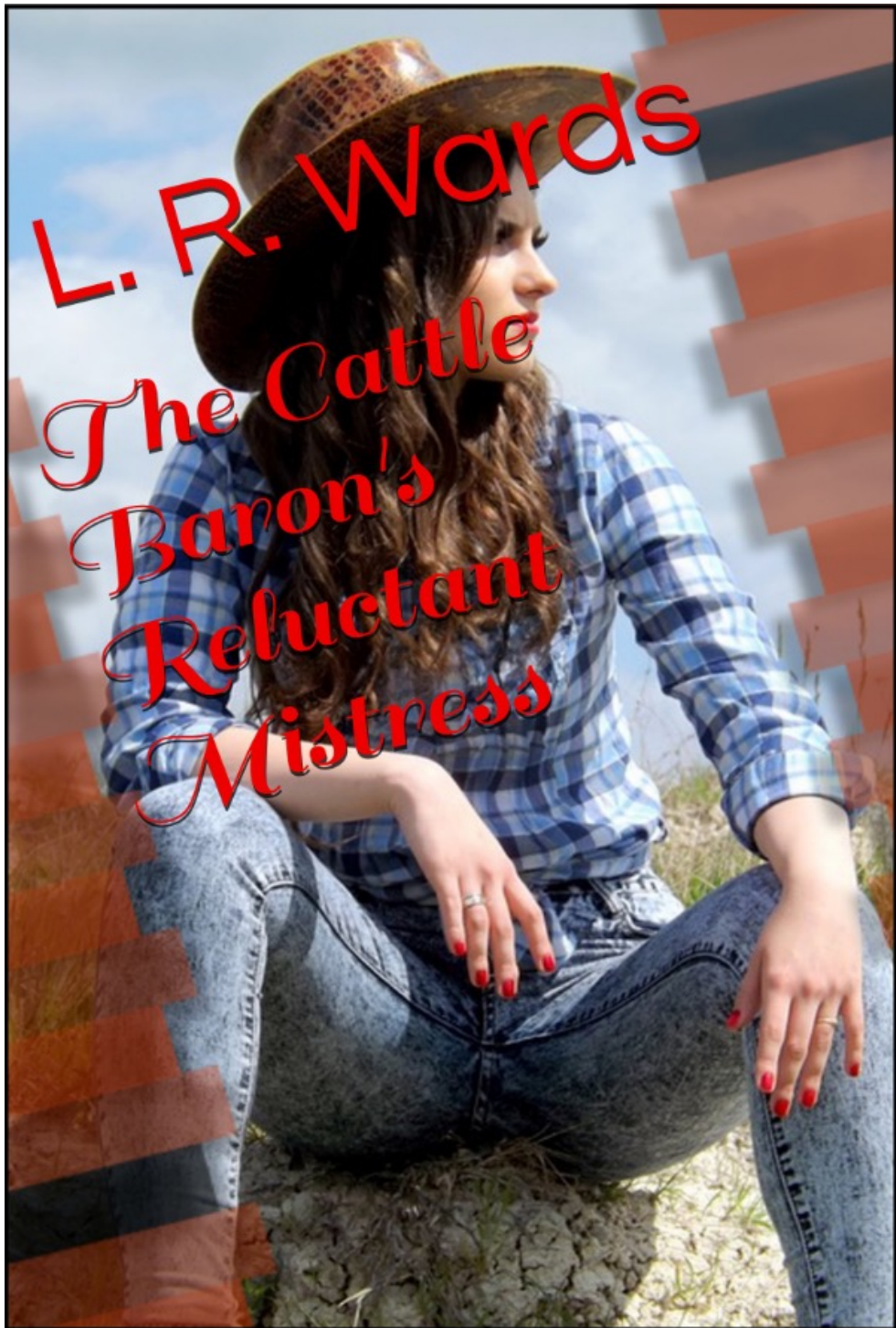


L. R. Wards

The Cattle
Baron's
Reluctant
Mistress



The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

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CHAPTER ONE

Leah cursed to herself as she saw the break in the fence. Usually she kept a good eye on the fences for her father but somehow she missed this one and a few of their herd escaped into the neighbour's land. Cursing wasn't like her, but unfortunately she had heard stories about the new owner of the Lazy 'C' and knew he was about as unforgiving as the old one. So she'd better get their cattle back as soon as possible before her father had to deal with an angry neighbour. He had enough problems at the moment.

It wasn't often that she put any faith in rumour, but they couldn't take that chance because what little money they had went to the ranch, and they couldn't risk damage to another rancher's property and risk losing their own spread through a lawsuit. Fortunately, she knew it couldn't have been too many of their cattle, because the majority of the herd was down at the dry river bed that she'd just come from.

Nudging her horse through the opening she urged him to a trot hoping she could recover the cattle before the new owner was aware of them.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the sun seemed especially bright today. She wished this hot spell would end and some rain would definitely be a blessing. One thing their ranch didn't have right now was access to water. She prayed every night for it to rain before she went to bed because she knew her father couldn't take much more stress. She worried about him. More than he knew.

Her father and their only ranch hand had been spending all day everyday for the last month hauling water because the river had gone dry, so it was one of her jobs to manage the fence line. Yet when cattle grew thirsty they'd go through anything to get to it. Today was no exception.

It was hot. *Really* hot. Hotter than usual it seemed.

She couldn't imagine what the cattle were going through with their furry hides.

She reined up to reach down and pulled her shirt out of the waistband of her cut-offs and tie it in a knot above her belly button. Then she undid the top two buttons after glancing around. She was quite modest usually, but she was too hot to care right now and besides, there wasn't another soul in sight. She usually didn't wear cut off jeans on horseback either because the leather of the saddle chafed the skin of her inner thighs, but the heat was awful. She grinned to herself thinking that she'd be better off riding horseback naked if she wasn't afraid of being seen. Then there were other things she had to worry about being chafed. She laughed a little at that. She felt daring in a way because there was no other possibility of ever being as bold in public.

She was a tomboy. Her best friend reminded her constantly about it, but she didn't mind and took the teasing well. Of course it didn't help that Kimmy was runway model material, and even though there had been offers she preferred an education instead. Leah was proud of her because of it. Unfortunately Leah couldn't get one. They had no money or relief for her to go. She was hoping for this fall because her father was insisting on her going to college, but she knew that was not going to happen. The river may be filled with fresh mountain water again, but like the last two years it would run dry and she'd have to drop out in the middle of a semester.

Lord it was hot.

Lifting her straw hat, she reached up to swipe her brow with the back of her arm silently wishing again that the heat wave would end. When she dropped her arm, she suddenly noticed a lone rider come over the crest of a dry, sunburnt hill about a quarter mile off on a buckskin. With him were several cattle.

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Three to be exact. Forgetting how she looked, she replaced her hat and stood up in the stirrups and shaded her eyes to watch him. The man definitely knew how to herd cattle and his horse seemed specially trained to anticipate every move they made. Even in the distance she could see the strength and size of his physique. He sat in the saddle with a notable confidence, looking totally relaxed and completely attuned to his horse letting her know that he was no stranger to the saddle.

Instantly she found herself admiring his skill. Not many people rode like that anymore except for the most seasoned ranch hands and, she grinned again, her father.

Already she knew that those were her escapees that he was herding back toward her and wondered if the new owner already was aware of them on his land. Hopefully this cowboy just decided to lead them back and not say anything. Sometimes they understood each other more than the wealthy owners and because of it would remain a little more loyal to their own kind.

As he drew closer she realized he was ruggedly handsome too. His Stetson was pulled low on his brow so it was difficult for her to see his eyes, but she didn't miss the strong jaw with a day's worth of dark stubble and the tan that showed he was no greenhorn on the range.

When he reined up next to her, he reached up lazily and tilted his Stetson back to reveal incredibly light hazel eyes loaded with intelligence as they dipped over her body with a calm arrogance almost as if she was unwelcome, but was still worth a look. A corner of his mouth pulled up a little in an arrogant well-what-have-we-here look. He leaned forward resting his forearms on the saddle horn looking completely relaxed as he raised his eyes back to hers.

Unexpectedly she felt her stomach flip as he centered them on her. She had met many ranch hands in her life, but there was something different about him. Despite that, she couldn't take

her eyes off him. He was very handsome in a rugged way. It looked as though he was born on a horse too by the way he handled the one he was on. Perspiration formed into droplets on his tanned skin at his throat and dampened a vee in his western cut shirt. Unlike her, who grew up under the hot Arizona sun and was still sweating horribly. Who was this guy?

Unable to help her curiosity, her eyes guided down to his thick chest. It was obvious he was well proportioned because the material of his shirt strained in all the right places it should on a well built man. The top two buttons were undone and she saw a thick tanned chest with dark curly hair.

Catching herself ogling him she darted her eyes back to his. Then she noticed that there was a bit of a glint there even though his expression gave nothing away. Without realizing it she was gawking at him like she'd never met a man before in her life.

"These yours?" he said in a voice of complete annoyance bringing her attention back to the cattle.

"Oh yes," She said trying to quickly recover from gaping at him, "I'm sorry, they broke through the fence." The southern drawl he possessed took her completely by surprise. If she thought he was already appealing, that accent tipped her over the edge.

"Apparently." He answered.

She blinked a couple of times. The man may have been attractive and he did return her cattle but his unsympathetic tone and obvious irritation began to raise her own ire, "It wasn't deliberate." She defended. "Cattle can and do go through fences when they're thirsty. Anyone who knows anything about cattle knows that." She shot at him defensively.

Then she noticed his mouth twitch like he was resisting a smile, but then he spoke and his tone hadn't changed.

"I didn't say that. It is your assumption." He said apathetically allowing his hazel eyes to dip over her again.

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It was bold of him to be so rude but still think she was worth a look of interest especially when he sounded so condescending. In fact he didn't even hide his perusal of her body. It was hard not to say anything to him but somehow she managed. She wanted to say, *stare much?* But he did return her stray cattle and she was grateful for it. "Okay, well thanks for getting our cattle back." She said dismissing him. She knew it wasn't worth arguing with the man. By the arrogant tilt of his chin, he looked like someone who was used to winning arguments. He seemed to have that air about him that made him seem right all the time and not very forgiving. Instead she turned her horse to guide her cattle back through the fence.

"Make sure you mend your fence. Good stock like that need to be looked after." He called after her.

"I will." She shot over her shoulder no longer allowing her tone to be polite. *What a jerk*, she thought, but she supposed that a man that handsome probably got away with it a lot. She wondered if his boss knew how rude he was. It was obvious that he knew how to ride for he was a natural on a horse so maybe he was a really exceptional ranch hand too. Maybe that's why he got away with his behaviour or maybe he never showed that side to his boss. Regardless she already made up her mind that the man was too darn arrogant to spend another moment talking to no matter how nice he was to look at.

She wiped her brow again with her forearm looking down and stifled a gasp. It was then to her complete horror she realized her state of dress—or undress. Then she shot a look over her shoulder to see him still there watching her.

Oh lord! No wonder he was staring so boldly and acting like he had the right to do so. She was practically advertising herself dressed like a stripper on horseback! What kind of image did that give off? He must've thought she was some sort of wanton woman. How embarrassing! She fell her face in her hand and

almost wanted to weep. What a display she gave him! No man has seen so much of her before. Then she got angry. It was his fault! If he wasn't so distracting she would have remembered that she was half undressed.

After a moment she lifted her head thinking that maybe she wouldn't run into him again. After all, it wasn't like Galesville was a small town. It was large enough to have its own college. Maybe he wouldn't remember her either. With those thoughts repeating through her mind hopefully she herded the cattle back toward their land.

Behind her the cowboy sat straight in the saddle, pushed his Stetson further up his brow, and watched her ride off. The view from the back was just as delicious as the front—almost. "Not bad, not bad at all." He said to himself out loud causing his horse to swing his ears back his way. He chuckled and patted his neck.

Obviously she didn't like him looking at her the way he was, but she practically gave him an open invitation in that getup. It had been a long time since he'd seen a little morsel that appealing and it wasn't if he hadn't had his pick. Yet most women who had a body like that would use it for attention but this little gal seemed to be offended. Hell, if she didn't want him looking at her, she shouldn't have been showing so much skin and what nice skin she had. Smooth and creamy without one blemish and slightly darkened by the sun which just made those large lovely eyes of hers stand out.

She was a pretty little thing too with auburn hair, large blue eyes and an appealing pouty mouth. The shirt she wore was tied up between her breasts, encasing them ever so nicely so he could easily guess her bra size. It was around a thirty-six C. Then there was that tiny little waist. He could practically span his large hands around it. Lastly, she had long flawless legs that would look pretty nice wrapped around him in a moment of passion.

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Smiling at the image he spun his horse around and nudged him into a steady trot. He'd run into her again. He'd make sure of it.

The next day Leah had too much work to do and not enough time to do it in just like the day before.

Last evening after she took the stray cattle to the water trough that her father just finished filling she managed to go back and finish mending the fence but it was just a patch job. It wouldn't take much for a thirsty cow to charge the fence again. So today she saddled up her horse and headed out to finish the job. However, she found herself looking around for the stranger and harshly chastised herself for doing something so stupid. He acted as though he didn't even like her for heaven's sake and she was *looking* for him. Making an excuse that it was the heat talking and she wasn't in her right frame of mind because it baked the brain cells that held common sense, she quickly finished up and went back home. This was just the beginning of her day. She had wood to chop, other fences to mend, and her father wanted her to start sorting the heard.

Unfortunately she used up the rest of the fencing nails but at least she had enough to finish the broken wire. If something like this happened tomorrow she'd have no way to fix it. That would mean she needed to head to town before she could finish up her chores. It delayed her possibly two hours and that would mean a late night.

After she unsaddled Rocket she went and changed into clean tan shorts and a white tank top, grabbed the keys to the rusty old ford truck that she usually drove and headed to town.

It was mid July and the truck didn't have air conditioning so again she found herself getting to darn hot. She could have rolled down the window but the roads were mostly gravel. It wasn't until she hit the paved highway did she do that.

They lived forty five minutes out of town in an old farmhouse that had been in their family for generations. It had just been the last few years that they'd been desolate. Up until then, they managed fine. There was always a little extra money, but water was getting scarcer. Her father blamed the golf course they put in for tourism for sucking the water table dry. It was only about ten miles from their ranch and the grass was green all year round with the sprinkler system.

Her father hated golf, and so did she knowing that they were suffering because of it. She even thought about going and giving the rich owner hell whoever it was, but what was the point? Rich people didn't care about hard working folk. Not only that he probably didn't even live here.

She pulled the truck up in front of the hardware store right behind a big red dual tire truck with the Lazy 'C' emblem on it. She'd passed two of the identical trucks on the way to town also. The new owner didn't pull any punches when it came to equipment obviously. Those trucks must have cost their weight in gold because they were all decked out and fully equipped. All she had was Rocket to ride out on the range with and doctor cattle. This man probably had an enormous amount of vet supplies in the chrome lockboxes present in the bed of the trucks.

She grabbed her wallet and tried to ignore the feelings of self pity as she went into the store.

"Hey Leah!"

She lifted her hand and waved to Barney who was the store's owner accompanied by a smile. Barney was a kind older man in his sixties that was balding and he wore spectacles. He was with a customer that was just hidden from her view behind a shelf and she knew what she wanted so she turned and went down the aisle where the fencing nails were kept.

"Leah?"

Barney looked up at the tall cowboy, "Leah Cooper. Her

father owns the spread beside yours. His name is Frank. He's a fourth generation rancher. If you want to know anything about cattle, Frank's the man to ask." He offered.

"Really?" he said.

"Anything," Barney continued. "Unfortunately he and a few others have been having trouble for the last few years. Water is hard to come by in the dry season, but most of the men blame it on the golf course. Their wells have run dry and so has the river for two months out of the year."

"It's tough luck." Garrett offered, *And that's ranching business*. He thought to himself. He'd spent a few years in poverty too, but they had managed. Now he was rich, filthy rich, and whatever he didn't have, he could buy. That made him look over the shelf for the redhead.

"The Cooper's are real nice people," the older man continued, "they'd drop everything to help someone out even if they're dealing with their own hardships."

Garrett caught a glimpse of the woman when she got out of the truck a moment ago. He instantly recognized her. If it wasn't for that killer body, it was the fiery red hair that gave her away. He just nodded. Although on the exterior he didn't give anything away, inside he was interested. He liked her spunk and it wasn't like him to go for a redhead either. He preferred blondes, but the color of her hair was bewitching especially in contrast with those deep sapphire eyes.

Leah picked up a box of nails and carried it to the front just to see the same cowboy from the day before. This time her heart near leapt out of her chest. He was leaning against the counter staring directly at her with that same unreadable expression as she approached. Quickly she averted her gaze unable to match his stare. He was so darn intimidating and since when in her life did she feel intimidated by anyone? Part of her was mad at him, and another was mad at herself for reacting to him. Today he

was wearing jeans topped with a leather belt and a large shiny buckle, a blue western cut shirt and tan Stetson. He was a powerful image of a masculine cowboy all the way down to his confident stance and masked expression. Like the day before his eyes dipped down her blatantly and she cursed herself for wearing shorts and a tank top. The front of it was still damp from the ride into town. It wasn't often she went to town showing skin like this either but it was hot.

"I liked what you were wearing yesterday better." He finally said in that deep drawl he possessed.

Thankfully Barney had gone in the back for a moment and didn't see the blush that rose to her cheeks.

She glared at him but didn't say a word. She knew she deserved that for baring so much the day before. Not only that, what could she say? She turned away from him pretending that there was something more interesting outside.

"Dinner?" he said in the same tone completely unmoved by her snuff. He also didn't miss the pinkening of her cheeks either. He'd embarrassed her. That was interesting.

"No." she said quickly in a whisper although her heart picked up a pace at his offer. Hearing that deep voice behind her did no good either.

"Lunch?" he continued.

She brought her eyes back to his narrowing them, "No."

He grinned and she swore her knees turned to jelly.

"Breakfast?"

It was then Barney returned, "It'll be delivered tomorrow afternoon." He said to the tall cowboy and handed him a slip. "I have one boy in the yard and he's swamped today, if that's all right."

"It's fine." He said taking the slip of paper, "Good day Leah." He tipped his hat added a sensual smile, glanced down her once more, and walked out of the store.

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She watched him with an expression of shock that he knew her name and a feeling of anger that he had the gall to be so forward. Then it was her turn to look down the length of him. He had a drop dead sexy swagger that told her she was right to turn him down. He'd have eaten her alive and she knew it. She was no match for that tall virile man. He didn't even seem the least bit disappointed that she turned him down. What did that mean? That he had enough women to fill the void? Inside she knew that wasn't it. He just wasn't done yet.

When it came time for bed that night she was physically exhausted. How her father was going to manage in the fall when she went to school was beyond her. She'd already talked about delaying it another year but he wouldn't let her. She'd already delayed three years in going and he said he'd make do. *But how?* She thought to herself. He could barely do it with the two of them and one ranch hand. Thinking of their ranch hand made her mind guide back to the mysterious cowboy she met earlier that day and with that thought her heart picked up a little remembering how he gave her that look of interest—twice.

She bet a man like that could look interested in whatever the hell pleased him and get away with it. She also bet that when he looked at a woman the way he did, they certainly didn't get angry like she did earlier. Maybe it was because she had absolutely no idea on how to respond to such a blatant perusal. Was that supposed to be a compliment? Maybe if he was nicer about it she would have been, but he was downright abrasive. Of course it didn't help that it looked like she was hardly wearing anything the day before either.

The boys she dated in the past were not that upfront about their intentions. It probably had something to do with them being closer to her age range. This man looked like he was in his thirties so he probably had more than enough experience with women.

Remembering the way that shirt stretched over his form under the hot sun, she didn't doubt it for a minute. He wasn't just large, he was solidly built. Also, it seemed as if the heat didn't even affect him. She was perspiring profusely as he was sitting there quite comfortable in jeans and long sleeved shirt. He only had a slight indicator of his own warmth that wasn't anywhere near where it should have been. By rights that shirt should have been plastered to him, not just show a slight dampness between the muscular mounds of his chest. Unexpectedly she licked her lips then realizing what she'd just done, she started fuming all over again. How could a man affect her in such a way? She didn't even know him yet here she was licking her lips over thinking out the cloth stretched tight over his thick chest—oh gosh! She pinched her eyes shut and started thinking of silly things while pulling the bed sheet up to her chin. *I'm such an idiot!*

When she woke up early that morning her father was just leaving to get another load of water. Leah noticed that he looked exhausted and she knew it was because he'd been trying to maintain the ranch with her and one ranch hand to help. It might have been all right if he didn't have to constantly haul the water and tend to the herd, but they'd lose them all if he didn't.

She wanted to tell him to take a day and rest, but that was not going to happen. There was no way that she could manage the place on her own. They couldn't risk it.

After her father left, she did some serious thinking. Seeing her father so tired trying to keep things together pulled at her heart. It was then she decided to go talk to the new neighbour and see if he would let them have access to one of his spring fed wells despite the gossip about him. Sometimes rumour was just that, rumour, and unless she did something for them soon, her father would be broke; physically and financially. He was all she had left and she couldn't let him go on at the pace he was doing.

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She was exhausted too, but she was also much younger than he was. What could their new neighbour do but say no? Either way it was worth a shot.

An hour later Leah was knocking on the door to his house. She'd only been on Lazy C land to retrieve her strays every now and then, so she'd never seen the house. If you could call it that. It was a mansion. Painted navy blue with white trim and many different dormers and peaks. She wasn't schooled on what type of style it was, but it was still beautiful. She was so involved in looking at it that when the door swung open she near screeched. If that didn't make her, the sight that met her did. She didn't know that they made men as big as the one that answered the door. He actually looked as if he was resisting a smile at her surprised. He was no man servant, that's for sure. Most likely Mr. Walsh made some people angry in his rise to wealth and this man was a bodyguard. He had no hair, but his eyes stood out as a vibrant blue.

"I—Is Mr. Walsh in?"

"Yes." He said letting his eyes move over her face without a trace of emotion.

"Can I see him?" she said getting more and more uncomfortable under the large man's scrutiny.

"Is he expecting you?"

"No." She answered truthfully, "I'm Leah Cooper, Mr. Walsh's neighbour—"

"The appaloosa." He finished looking a little more relaxed.

"Pardon?" she said tilting her head slightly.

"You ride the Appaloosa." He explained with a small glimmer of welcome.

"Yes, How'd you—"

"Come in." he said interrupting her again stepping aside at the same time giving her a slight smile.

Well he didn't look as menacing now when he smiled, she

thought while stepping in the house after giving him another wary glance.

“This way Miss Cooper.” He said turning and walking down a wide hall that he took up half of.

She followed him but couldn’t help but look around. The house had received a lot of work on the outside and it looked as if there was some renovation still occurring on the inside. If she were to hazard a guess, the house was over a hundred years old. There were numerous photographs on the walls, but she was too intimidated by the big man in front of her to stop and look. Although she really wanted to know that some of those were of Garrett Walsh and she would know what to expect when she met him for the first time.

The hulking man opened one of two dark stained double doors that led into another room and waved his arm for her to enter, “go ahead Miss. I’ll let Mr. Walsh know you’re here.”

“Thank you.” She said as she stepped past him. She might have glanced at him again if the richness of the room didn’t catch her attention.

She eyed her surroundings and the expensive décor with admiration. It was well done and definitely masculine in taste. As her attention drew over the priceless antiques and paintings it helped her to distract her from her purpose. She had to give him something, he had impeccable taste in style.

She had heard stories about Garrett Walsh. That he was ruthless in business and in his personal life as well. Apparently the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, she thought. His father was well known through the media with the same reputation. Yet, she never bought a tabloid magazine or never really read any of those money magazines beyond standing in a checkout counter to pay for groceries. She figured that Garrett was just a rich man dabbling in cattle ranching. Her father had a word for people like that—idiots. She smirked. Despite her internal

joking, she was really nervous. She couldn't dispel that he was worth a lot of money, he was smart, and they needed him. People like him usually weren't generous.

While Leah waited in Garrett's study, Sean made his way out back to the pool where his boss was sitting on a lounge chair reading the paper.

"Boss?"

Garrett looked up and raised his brows in question at his bodyguard and most trusted companion for the past five years. Sean used to work in special ops before he recruited him. He was more capable than five men so he paid him as much as that.

"You have a visitor."

"Male or female?" He said returning his attention to his paper seemingly bored.

Sean grinned, "All female for sure."

That got his attention. It wasn't the statement itself it was the way Sean said it. "Single or married."

"Single—no ring."

"How's she look?"

"As hot as this Arizona sun." He said letting his grin widen, "*Damn* hot."

"Well Sean, you should have said so." He said with a lazy smile as he set his paper down and stood up.

"It's the young gal on the appaloosa that you mentioned yesterday."

That made him pause, "You don't say?" Now he was interested. He was fully intent of keeping up his pursuit of her, but this made things easier. Her attitude may have been telling him no but from the way she was dressed the day before, and now she was here, he figured she changed her mind.

"She looks nervous."

"Is that right?" That confession made him rethink her visit. In view of Sean's observation and the fact that he would have

never pegged her to be brave enough to come see him, only meant one thing. She wanted something from him. Well he wasn't going to make it easy. A lot of people wanted things from him and he always made sure he got something back in return.

It was almost twenty minutes later when the door opened and a man stepped in the room, she felt her jaw drop as she came face to face with a familiar man. It was the cowboy she'd met the day before. Only this time he was wearing a white shirt and tan chinos. It was then a sinking feeling hit her gut. She hadn't been too nice to him and now she'd come to ask a favour. She wondered if he'd said anything to his boss about her behaviour.

She watched as he closed the door behind him and stood staring at her for a moment with an odd look in those sharp hazel eyes before he strode by her without a word and reached into a walnut box on the desk for a cigar. Lighting it he walked around to the front and leaned back against the polished wood taking a long draw off the cigar as if he had all the time in the world while his eyes slid over her with pure arrogance. A sense of dread filled her. At first she thought he was sent there in Garrett Walsh's place, but then it dawned on her after he removed the cigar that this was *his* study, his cigars and his house. She swallowed heavily as he crossed his legs at the ankles looking totally at ease and utterly appealing especially when he cocked a single brow in question.

Could this get possibly get any worse?

She wanted to run out of there right there and then. If this was Garrett Walsh, she was wasting her time. He had that hardened look about him that gave nothing away and it was the look of a man who wasn't prone to sympathy. He had about as much give as a cement wall that was six feet thick.

At least that odd feeling she got off him before made sense now. His overpowering charisma should have alerted her to the

fact that he probably never took orders from anyone in his life.

He didn't seem too concerned that she was even standing there but did everything on his own time, like retrieving and lighting his cigar before he leaned lazily against his desk then running his eyes lazily over her. She supposed he was used to that because he was so wealthy. People around him did things at his pace not theirs.

"I like what you were wearing yesterday better." He finally said lowering his eyes over her form again as if discussing something so intimate was common in conversation. It seemed to be his trademark opener around her, but who could blame him. Today she was wearing jeans that covered those exquisite legs of hers and a loose grey t-shirt. The jeans probably showed her ass nicely, which he was pretty sure she had if the rest of her body was a testament, but the t-shirt was way too loose for his liking.

Leah felt herself flush for the second time in front of him. It was the same thing he said to her yesterday and several days before that. "Mr. Walsh?" she said in hesitation trying to ignore that statement and his raking gaze, unable to shake that nervous feeling that developed the day before when she'd first met him. He was tall, but in her nervousness, she was sure he seemed ten feet tall. His unexpected height and air of arrogance just tripled her apprehension of asking him for help. She was silently hoping that this wasn't him, but someone sent to amuse her before the much older, retired wannabe rancher showed up. How wrong she was!

"No other." He said and nodded toward one of two comfortable burgundy velvet upholstered wingback chairs in front of him, "Sit down."

