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CLAY'S QUEST

*It will take more
than an antique
diamond to
lure Emma
back to Clay's bed...*



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by
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Chapter One

The cowbell attached by a copper spiral to the front door chimed.

Emma's hands stilled at the sound. She'd been standing at the glass display counter that faced the front door, hands busy untangling the delicate chains of a snarl of antique pendants that had arrived with the rest of what she'd bought at an estate sale the previous month. She hadn't had time to thoroughly examine all the various items that she had acquired by the boxful. But now traffic in her store slowed with the arrival of cold weather and put a virtual stop to outdoor sales and auctions in southwest Wyoming for the year. She looked up, and when she saw who it was she forced her fingers to be still and not tremble.

She doubted if this visit was professional, even though he wore the full complement of official paraphernalia in Velcro pouches on his belt and clipped to his shirt beneath the faux sheepskin-lined winter jacket. He knew her well and would know she was asking, without asking, what he wanted. In the middle of a chilly workday. In her shop. Where if he wanted to start up again with the questions that she had no answer for, she couldn't very well turn and run.

"Emma," he said as he removed his tan ball cap with its seven-point gold sheriff's department logo, which he held in one hand by its curled visor. He stretched out the opposite long forefinger with a clean, neatly clipped nail to give the chains she was working on a tiny bit of a swirl on the glass. Not enough to make the job of disentangling them harder. But enough to let her know he acknowledged he was interrupting her day. "Quite a mess," he said of the situation with the pendants. Or of the situation between them, perhaps. She couldn't be completely certain at this point what Clay meant.

She wasn't sure what to say either. *May I help you?* or *What can I do for you today?* were both out of the question. He had made clear on several occasions since she moved out exactly how she could help him and what she could do for him. Some of his requests had to do with sex, between old friends, if friendship was all that remained between them. Those she steadfastly refused. But most of his appeals had to do with her moving back home. Which she couldn't do, so there was no point in talking about it anymore.

"Place looks nice." He nodded at the various Christmas displays which she had put up early in an effort to make herself feel better: the tree in the middle of the worn plank floor with its antique glass ornaments and strings of popcorn and colorful paper chains, the gifts in foil and ribbons of gold and red and green under the tree and distributed here and there among the rest of the store's merchandise.

"Thanks." She had spent many hours decorating the shop, even though her heart had hardly cooperated with the effort. She felt more like Scrooge than Santa this year. But it was her own fault, and so she just got on with things whether she felt in the proper spirit or not.

"I need something," he said, and she thought, Oh boy, here it comes. And, truly, she didn't know at this instant what her answer would be. Sometimes she dreamed about Clay and what had been between them, specifically the fleshy ax handle he carried in his pants and that he wielded so well and that she missed so much, and more generally what a good life they'd had together. She had been determined to leave him, but lately she had been questioning whether her decision

hadn't been rash. Perhaps, as Clay had insisted more than once and which she had refused to consider, there was another way.

But instead of the plea she expected from him, his regular entreaty for either a quickie or for her to come back home, he continued, "I need something special. For a woman. A special woman."

He looked up. His hazel eyes glinted, crinkling at the corners as if he were holding back a smile from the lower part of his face but that he couldn't entirely conceal from her.

She held her immediate reaction at bay. He wanted a gift for a woman, a *special* woman, and he made a beeline to her shop to buy it? The news that he was seeing someone else hit her hard, although it shouldn't have. He was a man. A damned attractive man if it came right down to it. Tall, well-proportioned and well-built, he was as physically compelling as he'd been when she first laid eyes on him in her late teens. If he let himself smile, he would display even white teeth along with the familiar endearing dimple in his right cheek. If he unclasped his webbed belt and let his pants drop to the floor with a clunk of holstered gun and pouches full of cop gear, she well knew he could show her another impressive part of himself, a part she had enjoyed the use of on many a memorable occasion.

She wanted to curl her hands into claws. She wanted to sweep the snarl of pendants from the counter. She wanted to cry out, to protest his involvement with anyone new, to grab him and reclaim him for herself. She could remind him they were still married. Neither had seen fit as yet to begin divorce proceedings, although she couldn't have said why that was the case. But she didn't cry or protest or grab at him. She couldn't. Shocked at her own initial reaction, her hands still remained resting to either side of the pile of chains, and she forced them by sheer will power to hold their relaxed position.

"What is your price range?" she asked instead in as reasonable a tone as she could manage.

"Oh, money's no object," he replied with an airy wave of the hand holding his ball cap, as if she was unaware cops didn't make near the kind of salary the local miners and oil and gas workers made and spent so freely.

"Furniture?"

He shook his head.

"Pictures or *objets d'art*?"

He grinned, but to his credit didn't sneer at her use of such posh foreign terms. Again he shook his head.

"You weren't thinking...jewelry?" God, she'd hesitated, almost choking on the word. She didn't want to give away what she was thinking. She didn't want him buying jewelry for another woman. Especially not in her store. She tried to hide that sentiment, but Clay hadn't made it to patrol sergeant by being fooled by emotional women, especially one he knew so well. When he just gave a cool nod of his head, she asked, "A necklace, perhaps? It will take me a while to get the snarls out of these chains, but you can see what the pendants look like. There are all kinds of stones, emeralds, sapphires. There is even a rare black opal, very pretty. Or a bracelet? Or a squash blossom necklace? I have some lovely authentic Navajo pieces in silver and turquoise and coral on consignment."

He was peering into the glass case under the pendants, not listening to a word she was babbling. He was looking at rings. Emma's heart sputtered. Surely he wouldn't ask to see rings.

"I'd like to see some of those rings," he said, pointing to the top glass shelf of the old display case. He leaned over oak trim darkened through age and the touch of many hands over the years, his own hand resting where the palms of generations of people who stood before this cabinet to peruse and buy had rested.

So, Emma thought. Clay was changing tactics. No more asking her to come back. He obviously didn't need her anymore. He'd come in today to announce by this oblique method that he had found someone new. Specifically, she suspected he had probably come in to her shop

with every intention of punishing her. Show her what she had thrown away. Rub her nose in it. Make her eat dirt for ever leaving him in the first place.

Well, she supposed she deserved that. No matter how shocked she was at the thought that he had already replaced her. No matter how much it hurt. *Why*, until this very moment, had she never seriously considered that Clay would look for somebody else when she continued to refuse him? Somebody willing and female. Another woman to spend time with, expend his substantial randy sexual energy upon. To spend what spare money he had on.

He was a man with a big sexual appetite. If he didn't want to fuck once a day there was something seriously wrong with him. Generally, he wanted it more than once.

She forced herself to slide open the glass doors in the rear of the display case and begin taking out the rings he requested. One by one, the lovely old boxes of velvet with satin linings came out, royal blue, deep purple, Valentine red. One by one she slowly lined them up beside the jumble of chains, taking her time and letting him consider. One by one, he silently debated and then shook his head no. Square-cut amethyst in platinum? No. Oval pink diamond in silver? No. Marquise-cut black onyx surrounded by brilliant-cut diamonds in white gold? No. The rings she chose got progressively older and more expensive. Heavy, with curlicues and much hand work, the vintage pieces were as beautiful on the back as they were on the side meant to be admired when worn. Their beauty didn't seem to affect Clay any. He rejected them all.

Really, Emma was astounded. What did Clay Thorpe know about antique jewelry? How could he just shake his head negatively at all her pretty wares? "Maybe you would find what you're looking for at the mall," she suggested with a touch of asperity. He had heard her disparage the chain jewelers more than once and would know she was denigrating his taste. But in her opinion, industrial grade diamonds used on saw blades would be good enough for any new woman Clay was considering letting take her place.

"You haven't showed me everything you've got, Emma," he accused. "You're holding back the best."

Could he actually be referring indirectly to their situation? Would he dare accuse her? Up until now not a word of denunciation had passed between them. They had steadfastly refused to cast stones. But now that he'd found someone else, was the blame game going to begin?

His finger touched the glass. "That one. I want to see that one."

She blew out a breath. He would. Emma felt her shoulders sag. He would ask to see the one piece in the entire store she was reluctant to part with. Despite the bills steadily mounting now that she lived on her own, she had hoped to hang onto the ring until her financial situation improved. Until she could take it home and admire it and keep it for herself. Over the years she had become almost inured to giving up beautiful, priceless things, things that she appreciated but couldn't afford for herself. It was an unpredictable business, antiques dealer. Most of the time she made little money; sometimes she made a lot on a single item. She loved so much of what she bought, or else stocked on consignment for others, but the whole idea was to sell them. Not to have them for her own. Yet there were just those few certain pieces that cried out to be possessed and loved by her alone.

She could feel Clay's eyes on her, watching and assessing as she continued to hesitate. At last she brought out the ring and set the box on the counter. It was truly an extraordinary diamond, a round solitaire with a weight of almost a carat and a half, surrounded by smaller diamonds set in a platinum linear Art Deco design. Even in the poor light from the hanging ceiling fixtures of the shop and the dim autumn light struggling to penetrate the front windows, the ring sparkled, bending and refracting and reflecting what little light was available, in a remarkable demonstration of a long dead and forgotten master gem-cutter and -setter's talent.

Clay sucked in a breath. Even Clay, who would be the first to admit he knew little of truly valuable antique jewelry, had to appreciate this amazing ring.

"Put it on for me, Emma. Let me see what it looks like."

"Clay." She tried to forestall him. "This is a very expensive piece."

“Well, I figured. Since you didn’t want to show it to me.” She caught his eyes glinting with repressed humor again. “Come on, cooperate with me. I’ve seen your financials, remember. I doubt if you’re doing much more business than you ever were. You can probably use the money from a big sale. Let me see what it looks like on your hand.”

Trying on jewelry so her husband could buy it for another woman? Everything in her rebelled. The whole situation was ludicrous, and Clay was being cruel to subject her to it. Besides, unless he won the lottery or something, he couldn’t afford it. So what was his purpose besides being plain mean? He’d probably been talking to some of the guys at the detention center or on his bowling team, manly-type men whose advice would consist of something like: Just move on, dude. Forget the bitch. What do you need her for? Lots of fish in the sea.

She met his gaze, but his expression gave away nothing. When she continued to delay, he picked up the box and removed the big ring. Then he grasped her left hand, and where her wedding and engagement rings should have been, and slid it onto her finger. There was a message in his eyes, one she was pretty sure flashed in code, *You’re teetering on the edge of using up all your chances. We’re coming down to the final choices here, Emma.*

She dropped her eyes to look at the ring. If he hadn’t still been holding her hand, it would have slid sideways on her finger, which looked skeletal in the loose circle of the heavy ring’s shank. Shocked, she withdrew her hand to examine the ring and her hand more closely. Surely the last time she had it on, it had fit her perfectly. Now if she had any intention of keeping it she would have to have it resized or wrap tape around the shank in order to keep the heavy stone upright where it belonged.

“Yeah,” Clay said as if she had spoken aloud her astonishment at the ill-fitting ring. “How much more weight have you lost, Emma?”

“Well, I...I wasn’t aware I was losing any.” She had noticed the deepening hollows in her cheeks when she applied her makeup in the dim light of the apartment’s tiny bathroom in the mornings. She already felt the insistent press of time and she had attributed the new shadows on her face to aging; all the women in her family had long, narrow faces with cheekbones becoming more prominent as they got older. The swift passage of years was just one more reason she had left Clay. She felt she was almost out of time.

He reached across the counter for her arm, gathering the fabric of her dress in a tight bunch that she could feel pulling across what little remained of her breasts. She jerked away and he let her go. She knew his intention had never been to rip her clothes. A tear formed, welled, and dropped with a plop on the counter. Keeping her head down, she hurried to wipe it off the glass with a finger that looked bony, she definitely could see that now that her attention had been drawn to her increasing slenderness.

“Do you do layaway?”

