

L. R. Wards



The
Makings
of a
Good
Man

The Makings of a Good Man

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Chapter One

After Father Davis finished his sermon, he asked the Winters family to please stand so he could introduce them.

As the three stood; mother father and daughter, Ben, Marshal's nephew spoke in a barely audible whisper to try and keep his voice down, "Uncle, that's the family that bought the spread next to ours." They were sitting adjacent to them in the opposite aisle. Ben had seen the moving truck at the old O'Neil's residence when he took the school bus in last week. Obviously the old man's family sold the place when he died. It was a very nice spread, but not as nice as his uncles.

Marshal heard his Nephew but he didn't say anything as he looked at the three of them. He knew from rumour that the man was a lawyer and had set up practice in Salt Springs, but being a cattleman was something you had to have bred in you. This man looked nothing like a cattleman in his three piece suit. Marshal felt his lip curl sardonically. He had money though and probably thought that's all he needed. When people tried to do something they weren't bred and born for, they made fools out of themselves like singers who try and become actors or vice versa. Furthermore, something seemed a little odd about the three of them. The wife didn't raise her eyes at all and kept her head bowed while the husband grinned and nodded to various greetings. However, the daughter did and turned her head to look at everyone. Yet, her expression seemed almost sad as her eyes guided around the room.

She was beautiful, there was no doubt. She had long auburn hair that was plaited in a braid that fell halfway down her back, and as she looked around, Marshal saw large almond shaped emerald eyes that complimented perfect skin, oval face and high arched brows.

"Not bad eh?"

Marshal forgot about Ben who obviously he saw him staring at the Winters' girl.

"I heard her name is Beth." He leaned toward his uncle with a glint in his eyes.

"Shut up Ben." He answered in the same low tone as the Father continued to introduce them and asking the people to make them feel welcome.

Ben smirked and did as he was told. The words weren't said harshly in the least but more as a warning because Marshal didn't like to be teased about women. Ben was probably one of the few people besides Marshal's brother that could get away with it, but it usually wasn't for long and they were smart enough to know when to stop.

His uncle had a reputation for being a hard man, but Ben knew that under that crust was a soft spot for people he cared about. After all, he was raising him. Yet, he'd seen the man clear a room with his temper. He'd also seen him carry a newborn calf into the barn and warm him with his own hands and soothe him with his deep voice.

Besides that, people liked him because he had that quiet confident pose about him that drew attention and a few years ago Bobby, a good friend of his told him he should run for mayor when the old one retired. He would be fair and honest which is what any town needed. However, Marshal was also a workaholic and that would mean he'd have to give up some of his other responsibilities, which he wasn't ready to do. He loved ranching and as far as Ben was concerned, his uncle was born to do just that.

As Ben watched his uncle, he grinned because he still hadn't taken his eyes off the young woman except to tell him to shut up. He may have been barely in his teens, but he knew a pretty girl when he saw one and Beth Winters was definitely pretty.

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When the sermon was over, they were outside the church when Father Davis introduced Marshal to the Winters. Marshal tried to evade him but John spotted him through the crowd and waved him and Ben over, “This is Marshal,” He explained as Marshal and Ben approached, “My older brother and he also happens to be your neighbour.”

John was always one to make people feel welcome, but Marshall couldn't care less. John was outgoing and easy to get to know whereas Marshal didn't care if anyone liked him or not. They were opposites in many ways, but their brotherly bond was strong. He actually tried to leave because he knew damn well John would try and waggle him into making the Winters family feel welcome just because he was their neighbour. As far as Marshal was concerned, he had enough friends and had no desire to gain anymore. Not only that Lawyers weren't on his favourite list.

“Brother?” Said Theo holding out his hand, “That's nice to know. So you're the Cattle baron I've heard so much about?”

He shook Theo's hand hating that title, “Cattleman,” he corrected without humour causing his brother to clear his throat in discomfort. It was true, he was filthy rich, but he'd worked hard for it and it wasn't easy work. He'd inherited the spread from his father, who had practically run it into the ground before he died. It took Marshal ten years to achieve the success he had now, but it certainly wasn't without sacrifice.

Marshal oversaw everything and worked an eighteen hour day which left no time for his love life, not that he wanted one. He still dated, but it wasn't anything serious and the women filled his needs as much as he required.

Theo's brows went up at the man's tone, but he was not the least bit intimidated, after all, he was a lawyer and used to animosity, “I see. Well, Mr. Davis, being your neighbour, I would hope that you would seek my business.”

“I have a solicitor, Mr. Winters.” He said as his eyes went past him to the auburn haired woman. Up close the woman was more strikingly beautiful, but she looked young. He was sure she couldn’t be any older than twenty.

“This is our sister’s son Ben.” John further explained while placing his hand on his nephew’s shoulder. Ben stretched out his arm and shook Theo’s hand.

“This is my wife Laura, and my daughter Beth.” He introduced his family, “Beth is attending college here in the fall.”

“Oh?” said Marshal with sudden interest, “What is your major?” Usually he didn’t initiate conversation, but knowing that she wasn’t just beautiful, but ambitious peaked his curiosity. He admired people who wanted to further the education especially women. It was because of their older sister, who wanted to do just that but their father made her stay home saying this is where a woman’s place was. It was a waste of an intelligent mind. He made their mother home school Judy and she ended up running away when she was in her teens. John and Marshal had only seen her once since then.

Beth’s eyes guided to his. She could feel his eyes on her earlier in the church and when she was brave enough to finally look at him, he was talking to his nephew. She’d seen him around town and he was a large man with a rough appearance, but now he was wearing his Sunday’s best. A dark brown suit which just brought out a warm hue in his mocha colored eyes. She’d seen him walking by the café where her mother and she were sitting looking out the window and she caught herself watching him, but that was before she knew who he was and at that time he had on a worn cream Stetson, dusty jeans, and a matching denim jacket. However, now that she knew he was the brother of their priest she found herself interested him because he couldn’t be half as menacing as he looked with someone so religious in the family.

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When she saw him that first day, he stood out to her despite his appearance because he had a stride that emanated power and confidence. Also it was obvious from the way he spoke, that he didn't care what people thought of him. She had to resist grinning at the way he corrected her father, there weren't many people who were that brave. She couldn't help but admire that trait, especially when she was raised on outward appearances. Something she always despised.

He had an old scar that ran down his left cheek that made him frightening, but now that she had a good look at him, the scar was nothing compared to how handsome he was. If he'd smile, it would probably erase that whole frightening image, but she doubted very much that he smiled often. "English literature." She finally answered.

"Really?" he cocked an eyebrow.

Just when Beth thought he couldn't look any more appealing he surprised her. She averted her gaze to try and avoid his eyes. Golden flecks were buried in that mocha stare and it actually made her knees weak. What the heck was wrong with her, she never felt attraction for a man before in her life? Of course that may have had something to do with her father's strict rules, no dating and no staying out after nine pm. Also if she even glanced at another man, he'd keep her at home until the he lost interest and moved on.

"Marshal has a degree in finance from Yale with a minor in English." John offered with a hint of pride.

"Is that right?" she said with a degree of surprise. Looking at him, you would never guess that he was academically gifted. He looked like he was born and raised on the range with a horse under him. A Yale graduate no less! So the man wasn't just disgustingly handsome, he was highly intelligent. Then she really looked at those eyes of his and it was there that she saw the sharp intelligence he possessed. She'd missed it before because

of his whole demeanour.

“Yes.” He said keeping his eyes on her.

“It’s time we go.” Said Theo noticing the interest his daughter gave the man. He reached into his pocket to remove a business card, and handed it to Marshal, “Just in case you change your mind.”

Marshall took the card and his eyes guided to the man’s possessive hand on his daughter’s arm. He nodded and Theo led his daughter and wife away. “That seem right to you John?” he said to his brother watching the family walk away. He didn’t miss the look the young lady gave him as her father led her away, but decided to keep it to himself.

John shrugged, “Not particularly, but then again, they are from the city. Folks from there seem a little more secretive than most.” He studied his brother’s expression, “She’s quite pretty.”

“Eye candy, is what we would call her,” offered Ben with a grin.

Marshal spared Ben a glance that told him to leave it be. However, being a Priest and his brother seemed to give John that extra forgiveness when he ticked his brother off.

“You are getting up in years Marsh, maybe—“

“—you know me well enough,” Marshal interrupted while centering his angry gaze on his brother, “To know that I’ll pop you one despite who you are if you mention that ‘M’ word again.”

John grinned, “All right Marsh, but you shouldn’t let what happened in the past affect your relationships. Not all women are like that one.” He held up his hands in surrender when his brother took a step toward him, “I’ll shut up now.” He said without wiping the smile off his face.

Ben eyed the two carefully. It wasn’t often he’d seen his uncle angry, but usually the outcome wasn’t good. In fact, he’d heard that he had wrecked a bar or two in his rowdier years and ended up in jail more than once for misdemeanours, but since

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Ben came to live with him, he'd mellowed out a little. He suspected he didn't have it easy as a child because of some of the things he'd heard and reacted accordingly.

It was common knowledge around town that old man Davis, his grandfather, was a drunk and used to take his anger out on the three kids after his wife left him. He finally ended up in Jail from too many DUIs when Marshal was eighteen and John was seventeen. The oldest, his mother, took off when she was sixteen and no one heard from her until she showed up with Ben one day asking them to raise him.