Nervous enough to have her knees feel weak she quickly did as he asked but just so she was seated on the edge of it. She folded her hands on her lap. Although she managed to force

herself to look at him, she was a wreck inside. This man was definitely not what she expected, he was very intimidating. Now that she was sitting, he seemed even taller. Oh dear, how was she going to go through with this?

“What is it you want? I’m a busy man.” He said settling his eyes on her again.

Those eyes, she thought, were just so intimidating in themselves, and then the deep timbre of his voice really made her nervous. She began to feel like this whole thing was a mistake. However, she’d come this far and couldn’t possibly back out now. “I—I understand that and I appreciate the time.” She said unable to keep the tremor out of her voice. She couldn’t believe the way she spoke to him that day when he returned her cattle. Now she had come to ask him for help. She’d be lucky that he didn’t toss her out on her ear.

He made a motion with his hand holding the cigar to get along with her explanation all the while his sharp eyes remained on her face.

He was obviously used to people answering him immediately. Leah took a deep breath and let it rush out before she lost her nerve, “My father’s wells have dried up. I understand that you have several underground springs that water your cattle sufficiently and—“

“No.” he interrupted starting to get up as if the whole thing was trivial and of no importance.

He was annoyed. He never kept it secret the interested looks he gave her, and now she was using it to get something from him. One thing people should know is that women did not manipulate him—ever.

“but you haven’t even given me a chance—“ she blurted coming to her feet.

“I already know what you’re going to say little girl and the answer is no. I don’t do anything for free and quite frankly I find

it demeaning that your father sends his daughter to beg.”

How horrible. She thought, “I wasn’t—“

“You were.” He said calmly while looking down at her.

“He doesn’t even know I’m here.” She stated in exasperation, “If you knew him, you’d know that he’d never even considered this!”

“Sure he doesn’t, “ he said casting her a look of doubt, “He probably thought with your looks I’d agree to anything. I’m insulted.”

How dare he! She wanted to throw something at him. Her father was too proud to ask for help and until yesterday she was too. This time the breath she took was to withhold her rage as lifted her chin to fight for courage, “Mr. Walsh I can see you don’t think much of us. Maybe it’s because we don’t come from the same cloth you do—“

“Cloth?” he actually smirked at her choice of words.

“Yes *cloth*—however, my father is an honest man. It’s a shame you don’t understand what that is or you wouldn’t automatically assume that someone would do such a thing. Unlike you I don’t assume the worst in people or prejudge them. Now, it’s obvious that you aren’t going to help us. So I bid you good day.”

Garrett looked down at her and something in him sparked. Her face was flushed with anger, and it made those gorgeous eyes of hers glitter. Then when she took that deep breath it stretched the material of her shirt across her nicely shaped chest. He thought she was pretty from seeing her scantily clad the day before yesterday, but in anger, she was stunning. *What a little spitfire*, he thought. She’d swung away from him then and started angrily marching toward the doors of his study. Then an idea came to him. “Miss Cooper.”

Leah was on her way out of the room when she heard her name and turned back to him. “What? More insults?” she added

in exasperation. She was no longer nervous, she was irate. In fact she'd never been so angry before in her life or so rude for that matter. The man had about as much compassion as a rock and obviously there was no dealing with him. She would have to find another way to help her father.

"You may have something after all." He said ignoring her retort.

She tipped her head looking puzzled, "What?"

He stood erect and walked toward her almost smiling as she took a step back while he reached around and opened the door for her. He knew he was intimidating and he knew his affect on people, especially women. "Tell your father I'll be by tomorrow and speak to him."

"What is it that you want?" she said suspiciously narrowing her gaze doing her damndest not to let the scent of his cologne affect her.

Gosh, he smelled nice.

"I can see from the few minutes of knowing you that you don't do anything for free, like you said."

It was like sandalwood and leather.

She couldn't help herself and took another deep breath through her nostrils trying to be inconspicuous. She loved that combination.

"I'll let you know in time." He said while staring down at her and nodded toward the open door, "Good day Leah."

She looked at him for a moment trying to read his expression to give her some indication of what he wanted, but as she would come to realize, the man was as readable as concrete. However, there was something in his tone that made her know that he would keep his commitment about tomorrow.

"All right then." She said sceptically and casting him another suspicious glance before leaving.

When she left, Garrett went to the phone and dialled a

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

familiar number, "Joe," he said when the man on the other end answered, "I want you to do something for me. There's a cattleman that has property bordering mine—"

"You want me to check him out?" Said the voice on the other end.

"—no—not him, the daughter."

"She that good looking?"

Garrett grinned to himself and didn't deny it, "Just find out everything you can about her." He hung up and walked to the window that overlooked the driveway to his house and was surprised to see the woman riding the appaloosa down the road. *Well, he thought, it was the best way to get around in this country.* He felt himself smile remembering how she looked in the cut-offs and tied off shirt with beads of perspiration running down her flawless tanned flesh between the mounds of her enticing breasts. There was no doubt that the woman's body was a perfect ten. Then there was her grit.

The combination was very—seductive. Indeed it was.

It was something he wasn't used to in a woman. Even the women he'd had in the past always did what he wanted because of what he could give them in return whether it be jewels, money, or even his talents as a lover. He placed his hands on his lean hips and watched her ride off until she was out of sight. It had been well over a month since he'd had a woman because he'd grown tired of that life and the type of women that came with it. Getting laid was easy for him, all he had to do was pick up the phone and have one flown in. He'd done that last month with one of Sweden's top models. He'd seen her in a magazine and decided he needed some companionship for a weekend. When he was done with her, he'd sent her off with a permanently etched smile on her face and a new diamond necklace which she had earned, but now he was feeling the same itch again, but not for a model. He wanted the auburn-haired wildcat. No one had

the guts to speak to him the way she did because he'd crushed people who had in the past, financially and professionally. Yet, he knew she was desperate and had nothing to lose.

He had to admit, that she was different than he was used to and it would be a challenge to get her into bed, but he was certain that once he got her there, it would be worth it. It was intriguing to know that she shared interests with him too, like cattle.

Garrett knew a lot about cattle. He wasn't just some rich guy who was playing in the industry because he had money to do it. His father was a cattleman before oil was struck on his ranch in Texas, so this business was not unfamiliar to him. He'd bought the ranch because it seemed that the only happy memories from his childhood were on one when his mother was still alive. Only he didn't want to live in Texas anymore because of the bad ones. His father was abusive and made no qualms about letting him know that he never wanted children, so Arizona was the next best thing, and he liked it here.

The house was getting fixed. The last owner let it get a little rundown and he enjoyed the townsfolk. The town wasn't too small, but not large enough to be labelled a city. A few people knew him, but he didn't get mobbed by the press here, so he liked it.

Although he grew up poor, he'd made his first million by the time he was twenty five and retired two years ago at thirty as a multimillionaire. His father never gave him a cent except to pay for his education. At least he could give the man that. There wasn't much in his childhood that left fond memories that were every lasting. When he died, he inherited his father's millions, but by then Garrett already had more money than he knew what to do with. Also he had half a dozen patens that gave him some healthy royalty checks every few months.

When he bought the ranch he kept the staff with a few additions. His security team. Even though he was retired, it

didn't mean that the people he'd pissed off or his father did were going to let bygones be bygones.

The staff had a precognition that he was some spoiled rich boy too, but when he out roped them the first day he got on a horse, he won their respect. He thought he'd spend a day getting to know them so he put on a calf roping event. He won. Then he treated them to expensive triple grade 'A' steaks and beer. That was six weeks ago. Now he worked alongside of them and they seemed to genuinely appreciate his knowledge. It wasn't just for their benefit.

He always liked a good steak.

As for this local cowgirl, it had been a long time since a woman had interested him like this and he'd had plenty of women. Somehow he'd grown immune to their sultry looks and female needs. She was different.

He'd never had one come begging to him for someone else before. Usually they were begging for the latest fashion, or some other commodity. They had very shallow and selfish personalities, and he used them like they used him. He sighed heavily, not once did he grow attached to any of them and if someone were to ask him about love, he wouldn't have had a clue. In fact, he honestly thought, there was no such thing. Yet, he knew this woman would be downright hot with passion if her temper was an indication. No one spoke to him like she did because they didn't have the nerve. He could break anyone financially if he wanted, even if he was retired. He still had money—lots of it, and money like his could practically get him anything he wanted. As for Leah Cooper, she was beautiful and had a great body as he found out from the other day, and she may have been little but she had a spitting temper for a woman twice her size and for the first time in a long time, he was intrigued by a woman. However, it was obvious that she didn't like him and she didn't seem like the type to fall for his bank account so it

would take some manipulation to have her in his bed and he knew just the thing.

CHAPTER TWO

Leah rode back to her father's meagre spread. It was only a thousand acres and by no means the fifteen that Garrett Walsh had, but it was handed down through generations and it would break her father's heart to lose it. The last two years were hard on them because of the drought and they had started losing cattle over the last few weeks. There used to be a creek that ran through the property but now it was dried up and her father and old Jonas, a cow hand that had been with the ranch for almost thirty-five years, had been hauling water for them. It was time consuming and it was difficult to get to all of the cattle spread over the land.

When she heard that Eli Mitchell sold his ranch and the new owner had already taken over, it was a long shot to go and ask him for help. Only she expected someone much older. Eli wasn't a nice man and would have laughed at her if she showed up asking what she did of Garrett Walsh today and she didn't know much about the new owner. No one did. So she took a gamble and when her father and Jonas went to town for fencing supplies, saddled her horse and decided that it wouldn't hurt to ask. Only she was met with the same man from several days ago that had occupied her mind since. The rumours in town said he was a self made man who was filthy rich and bought the ranch as a retirement hobby so she thought he was as old as Eli, but he wasn't old at all. He was actually not that much older than her. She guessed he was in his early to mid thirties which meant that if he retired a millionaire, he was smart. Very smart.

When she first met him, it was undeniable the intelligence in his light hazel gaze and she was instantly intimidated at the first

sight of him. Then to discover he was Garrett Walsh! Not only did she expect an older man, but definitely not one as young and nice looking. In fact, if he smiled, she was sure he would be jaw dropping. Only he didn't smile and stared at her as if he was bored and maybe a little put out that she went to see him. Also, Garrett was tall, much taller than she first thought, but he was in a saddle then and still he looked foreboding and unforgiving. Standing almost toe to toe with him was incredibly intimidating even though she tried not to let on.

Yet, he said he would help them, but what did he want? She was sure he wouldn't have changed his mind so quickly if it wasn't in his best interests to get something out of it. But what?

Their small farmhouse came into view and she nudged her gelding, Rocket, to a trot. For now she would put Garrett out of her mind and finish her chores before her father returned. Then she promised her friend Kimmy, that she would meet her in town for lunch.

Kimmy had short brown hair and brown eyes, but she was tall and slender and had no problem attracting men. She had just finished college and was looking for work as a secretary, but she hadn't had any luck so far because the program was very popular and most businesses weren't hiring.

Leah had first met Kimmy in kindergarten and they had been friends ever since and although she dated quite often Leah never had the time. In some ways Leah was jealous of her because she got to go to college, she dated, and she was very attractive, but just the same she loved her.

Two hours later she pulled the truck up to the local diner and saw her friend waiting outside talking to a uniformed policeman. She thought something might have happened, but when she saw her she smiled and waved causing the man to turn and look at her too. He was handsome and it was then Leah realized that Kimmy wasn't in trouble at all, he had just stopped

to talk to her because she was pretty.

Shaking her head with a smile she cut the engine and got out of the truck. She saw Kimmy hand the man a piece of paper with a charming smile that not many men could resist before he walked off smiling himself.

“You never cease to amaze me.” Leah said still grinning.

“What?” Kimmy said with feigned innocent, “He’s hot, and in a uniform to boot.” She made a purring sound causing Leah to laugh.

“He was pretty cute.” Leah agreed. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

Kimmy shook her head, “No, only a few minutes, besides I wouldn’t have met him if you’d showed up earlier,” she said jutting her thumb over her shoulder in the direction the man took moments ago.

“I suppose. Are you hungry?”

“Starved!”

They went into the diner and sat at one of the window booths. The waitress came over and took their order and brought them their drinks.

“How’s the job hunting going?” Leah asked sipping on her coke.

“It’s not.” Kimmy said with a sigh, “I don’t have experience, so no one will hire me, even if there was a job opening. I should have done the research before I went into the program.”

“Hey,” said Leah softly, “Things will turn around—you’ll see. You’re smart, funny—not to mention pretty!”

Kimmy laughed, “It’s too bad I can’t put that on my resume.”

Leah giggled, “True, and then there’s the fact that you standing outside for five minutes gets you a date from a man in uniform.”

“You’re a good friend Leah.” Kimmy said dropping her smile while staring at her, “You have your own hardships yet here you

are trying to cheer me up.”

Leah shrugged, “What are friends for?”

“How are things for you and your father?”

“Terrible, so no change.” She admitted doing her best to keep the sadness out of her voice.

“What are you going to do?”

Leah was embarrassed at what she'd done that morning, but she could see the worry on her friend's face so she told her leaving out how he looked and how nervous she was around him.

“He said he'd help?” Kimmy said with surprise, “Wow, and for nothing?”

Leah nodded, “Maybe I misjudged him.” Although she couldn't seem to shake that feeling that there was something more to this. He had told her that he didn't do anything for free and then he suddenly changed his mind even though they didn't have anything to give him. She started to wonder if maybe he needed her father's expertise because he was a fourth generation cattleman. That would be a perfect trade.

“Rich people aren't all jerks Leah.”

“So you know a lot of them?” she teased.

Kimmy smiled, “No, but they're still human with human qualities and—oh my gosh—” she stopped and stared out the window letting her jaw go slack, “What a dish!”

Leah turned to see no other than Garrett Walsh walking across the street toward the diner in a long legged confident stride. He was wearing a dark brown chambray shirt, jeans, and a cream Stetson. It was different watching him when he wasn't watching her and she could see exactly why Kimmy thought that.

He walked with an easy masculine grace that gave off the charisma of a man in charge. Even though he was wearing the typical clothing of a rancher, it left very little to the imagination of his shape under the cloth. His thighs were as muscular as his thick chest indicated by the way the fabric stretched over him.

She had that image flash in her mind of his powerful form on a horse and the way he seemed so natural in the saddle. Oddly she felt heat rise to her cheeks even thinking about it. Probably because she had admired him despite how he acted toward her.

As he crossed the street, Leah didn't realize she was holding her breath until she felt a little faint. As she began breathing again she realized that he was headed in their direction. *Just my luck*, she thought, *so much for not running into him often*. First the hardware store, now here. Of course it didn't help that she went and sought him out earlier today, but then again she didn't expect him to be *the* Garrett Walsh.

The bells above the door to the diner jingled as he came in. Leah was glad for the fact that she had her back to him but it didn't stop Kimmy from ogling the man.

"Oh Lord, if I die today, I would be a happy woman knowing that I have seen the perfect man." She murmured placing her elbows on the table and setting her chin on her folded hands to stare at him. "I bet he's large *all* over." She added in a breathless whisper roving her eyes slowly down his body.

"Kimmy stop it, he'll see you." She whispered. Kimmy may have said it, but Leah was the one with the heat rising to her cheeks.

This brought her eyes to Leah, "so? A man like that should be aware that a woman appreciates—Oh—he's coming this way." She said quickly but still not taking her eyes off of him. Instead a flirtatious smile spread across her face.

If I die today, thought Leah, *it wouldn't be too soon*. She knew darn well he was coming over to talk to her and after dealing with him the last few days she knew he had no problem telling it like it is. Not only that Kimmy was practically drooling and not the least bit abashed by it. There were times that she admired Kimmy's confidence around men, but this was definitely not one of those.

“Leah.”

She heard his deep voice before but was it supposed to vibrate through her whole body like that. Slowly, while ignoring Kimmy's shocked expression, she brought her eyes to his. “Mr. Walsh.” She greeted with a forced smile.

“No cattle to water?” he said quirking a brow and giving Kimmy the barest of interested looks despite her gawking at him with a look of awe on her face.

“Dad's—“ Kimmy had just kicked her under the table and she tried her best not to let it reach her expression which was near impossible because it hurt. She got her in the shin. “Dad's getting a load of water as we speak. This is my friend Kimmy Thompson.” She said introducing them knowing that's what Kimmy wanted even with the guilty look on her face after that shin kick. Despite that she kept prodding her foot against her leg under the table.

He nodded at the other woman saying a brief ‘hello’ before settling his eyes back on Leah, suddenly looking curious, “Your father hauls water quite a bit?”

“All day.”

He didn't realize it was that bad and he actually felt a twinge of guilt over it, something he hadn't felt for a long time. There were struggling ranchers everywhere, but it never occurred to him that her father did have it so hard. Obviously she didn't exaggerate, but even if he felt a little guilty, it certainly didn't change his mind on what he wanted. It didn't help that he couldn't get that exotic image of her half naked on a horse out of his brain. Even now, while staring down at her, it was all he could see.

“Would you like to join us for lunch Mr. Walsh?” Kimmy shot an excited look to Leah who managed to give her a disapproving one without Garrett noticing.

Leah could have crawled under the table at Kimmy's

invitation. Why did she have to ask him? She was already incredibly unsettled around this man. Yet, somehow she knew that he'd refuse because he was rich, handsome and there was no way that he'd be seen with them.

How *wrong* she was.

"I'd be happy to." He said with a grin that Leah noticed poor Kimmy was gaping over.

Then to Leah's complete mortification he slid beside her not Kimmy. Then he laid his arm across the booth behind her as the waitress came back and took his order.

For the rest of their lunch Leah hardly said a word. Kimmy however, took it upon herself to ask him numerous questions about himself. She couldn't have gotten any more obvious unless she was sitting on his lap. Where that twinge of ire came from, Leah didn't know. She didn't even like the man, so why would she care if her friend was falling all over him? She took a deep breath to try and wash it away and in the process got a good whiff of his cologne. God, he really did smell nice! Then there was the heat of his arm behind her shoulder blades, the deep baritone of his voice and every now and then his thigh actually touched hers. Everything else in the dinner seemed mute when she started becoming aware of his body next to hers, even Kimmy's voice was a distant blur.

She should have been glad that Kimmy was distracting him so he would leave her alone but for some reason it was bothering her. It's not like he needed any more ego to have a pretty young lady look at him all starry-eyed, because he had enough conceit to fill a room. Then an odd feeling came over her. When she realized what it was she lifted her eyes to his. He'd been watching her. She could feel the heat of eyes on the top of her head. Kimmy was still talking but his attention was on her. Every now and then he nodded cordially to Kimmy, but he still didn't look at her. How could her friend not notice that he was

hardly paying attention to her? Was she that star struck?

Fighting every new sensation that was vibrating through her at his obvious stare she mouthed the word 'what?'. All he did was smile and shake his head subtly, before turning back to Kimmy. It would have been fine if it wasn't the type of smile that said a lot more than it did. He let it slowly draw across his handsome face causing very attractive dimples to appear at each corner. Her eyes were drawn to his sensual wide mouth before they darted up to his pale eyes. The glitter within them let her know that he knew exactly what he was doing and exactly how she was affected by it. She managed to glare at him before he turned away. Why was he doing that to her? It was obvious that he had no use for people like her, yet here he was sitting with them and at first she thought it was because he was attracted to Kimmy, but he wasn't even paying attention to her.

Thankfully their meals came. She couldn't help but be surprised by the amount of food that Garrett had ordered. It was a tripled decked burger and fries and he'd managed to consume it all. *Well, I suppose his large build has something to do with his appetite*, she thought to herself. Somehow Kimmy still managed to chatter all through the meal just picking at the food on her plate. It was later that Leah realized that she was acting as though she wasn't a big eater to impress Garrett because she'd seen Kimmy put away a large steak when it was just the both of them.

She looked down at her almost empty plate of burger and fries. Even though it was a third of the size of Garrett's she still managed to pack it away. Boy she sure had a lot to learn about outward appearances and social conduct. It didn't even occur to her that she shouldn't have eaten it all. After a moment she inwardly shrugged, who was she trying to impress anyway? Certainly not Garrett Walsh.

After about an hour he finally stood and directed his

attention back to Leah, “I’ll be over tomorrow morning to talk to your father.”

Leah had completely forgotten about that. Maybe it had something to do with how nervous she had become just sitting next to him. “Thanks.”

He just nodded, “I’ll get the check too. Good day ladies.”

“Mr. Walsh, could you use a secretary?” Kimmy asked as he turned to leave.

Leah near fell out of the booth at her boldness.

Garrett’s eyes went to the dark haired woman, but not until he’d seen the look that Leah gave her and his intelligent mind started work. He’d yet to tell her what he wanted in exchange for helping out her father, but he knew it wouldn’t go well. She feigned dislike but he didn’t miss her reactions as he sat next to her. It didn’t help that he did his best to entice her and how easily she picked up on it. Now, if he introduced an antagonist into the mix, he might be able to get what he wanted sooner than later. “I suppose I could.” Out of the corner of his eye he could see Leah snap her head toward him. “Come out tomorrow afternoon and we’ll talk.” He looked back at Leah and smiled while tipping his hat, “Until tomorrow.” He said before he left unable to help the grin that spread across his face.

Kimmy waved at him through the window until she was sure he was far enough away then she fanned herself with it as if she was having a hot flash. Suddenly she grabbed Leah’s hand, “Why didn’t you tell me that was your neighbour—good God I’m in love already.” She said excitedly then paused seeing Leah’s pinched expression, “—unless of course you—“

“Don’t be ridiculous—he’s too darn conceited for me.” Leah interrupted waving a hand dismissively. She was still not happy about Kimmy taking a job with him. She just told herself that her friend was too good for him even if it was a lie.

“Of course he is—look at him!” she looked at him again, “My

God, what nice ass!”

Oh lord, thought Leah and unfortunately found herself looking too. Then she pinched her eyes shut and cursed inwardly. Kimmy wasn't wrong. Her friend's laughter made her open her eyes again.

“Even you noticed.”

Leah mentally shook her head trying to erase the image of that part of him in tight denim and changed the subject from the man's body. “Don't get your hopes up Kimmy, I just don't want to see you hurt.” That was the truth. She was sure Garrett left a trail of broken hearted women everywhere. It was easy to see because of his confidence around them.

“He's so darn masculine my heart was broken just sitting here.” Kimmy said breathlessly.

Leah certainly couldn't deny that.

“I bet he likes to take charge,”

She couldn't deny that either.

Then Kimmy lowered her voice, “I bet he likes to be on top.” She finished with a wink.

“Of for gosh sakes!” she said trying to keep her voice low. Kimmy couldn't help but laugh at Leah's discomfort.

“I'm sorry Leah, I couldn't resist.” She said stifling her chuckle and giving her an apologetic look.

“He's rich, handsome and confident Kimmy, be careful. I have a feeling there's many women that fall for that.”

“You're the best friend a girl could have.” She smiled genuinely, “But at least I may have a job, even if he's not interested in me like I am with him. A man like him makes me feel plain. I'm not sure I could handle a tall drink of solid sexy muscle like that.”

“That is good news—about the job.” Leah said forcing a smile. Of course she was happy for Kimmy, but why did it bother her if her gorgeous friend was going to be working for her

devastatingly handsome rich neighbour?

Early the next morning she was chopping wood when she heard a vehicle coming up the lane. Shading her eyes from the sun to get a better view near had her holding her breath at the familiar sight of the red pickup from the lazy C.

Just then her father came out of the house as the truck pulled up next to their battered ford. No other than Garrett Walsh got out of the driver's side as a man she didn't recognize got out of the passenger side. Within seconds they were shaking each other's hands.

She quickly embedded the axe in the chopping block and walked toward the two. Unfortunately she couldn't heard what was being said, but when her father took his hat off his head and seemed to wipe his brow in disbelief, she knew Garrett had offered to help. Even from the distance she was at, it was obvious that Garrett Walsh carried himself with masculine poise. When she met him the day before in his office, he was in casual wear and ranch clothes in the afternoon. Today he had on expensive blue jeans and a blue chambray shirt. Either way the man was dressed, didn't hide the thickness of his shoulders or the fact that he could look good in just about anything.

As she approached she heard her father asking how Garrett knew about his water problems. Leah nearly cringed waiting for Garrett's answer. She never told him anything because she didn't put any faith into what he promised her. He seemed to mean it when he said it, but she wasn't very nice to him yesterday and was worried that he changed his mind. Now that he was here she became worried. Would he tell her father that she begged? You could have cut the tension with a knife as suddenly his attention turned to her as she come up from behind her father. Thankfully he saw her worried expression.

"I was in town earlier this week, and someone had

mentioned that you ran into some hard luck. I suppose with that new golf course there's a lot of that going around." He answered while his eyes stayed on her. It was the truth because the owner of the hardware store did tell him about the golf course, but he never considered that there were so many ranchers with the problem. He made a mental not to look into it.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Oh," said her father noticing Leah from Garrett's gaze, "this is my daughter Leah." Then he introduced the other man that was with Garrett, who was a contractor from the city by the name of Devon Macgregor.

"We've met." He said not taking his eyes off of her.

Frank looked back and forth at the two with a curious expression.

"Um—yah," she said finally guiding her eyes to her father, "He brought back the strays a few days ago." She really didn't want her father to know what she'd done by asking him for help.

"I guess I need to thank you then—and apologize. Hopefully that will be the last issue we have."

"No need." He smiled, "Your daughter thanked me properly."

Leah's eyes shot wide. If he dared mentioned the way she was dressed he was going to lose his eyes because she was going to scratch them out. He grinned and she glared at him.

Frank saw the exchange and now he was more than curious. "Is that right?" This time when he looked at Garrett, his eyes absorbed a little more about him. It wasn't anything his daughter said, it was in the tone of Garrett's voice. Now Frank always knew Leah was beautiful because her mother was. However, there was a slight edge of interest from the newcomer made him pause. Garrett Walsh was a powerful and wealthy man, and for a naïve woman like Leah, she had no defences. However, he had to let her grow up and he knew she could take

care of herself.

“A contractor?” Leah said abruptly changing the subject after another warning look toward Garrett who as usual, was completely unmoved.

“It seems I have several spring fed wells on my property.” He cast a knowing glance at her before he continued, “Devon’s going to drill a well and pipe one of them to your father’s land.”

Her jaw dropped. That is something she didn’t expect when she went to ask him for help. What she did expect was his help in letting them access to one of his spring fed dugouts so they didn’t have to travel so far to the nearest river and fill their truck four or five times a day. It was an all day job, but with Garrett’s land and water so close, it would cut the job down to less than half a day. Now they wouldn’t have to haul water at all.

Then there was the man’s charm. Surprisingly enough her father seemed to be sucked in by it. She shouldn’t have doubted that he didn’t possess it because Kimmy was already nuts about him. She’d phoned her twice last night just to talk about their lunch date even though she present the whole time. It frustrated Leah. First of all she kept calling their chance meeting a ‘date’ which it wasn’t. Secondly, she was sure that he didn’t show Kimmy any interest. Is that why he was so darn arrogant? Did women flock around him like that all the time? She already knew the answer to that the moment she thought the question. Well, no wonder he thought he had the right to look her over like she was on the auction block.

“Mr. Walsh—“Frank began.

“Garrett,” he interrupted turning his attention back to the older man, “I’m not much for formalities.”

“Very well.” Frank said, “I can’t pay you for this.” He gestured with his hand, “I don’t have much as it is and I’m struggling to make ends meet.”

Garrett’s eyes flicked to Leah, “I’m sure we can work

something out.”

“I don't have anything Garrett.” Frank said not seeing the interested glance at his daughter because he was busy worrying his fingers through his grey hair.

“We'll work it out once you get back on your feet. If we ranchers don't look after one another, how will we survive?”

Frank looked sceptical. He wasn't a man to take something for nothing, but he was desperate. There was Leah to think about and the security of her future. He wanted to send her to college in the fall and that's what tipped the scale in his decision. Slowly and reluctantly he nodded.

