



The Widow's
Window

Christi Williams

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by
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L'è meio 'na stala mia che 'n palaz en compagnia.

A cottage of your own is better than a palace shared with others.

—Tyrolean folk saying

Chapter One

The wind kicked up. Dust, leaves, and bits of straw swirled around Madysen's boots as an early dusk cast ranch buildings into dark gray shadow. She zipped up the canvas Carhartt, a favorite of Carl's that still smelled comfortingly like him. The jacket was so old the cuffs and corduroy collar were fraying to strings and wrinkles worn into the fabric showed as white zigzags against the jacket's faded black. Yet, as suitable as it was to be tossed, she couldn't bring herself to part with it.

A spotted cattle dog trotted at her heels, another of Carl's favorites and the only one of the dogs ever allowed in the house. It sniffed the night breezes for scent of fox or coyote or wolf. So far, wolf sightings this far south had been just unsubstantiated rumor, but she and the several Great Pyrenees dogs and the goat-minder llamas kept up a vigilant guard.

She stopped and cocked her head once more, trying to ascertain if the thin wail actually came from the barn as she thought or just from the wind whistling through the double row of almost century-old spruce standing like sentinels against the fence. She was headed for the barn and adjacent goat sheds anyway, to make sure all were safely tucked in for the night, so it wasn't out of her way to go check. But the sound was so out of place, and eerie, almost like a child crying. As she reached for the door handle, the wail came again, louder and more insistent. Now she was sure it came from inside the barn, but still her ears had to be playing some cruel trick: it really did sound like a baby crying. And not an animal baby either, whose calls and squawks and whines had become so familiar to her. This wasn't a calf, or a foal, or a kid, or any other bleating or whinnying or bawling creature that lived on her ranch.

She opened the door, listening intently. No. Definitely not an animal. This was the sound of a very upset baby, a human baby, voicing a high-pitched demand that someone come to its aid *immediately*.

She took a step inside, boots crunching bits of fresh-smelling straw that Antonio had laid down in the stalls that day. The horses, two huge Percherons like those that had always resided here at Willow Vale since Madysen's great-grandparents' time, started nickering and blowing greetings. Big Sam, the latest in a long and distinguished line of ranch horses named Sam, stamped his foot repeatedly, sending a Morse code-type message that he expected to be first in line for any handout of apple or sugar or carrot secreted in a deep canvas pocket. Madysen could feel the dull thuds under her booted feet. In response to the noise and vibration transmitted from Sam's hoof through the barn floor, the strange cries, so near, rose to terrified screams.

She flipped on the light. Everything looked normal, the horses safely in their stalls, the interior of the barn neat and tidy. The horses watched her expectantly as she moved toward the increasingly shrill noise coming from the tack room at the end farthest away from the goat pens,

their heads swiveling to keep her in sight. “Not now, Sam,” Madysen muttered. “I’ve got to check this out.” She eased the door to the tack room open, not really certain what might await her, or what might be startled into jumping out at her.

The crack of yellowish light grew brighter as she pulled, widening the space between the door and the jamb. Nothing leaped out. On the floor, bundled tightly in a neon pink blanket and lying atop a pile of folded, badly pilled blankets of various cheap patterns and colors, lay a red-faced, open-mouthed baby. Eyes pinched shut in fury, little, shiny, toothless gums working, the baby girl—Madysen thought it must be a girl from the color of the blanket—shrieked her displeasure at being so tightly swaddled and then left all alone in the dark.

At least Madysen had assumed she and the child were alone. Maybe she shouldn’t make such an assumption. The horses hadn’t acted as if anything were out of the ordinary and rarely did anyone who didn’t belong on the ranch find an excuse to be there. But still.

“Hello?” she called over her shoulder. “Is anyone out there?”

Only the nickering of horses and the muted bleating of goats outside answered.

She stepped cautiously into the room and when nothing threatening appeared, knelt next to the pile of blankets. Gingerly, she picked up the angry baby, holding it so its hot, wet cheek laid against hers. *Poor little thing*. She wondered how long it had been out here, alone and becoming more and more frantic when no one responded to its cries. Automatically, she began to rock while patting the baby’s back.

“Shh, ssh, little one,” she crooned. “Everything will be all right now. Madysen’s here. Everything will be just fine.”

Antonio Marquez’s cell phone rang. He had been idling away the evening with half his thoughts on a game of Solitaire on an old, extremely slow laptop that belonged to the ranch, while in the background a CD of *norteño* music played. He had satellite television, but he wasn’t in the mood for phony canned audience laughter or badly plotted dramas. He had read every book in the place: musty volumes that had sat around the cabin for years, some leather-bound classics but mostly Zane Grey and Louis L’Amour novels. He supposed he could start over again at the beginning and reread them all, but didn’t feel like putting forth the effort tonight. It was *la patrona*’s turn to check the stock and consequently he had nothing better to do than watch the screen, occasionally tap a key or click the mouse, and muse. Privately, he thought it peculiar that the boss lady should insist on taking her turn every other night on rounds. He would gladly have performed the task each and every night, he in fact rarely had anything better to do with his evenings and would have welcomed the diversion. But Madysen Collins paid his wage, admittedly a generous one at that, and she made all the rules. He thought it the better part of valor to keep his mouth shut even if he did find those rules a bit eccentric at times.

He answered the phone.

“Antonio? I’m sorry to bother you. Can you finish checking the goats and the hens? I was just in the barn; the horses are fine.”

“Sí, of course,” he said. A loud cry from her end interrupted them; it gradually trailed off to a hiccupping keening. “Are you all right, *señora*?” he asked in a louder voice, trying to be heard over the unfamiliar sound.

“I’m fine...I think. Antonio, could you come over here to the main house when you’ve finished your rounds? I found something. And I’m not quite sure what I should do with it.”

She wanted his advice? That was a first. Madysen Collins was one very self-contained woman. She rarely showed what she was feeling about anything, and had kept their relationship on a business-only basis for as long as he had been here. “Sure. Yes. I will be there as soon as I check the animals.”

“Thank you, Antonio,” she said, and disconnected as the wailing from her side of the conversation began rising in volume once more.

He pulled on his boots, donned his jacket and leather gloves, jammed his *Tejana* cowboy hat down on his head, and left the little log house that had been fully updated this past summer for his personal use. Walking across the yard, he neared the goat pens. The males, kept separate from the females, were still in high rut, pawing and snorting, butting each other, the fence posts, and whatever else they could while making the strange blubbering noise that girl goats seemed to find irresistible. The males hardly slept or ate while in rut, they smelled awful, they fought, and they had worn a deep furrow next to the fence as they paced the enclosure, waiting impatiently for their chance at the does. But the strong wire fence continued to hold and the channel wasn't deep enough to allow them to escape, and so they seemed as content for the night as goats with nearby females in estrus could possibly be.

Sometimes Antonio really despised those goats. But goats were what had brought him here in the first place. If he felt he had hardly advanced in life from tending his *abuela's* goats as a young boy, such feelings didn't signify. Working the dairy goats for the senora's cheese business was how he made his living, and so he was hoping that as the rutting faded with the coming cold weather he would come back around again to liking them somewhat. And he didn't have much choice in the matter anyway. He had applied to the manpower broker that provided foreign agricultural workers to Americans, la señora had provided the letter and done all else necessary to get him here with a valid green card, and so he did what he must in order to ensure her animals remained safe and healthy, and so thereby retain his job.

He had worked for Madysen for over nine months now. He was among those who were willing to come and work on isolated ranches, as sheepherders, or as migrant farm workers picking lettuce, peaches, or beets. The difference was, he didn't have to go back. His knowledge of goats, of all things, had assured him a place here. It wasn't a bad life, except for the remoteness and the sometimes crushing boredom, and much better than scraping along trying to make a living at home. He hadn't really expected to be chosen for this particular job, and he especially hadn't counted on finding a tough ranch woman with unexpectedly dazzling looks like Madysen Collins when he got here. He still couldn't get over such a young, beautiful woman living out here all alone and in charge of a bunch of goats, horses, chickens, dogs, and llamas, as well as a milking operation, a dairy, and an artisanal cheese business. Madysen ran herself to the point of exhaustion trying to keep it all going. In Antonio's opinion she didn't take proper care of herself—she was too thin. He often noticed her bedroom light on well into the wee hours, and assumed she wasn't sleeping well either. Not that he kept close track of her activities, he assured himself. But from what he could determine, she seemed to operate largely on nerves and caffeine for approximately eighteen or nineteen hours a day. And so it was obvious she did need him here, and he was happy to be here, so he was glad to be of service to her any way he could.

But the longer Antonio remained at Willow Vale and the better he got to know Madysen Collins, the more he found himself fruitlessly wishing *la patrona* might eventually need him for something besides tending her animals, and that his services might be required elsewhere than her barn, coop, or stock pens. She really was a stunning woman, and if a little emotionally remote, still fairly easy to work for. Her demands were few, and as long as he did his job, she kept her distance and said little directly to him.

He checked that the chickens were all safely roosting for the night, and then headed for the big house. His boot heels pounding up the front stairs, he crossed the porch and raised his hand to rap on the glass of the front door.

"It's open," Madysen called. "Come on in, Antonio."

The sight that greeted him as he opened the door could not have been more surreal. Pretty, blond Madysen Collins perched in an old wooden rocker, a tiny brown-skinned baby topped with a shock of straight, black hair in her arms. Madysen was trying her best to aim the plastic tip of a large syringe filled with what he assumed was goat milk into the child's greedy little mouth. He stood there staring, hat held loosely in the hand hanging at his side. No words adequate to his

surprise occurred to him.

"I found this baby," Madysen said.

"Sí, señora," he replied.

"In the barn," she said.

He nodded mutely, as if for all he knew Wyoming ranch women discovered babies in their barns every day. He didn't know what she expected him to say. It was probably wise to say nothing.

"What do you think I should do?" she asked.

Antonio tried to swallow. He couldn't seem to drag his gaze from the baby. His throat was very dry.

"To tell you the truth, I'm at a loss here, Antonio." The boss lady carefully squirted a little more milk in the baby's mouth. They had bottles for the goat kids that didn't take well to the teat or whose mothers rejected them, but she apparently didn't want to try one of those on a tiny baby. "Do you think I should call the sheriff?"

He forced himself to speak past a mouth gone as sere as a desert. "No, señora," he said. "I do not think you should call the sheriff."

She glanced at him sharply as she hoisted the baby to her shoulder and patted its back. "Why not?"

He hesitated, then said, "Because if you call the authorities, they will take away the baby."

She examined him closely from where she sat. "You want to keep it? How can we possibly do that?" She paused, her gaze narrowing. "Is there something that you know about this situation, that perhaps I should know as well, Antonio?"

"I...ah, I think so, yes, señora." He fingered his turned-up hat brim.

"Well? And what might that be, this something that I should know?" Her voice was beginning to acquire an impatient edge as he continued to hem and haw. He knew she liked to face things head on and deal with situations as they occurred. He knew she didn't much like surprises and she especially didn't like evasion.

"Well, the baby...that baby, I recognize her. I mean, I know whose baby that is. I'm pretty sure. No, I am sure."

"Okay, we got that much." The boss's full lips tightened with exasperation. "Whose baby is this, Antonio?"

He swallowed again. "Mine. You cannot call the sheriff. Please, señora. That baby is mine," he said almost in a whisper.

Madysen's head tilted. She frowned, staring at him as if trying to decipher the meaning of words that made no sense.

"I mean," he hurried to add, "that is my daughter's baby. My granddaughter. She is three months old. Her name is Lidia."

He crossed the space between them and held out his arms. With a stunned expression on her pretty face, Madysen wordlessly let him take the baby from her. She even handed him the half-empty syringe and a dishtowel that she had been using to wipe dribbles from the baby's chin.

She watched as he sat on the sofa across from her, an old wagon wheel end table on the worn carpet between them. He began attempting to feed the baby as he had seen her do.

Antonio looked down into the baby's dark eyes. "*No te preocupes, pequeña*," he said softly.

"What are you saying to her?" Madysen asked.

"I told her not to worry. That things will be all right."

"That's funny. That's what I told her, too." Madysen's lips stretched over her teeth, but Antonio didn't think it was a real smile, more an expression of tired resignation.

There was a long silence as Antonio continued feeding the baby. At last, as the child's eyelids started drooping, Madysen asked, "What are we going to do? This is temporary, I hope. Your daughter is planning on coming back?"

"I cannot say." He paused, looked up at the beautiful woman sporting dark circles beneath her tired-looking eyes. She sat watching him feed the baby with her cheek propped on one hand, blinking as if fighting sleep herself.

"But I do not think my daughter will be returning."

It was Madysen's turn to hesitate. "In that case, what do you suggest we do?"

He began inching toward the front of the sofa, trying not to jiggle the baby awake while he got to his feet. "I will keep Lidia, of course. I will take her home with me. We will not bother you further, señora."

He almost made it to the door before she said, "Wait right there."

He turned back toward the light. Back toward Madysen.

"Have you ever taken care of a baby before, Antonio?"

"Well...not by myself. Gaby's mother took care of her mostly. I wasn't really home that much, always working or else off looking for work."

She heaved a sigh. "Then your plan to take that baby to the cabin is impossible. Stay here," she said in a decisive voice. "I'll make up the bed in Jillian's room. We both need to get some rest. If the baby wakes up during the night, we can take turns tending her instead of you trying to do it all yourself."

He was moved that the boss would do so much for him, a hired hand, and the child who meant nothing to her. "That is very generous of you, señora."

Madysen sighed. "*De nada*," she said and waved a slender-fingered hand that sported short, blunt nails.

But, no matter what she said, it was something. She looked so tired, Antonio felt sorry for her, and especially sorry that he had inadvertently caused her even more work. He had known nothing of Gabriela's plans to abandon her baby, but still, Gaby was his daughter and Lidia his granddaughter. Their relationship to him meant he was partially responsible when shame such as this descended on his family.

He helped *la patrona* make up the bed in her absent daughter's room, and then she pulled a drawer from the dresser and lined it with blankets from a linen closet in the hall to make a crib for the baby. Antonio placed Lidia there on her back. She had apparently worn herself out; she slept soundly and didn't stir.

"I'll leave the doors open so I can hear if she needs me," Madysen said.

Watching the woman carefully for some clue as to how he should act as a guest in her home instead of her hired man, he said, "Okay."

"Milk's in the fridge. There are more clean syringes on the counter."

"Maybe she sleeps through the night," he said hopefully. When Madysen didn't answer, he said, "But probably not, huh?"

"Probably not," she agreed. "If I hear her fussing, I will get up."

"I hope that will not be necessary," he said. "Good night, señora."