“For you, Clay, of course.” She felt more tears threatening, although she was grateful for the change of subject. If not for the fact that he was actually going to buy the ring. Probably for someone it would fit, she thought in a vicious mental attack on her own negligence of her body. Probably for someone with curvy hips and a shapely ass and a nice rack, along with plump little fingers adorned with freshly manicured nails to show off such a rare prize as this precious ring.

“How much would you need down?”

“Ten percent. Eight hundred fifty. You would have to pay the balance in ninety days.”

He gave a soft whistle. “Eight thousand, five hundred total?”

“You got it. This beauty’s not mine, it’s on consignment. So the only break I could give you would come out of my commission.”

“Forget it. I didn’t intend to give you my business in order to make you eat your percentage.” He reached in his pocket, extracted his wallet, and handed her his bank card. “Eight fifty now. I’ll come in every week to pay on it, and the balance before ninety days.”

She swiped his card, typed in the amount, and handed him the receipt.

“Thank you,” she said automatically at the same time he said, “Thanks.”

His fingers brushed hers—her bony ones, she thought—as he took the slip of paper. But because her fingers had no flesh on them didn't mean she couldn't feel the old electricity zinging between them. She swiftly withdrew her hand, unconsciously rubbing it on the front of her dress. She saw him following the motion with a frown lowering his brows, and abruptly stopped her hand when she became aware of the feel of her ribs jutting beneath the fabric.

“Do you have time for lunch?” he asked.

She shook her head. “There's nobody to cover for me today.”

He didn't point out that she apparently had few customers on this cold, blustery day and could probably safely close the store without offending any potential buyers. “The offer of a meal stands. Any time you want me to feed you, you just let me know.”

Clay turned to go and Emma watched him as he exited the store. The bell jangled, the door closed, he crossed the sidewalk and got into the white county pickup.

She felt such a profound sense of loss, as if her heart had been ripped from her leaving a gaping hole in her chest. Her *skinny* chest. The tears fell in earnest then, and as she wiped at her eyes with a wad of tissues, she thought that it was a kindness that he hadn't been able to pay the full amount and just walk out of her store with the ring because in that case she was afraid he would call it quits for good and she might never see him again.

Chapter Two

Clay's unexpected visit to the store stayed with Emma all day. She replayed every gesture and word in her mind, trying to discover exactly what he meant and what his intentions were toward her now that he apparently had a new special someone.

She had been so determined to leave him and he had been so determined to get her back that she wasn't sure she would know how to play a new game by a new rule. *And the name of this game, folks, is Clay doesn't want Emma anymore!*

Well, in that case she had won, hadn't she? She had spent months trying to convince Clay to let her go and quit trying to get her to come home. If he now truly didn't want her to come back because he found someone else, she had won.

Right?

But she didn't feel like a winner. She felt like the world's biggest loser. Watching him walk away after buying an expensive gift for another woman had given Emma a nasty dose of her own medicine. She now had an inkling what Clay must have felt when she announced she had made up her mind to leave and then sashayed out the door with her suitcase.

Lunchtime passed. No other customers arrived. She still fiddled with the knotted chains, although she had managed to separate a few from the mound of snarled strands. She had debated packing a lunch this morning, and now was just as glad that she hadn't. She wasn't hungry. In fact she felt almost nauseated, and was sure she couldn't have forced down even one bite.

She had a headache, but she almost always had a headache these days. For some reason she had been attributing the nagging pain behind her eyes to stress and not to hunger. Now, after Clay pointed out how unpleasantly scrawny she'd become, she wondered if she sucked at self-diagnosis along with other skills she lacked. Which she wouldn't bother enumerating to herself yet one more time.

Like the ocean's tide swelling and waning, tears kept rising up, wanting to overflow, while she swallowed hard and forced them back. Crying sure didn't help her head any, and she knew from experience if she started bawling she would end up with an ache in her head bordering migraine.

She and Clay had married young. While he was still in college and before he had started at Wyoming Game and Fish. And way before he'd joined Sheriff Dalton's department. She had supported him through college, and through his unhappy years in the wildlife field. And then

through his swerve into county law enforcement. They'd been through a lot, but they had been a team and seen it all through. All the years together while they waited for her to become pregnant.

There were times she laughed bitterly over the dollars she had wasted on birth control pills while they were young and struggling just to keep their heads above water, vowing one day to start the family they both wanted. Only to have it turn out when they were ready that she was barren. Or Clay was sterile. Or something. She didn't know exactly what might be wrong. Their tests, and they'd had many, said they were both perfectly normal. Her tubes might be a touch narrow, Clay's sperm count might be a teeny bit low. But there was room for passage of an egg in her tubes, and the motility of Clay's sperm cells was good.

And yet she failed to conceive. Month after month. Year after year. She failed.

Her ticking biological clock got so loud and insistent, ultimately she couldn't concentrate on anything else. She had thought if she left Clay she would find someone to be an anonymous daddy. Someone willing to do the deed in dark of night and just go away afterward. She was sure there were many such in southwest Wyoming, single men or men in situations that resembled bachelorhood, living in travel trailers and man camps, not putting down roots but ready to pack up and move to the next big fossil fuel energy discovery two or three or even more states distant.

She hadn't considered that finding such a man meant either getting an oilfield job herself or haunting the bars at night. Those jobs, she discovered, in the oilfield service outfits that dotted the landscape in metal-sided buildings all around Hawk Point, should have been easy to get. But she had few verifiable skills, and found even then the high paying positions weren't easy to snag unless you knew somebody. And it should have been simple for her to shimmy into a bar on a Friday or Saturday night and pick herself up an operator or engineer, or even a burly water truck driver. But it wasn't. Easy. It wasn't easy at all. Not for her. And in fact she had not succeeded even once in actually forcing herself inside the door jamb of one of Hawk Point's sleazy stripper bars.

It was just one more thing to add to the list of her failures. She had discovered she was no good at cheating on her husband.

With needles pinched between her thumbs and forefingers, she managed to tease another strand of gold links from the tenacious clutches of its fellows. She carefully draped the delicate pendant over the arm of a maroon velvet-covered jewelry tree on the counter before leaning back and extending her arms to stretch her tight shoulders.

What was she going to do? What? That was the question. She had been almost on the point of giving up and seeing if Clay would consider taking her back. She had made some hurtful moves, but nothing drastic enough to end their marriage if he didn't want it to end. They had a lot of history between them. If he cared to overlook the fact that she had walked out on him, perhaps she could go back.

But now the tables had turned. Now it looked as if she might have to do the pleading if she wanted to go back home. If Clay could even hear her pleas over the moaning and heavy breathing of his new special woman as they went at it in the bed Emma used to share with him.

Oh, God. She couldn't stand it. What had she done? And was it too late to even try to fix it?

Clay sat low on his spine in the darkness in front of the flickering television screen, a longneck bottle of beer propped on his chest. The sound was turned so low he couldn't distinguish much of what was being said. But it didn't matter whether he could hear it or not; this program sucked as bad as most television did. He was mostly waiting to get sleepy enough to go to bed. Which happened later and later these days. He had gotten used to a woman sharing his bed and to his chagrin found he didn't sleep well alone. *Afraid of the boogey-man, Thorpe?* He snorted, not laughter but certainly making fun of himself. But the truth remained: soon he wouldn't be sleeping at all at night, and then he didn't know how he was supposed to function during the day.

His cell phone rang. He put his beer down and checked the readout before answering. The screen read *Micah Taylor* and gave his number. Micah was a highway patrol trooper who lived directly across the road, and Clay's good friend. But it was a little late for friendly neighbor phone calls. Puzzled, he answered with "Yeah?"

"You got company, buddy."

"No shit. Really?"

"Really. Check out the south windows, two houses down. She's backed up in the driveway, just sitting in her car and watching your house. I don't know how long she's been there. I just noticed her when I let the dog out before I went to bed."

"About time. I was running out of ideas and getting pretty sure nothing was going to work."

"Something obviously worked. Want me to see if Chancie would be willing to sneak over and stroll in front of your bedroom windows in her nightie a few times just to really get Emma going?"

"No. Oh, hell no. That's not even funny, Micah." Clay closed his eyes. Emma liked their neighbor Micah Taylor's wife just fine. But the announcement of a second pregnancy in three years for Chancie and Micah had been hard on Emma. The last thing Clay needed was their beautiful neighbor advertising her easy fertility in front of his missing wife like some fecund blond goddess. "I mean, thanks anyway but after the time I had getting her here, the last thing I want is to make a mistake and run her off. I'll take care of it. Hey, buddy, thanks for the tip."

"Any time." Before ending the call, Micah added, "I wish you luck."

Clay got up from his chair and headed down the hall. The doublewide was kitchen, living room in front, then divided into three bedrooms and baths down a central hallway. A fourth, large master bedroom in the rear was Clay and Emma's. The smaller bedrooms arranged along the hall were currently devoted to a guest room, then sewing, computer, gun cabinet and weapons cleaning table, and whatever other pastime happened to require space to spread out in the absence of children needing the rooms. The master bedroom at the back had sliding glass doors leading to a deck in the backyard.

Clay grabbed a coat, slid the door open, crossed the deck and descended to a lawn already gone crisply yellow in dormancy. He couldn't see Emma from the back of the house, and so, consequently, he was pretty sure Emma couldn't see him. He had to cross his corral, hoping he wouldn't step in fresh horse apples. His horses nickered softly in greeting, probably expecting he was bringing them a late night snack of apples or carrots or maybe even sugar. Spoiled animals, he thought. Micah's horses in the stalls across the road took up the nickering. It wasn't unknown for him to have enough treats in his pockets for them too. "Ssh!" Clay said. "You're going to give me away if you aren't quiet, guys."

He climbed the pipe enclosure and then crossed two more backyards before he could circle around and come up on Emma's car from behind. Luckily all the neighbors' dogs seemed to have been let in for the night so there was no barking. And luckily she wasn't looking in the rearview mirror to see him coming; her head was craned toward the north, all her attention riveted on the house they had previously shared.

He hesitated only a second, then rapped sharply on the driver's side window.

If the car hadn't been a hardtop, Emma was sure she would have broken both femurs on the steering wheel on the ascent when she jumped so high and hard. As it was, she thought she might be having a heart attack. She was hyperventilating and her heart was thrumming so hard beneath her ribs she thought it might explode. When she could finally calm enough to turn and see who it was, she almost fainted in relief. Clay.

So. She'd been found out. Sneaky spy that she thought she was, had he known she would show up sooner or later and been watching for her? Was he so sure of himself that he was certain she would come back some day?

Well, shouldn't he be sure of himself? And hadn't she come back?

He made an impatient roll-down-the-window motion. She pressed the button and the window slid down. Clay bent at the waist to be eye level with her.

“Come inside, Emma. It’s cold out here.”

“No,” she said. It sounded rather like a moan. She wanted to go with him and she didn’t. But she knew she would eventually, want to or not. Otherwise, what was she doing here? So why was she fighting him?

He came around the front of the car, opened the door, and folded his long legs to get in the passenger seat beside her. “Get something straight,” he said. “I’m not asking, Emma. I’m telling you to come inside the house.”

“Okay,” she whispered. Honestly, she felt like she was freezing. She didn’t have enough fat on her anymore to help keep her warm. She didn’t know that if she refused him and left, she could even make it back to town to her tiny studio apartment without freezing to death. Best to go with Clay. Shivering violently, she started the car and steering with fingers stiff from cold, pulled slowly out of the neighbor’s driveway and into their own, pulling up and parking in her familiar space.

Clay got out, came around the hood once again, opened her door and extended a hand to help her out. She took it, following meekly behind him as he climbed the steps to the deck, unlocked the front door and led her inside. He walked into the living room and turned on the electric fire. Then he bent over and retrieved a blanket from the sofa, shaking out its folds. “Come here,” he said.

Teeth chattering, she obeyed. He took his coat off, wrapped her up in the blanket and then sat, pulling her down onto his lap. His dog, a Heinz 57 mixture, wagged its tail a few times and watched them with moist eyes until it grew bored and put its head back down.

“Emma,” Clay said softly. “Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“I-I d-don’t know. I don’t know wh-what I’m doing.” Her molars clattered together. She was so cold.