“Mr. Cooper, I need to speak with you for a moment.” Said Devon after Garrett cast him a speaking glance, “We need to talk about what exactly I'm going to do here over the next few weeks. Is there a place we can talk?”

That left Garrett and Leah alone.

She lifted her head and met his eyes, “I need to thank you.” All the irritation was gone from her expression. She was embarrassed because now she thought she completely misjudged him. “I honestly didn't expect this. It's more than what I asked for.”

“No need.” He flicked his attention to the two men as Devon was talking to Frank seemingly in deep conversation. He didn't want the next bit to be overheard by Leah's father. “I have my reasons.”

“Which are?” Somehow Leah expected a catch, even though he was as charming as all get out the day before at lunch.

He brought his attention back to her. Even with her long hair pulled back into a ponytail, her worn jeans and t-shirt, there was no denying that the woman was beautiful. She just needed to be cleaned up a little. “Do you own a dress?”

“A what?” she gaped. What and odd question.

“A dress Leah,” he stared down at her. “I'm sure you've seen

them before.”

“Of course I have a dress.” She said in surprise, “Why?”

“I told you before that I don’t do something for nothing.”

“My father already told you that he doesn’t have anything.” She said with a puzzled expression.

If that wasn’t as clear as day, what he said next was, “Actually he does.”

“what?”

“*You.*”

She must be going deaf, because he possibly didn’t say that. Her mouth fell open and she could actually feel herself pale.

“I said, you.” He repeated seeing her astonishment.

“You’re not serious?” she whispered in wide-eyed shock while casting a glance past him to her father hoping their conversation wasn’t being heard. As it was, Garrett’s contractor had him completely occupied. What a surprise.

“I assure you that I always am.”

“Now it’s my turn to be insulted.”

“Insulted?” he stood straight almost letting his irritation reach his expression. How was that an insult? He never had a problem with a woman he wanted not want him. He also didn’t miss her subtle reactions to him or her small interested glances. Then again she wasn’t like any other woman he knew. He’d figured that out several days ago.

“My God, are you that arrogant?” she said feeling angry after the initial surprise of his confession.

“Possibly.” He said without hesitation, “Obviously you have a problem with this.”

“A problem? Of course I have a problem with this! You just said, that if my father wants access to your wells, I have to sleep with you!” she said in a harsh whisper seeing her father wasn’t that far away talking to Devon.

He gave her a devastating sinful grin. One she’d never seen

before from a man and it only made him completely and irrevocably gorgeous. That look alone probably would have any woman jumping in bed with him. "Actually sleeping has nothing to do with it."

"Oh God!" she flushed, "Just because you have a problem with women—"

"I have no problem in that field Leah," he said dropping his smile and appearing annoyed that she would even suggest such a thing. "I just know what I like when I see it."

He was right and he knew it. Leah thought that even if the man was faceless, his body would attract hoards of women. He *was* handsome though, even if she hated him at that moment there was no denying it. "It's just so simple for a man isn't it?" she said vehemently. "Men can hop into bed so easily with any woman."

"First of all despite what you think, I am picky. Secondly, woman can do that to honey, don't kid yourself."

"I don't!"

He stared at her for a moment and something odd passed over his expression before he spoke, but by then his expression was masked again. "I'll give you until tomorrow noon to think about it. However, the offer won't stay open forever and remember, your father's cattle won't survive without water either."

"You're a real jerk." She shot at him.

"I've been called worse." He said not even letting it bother him.

"Right now I don't like you at all, how the hell do you expect me to sleep with you?"

"Liking each other doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other."

"No one can be as cold blooded as you." She said

"Don't bet on it." He fished a cigarette out and lit it before speaking again, "You have until tomorrow. Then we'll discuss

the rules.”

“I’m not even going to dignify you.” She said harshly narrowing her angry eyes on him. “You’re lucky I left my axe by the chopping block.”

“Tomorrow. Noon.” He said as if she didn’t say anything at all, Then he watched her wave a hand furiously and stomp away without another word. He couldn’t help but grin at her receding backside. *Axe in a chopping block?* He chuckled to himself. She was brave.

She cast a scorching look over her shoulder before she disappeared around the side of the house.

Garrett let out a whistle. The woman definitely had passion in her. It had been a while since he enjoyed a night of hot sex. Women he usually slept with were eager to please, but they lacked that passion. Garrett had plenty of water on his property and it was nothing to him to give some to a neighbour, but when that fine young thing strutted in there he knew what he wanted. It suddenly occurred to him that she might be younger than he thought because she acted quite mature. Not many people would stand up to him but this little thing did and with such fire in her eyes.

He wasn’t as much of a bastard as people thought, but he kept the image and it worked for him. Being an only child and beaten to a pulp by his abusive father made him that way. He knew from an early age not to be vulnerable to anyone.

Leah spent the next hour burying her axe in wood with more force than needed cursing Garrett’s name each time she did so. She wouldn’t satisfy him! No way!

What kind of a person would ask for such a trade?

Apparently Garrett would probably because he knew there was no other way to get that out of her.

With a curse that was muffled by the sound of the axe burying itself in a chunk of wood, she vowed that he may have

demanded the use of her body, but he'd never have her heart.

Two days later Leah rode her appaloosa back to the Lazy C to see Garrett. He had told her noon yesterday for the deadline, but she wasn't going to satisfy him, not only that, this was her chastity she was giving up and it took a great deal of more thought. She weighed his words heavily over the last forty eight hours and barely slept a wink that night. There was no other solution and he knew it, so did she. She was almost twenty two and old enough to understand the repercussions of her decision and because of it, her father will have less strain and they'd be able to keep the ranch.

She knew women did this all the time, but not for her reasons and it was still a difficult thing to fathom. Her self respect was the hardest to set aside, but she would do it for her father.

The behemoth that answered the door several days ago answered it again and she still couldn't get past the size of the man. In fact she swore he'd grown.

"Ah, the young lady on the Appaloosa."

"I'm here to see Mr. Walsh." She said craning her neck up to look at him.

"Of course you are." He said with a sly grin while stepping aside and gesturing with his arm for her to enter.

She felt a little embarrassed wondering if Garrett told the mountain what his stipulations were from the grin he gave her. Thankfully he never said anything else and just led the way to Garrett's study again.

This time she actually stopped to look at the photographs in the hall and instantly recognized Garrett. Some of them were with famous people, one was with him in front of a jet with a pilots outfit on, another was him climbing a glacier, and lastly, skiing. Wasn't there anything this man couldn't do? It actually

surprised her that he had propositioned her, when it was obvious by his talents and money that he could have any woman.

While she was in the hall, Garrett was at his desk going over the file that his private investigator sent to him. There was nothing in it to indicate that Leah Cooper was someone to worry about. She was as free from sin as he could see. She had a straight A average in high school, graduated three years ago and a year early. Only twenty one? It surprised him for she talked and acted several years older than that. He stared at her birth date for a few minutes silently cursing. He was thirty two and twenty one seemed way too young for him. However, one thing caused him to push through that barrier.

He wanted her.

Maybe he could have walked away if he hadn't gone to see her the day before yesterday and met that passionate fire she possessed—maybe. Then there was the deadline that he set that she deliberately ignored. There wasn't one person he could think of that had done that to him in his life. At first he was angry, then he realized that it was that part of her that he found attractive. *Fine*, he thought, she could do her best, but he was experienced in that field and would still best her. If she expected to have upset him, he would act as if it was nothing. There was a knock on his door and he shut the folder putting in a drawer of his desk before he told whoever it was to enter.

Sean, his bodyguard stepped in and moved aside letting Leah appear.

“Come in.” he said politely.

Leah stepped in the room as the other man left shutting the doors behind him. She stared at the closed door feeling like she was just placed in a lion's den.

“So do I call you Mr. Walsh?” she said hating how she reacted around him. Already her heart was beating rapidly in her chest as he stood up and started to move toward her.

"I see that you've made your decision." He said in the same polite tone.

"You didn't leave me much of a choice." She said trying not to back up when he came so close that she got a scent of that cologne again. She thought he'd be a little put out by her defying his deadline but he never even mentioned it. Part of her was disappointed because she wanted him to be mad enough to not want anything to do with her. She was sure there weren't many people out there that ignored his requests—or demands.

"No, I suppose I didn't." he said with an arrogant tilt of his chin.

She just glared at him but he wasn't the least bit deterred.

"Garrett will do." He said in answer to her question as he pulled out his wallet and slid something out of it. Then he held it toward her. "Next week, I was thinking about a skiing trip with some friends in Colorado. You're going with me."

Ski trip? She looked down at his hand, "What is that?"

"A credit card." He said simply.

Then it dawned on her what he was doing. "I'm not taking your flipping money!" she said completely insulted.

"You are Leah. I already spoke to you about the rules. When I saw you ride up I alerted my construction company to begin putting in the watering system on your father's land. Did you want me to phone him and tell him how I'm not as generous as I come across and what it really cost?"

"I'm not a whore." She shot with her blue eyes flashing fire. Truthfully she was trying to cover up the tears that threatened to fall instead. It was hard to give in to his demands and set her moral upbringing aside even though she knew some of her friends wouldn't have a problem. Even Kimmy voiced her attraction to him.

"No, you aren't one and if it eases your conscience, I'll never think or call you that. Now take the damn card." He thrust it at

her.

She shook her head. *Ease my conscience?* She thought, *nothing could possibly do that.*

Garrett took a deep breath to contain his irritability. Any other woman would have snatched it out of his hand without hesitating. What the hell was wrong with her? “I insist. I will be seen in public with you and you dress like a pauper. If need be I will drag you into the city and the boutiques and dress you myself. No mistress of mine will dress like that.”

Mistress? She near choked hearing that word. “M—My father will find out.” She said fighting tears. “He’ll find out what I’ve done.”

“No, he’ll think we’re involved which we will be. I don’t talk about my personal life Leah and I certainly don’t kiss and tell.” Garrett didn’t feel guilty looking down at the woman even though he saw the moisture in her eyes. Women had ways of getting what they wanted through use of their attributes and Leah was no different. There’s no way a woman as gifted as she was didn’t do just that. It was just him she didn’t like, but what he had in mind didn’t mean they had to like each other. If they were compatible in bed, it would be worth it. Not only that, he wanted her and he always got what he wanted. This was no different than any relationship between two consenting adults and it just didn’t make sense why she would act so insulted. He did a tremendous thing for them and it wouldn’t cost her or her father anything at all. He felt he was being more than generous and in turn they would enjoy each other. He had several trips coming up and was thinking of taking her along. He usually didn’t go alone, but he grew bored after a few days with any of the other women he knew. However he already knew that Leah was far from boring. Not only that, she did have a selflessness about her that he found intriguing. That was something he wasn’t used to. It irritated him that she was so offended. He was maybe even

slightly shocked. When he wanted a woman, he got her, yet this little fire dragon with sparking sapphire eyes actually didn't want him?

“—But the clothes.”

“They'll stay here with me and in my penthouse in the city.” He said a maybe a little too abruptly with increasing annoyance at her resistance.

She was too upset to notice, “My father wants me to go to college in the fall. I'm not giving up my classes.”

“No need. Our trips to the city will be on the weekend.”

“I need to help my father on the weekends.” She said quickly.

“I'll send a man over to cover for you.”

Well he just had an answer for everything. “I can't possibly leave; my father will know what's going on!” she said in exasperation.

He stared at her a moment slightly taken back at what she was saying and that wasn't an easy feat, “I'm sure you've had boyfriends before.” He said softening his voice a little.

She never said anything.

“Leah?” All trace of his annoyance was gone. Now in curiosity his eyebrows lifted far enough to almost bury themselves in his ebony bangs.

she couldn't help the blush that started, “I haven't had time. The ranch needed me. My father needed me.” She explained.

“Ever?” he continued still in partial disbelief.

She shook her head. “Not the way *you* think.” She said a little more quietly.

“One night stands?”

She tilted her head angrily, “No. I'm not that kind of girl.”

It was the first time he allowed an inkling of expression to reach his handsome face, “Are you saying you're a—”

“God! Don't—” she interrupted.

“—Virgin?”

This time he just looked at her in incredulity, “I find it hard to believe. Look at you.” He waved a hand down her body

“What does that mean?”

“It means,” he continued with a partial smile of amusement, “That a woman who looks like you do, is no virgin.”

Just when she thought she couldn’t blush anymore, she did. “I am.”

He studied the pink tint of her cheeks knowing that she was telling the truth. He shrugged and regained his composure despite the excitement swirling inside him, “Well that remains to be seen.”

“So this isn’t going to change your mind?” she said incredulously.

“No.” *Definitely not*, he said without even considering that. “Are you saving yourself for marriage?”

Even though she disliked him more and more whenever he opened that conceited mouth of his, or looked at her with those intelligent eyes, she couldn’t lie, “No.” Although she had high morals on giving herself to a man, she honestly didn’t believe in the woman being a virgin bride when men had no inclination of doing the same thing. She was still a virgin because she never had a steady boyfriend and believed that if you honestly loved someone, married or not, that being with them in that way was acceptable, but she didn’t love Garrett, in fact she started hating him.

“Then there isn’t a problem.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “I can’t believe you’re asking this of me.”

“If you think about it Leah, it’s a small price to pay for your father’s welfare.” He added, “If it helps, I’ll tell your father that we’re dating.”

“As opposed to sleeping together?” she said glaring at him,

“Gee thanks.”

Again he shrugged, “In this day and age, it’s the same thing. That way he can relax about his little girl going off on some weekend getaway with a man.”

“Oh God—you really aren’t going to change your mind?”

“No. Now, do you ski?”

“Garrett, I’m not some backwoods hick,” she protested, “I ski, and I also can read and write.”

He couldn’t help himself and actually chuckled, “Point taken Leah, and I never thought that about you in the least. That was your perception. I was just assuming that with your family’s hardship that you didn’t have time for extra activities.”

She glanced away from him, “It wasn’t always like this. There was a time when the ranch made money.”

There was that twinge of guilt again. Garrett stood there looking down at her with one of his hands thrust in the pocket of his slacks and the other holding his credit card thinking his conscience was taking a beating over her. Then his eyes roved over her lovely face and then down to the vee of her t-shirt spotting the healthy mounds of her breasts. *I must be a bastard*, he thought because after that small glimpse, the guilt was gone, “Take the card Leah. You’re going to need a wardrobe for this weekend.” He had steeled his expression up again and shoved the card toward her.

Leah snapped her gaze back to his and narrowed her eyes angrily. Then she snatched the card out of his hand, “I really don’t like you.” She said turning around and storming out of the room.

Unfazed, his eyes dropped to the curved shape of her backside. If she knew how her tight little ass looked in blue jeans, she probably wouldn’t have done that as often as she did, he smirked. That was all fine for him. It just confirmed his previous ideas about her unequalled passion. Although he’d never been

with a virgin before, he had to admit, the concept was intriguing. That would mean whatever she learned, he would have taught her and that alone made him feel impatient. So much so that he turned and picked up the phone. Maybe a ski trip to Colorado would be a good way to introduce her to his world. If everything else failed, which he never had a problem with, he always had the money and means to impress. Although he never had a problem getting woman with his looks even when his attitude was biting, they put up with it. He knew how appealing he was to the opposite sex and didn't mind in the least that women were attracted to him over it. It gave him the pick of the cream of the crop. Leah may have been reluctant but he had confidence in his abilities as a lover. She would come to enjoy him as much as he did her; she only needed a bit of a nudge.

As Leah was riding down the road, a familiar brown civic caught her attention.

Kimmy.

She nudged her horse off the road and into a hay field hoping her friend didn't want to stop and chat. She was still upset and didn't want to talk to anyone. As luck would have it she only honked her horn as she zoomed by. Leah waved before she turned Rocket and nudged him to a gallop. It was then she remembered the way Kimmy was around Garrett that day at the diner and it bothered her. Suddenly several images of them being together flashed in her head and she gritted her teeth. Why was it bothering her so much? She didn't even like him. He was too damn arrogant for her tastes.

There was no doubt that Kimmy was beautiful and leggy. The type of woman that Garrett was probably used to and because of the way he handled himself it was obvious that he was no stranger to the opposite sex. She felt her anger rise. Of course he wasn't! He could have any woman he wanted and if he couldn't he'd find a way. He'd just manipulated her into his bed

with no thought to how cheap it made her feel. Maybe she should encourage Kimmy to go after him, then he would leave her alone. Why did that make her stomach clench? She didn't like him—didn't she?

That evening during supper she knew she had to tell her father that she was now seeing Garrett only she wasn't sure how he'd take it. It was a sudden step for her after just meeting the man a few days ago. As far as her father knew she'd just met him the day he returned the cattle, now she was going away on a skiing trip with him this coming weekend. It wasn't like she hadn't had boyfriends before, but she'd never gone away with them and she certainly never slept with them.

"Garrett called and said the crew would be here tomorrow for the well." Her father said drawing her out of her thoughts.

Of course he did. He said he would. Leah didn't know how else to tell him so she just said it. "Speaking of our neighbour, he wants to take me skiing this weekend."

Slowly, Frank sat straight and set his fork down while studying his daughter's expression, "Skiing?" It was no use in saying that he wasn't surprised because he was. It had nothing to do with his daughter, but it did with Garrett. Despite the obvious interest he showed her several days ago. Frank knew that he was a man who was into a different type of women, not women like his daughter. Leah was kind, sweet and completely naïve of men like Garrett, but he always promised himself that he wouldn't interfere in her choices no matter what. She was a grown woman and was intelligent. She never did anything without thinking heavily about it first.

"In Colorado." She said a little more quietly trying to maintain her father's probing gaze.

"I see." He said after a moment.

Leah just sat there and she could see the gears going in her father's head.

“I’m twenty one.” She added.

“That’s not the problem Leah, I know you’re a mature woman even if you’re still young in my eyes.”

“So do you have a problem with this?” she asked worried to death that he’d probe about her sex life. She never discussed anything remotely along those lines with him because she was never comfortable talking about such things with her father.

“That depends.” He said

“—On?” she said feeling her heart rate pick up.

“Garrett seems like a man who knows himself well—“ he gave her a pointed stare, “—and women for that matter. A man who looks the way he does is certainly not accustomed to a small town girl like you. I don’t want you hurt.”

She felt a wave of relief wash through her. He was trying to talk about it without really saying it. “It won’t happen.” She meant it. She would have to care about him to have him hurt her. He may have her body but he’d never have her heart.

“You seem sure.”

“He’s not what the media says he is.” She said wondering if she was lying. So far he seemed like a selfish man who was out for himself, but she didn’t know him that well to judge him quite yet. Part of her wanted to call it a slam dunk after what he was forcing her to do, but then there was the side of her that reacted to him and she wondered if there was more beneath the surface than he let show. There was no way she would be attracted to a heartless man, she was sure of it. “He said he’d send a man over to help while we’re gone.” She added, “And dad, it’s hard to get to know someone if we’re both working like crazy. We thought if we spent the weekend together we can get to know each other.”

“So there’s an attraction on both sides?” he said sceptically. Something didn’t add up here and although his daughter didn’t let on, he felt it. First of all, she wasn’t someone who’d fall for a man with money because she was genuine through to the bone.

She'd have to honestly find his intelligence and wit attractive and well, Garrett was intelligent, and charming no doubt, but Frank didn't miss the hardness in his expression either. He knew Leah was meant for true love and the man she finally married would have to sweep her off her feet in a whirlwind of passion—just like he did her mother, God rest her sweet soul. For some reason Garrett didn't seem to fit the bill, but he had to trust his daughter's judgement. If she liked him, he would support her. After all, she needed some happiness in her life.

Of course there was attraction on both sides, just not what her father thought, "Yes." She didn't lie. There was something but she was terrified of exploring it. She wouldn't feel the way she did about Kimmy around him if she didn't feel some attraction toward him, but he just seemed so callous.

Finally her father nodded, but he still kept his eyes on her, "All right baby, if you want to do this, I won't stand in your way." He leaned forward and put his forearms on the table, "but if he hurts you I'll shoot the son of a bitch, water well or not." He knew Leah wasn't stupid. Far from it, but it wasn't like her to fall for someone because he was handsome and rich. It also didn't go unnoticed that he was as charming as hell and women loved that type of man, but his Leah was different. She was super smart, something he always thanked her mother for, and it wouldn't have mattered if the man was prosperous or poor, she'd love him because of who he was on the inside. *Garrett must be a hell of a nice man*, he thought to himself *even if he seemed a little guarded*.

Leah couldn't help but smile, "I love you dad."

The next day Leah was still seething from the man's absolute arrogance, but like before she knew it was well founded. He was probably the most perfect looking man she'd ever met. too bad his personality was aversive. She was angry that she didn't tell

her father the whole truth either, but more at herself than Garrett. He never told her to lie.

She was just finishing up the breakfast dishes when noises made her go to the window to see several flat bed trailers delivering construction equipment and she sighed heavily looking at the expensive equipment, then to her father who was talking to Garrett's construction manager Devon.

After she was done cleaning up, she decided to go ride the fence line again to make sure that there were no further breaks in the wire. Just as she stepped out of the house she stopped. There was Garrett just getting out of one of his ranch trucks. She was so preoccupied by thoughts of him that she actually never even heard the big diesel dually pull up.

"What are you doing here?" she said glancing around, hoping her father didn't see him.

"I passed him on the way." He said as if reading her thoughts, "he was going to town. He pulled over, so I circled back. He wanted to talk to me."

"My father?"

"Yes."

She rubbed her forehead with her hand worrying about the conversation, "Did he say anything?"

"Actually he did." He gave her an amused smirk.

"Oh no, what did he say?"

"He said—" he actually smiled, "—that he would cut my balls off if I hurt you."

She placed her hands on her hips, "Oh tell me you're lying." She said in disbelief, "He wouldn't."

"No," He chuckled. "He really did. I just reassured him that I was crazy about you and he seemed to be satisfied."

"I'm beginning to think that you *are* clinically insane."

"I didn't get as successful as I am by not taking risks." He said with a sloppy grin.

"I suppose not." She agreed as he stepped up onto the porch where she was but stopped a step below her. It still made him taller than her but he did it purposely to affect her and oh boy, it worked. She felt the drumming of her heart and her breath became shallower.

"Yet, I might be." He said huskily locking his eyes with hers, "But maybe you have something to do with that."

"What do you want?" She said breathlessly not wanting to know what he meant by that because for some reason she knew the discussion would turn sexual and this was all too new to her. Yet she was a fool enough to ask the question.

She was no longer able to meet his gaze so she dropped it to the open neck of his shirt. She could see the dark hair curling up in that area. It was obvious that he was well built but knowing his had a spray of dark hair over his chest seemed to just add to his masculinity.

He reached up to cup her chin and guide her eyes back to his, "I was going to see if you wanted to go for lunch. That way I can have you to myself without your friend talking my ears off."

"Did you hire her?" she said with a mixture of relief for Kimmy and wariness over her friend's reaction to Garrett.

"I did." His gaze narrowed slightly as she searched her eyes for any indication that she might be jealous, "Why?"

"No reason. It's nice of you she needs the job."

"Is that right?" he said allowing a smile to tug at the corner of his mouth. She averted her gaze only slightly, but it was the indicator he was looking for. "You seem less enthused about it. She said you were her best friend."

"I am." She said, "let me go." She remembered that he had a hold of her chin.

"You forget, Leah—" he said bending down toward her locking his eyes on hers, "I own you until I tire of you."

"I can't forget," she murmured as his mouth brushed across

hers ever so softly, “You won’t let me.” She actually stifled a gasp at the heat forming between them over that simple gesture. If she thought she imagined it, when he pressed his sensual mouth against hers, it was immediately confirmed.

“Right.” He said nibbling on her bottom lip.

“Stop it.” She breathed sounding completely unconvincing.

“No.” he said smiling against her mouth as he continued to toy with her lips. She hadn’t even noticed that his arm slipped around her waist to pull her against him.

Was a man’s mouth supposed to be so provocative? She’d been kissed before but sure as hell not like this. He knew exactly what he was doing with that perfectly sensual mouth of his and she really didn’t mind because of the feelings ebbing deep within her. Whatever protest she had died when they touched hers and cancelled out any apprehension she had. Before she realized it his hand was up her shirt caressing her breast. Her head fell back in an audible gasp as his mouth trailed heated kisses down her arched neck.

“Garrett.” She choked out.

“hmm-hmm.” He said bringing his head back up and suckling the lobe of her ear.

The stubble from his jaw felt oddly exotic against her soft skin. “Oh God!” she groaned, then suddenly remembered where they were, “Please, not here.”

He straightened and took a quick glance around. She was right, but somehow he’d gotten a little carried away. Seeing that no one was around, he directed his eyes back down to the sexy woman in his arms. She felt better than he thought she would. She was velvety soft and tasted like warm honey. He could have easily gone further with her, but she was right, this was entirely inappropriate. No matter how addictive she was, he wasn’t about to disrespect her. One thing was certain, if she was a virgin and responded to him like that with just a simple kiss, this weekend

was a long way off and judging by the erection he had, it was going to be a painfully long wait. Not able to help himself his hand still cupped her breast and he played with the nipple between his thumb and forefinger causing her to fall her forehead against his chest with a moan.

He was right about her breasts. They were firm and fit his hand perfectly. He bent his head so his mouth was close to her ear. "Tell me you don't feel that."

She knew exactly what he was talking about. It was the heat between them and it was scorching. She had to admit that he was good at recognizing something that she wasn't even aware of. She didn't answer him, she couldn't. He was still playing with her breast and the sensation was *incredible*. Maybe if she could concentrate on anything else besides that she would see that her hands were twisted in the cloth of his shirt as she struggled to get closer to him. She turned her face up under his chin and found herself nuzzling against him.

"Baby, you have to stop or I'm going to drag you into the house, your father be damned." He said hoarsely removing his hand.

"Oh no." she said pulling away from him and shooting him a shocked look, "I didn't realize I was—"

"Yeah well, that makes two of us." He interrupted giving her a sinful grin.

If she thought his caresses warmed her up, that grin made her toes tingle. She knew then and there that she was attracted to him even more than she thought and if she went away with him this weekend she wouldn't be able to resist him at all especially after that display. He'd set her on fire with what little he'd just done to her. No man had been able to touch her that way before in all her life. She couldn't possibly imagine what would happen if she'd let him near all of her. She'd probably go up in smoke.

Garrett looked down into large sapphire eyes darkened with passion and wonder. “About lunch?”

Oh yes, she’d forgotten. “I was actually going to ride the fence line to see if there were any more breaks.” She managed shakily.

He near laughed out loud at how quickly he was able to tame the tigress, but he didn’t, because she wasn’t the only one. Now he was as hard as granite and sitting in his truck to drive back home would be a feat in itself. “All right then, maybe tomorrow.”

She tilted her head at him, “For lunch?”

“Yes, but we’ll have it at my place.”

She started shaking her head causing him to chuckle because he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“I promise, I’ll behave, but I have perhaps the best cook in the state and honestly, I thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better.”

“Do you really mean that?” That was surprising because she really thought that he just wanted her body.

“I do.”

“You know, this doesn’t change anything I still don’t like you.” She tried to sound convincing but was failing miserably. He gave her another one of those sexy smiles that she felt through to the bone.

“If I promise you something, would you believe me?”

She studied his expression for a moment before she nodded.

“I promise that I won’t do anything to you that you don’t want, deal or not.”

“I don’t want to go skiing with you.” She said

“That doesn’t count—you know what I’m talking about.” He said with a tilt of his head so he could look down on her in an authoritative manner.

After a moment she sighed and waved a hand, “fine.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Actually I think I do.” She did because he could easily make that promise and still manage to do anything to her that he wanted from the way she reacted moments ago. He could have easily dragged her to her room and she probably wouldn't have even made squeak of a protest. As he stood there looking down at her she really knew that to be true. He was so sexually potent that it was like some wicked aphrodisiac.