The way he'd heard the story was from John who said Marshal took one look at her and couldn't refuse her request. She left the next day even though they offered to help her. Without going into details John said that she was in no shape to look after an infant, but he knew she loved him and it was the hardest thing in the world to give him up. Ben tried to believe that, but as the years passed he'd never heard from her and neither did John and Marshal. However, not once did they say anything bad about his mother and he was sure they didn't think it either. John was sympathetic saying that Ben had no idea what they had gone through as kids, and his mother got most of it because she was the oldest. When she left, the brunt of the abuse fell on Marshal until he was big enough to stop her. He went to jail shortly after that and died in prison. Neither brother even went to the funeral and Ben couldn't imagine the kind of hurt someone like that could dish out to have that happen. He knew the sacrifices the brothers made for him and never took it for granted. They weren't always wealthy and Marshal worked his fingers to the bone to get the ranch out of debt. Then, when he made enough money, he went off to school to have something to fall back on if the ranch didn't make it while John took over the responsibilities. He may have devoted his life to God, but he certainly knew cattle ranching.

Marshal would come home as often as he could over those four years he took to earn his degree. Ben was five when Marshal came home permanently and started putting his education to work. Now his uncle was thirty four and filthy rich from good investments and land deals. He still spread himself thin, but unlike most people Marshal seemed to thrive on it. As for his reaction a moment ago to John, Marshal had a deep mistrust of women because of an incident quite a few years ago.

The woman who caused him so much resentment was gone, but because of her, he didn't trust women so much. It was too bad, because he was sure there were times that he was lonely and because of that, he worked long hours. It wasn't like he had a shortage of women who would like to date him, and the ones he did, usually couldn't put two syllables together. Ben made a face thinking about the latest one. She wasn't so bad, but she obviously didn't like kids. She wouldn't even give him the time of day. Yet, she looked really nice in a dress and he supposed she was pretty and that's why his uncle dated her. To him, they seemed a little shallow and Ben realized that it made the relationship simpler because as soon as it became the least bit complicated, he'd change women.

It was a shame that many people didn't know the real Marshal who was trying his best to raise him. Marshal had a housekeeper Nancy, who helped with his upbringing, but it was Marshal he'd turn to if he needed help with something and his uncle always had time for him even if he was in the middle of something else. Actually he was twice blessed, because John would do the same, but John lived in town near the church and was busy with that and his parishioners most times and because Marshal mostly worked from home, it was the better option to live with him.

"Not in front of the boy Marsh," said John as Marshal's menacing expression remained.

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“Nice save John.” He looked down at Ben who was still grinning, “Hell.”

“Marsh.” John warned.

“Yeah, sorry.” He said sheepishly remembering where he was while placing his hand on Ben’s shoulder, “Come on, let’s go home. I can swear there without the roof caving in.”

Meanwhile Theo got his family in his Lincoln and turned to his daughter, and his face took on a deadly expression, “Don’t even think of Marshal Davis beyond a client of mine. Do you understand?”

She hated him. She hated him so much she wanted to scream. It took every inch of her not to open the door and run away despite that she had no place to go. “Yes father.” She managed to say without a trace of the rage she was feeling. It took her years to learn how to hide her true feelings from him knowing that if she let him see them, he would make her pay.

“You’re lucky that I even let you go to college. You should be home with your mother, but for some reason I let you convince me. If you go against me child, I’ll pull the plug.”

“Yes father.” She said averting her gaze so he couldn’t see the fury in her eyes. It was true she did think Marshal was attractive, but that meant nothing. The man was obviously steeled against any kind of emotion and probably wouldn’t give her the time of day if she begged for it. Not only that, he was a lot older than her. She wasn’t sure of his age, but she was guessing early thirties. Regardless, her father wouldn’t let her date or have interests in any man, so she’d probably just see him in church like today from now on.

The next day proved her wrong. The next day Marshal was coming out of the hardware store and ran into Beth. Literally. He had barely felt it, but she landed flat on her bottom on the pavement with a grunt.

“Watch where you’re—Oh—it’s you.” She said standing up

and dusting herself off.

“Marshall,” he said, “I have a name.” He almost made a move to reach down and help her up, but something stopped him. He didn’t know what, but for some reason he thought that if he were to help her she would get offended.

She stopped what she was doing and looked at him bristling at his cool response. He didn’t even apologize, even if it was her fault, she was a lot smaller than he was and he obviously hardly felt it, “I didn’t forget.”

“Then use it Beth.”

Her name on his lips made her pause again and guide her eyes to them. Those lips alone made him sinful. They were perfectly formed, and undeniably sensual. Somehow she knew a man like Marshal knew exactly how to use them on a woman. Suddenly she had an image flash in her mind of those lips on hers. After a moment, neither one of them moved, and she wondered if he was interested in her.

“See something you like?” he said with a knowing look cocking a single dark brow.

Her eyes flipped up to his, “You wish.” She said icily narrowing her eyes glaring at him. Yes, she did, but she wasn’t going to tell him that.

“If you’re done memorizing my mouth honey, could you move? You’re in front of my truck.” He said with clear amusement.

She looked over her shoulder and saw that she was directly in his path, “Oh God.” She said turning and stormed down the sidewalk clearly embarrassed. So much for him being interested, she was standing in his way! Then to top it all off, he caught her staring at him. Something she could never be found guilty for in the past. However, that man was really nice to look at, maybe too nice. Only thing was, he knew it. Who could fault him? Even in Jeans and a red and black plaid shirt he was

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unequivocally masculine to the core.

Behind her Marshal smirked, tipped his Stetson up on his brow and watched her determined pace giving him a good view of her bottom in blue jeans. *Not bad*, he thought, *not bad at all*. Shaking his head, he tossed his supplies in the bed of the truck and got in. He had too much on his mind to pause over a pretty girl. She was pretty though, he thought as he drove past her. He chuckled as she purposely averted her gaze pretending to find something in a shop window more interesting. Fact is, even though he was completely unapproachable most times, he never had a problem getting women. However, he never had a woman treat him with such indifference before either, despite her obvious attraction to him.

Pushing her from his mind, he began listing the things he had to do today. There was fencing to be mended in the south pasture, Ben needed help with his homework, and he was lax on his bookkeeping in the past week. Usually he had a secretary that did those things but she was on maternity leave as of then. Marshal may have been brilliant in a lot of ways, but crunching numbers only frustrated him because it meant he had to sit at a desk. He could do it, but he'd rather not. Even with his fancy degree at hand, it never suited him. Although it did help him manage his business well, he wasn't a desk jockey and never would be. He was rich enough to hire others to do those things for him. He frowned. Nancy made him put an add in the paper for a replacement the day before, because she told him that his mood had gotten from intolerable to downright excruciating and he'd be eating a cold supper until he did it. So he reluctantly agreed.

Marshal didn't trust many people, so his new secretary had to be chosen carefully and hopefully married. That way he wouldn't find her in his bed like he did the one before last. He'd come home late and there she was. She left in tears when he'd

fired her on the spot none too gently. So the next woman he hired was married, and not too easy on the eyes, but she proved very efficient and he liked her.

It wasn't that Marshal didn't like women, he did. He just preferred to be the pursuer if he saw something he liked. Of course he liked aggressive women in the bedroom, but not ones that assumed that because they were pretty, or sexually appealing, to climb into his bed thinking he'd want them. He was old fashioned that way. As far as he was concerned, he still paid for dates, opened doors for women, and if he wanted to have sex with them, it was his decision. He also didn't like public displays of affection and if a woman got clingy, it was the last time he went out with her.

It made him wonder about Beth because she didn't seem like the clingy type. Generally he would have helped her up off the sidewalk, but his instincts told him not to touch her. It was something her persona gave off. Funny thing was, she wasn't offended by him not helping her, but offended that he'd caught her staring at his mouth. Her eyes were incredible and they held a sharp intelligence even as fiery as they were. He admired intelligent women but unfortunately he didn't date them very often because emotionally he'd never let them get close. He didn't want to for the reason that as soon as an intelligent woman had him caring about him, they'd rip his heart out. It had happened to him once and he never forgot. He made a promise to himself never to have that happen again. It made him wise to their subtle tricks, the false tears, the cooing, and the manipulation of using their bodies, but never had he fallen for it again and he never would.

Yet, if Beth's temper matched her passion, she would be a treat in bed whether she was smart or not. She certainly had a great ass, so it went without saying that the rest of her was probably just as nice.

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He looked up to his visor where he stuck Theo Winters' card. He could probably use another lawyer. The one he had was getting close to retirement. It probably wouldn't be a bad idea to break in another one and give the newcomer a good start in a new town. First he'd have him checked out to make sure he was honest. Just because the man went to church, didn't mean he was a straight shooter.

A short time later, Beth arrived home to find that her father had already started drinking. Her mother met her at the door, "Don't say anything to set him off honey." She said.

"Like *hello*." She offered with sarcasm.

"Please," her mother begged, "Beth we're trying to start over."

"If he quit being such a bastard, we could." She mumbled under her breath.

"Beth!" came her father's bellow from the living room. "Come here."

"Listen to me Beth. I don't want you to get hurt." Her mother pleaded, "Please don't provoke him."

"Mama, nothing could hurt me anymore." She stripped off her coat and followed the sound of her father's voice. He was sitting in a leather chair watching the news on a large flat screen plasma TV. "Hi." She said steeling a false smile on her face.

"Have you seen the paper?" he said not looking up from it.

"No dad, I don't read the paper often." She said sickly sweet to hide her sarcasm. Regardless he still caught it.

"Don't get smart with me." He said casting her a warning glare while standing up and leafing through the paper, "This man Marshal Davis that you met last Sunday at church has an ad in here for a secretary. I want you to apply."

"Dad!" she said in exasperation, "Didn't you tell me to stay away from him?" Usually she could anticipate his violence

and move in time, but the backhand was quick and knocked her to the floor.

