thousands of times on the toy ads from Saturday cartoons, the modern toy manufacturer's mantra, but she'd had no idea how expensive buying for a child could get once the computer and cell phone industries got ahold of toys. And she should have been prepared, because as the years passed everything for kids got more and more expensive as more and more technology was tapped for entertainment purposes.

"My goodness," she said, stunned.

Micah took her elbow, steering her away from the clerk's bright sales chatter and the tempting sight of the little car still whizzing around the store.

"This is the biggest rip-off I've ever seen," he muttered. "You're not seriously considering buying that exorbitant pile of plastic and also a computer he'd need to run it?"

"Micah, I have to get Jamie something. He'd love it." She didn't like the stormy look in Micah's blue eyes. Was he bound and determined to fight with her after the closeness they'd just shared?

It seemed so.

"I can't believe it. From what you've said today, that kid of yours owns at least one of everything in this mall. It sounds to me like you're trying to buy his love, Chancie."

"I—what? I am not!" Her back stiffened, and she jerked her elbow out of his grasp. "How dare you, Micah Taylor? You don't even know Jamie. You don't have kids, so you're making an awfully broad judgment about me and mine on no experience!"

Micah's own brows lowered. "That's hitting below the belt, Chancie. Not having kids wasn't my idea, remember?"

"Well, dammit, it's true. You haven't met Jamie, so how would you know what he's like?"

The clerk eyed them curiously, a hint of embarrassment on her face. This was the second time in one day Chancie and Micah had drawn attention in a store. The way they were going, they'd be kicked out of the mall pretty soon. Chancie cringed a little, but Micah didn't back off one bit.

His chin jutted. "That little detail was supposed to be taken care of, remember? You said I could meet Jamie, and I still want to. Whether you still want me to or not."

"Fine with me. You're switching to days this week? Come to dinner tomorrow night." Chancie could jut her chin too.

"I will," Micah raised his voice, but he was suddenly grinning down at her. "What do you want me to bring?"

Chancie felt a return grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. She'd begun to enjoy this tussle, and didn't want it to end just yet.

"Just yourself, you big lug. Six o'clock, and don't be late. And I'm buying that car and the tablet for Jamie."

Micah's face sobered. He lowered his voice. "I really do think it's a mistake, Chancie."

She raised her hands, palms up. "Micah, I don't know what else to do."

He put an arm around her. The clerk's expression changed from chagrin to puzzlement as she watched the drama, open-mouthed. Chancie could almost read her thoughts: Were the two of them fighting, or what?

Or what, as it turned out.

Micah pivoted Chancie toward him and placed both hands on her shoulders. "You drive a hard bargain," he said. "Okay. Let me pay for half of it then. The car and the computer. They can be from both of us."

Micah Taylor dazzled Chancie. He puzzled her, swung her around on her axis, and tipped her world upside down. She didn't know what to say.

Letting him pay for half of Jamie's Christmas felt like a commitment, in an odd kind of way. Letting Jamie's gift come half from Micah meant he planned to share in their holiday. And that was a promise, of a sort, wasn't it? Christmas wasn't any old day, it was a red-letter major one to a kid. And in her case and Jamie's, it was even more poignant because they had such mixed feelings about it.

When she didn't answer, Micah prompted, "Okay?"

Chancie gazed into blue eyes whose pupils seemed bottomless, fathomless, as Micah stared back at her. "Okay, Micah," she managed to say. "If that's what you want."

"It's what I want."

"Then you'll join us for dinner on Christmas day too?"

His eyes crinkled at the corners. "You know that's what I've been angling for all along, some good home cooking."

Chancie felt her eyes widen, the corners of her mouth droop. The way he ate, she believed him. "Really? All you wanted was a meal? You should have been asking Alma out instead of me."

"Nah. I like you fine, even if you can't cook." Micah smiled. "But I do accept your invitations. Both of them."

The clerk broke in. "Um, have you folks made up your minds?"

"We sure have. About some things, anyway." Micah's eyes flashed a message at Chancie, before he dropped his hands from her shoulders and faced the saleswoman. "We'll take the car. I don't suppose you sell the tablet computer as well?"

Micah took the car, and all its components, to his apartment to add to the rest of Chancie's gifts. Chancie drove home, with the taste of one last searing kiss from Micah lingering on her lips.

But although she and Micah had weathered their first argument, she should have known better than to expect the rest of the day to brighten.

She had called ahead to tell Alma she was on her way home. Jamie waited for her in a chair in the living room, arms folded rigidly across his chest. The first clue that she was in for a confrontation should have been the blank television screen. Chancie rarely came home to a turned-off television.

She kicked off her boots and curled her feet under her on the sofa. Might as well get it over with. And how she *hated* it when Jamie brought out that self-pitying attitude in her.

"What's up?" she asked.

Jamie glared at her. "I thought you were going Christmas shopping."

She nodded. "I did."

“Then how come you didn’t bring anything home?”

“For your information, Sherlock, I left them at a friend’s house so you wouldn’t peek.”

Jamie refused to take the bait. “Even Grandma’s present?”

“Even Grandma’s. I bought her a sweater.”

“Alma’s present too?”

Chancie glanced around. “Is she still here? I can’t tell you what I bought her if she hasn’t gone yet.”

“Nah. After you called and said you were coming home she left to go to the movies with some other old bag.”

Chancie gasped. “James Carlton de Leur! That was unforgivably rude. I hope you don’t talk like that to Alma’s face, after all she’s done for you.”

Jamie studied her with no sign of remorse. “So who’s your friend? It’s the cop, right?”

Chancie’s muscles tensed. “I think we should discuss my friends when you’re in a better mood.”

Jamie laughed sourly. “You sure know how to pick *friends*, Mom.”

She rounded on him, unable to stop the impulse to shut him down before he said something she’d find hard to forgive. “I’ll tell you something, Jamie. I don’t especially like your friends either, but because you like them, they’re welcome in this house. I don’t pick your friends, and you sure as hell won’t pick mine.”

He went completely still. “In this house? Wait, the cop is coming to this house? To *our* house?”

Chancie wanted to scream. Was everybody in the world, except herself, an expert at perception? How had Jamie arrowed in on such an accurate conclusion from what little she’d said?

“As a matter of fact, Micah is coming to dinner tomorrow. I’d appreciate a little cooperation in making the evening enjoyable for him.”

“Enjoy all you want. I won’t be there.” Jamie got up to leave, but Chancie was quicker, springing up and seizing him by the upper arms.

“Your presence in this house tomorrow night is not open to question, Jamie. Do you understand me? You will be civil to my guest, if not downright gracious. I will not have you acting your usual disagreeable, sulky self. Have you got that?”

He stared her down. “Yeah. Because you’ve got enough on your mind already. Right, Mom? I’ve heard it all ten thousand times before. First it was the business. Now you’re trying to replace Dad.”

“Jamie.” She tried to hug him, but he pulled away. She kept her grip on his elbows because if she let go, he’d run to his room and slam the door. “My God, you make me feel so guilty. Do you want me to stay right here in this house all the time with you? We’d starve to death!”

“Is that why you’re after this guy? For the money? We don’t need so much money, Mom. Can’t you get a regular job? I’ll sell my new computer if you want me to.”

She rested her forehead against his, and he allowed it. “Jamie. It’s not money, son. I don’t ever want you to worry about that.” The money worries she meant to keep to herself. “It’s just really, really hard to be an adult and to be by myself all the time. I like Micah very much, and I just wish you’d give him a chance, that’s all.”

Jamie pulled away slightly to look at her with Kenny’s dark eyes. Confusion and the need for comfort warred on his face. He said, “But you’re not alone. You have Alma and me.”

Chancie could feel herself blushing, the heat rising from her collar to her forehead.

Jamie watched her, comprehension slowly beginning to dawn. His eyes widened as realization hit. He was old enough; he watched enough television that he could put the pieces together. He said simply, “Oh.”

He tried to yank his arms away, but Chancie held on. He looked down at her fingers making white marks on his arms, then back up at her. He shook his head as if to clear it.

Chancie remembered what Micah had said about boys being unable to accept their mothers as human, in this case sexual, beings. Obviously, in Jamie's view, Chancie had stepped *way* outside the boundaries of how a good mom was supposed to act.

What had Jamie said, that she was trying to replace his father? If Jamie had anything to fear, it was that he would get a stepfather exactly like Kenny. But Chancie couldn't say anything like that to Kenny's child. What, then, could she say?

"Listen. Jamie, listen to me." She shook him slightly, but it was like jostling a zombie, no reaction. "I promise I will try my best to stay home more. Okay? I'm sorry I've disappointed you. Jamie? Would you at least look at me?"

He complied, but that made her feel worse. The dark eyes beneath thick black lashes were blank, desolate.

"Okay, don't believe me. I'll just have to show you then."

She let him go, and he turned listlessly toward his room. She wondered dully if her son were crying, just as she was, and wondered why loving had to be so painful. As well as so awfully complicated.

## Chapter Eight

Chancie hadn't read her horoscope lately, but it seemed she was destined for a knock-down, drag-out fight. With somebody. As soon as she got inside the office door the next morning, Judy wanted to see her. Judy wore a frown, and her body language screamed *trouble*.

The deliciously good feeling that had flowed through Chancie the night before at Micah's apartment seemed very far away in time now, and receding farther at the speed of light. First Micah, then Jamie, and now Judy appeared determined to dispel the lingering glow Chancie wished fervently to continue basking in.

Chancie sighed, stamping clinging new snow from her boots. "It's Monday morning, Judy. Can it wait?"

The assistant shook her head, spikes of blond hair waving. "I don't think so, Chancie, or I'll lose my nerve."

Chancie's lipsticked lips stretched in a forced version of a smile. "I don't think I like the sound of this."

Judy didn't smile at all. "I think you'll like it less before we're finished."

Chancie walked into her office, took off her coat, and seated herself behind her desk, a much larger version of Judy's.

"Okay, I'm ready. Hit me."

Judy followed right behind. "You're not making this any easier, Chancie."

"Am I supposed to? What are you trying to tell me, that you're quitting?"

"As a matter of fact—"

"No. Wait." Chancie stared at her assistant. "Judy, you have got to be kidding."

To delay the shock waiting to set in, she thought: Something's different about Judy, and it isn't only her mood. At last she grasped what she'd been searching for: Judy's nose-ring was missing this morning.

"I'm not kidding, Chancie," Judy rushed to fill the stunned void of Chancie's silence. "Parker says with the experience I've gained here, I could really be making good money."

"Parker says." The bite of breakfast Chancie had snatched earlier turned sour in her stomach. She thought she might have to make a run for the restroom and get rid of it before she could face the rest of this morning. She managed to ask, "And what does Judy say?"

"Look," Judy insisted. She held out her left hand, on the fourth finger of which perched a new marquise diamond ring. She raised pleading eyes to Chancie's. "Parker wants to marry me. Can you beat that? He wants a house and kids, and he wants them with me. Chancie, try to be happy for us."



Chancie obeyed her heart instead of her head, and rose to hug her assistant. When she could finally let Judy go, her eyes swam. She said, "Oh, I am happy for you. Congratulations, sweetie."

The wattage of Judy's radiant smile could have lit the office. "I've got an appointment at eleven to get my hair cut and dyed back to its natural brown. Parker's always hated this fake blond mop. I took the liberty of calling Brenda, the temp, to cover for me here. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind." Chancie's head spun with all the information Judy had imparted in less than five minutes. She couldn't just let Judy walk out. What would Screening Services do without its backbone? If Chancie was the heart of the business, Judy was the support that held the whole thing up and kept it going. Chancie had to find out more about Judy's plans, see if there was any way she could change them and convince her to stay.

Chancie the personnel manager swung into action. "So we have almost two hours to talk?"

Judy nodded slowly, eyeing her warily.

"Put everything that you can on hold this morning, Judy. Let's get some things straightened out."

Judy had been on the receiving end of some of Chancie's talks before, but she obediently perched on one of the chairs facing the expanse of the big oak desk. Instead of rounding the corner of the desk and taking her own seat, Chancie took the visitor's chair next to Judy.

"Okay," she said, feeling as though she were opening the bidding at an auction. "Tell me what it's going to take to keep Judy Weinrich at Screening Services."

Judy twisted the diamond ring on her finger, not meeting her boss's eyes. "I've been talking to Parker"

"And?" Chancie prompted.

"Um, I told him I thought I had too much responsibility for too little pay. And, um, that I would appreciate some help around here." Judy raised her eyes from the sparkling diamond to confront Chancie directly. "I can't do it by myself anymore, Chancie! The phones, the invoicing, the coordinating of collectors, the training, the dispatching, handling all the field offices. It's too much."

She put a consoling hand on Judy's shoulder. "I understand. I've often felt the same way. I thought we could hold out until the money from the pipeline contract came through, but we'll find some way."

Judy twisted sideways in the chair to face Chancie. "I really don't want to go anywhere else. I like it here at Screening Services, most of the time. I've sort of grown into the job, if you know what I mean."

"I know exactly what you mean. You're talking about gaining confidence and competence. I've seen it; Parker's right." Chancie chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Go on."

"The thing is, I think I could do your job, Chancie. I'm starting to feel stifled as a secretary, and I want the opportunity to go for it. Parker says there are other jobs in office administration I could try for, now that I have the experience."

Everything suddenly fell into place. Chancie had long ago learned this negotiating tactic, the simple act of waiting for the other person to reveal exactly what they wanted. Now Judy's secret desire to take over Chancie's duties corresponded directly with Chancie's need to back off from the constant pressures of the business, their requirements fitting like the pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle. If she could only swing the financial aspect.

Chancie leaned back, studying Judy. Could Judy handle the Byzantine minutiae of contract negotiations, the myriad details of setting up a regional training conference in a strange city, living in motel rooms and eating her meals alone in restaurants? It was a high-pressure, lonely existence, and Chancie was nonplussed to learn Judy envied her for it.

What would happen to Judy's relationship with Parker if she traded places with Chancie and was therefore seldom in town? Six months from now, would Judy be back in Chancie's office with tears in her eyes, saying, *I just can't be away from Parker like this anymore and I want my old job back.*

Well, the future couldn't be predicted. Two weeks ago Chancie wouldn't have believed she would find herself in the initial throes of a passionate new relationship with Micah Taylor. Judy's desire to take over Chancie's job suited Chancie at the moment: she'd have time to repair her deteriorating maternal tie to Jamie, and she'd have much more time to spend in Micah's arms.

Assuming, of course, that's what Micah wanted as well.

Chancie would have to take a lot on faith. She would have to believe everything would fall into place and work out. Could she do it? She didn't have much experience with faith or hope or trust.

Judy squirmed under Chancie's prolonged scrutiny, but held fast to her resolution and didn't back down. At last Chancie said, "How many extra people do you think we need?"

Judy considered. "At least three, for now. More if we go to forty-eight states from our present ten."

Chancie noted the fact that Judy had unconsciously followed her lead in saying *we* when talking about the future. Judy, Chancie remembered, had never actually said she was quitting. She had just let Chancie make that assumption. Hm. Judy was better at this negotiating stuff than Chancie thought she was.

Chancie kept her face as immobile as possible, a trait her father had taught her all good gamblers mastered.

"Three, huh? Okay. Get ahold of the Workforce Services people, or put an ad in the paper if you want to handle the extra phone calls yourself."

Judy's jaw dropped. "I'm going to do the hiring?"

"Well, sure. What have we just been talking about here?" Chancie shrugged. "You'll find the right people, Judy."

A pleased smile tugged at the corners of Judy's mouth. "And the training?"

"Call the lawyer and brush up on contracts. I'll do as much as possible of the staff training myself. If you want my job, you'll be on the road a lot once you learn the ropes. I won't warn you, you should know by now exactly what you're getting into. We'll see then if Parker likes what he's helped create."

The triumphant grin hovering on Judy's features finally broke into a full smile. "I can handle Parker. I'll just keep reminding him of the size of the down payment we need for the house he wants to buy. Uh, which brings us to the little matter of my new and improved salary."

Chancie wondered if her poker face slipped just a little. Could she afford a cut in her own net profit from the gross in order to keep Judy happy? Overhead from the far flung offices was killing her, and she'd just promised to hire three more people here. She had her own house payment, the car payment, medical and dental for herself and Jamie, Alma's paycheck. It just went on and on.

Chancie would have to call the bank again. She and the loan officer, to her steadily increasing alarm, were fast becoming bosom buddies. She knew from her previous visits the names and ages of the three tow-headed children who smiled out from the photograph on his desk. The last visit had been so recent she knew what he planned to get each of them for Christmas.

"How much are we talking about, Judy?"

Judy straightened her shoulders. "I was thinking along the lines of maybe double what I make now?"

Chancie raised her eyebrows, blew out a held breath. "How about raised by half for now," she countered. "Then we'll talk again in three months."

When Judy hesitated, Chancie added, "Three months, I promise."

The phone rang. Simultaneously, the front door opened and the package delivery man entered to pick up the day's samples shipment. Judy jumped to her feet.

"Deal," Judy declared. She held out her hand.

Chancie decided she liked this new, self-confident Judy. She shook the extended hand.

"You'll have to spend some of your new salary on a wardrobe, you know."

"Already thought of," Judy tossed over her shoulder on her way to take care of the ringing telephone. "Parker wants to wait for the after-Christmas sales."

Parker. On that parting note, Chancie sank into her own chair behind the big desk and began opening the mail. Right now, Chancie would like to throttle young Parker and choke some of his big ideas concerning her assistant out of him. No, make that big ideas concerning her *office manager*. Soon she'd have to come up with a whole new title if Judy was indeed going to take over all Chancie's duties, something approaching *partner*.

Chancie slit more envelopes open, examining their contents and sorting them into piles. Oh, well, she couldn't blame Judy for being ambitious. She herself seized opportunity wherever she could, with little in the way of support along her climb to success. It fit in with her concept of what feminism was all about to help boost Judy's career.

But could she afford such a move now? No matter how much Chancie wanted to stick close to home, she took a big risk in letting someone so young and untried represent Screening Services to the outside world. If she wanted a life for herself it all came down to handing over the reins, loosening the tight control that she held over everything. If she wanted to start over again, she had to let go.

She drummed painted nails on her desk. This was all Micah Taylor's fault, really. He'd opened the floodgate that dammed up her reserve and her tightly governed emotions, both of which had instantly swirled away in the torrent of simply letting go of her inhibitions. Micah Taylor and that young guy, Parker, no more than a kid, hitting her with a one-two punch when she was off guard. Not to mention almost totally out of capital. Again.

The thought niggled that it was her own fault she was broke and so deep in debt. Chancie admitted she spent way too much on unnecessary items. Such as the computer that sat unused in Jamie's bedroom. Micah said she tried to buy her son's affections. The accusation had stung badly last night, and still did. She could hardly admit to herself that as soon as Jamie talked her into buying him the ignored computer, he was getting a tablet model.

Which she had bought for him so he could operate some remote control cars.

Her life was out of control. There was no maybe about it. Micah was right: she was trying to hold Jamie's affection with presents she couldn't afford.

Chancie didn't know what to do about money, exactly, beyond tightening her belt and trying to see the current financial crisis through. She'd done it before, and more than once, but now dear Parker had raised the ante by pushing Judy into precipitate action. And just that suddenly, Chancie was in over her head again.

Parker. Parker the young man about town. Chancie toyed with the gold-handled letter opener, spinning the blade on the leather blotter without seeing it. What was it Judy said Parker did for a living?

Of course. The blade spun to a halt as Chancie leaned back against the padded headrest of her executive's chair. How could she have forgotten. Parker handled money. Parker handled other people's money. He had trained as an accountant, but when he graduated he'd gone into life insurance, and then estate planning.

Parker the money man. Chancie tapped her lower lip with a long shiny fingernail, deep in thought.

Parker had a big hand in creating Chancie's latest financial dilemma, and so he could help her get out of it. Parker could use his accounting skills to put her on a stringent budget. Straighten out the books and streamline the office accounts. Find forgotten funds in her checking account. Something. There had to be a solution to this expanding monetary mess.

The phone rang again, and this time Chancie picked it up because Judy was still busy with the delivery driver. When Chancie got off the phone, the driver was gone and Brenda had showed up to take Judy's place for a few hours.

Judy grabbed her coat and waved cheerily on her way out.

Fine. Chancie didn't need Judy's input right now.

She promised herself she would have almost the whole plan worked out by the time Judy got back.

Micah radioed in at eight a.m., on the job the moment he got into the patrol car parked in front of his apartment. He cruised the snow packed roads in the passing lane of I-80 at a steady fifty-five miles an hour, switching from westbound to eastbound and back again, listening to the crackly voice of the dispatcher in Cheyenne giving the day's summary of bulletins and trooper safety messages.

Micah knew his slow pace irritated the hell out of commuters in a rush to get the fifteen miles from the smaller town of Rock Creek to work in Hawk Point City. But he also knew damn few of them had the guts to pass the impressive black cruiser outfitted with a big light bar on top and equipped in front with an imposing black iron nudge bar attached to the chassis. If he prevented even one idiot who hadn't checked the weather from sliding across the road and causing havoc, he could be proud of his day's work.

But he couldn't be too hard on the thoughtless public today. He hadn't expected the storm, either, and he should have known better. The week-long freeze had lifted yesterday; he'd had to walk through slush to reach Chancie at the mall. Anytime the temperature rose and a good melt occurred, it was a sure bet that Wyoming winter weather was gearing up for more snow.

If he'd had his head on straight, he would have known what kind of road conditions he'd wake up to this morning. But he'd hardly been thinking about checking the sky for signs of snow with that gorgeous woman standing there across the parking lot waiting for him. His head had been way up in the clouds somewhere. And later, at his apartment with his hand in Chancie's jeans, discussing the latest weather report had been the furthest thing from his mind.

He had been, still was, too full of Chancie. The thought of her, smell of her, feel of her. She'd been burned into his brain, not to mention other parts of his anatomy, and he couldn't escape her constant image.

Even when a big four-wheel drive zipped past westbound at sixty-five and a little blue passenger car followed, too close to the pickup's back bumper for safety, Micah couldn't banish Chancie de Leur from his head. He watched the two foolishly fearless drivers pull away, and automatically slowed to cross the median before suddenly connecting the pickup with a stolen vehicle report he'd heard earlier. The long line of probably cursing motorists in the eastbound lane behind him went on by while he sat in the median, waiting for a safe opening in traffic.

Micah's heart beat faster as he pulled out. The truck's taillights receded swiftly as Micah came up over the shoulder of the opposite side of the road, and the cretin did exactly what Micah was afraid he'd do. The taillights flashed as the driver caught sight of the patrol car coming up behind him and slammed on his brakes. The pickup started to fishtail wildly on the ice. Probably the driver was yet another one under the mistaken impression four-wheel drive trucks wouldn't slide on ice.

The driver of the little blue car didn't have a chance. In order to avoid a collision, the woman driver jerked the steering wheel to the right. The little car slid straight off the shoulder of the road and instantly plowed into half-frozen mud up to its front axle.

Micah radioed the stolen pickup's milepost location, while he steadily started to gain speed. The young male driver was lucky. He brought the truck under control without rolling it.

Micah hit the button for his lights. He followed for mile after tense mile, the driver of the stolen truck ignoring the flashing lights and siren, and refusing to pull over. In the distance, a white Hawk Point city police car and an SUV belonging to the county sheriff's office neared, sirens screaming. Both crossed the median and then followed Micah trying to stop the truck. As if it took three official vehicles to finally get his attention, the kid driving the pickup began to slow and eventually pulled into the emergency lane.

Micah followed, keeping a light, steady pressure on his own brakes to avoid bringing the cruiser to a sliding stop. The other two official vehicles pulled up behind Micah's patrol car. None of the officers approached the stopped pickup. Micah's hands were slick with tension on the steering wheel, but he automatically followed policy for a felony stop: he hit the button for the P.A. system and ordered the driver out of the truck.

Micah waited, heart in his dry mouth, and then repeated the order. Still nothing happened. He pictured a standoff with the driver of the stolen truck, the sound of gunfire and the headlines afterward. All very dramatic, but not even remotely personally rewarding. Micah was the kind of cop who carried a family of five teddy bears strapped in a seat belt in the back in case he had to comfort a scared child, along with the more expected cop accessories like the shotgun propped beside him and in the trunk an M14 rifle of Korean War vintage rented from the National Guard for a dollar a year as well as a Colt AR-15/M4 carbine.

The names and faces of the troopers killed and wounded in the line of duty flashed through his consciousness: men he'd known who served no more, or who had to transfer out of patrol because of their physical or mental disability. He knew the nervous hair-trigger mentality of the city cop and the sheriff's deputy sitting in their cars behind him, because he felt it himself.

Micah had to stop what he knew in his guts would happen if the kid didn't cooperate and get out of the truck. Advising the other two officers over the radio what he was going to do, with cold dread he slowly opened the cruiser's door and got out, drawing his Beretta semi-automatic pistol from the holster on his belt. Time seemed to slow. With the other two officers fanning out to surround the pickup, Micah approached the driver's door slowly through the snow, the last two steps so forced he felt like he was plowing through syrup.

Micah could see through the driver's open window now. He stood slightly back from the truck door, out of a direct line of fire from the truck cab. "Look out!" the city cop yelled as the kid's head ducked out of sight. The kid was leaning over the seat reaching for something. It streaked through Micah's head that he would straighten up with a gun.

Micah held his breath. The young driver sat up. Micah's finger tightened on the trigger. Then the badly frightened kid, all blood drained from his stark white face, slowly extended a wallet through the open window.

Micah could suddenly breathe again, and hot anger at the kid's stupidity flooded in with an indrawn breath of cold air. He jerked the pickup door open and tried to yank the kid out by the collar. It was like tugging on a block of concrete. Micah yanked again. He couldn't budge the driver, who must have weighed closer to four hundred pounds than Micah's one-eighty. The city cop and sheriff's deputy approached, guns still drawn but relieved grins on their faces at Micah's predicament.

His hand still on the kid's jacket collar, Micah grunted and said, "Would you mind stepping out of this vehicle?" When the big kid finally complied, Micah patted him down for weapons, ignoring the low chatter and muted guffaws of the other two officers.

When at last he could face their good-natured ribbing, Micah gestured to the city cop. "He's all yours," he said.

Wyoming Highway Patrol didn't interfere in city police affairs unless they were asked. Well, Micah had been asked, he'd stopped the driver of the truck stolen in Hawk Point, but he didn't want anything more to do with it. He stood back, trying to slow his still-speeding heart. The humor in the situation had helped, but there was no denying the fact that he'd been scared pretty bad. When the kid was safely cuffed and the city cop was leading him away, Micah went to sit and recover from residual shakes in his patrol car.

At last the fear dissipated. He hadn't been paying enough attention. He'd been dreaming of Chancie and as a result could have gotten himself killed. He radioed the outcome of the stop to Cheyenne, watching the other two official cars drive off.

Micah still had to work the wreck. He swung around to see to the driver of the stuck passenger car.

He had to keep his mind off Chancie de Leur while he was at work. That was all there was to it.

Something bigger and stronger than himself had taken hold, and wasn't about to let go soon. The only solution Micah could see was for him and Chancie to find a way to get enough of each other at night to propel them safely through the day. Otherwise he didn't think he could competently go on doing the job he'd always been proud of doing so well.

Judy swept into Chancie's office after lunch, pirouetting to show off her new look. Her hair had been cut into pixie wisps that softly framed her face, and dyed an attractive light ash brown. She wore an aqua suit with matching pumps and gold love knot earrings.

"You look absolutely wonderful, and very professional," Chancie said. "But what happened to waiting until after Christmas for new clothes?"

"I got out of the salon, and didn't feel right in jeans and flannel anymore. None of this is name brand, so Parker won't have a fit over the bill."

"Hmm," Chancie replied. She wondered exactly how far Judy would let Parker overshadow her before she rebelled, but with her own finances in such disarray Chancie was hardly in a position to advise Judy about when to buy clothes. Besides, it was Parker's talent for squeezing a dollar Chancie was interested in. "Speaking of Parker. When you get a minute, give me his number."

Judy looked slightly apprehensive, but did a good job of hiding it. Perhaps only Chancie, who knew her so well, would have detected the anxiety in Judy's posture. Maybe Judy really would make an accomplished negotiator.

"Don't worry," Chancie assured her. "I'm not going to lecture him, and I certainly don't want your man. The way you look, I don't think he'd be interested in a frumpy old woman like me anyway."

"Frumpy. Huh. I'll bet Trooper Micah Taylor doesn't think you're frumpy."

Chancie squirmed uneasily. She didn't want to discuss Micah, because she didn't know yet if there were anything lasting between the two of them to talk about. "Let's leave Micah out of this, Judy. We were talking about Parker."

Judy smiled, but wisely said nothing more about Chancie's love life.

"Parker has asked you to marry him, and wants to join our little family," Chancie began. "I've been thinking he should have to work to get you. If he agrees, and things pan out, you and Parker might both get some of the down payment for your house from Screening Services."

Judy leaned a shoulder against the doorframe. "Would you like to clarify?"

"I need financial advice," Chancie said.

Judy hesitated, as if she didn't want to hurt Chancie's feelings. "Parker's very conservative."

*And I'm not, is that what you're saying?* It was rather deflating for Chancie to discover even Judy secretly thought her profligate. "Okay. Good. That's good. Conservatism is exactly what I'm looking for. I'm in a mess, Judy, and I have to find a way out before I lose Screening Services."

Judy looked crestfallen, all her dreams of taking over the business threatening to be crushed by Chancie's confession. "Is it that bad?"

"Not yet. It could be soon. But don't worry. Our deal stands, no matter what."

Judy nibbled a fingernail. "Let me talk to Parker. He'll need something to keep him busy while I'm out of town, and we could use the extra money. I'd feel better if he was spending his weekends here at Screening Services on the books instead of at loose ends."

Chancie felt she could relax a little now. She'd fought her battle for the day, and come through relatively unscathed. "Thanks, Judy."

Judy touched a wisp of brown hair at her temple. "Thank you, Chancie. For listening to me and taking me seriously. I hope it all works out."

"I hope so too," Chancie said, thinking suddenly of other things in her life than her checkbook balance. "I hope everything works out for all of us."

Especially since it seems we're all getting in deeper together all the time, she thought.

## Chapter Nine

Chancie hurried home, in a dither to have everything ready by the time Micah arrived at six. She tugged off her coat and rushed toward the kitchen, but slowed her footsteps at the sight that greeted her. She needn't have worried: Alma already had the table set with the good china and

silver, and a standing rib roast browned in the oven, setting Chancie's stomach to rumbling. Fresh flowers graced the table, white carnations with sprigs of holly berries in a cut glass bowl.

But there were only two place settings.

The growling in Chancie's middle began to feel like panic. Alma had her back turned, busily stirring something in a pot on the stove.

"It all looks lovely, Alma." Chancie tried to modulate her voice, even as her hand clutched the back of one of the chairs. Alma had added two slender tapers in crystal holders flanking the intimate table set for a couple. "But this wasn't intended as a romantic dinner. I wanted you and Jamie here with me."

Alma set down her spoon and turned, revealing a red-checkered apron that partially covered her sagging rayon slacks and sweatshirt. She obviously hadn't dressed for company. "I thought Jamie and I could eat in our rooms. We don't want to be in your way, dear."

"Jamie is here, then?" Some of the tension went out of her hand as Chancie held on to the ladder back chair. She'd been afraid Jamie would defy her wishes and disappear to a friend's house after school. "Micah wants to meet him. You two are my family, Alma. So please change your clothes and plan on joining us."

"Probably not a good idea, Chancie. The boy isn't happy about this. And I'm busy here." Alma half turned toward her steaming pots.

What little control Chancie had shattered. "Darn it, Alma! I'm nervous enough as it is. Would you please go get dressed? I can stir gravy while you're gone."

Alma hesitated, as if debating with herself whether to press Chancie right now. "If you like, you change first, dear. I'll finish everything up here. It will only take me five minutes to get something out of my closet. I think you'd better take some time to talk to Jamie before your young man arrives."

Chancie tried not to sound confrontational, but it was hard. It seemed she could handle anything except her personal affairs. "You think I'm rushing things, don't you?"

Alma shrugged. "Doesn't matter what I think. I want you to be happy. And I want Jamie to be happy."

"And Jamie isn't happy."

"Well, no. But I don't think you need me to tell you that."

"I'll talk to him. But you put two more plates on this table right now, Alma, or I'll do it myself."

Alma picked up her spoon and resumed stirring. "Whatever you say, dear."

Chancie crossed the big kitchen toward the hall and knocked on Jamie's door. He didn't answer. She opened the door to find him in his usual don't-bother-me position on his bed with the earphones drowning out all other sound.

Chancie negotiated the clutter on the floor, and sat beside Jamie's prone body on the mattress. He didn't open his eyes. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. Chancie watched for a moment, then lifted one of the earphones. "I know you're playing possum," she said. "If you don't open your eyes, I'm going to tickle your feet."

Jamie's toes curled defensively inside his socks at the threat. His eyes slitted open.

Chancie reached across her son's body to flick off the music. Jamie watched her from beneath dark lashes, saying nothing.

Chancie straightened her back, looking into Jamie's eyes. He clenched his jaw, but Chancie continued gazing at him. He gave no sign of even blinking, let alone of being ready to talk to her.

At last she said, "It would please me very much if you would come out to dinner with Micah and Alma and me. It would please me more if you could unbend enough to accept Micah's presence in our house with common courtesy."

When Jamie still refused to verbally acknowledge her presence or her request, Chancie went on, "I have some important things to tell you. About work and about some changes I'm making. I can't explain right now, but I think you'll like what I have to say."

Absolutely no reaction. Chancie sighed, ruffling her son's hair. "I'll admit this dinner probably wasn't a good idea so soon, Jamie. I'm sorry I rushed you into meeting Micah when you weren't ready. I know it's asking a lot, but please try to make the best of this one night."

Jamie gave no sign that he heard or understood. Frustrated, feeling too rushed to spend necessary time with her son and terribly guilty about it, Chancie rose and left, shutting the door quietly behind her.