The phone rang in the house at that moment and it seemed to snap her out of the moment. “I should get that.”

He tipped his hat, “I'll see you tomorrow at lunch, come to the ranch around noon.”

“All right.” She said turning away.

“I would ask if you could possibly wear what you did the first day we met, but somehow I think I was in the right place at the wrong time.”

She stopped in the middle of opening the screen door and turned her head to look over her shoulder at him, “Dream on.” She said before she went in the house.

Garrett smiled to himself as he headed back toward the truck. He knew after that passionate moment that he wasn't wrong about her at all. He did make a promise to her but he also knew damn well that she had no resistance against his experience and he would use everything possible to convince her.

Leah could hear Garrett drive away as she answered the phone. Just her luck, it was Kimmy.

“Oh God, I'm the luckiest woman alive!” Kimmy said

“You got the job.” She said trying to sound surprised.

“I did!” then there was a pause, “How did you know?”

“Oh—er—Garrett was just here to see how the well was being done,” she lied feeling incredibly guilty. Kimmy sounded so excited and if Leah said anything about her and Garrett she would most definitely be upset with her after all she did tell her that she wasn't interested in him.

“Oh is that where he went. I was just taking a bit of a break to call you and tell you how excited I am. Oh, and Leah, I think he likes me too.”

“What about that policeman you ran into?” she hedged trying to ignore the sickening feeling in her gut at those words.

“Who?”

“The one that practically asked you to bear his children outside of the diner yesterday.”

Kimmy laughed, “That’s right, he was really cute too, but no Garrett Walsh.”

“Kimmy, Garrett probably has a girl in every city in the state.” *Including me*, she thought to herself. It was no wonder why, if he could kiss a woman the way he just did her. She was still rattled by it.

“I’m sure he does, he’s a tall drink of sex—“

You have no idea, Leah thought.

“—and I’m sure he knows how to make a woman moan.” Kimmy finished with a chuckle.

That too. Leah felt dread heavily in the pit of her gut. If Kimmy liked him, how could she possibly tell her the truth?

“Leah?”

“Oh sorry, I was thinking of something.”

“Anyway, I thought I’d at least wait a couple of weeks until he was comfortable around me before I’ll make myself known.”

It was then she remembered that Garrett had invited her to lunch. Most likely Kimmy would be there tomorrow and see her. How was she going to tell her that he invited her? She couldn’t. Maybe she’ll luck out and Kimmy would go to town for lunch. The last person she wanted to hurt was her best friend.

After she said goodbye she covered her face with her hands and took a deep breath. This wasn’t going to go well at all.

Unfortunately as the day wore on, so did her worry. She spent the afternoon like she said she would and rode Rocket

around to check the fence. It was something she liked to do because it helped her think things through. Maybe if she told Garrett what was going on he'd reconsider. Well, that idea lasted a whole thirty seconds just knowing what little she did about him was enough to know that wasn't an option. When he wanted something, he got it, and as he told her, and he wanted her, not Kimmy or he'd have Kimmy. Then something else occurred to her, what if he wanted both of them. Really how much did she know about him? Maybe he had more than one woman on the side. She never even considered that. Well, that just won't do! She didn't care how much he did for her father, she couldn't possible deal with a polygamous relationship. It was repulsive. It was funny how angry she got at that thought. She would ask him about it first thing when she saw him tomorrow.

Oddly enough that new realization pushed her concern about Kimmy out of her head. *One thing at a time*, she told herself.

As it was Kimmy was the first person she saw when she rode her horse up to the house the next day. She just happened to be coming out of the house when she spotted her and waved.

"Did you come to see how I was doing?" she said with a smile.

Leah felt like a heel, "Actually—"

"Miss Cooper,"

Leah looked up to see the muscled mountain exit the house, "Mr. Walsh said to send you over to the corral when you arrived." He pointed in the direction.

"Thanks." She said glancing at Kimmy as the man went back in the house wishing there was a hole nearby that she could crawl into.

"You're here to see Garrett?" Kimmy narrowed her gaze slightly in suspicion.

“Yes, he asked me to come for lunch.” She admitted watching her friend’s expression carefully.

“He asked you?” she said in disbelief, “Why?”

Leah shrugged.

“I thought you said you weren’t interested in him.”

“I’m not.” She replied hoping she wasn’t lying.

“Then why are you here.” Kimmy crossed her arms under her breasts and eyed her suspiciously.

“Kimmy, he’s putting in a well for my father. If he asks me to lunch do I tell him to get lost?” she said exasperated.

Kimmy actually blushed and her arms fell, “Oh gosh, Leah I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. How selfish could I possibly be?”

Leah was thinking the same thing about herself, “It’s all right. I’ll talk to you later, I’d better go find him.”

“Can you give him this?” she said handing her a piece of paper, “some woman of his called and wants him to call her back.”

“Okay,” she said taking the paper and trying to crush the urge to toss it in the dirt and stomp on it on her way to the corral. It was a good ten minutes walking through the throng of fences until she saw a lot of dust rising from one. At least she was able to calm her temper somewhat when she reached it. Then all she could do was stare.

There were a half a dozen men and they were calf roping by the looks of the one just releasing a tied steer. Stepping up on the gate next to another man she couldn’t help but smile. She loved these events and to see that he kept his men in shape plus giving them time to show their skills just showed her how much integrity he had. She just happened to arrive just as gate snapped open with a metallic clamour to release the calf and it was Garrett swinging the lasso above his head as his horse lunged forward and in less than five seconds he was on the ground tying the calf. The men whooped and hollered at him.

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

It was a thing of beauty seeing Garrett on top of a thousand pounds of magnificent muscled horseflesh moving as if he was a part of the animal. He snapped the lariat forward with accomplished expertise in perfect timing with the movement of the calf's head. His horse halted as Garrett dismounted, tossed the calf and tied it. If she didn't know who he was, he would look like an experienced cowboy and nothing else. That image made him very attractive to her. Just an ordinary man with exceptional skills not a rich man who just bought her for a water well.

Leah licked her lips thinking that was unbelievably amazing in every way. Of course she'd seen plenty of calf roping, but to see that large man move with such masculine agility and grace near made her jaw drop. She would have never guessed that he was capable of such a thing. The more she got to know him, the more fascinated she became.

Then he bent and freed the calf, gathered his lariat and patted his horse on the neck for his good work. Then he spotted her and grinned.

Leah watched as he walked over to the corral fence. Kimmy was right, he was a tall drink of sex, especially after what she'd just seen. His jeans and chaps were dusty as was his worn Stetson, but he looked like a cowboy, and it was very sinfully appealing.

"I see you got my message." He said while easily climbing the gate and landing heavily beside her causing dust to billow around his scuffed boots.

"Yes," she remembered what Kimmy gave her and handed him the piece of paper, "Kimmy said one of your women called."

"Is that right?" He grinned down at her taking the paper and reading it for a moment.

"Garrett about that—your women I mean—" she cleared her throat unable to continue.

Even though he was reading the message he was still listening to her and when she stopped talking he raised his eyes to hers, "Go on."

It took her a moment to answer him because those hazel eyes of his were hypnotic. Unable to figure out how to approach the subject she just gave up and blurted out the question. "How many girlfriends do you have?" To her surprise he looked puzzled by her question and then he threw back his head and laughed. If she wasn't so darn uptight she might have thought he looked more handsome with that. Instead she started feeling downright stupid for asking. "Garrett?" she repeated wanting out of this situation more and more.

Finally able to bring his laughter to a chuckle he took her arm and started leading her back toward the house out of earshot of his men. "You actually think I have the sex drive like a well built machine?" He mused looking down at her, "So I can handle a multitude of women at once."

"You're joking about something that I don't find funny." She said tersely, "I may be naïve, but I'm old fashioned in that sense."

He stopped and pulled on her arm to get her to face him, "Leah, I wouldn't disrespect you like that. Nor another woman." He finally answered. "Even if my life wasn't followed so closely by the tabloids to get away with such a thing, it's not in my nature to overlap girlfriends."

The wave of relief that went through her was disturbing, but she couldn't deny that it took a load off her shoulders. Her eyes guided down to the paper in his hand thinking the way he looked, she was sure women would be calling him a lot.

"This," he said holding up the paper seeing that she was fixated on it, "Is the wife of a close friend. We're going skiing with them this weekend, if my friend Conner can get out of work for a few days."

If she didn't feel stupid before she did now, "I think maybe we should figure out some rules."

"Rules?" He quirked a brow.

"Yes, what do you really expect from me?"

"I thought I made myself clear yesterday." He said allowing his voice to deepen.

"Oh gosh!" she blushed remembering the incident on her porch, "I meant with your friends, what do we tell people, you know, that stuff?"

"We tell people we're dating, it's the truth, and my friends won't think any different of you if that's your worry."

Part of it was. He just mentioned that the couple they're meeting up with was married, and she and Garrett weren't, but obviously they were going to share a room so how would that look? "I'm worried about that."

"Don't be." He said taking her hand this time to lead her back toward the house, "My circle of friends are all respectful of me."

What about me? She wanted to say. Normally she wouldn't let things bother her, but she couldn't help it. She'd never been with a man, so she was very insecure about it. Was this a normal concern for woman who he slept with? Probably not, because he was used to being with sophisticated women, not a cattle girl from a small town. Maybe she had some growing up to do because Kimmy wouldn't think twice about going off on a weekend with Garrett.

Once inside the house, he stripped off his chaps and the behemoth showed up to take his hat. "I should introduce you to Sean properly." He said nodding toward the other man, "He's the head of my security team."

"Security team?"

"Yes, so if you notice him around you from time to time, don't get alarmed."

“Why would he be around me?”

“To protect you.”

“Protect me? What on earth for?”

He gave her a look that said it should have been obvious but she still looked puzzled. He sighed in frustration before he explained. “Leah, I’m worth a lot of money, and chances are when I’m seen with you, you’ll get hounded by the press. Also, I may have pissed a few people off in the process of making myself rich and my father certainly did, so Sean and his team’s protection will extend to you while we’re together.”

“Oh.” Now it made sense, but she still didn’t like the thought of this man or any other hanging around her. Leah liked to be independent and do things by herself, like riding. “I don’t think I like that idea.”

“Tough.” He said looking down at her as Sean excused himself. “It’s one of the perks.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

He bent toward her, “Get used to it honey, I don’t want any harm to come to you and feel responsible for it.”

“Thanks for taking over my life.” She shot back.

“Anytime.” He said with a smile, “Come on, Ellie’s waiting.”

Ellie happened to be a joyful woman in what looked like her mid fifties with a thick Scottish accent, but that wasn’t what caught her attention; it was the buffet the woman laid out. Garrett was right, the woman could cook and Leah found herself eating until she was so full it hurt.

“What did I tell you?” he smiled watching her lick her fingers. Surprisingly it was very erotic to him.

“Where did you find her?” Leah said spanning her hand over her full belly.

He chuckled, “She used to work for my father.”

“She’s amazing.”

"I think so." He paused looking at her. Then he held out his hand, "come here."

Leah stopped what she was doing and looked at him. Then she slowly shook her head, "You promised." She was still reeling from the day before and every time she thought of it, waves of desire rippled through her. It seemed that they had increased since yesterday because she kept reflecting back on it.

"Yes, and I meant it." He made a motion with his fingers, "Now come here."

"Garrett, there's people around."

"Kimmy doesn't come in here, and Ellie won't either."

"So I'm thinking that you just expect every woman to jump when you say jump."

"Getting me irritable doesn't do much for my mood." He dropped his hand.

"I see, does that mean you bring a lot of women home for lunch then fornicate in the dining room with them."

Fornicate? He howled with laughter, "No. They just know not to disturb me when I'm eating. It's one of the very few times I don't like to be disturbed." He hadn't laughed so much in a short time before in his life. More and more, she was surprising him.

"Oh." She felt stupid.

"Leah, you come here or I'm coming over there." He said authoritatively.

She recognized that tone. He'd used it on her several times and it was one that she knew that told her he was getting his way no matter what. As it was, she wasn't willing to fight him today. "Fine." She tossed her napkin on her plate and stood up. She didn't know what he wanted or what to expect, but when she got close enough, he pulled her onto his lap causing her to gasp.

"Settle down. I'm not going to ravish you in here." He reassured feeling how stiff she was. "I just wanted to feel you for a moment." He said looking at her while running his hand up her

back and wrapping his other over her thighs.

“I’m really not comfortable with this.”

“I can tell. You’re stiff as a bloody board. Now relax.” He said with amusement.

“It’s not easy.” She breathed finally looking at him.

He smiled at her, “Tell me you’re not attracted to me Leah and I’ll let you get up.”

“I’m not.” She said too quickly causing him to chuckle.

“No?” he said thickly letting his arm leave her lap and cup one of her breasts causing her to tilt her head back. He grinned arrogantly pulling her now relaxed body against his chest, “I must admit that I love the way you react to me.”

“You promised.” She murmured not feeling any will of her own to resist his hold on her.

“Yes I did.” He said running his mouth along her cheek to her mouth.

Just as she turned her face to his so he could kiss her, he pulled back, “So I better stick to my promise, hadn’t I little one?” he said with a wry smile.

Her eyes narrowed and she got off his lap, “You did that purposely!”

“I did.” He grinned arrogantly, “You need to see that this attraction between us is mutual. I would never force a woman to my bed.”

“You are though! Garrett, I wouldn’t be doing this if you didn’t dig that well for my father.”

“You’re wrong.” He said standing up to look down at her, “I would have you anyway. When I spotted you that first day half naked on your horse, I knew what I wanted and I’m relentless in getting what I want. Sooner or later you would end up in my bed. This way you get something out of me.”

“You’re so darn conceited!”

“Yes I am because I know what we could have together

Leah.” He reached out and cupped her chin so he could lock his gaze with hers, “we could set the bed on fire and you know it. You’re just afraid because you haven’t been with a man before and the feelings I arouse in you are new.”

“I’m sure it’s like that with anyone.” She seethed.

Garrett narrowed his gaze, “No it isn’t.”

“Like you said Garrett, I’m new at this, so maybe if I have experiences like this with other men—“ That’s all she got out before he crushed his mouth down on hers. If she thought that kiss yesterday made her toes tingle, this one literally blew her mind especially when he thrust his tongue hungrily past her parted lips, gripped her braid and tilted her head back so he could take her mouth fully.

It only took about five seconds for Leah to respond to him and did she ever. Her hands reached around his neck as he moved his mouth over hers. Garrett reached behind her and pushed his plate out of the way before he cupped her bottom, and lifted her onto the table bringing himself between her thighs. How easily he could lay her out and have his way with her! It excited him to have her respond so passionately to him, but regardless he did make her a promise. She released a feminine moan against his mouth and he nearly broke that promise. Instead he lifted his head and gazed down at her. Her sapphire eyes were almost blue violet with desire and her seductive bow mouth was slightly swollen from his kisses. “I made you a promise.” He said hearing his voice crack with desire, “I’ve got to stop or I’ll be breaking that.”

It took Leah a minute to realize that he was talking. Instantly she felt herself blush at their position and the fact that he just proved his point with her. She placed her hands on his chest and pushed at him, “You did.” She said her voice sounding oddly distant, “so back off.”

He chuckled and took a step back, “Just because I’m

behaving now doesn't mean I will this weekend Leah. I'm looking forward to corrupting every inch of you."

Now her blush turned scarlet she was sure. It wasn't because of the conversation itself, it was because part of her wanted to be corrupted. "I'm going home." She said hopping off the table not meeting his gaze or he'd see that in her eyes. Gosh, she didn't even know how she got up there.

"Stay." He heard himself say.

Her eyes darted to his in question.

"Does that gelding of yours cut cattle?"

"Of course he does." She answered as if it was an insane question while wondering why he was asking.

He grinned, "Why don't you come and give us a hand?"

She was taken back. He was asking her to stay not to play with her, but to hang out together?

"Unless your father needs you?" he added seeing her hesitation.

"No, with the well you drilled, he can manage a few hours without me." She said without thinking. Did she want to stay? Actually she did. Maybe he was right and they should get to know each other. After all, this weekend wasn't that far off and maybe if he found that they weren't compatible, he would release her of this agreement. Surprisingly part of her was actually disappointed at that thought.

"What do you say?"

"Did anyone ever tell you that you could sooth a typhoon?" She said referring to her temper a moment ago.

"Actually, yes." He chuckled and held out his hand, "Like I said, we'll take some time to get and know one another." Even though he'd held out his hand, he somehow didn't expect her to take it, but she did. It was unusual for him to actually want to get to know a woman as much as he did her, but she fascinated him. She wasn't like any of the women he was used to. Usually he got

bored with them quickly, but Leah was in a category all of her own. Besides how compatible they were sexually, she had a hot temper, a quick mind, and she had the same interests he did. She knew cattle and she liked to ski. It made him curious on what other things they had in common.

Leah had to admit that the afternoon was fun. If she thought she was good with a horse, she looked like an amateur compared to the way he handled his. She couldn't help but admit how downright appealing that was as he weaved his way through the herd with an unusual grace. It was hard to fathom where man and beast separated because they moved as one. It looked as if he was no stranger to physical labour and it made her curious to where he'd acquired that. At least it was obvious that his hard muscular body was naturally earned, not in a gym which is what she originally thought. Where he found the time, she'll never know because she was sure he hadn't made his wealth on the back of a horse even though he probably could from the way he looked on one. Was there anything about this man that was less than perfect? Even at a distance she could recognize that powerful physique through the throng of the other cattlemen there. It didn't help that he was taller than them, but he also moved with an air of authority that was distinguishable. She blew her bangs off her face in frustration knowing she was in trouble. She'd known the man for less than a week and was coming dangerously close to falling for him. She shouldn't considering what he was making her do, but looking at him now made her know that she never did have much choice in the matter. "I'm so stupid." She said to herself and swung her horse around to head home. Garrett was busy with his herd, and hopefully he didn't notice her leave, but she couldn't take much more of this. Watching him work was making her hungry and not for food.

By supertime, she hadn't heard nor seen him and was thankful for it. Over and over again she scolded herself for

falling so easily for his charms. He had her on the bloody table at his house for crying out loud! And she was so spellbound; she hadn't even noticed that he'd hoisted her up there.

"Hey, why so quiet."

Her father's voice brought her back to the present. Her eyes darted to him, "Just thinking."

"Want to share?" he said spearing a potato and shoving it in his mouth.

She shook her head, "I'm just thinking that I'm glad about the well, now you can slow down a little."

He smiled, "That Garrett Walsh seems like a nice man Leah. I can't think of another person that would do such a thing for nothing."

Leah could feel the familiar heat rushing to her cheeks along with the image of her on his table. She quickly averted her gaze to her plate so her father wouldn't see her embarrassment, "I suppose."

Frank saw the blush and misinterpreted it for her daughter's infatuation for the man. It worried him quite a bit because of his previous thoughts about Garrett being a man with experience, and lots of it. He was hoping that Leah was careful where her feelings lie.

The sound of a vehicle pulling up caused her father to get up and look out the window, "Speak of the devil."

Oh oh, so much for not hearing from him. Her father was right. He was the devil. Leah stood up and took her plate to the sink trying to ignore the rapid beating of her heart as her father went to answer the door. It was rude, what she did, just leaving like that, but she couldn't help it. Watching him was driving her insane. Soon after she heard the front door shut and she breathed a sigh of relief as a vehicle started.

"What did he want?" She said as her father came back into the kitchen.

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

"I thought I was clear on that."

She dropped the glass she was holding and it shattered all over the floor surprised by the sound of Garrett's voice.

"Don't move." He said as he reached her in several quick stride and bent down to pick up the pieces.

"I'm not a child." She said bending down at the same time.

"No honey, you certainly aren't." he said with a double meaning.

She stopped and stared at him, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. You took off so quickly this afternoon—"

"I had things to do." She interrupted gathering up the rest of the glass and tossing it in the garbage. It gave her the opportunity to turn away before he saw her vulnerable expression.

"Sure you did." He said grinning while he straightened up and handed her the rest of the glass so she could throw it out.

He was too close. She quickly walked away, grabbed the broom and swept up the rest up not saying a word.

"Leah, stop for a minute."

She sighed and finally looked at him, "don't you have something else to do than bother me?"

"No, I'm retired." He said taking a step closer to her and smiled sinfully when she stepped back against the counter. "I have all the time in the world."

"My god Garrett, can't you go five minutes without pawing me?" she said with exasperation.

"Absolutely not." He said not dropping his grin and letting his expression darken sinfully, "Besides, you like it."

"I don't." she said breathlessly as he circled his arms around her .

"Liar." He said deeply winding his hand in her braid, "I have to admit that I love your long hair." He made his point by tugging on it causing her to tilt her face up to his, "Anyway—" he added

staring down at her, “—I needed to come and talk to you about this weekend.”

“Talk—“ she breathed shuttering her eyes.

He chuckled, “I need to delay it, because something came up.” He bent his head and inhaled her scent deeply, “Ah hell, I’m really disappointed, but I’ll be back next week. Now tell me you’ll miss me.”

“Not on your life.” She murmured.

“Liar—again.” He smiled before taking her mouth under his. Her mouth was perfect; soft supple and just like the rest of her, completely inviting. In fact since he kissed her the day before, it haunted him. It was a mouth made for kissing and he was certainly doing just that. There was some resistance from her in the beginning, but he wasn’t sure if it was her stubbornness or her inexperience that caused it. Once that passed, he took it further, released her braid and placed his palms on her cheeks splaying his fingers on either side of her head to gently tip it so he could take her mouth more fully. She tasted divine! So much so that he wasn’t sure when her hands splayed over his abdomen, but the sensation of her hands moving up over his shirt was enticing enough. He couldn’t even begin to fathom what that would do to him naked. Christ, he was hard already thinking about her soft body under his.

Dipping his tongue in her mouth seemed to be her undoing especially when it touched hers. She groaned and leaned into him just to be backed against the counter. He was such a large hard man that even if she didn’t want to be there, she wouldn’t have had a choice, but she did. Did she ever! Her hands moved up over his thick chest and around his neck feeling the hard muscles under his clothing.

“Tell me to take it off and I will.”

She was already feeling warm all over, but when he spoke that deep husky vibration moved through her so well that she

heated up even more. She didn't answer him. She couldn't because her tongue was in his mouth in a scathingly hot kiss. He didn't seem to need an answer and released her head to open the buttons on his shirt. Not once did their mouths separate.

A moment later he had her hauled against him tightly bending her back over an arm. Her hands found his bare flesh. He could have her here, now, right now. He knew he could.

The sound of a vehicle made him lift his head. He near laughed at his own stupidity. This wasn't his house, it was hers. He looked down at her for a moment. It was obvious that she didn't hear it. Her eyes were closed and her mouth parted ever so slightly. She looked positively desirable.

Her eyes fluttered open and she stared up at him in complete awe, "What was that?"

He gave her a devilish grin, "That honey, was passion, white hot passion."

"Wow." She said in barely a whisper.

"Now you know." He released her and began to straighten his shirt before buttoning it. All the while his eyes stayed on hers.

"You're making me nervous." She finally said as he watched her, "I feel like a rabbit in a wolf den."

He chuckled, "you weren't kidding when you said you didn't have experience. What you see in me is desire. I can't help thinking how much this wolf would love to devour the rabbit."

She flushed.

"Leah." Came a voice from another room.

Her eyes widened, "my dad." Gosh, she didn't even hear him drive up or come in the house.

He nodded but didn't seem the least concerned about it.

"In the kitchen." She said casting him a nervous glance and rapidly straightening her clothes, "Go."

"Walk me out and I will."

She released a frustrated sigh and nodded just as her father came in. She was amazed at how charming Garrett was towards him, but then again he didn't get where he was by pissing people off. She was sure he could charm his way out of just about anything. He was a good businessman. She knew that firsthand. He'd been able to convince her to give up her virtue for a water well.

Those familiar resentful feelings came back and as she followed him out of the house. Then something else that ended up surprising her. She actually thought she might miss him.

He got in his truck and rolled down the window, "Don't pine too much for me."

"I won't." she said not revealing her earlier thoughts in her expression.

"Sure honey." He chuckled as he started the truck and with another heated glance, drove away.

Leah stood there for a moment watching the taillights disappear. She was in trouble.

Garrett wasn't who she thought he was. It was true he was rich and arrogant, but he was also intelligent, confidence and downright gorgeous. Furthermore, he could be an ordinary man if he wanted to like she saw when he was roping cattle with his men. That's the type of man she found attractive. One that wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty, worked hard, and earned respect from his men. And he did. Even her father seemed to like him and it took a lot for him to warm up to someone. It didn't help that Garrett was charming to the teeth when he wanted to be.

She sighed heavily and rubbed her arms like it was chilly, but she was just unsettled. What woman in her right mind would turn him down? She had problems telling him no, and she was sure she was more than capable compared to other women that he'd been with. They would have wanted to be with him, not

using blackmail to get what he wanted. However would she have gone out with him if he asked?

No she wouldn't have, because she would have wanted all of those qualities she thought of earlier and would have assumed that he didn't have one of them.

Pursing her lips she turned and went back into the house. She was disappointed in herself because she wasn't judgemental, yet here she was assuming negative things about a man even though she didn't know him that well. Maybe it was because he was a threat to her. Not another could brag about touching her the way he did and she hardly knew him. She'd grown up with a lot of the men around town and even kissed a few, but none of them handled her the way Garrett did.

Problem was, she liked it—a lot.

CHAPTER THREE

When she got back in the house the phone was ringing. It was Kimmy. She was so excited that Leah barely understood a word she was saying

“—And he chose me Leah. Isn't that amazing?”

“What?” She missed the first part because of her friends animated babbling.

“I said Garrett—or I mean, Mr. Walsh is flying to the Caribbean to meet his cousin or something and insisted on taking me. Oh Gosh, what do you think? I'd love to ask him about the room arrangement but that might be a little forward—“

Leah felt the blood drain from her face then flush again in anger yet she was able by some miracle, to keep it out of her voice, “Is this business?”

“Oh who knows. All I know is that he told me to go home and pack. I've never been to the Caribbean. Do you think it's going to be hot this time of year—“

Kimmy went on for another fifteen minutes about this trip that Garrett regretfully had to take. If he thought that he would have her and Kimmy, the deal was off. She instantly regretted all of the nice things she thought about him minutes ago. When she hung up and after she wished Kimmy all the best in the world she took her frustration out on her hair untangling the long braid that his fingers managed to knot up. Water well or not, she'd carry buckets on her back before she ever let him touch her again. He said he didn't overlap women, yet he knew how Kimmy felt about him, she was sure he did. A man with his experience couldn't have possibly missed it.

The next day after a restless night, she went down to the college and signed up for some courses. She was not going to be someone's mistress and she was going to do her best to make something of herself.

"Leah—Leah Cooper?"

She turned at the sound of her name and saw someone she used to date in high school "Hi Davis." He sure grew into a tall handsome man. He lacked the muscular width that Garrett had, and maybe the excessive confidence, certainly the arrogance, but for some reason that was all right with her. He was a nice man from what she remembered.

"What are you doing here? I swear I haven't seen you for several years. For some reason I thought you moved away."

"Well remember when my mom died, everything seemed to happen at once and Dad needed me. Now, Dad doesn't need me as much this fall, so I thought I'd sign up for some courses."

"What are you thinking about doing?"

"Not quite sure. I was thinking of science courses."

"Pre-vet?" he quirked a brow making her smile.

"It was a thought." She smiled slyly.

"Well you were always top of the class in high school."

"Liar."

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"It's not lie and you know it." He paused studying her for a moment, "Do you have time for a cup of coffee? I wouldn't mind catching up on old times." He said thrusting his hands into the pockets of his slacks.

"Sure." She said without much hesitation. She liked Davis but that was as far as it went. There was no spark there, not like there was when Garrett touched her.