“You little tramp! I ask you to do something and you do it!” He stood pointing a finger down at her.

She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of crying, it only exacerbated his behaviour.

“I need this account. Just having his name attached to mine would give me all the business I need. Now, I want you to go and apply for this job. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.” She said holding her stinging cheek. She looked past him as her mother came to the doorway and subtly shook her head. More than once she put herself in front of Beth to protect her and because of it, got the brunt of her father’s temper. He was always violent, but when he drank things got worse. Her mother glanced at her husband’s back before she silently backed out of the living room. Her father shook out the paper to straighten the spine and sat down in his chair as if nothing happened. Beth knew that the violence had passed and he would leave her alone now. She picked herself up off the floor and left the room without a word. Her mother was waiting in the hall ringing her hands.

“Are you all right?” She said with concern.

“I’m fine.” She said giving her mother a false smile, “I just wish he would go away and never come back.”

Her mother reached up and touched the reddened area on her daughter’s cheek, “That might leave a bruise. Let’s get some ice on it.”

Beth nodded and allowed her mother to lead her to the kitchen for a bag of ice. She guided her to a stool at the breakfast counter and threw some crushed ice in a Ziploc bag, “What did he want.”

“He wants me to apply for Marshal Davis’ secretary.”

Her mother lifted her brows as she handed the bag to

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Beth, “That Cattleman we met at church yesterday?”

Beth nodded and hissed as the ice touched her sore cheek.

“I thought he warned you off him.”

“He did, but when it comes to money—you know dad.”

She sighed. He’d probably sell her and her mother to make a buck. She hated him. However, she’d do what he said because it would be worse than what she just got if she disobeyed him.

“He seemed a little scary.” Her mother added.

No scarier than what they lived with.

The next day Marshal interviewed a dozen women and his mood became fouler as the day wore on. Not one of them had any skills and the ones they did have were openly displayed.

“Quit your growling Mr. Davis.” Said Nancy, his housekeeper, as she came in with a cup of black coffee for him, “You can’t blame these women. You are a handsome unmarried wealthy man.” Her answer was a growl. She straightened herself and stared down at him, “You can wipe that menacing look off of your face, you have one left and if you interview her looking like that, she’ll run for the hills.”

“Send her away. I’ll do the damn books!” he cast her a glare that would have sent any other of his employees running for the hills, “I told you this was a bad idea!”

“Quit your bellowing, Ben’s trying to do his homework,” she scolded, unmoved, “You’ll see every one of these women Mr. Davis. Besides, this one looks as though she has some skills about her.”

“How the hell do you know that?” He said in irritation tossing his pen on his desk and leaning back in his high backed leather chair. “Goddam women flounce through here like it’s a bloody auction house and I’m the only bidder.”

“If you’re done growling and cursing like an old fishmonger, I’ll tell you why I know she’s got skills, because she’s

the only one that doesn't have makeup on an inch thick, or a dress so low cut that her breasts are popping out of it." She answered.

He was actually curious about that and his voice calmed a little, "All right then show her in, but this is the last one." She gave him a mocking bow before she left his study, making him want to throw something at the closed door.

Nancy was right about the next applicant. The woman had on grey slacks and a white blouse, buttoned up to the neck adorned with a colourful scarf and looked very professional. The only thing was, it was Beth Winters.

"Of all the people to walk through that door, I certainly didn't expect you." He said with a sardonic smile.

"I would like a job." She said taking a seat across from him and tilting her chin slightly in defiance.

"From me?" he was surprised, because she practically ran away from him the day before. She put up a good cover but he could see the apprehension in her gaze when he teased her about staring at him.

"I need to pay for tuition next fall." She answered.

"Tuition? Your father seems wealthy enough." He said curiously.

"Are you done with the personal questions?" she said tersely setting her purse down and handing him her resume in a crispy gesture.

Marshal gave her an expression of amusement not the least bit bothered by her terse behaviour, "I suppose." He took the resume, leafing through it while speaking to her, "Do you type?"

"One hundred and twenty words a minute."

"Computer knowledge?"

"I took a six week course from college in the city at my father's request." She answered.

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“Where did you accumulate your skills?” he said as if he didn’t hear a word she said. However, he did, and by the sounds of it, she was the best candidate so far.

“I summer clerked for my father since I was fourteen.” She didn’t tell him that her father made her because he was possessive and wouldn’t let her out of his sight for more than an hour at a time.

“Which brings me to my next question.” He said tossing the papers on his desk, “How old are you?”

“I already told you how I felt about personal questions.” She cut in tersely.

He sighed impatiently, “Beth, I am chair of the cattleman’s association which requires me to take trips to Vegas twice a year. Your birth date isn’t on your resume. I need to know if you are old enough to accompany me. You look sixteen.” He lied. Even in the conservative clothes she wore, there was definitely no body of a sixteen year old within them. She had a tiny waist and the hips and bosom of a woman.

“I’d appreciate it if you called me Miss Winters.”

“You can appreciate it until the cows come home, but I’m calling you by your bloody name, just like you’ll call me Marshal. We don’t need formalities around here. If it makes you feel better you can call me boss like some of my other employees, but I’m still calling you Beth.” he said abruptly in a tone that he knew intimidated people, “Now how old are you?”

She lied too. She was nineteen. “I’m twenty-one.” She offered straight faced refusing to be browbeaten. Her father was vicious and although Marshal did intimidate her, at least he wouldn’t strike her. At least she didn’t think he would. Her eyes guided to his large hands thinking that if he did, she certainly wouldn’t have survived it. When her eyes went back up to his, he looked sceptical. “I look young for my age.” She added but he kept staring at her, most likely trying to find a weakness in her

armour. *He won't find it*, she thought. It took years for her to form it. Finally to her inward relief, he nodded subtly.

“Apparently, because you certainly don't look twenty-one.” He studied her expression, “how soon can you start?”

“I have the job?” She was actually surprised because of the way she argued with him. Secretly she was hoping he'd turn her down. She didn't want to be put in this position spying for her father.

“For now.” He said standing up and staring down at her, “But keep your opinions to yourself, I have enough backtalk from Nancy. I don't need two damn females giving me pains.”

“I'll try as long as you don't provoke me.” She said staring up at him. She saw his mouth twitch like he was fighting a smile.

“If you need help with anything, just ask Nancy, she's my housekeeper, but she's smarter than she lets on. Don't let her know I told you that, the damn woman will hold the compliment against me.”

Beth tried not to smile herself. She could only imagine what Nancy was like if she could hold her own against this man. Beth was intimidated if he even stared at her.

She met Nancy briefly but they never introduced themselves. She just had her sit and wait in the hall with the rest of the woman. She seriously felt overdressed when she looked at what they were wearing, but it didn't take long for her to figure out why. She may have been naïve but she certainly wasn't stupid. Marshal was a nice looking man, and single from what she heard around town, but she could never act the way these women were acting. It was very blatant what they were here for. She scanned her eyes over their tight skirts, revealing cleavages and profound makeup. You would think a man would be flattered by all of these women showing him their bodies, but he just seemed more irritable than he did the other day. She even heard him bellowing at Nancy before she went in the room and had a

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good mind to high tail it out of there if her father wasn't making her do this. However, when the older woman came out she smiled as if nothing happened and asked her to go in. Beth probably would have crawled under the rug in the middle of the floor if he tore into her like that. In her life, the yelling was usually followed by hitting, if she was lucky for that warning. There had been times like yesterday that it was unexpected.

"I can start right away." She said standing also, then realizing that she should have remained seated. Somehow the man seemed taller, especially when she had to crane her neck to look up at him. At least when she was sitting down, she could lean back in the chair somewhat, "Your housekeeper told me that your secretary has been gone for a week. I'd rather start right now so I can start putting things back in order as soon as possible."

"Suit yourself." He said looking down at her knowing he intimidated her from the flickering of her eyes around the room. She was obviously unable to stare at him for a prolonged period and he suppressed a smile over it. She acted tough, but she was far from it. He could easily recognize that much about her although the rest of her reserved demeanour was a mystery. There was something that wasn't quite right about her, and it intrigued him.

She really wished he wouldn't look at her so much, it completely unnerved her. However, she was an expert on keeping her emotions out of her expression, thanks to her father. If there was any sign of weakness from her, her father would jump on it like a spider to a fly.

At the same time she turned her head to look around, his eyes guided to the side of her face seeing some skin discoloration there, like a faint bruise, "What happened to your cheek?"

She'd forgotten about the bruise her father gave her the day before, "I walked into a wall." she said meeting his sharp

gaze with her best acting face not to let on what had really happened. She resisted covering it with her hand as he stared at it, because it would make her look ashamed and that could lead to other questions.

“A wall?” he said narrowing his eyes and studying the mark.

“I’m clumsy.” She continued hoping he wouldn’t suspect what it was really from.

“I guess after the other day, I’m willing to believe anything.” He said with a mocking smile remembering that she careened into him. If she didn’t notice him, she probably didn’t notice a wall.

“Not funny.” She managed, “I was distracted.”

“Yes, you were.” He smirked remembering those intense emerald eyes fixated on his mouth.

She released a frustrated breath knowing that he was referring to her staring at him, “Where did you want me to work?” she said changing the subject. He was close enough that she caught the scent of his cologne and it was masculine, and spicy just like everything else about him causing her to lose the regular rhythm of her heart beat.

“the computer is over there.” He nodded to another desk in the corner of the room, “and that box beside it are my receipts for the last week.”

“That *huge* box?” she said in surprise. She expected a shoe box maybe, but not one that she could put a small dog in.