"Good night, Antonio," she said. She crossed the hall, gathered her night clothes and went into the bathroom.

Antonio undressed and got between the cool sheets of Madysen's daughter's single bed. The mattress was too short for him, and he thought between that and the unfamiliar presence of the small person lying next to him in a dresser drawer, he probably wouldn't get much sleep.

He was still awake when Madysen exited the bathroom in a cloud of perfumed steam, clad in a nightgown that revealed the shape of her long legs and generous breasts when illuminated by the bedside lamp in her room. Antonio was astounded. He rubbed his eyes, thinking he might be dreaming. But his cock responded to the vision she presented without hesitation, as if with the display of the boss's body—no matter how unintentional—a silent invitation had been issued.

It couldn't be. No. Could it? Could she be advertising to him what she meant for him to have?

Impossible. He would be a complete *idiot* to think so, only the long period of enforced celibacy out here in the middle of nowhere making him think something existed that did not exist outside of his fevered imagination.

He watched for as long as he could stand it, and then flung an arm over his eyes so he didn't have to continue looking. He'd caught sight of her completely naked, more than once, framed in that same bedroom window. But that had taken place at a distance. If perhaps a little wrong of him to stand at his own window staring at the vision, still it had been safe. This right here was up close and personal. If he even attempted what the sight of her body beneath the sheer gown made him want to do, he would probably get himself fired from his job and thrown off her property.

He to his side, his eyes tightly shut as he tried to ignore the twitching of his erect cock brushing his belly.

Now he was positive he would spend the night without sleep.

Chapter Two

Well aware that the nightie she wore was transparent—it had been one of Carl's favorites—Madysen delayed actually getting into bed. First she stood in front of the nightstand in direct line of sight of the open bedroom doors facing each other across the hall as if debating with herself over something, while giving her guest a good, long look. Then she bent to open the lower drawer, and stayed that way for a minute or two, rummaging around with her legs spread and her breasts swaying loosely. When she heard a muffled groan, she knew she had the attention of the audience she desired. She stood, turning sideways and taking a deep breath, stretching her arms over her head with her tummy tucked in and back arched so her large breasts were nicely pointed. As the material of her nightgown brushed against her nipples, they hardened into little peaks. She yawned, running her palms lightly over her breasts and down her flat stomach to rest on her hips, stretching the gown tight and outlining her shape. There was an answering creak of bedsprings from across the hall, and another groan, a bit louder than the first.

Smiling to herself, she reached for the switch and turned off the light, plunging the room into darkness and thereby pulling the curtain on the show for the night.

She had mourned Carl hard for more than a year. When he died, it felt like the stuffing had been yanked out of her. Then before Madysen was ready for it, Jilly left for college. For months now, she had dragged herself around like a limp cotton rag shaped like a woman, faking being alive and just going through the motions.

She had held herself firmly in check in these last couple of weeks since she had begun to emerge from the fog of widowhood—and at the same time had begun to notice what an extremely attractive man she had hired. Covertly, she watched Antonio Marquez when she thought he wasn't aware of her scrutiny. And she liked what she saw: the fluid sureness of his movements, the strength in his muscled back and arms and flexing thighs. Sometimes, she was almost sure he watched her too, although it was just a feeling and she had never caught him openly ogling her. She had kept them on an unequal footing, boss lady and hired man, longer than she really wanted to. She knew she came across as tough and unyielding—but better that, she told herself, than too easy.

Only now she felt herself coming alive again. Now she was coming back to herself, and found she was already wanting to play with fire. She had so loved showing off her body. Carl had loved her showing off her body. The lush valley, Willow Valley, was a closed society of few people. The ranch itself, Willow Vale, was an isolated little paradise in a fertile valley hidden away by itself in the high desert. Her exhibitionism had always been their exciting secret, hers and Carl's.

Now Carl was dead. Jillian was off starting a new life. Madysen was suddenly no longer wife or mommy or anything recognizable to herself except goat milker and cheese maker. She

was left here on the ranch all alone...well, all alone with the Latin hunk, Antonio Marquez, living just across the yard.

Alone with Antonio...except for the new wrinkle of Antonio's little granddaughter Lidia, of course.

Madysen asked herself if she was really ready to start up again. Relationships, even those built strictly on sex, had a habit of becoming so complicated. She had waited to test her kinky little routine out on Antonio, and she wasn't certain what daring impulse made her put it on display the very same night she found little Lidia crying in the barn. The discovery of the baby had been a convenient way to get Antonio inside her house, and to give him a little preliminary show, but already the difficulties of the situation were more than she felt ready to handle.

She would just have to wait and see how things went.

Antonio woke suddenly, the unfamiliar snuffling sound coming again as he gained full consciousness. He tried to think what the sound might be, and then remembered Gaby's baby. Remembered that he was sleeping in *la patrona's* house in a bed next to Gaby's baby.

He slid an arm out of the covers to try and comfort the baby, see if she would be willing to just go back to sleep so he wouldn't have to get up and risk waking Madysen. As he extended his arm in the darkness, his hand brushed fabric, as well as the outlines of two round, warm mounds. There was a sharp intake of breath, which he echoed when he suddenly realized what had just happened.

Madysen, dressed in her filmy nightgown, knelt next to the baby, who was in a dresser drawer next to his bed. Without knowing she was there, when he reached his hand out, he brushed her breasts.

He didn't move. Neither did she.

Her generous breasts, too large really for such a slender woman but somehow perfection attached to her body, remained resting lightly on his hand and wrist. Her skin radiated the warmth of her bed through the thin fabric. His skin burned with an answering heat where she touched him.

Madysen bent forward. He couldn't believe it. Could she deliberately be mashing one of those luscious breasts into his palm? He didn't dare cup the ripe roundness pressing against his open hand as every instinct urged him to do. He lay supine and didn't allow himself a response as the boss lady got to her feet with Lidia grasped in her arms, hesitated for a moment, then turned and left the room.

Sometime later, an eternity or perhaps only minutes, she returned with the baby. He didn't dare extend his arm again, even though he wanted to. He really, really wanted to. But he wasn't quite sure what was going on here. All the glimpses of Madysen's body by lamplight, the feel of her soft breast in his hand, could be accidental. If he was misreading the situation, if he made a move toward her and she became offended, she could fire him. She was, after all, the boss.

He tried to decipher what she was doing by sound alone. Out here, miles from civilization's street lights and security lights and porch lights, the only illumination came from the stars or the moon. There was no moonlight tonight, and starlight didn't penetrate very far inside the house. So he listened. She bent to carefully place the sleeping baby back in the nest of blankets. Then she stood for a moment beside the bed where he lay, as if undecided and trying to make up her mind about something. But she made no further move toward him. Finally his ears told him, and the receding swish of her nightgown against her legs affirmed, that she was gone.

He thought he probably wouldn't sleep, since his breathing was harsh and uneven and his steel hard cock a torment, but eventually he did. He woke to the smells of bacon frying, bread toasting, and coffee brewing. Beside him, in the drawer on the floor, Lidia began whimpering. He hurriedly rose from the bed and dressed, and by the time he picked up the soaking wet baby, the hitch in her breathing told him little Lidia was preparing to cut loose with some really

unhappy wails. “You are wet and you are probably hungry as well, *sí*, Lidia? Maybe the smell of bacon makes your stomach growl as loudly as your *abuelo*’s.”

He had to smile at the improvised plastic pants she wore over her dish towel diaper. Madysen had cut leg holes in a grocery bag and taped the ends together around the baby’s waist. It was fairly effective, but the heavier the wet diaper became, the more the improvised affair sagged and threatened to tear away completely.

When he descended the stairs to the kitchen, Madysen, standing over an old gas range of chipped white enamel, pointed with her spatula to a stack of cotton dish towels. He retreated to the sofa in the living room with Lidia and a sweet-smelling dish towel printed with cheerful daisies. Antonio couldn’t recall ever changing a diaper before, but he didn’t think it could be that hard. So he was surprised at how difficult it was to diaper an angry, hungry, kicking baby. He was terrified that he would jab her soft skin with a safety pin, which, thankfully, didn’t actually happen. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself at accomplishing his task until he lifted her up and the diaper drooped to her knees, threatening to fall off completely.

There came an unfamiliar noise. He turned toward the kitchen to find Madysen propped against the doorframe. She was laughing. At him. He couldn’t recall ever hearing the sound of her laughter in the nine months he had known her.

“Antonio, you’re hopeless,” she said. “Go eat breakfast. I’ll get Miss Lidia fixed up, and then you can feed her while I eat.”

He grinned, shrugging, and yielded his place on the sofa to Madysen. Almost before he could seat himself in her kitchen and pick up his fork, she was back with the baby. Propping Lidia over her shoulder, she took a pitcher of milk from the fridge, poured some out into a measuring cup and put it in the microwave to heat. When it was done, she stuck the tip of her little finger in it to check the temperature. Then they waited for him to finish eating, Madysen patiently and Lidia increasingly peevishly.

He was uncomfortable with the boss lady’s blue eyes watching his every move. But he was also hungry. He hurried to finish, hoping he wasn’t making her think he was completely without manners, gulping his food and swigging his coffee.

“May I ask, Antonio, what your daughter was thinking when she dropped her baby off here? How did she assume you were going to manage?”

“I do not know.” He wiped a bit of egg from his lips and stood to fill the syringe and then to relieve Madysen of Lidia. “Honestly, I wonder sometimes if Gabriela thinks at all about what she is doing, or if she only goes along with whatever she feels at the moment. I am sure that is how she ended up with Lidia in the first place, by not thinking. And that is probably how she came to abandon her own baby.”

Madysen sat and picked up her own utensils preparatory to eating breakfast, then paused. “How old is Gabriela?”

“Sixteen,” he said, not raising his eyes from Lidia’s innocent deep black eyes intently studying his face, to what he was sure were the boss’s accusatory blue ones. “Gaby always did whatever she wanted. And what she wanted, ever since she laid eyes on him or so she said, was a young hotshot named Rafael.”

“And did her mother not try to stop her?”

“I do not know, *senhora*,” he said. “I was not married to Gaby’s mother. I have not lived with them for many years. I sent money when I could find work, and saw Gabriela when I could, which was not often. I only met Rafael once, here. Gaby was already big with his baby, and he was talking about going back. I think, after she had Lidia, Gaby decided to follow him. Lidia would have been inconvenient.”

He watched Madysen run her coffee cup contemplatively across her bottom lip. “It’s none of my business, but may I ask why you didn’t marry Gabriela’s mother?”

He looked down into the round-cheeked, innocent face of Gaby’s baby. “There

were...others. Gaby's mother always had men hanging around. I could not bring myself to marry that kind of woman."

She glanced up sharply. "Yet when she told you Gabriela was your child, you believed her?"

He shrugged. "Gaby is mine."

She put her coffee cup down, staring at him. "I'm sorry, but how can you know that? Have you had blood tests?"

"I just know." After another pause where she just continued looking at him, he said, "You think me a fool, sí?"

She examined him, blue eyes traveling from his booted feet all the way up to meet his gaze again. After a long moment, she said, "I think you might be a man of honor, Antonio."

He couldn't help himself. She was making him so nervous, watching him with a fascination not unlike a housecat playing with a cornered insect. "A foolish man of honor," he insisted. "Like Don Quixote and his windmills."

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Perhaps."

If she was surprised he knew of Don Quixote, she didn't show it. As she added nothing more, he felt embarrassed suddenly, as if she couldn't help but think he was fishing for compliments. "If you could watch Lidia, if that is not asking too much, I will start on the morning chores," he said.

She held out her arms, and he handed her the baby. "I'll be out pretty soon to help you with the bucks, Antonio."

He thought of her stinky male goats and how he had to dress in heavy coveralls and gloves in order to handle them and not get their reek on his clothes. "It is not necessary, señora. I can do it alone."

"Antonio. I will be out to help you with the bucks as soon as Lidia goes down for her nap."

He nodded his head in assent and turned to leave. For all the sharing of secrets, he had risen to no higher position in Madysen Collins' estimation than the one he had previously held. Extraordinary circumstances aside, he was still just the hired man.

He fed the goats, filling the troughs that ran down a center aisle in the shed so they had to poke their heads through pipes to get at the feed. Goats were the most wasteful creatures on earth, he thought. If allowed to, they would scatter and trample all their food. And these particular goats had to be fed a careful, expensive mixture. These pampered goats couldn't be allowed like other goats to eat anything they could find in an ordinary pasture; for Madysen's cheese business she needed consistent results from their milk with no odd wild taste to ruin the product.

He fed the big horses, led them out to the corral, and then cleaned the barn.

He was scattering feed for the chickens when Madysen emerged from the house. She had on a clean pair of coveralls, disguising her curves, and leather gloves and work boots. With no ado, assuming Antonio would follow her lead without spoken directions, she chose one of the females in heat, herded her out of the communal pen and down a fenced aisle to a place where she could be penned up alone. Then she approached the enclosure where the bucks were. When he could determine which buck she had her eye on, Antonio headed Madysen off to begin manhandling it where they wanted it to go. Once the animal caught on to the idea that he was destined to mate with the single bleating doe, he began blubbing his lips in earnest and fighting to get to her.

The mating itself took only seconds, but in order to be sure the does came up pregnant, Antonio and Madysen let the bucks have at them three or four times before separating the amorous pairs.

Near noon, Madysen grimaced, saying, "I think that's enough for now, Antonio. I'm more than ready for a shower."

He held himself in check as best he could from following that line of thought where he could well visualize her naked, wet body. Instead he contented himself with watching as she unzipped

her coveralls and peeled them off, revealing a tight shirt and jeans that hugged her body. When she bent over, presenting her ass to him, he thought the top of his head might blow off from the instant explosion of heat that rose inside him like a geyser.

“Come on. Hurry up and get your clothes off,” she said over her shoulder. “We’ll have to take turns in case Lidia wakes up. Do you want to go first?”

He was amazed at this offer. He had thought he would go to the little cabin where he lived to get cleaned up, but Madysen was right. In that case there would be no one to tend Lidia while Madysen was in the bathroom. Unversed in the ways of mothers, who all over the world showered while no one watched their babies, Antonio could only agree. Unsuspecting, he had no idea he was being steered toward another of Madysen’s favorite kinds of erotic activity as he shucked his smelly coveralls.

“Why don’t you go first, señora?” Antonio asked when he saw that Lidia was awake and starting to fuss. “I will feed Lidia, and then go over to the little house to get some clean clothes.”

Madysen seemed to consider this, then making up her mind that he probably couldn’t manage on his own, she said, “Don’t you want me to change her diaper first?”

“I will manage,” Antonio asserted with supreme confidence.

After his initial disastrous experience with diaper changing, Madysen found this hard to believe, but she tried hard not to laugh aloud.