She ground her teeth together angry that she couldn't stop comparing the two.

"I'll wait if you want." He grinned.

Well, he was handsome, she thought, with his blonde hair and blue eyes. "Okay, I'll be a few minutes." She said turning back to the register's counter.

"So," Davis said taking a sip of his coffee while eyeing her over the rim, "Are you dating?"

She near laughed. "Not exactly."

"Single?"

Was she? No, she wasn't yet. She wouldn't stoop to Garrett's level. She'd speak to him first about Kimmy then dump him cold. "Not quite."

"So who's the lucky guy?"

She shrugged, "Garrett Walsh." It was easy to confess. She knew Davis, and liked him. He wasn't the type to run around and start rumours.

He couldn't stop the look of surprise, "Wow, *the* Garrett Walsh."

"The one." She said with slight exasperation.

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised. You're prettier than you were in high school."

"Thanks." She didn't know what else to say.

"Why did we break up anyway?"

"You dumped me to date Kimmy." She said with

amusement.

He actually looked embarrassed, “Oh yes. Sorry.”

She laughed at his discomfort, “We were kids and Davis, Kimmy was so beautiful.”

He grinned, “Yeah she was.”

“She still is.” Leah added.

He chuckled, “Is that right?” He leaned forward, set down his cup and stared at her, “I’d much rather know more about you.”

“I told you that—”

“Actually,” he interrupted with a slight turn of his head, “you told me nothing. So I’m assuming, correct me if I’m wrong, that this man of yours isn’t as interested in you as you are in him.

“I’m not,” she said quickly and defensively causing him to grin.

“Another woman huh?”

She pinched her lips together then released a rush of breath, “Oh, I don’t know Davis. I just don’t understand what he really wants.” She confessed. It was the same thing with Davis and Kimmy back then as it was now with Garrett. She wouldn’t fight for him. Especially when he wasn’t interested.

“Well, I think that you have just described how men feel about women, so it’s nice to know that it’s actually a two way street.”

She found herself smiling, “You were always a nice man Davis.”

He shook his head, “No, I just grew up. I felt guilty about what I did to you in high school, but back then I was a stupid jock.”

She found herself laughing. “I didn’t think much of it. I have to admit that I wasn’t all that attracted to you, maybe I was too involved in my father’s ranch.”

“Shot through the heart.” He sat back and put his hand in

the middle of his chest.

"I could never lie." She said giving him a sheepish smile.

"That's all right in my books." He said with a reassuring grin, "How about I take you to dinner tonight so you can make it up to me."

Oh lord, how could she tell him she wasn't interested? Was he though? Or did he just want to be friends. She was just about to answer when she saw Garrett's truck pull up outside the window they were sitting against. It wasn't until he got out of the truck that she saw the anger in his expression. "Oh oh."

Davis turned his head to see a large cowboy stare directly at the both of them as he walked by the window to the door of the diner. "Yours I take it." He said directing his attention back to Leah.

"He thinks so." She swallowed knowing that this wasn't going to go well. Garrett didn't get to where he was by letting others take what he thought was his.

"Hell he doesn't look impressed." He said looking over her head as Garrett stepped in the diner and without hesitating headed toward them.

"Ignore him."

"I have a feeling he's not playing that game. In fact it looks like he wants to knock a few of my teeth out."

"Leah," came that familiar deep voice.

She turned her head and looked up at him, "This is Davis Havener."

"I don't care who he is, get in the truck." Came the terse response.

"What?" she stared at him stunned at the violent tone of his voice.

Davis looked back and forth between the two. He recognized the powerful man who stood looming over Leah. Even though Leah told him who she was seeing, it still took him

by surprise. Garrett was well known. He was ingenious and despite the man's temper, he was in awe. Garrett made groundbreaking inventions in artificial intelligent guiding systems for aeronautics. He was sure he heard some rumour that he secretly worked for NASA, but was now retired. Davis was in computer science but there was no way on earth he could achieve what Garrett did because your IQ would have to be near one eighty.

“Get in the truck.”

“Garrett—“ she started when He leaned down and took her arm pulling her out of the booth.

His grip was so firm it was almost painful. She looked around seeing the other two patrons in the diner staring with their mouths gaping open. She certainly didn't want to make any more of a scene. “Sorry.” She said to Davis as she turned and left the diner thinking she'd tear into him as soon as she got him alone, but this wasn't the place.

“No problem.” Davis said still staring in awe at Garrett.

When she got inside the truck she was red hot seething from the incident. How could he not care how he embarrassed her or Davis for that matter? Then she watched as he leaned down placing his palms on the table bringing his face inches from Davis while speaking. Davis nodded twice before Garrett straightened himself and left. Davis' face was slightly pale.

“What on earth did you say to him?” she accused when he got in the truck.

“You really don't want to know Leah,” he said abruptly as he started the engine.

“I think you'd better take me home, I'm getting the urge to shoot you.” She returned just as tersely. “And that's where I keep my gun.”

He cast her a sideways glance not revealing anything in his expression except anger, “If I see you sitting with another man

again, I'll tell your father everything.”

“You son of a bitch!” she burst, “I hate you!”

“I told you before I don't care.” He added coolly.

Leah made a frustrated noise and straightened herself to look out of the front windshield.

He cast her another glance but didn't say anything. He was being a complete bastard and he knew it. The rapid feelings of jealousy were new for him and he knew he mishandled it but still, as far as he was concerned she belonged to him, now more than ever. Seeing her sitting with another man and enjoying a conversation with him struck him hard. “Who was he?”

She didn't answer.

“So help me Leah—“

“Go to hell!” she shot back.

With a squeal of tires he left the highway and reared down a gravelled road causing her to grip the dash. Then he slammed the breaks, slammed it into park and turned to her, “Now the rules.”

She glared at him.

“No men.”

“It goes both ways.”

“I already told you that was a wife of a friend.”

“I wasn't referring to her!”

He looked puzzled.

“Kimmy.”

He stared at her for almost a full minute before he burst into laughter.

Her anger flared again, “What the heck is so funny?” That was the second time he roared with laughter when she brought up a suspicion. It was infuriating because it made her feel stupid and insecure.

“You think that Kimmy and I—“ he chuckled.

“You cancelled our trip to take her to the Caribbean.”

He turned to her, “Let me get this straight. You hate me, yet you’re disappointed that I cancelled our ski trip where I’d most likely get you into bed—no let me rephrase that—where I would get you into bed to take my secretary on a business trip with four other employees—all men, to a conference in the Caribbean.”

Her face fell, “She—she never—“

“Of course she didn’t Leah.” He said almost mockingly, “And why do you think that was?”

She fell her face in her hands feeling like a complete fool.

“I would have taken you, but then I probably wouldn’t have even left the bedroom of our suite for the four days I need to be there.”

She shook her head but didn’t say anything.

“It’s purely work, and purely professional.” He chuckled, “I have no reason to lie to you.”

He didn’t. He had her already from their agreement and she couldn’t go back on her word or he would tell her father and probably fill in the well he drilled. Regardless, she was still angry with him.

“We’re not even staying in the same hotel. I have a house on the beach.” He smirked, “Are you happy now?”

“I’m an idiot.” She mumbled in her hands.

“Well I’m the one that tore your male friend to pieces verbally in front of gossip central.” He added.

She lifted her head and looked at him. His expression wasn’t the least bit apologetic. In fact, he looked amused, “You find that funny?”

He shrugged, “If I cared what people thought about me I wouldn’t be as successful as I am, or as rich.” He added.

“Davis is a nice man.”

His expression darkened, “Say that again.”

She didn’t. His look said everything.

He raised a finger at her, “No men.”

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"No women." She countered matching his glare.

"Hell." He said shaking his head and putting the truck into gear, "I'm taking you home to pack."

"What?"

"You asked for it. You're coming with me."

"But Kimmy—"

"It's too late to be worried about your friend's feelings honey." He said turning the truck around to head back to the highway.

"That's not fair, and there was no deal on hurting my best friend."

"So you want to run around behind her back?"

"Well, no but—"

"I never made her promises and I can't help that she assumes anything. I gave her a job, not a bloody place in my bed. Besides she's not that attractive."

"What?" Kimmy was leggy tall and gorgeous. He must've been kidding, but the look on his face was serious.

He glanced at her, "You find that so hard to believe."

"Davis dumped me in high school to go out with her."

"The schlep at the diner?"

She nodded.

He laughed, "What an idiot."

What did that mean?

He saw her puzzled expression and shook his head followed by a whistle at her naiveté. She didn't know how beautiful she was. Kimmy paled in comparison. He didn't miss her friend's not so subtle hints. The fluttering of eyelashes, short skirts, and top buttons of her blouses undone so more than enough cleavage was shown, but Kimmy didn't know that he had his hands on the woman sitting next to him. Her breasts were incredible. His eyes guided down to them.

"Stop it." She said seeing where his gaze was. It wasn't just

that, the heat she'd started to become accustomed to reappeared and she started liking it.

He smirked, "Sure thing honey, but you're still packing."

She crossed her arms under her breasts knowing darn well she asked for this.

A few minutes later he pulled up in front of her house, "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning. Pack a bikini," his eyes went to her breasts again, "a small one."

She narrowed her gaze on him, "Get real. Does it look like I've had leisure time in the last few years?"

"I'll buy you one then."

She waved her hand in frustration and got out of the truck slamming the door on his chuckle. There was no point in protesting. He was going to do whatever he wanted no matter how much screeching she did at him.

He watched until she went in the house without a backward glance before he drove away. He couldn't ignore the desire that flared in him imagining that woman in a bikini, or nothing at all for that matter. The familiar guilt he felt about blackmailing her into this was gone again.

CHAPTER FOUR

ncredibly enough, it was a stretched black limousine with tinted windows that pulled into the yard the next morning. Her father let her know that Garrett was there. She told him of the change in his plans that skiing had been exchanged for the Caribbean and again she saw and odd look over her confession. Yet, he smiled and wished her luck. Now he looked a little taken back by the size of the limousine.

"Wow, that fella of yours doesn't pull any punches with class." Her father said standing behind her. "somehow it's hard to imagine wealth like that until you see this."

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She turned and looked at him trying to keep the worry off of her expression, "I guess."

"Have a good time baby." He said giving her a kiss on the forehead before he walked out the door to greet Garrett. She just gaped at him incredulously. Even though he seemed okay with this a few days ago, how could her father be so at ease with her going off four days with a man that she met only a week ago? Obviously that look she thought she saw from him was all in her head.

Sean got out of the driver's door, walked around and opened the back door for Garrett when she came out onto the porch with her suitcase.

Garrett, in a word, was devastating. He wore a dark navy suit, white shirt with a high mandarin collar. There was no trace of the cowboy that she came to see him as. Every inch of him screamed money and sophistication. He was clean shaven and his normally wind arranged hair was neatly combed. She would have hardly recognized him if it weren't for those amazing eyes when they settled on her. Immediately she felt underdressed and unsophisticated. All she was wearing were jeans and a lime green tank top.

"I'll take that Miss Cooper." Sean said as he reached for her suitcase.

Even that looked quite ratty compared to this whole scene, but the mountain didn't let on. She was a little embarrassed at how she looked and never had she cared about that before. But this was as real as it gets. Garrett was worth a lot of money, and she suddenly felt insignificant.

Her father gave her a wave after he shook hands with Garrett and then walked toward the barn.

"Don't worry about it princess." Garrett said walking up to her.

She turned her gaze on him, "Don't make fun of me over

this. I feel like a pauper.”

He smiled down at her and her knees near melted, “I’ll remedy this when we get to the city.”

She shook her head.

“So, when I take you out on the town, you want to wear this?” he said waving his hand down her form.

“This is entirely unfair.” She answered in a harsh whisper hoping Sean didn’t hear.

“I assure you I can afford it, come on.” He took her arm and led her toward the car. Sean was holding the door open.

They got in and Garrett situated himself beside her while pulling out some sort of device a little larger than a cell phone with what looked like a computer screen and began tapping his fingers on it.

“What is that?”

Smiling he held it up so she could see, “When I was working, it was my lifeline to everything. I could communicate all over the globe with the tap of the screen.”

“Like a personal Data Device?”

He smirked arrogantly “this makes a personal data device look like a rotary telephone.”

“I take it you invented that?”

His grin was her answer.

“You said you didn’t work, aren’t you still working? Isn’t this trip a business trip?”

“Not like I used to and this is more of a convention. I have to basically explain to the scientists how to use my product.” He said with an arrogant chuckle.

“You’re kidding right?”

He gave her a wry smile, ‘Honey, I never joke about business. Besides, I like the Caribbean, they pay me, and I can get away for a few days.’

“Pay you?”

He grinned again, "A lot."

She didn't doubt it.

"Now about your wardrobe—" she turned her head away, "Leah." He added softly, "It's not such a big deal."

"It is to me." She said bringing her eyes back to his. "I find it demoralizing."

"That a man wishes to buy you things? That's absurd."

"You make me feel like a kept woman."

"That's not my intention."

"You said 'no mistress of mine'." She reminded him of the time he told her the ultimatum he gave her.

She was right he did. However, a mistress had experience in many different facets. Leah was naïve everywhere. She was also unselfish and untouched. Oddly enough he actually wanted to buy her things, shower her in them. She was beautiful, but done up right, she would be a force to be reckoned with. "I suppose I did."

"It was insulting."

"I understand why you would think that now that I know you a little better, but this is the modern age. Women who are beautiful can use that to get things they desire. That's one of the ways."

"I'll never be like that Garrett." mostly because she wasn't beautiful. She didn't think she was ugly, but Kimmy had her beat, hands down.

"You're right, because you're mine." He added a little more abruptly while looking down at her, "And women like that can do whatever they wish with their bodies. You won't."

"Until you tire of me." She said in the same tone, "Hopefully soon."

He chuckled, "You certainly have a lot to learn about men." Then he returned his attention to his handheld computer. He had to or he was going to flatten her out right then and there. He

already knew that her first time wouldn't be in the back of his car. It would be in a bed where he could take his time and show her what he liked and how powerful the passion would be between them.

Yes she did, she thought to herself while looking at his handsome profile, because that statement made no sense to her. Did that mean he wouldn't tire of her? None of this seemed to bother him at all. Maybe she was being old fashioned, but truthfully, she was frightened. Actually she was scared to death. He created something in her when he touched her, and she was worried that she would get too caught up in it. Nothing ever happened to her like that when a man touched her before. Then again, a man never touched her like Garrett did. She wasn't used to men of his calibre that was confident enough to touch a woman the way he did. Usually they fumbled and were unsure about even kissing her. It just went to show her how experienced he was.

The ride to the city was three hours long and because Leah spent the night before tossing and turning she didn't sleep much. She didn't even realize that she'd fallen asleep until Garrett nudged her.

"Wake up sleeping beauty we're here."

"Here?" she said groggily.

He looked down at her. She had fallen asleep about an hour and a half ago and he had discarded his computer to watch her. She had leaned her head on his shoulder and he moved to pull her closer to him while sliding his arm around her. She felt warm and soft and completely irresistible. He had to admit that he liked this woman, more than he should. She was strong willed, stubborn, and smart. She may not have a college degree to show it, but he never judged intelligence that way. His own mother had a high IQ and she was a housewife. He bent his head and inhaled her sent. It took him a moment to figure out what it

was. Honeysuckle. The sweet fragrant smell of a bush flower. Hell, he shouldn't have expected anything less. Everything about her was rare and unique.

She sat up and gave him a sheepish smile seeing that she was lying against him. Then she turned and looked out the window of the Limo. "Where's here?"

"This is fashion central. I'm taking you in several of these shops so we can furnish your wardrobe for the next few days."

She looked down at her clothes and felt a little embarrassed again.

"Come on, in an hour you won't care." He said as Sean opened the door and he took her hand.

Reluctantly she nodded and let him urge her out onto the crowded street. Everyone around seemed to be dressed to the nines, and a few of them even turned and gave her odd looks. She was way out of her league.

"Who's that? She noticed another man get out of the front passenger side of the car. He wasn't as big as Sean, but with the way he was standing and scanning the surroundings, she knew he was another of his security team. There was an opaque divider between the front and the back of the Limo, but she assumed it was just Sean that was in front.

"That's Mickey." He said not elaborating as he pulled her along with him into the first shop.

"Mickey?"

"He's Italian, it's short for Michelangelo. Apparently his mother was a fan."

"Oh." She said eyeing him carefully before she went into the boutique. He looked very menacing. She thought Sean could be, but at least he smiled every now and then.

"Another bodyguard?"

"Yes, yours."

"Mine?" she glanced over her shoulder but he was having his

back to them while watching the surrounding street. “I don’t need a—“

“Around me you do. Sooner or later, someone will snap a picture of us and know that we’re together. It’s just a precaution.”

“Good lord are you that important?”

“Let’s just say that there are a few countries that would really appreciate my skills.” He said over his shoulder without elaborating.

“Oh.”

“Sir?” A slender woman with a fuchsia suit and lipstick to match scurried over with an eager look on her face. She was possibly in her late forties with bleach blonde hair and wore a whiter than white smile.

Garrett fished out his wallet from his inside pocket and removed a credit card, “Anything she wants. Evening, beachwear, lingerie.”

If it was possible the woman’s smile grew wider, “Of course sir,” she said taking the card and then turning her blinding smile on Leah, “Ladies!” she called without taking her eyes off the younger women. Instantly there were two more women there scurrying her into the back. She cast an unsure look over her shoulder as Garrett nodded for her to go before turning to the first women. She couldn’t hear what he was saying, but when she emerged from the dressing room ten minutes later he was gone.

“Your gentleman said he’d return in an hour.” Said the older of the three that met them at the door.

She glanced toward the door to see the Limo gone but the man named Mickey was now standing inside the door looking out through the large windows of the boutique.

“Might I say, what a dish.” She beamed, “He said to spare no expense. So my dear we have our work cut out for us.”

She diverted her eyes to hers not feeling her enthusiasm.

She felt like Garrett's mistress no matter what he said. What was wrong with anyone, didn't they find this odd? Maybe she was completely naïve, and this behaviour was widely acceptable with rich bachelors like him. After that thought, she was scuttled into the back room again barely having time to revisit her concern.

Meanwhile Garrett was at the jewellers. If he was going to get her to accept him completely, he had to sweep her off of her feet. He knew she wasn't one to be swayed by gifts like his past women, but making her feel beautiful would probably do the trick. All women dreamed of feeling beautiful, not that she needed to because she was already gorgeous. However, that brief confession about Kimmy being better looking took him by surprise, because that woman didn't hold a candle to Leah. Leah had this untamed wildness about her that was utterly devastating to a man like him. He knew exactly what a rare jewel she was.

Just like in the boutique the jeweller was falling all over himself to please Garrett. Even if he wasn't wearing the four thousand dollar suit, he carried himself in such a way that people knew he had money.

"Her eyes sir?" offered the grey haired man behind the counter in a thick German accent.

"Blue. Midnight Sapphire to be exact." He said scanning the store, "And, I want to see your *other* jewellery." He added with a speaking glance.

The older man nodded and smiled, "But of course. Just let me lock the door and I'll be right with you."

Sean stood behind his boss and near laughed at the dollar signs that appeared in his eyes. He watched as he turned over the open sign to display 'closed', locked the door then with a sweep of his arm led them into the back room.

Garrett was led into a large walk in safe which housed a series of other counters, but with no protective glass. The jewellery was displayed openly on royal blue velvet under subtle

lighting used to enhance the beauty of the stones.

“She is a special woman?” offered the clerk.

He picked up a sapphire necklace and studied it carefully, “Yes.” He answered without looking at him.

“Would you be interested in a custom engagement ring then?”

He brought his head up, “Do I look like I’m ready to get married?” he answered sharply.

“Of course not sir.” He answered quickly dropping his eager smile, “I just assumed, forgive me.”

Behind him Sean smirked. He may have been trained to be menacing and protect his boss, but Garrett could certainly intimidate the best of them with that look of his.

“Where are my clothes?” Leah asked the older saleslady. Now she was wearing a pretty white spaghetti strap dress that came to mid thigh and comfortable white sandals with a slight heel. Still she felt almost naked. She wasn’t used to wearing short tight dresses no matter how good it looked on her. However she had to begrudgingly admit that she felt beautiful for once.

“In here miss.” She said lifting a bag onto the counter to complete an overwhelming number of them.

“Good lord, is that all mine?” she said wide-eyed.

She smiled, “Yes.”

“Wait a minute—“ just then a bell dinged as the front door opened and Garrett stepped in with Sean behind him. He grinned when he saw her and took her hands, “Stunning.”

She flushed, “Garrett, I can’t accept all of this.” She whispered indicating to the parcels that Sean and Mickey were now collecting.

“Nonsense. You need all of it. I left specific instructions to what you would need over the next six days.”

“Six?” she narrowed her gaze and placed her hand on her hip, “You said four.”

“The convention isn't until Monday, so I have the whole weekend with you.”

She brought her hand to her forehead, “Six days? I told my father four.”

“And I corrected that when I went to pick you up.” He said looking at her stance, “Leah, act like a lady, put your hand down and stand straight. You look like you're about to jump on a bareback horse.”

She glared up at him, “Did anyone tell you that you are very controlling?”

“Yes.” He said turning away from her to sign the bill and retrieve his credit card.

How could all of this seem so normal to him? She worked for everything she got in life, and wasn't used to being pampered like this or told what to do, or how to behave. Besides being angry, it made her very uncomfortable. “Garrett?”

He turned back to her and took her arm to lead her out of the boutique. “Not now.” He said.

She glared at him, but he ignored her until they were settled in the car. Across from her were all the bags of clothes he'd just purchased for her. Before she could say anything he spoke.

“Not another argument. I made myself clear that first day you accepted our terms. Now unless you want to run around on my beach naked, which I won't protest, accept the damn clothes.”

“This is not a business deal.”

He was tired and growing more irritable with her constant resistance. Not only that, he'd just spent almost a million dollars on jewellery which is something he'd never done for a woman before. If only she knew that he didn't do those things. Maybe a necklace, or a bracelet here or there, but not like that. It wasn't that he couldn't afford it, he could, but would have never

fathomed doing such a thing. Before he knew it, he was finding more and more pieces that suited her. "It is."

She snapped her jaw shut. That was a blatant reality check. He was right. What was wrong with her? How could she have forgotten that? He was rich, and used to getting what he wanted by any means possible. Yet she didn't see it as cold as that. She crossed her legs and her arms and looked out the side window. She was such an idiot.

He saw her expression and knew he had hurt her. It was callous to say that to her because she didn't fall into that category at all. Truthfully he was interested in her, more than he liked to admit. Not only that, he was looking forward to making love to that exquisite body she possessed. His eyes guided down her form in that fashionably tight material. She was perfect. Every inch of her was. Those legs were delightfully toned from riding horses most of her life and he already knew that having them wrapped around his hips was going to be thrilling in itself. "Leah." He said softening his voice somewhat, "I was harsh."

"Gee," she said turning back to him showing that familiar spark of anger in her sapphire gaze, "You think?"

"I'm irritable."

"You're always irritable." She said with exasperation, "You boss me around, threaten my male friends, and continue to remind me that I was bought and paid for!"

He shook his head once while reaching over and placing a hand on her thigh, "First of all, I'm used to being in charge so forgive me. Secondly, that man at the diner had designs on you. I'm smart enough to recognize a predator. Finally, I'm usually more easy going than what you've been seeing lately, but the truth of it is, I want you."

She looked down at his large hand on her bared thigh wanting to shove it off her, but she belonged to him and knew it. Not only that, the familiar heat started in the pit of her stomach

again. Slowly her eyes guided back to his along with the familiar feel of a rising blush at his candid words. "That makes you irritable?"

He gave her a devastating smile, "If you knew more about men, you would believe me." His hand contracted slightly, "Come closer."

She shook her head watching those piercing eyes of his dilate slightly, "Don't you have work to do?"

"Excuses, excuses little one, are you afraid of me?"

"Never." She said trying to be brave under that sinful stare.

"Come, I won't compromise your virtue in my car." He applied pressure to her thigh until she finally nodded and slid closer.

"Sure you won't."

His other hand slid up to cup her jaw while his eyes studied her face. "You look beautiful Leah. Did I tell you that?"

She shook her head unable to find her voice. Why is it that she always lost her will around this man? A moment ago she was willing to jump out of the car, now, she was craving his touch.

His smile widened into a grin, "It's true." He bent his dark head and brushed his mouth across hers. There was no hesitation this time when she surrendered. "See how good we are together?"

Gosh, his mouth was so warm, hard, and masculinity appealing that she didn't even hear him the second time. It was gentle and coaxing and god forgive her, she loved it. Not just that, but everything about him was so attractive. He made her feel beautiful without even telling her. His confidence, his intelligence, and most importantly, the way he touched her. Even his conceit was somehow alluring to her. It wasn't ill conceived, she knew that now. Every ounce of it had been earned.

He lifted his head and stared down at her. They were on

their way to the airport and he already knew that this was going to be the longest flight ever. If it were up to him, he'd take her to bed as soon as he got to his villa, but he needed to be careful. He'd never been accused of forcing a woman in his life, and he certainly wasn't going to start, especially with a virgin. He would make sure that she was going to beg him. That thought sent a wave of desire through him.

"What-is-this?" she said finally opening her eyes as the car drove across the tarmac to a private jet.

"Mine." He said with pride.

She actually laughed seeing the bullhorns painted on the tailfin.

"Yeah, the country will be in me no matter where I am." He said as the car glided to a stop. "Come on." He took her hand just as Sean got out and opened the door.

The flight itself was amazing never mind the rich interior of the jet. She felt like she was worth a million bucks and this weekend had just begun. She couldn't help but smile.

"Look at this." He said pulling out his little computer and scrolling through photographs. "It's my house on the beach."

She had never seen water that blue. "Gosh it's beautiful."

"This doesn't do it justice. But it's a nice solitary place. I own the whole beach."

She looked at him, "All of it."

"You can run naked in the surf if you like. You won't get a protest from me."

"Enough of that." She said lowering her lashes trying not to blush.

He chuckled deeply and settled in the plush leather seat.

"When does the rest of your staff show up?"

He turned his head and looked at her, "I take it you haven't talked to Kimmy yet."

She shook her head.

"I can tell her if you like. I don't have a problem with it."

She was sure he didn't and he would probably break it with no sensitivity and crush her. "No thanks. She's my friend."

"Sure she is." He smirked.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that when it comes to competing for men, women don't have friends."

She felt herself get angry, "You don't know how close we are."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does. I've known her since elementary school."

"I thought you said Davis dumped you in high school for her." he raised a brow proving his point.

"That was different, she didn't steal him from me, and I wasn't really interested in him."

"Sure you weren't."

It was true, but he actually had a bit of a point. If she was such a good friend should she have gone out with Davis knowing that he dumped her to do that? "We were kids."

"so your saying that if she throws your friendship away over me—" she made a sound of disbelief and he grinned, "Honey, don't put too much faith in your friends."

"You don't know Kimmy." She protested.

Neither do you, he thought watching her skin flush in anger over defence of her friend. *Trusting and loyal*. It wasn't a common combination in a woman. However, he knew Kimmy's type and knew that this would be a problem especially since the other woman made no secret of her attraction to him.

"This conversation is over." She added feeling uncomfortable under his intense stare. She could only imagine what he was thinking. Well, he was wrong. Kimmy was a good friend, and it was up to her to tell her.

"If you wish." He finally said with a knowing smirk.

Gosh he was so infuriating, “I wish we could go ten minutes without you making me angry.”

“I wish you would quit being so damn stubborn then we could.” He said casually.

She shot him another glare and never said another word until the flight landed.

“Are they staying with us?” She finally said.

It took her a moment to realize she was still talking about Kimmy and his four employees, “No. They’re staying at the hotel in town where the convention is. “I like solitude because I’ve spent most of my professional life surrounded by strangers. Not only that honey, I want you all to myself.”