“Baby, come home,” he urged. “I have a plan. We’ll try again.”

“Wh-what kind of plan?”

“You’ll see. Just say you’ll come back. Trust me, Emma.”

“Wh-what about the ring?” she said suspiciously. This wasn’t making sense. She knew there were questions she should ask, but they wouldn’t take proper shape in her thoughts. Maybe her brain had frozen along with her bony fingers and toes.

“We’ll leave the ring where it is for now. Don’t worry, I’ll keep making the payments on it.”

“F-for your special woman.” She remembered that much.

“That’s right.” He paused. He drew a breath before continuing. “I haven’t asked you any questions and I don’t plan to, Emma. I’m going to trust that you wouldn’t be here tonight if you were fucking somebody else. So don’t ask me questions either. I won’t tell you anything. Just say you’ll move back here with me and we’ll forget everything beyond that.” His arms tightened around her.

She was just starting to realize he was hurting. She had wounded him, but before now she hadn’t had any idea just how deeply she had wounded him. He was a big man, physically, and in his appetites, and in his character. Once again she was getting a lesson in the special kind of man he was. He would take her back, no questions asked. The *me-me* blinders were suddenly being ripped painfully from her eyes. She shivered. She drew a deep breath. She leaned into him, into his warmth.

She said, “All right, Clay.”

Chapter Three

The first sight of their formerly shared home in daylight made Emma sad. The aging doublewide mobile home smelled musty and disused. Not dirty, never that. Clay was a fastidious

man in his personal habits. He didn't let dishes pile up, he took out the trash and wiped down surfaces in the kitchen. He cleaned his bathroom and ran the vacuum once in a while, but that was about it. He changed sheets, she noticed with a clutch at her heart that she tried to ignore because of what such an action might mean. But he only pulled the blankets up. The coverlet and shams were all in a bunch at the foot of the bed, and he obviously didn't dust. The place needed a good going over and then some holiday decorations taken out of storage and put up. Emma meant to see to that the first chance she got.

He did cook. At every opportunity, he was whipping up something for her to eat. She knew her gauntness displeased and frightened him. He'd always liked a big handful of breast, with meat enough on her hips to clutch in his big hands when he drove into her during lovemaking. So she ate. Whatever she felt like eating. It was wonderful. For the first few weeks.

Over a spaghetti and meatball dinner, with garlic bread, vegetables and wine almost two weeks after her return, she said, "I feel like the fatted calf. Not that I don't appreciate your thoughtfulness, but enough is enough, Clay."

He tossed a meatball to the dog who caught it in midair, got up from the table, picked up her plate and his, and headed for the sink. "Did you hear me?" she asked. "You don't have to cook dinner every night just to make sure I eat. I will, I promise."

"Yeah?" He returned to the table, placed a bowl of ice cream and a spoon in front of her and then leaned over toward her, his face level with hers. "Tell me, what did you have for lunch, Emma?"

"I...well. Hmm. I guess I don't remember if I ate lunch."

"See?" he said, straightening up to his full, impressive height. "Eat your ice cream."

She patted her tummy. "I really don't want ice cream, Clay."

"Eat it. Please. It's part of the plan."

"Excuse me? What plan?"

"I told you I had a plan. It has to do with a providing a hospitable environment."

"Clay...what, exactly, are you talking about?"

"Micah asked his mother. She said you have to make a hospitable environment for a baby, or it won't want to get started in your womb."

"Uh." For a moment she was stumped for a proper answer to this news. "So you've been discussing our problem with Micah?"

"Yeah. You know how it is, guys shooting the bull over the fence. His mom is Blackfoot Indian. She had six sons. She's very wise."

"Uh-huh. I'm sure Chancie will be most grateful when she and Micah are on their sixth child." She paused, thinking she might be sounding a bit green with envy of her neighbor, Chancie. Well, she was, really, but no sense in whining about it to Clay. "Listen, nothing against Micah's mom's Native wisdom, but I've almost given up on the idea of us ever having a baby. I think it might be too late for us." She bit her lip, stirred the melting ice cream in the bowl.

"I am telling you," Clay said, stabbing a finger at the tabletop for emphasis, "this is how it goes: In the old days there were times of plenty and times of want. If the baby thinks it won't have enough food, it won't hang around to begin life. So you've got to provide an environment that reflects times of a good food supply. That's fat. As in ice cream. So eat up."

Now that she'd nearly decided it was hopeless, Clay and Micah had gone on some kind of Indian quest to get her a baby. It was sweet, she supposed, especially considering her own crazed years of trying to become pregnant, but it was kind of weird as well to think of the two men consulting with Micah's Blackfeet mother about her inability to conceive.

"I've been researching it," Clay said. He had sat across from her and was licking his own spoon. "On my own. I looked it up on the Internet. There's medical studies to back up Micah's mom's claims, Emma."

"Um," she said. She looked searchingly into his hazel eyes.

“Eat up,” he urged her again. “As soon as you’re nice and round again, we’ll start on the second phase of the plan.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what that might entail.” She rolled her eyes.

In response, Clay’s eyes crinkled at the corners and his dimple showed as he smiled. His voice turned seductive as he said, “You’ll like this part, I promise.”

He hadn’t touched her since she came back. She worried about that. Such abstinence had never happened between them before, ever. Now that she was back, they slept in the same bed and she often woke to find one of his muscular arms draped over her, and once or twice the unmistakable evidence of a massive hard-on nestled between her butt cheeks. But there was no sex. He wouldn’t allow it. If she reached for him, even fast asleep he woke enough to gently lift her hand away and return it to rest on her own hip. She hadn’t understood what was happening, or rather the reason for nothing happening between them. So the promise in his eyes now was enough to get her to take the first spoonful of ice cream even though her hunger was long past sated. He watched until she obediently scraped the bowl clean.

“I’m doing this for us, baby,” he said softly. “Otherwise I wouldn’t be hounding you to eat all the time. I like you just fine the way you are. Any way you are.”

“Oh, Clay, you’re so sweet. You’ve been so understanding and put up with so much from me. But it’s so hard to keep trying, to have any faith that *somehow, this time*, it will work.”

“It will work,” he said, his tongue snaking out to lick his own spoon while his gaze locked with hers.

It would work because he said so? And how could he know? But he seemed so sure. She wanted to believe him.

The cowbell on the door jangled.

Emma looked up and smiled as her big lawman entered, bearing lunch in a brown paper bag.

“What is it this time?” she asked.

He grinned. “A little selection from the taqueria. I ordered lots of sour cream plus the tomatillo sauce for you, baby.”

“*Little* selection, my Aunt Gracie,” Emma said, eyeing the bulging bag. “You’re stuffing me like a pig, Clay.”

“Gotta eat. And the fat in the sour cream and the tomatillo sauce will be good for the baby.”

Emma’s lips involuntarily tightened, but she didn’t shake her head to contradict him. He had such a rock solid belief his way was going to work. All those years when she had been the one frantic to start a family, he had kept his opinion to himself and gone along with whatever she wanted to do. Through invasive tests, the several and expensive specialists starting with fertility drugs, artificial insemination, then conception caps, then intrafallopian gamete transfer, then intracytoplasmic sperm injection and finally IVF treatments. None of which Clay’s county insurance had paid for. There was good reason the two of them still lived in an old trailer house in desperate need of some serious updating; they had spent all the money they could scrape together on fertility treatments. Clay had gone along with her on all of it, because he knew how much Emma wanted a baby. They had stopped just short of surrogacy or adoption. Their baby had to be his and hers.

She dug into the bag.

There were tacos. There were burritos. There were enchiladas and rice and beans. He watched as she made her selection and then added a few more spoons of rich sour cream and tomatillo sauce to her paper plate. She grimaced, but he only showed her his dimple in return and added yet another spoonful. They took their plates over to an oak drop-leaf table and sat to eat their lunch.

When they finished, Clay wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and gathered up the empty containers, stuffing them back in the bag. “Where do you keep your purse?”

“What do you want it for?” Clay had never rummaged in her drawers or her purse before.

“I need your keys.”

“What for?”

“We have to ease into the second phase of Dr. Thorpe’s special treatments. We need to practice.”

“Oka-ay,” she said slowly. “Behind the counter, on the floor next to the stool.”

He retrieved her purse and after some pawing around inside pulled out a jangling set of keys. Separating one from the rest, he headed for the front door.

“May I ask what you’re doing?”

“I thought it would be pretty easy for a smart lady like you to figure out what I’m doing, Emma. I’m locking the door.” He switched the cardboard sign on the door to *Closed*.

“I don’t close for lunch.” She crossed her arms over her middle, noticing how much more solid the flesh over her ribs felt these days. Her breasts actually rested on her arms. Clay’s force-feeding program was having the desired results.

“You do now.” He came back toward her with a decidedly wicked grin on his face.

“Clay, people can see us through the front window.”

“Emma, relax. Nobody gives a good damn what we’re doing. Besides, we’re married. Nooners are allowed.” He pulled her to her feet and waltzed her over to the rear of the store, where the light was dim and bookcases, armoires, and antique floor screens separated one consignee’s goods from another into little room-like enclosures. He bypassed the tables loaded with old flowered gold-rimmed china and leaded glass, leather bound books piled on an old desk alongside a marble desk set and a real fountain pen, trunks and racks of satin dresses and fox jackets, tugging her inexorably toward a spindle bedroom set.

“Oh, no.” She said. “Clay. No.”

“Emma. Oh, yes.” His fingers reached for her and he started to unbutton her blouse.

“Not on Mrs. Pratt’s antique wedding ring quilt. It’s way too delicate,” she protested, but her fingers, trained to pleasure with Clay, were already cooperating by undoing the buttons of his uniform shirt. It was the first time he’d offered to touch her since her homecoming, and there was no way she was going to succeed in holding him off for long.

“You’re right,” he agreed as his mouth descended on hers. After a thorough exploration of her lips and tongue with his, he said, “We’ll have to remember to strip that pretty quilt off the bed after we finish stripping each other and before we get down to our first practice.” He removed his heavy belt, setting it carefully on a scarred dresser nearby. Then he reached for the tab of his pants.

“Let me,” Emma said. Her fingers were itching to have the familiar contours of his imposing cock back in her hot little hands. By this point she was beyond caring if they were visible to curious passersby. Clay had always had this effect on her; she had never taken much convincing when it came to having sex with him and they’d almost been discovered engaging in foreplay more than once.

She carefully unzipped his pants, and his eager cock sprang free. She wrapped both hands around its silky-skinned rigidity and stroked it up and down until a pearl of cum glistened on the empurpled head. Then she swiftly knelt, wrapping her lips around as much of his length as she could while her hands kept their busy rhythm from his crinkly sandy pubic hair to the circle of her lips.

Clay groaned. “Wait. Too good, too soon. I can’t take much of that, Emma. Stand up.”

She obeyed. His lips sought hers while he yanked up on her bra, baring her breasts. The fact that the band tightened across her chest and made her breasts look more full and the nipples more engorged seemed to enflame him further. He bent and laved one dark rose nugget with his lips and tongue while he massaged the other between thumb and forefinger. Liquid heat shot from her rigid peaks to her womb in sharp pinpricks of desire. He stood, cock brushing her belly and bent her backwards to try to pull the quilt from the bed.

“No. Wait. I have a better idea.” She pulled her skirt up and slid her panties down, over one heel to circle the other ankle. Then she turned away and bent over, presenting her ass to him with her skirt gathered at her waist. She had never felt comfortable with her breasts loose and swaying nipples downward, but with the bra a tight band she noticed they stayed nice and roundly distended. Clay must have noticed too; he grabbed a double handful and squeezed lightly. As he moved closer his cock explored the crevice between the cheeks of her ass. He moved his hips back, and his big, familiar tree trunk of a dick dropped lower. She spread her legs, glad she’d worn the heels that raised her ass higher for him, and placed her hands on the high spindle footboard for balance. When the large, seeking head of his rod found the entrance to its goal she reached down with one hand to hurriedly guide him between her wet inner lips.