“Well, okay then.” She went out to the mudroom attached to the back of the house, and kicked off her boots. Then she wriggled out of her jeans and wearing only her panties, bent to pull off her socks, making sure the mounds of her ass faced in Antonio’s direction. She straightened, pulled off her shirt, and threw her clothes in the washer. “Just add yours to this load when you’re ready,” she said, and nonchalantly sauntered toward the stairs. She was grinning her head off at the look on his face as he stood open-mouthed and with his feet planted to the floor in her kitchen, staring at her breasts.

“And don’t drop Lidia,” she called as she mounted the stairs.

“No. I won’t,” he said, and she could imagine him clutching the little girl tightly until he could safely lay her down and change her diaper.

Madysen hurried through her shower. If Carl had been there and she’d walked across the kitchen in her bra and panties on the way upstairs, he would have taken up the unspoken invitation and followed. But this situation was so different. Not only were she and Antonio not married, they were hardly acquaintances. She would be willing to bet he wouldn’t dare come up the stairs after her.

And she was right. When she went back downstairs, toweling her hair, Antonio was sitting in the living room trying to feed Lidia with the syringe. There was a stack of neatly folded clothes on one of the kitchen chairs, so she assumed he had made it to the cabin and back in the interim.

“Your turn,” Madysen said, smiling, hoping he would follow her lead and undress right here so she could watch. But no such luck. He rose, handed her the baby. She noticed with a grin that he had dispensed with the pins. Lidia now wore a taped-on dish towel as well as the modified plastic bag arrangement.

Antonio headed for the stairs, fully dressed and carrying his clean clothes. Madysen sighed. She was disappointed. But not defeated. Not by a long shot.

She carried Lidia into the kitchen, where she rummaged through the drawers for something baby-safe to amuse her. She heard the water in the bathroom come on. Returning to the living room, she pulled an afghan from the sofa, tossed it on the floor, and placed Lidia on it. Then she handed the baby one red plastic spatula and one blue one, watched to see that they would suffice for a while as toys, and headed for the stairs.

She waited a few moments after she heard the metal shower curtain rings sliding along the

rod, telling her Antonio was under the spray. Then she eased the bathroom door open and slipped inside.

The small room was filling up with steam, but it was no more steamy than she already felt. She approached the tub, put her hand up to the curtain, and started pulling it aside as slowly and noiselessly as she could manage.

Antonio had his back to her, busily soaping his arms and chest. He had wide shoulders, a narrow waist, a really nice pair of butt cheeks, and long, muscular legs. His hair gleamed wetly blue black and his skin was an all-over lovely shade of milk-and-coffee brown.

He bent to wash his lower legs and feet, and she had a nice rear view of his package, hanging scrotum with large oval testes. The head and a few inches of his cock hung below that. Madysen appreciated its length and girth even while soft. She licked her lips, an anticipatory hum starting low in her throat.

Antonio straightened and reached for the shampoo, then began lathering his hair. Madysen followed the tracks of the bubbles with her eyes, down the firm column of his neck, between the wings of his shoulder blades, down the ridges of his spine, and finally between the cheeks of his ass, where strings of bubbles plopped onto the shower floor.

He turned toward her, eyes shut against the sting of shampoo, and leaned back to begin rinsing his hair, running his hands through it and massaging his scalp. He let the water run down his face to rinse off the last of the shampoo, flicked it away with his hands...and then he opened his eyes.

Madysen let her gaze slide unhurriedly from his cock up to his horrified, wide open eyes, and then just as slowly back down. His cock twitched, immediately starting to harden and to lengthen and then to rise. He stood, just letting the water sluice off his shoulders as his erection grew.

She smiled.

“Just lovely,” she murmured.

She slid her right arm inside the curtain, out of the spray and deliberately not close enough to touch him. She made a circle of her fingers, mimicked jacking him off, raised her eyes to his face to see if he would get the message. She licked her lips again in anticipation.

A slight frown marred his features, as if he wasn’t entirely sure he was reading her right. She made the stroking motion again, and as if without volition, his hand obediently rose to grasp his cock.

Not taking his eyes from hers, he slid his curled fingers up and down his shaft. Harder, and then faster. She could hear the sound of his fingers tightening and loosening, a light slapping noise, as they worked his wet cock.

As she watched, she knew when he was close and getting himself ever closer. She held up one finger, and unquestioningly, he stopped. She placed that finger over the little eyehole in the head of his cock and rubbed delicately, once, twice, while she watched his face for his reaction.

He closed his eyes. Moaned. She deliberately slid her finger once more over the little opening, slick with his excitement. Smiling, Madysen licked her finger, gently closed the curtain, and walked back downstairs.

Chapter Three

Madysen had Lidia in her lap, waving the spatula in front of her face as the baby reached for it, when Antonio came silently down the stairs. He stood looking at the two of them, his dirty laundry in his arms. But when Madysen said nothing, he continued through the kitchen to the mudroom. She heard the washer lid drop, the dial spin, and the water start flowing.

Antonio returned to the living room and again stood before her. He looked nice, cotton pants and a button-decorated *guayabera* shirt, square cut on the bottom and not tucked in. He smelled

good too. He smelled like her shampoo, but still.

“Would you like to drive to town with me?” Madysen asked. “The baby needs some diapers and a bottle, and a car seat and probably a playpen as well.”

“That’s all you have to say?” he said. “Do I want to go to town?”

“Would there be something else to say, Antonio?” Madysen put on her most innocent expression, but refrained from batting her eyes. She was playing with him, but she didn’t think he really minded, despite his stern expression.

“What’s happening here, between us—” he began, gesturing with his long-fingered hands.

“Don’t you like it?” she hurried to ask before he got too far into questions and explanations and justifications. She was what she was, she liked what she liked, and there was no reason behind it. It just was. He either agreed that he liked it, or he didn’t.

“Sí, yes, of course I like it,” he said.

“Well, then.” Madysen got to her feet as if the subject had been fully covered and was now firmly closed. “Were you wanting to go into Hawk Point with me?”

He stood his ground. Then he asked, “Would you at least call me Tony?”

She smiled. “I’m Madysen,” she said.

Antonio drove the ranch pickup over dirt roads until he hit pavement, and then turned north. Their conversation had been fairly desultory, ranch talk of goats and feed and new kids in the spring, of the growth of her cheese business with the rising national hunger for natural products and the need for a new pasteurizer soon. Madysen really should hire more help, the business was growing beyond her ability to handle it even with Antonio there, but she was putting it off as long as she could. She liked the valley the way it was, quiet, and distant from town noise, and town smells of diesel exhaust and fried food, and town experiences of congested streets and impatient, rude people, and crowded parking lots and stores.

“I only have one question for you,” she said when she thought he was totally off guard. “Are you married now?”

He took his eyes off the road to give her a narrow look. “Would it make any difference if I was?” he asked.

She hesitated. “Probably not much.”

“But maybe a little?”

“Maybe a little,” she admitted.

“Well, I’m not married.”

“*Bueno*,” she said, “good. The fewer the obstacles, the better.”

The corner of his mouth twitched, not enough to be considered a true smile. “I have a question for you,” he said.

“That’s fair,” she said. Lidia had slid down during the ride; Madysen hitched her back up on her shoulder so she had a firmer grip on the baby, her little round butt riding one forearm.

“Do you do what we did, with other men?” He gave her a brief sideways glance.

She drew in a breath, considered how to answer. Then she said, “Would it make a difference if I did?”

He paused. “Maybe not,” he said slowly, apparently thinking hard about it before giving her an answer.

“But maybe yes?” she prodded.

“Probably yes,” he said.

“You’re the only one since my husband. He was my first. You are my second.”

She saw the corner of his lip twitch again. “*Bueno*,” he said, without looking at her.

He turned into the lot of a big box discount store. They were lucky to have made it this far without getting a ticket for having the baby riding in Madysen’s lap, and she intended to remedy that lack and the danger to the child before they headed back home.

But there were more than just things lacking. She had been lacking something for a long time. She was coming to suspect that maybe Tony and baby Lidia had been sent to address that lack in her life. Maybe they were even meant to start filling the big hole that had been carved out of her heart when Carl died.

Inside the store, Madysen complained of the heat. She handed Antonio the baby while she removed her jacket. Jeans like a second skin covered her perfect heart-shaped ass, pleated just so beneath the knee with the bottom hem riding atop her ostrich skin boots. Her blond hair hung in waves down her back. Her form-fitting Western shirt clung to her, accentuating those impressive tits on her chest. She was a cart-stopping sight in the crowded store. Honestly, he thought her *chichis* alone could halt a wild bison stampede.

Antonio enjoyed hanging back, holding the baby, just watching Madysen shop. She was a methodical shopper, no aisle traversed twice, rarely pausing to read labels and compare. She knew what she wanted and where to get it. Before long, the cart was full of clothes, diapers, toys, and whatever else she deemed necessary for the proper care of Lidia. Antonio had not had the faintest inkling that one little baby required so much stuff.

Every male eye, and not a few female ones, was drawn ineluctably to the sight of those twin knolls straining the front of Madysen's shirt. She seemed to appreciate the attention while not overtly courting it. She was just a natural eye magnet; she couldn't help the way she looked. But now he could understand how she came by her need to show off. It was either try to hide her endowments in slump-shouldered big shirts, or straighten her spine, throw her shoulders back and walk tall. His participation in this harmless exhibition in the store was limited to checking her out, noticing her effect on other men, and relishing it as much as he could without actually running into anyone since he was not paying attention to where he was going.

He drew a few oblique glances himself, but he was used to that. After all these years, he still didn't quite fit in here, his rolled up hat brim and dark eyes and skin announcing that he was different. And yet, as time passed, he found he didn't fit in at home anymore either. The last time he had been to Durango, he had been left out of conversations several times because there were so many new words he didn't understand what people were talking about. It was crazy, this feeling of being suspended somewhere between two worlds: the poverty and hopelessness of his home country, and the casual wealth so taken for granted in the United States, where the only difference between rich and poor was the size of their credit spending limit.

Speaking of which, he thought, the credit card he had been so proud to obtain courtesy of his permanent resident status was going to take a major hit from the small mountain of baby goods now going through the checkout. After Madysen finished piling things on the belt and went to stand near the card reader, he bumped her gently with the cart. When she looked up with a frown wrinkling her smooth forehead, he motioned with his chin for her to move out of the way.

"I assumed at least some of this would be my gift to Lidia," she whispered as they pushed the cart through and then stood side by side, she holding the baby now while he slid his card through the reader.

"Not necessary, señora," he said in a low voice for just her ears. "Lidia is my responsibility."

They refilled the cart and headed for the iron benches near the door, where they unpacked the new car seat and looked at the directions to make sure they understood how it was to be used correctly in the truck. Lidia rummaged through the bags until she found a pink fleece snowsuit, bundling the baby into it for the ride home.

"We won't have time to stop and eat before Lidia starts getting hungry again. Do you want to pick up something before we head out? My treat."

He thought of what he had just spent on the baby. The boss's offer sounded good to him. "Very well. Thank you, señora."

“De nada,” she replied, handing him the baby so she could put her jacket on. “And I thought we agreed you were to start calling me Madysen.”

They hurried home to the ranch, to feed the baby from a proper bottle, have dinner, get the horses in the barn, and give a quick check to the other animals. While Tony was outside, Madysen bathed Lidia, washed her hair with her new baby shampoo, lotioned and powdered her, and put her in a cloth diaper/plastic pants combo with Velcro closures that even her grandpa should be able to master, and finally a pair of warm jammies. She held the baby close and inhaled deeply. There was nothing like the smell of a clean, sleepy baby, she thought. She rocked with Lidia until the child fell asleep. Then she laid her down in the new playpen, covered her warmly, went upstairs and brushed her teeth and her hair, and came back down wait for Antonio.

She heard his boots on the porch, then the door opening, and then there he was. How had she missed for most of a year how incredibly good looking he was? Tall and slim, with a rangy musculature that she was beginning to find irresistible. Tall, dark, and handsome indeed.

“Madysen?” he whispered, after glancing at the sleeping baby, the first use of her name a bit awkward on his tongue.

She pointed in the direction of the stairs.

He gave her one of those corner-of-the-mouth twitches, retreated to the mud room and removed his boots and hat and coat. He paused a moment when going back through the living room, watching her just rocking and waiting for him. Once more she raised a finger to indicate that he should go upstairs. He grinned and obeyed.

She gave him time for using the bathroom, getting undressed, and climbing into bed. Then she followed him up the stairs.

She was surprised to find him back in Jilly’s room in the little twin bed. She had thought her invitation was clear. But that was okay, she decided. She could make this work.

She entered her room, leaving the door open as he had done across the hall, and turned on the bedside lamp. She turned toward him, reached for and opened the tab of her jeans, and then slowly unzipped them. Her hands on her hips, she turned her back toward him and began inching her jeans down over her long legs. When she finally had them in a bunch on the floor, she bent, giving him a good view of the crotch of her red lacy panties and the twin globes of her ass. The sheets on the bed across the hall rustled, and she heard him groan. She slowly straightened, and then repeated the whole process with her panties, this time spreading her legs as she bent over, in order to give him a good look at what awaited him. She shook her head, setting her blond hair swaying from side to side.

Once again she straightened, throwing her long hair over her shoulders. She turned sideways, reaching for the buttons of her shirt. One by one she undid them, and then aching slowly started peeling the shirt from her arms. She threw it to the floor with her jeans and panties, and then just stood there, letting the light illuminate her magnificent breasts enclosed in red satin and lace. She ran her hands over them, cupping and squeezing, her head thrown back and her spine arched.

“Madysen, *por favor*,” she heard him whisper in an agonized tone.

She reached behind, undid the clasp of the bra. Her heavy breasts dropped, pulling the cups of the red bra with them. Holding the cups up with one arm, she slid the bra strap down, and then repeated the process with the opposite arm. She slipped a finger beneath the bra and then swiftly yanked it away, standing naked and proud at last, the red scrap of garment dangling from her finger.

Once again she faced him, and step-by-step, stalked from her bed, across the hall to his. His erection was a tent pole beneath the sheets. As he had done once before, except this time it was deliberate, he held out his hand. She reached for it, gently bent all his fingers except the index one, and then stepped forward. She guided his extended finger between the lips of her pussy. He

needed no further instruction to slide his finger in and out as she spread her legs wider to accommodate him.

“You want me, Tony?” she whispered raggedly.

He rolled toward her, sat up, wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. Still rubbing her clit with one hand, he clutched her ass with the other and buried his face in the cleft of her tits.