Oh Lord. “Am I going to see her while I’m here?”

He looked down at her, “No. Unless we run into her by chance if that makes you feel better.”

“It does, but I feel guilty Garrett.” she finally admitted.

Of course she does. She was full of compassion. He stared at her for a moment longer. “We don’t have to leave the villa if you don’t want to.” Which was fine with him. Once he got her in bed, chances were he wouldn’t want to get out of it.

She nodded.

“I can probably speak to her when we get back. “ she felt like she was stabbing Kimmy in the back after all she told her friend that she wasn’t interested in him.

“I don’t want her Leah, keep that in mind.”

Her eyes guided to his to see if he was lying. From the solid look he gave her, he wasn’t. Not only that, he didn’t have a reason to. At least he was trying to make her feel better. That was surprising considering his behaviour up until now, but no one ever picked her over Kimmy before and it wasn’t like he was starving for women either. He didn’t need to blackmail one to get them in his bed either, which brings her back to that reoccurring question again. Why her? Finally she nodded as he

stood and helped her up. At least he was a gentleman when he wanted to be.

When they came down the stairs of the plane there were two bright yellow jeeps, one behind the other waiting for them, and a large black man was leaning against the first of them with his arms crossed across his chest while wearing a large toothy grin.

"Mr. Walsh!" he said in a heavy French accent.

"Claude." Garrett answered smiling and shaking the other man's hand, "This is Leah."

He flashed a grin at Garrett before acknowledging her, "Well, this is a pleasure." He said taking her hand and planting a kiss on the back of it while his dark eyes stayed on hers.

She smiled at him, he seemed quite genuine. "thank you."

Behind her Sean and Mickey were loading the luggage in the second Jeep.

"Don't be a dog Claude, she's taken." Garrett warned removing her hand from the other man's and clasping it in his own. "And you're married."

"A minor detail in view of a beautiful woman." He said with a throaty chuckle still keeping his eyes on Leah.

"I'll tell your wife."

"She won't believe you. She loves me endlessly." He answered with a boisterous laugh.

Leah laughed herself.

Garrett leaned down, "don't fall for his charms little girl, he has eight children."

"Eight?" she stared wide eyed at him over her shoulder and Claude winked.

"With three different women."

"Oh dear."

"But he's completely trustworthy."

"Doesn't his wife care that he has all of those children?" she said as he helped her into the back of the jeep.

“His wife has five of them, and he married her after the other two. So he is loyal to her.”

“Oh.” She smiled and waved.

Garrett took her hand, “Loyal today, don’t tempt him.” He warned.

“Spoilsport.”

This time he raised it to his mouth and kissed it, but it was much different than the greeting that Claude gave her. His warm mouth lingered there for a fraction longer as his eyes searched hers, “remember who you belong to.”

“You make it difficult to forget.” She said snatching her hand back not liking those feelings he could easily instil in her.

He grinned knowing damn well why she did that. Just then Sean got in behind the wheel and Mickey got in beside him.

“Any stops boss.” Sean said.

“No, home.” Garrett said keeping his eyes on Leah.

She was looking out the side window but could feel the heat of his gaze on the side of her head. She was nervous, scared, and completely unsettled about what was to come. Surprisingly enough, part of her was actually excited.

Garrett was all man, masculine, sexy, and undeniably attractive and the more she got to know him the more she found herself falling for him. There’s no way, water well or not, that she would let someone touch her the way he did without that. She was hooked when she first saw him on a horse collecting her cattle looking rugged and sexy. Absently she reached up and pushed a lock of red hair behind her ear not noticing Garrett’s gaze follow the gesture. She was too preoccupied with her own thoughts.

What was she going to do when he did tire of her? Already she knew her heart would be crushed. Then there was Kimmy and her attraction to Garrett. It was another complication. She didn’t want to lose her best friend.

“Leah.”

The way he said her name, husky and deep made her guide her eyes to his.

“Quit worrying.”

She was going to deny it, but she was sure it was etched on her face like a billboard. She saw Sean glance in the rear-view mirror at her and she subtly shook her head turning her attention to the outside scenery. She didn't want an audience when she spoke about her feelings. Thankfully the scenery was incredibly beautiful and distracting.

Garrett watched her feeling that familiar ache in his groin rise up again. He wanted her so bad he could almost taste it. Almost. *I bet she tasted as sweet as she smelled*, he thought to himself. Absently he reached over and took her hand that was resting on her lap. She turned and looked at him in question. He only smiled. This weekend was going to be amazing.

Leah just stared back at him feeling like she was a canary being eyed by a very hungry tomcat. Yet, there was that twinge of excitement again. Was that normal? She hardly liked him. At least that's what she kept telling herself. Even her hand engulfed in his large warm one sent a shiver through her.

About an hour later the vehicles turned off the highway down a narrow private drive. Leah shot to her feet and held on to the roll bar as their jeep emerged from the dense foliage to a rise that overlooked the Ocean.

“Oh Garrett, you're right, it's so beautiful!” A warm tropical breeze blew over her pushing her long hair back off her face at the same time she stood up. It felt amazing. As the jeep started down an incline, she caught a glimpse of the house, if you could call it that. It was a large Spanish style structure that seemed to go on forever. With bright colors of yellow and orange with a terra cotta roof and decorated with very bright foliage and large flowers. Obviously someone took very good care of it when he

wasn't here.

"Do you like it?"

She looked down at him with a smile of excitement, "oh yes!"

There was a white sandy beach just feet from the front steps where the jeeps stopped and he was right about the ocean, it was unimaginably blue.

Without waiting she hopped out and removed her sandals before practically running down to the water.

Garrett watched her intently loving the look of discovery on her face.

"Mr. Walsh?" Claude stepped up beside him while Leah let the surf wash over her bare feet and laughed, "that's some woman."

"You're telling me." He grinned not taking his eyes off of her. "Put the luggage in my suite."

"Of course." He said as if he expected no different. "Millie's making her Caribbean jambalaya for supper."

Garrett nodded, but still couldn't take his eyes off of Leah. Just when he thought she couldn't get any more beautiful to him, she did. To see her play in the surf with the refreshing appearance of sheer innocence was surprisingly exotic. Without even realizing it he was walking toward her.

"Oh Garrett, it's so incredible." She said with her cheeks flushing, "I would have never imagined that there was a place like this. It's a paradise."

"I'm glad you like it." There was something that happened between them then. There was no anger, no hostility and he saw her the way he was sure other people did. Sweet, carefree and completely herself. He shoved his hands into his slacks and smiled at her knowing that if he had them free he'd want to touch her very inappropriately, but not in front of his staff.

"Can we go for a walk?" she said looking at him with her

blue eyes glittering.

“How about after supper. I don't know about you, but I'm starving.”

She never even thought about it after seeing this place, but now that he mentioned it, she was too. She nodded, “Promise me, though.”

“All right,” he chuckled, and held out his hand. To his surprise, she took it.

Dinner was amazing and like she did at Garrett's house that day she went for lunch she found herself licking her fingers, “I'm going to get fat.” She said finally leaning back in her chair. They were sitting out on the front patio facing the ocean. There were brilliant colored flowers all around her and the sounds of the ocean were in the background. Leah swore that if she died and went to heaven it was as beautiful as this.

“It will never happen.” He said with his eyes glittering. He knew exactly how to work off those extra calories.

Leah had several glasses of wine and found herself feeling a little giddy and brave. Her eyes went to his thick chest then back up to his face, “How do you stay in such good shape?”

He grinned.

She rolled her eyes, “Forget I even asked.” But she couldn't help herself and giggled, “Oh lord, I think I've gone over the edge.”

He reached for her hand, “No, you're actually having fun for once in your life.”

“I've had fun before Garrett.” she said dropping her smile to try and hide the lie. It was unsuccessful.

“Like this?” he countered knowing she didn't.

She shook her head, “You make the best out of what you have. My father tries to keep me worry free, but I know him too well.”

“You really love him.”

She tilted her head slightly, “Of course.” Her eyes studied his, “I take it your father was hard on you.”

It was his turn to release her hand, “Very.” His expression clouded over.

She realized that it was something he didn’t wish to talk about, “what about your mother?”

“She died when I was really young.” He said.

“I’m sorry.”

He nodded with his expression not revealing anything, “My father died when I was twenty three. There are times I wish it was the other way around, because he was a bastard, but then again, I probably wouldn’t have turned out so well.” He added with a teasing tone.

She couldn’t help herself and burst into laughter.

He grinned because her whole being seemed to light up with that. He’d seen her smile at others and even laugh, but this was completely her, totally uninhibited. He reached up and ran two fingers down her jaw causing her to abruptly stop laughing and look at him. “Don’t be frightened Leah. I would never hurt you.”

It was too late. She was falling hard for him despite her claims to the opposite. Her eyes focused on his.

“You are having fun are you not?” he said deeply.

“I am.”

“I remember promising you a walk along the beach.”

She lit right up with that, “I would love it.”

Smiling he took the half empty bottle of wine and led her down the stairs to the beach.

The sun was just setting and cast a golden scarlet cover over the water. Leah swore nothing was so beautiful. “I could stay here forever.” She’d discarded her shoes back at the house and revelled in the feeling of the sand squishing between her toes. Garret had done the same.

She felt good. Probably the most she'd felt in a long time. They didn't say much but walked hand in hand up the beach. They were the only two on it. He did say he owned it all, but still she did expect some people to be there because it was so beautiful.

Already she knew that six days would be too short. Being there even with him made all of her problems disappear, and despite the fear of the coming night and the intimacy he expected, she was going to do her best to enjoy herself.

Garrett made her feel beautiful despite her protests and her stubbornness where he was concerned. In fact, she didn't think she ever felt as beautiful as she did over the last twelve hours with him.

She released his hand to walk into the surf and swish her fingers in the water.

Garrett watched her while taking a drink from the bottle of wine he brought. She was so beautiful at that moment he could barely think straight.

Laughing she came back and took the bottle from him to take a drink herself, "Do you get to come here often."

He chuckled looking down at her, "That's a cheesy pickup line." She tilted her head in confusion making him laugh, "Man you are naïve."

"I'm not going to let you spoil my mood." She said with a sly grin and a mock look of anger.

"I wouldn't dream of it." He said huskily reaching for her.

"Garret—"

"Shut up Leah." He interrupted cutting off her words with his mouth. He couldn't take it anymore. He wanted her so bad that every cell he owned was throbbing with desire. She was excruciatingly exotic, carefree and completely beautiful to him at that moment and he couldn't resist the pull she had on him.

She was giddy from the wine, drunk on the beauty of the

place, and intoxicated by him. Any resistance that she had was gone when she came to this place. It was as if she was someone else even for a few days and she was going to make the best of it. Her arms went around his neck as his mouth covered hers. When she did that he deepened his kiss making her toes curl. His tongue met hers and fire heated her pelvis.

Finally he lifted his head, "I want you Leah."

She looked up at him and nodded.

"Tell me you want me too."

She did. She really did.

"Leah." He prompted searching her eyes.

"I'm scared Garrett."

He smiled slowly, "You'll forget about that quick enough." Somehow that confession made him feel empowered. She was showing him that she was vulnerable and it gave him knowledge that she trusted him if even a little bit. "Come." He took her hand and led her back to the house.

The whole walk back she had mixed feelings. Excitement, fear, and eagerness all rolled into one. What she didn't understand was how he was going to eliminate her fear.

When they were in his room and he shut the door she began to let her fear rise.

"I won't do anything you don't want." He assured her, "I promise."

She nodded and he took her hand and led her to the bed.

"First, you undress me." He took her hands and put them on the top button of his shirt.

She didn't know where she found the will to do it, but maybe it was her curiosity overall that won out. He was incredibly masculine. As she pulled his open shirt aside to look at his hard muscularly tanned body, her excitement rose up again. Then she touched him out of eagerness to see if it was possible that he was real. Her hands smoothed up over his flat hard abdomen to the

thick mounds of his strong chest, to his shoulders and she slid the shirt down his arms. Her eyes followed the movement of her hands.

The newness of her curiosity registered in her large blue eyes. Garrett was profoundly spellbound. She was so incredibly beautiful to him at that moment in all of her innocence that he became hot with desire the instant her fingers touched him. What made it even more incredible is that she had no idea what her fingers were doing to him. *So much for patience*, he thought while reaching for her.

His mouth met hers in a fury of desire and she took it. He guided her down on the bed and brought his body down on top of her. His hand slid up the smooth contour of her bared thigh pushing the hem of her dress up higher so he could cup her bottom.

She groaned against his mouth and he rolled onto his back bringing her on top of him so he could undo her zipper. Her legs fell to either side of his hips and he adjusted her so he could lift the dress over her head. Now she was naked with the exception of white lacy underwear. Her breasts were pert and perfect. His hands cupped them and her face buried in his shoulder with a very sexy moan.

In another swift movement he rolled her on to her back and raised himself above her so he could look down the length of her. There's nothing more he'd want for her to ride him, but he had to think of her innocence as hard as it was with his mind being so clouded by desire.

She never said anything but just stared up at him with her eyes dark with desire.

"Stay put." He said deeply and quickly got off her to remove his pants and underwear.

She raised herself up on her elbows to look at him. He was beautiful. Every inch of him was covered with tan taut skin

over thick muscle. Then her eyes went lower and widened, “Garrett that’s not going to fit, I—“

“It will.’ He said coming down on her again taking her mouth under his and making her forget. His hand slid down her flat belly under the lacy trim of her panties until he found to his complete delight that she was moist.

“Oh *God!*” she arched up off the bed when he slid two fingers into her. Her incredible breasts were presented to him and he took complete advantage of it taking one in his mouth.

Leah was delirious. She was hot everywhere, and what he was doing to her was making her mindless. Yet, she knew it wasn’t enough, she wanted more and before long she was begging him for it. Screaming it in fact.

Garrett slid her underwear off her and centered himself over her, “Say it again.” He said in a voice cracking with desire.

“I want you.” She moaned as he moved over her rubbing his naked form against hers. Every bit of his hard flesh was burning hers and she wanted to be lit on fire if this was any indication to what he could do to her.

“Again.” He said moving again while moving his mouth over her neck to nibble on her ear.

“I want you.” She near cried it out this time.

“As you wish love.” He reached down and pulled one of her thighs over his hip to settle between them. His mouth covered hers as he pushed into her. She stiffened slightly as he felt the barrier of her virginity. There was no way to make this easy for her except to get her as excited as she was. “Open your eyes Leah, look at me.”

She did.

With a firm thrust he broke through and covered her gasp with his mouth. She was so tight that he near came with that first thrust. It didn’t help that he was on fire for her either. The feeling of being inside her was excruciating and he needed more.

It was painful to hold back and not devour her completely and thrust roughly to claim his own pleasure, but he needed to stay grounded enough to have her enjoy it too. So he began to move slowly within her trying his best to hold back until she gave an indication that she was with him.

She did.

Her nails contracted on his shoulders the third time he moved and then the noises came. That did it. He gripped the headboard with one hand, thrust the other under her gorgeous ass and began moving forcefully in her. However it was her that slammed her mouth against his and tangled her hands in his hair until it was painful. It was her that tightened those magnificent thighs around his hips and took every powerful thrust with eager participation.

Their voices rose together and echoed around the room. Both of them were perspiring, tangled in sheets and making enough noise to nearly rattle the walls of the house.

Leah was the first to scream her release as Garrett arched up and pushed into her with a final thrust of his own. Wave after wave of torturous orgasm consumed him. He collapsed fully on top of her with a rush of air.

Leah was lost. She had never experienced anything so amazing in her life. Everything ebbed out of her, all the stress, the worry and most of all, she felt absolutely beautiful for the first time in her life. Tears started to fall from her eyes.

Garrett lifted his head and looked down at her, "Did I hurt you?" He was rough, too rough, and although he tried, she was a wildcat, he couldn't possibly control himself. Something deep within him stirred over that. Hurting her hurt him. "Leah?" he continued when she didn't answer.

She shook her head.

He brought his thumbs up to wipe away the tears, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head again.

He smiled, bent down and kissed her long and slow.

Leah kissed him back. He felt so perfect to her at that moment and she didn't want it to end. Somewhere along the way she found herself falling in love with him. She knew tomorrow he would be different and this tender side would be gone, so she was going to take as much of it as she could right now.

"Again." He said softly in her ear.

She nodded, "Yes, please."

He chuckled deeply and rolled onto his back pulling her with him, "Your turn."

"Garrett—" she started feeling very vulnerable and insecure about this position.

"Like this." He murmured cupping her bottom and sliding her up and down on him. He groaned, "God Leah—You're so damn gorgeous—" his eyes roved over her in blatant appreciation. Her beautiful breasts bounced with every movement and he swore he would have come already if he hadn't had her a moment ago.

That gave her courage and when his hands came up and cupped her breasts she found her own rhythm. It seemed natural to her and in turn she felt powerful seeing him beneath her unable to keep the look of pleasure off his expression.

"Faster—oh hell—" he gripped her hips and slammed into her until he felt himself explode into a million pieces.

It was Leah's turn to fall on him. She was throbbing everywhere and it was too incredible to describe.

"I knew it would be like this." He said brushing her hair off her face while she lay on his thick chest.

"Amazing." Was all she said before she fell asleep leaving Garrett grinning from ear to ear.

It was a great relief knowing he didn't hurt her, but the tears bothered him. If he didn't hurt her why was she crying? There

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was no question she was a tough gal, and not one to reveal her feelings. He had the distinct idea that she kept things to herself to not worry her father and now they were embedded in her. It was odd for him to be concerned, because normally he wasn't, but as he thought before, Leah was different. Special. A satiated smile pulled at his sensuous mouth, and more passionate than he could have fathomed. Sex like that only got better with practise and she pretty much blew his mind. He was prepared to be careful and nurture her the first time, but she fought to take control and *damn* did he like that.

He looked over at his bedside clock. He'd give her a few hours before he woke her again.

The next morning Leah could feel every muscle in her body screaming. She turned and looked at Garrett. He was still asleep belly down with his face turned toward her. She rolled on to her side and stared at him. He was so handsome and with every passing day of knowing him, he became more and more attractive. She sighed heavily. Was it possibly to fall hopelessly stupidly in love with someone so quickly? This wasn't a crush. She had crushes in the past, and compared to the way she felt, that was minute.

Suddenly one of his eyes popped open, "Keep looking at me like that little girl and I'll have you again."

She instantly flushed as all the events of the night before popped in her mind. She tried to quickly roll over and get out of bed but her body had different ideas. It was so sore that she groaned followed by a deep chuckle behind her.

"It's not funny." She said looking back at him.

"My ego is inflating." He said propping his head up on his hand.

"You don't need any help there and you know it."

"Ah, but I do." He bent over and kissed her.

Despite her condition she kissed him back.

“Darling, you’ll have me again if you keep that up.” He said lifting his mouth away from hers ever so slightly.

She took a deep breath and looked up at him, “It’s broad daylight.”

“hmm-mmm.” He said keeping her gaze.

“I hurt everywhere.”

He chuckled, “maybe we should see if I can help soothe your pain.”

She was about to protest when she felt his fingers curl around her inner thigh, “Oh lord.” She breathed, “So unfair.” She pinched her eyes shut as he moved them into her. Then a highly pleasurable moan tore from her.

“Jesus Leah, you’re so damn hot.” He threw the blankets off of her before he resumed his task of pleasuring her. he wanted to see her writhe beside him in broad daylight so he could see every naked inch of her flush with passion.

And she did.

Garrett had never had a woman respond to him so openly before. She was one in a million. Her body arched and moved with everything he did to her. Oh, he’d have women do whatever he wished and respond to his talents as a lover, but Leah was untouched except by him and he swore right then and there while looking at her, that he was going to keep it that way.

She reached down and grabbed his wrist.

Garrett moved over her then, “That’s right honey, show me what you like.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him, “more, I want more.”

He grinned, “you bet your ass you’re going to get more, but I’m in no hurry.”

She shook her head, “Now.”

He chuckled, “Just you wait.” He moved down her body

slowly torturing her with his mouth and hands. If he hadn't had her three times in the night, he'd be as impatient as she was, but he was able to hold back a little more and he was going to show her exactly what he was capable of.

When he moved down between her legs and covered her with his hot mouth, Leah gasped and tangled her fingers in his hair. Nothing could have prepared her for that! He'd already had her too wound up to protest, and after a few seconds she wouldn't have even dreamed of it. She started shouting and tightened her legs against his head trying to reach that incredible peak of pleasure. Just when she was just about there, he'd ease off drawing her further and further into a vortex of painful pleasure. Soon she was begging him to the point of crying. So when he finally lifted himself back on his heels, flipped her over onto her belly and pulled her back against him, she didn't protest.

"Like this." He said huskily moving his thick arm under her breasts while he positioned her on his lap so he could take her from behind.

She didn't feel complete until he separated her legs on either side of his hips and pushed into her. It was then that everything peaked at once. At that moment she'd let him do anything to her that he desired. She was so consumed with desire, it didn't matter.

Garrett found his own release moments later. He pulled her back against him, cupped her jaw and turned her face towards his so he could kiss her.

"Incredible." He murmured against the soft skin of her cheek.

She could only sigh.

He smiled, "I told you that we'd be good together."

"Oh boy." She said barely in a whisper. She honestly didn't think she had it in her.

“I’m going to teach you everything I know in the next five days that I possibly can.”

“Oh please do.” She answered causing him to chuckle.

Garrett had to admit, she was every bit as passionate as he thought she’d be. She was stubborn and strong willed and that translated well into the bedroom. Yet, she was also eager to learn and he’d teach her.

Leah was a totally different person here. It was as if that hardship that she had at home, didn’t exist. Garrett made her feel on top of the world and she soaked up every bit of the attention he gave her. A part of her would come back to reality every now and then knowing that this was only temporary and that Garrett’s attention would turn elsewhere as soon as they returned home.

They’d spent the whole weekend in bed and on Monday he’d gotten up and left for the convention before she woke. If she thought she was stiff and sore from the first night, she was practically comatose now.

Claude and his wife always made sure there was a tray of food outside the door for them, but other than that and bathroom breaks they never did leave the bed.

Just that thought alone sent a wave of heat through her pelvis and she sighed. He wasn’t even there and he affected her to the point of turning her on. She got out of bed and slowly, begrudgingly when to the shower to clean up. It was there that she let her emotions go and wept. She knew she was in love with a man that couldn’t return it. She was certain that he cared for her maybe a little but no more than he would for another of his women. She was in way to deep and the only person she could talk to about it was smitten with Garrett too.

Never in her life did she feel so alone.

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

Leah was walking on the beach when Garrett came home. He had seen her at a distance. There was no mistaking that fantastic body in a bikini and he had had her. He'd been the only man who had ever touched her. Ever since that first night with her he'd become fiercely possessive of her. As far as he was concerned, he was the only man that would touch her. He leaned against the doorframe from his bedroom and watched her. With her, it was like there wasn't a care in the world. She was so refreshing compared to what he was used to, not to mention the hot marathon of passion they shared. He'd never made love to a woman four times in one night before in his life, but he couldn't get enough of her. She was like an addiction.

The convention was possibly the longest he'd ever been too and he couldn't wait to get away and back to her. Kimmy actually had the nerve to ask him to dinner to which he warned her outright to remember her place. From the shocked look on her face he could see that she'd never been told that by a man before in her life. It was obvious that she was used to getting her way.

Sean approached from behind and Garrett turned his head slightly so that he wouldn't have to take his eyes off of her, "How was her day?"

"Mickey said that she spent most of it down at the beach."

Garrett nodded, "No phone calls or anything?"

"No she didn't make any."

That was odd, you'd think she want to tell her father that she was safe and sound.

"Tell Mickey to take her shopping in the village tomorrow."

"Will do." Sean said.

He turned his head a little more so Sean could see his expression, "And not to let a man near her."

Sean resisted a smile, "He's already aware of that boss." He had already informed Mickey not to have another man even

touch her or he'd be looking for a job elsewhere. He knew Garrett well enough to see that he was possessive of Leah.

Garrett nodded before he straightened himself and walked down to the beach toward Leah.

Sean watched with a slow smile as Leah spotted him and rushed up to him just to be gathered in his arms and kissed senselessly. From the first day he'd met her, he thought she was perfect for him. He'd spent five years watching his boss be alone and emotionally cut off from the opposite sex even though he had enough attention from them to warrant some connection.

"Hi." She said breathlessly looking up at him.

"Hi yourself. How was your day?"

"Amazing. I think I'm waterlogged." She said tilting her ear and digging at it with her fingers.

He chuckled, "you look very yummy." His eyes went to her breasts that her top was pasted to from seawater.

She flushed, "I'm soaked."

"Sexy."

"Okay, enough." She laughed unable to hold it in.

"We should go out tonight."

"Where?"

"There's a casino in the town, I should take you. There's dancing besides gambling, and dining."

"I'd love it!"

"Find something irresistibly sexy to wear while I shower." His eyes went over her, "On second thought, we'll shower together." He took her hand and led her back to the house not wasting any more time.

The shower lasted over an hour and they had run out of hot water fifteen minutes prior to getting out but they barely noticed.

He wrapped a towel low around his waist and was shaving while she watched him. "Go pick something blue to match your eyes." He said through his reflection in the mirror.

She leaned back against the door and smiled. "Blue huh?"

"My favourite color." He smiled while lifting his chin to shave underneath.

"Maybe I don't have anything that color."

"Don't lie, I told the saleslady to make sure you did." He mused.

"Cad." She said before leaving causing him to chuckle and watch her go.

He chose a black suit with a red shirt and matching tie. To Leah he was lethal to her sex. Yet she managed with a royal blue velvet strapless dress.

"Wow." He said while adjusting his tie. She had pinned her hair up and it showed the elegant curve of her neck and shoulders. She looked like royalty. "But—" he said smiling.

"But?"

"Something's missing."

"Is there?" she looked down her body trying to think of what it was.

"Leah."

When she looked up he was holding a black velvet box.

"What is it?"

"A gift."

She shook her head, "That's jewellery isn't it? Garrett I can't accept it."

"Too late I already bought it."

She placed her hand on her hip.

"Look honey, the island's elite go to this place and I'm telling you that if you walk in there with the two thousand dollar Christian Dior that you're wearing without any jewellery what does that say about me."

"A w-wwhat?"

"The dress." He said nodding toward it.

"Oh, no this is not—" she reached behind her and began to

unzip it. That seemed to bring her out of the dreamy haze she'd been in for the past few days. What was she doing? She was acting just like the woman she didn't want to be.

He approached her in several strides gripping her shoulder with his free hand, "It's not a crime to buy things for you. Quit being so ashamed Leah."

She still shook her head.

"Wear the dress, and take the necklace." He said a little more abruptly.

"I can't." she said feeling more and more ashamed.

"You have to." He pursed his lips refusing to get frustrated, "It says I'm too damn cheap to purchase a gift for my gorgeous girlfriend. It's expected if you understand anything about the circles I'm in."

Girlfriend? Her face softened and so did her temper at those words. Did he mean it?

"I can't return it." He said releasing her so he could open the box, "Jewellery like this is not refunded."

She gasped at the sapphire and diamond necklace with matching earrings. "Oh my God!" her eyes shot to his, "How much was this?"

"A lady doesn't ask, she just accepts." He said with a smile while removing the necklace, "Turn around."

She actually did surprising herself completely just to look into the full length mirror as he clasped the necklace into place. It was in a word, stunning. She never had any jewellery. Her mother's wedding band was buried with her and she didn't own much along the lines of valuable items so Leah never thought much of it, but this, this was the most incredible thing she'd ever seen. Her fingers roamed over the beautiful stones and she felt like weeping, "Not fair Garrett, I have nothing to fight you with."

"The hell you don't." he said in her ear. His hands slid down her sides and circled around her waist pulling her back against

him. "Every inch of you is a weapon. You just don't realize it."