He slid in. Fully in. For a few moments they just stood trembling, enjoined. With the hand that had helped him gain entrance, she massaged his length from outside the skin of her belly while at the same time clenching him with her interior muscles.

He began to move. “I. Have. Missed. This. So. Much.” Each word accompanied by a thrust. She squeezed each welcome thrust inside and at the same time kneaded him with her hand on the outside. “Emma,” he whispered, “I love you, baby.”

“Oh, Clay,” she cried. “I love you too.” And then they were both suddenly coming, in long-suppressed waves of pleasure. As the orgasm subsided, her knees threatened to give. She gripped the footboard tightly to remain standing, but Clay helped by holding her upright from behind with a hand around her middle. Still inside her, he reached to jerk the quilt from the bed and this time she let him. He took a couple of steps, maneuvered her around and sat on the edge of the bed with her in front of his splayed legs and his semi-hard cock still inside.

“How was that, Mrs. Thorpe?” he asked while his long fingers toyed with her nipples.

She still hadn’t caught her breath. “That was wonderful, Deputy Thorpe,” she wheezed.

He laughed. She could feel the rumble inside his taut belly, and as a consequence his cock slipped out a little from its wet embrace between her legs.

“Glad you enjoyed it. That’s the last of the skin-on-skin stuff between us for a while.”

She tried to turn but he held her tight. “What do you mean?”

“Part of my plan,” he said. “You’ll find out.”

He sounded so smug she wanted to smack him. But on the other hand his purported plan seemed to be going well so far. She was regaining the sexy shape she used to have, only because he insisted. He usually knew what he was doing and she knew from long experience Clay was trustworthy. So she would just continue to trust him.

He got dressed while she made for the washroom and straightened herself up.

He made sure to kiss her thoroughly before he left, but before he did leave he made a payment on the ring.

She stopped after work that night to begin dismantling the studio apartment and moving her stuff back home. The place was tiny and she had little there to move. She had some clothes and some grooming items in the bathroom, and she started placing those into bags. She hurried. She wanted to get her things back home before Clay got in. It didn’t make sense that she didn’t want him watching her move bottles of makeup and shampoo back, but that’s the way she felt about it. Little things that weren’t personal she had brought from the store: dishes and flatware and some lamps and a few of the smaller pieces of furniture and she could worry about returning those later. What she had really come for were her rings, the engagement ring and wedding band Clay had given her. She slipped them on, happy that they fit now that she was putting on weight.

She gave the place a quick look around before leaving. The larger pieces, bed, and table and chairs, loveseat and recliner, were included in the rent and belonged to the landlady, who, speak of the devil, knocked on the door as Emma was getting ready to leave. Emma knew Dorothea Hayes watched her comings and goings pretty closely, and so was probably aware she was present after weeks of not being there at all.

“I’ll finish cleaning the place out bit by bit, as much as I can pack in my car at a time, but I definitely will be out by the end of the month,” Emma said.

Mrs. Hayes nodded. “So I can start showing it without disturbing you?”

“You can show it any time. I don’t live here. I’ve moved back home.”

“I thought so,” the woman nodded. “I haven’t seen you lately. Oh, well, it’s for the best, I think. You weren’t happy here. You look happier now, Emma. And Clay is probably happy to have you back.”

Emma hadn’t been aware that her unhappiness was so obvious to everyone but herself. But Mrs. Hayes was right. She was, indeed, very happy to be back home where she belonged. So that’s where she hurried to go.

But it came back to her later when she had time to think about it that Dorothea had called Clay by name. Emma hadn’t been aware that her landlady knew Clay, and wondered if he had been keeping tabs on her through Dorothea Hayes.

And if he had been keeping up with her nighttime activities, or lack of them, had it made a difference in his continuing to want her to come home? If Dorothea had ever glimpsed a strange man leaving Emma’s tiny apartment, would Emma still be moving her underwear back to the drawers in the dresser she shared with Clay?

So. She concluded it was a good thing she had been a good girl. In the small town of Hawk Point it was probably an excellent thing she had been faithful if Clay had been receiving reports of her behavior from Dorothea. Otherwise Emma might not be moving out of the sad little studio where she had spent all her nights alone after all.

Chapter Four

As Clay drove the dirt roads of the unincorporated county land north of Hawk Point toward his own place on Saturday morning, he slowed to a stop as he caught sight of the two women visiting over the fence. Each arrestingly beautiful in her own way, he was glad once more he had caught tall, redheaded, green-eyed Emma when she was young and got to watch her grow into this elegant, assured woman with the fall of red waves down the back of her coat. Not that Chancie wasn’t gorgeous: tiny and blond, with her hugely pregnant belly stuffed into a jacket he recognized as one of Micah’s Carhartts, she was the perfect contrast for her husband’s dark good looks. No one could deny the suitability of the Taylors, and judging by the one they already had, they sure made exceptionally pretty babies. Chancie held on to a squirming Lucky as long as she could, but the little girl leaned precariously over the fence, wanting to be held by Emma, waving her chubby snow-suited arms and kicking at her mother’s swollen belly with her little booted feet until Chancie gave up and let her go.

As Clay drove into his yard, he watched in the rearview mirror as Emma took the dark-haired little girl from her mother, holding her patiently while Lucky entwined the dangly earring that had captured her attention in her chubby fist. Emma leaned her head toward Lucky, trying to lessen the pain while Chancie scrambled to disentangle the bauble from her daughter’s tight clutch. Both women were laughing, and Clay felt a tight sadness in his chest at this new evidence of Emma’s love for children.

Well, he would fix that situation if he could. He was doing his best. He got out of his pickup with a cardboard box in one hand and a plastic shopping bag in the other, went in the house and down the hall to the master bath. He set the bag down, ripped open the box and took the two pieces of the plastic apparatus, about the size and shape of a dishpan, out of the box and set them on the counter between the double sinks. Then he sat down on the edge of the tub to read the directions.

He could hear Emma approaching, and the door was open so she came in, rubbing one ear. “That little girl sure has a grip,” she commented, turning her head to examine her red earlobe in the mirror. “I didn’t think I would escape until she tore my earring out of my ear.”

She removed both dangly earrings and laid them on the counter next to the plastic bag. Then she noticed the covered white plastic dishpan-shaped apparatus with an electrical cord sticking out the back. "You've been shopping. What's this?"

"Went to Wyoming Rancher's Warehouse," he mumbled, deeply involved in the printed directions.

"And? Clay, what is this?"

At last he looked up, met her gorgeous green eyes in the mirror. "An incubator," he said.

"Okay, an incubator." She turned to face him. "What is it for?"

"It's part of the necessary equipment for Dr. Thorpe's Fertility Lab."

"You're having fun with this big plan of yours, aren't you?" she accused.

He shrugged. "Don't you think it's time? We might as well have a little fun along the way, baby."

She stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. He grinned to himself. Just wait until she looked in the bag.

When no further explanation was forthcoming from him she turned slowly back toward the counter. With one finger she separated the handles of the thin plastic bag. Then when the bag's contents were revealed, she just stood looking down wordlessly.

"A super economy sized box of ribbed, lubricated condoms, size extra-large? Um...we need these, Clay?"

Uh-oh. Her large green eyes searching his reflection in the mirror wore a stricken expression beneath a puzzled frown. He'd been so wrapped up in amusing himself with this let's-make-a-baby business, he hadn't stopped to think how a woman infertile for a decade would take her husband showing up with an ordinarily needless purchase of an outsized box of condoms.

"Yes. They're for us. Trust me, Emma."

"Have you lost your mind?"

Once more he grinned. "Not yet. Not that I know of, anyway. We're gonna have some fun, baby, you and me. Just let me figure out this contraption that's supposedly made for elementary school kids to use, and then we'll talk."

She turned her back and left. He didn't think she believed him about the condoms.

She was in the kitchen getting them some lunch when Clay came in and started rummaging through the drawers. After some considerable rattling of utensils and fruitless opening and closing of drawers, she asked, "What are you looking for?"

"Turkey baster," he said. "Are you frying bacon? Smells good. What are we having?"

"BLTs. You should be pleased. Lots of fat in BLTs." She turned her head toward him and made a face. He laughed.

"That's good, baby. You're doing good. I'm glad you're doing your part." He came to stand behind her, stepping around the dog who had become Emma's best friend since she took out the package of bacon, and put his chin on her shoulder while idly rubbing her ass with the palms of his hands.

"Are you feeling me up or just checking to see if I'm putting on weight?"

"Can't I do both?" His hands came around to burrow beneath her apron to cup her breasts through her clothes. "You're getting nice and round again, Emma. I can't feel all your bones now. I sure like how you're starting to fit in my hands."

Her nipples hardened at his words and his touch. She felt a nice warming tingle between her legs. "I like the way your hands fit on me too," she said. "But I need to see to this bacon. It's going to start smoking in a minute."

"Tell you what." His hands dropped lower to massage her mound. "Let's make a date for after lunch. Meet you in the bedroom at one. I'll explain everything then. I'll even give you a free demonstration of Dr. Thorpe's Medicinal Injections."

"Are you saying that on other days I have to pay?"

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe. It’s not a bad idea. Let me think about it.”

She laughed, reaching for the roll of paper towels to blot the drained bacon strips and instead smacked him with it. “You’re on, cowboy. Meet you at one.”

He stepped around the dog still sitting at Emma’s feet looking adoringly at her and started to head back toward the bedroom, then halted and returned to the kitchen. Their eyes met, hers with a quizzical quirk of an eyebrow. *What now?* “Turkey baster,” he said.

“The anticipation is killing me, Clay. I really have to wait until after lunch for your explanation?”

He gave a firm nod, stepped closer and ran a long finger suggestively between her legs. “And your free demonstration. Don’t forget that part.”

She sighed in resignation. If he wasn’t ready to tell her his big secret there was no way she would pry anything out of him. “Bottom drawer. Left hand side, under the gravy ladle.”

“Thanks.” He retrieved the utensil and headed back toward the rear of the house. She continued with lunch preparations and had their sandwiches on the table when he returned with the flattened incubator box and empty plastic shopping bag. These he added to the covered recycling cans on the front deck and then they sat to eat, each extremely conscious of the other and trying to swallow past heightening sexual tension. It wasn’t unknown for them to have a date for sex; there had been years of watching the calendar and taking her temperature and fucking automatically when the calendar said it was time.

The difference now was Clay had taken the initiative. Emma, whose desires and doctor’s orders had driven them for years, was now subordinate to her husband’s directive. It was new territory for them, and it added a hefty dose of spice to what had become a fairly routine—if still good—love life. As if she had come home to find a new and exciting man inhabiting her husband, she wondered if Clay, too, felt he was bedding a different woman since she had left and then come back at his decree. Clay was still Clay, but he was a man with a plan, and his single-minded pursuit of that as yet unexplained plan made him more dominant in their long-familiar relationship. And the fact that she had gone for no valid reason and then come back at his request only to go along submissively to his mystery plan, put Emma in a very different position than the one she had occupied in their marriage before she left.

Things between them had always been very much her way. Now they would be done Clay’s way. She felt a frisson of heat low down in her belly at the thought. She pushed away doubts about where he had learned these new methods of control. She was starting to look forward to being this new, more masterful Clay’s woman.

Their eyes met, slid away, rose to meet again. His generous lips were shiny with bacon grease, and she had the sudden, very distinct vision of them sucking her clit. Which made it very hard to concentrate on chewing the dry bread of her sandwich. Clay held her gaze, grinning suddenly as if he could read her expression and knew exactly what she was thinking. He bent toward her across the table, hand reaching to encircle her neck and bring her head toward his. His tongue whipped out and licked a dab of mayonnaise from the corner of her mouth.

“Big, bad wolf gonna eat you up, little girl,” he growled, close to her face.

“Promise?” she whispered, and he laughed, letting her go and straightening away from her in order to finish his lunch.

The dog finally scored a bite of bacon from Clay, then they cleared the table, loaded the dishwasher, and Emma polished the stove while Clay went to brush his teeth.