She raised one long leg and bent the other knee until she straddled him, his cock sliding easily inside a pussy already lubricated with her own nectar of arousal. She began to slide slowly up and down his length, squeezing him tight with her interior muscles while he licked and sucked her nipples. A strong ranch woman, it took a considerable time before the muscles of her thighs and calves started burning with her effort. “Help me,” she whispered.

His hands, which had been busy molding her breasts to burning peaks, dropped to her hips. Then he was lifting her and letting her glide back down, faster and faster, until finally he said through clenched teeth, “I cannot hold any longer.”

“Give it to me,” she said and he pistoned into her after slamming her down hard and holding her imprisoned and impaled on his burning rod. She dangled on the ragged edge of orgasm, just waiting for him to join her.

He sucked in a breath, held it, thrust once more savagely upward, and she could feel him spurting hot inside her. And then she was jolted into her own electrified release, every nerve tingling and firing in successive waves of pleasure.

As the aftershocks receded, he lay back, his hands on her ass, holding her captive on his lance of a cock.

“You are *una diosa*,” he said when he got his breath back. “A goddess. *Verdaderamente*.”

“Don’t put me on too high a pedestal,” she said, laughing a little. “I’m just a country girl who likes sex.”

“*Esta bien*. Lucky for me,” he said, urging her closer with his hands on her back and burying his face once more between her breasts.

It was the middle of the night, after they’d migrated to her bed for one more bout of hot sex, and he had gotten up to feed Lidia and then returned, before Madysen thought to ask the important question: “Tonight was safe, wasn’t it, Tony?”

“Safe? You mean safe from making a baby?”

“No, I took care of that part. I mean, you have no history I should worry about?”

“You are safe on both counts, *diosa*. Before I arrived here, I had the money for the operation to prevent babies, and at that time my blood was clean.”

“And since?”

“And since, I have lived here on your *rancho*, alone with you.”

“I had to ask,” she said.

“A little late, but understandable,” he said, pulling her body toward his to spoon until they both fell into a contented sleep.

Chapter Four

Madysen frowned down at the screen on her cell phone, then blew out a breath and rolled her eyes.

The air was chilly. The water in the Burntfork near the old cabin had worn a skim of ice at dawn, but now the sun reflected heat from the barn walls.

Antonio drew near enough to see she was looking at a text message. “Is something wrong?”

“Honestly. That brother of mine. I wish he would make up his mind.”

Antonio waited, not questioning her. If she wanted to explain, she would do so. She looked up to meet his gaze. “My brother is—was—supposed to come live here on the ranch. Now he’s

putting it off again. But he says to expect the backhoe.”

He nodded as if he understood what she was talking about. Hot sex or not, she was still the boss, and he didn’t often push her. Outside the bedroom, anyway. Sometimes in bed he took plenty of initiative. He couldn’t help it; he grinned every time at the thought of her naked and panting his name.

“What?” she demanded, still gnawing her lip over the message from her brother but catching his sly look.

“I am done with chores,” he announced.

“Well, so am I,” she said, a cranky note lingering in her voice.

“I could make *quesadillas* for lunch. But then we would have many hours yet to fill before darkness.”

He had her full attention now. She tilted her head back to look at him. “What did you have in mind?”

“I think it would be nice to see you in the daylight. Without clothes,” he said.

He watched the pupils of her blue eyes grow large as the thought of what he had been contemplating suddenly began filling her mind as well. She was so transparent in her arousal; he could read the fact that she was instantly afire at his suggestion. There was hardly any dissembling to her nature and none at all when it came to sex.

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” she said, her voice husky. “Unfortunately, we’ll have to make it quick. The damned backhoe will be here soon.”

“Would you like to leave the *quesadillas* for another time? Lidia might not wake up if she doesn’t smell food cooking. You and I could perhaps think of something else to satisfy our appetites.” He leered at her suggestively.

“Suddenly, this day has gotten a whole lot brighter.” Madysen grabbed his sleeve and started towing him toward the house.

They removed their boots on the porch so there was less chance of waking the baby. Madysen waggled her ass at him as she bent over, looking over her shoulder through the strands of her long blond hair.

Once out of their coats, holding hands like teenagers and trying not to giggle, they snuck in stocking feet past the playpen where Lidia continued to snooze in the buttery light of a ray of sunshine.

At the top of the stairs, she paused to work the buttons of his shirt. “You first,” he whispered.

She grinned and started quickly unbuttoning her own clothes. “No time for the striptease today,” she said, and pouted a little.

“It is unfortunate. Perhaps next time.” From behind, he finished pulling her shirt from her arms and then worked on the clasp of her bra while she unzipped her jeans. She turned to face him, started shimmying out of her pants and panties and socks, and her breasts popped free from the cups of her bra. He already had his shirt unbuttoned, and started to free the erection being tightly restrained by his jeans.

“Me, me, me,” she chanted in a whisper, licking her lips and grinning at him while she reached for his zipper. She pushed his jeans down just far enough to free his cock, and then she knelt and took him in her mouth. She rimmed the head of his cock with her tongue, and then took him more fully in her mouth. While her hand worked up and down on the lower half of his shaft, she copied those motions with her lips and tongue on the upper half.

He wound his hands through her hair. Everything in him told him not to pull her long hair or scratch her scalp, but it required every ounce of will he possessed not to force himself deeper down her throat. “Ay, *dios*,” he said in a hoarse whisper, pushing her away even though halting her was the last thing he wanted at the moment. “Get on the bed,” he ordered in a low, urgent voice. “Hurry. Spread your legs.”

She did as she was told, her bra still hanging unheeded from one arm. He took a moment to admire those magnificent breasts, and then let his eyes wander down to the apex of her thighs. He knelt, tugged her hips closer to the edge of the bed, and buried his face in her pussy. Spreading her legs even wider, he extended his tongue and licked and lightly bit her clit. She moaned, now wrapping her hands in his hair, and she didn't seem to care a bit if she pulled hard enough to make him wince. To punish her, he dipped his tongue inside her opening while at the same time inserting the index and middle finger of one hand. He spread the petals of her woman's lips even wider with the other.

She bucked her hips wildly. "Antonio!" she cried, clenching his fingers inside her with the force of a quick, intense orgasm.

"Shh, don't wake Lidia," he said, petting her slick wetness while her shudders calmed. Then he pulled her closer and roughly rammed his throbbing cock inside her where his fingers had been.

Through the closed bedroom door, they could hear the baby starting to fuss.

"She'll be all right for just a minute," Madysen assured him in a quiet voice, fingers clutching his ass. "Give me the ride of my life, cowboy."

He took her at her word, butting into her while her legs hung over the side of the bed. His heavy balls slapped her ass and her breasts jiggled madly with each hard thrust. He looked into her eyes as he continued to pound, wanting to watch her until he was positive she came for him again. As soon as he was certain from her closed eyes and hard shudders, he let himself go and joined her.

When he could manage the feat, he rocked back on his heels. Madysen got up from the bed, one long leg to each side of his bent ones. He lifted his hand and ran a finger between her legs, where she was now slippery smooth and wet.

"Sorry. Gotta go," she said, grinning and stepping over him to grab her clothes.

"Until next time, then." He got to his feet, pulling up his jeans.

"Promises, promises," she said over her naked shoulder as she and her flawless ass disappeared into the bathroom.

Antonio headed for the kitchen first, to get out the milk and a jar of baby food. They had begun feeding Lidia solids earlier than the literature advised, but it worked. She wasn't always so hungry anymore and often slept through the night now that her belly was full. The baby rolled over, pulling her knees under herself, but not quite able to manage getting herself upright yet. She tracked him with her big, black eyes as he passed.

"Lunchtime, Lidia," he sang, placing the milk and food in the microwave and then going to lift the baby out of the playpen. "Diaper change first, eh, *nieta*?"

There were times he was grateful his friends from childhood couldn't see him now, Madysen's virtual sex slave and Lidia's pet grandpapa. He was becoming soft in his old age, he thought, women both young and those more mature able to wrap him securely around their soft little fingers. He wasn't really an old man, not in years anyway. But there would be no more macho man antics for Antonio Marquez, that was sure. He would never have dreamed of such a future for himself; it would have been inconceivable for a boy with as few prospects as he had. His personal salvation, incredibly enough, began with Gabriela's mother coercing him into promising financial support for their baby. The next years were spent searching for sufficient work to do just that, a few months here and a few months there, on temporary nonimmigrant visas. Then Gaby was all grown up and didn't need him anymore, but in her stead she left him baby Lidia. And then there was Madysen, who definitely needed him, but not for any money he might possess. He smiled, shook his head slightly, amazed at life's unpredictable twists and turns. Despite it all, despite very little of which he would have chosen for himself had it been left up to him, he was happy and content.

So the sudden rumble of the big yellow machine approaching up the lane to the house

sounded to him like the thunder of an impending storm of destruction. He didn't know why the sound was so ominous to him; he had heard the sound of rolling tires of construction machinery many times before, in fact had worked construction jobs, especially road building, on more than one occasion because the pay was so good for temporary work. He had no reason to fear the arrival of the backhoe Madysen was expecting—but still he dreaded it without knowing the reason.

"Sorry, I've got to go see to this," Madysen said as she crossed the kitchen to snatch her jacket from a hook in the mudroom.

"We will be fine," Antonio said. "I will feed Lidia her lunch."

"Good. I'll be right back."

"No hurry," he assured her. Yet the urge to peer out the window to follow her progress across the yard was strong. Instead he deposited the baby in her highchair after getting her in dry pants, retrieved her food from the microwave, and began spooning processed carrots into her eager little mouth. She still had her little fat baby cheeks, but her hair was growing longer, requiring a barrette to hold it out of her eyes, and she now made sounds that often sounded like she was trying to form words.

She drooled and smacked her pink gums together. Madysen suspected there was a tooth or two waiting to break through, but they had seen no evidence of one as yet. He offered Lidia a sippy cup of milk, although more for his benefit than hers as she still preferred the bottle.

As he rose to take the baby's lunch things to the sink, the back door opened and Madysen entered accompanied by a big, sandy-haired stranger. The man studied Antonio and the baby, a quizzical look on his face, and then turned to Madysen.

"My...ranch manager, Antonio Marquez," she said with only the slightest hesitation over what to call him in front of the other man. "Tony, this is Clay Thorpe. He grew up here in the valley, but now he's a sheriff's deputy in Hawk Point."

"Sit," she said to the man, with a wave of her hand toward the table and chairs. "I'll get us some coffee and then we'll go outside and figure out what the hell Beck thinks he's doing."

The big man eased himself into a chair at the table. He eyed Lidia still sitting in her highchair, and then his eyes traveled back to Antonio, obviously trying to assess what the domestic situation was here.

Despite the fact that his papers were in order, and although Lidia possessed no official papers yet she had been born a few miles away and so had every right to be here, Antonio felt the palms of his hands grow moist with anxiety as the deputy continued to rake the two of them with his hazel-colored eyes. "Be cool, Maddy," the deputy said without looking in her direction. "I'll get it done right for you."

"But he just makes me so angry," Madysen said.

"Still with the sibling rivalry?" Then he did look at her and his eyes twinkled. Antonio did not like that twinkle at all. He didn't like their obvious long-standing affection for each other. He did not like this man calling her *Maddy*.

"Sibling rivalry, my butt," she said. "He's plain inconsiderate. What do you call sending me a text on the morning of the same day you were planning on coming out here, Clay? What if I wasn't home? What if I had plans?"

Antonio shifted uncomfortably, hoping the deputy wouldn't decipher what kind of plans Madysen might have had for her afternoon. The man's eyes shifted back toward Antonio at the slight movement, his sandy eyebrows knotting. Antonio turned toward the sink, giving the curious man a view of his back.

"He made pretty plain where he wants the pipe to the septic system to go, Maddy. You didn't need to be here."

"But he didn't ask me! I don't want it there. I don't want his house facing my house. Move it away so it faces out over the pasture." Antonio caught a glimpse of Madysen crossing her arms

stubbornly under the swell of her breasts.

The man called Clay hesitated. "Beck wanted his house to face the Burntfork, just like yours does."

"He wanted! He hasn't been here in years. All the work and worry of this place has been left up to me. I am not moving my entire goat operation so Beck can have a water view. Those goats are my livelihood. Beck can look out over the pasture. It has a pretty enough mountain view."

"Shit, I hope I didn't come all the way out here for nothing, wasting my day off," Clay said, getting to his feet. "Let me call him and see what he says."

"You do that."

Madysen was fuming. Beck had a nerve, sending Clay out here on a Saturday when he probably thought she would be in town doing her weekly shopping, sneaking his damned sewer pipe location in where he wanted it while she wasn't home.

She went and sat at the table next to Lidia, who smiled toothlessly at her and said, "Meh-meh-meh."

"She thinks you are mama," Antonio said.

Madysen felt her heart might burst. She was terrified she was going to lose this little bit of happiness she had with Antonio and Lidia when Beck showed up to claim his half of the old homestead. "Don't you say that, Antonio," she said, not looking at him. "Don't say that to me."

Antonio closed his mouth to a tight line, took out a pan and some cheese and tortillas to make a late lunch, and said nothing more. Madysen sat and chewed her lip. After a time, Clay returned. "He's not happy about it, but he says to put the line where you want it."

"Good," Madysen said.

"I gotta tell you, he sounds messed up, Maddy. Maybe you should have a little compassion for the guy."

"And maybe he should have some for me," she couldn't help replying.

"Okay. All right. Peace." Clay held up a hand, palm out. "I'm going to go get started."

He no sooner left than her phone rang. Antonio turned off the stove and retreated to the living room with the baby while Madysen answered the phone. It was her cousin Carole, calling from Boston. At first she was glad to hear Carole's voice, until the older woman started excusing and trying to explain Beck's latest behavior.

"And so you're sticking up for my brother as well?" Madysen asked. "Beck was supposed to be here to help me after he retired. That was about seven months ago. I had to hire somebody to help me out because I couldn't handle all the work. Clay says Beck is messed up. What does that mean, exactly?"

"Well, Beck got involved with somebody. It got fairly complicated very quickly."

"Involved? Involved?" Madysen's voice rose. She saw Antonio glance at her from the living room and tried to modulate her pitch.

"Selene is a lot younger than Beck, and I think before he knew what was happening the situation just got a little out of hand. You know he was pretty cut up when Annie left him."

"Oh, for sure, Annie leaving Beck was a whole lot worse than my Carl *dying* in that fire." Madysen's eyes were tearing up, her voice breaking. She felt like she was choking on the lump in her throat. "Look, Carole, this isn't a good time. Call me back, okay? Maybe tomorrow."

"I'm so sorry, Madysen. I only meant to try to make things better, and I seem to have dredged up all kinds of grief. I will call you later, honey."