She could only hope Jamie would cooperate through the evening, but in her heart she knew better. She remembered too many times when silence had filled the house after one of Kenny's rages, times when she'd retreated into herself to avoid the pain of her husband's unfounded, drunken accusations. Times when, God help her, she hadn't been able to banish Jamie's fear and sadness because she'd been too full of those emotions herself. She couldn't blame Jamie for emulating her turtle act now. After all, the boy had learned to tuck in and hide under pressure from her. And also from Kenny, who had never faced a problem without chemical backup of some sort in their entire married life.

Chancie had learned new ways to deal with stress, but seemed unable to pass those techniques on to her son. She would just have to try harder, now that she was making the extra time. She just hoped she wasn't also making a big mistake in forcing Jamie to accept Micah in their lives before the boy had finished sorting out his feelings for his father.

Micah arrived at Chancie's house promptly at six. He was still upset about the stolen truck incident, and wondered if he should say anything about it to Chancie. Then he decided he wouldn't. He didn't want to scare her off with the details of a cop's life before he even had a chance to get to know how she'd react. He rang the doorbell, juggling a dozen long-stemmed yellow roses in a box in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

He studied the profile of the cedar-sided house as he waited, thinking once again that Chancie was used to a much higher standard of living than he could offer her. He felt dwarfed, waiting there on the front doorstep of the bi-level house that towered over him, wondering if the slacks and camel wool jacket he wore were appropriate.

Chancie herself answered the door, and his mood brightened at once. She wore something soft and flowing, bright red to match the season, and the light behind her lent her dark honey curls a copper aura. She smiled in welcome, and all was instantly right with Micah's world. It didn't matter if he didn't know how to dress well or pick out the proper wines. Chancie's smile made all those details inconsequential.

"Hi, baby," he said in a low voice. The mere sight of her took his breath away, but he managed to add, "I brought you something."

Her tremulous smile widened as she took the florist's box. She stepped aside, the legs of her velvet outfit swirling around her calves. "Come in, Micah," she said. Her voice quavered slightly.

"Nervous?" he asked as she shut out the cold draft behind him.

She nodded. "Very."

"Me too."

He studied her, standing there in that alluring getup. Once again she'd chosen clothes that solicited stroking. He fervently wished he could oblige, but felt constrained by the fact he was in her house with her family somewhere nearby. "I'll try to be my most charming," he assured her, adding, "Want a hug?"

"Yes," she whispered. "So far, I've spent the hour I've been home snapping at Alma and lecturing Jamie. I'm ready to collapse. Hold me for just a minute, Micah."

She bore the box of flowers and he still held the neck of the wine bottle, but they fit together just right, her head instinctively seeking its accustomed place against his hard chest. One hand slipped beneath his shearling jacket and the camel blazer, and she squeezed him around his waist for a moment.



Micah resisted the urge to grasp her round buttock with his free hand and mold her to him, claiming her mouth voraciously with his in the process. That sort of reception wasn't what she needed right now, no matter how much he might need it after his hellish day. Instead he pulled her shoulders to him and kissed the top of her head.

They broke apart at the same instant. Chancie looked flushed and guilty, just from that small contact. "Let me take your coat," she said in a restrained, formal voice, not meeting his eyes.

Micah stifled a sigh as he set the wine on a small table beneath a mirror on the foyer wall and shrugged out of his shearling jacket. He supposed they'd get through this night somehow, but it wasn't going to be easy with both of them nervous as caged wolves.

The tension level began to ease perceptibly when she led him across an attractively furnished living room toward a big combination kitchen-dining area where a matronly woman bustled about.

"Alma," Chancie said, "I don't think we're dying of starvation just yet. Slow down for a minute and meet Micah."

The older woman with heavily gray-shot hair wiped her hands on the front of a checkered apron she wore to protect her frilly blouse and navy blue skirt. She peered up into Micah's face, while offering a smile and a knobby hand. "Pleased, I'm sure, Mr. Taylor."

Micah took the hand gingerly, barely compressing its obviously arthritic contours. "If I get to address you as Alma, I'd prefer you call me Micah." He handed Alma the bottle of wine.

"I hope you like roast beef, Micah."

"I sure do, ma'am. And if it tastes anything like it smells, I'm going to love yours."

Alma simpered prettily, hugging the wine bottle to her bony chest. Chancie said, "You'll finally have someone to do justice to your cooking, Alma. He eats like a horse."

Chancie turned to find a vase to put the roses in, leaving Micah to face Alma alone. He wasn't sure what to say after a comment like that. His flustered silence increased when Alma patted his arm, whispering conspiratorially, "Chancie eats like a *canary*. Myself, I always went for a man with a good appetite. My Henry could eat a whole roast chicken and a pot of potatoes when he came in from work, and he was always built slender like you."

"I never said I didn't like the way he eats, just that it's a wonder to behold," Chancie called from where she was stretching on tiptoe to reach the highest shelf of a cupboard. "Micah, stop flirting with Alma and come reach this vase for me."

Alma winked broadly, and Micah finally realized they'd been ganging up to tease him, trying to put him at ease. His tension slipped another notch. He smiled down into Alma's wrinkled face before going to Chancie's aid.

When they had the roses in water and safely removed from the wilting heat near the stove, Alma said quietly, "Don't you think it's time to get that boy out here, Chancie? The meat's carved, and it's going to get all dried out and cold if we don't sit down soon."

Chancie bent her head one last time to sniff the fragrance of the roses, as if putting off what she dreaded doing. Micah felt sorry for her and suddenly nervous again. Chancie lifted the vase and carried it with her like a shield, setting it on a table in the living room on her way to summon Jamie.

"We can start setting the food out. They'll be here in just a second."

Micah turned away from watching Chancie go, grateful for Alma's suggestion as to what to do with his dangling hands. Alma got him scooping out a mountain of mashed potatoes while she scurried between stove and refrigerator and table, setting a filled gravy boat, a dish of whipped butter and a basket of hot dinner rolls on the lace-lined surface.

Micah opened the wine while an inordinate amount of time seemed to drag past. At last Chancie reappeared with a wavy-haired boy who kept trying to tug away the hand she clutched. All activity in the kitchen ceased. Alma said too loudly into the silence, "Well, here's our boy Jamie now."

Jamie's eyes sought the floor and stayed there, as though he'd just now noticed something unusual and interesting in the shiny surface. Chancie performed introductions. The boy refused to meet Micah's eyes or even to look at the hand he woodenly shook at his mother's insistence.

“Those candles are going to melt away. Let’s sit,” Alma said, sparing them all further awkwardness.

Micah seated Chancie first, but Alma had already pulled up her own chair by the time he finished. “We don’t stand much on ceremony around here,” Alma said, patting the chair to her left, at the head of the table and directly across from Chancie.

Micah took the indicated seat. While he was shaking out a linen napkin, Alma said, “Well, let’s not just sit here like stumps on a log. Somebody start passing the food.”

Chancie began with the bowl of mashed potatoes, passing it to Jamie. The boy took a mere dab, and then held the heavy bowl slightly out of Micah’s reach, making him stretch across the table for it. The test of wills was repeated with every dish on the table, but Micah bit his tongue and said nothing.

He wondered if Chancie noticed what her son was doing, and decided she did when her expression tightened a little more each time she passed a dish on to Jamie. But at last they sat with plates full, and began eating. Chancie tried to draw Jamie out, asking questions about his day and receiving monosyllabic answers.

After a considerable silence, Alma rescued the flagging conversation. “Maybe you can tell by my lack of citified manners that I grew up on a ranch, Micah.”

Having contributed nothing to the conversation so far but doing as much justice as he could in the interim to the slab of beef Alma had deposited on his plate, Micah answered gratefully, “So did I.”

“Ha,” she exclaimed, pointing her fork at him in triumph. “I knew it all along. Where were you all at?”

Chancie looked slightly chagrined that she hadn’t known this fact. Micah smiled across the table at her to indicate her ignorance wasn’t her fault, then turned to Alma. “We had a place in Montana. Outside the Blackfeet Nation reservation. The tribe bought it back when my dad was ready to retire. My mother still lives there, as a matter of fact.”

“You didn’t want to be a rancher?”

“I always wanted to be a cop, from the time I was a little kid. My mother’s brother was with the reservation police and I used to drive him crazy with questions.” Micah shrugged deprecatingly. “I hope I’m half the peace officer, and the man, that he was.”

“What was his name?”

“John Taylor,” Micah said quietly.

Alma colored when she realized what information she’d unwittingly extracted. “Oh.”

Micah glanced at Chancie. She was staring absently at Jamie, but looked up when she felt Micah’s gaze on her. It had been a huge cross for his mother to bear, but these days almost half of babies were born to single mothers and it wasn’t such a big deal anymore.

“Don’t be sorry,” he told Alma. “My parents weren’t married, but they were happy. My dad was a big Swede, Carl Johanssen. My mother is part English, part Blackfeet. Her name is Anna Taylor.”

Now Alma shot a glance at Chancie. The housekeeper looked slightly uncomfortable about monopolizing Micah and the conversation. But Chancie just smiled fondly at the two of them and went on eating. Jamie kept his eyes steadily on his plate.

“Do you miss riding?” Alma asked with a note of wistfulness. “I do.”

“I still ride. If you’d like, you can take either of my horses out any time you want,” Micah offered. “They tend to get fat over the winter and need the exercise.”

For the first time, Micah noted a glimmer of interest from Jamie. At the mention of horses, the boy’s fork paused in its steady journey to his mouth and back to his plate.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Alma said, staring down at her misshapen hands. “I don’t think my poor old bones could take the jarring anymore.”

“If you change your mind, they’ve both got a pretty smooth gait,” Micah assured her. Then he took his courage in hand and said, “Jamie, would you like to go riding with me sometime?”

The boy almost choked on a bite of beef before clearing his throat and muttering, "I don't know how."

Micah looked toward Chancie. Her eyes glinted in the candlelight, offering silent support. Micah turned his attention back to Jamie. "I'll teach you. It's not hard."

Jamie kept his eyes averted. "My mom doesn't let me out of the house much."

It was Chancie's turn to almost choke. "Good grief, Jamie. You can certainly go riding with Micah." She reached for her water goblet instead of the wine.

"You could go with us," Micah said to her. "I could borrow another horse."

Chancie's face blanched. "N-no, thank you. But Jamie is free to go if he wants."

"Chicken," Jamie said *sotto voce*, to all appearances addressing his plate and not his mother.

Micah stifled a smile. The kid had guts, he'd give him that. Maybe not so many brains, but then a boy couldn't have everything. "So what do you say, Jamie? Want to go out tomorrow after school if it's not too cold?"

"It'd be almost dark by then."

"Well, we could just go feed them this week after I get off work, and get you used to being around them. Then we could ride on Saturday. How does that sound?"

At last Jamie looked up from his dinner, grimacing in Chancie's direction. His look said, *Do I have to?*

She looked back at her son without expression, motherese for *I think you should go and I'm choosing not to help you get out of it*. She said aloud to Micah, "Come by for some dinner before you go feed your horses tomorrow."

Jamie looked back at his plate, trapped between the adults. His mouth drooped miserably, and he asked to be excused soon after Chancie issued her invitation to Micah. Chancie took pity on him and let him go. He'd behaved as well as could be expected, and she didn't want to push it. The ambience at the table buoyed almost immediately with Jamie's absence, Alma and Micah turning to fond reminiscences of ranch life and Chancie asking questions that elicited more memories.

Micah learned that an accident with a hay baler had driven Henry and Alma Benson from the land they hadn't owned and into town, with Henry never really recovering from the loss of his arm. When Henry died, Alma had been left with nothing except a pittance from Social Security, and considered Chancie her salvation from the welfare, as she put it. Alma said staunchly she had never taken charity a day in her life and hoped she could work for Chancie until the day she died.

Chancie said in a shocked voice, "Honestly, Alma!" and the older woman replied evenly, "Well, every word of it is true."

Micah learned Chancie harbored an inordinate fear of horses, which she thought until tonight she'd concealed from Jamie. Micah was touched by Chancie's trust in allowing her son to go near his own horses, and teased he'd have Chancie herself barrel racing by springtime. She laughed and shook that glorious head of curls, saying, "Never. No way. Absolutely not."

Forgetting Alma's presence for a moment, he said, "You'd knock all the cowboys out in a skintight pair of jeans and some proper cowgirl boots."

Chancie blushed, and Alma hooted laughter. "I always wanted one of those pink hats the rodeo queens wear," Alma said. "Maybe you could get one of those too, Chancie."

"Uh-huh. That's just what I need." Chancie rose and blew out the candle nearest her. Alma pushed her chair back, preparatory to clearing the table.

Micah placed a hand on the housekeeper's arm. He whispered, "Go watch TV or something. I'll help clean up."

Alma grinned. "I knew there was a reason I liked you," she whispered back.

Chancie leaned between them to blow out the second candle. "I haven't even got my back turned and you two are flirting again," she said sternly.

"Micah's doing dishes," Alma announced. She held her hand over her heart. "I think I'm in love."

"Ma'am, if I were just a little bit older," Micah said gallantly as Alma rose.

"It would have to be by about twenty or thirty years, dear, or we'd cause talk," Alma finished for him, ending their fun. "Guess I'll butt out now and leave you two alone." From the doorway before disappearing she added, "Micah, it was a great pleasure meeting you."

Chancie was already stacking dishes and Micah started on the other side of the table. He said, "Your Alma is something."

"She likes you too. I've never heard her call anybody *dear* but Jamie and me."

They worked together companionably for a while, Chancie running hot water in the sink and rolling up her sleeves to the elbows to plunge them in the suds after loading the dishwasher. Micah shed his jacket, grabbed a dish towel and began drying pots.

Chancie said, "I learned a lot about you tonight. It's nice to have some of the gaps filled in, although I guessed you were Native American."

"Indian. It's okay to say it." He hesitated. "Maybe we should spend more time talking."

Her lips tilted in a secret smile. She murmured, "Do you really think so?"

Micah stepped away to survey her attractive backside, appealingly covered in crushed red velvet.

"Nah," he decided. "If I eat here often enough, Alma will soon have me divulging all my secrets. You can just listen in. Then you and I can think up better ways to spend our private time."

"I wish we had some private time," she said, turning to tug the dish towel from him and dry her hands before placing them on the shoulders of his dress shirt. "Kiss me quick," she demanded.

Micah intended to comply, but the warm welcome of her open mouth tempted him beyond the containment of a little peck. He delved into that velvety softness, crushing her body to him and holding her there by the lush nether curves he'd admired only moments before.

And Chancie kissed back, pressing her breasts with their taut nipples against his shirt, rubbing and purring deep in her throat like a contented Persian cat. He wanted to undress her right there in her kitchen, divest her of those red velvet trappings and have her naked on the countertop. He wanted to hold her forever, bury himself inside her at last. He wanted—

"Mom!"

They sprang away from each other. Chancie's hand flew to her mouth; Micah's grabbed the dish towel to drape it nonchalantly in front of his bulging fly. Jamie stared at them from the arched doorway.

"I thought he was gone," the boy said accusingly. "I heard a door shut."

"A-Alma must have gone to her room," Chancie managed to say. She ran her hands down the front of her velvet tunic to smooth it. "We were just finishing the dishes."

Jamie looked at the bowls and platters of food still on the table. "Yeah, right." He turned and stomped away.

"Jamie, what did you want?" Chancie cried after her son.

"Just never mind, Mom," he yelled from the hallway. "I can see you're really busy! Finish the damn *dishes*."

His bedroom door slammed. Chancie looked at Micah with wide green eyes. She said, "Whoops."

Micah didn't know whether to laugh or yell himself. That damned jealous kid had Chancie spinning in circles. She couldn't please everybody all the time, no matter how hard she tried for Jamie's sake.

He put his arm around her, trying to ignore the slight stiffening of her spine in response. "It'll be okay," he said. "Give me a week to work on him. He'll come around."

"Oh, Micah. Do you really think so?" Chancie's hands sought his waist through his shirt, where she clung tightly.

"Yeah," he affirmed with more bravado than he felt. Jamie de Leur was one tough little brat and would go down kicking and screaming. Micah recognized all the signs, because he'd been a tough little brat himself with five bigger brothers always beating up on him. Still, if he could handle

scared drivers of stolen vehicles surrounded by cops with guns, he could handle one ten-year-old with a stubborn hang up about his mother's new boyfriend, right?

Micah sighed and swore to Chancie without much conviction, "Jamie will get used to the idea of us being together. Just you wait and see."

He did his best to ignore the voice in his head that whispered something about famous last words.

## Chapter Ten

The appointed days of the week Micah had given himself to win over Jamie's affections began to pass. Both Micah and Chancie thought they dragged by interminably.

Each evening Micah arrived at Chancie's for dinner. These were much less formal affairs, where he didn't feel out of place in jeans and boots. Chancie greeted him with affection, the simmering passion he could detect in her forcibly curbed, and he knew they were falling into a routine that would be devastating to both of them to discontinue if Jamie ultimately wouldn't accept having Micah around.

After some wonderful meals where he came to appreciate Alma almost as much as Chancie did, Micah would wait while Jamie got himself dressed in clothing warm enough to withstand the Wyoming outdoors in December. Then he'd drive the boy in his pickup to the place north of town where he boarded his horses, almost an acre of unincorporated land belonging to a sheriff's deputy acquaintance, Clay Thorpe.

Thorpe's dog barked a couple of times when they drove up, just enough to warn Thorpe and his wife someone was around but not enough to make a nuisance of himself. When Micah and Jamie reached the barred gate of the corral, Jamie would open the door of the truck and get out with as much enthusiasm as if he were a death row prisoner being led to execution.

The first day, Jamie merely watched and refused to approach the Appaloosa mare and gelding. But after that he reluctantly began to help Micah bridle and saddle the horses by the light of an aluminum cone lamp mounted on the stall. After much urging he would climb into the saddle on the spotted mare and let Micah lead him around the corral, even take the reins and guide her himself if Micah forced him to. But he wouldn't admit by word or expression that he was enjoying any of it.

Jamie forked hay more readily than he rode, struggling with the heavy bales and the wire cutters. He even mucked out the stalls and as much as he could of the frozen corral without too much muttering under his breath. Micah came to admire the kid's silent fortitude, but he still felt the urge to shake some compassion for his mother's predicament into Jamie.

Micah thought he'd never find the key to opening the boy's locked emotions. By Friday he was about to give up on winning over Jamie. They were ready to leave. While Micah hung up his tack and finished straightening things up, Jamie wandered off toward the gate. Micah hurried faster than usual, his fingers and toes getting numb from cold.

He hadn't turned off the light yet, their signal to go. For some reason he turned to look behind himself instead, and caught the boy hugging Thorpe's ugly mutt beyond the bars of the metal corral. Micah stood watching Jamie, whose emotions were unguarded for a moment, and the dog. He knew he'd discovered an important key to the boy's affections.

But Micah didn't know whether to use it or not. Jamie hadn't volunteered anything personal about himself, and clearly wasn't ready to treat Micah with anywhere near the warmth he showed to Thorpe's dog.

Yet how long would Micah and Chancie have to wait to gain the boy's trust? The urge to nudge Jamie along toward accepting him was too strong for Micah to deny. At last he decided almost anything with Jamie couldn't hurt.

"Like dogs, huh?"

Jamie stiffened. His hand froze where it had been fondling the animal's fuzzy ears. The poor dog looked to be what Micah's father had called Heinz 57, a product of too many cross-breedings to

tell what varieties of canine its ancestors might have been. Micah crossed the corral toward the fence, trying to seem nonchalant.

"I like dogs," the boy finally answered. "But Mom won't let me have one."

The boy had strung two sentences together. Micah had to grab for the support of the top rail of the corral to keep from falling over in shock.

He lifted one boot to hook its heel over the bottom rail. It wouldn't do to seem too eager. "Your mom probably thinks she'd have to take care of a dog. I'll tell her what a good job you do with the horses. Maybe if we work together on it, both try to convince her, you could have a dog."

Jamie glanced up, his face full of a sneering cynicism that was too old for his young features. He said flatly, "I don't need your help. My mom and I got along just fine until you started hanging around."

Micah knew from what Chancie told him that was a baldfaced lie, but he admired the kid's bluster. His week was passing, and he'd made absolutely no headway with Jamie. He gave up on the subject of dogs for the time being, but an idea formed that wouldn't quit nagging him. He couldn't give up all hope that he might yet win.

They drove back to Chancie's house, where Micah and Chancie had only a few minutes together. Micah asked her a hurried question without much explanation, and she reluctantly agreed to trust his judgment. Micah felt he'd won a major battle, if not the weeklong war, when she assented.

He went home alone. Again. If the difficult evenings with Jamie were hard on Micah, the nights he spent alone were harder. Beginning with dropping the boy off and then having to take his chaste leave of Chancie, Micah's nights became unbearable endurance tests where he paced the floor of the small apartment or lay in bed staring at the darkened ceiling. He missed Chancie. He even, truth be told, missed Jamie a little. Being at Chancie's house every night, if only for an hour or so, showed him vividly what he'd been missing all these years. Lights twinkled on the Christmas tree that had appeared in the corner of her living room, she and Alma teased and laughed, their phones rang almost constantly for one or another of them, and the smell of Alma's baking invariably perfumed the air.

Home. He knew he was building up an idealized picture that was probably nowhere near the reality of the life Chancie lived. Alma was baking so much because it was Christmas. He doubted if she cooked all the time; she probably ordered take-out pizza once in a while just like everybody else. Chancie and Alma, and Chancie and Jamie, sometimes sniped at each other when they were hurried or impatient. It wasn't all sugarplums and spun icing at Chancie's twenty-four hours a day.

But it was a hell of a lot better there than here. Sometime during the week, the Christmas presents Chancie left with him had disappeared. He suspected she used her lunch hour to wrap them, and now he hadn't even the comfort of other people's gifts to keep him company in the bleak rooms.

Micah and Chancie had agreed to cool their ardor while Micah got to know Jamie better. But the bargain got steadily more burdensome to keep as the week progressed and Micah's almost constant erection chafed, never letting him forget the implied reward that lay at the end of a successful stretch of seven celibate days. And the knowledge he read in Chancie's eyes when he kissed her virtuously good night—that she desired him as much as he did her, that she longed for their self-imposed exile from each other to be over so they could continue where they'd left off, with her naked body branding his—didn't help one bit.

Why had he agreed to such insane terms? This week was going to end up driving them nuts. Only once, when she said she couldn't stand it anymore, had she come to him in the night. Soft, warm, wet, giving, they took turns with mouths and hands, all silken friction, excitement building until the darkness imploded for each of them.

Yet she ended the night crying because he wouldn't give her what she wanted. "I see stars when you touch me. Do you know that? I don't care about the future! Right at this moment, I only care about now. Do I need to beg, Micah? I will. I have no pride left when it comes to you."

“That’s not it, baby. You know that’s not it.” He was at the point where he wondered if this state of suspension, weeks involving only foreplay or nothing at all, hadn’t become a kind of exquisite torture to see which of them would break first.

“Have you had this particular problem with other women?” she demanded, sitting up and swiping tears from her cheeks as if she didn’t want him to know she was crying.

“You’re well aware I don’t have a physical problem, Chancie. I’m killing myself to hold back, only because of you. Because you’re so damned important to me. I don’t want to make a mistake.”

She twisted to stare at him. “Bullshit,” she spat. “This is not just about me anymore. You’re afraid.”

“You make it sound like there’s something wrong with being afraid.” Suddenly he had the urge to put his clothes on. He lowered his hands from behind his head and sat up beside her. It didn’t feel right to be arguing with her while lying down naked, although he couldn’t have explained exactly why those circumstances made him so uncomfortable.

“You *do* have a problem, Micah. And it’s called trust. You need to trust me, and trust that we’ll be stronger together than we are separately. It’s starting to look like I’m going to be changing my *whole life* in the next few months. I’m not scared to admit I’m afraid. But I’m going to do it anyway, because things can’t go on like they are.”

“The difference is you’re not changing your *whole life* just because of me.”

The sudden silence in the room was like a thunderclap. The look on her face when he said that, as if he’d slapped her, was almost his undoing. He wanted to take it back, kiss her and make it better, lay her back on the bed and make the world and all its problems go away for at least a little while.

But he didn’t. He pulled the sheet up over himself, and watched her get out of his bed and throw her clothes on, while he said and did nothing to stop her.

She turned her back on him wordlessly and left. Frustrated, and angry. And he couldn’t blame her.

Now Micah told himself: two more days. Two more days until the big test. Tomorrow, Christmas Eve, and Sunday, Christmas day, and he and Chancie would have their answer. He tried to talk himself out of discouragement. He could survive two more days.

Maybe.

On Saturday morning the sun delayed rising, the winter days short and crisp. Micah woke late, hurrying through a cold breakfast and a shower. He had a lot to do, but he’d promised Jamie they would ride today and he wouldn’t put the boy off.

He opened the front door, his breath puffing out in a frozen plume, and reached for the morning paper. He shut the door on the cold and ran his finger down the classifieds, wondering if it was too early on a holiday Saturday to call. But the woman he reached when he punched in the numbers said three o’clock was fine. Micah said he’d be there, and hung up.

He pulled on a coat and gloves, and went out to start the pickup. Its engine whined before finally catching, and he had to sit with his foot on the gas to make sure it didn’t die. When it finally warmed up enough to move without choking, he put it in gear and headed toward Chancie’s.

Chancie arrived at Screening Services promptly at nine. Judy had set up this special appointment with Parker, and Chancie didn’t want to miss it. The office had a deserted, weekend feel to it, and Chancie turned on a few lights to dispel the solitude.

She booted up Judy’s computer in case Parker should need the records on the hard drive. Even that small bit of normalcy, the light from the screen, helped liven the inert atmosphere. Parker arrived soon after, cheeks ruddy from cold.

He looks so young, Chancie thought. Am I doing the right thing by placing my business in his and Judy’s hands?

“Thank you for coming,” she said.

Parker rubbed his palms together briskly, whether from the chill or an eagerness to get his hands on her books, Chancie couldn't tell.

"Ready?" he asked, and she nodded uncertainly.

"Good," he said. "Let's get started."

Parker seated himself behind Judy's computer, but Chancie didn't have long to stand there feeling useless. He soon had her busy fetching invoices and check stubs, quarterly reports and copies of her loan agreements.

He asked probing questions, delving into every nook and cranny of her financial morass, and Chancie answered as fully as she could. She wouldn't be accused of wasting Parker's time by holding anything back. The more he explored, the more she began to feel she was in competent hands, and she finally began to relax a little.

The phone rang. Chancie prayed it wasn't an emergency. Judy had left for the Colorado office on Thursday and wouldn't be back until tonight to spend Christmas Eve with Parker. There was no one to cover for Chancie if there had been a screwup somewhere.

"Screening Services."

"Chancie, it's Alma."

Alma knew how important this meeting with Parker was. Chancie held her breath before exhaling and asking, "What's wrong?"

"Jamie disappeared while I was in the shower. He left a note saying he was going to a friend's house."

Chancie clutched the receiver. "He knew Micah was coming over."

"Yes, dear."

"He did this on purpose, so he wouldn't have to see Micah. He knew I'd be busy at least until lunchtime, probably more like early afternoon. So he took the opportunity to run off."

"I'm afraid so."

"I swear I'm going to throttle him when I get my hands on him, Alma."

"Now, Chancie. You know this whole affair with Micah has been hard on the boy."

Chancie glanced at Parker, who didn't look up from the computer screen. She lowered her voice. "I just don't understand *why*. Micah's been nothing but patient with Jamie, and Jamie's been a total little snot in return. I really thought...oh, never mind. Where is Jamie, anyway? Did he leave any clue where he was going?"

Alma sighed. "You know he's smarter than that."

Chancie sighed too. "I also know he knows I don't have time this morning to call all over town looking for him. He gripes that I'm never home, but he sure uses the opportunity to slip out unobserved when it suits him, doesn't he? He's playing Micah and me for fools."

"Chancie, I think that's a little harsh."

"And I think you're a certified saint if you believe I shouldn't be mad at him," Chancie hissed into the phone to keep from yelling. "If Jamie shows up there at home, I want to talk to him immediately. Parker's given up his Saturday, in addition to it being Christmas Eve, to help me out here. I can't spend all day searching for Jamie if he's hiding out with his friends."

"I understand, dear. I'm sure Jamie's fine. I just thought you would want to know." Alma hung up.

Chancie rested her head against the rough wood wall near the phone for a moment, so angry and disappointed in her son she didn't care if she got slivers in her forehead. It had been so much easier when Jamie was small, when she could command him and he would obey. Now he was certainly old enough to cross the street by himself, cross town on foot if he felt like it, which he had apparently done to get away from her. And away from Micah.

"Trouble?" Parker asked mildly, distracted by the numbers on the screen in front of him. He'd taken off his overcoat and cardigan, and sat with rolled-up shirt sleeves.

"You might call my son trouble," Chancie muttered.



"You can go for a while if you like," Parker said. "I won't need you here for another hour or so. It will give me some time to go over these numbers again before I give you the bad news. If you're going home, why don't you bring your personal records when you come back."

Parker's last words should have given Chancie a chill, but she'd already reached the conclusion that he wasn't going to be falsely cheery about her finances, especially her personal expenditures. Chancie doubted if she could find Jamie in an hour, but maybe she could intercept Micah and try to soften the blow.

"Thanks, Parker," she said, grabbing her coat. "I'll be back in a little while."

When Micah rang the doorbell at Chancie's, Alma answered. She had a funny look on her face he couldn't decipher. She didn't smile, and she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Oh, Micah," she said, fluttering a hand. "Come on in, dear. Sit and have a cup of coffee."

Micah smiled. He could already feel the warmth of the cup against his cold fingers. "Maybe just one cup, thanks. Is Jamie ready?"

"Jamie isn't here." Alma shut the door and stood twisting her hands together.

A frigid feeling crept up between Micah's shoulder blades that had nothing to do with the temperature outside. "Where is he?"

"Well, I can't say. He slipped out while I was showering. He's at a friend's, but he didn't say which friend. Micah, I'm so sorry. I know he was supposed to be here to meet you this morning."

Micah put his hands in his pockets to hide their tight clenching. He'd pushed too hard, and Jamie had retaliated. He tried a smile that he knew didn't come off too well. "It's damned cold outside to be riding, anyway," he said. His voice sounded unconvincing even to his own ears.

They heard the crunch of tires on ice from Chancie's car in the driveway at the same moment. Alma patted Micah's arm in silent sympathy, and then left him standing alone in the hallway to meet Chancie.

She blew in, stamping snow from her boots. From the look on her face as she slammed the door behind her, Micah concluded it was probably a good thing Jamie wasn't around. But when she lifted her eyes to Micah's face, her stormy gaze softened.

"Micah, I'm so sorry," she said.

"Everybody's sorry. You. Me. Alma." He shrugged. "Do you know what set him off? Was it just me?"

"I don't think so." Chancie tugged at his arm. "Come in and sit down."

She pulled her coat off and shook her hair out. Micah perched on the red and blue sofa, and Chancie sat next to him. She picked up his hand and held it.

"I've told Jamie some things that I haven't told you," she said. "I didn't know where we stood. You and me, I mean. Especially after the other night. So I didn't talk much about the future."

"Maybe it's time to face the fact that we don't have a future, Chancie." His chest hurt when he said it. His body ached as if he were getting the flu, the hand she held hurt, but there it was: the bald truth and nothing but the truth. If push came to shove, Chancie couldn't pick him over her own son. She was going to call it off between them.

"You're going to break my heart, Micah," Chancie whispered.

"I warned you from the beginning I might. I never meant to hurt you, Chancie." Now his throat felt raw.

She crumpled, head against his chest. He tangled his hands in her glorious, riotous gold curls. "Go on and tell me what you told Jamie," he said softly. "Maybe it will help me understand where I went wrong."

"I don't know if it's possible to fully understand Jamie." Chancie sniffed back tears. "He said he wanted me to stay home. I've been working on that with Judy. She'll be going out of town and I'm going to stay here and run the office. I explained that to Jamie, but it didn't seem to make any difference."

"You're trading places with your assistant?" Micah couldn't help the amazement in his voice.

“Micah, you haven’t seen Judy lately. You wouldn’t recognize her. She threatened to quit. I know it sounds crazy, but I really think she can do my job.”

How much was Chancie willing to give up in order to please her son? “I don’t think Judy is the one I’d have trouble recognizing right now. Chancie, are you all right?”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Okay. The whole truth. I didn’t agree to Judy’s idea just for Jamie. I wanted to have time to be with you too. I didn’t want to be calling you from motel rooms and missing you all the time. And if you’re talking about giving up control, well, I’m going to have to start trusting somebody sometime so I thought I’d start with Judy.”

She’d been making plans. Micah felt hollow inside. Didn’t she see it wasn’t going to work out between the two of them? Or should he say among the three of them? How could they think they might have a future together when Jamie hated him?

“There’s more.” Chancie continued, shuddering. Micah’s arm automatically tightened around her shoulders. “I’m not who you think I am,” Chancie said in a tiny voice.

All Micah’s cop instincts bristled. What did she mean? Did she have a secret identity, a criminal past? Was there something else hidden between them, holding them apart? Impossible. He damped down his suspicion. He knew Chancie de Leur better than she thought he did. He knew she could never be happy while Jamie was unhappy. She was turning her whole life around for a kid who appreciated none of her effort.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” he said. He lifted her chin. “If you’re not who I think you are, just who might you be?”

She wouldn’t look at him. “At this very moment, Judy’s accountant boyfriend is at my office trying to straighten out my books. I’m a fraud, Micah. I’m not the success you think I am. In order to keep my business, I may have to sell this house. That’s what I told Jamie, and that’s why I think he’s so upset. I should have at least waited until after the holidays. I’ve been so thoughtless. Christmas is already hard on him. I could have waited a while, given him that much.”

Micah looked at the Christmas tree in the corner, its lights darkened, and at all the presents piled beneath it. He thought of how he’d accused Chancie of trying to buy her son’s love, and he felt ashamed. All the time she’d been struggling to keep her business alive and simultaneously keep everybody satisfied, he’d been thinking she was rich and spoiled.

“How bad is it?”

At last she met his eyes. “I won’t know until Parker finishes adding everything up.”

“I have some money saved up,” he offered. “I could—”

“No way. I mean, no thank you, Micah. This situation is only temporary. With the federal regulations on enforced testing, Screening Services *can’t* fail if I can just get through the next few months.”