He managed a chuckle, “I have a large spread Beth.”

The sound of her name on his lips made her pause. She liked it, maybe too much from the thrill that went through her. She swallowed thickly, “I know, but I didn’t think—“

“I also own six feedlots.” He finished with all humour now gone from his voice.

“Feedlot?” she stared at him quizzically.

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“You live here and you don’t know what a feedlot is?”

“I—we’re from Chicago.” She answered hesitantly. “My father dealt with land deals and such, but not cattle.”

It just reaffirmed his earlier thoughts about a rich man playing in something he knew nothing about. People like that thought that because they had money, they could do anything. He was curious on why they settled in a ranching town. If the lawyer didn’t know anything about cattle, what was he doing here? Marshal would give the man less than a year before the ranch became a liability. “In short, a feedlot is where other cattlemen bring their beef cattle for market. I keep them on my lot so they gain enough weight for slaughter. In turn for this I charge a fee per head of cattle.”

“Why don’t they just graze them, there’s plenty of grass out there.” She said waving her arm toward the window. He gave her an amused smile as if the answer was obvious.

“They gain weight faster on a feedlot than grazing. Therefore they are ready for sale quicker and a rancher makes money quicker.” His eyes guided down to the healthy mounds of her breasts while she was momentarily distracted. Then he moved them back up to her face before she saw his curious stare. He had to admit, that she was very nicely put together.

“Wow.” She walked over to the box and started thumbing through the receipts, “I guess I didn’t realize.” Everything about this man was large. He owned a large spread, several large businesses, he was large himself, and this box was huge! Now it was obvious why her father wanted him as a client.

“As I said before, if you need help call for Nancy, she manages everything that has to do with the house anyway. I’ll be outside working.” He said watching her take a seat at the desk and turn on the computer. She didn’t look at him again and he wasn’t sure if she was purposely avoiding it, or she was just getting in the frame of mind to start through that box.

“All right.” She said not looking up. She could feel his gaze on her and it made her temperature go up several degrees, she was sure of it because she started feeling uncomfortably warm. Her heart was already doing odd things in her chest and she knew that if she locked gazes with those penetrating eyes of his, she’d go into cardiac arrest. Then he’d really mock her. She was used to keeping her expression masked, but for him, she needed to build up immunity. He must know how he affected women and wondered if they dropped down at his feet all the time. Then she recalled the women waiting to be interviewed and knew it must’ve been obvious to him, but he didn’t act like it flattered him at all.

Marshall took his cup of coffee and left her while she was intent on her task. Shutting the door behind him as he left the room, he turned around and nearly spilled his coffee as Nancy startled him. Obviously she was waiting outside the door to see if he hired Beth Winters, “Christ woman, you’re like a bloody ghost.” He snapped. The older woman stood there with her hands on her hips. She had many years to become accustomed to his moods and was rarely affected by them.

“Don’t you take the lord’s name in vain around me.” She scolded, “You hire her?”

“I did.” He said.

“You ask who hit her?” she continued with a firm tone.

“She said she ran into a wall.” He answered.

“Are you sure?” She said sceptically.

“She ran into me the other day so knocking herself flat on her ass so I have no reason not to believe her, until she tells me something different.” He walked past her but Nancy followed him.

“You as well as anyone know what it’s like. Mr. Davis, you can’t possibly—“

He turned on her with a menacing look causing her to

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abruptly stop, “This will end right now. Nancy, I don’t control everyone’s lives. Quit harassing me dammit.” He said through clenched teeth, “If the woman won’t tell me the truth, there’s nothing I can do. Hell, maybe she did walk into a wall. We can’t suspect anything.”

“She’s just a little thing.” Nancy said exasperated.

“I know how damn little she is. Are you done?” he snarled glowering at her.

“Quite.” She shot back at him with a glare of her own, and then dropped her eyes to the mug he still had clasped in his large hand, “You’d better stop drinking coffee for a while lest someone spits in the pot.” With that she turned on her heel and stomped off.

She would too. He thought while looking down at his cup. Then he shrugged thinking he’d better enjoy this one because it was the last one he would have for a while obviously.

It was almost ten in the evening when she finally had enough and turned off the computer. Then she lay back against the chair and sighed. Earlier, she had to call her father and let him know she would be late and why, or he’d show up here and demand she go home. Surprisingly he seemed enthusiastic that she got the job and told her to take her time. She had to admit, that being there was much nicer than being home. She glanced over the organized system she made with Marshal’s receipts. Her father was right about one thing. The man was disgustingly rich.

Her father had money too, not like this, but it was made living comfortable. He just always wanted more. Men like that were greedy and she was sure that Marshal was no different. Although Marshal’s income was beyond what her father could ever hope for if this box was just a mere fraction of what he was used to. Yet, he acted as if he was just a plain ordinary cowboy—with a temper. It was his demeanour and confidence that gave away the authority that he wielded. It was odd how she seemed

to be thinking about this man constantly lately when she only met him a few days ago.

The door opened then and in came Nancy with a glass of ice tea. “Here dear, no use you being a slave unless you get some payment.”

“Thank you.” She said taking the glass. She didn’t realize how thirsty she was until she got a first sip. She downed the glass before she realized it. “Gosh, that was good.”

“You’ve been in here for six hours without so much as a break.”

“That long?” *Time flies*, she thought. It certainly didn’t seem like six hours. However, she finally started to make headway. The man just piled all of his receipts in one box without separating one business from another. She had spent six hours separating and chronologically arranging them, so she could put them in the computer first thing tomorrow.

“You’re a workaholic like Mr. Davis.” Nancy said with a grim smile.

“I am. No doubt.” She answered. She had heard some rumours that the man could outwork any of his men and after meeting him, she didn’t doubt it. He had the build of a man that was made by hard work. She knew he did it probably for pride’s sake, but with her it was different. She was like that with any job she took so she didn’t have to go home.

“It’s not good for a woman to be that way.” Nancy clucked her tongue.

“Well, it helps me.” She said without elaborating as she finished the glass of juice and got up, “I’ve got to get home. But I need to use the washroom.”

“I never even thought to show you around the house. Silly me, I will remedy that first thing tomorrow, but for now, there’s a bathroom outside the door and down the hall to the left. We have one next to the front door, but we’re having some

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plumbing problems. So just go help yourself.” Nancy watched the woman leave and wondered what she meant by that statement. How could someone so young working like that, help them? She was already curious about the woman. She was so reserved for someone who was as young as her and dressed like a woman twice her age. Her demeanour seemed to be of someone much older too and if Nancy didn’t know better she was no older than eighteen, but she acted as though she lived a lifetime.

“Thanks again.” She shouldered her purse and made her way down the hall. The house was quite impressive to say the least. On the outside it was a sprawling brick ranch style house, and the theme of a cattle man carried on the inside, but with modern masculine tastes. She really liked it. Then she saw the bathroom. It was bigger than her room. She washed and dried her hands when she was finished and stopped to look at her reflection, “What are you doing Beth? You should get the heck out of this.” She said out loud to herself. She didn’t want to be part of her father’s schemes and started to silently curse him while shouldered her purse again and opened the door.

Then she stopped.

Her eyes guided to the partially open door across the hall. Not necessarily the room itself but the half naked male body within. Never in her life had she seen a man in such good shape up close. Taut tanned flesh smoothed over rippling sinewy muscle as he removed his shirt and before she knew it, she was gaping at him. Her eyes guided to his flat washboard abs and the sprinkling of hair there that disappeared into the belt line of his jeans. Then he began to don another shirt and she watched the muscles in his arms flex and bulge. *Oh God, a man shouldn't look like that, it's just not fair*, she thought to herself. As she watched him she realized that he seemed oddly gentle. Everything about that man screamed the opposite, but now looking at him, she couldn’t help but wonder how tender he

would be if those strong hands touched her, caressed her.

As if hearing her thoughts Marshal abruptly brought his head up pausing at doing up his buttons as their eyes met.

Beth stifled a gasp but couldn't stop the blush that started especially when a slow sensual smile slid across his handsome face. She quickly averted her gaze and rushed back down the hall swearing she heard a deep throaty chuckle follow her.

"Do you have a ride?" Nancy said handing Beth her coat. "What's wrong?" she noticed the look of embarrassment on the young girl's face.

"It's nothing." She forced a smile, "And I brought my car." It was a piece of junk to say the least, but it got her from point a to point b. You'd think with her father's wealth he'd given her something flashier, but he made a point to let her know that she needed to earn anything from him.

Nancy gave her a look that said she didn't believe her about nothing being wrong, but bid her goodnight, "I'll see you tomorrow Miss."

"You can call me Beth." She offered remembering what her new boss told her about formalities. However she noticed the housekeeper still used them from what she said next.

"I'm Nancy, Mr. Davis' housekeeper. I have been since the senior Mr. Davis was alive ten years ago."

Still embarrassed from being caught looking at Marshal with raw awe on her face, she had to get out of there before he appeared so she made a quick 'nice to meet you' to Nancy as she turned to leave. She would have asked her why she called him Mr. Davis when he insisted that she call him Marshal, but she was still reeling from getting caught staring—again.

"Don't let him bother you honey, his bark is worse than his bite—most times." She smiled.

"I've got to go. Can you please tell Mar—er—Mr. Davis that I'll be back first thing tomorrow?" She said suddenly unsure

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about what to call him and rushing out the door. If the woman only knew what had just happened. It didn't surprise her that the man wasn't the least bit caught off guard at her gaping at him. He was so beautiful, she was sure all women gaped at him even fully clothed.

"I will." Said Nancy waving as the young lady left.