"Okay," Madysen said, reaching for a paper napkin to wipe her eyes and blow her nose after she disconnected and set her cell phone down. "Damn!" she said to herself. She looked at Tony, who was looking silently at her. Thanks to Beck, it was all going to come tumbling down. She knew all along this sweet little interlude with the two people occupying her living room at this moment had been too perfect to last.

Outside, the noise of the big bucket's engine came closer, then faded a bit as Clay drove it

toward the pasture. Then the sound of the backhoe's shovel scraping the earth started up.

Might as well get it over with, she thought. She went and sat next to Antonio. She held her finger up in front of Lidia, and the baby grabbed for it, trying to get it to her mouth.

"I have something to tell you, Tony," she finally said. "Jillian will be coming home for her school break soon, and then I guess my brother is going to come back here to live. I'm going to have to ask you...to go back to the cabin for a while."

He said nothing for the longest time. Then he said in a quiet voice, "I see."

"I don't think you do. It's Jilly I'm worried about, really. I don't know how she would take me and you being together. It will only be for a few weeks, until she goes back to Laramie after New Year's." It sounded to her own ears as if she was pleading. But she had the eerie sense of the first in a line of dominoes falling, or maybe a tower of blocks defying the laws of gravity to remain suspended in midair momentarily after the bottom one had been snatched away.

"Sure," he said. "I understand. Lidia and I will go this afternoon."

"You don't have to go today!" She snatched at his arm.

"We won't go far. The cabin is just across the yard," he said. "So close I can see your window, remember?"

"This is just awful, Tony. I feel so bad." She shuddered and hugged herself.

Antonio rose to his feet with the baby in his arms. "Don't feel bad, señora," he said. "I really do understand. It is just the way things are. Do you want your lunch now?"

Chapter Five

Madysen heard the backhoe shut down around four o'clock. She had watched Lidia for Antonio while he made the trips back and forth that transferred all the baby's things, and those possessions of his that had migrated from the cabin, back across the yard and into the little house. Even when the baby napped, he had deflected her help, and so after he made the final trip and departed with Lidia she sat at the table with the ranch spreadsheets that needed updating, trying to make sense of rows of numbers that blurred in front of her eyes. Tony had been so polite. So distant. As if everything between them except their employer/employee relationship had been wiped out with a few ill-chosen words from her.

She heard boots cross the porch and then a knock at the door. Her heart sped up a little; she hoped it was Antonio. But it was Clay Thorpe. He stuck his head in the back door and said, "Hey, lady, would it be too much trouble for you to give me a ride over to my dad's?"

"Come in. I want to apologize for how I acted earlier, Clay. I'm really sorry. Are you finished digging the new line?" she asked, rising to her feet to get her jacket and keys, grateful for an excuse to get out of a house that suddenly seemed way too quiet.

"Not quite. I'll have to come back. But it's getting dark, and I promised Emma I'd be home in time for dinner. And you don't have to apologize to me. I know this last year or so has been rough on you. How are you holding up?"

They stepped off the porch, Madysen shrugging into the faded black Carhartt. "Fine, really. Antonio has been a lifesaver. It's like I don't even have to tell him what to do, he just knows. I'm lucky to have been able to hire him. Anyway, how is Emma?" she asked. "It's been ages since I've seen her."

Clay grinned. "We're pregnant," he said.

"What? Clay!" Madysen grabbed for his coat sleeve to halt him. "Nobody told me. I'm so happy for you!"

She went to give him a big hug and instead he picked her up and twirled her around. "I'm gonna be a daddy," he sang. "Yeehaw!"

Madysen laughed, placing her hands on his shoulders until he stopped spinning and put her down. It was only then that she caught sight of Antonio watching them from the door of the

cabin. The look on his face said it all, how he was misconstruing this little celebration of an old friend's long-anticipated happiness, and she wanted to run to him and explain. But Clay needed a ride, so he wouldn't be late getting back to Emma. She would explain to Antonio as soon as she got back.

"I'm so out of the loop here at the ranch. I've got to get into town more often," she said. "I want to see Emma. I bet she's blooming with motherhood."

"She is that," Clay said as they resumed the walk toward the ranch pickup. "Blooming as big and pretty as a peony bush—don't tell her I made that comparison! And she'd be glad to see you again, Maddy."

They climbed in the truck, Madysen in the driver's seat. As they passed the little house, she looked for Tony, but he didn't make a second appearance.

Once out on the road, silence descended, an interlude between friends that neither was desperate to fill. But finally Clay said, "Antonio, huh? Where did you find him?"

"I applied to an agency that furnishes agricultural workers. These jobs out in the boonies aren't so easy to fill. And he has experience with goats. I was fortunate he was looking for work at the same time I needed someone." She halted, her cheeks warming as the inadvertent thought entered her head of the many ways she needed Antonio.

Clay watched her carefully from the passenger seat. "He legal?"

"Yes, he is." Madysen felt herself stiffen defensively, her hands tightening on the wheel. "He has his green card. His social security number is legit."

"Relax. I'm just asking. It doesn't make much difference to me either way. There's not a big effort around here in enforcing federal law unless immigrants without papers are caught in a drug bust or something. Local law enforcement has enough on our own plates."

"He's very nice. Very helpful."

He studied her. "You hiding something, Maddy? You're not being very forthcoming."

"No! Why would I hide anything?" She tossed her head.

"Were you aware he had a baby when you hired him? I noticed the baby stuff all over your house. You're watching his kid? Where's his wife?"

"It's complicated, Clay," she said, telling herself she gripped the wheel so tightly because the dirt road was in such bad shape.

"I was beginning to suspect that," he said.

"Oh, stop being such a cop! There's nothing wrong." Nothing except that Antonio was hardly speaking to her now.

"And the baby?" he persisted. "I'm just curious, Maddy."

"It's none of your business," she said as they turned into the lane to his dad's place and she stopped to let him out.

"Okay then," he said, dragging out the word while opening the door. "Thanks for the ride." He closed the door with a little more force than necessary.

Madysen leaned her head back and blew out a breath. What a day. What an awful, gut-wrenching day. Then she put the truck in gear and backed up alongside Clay's pickup. He was just climbing in the driver's side. "Hey!" she yelled. He halted, but didn't turn around. "I'm sorry for being so cranky!" He waved a gloved hand, as if her unfriendly attitude was already a thing of the past.

She looked around for a moment before turning the truck around to leave. Clay's dad's little house was dark, no dogs barked, and no cows mooed. Clay had sold off almost everything except the land after his dad died, keeping the house and the ranch against the day he retired from the sheriff's office. She liked the valley quiet, she thought, but not this quiet. The old folks were dying off, and new residents had yet to take their place. Ranching wasn't exactly a glamorous profession, and most young people couldn't wait to grow up and leave the valley.

As her brother Beck hadn't waited. He had left the day after his high school graduation, and

for the most part he had stayed away. But now he was coming back. Making demands, going behind her back to have things his way. As much as she had wanted him to come home at one point while she was in the deepest depths of shock and sorrow, now she wished he would just stay away. He wasn't even here yet, and he was already making himself a big pain in everybody's ass.

She watched Clay start his truck and turn his headlights on preparatory to leaving. She gave him a short honk of the horn, pushed down on the gas pedal and drove away. She had yet another apology to make before this day was over. She would go see Tony, invite him to dinner, try to explain in a way he would understand why he had to leave her house for a while. Surely he would realize that Jillian wouldn't appreciate him taking her father's place while she was gone off to college. Jilly would need some time to absorb the fact that Antonio was not only doing all her father's work around the place, he was also sharing her mother's life. And her mother's bed. Madysen shied from even the thought of such a confrontation. She couldn't just smack her daughter in the face with her relationship with the hired man.

And yet wasn't she dissembling, she wondered as she pulled into her own lane, just making excuses for herself? She wasn't ashamed of Antonio, but she was not looking forward to explaining him either. She was sure it would be the same with any man, not just him. She wondered if she could make him believe that.

But if she thought Antonio was going to hang around waiting for her to crook her finger for him to come over so she could explain, she was mistaken. The little cabin was dark. His rusty old Ford pickup wasn't in its familiar spot. He was gone.

Antonio drove slowly, carefully, into Hawk Point. He had never driven alone with Lidia before, in fact had never had sole care of his granddaughter. He had come to rely on Madysen to be there whenever he or Lidia needed her. A most mistaken and lazy assumption to make, he now realized. Madysen Collins was not going to be taken for granted, no matter the circumstances.

He parked in the mall parking lot, opened his creaky door, and went around to retrieve Lidia and all her necessary paraphernalia stuffed into a big shoulder bag. He wondered how absurd he must look. He never saw his compatriots lugging a baby in a car seat like American men and women who insisted their children—and oftentimes their dogs—be allowed to accompany them everywhere.

He headed for the lighted windows and brightly painted store front of the Arroyo Café. For tonight, just for a little while, he wanted to hear the accents and the music of his people. He and Lidia could sit back, order hot, familiar food, and just enjoy being part of an expatriate community that somehow managed to thrive in these foreign surroundings where they were not welcomed outright, but yet were tolerated because they were so useful.

The young waitress fussed over Lidia, making her smile and coo. Soon the cashier, grandfather to the large brood who served in every capacity in the business, came over to sit and talk. Even the cook, busy as he was, came out from the kitchen to ask how things were going. They knew Gabriela, knew this was her baby, but just accepted that Antonio, instead of the baby's mother, should appear with Lidia. Antonio's people came to Wyoming, they stayed or they left, and nobody asked too many questions. Everybody had their problems, he was hardly unique in that respect.

He stuffed himself with rice and beans, spicy beef and a mound of tortillas. Madysen would have had a fit to watch him feed Lidia such piquant fare, but Lidia gobbled it up. Madysen wasn't here, and so Antonio could do as he thought best. If the baby was awake all night with a belly ache, he would deal with that when the time came.

When the staff of the café started cleaning up, stacking chairs on the tables and sweeping the floor, Antonio realized how much time he had spent there and how late it was. He paid his bill,

said his goodnights, and bundled Lidia in her car seat back into the old pickup with the door hinges that needed oiling.

When he pulled up to the little cabin at Willow Vale, he sat and looked at his surroundings, and then sighed. It wasn't much, a little half-dugout cabin with an old root cellar beside it. And yet it was more, much more, than what he could afford at home. He couldn't, despite his hurt feelings, just pack up and go. Now he had Lidia to care for. She had been born here and she would be raised here, no matter the cost to her abuelo. And so he would set aside any dashed hopes he might have had concerning Madysen Collins, any thwarted dreams. It had been nice while it lasted, in truth more than he had ever dreamed of: she was ¡caliente! But he wasn't a young man anymore, and so he would set aside a foolish young man's expectations. A woman like Madysen Collins wasn't right for a man like him. *Estúpido*, he chided himself, to ever begin to entertain the hope that she might be.

He took the baby inside, changed her diaper, washed her hands and face, and put her to bed. She slept the entire night without waking.

Madysen picked without appetite at her solitary dinner, finally giving up and offering it to the spotted dog that she had let inside to keep her company and that eagerly accepted her meal before being let back outside.

She missed Antonio. She missed Lidia. There was always something to do with a baby in the house, and now that Lidia was gone, Madysen didn't know what to do with herself. She tried watching television, but the laugh track and loud ads grated on her nerves so she snapped it off. She tried reading, but couldn't keep her mind on the words.

She donned her jacket and walked outside several times, but she didn't have to go far to see that Antonio's truck was still missing. It was getting late. She knew she shouldn't worry, but she hoped nothing had happened to them. She hoped that they were coming back. She saw once again the look on Antonio's face as he caught sight of her in Clay's arms. Was Tony capable of becoming so upset he would drive carelessly with Lidia in the truck? She didn't think so; the man was very good at hiding his emotions. Except in certain circumstances, where it was guaranteed she could cause him to lose his cool.

She gave up on repeated trips to the cabin. As it got later and later, she decided maybe he was gone for good. She went inside, dragged herself upstairs and through a shower. She dressed for bed, and then stood at her bedroom window, whose view was of the little cabin, and stood very still.

She waited for a long time in the dark but Antonio and Lidia didn't return.

Sometime in the deep darkness of night, she woke and returned to the window. Stars in their thousands crowded the night sky, those arranged in the center like a silk scarf twisted by a celestial wind. Finally, she forced herself to lower her gaze and peer out into the yard once more, her nose almost touching the cold glass. All the windows of little house across the yard remained dark, and she clenched her hands at her sides until her short nails dug into her palms at the thought that she had really succeeded in running off Antonio.

But in the deeper shadows at the side of the little house, there was a shape that anyone could have mistaken for a pickup's rear bumper. Even from this distance and in the dark it sure looked like the diamond plate on Antonio's rusty old Ford. She knew sleeping was out of the question until she went and checked it out. In just her nightgown she hurried downstairs, pulled on her boots and coat, opened the door and crossed the yard, her heart thrumming in her chest. The spotted dog followed her, tilting its head and looking up toward her face as if trying to catch her eye and ask what the heck they were doing out in the yard in the middle of the night.

When they drew near, Madysen raised a hand in relief and rested it on the frigid tailgate. The dog hiked his leg on the tire, and then they both turned for the warmth of the big house. All was well. Almost in tears, Madysen assured herself that all was truly well.

In the morning, she rose early, ate a bite of breakfast, and headed for the steel building housing her cheese-making operation. The goats were winding down their milk production for the year as the days grew short and temperatures outside dropped. It was almost time to close up shop for the winter, leaving just the cheese aging in climate- and humidity-controlled conditions on the shelves in a separate room, to distribute for the holidays and into spring, when Madysen could start up the operation again.

The door opened. Antonio stepped inside, carrying Lidia in her combination carrier and car seat. The baby was dressed in her pink snowsuit, more like stuffed into her snowsuit, Madysen thought. "She doesn't look comfortable, Tony. Her clothes are already getting too small."

"Good morning," Antonio said. "I will see to Lidia's clothes as soon as I get time to go shopping. Are you feeling better today? Would it be possible for you to watch the baby? I don't know what else to do, it's too cold to take her in the barn with me."

"Have I given you any reason to think I don't want to watch Lidia? Yesterday was a misunderstanding between us, Tony. I didn't express myself well. I'm sorry."

"A misunderstanding," he repeated tonelessly.

"Yes! It's just until Jillian goes back to school after the first of the year. Her father has only been gone a short time. I can't just replace him while Jilly is gone away to school. Please try to understand."

"How long do you think it will take for you to begin thinking about it?" The words seemed torn from him, as if he would prefer to keep silent but couldn't.

"About replacing Carl?"

"That...and other things."

"Nobody will ever take Carl's place. If I truly loved another man, he would have his very own piece of my heart. As for the other, there's something I need to show you." She reached for his hand, pulled him toward the door.