“Are you sure? Is this the right time to turn Judy loose, Chancie? I don’t know much about business, but you’re taking a big risk, aren’t you? She looks pretty young to me.”

Chancie lowered her eyes. “Yes and no, about the risk,” she said. “I’m risking that Judy can’t make a bigger mess than I did. But she and Parker are trying to build a future together, and I’ve tied their success to that of Screening Services. If I lose, they lose.”

Chancie the gambler, hedging her bets. He smiled fondly. He’d known all along she could live up to her name, and now, when it was too late, he was discovering he’d been mostly right about her. He couldn’t help warning, “Judy could walk out at any time, you know.”

“Let’s be realistic, Micah,” she said. Two fat tears trembled on her lashes. “So could you.” She took another deep breath. “But I’m betting neither of you will.”

He admired Chancie’s guts, but at the same time he had a strong sense of regret. Was it possible she just didn’t know when to give up? He couldn’t face Jamie’s hostility for the rest of his life, or even for a few years until the kid was ready to leave home. Micah couldn’t be the one to make Chancie choose between her son and her lover. Even at this moment, Jamie was missing and she felt she had to sit here and explain, making a choice between the boy and the man. Micah didn’t want to go on feeling guilty for tearing Chancie apart.

His sense of fairness was violated by the situation. If it had been another man vying for Chancie's affection, he might have relished the fight. But Micah Taylor wouldn't go on battling a ten-year-old boy.

When he didn't answer her right away, Chancie said apprehensively, "What are you thinking, Micah?"

Could he tell her he thought she would lose her bet with herself? She was so brave, a formidable contender who could take it on the chin and come back for more. He had a much clearer picture of her now and liked her more than when he had thought her lavishly wealthy. He admired her grit, but he couldn't let her go on thinking he was in her corner when he was backing out of the ring.

"I'm thinking you're the most courageous lady I've ever met in my life," he finally answered truthfully.

"But you also think I'm being too optimistic." It wasn't a question.

He squeezed her upper arms. How could he give her up now? But he had to. "Chancie, Jamie hates me. I don't think that's going to change anytime soon."

Her green eyes flared. She jerked her arms away, breathing heavily. "Micah Taylor," she said in a low voice, "you are really starting to piss me off. Don't you *dare* give up on me. You're coming to Christmas dinner tomorrow. You *promised*."

"And you're going to hold me to it, come hell or high water." He smiled sadly. He was going to miss her spunk as much as her fiery kisses and her sweet body responding instantly to his touch, although those memories would be enough to ensure many a sleepless night.

"You bet I'm holding you to it." She checked the time, muttered a curse. "I've got to get back to Parker. Would you just kiss me, Micah? For luck?"

So tough and so soft. Was her business woman's exterior all a bluff, a ruse she'd learned in order to survive? In one breath she commanded his presence at dinner, and in the next she seemed uncertain he'd want to kiss her.

*Kiss her goodbye?*

He shoved the thought away. If Chancie thought he was breaking her heart, his own felt remarkably battered at the moment. He raised his arms and she flowed into them, her lips seeking comfort and courage and strength from his. He gave all he had at the moment to that searching kiss, but he was afraid all he had wasn't enough for Chancie de Leur.

And Chancie wasn't fooled. Sensing his doubts, used to better and bolder kisses from him, she pulled away.

"I have to go," she said. She touched a finger to her trembling lips while she looked at him with an unanswered question in her eyes.

"Me too," Micah answered.

*Maybe forever.*

## Chapter Eleven

Chancie returned to the office, a box of receipts and what personal check stubs she possessed in her arms. She did most of her banking and bill paying online, so would have to either log in to all her accounts or give Parker her passwords. Parker, surrounded by stacks of files and loose papers and plastic binders, looked up with glazed eyes from the ledger he was studying. Chancie felt sorry for him.

"Want a break?" she asked. "I could buy you an early lunch."

"Let's go on," he answered. "I think I've about got a handle on the business, then I'll take a look at your household accounts." He nodded toward the box Chancie held.

She crossed around behind Judy's desk to put it at his feet, since there wasn't any room left on the surface. She felt inadequate, uncertain, and she hated that feeling. Everything seemed to be

closing in on her at once, and her first impulse was to panic because she thought it all might blow up in her face.

She'd watched with a strong sense of impending disaster as Micah drove away from her house. Jamie had run away, just for the day, she was sure. But the message she got was that he couldn't handle the situation. Micah had seemed less than enthusiastic about her shaky optimism concerning their future, jarring her confidence even more. She didn't know for sure if Judy could deal with the responsibility she said she could. And now Parker looked so gloomy, Chancie wondered if he was already planning a funeral for Screening Services.

The whole house of cards Chancie had thought so carefully constructed, seemed poised to fall down on her head. She didn't know if she could take any more bad news today. Maybe she could ask Parker to put off his verdict until next weekend.

Instead she found herself asking, "Want some coffee?"

"Sure," Parker said without looking up from the computer screen.

Plow ahead, nose to the grindstone, eye on the prize. Keep on keeping on. What else could she do?

She'd begged Micah not to give up on her, well, ordered him not to, actually. She hoped he understood she'd been under pressure. But Micah couldn't give up because Chancie couldn't give up. Didn't he understand that?

She filled the glass pot with water. The machine hissed and bubbled emptily, sounding like Chancie felt. When she poured the water in, it settled down to its job of perking, the smell of roasted beans permeating the office.

Simple pleasures, like a good cup of coffee. Like laughter. Like making love. Her hands clenched.

Could she and Micah settle for little pleasures and let the big things take care of themselves?

Maybe she'd built her dreams too high, too fast.

Maybe it wasn't Jamie who ran Micah off, or Micah who scared Jamie away. Maybe Chancie herself, with her habit of trying to control everything around her, frightened those she loved into headlong flight away from her. She tried to force events, and people, into patterns they wouldn't fit. Because not having control meant being out of control.

She loved Micah. Too soon, too fast, who cared and what did it matter anyway? She'd been afraid herself that her attraction to him was merely his dissimilarity to Kenny. She'd been searching for Kenny's antithesis for a long time, and Micah seemed to fit perfectly. But somewhere in their admittedly short acquaintance, Micah had become so much more to her than balm to an ego she'd thought wounded beyond healing by Kenny.

Her thoughts now focused on Micah the person, Micah the man, Micah and Chancie together. She found her thoughts barely touched on Micah's contrast to Kenny anymore. But maybe Micah had inadvertently fed the domineering monster inside her by holding back in their relationship. Maybe, instead of waiting until he thought she was ready, Micah needed to make a few demands of his own. Maybe he should just pick her up, throw her on the bed, tear her clothes off and bang her until she passed out. But if anything, Micah was more stubborn than she was. He was holding out for his week to pass, as if there would be some magical transformation in Jamie by tomorrow and they could all live happily ever after.

She served Parker a cup of coffee, and stood watching him work, sipping hers while his cooled unnoticed. She studied his button-down shirt, his neatly trimmed hair, the rims of his tortoise shell glasses. She'd made fun of Parker in her mind for his seriousness, but now she appreciated the very quality that she'd found so amusing.

Judy was transforming herself, chameleon-like, to accommodate Parker. The change in Judy, while to Chancie's benefit and almost certainly Judy's own, still made Chancie a bit uncomfortable. She didn't believe that women should have to twist themselves inside out to please a man, oblige every wish and desire in order to catch a male.

On the other hand, there was such a thing as being too austere. Too uncompromising. She herself had been very close to such rigidity when she met Micah. She'd found herself admitting she hadn't had a date in years because men found her cold.

But Micah's holding out on her had one effect: she was more pliant than she used to be. Maybe she went along kicking and screaming and complaining, but she went along with his waiting game nevertheless. And she certainly didn't feel cold inside anymore. The fact that she'd called Parker in to help her out of a jam, and traded places with Judy, must finally prove Chancie's personality was altering, too. When a woman met a man she cared about deeply, maybe it was impossible not to change. Flowering, she had compared it to, when thinking about what Micah did for her.

And, hell, maybe this was all a crock. What did she know, really? She was so confused. Her personal life was as much a mess as her financial concerns. She snorted softly. Appearances could be deceiving. Perhaps Parker the money manager could give her some advice on how to straighten out other things in her life besides her checking account, starting with her rotten kid.

While she waited for Parker she tried calling around for Jamie, with as little result as she expected. Either none of Jamie's friends had seen him or they were hiding his whereabouts from her.

"Chancie, are you ready?" Parker asked, in a tone of voice that indicated he was repeating the question. He was standing in the doorway of her office.

"What? Oh, Parker, of course. Come on in." Chancie hung up the phone.

He stretched kinks out of his back before taking a seat. "I have a couple of questions."

"Shoot." She tensed as if he actually would pull a gun and shoot her.

Parker smiled. "Relax. I'll try to make this as painless as possible."

Chancie was beginning to understand what Judy saw in Parker. He had a wonderfully impish smile when he wasn't deeply burrowed into numbers.

Then he went for the throat. "You authorized expenditures of over one hundred thousand dollars in equipment in one month."

Chancie explained about the changing federal regulations and the need for new breath analyzers and the fact that all the satellite offices had overhead.

"When did you expect to recoup that kind of outlay?"

"I have ongoing contracts, and expect to sign several more in the next few months."

"The first thing you need to realize is that your business is a pyramid scheme. You constantly require new contracts to pay ongoing expenses. You do know you're in hock up to your neck." Parker paused and he lowered his voice. "Every doctor's office and hospital in the nation can invest a fraction of what you've spent in overhead and set themselves up to take business away from you. Also, you don't let the system you've devised work for you. From what Judy says, you hire a private plane at the drop of a hat to go flying off to do everybody else's job."

Chancie felt warmth seeping into her face. Judy had told Parker about the unnecessary trip to Douglas, and Parker was merciless.

"No doctor's office or hospital can offer the kind of coverage I do," Chancie said in her own defense. "I guarantee testing within two hours, no matter what."

"Okay," Parker spread his hands. "But the new offices are supposed to be paid for by the old ones, not vice versa. Going to forty-eight states from ten after the holidays is probably going to break you, Chancie."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," she admitted in a small voice.

"All I'm trying to say is, stay small and this business could grow phenomenally for a year or two. You could pay off your bills and then think about expanding. For now, you can use the equipment expenses as tax write-offs. I've run some projections, and you could double or even triple your gross next year if you agree to pass on the planned expansion. You could begin a concerted effort to dig yourself out of the hole you're in. In the meantime, you have got to find ways to economize or you're in great danger of going under."

*Learn to control your impulses, in other words.* When she'd been so proud of her ability to control everything. Chancie disregarded her own embarrassment. What Parker was telling her was too important. "I'm open to suggestions."

"Your operation needs to be lean and mean. Shut down the nearest satellite offices. They're too close to do you any good. If you're bent on opening others, make sure it's just a few at more strategic sites. This office is the center. All invoicing comes through here. All billing goes out from here. Keep your finger on the pulse and hire good people. You shouldn't have to ride in like a white knight every time some little thing goes wrong."

"Well, that sounds like what I wanted to work toward," Chancie said in a small voice. But she listened carefully while Parker described other ways to streamline the business. He stressed the dangers of rapid growth and spending profits as fast as they came in, continuing to lecture Chancie as only a man schooled in numbers could.

Then he said, "My advice would be to sell if you can reach the point where you're actually paying your bills."

Chancie had never considered selling Screening Services. The suggestion shocked her. "May I ask why?"

"I don't mean to sound harsh, but it's my opinion you're not cut out for this business. Anyway, that's in the future, something for you to think about," Parker said. "Let's take a look at your personal situation."

So every bombshell Parker had dropped so far had just been preamble? Chancie tensed, her lacquered fingernails digging into her palms, awaiting more bad news.

"Number one," Parker said, ignoring her silence, "cut up your credit cards. Have new ones issued to the business, and use them *only* for legitimate, essential business expenses. Number two, fire the housekeeper. Get once-a-week cleaning help."

He peered at her when she gasped. "Are you all right? You look a little pale."

"I couldn't fire Alma." Chancie was almost hyperventilating. Her stomach roiled.

What would Parker suggest next? That she send Jamie to an orphanage so she could save money on food bills? She'd expected Parker to open fire with both barrels over the way she did business. She had asked for his help and undoubtedly deserved his censure. But Alma was different: Alma was family, even if she did draw a paycheck.

"I-I'll sell my house. I had already decided to give it up. We could live on the equity until the business gets on its feet."

Even though Chancie had mentioned this eventuality to Jamie and to Micah, she realized now she'd secretly thought Parker would pull some magic money rabbit out of a hat and save her from her own imprudence. Brought up short, she had to regroup. She'd been so desperate to prove to a dead man that she was capable of providing well for herself and their son that she'd almost lost what mattered most to her: Alma and possibly Jamie. And almost certainly Micah.

Kenny. She'd done it all to spite Kenny, who would never take her advice, never listen to her, never let her feel that she was competent or smart or worthy. *It's your fault, Chancie. Yours and that kid's. I'd be somebody if it weren't for you, taking all my money, draining the life out of me. I just give and give and give. And you take and take and take.*

Kenny's words. She'd believed them. Despite her denial, despite Kenny's selfish actions that contradicted his cruel words, she'd believed him, and been stupid enough to go on believing him. All the hours she'd spent studying, all the days she'd spent working and building the business, the *years* she'd spent transforming herself so she wouldn't be the woman Kenny saw when he looked at her.

The time away from Jamie that he resented so much, she'd squandered on proving a dead man wrong. If Kenny had hurt Jamie, how much more had she injured their son? If Micah hadn't begun to open her eyes, if she never had this illuminating, humiliating meeting with Parker, how long, if ever, would it have been before realization hit her? She was almost bankrupt in more ways than one.

Micah and Jamie. Chancie had a lot of work to do. Maybe harder work than she'd ever done in her life. At home. Not necessarily here at Screening Services.

"Parker," she said slowly, "you've certainly given me a lot to think about. I appreciate it so much. I'll take your advice. Most of it, anyway. Judy will be back in town soon. It's Christmas Eve. I think you should go home now. Thank you very much for coming in."

Parker's eyes blinked behind his glasses. He apparently wasn't used to being dismissed out of hand. To soften the blow, Chancie forced herself to smile, lips stretching across her expensive white teeth.

At loose ends after he fed and watered his horses, Micah drove slowly past Chancie's house again. Once again he didn't stop. Her car wasn't there, and even if Jamie had come home, Micah didn't know if he could face the kid right now.

He debated with himself. It was Christmas Eve, and the mall beckoned. Should he buy Chancie a Christmas present? Should he not buy her one? Tomorrow was the deadline he'd given himself, and if things didn't improve with Jamie it might be all over.

Micah didn't want to endure any more rejection from the kid. Not that he couldn't, but it was beginning to look like wasted effort to keep trying. So if he bought Chancie a present, it would look like he wanted to stay and tough it out with Jamie. And then, what if he later tried to walk out of her life? Providing, of course, he could ever make himself walk away from her.

Chancie wouldn't keep a gift that brought bad memories. She'd probably shred or burn or throw in the trash any gift he gave her, right after he walked out on her.

But he couldn't show up on Christmas day without a present for her. So should he buy one? Or should he not? Would he take the easy way out and just not show up at all?

Oh, to hell with it, he thought. He was already passing the mall, his subconscious having made the decision for him. He'd find Chancie a nice present, but not too nice. No jewelry. No ring, for example. He'd stay away from jewelry stores. Nothing personal for Jamie to throw a fit over when Chancie opened it. He'd buy her a pretty sweater, from the store where she'd bought her mother's. Size ten, he remembered as he pulled into the lot and parked.

But Christmas Eve in the shopping center proved almost too much for Micah. Cursing under his breath at the idiocy of the crowd of last-minute shoppers, he was bumped and jostled and elbowed too many times to count. Everyone wore the same frown he did. So much for the spirit of the season.

"Ho, ho, ho," Micah mumbled sourly as he wrestled an embroidered ecru sweater away from a horrible brassy blonde who gave him the finger before finally giving up the tussle for the garment. Once Micah had the sweater all to himself, he decided he didn't really like it. Its knit looked a little loose after the battle. He stuffed it back on the rack, ignoring the withering look the rough-edged blond woman sent him.

He turned bravely toward the perfume counter, a horseshoe shaped glass display that held uncountable brands of scent he'd whose names he had never heard of. The gorgon who manned the perfume section eyed him suspiciously from beneath heavily mascaraed clots of eyelashes. Micah decided against telling her that she should go powder her face: her make-up was slowly but surely collecting in the deep wrinkles on her cheeks.

Micah picked up a sample bottle, sniffed it, put it down and picked up another. The Medusa watched him, a pearl button on the collar beneath her turkey wattle chin quivering. At last he settled on one he liked, a spicy yet sweet perfume that suited Chancie's personality, in a vermilion bottle that reminded him of the ginger jar lamp in her living room.

"How much?" he asked, earning the gorgon's everlasting scorn. The saleswoman answered in a chilly tone that said if a worm like him had to ask, he couldn't afford it anyway, so why was he wasting her time?

"I'll take it," he said, smiling into her face just because he felt ornery. "You do gift wrap, right?"

"I do not," she said as if he'd offered her a personal insult. She pointed with one long claw toward the back of the store.

Micah was about to turn away with his purchase, when he caught sight of a familiar form standing among a group of boys just outside the doorway. Jamie and his friends huddled for a moment, then they all straightened, trying to hide wide grins. As they came into the store, they separated two by two, carefully avoiding the glances of any adult.

Micah, all his cop senses on red alert, watched Jamie and a buddy head for the women's department. Micah stuffed the perfume and receipt in his jacket pocket, already following Jamie, ignoring the saleswoman who was asking querulously if he wouldn't at least like a bag.

Jamie didn't once look back. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted, and threaded through the crowd with Micah several paces behind. At the women's wear department, Jamie paused, fingering a silk blouse and turning his head to see if anyone might be watching. Micah ducked behind a pair of dressing rooms not much bigger than two outhouses. When he peeked around a few seconds later, the second boy had taken up the watch, hands stuck nonchalantly in his pockets and his back to Jamie, while Jamie slipped the blouse off the hanger and inside his jacket.

The two boys started to walk toward the front of the store again. Micah was pushing people out of his way, and still he almost lost them. But he managed to stop Jamie before he reached the exit.

"Hold on." Micah reached out and seized the boy by the arm. Jamie twisted frantically, without even knowing who held him. The other kid ran like hell to get away and Micah let him go.

The gray silk blouse fell out of Jamie's jacket to the floor. Jamie finally ceased struggling and looked hopelessly into his captor's face. He froze.

"You," he said in a strangled whisper. Then he renewed his flailing and kicking, yelling, "Let me go! I hate you. Let me go, dammit!"

The sales clerk from the shoe section to their right approached. "Trouble, sir? Shall I call security?" Jamie stopped straining against Micah's confinement when he realized he was about to be busted by a bigger authority than his mother's boyfriend.

"No trouble," Micah answered. He looked at Jamie through slitted eyes. "We were just in such a hurry, I think the boy forgot to pay for something. We'll take care of it right now."

He bent to retrieve the gray silk blouse with one hand, first making sure he had a good grip on Jamie's wrist with the other. Size ten, he noted, and smiled grimly.

Micah dragged a stiff-legged, red-faced Jamie to the nearest cash register. "Have you got any money?" he asked in a harsh voice that said he knew the kid probably didn't.

Jamie shook his head mutely. Micah said, "I'm going to reach for my wallet now. If you run when I let go, I swear I'll tackle you right here in the middle of this store. Everybody in the place will remember both our faces for a *very* long time. You got that?"

Jamie nodded, cheeks pale. Micah released him and paid for the blouse. As soon as he had the bag in his hand, he grasped the boy's arm again.

Outside on the tiled concourse, a cluster of Jamie's waiting friends scattered as the two approached. Micah dragged the kid along by the arm through the jammed mall toward the main exit. Jamie actually had the guts to protest. "Where are you taking me?"

"To wrap your mom's present." Micah wanted to add, *you little brat*. But he controlled himself and kept his mouth shut.

Jamie took a deep breath. Tears flooded his eyes, but he gritted his teeth and didn't let them fall.

"Are you going to tell my mother?" Jamie whispered as Micah hauled him through the double doors of the exit.

Let the kid sweat, Micah advised himself. He deserves to be scared.

"What do you think?" was all he told the boy, who was now quivering in his grip.

He hoisted Jamie like a sack of grain onto the high front seat of the pickup from the driver's side, so the boy wouldn't have a chance to run away. Then he started the engine and headed for his apartment in oppressive silence. His conscience goaded him to give Jamie a blistering lecture, but



the kid wasn't his to correct. He let the bleak afternoon silence deepen, thinking Jamie could be the one to break it if he wanted.

Jamie didn't. They pulled up in front of Micah's apartment house, and the boy still said nothing. Micah got out and waited for Jamie to do the same, but he merely sat there, so Micah went around to the passenger door and hauled the kid out.

"This is kidnapping," Jamie blustered as Micah put the key in the lock of his apartment door while holding on to the boy's coat collar.

"You can borrow my phone to call 9-1-1," Micah said.

Jamie's head swiveled to take in the living room where they stood, the frayed carpet on the stairs, the glimpse of the small kitchen visible in the light from the living room. "This place is a dump," he said.

"I'm not asking you to live here," Micah answered evenly. "Plant your butt."

The boy took a seat gingerly, on the very edge of one of the matted cushions of the sofa. Once again Micah noticed the pitiful, sagging state of his furniture. For sure Jamie was used to better. Micah felt shame that he'd even brought Chancie here.

But Chancie hadn't reacted as badly as her snippy, thieving son. On the contrary, she'd got right down on the floor and made herself at home. She'd loved Micah right here on this beaten-down carpet, and not said a word about discomfort or dissatisfaction.

Micah might venture to dream Chancie would be happy on a cop's salary, but this kid of hers was another story entirely. Micah glanced over his shoulder to make sure Jamie stayed put while he went to the kitchen to retrieve the neat paper sack of wrapping discards Chancie had left for him to put out on garbage day. He rummaged through the cabinet drawers, finally coming up with a pair of scissors and a roll of masking tape.

He returned to the living room and set the sack on the coffee table. Jamie looked at the design of the paper, which matched that of some of the presents under the tree at his house. His mouth twisted ironically before he raised hate-filled eyes to Micah's.

"Start wrapping," Micah said.

"You don't own me. You can't tell me what to do. You're not my dad." Jamie's fists clenched.

"You're right about that much," Micah replied coolly. "I'm not your dad."

"You can't tell me what to do, I said!"

Micah didn't back down from the boy's blazing dark eyes. "Now, Jamie, that's where I think you're wrong," he drawled. "I *can* tell you what to do because you screwed up. In front of a cop."

"That's blackmail," Jamie spat.

"Maybe." Micah shrugged, unconcerned with his own crimes at the moment. "Wrap the blouse. I think your mom will like it. Too bad you didn't have the money to pay for it. In your hurry to keep away from me all day, you must have run out of the house this morning without your piggy bank, huh?"

Jamie glared at him, but his shoulders slumped in response to the hint of threat that Micah would tell on him. He finally reached for the scissors, then ever so slowly for the wrapping paper. Micah suppressed a grin; the kid was beaten, but he still wouldn't admit it. Jamie was going to drag this wrapping business out to the bitter end. He, much like his mother and Micah himself, was too stubborn for his own good.

Finally Jamie finished. Once again he looked at Micah with challenge in his dark eyes. The resulting package looked exactly like it had been taken out of the trash and wrapped by a ten-year-old boy, but Micah would bet Chancie was going to love it anyway.

He checked his watch. It was near two-thirty and he had an appointment at three. Which he meant to keep even if Jamie had taken nearly all the joy out of his surprise. Maybe, Micah thought glumly, he could teach the kid by example, even though he seriously doubted it.

"I'll take you home now," Micah said, adding when Jamie stood empty-handed, "with your mom's present, if you don't mind."

He escorted Jamie clear up to Chancie's door to make sure the kid didn't ditch the package. Chancie herself came to let them in, surprise at seeing the two of them together widening her eyes, pleasure taking its place when Jamie shoved the wrinkled package at her. From behind her back the boy shot a shriveling glance, full of loathing and the dare to go ahead and tell, at Micah.

"I'm so glad to see you two," Chancie said to Micah. "What a surprise." And to Jamie's back retreating across the living room, "I want to talk to you, young man. I've been calling all over town looking for you."

She turned back to Micah, the present held loosely in her hands. "Where did you find him?"

Micah rolled his head on his shoulders, trying to loosen muscles he hadn't realized were so tight. "At the mall," he said.

He didn't add what Jamie had been up to when they'd met at the mall. He'd known all along he wouldn't increase Chancie's burden with Jamie. Maybe the knowledge that Micah alone knew what he'd done, and therefore could always spring it on him in the future, would hold the boy in line.

Chancie looked at Micah curiously, then glanced at Jamie already disappearing into his room. She was no fool. "What's up, Micah?" she asked softly.

"Nothing," he said, unable to meet her eyes.

He could see the hurt stiffness in her face, and finally faced the truth that he wouldn't tell her what Jamie had done because the secret knowledge actually distanced him from her and her delinquent kid. He could see recognition of what he was doing in Chancie's face, in her frozen smile, and in the fixed grip of her fingers on Jamie's present.

"Will you stay for supper?" she asked, voice dry and tight.

"Not tonight. I have to see a man about a horse." His joke about where he was going fell flat.

Chancie said, lips barely moving, "What are you doing, Micah? You've obviously made up your mind about Jamie and me. Why go through with it now?"

His arms ached to reach for her. In his thoughts, it was true he'd already given up on any kind of lasting relationship with her so long as Jamie was in the picture. But he still wanted her, still hurt for her. Maybe he always would.

"Damned if I know what I'm doing, Chancie," he admitted ruefully. "Jamie just about has me whipped. I guess I'll try one last time, because I'm too reckless to know when to give up. You make me crazy, Chancie. So crazy I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

She moved closer, into his arms, arms that swept up to enfold her without his conscious volition. His body knew what he needed, even as his mind tried to deny it.

"I just want you so much," he whispered into the tumble of burnished curls on her neck. "I really wanted this to work, Chancie."

"We'll work it out, Micah," she promised, and he wanted to believe her.

It was so much easier to believe Chancie when Jamie wasn't around.

## Chapter Twelve

Christmas day Micah woke to a winter fantasyland. A frozen fog had risen during the night and still hung above the houses and the tops of the trees, obscuring the sun in a curtain of white.

Everything outside his window was painted with a sparkling whitewash. It was an absolutely still world for the moment, even the ever-present Wyoming wind subdued by nature's frozen beauty.

The sound that had awakened him came again: a high-pitched cry that demanded his attention *now*. He pulled on his jeans and opened the bathroom door. The furry ball confined to the torn, wet newspapers in the bathtub panted, frantically wagging a puppy-fuzz tail.

"You're going to get us evicted," Micah warned in a mock stern voice. "You're not even supposed to be here, bud. The least you could do is keep quiet about us breaking the terms of my lease."

The mongrel pup regarded him with moist black eyes before attempting once again to climb the slick surface of the tub. It landed sprawled on its fat belly in a clump of urine-soaked newspaper.

“Not very graceful, are you?” Micah picked up the wriggling ball of mottled black and brown fur. While the puppy licked his face, he surveyed the mess in his tub. “Yuck,” he said. “I have to shower in there, you know.”

He put the puppy down, hoping it wouldn't pee on the carpet since he couldn't very well take it outside for all the neighbors to see. He knelt to place food and water dishes on the floor beside him, and retrieved the old-fashioned windup clock whose ticking was supposed to have kept the puppy company during the night. “So much for conventional wisdom,” Micah said to himself, recalling the countless times he'd gotten up to quiet the pup's piteous crying. He rolled the soiled newspapers into a ball before tackling the scouring of the tub.

The pup sat on its plump back end and regarded Micah with solemn eyes, sneezing violently once when it took a big, curious whiff from the powdered cleanser can. “That's for cleaning,” Micah said. He pointed out the untouched dish of puppy crunchies. “That's for eating.”

Micah had gone ahead and got the puppy for Jamie. It was a friendly little thing; maybe Jamie would like it as much as he did Thorpe's dog. The puppy wagged its whole back end as if in agreement. Micah shut the door to keep it in the bathroom on the vinyl flooring in case of an accident, then stripped down and turned the faucet on. He stepped into the shower, soaped up, and began singing. The puppy howled along in chorus, and Micah decided to quit tormenting its ears with his off-key voice before one of his neighbors decided to call the police.

Micah wondered what Chancie was doing this morning, if she and Alma and Jamie had already opened their presents and were perhaps now eating breakfast. The thought of one of Alma's meals made his stomach growl, and it continued to complain and torment him while he shaved. The puppy cocked its head at the sound and growled menacingly back.

Micah laughed, noticing how less lonely it sounded to laugh with company in the apartment, even if it was only a little mixed breed pup. Laughing all alone sometimes made him feel strange, a bit like he was losing touch with reality. Like conversation, laughter seemed to require someone to hear it and join in, in order to be valid.

He made scrambled eggs and toast, sharing it with the dog. It ate the warm food readily when compared to the ignored crunchies. Micah washed the few dishes in the sink, checked the time, and decided to clean the place to keep himself busy since he couldn't very well show up for dinner at Chancie's at nine in the morning.

He stripped the bed and remade it with clean sheets, all the while keeping an eye on the puppy for signs of nervousness that indicated it had to go. But it seemed content to curl up on the discarded sheets and nap while Micah dusted and ran the vacuum.

He checked the time again. Wow, a whole thirty minutes had passed. Before cleaning the living room, which might take all of fifteen minutes, he'd call his mother and wish her Merry Christmas.

He sat in a chair in the kitchen with the pup on his lap while the phone rang in his mother's house in Montana. At last she answered, and he could barely hear her above the din in the background.

“I wish you were here, Micah,” she said. “Your brothers all came and brought the kids. It's been a long time since you've seen your nephews. They're getting so big.”

Micah could see in his mind the house on the reservation where his mother had gone after her husband died and the tribe bought the family ranch, the little pre-fab packed to bursting with relatives for the holiday. Anna, mother to six boys and grandmother to eleven more, all boys, must be in her glory right about now.

She went on to describe what each of her grandchildren had been up to lately and what they got for Christmas. Trying to steer clear of the subject of kids and wives and marriage, Micah said, “How have you been doing at the new place, Ma?”

“Fine, fine,” she assured him. “Don't worry about me, Micah. I got the Senior Citizens and the bingo. I keep busy. How about you? I hate to think of you down there all by yourself on Christmas. Couldn't you have got the time off to come home like your brothers?”

He couldn't let his mother go on feeling bad about him being all alone today. "Maybe in the spring I'll come up for a visit," he said. "I'm going to a friend's house this afternoon for dinner."

"Just a minute, Micah." Anna held the phone away from her mouth to say in a loud voice to one of the grandkids, "Look there, Jonas, the baby's eating needles off the tree. Go stop him right now before he pulls the whole thing down."

Micah thought he was off the hook as far as talking about Chancie, but he should have known his mother wouldn't forget. Anna Taylor had internal radar when it came to her boys, and she zeroed right in when she got back on the line. "This *friend*, is it serious with you, Micah?"

"I never said my friend was a woman, Ma."

"You don't have to say it, Mikey. It's serious, I can tell 'cause you don't want to talk about her. What's she like? Is she pretty?"

"She's beautiful." Micah couldn't help answering his mother truthfully.

"So what's the problem? How come I haven't met her, or even heard about her before? Have you asked her to marry you yet?"

"Ma, I never said there was a problem." Micah stroked the puppy's ears. "I've only known her a couple of weeks so there haven't been any marriage plans."

"But you think it's right, huh, Mikey? I can hear it in your voice, you're serious about this woman. And when it's right, you know it," his mother insisted. "I knew your dad was the one the minute I set eyes on him. Big and blond and so handsome, standing there at that dance."

"I know, Ma," Micah said patiently. He'd heard the story at least a hundred times. "But Papa didn't come to you with a ten-year-old son."

"So that's it. Well, we all got problems. Your father had that witch of a Swedish mother who hated Indians. He never would get up the guts to defy her and marry me." The old resentment flared in her voice.

"Grandma wasn't that bad, Ma," Micah protested.

"Sure, not to you kids she wasn't. She was an *old* witch by the time you knew her and some of her witchiness wore off. So anyway, true love overcomes all obstacles, Mikey. If this woman loves you, she'll find a way to be with you. Remember that."

Micah wanted to tell Anna she watched too many romantic dramas on the Hallmark Channel, but he refrained out of respect for his mother's hard life experiences.

"I'll keep it in mind," he said. "I've got to go now. I love you, Ma. Merry Christmas."

"To you too, son. Let me know right away when you've set a date, okay, Mikey? I just love weddings," his mother said, already reprimanding another grandson as she disconnected.

Micah sighed.

He didn't feel any better after talking to his mother about Chancie and Jamie. He didn't have any solutions to the problem of Jamie de Leur. And he'd somehow gotten his mother's hopes up that he was going to settle down and marry Chancie and present her with a few more Taylor grandchildren.

He checked the time again before hauling the vacuum down to the small living room coat closet, and depositing the sleeping pup on the sofa. He got his uniforms ready, fastening his WHP pins to the collar of one shirt, his name tag with years of service below the right pocket and his badge on the left. Soon he was finished with his usual weekend chores, and there was nothing more to do but wait for the time to pass before he could decently show up at Chancie's door.

He tried to watch television on the big black monitor in his bedroom, his one major purchase since the divorce. The puppy snoozed beside him, and Micah drowsily lost track of the plot of the movie on TV while he thought instead of Chancie's warm body.

How he wished Chancie lay here beside him instead of the little pile of fuzz he'd picked out for her son. How he'd like to have a whole Sunday to laze away with Chancie de Leur, dozing and watching television, and waking and making tender love, and then sleeping some more before waking to start all over again. Uncomfortably familiar with the taste and smell and contours of her,

it was all too easy to imagine lying beside her, rolling over and spreading her legs, and giving her what she insisted she wanted from him.

Micah's muscles twitched. He tried to disregard the constant erection that thoughts of Chancie brought, the aching hardness that refused to go away. What if he and Chancie never worked things out? Would he go around with this unfulfilled need throbbing in his pants the rest of his life? He'd thought he could control such unwanted primitive reactions to a woman by now. Once again, without even being present, Chancie had proved him wrong. He wanted her like crazy. But, holy crap, that kid of hers.