She should have been offended but the truth of it was she was heating up, "Stop it, or I'll never see civilization again." She whispered knowing they'd end up back in bed.

He chuckled while releasing her and handed her the earrings, "They'll set off your eyes."

Twenty minutes later they were in a sleek black car driving towards the town.

Garrett couldn't help but glance at her several times. She was going to knock people on their knees when he showed up with her and to think that he'd discovered her half naked riding a horse on his land, and cleaned up like this, was incredible. He had to admit that he had a talent for seeing beauty.

As he pulled up to the front entrance of a beautifully lit building he turned to her, "Stay there until I help you out."

She looked at him with her hand on the door handle not even thinking of where they were and the etiquette that was required.

A Valet opened the door for him and he got out to walk around to the passenger side as her door was being opened also.

"I'll take it from here." He said tipping the man and taking Leah's hand.

Several flashes went off in her face and she scrunched her eyes, "What on earth—"

"Paparazzi honey, smile."

"here?"

"I told you." He whispered as he circled an arm around her waist for several pictures, "to prepared for it, now smile, or they'll think I'm dating a sour mule."

She actually laughed just as several more flashes went off followed by a few shouted questions.

Who's the woman Mr. Walsh?

How'd you meet?

Does that mean your Swiss model is on the outs?

"Swiss what?" she looked at him.

He gave her an amused glance while leading her toward the front doors.

She rolled her eyes, "you dog you."

"It was one weekend, and it was before I even met you so shush." He teased, "Besides honey, you blew my mind, she didn't."

She stalled just inside the doors out of sight of the eager paparazzi, "One weekend and they knew about it?" she said wide eyed.

"I was seen with her, and it's no big deal. The tabloids are all gossip. They're just trying to get a reaction out of you so they have something to print."

"No, I understand that, but I mean, what about me?"

He paused looking down at her, "You?"

"Am I just a weekend?"

He closed up. He never put any thought into that and ending this after these few fantastic days never occurred to him, but that was his pattern. It always had been.

She saw the change in his expression and dread filled her, "I am, aren't I. I mean all of this, it doesn't mean anything."

"We had an arrangement Leah."

The sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach was as real as it got.

He looked around before he took her arm and led her to an alcove, "What did you expect? That I'd fall in love with you? I've been through this a hundred times. There's nothing wrong with what we've been doing and what we share. We made an arrangement and don't lie and tell me that you haven't been enjoying yourself."

She never said a word but just looked up at him.

“Leah, you are naïve, but I was always honest with you.”

“Yes, you were.” She finally said.

“So can we just enjoy the few days we have left?” he said arching his brows in question.

Could she? She was crazy about him despite fighting her feelings earlier. She had no doubt that every woman he'd brought here and treated the way he did felt the same. Slowly she nodded and steeled her expression to stop her eyes from watering. She'd already given him her body and her heart and she would make the most out of the time that was left despite the feeling of it breaking in two.

He smiled and ran a finger down her jaw, “It's good to see that you understand.”

She did to a point, but when they got home, it would be over. There was no way she could stay in a relationship that feelings weren't returned despite what they shared.

The night was amazing and she should have been more attuned to it. He introduced her to some very wealthy people, some whose names she even recognized from the media. They danced, and even gambled a little. She must be a good actor because he didn't even seem to notice that a part of her died a little earlier on. She should have felt like a princess from the way he treated her, but she realized now that this was the way he treated all women and it took away from the event.

That night Leah felt Garrett's arm tightened around her after they'd made love. She had to admit she liked it. Even though the man was a brute, temperamental, and at most times emotionally unattached, she had to admit she cared about him more than she wanted to admit to herself and his confession crushed her, but he was right. He was honest with her from the start in what he wanted from her.

Then next few days went by quickly because he was at the convention during the day, but their nights were still scorching

and try as she might she couldn't deny him the use of her body.

When he was gone during the day Mickey had taken her shopping a couple of times and she'd bought a few souvenirs refusing to use his credit card despite her bodyguard's encouragement.

It seemed like everything was a dream and before long she was staring at the familiar landscape of her home.

Her father's truck wasn't there, so she knew she was going to be alone for a bit, which was fine with her. She felt like weeping.

"Leah."

She turned and looked at him.

"It was a fantastic few days."

She nodded.

His eyes searched hers, "Are you okay?"

She managed to give him the best fake smile she could muster, "just tired." She leaned over and gave him a kiss. It may have gone on too long, but it was her way of saying goodbye.

"Wow." He smiled. "I'll call you tomorrow if I can. I have a load of work waiting for me."

"That's fine." She said getting out of the door that Mickey opened for her. Sean already had her luggage on the front porch.

Mickey shut the door and Garrett watched her in silence. Something was wrong with her. Was it the way he spoke to her that night out? If it was, she didn't say a word and it wasn't like her to keep anything bottled up, that's why he liked her so much. Maybe she was tired like he thought.

When Leah came in the house, she felt like bursting into tears, but it would have to wait because the phone rang. Kimmy.

She was bursting with excitement telling her all about her trip and how Garret and she had spent time together.

"Kimmy we need to talk." She said solemnly.

"What's wrong?"

"There's something you need to know, can we meet later

on?"

"You're place?"

"How about I meet you in town at the diner."

"Okay." She said hesitantly. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Right as rain." She lied.

After she hung up she went to her room and unpacked. She was going to need a ride to get rid of all of these crazy emotions. It seemed to help her at times when she worried about her father and the ranch, but this was different.

She didn't even bother with the saddle and rode full out across the fields. Unknown to her Garrett sat on his buckskin on a ridge watching her. She didn't see him, but he certainly saw her. Obviously she needed to clear her head too, just like he did.

That night Leah was wringing her hands while waiting for Kimmy. It was going to be the hardest thing she ever did confessing to her about Garrett, but she valued their friendship and needed to.

She came in like a breath of fresh air and sat across from her, "Hi! Gosh I have so much to tell you Leah. I had the time of my life! Garrett was such a gentleman. He took me—"

She held up her hand, "I need to say something before you continue."

Kimmy suddenly became concerned, "What is it? Are you ill?"

She shook her head, "I don't know how to tell you so I'm just going to come out and say it. Truth of it is, you will hear this sooner or later from someone." She took a deep breath, "I was with Garrett in the Caribbean."

Kimmy's mouth fell open and she flushed, "That can't be true. You don't do that sort of thing."

She nodded, "I was. I was there for six days with him Kimmy. I'm sorry. I didn't want you to know, but I know you

have a crush on him and—“

Her words were cut off when she water from Kimmy’s glass splashed into her face.

“I trusted you as a friend! Here you were behind my back!” she got to her feet abruptly.

“Your back?” she said trying to fight the humiliation, “I never did anything behind your back. You work for him that’s it!”

“How did you know Leah?” she said cynically, “Because he told you? You’re so stupid.” She turned and walked away leaving her gaping at her back. Was she? She felt like crying and picked up a napkin to wipe her face. Was that whole week a lie?

When she got home her father was back and unlike Kimmy or Garrett could easily see the heartbreak on her face.

“Come here angel.” He said and she went to him and held her.

“I’m so stupid.”

He smiled, “No honey, you’re a kind hearted person, who fell for a man that needed you.”

She sniffed, “Garrett doesn’t need anyone.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you could have seen the way he looked at you the first day he showed up with his construction foreman.”

She looked up at him, “W—what?”

“I’m a fool, maybe an old fool, but I know what I saw. Do you think I would have been stupid enough to let my only daughter go off with a man if I didn’t think you belonged together?”

“He doesn’t want me.”

“He does, he just hasn’t come to terms with it yet.”

She didn’t believe him. Oh, how she wished it was true, but Garrett didn’t need anybody. Now because of it she was heartbroken and her best friend hated her.

CHAPTER FIVE

A whole week went by, then another, and she hadn't heard from Kimmy or Garrett. She tried phoning Kimmy a couple of times but didn't get an answer, just the answering machine. Garrett, she didn't try phoning at all. Every time she thought of it her heart twinged painfully in her chest. Her father told her to give it time, but she couldn't possibly live through this if he needed time. She needed to get away from it all. Then two days later everything came to a head.

She was late.

She went and bought one of those home pregnancy tests and it was positive. She'd heard that they sometimes gave a false negative but not the other way around. Sobbing she slid to the floor and pulled her knees to her chest. Things just kept getting worse and worse.

She was supposed to start school in the fall which was only a few weeks away and she was pregnant by a man who didn't want her. Her best friend wasn't speaking to her, and worst of all, she needed to tell her father.

She wished her mother was alive because she'd know what to do. *Pull yourself together Leah.* She scolded herself. There had to be a solution to all of this.

A few days later, Garrett was leaning on a pole fence while the auctioneer echoed through the crowd. Sean and one of his ranch hands Rocky were on either side of him.

He was after a certain bull that was up for sale and the horse auction was almost over. Then the cattle would start.

He was deep in conversation with Rocky when Sean nudged him. He turned to his bodyguard who nodded toward the ring. No one could mistake the horse that was brought through the gate.

It was Leah's.

He stood straight. "What the hell." He said to himself. There's no way in hell she would sell that horse. He eyed it carefully, that was definitely Rocket. He pulled out his phone and spoke to his ranch hand at the same time, "Rocky, buy that gelding. I don't care what it costs." He flipped open his phone and dialed a number.

"Yes boss."

Sean waited patiently while Garrett talked on the phone. His voice raised a couple of times but it was hard to hear over the auctioneer.

He finally hung up just as the auctioneer shouted sold and called Rusty's number that he held up.

"Boss?"

"Her father doesn't know where she went."

"How long has she been gone?"

"Two days. He alerted the authorities, but they have no living relatives so he has no idea where she would go." He nodded toward the ring, "Find out where they're sending the check for that horse."

"Yes sir." He turned and made his way through the crowd.

"Boss," Rocky came up to him, "Did you want the bull."

"Fuck the bull. Get the trailer, load the horse and get home."

"Yes boss." He said running through the crowd.

He took his Stetson off and ran his hand through his hair. Where the hell was she? He needed to stop at Frank's and see if she left any clues. He should have phoned her, but he'd been busy and he needed to see if what he felt for her would pass.

It didn't.

He couldn't stop thinking about her. It was driving him completely insane. Even his dreams were filled with her and what they shared. He woke up with vivid images of them together which was so clear and real, he actually had sweat

dripping from his brow. She had completely bewitched him.

But why would she leave? She would never do that to her father, she loved him too much.

Maybe she told Kimmy where she went. He'd go home and get her to tell him.

"I haven't talked to her in two weeks." Kimmy confessed. Garrett looked worried. She'd never seen him like that. "Why?"

"She left town and no one knows where she went."

Her expression was a mix of shock and worry, then guilt. "Oh no."

"What happened?" he said abruptly. No one could miss that telltale look.

She averted her gaze.

"Kimmy?" he placed his hands on his hips, "You have about two seconds before you're out on your ear. Tell me where my girl is!"

That made her bring her eyes back to his suddenly with a look of horror, "She told me you spent time together in the Caribbean. I d-didn't believe her. I was mad because I thought she lied. I thought that we—well you and I—"

He felt his anger rise while she stumbled through her confession. "You had no reason! I never gave you any indication that I found you attractive."

She flinched at the harshness of his voice, "I know!" She blurted, "I was jealous. I'm sorry. I was so mean to her. I threw a glass of water in her face—" she burst into tears and buried her face in her hands.

"Over nothing!" he spat before he turned and walked out of the room. It sounded like those past few weeks were hell on her and he was no better. He tried pushing her out of his mind and stayed away from her. Why didn't she at least try and call him? He already knew the answer to that. She was the most

infuriating stubborn woman he'd ever met.

He went to his study and phoned his private detective. It was a half an hour later when he got off the phone and left his house walking by a still weeping Kimmy. Despite how angry he was at her, Leah would still want her to have a job. For her, he'd keep her friend, but she had a lot of apologizing to do. For now he'd make her suffer before he told her his decision. He needed to find Leah.

Frank was sitting on the front porch when Garrett's truck roared up in a spray of dust and gravel. He'd been waiting for him. He was frantic with worry himself, but he had to still his temper around Garrett. He didn't have the means to locate his daughter, but he did. He had the money and the resources. However, that still didn't mean he still wasn't going to pull the shotgun on him that was lying across his lap if he so much as stepped out of line by an inch.

Garrett rounded the truck and paused when he saw Leah's father gripping the rifle.

"I blame you for this." He said casually.

Garrett nodded and came up the steps to sit beside him, "I was a complete idiot." He said after a moment. He removed his hat and rubbed the back of his neck, "A complete and utter idiot."

"Yes you were." He said looking at him.

Garrett leaned forward and put his arms on his knees while dangling his hat off his fingers and staring at it as he continued speaking. "I have a detective looking into it. He's just about the best there is."

Frank nodded. "She's a big girl and I'm sure she could look after herself, but I worry." His eyes ran over Garrett's posture. He was definitely humbled. Unless he'd seen it himself, he wouldn't have believed it. From the first time he met him, he knew it would take something spectacular to bring this man to his knees and it looked like his daughter was capable.

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

“Why would she run off like that?”

He shrugged, “There are two reasons I can think of.”

He sat back and looked at him, “Two?”

Frank nodded, “One, she had some illness that she doesn't want me to know about because it tore me up to watch her mother die.”

“And the second?” he felt horror at that thought and he might have even paled slightly. Leah, his beautiful Leah, dying alone somewhere was gut wrenching.

Ted studied Garret's expression carefully before he spoke. “She's pregnant.”

Now the first statement fill him with horror, but the second, it nearly knocked his socks off, “W-what did you just say?”

“You heard me Garrett. In all honesty I think she's pregnant and rather than shame me or get the townsfolk gossiping, she left.”

Garrett fell his head in his hands, “Oh hell.”

“You're a complete idiot. For a man who has everything, you have no idea what you let go. Hell, you're lucky I don't put a hole between your eyes, but my daughter loves you and knowing her she'd want you to live.”

Slowly Garrett lifted his head and looked at him. “You're a good man Frank.”

“I know I am. I also know that your life wasn't easy, but you don't need to go down that same path. Find Leah.”

“I'll try.” He said standing up and placing his hat back on his head.

“If you don't mind, bring home my grandchild too.”

He nodded and turned to leave.

“Marry her too Garrett or I *will* shoot you.” He said as he started down the steps.

He paused but didn't turn around or say a word in response. Then he got in his truck and tore out of there.

Leah was staring at the tabloids. She was at the grocery checkout with a few things for supper when one of them caught her eyes. It was Garrett. He was at some charity event in Texas and had a drop dead gorgeous blonde on his arm. She felt sick looking at the two of them. Her eyes flashed to the date. It was last weekend.

“Ma’am”

She should have known that he could move on so easily. There were a number of women that would have taken her place without the slightest hesitation.

“Ma’am”

She was still as much in love with him as she was that day she left home. It didn’t help that she was swollen with his child. Her hand splayed over her large belly as a slight discomfort took her.

“Ma’am!”

Finally she averted her gaze to the bag boy who was looking at the floor beneath her feet. She looked down and saw a pool of water there at the same time a strong contraction hit her like a sledge hammer. She doubled over. She heard someone shout for an ambulance.

“Take a deep breath.” Came a soothing voice.

She looked up to see a woman with slightly greying hair kneeling next to her, “A deep breath honey.”

“I—“ she screeched as another contraction took her and clutched her middle, “Oh, it hurts!”

“The ambulance is on its way!” shouted the check out lady while leaning over the counter to look at her.

“Another deep breath.” The older woman smiled, “It’s your lucky day. I’m a nurse.” She smiled reassuringly.

All along Leah felt as if God had abandoned her, but here in her desperate need, he gave her something. She started

laughing.

Twenty minutes later she was on a stretcher and being wheeled toward the ambulance. The woman with her went to leave but Leah begged her not to. "No please don't go!" she clutched the older woman's arm while they were putting her into the ambulance.

"All right." She looked at the two paramedics a man and a woman, "I'm a nurse. Can I go with her?"

"If it's fine with her, no problem." Said the woman who got in the back with the both of them.

"I'm so scared." She confessed to her. The woman was a stranger but she had a kindness about her that made her not want to let her go.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty two." She howled as another contraction took her, "My identification is in my purse." She continued after the painful wave passed.

The older woman dug in her purse and found a wallet. "The hospital will need all of this to admit you. I can help."

"Thank you so much." She said clutching the woman's hands in her own.

"Is there anyone you want us to call?"

"There's no one." She sobbed, "I have no one."

She smiled trying to divert her worries, "My name is Candace by the way. I'll stay as long as you want."

"Thank you." Everything about this woman was so reassuring to her. In her darkest moment, she was grateful for her presence. She needed her.

The female paramedic lifted back her skirt and sent a speaking glance to Candace.

Candace saw the look and knew it was one of concern. She just nodded to the woman and smiled down at Leah as if nothing was wrong, "What are you going to name the baby?"

Leah clenched her teeth as another contraction took her. “It hurts so much!”

“That’s normal honey.” She said soothing her while she smoothed her hand through Leah’s hair.

“G—Gregory for a boy.” She finally said as the wave of pain passed again, “It’s my father’s middle name.”

“It’s nice.” She said, “What about a girl?”

She laughed almost deliriously, “I won’t have a girl.”

“Are you certain?” Candace had heard that many times over her last twenty five years as a nurse and usually the parents were only half right.

“You’d have to meet his father to understand.” She wrenched again.

“Did you get that line?” she heard one the male paramedic say from the driver’s seat.

“Just.” The woman answered while pushing the needle into her arm to start the I.V. She flicked Candace a look, “Barely.”

“Give her something for the pain.” He said.

“Already on it.”

“No,” she protested, “I don’t want it. It’ll hurt the baby!”

“There are some things they can give you that don’t cross the placenta. It’s fine.” Came the soothing voice again. That’s the last thing she heard.

“My credit card?” Garrett said with astonishment as the company phoned him to okay a large charge.

“Yes Mr. Walsh, came the woman’s voice. From Texas.”

“Where?”

“State children’s hospital in Austin.”

He’d completely forgotten about the credit card he’d given Leah. There was no activity on it at all. This was the first charge so the company was calling to check it out since its issue nine months ago. *Nine* months. He’d seen several seasons come and

go and now the last snow of winter was barely traceable on the ground. Not one day went by that he wasn't worried about her.

"Mr. Walsh?"

"Okay the charge and any other on that card from now on." He may have sounded calm but inside he was reeling with fear and excitement all at the same time. For almost eight months he'd been looking for her, but she hid herself well. He had found out who had gotten the check for her horse. It was sold to a friend who was instructed to take it to auction. She took the money her friend gave her and left. The bus was a dead end, and he had half a dozen men looking for her. Still looking for her.

"Yes sir." She said and hung up.

He didn't even set the phone down. He dialed the airport and got the pilot to warm up his jet, for Austin. Then he went to pack a few things knowing he was going to be staying a few days. On his way up the stairs he shouted at Sean to do the same.

"They found her?" Sean said following him up the stairs.

"No, but I gave her a credit card when we started seeing each other. She's gone into labour and the hospital began charging her bill on it. The company phoned me."

"Jesus! What a lucky break." Sean said before splitting from his boss and rushing towards his own room.

It was on the way to the airport that he phoned Frank and gave him the relief of some news after all these months. He was sure the man aged ten years. He knew that Leah would have called him if it meant that she couldn't be tracked by him and she was right. He had a tap on her father's phone.

"Take it easy on her Garrett. Don't let your temper take over."

"I'll try." He said before he hung up. Sean glanced at him briefly in the review mirror, while he made a few more calls.

Garrett had come to care for Frank over the past few months

while Leah was missing. He'd kept him up to date on any progress he made which wasn't any. It gave him an excuse to go and check on the man to see if he was coping all right. He had to hand it to him. He was coping much better than he was. The unknown had him in knots for months. He was beyond worried about Leah and his unborn child, if that was the reason she'd left. Now he knew for sure. It was.

The flight was less than an hour and Garrett was on the phone to the hospital as soon as the plane landed.

Sean took his luggage to the car.

"Surgery. What surgery!" he burst getting Sean's attention.

He saw his boss run his hand through his hair then down his face in complete shock and he nodded slowly as if the person on the other end could see him. It was a side of Garrett that no one else ever saw and Sean shared his worry.

"I'm a half an hour away." He said. "Is there any news on the baby?" he paused, "Yes, thank you." He hung up.

Sean noticed that he'd paled slightly. "boss?"

"She's going for a c-section. She lost a lot of blood." He looked at him, "You have thirty minutes to get me to the hospital, or I'll fire you."

"I'll get you there in twenty five." He said before he closed the door behind him.

The thing is, Sean knew Austin. It was where he started working for Garrett. Once behind the wheel he tore out of there leaving black strips on the pavement.

Twenty five minutes later almost to the second, he pulled up in front of the hospital. Garrett was out of the door even before the car came to a stop.

"Leah Cooper." He said to the nurse at the front desk.

"Are you family?"

"Yes." He answered without hesitation.

"Your relationship?"

"The father of her child." He answered.

"One moment." She entered the name on the computer then picked up the phone.

Sean was just coming in the front doors when she hung up.

"The doctor said to take you to the waiting room Mr--?"

"Walsh. Garrett Walsh."

She stopped and looked at him finally recognizing him for the first time and gave him a smile, "of course." She said "Right this way." Everyone in Austin knew who he was. He was a celebrity of sorts being born and raised here.

Once in the waiting room, Sean took a seat but Garrett couldn't. He walked over to the window and looked down at the streets below.

"She's a tough gal Mr. Walsh."

He nodded but didn't say anything.

"Mr. Walsh?"

This time it was another man's voice. Garrett turned around to see a man in a white coat and tie enter the room, "I'm Doctor Chavez." He said holding out his hand.

Garrett shook it, "how's Leah?"

"We're still working on her."

He gave him a puzzled look, "Working--?"

"Mr. Walsh, would you please sit down."

"No." he said putting his hands in his pants pockets. His expression was steeled despite his inner dread. Something was wrong, very wrong. If a doctor asks you to sit down, then it's out of worry that you'll have problems standing. He remembered this when he was young and the doctors told his father news of his mother.

"Very well." He folded his hands in front of him. "Your wife has what we call HELLP syndrome. Unfortunately it has gone undiagnosed, and—"

He held up his hand, I don't need to know the details. Is she going to live?"

He darted his eyes to the large man that just got up from his chair and stood behind Garrett. "She's lost a lot of blood. With HELLP syndrome, there's a problem with clotting. Unfortunately she didn't know this, and neither did the delivery team."

"Do I look like I need to be spoon fed?" He said abruptly referring to the man's long explanation.

"No, of course not." He said quickly, "She coded on us twice, but we did get her back."

"She's alive?" he said with profound relief in his tone.

He nodded, "But we won't know how much damage was done until she wakens—"

"Wakens—"

She hasn't woken up yet, but we anticipate the next twenty-four hours will tell."

"Jesus." He murmured. She was alone through all of this with no one. Suddenly he felt Sean's strong hand grip his arm.

"Sit down boss." He said. Garrett may not have realized it but he swayed slightly.

"If you want my professional opinion Mr. Walsh, I think she'll be fine."

He let Sean help him to his seat. He did feel relief over that statement. Then the next priority, "How is the baby?"

"He's fine. A big boy over eight pounds."

For the first time since he'd gotten there he felt some of the guilt lift.

"Congratulations boss." Sean said beside him while patting him on the shoulder. "You're a father."

A father.

Those words came with a loaded cloud. Would he be a good father? Could he be? His genetics didn't leave much to be

desired.

"You can see him if you like, the nurse with your wife said she wanted to call him Gregory. It was lucky that a nurse just happened to be next to her when she went into labour."

"That's a great name." he heard himself say. Although he didn't miss the rest of what the doctor said. This nurse will be rewarded for saving Leah's life.

"I'll let you know when your wife awakes."

"Actually we're not married." He said feeling stable enough to stand, "Something I'll remedy as soon as she wakes up. I'll see my child now."

"Of course."

He was led to a nursery where about another twelve babies were, but for some reason out of all of them he knew which one was his. There was a nurse sitting in a rocking chair with a gown over her uniform holding one of them and an older woman standing outside looking through the window into the nursery. His eyes went to the baby being held.

"I take it you're Leah's other half?" The older woman said smiling up at him as he turned to go in the nursery.

"Who are you?" When Garrett stopped to speak to her, the Doctor went in the nursery and spoke to the nurse.

"I'm Candace—"

"the good Samaritan." He said with a slight smile, "Doctor Chavez told me that you saved her life. I owe you a debt of gratitude."

"It's not necessary. I was just doing what I was trained to do. Besides, your wife was amazing."

That was the second time someone referred to Leah as his wife. This time, however, he didn't correct it. "Yes she is."

She smiled wider. Leah said she had no one, but the look in this man's eyes was one she had seen often when a man became a father. Pride. Obviously he came rushing in to be with her and

maybe Leah didn't realize it, but he cared.

Garrett was still listening but his attention was on the doctor who was speaking to the nurse in the nursery who directed her attention to him and smiled.

"Well," she said seeing his attention go to the window past her, "I'm actually here on vacation from Las Vegas visiting my sister for a week." She chuckled, "Wow, it's been exciting."

At the same time the nurse in the chair stood up with the baby in her arms turning him so Garrett could see his son.

"You're telling me." He said looking at the bundle wrapped in the blue receiving blanket.

She then moved the blanket out of the baby's face,

"She said it would be a boy." Candace continued watching the play of emotions over the man's face.

"she did?" his eyes went back to her.

"I know what she meant now."

"Pardon?"

"Never mind," she laughed seeing his puzzled expression, "I told her I wouldn't leave until I knew she was all right." She paused, "She said she had no one."

"She has me." He said concretely, "She always did."

Just then the Doctor came out, "You can hold him if you like Mr. Walsh. The nurse said he's doing well."

"Thank you, And I do want to hold him."

Candace nodded toward a shelf with folded gowns on it. "You'll need to put on one of those over your clothes before you go in the nursery. He's new and can get sick easily."

Sean already handed him one before she finished speaking.

When Garrett went in and sat down the nurse handed him his son showing him how to hold him.

"Good lord, he's so small." He said in awe.

Sean stood behind him and grinned, "Wow, who knew you could create a little person."

Candace laughed, "He's really sleepy. He's been through an ordeal."

Garrett didn't hear anything after that because he was in awe at the little human being in his arms. One that he created. For the first time in his life he actually felt like weeping.

"You said you knew what she meant." His eyes went back up to Candace, "What did that mean."

"About you having a boy." Candace explained, "I asked her what she'd call the baby if it was a girl, and she said, if you met his father you'd know that it would be a boy."

He chuckled, "I see. How long are you in Austin?"

"A few more days. I called my sister and told her what happened so she didn't worry."

He nodded, "I appreciate everything you've done." He cast Sean a glance who immediately nodded getting the silent order, "I'll get my man here to drive you home. I'd like to compensate you for what you've done for Leah."

She looked back and forth at the two, "Actually I just wanted to stay and see how she was. I'm not family so they wouldn't tell me anything."

"She's still asleep. Sean will get your number and call you as soon as we hear anything." He didn't need a crowd when he went to see her and although he felt beholden to this woman, he'd make sure that he did compensate her somehow.

"I'd appreciate that."

"Ma'am," Sean said walking around and holding out his arm toward the door indicating for her to go first.

"Tell her I'll talk to her later." Candace said, "It was nice meeting you."

"I will, and you too."

She gave him a final look before walking out ahead of Sean.

Garrett looked down at his sleeping son who's cheek twitched and he found himself smiling over it. He felt warm and

heavy in his arms and he knew then and there, that he never wanted to let him go.

“Mr Walsh.”

He looked up to see the nursery nurse standing at the door.

“The doctor called a moment ago. Your wife is awake.”

Relief flooded through him, “Thank god.”