Out in the yard, she pointed to the little house and then to the big one. "Do you see which way these houses face? You know that the big house overlooks the original, little house. All you have to do is look out your window at night. If my light is on, I'm awake. If I stand in the window, it's safe for me to see you. If I see your light on, I will call you, and then come over if that agreeable to you."

He looked toward the little house, tilted his head up toward where her bedroom window was. "So you have been thinking of this all along?"

"Only since yesterday. Only since I thought of my daughter coming home, and also of my brother's return. Why do you think I was so adamant that his house face the other direction? I couldn't have his house facing my window, have him finding out what I am...or I should say, finding out how easily you accept me for what I am."

"All that big fuss was about me?" He looked a bit bewildered.

"Well, mostly. Beck has no right to come around here and start making demands. But it was about us, Tony. If you want me, like I want you, we will have to be a little more cautious while I make an effort to straighten out some things. It's too easy to forget that we're not the only people who matter here."

He looked again at the high window of her bedroom. He was a proud man. She could see the struggle to step aside for her sake playing out on his usually impassive features. At last he said, "Okay."

Whether he was okay with the long term plan, or just the more immediate prospect of resuming their erotic activities, she couldn't tell. "So. Bueno. Now hurry up and kiss me, dammit. We don't have much time—I hear the baby starting to fuss already."

She grasped his coat collar and pulled him toward her. She was afraid he would resist, but once their boot tips touched he crushed her to him, mashing her breasts to his chest, his lips descending on hers in a grinding kiss that expressed a deep need that went beyond mere sex.

She returned it with equal fervor, lips and tongue and rough hug meant to convey what she couldn't yet put into words. She was afraid that somewhere along the way she had already fallen in love with this man. But she couldn't let him know that yet. Not until she smoothed his way with her family.

Chapter Six

Madysen returned to the cheese building. Lidia had been just whimpering, but now she held her breath until her face turned bright red and then opened her mouth and let out a shriek of displeasure. Madysen had thought to start getting some aged cheese wheels wrapped, labeled, and packed in wood crates with excelsior for the holiday gift market. Instead she bent to see to the baby, unbuckling the strap that held her in the carrier. Lidia twisted her little body, her face once again turning red, and drew her knees up.

"I swear I would suspect you had colic, Lidia—that is, if babies suddenly developed colic at five months old. I bet Grandpa's been feeding you things he shouldn't have on your date last night. Is that right, you poor little thing?"

As Lidia began screaming, Madysen picked her up, pulled over a stool and sat, turning the baby face down over her knees. The position seemed to ease Lidia's symptoms a bit. Madysen wondered if she still had peppermint oil from the days of Jillian's childhood stomach aches, and if so, how long peppermint oil stayed fresh when shoved to the hidden recesses of a kitchen cabinet.

She really needed to get her product packed and ready for distribution. She had only a week until Thanksgiving, and with the holiday season starting earlier every year, she was already late.

Her cell phone in her pocket rang. One-handed, she pulled it out and looked at the screen. "Jillian?"

"Hi, Mom. How's it going?"

"Good, except I'm behind as usual. How are things in Laramie?"

"Great. I wanted to tell you as soon as I was sure that I won't be home for Thanksgiving, so don't make big plans."

"Oh?" Madysen felt her stomach clench. For years now Jillian had been steadily pulling away from her mother and the ranch as she made her own life and friends, and developed her own interests. Madysen hadn't planned a huge feast, maybe turkey and dressing and a pie. But still, she felt a pang of bitter disappointment. Now she would not even have the comfort of Jilly's company to help compensate for the big deal about it she had made it sound to Tony.

"There's a guy here who takes over the kitchen of a closed school for Thanksgiving and feeds anyone who walks in the door. So all of us who are going to be in town have volunteered to help cook and serve and clean up."

"Well, that's real nice of you, honey." Madysen tried to sound happy. The realization that she had made Antonio hurry and move back to the little house for no reason made her want to cry. Lidia grunted, hiccupped, passed some gas and then made a tentative word-like sound.

"Did I catch you in the middle of something? What was that noise?" Jillian asked.

"You remember Antonio, he was here before you left."

"Antonio, sure."

"Well...he's got his little granddaughter here with him now. I'm watching her this morning."

"What? Mom! How did Antonio get his granddaughter? How old is she?"

"Lidia is five months old. Antonio's daughter couldn't care for her, and so now he has her."

"So am I getting this straight, she just left her baby, expecting that Antonio or you would take care of her? That's just not right, Mom."

"A lot of things in this world aren't right, Jillian. We do what we can. It kind of looks like we'll both be taking care of people less fortunate than we are for the holiday, doesn't it, honey?"

Like mother, like daughter.”

Jillian hesitated. “I guess,” she finally agreed without enthusiasm. “Finals are over in the middle of December. I’ll be home after that, until the middle of January.”

“A whole month. That’s great, honey. I’ve missed you. A lot.”

“I miss you too, Mom. I’ve got to go now.”

“Take care. I’m proud of you, Jilly.”

Lidia let out a loud belch, and then a huge sigh. Jillian hesitated as if she wanted to say more, then just said, “Love you, Mom. Bye.”

Madysen disconnected and put her phone back in her pocket, pondering on the events of what had proved to be such a bittersweet morning. Talk about mixed feelings, she thought. She wasn’t sure whether to feel sad or relieved. Certainly she wanted her daughter to come home; she had waited months for that event. Yet Jilly’s phone call had given her the opening she needed to introduce the idea of Antonio and Lidia being part of the family. And her daughter’s absence over Thanksgiving break gave Madysen more time to get the last of the year’s cheese made, and another batch out to the wholesaler.

Not to mention more time alone on the ranch with Antonio, which promised its own rewards. She only wished she hadn’t been so hasty in sending him back to the cabin before she found out her daughter’s plans for the holiday didn’t include coming home.

When Antonio returned to pick up Lidia, Madysen came out of the stock room and said, “I need to ask what you’re feeding this poor baby, Tony.”

“Is something wrong?”

“She had a bad stomach this morning. I gave her a little peppermint in her bottle, and it seems to have helped.”

“Maybe the beans and rice from the café last night didn’t agree with her. She ate them right up. I thought she was fine.” He shrugged, looking sheepish.

She shot him a look. “Peppers, too? She’s just getting used to solid food. You can’t be feeding her adult food, Antonio. Especially spicy food.”

“Do you have so little confidence in me? I would not feed Lidia peppers.”

“It’s a matter of experience. Caring for babies is a thing you learn as you go along. I have jars of baby food in my cupboard. You need to be feeding her that, so come and get some.”

“Okay.” He went to pick up the sleeping baby in her carrier.

“I had a phone call from my daughter,” Madysen said.

“Oh, yes?”

From his tone she thought he might as well have said, *That’s nice*. She threw on her jacket for the walk to the house. “She’s not coming home for Thanksgiving.”

“No?”

“What I’m trying to tell you, Antonio, is that you can come back to the house for a while if you like.”

His footsteps faltered. “For a while? So you can tell me to leave again later? No, thank you, señora.” His gaze remained on the path.

“I thought we got past the *señora* business, Antonio.”

“Until yesterday, I thought we had as well,” he said.

“So we’re not going to go back to where we were right away, are we?”

“Not right away, no.” He kept walking.

“I apologized. Don’t you believe me? What more do you want, Tony?”

At last he stopped and looked at her. “The question is not what I want. It is what you want, Madysen. I think you should take this time until your daughter comes home to decide exactly what that might be.”

“I told you. I already know. I want you.”

“Do you? I wonder.”

She hadn't expected to be turned down. But if the situation were reversed, if he had asked her to leave his house because someone he cared about was coming to visit, wouldn't she feel hurt? If not cheap. As well as used. "But...but what about what we had together? That was good, wasn't it?"

"I am not an *imbécil*." He smiled. "Yes, it was good. I will watch your window tonight, and all the nights ahead, with much anticipation. Okay?"

"So it's only sex for you?"

He hesitated, studied her face for a long moment, and then looked into her eyes. "I could ask you the same, Madysen, if I thought either of us really wanted to know the answer." His tone was mild, but she didn't miss the fact that he wasn't answering her question.

She jammed her hands in her pockets and started walking ahead of him. At the house, he accepted a few jars of baby food, but turned down the offer of a midday meal. Later in the day, she saw the telltale dust cloud on the lane rising above the trees as his old beater pickup pulled out of the yard. He was spending a lot of his free time in town lately. Was he deliberately keeping his distance from her?

And if she asked him that, would he answer her question with a question, as he seemed prone to do when he didn't want to answer?

At the moment, Antonio had no thoughts of Madysen. He was a man with a purpose. Madysen insisting that he return to the little house had shocked him into an examination of his situation and that of his little granddaughter. His mind was filled with thoughts of Lidia's welfare.

He had many questions, but no answers. What if Gabriela showed up one day, his silly, capricious daughter Gaby, and wanted her baby back? Could he just hand Lidia over to the unreliable teenaged mother without a second thought? What if Gaby wanted to take Lidia out of the country? Gaby had no papers, and therefore could not legally return if she later changed her mind. Where did that leave baby Lidia, if Gaby took her away and then could not bring her back? Lidia would be trapped outside the country of her birth.

What if Lidia got sick while here in his care? Could he just show up at the hospital with a sick baby and trust that they would treat her without question? That they wouldn't turn both grandfather and granddaughter over to the authorities on unfounded suspicions that they were undocumented? Lidia had been born here...but he had no papers to prove that. He was a legal immigrant and Lidia's grandfather...but did that relationship give him any rights when it came to deciding her welfare?

Was it even possible he could be granted guardianship of the baby if he had only a green card and not citizenship?

He was a simple man. How had his life suddenly become so complicated? It wasn't something he wanted to dwell on, but he grumbled to himself that all the snarls in his life had always been, and were now, and probably always would be, caused by females.

He stopped at the library, was issued a library card since he could prove legal status, and with Lidia clutched in one arm, checked out what books he could find on immigration law, which were few—and on guardianship and adoption, which were fewer.

Finally came thoughts of Madysen. He was very dependent on her to finance his ability to stay here. He wondered if things got any more personally complex between them, or if things didn't work out at all, if she would still be willing to keep him employed at Willow Vale so he could continue to watch over Lidia while he tried to straighten out the tangled skein of custody law.

He made one last stop. Lugging the baby past jewelry display counters backed by a wall display of rifles and shotguns and tables piled so high with jumbled electronics amid tangles of wires like nests of skinny snakes, he could barely navigate the narrow aisles without bumping

anything. He finally came to the camping gear, finding what he wanted almost immediately. He checked out several sets to make sure the lenses weren't cracked and that the focus wheel worked. He wasn't planning on hunting game; the quarry he pursued didn't require a very long-range, powerful or expensive pair, but he wanted to be sure that what he bought worked, and that he would have a clear picture. Satisfied at last, he juggled the baby and his purchase out to the truck and headed home.

Lidia had been a little angel all day, but by now she was hungry and cranky and tired. It was amazing how one tiny creature could emit such a loud sound that grated on her grandpapa's ears. She began wailing as soon as the truck stopped in the yard, and didn't stop until he had her winter clothes off and her solid, squirmy body parked her in the high chair, her dinner warmed, and the tip of a baby spoon full of peas in her mouth.

He was afraid she would choke before she discovered he really was doing his best to feed her, so he didn't dare stick the spoon any farther in her mouth. "Lidia," he said. She ignored him and continued to shriek. "Lidia," he said more loudly, and when that didn't do the trick, he hollered, "Lidia!"

She opened her eyes and closed her mouth, a shocked expression on her tear-tracked, chubby little face. He was sure she was quite surprised; her abuelo had never raised his voice to her before. But at least she got a taste of the peas. She smacked her lips, made an *mm-mm* sound as she decided she liked them, and finally settled down in earnest to the business of eating.

And so his evening was spent amusing and bathing the baby, dressing her in clean pajamas and putting her to bed, and then showering himself. It was late when he finally turned out the light and stepped to the window with his new binoculars. As he feared, Madysen's window was also dark. Still, he waited, and suddenly yellow light bloomed in her window and there she was. He hurried to flip his own light on and then off, their signal. His cell phone rang almost immediately. He picked it up as he regained his post at the window that faced Madysen's.

Her voice purred in his ear: "Is that you, stud?"

"At your service, señora," he replied, unable to decide at the moment if he were pleased or pissed off at how she thought of him, a cock to be used at her pleasure or discarded, as she saw fit.

She ignored his use of the title that distanced him from her. "Can you see me, Tony?" she asked. Her voice sounded a bit hollow. She must have placed the phone down on the nightstand by her bed, turned to speaker and leaving her hands free.

"I can see you," he replied.

"What am I wearing?"

"Night clothes. Something short and white, with lace. I can't see through it, but I can see your legs."

"Can you? That's nice." She lowered one hand to the juncture of her thighs, stroking herself like a cat. "Can you see what I'm doing, Tony?"

"Yes." His cock started stiffening. The little brain hadn't registered that he wasn't happy with Madysen. It seemed more than happy to see her again. He had to pause for breath. "You're petting your..."

"Yes, I'm petting my pussy. It needs some attention. It's feeling lonely for you, Tony."

He peered through the binoculars. It was like standing next to her, but almost better in a way. The image of her hand fondling her own *chocha* was crystal clear and bigger than life. His cock throbbed. His throat almost closed. "Are you wet for me?" he whispered.

"Yes, I'm wet for you, Tony. I wish you could feel how hot and wet I am." She moved a bit of material aside so her middle finger disappeared between the soft blond curls at the juncture of her thighs. Her head tilted back and he had a glimpse of her long hair as it swung down her back. Her other hand slid beneath the hem of her nightie, lifting it to give him a good picture of a pair of white lace panties stretched to one side so she could pleasure herself and then, slowly as she

peeled the hem up her torso, those glorious breasts came into view. She ran her free hand over them, first one and then the other. He could see her nipples responding. She pinched and tugged at each in turn, causing them to blush from pink to red, all the while sliding that busy finger in and out of herself. The digit glistened in the light when she withdrew it before slipping it back in, evidence that she was truly getting off on teasing him from a distance.

“Do you want me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered, panting. “I want you bad, Tony.”

“Then you need to come over here where I am. Now, Madysen.”

She withdrew her hand from between her legs, twirled away and dropped the hem of her nightgown before disappearing from view.

Tony stepped away from the window, tearing his pajama bottoms off and going to stand beside the entry door without bothering with the light. She must have run down the stairs and across the yard. She flung open the door, a robe flapping loosely around her and a pair of slippers on her feet. He grabbed her, and without preamble positioned himself behind her, bent her over, flung the robe up and tore her panties down her legs. He felt for himself how slick and warm she was, one hand holding her wide open while without preamble he rammed himself up to the hilt inside her. She gasped.