The puppy snorted, dreaming, and settled its cold nose deeper in his armpit. Micah quit squirming and tried to make up a little of the sleep he'd lost with the pup's crying the night before. The little sucker was loud! But even with it quiet there was no going to sleep. Thoughts of Chancie kept intruding, keeping him awake. He kept picturing her licking him for some reason. The thought was agony. He punched the pillow beneath his head.

He didn't know which would be worse: if they broke it off before he actually had the opportunity to love her fully, or if he took her into his bed and then they decided to break it off.

He eyed the sleeping pup balefully. What would it be like to have no worries about the future, nothing to think about but what the present moment held? If that were the case with humans, he and Chancie would have leapt on each other the first night at the restaurant, because there was no doubt in Micah's mind she wanted him as much as he wanted her. And had since they'd very first laid eyes on each other.

Could his mother be right about love at first sight? Micah himself suspected love was largely chemical reaction. Once they exchanged kisses, or *licked each other's skin* or something, a blending of hormones happened so that two people got in each other's blood like a drug. And when he was away from Chancie, it certainly felt like the way drug withdrawal was described. When he was with her, he experienced a high that he doubted any amphetamine could match.

But if it was true that love was chemical, maybe it was worse than if it was merely all in his head or his heart. If he had Chancie in his blood for the rest of his life, there was no Narcotics Anonymous twelve-step program for recovering losers at love.

Whenever he was around Jamie, he swore he'd had enough and that he would give Chancie up. Then he'd come home and start thinking about her sweetness, her intelligence, about the heat that smoldered inside her, and he'd be off to the races again: daydreaming, fantasizing how he would not only *taste her*, but cherish her and love her and about the life they would make together.

Right now in the back of his mind, he was picturing how he'd carry the puppy in, present it to Jamie, and all would be well. The boy would love his gift so much, he'd accept Micah as his stepfather and they'd all live happily ever after.

He groaned. He was a goner. How could he even entertain such sappy thoughts when he now knew Jamie for the roadblock to his mother's happiness he was?

Micah smacked his lips. He honestly, right this moment, could taste the wetness between Chancie's legs. Just by thinking about her.

He seriously thought he might be losing his mind. He was no good at work, totally helpless around Chancie, lost at home. He'd talked to his *mother* about her. No doubt about it: he was teetering dangerously off his rocker.

What was he going to do? He had to make up his mind, soon, before he lost it totally.

Despite any visions Micah may have had about a big Christmas breakfast at the de Leur house, Chancie and Jamie and Alma sat down to frozen waffles and syrup. Neither of the women felt like cooking and cleaning up after an elaborate breakfast when they had a big dinner to worry about.

Chancie cleared her throat, still hoarse from the night before, when she'd talked and talked and talked to Jamie. Talked at him, was more accurate. She knew in her bones something beyond a simple shopping trip had happened between Micah and Jamie, but the boy would reveal nothing.

She'd threatened to call Micah and ask him, but she knew he would probably refuse to divulge any more than he had at her door when he dropped Jamie off.

She discussed, again, the changes they were probably facing as far as selling the house and her staying around the office more instead of haring off all over the country. Jamie just shrugged as if the decisions that were so difficult for her didn't make any difference to him one way or the other. When she approached the subject of Micah the boy's vocal cords seemed to grow paralyzed. No matter how many times she asked, "Jamie, what's *wrong*?" he wouldn't even give her his customary one-word, monotone answer.

If she didn't know Jamie better, she would think he was afraid. But of Micah? The thought was absurd.

After she gave up, exhausted from trying to worm the whole story of what had happened yesterday out of Jamie, she had her talk with Alma. What a terrible time, Christmas Eve, to tell the older woman that Chancie's financial advisor suggested she let Alma go. Christmastime was already bad, but apparently she was determined to make it worse. Even after she assured Alma for the thousandth time, "I *won't*. I promise. I'll find a way to keep you on," Alma, too, looked terrified.

Chancie doubted any of them had slept well. Alma's face looked pale and haggard, and her own, the last time she'd checked the mirror, sported purple circles like bruises beneath her eyes. Jamie was sulky and withdrawn, his jumpy terror of the night before settled into dark brooding. Even opening the fancy remote-control car and the tablet computer failed to bring out a smile, and Chancie thought it had probably been a big mistake to put Micah's name on the card along with her own. But Micah had paid for half of the car; why shouldn't Jamie know that?

When she opened the pretty gray silk blouse with a gasp of pleased surprise, Jamie turned a sullen red and left the room before she could hug him or even thank him.

She sat stunned, surrounded by discarded Christmas wrapping like banks of brightly colored snow. She looked forward to seeing Micah. She hoped he was in a better mood than yesterday. But she felt chilled at the thought that he and Jamie would be thrown together once more.

They seemed to bring out the worst in each other, her temperamental son and her sensitive lover. Well, maybe Micah wasn't really her lover. Not technically. Not yet. They'd just sort of played at sex like a couple of teenagers who'd taken a vow of abstinence before marriage, and so she wasn't sure it counted. So they had nothing yet to fight about, since there was no real relationship between her and Micah to make Jamie feel threatened, right?

Maybe, she mused, she should set about remedying that right away. If they couldn't get along anyway, she might as well give Jamie and Micah something to not get along about.

Later she sat at the table scoring a ham before inserting whole cloves in the cross grooves and pouring Alma's special honey mustard sauce on it. Alma peeled spuds for scalloped potatoes, every once in a while wiping her eyes as if she peeled onions instead. Chancie rose and put her arms around Alma's thin shoulders.

"I'd stay even without pay, Chancie," Alma offered sincerely. "I just want you to know that."

"I know you would. But I wouldn't ask you to. I'm sorry I scared you. I shouldn't be burdening you and Jamie with my problems. Your home is with us for as long as you want. Now, the subject is closed, okay?"

"But if you can't afford it, how—"

"Don't worry about it, Alma."

"But I do, dear. I worry about you. I can't help it. You've worked so hard, and now it looks like you—"

"Don't even say the words, Alma. I won't lose." Chancie crossed her fingers superstitiously. "I'm not going to lose anything."

*Brave words.*

Suddenly and mysteriously the dishwasher refused to work. Chancie sighed, unloaded the machine and started washing dishes by hand so they would have room in the kitchen later. She

wished while she'd been charging up a storm on her credit cards, she would have charged a new dishwasher and saved herself and Alma so much extra work. Now it was too late. The dishwasher had apparently breathed its last and she'd already taken Parker's advice and cut up all her cards. She could only hope nothing so drastic happened at Screening Services before the new business ones were issued.

But those thoughts were only a cover for what she was really thinking. I'm not going to lose anything, she'd said. Oh, yeah? some part of her asked cynically. What about Micah? How much more of Jamie's crap do you think Micah's going to take?

If Chancie found herself inflexible in certain ways, in the matter of his word Micah was unyielding. He'd said he wouldn't make love to her until she was ready, and he hadn't. He *wouldn't*, even when she tormented him past any ordinary human male's endurance.

He said he'd give himself a week with Jamie to see how it went. The week was up, plus today. All Jamie had to do was act his normal, troublesome self this afternoon, and Chancie might never see Micah Taylor again.

Right this minute, Jamie was in his room brooding. Probably thinking up new ways to get under Micah's skin. She wondered if she could be charged with child abuse if she went and locked Jamie in his bedroom, and didn't let him out until Christmas dinner was over and Micah had gone.

If only Jamie would talk to her. If he'd tell her what was wrong, she could fix it, change it, make it all right. She was good at that, at rearranging and controlling things. She could make Jamie happy, she knew it, if only he'd open up and tell her what he thought was the matter.

*You're trying to let the cop take Dad's place.* Had Jamie built up some rosy picture of how it had been with Kenny? Some perfect vision of a lost father that no man could live up to? She never deliberately put Kenny down in front of Jamie, but she didn't gloss over the facts either. Jamie certainly had to remember the way Kenny belittled him, his rough way of demanding hugs after he made the boy cry, his drunken rages where he tried to make them both feel guilty because he was unhappy. *Unhappy.* Oh, God. Who of the three of them had been happy?

Jamie couldn't be pining for those times, that father. He couldn't be. Chancie wouldn't believe Jamie had forgotten what Kenny was like, inserted in his mind a studio photo of a model father in Kenny's empty picture frame. The very thought horrified her. What if Jamie inherited Kenny's mental instability?

What if years growing up in the oppressive atmosphere of their home had unbalanced the boy, caused him to think his father an angel and Micah some sort of devil?

Then Chancie would be at fault. For not leaving Kenny sooner, for not fleeing with Jamie before it was too late, for failing to protect her son.

Hot water in the double sink ran unnoticed until it almost overflowed. Alma warned, "Chancie!" and she jumped back to awareness and shut it off just in time.

"I think we could all use a nap," Alma said. "As soon as I get these potatoes in the oven, I think I'll go lie down."

"You go ahead," Chancie said. "I'll finish up here."

"What time do you expect Micah?"

"About one o'clock. Go on, Alma. Stop fussing. I'll be all right."

But the more Chancie thought as she tidied up the kitchen, the more one o'clock seemed to recede into the misty distance. She didn't want to sleep. She wanted Micah. She wanted the comfort of his arms, his deep voice saying everything was all right, that she wasn't to blame.

Before she could think twice, she dialed his number. He sounded kind of sleepy when he answered. Surely she hadn't awakened him at this time of day?

"Micah? It's Chancie."

"Hi, baby," he said automatically, and she thrilled to the tips of her toes. She was glad Micah was sleepy; his responses weren't so guarded as they'd been yesterday after whatever had happened with Jamie.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

“Really want to know?”

“I really want to know.”

His voice deepened. “I’m thinking about you.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Really want to know?”

He was teasing. A good sign. Chancie smiled. “Really.”

“I was thinking of all the things we could be doing together right now if you were here with me.”

“Like what kinds of things?”

He groaned. “Oh, baby. You really want to know?”

“If you ask me that one more time, I’m going to tell you what *I’ve* been thinking about us this morning.” Chancie’s smile grew wider and unconsciously her tongue flicked out to moisten her lip.

“You’re a tease,” Micah accused softly. “You wouldn’t talk dirty over the phone. Someone might hear you.”

“Nobody can hear *you*,” she challenged. She lowered her voice to a sexy whisper. “Tell me what you’re thinking, Micah.”

He did.

Micah drew very good word pictures, of how he would undress her, descriptions of her body and his, and how they would fit together and all the things they would do. Chancie could see it all unroll in her head while he talked, just like a movie. He kept talking about licking, her tongue on his skin and his on hers. When he finished, with descriptions of her legs spread and his tongue *in* her, she was limp.

“Can’t you come over right now?” she asked plaintively.

“And do what, sweetheart? Jamie’s home, isn’t he? How would it look, us so hot for each other we couldn’t behave? Give me some time to get myself together, take a cold shower or something.”

She sighed. She’d got him awake now, and he was getting grumpy as reality intruded. “You’re the tease, Micah. Here I am, all aquiver, and you turn me down again. Shame on you.”

He laughed at her distress, the cad. But she felt better for having talked to him, even if they hadn’t talked about what was bothering her.

“I’ll see you later,” she said, and rose on wobbly legs to go wash dishes.

Micah arrived promptly at one, the puppy for Jamie wriggling hidden inside his jacket. Chancie grinned, sitting them down in the living room, and went to get Jamie, hoping he could behave himself for once.

She led a very reluctant Jamie out toward Micah. The boy said woodenly, “Thank you for the Christmas present.”

“You’re welcome, Jamie. But look what we have here.” Micah pulled the puppy from his coat like a magician with a white dove out of a top hat. Chancie tried to act surprised.

She thought Jamie really was surprised. Or shocked. Or something. The boy stared blankly at Micah and then at the puppy. And then he burst into tears.

Chancie didn’t know what to say as Jamie ran from the room and slammed his bedroom door.

“Well, that went over like the *Titanic*,” Micah said. He plopped the puppy in his lap as it tried its best to stretch up and lick his face.

“God, I’m tired.” Chancie sat down next to him and picked up the wildly excited pup. She held it on her shoulder and crooned to it, trying to settle it down. The puppy wagged its tail and licked her cheek instead.

“That really makes me not want to kiss you,” Micah said sourly as he watched the puppy wash Chancie’s face with its little pink tongue.

“At least he wants to kiss me. I think puppy kisses are kind of sweet. I suppose you haven’t had any today?” Chancie shot back.

“As a matter of fact, for your information, I have.”



“So then what’s stopping you?” Chancie leaned over and kissed Micah, the pup excitedly taking turns licking both their faces. Micah’s taut lips finally relaxed under the double onslaught of kisses, and he began to kiss Chancie back.

“Would you like to tell me what happened between you and Jamie yesterday?” she asked when she came up for breath, looking into Micah’s sapphire eyes.

“I think Jamie should be the one who talks about yesterday,” Micah said stubbornly. He pulled away from her and crossed his arms, making the muscles strain against his shirt.

“Micah, won’t you tell me? Don’t you think I should know? I’m his mother.”

“No, Chancie.”

She sighed. Micah could certainly be obstinate when he wanted to be. “Then how about standing outside with this dog until it wets enough to safely be let inside for an hour or so. Alma and I will get dinner on the table.”

“I think Jamie should be the one to go outside and stand with the dog.” Micah clenched his jaw, refusing to look at her.

*Ooo-kay.* “You’re right,” she finally conceded. “It is supposed to be his dog.”

She rose and clomped over to Jamie’s door, where she pounded on it with the side of her fist in a very unladylike manner. She was tired, she was cranky, and the tension in the house was getting thick enough to blind her.

“If you want to keep this dog,” she yelled at Jamie through the closed door, “get out here and take care of it. It’s a male dog, and I’m not putting up with any more male crap today.”

Jamie opened the door, his eyes big in his head. “I’m not kidding, Jamie,” Chancie said in a quieter voice. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on with you and Micah, but I’ve had just about enough.”

She thrust the puppy at her son. Jamie had no choice but to accept it or let the poor little thing crash to the floor.

“Take that dog outside and let it do its business,” Chancie continued in a level voice. “Then get back in here and wash your hands and sit down at the table. Don’t even cross your eyes when you look at Micah or you’re grounded for the rest of your life.”

Jamie behaved himself for almost two hours, perhaps a new record, Chancie thought. They ate Alma’s excellent dinner, then they all went into the living room at Chancie’s insistence. The dishes could wait, she told Alma.

Alma, almost asleep in her chair, asked if anyone wanted pie. Micah groaned and rubbed his belly, but accepted. Jamie nodded. Chancie stopped Alma from getting up, saying, “I’ll get it.”

From the kitchen she heard the television click on, then only its background noise for a while. She cut the pie, dished out four portions, and scooped whipped cream on top.

She was really beginning to think they might make it through the day.

Then she heard an unfamiliar noise. She thought for a moment someone was choking or vomiting. Her heart skipped: Alma had been acting strangely ever since Chancie had talked to her. Was Alma sick?

Chancie listened for just a moment. The odd noise continued. She hurried toward the arched doorway to the living room on stockinged feet.

Jamie sat opposite Micah, the puppy on his lap. Micah sat stiffly, face utterly immobile. Alma, wide awake now, sat in another chair stupefied with shock.

Jamie’s face twisted as he looked at Micah. Ugly, grunting pig sounds issued from his throat.

Chancie had left them for all of five minutes. What in the world had happened in that short space of time? Had Jamie lost his mind?

Seemingly out of the blue, Jamie said, “You’re not just a pig. You’re a dirty, bastard, Indian pig.”

Chancie couldn’t believe her ears. This was not her son. She didn’t know who was speaking those awful, despicable words, but it was not the Jamie de Leur she had raised. Reacting before she

could think about it, she raced over to the chair by the window and seized Jamie by an ear. The pup fell aside with a startled yelp and bolted behind the sofa.

Chancie hauled a yelling Jamie toward his bedroom and slammed the door on him. He should count himself lucky she didn't slap him silly, she thought, hands shaking with the urge to do just that. By the time she marched back to the living room, Micah was already in the hall with his coat on.

"Micah, wait. Please don't leave."

Chancie was frantic, all her carefully laid plans blown to bits by the buried booby trap called Jamie.

Micah's face. She didn't think she could bear the look frozen on his tight features. He brought a hand out of his pocket blankly, as if he'd never seen his own hand before. He shoved something at her, saying, "I got this for you. I'm done here, Chancie."

Then he was gone.

She sank down to the cold floor of the foyer after the front door closed. She was utterly exhausted, sick inside, bereft. She'd tried so hard. Micah had tried so hard. When it came to Jamie, all their effort was for nothing.

Maybe Micah was right to get out. Maybe Chancie couldn't take any more of this futility either.

The puppy came ambling from down the hall where it had tried without success to follow Jamie and climbed into her lap. Chancie picked up the warm, fat, innocent little body and hugged it to her.

She thought ludicrously: Now what am I going to do with the nice shirt I bought for Micah for Christmas? Then suddenly her chest heaved and she started to cry.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

Amazingly, Monday passed. It was a quiet day, a holiday since Christmas had fallen on Sunday. Chancie and Judy spent the day trying to catch up at the office. Judy had set up a couple of interviews with those applicants she could catch over the holiday weekend. Chancie spent the morning unpacking boxed test kits that had sat in their unopened crates for a month because everyone had been too busy to see to them, while casually eavesdropping on Judy's interviews.

Chancie's mind certainly wasn't on what she was doing. Several times she found herself depositing one client's test kits in another's plastic bin in the hallway. Her thoughts spun around and around as she thought of ways she might have done things differently on Christmas day, avenues she might have taken in order to prevent Jamie from attacking Micah.

The thought occurred to her that if Jamie was determined to hurt Micah, there was really no way she could stop him. Sooner or later the opportunity would have come, unless she kept the two of them so carefully compartmentalized in her life that they never crossed paths.

Could she do that? Could she start over with Jamie at home, satisfy him that Micah would not intrude anymore, begin to build the kind of life with her son she'd always envisioned? Could she keep Micah a secret, sneak out at all hours just to see him, arrange her schedule during the day so they could have a few stolen moments illuminated by a midnight moon when he got off night shift?

Why should she consent to that kind of half-life? Why should Micah?

Because Jamie was unhappy?

Echoes of Kenny's continual complaint rang inside her head. She'd twisted herself inside out, just as she believed women should never do, in order to try and please Kenny. She'd tried everything, acceded to his every demand for a long time. But ultimately nothing worked. Kenny was unhappy. And it was her fault. And that was that.

Now Jamie was unhappy, and she was considering doing the same thing for Jamie that she'd done for his father. She was pondering rearranging her life into patterns that didn't suit her, denying

her own needs while crying inside, maybe for years, in order to please Jamie. *Because he was unhappy.*

And she still didn't know why he was so adamantly unhappy. After she'd calmed down enough to approach him again, Jamie refused to comment on why he had acted so unforgivably toward Micah. He bore the red mark on his ear from the pinch of her fingers without a word. He stolidly accepted her apology for hurting him, and offered no justification or apology of his own in return.

Chancie's eyes were red and swollen. Jamie's were quite dry. He was grounded until he apologized to Micah, which, Chancie admitted, might never happen.

She cornered poor Alma in her neat bedroom, where Alma had retreated after they had finished cleaning up the kitchen in shocked silence. "What in God's name happened out there this afternoon?" Chancie demanded.

Alma flinched, but answered bravely in the face of Chancie's fury. "They were watching television. Jamie was flipping through the channels. Something came on, and Jamie laughed. But it was a cruel sound, not happy. Then he started making those awful pig sounds."

Chancie's shoulders slumped wearily. She sat on the edge of Alma's bed, almost in tears again. She'd thought she would find some answers, some reason for Jamie's outburst that made even a little sense. "Just like that? Alma, I don't know what to think. Do you suppose Jamie needs professional help? Do I? I shouldn't have hurt him, dragging him away by his ear."

Alma said, kindly now that Chancie had calmed a little, "Don't take on so. My dad used to drag us kids out to the woodshed and strop us. Didn't hurt us none in the long run. I remember the barn cats, too, keeping the kittens in line with a growl and a sharp nip. Sometimes a little dose of hard reality does a lot more good than a whole bunch of useless talking."

Chancie shook her head. "I still shouldn't have hurt Jamie."

"Jamie shouldn't have hurt you, either. Nor Micah," Alma said with a touch of asperity. "There was a whole lot of hurt feelings in that room. Micah is a good, decent man who didn't deserve that kind of treatment.

Alma hesitated. "Chancie, have you called him?"

"Micah? No." Chancie suppressed a small shudder. What in heaven's name would she say to Micah?

"You should. Don't let too much time pass, dear. A fierce hurt like that has a way of hardening to bitterness."

Chancie could picture Micah bitter, all right, because she'd done nothing to alter Jamie's despicable behavior. But could she make herself call him? She was so embarrassed, so perplexed. So lost without Micah.

Yes, she would call. It was the least she could do.

Chancie hugged Alma. "Thank you. You are so wise and I love you so much."

Alma smiled, the balance of her world restored. Even her color was better. "Why, I love you too, dear," she said.

Perhaps Alma was the only sane one among them. Chancie wished she could simply tell Jamie and Micah that she loved them too, and then have everything fixed up like magic. She called Micah and left a message on his voicemail because he didn't answer.

Now, at the office, she left the test kits partially unpacked to try once again. She got his voicemail. She repeated her message: "Micah, this is Chancie. I am so sorry. Please forgive me. Please forgive Jamie." Then she added softly, "I love the perfume. It's perfect. Thank you."

Tuesday passed. Micah got in from work at five. He would stay on days for two weeks before rotating back to nights on a six-week schedule. He took off his green trooper's jacket and hung it in the small closet by the front door.

He hadn't checked his voicemail again. Once was enough. Listening to Chancie begging forgiveness tore at his heart. He wished she would just quit.

He went upstairs and took off his uniform, hanging it in his bedroom closet. He changed into jeans and boots, then sat on the bed, lost in thought for a moment before going back downstairs.

At last he made himself rise and go down to the kitchen. He picked up his cell phone and then stood, hands on the counter, elbows locked, jaw clenched while he forced himself to listen to her message, the same message she'd been leaving since the previous evening: *I'm so sorry*.

If he saved the message, he wouldn't be able to stop himself from listening to it again and again. If he erased it, she would probably leave another just like it.

He stood there for a long time. He didn't know what to do.

Micah was sorry too. Perhaps Chancie would never know how sorry, because he wasn't going to tell her. If he called her back, she'd just assume he wanted to go on the way they had been. And he didn't want that.

And yet he did.

He left the house abruptly, slamming the door behind him. He had an appointment with a real estate agent to see some county property zoned for horses. He couldn't go on living the life he had been living before Chancie, in the depressing, lonely little apartment. If he salvaged nothing else from his relationship with Chancie de Leur, he'd at least rediscovered a little part of himself that wanted a life outside work.

On Wednesday, Judy left for California to negotiate a big amusement park contract. She'd come in and shown Chancie some of the new wardrobe she and Parker had picked out, and Chancie had to admit Judy now certainly looked the part of the confident business woman. The trip had been planned before Chancie's meeting with Parker, and it was too late to get refunds on plane fare and hotels booked for the holiday season, so they agreed Judy might as well go.

Chancie could only keep her fingers crossed. The contract with the giant amusement park for random testing of their employees wasn't a sure thing, and it would be up to Judy to sway the officials in charge to hire Screening Services. Then they would all have to hustle their buns to get an office opened and running smoothly in California.

Judy had offered employment to one of the women applicants before she left, a motherly sort named Agatha Hemphill who had previous office experience. Chancie spent the day showing Aggie the ropes, but since few people had drug testing experience and Aggie had none, Chancie still had to conduct all the tests herself.

Once again it hit her how much she disliked the actual nuts and bolts of what she did for a living. She'd begun her training at the local junior college as an emergency medical technician, but had quickly changed her major to business. She had realized early on that dealing with medical trauma wasn't for her; she was much better at dry, mind-exercising subjects such as business law and statistics.

She followed the script for the testing by rote, shutting off her personality in order to protect everyone involved. And maybe that was what bothered her so about her business: she could ethically make no human contact with the clients who passed through the doors of Screening Services, no friendly smile or asking how their kids were, no talking about their jobs or the new car they'd just bought. She must think of them as specimens. And they must regard her as the collector. No more, no less.

Micah had been right in saying that cops and drug testers were very much alike. The nature of their jobs made them solitary and untrusting. She had shut herself off so completely while married to Kenny that it had been hard for her to get outside the door every day to attend college classes. She slowly grew to enjoy the company of other people, and now her job forbade making any overtures toward friendship or trust.

It was a conundrum that fate seemed to continually block exactly what she wanted. She spent so much time detouring around obstacles, sometimes she lost track of her goal. Her goal had been to become a successful business woman. And if she could believe Parker and her own predictions,

with a lot of hard work that might ultimately be true. Then, Parker advised her, sell. Because she wasn't cut out for this.

Then there was Jamie, whose problems seemed to grow instead of recede as she tried harder and harder to mollify him.

Her latest and most pressing aspiration had been to convince Micah Taylor that they were made for each other, a design at which she bombed badly.

Chancie tried to put it all into an ordered list, a prerequisite to problem solving. Jamie hated Screening Services because it kept her too busy to be a mother. She didn't really like her work, she merely wanted to feel that she'd succeeded professionally enough to keep their heads above water.

She wanted Micah Taylor and, she thought, he wanted her. But Jamie hated Micah.

How could all these things come together? There were vital pieces missing, and until Chancie found the answers she'd never solve the entire puzzle. She had to know exactly what Micah Taylor wanted. And she had to know exactly what Jamie de Leur's problem with Micah was.

She sat, stumped, in her office, finally deciding she'd let the whole mess stew in her head for a while. Sometimes her subconscious came up with solutions that all the conscious mind-contorting in the world couldn't crack.

She checked the time. The real estate agent she'd contacted yesterday was due to arrive any minute. Chancie tried to clear her brain of anything but this most immediate of issues: arrangements for the sale of her house and the purchase of a property that she could afford.

The agent arrived right on time, an album of pictures under one arm because she had time only for the merest glance at their online listings. An earnest, eager young man with a wide salesman's smile, he offered to have Chancie's house appraised for her and to take care of other details of the double transaction so she wouldn't be bothered.

As he talked, Chancie leafed through the album. She rejected most of the photos right off. *Handyman's Special* were code words meaning the property needed extensive repairs she couldn't afford. *Cute Cottage* meant too small to hold three, or perhaps more people comfortably. In amongst those she didn't want were pictures of others she couldn't afford: large, imposing houses that looked as if they could shelter half the population of Hawk Point. Chancie wondered idly who could afford those mansions. And then she stopped flipping the pages.

Visions of Micah filled her head as she stared at a picture of a doublewide mobile home with a spacious yard, and horse stalls and a corral off to the side, all surrounded by a chain link fence. Someone had planted spruce trees near the home itself and around the perimeter of the fence for a windbreak. The trees were quite tall, indicating that they'd had some time to grow in the harsh environment of Wyoming's high desert.

She looked at the price. She could roll the equity in her house over into this property, and lower her payments by half.

"This is perfect," she said.

The real estate agent leaned over her desk to see what she had found. His smiling face sobered. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should have removed that. I had a firm offer on that particular property just last night. I'm going to pick up the earnest money this evening."

Chancie herself had no earnest money to counter the offer. She had to wait until her own house was sold before she could buy. Feeling deflated because someone beat her to the perfect house, she glumly leafed through the rest of the pages. But she found nothing so close to what she hadn't known she'd been looking for until she was outmaneuvered for it.

"Go ahead and make the arrangements to sell my house," she told the agent.

"Maybe something else that you like will come up for sale in the meantime," he said optimistically. "I'll certainly keep my eye out, Ms. de Leur."

Chancie saw him off, started to close up the office, and remembered she hadn't left the message for Micah that by this time was becoming habit with her. She knew any ordinary idiot would have given up by now since Micah didn't acknowledge her attempts to reach him, but Chancie refused to surrender to resignation that their truncated affair was well and truly ended.

She drove home, no closer to any solution than she had been when she started the day. She tried to emulate the salesman's hopefulness, but it wasn't easy putting on a cheerful face, especially when she was around Jamie.

She wanted Micah. And Jamie stood in her way.

Chancie fingered the key she wore like a talisman on a chain around her neck. Micah hadn't thought to ask for it back. Her fingers stilled as another piece of the puzzle suddenly clicked into place.

On Thursday, Chancie conducted an interview with a job applicant because Judy was still out of town. Almost overwhelmed by now with the sheer volume of paperwork that came through Screening Services every day, veritable mountains of records and invoices and bills she had thoughtlessly expected Judy to handle alone, Chancie hired the young man on the spot. Brett MacBride's office skills were rudimentary, but Chancie had other duties in mind for him.

While Aggie manned the phones and typed away on Judy's computer, Chancie introduced Brett MacBride to the intricacies of drug and alcohol testing. His first tries were on himself. Chancie showed him how to calibrate the breath analyzer. Then she held its plastic tip up to his face and said, "Blow." He did, and she commanded, "Harder." He complied, and she said, "Come on now, give it all you've got." His face turned red and his cheeks bulged with effort. She said, "Very good," and showed him his zero reading.

They did a urine specimen, following the script Chancie held in one hand so she wouldn't inadvertently forget anything. Then Brett tested her, and Chancie thought, with a bit of further training he would do very well. One day soon she might be able to hand the collecting over to Brett MacBride. It would be a great relief to have a male employee who could actually remain in the room with male clients who'd previously tested positive for drugs, a task Chancie now had to call the city police to perform.

In the early afternoon, as she was going over the several different chain of custody forms various companies used prior to their digitization, Aggie broke in to say, "Judy's on the phone."

Chancie looked at Aggie expectantly, but the middle-aged woman said nothing further. Chancie picked up the handset on her desk.

"We've just broken for lunch, so I wanted to call you while I had a minute," Judy said.

"How are the negotiations going?"

Judy sucked in a breath and held it. "Not well. We're up against a California firm that's offering better terms for more varied services. Chancie, I think we're going to lose this one."

Chancie's hand tightened on the receiver. It was her turn to hold her breath. This was the setback that could bring the whole house of cards called Screening Services tumbling down around her. She could see all her creditors pounding on her door, the faces of the collectors she would have to lay off, the windows of her office boarded up and all the furniture sold.

Her first impulse was to drop the phone and get on a plane to California. She pictured herself shoving Judy away from the conference table so she herself could take over and save the day. Then she saw herself firing Judy for incompetence, and hiring someone who could do the job properly.

She remembered her motto: Nobody got the chance to screw up twice on Screening Services' time.

Then Chancie remembered that Judy's boyfriend, Parker, had advised her to cut up all her credit cards. She couldn't pay for air fare to California. And it wasn't Judy's fault that Screening Services didn't offer blood tests for illicit substances and DNA testing for paternity cases, or CPR, first aid, and occupational training seminars. Chancie had always been too broke to keep up. Instead of expanding services, she'd focused instead on expanding territory.

"Chancie?" Judy asked uncertainly.

"Hold on, Judy." Chancie rubbed her forehead. She was hunched over the phone, her shoulders and neck a mass of tight knots. "Let me think. How low are the other guys going?"

“Not much lower than we are, but enough to clinch the deal. They’re headquartered right here in California; they can afford to be cheaper.”

Chancie could make some new arrangements, shut one of the offices near Hawk Point and open one in California. She’d need California tax law advice on top of expensive California overhead. It would all have to be done awfully fast. And it would go against Parker’s best advice for saving Screening Services.

“What do you think we should do?” she asked Judy.

“Honestly? I think we should take Parker’s advice and let this one go, Chancie.”

Judy waited while Chancie thought about it. The very idea went against the grain, and Chancie gritted her teeth while she tried to come to grips with Judy’s counsel.

“Chancie,” Judy said hesitantly. “If I don’t get this contract, are you going to fire me?”

Chancie hesitated, struck by the anxiety in Judy’s voice. Tension hummed between them on the telephone line.

Inflexible. Unyielding. Rigid. Chancie thought of all the words that applied to the old Chancie she didn’t want to be anymore. She was reacting as Judy had always known her to react, and Judy expected the result that everyone got who failed Chancie de Leur.

Judy was trying her best. She wasn’t out partying on a California beach and refusing to answer her phone. She was carrying out high-pressure negotiations on Chancie’s behalf, and she’d come up against some stiff competition. It wasn’t her fault Screening Services didn’t give her the resources she needed to succeed.

Chancie saw young Brett MacBride eyeing her apprehensively. Her face must be betraying all she’d been thinking. She tried to loosen the knots in her neck, rolling her head slightly on her shoulders.

The new Chancie de Leur said, “I won’t fire you, Judy, no matter what happens. You’re too valuable to me and to this company. In fact, I’ve been thinking if you and Parker want to buy in to the business I’ll make you a full partner.”

Judy said slowly, “Is this for real? Have you been drinking, Chancie?”

“Very funny. Get some lunch,” Chancie said. “Then get on a plane and get back here. We have plans to discuss.”

She frowned as she hung up the phone. She didn’t have to remind Judy they would have to work ten times harder to make up for the lost revenue if she couldn’t get the signatures on the California contract. She’d be a nervous wreck until they could get together with Parker and decide exactly what their next step should be.

Chancie caught Brett MacBride still eyeing her warily. The prominent Adam’s apple in his neck bobbed as he swallowed. Poor kid. His first day on the job and he gets to witness a crisis. Well, he’d better get used to it if he wanted to work for Screening Services. At least he’d seen her delegate to Judy instead of rushing out in a blind panic to fix everything herself, as she might have done only a month earlier.

Chancie was rather proud of herself, now that she thought about it.

She smiled and told Brett, “Welcome to the testing business. It gets a little tense around here sometimes.”

He smiled back nervously. But Chancie felt heartened when he didn’t up and quit on the spot.

At home that night, Chancie sat on the sofa alone. She fingered the key at the base of her throat and thought, Why not? Jamie had gone to bed. Alma was watching television in her room. Chancie could call it a night, or she could go find out right now if she still had any place in Micah’s life.