“Working perfectly,” he said when he returned, taking her hand and leading her down the hall to the big bath. She just looked at him. “The incubator. It works,” he said, tapping the lid of the plastic basin.

“I’m so happy for you, Clay.” She squeezed toothpaste out and started to brush her own teeth.

“For us, baby. Be happy for us.” He squeezed behind her to get to the bedroom, giving her ass a good feel of his cock as he passed.

She nodded agreement that she was happy for them both, rinsed her mouth, and followed him to the bedroom.

He was already sitting on the edge of the bed, boots off and belt undone. He raised a hand, motioning to her. "Come here."

She approached and he put his arms around her hips, nuzzling his face into her belly. She ran her fingers through his short, thick hair. Then he leaned back so he could reach the button of her jeans. He unzipped them and tugged them down her legs, along with the red lace panties she wore. He fingered the line on her hips where the underwear had grown too tight as she gained weight, the elastic leaving a groove in her flesh. He bent his head to lick the groove, side to side and across her belly above the slight V of her reddish pubic hair.

Trapped in the legs of her jeans, she couldn't move if she wanted to as he ran a questing finger beneath the crotch of her panties and between her legs to her inner lips. "Soft. And so wet," he murmured. "You're getting ready for me, my Emma."

He pulled her forward, moving aside a bit so she could sit. He knelt to remove her shoes, then had her stand to get her jeans and panties off. He nudged her down and pushed her back a little until she was leaning on her elbows. He spread her legs and looked his fill. "So pretty. You're like a pretty pink flower."

One by one he raised her long bare legs over his shoulders, spreading her wider. Then he leaned in to taste, tongue licking her from bottom to top as if she were an ice cream cone. He was taking his time, doing her just right, driving her wild with need. When she thought she couldn't stand anymore, his lips closed over her clit, sucking hard, just as she had imagined him doing such a short while ago. He slid one, two, three long fingers inside her as his teeth rasped gently over her throbbing nub. She came hard that first time, in a spiral of sensation that consumed her from her clit to her back teeth, every nerve the length of her torso firing in a simultaneous burst.

She drifted slowly back to herself with her muscles still spasming on Clay's fingers. He had pulled his head away and was watching her face, smiling as he glided the long digits out and slid them back in, in a sinuous play on all the sensitive surfaces inside her.

She raised herself back on her hands until she was sitting up. She pulled her sweater off, tossed it aside, and reached to unclasp her bra which she also discarded.

Completely naked, she watched as he rose to his full height and began to undress, revealing bit by bit what a gorgeous example of maleness he was. When he stood before her in all his hard glory, he grinned at the rapt expression she knew was on her face. "You like?" he asked, stepping closer.

"You know I like," she murmured. She grasped him by his hard buttocks, pulling him closer and rising until she could reach one of his nipples with her mouth. He raised her breasts and squeezed them against his big cock, and she was glad, glad, glad she'd grown them big enough lately to experience that sensation as he started to glide against her skin. He felt hot to her touch, as if fevered, and jerked a little as he let go of her breasts and stood away, putting space between them.

"Whoa. The pregame show is moving a little fast," he said. "Just lie back there, Emma."

She obeyed, but improvising on his command, she spread her legs and ran her own forefinger up and down her slit. She smiled seductively until she saw that while he was enjoying her show he was busy rolling on a condom. For the first time she noticed the big box of them had migrated to the nightstand.

"Clay? What are you doing?" she asked. She sat up.

"Relax. I told you. All part of the plan," he said. He turned toward her all suited up for the game, knelt on the bed and urged her to lie back down by pushing on her shoulders. He threw one muscled leg over her so both her legs were clamped between his. He parted hers just enough so he could get his cock between them and then inside her. "Now cross your ankles," he ordered.

She was clutching him much tighter than she could have with just her pelvic muscles. The bonus for her was that each stroke of his cock rubbed her clit harder than normal. He grunted in

pleasure, starting a rhythmic stroke as she gripped the muscles of his ass with both hands, urging him on.

He couldn't be enjoying this as much as she was, she thought. The ribs on the condom heightened her pleasure, but he was totally enveloped in latex. But it was his idea so she couldn't feel too sorry for him, she thought as their bodies slicked with Clay's effort. He put his hands under her ass so that her grip on him was tighter than she thought possible. She could feel every inch of him, from the skin on the inside of her thighs, to her clenched pussy lips, up into the walls inside her channel.

She gritted her teeth, wanting to hold on for him and not wanting to come until he was ready.

"Let go, baby," he ground out. "Come for me now."

On this demand, she felt the sweet implosion start, as if all the cells of her body concentrated themselves in anticipation in the area around his cock. She came immediately, screaming his name, and he followed her to his own release.

Used to having him remain inside her afterward as they cuddled to recovery, she didn't understand at first when at the first sign of his cock softening he rose from the bed. His finger and thumb encircling the condom to keep it on, he headed for the bathroom. She watched him in the mirror over the double vanity as he carefully peeled the latex off, leaving its contents in the reservoir at the tip. He made a neat knot in the top, lifted the lid of the incubator, and deposited it inside.

He bent to check the thermometer readout attached to the lid, nodded in satisfaction, and then straightened up.

"You look like an escapee from an SF movie, a naked mad scientist gloating over his latest experiment." She lay in the rumpled bed with her arms over her head, watching him.

He laughed, turning to take her in with an admiring glance from what she knew was a tangled mess of hair to painted toenails. "God, you're gorgeous," he said.

"You're pretty easy on the eyes yourself, Doctor Frankenstein," she teased.

He came to sit beside her on the bed, idly toying with one of her nipples. "So you're saving your filled condoms?" she asked. "What's up with that?"

"I figure every other day, three times a day, we'll make love. Then at night I'll combine all the day's goodies and we'll give you a special injection."

She could feel her eyes widen as enlightenment dawned. "With the turkey baster. Clay, you're not serious."

"Sure I am. I do have a degree in biology, remember."

"Uh, yeah. *Wildlife* biology. I'm not sure it applies here, Clay."

"Look. We're not doing things much different than those expensive bouts of artificial insemination at the doctor's. We'll be giving you a triple whammy at night, just in case it's intermittent low sperm count on my part that's causing our problem. We'll also effectively bypass the acidic environs of the vagina in case that's what's preventing conception."

"And the incubator..."

"Keeps the day's samples all warm and moist until we're ready to use them. You, of course, would be the perfect receptacle for safekeeping." He lowered his hand to slide a finger suggestively between her legs. "Your body's the proper temperature, and my little swimmers could theoretically stay alive inside you for up to five days. But I think, for some reason, three individual shots a day wouldn't work any better than they ever have for us. So...that's the reason for the collection process, and the incubator."

"Three times a day?"

"Yeah, every other day. I figure that ought to do it."

"Oh, you do." She licked her lips. Clay had obviously put a lot of thought into this wacky procedure of his, and she really didn't *mind* the thought of them fucking three times a day. Maybe he would get even more creative ideas.

“Every other day should be enough to insure you’ve always got a viable supply of my cells inside you, Emma. If you start checking your ovulation indicators again like you used to, we can be sure.”

“Clay.” Her breath caught as he started some serious fondling between her legs. “Just how long have you been thinking about this plan anyway?”

“For as long as you were gone, Emma. Months.”

She caught her breath at the reminder of her departure. “Clay,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to talk about it. I’ve got to go outside and clean the corrals. We’ll resume right here where we’re leaving off after dinner tonight. Deal?”

She put her hands over his and pressed it to her mound before he could pull away. “I’ll be waiting for you,” she said.

Chapter Five

Clay had a big pile of straw and horse manure ready to load in the pickup and haul to the dump. Across the road, Micah exited his house, his big dog on his heels. Clay’s mixed breed dog and Micah’s huge white Pyrenees each immediately raced for their respective fences, setting up a din of excited barking, which continued until Micah crossed his yard and opened his gate to let his dog out.

“BFFs,” Micah commented drily as the dogs touched noses and sniffed respective parts. “Isn’t that what the kids call it these days?”

“I guess.” Clay shrugged, continuing his raking. “Every single time, they act like they haven’t seen each other in years.”

“Pretty simple to be a dog.”

“Yeah. Must be nice.”

“How’s things?”

“Pretty good,” Clay admitted. “Going along good, as far as I can tell. Emma seems happy to be back.”

“And you?”

“Happy to have her back. Got her eating lots of ice cream.”

Micah grinned. “Glad to hear it. I’ll tell my mom. Listen, if you wait, I’ll clean up my corrals and we can combine it all to make one trip.”

“Sounds good.”

Could men be any more laconic, Emma thought as she stood on the deck with a throw rug in her hands next to the Christmas tree Clay had propped against the rail, shamelessly eavesdropping. As if the two neighbors, both cops, talked in a kind of shorthand, and she knew there was a lot of information imparted in that exchange.

Her cheeks heated as she wondered just how much of Clay’s plan Micah might be privy to. Had they hatched up the whole thing between them in the months she lay awake alone at night in her pathetic little apartment in town? Did Micah know that now she was back, she and Clay were slated to have at each other three times a day, saving the result until bedtime to intensify its effect? Maybe Micah had let his pretty wife Chancie in on the plan. Maybe Micah and Clay had consulted Micah’s Blackfoot *mother* about that part too.

She held her breath, puffing out her cheeks, then let it slowly out. She turned to go back in the house, leaving the men to their chores and their code talking. If it worked...if Clay’s outlandish plan actually worked and she finally had their baby, it wouldn’t matter to her if he announced to the whole world what they had to do to get it. He could take out Internet ads to spread the news about the condoms and the incubator, as far as she was concerned. If it only worked....

She cleaned like mad until the place gleamed. One good thing about living in a modular, it was easy and fast to get it looking nice. No lugging vacuums and cleaning supplies up and down stairs, everything all on one level and all she had to do was move quickly from room to room.

Afterwards, she pulled boxes and plastic totes of Christmas decorations out of one of the bedroom closets. They had so much because each year she changed to a different color scheme. And one large box was filled with the tracks and cars of Clay's Christmas train, which like a little boy, he insisted they display in the living room with a toy Santa driving the engine.

Gold, she thought. This year she felt like gold, and she unpacked everything she had in gold until she sat surrounded by glittering bows and garland and glass ornaments.

It felt magical, for a moment, as if she were a princess sitting on a hoard of coins. She laughed aloud, then got to her feet to begin hauling it all out to the living room to put it up. Clay felt the enchantment too, she knew. When he came in, tired and dirty and fragrant with corral muck, he stopped in the doorway, wide-eyed. "Wow," he said. "You've really gone all out this year, Emma. It looks nice."

"Nice, huh? I'll have you know I worked all afternoon to get it looking this good."

"I see you put up my train set, too. Thanks, baby." He grinned.

"Go take a shower before dinner, Clay. You smell like a horse stall."

"You don't have to insult me. I didn't mean to make you mad. The place looks *won-derful*. Is that better?"

"Much. But you still smell like horse manure."

"How much time do I have before dinner?" He was already pulling his boots off.

"Plenty enough for a shower."

He took off his pants and shirt and socks, balling them up before crossing the clean living room floor in his shorts and stopping along the hall to throw his clothes in the washer. The dog followed him, almost tiptoeing past Emma as if afraid she might decide he needed a bath as well.

And Clay might not smell so good, but he sure looked *won-derful*, Emma conceded to herself.

After dinner and cleaning up the kitchen, he sat with a beer in front of the television turned low while she tried to read a book. Every time she looked up his eyes were on her, looking back. She could feel his coiled anticipation; he definitely wanted to do something besides what they were doing. At last he yawned theatrically and stretched, asking, "Ready for bed?"

"Um. It's only eight o'clock," she said.

"Yeah, it's getting late."

"Clay..."

"Phase two, Emma. I'll make it worth your while, I promise." He showed her his pretty white teeth and his dimple. She dropped her book and took his hand.