“Are you sorry now for teasing Tony?” he growled.

“No!” She shook her head, blond hair tumbling forward over her face.

He pulled out to the very tip of his cock, slapped her ass once with an open palm, and then shoved back in, holding her pelvis and slamming her back against him at the same time, doubling the force.

“Feel this?” He tightened his hold on her hips, and rammed home once again. “I will make you sorry.”

She grunted, grinding against him. “No, you won’t. You can’t make me sorry.”

“Tell me how it feels for you when we are together.” He didn’t move as she started to do the work, hands on her knees for balance, rotating her hips while holding him inside and squeezing with her inner muscles as she pulled away, before sliding home on his cock again.

“You fill me up,” she said. “You make me complete.”

“You feel how hard I am for you? How much I want you? How long and hard I get for you?” He reached for her breasts hanging free, the nipples rigid and hot to the touch. He bent over her, bit her neck. “Answer me,” he growled.

“Yes!” she cried. “I can feel every inch of you inside me. Hot and hard and long. Don’t tease me, Tony.”

“It is only what you deserve. Tell me what you want. Say the words.”

“I want you. I want...you...to make me come.”

“Is that all you want?”

“No! I told you. I want you. All of you, Tony.”

In a voice so soft he didn’t think she could possibly hear, he said, “I want you, too, Madysen.” His strokes gentled, slowed and stretched, becoming an unhurried exploration of her heated, slippery chamber. He kept bumping up against what he assumed was her cervix, the entrance to her womb. Every time he did, he heard her suck in air. So he kept it up, nudging her just there, one hand sliding back along her belly so his fingers could find her clit. Once he did, he pinched gently each time his cock bounced against the firm surface deep inside her. She started sobbing. He could feel the tremors begin in her, traveling up her long legs and echoing inside her pelvis. The fingers of the hand still at her breast sought and found a nipple. He rolled it between his fingers, and then pinched lightly at the same time he squeezed her clit. She sucked in a long breath, shuddered all over, while inside her he could feel the waves of her orgasm build and recede, build and recede, drawing the same rolling response from deep inside him.

When it was finally over, both of them a shattered mass of raw nerve endings, it was all he

could do to drag them over to the sofa where they collapsed. Thrown sideways, one of her legs flung over his lap, the other foot on the floor, it took a while for her breathing to slow. At last she straightened so she was sitting upright in his lap, facing away from him.

"You're mad at me, aren't you, Tony?"

His arm tightened around her middle, her big breasts resting on his arm. He could feel a huge sigh building up inside, the urge too big for him to fight. At last he surrendered. Gave in to what he really wanted, which was Madysen. "Not anymore," he said as he exhaled.

"I told you I'll fix it. You believe me, don't you?" She swung her leg off his lap and changed position so she was facing him.

"Yes, sure," he said, shrugging.

She slugged his shoulder. "Stop that 'sí, señora' stuff right now, Tony. It really pisses me off."

"Sí, señora," he said, smirking and trying to draw her hand toward his still semi-hard cock. "Convince me to stop, *patrona*."

"Okay, now you're asking for it, mister." She scooted back on his thighs, her hand curled around his rod as they both smiled in renewed anticipation. "Now you're gonna get it." They tussled playfully for a while and even though he ended up on top of her, clutching her ass on the narrow couch to stay there with her while he emptied himself once more inside her, it was hard to say which of them actually won.

Later, in the dim yellow light of an old table lamp as she was standing and straightening what few clothes she had arrived in, she caught sight of the binoculars lying next to the small pile of library books on the coffee table. She bent to lift them. "Taking up birdwatching?" she asked, her full lips curved into knowing a smile.

"Yes, one pretty bird in particular. It's all yellow and white. I've never seen one like it before. I see it preening itself sometimes, but I don't know what kind of bird it is."

"Hmm. It's probably one of those common Western titmice." She bent to lift the books one by one, studying their spines and front and back covers.

"A very clever bird," he said. "But I think not so common."

"You studying immigration law, Tony?" she asked, growing more serious.

He sat on the couch, watching her. Even when she wasn't deliberately posturing for his viewing pleasure, he liked looking at her. "I need to know my rights when it comes to Lidia," he said.

"Maybe you could seek legal guardianship of her," Madysen said. She lowered her voice, as if what she was thinking would hurt him if she voiced her thoughts. "Gabriela is an unfit mother. She abandoned her child. Her actions have legal ramifications. Before the government can take Lidia from you, maybe you should take custody away from her parents."

He blew a breath. "I don't like to admit it, but I agree with all you say. But...do I have the right to take custody from Gabriela and Rafael?" He stood and started pulling on his pants.

"I don't know. You probably need a lawyer."

He looked at her over his shoulder. "Lawyers cost money."

She hesitated just a second. "I have some money. You're welcome to use it."

He hesitated in turn. He already owed her so much. Sometimes he felt emasculated by the inequities in their relationship. "Let me read the books. See what I can find out."

"I'll help you. Let me take one or two with me." She picked up a couple of the few volumes he had borrowed from the library.

"You're leaving?" He rubbed his cheek with one finger.

"I wasn't asked to stay." They had circled back around to the sore point between them. She looked at him with her big green eyes.

"You own this place; stay if you like."

A look of hurt stole over her face, as if she thought he was just trying to get back at her, so

he amended in a soft voice, “Madysen. It would please me very much if you stayed.”

Chapter Seven

The days passed swiftly. Tony didn’t mention Thanksgiving. Madysen wasn’t sure if he celebrated the holiday or not, and so she didn’t knock herself out preparing a special meal. She spent the days in hard work, it had always been her habit to fill with work the hours that otherwise she would have spent thinking of things that caused her pain. She spent most nights in the little cabin with Tony, and was surprised to find that she didn’t mind leaving the big house unoccupied. It seemed it didn’t matter where she slept, so long as it was with Antonio.

Clay arrived one day and finished digging the sewer line for Beck’s house, and trenches for water and power lines. He claimed he didn’t have time to come in for coffee, so Madysen assumed the chill hadn’t lifted which she had imposed on their friendship when she deflected questions about Tony. But as the afternoon wore on toward darkness, she heard the backhoe’s engine sputter to a stop. Coming out of the barn to see if Clay might need a ride back to his dad’s, she caught her old friend deep in conversation with her lover. She might have known Clay’s overbearing cop side would eventually override his diminishing old-friend side, and he wouldn’t be able to help interrogating Antonio the first chance he got.

She tried to judge by their body language what they were saying, and was on the verge of stepping in when the two of them suddenly broke into laughter. Clay clapped Tony on the shoulder, turned and climbed back into his machine, started it up and drove down the lane, heading toward his dad’s spread.

From the way they had both bristled the last time they met, she had thought they might have to do more circling and neck-hair raising, like a couple of feral dogs. But they seemed to get along fine—as long as she wasn’t around to interfere. She wanted, but was reluctant, to ask Tony what they had said. What they laughed about. More and more she deferred to Tony, afraid to inflate anything and every little thing into a boss and employee situation. She wanted him on a more equal footing with her, but she had made a big strategic error in asking him to leave her house. When it came to sex Tony was becoming more and more dominant, but elsewhere in their relationship he hung back. As if distancing himself? Was he planning on leaving? Madysen didn’t know.

She read his library books. There seemed one sure solution to Tony’s dilemma, but she didn’t know how he would take it if she suggested it so she held off.

A few days later another man showed up with a load of cinder blocks and after Madysen intercepted him to show which direction she wanted the new house situated, he began building a foundation. A week before Jilly was due home for winter break, Beck’s new house came trundling up the lane, hauled behind a semi-truck belching black fumes from its twin exhaust pipes. A small man with a tobacco chaw making a bulge in his lower lip and legs that looked too spindly for his barrel-shaped body climbed down. “Howdy!” He smiled, showing a gap between his two front teeth. “Got a new, pretty, little house here for ya.”

Madysen didn’t bother explaining it wasn’t her new house. She just led the man through the pasture gates and pointed out where the new sewer and water pipe connections were sticking up out of the foundation. “I’ll come back tomorra, get ‘er all set up for ya,” the man said with a grin, spitting tobacco juice off to one side.

“Whatever it takes,” she said. “I hadn’t realized it would have a little front porch, but that’s all the better. I thought facing it toward the mountain would make for a nice view.”

“Whatever you say,” he said, spitting again and wiping his lip with the back of his hand.

Madysen repressed a shudder and turned back to her work. He climbed into the passenger seat of the pilot vehicle with the rotating yellow light whose driver had followed the modular house out to the ranch, and they took off. The next day when she had time to pay any attention to

the little blue clapboard modular, the man had it situated over the utilities and was starting to jack it up and get it leveled on its foundation. She was surprised at how much she liked the looks of it. Despite her feeling that against her inclination for solitude the beginnings of a family compound might be starting here at Willow Vale, once fenced off from the pasture and a yard and garden put in, she had to admit the new little house would look right at home. In quick succession over the next few days, an electrician arrived to finish hooking it up to power, a propane tank for heat was delivered and set up, and then suddenly it was all ready for Beck to move in.

She didn't hear Tony come up behind her as she stood rubbing her lip and thinking. Her impulse to turn the new house in a direction opposite to the old ranch house and the cabin made it very private even though the other two structures were nearby. "Your brother's new house?" he asked.

"Do you like it? Maybe I can talk Beck out of it."

"Why would you want to talk him out of it? You have a house."

"Look at it, Tony. It would be perfect. For us."

He said nothing, seeming to consider. "Nobody could see us," he finally said. "Even if we forgot to close the curtains."

"You catch on fast, cowboy." Madysen smiled and turned to kiss him.

Jilly arrived home the second week in December. Although she tried to participate fully in the cookie baking and tree trimming, she seemed to Madysen to be wary and watchful. "It's different here," she finally said. "Last year we were in such shock there was no celebrating. This year I wanted it to be like it always was, and you're trying. But it's not the same, is it, Mom?"

Madysen pulled her daughter to her, smoothed her hair. "Nothing will ever be like it was," she said. "Your dad's gone, and you're all grown up and moved away to college. From now on we can only make new lives and new traditions."

Jillian stilled in her mother's arms. "I noticed some of the presents under the tree are for Antonio...and the baby. Are they coming over for Christmas?"

"I thought so, yes, Jilly. I thought it would be nice to ask them, since they're alone and we're also alone. Would that be all right with you?" Tony and Lidia had kept to themselves since Jillian's arrival. Madysen felt their absence with a keen pang despite Jillian's familiar presence in the house. She wondered if the time was approaching when she would have to explain to her daughter Tony and the baby's true meaning in her life.

"You're not trying to...replace Daddy and me already. Are you, Mom?"

"Never, never, never! Look at me, Jilly." She tipped her daughter's chin up with one finger so Jillian would have to face her. "No one will ever take your place in my heart. Understand? No one will ever erase the memory of your dad either. If life is like a photo album, we can keep adding pictures, but that doesn't affect the sentimental feelings we have for the old ones. Does that make sense?"

"I guess." Jillian ducked her head again, and Madysen knew her daughter would need time to think about things. "I just wouldn't want you to love a new baby more than me."

Madysen rested her arms on her daughter's shoulders before letting her move away. "Jillian. You will always be first in my heart."

"Well, I just wanted to make sure, that's all."

"I could give you a chance to get to know Lidia. Tony could use some help this morning if you would agree to watch the baby for an hour or so."

"Tony?" Jillian gave her mother an accusing look, her lower lip threatening to quiver.

"Antonio. Tony. Yes. If I could just go help him for a little while, it would make me feel better than leaving all the chores to him. Especially since he has the baby to tend. You like Antonio all right, don't you?"

“Well, I guess I never thought much about it.” Jillian gave her mother a searching sideways look from beneath her lashes. “But you like him, is that what you’re telling me, Mom?”

“That’s what I’m saying, yes.” She waited for Jilly’s reaction.

“Wow,” her daughter said. “I come home and everything’s changed. I never expected something like this.”

“To tell you the truth, I never did either,” Madysen said.

There was a knock at the back door, and Tony entered with Lidia. Jillian stood stock still while Madysen went to the kitchen to meet them and take the baby from her grandpa. Madysen gave Tony a kiss before heading back to the living room to sit and start taking Lidia’s jacket off. Tony hung back in the kitchen. “Hello, Jillian,” he said.

“Hello, Antonio,” Jillian replied. Her gaze swung from Tony standing in the kitchen doorway to the baby in her mother’s lap. Once Lidia’s hands were free, she lifted one to pat Madysen’s face, chortling her infectious baby laugh.

“She’s glad to see you,” Jillian said.

“She’s generally a pretty happy baby,” Madysen replied. “Here, take her, why don’t you? She’s had lunch, Tony? And she’s dry?”

He nodded, rotating his hat by its brim in his fingers. “She’s all ready, then, Jilly, if you could just watch her for a little while,” Madysen said.

Reluctantly, Jillian held out her arms and took the baby. Once Lidia was in her arms, they studied each other with twin somber expressions. Having accomplished her goal, Madysen hurried to don her jacket before Jillian could change her mind. “Here’s her diaper bag, with some toys and a bottle and some teething biscuits,” she called over her shoulder as she hustled Tony out the mud room door ahead of her.

Once outside with the door safely shut behind them, she said, “Whew. That went better than I expected.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to just leave them together like that?” Tony said, clapping his hat on his head. “I truly don’t need any help, you know. There’s not that much left to do this morning.”

“I know. That’s not the point. The point is to get Jilly comfortable with Lidia, so we can eventually be one big, happy family.”

“Excuse me?” He halted in his tracks.

“Where did you think I was heading when I said I would fix things, Tony?” Madysen kept walking, and eventually he followed until they were standing inside the barn. “I’ve read your library books, but they only reinforced what I already knew. You and I need to get married, and then we can work on getting custody of Lidia.”

“This is no way to...to propose marriage.” He was shaking his head.

“It’s my way, and I just did. Now kiss me and tell me you love me. You do love me, don’t you, Tony?”

He just looked at her, his handsome face radiating confusion.

“Tony? Don’t you?” She was a little less sure of herself as he continued to balk at telling her what she needed to know.

“Sí. Yes, no question,” he finally admitted.

“Then say it,” she demanded, sticking out her chest.

His eyes dropped to her tits. “I love you,” he mumbled.

“Look me in the eye, dammit.”

He raised his gold-flecked brown eyes. His generous lips curved as he continued to stare at her, making her wait. “*¡Te amo!*” he finally said. “Madysen Collins, I love you! Is that better?”

“Much. Antonio Marquez, I love you too. But this month of going without you is going to kill me. Now kiss me before I die of wanting you.”