Marshal came down the hall shortly after.

Nancy turned to him, "I thought you were out on the range?"

"Apparently you weren't the only one." He said with amusement.

"Now what does that mean?" she flashed him a suspicious look, "Could that have something to do with that young lady flying out of here?" she shot her thumb over her shoulder to the door.

"It might." He said plunking his Stetson on his head.

"You behave yourself Mr. Davis." She scolded wagging her finger at him.

"As best I can." He said with laughter in his tone as he left the house ignoring Nancy's gesture.

Nancy knew how intimidating the man could be, and although little Beth Winters tried to act tough, she was extremely vulnerable. It was as easy to see as the day was light.

Chapter Two

Beth chastised herself all the way home for being so bold and staring at him like she did. Just thinking about it made her cheeks heat up again. To top it all off, she had to go back tomorrow and face him. Knowing him and his arrogance he was most likely to throw it in her face that she was standing outside his door ogling him. And she definitely was ogling. Images of his body flashed in her mind and she cringed in disbelief that she

actually gawked at him like a little school girl. Unfortunately if she went to her father, she knew he would refuse her request to quit and most likely yell at her over it, or much worse. She would much rather face Marshal Davis than her father any day. She even tried to make up excuses on why she was looking at him so if he asked, she'd have one, but it was too darn obvious. Oh, she could just die!

To her ultimate relief, the next day she was met at the door by Ben, Marshal's nephew.

"You don't need to knock." He explained, "You work here, and my uncle doesn't lock the door."

"Ever?" she said stepping in to the house.

"No." he said giving her a smile that seemed beyond his years.

Beth realized that the boy had inherited his uncle's good looks without the cynicism. She liked him instantly. "Why not? Isn't he worried about intruders?"

"Have you not *seen* my uncle?" Ben said with amusement raising one brow.

She couldn't help but smile, "Good point." Marshal was a big man and after what she saw the day before, solid muscle. Her eyes went over the young man who was only a few inches shorter than her, "Apparently height is in your future too."

"I hope so." He said, "next to my uncles, I feel short."

"How old are you?"

"Twelve."

This time she laughed, "I think you don't have a worry in that field." She spared him another look and walked toward the double doors of the study.

"Thanks." He said behind her grinning.

Already Beth could tell that the boy would be just as handsome as his uncles with his handsome dark looks. He even quirked a single brow in the same way Marshal did. Smiling, she

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shut the door behind her and sat down at the desk to get to work.

She had worked through a quarter of the box when Marshal came in and plunked another one on her desk.

“This too?” She said avoiding his gaze. She started praying that he wouldn’t bring up the night before and to her ultimate surprise he didn’t. In fact he didn’t even act like he remembered the event at all. Oddly enough, she almost felt disappointed. It meant that women probably gaped at him all the time and it wasn’t even worth pondering about. But she didn’t gape at anyone! It was completely new to her.

“Yes.” He said with indifference watching subtle emotions play over her expression. He was wondering if she was remembering last evening and the fact he didn’t mock her over it. Even though he teased her a few days before when he caught her staring at his mouth, this was something entirely different because it evoked something deep and primal within him and he liked it. No way in hell was he going to tease her over it, because she wouldn’t do it again out of embarrassment and he wanted her to look at him. If she wanted to stare at him, by all means stare, but he certainly wasn’t going to embarrass her over it. Still he couldn’t get the look she had on her face out of his mind, it was completely natural and totally uninhibited. It was a look he’d never seen before on a woman’s face. Normally there was lust, or desire, but Beth’s was different, it was more like wonderment and he found it completely flattering. This was something he hadn’t felt in a long time over a woman’s affections.

Last night when he was in bed, he wondered what else about her could bring that expression on and all kinds of things started to go through his mind. X-rated things. He had trouble sleeping after that. It served him right leaving his bedroom door open while he changed his shirt. Nancy couldn’t give two hoots if he stood naked in front of her, except maybe give him hell for

catching a draft and getting a cold, but another woman in the house meant some adjustments would have to be made. His last secretary used the bathroom near the front entrance, but the sink kept backing up and he hadn't had time to look at it yet, and probably won't for some time, so he should be more considerate where Beth was concerned. Then again, he rather enjoyed that incident, so maybe he wouldn't fix that sink for a while yet. Her voice brought him back to the present.

"You don't need one secretary you need three."

"My last girl could do it." he added with a challenging tone.

"She probably got pregnant to get away from it." she grumbled.

He placed his palms on the desk and leaned toward her with a challenging expression on his handsome face, "If you're having trouble I could hire someone else." This finally brought her eyes to his, but he only saw defiance and it intrigued him. Most people wouldn't challenge him. Hell, no one would except maybe his brother and Nancy, but it didn't mean they ever won.

"I'm not!" she said defensively, "This is just insane."

"Then quit your whining." He said straightening up and staring down at her from his full six foot four height.

"Fine, then quit hovering." She said ducking her head again as she began sorting through another stack of papers.

He actually smiled down at her and turned to leave. The woman's temperament was affecting him, not that he'd let on and not in a way most people would think. She began to fascinate him, which wasn't easy, but he knew that getting involved would be way too complicated. Also, there was something about her that set off warning bells in his head, but then again he didn't trust many women so that could just be a learned reaction he developed. Yet, when he caught her staring at him the day before, he couldn't help but feel arrogant. He knew how he

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looked to the opposite sex, but for some reason it was different when he saw her expression and he actually liked it. The look of awe on her face was completely innocent and couldn't be faked especially the embarrassment afterward of being caught. Now she wouldn't even look at him and he felt another wave of satisfaction. What would she do if he started taking his shirt off right then and there? It wasn't unlike him to do that if it was drenched in dirt and sweat because Nancy would take the broom to him if he came in the house with it on. He chuckled to himself as he walked down the steps of the front porch. For some reason he knew she'd crawl under the desk and tell him to go away.

Several hours later, Beth stood and stretched. She needed some fresh air. Earlier she'd seen a ranch hand take several horses into the stables and wondered about them. She never knew horses from a hole in the ground, but she would certainly like to learn. She read every book out there was on the subject when she was a little girl, hoping that her father would give in and get her one.

Before she knew it she was walking across the yard toward the open door of the building. She could smell the distinct order of horse and hay when she entered and found it surprisingly pleasant. Several horses were poking their heads out of the stalls and nickered at her. Not being able to help herself, she grinned. This was wonderful. What beautiful creatures! She walked up to the nearest one and giggled as the animal pushed its velvet nose into her shoulder.

"She likes you." Marshal was talking to Slim, his mechanic when he saw her walk toward the stables. Before he knew it he was following her into the building. Maybe it was curiosity, or maybe he couldn't help himself, she was beautiful and he'd be lying if he tried to deny that he was attracted to her.

The familiar deep voice made her spin around and face him, "I—"

He saw her expression; it was like a kid being caught with his hand in the cookie jar, much like the one he saw last night after he'd caught her looking at him. He raised his hand to ease her fears, "There's no need to feel like you violated some rule Beth. Come and see them any time you like." He stopped and hooked a thumb in a belt loop at the waist of his jeans.

The fact that he looked totally relaxed while she was becoming more unsettled at his presence just added to her discomfort. "I didn't think there were rules." She protested turning away from him and placing her palm on the velvety nose. "She's so soft. What's her name?"

"Lily bell, I think."

She turned and looked at him again, "You think?"

"I have around forty horses. Remembering all the names the staff gives them isn't easy." He turned up one corner of his mouth.

"Oh, I didn't know." She said, "I guess I have a lot to learn about ranching."

He fished out a cigarette and bent his head to light it. Then he took a long draw and focused his eyes back on hers. She looked genuinely surprised. "What?"

She looked down at the cigarette, "You smoke?"

"Occasionally." He answered taking another draw, "When John, Ben or Nancy aren't around to nag me about it."

"It's bad for you."

"Thanks mom." He answered with a bit of a smirk causing her to narrow her eyes.

She shook her head and returned her attention to the horse that was nuzzling the pockets of her slacks. "Doesn't anything bother you?" she heard herself say.

"Not anymore."

His voice was closer this time, and she realized that he'd come up behind her without her even hearing anything. For a

big man, he sure moved like a stealthy predator. “Anymore?” She said still not looking at him and trying her best to keep the nervousness out of her voice. “that must be nice.” She said.

“It comes with age.” He said looking down at her, wishing she’d meet his eyes again. She had such large lovely eyes. They were so green a man could lose themselves in them.

“well then I have a lot to learn there too.” She said referring to her youth. That got her a deep chuckle. She glanced up at him before turning her attention back to the horse.

Then his hand slid in front of her and she looked down to see to several green cubes in his large palm, “They’re horse treats. It’s what she’s looking for. Some of my staff carry them in their pockets sometimes so they’re handy. That’s why she’s nudging yours.”

She looked up not knowing what he meant. Then he nodded toward the horse, “Oh.” She took the cubes out of his hand while avoiding touching him. If she had weak knees from just a view of his upper torso, who knew how’d she react if she actually touched him. Then she did her best to hold them for the mare. “They’re that smart?”

“Yes they can be.” He said watching her trying and hold the cubes without a thought on how to give a horse treats, “No— unless you want to lose your fingers.” He said showing her how to flatten her palm by demonstrating with his own, “Put the treats in the middle and tuck your thumb flush with your hand. Horses don’t know how to sort through fingers to get food so they’ll take it all.” He grinned, “Then what good are you to me.”

She felt stupid but did as he asked and giggled when the mare’s mouth tickled her palm.