Tapping on Alma’s door to tell her she was going out, Chancie got in her car and drove to Micah’s apartment. From where she sat in the Lexus, she could see a single light burning upstairs in his bedroom. As the car’s engine ticked, cooling, Chancie lost her nerve. She could back out of here right now and Micah would never know she’d come this close to forcing the issue with him.

She could stop calling and leaving those stupid apologetic messages that he never answered. She could let their aborted affair die a quick death. She could just give Micah Taylor up.

The thought grated. And worse, it frightened her. Because she'd given up so much lately, should she just roll over and play dead in everything? She'd worked hard to become the person she was now, the Chancie who fought for what she wanted.

She opened the car door, got out, and walked to Micah's front door. She slipped the key into the lock.

In his bedroom at the top of the stairs, Micah Taylor heard the front door open. He froze in the act of removing his jeans, listening for the sound of the door to close. When it did, he crossed on silent, bare feet to where his WHP-issue Beretta lay in its holster on his nightstand.

He crouched slightly, legs spread and knees bent. He held the gun in both hands straight out in front of him.

The third step creaked as whoever it was continued climbing the stairs. A shadow appeared in his doorway. His finger tightened on the trigger.

The intruder paused in the light from his room, a cloud of burnished dark honey curls swirling around her head. Incongruously, she held a wrapped Christmas package in her hands. Micah took a deep breath and released his tight grip on the gun, opening the drawer of the nightstand to place it safely inside before collapsing to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Christ almighty, Chancie," he said on a shaky breath. "I almost shot you. Why didn't you call first?"

"So you could ignore me? I've been calling for four days." She paused before adding, "I've been apologizing for four days. I didn't know what else to do, Micah."

He looked at her face. She had apparently been sleeping as badly as he. Purplish shadows darkened the skin beneath her eyes, and her face was so wan it shone a very pale blue like skim milk.

"You're not the one who should be apologizing," he said. "You didn't do anything wrong."

She sagged a little in the doorway, closing her eyes for a moment. "I'm glad to know you think that way. I've been feeling awfully guilty."

He cursed softly. How could anyone carry the burden of so much guilt? Did she think she was responsible for the whole world's happiness? And he'd just increased her burden by ignoring her phone calls because he couldn't take anymore. He hadn't stopped to ask himself how much she was supposed to take.

"Come here," he said. He couldn't stop himself. Sitting shirtless, he opened his arms, gesturing with his hands. She came willingly, kneeling to throw her arms around his waist, where she clung ferociously. She still held on to the wrapped package.

How he'd missed her. His body remembered, each slight touch of her fingertips opening new floodgates of sensation. "I'm sorry I hurt you," he bent to whisper into the mane of her hair trailing down to his groin.

She raised her face. "I guess hurting goes along with loving," she said.

"I hope not. Or not this much, anyway. These last few days have been hell. I can't imagine what you've gone through." He looked into her green eyes, wanting to kiss her, wanting to tug her up on the bed with him, to tuck her up tightly against himself and hold her, and never let her go.

She said, "The way my luck has been running, I'm fortunate you didn't shoot me. You're going to have to get used to people barging in on you at all hours if you're going to marry me." She paused. "Micah, would you please make love to me now?"

He was struck mute, his hands frozen in the swirl of her hair. He felt his eyes widen as he looked down at her. His lips worked, but no sound came. Talk about marriage was the very last thing he'd expected. She had managed to shock him mute.



But she must be joking. Surely he'd proved these last four days that he wasn't adequate husband and father material. He was surprised she was here at all, giving him a second chance when he thought no one got two chances with her.

His mother's words came back loud and clear: *If she loves you, she'll find a way.*

She set the package on the floor beside her and reached for the button on his jeans, never taking her green eyes from his. Her glossy lips moved.

"I've thought a lot about what you said that first night," Chancie whispered. "Make love to me, Micah. Let's really change our lives. Let's make a baby together."

## Chapter Fourteen

Chancie pulled her hand back and clapped it over her mouth in dismay. She'd done it again. Despite all her good intentions and her vows to stop trying to force people to conform to her objectives, she'd pushed Micah to ask her to marry him! And worse, she couldn't just ask him to make love to her. She had to tell him she wanted to make a baby.

All she'd come here for had been to maneuver Micah into bed. Chances were, if she kept pushing, she might have got that much. But no, she had to bet everything. Had she lost her mind, raising the stakes on him that way? Why couldn't she control herself around him?

Micah stared at Chancie, her green eyes suddenly gone wide with shock over the top of her fingers as she knelt in front of him. In the space of about sixty seconds, she'd offered him two of the essential components of making all his secret fantasies come true. Fantasies that hurt so much to take out of the storage of his battered heart and examine, he hadn't dared admit they existed.

And what in the hell caused her make such an offer? From the look on her face, she'd startled herself as badly as she had shocked him.

He lifted her from the floor where she knelt. He pulled the heavy quilted coat from her shoulders and laid it over the pillows on his bed. Then he tugged at her hand to urge her to sit beside him.

"Take a deep breath," he said. She did, and he seized the opportunity to fill his lungs as well.

"Better?" he asked. She nodded. "Okay," he continued, "we have some things to talk about, Chancie. Much as I'd like to take you up on your suggestion that I make love with you right this minute—"

"We could make love, Micah," she said softly. "All the rest of it, marriage and having a baby, I meant what I said. I'd love to have your baby. But if that's not what you want, I guess I'll just have to accept it."

He closed his eyes at the sharp pain in his chest. "Two weeks ago, I told myself the same thing," he said. "That if sex was all you wanted from me, I would live with it and be happy."

"Well, I'm willing to try that. See how it goes."

He glanced at her. Her green cat-eyes tilted at the corners, she looked unreservedly back. She would do it, too, he thought. Whatever it took. Whatever he wanted. Whatever he asked.

She wanted him that much.

He thought of her body and the way she responded instantly, wetly to his merest touch. He felt himself hardening just as immediately to her offer to try her and see.

Her hand crept to his thigh, and he covered it with his own, halting its progress before she discovered his cock's eager willingness to go along with her crazy plans. "You're too damned tempting," he growled. He'd have to be knocked senseless to be unaware of the fact that she again wore something that moved easily on her body, a soft and touchable melon colored top that would slip easily over her head and a wrap skirt with one button at the waist that could be effortlessly unfastened. "We need to talk. I'm going to have to send you home so we can talk on the phone if you don't behave yourself."

“That wouldn’t accomplish anything. You don’t answer my calls. Besides, I can’t help myself,” she defended. “You’re awfully tempting yourself, sitting there half naked, showing off your pecs and abs.”

“I’ll get dressed.”

“Please don’t put yourself to any trouble. Unless you don’t like me looking at you, that is.”

“I’m not uncomfortable with you looking at me, as long as you like what you see. It’s cold in here, that’s all.”

She glanced behind him at the turned-down blankets. “Then let’s get in and cover up.”

“Chancie.”

She licked her lips. “With our clothes on if you want. I’ll be good, I promise.”

Micah laughed shortly. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

But he stood and moved her coat to the foot of the bed. Chancie kicked off her boots. Micah held the sheet wide for her and she crawled in, waiting for him to lie beside her before resting her head on his chest.

“Warmer now?” she asked.

This felt so right. Chancie in his bed, his arm trapped beneath her head, the two of them all cuddled up against the cold. Micah swore he’d control himself at least until he got some answers.

“Chancie, talk to me,” he said, trying to ignore the play of her fingers across his chest. “Finish telling me what you’ve been thinking.”

Chancie sighed. “On Saturday, Judy’s boyfriend Parker came in to help me get my books straightened out.” She went through the entire four days since she’d last seen Micah: Parker’s stringent measures for putting Screening Services firmly on its financial feet, Judy’s probably fortuitous loss of the California contract, the hiring of Aggie and Brett, the planned sale of the house which would allow Chancie to keep Alma as part of her family.

“It all started to come together when Parker suggested I also sell the business,” Chancie said. “Selling out was something I’d never considered, but when I thought about it, I knew that’s what I wanted to do. And that I didn’t want to wait a year, as Parker suggested. I want out now.”

Her hand stilled on his chest as she talked, but his hand stroked her back absently as he listened. “I don’t understand,” he said at last. “I thought you liked your work.”

“I liked the idea of it. I liked the challenge of seeing if I could make a go of my own business. I like being in charge, but I guess you know that about me already.” She laughed. “But I only got into the testing business because the opportunity existed. I’ve discovered I don’t much like it. If I can eventually get my investment back, I’ll try again at something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know at this point, Micah. Maybe a clothing store or something simple like that.” She again took up gently exploring the smooth skin of his chest, which along with his straight black hair was the legacy of his Indian blood, she was sure. She was careful not to touch his nipples or let her hand stray lower than the top of his ridged diaphragm. She’d promised to be good, she reminded herself. But it was getting most difficult to keep her reckless promise.

“It would suit you,” he agreed. “You have good taste.”

“I know,” she said. “That’s why I picked you.” She raised her head to look into his slightly hooded sapphire eyes before plunging on. Then she put all her chips on the table for one last big bet. At this point she honestly could not help herself. “We could make beautiful babies, Micah. The first one could be born about the time I would be done turning over Screening Services to Judy and Parker. I could take some time off before I got a clothing store started, and Alma would help.”

His eyes closed and his jaw tightened. She feared he was getting ready to shut her out again.

“Oh, Micah, don’t you see?” she urged. “I know it sounds like I want a baby so I can leave my old life behind and have you take care of me or something. But that’s not it, I swear. Things just suddenly all started to fall into place for me when I decided to sell the testing business. The timing is perfect. I always wanted another baby, but only with the right father. Can’t you see? You’re that man.”

"You have beautiful dreams, Chancie. I wish I could share them with you," he said raggedly. His eyes opened and he stared at her with a deep pain in their blue depths. "But you're forgetting a couple of things. For one, I'm a cop. I don't have a safe little job where I can count on being home for dinner every night." He recounted the hair-raising episode of the chase and arrest of the driver of the stolen truck.

"Not all days are like that, of course," he said, kissing her forehead to make the worry lines disappear. "But sometimes it gets hairy. Can you handle that, Chancie?"

"It's true I'd worry about you every day," she said truthfully. "And I'd be there for you every night." She touched a finger to his lips, turning suddenly mischievous. "Just think about it, would you? Somebody has to marry cops."

Micah clasped her finger to his bare chest, refusing to give in to her logic. "There's still Jamie," he said quietly.

Oh, yeah. Jamie. Chancie's breath caught and then she began babbling rationalizations. "Well, if I had something like a little clothing store in the mall I'd be home more. I'd have regular hours and nobody calling me in the middle of the night to respond to an emergency. I think Jamie would be much happier in that situation."

Micah's other hand tightened on her back. "Jamie's coming up on his teen years. How will he feel about not only a new authority figure in his life, but a new baby brother or sister? Be realistic, Chancie. He hates me. How's he going to feel about any child of mine?"

Chancie tensed. Why did Micah always insist on dragging her back to cold reality even in the midst of what could have been some very hot passion? Couldn't they just get down to business and stop talking? She knew she'd sprung all this on him a little quickly, but did he really have to be so coolly rational *all* the time?

"Let's face it: nothing's perfect, Micah. Not even dreams," Chancie said flatly. "If you think we could live together without ever squabbling, or together raise my child *and* our child without some bumps along the way, *you* need to face reality."

"I have five brothers," Micah said. His dimples showed beside his incredibly white teeth as he talked of his family. "We fought like crazy, and sometimes nearly killed each other. I don't have any illusions about what raising kids is like. One minute my mother was hugging us and the next minute she was scolding. But I've never encountered anything like Jamie before. He despises me. And I think it would put a big strain on us to try and live with that raw hatred day after day."

Chancie propped her head on one hand and rested her other elbow on Micah's chest to cover her eyes for a moment. Micah had circled around and hit back on the one sticking point for which she had no solution. Maybe Micah's real fear was that she'd done such a terrible job with Jamie, he couldn't trust her to raise another child properly.

She wished she had an explanation for Jamie's behavior. But she didn't. Yet.

And until she did, she couldn't lose Micah and her dream. She couldn't just let it all fade away while she waited for Jamie to grow up.

But she could put the dream on hold, if that's what Micah insisted on.

"One day Jamie will make you choose, Chancie. I won't let it come to that," Micah said into the silence.

She uncovered her eyes. Micah was still looking at her. She wanted him so much. She had to make this hopelessness go away, at least for a little while. She wanted him to remember only the good parts of her offer when she left him tonight.

"Okay," she said slowly. "How's this? You use protection until I can figure out what to do about Jamie."

Micah's eyes widened. Then the lines in his cheeks deepened and laughter spilled from him. He said, "You just don't know how to give up, do you, baby?"

She'd startled a laugh out of him. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his deep dimples appeared, and Chancie knew then he would accept her counterproposal. "I won't ever give you up,

Micah, unless you tell me absolutely, positively, that you don't want me. Understand? I will never, never, never give you up."

She sat up, reaching for the hem of her melon-colored shirt.

She really was something. But Micah reached out to stop her from pulling the shirt over her head. "Wait," he said. "If you insist on this, I want to do the honors."

Chancie found herself lifted over Micah's body. He rose with her until they stood beside the bed again. His blue eyes flared a silent message before his lips descended on hers. Chancie opened her mouth to his assault, welcoming his ravaging kiss of pent-up need and returning it in equal measure.

His hands explored the full curves of her breasts through the soft fabric, dropping to her waist before slipping beneath her shirt. Chancie pressed her full length against him, belly tight against his rock hard erection, purring deep in her throat while his hands sought the clasp of her bra.

They came out of the kiss panting. The pupils of Micah's eyes were big enough to drown in and shiny black. Chancie stepped away ever so slightly, raising her arms, and he lifted the shirt over her head. His eyes dropped to her breasts, loosely covered in the satin cups of her matching melon-colored unhooked bra. She stood quivering with need while he undressed her with only his eyes. Then, ever so slowly, he slipped the straps from her shoulders and her hard-peaked breasts sprang free of confinement.

Micah was done fighting. He would never turn Chancie down again. Even if this once was all she ended up wanting, he'd make it a night to remember. He bent his head to kiss each soft shoulder, each silky breast, drawing each nipple lovingly into his mouth and sucking gently while he kept the other fully aroused with his fingers. He kissed his way down, tongue circling her navel, lower and lower until he was kneeling before her as she had knelt to him, lips tracing fiery kisses across the sensitive skin below her ribs.

Chancie's fingers wound themselves helplessly in Micah's thick black hair as he reached for the button that loosened her skirt and let it fall free. A scrap of satin panties peeled away under his questing fingers, falling down her legs to her ankles. His lips followed their silky trail, kissing her thighs, her calves, the arch of each foot as she stepped out of the bit of cloth.

He loved this woman, everything about her, from her stubborn refusal to give up to the dusting of freckles revealed on her bare skin. A groan escaped him when he had her finally, completely naked. He grasped her ass with long fingers, kneading its roundness gently as his lips nuzzled the soft triangle between her legs. Chancie gasped his name, and Micah rose in one fluid motion to claim her mouth once more.

Now it was her hands hotly seeking, each button of his jeans a new challenge, making her whimper in frustration until she'd conquered all five. She craved this. She wanted Micah so much after the endless waiting. His hands bracketed her jaw as his tongue found its way back into the warm recesses of her mouth, strong hands that supported her so her trembling knees wouldn't give way while she completed her task. At last she had his metal buttons undone. She slid her hands around to the place where his waist met slim hips, and worked the jeans down over hard male buttocks that flexed beneath her fingers.

Micah held his breath as his cock sprang free. He rubbed its rigid contours against Chancie's lower belly as he wriggled out of the confining legs of his jeans. Chancie threw her head back, the tips of her hair trailing almost within reach of his hands on her ass. Micah's mouth sought the delicate rounds of her earlobes, trailing searing kisses down the long column of her arched neck. She sighed, whimpered, cried out softly, moaning his name. Her responses drove him to frenzy, but he controlled himself for her sake. This might not be Chancie's first time by a long shot, but he wanted it to be her best.

He descended to the edge of the bed, pulling her between his spread legs, one hand reaching to open the nightstand drawer while the other crept between her legs to seek the slick heat of her center. When he withdrew his questing fingers, Chancie cried her need aloud.

Chancie's thoughts were jumbled, all her reactions stemming from pure sensation. So far Micah had only allowed her a tiny orgasm, which was good because she thought she'd fall over if she was standing during one of the earthquakes he induced in her. But Micah's fingers were withdrawn from her only long enough to slip a sheath over his rigid hard-on, and then his welcome heat was back. He held her again, sliding his tongue along her body while his strong hands urged her down, down, into his lap and then the warmth of his bed. He turned with her in his embrace, laying her on the sheet before kneeling between her legs.

Once more their eyes met, a question still in Micah's sapphire gaze. *Are you sure?*

Now, she wanted to scream. *Micah, do it now!* She raised her hands to his broad shoulders, digging her fingers into the muscle, beseeching him wordlessly to satisfy her boundless yearning to have all of him inside her at last.

He entered her hot cavity in tantalizing increments, despite her widespread legs and clutching hands urging speed. And he had a lot of increments to give her. He held her green gaze, savoring the way her expressive face slowly gave away to the pleasure building inside her while he slipped inch by torturous inch deeper inside.

Chancie's fingers raked Micah's back as the tremors inside her once again turned to shudders of orgasm. Micah's cock filled her so slowly and completely the anticipation was nearly unbearable. When the clenchings inside her began to subside, he started to move at a rhythmic pace, rocking her gently in liquid fire. Chancie's legs wrapped tightly around his back and Micah's arms enfolded her upper body so securely she was almost sitting upright in his strong grip.

Sweet tension built between them. Layer upon layer, each slow, sure thrust, each lingering, sweltering kiss sent her another notch higher. Micah's protracted loving drove her to a fever pitch, his long length exploring previously untouched places deep inside. Finally with a hard thrust that sent her tumbling over the edge of the precipice she spiraled into a last shattering climax that left her weak and quaking.

When Micah felt the rhythm of the pulsating shocks inside Chancie begin to mount once more, he could hold back no longer. He joined her, his own release a long, slow incineration he thought he might actually die from before the lingering heat waves were finally extinguished.

He turned them so he lay on his back, still buried inside her. Their bodies cooling, she squeezed him gently inside her while they recovered breath enough to speak. At last Chancie managed to say, "I always thought the first time with you would be hot and fast, not slow and volcanic. We waited such a long time, I'm surprised you still had such control."

She lifted her head to look into Micah's eyes. They glinted back languid blue humor. "You didn't like it?"

"Oh, baby." Chancie sighed, echoing the endearment he'd used ever since their first meeting. "You're every woman's fantasy."

Then she glared at him. "But still, it's not fair. You'll have me eating out of your hand and begging for a steady diet of loving like that."

Micah gazed at her seriously, and Chancie's limbs liquefied in response. "It's what I wanted our first time to be, Chancie. Loving," he said.

Was he saying what she thought he was saying? Chancie's slowing pulse started to speed up again.

He lifted an elbow to prop them both up. One finger traced the outline of her jaw, her hairline, her lips. Then it dropped to lazily circle one rosy nipple.

Chancie sat in his lap in paralyzed terror mingled with hope, pinned by the force of Micah's smoky blue gaze.

"I love you, Chancie." He said each word very deliberately.

"Oh, God. Oh, Micah. I love you too, so much." She flung her arms around him, feeling his warmth and his strength and the deep down, essential decency and honesty of him. She thought she could just go on like that forever, holding on to Micah Taylor, while the world and all its problems outside his bed just faded away into oblivion.

But, unfortunately, the world didn't go away. Chancie and Micah lay talking, hugging, touching each other for a while, just enjoying the fact that they could revel in the newness of exploring each other's bodies. Chancie insisted he open the gift she'd brought, and Micah ended up wearing it in bed with her. When he happened to look at the clock on his nightstand a long time later, Chancie's glance followed. She was shocked to find it was nearly one in the morning.

"I have to go," she said regretfully, starting to disentangle herself from his busy hands.

"You said you expected fast and hot," Micah countered. "I've still got another try in me. I wouldn't want to send you away disappointed." Did she have to leave? He wanted to keep her there by any means.

"You don't play fair, Micah Taylor." Chancie again echoed his own words back to him, and he smiled, remembering.

She sighed dramatically, as if supremely sorry to go. Then she threw the covers back and leapt playfully on him, tugging the tails of his new shirt aside. "I'm ready," she declared. "Take me again. Hot and fast."

She laughed, tossing that glorious mane of copper tinged curls.

"Not quite that fast, baby," Micah teased back, reaching for the night table drawer.

Chancie pouted at the sight of the square package, but waited until he was ready. Micah liked her teasing. He liked her serious. He loved her, he admitted, any way he could get her.

He gave her fast and hot, and she met him thrust for thrust, fiery enough so that the residual heat would keep them warm as they sought their separate beds. Then Chancie reluctantly dressed and left him, raining goodbye kisses on his face and chest and hands as he walked her to the front door.

And then Micah was alone again, to find sleep as best he could. He kept the shirt on that retained the smell of Chancie's perfume. But he really didn't know how he could need any sleep after a night where he'd already dreamed his best dreams.

## Chapter Fifteen

On Saturday, New Year's Eve, Micah woke to fresh snow on the ground again. He pattered around the apartment, then went to the laundry and started his uniforms washing before heading to the grocery store. He pushed the cart listlessly up and down aisles where he couldn't find anything that looked appetizing enough to buy. Alma's cooking had quickly spoiled him; he could barely tolerate the thought of a microwaved frozen dinner these days.

He had a whole day to get through before he saw Chancie again, and nothing much to do to fill the empty hours. He would have gone and worked out, sweating off some of the sluggishness mixed with a peculiar anxiety that made his stomach ache when Chancie wasn't around, but the city rec center was closed for the holiday.

He resented not being able to just go over to her house, see if she or Alma had some chores to keep him busy, have some lunch, curl up with her on the sofa and watch TV. All the ordinary, day-to-day activities of living together were denied to him and Chancie, so long as her son continued to hate him.

He gazed absently out the big plate windows of the store as his few purchases were being bagged. The sun had come out, glistening on fresh powder, and there was no wind. It was one of those rare postcard-perfect winter days in Wyoming, a day for snowmobiling if they had got up early this morning and headed for higher country with deeper snow. They could have taken Jamie, and Alma too, if she wanted to go, and had a good time. Micah could picture Chancie's cheeks pinkened with delight and cold, her green eyes glowing with pleasure as they sped over the snow. He could feel her excited breathing in his ear as they flew down snow-packed trails.

The checkout clerk said loudly, apparently not for the first time, "Will that be all, sir?"

Micah sighed and swiped the debit card he'd unconsciously been clutching during his reverie, and then hauled his meager week's groceries out to the truck. He'd claimed Chancie's body, but he

could make no concrete plans with her. He couldn't even ask for a Saturday so long as they had to keep their love a secret from Jamie.

He checked in at the Laundromat, transferring his clothes from a washer to a dryer. Then he drove out north of town to the land he'd put money down on earlier in the week. He just sat there for a while, slipped down on his spine in the driver's seat of the pickup, admiring the tall blue spruce trees and the well-built stalls where he would soon stable his own horses.

He hadn't yet had the opportunity to discuss with Chancie his purchase of the place. Her penchant for fantasy would have her making plans to move in after they were married and deciding which bedrooms their unborn babies would occupy. Micah didn't know if he could take much more of getting sucked in to her heady delusions right now. If opposites attracted, then Chancie was the dreamer and Micah the realist.

And Jamie was the worm in the apple of their happiness.

The corners of Micah's mouth lifted at his own sour humor. He had to keep some kind of droll perspective where Jamie was concerned. As time passed with no positive overtures from Jamie, Micah was beginning to think of the kid as the rotten center, the mushy core of what could otherwise be a solid relationship between himself and Chancie. If Micah didn't keep a lid of humor on his thoughts about the boy, he might find himself hating Jamie right back.

And if the kid ever came around, changed his mind and accepted Micah in his mother's life? Micah struggled against such probably fruitless hope, but he wouldn't want to be so far gone in resentment of Jamie that he could never forgive and forget the boy's malicious behavior.

Micah sighed again and shook himself mentally, turning the key in the ignition and starting back to pick up his laundry before heading to his apartment. He would see Chancie tonight. They'd each been invited to separate New Year's Eve parties, and decided they would try to attend both before the night ended. Micah could think of better ways to celebrate the new year with Chancie. But she wanted to go out, to show him off, she said. He'd grinned at that, pleased despite his embarrassment, and so they would go out.

Chancie spent the morning in Jamie's room, supervising and prodding. She'd finally had enough of the boy's nasty slovenliness. She thought of it as a reflection of his recent mental state and decided he would use one of the last days of his vacation from school shoveling out the mess in his room.

She was still angry with Jamie, and it showed. "I don't know how you can stand this mess," she nagged, opening the door to his closet.

"What's the matter?" Jamie asked, watching her. "Think there's a monster in there?"

"No. I was actually afraid of rats," Chancie said.

"We don't have any rats in Wyoming," Jamie said airily, shrugging off her attempt to scare him into picking up.

"Don't be too sure about that," Chancie challenged. "You've probably got cockroaches in here too."

"I do not," Jamie declared, but he looked about uneasily at the discarded ice cream bar wrappers that had missed the trash container and plates crusty with old food sitting on the dresser top.

Chancie bent over to begin folding some of the clean clothes strewn across the carpet. When she started to open a drawer, Jamie jumped to bar her.

"Okay, okay. I'll do it," he said.

Chancie eyed him suspiciously. "What are you hiding in that drawer, Jamie?"

He reddened. "Nothing."

"Let me see."

"No." He spread his hands protectively in front of the drawer.

Thoughts of Jamie's friend Brandon and his trouble with drugs flitted through her mind. "I want to know what's in that drawer, young man."

Jamie looked desperate. “It’s just paper, see?” He yanked the drawer open and quickly slammed it shut. Chancie had the merest glimpse of pink ink on many intricately folded sheets of lined notebook paper.

Chancie frowned. So. She thought of all the phone calls Jamie had been getting lately, the giggly girlish voices that finally coalesced in her memory into a single giggly high-pitched voice. She thought of Jamie’s low whispers and his attempts to keep his conversations private, of his begging for his own cell phone so he could retreat to his bedroom to talk.

“You’ve got a girlfriend, don’t you?”

Jamie’s flush spread to his hairline and the tips of his ears.

“I see,” Chancie said slowly, when Jamie didn’t answer. “It’s okay for you to like somebody special, but not me. Is that the case?”

Jamie’s jaw tightened. No matter what tactic Chancie tried, he still refused to discuss Micah or what had happened between them to cause the Christmas disaster.

“You’re really giving me pain, son. Moms are human too,” she said softly before leaving him to ponder that on top of being grounded for the rest of his life.

Chancie left to pick up Micah at seven. The streets where snow had melted earlier now possessed a dangerous sheen of ice. She slipped on her front step but caught herself before she fell. Then the car slid off the concrete pad of the driveway and over the curb with a thump.

At a red light, she tried slowly applying her brakes. Hawk Point’s sand truck drivers must all be on holiday, she thought inanely as she slid completely through the intersection. Her car spun halfway around. A pickup coming the other way, whose driver had the green light and couldn’t stop in time, hit her Lexus head-on.

Her forehead smacked the steering wheel, and she blacked out.

Micah paced, checking out the front window of his apartment every few minutes. There was still no sign of Chancie.

He was nervous anyway, dressed in brand new clothes from head to foot, and the new stiff black boots pinched his toes. He wasn’t looking forward to meeting Chancie’s friends, people probably too fancy and well-to-do for him to relax and have a good time. And he wondered how she would like his cop friends, if she could fit in, or if she would be subtly snubbed.

He should have gone to pick her up instead of the other way around, he berated himself. She hadn’t wanted to antagonize Jamie by announcing her date, she hadn’t wanted to go in his ungainly four-wheel drive in her party clothes. She had a hundred excuses why they should take her car, and Micah had given in. The street surfaces that he could see out his front window were sheets of shimmering ice. He should have insisted.

He checked the time, the window, the time again. Chancie had some faults, such as worrying too much and trying too hard to make everything perfect, but she was always punctual no matter how many irons she had in the fire.

He checked the time again, grasping his cell phone. Then he hesitated. Should he call the hospital? The Hawk Point police? Alma?

What if Jamie answered?

Well, what if Jamie did answer.

Micah punched in the numbers.

Chancie’s eyelids fluttered. She lay uncomfortably across the console of the Lexus, and there was a face she didn’t know looming over hers from the passenger side of the car. The face looked worried, she thought. Worried about her? She lost consciousness again.

Micah luckily reached Alma instead of Jamie.

“Chancie left over half an hour ago, Micah,” Alma said. “Should I be worried?”



Yes. Micah heard sirens in the distance.

But he said, “No, I don’t think we should worry. Not yet, anyway. Call me if you hear anything. I’ll call you if—*when* she gets here.”

He waited another quarter hour in sweaty-palmed agony. Then he called the hospital, feeling foolish and at the same time very, very scared.

The switchboard operator at the hospital couldn’t tell him if Chancie was there, but put him through to emergency when he insisted. He told the emergency room clerk he was Chancie’s fiancé and asked if they had anyone fitting her description. The voice said no, but Micah could hear the scream of a siren above the background noise of the emergency room. He left his name and number, just in case, and hung up, his mouth dry with fear.

Then he did what he couldn’t bring himself to do when he couldn’t reach Chancie before. He called dispatch in Cheyenne and asked them to get him any word they could on her from the Hawk Point police. The night dispatcher called about ten minutes later, informing him Chancie had been in an auto accident. Micah disconnected in sick dread and dialed Alma, his hands shaking.

“I’ll pick you and Jamie up in five minutes,” he said. He knew he should have insisted on taking Chancie in the pickup.

Chancie opened her eyes again. Two men in white lab coats stood over her. One had the cartilage of her nose pinched between two gloved fingers. A stethoscope hung down from his neck. He wiggled her nose from side to side, saying, “I can’t believe it’s not broken.”

Her eyes wandered to the white ceiling tiles, the green curtains surrounding the cubicle where she lay. The surface beneath her had the peculiar solid-slippery feel of cotton sheets on plastic. A hospital gurney.

“You’re awake, huh?” the second doctor said. “How do you feel? Does your head hurt?”

“No,” Chancie answered through thickened, sticky lips. She could hardly move her jaw. “My fashe hurtsh.” She lifted a hand to try and explore her face.

“Your face? I don’t doubt that.” The doctor gently pushed her hand back down by her side. He shook his head slightly, and Chancie wondered how bad she really looked. He held up two fingers. “How many do you see?”

She blinked, trying to clear her vision. “Two.”

“Very good.” He lowered his hand. “We’ll get you cleaned up a little bit and then take some pictures of your head, just to make sure nothing’s broken, okay?”

“Okay.” Chancie was confused. She remembered leaving her house to go to Micah’s apartment, but nothing more. The two doctors went out through the green curtains, and a nurse wearing a blue flowered smock came in, followed by two police officers.

She saw the uniforms, and her first muzzy thought was, Thank God, it’s Micah! But these two wore the blue of Hawk Point city police. The nurse busied herself getting out cotton balls and a dish of Betadine and water. Then she seated herself beside Chancie and began to swab at her sore face.

Chancie winced. The brown-orange antiseptic stung.

One of the cops said, “We’d like to ask you a few questions, ma’am.”

“Okay,” Chancie said dubiously, since she remembered so little. The nurse noticed her difficulty in speaking, and swabbed some dried blood from her lips.

“Did you have anything to drink before you left your house tonight, ma’am?” the second cop asked.

Chancie didn’t have time to answer. “I doubt there was alcohol involved,” a deep voice behind the two policemen said. Micah appeared between the curtains. His presence made the tiny cubicle suddenly seem very crowded. She tried to smile at him, she was so glad to see him. But it felt like her face was cracking from all the dried blood so she gave up the effort.

Micah seemed to understand why she didn’t greet him. His blue eyes radiating compassion and concern in her direction, he said to the two officers, “Can’t your questions wait? She just woke up.”

One of the cops looked from Chancie to Micah, who towered over him. He shrugged slightly. "Okay. Sure. We'll be right outside. Call us when she's cleaned up."

Micah stepped aside as they departed through the curtains. Then he came to hold Chancie's hand, looking every bit as uncomfortable as any regular healthy visitor to the emergency room, despite all the practice he must have had at emergency situations. "How you doing, baby?" he asked in a quiet voice.

She moved her head on the pillow, which tore a groan from her throat.

"We're going to get a few X-rays," the nurse said as the curtain opened and an attendant came in to wheel Chancie out. "Then we'll know more. If you'll excuse us, please?"

Micah backed out into an aisle between curtained cubicles, and Chancie had a glimpse of Alma's white face and Jamie's grim one where they stood waiting before she was whisked off down a tan-walled corridor.

"I should have picked her up in the truck," Micah muttered for about the tenth time. He and Alma and Jamie had retired to a waiting room for the duration.

"You're as bad as Chancie," Alma scolded. Her voice shook. "She's always blaming herself for everything. It was an accident. It couldn't be helped. Besides, you know you can't win an argument with her. If she wanted to take her car, she'd take the car."

Micah grunted. Chancie did have a hard head, but he still felt guilty. He should at least have lectured her more thoroughly about seat belts when he first discovered she didn't regularly use them. She could have been killed.

Jamie sat staring straight ahead in the dimly lighted waiting area. His face had a sickly green cast. Every once in a while a muscle twitched in his jaw. Alma patted his hand, but the boy didn't seem to notice.

"We should be thankful," Alma added, seeming to want to fill the silence with hospital platitudes. "It could have been so much worse."

"She could be dead, you mean," Jamie said abruptly.

Alma flinched. "Well, that. Or paralyzed. Or something," she whispered brokenly.

Jamie's eyes sought Micah's. The boy was suffering greatly and was badly scared. Micah wished he could comfort him. But Jamie's expression was unreadable, and Micah was afraid to say anything at all for fear he'd make Jamie feel worse.

Then Jamie said, "It's my fault. My mom could be dead, and it would be all my fault." His shoulders shook, but he didn't cry.

Alma made a sound in her throat. "Jamie. My lands," she said too loudly to cover the fact that tears were spilling down her own cheeks. "Everybody is so ready to take responsibility for an accident! How on earth could it be your fault?"