Warm and drowsy after making love again, Emma lay in bed waiting for Clay to come out of the bathroom. She could get used to this role reversal of not having to get up afterward, she thought with a naughty giggle.

Clay sauntered out of the bathroom, turkey baster at the ready. "Happy?" he asked. "It's good to hear you laugh. Now put your pillow under your hips. Prop yourself up," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I said so. Do it, Emma."

"Oh, all right, Clay."

"Now spread 'em."

"This is only the second one today. You said there were going to be three."

"Sorry. That's all I've got for today. We got a late start because I didn't have the incubator. Now stop wasting time. Just do what I tell you."

She knew there was no sense arguing further. She did as he ordered, lying with her pelvis tilted up and legs spread. He knelt between her legs. With one finger he spread her inner lips, carefully inserted the turkey baster, and gave the bulb a couple of squeezes.

“I feel weird doing it this way,” she said.

“More weird than all we’ve been through with medical science?” He gently pulled the plastic tube out of her.

She thought about it. “No. You’re right. This is better than any of the procedures at the doctors’ clinics.”

“Good. Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

He left to go wash out the plastic tube. When he came back, he lay down beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist. “Are you comfortable enough?”

“How long should I stay like this?” she asked.

“Optimally, all night. We want as many little swimmers as possible to make it past the cervix.”

“Clay, we tried something similar with the cervical cap, remember?”

“We tried a lot of things, Emma. But with the cap you were standing upright afterwards and then sitting in the car and then you went to work, if I remember right. It just stands to reason that this way is better. You’re working with gravity instead of against it.”

She sighed. “Well, I can’t stay propped up this way all night. My back will be killing me in the morning.”

“How about an hour?” he asked in his most seductive voice. “Can you give us an hour?”

She closed her eyes and blew air out between her lips. When she opened her eyes again, he had risen up on one elbow, propping his head on his hand, staring at her. He placed the other hand between her legs, cupping her mound and pressing on her pubic bone. “Would it help if I distract you a little? Make the time go faster?”

She turned her head to look him fully in the face, and as if he’d been waiting for her to do that his lips swooped to meet hers. She automatically opened her mouth to him, and he hummed deep in his throat in appreciation of her cooperation. His tongue began a thorough exploration of her lips and teeth, and then her tongue met his in the motion that mimicked dancing...or fucking. He raised his hand, one finger sliding into her wet slit.

She pulled her mouth from his. “Again?” she whispered. “How many times in a day do you think you can make me come, Clay?”

“As many as it takes, baby,” he said with a smirk, apparently supremely satisfied with himself. “I told you my way would be fun. And besides, it’s only every other day, remember? On the second day, we rest.”

“I’ll need to rest,” she ground out as his finger began a lazy glide up and down, just the way she liked it. She wouldn’t allow herself to think about what he might be doing on those other days. She and he were here and now. She could smell herself, her newly aroused desire for him. She couldn’t help it; he knew her responses too well. “You’re going to kill me, Clay.”

He bent his head and licked her nipple. “You like what I do to you, Emma,” he said. “Don’t try to pretend you don’t. I know you.”

He was right about that. She liked everything Clay Thorpe did to her, and every way he did it. She always had. She always would.

The days passed in a haze of what felt to Emma like newly discovered love, and also the familiarity of scheduled lovemaking. Clay and Emma kept to Clay’s agenda as much as they could. Sometimes an unforeseen event occurred and they missed a nooner or an evening session but for the most part the schedule reigned supreme in their lives. Once Emma asked why they couldn’t try morning, evening, and then morning again if they missed a lunchtime love break, or a morning, noon and the next morning if they missed an evening. But Clay wouldn’t budge from his every other day off. And his stubbornness more than puzzled Emma, as he stuck to his self-

imposed timetable it made her deeply suspicious of what he might be doing on the days he was refusing her. She hadn't forgotten his special woman remark; she wasn't allowed to forget since in addition to the agenda he wouldn't deviate from, he came in to the store religiously once a week to pay on the layaway ring.

Yet for all their effort—the calendar and calculations, her temperature taking, the ovulation tests and predictors—her period arrived in the middle of November. Her pregnancy strips had been telling her she wasn't pregnant, but it was too early to be absolutely sure, so still and all she was crushed when she saw the telltale stain in the toilet. She hadn't expected to feel so bad if the effort at conception failed once again. She had told herself she didn't have any belief in Clay's experimental methods, that she had only been going along to please him and because his inventive ways of loving were so pleasurable for her. But obviously somewhere along the line she had begun to rely on his assurances that his method would work. When the new evidence of her failure presented itself she wanted to scream in frustration.

When Clay came in that night, her long face gave him the news. He just looked at her, then reached for her and held her. "It will be all right, baby. We just have to keep trying."

"Clay, you're too much." But she held tight to him anyway, holding back tears.

"Too much for most women," he joked, trying to make her feel better. "But I'm just right for you, huh, Emma?"

"Just right," she agreed. She wished he wouldn't mention other women, but she guessed she couldn't have everything. "You're perfect for me, Clay Thorpe."

"Good to know," he said in a low voice, and then licked her ear.

She became even more obsessive about taking her temperature daily, consulting online ovulation predictors and using the pregnancy test stick. Every other day in the morning they made love at home. Noon they ate lunch at the store, and then did their loving. Nights found them back in their bed, making love.

On the day her calculator and her temperature told her she was ovulating, they closed up the shop as usual and hurried to the back to the shadows where they couldn't be seen. When they finished, Clay was just tying the knot in the condom when his cell phone rang.

"I better take this call," he said. He pulled up his pants and sat on the edge of the old spindle bed. "Thorpe," he said after connecting.

Emma listened. It didn't sound good.

"I've got to go," he said when he finished. He handed her the tied-off condom, zipped up his pants and grabbed his laden belt off the dresser. "I'll probably be late," he said, giving her a swift kiss.

"But...it's my luteinizing hormone day today. I'm ovulating, Clay."

"Sorry. Can't be helped." He was already moving toward the door, grabbing his jacket and hat along the way.

"What do I do with this?" She held up the filled condom.

"You'll have to take care of it, Emma. I'll see you later."

He turned the key in the lock, the bell on the door jangled, and he was gone.

"Be careful, Clay," she whispered, even though he couldn't hear her.

Now what was she supposed to do? Clay usually took the time to run the noon deposit home and place it in the incubator before it got cold. If she lost this one, that would leave her only the morning's contribution, which according to Clay simply wasn't enough.

The condom so recently inside her body still held its warmth. She remembered Clay saying where the best place to store semen was. She retrieved her purse and headed for the restroom. A cop's wife, she had information about underworld activities she wouldn't have had occasion to know otherwise. If drug couriers could use their body cavities to hoard their stashes, she thought she could endure one afternoon with her precious booty inside her. She was glad she still had a

tampon in her purse from last month. It would come in handy today to hold her precious store of baby-making material up inside.

Chapter Six

First thing at home that evening Emma retrieved the condom from inside herself and placed it in the incubator along with the morning's latex tube. She waited for Clay all evening after a solitary dinner. When he didn't come home by an hour before bedtime she fed the dog, ate a bowl of ice cream, took a shower, carefully snipped the reservoirs in both condoms, poured them into the turkey baster, and went to bed. She could only hope two would do the job of Clay's prescribed three dosages. Today was, after all, the big day.

Sometimes cops didn't come home at night, and cops' wives just made do. She would make do. Propping her hips up on her pillow, she cautiously inserted the baster and squeezed. Then she read for an hour with her pelvis tilted toward the ceiling before she retrieved her pillow, turned off the light, and waited for sleep.

But sleep didn't come. Still tossing and turning at midnight, worrying about Clay, she was awake when the phone rang.

"Emma, I'm sorry to bother you at this time of night. It's Chancie."

She sat up. "Chancie, what's wrong?"

"I'm in labor and Micah's not here. Could you drive me to the hospital?"

"Exactly how much in labor are you?"

She could hear Chancie's harsh breathing while she waited for an answer. "It's close," she finally said. "I waited as long as I could, hoping Micah would get here. Emma, can you come now?"

"Meet you outside in two minutes." She hung up and flew out of bed to hurriedly throw on her clothes and grab her keys.

She backed out into the road without letting her car warm up. Chancie was standing at her fence with a too-big canvas jacket on, unzipped over her big belly. When Emma backed far enough and stopped, Chancie maneuvered her ungainly bulk into the passenger seat. "Ugh," she said. "I swear this baby's bigger than the last one. I'll be glad when it's born and I can have my body back."

Emma held her tongue. What she wouldn't give to be in Chancie's place, with a big pregnant belly that wouldn't fit behind the steering wheel. "Seat belt," she reminded before putting her car in gear.

Chancie grumbled something about it being late for much traffic and only a few miles to the hospital, but she got the belt across her lap and situated so it wasn't directly across her belly before clicking it in place. "We better move, Emma," she said.

"How close are your contractions?"

"Close." She started puffing air out between her lips.

When Chancie finally laid her head back against the headrest, Emma asked, "Where's Micah?"

"I don't know. He didn't come home," Chancie said.

"Clay either."

They looked at each other with expressions of recognition in the dim light from the dashboard. "Drug bust," they said in unison. More and more, arrests of local drug dealers were intricate inter-agency Wyoming Department of Criminal Investigation operations involving numerous law enforcement divisions from five or six cooperating Wyoming county sheriffs' offices, Wyoming Highway Patrol—which was where Micah came in—local police departments, and federal agencies such as Immigration Customs Enforcement.

"I didn't know there was another one in the works. Clay didn't say a word."

"Micah either. But then, they're not supposed to. I hope they're all right," Chancie said.

Emma said, "Me too."

Chancie started puffing through another contraction.

Emma didn't worry about baby Lucky or Chancie's son Jamie. Chancie had live-in help she had brought with her when she married Micah, an older woman named Alma who was really part of their family, and so the kids were well taken care of.

When they got to the emergency room, Emma rushed across the parking lot to get a wheelchair. When she explained why she needed it, an attendant came on the run.

Emma said to Chancie, "Give me your purse. I'll take care of as much of admitting as I can until Micah can get here. You better go on to delivery."

As the hospital staff became aware of the situation, they hurried to help Chancie onto a gurney and then rushed her away. After the paperwork was done as well as she could manage, Emma went in search of delivery. Chancie was already gowned and set up in a room to wait out the rest of her labor. "Will you stay with me until the baby comes, Emma?"

Emma hesitated. She knew all about making babies but she didn't know much about childbirth, what to expect. What if she fainted or something equally embarrassing? When she didn't answer immediately, Chancie said, "Please," and reached for her hand.

Things moved quickly after Emma agreed to stay. A nurse came in to check Chancie, took a look between her legs and exclaimed, "This baby's crowning already!"

Several attendants came in to wheel Chancie to the delivery room, but she refused to let go of Emma's hand so Emma was forced to run alongside the bed to keep up.

A nurse kept urging Chancie, "Don't push! Don't push!" which was ridiculous because they could all see the baby's dark head was already emerging, its little shoulders visible.

The doctor barely had time to don enough of a gown to use its sterile arms to catch the new baby when it shot out from between Chancie's legs. "It's a boy," he announced as proudly as if he'd had something to do with its birth.

Emma found she was crying. Oh, happy tears surely for Chancie and Micah, but tears of envy as well, because having pretty little babies seemed so easy for them. Heck, Chancie hadn't been in labor but a couple of hours, and here she had a brand new addition to her family. She made the whole thing look so simple and joyous, not anything like the years-long, fruitless effort Emma and Clay had put in to try and make a baby of their own.

"Just look at him," Emma told Chancie through her tears as the doctor laid the baby on the mother's chest so she could hold him. He was red and white and slimy. "He's beautiful. Look at all that black hair. He's going to resemble Micah."

Chancie smiled, looking down at her new son. "I hope so," she said. "Thank you, Emma, for staying with me. I appreciate it so much."

Then there was a flurry of activity around the new baby and his mother, and Emma was soon dismissed by a nurse and directed toward a waiting room. Unsure of what was expected of her, she waited until Chancie was returned to her room. But Chancie was already exhaustedly asleep so Emma felt she could safely leave.