Marshal took another draw off his smoke thinking of how fragile yet beautiful she looked over the discovery of a horse. He’d practically been born on one and it was hard to fathom being without one.

“You really shouldn’t smoke.” She said again without looking at him, “there’s straw and stuff in here isn’t there?”

He grinned taking another long draw, “Yes, and an ashtray.” He said turning and walking up to a tin can that was nailed on the wall to put his cigarette in. “It’s got water in it. I have a lot of stuff that smoke.” He turned back to her and leaned against the wall, “Does it bother you.”

“Not really.” She said honestly, “I was worried about fires.” It horrified her to think of these beautiful creatures dying such a horrible death.

He pointed up before he folded his arms across his thick chest.

Beth looked up and saw a series of pipes and sprinklers. “Oh.”

“I wouldn’t be in here smoking if I wasn’t prepared.”

Of course he wouldn’t, she thought, he was always prepared. He was perfect. “so you were saying you didn’t know all the names of your horses.” She said trying to distract herself from her thoughts.

“I know my favourites. My stallion, my buckskin, and the dapple grey stallion down at the end.” He nodded to the tall horse poking it’s head out.”

“Wow, he’s really pretty. Is that an unusual color?”

“Actually it is.”

“What breed is he?”

“He’s a thoroughbred mix which gives him height. The one you’re petting, is an endurance mare, she’s half Arabian and half quarter horse. Smart, swift and cuts cattle perfectly. She’s a good mare for a lady because she’s well trained. Take her out for a ride if you like.” The image he created in his mind of her on a horse near made him groan. He could just imagine that gorgeous body bouncing in the saddle with her long auburn hair blowing behind her.

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“I don’t know how to ride.” She mumbled still not meeting his gaze.

“Hell, everyone around here knows how to ride.”

She shot him a glare, “Well, I’m not from around here.” She stopped petting the horse and made to walk by him when he grabbed her arm. Something he remembered afterward that his instincts warned him not to do and he was right. “No need to be so defensive little girl. I meant nothing by it. You change moods like the wind.”

“It seems to work for you. “ She said sternly as her eyes darted to his hand. “Let go of me.” He instantly released her and she left.

Marshal watched her walk back to the house through the open stable doors. She tried to hide it, but he was still able to see the fear in her eyes when he grabbed her. He wasn’t sure before, but he was now. Also he didn’t miss the muscle in her bicep tense and tremble under his grasp. She was afraid of him, or his aggressiveness for that matter, which meant that there was another man she was afraid of. Maybe she had problems with a previous boyfriend and that’s why the father relocated the family.

He ground his teeth together. He didn’t want to get involved, but he knew he was from the first day he hired her. Marshall liked his life the way it was and this girl started to get under his skin. Now he was even more intrigued.

He had enough complication in his childhood. Raising Ben was the only highlight he’d ever had in his life. Now there was this girl he was attracted to. It wasn’t just a simple crush either. He wanted her—badly. Maybe it was because she was beautiful, defiant, and intelligent, or maybe it was because he never met anyone like her.

He swore under his breath and went to saddle his buckskin. Maybe if he spent his days out on the range, and in the hills, he could avoid her and his attraction for her.

Beth was almost in tears when she made her way back into the house and his study. She nearly let go and he almost saw her vulnerability. The man wasn't stupid, far from it. She could see the intelligence in his eyes and knew not much got by him. She really wanted to quit before he figured out what was going on in her life, but her father would kill her. He wanted the Davis' account more than he wanted to keep her from a man and Marshall was definitely all man. In all, she felt so trapped. If this was a different life, she could make her interest in him known and who knows, maybe something would grow out of it. However, she was afraid that if she did, and her father's intentions were revealed, it would seem like she enticed him. She didn't want to be part of that betrayal.

She plopped in the chair in front of the computer and buried herself in her work. Nancy came in later with a bowl of soup, a sandwich and some tea on a tray giving her a disapproving look.

"Young lady, life is going to pass you by if you work so hard. You need to make time to play in your life."

"I can't," she said without looking up. Every time I ease off, that man brings me another huge box." She pointed at the one he must've left on her desk right before she ran into him at the stables. "I don't know how the last woman did it."

Nancy smiled down at her, "She learned to manage and by the looks of things, you're gaining on him."

Beth sighed and looked up, "How long have you worked here?"

"Twenty five years." Nancy said smiling as Beth's eyes widened and she mouthed the word 'wow'. "It's not so hard to believe. Mr. Davis is an excellent employer."

She made a sound of disbelief.

"Don't be so sceptical. He's not as hard boiled as most people think." She mused studying the younger woman. "The last

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time he hired someone for the ranch, not including secretaries was more than five years ago. They work for him because he's honest, and wouldn't ask them to do anything that he wouldn't do himself."

"Yeah right." She mumbled and ducked her head again to bury herself back in her work. "Like he'd attack this box of paper work with zeal."

Nancy looked down at her thinking that she was way too young to act so embittered. Yet she was dead on, Marshal hated paperwork despite his hard earned degree.

Several hours later, Beth finally got up from the desk. Her back and bottom hurt from sitting so long. Placing her hands on her hips she stretched her back and packed up her purse while glancing at her watch. Ten pm again. Wow these long days seemed to zoom by. Actually she really didn't care as long as she wasn't at home. Quietly she left the house hoping not to wake anyone or most importantly, run into Marshal. She hadn't seen Marshall since the confrontation in the stables earlier that day, but she did see him ride out on the back of a large horse after she left him. She actually got up and watched him until he rode out of view. He was magnificent to say the least. All of that power in horse and man was so appealing. She never realized how attractive it was until she saw it. Or was it just him? That horse looked blonde. Maybe that's what he called a buckskin.

She got in her car and turned the key, but nothing. "Oh for crying out loud. Not now." She turned the key again and it made a small click. Laying her head on the steering wheel she thought, *it figures*. Well she didn't live too far from here, so she'll walk. What's the big deal? Only she never walked at night in the middle of the wilderness before. Actually this wasn't the wilderness, but she came from a big city, so it was to her.

Grabbing her purse she started down the driveway. The

sun was gone several hours ago and she had sliver of moon to navigate by. It was only about a mile and a half. It shouldn't take too long. Would it?

About a half an hour later, she realized her mistake because as soon as she left the yard lights of the ranch, everything looked dark. She should have just asked Nancy if she could give her a ride home instead of being so stubborn. Then she saw a pair of headlights come around some unseen corner and head toward her. She was wondering if it was her father, but as the vehicle got nearer, she realized it was a ranch truck. Good, she thought, she'll flag him down for a ride home. However when the truck pulled up alongside and the window rolled down, she saw that it was Marshal."

"Why are you walking?" He was surprised finding a city girl walking a country road in the middle of the night.

"My car died." She admitted with embarrassment. Her father had loads of money but she drove a junker. He didn't seem to notice her embarrassment and spoke to her like it was no big deal.

"Get in I'll give you a ride."

"I'll walk." She said.

"Beth don't be ridiculous. I don't bite."

"That remains to be seen." She shot him a look and kept walking.

Marshal shifted the truck in reverse and began backing up along side of her, "Honey, get in. Just put your pride on the back step for once. I'll take you home. I won't touch you again, I promise." He added softly.

This made her stop and look at him, "You don't know what you're talking about." After a few seconds she realized he did know what he was talking about. He knew that grab frightened her, and she was always so careful. It was the tender look on his face that she made out from the dash lights that

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changed her mind. He really didn't mean to scare her. Up until then, she thought men got off on that.

"Maybe, but get in." he shifted the truck in park and reached over and opened the passenger door. "Come on. There's too much wildlife out this time a night to walk safely even if it's only a mile down the road."

"Wildlife?" she glanced around not feeling so confident or stubborn after he said that.

"Loads." He answered unable to keep his grin to himself "And they'll eat you despite the crust on the outside, because you're still soft and pink in the middle."

She focused on him again, "You're teasing me."

"Not entirely. There's moose, elk, coyote and some bear, but they usually stay in more remote areas. There's still a chance though."

Hesitating a little she finally nodded, "Just this once then." She walked around and got in the truck.

He easily turned the big dually crew cab around in the middle of the road. "Good thing I came along." He said as he shifted the truck into drive and began down the road.

She never said anything, but folded her hands on her lap.

"This man that hit you, is he still in your life?"

She swung her head toward him, "You don't know anything."

"Don't I?" He flicked her a glance, "I lived with it for ten years. So it's not hard for me to spot when someone else gets beat."

Her eyes coasted over his muscular form before bringing them back up to his knowing he got her point, "I don't believe you."

"Until I grew bigger than he was." He added with another glance in her direction. "He was my father."

"Oh." She said softly trying not to give anything away in

her voice or her expression.

“The last time he came at me with a baseball bat.”

She quickly turned her head away so he couldn't see the vulnerability there but he continued.

“I removed the bat from him and laid him out flat.”

“What about your brother?” she asked softly still not looking at him.

“I came home too late to help with that. He'd already broken his arm.” Her sharp intake of breath made him know that it upset her, “Yeah, that's how I felt.”

“Is that why he's a Priest?”

“He said he always had that calling.”

“Where's Ben fit in?” She found herself asking. Beth wasn't one to pry into someone's personal life, knowing how much she hated it when someone did to hers, but having the knowledge that someone else understood her dilemma seemed to make it a little easier.

“Ben's mine as far as I'm concerned. My sister left him with me when he was a baby.”

“Your sister?”

“She's the oldest. We don't know where she is.” He flicked her another glance, “She's got—problems.”

“Oh sorry.”