"She wouldn't let him," Jamie indicated Micah with a tilt of his chin, "come to the house because of me." He took a deep breath. "Micah's right. If he had picked her up instead of her driving, this wouldn't have happened."

"Well, now, hold on a minute," Micah said, unwilling to let a ten-year-old shoulder his own burden of guilt. "There's nothing to say my truck wouldn't have been involved in an accident. I've seen a lot of four-wheel drives slide on ice and get into wrecks."

"There! You see?" Alma swiped at her cheeks with a tissue before patting Jamie's hand again. "Nobody's at fault. We all agree it was an accident."

Jamie looked questioningly at Micah. Micah returned the boy's dark, wounded gaze, trying to think of something further to say. But before he could come up with anything appropriate, the nurse in the blue flowered smock appeared, saying, "She's back. The doctor says there's no concussion, and the police are finished with their questioning. You can see her now."

Jamie ducked his head, not looking at Micah again, and the moment to approach rapport with the boy passed. Micah thought, Hell and damn. If I don't always pick the wrong time to keep my mouth shut! Why didn't I say something to him while I had the chance?

But Jamie surprised Micah by hanging back at the swinging doors that separated the waiting room from the emergency area. The boy raised his head to look at Micah, and blurted, "I'm sorry about what I said Christmas day. I didn't mean it."

*At last.* Micah swallowed a lump in his throat. He held out his hand. "Apology accepted. No hard feelings."

Jamie shook Micah's hand like the man he was becoming, although he wouldn't meet his eyes again as they pushed through the metal-clad doors.

The three approached the long green curtains surrounding Chancie's bed. Micah reached above Alma's head to part the curtains. When Chancie saw them standing there in a group, she tried to smile. Somebody had put something shiny on her lips, but her nose was badly swollen and her cheeks and neck still bore traces of dried blood. She had black stitches in one nostril and the purpling of two monstrous shiners appearing under her eyes from the bump on her head.

Jamie's eyes grew wide as he looked at the sorry state of his mother's face. His throat bobbed convulsively a few times, and then he broke from Alma and Micah and stumbled to throw himself into his mother's arms. "It's all right, Jamie," Chancie said awkwardly, patting his back. "I'm okay."

The boy mumbled something into the front of her hospital gown. Chancie looked questioningly at Micah, but he could only shrug and shake his head. She said through painful lips, "What did you say? I can't hear you, son."

Jamie almost shouted, "I stole the blouse! The one I gave you for Christmas. I tried to kife it."

Chancie exhaled audibly. Jamie was hugging her so tightly, Micah thought the boy might be hurting her. He stepped forward to pull Jamie away from his mother so Chancie could breathe. To his surprise, Jamie didn't jerk away from his hands.

Chancie raised bruised eyes to Micah's. "And you saw him do it. That's what's been going on between you."

Micah nodded.

"And you didn't say anything to me. His mother."

Micah shrugged, offering no excuse. He just squeezed Jamie's thin shoulders.

Chancie said exasperatedly, "Men," and tried to roll her eyes. But the effort apparently hurt her, because she didn't complete the gesture.

Jamie hung his head. He muttered, "I thought Micah would be like Dad. I thought he would use what he knew to hurt you. But he didn't. I thought I could make him go away, before he hurt us. But I couldn't."

"You loved your dad, didn't you, Jamie," Chancie said softly, her gaze resting on Micah's hands where they gripped Jamie's shoulders.

Jamie nodded, wiping a hand under his nose. "I didn't want to, though."

"Sometimes love hurts, Jamie," Chancie said. "And sometimes, with the right person, it heals. Micah's one of the good guys, I promise." She lifted misting eyes to Micah's. If she started crying now, she was pretty sure it was going to hurt so she tried to hold back tears.

She already knew Micah Taylor could give and receive love. He had taken some convincing, but Micah wanted to accept joy and happiness with an open heart, and to give those gifts back freely.

To turn away from love was to deny the giver, and one's essential self. Kenny, unable to give love, also could not accept it. At last Chancie could understand Kenny, a little, and begin to forgive. She had never once been able to give him peace, or joy, or happiness. Maybe her tormented dead husband had finally found a higher form of love that he could not reject. She hoped so. With a last wrench of release from her heart, she thought: Rest in Peace, Kenny.

Alma sniffed loudly, then blew her nose. She bent to retrieve Chancie's clothing from a shelf behind the gurney, inspecting the bloodstains. "Probably ruined," she said judiciously, shaking her head. "You're a lucky girl, Chancie."

Chancie looked into one dear face after another. She couldn't get enough of the picture of Micah standing behind Jamie, with his strong hands on Jamie, and Jamie accepting the contact. It had taken no little amount of pain, a totaled car, and probably some scars on her face, but she'd brought them together at last. She wanted to close her burning eyes, but she couldn't without the welling tears spilling out.

She'd taken a big risk gambling on Micah. Had it been only luck that she found her soul's mate and kept him, or her own stubborn refusal to give up when she should have been beaten? Either way, she won. Judging from the expressions on Micah's and Jamie's faces, they all won.

"Ready to go home?" Micah asked.

Chancie nodded, ignoring the pain in her head. She didn't know if he meant home to her big four-poster or home to his bed at the apartment. And it didn't matter, so long as *home* meant going home with Jamie, and Alma.

And, finally, with Micah.

## Epilogue

Micah took Chancie home from the hospital, belting her securely in the pickup. He gave her such a severe look that spoke volumes about the terror she'd put him through that she remembered ever afterward to buckle up.

Her face healed nicely, with only the smallest of scars.

When Micah finally got to meet her friends after that New Year's Eve when they missed the party, he found they were her college friends, women like her who'd gone back to school as adults to try and better their lives. He and Chancie got to play matchmaker between one of her women acquaintances and a bachelor trooper friend of Micah's. So Chancie got Micah out in circulation more, and Micah instilled a bit of caution in Chancie.

Chancie shouldn't have been surprised that it was Micah who had beaten her to the perfect home for them, the one with the acreage and the firs and the stalls for his horses.

It was more like two years than the one Chancie had predicted before she and Micah had their first baby. Chancie stayed with Screening Services for the first year, helping to make it the successful enterprise she'd always known it would be while Judy and Parker made payments to buy it from their portion of the partnership. Chancie had a sneaking suspicion Parker might have been a bit pessimistic about the profits flattening after a few years, but she sold at a fair price and wished the young couple every success.

Micah wouldn't agree to Chancie carrying his baby for the year she exhausted herself getting Screening Services in the black and starting the new store. He doggedly bought boxes of condoms for a full twelve months, and since Chancie wouldn't deny herself the intoxicating pleasure of going to bed with him for any reason, he got his way on that at least.

Chancie finally did learn to conquer her fear of horses and to ride, although she was never really comfortable in the saddle. When Micah wanted company on long weekend rides, he asked Jamie or his friend Clay Thorpe instead of his wife.

The Christmas puppy grew into a huge thing almost big enough to ride like the horses, and always underfoot. But Jamie and Micah loved the gentle beast, so Chancie grew to tolerate the dog too. But her tolerance was severely tested each time he tried to climb in her lap as he'd done when he was small.

Motherhood the second time around was easier and more enjoyable for Chancie. She was less exacting, almost deliriously happy, and her whole life seemed to calm down as she grew to tremendous proportions in pregnancy. Micah paid inordinate attention to her hugely swollen breasts while she was pregnant and then nursing the baby, but Chancie was glad when she slimmed back down afterward and could fit into the kind of stylish clothes she sold in her new store.

Like all teenagers, Jamie wasn't always a delight to live with, but he openly adored his raven-haired, cobalt-eyed little sister and often relieved Alma of the chores of amusing and feeding her.

Chancie and Micah named the baby Liena, a name Micah found in a book and which he said meant *a bond*, and it was true she bonded them all more tightly into a cohesive family.

But right after she was born, Jamie began referring to his little sister by a nickname that soon stuck as firmly as Chancie's had. Jamie would always remember the night in the hospital when he'd come close to losing everything that came to matter so much to him: his mother and her happiness, and a stepfather who treated him like his own son.

Just so he'd never forget how fortunate they all were, Jamie insisted, and they all eventually did call the little girl Lucky.

# PERILOUS PROMISES

by  
Christi Williams

## 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 lunk 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 rumped, 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?

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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 neces—"

"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."

Perri 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 squinchy 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 towed 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," Perri 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.

Perri'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 Perri, 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 quarreling 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, clasping 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, Perris 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 rumpled 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 doorframe 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 waggled 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," Perri 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?"

Perri'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 Perri 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.”

# CLAY'S QUEST

by  
Christi Williams

## Chapter One

The cowbell attached by a copper spiral to the front door chimed.

Emma's hands stilled at the sound. She'd been standing at the glass display counter that faced the front door, hands busy untangling the delicate chains of a snarl of antique pendants that had arrived with the rest of what she'd bought at an estate sale the previous month. She hadn't had time to thoroughly examine all the various items that she had acquired by the boxful. But now traffic in her store slowed with the arrival of cold weather and put a virtual stop to outdoor sales and auctions in southwest Wyoming for the year. She looked up, and when she saw who it was she forced her fingers to be still and not tremble.

She doubted if this visit was professional, even though he wore the full complement of official paraphernalia in Velcro pouches on his belt and clipped to his shirt beneath the faux sheepskin-lined winter jacket. He knew her well and would know she was asking, without asking, what he wanted. In the middle of a chilly workday. In her shop. Where if he wanted to start up again with the questions that she had no answer for, she couldn't very well turn and run.

"Emma," he said as he removed his tan ball cap with its seven-point gold sheriff's department logo, which he held in one hand by its curled visor. He stretched out the opposite long forefinger with a clean, neatly clipped nail to give the chains she was working on a tiny bit of a swirl on the glass. Not enough to make the job of disentangling them harder. But enough to let her know he acknowledged he was interrupting her day. "Quite a mess," he said of the situation with the pendants. Or of the situation between them, perhaps. She couldn't be completely certain at this point what Clay meant.

She wasn't sure what to say either. *May I help you?* or *What can I do for you today?* were both out of the question. He had made clear on several occasions since she moved out exactly how she could help him and what she could do for him. Some of his requests had to do with sex, between old friends, if friendship was all that remained between them. Those she steadfastly refused. But most of his appeals had to do with her moving back home. Which she couldn't do, so there was no point in talking about it anymore.

"Place looks nice." He nodded at the various Christmas displays which she had put up early in an effort to make herself feel better: the tree in the middle of the worn plank floor with its antique glass ornaments and strings of popcorn and colorful paper chains, the gifts in foil and ribbons of gold and red and green under the tree and distributed here and there among the rest of the store's merchandise.

“Thanks.” She had spent many hours decorating the shop, even though her heart had hardly cooperated with the effort. She felt more like Scrooge than Santa this year. But it was her own fault, and so she just got on with things whether she felt in the proper spirit or not.

“I need something,” he said, and she thought, Oh boy, here it comes. And, truly, she didn’t know at this instant what her answer would be. Sometimes she dreamed about Clay and what had been between them, specifically the fleshy ax handle he carried in his pants and that he wielded so well and that she missed so much, and more generally what a good life they’d had together. She had been determined to leave him, but lately she had been questioning whether her decision hadn’t been rash. Perhaps, as Clay had insisted more than once and which she had refused to consider, there was another way.

But instead of the plea she expected from him, his regular entreaty for either a quickie or for her to come back home, he continued, “I need something special. For a woman. A special woman.”

He looked up. His hazel eyes glinted, crinkling at the corners as if he were holding back a smile from the lower part of his face but that he couldn’t entirely conceal from her.

She held her immediate reaction at bay. He wanted a gift for a woman, a *special* woman, and he made a beeline to her shop to buy it? The news that he was seeing someone else hit her hard, although it shouldn’t have. He was a man. A damned attractive man if it came right down to it. Tall, well-proportioned and well-built, he was as physically compelling as he’d been when she first laid eyes on him in her late teens. If he let himself smile, he would display even white teeth along with the familiar endearing dimple in his right cheek. If he unclasped his webbed belt and let his pants drop to the floor with a clunk of holstered gun and pouches full of cop gear, she well knew he could show her another impressive part of himself, a part she had enjoyed the use of on many a memorable occasion.

She wanted to curl her hands into claws. She wanted to sweep the snarl of pendants from the counter. She wanted to cry out, to protest his involvement with anyone new, to grab him and reclaim him for herself. She could remind him they were still married. Neither had seen fit as yet to begin divorce proceedings, although she couldn’t have said why that was the case. But she didn’t cry or protest or grab at him. She couldn’t. Shocked at her own initial reaction, her hands still remained resting to either side of the pile of chains, and she forced them by sheer will power to hold their relaxed position.

“What is your price range?” she asked instead in as reasonable a tone as she could manage.

“Oh, money’s no object,” he replied with an airy wave of the hand holding his ball cap, as if she was unaware cops didn’t make near the kind of salary the local miners and oil and gas workers made and spent so freely.

“Furniture?”

He shook his head.

“Pictures or *objets d’art*?”

He grinned, but to his credit didn’t sneer at her use of such posh foreign terms. Again he shook his head.

“You weren’t thinking...jewelry?” God, she’d hesitated, almost choking on the word. She didn’t want to give away what she was thinking. She didn’t want him buying jewelry for another woman. Especially not in her store. She tried to hide that sentiment, but Clay hadn’t made it to patrol sergeant by being fooled by emotional women, especially one he knew so well. When he just gave a cool nod of his head, she asked, “A necklace, perhaps? It will take me a while to get the snarls out of these chains, but you can see what the pendants look like. There are all kinds of stones, emeralds, sapphires. There is even a rare black opal, very pretty. Or a bracelet? Or a squash blossom necklace? I have some lovely authentic Navajo pieces in silver and turquoise and coral on consignment.”

He was peering into the glass case under the pendants, not listening to a word she was babbling. He was looking at rings. Emma’s heart sputtered. Surely he wouldn’t ask to see rings.

"I'd like to see some of those rings," he said, pointing to the top glass shelf of the old display case. He leaned over oak trim darkened through age and the touch of many hands over the years, his own hand resting where the palms of generations of people who stood before this cabinet to peruse and buy had rested.

So, Emma thought. Clay was changing tactics. No more asking her to come back. He obviously didn't need her anymore. He'd come in today to announce by this oblique method that he had found someone new. Specifically, she suspected he had probably come in to her shop with every intention of punishing her. Show her what she had thrown away. Rub her nose in it. Make her eat dirt for ever leaving him in the first place.

Well, she supposed she deserved that. No matter how shocked she was at the thought that he had already replaced her. No matter how much it hurt. *Why*, until this very moment, had she never seriously considered that Clay would look for somebody else when she continued to refuse him? Somebody willing and female. Another woman to spend time with, expend his substantial randy sexual energy upon. To spend what spare money he had on.

He was a man with a big sexual appetite. If he didn't want to fuck once a day there was something seriously wrong with him. Generally, he wanted it more than once.

She forced herself to slide open the glass doors in the rear of the display case and begin taking out the rings he requested. One by one, the lovely old boxes of velvet with satin linings came out, royal blue, deep purple, Valentine red. One by one she slowly lined them up beside the jumble of chains, taking her time and letting him consider. One by one, he silently debated and then shook his head no. Square-cut amethyst in platinum? No. Oval pink diamond in silver? No. Marquise-cut black onyx surrounded by brilliant-cut diamonds in white gold? No. The rings she chose got progressively older and more expensive. Heavy, with curlicues and much hand work, the vintage pieces were as beautiful on the back as they were on the side meant to be admired when worn. Their beauty didn't seem to affect Clay any. He rejected them all.

Really, Emma was astounded. What did Clay Thorpe know about antique jewelry? How could he just shake his head negatively at all her pretty wares? "Maybe you would find what you're looking for at the mall," she suggested with a touch of asperity. He had heard her disparage the chain jewelers more than once and would know she was denigrating his taste. But in her opinion, industrial grade diamonds used on saw blades would be good enough for any new woman Clay was considering letting take her place.

"You haven't showed me everything you've got, Emma," he accused. "You're holding back the best."

Could he actually be referring indirectly to their situation? Would he dare accuse her? Up until now not a word of denunciation had passed between them. They had steadfastly refused to cast stones. But now that he'd found someone else, was the blame game going to begin?

His finger touched the glass. "That one. I want to see that one."

She blew out a breath. He would. Emma felt her shoulders sag. He would ask to see the one piece in the entire store she was reluctant to part with. Despite the bills steadily mounting now that she lived on her own, she had hoped to hang onto the ring until her financial situation improved. Until she could take it home and admire it and keep it for herself. Over the years she had become almost inured to giving up beautiful, priceless things, things that she appreciated but couldn't afford for herself. It was an unpredictable business, antiques dealer. Most of the time she made little money; sometimes she made a lot on a single item. She loved so much of what she bought, or else stocked on consignment for others, but the whole idea was to sell them. Not to have them for her own. Yet there were just those few certain pieces that cried out to be possessed and loved by her alone.

She could feel Clay's eyes on her, watching and assessing as she continued to hesitate. At last she brought out the ring and set the box on the counter. It was truly an extraordinary diamond, a round solitaire with a weight of almost a carat and a half, surrounded by smaller diamonds set in a platinum linear Art Deco design. Even in the poor light from the hanging ceiling fixtures of the

shop and the dim autumn light struggling to penetrate the front windows, the ring sparkled, bending and refracting and reflecting what little light was available, in a remarkable demonstration of a long dead and forgotten master gem-cutter and -setter's talent.

Clay sucked in a breath. Even Clay, who would be the first to admit he knew little of truly valuable antique jewelry, had to appreciate this amazing ring.

"Put it on for me, Emma. Let me see what it looks like."

"Clay." She tried to forestall him. "This is a very expensive piece."

"Well, I figured. Since you didn't want to show it to me." She caught his eyes glinting with repressed humor again. "Come on, cooperate with me. I've seen your financials, remember. I doubt if you're doing much more business than you ever were. You can probably use the money from a big sale. Let me see what it looks like on your hand."

Trying on jewelry so her husband could buy it for another woman? Everything in her rebelled. The whole situation was ludicrous, and Clay was being cruel to subject her to it. Besides, unless he won the lottery or something, he couldn't afford it. So what was his purpose besides being plain mean? He'd probably been talking to some of the guys at the detention center or on his bowling team, manly-type men whose advice would consist of something like: Just move on, dude. Forget the bitch. What do you need her for? Lots of fish in the sea.

She met his gaze, but his expression gave away nothing. When she continued to delay, he picked up the box and removed the big ring. Then he grasped her left hand, and where her wedding and engagement rings should have been, and slid it onto her finger. There was a message in his eyes, one she was pretty sure flashed in code, *You're teetering on the edge of using up all your chances. We're coming down to the final choices here, Emma.*

She dropped her eyes to look at the ring. If he hadn't still been holding her hand, it would have slid sideways on her finger, which looked skeletal in the loose circle of the heavy ring's shank. Shocked, she withdrew her hand to examine the ring and her hand more closely. Surely the last time she had it on, it had fit her perfectly. Now if she had any intention of keeping it she would have to have it resized or wrap tape around the shank in order to keep the heavy stone upright where it belonged.

"Yeah," Clay said as if she had spoken aloud her astonishment at the ill-fitting ring. "How much more weight have you lost, Emma?"

"Well, I...I wasn't aware I was losing any." She had noticed the deepening hollows in her cheeks when she applied her makeup in the dim light of the apartment's tiny bathroom in the mornings. She already felt the insistent press of time and she had attributed the new shadows on her face to aging; all the women in her family had long, narrow faces with cheekbones becoming more prominent as they got older. The swift passage of years was just one more reason she had left Clay. She felt she was almost out of time.

He reached across the counter for her arm, gathering the fabric of her dress in a tight bunch that she could feel pulling across what little remained of her breasts. She jerked away and he let her go. She knew his intention had never been to rip her clothes. A tear formed, welled, and dropped with a plop on the counter. Keeping her head down, she hurried to wipe it off the glass with a finger that looked bony, she definitely could see that now that her attention had been drawn to her increasing slenderness.

"Do you do layaway?"

"For you, Clay, of course." She felt more tears threatening, although she was grateful for the change of subject. If not for the fact that he was actually going to buy the ring. Probably for someone it would fit, she thought in a vicious mental attack on her own negligence of her body. Probably for someone with curvy hips and a shapely ass and a nice rack, along with plump little fingers adorned with freshly manicured nails to show off such a rare prize as this precious ring.

"How much would you need down?"

"Ten percent. Eight hundred fifty. You would have to pay the balance in ninety days."

He gave a soft whistle. "Eight thousand, five hundred total?"

“You got it. This beauty’s not mine, it’s on consignment. So the only break I could give you would come out of my commission.”

“Forget it. I didn’t intend to give you my business in order to make you eat your percentage.” He reached in his pocket, extracted his wallet, and handed her his bank card. “Eighty fifty now. I’ll come in every week to pay on it, and the balance before ninety days.”

She swiped his card, typed in the amount, and handed him the receipt.

“Thank you,” she said automatically at the same time he said, “Thanks.”

His fingers brushed hers—her bony ones, she thought—as he took the slip of paper. But because her fingers had no flesh on them didn’t mean she couldn’t feel the old electricity zinging between them. She swiftly withdrew her hand, unconsciously rubbing it on the front of her dress. She saw him following the motion with a frown lowering his brows, and abruptly stopped her hand when she became aware of the feel of her ribs jutting beneath the fabric.

“Do you have time for lunch?” he asked.

She shook her head. “There’s nobody to cover for me today.”

He didn’t point out that she apparently had few customers on this cold, blustery day and could probably safely close the store without offending any potential buyers. “The offer of a meal stands. Any time you want me to feed you, you just let me know.”

Clay turned to go and Emma watched him as he exited the store. The bell jangled, the door closed, he crossed the sidewalk and got into the white county pickup.

She felt such a profound sense of loss, as if her heart had been ripped from her leaving a gaping hole in her chest. Her *skinny* chest. The tears fell in earnest then, and as she wiped at her eyes with a wad of tissues, she thought that it was a kindness that he hadn’t been able to pay the full amount and just walk out of her store with the ring because in that case she was afraid he would call it quits for good and she might never see him again.

## Chapter Two

Clay’s unexpected visit to the store stayed with Emma all day. She replayed every gesture and word in her mind, trying to discover exactly what he meant and what his intentions were toward her now that he apparently had a new special someone.

She had been so determined to leave him and he had been so determined to get her back that she wasn’t sure she would know how to play a new game by a new rule. *And the name of this game, folks, is Clay doesn’t want Emma anymore!*

Well, in that case she had won, hadn’t she? She had spent months trying to convince Clay to let her go and quit trying to get her to come home. If he now truly didn’t want her to come back because he found someone else, she had won.

Right?

But she didn’t feel like a winner. She felt like the world’s biggest loser. Watching him walk away after buying an expensive gift for another woman had given Emma a nasty dose of her own medicine. She now had an inkling what Clay must have felt when she announced she had made up her mind to leave and then sashayed out the door with her suitcase.

Lunchtime passed. No other customers arrived. She still fiddled with the knotted chains, although she had managed to separate a few from the mound of snarled strands. She had debated packing a lunch this morning, and now was just as glad that she hadn’t. She wasn’t hungry. In fact she felt almost nauseated, and was sure she couldn’t have forced down even one bite.

She had a headache, but she almost always had a headache these days. For some reason she had been attributing the nagging pain behind her eyes to stress and not to hunger. Now, after Clay pointed out how unpleasantly scrawny she’d become, she wondered if she sucked at self-diagnosis along with other skills she lacked. Which she wouldn’t bother enumerating to herself yet one more time.

Like the ocean's tide swelling and waning, tears kept rising up, wanting to overflow, while she swallowed hard and forced them back. Crying sure didn't help her head any, and she knew from experience if she started bawling she would end up with an ache in her head bordering migraine.

She and Clay had married young. While he was still in college and before he had started at Wyoming Game and Fish. And way before he'd joined Sheriff Dalton's department. She had supported him through college, and through his unhappy years in the wildlife field. And then through his swerve into county law enforcement. They'd been through a lot, but they had been a team and seen it all through. All the years together while they waited for her to become pregnant.

There were times she laughed bitterly over the dollars she had wasted on birth control pills while they were young and struggling just to keep their heads above water, vowing one day to start the family they both wanted. Only to have it turn out when they were ready that she was barren. Or Clay was sterile. Or something. She didn't know exactly what might be wrong. Their tests, and they'd had many, said they were both perfectly normal. Her tubes might be a touch narrow, Clay's sperm count might be a teeny bit low. But there was room for passage of an egg in her tubes, and the motility of Clay's sperm cells was good.

And yet she failed to conceive. Month after month. Year after year. She failed.

Her ticking biological clock got so loud and insistent, ultimately she couldn't concentrate on anything else. She had thought if she left Clay she would find someone to be an anonymous daddy. Someone willing to do the deed in dark of night and just go away afterward. She was sure there were many such in southwest Wyoming, single men or men in situations that resembled bachelorhood, living in travel trailers and man camps, not putting down roots but ready to pack up and move to the next big fossil fuel energy discovery two or three or even more states distant.

She hadn't considered that finding such a man meant either getting an oilfield job herself or haunting the bars at night. Those jobs, she discovered, in the oilfield service outfits that dotted the landscape in metal-sided buildings all around Hawk Point, should have been easy to get. But she had few verifiable skills, and found even then the high paying positions weren't easy to snag unless you knew somebody. And it should have been simple for her to shimmy into a bar on a Friday or Saturday night and pick herself up an operator or engineer, or even a burly water truck driver. But it wasn't. Easy. It wasn't easy at all. Not for her. And in fact she had not succeeded even once in actually forcing herself inside the door jamb of one of Hawk Point's sleazy stripper bars.

It was just one more thing to add to the list of her failures. She had discovered she was no good at cheating on her husband.

With needles pinched between her thumbs and forefingers, she managed to tease another strand of gold links from the tenacious clutches of its fellows. She carefully draped the delicate pendant over the arm of a maroon velvet-covered jewelry tree on the counter before leaning back and extending her arms to stretch her tight shoulders.

What was she going to do? What? That was the question. She had been almost on the point of giving up and seeing if Clay would consider taking her back. She had made some hurtful moves, but nothing drastic enough to end their marriage if he didn't want it to end. They had a lot of history between them. If he cared to overlook the fact that she had walked out on him, perhaps she could go back.

But now the tables had turned. Now it looked as if she might have to do the pleading if she wanted to go back home. If Clay could even hear her pleas over the moaning and heavy breathing of his new special woman as they went at it in the bed Emma used to share with him.

*Oh, God.* She couldn't stand it. What had she done? And was it too late to even try to fix it?

Clay sat low on his spine in the darkness in front of the flickering television screen, a longneck bottle of beer propped on his chest. The sound was turned so low he couldn't distinguish much of what was being said. But it didn't matter whether he could hear it or not; this program sucked as bad as most television did. He was mostly waiting to get sleepy enough to go to bed. Which happened later and later these days. He had gotten used to a woman sharing his bed and to his

chagrin found he didn't sleep well alone. *Afraid of the boogey-man, Thorpe?* He snorted, not laughter but certainly making fun of himself. But the truth remained: soon he wouldn't be sleeping at all at night, and then he didn't know how he was supposed to function during the day.

His cell phone rang. He put his beer down and checked the readout before answering. The screen read *Micah Taylor* and gave his number. Micah was a highway patrol trooper who lived directly across the road, and Clay's good friend. But it was a little late for friendly neighbor phone calls. Puzzled, he answered with "Yeah?"

"You got company, buddy."

"No shit. Really?"

"Really. Check out the south windows, two houses down. She's backed up in the driveway, just sitting in her car and watching your house. I don't know how long she's been there. I just noticed her when I let the dog out before I went to bed."

"About time. I was running out of ideas and getting pretty sure nothing was going to work."

"Something obviously worked. Want me to see if Chancie would be willing to sneak over and stroll in front of your bedroom windows in her nightie a few times just to really get Emma going?"

"No. Oh, hell no. That's not even funny, Micah." Clay closed his eyes. Emma liked their neighbor Micah Taylor's wife just fine. But the announcement of a second pregnancy in three years for Chancie and Micah had been hard on Emma. The last thing Clay needed was their beautiful neighbor advertising her easy fertility in front of his missing wife like some fecund blond goddess. "I mean, thanks anyway but after the time I had getting her here, the last thing I want is to make a mistake and run her off. I'll take care of it. Hey, buddy, thanks for the tip."

"Any time." Before ending the call, Micah added, "I wish you luck."

Clay got up from his chair and headed down the hall. The doublewide was kitchen, living room in front, then divided into three bedrooms and baths down a central hallway. A fourth, large master bedroom in the rear was Clay and Emma's. The smaller bedrooms arranged along the hall were currently devoted to a guest room, then sewing, computer, gun cabinet and weapons cleaning table, and whatever other pastime happened to require space to spread out in the absence of children needing the rooms. The master bedroom at the back had sliding glass doors leading to a deck in the backyard.

Clay grabbed a coat, slid the door open, crossed the deck and descended to a lawn already gone crisply yellow in dormancy. He couldn't see Emma from the back of the house, and so, consequently, he was pretty sure Emma couldn't see him. He had to cross his corral, hoping he wouldn't step in fresh horse apples. His horses nickered softly in greeting, probably expecting he was bringing them a late night snack of apples or carrots or maybe even sugar. Spoiled animals, he thought. Micah's horses in the stalls across the road took up the nickering. It wasn't unknown for him to have enough treats in his pockets for them too. "Ssh!" Clay said. "You're going to give me away if you aren't quiet, guys."

He climbed the pipe enclosure and then crossed two more backyards before he could circle around and come up on Emma's car from behind. Luckily all the neighbors' dogs seemed to have been let in for the night so there was no barking. And luckily she wasn't looking in the rearview mirror to see him coming; her head was craned toward the north, all her attention riveted on the house they had previously shared.

He hesitated only a second, then rapped sharply on the driver's side window.

If the car hadn't been a hardtop, Emma was sure she would have broken both femurs on the steering wheel on the ascent when she jumped so high and hard. As it was, she thought she might be having a heart attack. She was hyperventilating and her heart was thrumming so hard beneath her ribs she thought it might explode. When she could finally calm enough to turn and see who it was, she almost fainted in relief. Clay.



So. She'd been found out. Sneaky spy that she thought she was, had he known she would show up sooner or later and been watching for her? Was he so sure of himself that he was certain she would come back some day?

Well, shouldn't he be sure of himself? And hadn't she come back?

He made an impatient roll-down-the-window motion. She pressed the button and the window slid down. Clay bent at the waist to be eye level with her.

"Come inside, Emma. It's cold out here."

"No," she said. It sounded rather like a moan. She wanted to go with him and she didn't. But she knew she would eventually, want to or not. Otherwise, what was she doing here? So why was she fighting him?

He came around the front of the car, opened the door, and folded his long legs to get in the passenger seat beside her. "Get something straight," he said. "I'm not asking, Emma. I'm telling you to come inside the house."

"Okay," she whispered. Honestly, she felt like she was freezing. She didn't have enough fat on her anymore to help keep her warm. She didn't know that if she refused him and left, she could even make it back to town to her tiny studio apartment without freezing to death. Best to go with Clay. Shivering violently, she started the car and steering with fingers stiff from cold, pulled slowly out of the neighbor's driveway and into their own, pulling up and parking in her familiar space.

Clay got out, came around the hood once again, opened her door and extended a hand to help her out. She took it, following meekly behind him as he climbed the steps to the deck, unlocked the front door and led her inside. He walked into the living room and turned on the electric fire. Then he bent over and retrieved a blanket from the sofa, shaking out its folds. "Come here," he said.

Teeth chattering, she obeyed. He took his coat off, wrapped her up in the blanket and then sat, pulling her down onto his lap. His dog, a Heinz 57 mixture, wagged its tail a few times and watched them with moist eyes until it grew bored and put its head back down.

"Emma," Clay said softly. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"I-I d-don't know. I don't know wh-what I'm doing." Her molars clattered together. She was so cold.

"Baby, come home," he urged. "I have a plan. We'll try again."

"Wh-what kind of plan?"

"You'll see. Just say you'll come back. Trust me, Emma."

"Wh-what about the ring?" she said suspiciously. This wasn't making sense. She knew there were questions she should ask, but they wouldn't take proper shape in her thoughts. Maybe her brain had frozen along with her bony fingers and toes.

"We'll leave the ring where it is for now. Don't worry, I'll keep making the payments on it."

"F-for your special woman." She remembered that much.

"That's right." He paused. He drew a breath before continuing. "I haven't asked you any questions and I don't plan to, Emma. I'm going to trust that you wouldn't be here tonight if you were fucking somebody else. So don't ask me questions either. I won't tell you anything. Just say you'll move back here with me and we'll forget everything beyond that." His arms tightened around her.

She was just starting to realize he was hurting. She had wounded him, but before now she hadn't had any idea just how deeply she had wounded him. He was a big man, physically, and in his appetites, and in his character. Once again she was getting a lesson in the special kind of man he was. He would take her back, no questions asked. The *me-me* blinders were suddenly being ripped painfully from her eyes. She shivered. She drew a deep breath. She leaned into him, into his warmth.

She said, "All right, Clay."

### Chapter Three

The first sight of their formerly shared home in daylight made Emma sad. The aging doublewide mobile home smelled musty and disused. Not dirty, never that. Clay was a fastidious man in his personal habits. He didn't let dishes pile up, he took out the trash and wiped down surfaces in the kitchen. He cleaned his bathroom and ran the vacuum once in a while, but that was about it. He changed sheets, she noticed with a clutch at her heart that she tried to ignore because of what such an action might mean. But he only pulled the blankets up. The coverlet and shams were all in a bunch at the foot of the bed, and he obviously didn't dust. The place needed a good going over and then some holiday decorations taken out of storage and put up. Emma meant to see to that the first chance she got.

He did cook. At every opportunity, he was whipping up something for her to eat. She knew her gauntness displeased and frightened him. He'd always liked a big handful of breast, with meat enough on her hips to clutch in his big hands when he drove into her during lovemaking. So she ate. Whatever she felt like eating. It was wonderful. For the first few weeks.