At home near dawn, she saw the porch light still on across the road and a worried Alma peering out through the glass of the door. So she crossed to hand the older woman Chancie's purse. "Congratulations. It's a boy," she said. "Mother and baby are doing fine."

"Thank goodness," Alma said. "I was so worried. I wish Micah would come home."

"He will soon, I'm sure," Emma said, turning wearily toward their house and wishing Clay would come home as well.

It was full morning before Clay got home, looking haggard and with time only for breakfast and a shower before he had to get back to the office.

After grabbing him for a hug and kiss, grateful he'd made it home safe, neither had much time for conversation about their eventful night. Emma ate her full-fat yogurt with granola while Clay managed to gulp down a couple of fried eggs with toast.

“How many did you arrest this time?” she asked.

“Nineteen. All the details will be in the paper.”

“Meth?”

He nodded.

“Micah and Chancie have a baby boy,” she said. “You guys missed all the action. I went with Chancie to the hospital last night.”

“No shit! Did you, baby? Was it hard for you to do that?” He reached for her hand.

She nodded. “Hard. And glorious. It went so fast—and then there he was.”

“It was good of you to be there for Chancie, Emma. But I bet Micah would rather have been where you were, than where he was.”

“No doubt. I would rather he would have been with her, too. Clay, is everybody on the drug bust all right? Micah is for sure coming home?”

“Far as I know the new daddy is fine. Listen, Emma, I’m sorry about the break in our schedule. I know yesterday was important to you. But we did two days before and we’ll do two days after, so we’ll still have a few days in the window of time for this month, right?”

“I’ll hold you to our regular three workouts tomorrow after you’re rested,” she said. “But I’ll have you know I took care of yesterday all by myself.”

He was on the point of biting off another piece of toast but pulled it away from his mouth to look at her. “You did?”

“Well, sure. I only had two of your donations, but I didn’t want to waste them.”

“My donations, huh?”

“Yeah, you know, to our private sperm bank.”

He gave her his trademark sexy grin. “I’m glad you’ve got such a good attitude about this experiment of mine, Emma. The old way with all the medical intervention was getting pretty grim.”

“If I haven’t told you how much I appreciate all you’ve done on my behalf all these years, I want you to know now, Clay. Thank you.” Geez, she was crying again. Must just be hormones or something making her so weepy, she thought.

“Oh, baby.” He used a thumb to wipe away her tears. “You are so worth it.”

She had to grab a napkin after that one, as the tears started in earnest.

“Uh, I’ve got to go. We don’t have time for this now,” Clay said, rising to give her a kiss on the forehead.

“I know. I’m just happy you’re safe. Go. Go to work.” She waved him out the door. “I’m fine.”

But his emphasis on keeping to their every-other-day schedule had her wondering once more: Was Clay fucking another woman, his special woman, on the days in between her allotted bouts of thrice daily with him? She well knew he was perfectly capable of having sex more than once a day, every day. Highly sexed and blessed with outsized equipment he used to perfection through years of such daily practice, he was a veritable fucking machine. Until recently, Emma had been sure he was solely *her* fucking machine.

Maybe Clay thought he owed Emma the baby she longed for and the other woman was special to him because she was reserved for pure sex play.

There was no way for Emma to know if another woman had entered the scene to enjoy her husband while she had absented herself from his life. The neighbors liked Clay and wouldn’t tell what he had done while she was gone, and his cop buddies would never betray him no matter what. Chancie might know, but being a neighbor and also the wife of one of Clay’s closest cop friends, she wouldn’t reveal to Emma anything she was privy to about Clay’s activities.

She had to let it go and stop dwelling on it, Emma thought. Just be grateful for what crumbs were left after she had almost succeeded in destroying her marriage. Because what she was sitting here daring to consider Clay’s crumbs, she acknowledged, would make a mighty fine full course gourmet meal for any other woman.

It wasn't until after Clay left and she was cleaning up the kitchen that Emma noticed the newspaper he had left next to his plate. Folded over to the classifieds, there was a two-column property ad circled heavily in ink.

Corner lot. Six—six!—bedroom modular with three baths, completely remodeled. Three car garage, oversized. A shop bigger in size than their present home, heated. Horse barn with four stalls, feeders, electricity, and tack room. Moveable panel corrals with electricity, water, head catch, and riding area. Extra building that could be a small second residence. The asking price was set between half and three quarters of a million dollars.

Emma could feel her mouth hanging open as she stood stupefied, staring at the ad and trying to take in all the property's amenities. Her weariness flapped away on giant wings of fear.

She and Clay could never afford such a place. So what was his interest in it?

Oh, oh, oh. She felt sick. Her hand covered her mouth, as if she would otherwise lose her breakfast just from thinking what she was thinking. The ring. The mysterious special woman. Could Clay be buying the antique diamond from Emma's shop for a special *rich* woman? Could he be playing on Emma's desire for a child while at the same time ingratiating himself with another woman who liked big dicks and could also afford something like this little real estate offering for the two of them?

Emma couldn't conceive of Clay playing such a cruel game. Unless he truly hated her now and was paying her back in spades for leaving? No. She couldn't under any circumstances believe that Clay, the man she had known for nearly half her life and had been married to for ten years, could stoop to such a low level.

He couldn't look into her eyes while he claimed her body with his hands, he couldn't proclaim his love for her in the heat of lovemaking, could not be so cruel as to make her believe he still wanted a child with her...all while stringing along someone else. She wouldn't believe it.

But she wrote down the address on a sticky note and stuffed it in her purse. Then she hurried to the door, let Clay's dog in, locked the house and drove to town to open up the shop.

The desire to know more, to come up with some kind of answer, burned in her. Once she had the lights on and change in the cashbox, she took her old laptop to the drop leaf table and waited impatiently for it to boot up.

She knew the area where the mysterious listing was, in general, it was the area where she and Clay lived. A fairly new development of tan modulars with double garages and white plastic fences, whose prices rivaled stick built homes in town. The big draw was the ability to keep horses on land in the county. Emma was not familiar with this particular house, and wondered in a fever of curiosity what made it so special.

"Come on, come on," she urged the old machine as it slowly loaded all the icons one by one on her desktop. When she finally got a browser and an Internet connection, she first checked the listing on the real estate company's page. There it was, in color and a bit more detail, but the price was the same and in fact had been lowered a bit in an effort to sell it more quickly. And it did look like a nice place, although all the pictures were of the exterior as if the listing agent was pretty certain the horse barn and garage would be the property's selling points.

Next she typed in the address on an online property value estimator. This site loaded even more slowly than the previous one. She waited, tapping her fingers on the tabletop, and was finally allowed to type in the address of the property north of Hawk Point. The information provided was exactly the same as what she had seen on the broker's site, and she supposed this site either gathered it directly from the real estate brokerage's page, or it was provided by the listing agent. She could see either a map, a bird's eye view, or a street view of the property. It did look like the place had a lot more buildings and a lot bigger house than its neighboring one acre properties. But what was interesting was the estimate of what the property was worth: about a third of the asking price. Emma sat back, wondering at the disparate numbers. She had heard the

value given by the estimating sites could be wildly off a property's real local value. Still...this was way off.

At that point she was interrupted by the jangling of the bell on the front door. She quickly minimized the web browser, and stood in case she could be of any help to potential customers. Two women entered, bundled against the cold but smiling, and Emma smiled back.

"We're looking for miniature Christmas decorations for our little Christmas village's tree. Do you have anything like that?"

"How small is the tree?" Emma asked.

When the answer came back as two feet, more or less, she led them to a display of exquisite small cloissoné bells. "Would something like this do? They're not antique exactly, but the technique is over five hundred years old. Do you know the history of cloisonné?"

When the women shook their heads in unison, Emma continued, "The raised design is made of copper or bronze wire. In antique pieces, the spaces were filled with cut jewels or glass. Today the designs are filled with enamel, baked in a kiln, and then they're polished."

"But how can you sell a box of six for such a low price?" the bigger woman demanded, as if suspecting Emma was spinning them a tale of hand-manufacture and trying to rip them off with plastic.

"They come from a women's cooperative in India. The women who live there have no place else to go. Their husbands have disfigured them by throwing battery acid in their faces."

The women gasped. "Battery acid? For what?"

"For infidelity, real or imagined."

"I've never heard of that. Have you, Ruth?" one of the women asked her companion. She grimaced. "That's just awful."

"Yes. I'm glad I don't live in Cambodia, Pakistan, India, or Bangladesh." Especially not after she moved out on her husband, Emma thought. She said, "I promise you, the Indian women are paid their asking price."

"Incredible." The other woman removed one of the bells, causing its tiny clapper to ring against the sides, while she examined the workmanship more closely.

"We'll take them all," her friend said, scooping up five boxes nestled with six tiny bells, each uniquely decorated. "Do you have any more?"

"Not at this time, and not before Christmas, unfortunately," Emma said. "But if you want to plan for next year, check back here in a couple of months."

The two women left, well pleased with their bargain. Emma was pleased to have made a sale on such a quiet day.

She sat down and resumed her research. The next site she consulted was the Powell county assessor's office. So much information that used to require a trip to the courthouse, a willing county employee, and a copier fee, was now available free online. She clicked on the GIS mapping icon, agreed to the terms of use, and a local tax map popped up. Clicking on the little *plus* magnifying glass, she kept enlarging the map until finally she was at the correct cross streets where the property sat whose elusive data so consumed her. She clicked on the *i* for more information. A yellow box popped up with details on the parcel number, account number, county map number, the property's owner, its address, mailing address, date of its deed, legal description, and property tax classification. If that wasn't quite enough information, and in this case it wasn't, she could click on *Property Detail* and find the year it was built, the fact that it also had a basement, and that the market value was about two-thirds of the asking price.

Once again she sat back to try and digest everything she had discovered. She had a ton of information on a property she and her husband couldn't begin to afford. So what did it all tell her? Specifically, did it tell her anything about Clay and why he was interested enough in such an expensive piece of real estate he'd circled it and left it lying by his placemat for her to find?

A woman who was sure of her husband, she thought, would just text him with the straightforward message: *What's up with the real estate ad you circled?*

She sighed and put her cold hands to her hot cheeks. It was past lunchtime and Clay obviously wasn't coming in today. She had no appetite, and despite the fact she had an avocado and bacon sandwich with extra mayo in the store's tiny refrigerator, didn't feel like eating. Her fingers were like ice and her skin flushed hot and then cold. She was damned scared, she admitted to herself. A woman who had left her husband and given him time and reason to look around for another didn't just confront him with questions about any hidden intentions he might have. If they existed, and were hidden, he had deliberately hidden them. Clay didn't reveal secrets. She could torture him and he wouldn't tell her what he was up to if he didn't want her to know.

But how long could she keep her burning curiosity bottled up inside? She wanted to know the truth.

She was afraid to know.

How long could she live with the conclusions she had drawn? What if she was wrong? God, what if she was *right* and Clay was planning to dump her?

It's hormones, she assured herself. Her suspicions were groundless, fueled by hormones. She wouldn't ask Clay anything. She would just trust him.

She lasted until suppertime before confronting him.

Chapter Seven

She found the expensive property on her way home from work and circled the block a couple of times, trying to figure out why it was listed for so much money. It was getting dark already and she couldn't really see much. But what she could make out looked impressive and well cared for. And there really were a lot of buildings on the land, so maybe it was worth what the owners were asking.

She had the evening meal on the table when Clay came in. He was late, and obviously exhausted after two days without sleep. After he ate, he could shower and go to bed if he wanted.

He removed his coat, cap, gun belt and uniform shirt and sat at his place at the table in his t-shirt. Head resting wearily on his hands, he indifferently nudged the newspaper still sitting beside his placemat out of the way with one elbow.

"Tired," he said. "Sorry, Emma. Food looks good, but I'm not very hungry."

"Eat what you can," she said. "I'll put it in the fridge if you want it later. Clay...can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," he said between bites of quinoa. "What is this stuff anyway?"