“No need. Ben has everything he needs.” He pulled up in front of her house. “I take it this is yours.” He ducked to look out the passenger window to the house. There were no lights on except the porch light, “Looks like everyone's in bed.”

“Yeah.” She said following his gaze, *Thank God*. She went to open the door to get out when he stopped her by saying her name.

“Beth.”

She looked at him hearing the sincerity in his voice, not sympathy. Something she was totally unused to from a man or

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anyone for that matter except her mother.

“I’ll pick you up at seven thirty tomorrow, and then I’ll see what’s wrong with your car.”

“That’s really not necessary. “She said trying to keep the shakiness she felt at his tenderness out of her voice.

“You aren’t too defensive to take help from a neighbour are you?”

It sounded harmless when he said it that way. She actually managed a bit of a smile, “I guess not.”

“Until tomorrow then.” He nodded and she got out without another word.

Marsh watched her go into the house. *Maybe, just maybe*, he thought to himself as he shifted the truck into drive and pulled away. She never told him anything when he asked, but maybe telling her a little about himself would get her to open up more. She was locked up tighter than anyone he’d ever met. It made sense why the father was so protective of her if a boyfriend used to pound the crap out of her.

Beth washed up and went to bed. She locked her door like she did every night, even though her parents were in bed it still made her feel safer. After she crawled into bed, she tried reading a book to get her mind off of her new boss, but it didn’t work. The fact that he could relate to her made her see him in a different light all together. After all, he always seemed to be a man in total control of himself, but to hear that he’d been beaten as a child somehow let down that wall of hers a bit toward him. He didn’t tell her that to illicit sympathy, he told her that to let her know he understood. It gave her hope too, because if he could turn out the way he did being so self-assured, maybe she had a chance. Then there was the fact that he didn’t say anything about the other day to her either. She really expected that he would rub it in her face that she was gawking at him. All of this made her come to the conclusion that he may have been

arrogant, but he wasn't cruel. That revelation made her finally drift off to a restless sleep.

The next morning she got out of bed early and showered. Normally she wouldn't take such time to look after herself, and she knew he had something to do with it. Yet, she couldn't shake that warning in the back of her mind about getting involved with him, not that he even indicated anything toward that route, but she decided that she wouldn't reject him if he wanted to. Actually she doubted she could deny him for she was fascinated with everything about the man.

It was a cool morning so she donned a white sweater, black slacks and a colourful scarf to keep out the chill before she pulled her black wool jacket on over top. When the familiar ranch truck pulled up in front of the house she had to refrain from bursting out the front door to meet him. Silently she chastised herself over her eagerness as she locked the door behind her trying to remain completely nonchalant on the outside.

To her complete surprise Marshal had gotten out of the truck and opened her door for her.

"Hi." She said as she approached. A smile actually touched her lips as she took in the sight of him. He was wearing a sheepskin lined denim jacket with a black and brown plaid shirt underneath, a black Stetson and blue jeans that seemed to be snug in all the right places.

"Good morning." He answered in a steady tone studying her expression, "I always wondered what it would be like if you gave me a smile."

She gave him a puzzled expression, "Really?"

"Get in." he said nodding to the truck.

Beth obeyed and got in the truck while he walked around to the driver's side, got in pulled away.

It took her a moment to realize that he wasn't heading

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toward the ranch, "Where are we going?"

"I need a coffee." He cast her a glance, "You?"

"A coffee? I don't drink coffee, but I wouldn't mind tea."

'Good." He said pulling on to the highway toward town.

"Doesn't Nancy make you coffee in the morning. That woman seems highly efficient."

"Not this week. I pissed her off." He said with a bit of an edge to his voice.

"I find that hard to believe." She said mischievously.

He cast her a sideways glance of amusement, "You mind yourself, or I'll make you walk."

"Such threats." She mumbled watching the road.

"Be careful little girl, someone might think you have a sense of humour."

"That goes both ways." He shrugged not saying anything else but she did see evidence of a small smile on his face.

Soon he was pulling up to the coffee shop in town, "Come on in, I'm not your patsy, you can carry your own drink."

It may have been said tersely but she realized now, that it wasn't meant that way. "Don't do me any favours." She shot back causing him to chuckle while she got out of the truck.

As they entered the shop, she noticed that several people were staring at her then Marshal who as usual, either didn't notice or didn't care that they did as he was placing their order. The place was packed with more people than she swore the town held and she felt like she was being watched by all of them.

"Beth, did you want a muffin?"

She turned her head toward him, "Depends on what they have." She said softly not missing a few more looks their way. Him using her first name in public seemed oddly intimate and she wondered if he normally did that with people who worked for him. After all Nancy still called him Mr. Davis.

"Well, come and see what you want then." He added

holding out his arm.

Without thinking about it she stepped up beside him and he placed his hand on the small of her back to guide her through the crowd. It was completely opposite of what the touch made her feel the day before. That whole gesture made her insides warm up. She liked it. She liked it a lot. Especially standing so close to him as he stepped behind her, because it made her feel oddly protected. Safe. She could feel the heat off of his large form on her back and swore once or twice her clothing brushed his.

There wasn't another time in her life she could say that she actually felt that way. She was always alone and afraid. Her father was abusive and her mother was submissive. She never confided in her friends because they wouldn't understand, and because of the way her family behaved she couldn't bring any of her friends home to meet her father either. It made it hard to have close personal friendships beyond acquaintances. Not only that her father really never gave her much breathing room. He liked control. It wasn't until she went to work for Marshal, that he relinquished it.

An unexpected wave of sadness hit her at that realization. "Excuse me." She said in a barely audible whisper as she turned and made her way back through the crowd to the outside. She needed to get out of there and get some fresh air. Furthermore, she needed to get away from him. It was too hard to be near him. He couldn't possibly understand the depth of what was going on inside her caused by a small gesture from him.

"Beth?"

She heard his name but ignored it as she pushed out the doors of the shop nearly running into a man coming in. "Sorry." She managed before she started down the sidewalk toward home. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Beth!"

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Now his voice was right behind her and before she had a chance to get away he grabbed her and spun her around. “Let me go.”

“What the hell got into you?” he eyed her tear stained face, “You’re crying?”

“You shouldn’t touch me.” She said in complete vulnerability.

“Like hell I won’t.” he stated softly and embraced her. “Honey you were meant to be touched. It’s too bad you don’t know that.”

Her fingers clenched the lapels of his jacket as she buried her face in his chest. Despite feeling a little overwhelmed at his show of tenderness, she couldn’t ignore how good he smelled. “I’m sure we’re causing a scene.” She spoke in a muffled voice against him.

“I don’t give a shit.”

She felt herself smile regardless of her sorrow. Of course he didn’t. Seconds stretched into minutes and she still didn’t want to let him go, and he never indicated that he was going to until she reluctantly pulled from his grasp.

Clasping her head between his hands he tilted her face up to his, “Do you feel better?” he said searching her eyes with his. This caught him totally off guard. He knew she was being defensive for a reason, but this vulnerability pulled at his heart.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t know what got into me.” She said wiping her eyes on her coat sleeve feeling more foolish by the minute.

His eyes studied hers for a moment, “I think you do. However, I’m not one to push so if you’re feeling better we can go home. Obviously I’m not getting coffee.” He added mockingly.

“It’s not good for you anyway.” She shot back causing him to give her a rare grin. “I read somewhere that it causes digestion problems and the caffeine leaches calcium from your bones

besides being addictive.” She could have kissed him over the teasing play because she was sure he did it purposely to distract her. More and more, she knew she was in trouble of seriously falling for him.

“Is that right?” he said in a tone that was obviously humouring her.

“It is.” She said catching his look, “You should know better, addiction is sinful.”

He released a chuckle, “I sure as hell hope you don’t start crying every time I feel like sampling one of my sins, because I got loads and you’ll dry up into nothing.” That got him a laugh.

“No doubt.”

He sighed heavily, “Well, I guess I don’t get coffee in town or at home.” He said leading her back toward the truck.

“Maybe you should apologize to Nancy.”

“Bite your tongue!” he said opening the door for her, “If I apologize to that woman, she’ll use it against me until the day I die.”

“At least you’ll have coffee,” she added getting in.

“I can live without coffee just to save my pride.” His eyes glinted as he shut the door.

Before long they were pulling up in front of his house. Marshal cut the engine and much to Beth’s relief never mentioned another thing about her little episode and just got out of the truck after wishing her a good day. She was hoping he never mentioned anything about it in the future to her or anyone else. Now that she reflected on how she acted, it was becoming more and more humiliating. She’d never had a moment of weakness like that. She kept all of her vulnerabilities deeply hidden so this had set her back on her toes. Who knew a simple gesture would touch something deep inside herself. Regardless, she discovered something from him over these past few days. Marshal didn’t pry—ever. He let that incident go and the one

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where she gawked at him without saying another word. She had to admit that she never met anyone like him before in her life.

The day seemed to zoom by and she felt that at least she had finally caught up entering his receipts in the computer. Grinning she settled back in her chair and half humorously gave herself a pat on the shoulder. However, it was short lived, because the door opened and in came Marshal with another box.

Beth groaned, “My God, did anyone tell you that you are way too busy?”

He chuckled and plunked the box on her desk, “I don’t pay to complain.”

“You don’t pay me to shut up either, because you couldn’t afford it.” she responded.

He was on his way back out when she said that to him. He liked the rapport they developed between one another over the past few days and more and more he found himself liking her. Turning he guided his eyes to hers, “do you want to get out of here for a bit, before you chew into that box?”

“It depends.” She eyed him carefully, “What do you have planned?”

“How about a riding lesson?”

Her eyes widened, “I’m in!” she jumped up from her chair, “What do I need?”