Over a spaghetti and meatball dinner, with garlic bread, vegetables and wine almost two weeks after her return, she said, "I feel like the fatted calf. Not that I don't appreciate your thoughtfulness, but enough is enough, Clay."

He tossed a meatball to the dog who caught it in midair, got up from the table, picked up her plate and his, and headed for the sink. "Did you hear me?" she asked. "You don't have to cook dinner every night just to make sure I eat. I will, I promise."

"Yeah?" He returned to the table, placed a bowl of ice cream and a spoon in front of her and then leaned over toward her, his face level with hers. "Tell me, what did you have for lunch, Emma?"

"I...well. Hmm. I guess I don't remember if I ate lunch."

"See?" he said, straightening up to his full, impressive height. "Eat your ice cream."

She patted her tummy. "I really don't want ice cream, Clay."

"Eat it. Please. It's part of the plan."

"Excuse me? What plan?"

"I told you I had a plan. It has to do with a providing a hospitable environment."

"Clay...what, exactly, are you talking about?"

"Micah asked his mother. She said you have to make a hospitable environment for a baby, or it won't want to get started in your womb."

"Uh." For a moment she was stumped for a proper answer to this news. "So you've been discussing our problem with Micah?"

"Yeah. You know how it is, guys shooting the bull over the fence. His mom is Blackfoot Indian. She had six sons. She's very wise."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure Chancie will be most grateful when she and Micah are on their sixth child." She paused, thinking she might be sounding a bit green with envy of her neighbor, Chancie. Well, she was, really, but no sense in whining about it to Clay. "Listen, nothing against Micah's mom's Native wisdom, but I've almost given up on the idea of us ever having a baby. I think it might be too late for us." She bit her lip, stirred the melting ice cream in the bowl.

"I am telling you," Clay said, stabbing a finger at the tabletop for emphasis, "this is how it goes: In the old days there were times of plenty and times of want. If the baby thinks it won't have enough food, it won't hang around to begin life. So you've got to provide an environment that reflects times of a good food supply. That's fat. As in ice cream. So eat up."

Now that she'd nearly decided it was hopeless, Clay and Micah had gone on some kind of Indian quest to get her a baby. It was sweet, she supposed, especially considering her own crazed years of trying to become pregnant, but it was kind of weird as well to think of the two men consulting with Micah's Blackfoot mother about her inability to conceive.

"I've been researching it," Clay said. He had sat across from her and was licking his own spoon. "On my own. I looked it up on the Internet. There's medical studies to back up Micah's mom's claims, Emma."

“Um,” she said. She looked searchingly into his hazel eyes.

“Eat up,” he urged her again. “As soon as you’re nice and round again, we’ll start on the second phase of the plan.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what that might entail.” She rolled her eyes.

In response, Clay’s eyes crinkled at the corners and his dimple showed as he smiled. His voice turned seductive as he said, “You’ll like this part, I promise.”

He hadn’t touched her since she came back. She worried about that. Such abstinence had never happened between them before, ever. Now that she was back, they slept in the same bed and she often woke to find one of his muscular arms draped over her, and once or twice the unmistakable evidence of a massive hard-on nestled between her butt cheeks. But there was no sex. He wouldn’t allow it. If she reached for him, even fast asleep he woke enough to gently lift her hand away and return it to rest on her own hip. She hadn’t understood what was happening, or rather the reason for nothing happening between them. So the promise in his eyes now was enough to get her to take the first spoonful of ice cream even though her hunger was long past sated. He watched until she obediently scraped the bowl clean.

“I’m doing this for us, baby,” he said softly. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be hounding you to eat all the time. I like you just fine the way you are. Any way you are.”

“Oh, Clay, you’re so sweet. You’ve been so understanding and put up with so much from me. But it’s so hard to keep trying, to have any faith that *somehow, this time*, it will work.”

“It will work,” he said, his tongue snaking out to lick his own spoon while his gaze locked with hers.

It would work because he said so? And how could he know? But he seemed so sure.

She wanted to believe him.

The cowbell on the door jangled.

Emma looked up and smiled as her big lawman entered, bearing lunch in a brown paper bag.

“What is it this time?” she asked.

He grinned. “A little selection from the taqueria. I ordered lots of sour cream plus the tomatillo sauce for you, baby.”

“*Little* selection, my Aunt Gracie,” Emma said, eyeing the bulging bag. “You’re stuffing me like a pig, Clay.”

“Gotta eat. And the fat in the sour cream and the tomatillo sauce will be good for the baby.”

Emma’s lips involuntarily tightened, but she didn’t shake her head to contradict him. He had such a rock solid belief his way was going to work. All those years when she had been the one frantic to start a family, he had kept his opinion to himself and gone along with whatever she wanted to do. Through invasive tests, the several and expensive specialists starting with fertility drugs, artificial insemination, then conception caps, then intrafallopian gamete transfer, then intracytoplasmic sperm injection and finally IVF treatments. None of which Clay’s county insurance had paid for. There was good reason the two of them still lived in an old trailer house in desperate need of some serious updating; they had spent all the money they could scrape together on fertility treatments. Clay had gone along with her on all of it, because he knew how much Emma wanted a baby. They had stopped just short of surrogacy or adoption. Their baby had to be his and hers.

She dug into the bag.

There were tacos. There were burritos. There were enchiladas and rice and beans. He watched as she made her selection and then added a few more spoons of rich sour cream and tomatillo sauce to her paper plate. She grimaced, but he only showed her his dimple in return and added yet another spoonful. They took their plates over to an oak drop-leaf table and sat to eat their lunch.

When they finished, Clay wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and gathered up the empty containers, stuffing them back in the bag. “Where do you keep your purse?”

“What do you want it for?” Clay had never rummaged in her drawers or her purse before.

"I need your keys."

"What for?"

"We have to ease into the second phase of Dr. Thorpe's special treatments. We need to practice."

"Oka-ay," she said slowly. "Behind the counter, on the floor next to the stool."

He retrieved her purse and after some pawing around inside pulled out a jangling set of keys. Separating one from the rest, he headed for the front door.

"May I ask what you're doing?"

"I thought it would be pretty easy for a smart lady like you to figure out what I'm doing, Emma. I'm locking the door." He switched the cardboard sign on the door to *Closed*.

"I don't close for lunch." She crossed her arms over her middle, noticing how much more solid the flesh over her ribs felt these days. Her breasts actually rested on her arms. Clay's force-feeding program was having the desired results.

"You do now." He came back toward her with a decidedly wicked grin on his face.

"Clay, people can see us through the front window."

"Emma, relax. Nobody gives a good damn what we're doing. Besides, we're married. Nooners are allowed." He pulled her to her feet and waltzed her over to the rear of the store, where the light was dim and bookcases, armoires, and antique floor screens separated one consignee's goods from another into little room-like enclosures. He bypassed the tables loaded with old flowered gold-rimmed china and leaded glass, leather bound books piled on an old desk alongside a marble desk set and a real fountain pen, trunks and racks of satin dresses and fox jackets, tugging her inexorably toward a spindle bedroom set.

"Oh, no." She said. "Clay. No."

"Emma. Oh, yes." His fingers reached for her and he started to unbutton her blouse.

"Not on Mrs. Pratt's antique wedding ring quilt. It's way too delicate," she protested, but her fingers, trained to pleasure with Clay, were already cooperating by undoing the buttons of his uniform shirt. It was the first time he'd offered to touch her since her homecoming, and there was no way she was going to succeed in holding him off for long.

"You're right," he agreed as his mouth descended on hers. After a thorough exploration of her lips and tongue with his, he said, "We'll have to remember to strip that pretty quilt off the bed after we finish stripping each other and before we get down to our first practice." He removed his heavy belt, setting it carefully on a scarred dresser nearby. Then he reached for the tab of his pants.

"Let me," Emma said. Her fingers were itching to have the familiar contours of his imposing cock back in her hot little hands. By this point she was beyond caring if they were visible to curious passersby. Clay had always had this effect on her; she had never taken much convincing when it came to having sex with him and they'd almost been discovered engaging in foreplay more than once.

She carefully unzipped his pants, and his eager cock sprang free. She wrapped both hands around its silky-skinned rigidity and stroked it up and down until a pearl of cum glistened on the empurpled head. Then she swiftly knelt, wrapping her lips around as much of his length as she could while her hands kept their busy rhythm from his crinkly sandy pubic hair to the circle of her lips.

Clay groaned. "Wait. Too good, too soon. I can't take much of that, Emma. Stand up."

She obeyed. His lips sought hers while he yanked up on her bra, baring her breasts. The fact that the band tightened across her chest and made her breasts look more full and the nipples more engorged seemed to enflame him further. He bent and laved one dark rose nugget with his lips and tongue while he massaged the other between thumb and forefinger. Liquid heat shot from her rigid peaks to her womb in sharp pinpricks of desire. He stood, cock brushing her belly and bent her backwards to try to pull the quilt from the bed.

"No. Wait. I have a better idea." She pulled her skirt up and slid her panties down, over one heel to circle the other ankle. Then she turned away and bent over, presenting her ass to him with

her skirt gathered at her waist. She had never felt comfortable with her breasts loose and swaying nipples downward, but with the bra a tight band she noticed they stayed nice and roundly distended. Clay must have noticed too; he grabbed a double handful and squeezed lightly. As he moved closer his cock explored the crevice between the cheeks of her ass. He moved his hips back, and his big, familiar tree trunk of a dick dropped lower. She spread her legs, glad she'd worn the heels that raised her ass higher for him, and placed her hands on the high spindle footboard for balance. When the large, seeking head of his rod found the entrance to its goal she reached down with one hand to hurriedly guide him between her wet inner lips.

He slid in. Fully in. For a few moments they just stood trembling, enjoined. With the hand that had helped him gain entrance, she massaged his length from outside the skin of her belly while at the same time clenching him with her interior muscles.

He began to move. "I. Have. Missed. This. So. Much." Each word accompanied by a thrust. She squeezed each welcome thrust inside and at the same time kneaded him with her hand on the outside. "Emma," he whispered, "I love you, baby."

"Oh, Clay," she cried. "I love you too." And then they were both suddenly coming, in long-suppressed waves of pleasure. As the orgasm subsided, her knees threatened to give. She gripped the footboard tightly to remain standing, but Clay helped by holding her upright from behind with a hand around her middle. Still inside her, he reached to jerk the quilt from the bed and this time she let him. He took a couple of steps, maneuvered her around and sat on the edge of the bed with her in front of his splayed legs and his semi-hard cock still inside.

"How was that, Mrs. Thorpe?" he asked while his long fingers toyed with her nipples.

She still hadn't caught her breath. "That was wonderful, Deputy Thorpe," she wheezed.

He laughed. She could feel the rumble inside his taut belly, and as a consequence his cock slipped out a little from its wet embrace between her legs.

"Glad you enjoyed it. That's the last of the skin-on-skin stuff between us for a while."

She tried to turn but he held her tight. "What do you mean?"

"Part of my plan," he said. "You'll find out."

He sounded so smug she wanted to smack him. But on the other hand his purported plan seemed to be going well so far. She was regaining the sexy shape she used to have, only because he insisted. He usually knew what he was doing and she knew from long experience Clay was trustworthy. So she would just continue to trust him.

He got dressed while she made for the washroom and straightened herself up.

He made sure to kiss her thoroughly before he left, but before he did leave he made a payment on the ring.

She stopped after work that night to begin dismantling the studio apartment and moving her stuff back home. The place was tiny and she had little there to move. She had some clothes and some grooming items in the bathroom, and she started placing those into bags. She hurried. She wanted to get her things back home before Clay got in. It didn't make sense that she didn't want him watching her move bottles of makeup and shampoo back, but that's the way she felt about it. Little things that weren't personal she had brought from the store: dishes and flatware and some lamps and a few of the smaller pieces of furniture and she could worry about returning those later. What she had really come for were her rings, the engagement ring and wedding band Clay had given her. She slipped them on, happy that they fit now that she was putting on weight.

She gave the place a quick look around before leaving. The larger pieces, bed, and table and chairs, loveseat and recliner, were included in the rent and belonged to the landlady, who, speak of the devil, knocked on the door as Emma was getting ready to leave. Emma knew Dorothea Hayes watched her comings and goings pretty closely, and so was probably aware she was present after weeks of not being there at all.

"I'll finish cleaning the place out bit by bit, as much as I can pack in my car at a time, but I definitely will be out by the end of the month," Emma said.

Mrs. Hayes nodded. "So I can start showing it without disturbing you?"

"You can show it any time. I don't live here. I've moved back home."

"I thought so," the woman nodded. "I haven't seen you lately. Oh, well, it's for the best, I think. You weren't happy here. You look happier now, Emma. And Clay is probably happy to have you back."

Emma hadn't been aware that her unhappiness was so obvious to everyone but herself. But Mrs. Hayes was right. She was, indeed, very happy to be back home where she belonged. So that's where she hurried to go.

But it came back to her later when she had time to think about it that Dorothea had called Clay by name. Emma hadn't been aware that her landlady knew Clay, and wondered if he had been keeping tabs on her through Dorothea Hayes.

And if he had been keeping up with her nighttime activities, or lack of them, had it made a difference in his continuing to want her to come home? If Dorothea had ever glimpsed a strange man leaving Emma's tiny apartment, would Emma still be moving her underwear back to the drawers in the dresser she shared with Clay?

So. She concluded it was a good thing she had been a good girl. In the small town of Hawk Point it was probably an excellent thing she had been faithful if Clay had been receiving reports of her behavior from Dorothea. Otherwise Emma might not be moving out of the sad little studio where she had spent all her nights alone after all.

## Chapter Four

As Clay drove the dirt roads of the unincorporated county land north of Hawk Point toward his own place on Saturday morning, he slowed to a stop as he caught sight of the two women visiting over the fence. Each arrestingly beautiful in her own way, he was glad once more he had caught tall, redheaded, green-eyed Emma when she was young and got to watch her grow into this elegant, assured woman with the fall of red waves down the back of her coat. Not that Chancie wasn't gorgeous: tiny and blond, with her hugely pregnant belly stuffed into a jacket he recognized as one of Micah's Carhartts, she was the perfect contrast for her husband's dark good looks. No one could deny the suitability of the Taylors, and judging by the one they already had, they sure made exceptionally pretty babies. Chancie held on to a squirming Lucky as long as she could, but the little girl leaned precariously over the fence, wanting to be held by Emma, waving her chubby snow-suited arms and kicking at her mother's swollen belly with her little booted feet until Chancie gave up and let her go.

As Clay drove into his yard, he watched in the rearview mirror as Emma took the dark-haired little girl from her mother, holding her patiently while Lucky entwined the dangly earring that had captured her attention in her chubby fist. Emma leaned her head toward Lucky, trying to lessen the pain while Chancie scrambled to disentangle the bauble from her daughter's tight clutch. Both women were laughing, and Clay felt a tight sadness in his chest at this new evidence of Emma's love for children.

Well, he would fix that situation if he could. He was doing his best. He got out of his pickup with a cardboard box in one hand and a plastic shopping bag in the other, went in the house and down the hall to the master bath. He set the bag down, ripped open the box and took the two pieces of the plastic apparatus, about the size and shape of a dishpan, out of the box and set them on the counter between the double sinks. Then he sat down on the edge of the tub to read the directions.

He could hear Emma approaching, and the door was open so she came in, rubbing one ear. "That little girl sure has a grip," she commented, turning her head to examine her red earlobe in the mirror. "I didn't think I would escape until she tore my earring out of my ear."

She removed both dangly earrings and laid them on the counter next to the plastic bag. Then she noticed the covered white plastic dishpan-shaped apparatus with an electrical cord sticking out the back. "You've been shopping. What's this?"

“Went to Wyoming Rancher’s Warehouse,” he mumbled, deeply involved in the printed directions.

“And? Clay, what is this?”

At last he looked up, met her gorgeous green eyes in the mirror. “An incubator,” he said.

“Okay, an incubator.” She turned to face him. “What is it for?”

“It’s part of the necessary equipment for Dr. Thorpe’s Fertility Lab.”

“You’re having fun with this big plan of yours, aren’t you?” she accused.

He shrugged. “Don’t you think it’s time? We might as well have a little fun along the way, baby.”

She stared at him as if he’d lost his mind. He grinned to himself. Just wait until she looked in the bag.

When no further explanation was forthcoming from him she turned slowly back toward the counter. With one finger she separated the handles of the thin plastic bag. Then when the bag’s contents were revealed, she just stood looking down wordlessly.

“A super economy sized box of ribbed, lubricated condoms, size extra-large? Um...we need these, Clay?”

Uh-oh. Her large green eyes searching his reflection in the mirror wore a stricken expression beneath a puzzled frown. He’d been so wrapped up in amusing himself with this let’s-make-a-baby business, he hadn’t stopped to think how a woman infertile for a decade would take her husband showing up with an ordinarily needless purchase of an outsized box of condoms.

“Yes. They’re for us. Trust me, Emma.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

Once more he grinned. “Not yet. Not that I know of, anyway. We’re gonna have some fun, baby, you and me. Just let me figure out this contraption that’s supposedly made for elementary school kids to use, and then we’ll talk.”

She turned her back and left. He didn’t think she believed him about the condoms.

She was in the kitchen getting them some lunch when Clay came in and started rummaging through the drawers. After some considerable rattling of utensils and fruitless opening and closing of drawers, she asked, “What are you looking for?”

“Turkey baster,” he said. “Are you frying bacon? Smells good. What are we having?”

“BLTs. You should be pleased. Lots of fat in BLTs.” She turned her head toward him and made a face. He laughed.

“That’s good, baby. You’re doing good. I’m glad you’re doing your part.” He came to stand behind her, stepping around the dog who had become Emma’s best friend since she took out the package of bacon, and put his chin on her shoulder while idly rubbing her ass with the palms of his hands.

“Are you feeling me up or just checking to see if I’m putting on weight?”

“Can’t I do both?” His hands came around to burrow beneath her apron to cup her breasts through her clothes. “You’re getting nice and round again, Emma. I can’t feel all your bones now. I sure like how you’re starting to fit in my hands.”

Her nipples hardened at his words and his touch. She felt a nice warming tingle between her legs. “I like the way your hands fit on me too,” she said. “But I need to see to this bacon. It’s going to start smoking in a minute.”

“Tell you what.” His hands dropped lower to massage her mound. “Let’s make a date for after lunch. Meet you in the bedroom at one. I’ll explain everything then. I’ll even give you a free demonstration of Dr. Thorpe’s Medicinal Injections.”

“Are you saying that on other days I have to pay?”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe. It’s not a bad idea. Let me think about it.”

She laughed, reaching for the roll of paper towels to blot the drained bacon strips and instead smacked him with it. “You’re on, cowboy. Meet you at one.”

He stepped around the dog still sitting at Emma's feet looking adoringly at her and started to head back toward the bedroom, then halted and returned to the kitchen. Their eyes met, hers with a quizzical quirk of an eyebrow. *What now?* "Turkey baster," he said.

"The anticipation is killing me, Clay. I really have to wait until after lunch for your explanation?"

He gave a firm nod, stepped closer and ran a long finger suggestively between her legs. "And your free demonstration. Don't forget that part."

She sighed in resignation. If he wasn't ready to tell her his big secret there was no way she would pry anything out of him. "Bottom drawer. Left hand side, under the gravy ladle."

"Thanks." He retrieved the utensil and headed back toward the rear of the house. She continued with lunch preparations and had their sandwiches on the table when he returned with the flattened incubator box and empty plastic shopping bag. These he added to the covered recycling cans on the front deck and then they sat to eat, each extremely conscious of the other and trying to swallow past heightening sexual tension. It wasn't unknown for them to have a date for sex; there had been years of watching the calendar and taking her temperature and fucking automatically when the calendar said it was time.

The difference now was Clay had taken the initiative. Emma, whose desires and doctor's orders had driven them for years, was now subordinate to her husband's directive. It was new territory for them, and it added a hefty dose of spice to what had become a fairly routine—if still good—love life. As if she had come home to find a new and exciting man inhabiting her husband, she wondered if Clay, too, felt he was bedding a different woman since she had left and then come back at his decree. Clay was still Clay, but he was a man with a plan, and his single-minded pursuit of that as yet unexplained plan made him more dominant in their long-familiar relationship. And the fact that she had gone for no valid reason and then come back at his request only to go along submissively to his mystery plan, put Emma in a very different position than the one she had occupied in their marriage before she left.

Things between them had always been very much her way. Now they would be done Clay's way. She felt a frisson of heat low down in her belly at the thought. She pushed away doubts about where he had learned these new methods of control. She was starting to look forward to being this new, more masterful Clay's woman.

Their eyes met, slid away, rose to meet again. His generous lips were shiny with bacon grease, and she had the sudden, very distinct vision of them sucking her clit. Which made it very hard to concentrate on chewing the dry bread of her sandwich. Clay held her gaze, grinning suddenly as if he could read her expression and knew exactly what she was thinking. He bent toward her across the table, hand reaching to encircle her neck and bring her head toward his. His tongue whipped out and licked a dab of mayonnaise from the corner of her mouth.

"Big, bad wolf gonna eat you up, little girl," he growled, close to her face.

"Promise?" she whispered, and he laughed, letting her go and straightening away from her in order to finish his lunch.

The dog finally scored a bite of bacon from Clay, then they cleared the table, loaded the dishwasher, and Emma polished the stove while Clay went to brush his teeth.

"Working perfectly," he said when he returned, taking her hand and leading her down the hall to the big bath. She just looked at him. "The incubator. It works," he said, tapping the lid of the plastic basin.

"I'm so happy for you, Clay." She squeezed toothpaste out and started to brush her own teeth.

"For us, baby. Be happy for us." He squeezed behind her to get to the bedroom, giving her ass a good feel of his cock as he passed.

She nodded agreement that she was happy for them both, rinsed her mouth, and followed him to the bedroom.

He was already sitting on the edge of the bed, boots off and belt undone. He raised a hand, motioning to her. "Come here."



She approached and he put his arms around her hips, nuzzling his face into her belly. She ran her fingers through his short, thick hair. Then he leaned back so he could reach the button of her jeans. He unzipped them and tugged them down her legs, along with the red lace panties she wore. He fingered the line on her hips where the underwear had grown too tight as she gained weight, the elastic leaving a groove in her flesh. He bent his head to lick the groove, side to side and across her belly above the slight V of her reddish pubic hair.

Trapped in the legs of her jeans, she couldn't move if she wanted to as he ran a questing finger beneath the crotch of her panties and between her legs to her inner lips. "Soft. And so wet," he murmured. "You're getting ready for me, my Emma."

He pulled her forward, moving aside a bit so she could sit. He knelt to remove her shoes, then had her stand to get her jeans and panties off. He nudged her down and pushed her back a little until she was leaning on her elbows. He spread her legs and looked his fill. "So pretty. You're like a pretty pink flower."

One by one he raised her long bare legs over his shoulders, spreading her wider. Then he leaned in to taste, tongue licking her from bottom to top as if she were an ice cream cone. He was taking his time, doing her just right, driving her wild with need. When she thought she couldn't stand anymore, his lips closed over her clit, sucking hard, just as she had imagined him doing such a short while ago. He slid one, two, three long fingers inside her as his teeth rasped gently over her throbbing nub. She came hard that first time, in a spiral of sensation that consumed her from her clit to her back teeth, every nerve the length of her torso firing in a simultaneous burst.

She drifted slowly back to herself with her muscles still spasming on Clay's fingers. He had pulled his head away and was watching her face, smiling as he glided the long digits out and slid them back in, in a sinuous play on all the sensitive surfaces inside her.

She raised herself back on her hands until she was sitting up. She pulled her sweater off, tossed it aside, and reached to unclasp her bra which she also discarded.

Completely naked, she watched as he rose to his full height and began to undress, revealing bit by bit what a gorgeous example of maleness he was. When he stood before her in all his hard glory, he grinned at the rapt expression she knew was on her face. "You like?" he asked, stepping closer.

"You know I like," she murmured. She grasped him by his hard buttocks, pulling him closer and rising until she could reach one of his nipples with her mouth. He raised her breasts and squeezed them against his big cock, and she was glad, glad, glad she'd grown them big enough lately to experience that sensation as he started to glide against her skin. He felt hot to her touch, as if fevered, and jerked a little as he let go of her breasts and stood away, putting space between them.

"Whoa. The pregame show is moving a little fast," he said. "Just lie back there, Emma."

She obeyed, but improvising on his command, she spread her legs and ran her own forefinger up and down her slit. She smiled seductively until she saw that while he was enjoying her show he was busy rolling on a condom. For the first time she noticed the big box of them had migrated to the nightstand.

"Clay? What are you doing?" she asked. She sat up.

"Relax. I told you. All part of the plan," he said. He turned toward her all suited up for the game, knelt on the bed and urged her to lie back down by pushing on her shoulders. He threw one muscled leg over her so both her legs were clamped between his. He parted hers just enough so he could get his cock between them and then inside her. "Now cross your ankles," he ordered.

She was clutching him much tighter than she could have with just her pelvic muscles. The bonus for her was that each stroke of his cock rubbed her clit harder than normal. He grunted in pleasure, starting a rhythmic stroke as she gripped the muscles of his ass with both hands, urging him on.

He couldn't be enjoying this as much as she was, she thought. The ribs on the condom heightened her pleasure, but he was totally enveloped in latex. But it was his idea so she couldn't feel too sorry for him, she thought as their bodies slicked with Clay's effort. He put his hands under her ass so that her grip on him was tighter than she thought possible. She could feel every inch of

him, from the skin on the inside of her thighs, to her clenched pussy lips, up into the walls inside her channel.

She gritted her teeth, wanting to hold on for him and not wanting to come until he was ready.

"Let go, baby," he ground out. "Come for me now."

On this demand, she felt the sweet implosion start, as if all the cells of her body concentrated themselves in anticipation in the area around his cock. She came immediately, screaming his name, and he followed her to his own release.

Used to having him remain inside her afterward as they cuddled to recovery, she didn't understand at first when at the first sign of his cock softening he rose from the bed. His finger and thumb encircling the condom to keep it on, he headed for the bathroom. She watched him in the mirror over the double vanity as he carefully peeled the latex off, leaving its contents in the reservoir at the tip. He made a neat knot in the top, lifted the lid of the incubator, and deposited it inside.

He bent to check the thermometer readout attached to the lid, nodded in satisfaction, and then straightened up.

"You look like an escapee from an SF movie, a naked mad scientist gloating over his latest experiment." She lay in the rumpled bed with her arms over her head, watching him.

He laughed, turning to take her in with an admiring glance from what she knew was a tangled mess of hair to painted toenails. "God, you're gorgeous," he said.

"You're pretty easy on the eyes yourself, Doctor Frankenstein," she teased.

He came to sit beside her on the bed, idly toying with one of her nipples. "So you're saving your filled condoms?" she asked. "What's up with that?"

"I figure every other day, three times a day, we'll make love. Then at night I'll combine all the day's goodies and we'll give you a special injection."

She could feel her eyes widen as enlightenment dawned. "With the turkey baster. Clay, you're not serious."

"Sure I am. I do have a degree in biology, remember."

"Uh, yeah. *Wildlife* biology. I'm not sure it applies here, Clay."

"Look. We're not doing things much different than those expensive bouts of artificial insemination at the doctor's. We'll be giving you a triple whammy at night, just in case it's intermittent low sperm count on my part that's causing our problem. We'll also effectively bypass the acidic environs of the vagina in case that's what's preventing conception."

"And the incubator..."

"Keeps the day's samples all warm and moist until we're ready to use them. You, of course, would be the perfect receptacle for safekeeping." He lowered his hand to slide a finger suggestively between her legs. "Your body's the proper temperature, and my little swimmers could theoretically stay alive inside you for up to five days. But I think, for some reason, three individual shots a day wouldn't work any better than they ever have for us. So...that's the reason for the collection process, and the incubator."

"Three times a day?"

"Yeah, every other day. I figure that ought to do it."

"Oh, you do." She licked her lips. Clay had obviously put a lot of thought into this wacky procedure of his, and she really didn't *mind* the thought of them fucking three times a day. Maybe he would get even more creative ideas.

"Every other day should be enough to insure you've always got a viable supply of my cells inside you, Emma. If you start checking your ovulation indicators again like you used to, we can be sure."

"Clay." Her breath caught as he started some serious fondling between her legs. "Just how long have you been thinking about this plan anyway?"

"For as long as you were gone, Emma. Months."

She caught her breath at the reminder of her departure. "Clay," she said. "I'm so sorry."

“Don’t. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to talk about it. I’ve got to go outside and clean the corrals. We’ll resume right here where we’re leaving off after dinner tonight. Deal?”

She put her hands over his and pressed it to her mound before he could pull away. “I’ll be waiting for you,” she said.

## Chapter Five

Clay had a big pile of straw and horse manure ready to load in the pickup and haul to the dump. Across the road, Micah exited his house, his big dog on his heels. Clay’s mixed breed dog and Micah’s huge white Pyrenees each immediately raced for their respective fences, setting up a din of excited barking, which continued until Micah crossed his yard and opened his gate to let his dog out.

“BFFs,” Micah commented drily as the dogs touched noses and sniffed respective parts. “Isn’t that what the kids call it these days?”

“I guess.” Clay shrugged, continuing his raking. “Every single time, they act like they haven’t seen each other in years.”

“Pretty simple to be a dog.”

“Yeah. Must be nice.”

“How’s things?”

“Pretty good,” Clay admitted. “Going along good, as far as I can tell. Emma seems happy to be back.”

“And you?”

“Happy to have her back. Got her eating lots of ice cream.”

Micah grinned. “Glad to hear it. I’ll tell my mom. Listen, if you wait, I’ll clean up my corrals and we can combine it all to make one trip.”

“Sounds good.”

Could men be any more laconic, Emma thought as she stood on the deck with a throw rug in her hands next to the Christmas tree Clay had propped against the rail, shamelessly eavesdropping. As if the two neighbors, both cops, talked in a kind of shorthand, and she knew there was a lot of information imparted in that exchange.

Her cheeks heated as she wondered just how much of Clay’s plan Micah might be privy to. Had they hatched up the whole thing between them in the months she lay awake alone at night in her pathetic little apartment in town? Did Micah know that now she was back, she and Clay were slated to have at each other three times a day, saving the result until bedtime to intensify its effect? Maybe Micah had let his pretty wife Chancie in on the plan. Maybe Micah and Clay had consulted Micah’s Blackfoot *mother* about that part too.

She held her breath, puffing out her cheeks, then let it slowly out. She turned to go back in the house, leaving the men to their chores and their code talking. If it worked...if Clay’s outlandish plan actually worked and she finally had their baby, it wouldn’t matter to her if he announced to the whole world what they had to do to get it. He could take out Internet ads to spread the news about the condoms and the incubator, as far as she was concerned. If it only worked...

She cleaned like mad until the place gleamed. One good thing about living in a modular, it was easy and fast to get it looking nice. No lugging vacuums and cleaning supplies up and down stairs, everything all on one level and all she had to do was move quickly from room to room.

Afterwards, she pulled boxes and plastic totes of Christmas decorations out of one of the bedroom closets. They had so much because each year she changed to a different color scheme. And one large box was filled with the tracks and cars of Clay’s Christmas train, which like a little boy, he insisted they display in the living room with a toy Santa driving the engine.

Gold, she thought. This year she felt like gold, and she unpacked everything she had in gold until she sat surrounded by glittering bows and garland and glass ornaments.

It felt magical, for a moment, as if she were a princess sitting on a hoard of coins. She laughed aloud, then got to her feet to begin hauling it all out to the living room to put it up. Clay felt the enchantment too, she knew. When he came in, tired and dirty and fragrant with corral muck, he stopped in the doorway, wide-eyed. "Wow," he said. "You've really gone all out this year, Emma. It looks nice."

"Nice, huh? I'll have you know I worked all afternoon to get it looking this good."

"I see you put up my train set, too. Thanks, baby." He grinned.

"Go take a shower before dinner, Clay. You smell like a horse stall."

"You don't have to insult me. I didn't mean to make you mad. The place looks *won*-derful. Is that better?"

"Much. But you still smell like horse manure."

"How much time do I have before dinner?" He was already pulling his boots off.

"Plenty enough for a shower."

He took off his pants and shirt and socks, balling them up before crossing the clean living room floor in his shorts and stopping along the hall to throw his clothes in the washer. The dog followed him, almost tiptoeing past Emma as if afraid she might decide he needed a bath as well.

And Clay might not smell so good, but he sure looked *won*-derful, Emma conceded to herself.

After dinner and cleaning up the kitchen, he sat with a beer in front of the television turned low while she tried to read a book. Every time she looked up his eyes were on her, looking back. She could feel his coiled anticipation; he definitely wanted to do something besides what they were doing. At last he yawned theatrically and stretched, asking, "Ready for bed?"

"Um. It's only eight o'clock," she said.

"Yeah, it's getting late."

"Clay..."

"Phase two, Emma. I'll make it worth your while, I promise." He showed her his pretty white teeth and his dimple. She dropped her book and took his hand.

Warm and drowsy after making love again, Emma lay in bed waiting for Clay to come out of the bathroom. She could get used to this role reversal of not having to get up afterward, she thought with a naughty giggle.

Clay sauntered out of the bathroom, turkey baster at the ready. "Happy?" he asked. "It's good to hear you laugh. Now put your pillow under your hips. Prop yourself up," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I said so. Do it, Emma."

"Oh, all right, Clay."

"Now spread 'em."

"This is only the second one today. You said there were going to be three."

"Sorry. That's all I've got for today. We got a late start because I didn't have the incubator. Now stop wasting time. Just do what I tell you."

She knew there was no sense arguing further. She did as he ordered, lying with her pelvis tilted up and legs spread. He knelt between her legs. With one finger he spread her inner lips, carefully inserted the turkey baster, and gave the bulb a couple of squeezes.

"I feel weird doing it this way," she said.

"More weird than all we've been through with medical science?" He gently pulled the plastic tube out of her.

She thought about it. "No. You're right. This is better than any of the procedures at the doctors' clinics."

"Good. Don't move. I'll be right back."

He left to go wash out the plastic tube. When he came back, he lay down beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist. "Are you comfortable enough?"

"How long should I stay like this?" she asked.

“Optimally, all night. We want as many little swimmers as possible to make it past the cervix.”