“Sí, señora,” he said, teasing her about her bossiness but tacitly admitting that her plan was

sound. They sealed their bargain with an open mouthed tongue-thrusting smacker that left her weak in the knees.

When they finally parted so their breathing could return to normal, she said, "That still leaves Beck."

"Your brother."

"Yes."

"Whose new house you are now going to try to take away."

"Yes."

"Sometimes you scare me, Madysen Collins."

"But I make up for that, hmm, Tony? You still like me, don't you?" She stepped up and rubbed her breasts against his chest, watching his eyes glaze over.

"A month without you might kill me as well, if you keep up that kind of teasing," he growled, backing up a step.

"Then you've got a long time to think of ways to punish me, don't you?" she whispered.

"I will think of so many ways, you might die of pleasure before I'm finished with you." His eyes glinted as he grabbed her ass and pulled her close against the erection straining his jeans.

"We will never be finished with each other, Tony. I can promise you that," she said before their lips met again in a searing kiss.

They tiptoed across the porch like the conspirators they were, Madysen quietly opening the mud room door to see how it was going before they stepped inside.

Jillian sat with Lidia on a blanket on the living room floor. The baby's face and hands were smeared with drool and biscuit, and Jilly was trying to teach her pat-a-cake. The baby was so eager to high-five Jilly, she fell over sideways when her reach exceeded her balance. They both laughed as Jillian settled her solid little body upright so they could begin again.

Madysen stepped aside, a finger to her lips, so Tony could take her place in the doorway while she tried to peer around his bulk and not miss anything. One of the ranch dogs barked behind them, and the noise caused Jillian to look up and see them. They stepped inside the kitchen, trying to appear nonchalant as if they hadn't been watching her interact, perfectly happily, with Lidia.

Jilly got to her feet and started toward them. "I need to wash my hands," she said, turning them palms up so they could see the smear of sticky teething biscuit.

Tony moved sideways to let her pass. Lidia started to whimper when she discovered they were all in another room and she was left alone. Tony walked to the baby but didn't pick her up. He just looked down at Lidia as her distress mounted.

Jilly turned to watch as she dried her hands. "Why isn't he picking her up, Mom?"

Madysen shrugged, so Jillian called, "She wants you to pick her up, Antonio."

"I know. But you need to look at her. I can't believe it. Jillian, you have taught Lidia to sit up by herself."

"I did? She never did that on her own before?" Jillian looked pleased. "Well, that's pretty amazing."

"We were only gone such a little while. You are a good teacher, Jillian."

"She's a good baby." Jilly's admission didn't sound forced to Madysen, but she was glad Tony bent to pick up Lidia before she worked herself into a frenzy and belied Jillian's nice picture of her. Lidia was a good baby, but she had her moments when nothing would do but getting her own way. Maybe that was why Madysen liked her so much: they were two of a kind. She put her hand to her mouth to hide her secret grin.

"I'm going into town tonight, Mom," Jillian said. "Some of us from high school are getting together since we've scattered all over the country and now are home for break."

Madysen's gaze caught Tony's as Jillian turned to hang up the dishtowel. She sent him an

elaborate wink. "It will be nice for you to see your friends, honey."

Jilly turned back and Madysen bit her lip, unsure if she'd been caught making goo-goo eyes at her man.

"That's what I thought," Jilly said. "I just wasn't sure it would be right to go off with my friends and leave you alone. But I guess it's okay, huh?" She gave her mother a searching look.

"Don't worry about me, honey. You're young. You need to spend time with your friends, so if you want to go out tonight, go on and have fun." She couldn't help looking at Tony, and saw in her peripheral vision Jilly's head turn to follow her gaze. Madysen hoped by now Jilly could accept that it wasn't only people her own age who needed companionship. Mothers needed love too.

Chapter Eight

Two down, one to go, Madysen thought as she erased the text message from Beck. He would be there within the hour, he had written. *Can't wait*, she thought. Her plans had worked out well the previous day with Tony, and then, miraculously, also with Jilly. But she had hardly ever been successful in the past in getting her big brother to see things her way. So she wasn't looking forward to what she was sure would be more of a confrontation than a reunion.

"Your Uncle Beck's on his way," she said to Jilly, who was again entertaining Lidia on the living room floor.

"Oh, good. I'll be glad to see him," Jilly enthused.

Tony was sitting on the couch watching Jillian playing with Lidia. He sent a look Madysen's way, probably to see if he could decipher how she was feeling about her brother's impending arrival. It was amazing how fast Jilly had taken to Lidia, once she got past her concern that she still had the biggest piece of her mother's heart. And she had already developed an easygoing, relaxed manner with Tony. Madysen was grateful for her daughter's maturity, and glad Beck had chosen to finally show up when Jilly was there—his favorite and only niece's presence would be sure to diffuse any blowup. If she wasn't such a big chicken, Madysen thought, she would have told him about Tony already. She wondered if their mutual friend Clay had mentioned that she had insisted on changing the location of the utilities, and paved the way to Beck accepting her plans for his new house.

Madysen went to the kitchen to arrange a plate of cookies and set out glasses for cider and eggnog. It wasn't long before she heard a car in the yard, and then silence outside. Beck didn't come in the house, and she wasn't going out to meet him, taking what she was sure was going to be a disagreement into the yard. Tony rose to join her in the kitchen, his arms going around her as she peered out the window.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I will be. At the moment, I'm feeling a little nauseated."

"Would it be better if I took Lidia to the cabin? Your brother is going to have many changes to take in at once."

"Don't leave," Madysen said. She turned toward him, catching sight of Jilly watching the open display of affection between them as she did so. Tony's arms tightened around her. Madysen sent a wavery smile in Jillian's direction, but her daughter gave no sign of what she was thinking and just turned her attention back to Lidia.

At last there were footsteps on the porch. One sharp rap, a turn of the knob, and the door was opening.

But the person who entered was not who Madysen was expecting. This person was female, and had long dark hair with reddish highlights. This person was in her mid-twenties, and she was unmistakably pregnant.

The arm holding the door open for this astonishing vision belonged to her brother Beck. He

ushered the young woman inside, and shut the door on the cold draft entering with them. Then he, and Tony, and Madysen, and Beck's unexpected guest, just stood taking each other's measure for a long pause. Madysen didn't dare think *pregnant pause* or she might burst into nervous and horribly inappropriate laughter.

"Maddy, what the hell—" Beck began, his brows lowered and thunderclouds building in his eyes.

The young woman laid a restraining hand on his arm. His eyes lowered to her hand and then raised back up to her face. Madysen had never seen anyone so easily stop Beck in his tracks like this young woman did. She kind of sparkled; there was no other word for the faint gold aura that surrounded her. She stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Hi. I'm Selene. You must be Madysen. I've heard so much about you."

Madysen wanted to say *I'll bet*, but the sarcastic words wouldn't form while sparkly Selene had hold of her fingers. Instead she said, "This is Antonio Marquez. Tony, my brother Beck."

Tony stepped forward and shook hands with the two newcomers. Madysen beckoned toward the living room. "And my daughter, Jillian, and Tony's granddaughter, Lidia. Jilly, come and meet Selene, Uncle Beck's, uh, *friend*."

"My wife," Beck corrected.

Jilly hurried forward, handed Lidia to Tony, and threw herself in Beck's arms. "Your wife! Uncle Beck! Congratulations!" She turned to hug Selene, and so she was enveloped in little gold sparklies too.

Madysen thought, what in the world is it with this woman and her fairy dust? And Beck's *wife*? He had to be at least fifteen years older than this child-woman, who was more Jillian's age. But she found she couldn't bring herself to say anything of that nature, either.

It looked like Beck was also choking back words, a most unusual occurrence with him, so she had that small mercy to be thankful for at least.

"Let me take your coats. All of you go on in the living room, and I'll get us something to drink. Beck, would you like a little rum in your eggnog?"

"I think I would, yes, please, Maddy," he said, sounding in restraint as if his back molars were glued together.

"Tony?" she asked, noticing Beck's eyes shift from her to Antonio.

"Sure," Tony said pleasantly, his tone alone the only natural one since he hadn't been sprinkled with sparkle dust. "Why not?" He gestured with the hand not holding Lidia for Beck and Selene and Jillian to precede him into the living room. As Selene passed Tony, Lidia bent so far forward as to topple from her abuelo's arms. Selene laughed and held her arms out for Lidia, and then the baby was besparkled as well.

Beck gave Tony an assessing look as he passed, trying to gauge his exact role in his sister's house, Madysen was sure. But if Beck could nonchalantly spring Selene on them, she could return the favor with Tony.

"I'll take some rum, Mom," Jillian said with a teasing twinkle in her eye.

"No, you won't." Madysen flipped her daughter's hair over her shoulder. "Plain eggnog or hot apple cider?"

Jillian sighed. "Cider. Selene?"

Selene nodded. "Me, too."

"So, Tony," Beck said as he claimed one end of the couch, slinging one ankle over his knee. "You worked here long?"

"About a year," Tony said as he dropped into an armchair. Madysen noted that Beck did at least have the grace to look uncomfortable at the reminder of the stretch of time that she had been left to take care of everything herself when Carl died.

"Tony is Mom's boyfriend," Jillian supplied helpfully, grinning. Beck almost choked on the eggnog Madysen had just finished handing him and that he had raised to his lips.

"That's not quite true," Madysen said as, with an evil smile that said *I'm going to choke you later*, she handed her daughter a cup of cider.

Jillian grinned back at her mother. "It's not? The secret is out. I saw you two kissing in the kitchen, you know."

"The secret is that Tony is not my boyfriend. He is my fiancé."

"What? Mom!" Jillian spilled cider as she jumped up to hug Madysen. "More congratulations to you and to Antonio! But what does that do to Willow Vale? I don't want to sound selfish or anything, but I always thought it would be..."

"Yours. And it will be," Madysen assured her daughter. "And it will be Beck's child's as well, and Lidia's when Tony and I adopt her. Kent Reed and Francesca Sittoni's legacy, Willow Vale, is in an unbreakable family trust, to be passed down in perpetuity."

"Pretty name," Tony commented. "Francesca. I like it."

"She was an immigrant from the Tyrol. Like you, Tony. With a little daughter who became Beck's and my grandmother. The parallels are quite striking, aren't they, Beck?"

"Now that you mention it, I think the man was named Marquez. The one who lived on the old Broadbent place and worked for Kent and Francesca for years, until he was an old, old man."

"I think, from the way Grandma Elena told the story, Señor Marquez was always a little in love with Francesca," Madysen said, smiling at Tony.

"Another pretty name: Elena," Tony said, deflecting attention from himself.

"Oh, I agree," Selene said. "Do you know, my great grandmother was also from the Tyrol? Beck, if we have a girl, would you like to name her Francesca or Elena?"

"Maybe both. Elena Francesca sounds nice, but so does Francesca Elena."

"They would have been so pleased," Madysen said.

"How in the heck did I end up with a name like Jilly?" Jillian demanded, and they all laughed.

"Your dad liked it, honey," Madysen said, sinking down on the arm of the chair where Tony sat.

"Well, speaking of the family trust...is it time to get down to some business here?"

"Beck," Selene said quietly where she sat beside him. "Be nice."

"Selene, our house faces the *wrong way*," he told her. "I specifically asked Clay to make sure it would face the river, like this one does and like the original homestead cabin does."

"It's my fault it doesn't, Beck," Madysen admitted quietly.

"Well, I figured. Clay wouldn't just ignore my instructions without some strong input from you," Beck said. "What gives, Maddy?"

"How important is it to you that you have a view of the Burntfork?"

"I think it's pretty obvious by now that it was damned important to me, Madysen." Beck set his drink down and leaned toward his sister. Once again all it took was for Selene to touch his arm, and he reined himself in, sighing and sitting back against the cushions.

Tony sat very still while Jillian's eyes grew round and ping-ponged back and forth between her mother and her uncle, probably scared her holiday was going to be ruined by a big family fight.

"Would you consider a trade, Beck?" Madysen asked. "I'll take your new house if you take this one."

"Wait a minute. I hate to keep saying 'what about me,' but what about me?" Jillian asked. "Do I have a vote?"

"Nothing's decided. But if we take this house and it's left up to me, you can certainly keep your room as long as you want it, Jillian," Selene offered in her quiet voice.

"Or you can stay with me and Tony if your uncle agrees to switch houses. Or you could take over Francesca and Kent's little cabin. Whichever you like."

"But what about Lidia, and Uncle Beck and Selene's baby? They'll need bedrooms."

"It sounds like we're going to have our own little preschool," Selene said. Beck smiled at her fondly, and patted her belly. Madysen thought: *Holy crap, I can't believe how he acts with her. She's bewitched him or something.*

"We can always build more rooms later, Jilly," Beck said. "First things first. Maddy, you're really willing to hand over this house just like that?"

"I've had my turn here, Beck. And while I love the house that Kent built for Francesca, it's very small. I would like to start in a new place with Tony and Lidia."

"Well, let me ask you this since we're springing surprises of all kinds on each other. What would you think about grapes?"

"Excuse me?"

"Grapes. A winery. It's something I've always dreamed about."

"In Wyoming? It gets a little chilly here for grapes, doesn't it?" Madysen couldn't help the skepticism in her voice.

"I wouldn't be the first to try it, Maddy. There are already several vineyards in the state."

"And I'm very good with growing things," Selene offered.

"Well, we've certainly got the land. Do whatever you like, Beck. I've already got the cheese business to keep me busy. And now that I've got Tony, I'm perfectly happy."

But Beck was still distrustful. "I don't get it. Why would you want the modular house over this one?"

Madysen laughed, but couldn't immediately manufacture a reason off the top of her head without revealing secrets she didn't want anyone but Tony to know.

Beck waited, until finally Tony offered, "For the view."

She turned her head away from the company, pursed her lips, and blew Tony a kiss of gratitude.

"You would seriously choose the mountains over the river, Tony?" Beck asked doubtfully.

Madysen hoped she was the only one who noticed Tony's lashes lower as his gaze brushed over her shirt front. "*Las montañas*," he said with great feeling. "Sí, yes, I assure you I love the mountains, and will be very happy wherever Madysen chooses to live."

"I love you," she mouthed silently.

He raised his eyes to her face. "*Te quiero*. I want you. *Te amo*. I love you," he replied in his normal soft voice, as if he didn't care who heard him. Tony really was fitting in quite nicely here in Willow Valley. Beck was happy with his new wife and the old house. Jillian was happy that she would never be ousted from her place on the family ranch or any of its dwellings. And although she had never expected to be so happy again, Madysen couldn't wait to begin her new life in her new little house with her new husband and the ranch's youngest new resident, baby Lidia.