"It's a seed, actually, related to spinach. Do you hate it?" She noticed Clay's dog wasn't doing his usual begging at the table, not for quinoa.

"S okay," Clay said, continuing to shovel his dinner into his mouth. Once he started eating, he must have discovered his lost appetite.

"That newspaper by your elbow," Emma began. Clay glanced over at the paper folded to the classifieds, looked up at her with a question in his hazel eyes.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I...wondered what your interest was in it." She waited. Clay's gaze on her sharpened. She began to squirm.

"Why did you think I was interested in it, Emma? You know we can't afford something like that."

"That's why I wondered." She avoided his gaze by looking around their much smaller, much shabbier mobile home. "Have you...have you resented spending so much money on trying for a baby with me all these years, Clay? In other circumstances, we would have had been in a lot better financial position. Is that why...is it why we're doing your homemade fertility experiment? To save money?"

He pushed his plate away, ran a tired hand over his eyes. “I won’t deny I was getting to the point I thought we were wasting our money on further medical treatment, Emma. Saving money might have been one reason I came up with my plan, I don’t know. I just thought, if you came back, we could have a lot more fun trying than we did before. As for the ad, I thought you knew me well enough by now to know I don’t care much about impressing the neighbors with what we own.”

Now she’d made him cranky. She couldn’t have held her tongue and waited for a better time, could she? When he wasn’t so tired, after he’d had a shower, maybe when they were in bed awaiting sleep.

He pushed away from the table, the paper falling unheeded to the floor. “I saved the ad for Micah, okay? I was going to show him what rich neighbors we have, and how they probably just jumped our property value a few hundred thousand when they listed theirs.”

“I couldn’t figure out what you meant by saving the paper like that,” she said in a small voice. “I didn’t know if you’d left it for me to find or what.”

“It was a joke. If you don’t need help cleaning up here, I’m going to take a shower,” he said. As he headed across the living room, he added, “Why don’t you come on to bed with me. We’ve both had a long couple of days.”

“You go take your shower,” she said. She felt like a fool, having wasted almost the whole morning researching Clay’s little joke. “I’ll be right behind you.”

As soon as she could, she headed for the back of the house, stripped off her clothes, and hurried through her own shower so she could cuddle up to him in bed. His arm automatically provided a pillow for her head, and she scooted her body in close.

His breathing deepened. It took her a while to gather up her courage enough to whisper, “Clay, I’m sorry.”

“S all right,” he slurred. A loud snore ripped from him immediately after his words. When was she going to be able to trust him as he apparently trusted her? Another month of not conceiving was only exacerbated by her guilt over leaving him. If Clay didn’t feel she merited punishment, obviously if subconsciously, she did. She kept expecting to be punished, and instead he gave her reassurance. Even half asleep her man comforted her with the promise that they were okay.

Chapter Eight

Emma closed the shop for four days at Thanksgiving. It was rare for Clay to have four days off in a row without using vacation time, and she meant to spend it with him.

It was possible she was still in her fertile period and she wanted to relax and enjoy her husband. After the first month of doing things Clay’s way had ended in disappointment, she had fallen back into her old habits, worrying herself to a needless frazzle. She needed to take her mind off becoming pregnant. She needed to leave things in Clay’s hands, to concentrate on her home and her life with her husband and just being happy, like him, with what they had.

She made a huge feast, a turkey with all the trimmings, a small ham, and several kinds of pies. They had been invited to Chancie and Micah’s, and it was tempting to go over and feast on Alma’s cooking. But instead they stayed home and stuffed themselves. Afternoon found them dozing on the couch in front of a movie on disk, the dog alongside them. As darkness fell Clay rose and started rummaging around in the kitchen. The dog immediately perked up and followed.

Emma looked on in slight astonishment. “Surely you can’t be hungry?”

“Turkey sandwich. It’s tradition; gotta have it.”

She admired his nicely-shaped butt sticking out as he bent headfirst into the refrigerator. “You want one?” he asked, straightening up with the jar of mayonnaise he’d been searching for held triumphantly in his fist.

She sighed, patting her rounded belly. “Why not,” she said. “It’s tradition.” She was glad the day wasn’t one of their scheduled inoculation days. After the sandwich there definitely wouldn’t be room to stuff anything more into her body, not even if she really wanted to, not even Clay’s special over-sized syringe.

She forced herself to wait. Her obsessiveness had been getting out of hand and besides, long familiarity with the literature that accompanied all pregnancy tests warned that most home tests wouldn’t detect HCG, the hormone that signaled a fertilized egg had implanted itself in the wall of the uterus, until at least six days after fertilization. Although some were sold as early detection kits, supposedly capable of telling six days before a woman’s period was due whether she was pregnant, the tried and true method advised waiting.

On the day her period was due, she reluctantly got out of bed and headed for the bathroom, sure she would be greeted by the telltale stain. It didn’t show.

She held her breath, too scared to hope. She had been late before, a day or two, but the sign of her failure had always showed up eventually.

Her hands started shaking. Today she would test. She opened the pink box. This particular brand was a test-and-confirm method, with two stages, a modern positive/negative and an older method comparing stripes. She wanted a plus or minus first, no guessing. So if it was negative as she expected she could just leave it behind and get on with her day. She thought she was ready for a minus sign. The literature claimed almost one hundred per cent accuracy on the expected first day of a woman’s menstrual cycle, but the fine print warned that in case of negative results she may have miscalculated or was one of those women who didn’t produce much pregnancy hormone even though they were indeed pregnant.

She unwrapped the test stick, checked to see that its cute little clock showed in the window, dipped the tip in her saved sample for five seconds, recapped the stick, and waited, too nervous to even continue putting on makeup or fixing her hair. One minute. Two minutes. Three. If she took too long in the bathroom, Clay would just go down the hall to wash and shave for work. She stared at the little plastic window as the tiny clock counted down, willing the stick to give her the result she wanted. The clock disappeared and in its place appeared a tiny symbol.

She looked at it. Turned away and then turned back and looked again. The readout was a tiny plus sign. She consulted the literature to be sure. Yes, a plus sign was positive. This test was saying she was pregnant.

She couldn’t just accept a happy result. Not after all the years of negative blows. She had to confirm it. Hands trembling violently, she opened the second test, a traditional line test. She dipped the strip in, took it out, and waited. The dark control line appeared, and then, slowly, a pale line to its right.

This test, too, was saying she was pregnant.

She wanted to open the bathroom door, jerk Clay inside, and have him confirm that she wasn’t seeing verification in the little plastic windows just because she wanted so much to see positive results.

But she didn’t. She would test again tomorrow just to make sure, and maybe the day after that just to make even more sure.

After she made double and perhaps even triple sure, she might even wait for Christmas to tell Clay. She would feel more secure by then in her success, and it was only a few weeks away.

Clay paid off the ring that week. With no fanfare, he came in at lunch, gave her a booster shot, tendered his bank card across the glass counter. The deal was done so dispassionately, showing no emotion at all he walked out the door with the large, showy, antique diamond ring that Emma admired so much and that he refused to explain stuffed in his jacket pocket.

Christmas day Emma locked herself in the bathroom first thing, ran a test just to be absolutely sure, and then went to the kitchen to put the coffee on and start breakfast. She left the plastic stick on the napkin next to Clay's plate along with his flatware.

He came in, kissed her, said, "Merry Christmas," and sat down at the table. She wasn't surprised; they both felt most of the traditions surrounding the holiday were for children. Theirs had always been a subdued celebration and she didn't expect anything more demonstrative from him.

She watched him reach for his napkin, look down before picking it up, hesitate, and then look back up at her. "Is this what I think it is?" he asked, holding up the capped test stick.

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Frankenstein," she said.

"Holy crap! I don't believe it. Emma, we're pregnant?"

"So all the tests for the last couple of weeks have been saying. That little plus sign means yes, we're finally pregnant." Her smile felt tremulous.

He rose and swiftly circled the table to take her in his strong arms and kiss her thoroughly. "My Emma," he said. "A mama at last."

"If I can carry it to term," she warned.

"You just have to have something to worry about, don't you? You'll carry this baby to term. But even if worse comes to worst, now we know what works and we'll try again."

"But for now, we don't have to keep to your every-other-day schedule," she said. She had been waiting for an opening to suggest that idea to him ever since he paid off the ring, to see what he would say. Would he still insist she only got his special brand of carnal care only every other day?

"Yeah, I'll be glad to give the three-times-a-day a rest. Believe it or not, I feel like I'm getting too old to keep up that schedule. It will be good to go back to once a day."

She searched his handsome face for any sign he wasn't telling the absolute truth. She had doubted him so long, she couldn't believe he'd agree to abandon his rigid schedule so easily. "Once a day, every day?"

"Well, yeah. What are we talking about here, Emma? I thought we were discussing going back to the way things have always been for us. Now that we've achieved our objective, we can relax a little bit."

She laid her forehead against his hard chest and gripped his shirt with both hands. "I would like nothing more than for us to go back to exactly the way we were, happy married people," she said.

"That's what I was saying. Emma, are you feeling okay? You keep repeating everything I say."

"Never better. Oh, Clay, I'm so happy."

"Me too, baby. Want to give the train set a run?"

"What?" She shook her head. Segue time. "You lost me."

"My Santa train. Want to watch it make a circuit around the living room?"

"Um, I guess so, Clay. If you want to."

"Come on. It will be fun." He tugged her by the hand toward the living room and sat her down on the couch. He flipped a switch, and the train's wheels began churning as it disappeared behind the tree and then reappeared next to the sofa. The dog still sat hopefully near the kitchen table, refusing to leave the food they had abandoned. He shot them an incredulous look that clearly said, *Are you both nuts?*

Clay came to sit beside her. After the train went once around the room, he exclaimed, "Did you see that?"

"See what?" she asked.

"Pay attention, Emma," he said. "Now watch. Here it comes again."

She watched the toy train pass by once again. "What am I looking for, Clay?" she asked, but she was smiling. This was so silly, but it felt good to be silly with Clay.

“All right. One more time. I’ll stop it for you. Look in the engine behind Santa.”

The train stopped right by the arm of the sofa. She leaned over to give the engine and Santa a good look.

Behind the little man in the red suit, seated in the engine compartment of the train, was a small, red velvet box. Its surface a little worn, she could tell it was old. In fact she knew it was antique, she recognized the box.

“Would you look at that?” Clay said. “I think old Santa brought you something, baby.”

“Really?” She could hardly speak. “Really, Clay?”

“Pick it up and open it, Emma.”

She reached down for the domed velvet box. Looking into his eyes over the top of the box, she slowly opened it. Inside sat the wondrous Art Deco ring, the one she loved so much. There was a piece of paper rolled up inside the shank. She pulled it out and opened it.

It said: *For my special woman. With all my love.*

“Oh,” she said. “Oh. Clay.”

“Here, let me put it on,” he said. He reached for the ring, lifted her hand, and slipped it on. “Would you look at that? It fits.”

“It does. It’s perfect. Thank you, Clay.”

“You’re forgetting the most important part, Emma.”

“What’s that?” She swiped at a tear rolling down her cheek.

“You’re supposed to tell me I’m special, too, and that you love me back.”

“You are the most special man in the whole world,” she said past the lump in her throat.

“And I love you infinitely, immeasurably, totally and forever.”

“That’s better.” He grinned, showing her his sexy dimple.

“But, Clay, how can you afford this ring?”

“Well, we haven’t had any medical bills to pay in quite a while,” he said. “I’ve been saving up.”

“Babies are expensive, you know,” she reminded.

“So I’ve heard. We’ll deal with it when the time comes. Listen, would you like to celebrate our good news?” He jerked his head toward the back of the house. “With diamonds?”

“And nothing else? Just these old diamonds?”

“Sounds good to me.” Clay pulled Emma to her feet and together they headed for the bedroom.

The dog emitted a very human sounding sigh and lay down with its head on its paws to wait until everybody else got hungry enough to come back and finish breakfast.