“Clay, we tried something similar with the cervical cap, remember?”

“We tried a lot of things, Emma. But with the cap you were standing upright afterwards and then sitting in the car and then you went to work, if I remember right. It just stands to reason that this way is better. You’re working with gravity instead of against it.”

She sighed. “Well, I can’t stay propped up this way all night. My back will be killing me in the morning.”

“How about an hour?” he asked in his most seductive voice. “Can you give us an hour?”

She closed her eyes and blew air out between her lips. When she opened her eyes again, he had risen up on one elbow, propping his head on his hand, staring at her. He placed the other hand between her legs, cupping her mound and pressing on her pubic bone. “Would it help if I distract you a little? Make the time go faster?”

She turned her head to look him fully in the face, and as if he’d been waiting for her to do that his lips swooped to meet hers. She automatically opened her mouth to him, and he hummed deep in his throat in appreciation of her cooperation. His tongue began a thorough exploration of her lips and teeth, and then her tongue met his in the motion that mimicked dancing...or fucking. He raised his hand, one finger sliding into her wet slit.

She pulled her mouth from his. “Again?” she whispered. “How many times in a day do you think you can make me come, Clay?”

“As many as it takes, baby,” he said with a smirk, apparently supremely satisfied with himself. “I told you my way would be fun. And besides, it’s only every other day, remember? On the second day, we rest.”

“I’ll need to rest,” she ground out as his finger began a lazy glide up and down, just the way she liked it. She wouldn’t allow herself to think about what he might be doing on those other days. She and he were here and now. She could smell herself, her newly aroused desire for him. She couldn’t help it; he knew her responses too well. “You’re going to kill me, Clay.”

He bent his head and licked her nipple. “You like what I do to you, Emma,” he said. “Don’t try to pretend you don’t. I know you.”

He was right about that. She liked everything Clay Thorpe did to her, and every way he did it. She always had. She always would.

The days passed in a haze of what felt to Emma like newly discovered love, and also the familiarity of scheduled lovemaking. Clay and Emma kept to Clay’s agenda as much as they could. Sometimes an unforeseen event occurred and they missed a nooner or an evening session but for the most part the schedule reigned supreme in their lives. Once Emma asked why they couldn’t try morning, evening, and then morning again if they missed a lunchtime love break, or a morning, noon and the next morning if they missed an evening. But Clay wouldn’t budge from his every other day off. And his stubbornness more than puzzled Emma, as he stuck to his self-imposed timetable it made her deeply suspicious of what he might be doing on the days he was refusing her. She hadn’t forgotten his special woman remark; she wasn’t allowed to forget since in addition to the agenda he wouldn’t deviate from, he came in to the store religiously once a week to pay on the layaway ring.

Yet for all their effort—the calendar and calculations, her temperature taking, the ovulation tests and predictors—her period arrived in the middle of November. Her pregnancy strips had been telling her she wasn’t pregnant, but it was too early to be absolutely sure, so still and all she was crushed when she saw the telltale stain in the toilet. She hadn’t expected to feel so bad if the effort at conception failed once again. She had told herself she didn’t have any belief in Clay’s experimental methods, that she had only been going along to please him and because his inventive ways of loving were so pleasurable for her. But obviously somewhere along the line she had begun to rely on his assurances that his method would work. When the new evidence of her failure presented itself she wanted to scream in frustration.

When Clay came in that night, her long face gave him the news. He just looked at her, then reached for her and held her. "It will be all right, baby. We just have to keep trying."

"Clay, you're too much." But she held tight to him anyway, holding back tears.

"Too much for most women," he joked, trying to make her feel better. "But I'm just right for you, huh, Emma?"

"Just right," she agreed. She wished he wouldn't mention other women, but she guessed she couldn't have everything. "You're perfect for me, Clay Thorpe."

"Good to know," he said in a low voice, and then licked her ear.

She became even more obsessive about taking her temperature daily, consulting online ovulation predictors and using the pregnancy test stick. Every other day in the morning they made love at home. Noon they ate lunch at the store, and then did their loving. Nights found them back in their bed, making love.

On the day her calculator and her temperature told her she was ovulating, they closed up the shop as usual and hurried to the back to the shadows where they couldn't be seen. When they finished, Clay was just tying the knot in the condom when his cell phone rang.

"I better take this call," he said. He pulled up his pants and sat on the edge of the old spindle bed. "Thorpe," he said after connecting.

Emma listened. It didn't sound good.

"I've got to go," he said when he finished. He handed her the tied-off condom, zipped up his pants and grabbed his laden belt off the dresser. "I'll probably be late," he said, giving her a swift kiss.

"But...it's my luteinizing hormone day today. I'm ovulating, Clay."

"Sorry. Can't be helped." He was already moving toward the door, grabbing his jacket and hat along the way.

"What do I do with this?" She held up the filled condom.

"You'll have to take care of it, Emma. I'll see you later."

He turned the key in the lock, the bell on the door jangled, and he was gone.

"Be careful, Clay," she whispered, even though he couldn't hear her.

Now what was she supposed to do? Clay usually took the time to run the noon deposit home and place it in the incubator before it got cold. If she lost this one, that would leave her only the morning's contribution, which according to Clay simply wasn't enough.

The condom so recently inside her body still held its warmth. She remembered Clay saying where the best place to store semen was. She retrieved her purse and headed for the restroom. A cop's wife, she had information about underworld activities she wouldn't have had occasion to know otherwise. If drug couriers could use their body cavities to hoard their stashes, she thought she could endure one afternoon with her precious booty inside her. She was glad she still had a tampon in her purse from last month. It would come in handy today to hold her precious store of baby-making material up inside.

## Chapter Six

First thing at home that evening Emma retrieved the condom from inside herself and placed it in the incubator along with the morning's latex tube. She waited for Clay all evening after a solitary dinner. When he didn't come home by an hour before bedtime she fed the dog, ate a bowl of ice cream, took a shower, carefully snipped the reservoirs in both condoms, poured them into the turkey baster, and went to bed. She could only hope two would do the job of Clay's prescribed three dosages. Today was, after all, the big day.

Sometimes cops didn't come home at night, and cops' wives just made do. She would make do. Propping her hips up on her pillow, she cautiously inserted the baster and squeezed. Then she read

for an hour with her pelvis tilted toward the ceiling before she retrieved her pillow, turned off the light, and waited for sleep.

But sleep didn't come. Still tossing and turning at midnight, worrying about Clay, she was awake when the phone rang.

"Emma, I'm sorry to bother you at this time of night. It's Chancie."

She sat up. "Chancie, what's wrong?"

"I'm in labor and Micah's not here. Could you drive me to the hospital?"

"Exactly how much in labor are you?"

She could hear Chancie's harsh breathing while she waited for an answer. "It's close," she finally said. "I waited as long as I could, hoping Micah would get here. Emma, can you come now?"

"Meet you outside in two minutes." She hung up and flew out of bed to hurriedly throw on her clothes and grab her keys.

She backed out into the road without letting her car warm up. Chancie was standing at her fence with a too-big canvas jacket on, unzipped over her big belly. When Emma backed far enough and stopped, Chancie maneuvered her ungainly bulk into the passenger seat. "Ugh," she said. "I swear this baby's bigger than the last one. I'll be glad when it's born and I can have my body back."

Emma held her tongue. What she wouldn't give to be in Chancie's place, with a big pregnant belly that wouldn't fit behind the steering wheel. "Seat belt," she reminded before putting her car in gear.

Chancie grumbled something about it being late for much traffic and only a few miles to the hospital, but she got the belt across her lap and situated so it wasn't directly across her belly before clicking it in place. "We better move, Emma," she said.

"How close are your contractions?"

"Close." She started puffing air out between her lips.

When Chancie finally laid her head back against the headrest, Emma asked, "Where's Micah?"

"I don't know. He didn't come home," Chancie said.

"Clay either."

They looked at each other with expressions of recognition in the dim light from the dashboard. "Drug bust," they said in unison. More and more, arrests of local drug dealers were intricate inter-agency Wyoming Department of Criminal Investigation operations involving numerous law enforcement divisions from five or six cooperating Wyoming county sheriffs' offices, Wyoming Highway Patrol—which was where Micah came in—local police departments, and federal agencies such as Immigration Customs Enforcement.

"I didn't know there was another one in the works. Clay didn't say a word."

"Micah either. But then, they're not supposed to. I hope they're all right," Chancie said.

Emma said, "Me too."

Chancie started puffing through another contraction.

Emma didn't worry about baby Lucky or Chancie's son Jamie. Chancie had live-in help she had brought with her when she married Micah, an older woman named Alma who was really part of their family, and so the kids were well taken care of.

When they got to the emergency room, Emma rushed across the parking lot to get a wheelchair. When she explained why she needed it, an attendant came on the run.

Emma said to Chancie, "Give me your purse. I'll take care of as much of admitting as I can until Micah can get here. You better go on to delivery."

As the hospital staff became aware of the situation, they hurried to help Chancie onto a gurney and then rushed her away. After the paperwork was done as well as she could manage, Emma went in search of delivery. Chancie was already gowned and set up in a room to wait out the rest of her labor. "Will you stay with me until the baby comes, Emma?"

Emma hesitated. She knew all about making babies but she didn't know much about childbirth, what to expect. What if she fainted or something equally embarrassing? When she didn't answer immediately, Chancie said, "Please," and reached for her hand.

Things moved quickly after Emma agreed to stay. A nurse came in to check Chancie, took a look between her legs and exclaimed, "This baby's crowning already!"

Several attendants came in to wheel Chancie to the delivery room, but she refused to let go of Emma's hand so Emma was forced to run alongside the bed to keep up.

A nurse kept urging Chancie, "Don't push! Don't push!" which was ridiculous because they could all see the baby's dark head was already emerging, its little shoulders visible.

The doctor barely had time to don enough of a gown to use its sterile arms to catch the new baby when it shot out from between Chancie's legs. "It's a boy," he announced as proudly as if he'd had something to do with its birth.

Emma found she was crying. Oh, happy tears surely for Chancie and Micah, but tears of envy as well, because having pretty little babies seemed so easy for them. Heck, Chancie hadn't been in labor but a couple of hours, and here she had a brand new addition to her family. She made the whole thing look so simple and joyous, not anything like the years-long, fruitless effort Emma and Clay had put in to try and make a baby of their own.

"Just look at him," Emma told Chancie through her tears as the doctor laid the baby on the mother's chest so she could hold him. He was red and white and slimy. "He's beautiful. Look at all that black hair. He's going to resemble Micah."

Chancie smiled, looking down at her new son. "I hope so," she said. "Thank you, Emma, for staying with me. I appreciate it so much."

Then there was a flurry of activity around the new baby and his mother, and Emma was soon dismissed by a nurse and directed toward a waiting room. Unsure of what was expected of her, she waited until Chancie was returned to her room. But Chancie was already exhaustedly asleep so Emma felt she could safely leave.

At home near dawn, she saw the porch light still on across the road and a worried Alma peering out through the glass of the door. So she crossed to hand the older woman Chancie's purse. "Congratulations. It's a boy," she said. "Mother and baby are doing fine."

"Thank goodness," Alma said. "I was so worried. I wish Micah would come home."

"He will soon, I'm sure," Emma said, turning wearily toward their house and wishing Clay would come home as well.

It was full morning before Clay got home, looking haggard and with time only for breakfast and a shower before he had to get back to the office.

After grabbing him for a hug and kiss, grateful he'd made it home safe, neither had much time for conversation about their eventful night. Emma ate her full-fat yogurt with granola while Clay managed to gulp down a couple of fried eggs with toast.

"How many did you arrest this time?" she asked.

"Nineteen. All the details will be in the paper."

"Meth?"

He nodded.

"Micah and Chancie have a baby boy," she said. "You guys missed all the action. I went with Chancie to the hospital last night."

"No shit! Did you, baby? Was it hard for you to do that?" He reached for her hand.

She nodded. "Hard. And glorious. It went so fast—and then there he was."

"It was good of you to be there for Chancie, Emma. But I bet Micah would rather have been where you were, than where he was."

"No doubt. I would rather he would have been with her, too. Clay, is everybody on the drug bust all right? Micah is for sure coming home?"



“Far as I know the new daddy is fine. Listen, Emma, I’m sorry about the break in our schedule. I know yesterday was important to you. But we did two days before and we’ll do two days after, so we’ll still have a few days in the window of time for this month, right?”

“I’ll hold you to our regular three workouts tomorrow after you’re rested,” she said. “But I’ll have you know I took care of yesterday all by myself.”

He was on the point of biting off another piece of toast but pulled it away from his mouth to look at her. “You did?”

“Well, sure. I only had two of your donations, but I didn’t want to waste them.”

“My donations, huh?”

“Yeah, you know, to our private sperm bank.”

He gave her his trademark sexy grin. “I’m glad you’ve got such a good attitude about this experiment of mine, Emma. The old way with all the medical intervention was getting pretty grim.”

“If I haven’t told you how much I appreciate all you’ve done on my behalf all these years, I want you to know now, Clay. Thank you.” Geez, she was crying again. Must just be hormones or something making her so weepy, she thought.

“Oh, baby.” He used a thumb to wipe away her tears. “You are so worth it.”

She had to grab a napkin after that one, as the tears started in earnest.

“Uh, I’ve got to go. We don’t have time for this now,” Clay said, rising to give her a kiss on the forehead.

“I know. I’m just happy you’re safe. Go. Go to work.” She waved him out the door. “I’m fine.”

But his emphasis on keeping to their every-other-day schedule had her wondering once more: Was Clay fucking another woman, his special woman, on the days in between her allotted bouts of thrice daily with him? She well knew he was perfectly capable of having sex more than once a day, every day. Highly sexed and blessed with outsized equipment he used to perfection through years of such daily practice, he was a veritable fucking machine. Until recently, Emma had been sure he was solely *her* fucking machine.

Maybe Clay thought he owed Emma the baby she longed for and the other woman was special to him because she was reserved for pure sex play.

There was no way for Emma to know if another woman had entered the scene to enjoy her husband while she had absented herself from his life. The neighbors liked Clay and wouldn’t tell what he had done while she was gone, and his cop buddies would never betray him no matter what. Chancie might know, but being a neighbor and also the wife of one of Clay’s closest cop friends, she wouldn’t reveal to Emma anything she was privy to about Clay’s activities.

She had to let it go and stop dwelling on it, Emma thought. Just be grateful for what crumbs were left after she had almost succeeded in destroying her marriage. Because what she was sitting here daring to consider Clay’s crumbs, she acknowledged, would make a mighty fine full course gourmet meal for any other woman.

It wasn’t until after Clay left and she was cleaning up the kitchen that Emma noticed the newspaper he had left next to his plate. Folded over to the classifieds, there was a two-column property ad circled heavily in ink.

Corner lot. Six—six!—bedroom modular with three baths, completely remodeled. Three car garage, oversized. A shop bigger in size than their present home, heated. Horse barn with four stalls, feeders, electricity, and tack room. Moveable panel corrals with electricity, water, head catch, and riding area. Extra building that could be a small second residence. The asking price was set between half and three quarters of a million dollars.

Emma could feel her mouth hanging open as she stood stupefied, staring at the ad and trying to take in all the property’s amenities. Her weariness flapped away on giant wings of fear.

She and Clay could never afford such a place. So what was his interest in it?

Oh, oh, oh. She felt sick. Her hand covered her mouth, as if she would otherwise lose her breakfast just from thinking what she was thinking. The ring. The mysterious special woman. Could

Clay be buying the antique diamond from Emma's shop for a special *rich* woman? Could he be playing on Emma's desire for a child while at the same time ingratiating himself with another woman who liked big dicks and could also afford something like this little real estate offering for the two of them?

Emma couldn't conceive of Clay playing such a cruel game. Unless he truly hated her now and was paying her back in spades for leaving? No. She couldn't under any circumstances believe that Clay, the man she had known for nearly half her life and had been married to for ten years, could stoop to such a low level.

He couldn't look into her eyes while he claimed her body with his hands, he couldn't proclaim his love for her in the heat of lovemaking, could not be so cruel as to make her believe he still wanted a child with her...all while stringing along someone else. She wouldn't believe it.

But she wrote down the address on a sticky note and stuffed it in her purse. Then she hurried to the door, let Clay's dog in, locked the house and drove to town to open up the shop.

The desire to know more, to come up with some kind of answer, burned in her. Once she had the lights on and change in the cashbox, she took her old laptop to the drop leaf table and waited impatiently for it to boot up.

She knew the area where the mysterious listing was, in general, it was the area where she and Clay lived. A fairly new development of tan modulars with double garages and white plastic fences, whose prices rivaled stick built homes in town. The big draw was the ability to keep horses on land in the county. Emma was not familiar with this particular house, and wondered in a fever of curiosity what made it so special.

"Come on, come on," she urged the old machine as it slowly loaded all the icons one by one on her desktop. When she finally got a browser and an Internet connection, she first checked the listing on the real estate company's page. There it was, in color and a bit more detail, but the price was the same and in fact had been lowered a bit in an effort to sell it more quickly. And it did look like a nice place, although all the pictures were of the exterior as if the listing agent was pretty certain the horse barn and garage would be the property's selling points.

Next she typed in the address on an online property value estimator. This site loaded even more slowly than the previous one. She waited, tapping her fingers on the tabletop, and was finally allowed to type in the address of the property north of Hawk Point. The information provided was exactly the same as what she had seen on the broker's site, and she supposed this site either gathered it directly from the real estate brokerage's page, or it was provided by the listing agent. She could see either a map, a bird's eye view, or a street view of the property. It did look like the place had a lot more buildings and a lot bigger house than its neighboring one acre properties. But what was interesting was the estimate of what the property was worth: about a third of the asking price. Emma sat back, wondering at the disparate numbers. She had heard the value given by the estimating sites could be wildly off a property's real local value. Still...this was way off.

At that point she was interrupted by the jangling of the bell on the front door. She quickly minimized the web browser, and stood in case she could be of any help to potential customers. Two women entered, bundled against the cold but smiling, and Emma smiled back.

"We're looking for miniature Christmas decorations for our little Christmas village's tree. Do you have anything like that?"

"How small is the tree?" Emma asked.

When the answer came back as two feet, more or less, she led them to a display of exquisite small cloissoné bells. "Would something like this do? They're not antique exactly, but the technique is over five hundred years old. Do you know the history of cloisonné?"

When the women shook their heads in unison, Emma continued, "The raised design is made of copper or bronze wire. In antique pieces, the spaces were filled with cut jewels or glass. Today the designs are filled with enamel, baked in a kiln, and then they're polished."

"But how can you sell a box of six for such a low price?" the bigger woman demanded, as if suspecting Emma was spinning them a tale of hand-manufacture and trying to rip them off with plastic.

"They come from a women's cooperative in India. The women who live there have no place else to go. Their husbands have disfigured them by throwing battery acid in their faces."

The women gasped. "Battery acid? For what?"

"For infidelity, real or imagined."

"I've never heard of that. Have you, Ruth?" one of the women asked her companion. She grimaced. "That's just awful."

"Yes. I'm glad I don't live in Cambodia, Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh." Especially not after she moved out on her husband, Emma thought. She said, "I promise you, the Indian women are paid their asking price."

"Incredible." The other woman removed one of the bells, causing its tiny clapper to ring against the sides, while she examined the workmanship more closely.

"We'll take them all," her friend said, scooping up five boxes nestled with six tiny bells, each uniquely decorated. "Do you have any more?"

"Not at this time, and not before Christmas, unfortunately," Emma said. "But if you want to plan for next year, check back here in a couple of months."

The two women left, well pleased with their bargain. Emma was pleased to have made a sale on such a quiet day.

She sat down and resumed her research. The next site she consulted was the Powell county assessor's office. So much information that used to require a trip to the courthouse, a willing county employee, and a copier fee, was now available free online. She clicked on the GIS mapping icon, agreed to the terms of use, and a local tax map popped up. Clicking on the little *plus* magnifying glass, she kept enlarging the map until finally she was at the correct cross streets where the property sat whose elusive data so consumed her. She clicked on the *i* for more information. A yellow box popped up with details on the parcel number, account number, county map number, the property's owner, its address, mailing address, date of its deed, legal description, and property tax classification. If that wasn't quite enough information, and in this case it wasn't, she could click on *Property Detail* and find the year it was built, the fact that it also had a basement, and that the market value was about two-thirds of the asking price.

Once again she sat back to try and digest everything she had discovered. She had a ton of information on a property she and her husband couldn't begin to afford. So what did it all tell her? Specifically, did it tell her anything about Clay and why he was interested enough in such an expensive piece of real estate he'd circled it and left it lying by his placemat for her to find?

A woman who was sure of her husband, she thought, would just text him with the straightforward message: *What's up with the real estate ad you circled?*

She sighed and put her cold hands to her hot cheeks. It was past lunchtime and Clay obviously wasn't coming in today. She had no appetite, and despite the fact she had an avocado and bacon sandwich with extra mayo in the store's tiny refrigerator, didn't feel like eating. Her fingers were like ice and her skin flushed hot and then cold. She was damned scared, she admitted to herself. A woman who had left her husband and given him time and reason to look around for another didn't just confront him with questions about any hidden intentions he might have. If they existed, and were hidden, he had deliberately hidden them. Clay didn't reveal secrets. She could torture him and he wouldn't tell her what he was up to if he didn't want her to know.

But how long could she keep her burning curiosity bottled up inside? She wanted to know the truth.

She was afraid to know.

How long could she live with the conclusions she had drawn? What if she was wrong? God, what if she was *right* and Clay was planning to dump her?

It's hormones, she assured herself. Her suspicions were groundless, fueled by hormones. She wouldn't ask Clay anything. She would just trust him.

She lasted until suppertime before confronting him.

## Chapter Seven

She found the expensive property on her way home from work and circled the block a couple of times, trying to figure out why it was listed for so much money. It was getting dark already and she couldn't really see much. But what she could make out looked impressive and well cared for. And there really were a lot of buildings on the land, so maybe it was worth what the owners were asking.

She had the evening meal on the table when Clay came in. He was late, and obviously exhausted after two days without sleep. After he ate, he could shower and go to bed if he wanted.

He removed his coat, cap, gun belt and uniform shirt and sat at his place at the table in his t-shirt. Head resting wearily on his hands, he indifferently nudged the newspaper still sitting beside his placemat out of the way with one elbow.

"Tired," he said. "Sorry, Emma. Food looks good, but I'm not very hungry."

"Eat what you can," she said. "I'll put it in the fridge if you want it later. Clay...can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," he said between bites of quinoa. "What is this stuff anyway?"

"It's a seed, actually, related to spinach. Do you hate it?" She noticed Clay's dog wasn't doing his usual begging at the table, not for quinoa.

"S okay," Clay said, continuing to shovel his dinner into his mouth. Once he started eating, he must have discovered his lost appetite.

"That newspaper by your elbow," Emma began. Clay glanced over at the paper folded to the classifieds, looked up at her with a question in his hazel eyes.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I...wondered what your interest was in it." She waited. Clay's gaze on her sharpened. She began to squirm.

"Why did you think I was interested in it, Emma? You know we can't afford something like that."

"That's why I wondered." She avoided his gaze by looking around their much smaller, much shabbier mobile home. "Have you...have you resented spending so much money on trying for a baby with me all these years, Clay? In other circumstances, we would have had been in a lot better financial position. Is that why...is it why we're doing your homemade fertility experiment? To save money?"

He pushed his plate away, ran a tired hand over his eyes. "I won't deny I was getting to the point I thought we were wasting our money on further medical treatment, Emma. Saving money might have been one reason I came up with my plan, I don't know. I just thought, if you came back, we could have a lot more fun trying than we did before. As for the ad, I thought you knew me well enough by now to know I don't care much about impressing the neighbors with what we own."

Now she'd made him cranky. She couldn't have held her tongue and waited for a better time, could she? When he wasn't so tired, after he'd had a shower, maybe when they were in bed awaiting sleep.

He pushed away from the table, the paper falling unheeded to the floor. "I saved the ad for Micah, okay? I was going to show him what rich neighbors we have, and how they probably just jumped our property value a few hundred thousand when they listed theirs."

"I couldn't figure out what you meant by saving the paper like that," she said in a small voice. "I didn't know if you'd left it for me to find or what."

“It was a joke. If you don’t need help cleaning up here, I’m going to take a shower,” he said. As he headed across the living room, he added, “Why don’t you come on to bed with me. We’ve both had a long couple of days.”

“You go take your shower,” she said. She felt like a fool, having wasted almost the whole morning researching Clay’s little joke. “I’ll be right behind you.”

As soon as she could, she headed for the back of the house, stripped off her clothes, and hurried through her own shower so she could cuddle up to him in bed. His arm automatically provided a pillow for her head, and she scooted her body in close.

His breathing deepened. It took her a while to gather up her courage enough to whisper, “Clay, I’m sorry.”

“ ‘S all right,” he slurred. A loud snore ripped from him immediately after his words. When was she going to be able to trust him as he apparently trusted her? Another month of not conceiving was only exacerbated by her guilt over leaving him. If Clay didn’t feel she merited punishment, obviously if subconsciously, she did. She kept expecting to be punished, and instead he gave her reassurance. Even half asleep her man comforted her with the promise that they were okay.

## Chapter Eight

Emma closed the shop for four days at Thanksgiving. It was rare for Clay to have four days off in a row without using vacation time, and she meant to spend it with him.

It was possible she was still in her fertile period and she wanted to relax and enjoy her husband. After the first month of doing things Clay’s way had ended in disappointment, she had fallen back into her old habits, worrying herself to a needless frazzle. She needed to take her mind off becoming pregnant. She needed to leave things in Clay’s hands, to concentrate on her home and her life with her husband and just being happy, like him, with what they had.

She made a huge feast, a turkey with all the trimmings, a small ham, and several kinds of pies. They had been invited to Chancie and Micah’s, and it was tempting to go over and feast on Alma’s cooking. But instead they stayed home and stuffed themselves. Afternoon found them dozing on the couch in front of a movie on disk, the dog alongside them. As darkness fell Clay rose and started rummaging around in the kitchen. The dog immediately perked up and followed.

Emma looked on in slight astonishment. “Surely you can’t be hungry?”

“Turkey sandwich. It’s tradition; gotta have it.”

She admired his nicely-shaped butt sticking out as he bent headfirst into the refrigerator. “You want one?” he asked, straightening up with the jar of mayonnaise he’d been searching for held triumphantly in his fist.

She sighed, patting her rounded belly. “Why not,” she said. “It’s tradition.” She was glad the day wasn’t one of their scheduled inoculation days. After the sandwich there definitely wouldn’t be room to stuff anything more into her body, not even if she really wanted to, not even Clay’s special over-sized syringe.

She forced herself to wait. Her obsessiveness had been getting out of hand and besides, long familiarity with the literature that accompanied all pregnancy tests warned that most home tests wouldn’t detect HCG, the hormone that signaled a fertilized egg had implanted itself in the wall of the uterus, until at least six days after fertilization. Although some were sold as early detection kits, supposedly capable of telling six days before a woman’s period was due whether she was pregnant, the tried and true method advised waiting.

On the day her period was due, she reluctantly got out of bed and headed for the bathroom, sure she would be greeted by the telltale stain. It didn’t show.

She held her breath, too scared to hope. She had been late before, a day or two, but the sign of her failure had always showed up eventually.

Her hands started shaking. Today she would test. She opened the pink box. This particular brand was a test-and-confirm method, with two stages, a modern positive/negative and an older method comparing stripes. She wanted a plus or minus first, no guessing. So if it was negative as she expected she could just leave it behind and get on with her day. She thought she was ready for a minus sign. The literature claimed almost one hundred per cent accuracy on the expected first day of a woman's menstrual cycle, but the fine print warned that in case of negative results she may have miscalculated or was one of those women who didn't produce much pregnancy hormone even though they were indeed pregnant.

She unwrapped the test stick, checked to see that its cute little clock showed in the window, dipped the tip in her saved sample for five seconds, recapped the stick, and waited, too nervous to even continue putting on makeup or fixing her hair. One minute. Two minutes. Three. If she took too long in the bathroom, Clay would just go down the hall to wash and shave for work. She stared at the little plastic window as the tiny clock counted down, willing the stick to give her the result she wanted. The clock disappeared and in its place appeared a tiny symbol.

She looked at it. Turned away and then turned back and looked again. The readout was a tiny plus sign. She consulted the literature to be sure. Yes, a plus sign was positive. This test was saying she was pregnant.

She couldn't just accept a happy result. Not after all the years of negative blows. She had to confirm it. Hands trembling violently, she opened the second test, a traditional line test. She dipped the strip in, took it out, and waited. The dark control line appeared, and then, slowly, a pale line to its right.

This test, too, was saying she was pregnant.

She wanted to open the bathroom door, jerk Clay inside, and have him confirm that she wasn't seeing verification in the little plastic windows just because she wanted so much to see positive results.

But she didn't. She would test again tomorrow just to make sure, and maybe the day after that just to make even more sure.

After she made double and perhaps even triple sure, she might even wait for Christmas to tell Clay. She would feel more secure by then in her success, and it was only a few weeks away.

Clay paid off the ring that week. With no fanfare, he came in at lunch, gave her a booster shot, tendered his bank card across the glass counter. The deal was done so dispassionately, showing no emotion at all he walked out the door with the large, showy, antique diamond ring that Emma admired so much and that he refused to explain stuffed in his jacket pocket.

Christmas day Emma locked herself in the bathroom first thing, ran a test just to be absolutely sure, and then went to the kitchen to put the coffee on and start breakfast. She left the plastic stick on the napkin next to Clay's plate along with his flatware.

He came in, kissed her, said, "Merry Christmas," and sat down at the table. She wasn't surprised; they both felt most of the traditions surrounding the holiday were for children. Theirs had always been a subdued celebration and she didn't expect anything more demonstrative from him.

She watched him reach for his napkin, look down before picking it up, hesitate, and then look back up at her. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked, holding up the capped test stick.

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Frankenstein," she said.

"Holy crap! I don't believe it. Emma, we're pregnant?"

"So all the tests for the last couple of weeks have been saying. That little plus sign means yes, we're finally pregnant." Her smile felt tremulous.

He rose and swiftly circled the table to take her in his strong arms and kiss her thoroughly. "My Emma," he said. "A mama at last."

"If I can carry it to term," she warned.

“You just have to have something to worry about, don’t you? You’ll carry this baby to term. But even if worse comes to worst, now we know what works and we’ll try again.”

“But for now, we don’t have to keep to your every-other-day schedule,” she said. She had been waiting for an opening to suggest that idea to him ever since he paid off the ring, to see what he would say. Would he still insist she only got his special brand of carnal care only every other day?

“Yeah, I’ll be glad to give the three-times-a-day a rest. Believe it or not, I feel like I’m getting too old to keep up that schedule. It will be good to go back to once a day.”

She searched his handsome face for any sign he wasn’t telling the absolute truth. She had doubted him so long, she couldn’t believe he’d agree to abandon his rigid schedule so easily. “Once a day, every day?”

“Well, yeah. What are we talking about here, Emma? I thought we were discussing going back to the way things have always been for us. Now that we’ve achieved our objective, we can relax a little bit.”

She laid her forehead against his hard chest and gripped his shirt with both hands. “I would like nothing more than for us to go back to exactly the way we were, happy married people,” she said.

“That’s what I was saying. Emma, are you feeling okay? You keep repeating everything I say.”

“Never better. Oh, Clay, I’m so happy.”

“Me too, baby. Want to give the train set a run?”

“What?” She shook her head. Segue time. “You lost me.”

“My Santa train. Want to watch it make a circuit around the living room?”

“Um, I guess so, Clay. If you want to.”

“Come on. It will be fun.” He tugged her by the hand toward the living room and sat her down on the couch. He flipped a switch, and the train’s wheels began churning as it disappeared behind the tree and then reappeared next to the sofa. The dog still sat hopefully near the kitchen table, refusing to leave the food they had abandoned. He shot them an incredulous look that clearly said, *Are you both nuts?*

Clay came to sit beside her. After the train went once around the room, he exclaimed, “Did you see that?”

“See what?” she asked.

“Pay attention, Emma,” he said. “Now watch. Here it comes again.”

She watched the toy train pass by once again. “What am I looking for, Clay?” she asked, but she was smiling. This was so silly, but it felt good to be silly with Clay.

“All right. One more time. I’ll stop it for you. Look in the engine behind Santa.”

The train stopped right by the arm of the sofa. She leaned over to give the engine and Santa a good look.

Behind the little man in the red suit, seated in the engine compartment of the train, was a small, red velvet box. Its surface a little worn, she could tell it was old. In fact she knew it was antique, she recognized the box.

“Would you look at that?” Clay said. “I think old Santa brought you something, baby.”

“Really?” She could hardly speak. “Really, Clay?”

“Pick it up and open it, Emma.”

She reached down for the domed velvet box. Looking into his eyes over the top of the box, she slowly opened it. Inside sat the wondrous Art Deco ring, the one she loved so much. There was a piece of paper rolled up inside the shank. She pulled it out and opened it.

It said: *For my special woman. With all my love.*

“Oh,” she said. “Oh. Clay.”

“Here, let me put it on,” he said. He reached for the ring, lifted her hand, and slipped it on. “Would you look at that? It fits.”

“It does. It’s perfect. Thank you, Clay.”

“You’re forgetting the most important part, Emma.”

“What’s that?” She swiped at a tear rolling down her cheek.

“You’re supposed to tell me I’m special, too, and that you love me back.”

“You are the most special man in the whole world,” she said past the lump in her throat. “And I love you infinitely, immeasurably, totally and forever.”

“That’s better.” He grinned, showing her his sexy dimple.

“But, Clay, how can you afford this ring?”

“Well, we haven’t had any medical bills to pay in quite a while,” he said. “I’ve been saving up.”

“Babies are expensive, you know,” she reminded.

“So I’ve heard. We’ll deal with it when the time comes. Listen, would you like to celebrate our good news?” He jerked his head toward the back of the house. “With diamonds?”

“And nothing else? Just these old diamonds?”

“Sounds good to me.” Clay pulled Emma to her feet and together they headed for the bedroom.

The dog emitted a very human sounding sigh and lay down with its head on its paws to wait until everybody else got hungry enough to come back and finish breakfast.