“I’ll take him.” She said stepping forward.

Garrett handed his son to the nurse and removed the gown. He waited until she tucked him into a bassinet and led him down the hall with Sean right behind him.

After a couple of more turns and another hallway she stood aside, “This is ICU, she’s only allowed one visitor at a time. “When she’s more stable they’ll move her to maternity, where I am. Probably tomorrow morning. She’s young so she’s recouping well.”

“Thank you.” He said stepping through the door.

He wasn’t ready for the sight of all the machines and tubes connected to her. Leah looked so tiny and vulnerable in the white linens. “Oh hell.” He murmured.

Another nurse was leaning over her and adjusting something when she heard him, “Mr. Walsh.” he nodded and smiled, “It’s not as bad as it looks. A lot of people have trouble with all of this, but it’s just to monitor her condition. The doctor was just in and says she’ll be fine.”

“Garrett.” came a weak voice from the bed.

“Leah.” He said in a rush of relief and approached the bed in several strides.

“What are you doing here?” her eyes opened to slits.

She looked so pale and fragile under the dim lights, “Some fool ran off with my son. I had to find her.”

She managed a smile, “Jerk.”

“Call me if you need anything. I’m just pulling the curtain for privacy,” the nurse said.

He thanked her as she pulled the curtain closed.

"You didn't give me much of a choice." Leah said trying to open her eyes more, but the lights made her head hurt.

He leaned over and brushed some of her hair tenderly off her cheek. "That was a misunderstanding, but you're as stubborn as sin and if you doubted us, you should have called me."

"I doubted us with reason."

"Don't argue. You're recuperating." He smiled.

"They—the baby, is he healthy?"

"Very."

Tears leaked from her eyes, "no one told me what happened until just before you came in. It hurt so much."

He bent over and kissed her forehead, "you shouldn't have been alone."

"You didn't call. I was scared—"

"Don't say another word. You can make it up to me later."

"Arrogant fool." She murmured closing her eyes. It hurt too much to try and keep them open and she was so tired.

Yes he was. He thought as he pulled up a chair and sat beside her while she slept. The nurse came in a few more times over the next hour to check on Leah and everything that was attached to her. One time she came in and handed Garrett Leah's things. Obviously everyone thought they were married and didn't question him at all. Being well known and rich did have its benefits.

"Did you want some coffee?" She added looking back and forth between him and Leah.

"I'd appreciate that." He said. "How long will she sleep?"

"She has a lot of drugs on board so probably all night. It'll help her heal." She said turning to leave, "She probably won't even remember you were here."

That had him concerned. He glanced over at her sleeping form. What if she decided that she didn't want him in her life, or

his son's? She was that stubborn. He opened her purse and found a driver's license with her address on it. He needed to see where she was living, to see how she managed these past months.

Sean came in at that moment, "I took that nurse home."

"You made a note where she lived."

He nodded, "I'll send a gift there tomorrow."

"Watch her." he stood up. "I need to make some calls."

"Sure thing." He stared down at her, "Shit."

"Yeah, I know. I'll be back in a minute. If she wakes, tell her that."

"No problem." Sean said occupying Garrett's seat.

For two days Leah was in and out of it. At one point she was sure she'd seen her father. On the third day she felt as if a haze had lifted. Her eyes went to someone by the window. The light outlined a form but her eyesight was a little blurry.

"Dad?"

The figure turned around and it was unmistakable the shape. It was that of a younger man, "Garrett?" she said with a little more disbelief.

He stepped away from the window and she saw him clearly.

"Disappointed?" He quirked a brow.

"Yes—no—oh heck, I don't know." She turned away to try and still the rapid beating of her heart. He was still devastating to her.

"Leah." He said softly. "Look at me."

"When did you get in and how did you find me?" she said still not looking at him.

"I've been here for three days."

Her mind searched for some sort of clue that she knew that. There was one time maybe that she remembered a soft brush of his mouth across her forehead.

"Remembering?"

"It's all mixed up in my head." She confessed.

"The doctor said that."

"What happened?" she said finally focusing her eyes on him.

"You were really sick." He frowned, "you shouldn't have done this alone."

"Please don't start in on me."

He nodded. He'd gone to her small apartment with Sean yesterday when after her father arrived. He had him flown in. The place was a shithole. Although it looked as though she acquired a few things for the baby. A small crib, some clothing. How she got along without an income floored him. The whole thing near had him weeping. Was he that much of a bastard to make her run and live like this? The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. For some reason he thought she was tougher than this. Oh he knew she was kind hearted, but somehow he'd forgotten how naïve she was and remembered how damn stubborn she is.

He found the necklace and earrings he'd given her and couldn't believe that she didn't sell them. She could have lived for years on that and gotten better things for their child even if she pawned them.

"Pack up all of what's useful Sean, and take the rest to good will." He said fingering the necklace not turning around. His expression was raw with emotion right now and no one needed to see it.

"Yes boss." Sean said. He was also unhappy with the setting. Leah was too damn proud for her own good.

Leah's voice brought him back to the present.

"I know you're angry Garrett. I wouldn't expect anything else from you. However, I don't expect anything—"

"Stop." He said raising his hand, "Don't go that saintly route with me Leah."

She pursed her lips and stared at him.

“First of all—“ he reached into the breast pocket of his suit. “—I knew you’d say something like that.” He tossed the papers on her bedside table, “those are the documents I had my lawyers draw up and airmail to me. They are contesting for sole custody of Gregory.”

“Oh God!” she tried sitting up in bed but his put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down.

“Wait until I finished.”

Tears slipped from her eyes.

“I’m giving you two options. One, you move in with me and together we will raise our son, or two, you’ll end up in a long custody battle which will most likely end in my favour because I have the money and the lawyers the likes of which you’ve never seen.”

“I hate you.”

“I’m sure you do, but those are our options.” He said standing firm. What she didn’t know is her father put him up to this. He’d gone to him for help because he knew her the best. Frank told him to give her an ultimatum, frighten her into agreeing to his conditions so she wouldn’t run again, then he could work on the relationship side. He also said not to rush her or she’d go, lawyers or not. It was horrible what he was doing, threatening to take her son away, but he didn’t want to lose her again.

Her eyes centered on him again. “Well Garrett, I think you’ve made the decision for me.” She said cynically.

“You agree to my terms and I’ll call the dogs off.”

“I’m not sleeping with you ever again.” She spat out.

He shrugged and turned away, “suit yourself, I have no problem in that area.”

She turned her head away and couldn’t stop the tears that fell from her eyes. “Is my father here?” She said in a cracked voice.

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

His chest tightened hearing it, but he had his reasons for doing what he did. "He's outside."

"Can you please get him?" She said completely beaten.

"I will." He collected the papers from the bedside table and left the room.

Ted was leaning against the wall outside. "How'd she take it?"

"She hates me." He said softening his hardened expression. "I was an ass."

He shrugged, "She'll fight it for awhile."

"Knowing how stubborn she is, I'm thinking until our child is in high school."

He chuckled, "You chose her, you deal with it." He said before he went in the room.

After another week in the hospital Leah was released into Garrett's care. Sean pushed the wheelchair while Garrett carried Gregory. She tried her best not to say a word to him. However, it was hard to keep her mouth shut when he insisted on helping her with their new baby.

Actually he wasn't doing anything wrong. If anything he was a very attentive father which shocked her completely.

She was silent in the car ride to the airport too yet he seemed not to notice. He spent the whole time on his little handheld computer besides checking on Gregory who was strapped in beside him, not her. It angered her more. He seemed to only be concerned with his son. Although that should comfort her somewhat, she'd nearly died having him and if he cared about her at all wouldn't he pay her some attention?

After he snapped the car seat next to him on the plane he sat down and crossed one leg over the other staring at her.

Of course she was craving the attention, but now that she got it, she didn't know what to do. The whole situation seemed

uncomfortable especially with what those eyes always did to her. “What?”

He shrugged then his eyes went to her breasts which were engorged with milk.

“Garrett!” her eyes popped wide.

He grinned, “I can’t help it honey, and you are very — voluptuous.”

She rolled her eyes. That wasn’t the kind of attention she was looking for, but it still made her warm up on the inside even though she masked it.

“Tell me you that you’ve always had me on your mind since you left.”

She focused on him again but never said anything.

He smirked letting his eyes go over her.

Leah knew this wasn’t going to be easy. He was seductive, gorgeous and downright irresistible, “You’re forcing me to stay with you, but I won’t be your sex slave.”

He chuckled, “Is that right.”

She turned her head away. He was really difficult to resist. Even as arrogant as he was being, he was still dripping with sex appeal.

Gregory made a noise and Garrett bent over him, “I think he’s hungry.”

“He could be.” She said undoing her lap belt and standing up. She undid his straps and lifted him out of the seat. “I don’t think he’s eaten in a few hours now.” She flicked a gaze to him then around the cabin.

“There’s a stateroom in the back Leah.” He answered her unspoken question of privacy. “However, I really wouldn’t mind if you fed my son in front of me. I think it’s amazing.”

She flushed, “I don’t think—I’m just not ready.”

He pointed to the back to a door at the back of the cabin.

“Thanks.” She said just as Sean got up and opened the door

for her.

After it shut he leaned back against the seat and released a frustrated breath, "this is not going to be easy."

"I agree." Sean said. "Have you ever considered just asking her?"

"No, she doesn't work that way. I hurt her. It's going to take some time for her to trust me." He answered. Leah's feelings ran deep, deeper than any woman he'd known, and he needed to rebuild what he destroyed.

Sean thought he was probably right on that. After all, he didn't get his masters degree from a Cracker Jack box. He was smart. He'd also seen the way he was with women and knew that Garrett was more than capable in that field.

The plane was a few minutes away from the airport and Leah hadn't come out of the back yet. He made his way to the stateroom. What he saw there made his chest tighten in emotion. Leah was sound asleep with Gregory on her chest. She was flat on her back on the bed and his son was sucking on his little fist with his eyes wide open.

"Ah hell, that's enough to break a man's heart." He said to himself.

His voice woke her. Leah blinked a couple of times, startling seeing him standing over her, "I think I fell asleep."

"You're still recovering." He walked over and took the baby, "I'll carry Gregory," he held out his other hand, "Come. The plane is going to land soon."

She allowed him to help her stand. "you really care about him don't you?"

"He's my son Leah." He said with a tone of sincerity.

"Yes, but I didn't think you wanted children."

"My childhood was nothing to brag about, so I never thought about it."

"Now you have?"

“Now I have.” Was all he said. What he didn’t say was the pride he felt looking down at his son. It was no secret that he was a selfish man because he discovered at an early age to look out for himself and no one else. He had a great deal of friends, with only a select few that understood him, but this was completely different. Out of all the money and success he accomplished, this by far was the most important and profound thing he’d done in his life. Being a father.

Leah studied him silently as he stared down at Gregory. For him to admit that was a great step. She was still worried that he would grow bored with him. After all she’d seen his wall of accomplishments. The man had flitted from one woman to another like hobbies to another after he perfected his skills. She wanted so much to believe him.

The plane landed and Mickey was waiting with the car. Sean and he transferred the luggage while Leah and Garrett settled in the back.

“A car like this stands out.” She heard herself say. She was feeling a little uncomfortable. He had settled next to her with Gregory in between them.

“So?” he said looking down at her.

“People are going to see me, with a baby Garrett.”

“Again...so?”

She sighed heavily. What did it matter? It was obvious he didn’t care about his reputation, but she grew up in their town.

He saw the play of emotions over her face and understood that she grew up in the town they were heading back to tomorrow. He knew this was going to be hard for her. “You could marry me.”

She brought her eyes back to his sharply and narrowed them, “I’m not a pity case.”

He smirked, “I never even considered that Leah.”

“You don't care about me.” Her eyes went to Gregory and her voice softened, “I'm glad that you care about him.” Their baby, in her eyes, was perfect. She couldn't wait until he started growing into a toddler knowing that those newborn blue eyes of his would probably turn hazel to match his fathers. He already had a skim of black hair on his head.

“Assumption is an ongoing issue with you.”

Flicking her eyes to him, she tilted her head, “You don't leave much to go on Garrett.”

“I suppose.” He said staring at her, “Don't do that.”

She was biting her lip. She released it and nodded while turning her head away.

He knew she was vulnerable. She was trying to be strong, but with the birth of their son and her being alone for the whole duration of her pregnancy took its toll on her. Somehow along the way she lost the fight in her. He missed it. He expected more of a protest about their living arrangements because she was so righteous. “If you married me it would dispel rumour. Isn't that what you want?” He continued. She turned and looked at him again.

“I want to be in love with my husband.”

It shouldn't have, but it stung him, “Suit yourself.” He said nonchalantly. He knew women, but Leah wasn't like those women and more and more he was puzzled about her. Oh he knew she was stubborn to the teeth besides being the most beautiful sexy thing he'd ever had in his bed, but the fact that she just admitted that she didn't love him threw him. He honestly thought that from her reaction to him in the Caribbean that she did.

Leah took a deep breath contemplating his offer, “Would you be loyal?” she finally asked.

He stared at her, “Will you be willing?”

That wasn't even an issue. He could still touch her and set

her on fire. She knew he could. Even looking at him now despite her statement about not loving him, she still did. Truthfully she was defeated and didn't want to give him any more ammunition against her. Slowly she nodded.

"Then I can be faithful." He answered softly studying her expression. There was something there, he was sure of it, but she nodded and turned away.

"I need to tell my father."

"We'll stay at my apartment here in the city, get married and return home. You can call him from there tonight and invite him." He paused, "It'll be a quick service."

"That's fine." She murmured looking out the side window.

It's unfortunate he couldn't give her a wedding night because of the c-section, but he'd make it up to her when she was ready and her body was healed.

CHAPTER SIX

Kimmy was wringing her hands while waiting on the front porch for her boss to return. She'd received a message through Ellie that he was coming home with his new wife today. It had been over nine months since she had hurt her best friend and not one day had passed that she didn't feel incredibly guilty. Not once did she ever consider Leah's feelings when it came to men and time certainly put perspective on a lot of things. In twelfth grade she hooked up with Davis, Leah's boyfriend, and she forgave her. What she didn't know is that there were several other men that she'd taken away from Leah. It was all due to pride. Leah was beautiful, carefree, honest, and kind. People always were around her and she made friends easily. Kimmy on the other hand, could be snobby, and not only that, the only way she was able to take Leah's boyfriends was to sleep with them. Leah was virtuous and would never do such a thing.

The Cattle Baron's Reluctant Mistress

She could see dust rising in the distance and knew it was that huge sleek black limousine that her boss used to travel to the city in. She straightened her blazer and matching skirt. Ever since Garrett had told her outright that she should remember that she was just an employee she had started to wear more reserved clothing. Surprisingly enough he still kept her employed and treated her with blunt indifference, but not disrespectfully even though she deserved it.

Her heart started pounding in her ears as the car came into view over a rise. She was scared at how Leah was going to receive her. She didn't deserve to have her as a friend after the accusations and humiliation she gave her during their last meeting. Garrett told her that Leah was his when he told her that she still had a job right before he left for Texas. He told her that they were getting married.

Kimmy knew nothing of why Leah left. No one did. At first she thought she just went off to school, or that Garrett put her up in a nice apartment in the city, but she could never see Leah being someone's mistress. Then rumours started circulating that she was missing. When some evidence to that effect came in Garrett's mail that she processed, she was worried. She kept it to herself when people asked her about Leah because they were close. She may have been the worse friend someone could have, but she certainly wasn't going to spread rumours about her friend with what she saw. Also, she was hired to be confidential. It was more than six months of worrying.

As the car pulled up into the paved drive that monstrous bald-headed bodyguard, Sean, had got out and opened the door while Mickey got out of the other side and headed for the trunk for the luggage. She came down the steps slowly and waited. What she saw next floored her.

Sean leaned into the car and came out holding a baby car seat.

A baby!

Then Garrett got out and held out his hand to help Leah. Right then and there she knew that she was completely out of line with the both of them. First of all, Garrett never did look at her the way he was looking at Leah in that moment. Secondly, they had a child. How she could even think that she might be able to win him was ludicrous from the start. Instead she pushed her best friend away. The only one that ever understood her.

Sean carried the baby and Garrett took Leah's arm following behind closely.

She paused when she saw her and Garrett bent to say something in her ear flicking her a gaze and Leah nodded before he released her and followed Sean in the house.

Kimmy couldn't help but start crying, "I never knew." She said referring to the baby.

"No one did." Leah answered seeing the tears in her friend's eyes.

"I'm so sorry Leah. I was horrible to you."

She nodded, "I'm not mad at you Kimmy. I know you were just as infatuated with him as I was." She took a breath trying to constrain her own tears.

Kimmy walked up to her and hugged her. "I've missed you."

"The nursery," Garrett said to Sean after they went in the house. He looked out the door to see Kimmy clinging to Leah crying. Leah was holding her with Mickey hovering protectively. Obviously she'd forgiven her friend. It was too bad she couldn't forgive him. He went to turn away but something stopped him and he turned back, shoved his hands in the pockets of his slacks and took in the scene again.

"Oh no you don't!" came Ellie's voice as she rushed out of the kitchen, "You give that little one here!" Sean was on the way up the stairs with the baby.

Shrugging off what he was thinking Garrett turned grinning with pride as Ellie unsnapped his son's harness and lifted him carefully on her shoulder, "Oh my goodness, what a handsome young man!" she beamed from ear to ear at Garrett, "You are a lucky man Mr. Walsh. A beautiful wife, and a gorgeous son." She started humming as she turned and walked back to the kitchen, "Aunty Ellie is going to show you how biscuits are made."

Sean actually chuckled at the display, "Women and babies will never cease to amaze me."

"At least we don't have to worry about childcare." He said smiling.

Sean looked a little insulted, "And what's wrong with me?"

Garrett stared at him with surprise "You'll end up squishing him."

"Not likely." He defended, "I love kids."

He chuckled, "All right. You and Ellie can fight over him when I take Leah out."

"I'll win." He grinned.

"I highly doubt it. You piss her off, she'll starve you." That made him drop his smile and he glanced warily toward the kitchen door.

Garrett turned and watched the scene outside again.

"I'll go get the luggage." Sean offered. He walked past Garrett and went out the door to the car. Mickey had started to take it out of the trunk when he appeared.

Leah and Kimmy walked off together toward the corral in deep discussion.

"I'm such a jealous fool." Kimmy said as they walked toward the large red barn Garrett had just finished having built.

Leah looked at her with compassion, "It's okay Kimmy. I've had a long time to think about it. Garrett is a magnet for women, including me. I should have told you the truth sooner."

“I know why you didn’t. You didn’t want to hurt me.” She gave her a sheepish smile, “I mean I babbled on about him for weeks and he only had eyes for you.” She shrugged, “He turned down every one of my subtle hints and when I finally got brave enough to ask him out in the Caribbean he basically told me I was just his secretary and remember that.” She flushed slightly, “Little did I know that he had you with him.”

“I wasn’t immune either.” She said sincerely, “I fell in love with him.”

“Well at least he married you.” She said forcing a smile. “It’s something isn’t it?” She felt her friend’s pain. She couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through all alone through her pregnancy.

“For the baby.” She repeated solemnly almost to herself, then looked at her friend and smiled, “I’m glad he didn’t fire you.”

“He said it was because you wouldn’t want that.”

“he said that?” she said with abrupt surprise.

She nodded, “Then he told me he was going to marry you before he left for Texas.”

Leah’s mouth fell open. He made it seem like a spur of the moment thing to save her reputation or a way to give their son a father.

“I have to tell you something. It might get me fired but owe you. Leah, he’s crazy about you. I’ve never seen him smile all the time you were gone. He’s been moody and people seem like their walking on broken glass around him. There’s more—“ She cast a glance over her shoulder to see if they were being watched. Mickey followed at a distance but not close enough to hear to give them privacy.

“What is it?” she said curious. For the first time in months she felt some hope.

“He had hired some fancy detective agency to look for you.

It cost a small fortune.”

“What?” Leah stopped, “but—I mean, why?”

“I shouldn't tell you all of this, but the expense forms that came in were in excess of a hundred thousand dollars. He didn't care. He'd sign them without batting an eye.”

“God!” Leah near choked, “He—I mean, he's never said anything.”

“Of course not.” Kimmy said, “He's a millionaire. He's had hundreds of women around him and—sorry—” she said seeing the disappointment in her expression, “But you are so naïve Leah. You don't know because he was your first lover, but men don't behave like that unless they care. I wish I got a fraction of attention that he's showered you with.”

“It's not what you think.”

“No, it's not what *you* think.” Kimmy continued, “How many men out there would have married a woman with a child if they want to still play the field.”

“It's his son.”

“I know, but I'm saying that he could have just set you up and walked away with shared custody.”

“I never thought about that.”

Kimmy smiled, “No because you're too nice and because you don't have a selfish bone in your body, and that's why that man wants you.”

“Why couldn't he just tell me?”

Kimmy shrugged, “I don't know, men don't talk about their feelings, but Garrett is too self assured, it's intimidating. Maybe he just expects you to know.”

“He doesn't intimidate me. He makes me furious.” She said. “The whole time I was gone, I missed him the most. Isn't that stupid? I use to talk to our baby when I was pregnant telling him about his daddy.” Tears sprang to her eyes, “Why do things have to be so difficult. “

Kimmy hugged her again, “He’ll come around. He is smiling again and I’ve seen the way he looks at you Leah.”

She rolled her eyes, “sure. When I went into labour I was staring at a tabloid with him and some blonde on the cover.”

Kimmy didn’t know what to say to that. The only time she’d ever gone with him was to the Caribbean and he definitely didn’t look at or seem interested any other women there. Obviously he had reason. Leah was with him.

That night at supper Garrett watched his wife of one week coo over their baby. He was in a bassinet beside her and the look on her face literally took his breath away. She truly loved him.

He’d give anything to have her look at him like that again. “I thought we’d go to the city this weekend. I’d take you out to an opera perhaps.”

She looked up at him, “And leave Gregory?” she started shaking her head.

“We can take him with us but leave him in the apartment for a few hours with Sean or Ellie if you prefer.”

“I can’t.”

He set down his fork and sat back in his chair, “Leah, I want some time with you.”

“Me? What for? You made yourself clear that I could be replaced, it’s obvious that you only want me here to raise your son—“

“Shut up.”

She snapped her jaw shut, not because he told her to but because she was stunned at the vicious tone of his voice.

He pointed a finger at her, “You’re going to listen to—“

“For heaven’s sake—“ Ellie came in interrupting him and picked up Gregory, “Mr. Walsh, you watch your temper around your baby. I’ll take him and—“ she added with a wink to Leah, “—you may continue.”

“Is everyone crazy around here?” Leah said with exasperation as Ellie went back through the door to the kitchen. Then she centered her eyes back on him, “Kimmy told me that you were going to marry me when you left for Texas. That you looked for me. Is that true?” She couldn't stop from saying it. All he did was just stare at her with that famous expression that told nothing. Her heart thudded in her chest as anxiety rose within her. Did Kimmy lie?

Finally Garrett tossed his napkin on the table and stood up. “What?”

Without a word he walked toward her leaving her looking at him apprehensively. Then he turned and leaned back against the table crossing his arms across his chest while staring down at her, “I want you to tell me that you love me.”

She narrowed her eyes and stood up to at least try and get on the same level as him, but he was still way too tall. “You already know the answer to that Garrett. I think you always did, so you first.” She began to think that he was making fun of her and got angry. Kimmy *was* trying to make her feel better. There was no way Garrett would ever admit that he was vulnerable towards anyone, especially a woman. Why would she think that a man like him could love her?

His hand came up and cupped her chin tilting her face ever so slightly toward his. His eyes shifted over her face slowly until they focused on hers, “I love you.”

She was sure every cell in her body stilled in that moment. “W—what did you just say?” it came out in barely a whisper.

“You heard me and quite frankly I'm getting tired of waiting for you to admit it.” He said with a tone of amusement.

She just stared at him as if her mind was playing tricks on her.

“I mean it.” He repeated taking her arm with his other hand and pulled her toward him, “I can't think, I'm cranky and even

Ellie threatened to leave me.”

“You’re always cranky.” She murmured still stunned at what she heard. She felt like weeping.

“No, I told you before, only with you. I’m not that much of a bastard, but I swear to God Leah, you’ll drive me to drink if you don’t hurry up and confessed that you’re in love with me.”

Tears came to her eyes and she managed a smile, “You’re a crazy fool.”

“Your own bloody father told me to just let you come to terms with it because you’re so damn stubborn and if I pressed you, you’d run again, but I’m impatient. I didn’t get rich because I watch life pass me by.”

“My Dad?”

“I went to see him when I saw your horse at an auction.”

She bit her lip. Her precious Rocket.

“—which by the way could probably use some exercise, he’s as sour as you when he’s not active.”

“What do you mean—not being worked, he—“ it dawned on her then, “you bought my horse!”

“Anything that touched you I would have bought.” He said deeply, then he swallowed as if what he was going to say next was hard, “You left me.”

She threw her arms around him and he easily caught her lifting her off the floor.

“Garrett, you’re so hard to understand—“ she sniffled turning her face into his neck, “—I was scared. I didn’t want my father to be tainted by something I’d done—“

“We’d done.” He interrupted, “and how would you have known. You should have told me. It tears me apart thinking you endured this all by yourself.” His arms contracted.

“I didn’t know.” She pulled back from him but he still didn’t release her, “I saw you in a tabloid with a woman—“

He scoffed.

"I did!"

"A woman who clung to me when I was heading into a charity auction, *not* my date." He said seriously, "I went alone. In fact I went everywhere alone until now."

That statement was the one that made the tears start to flow because he'd said it in a way that meant his whole life, not just the last few months.

"I didn't marry you for my son Leah," he continued softly, "I married you because I love you. I've been alone a long time and you're the only one that made me feel truly worth something. The last woman I'd been with was you. Gregory is just an added bonus."

"You're infuriating," she sniffled with a smile.

"You're stubborn."

"Arrogant."

"Beautiful, sexy, damn hot in bed—" she slapped a hand over his mouth causing him to smile.

"Point taken." She said in a whisper casting a glance at the door that Ellie went through.

He let her slide to the floor and cupped her face to rub away the tears with his thumbs as his eyes searched hers, "I have someone now who likes the things I like to do, and understands a side of me I don't show many people."

"You could have anyone—"

"But you," he continued, "The only woman I ever missed in my life."

"Well," she smiled fully, "Nine months was a long time."

"I meant every time I dropped you off at your house Leah. Nine months was filled with devastating loneliness."

Now she was really weeping.

"Now say it." He added softly.

She nodded, "I felt so lost when I left." she took a shuddered breath, "I missed you more than my own father. You made me

fall in love with you when you took me to that beautiful paradise.”

He grinned, “When I touched you for the first time, I was hopeless. Then in the Caribbean, I made love to a woman for the first time.”

She buried her face in his chest and he held her, “Now that we have that sorted out.” He said deeply bending his head and inhaling her scent, “You guard your sweetness around Mickey from now on.”

She brought her head up, “What? Why?”

“He’s infatuated with you.”

She blinked a couple of times, “that’s crazy.”

“Sweetheart, you’re as potent as liquid heroine. Don’t doubt it. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Now he’s a damn good bodyguard, but I will fire him if he so much as touches you without reason beyond his duties.”

“He’s nice, but he never says anything. There’s never been any indication that—“

“There has, you may not see it but I do.”

She bit her lip and smiled.

He narrowed his gaze.

“You’re jealous.” She finally said.

“Of course I am. You’re my wife and I know how drop dead gorgeous you are.”

She flushed, “Garrett!”

He held her tight, “hell, when did the doctor say I could have you again?”

She blushed completely scarlet this time, “Two more weeks.” She murmured.

“Jesus! I’ll be hell bent until then.” He said with a rush of air and staring at the ceiling.

Her answer was a laugh, the first one she’d one in nine months.



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