“Just yourself,” he smiled, “Come on.” He held out his hand. She stopped and looked at it.

“I told you I don’t bite.” He nodded, “come on honey.”

“I might though.” She said meeting his gaze trying to break her nervousness by teasing him.

“Good to know.” He said without batting an eyelash as she took his hand.

“Nothing does faze you.” She added with a smile

“Yeah,” he said seriously looking down at her, “Some things do.”

“Oh.” She said resisting a blush.

They just got out of the house when a little red convertible drove up and a pretty voluptuous blond got out and waved. Marshal released Beth’s hand like she was burned as the woman made their way over to them. That little bit of kindness that she’d just witnessed from Marshall was shut down and eliminated. The woman turned out to be Cindy Parson, her father and Marshal owned several feedlots together, he said as he introduced them.

Cindy had no problem looking down her nose at the other woman, and Beth noticed that she had a talent not to let Marshal see that she was doing it, “You’re a secretary, why I heard your family was well off?”

Beth lifted her chin and matched the woman’s condescending stare, “Well, I don’t mind getting my nails dirty to earn my keep.” She said sweetly glancing at the woman’s well manicured hands. Although she sounded pleasant her eyes probably betrayed her inner anger. However neither Marshal nor Cindy seemed to notice.

Cindy shrugged her shoulder as if her comment was unimportant before she turned her attention to Marshal and gave him a welcoming smile while batting her false lashes. “I came to see if you’re going to still take me to the dance this weekend Marsh—I bought a new dress just for you.”

“Did you?” he said giving looking at Beth with amusement in his light brown gaze as she resisted rolling her eyes behind Cindy before he flicked his eyes back to her.

“Oh yes, and I hope you buy me something nice to decorate it with.” She cooed.

Beth near gagged, “I need to go back to work.” She mumbled turning away and going back in the house. So much for her riding lesson, she thought trying to hide her disappointment. It really wasn’t the riding lesson as much as it

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was having Marshal to herself for those few precious moments. She ground her teeth and made her way back to her desk. Somehow she didn't feel like making a fool out of herself on a horse with that woman watching her.

About four hours later she had finished cataloguing the last of receipts out of the box her brought her with a sigh of triumph. Then she glanced at her watch and the open door of his study. He didn't come back after she did and she wondered if he went off with Cindy. Several hours ago she did hear a vehicle start up and drive away. How a man like Marshal could be interested in such a socialite she'd never know. He was a rugged and raw male that was comfortable with himself and the way he was. So where did this woman fit in? She was sure nothing on her was real. Even her hair was dyed almost platinum. She was pretty though, Beth couldn't dispute that, even if she was ninety-nine percent bought and paid for. Gritting her teeth, she chastised herself for thinking so callously. She certainly wouldn't want people thinking such horrible things about her. Not only that, she really didn't know Cindy and it was selfish of her to assume her world was perfect because her father made theirs look that way and it was far from it. Sighing she made a silent promise to try and be nice to the woman despite her feelings of jealousy. *Jealousy? Oh, it definitely was.*

She glanced at her watch again. It was only five o'clock. Her father would be coming home and starting to drink again. She didn't want to go home to soon. This seemed like the only time in her life he didn't mind that she wasn't home all in the name of making money and she was going to use it as best she could.

Standing, she stretched and thought that maybe Nancy could find something for her to do. She found her in the kitchen putting freshly made buns in the oven.

"Are you done already?" She said with a smile while

closing the oven. "I seen him come in with that box earlier, you catch on quick."

She felt a wave of pride at the older woman's compliment. "Yes I seem to be, do you need help with anything?"

Nancy cast her a look while sweeping the flour off the counter into the sink, "I suppose. I wanted to throw a wash in before supper, but I've gotten a little busy. If you don't mind, could you go down to the boys rooms and collect it. There's a laundry basket on the table in the hall."

"No problem." She said feeling happy that she had something to do and she didn't have to go home. She left the kitchen not seeing Nancy's concerned look followed by the shake of her head and a sympathetic click of her tongue. It was funny that she called both Ben and Marshal boys, because there was nothing boyish about Marshal at all, but she supposed to Nancy's sixty some years all younger men were boys.

Ben was sitting at a desk in his room bent over what looked like homework. He looked up and gave her that sloppy Davis grin when she knocked on the door. "Hi!"

"Nancy's sent me looking for laundry." She said peering in. Ben's room was unusually spotless for a teenager. So much so, that he would have made army recruits look sloppy. "Wow, talk about clean."

He laughed, "I don't take anything for granted, so I keep my room clean. I'm thankful for my uncles, and this house, so I take care in keeping my room clean. As for my laundry, I already took mine about ten minutes ago to get me out of Algebra for a few minutes."

"Oh." She laughed, "Do you need help?"

He shook his head, "My uncle did this afternoon. I've got the hang of it now. He's pretty smart." Ben grinned proudly.

I'm sure he is, she thought, with his educational background, it's obvious. She admired that about him too, but

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she definitely wouldn't tell him that, he already had enough ego to fill a room.

"Uncle Marsh's room is next door, he's out fixing the hay rake, so just go right in."

"Okay." She said turning before the boy could see her blush. She already knew where Marshall's room was because the bathroom she was in the first night here was right across the hall. Hearing that he was out fixing something made her glad to know that he wasn't with that other woman. Regardless she still knocked even though the door was wide open and it was obviously vacant.

She set the laundry basket on the bed, which was a mess along with the rest of his room. Ben may not take anything for granted, but Marsh was a slob. There were filthy clothes littered all over the carpet with no thought to where he even took them off. She blew her bangs out of her face and started picking things up. She held up one of his pairs of jeans and still for the life of her couldn't believe the size of that man. His jeans would probably reach her breasts and she could put two of her in them. She chuckled at the thought and tossed them in the basket while cleaning up the rest of his clothes. If Nancy cleaned this room up every day, she needed a raise. Stopping, she looked around and decided that she'd tidy up a few more things before she left. That would give Nancy more of a break.

Nancy was just taking the roast out of the convection oven when Beth came in and asked her where the laundry room was.

"Through there hun." She pointed to a door off the Kitchen. However, Beth made three more trips after that. Then she heard the washer going. One thing was for certain, that girl wasn't the least bit lazy. After a few minutes she came back into the kitchen with her hands on her hips looking around. Nancy knew she was looking for something else to do so she obliged her,

“Why don’t you go do me a favour and collect some eggs from the chicken coop for Mr. Davis’ and Ben’s breakfast. These old knees of mine give me aches when I do too much work by this time of day.” She pointed to the back door, “There’s a basket out on the stoop.”

“Oh, okay,” she beamed and left.

Of course there was nothing wrong with Nancy’s knees but there was a reason why Beth didn’t want to go home, and she didn’t mind making her feel useful. About five minutes later she heard a muffled curse causing her to roll her eyes knowing full well the bull would be in the kitchen right about—

“What the hell happened to my room!”

—now. She turned to see his large form filling the doorway, “You hush up, and it was filthy.”

He arched his brows, “It was comfortable.”

“Don’t you glare at me Mister.” She warned seeing his eyes darken, “I sent the young gal in there to collect laundry. Obviously she was busy.” Beth didn’t know that Nancy didn’t touch his room except to change the towels and sheets every third day because he liked it the way it was. Not only that, he was big enough to pick up after himself. It wasn’t as if he was a complete slob because everything else on the ranch was spotless and ran sound. He even kept his study immaculately tidy, it was just his room he left messy. He’d take his clothes off where he stood and step over them rather than pick them up and he never made his bed. Even when he was younger she couldn’t get him to do it.

“I can’t find my bloody smokes.” He added in the same hard tone.

“Good.” She said casting him an indignant look as she proceeded to slice the roast, “You don’t need that bad habit.”

“You know better to clean anything up in there, now everything’s messed up.” He glowered, “And why did you send

her to do it! I could have been in the shower.”

“By the looks of it you need one.” She said running her eyes over his dusty clothes and dirt smeared face. *Like he would care if that pretty young thing saw him in his birthday suit*, she mused. She loved him but he was a rounder and knew how every inch of him looked to the opposite sex.

He waved an arm angrily and spun about and left but not before hollering, “Keep her out of there!”

Beth had a blast collecting eggs. She’d never been in a chicken coop before, but she was fascinated by them. Her basket was half full already and she didn’t know how many Nancy needed. She’ll do one more nest, and then call it. However when she reached for that last set of eggs something moved, then hissed.

Chapter Three

Marshal was in the process of stripping out of his clothes and tossing them on the now clutter free carpet when a blood curdling scream ripped through the house. He was out of the house following the sound, without his shirt, socks or shoes, and his belt was undone to his jeans. He ran by a stunned Nancy who was also going out the back door to see Beth running from the chicken coop toward them tossing the basket of eggs in the air almost if it would propel her faster across the yard. However she didn’t stop, she actually leapt on Marshal, wrapped her arms around his neck, folding her legs up around his chest to get her feet the farthest of the ground, forcing him to hold her or he was sure she’d be on his shoulders in another second. “What the hell! Woman hold still! I’m not a God damn ladder.”

She didn’t hear him because she still staring wide-eyed at the building while pointing at and screaming toward it, “Snake!—snake!—snaaaaaaakkkkeee!”

Ben came crashing out the back door at that moment.

“Did it bite you?” Marshal suddenly became concerned because of her reaction, “Beth—Dammit, answer me!”

“No! Kill it!” she answered unable to take her eyes off the door of the Chicken coop as if the snake was going to go supersonic and sling shot out of there to attack her.

Marshal looked over his shoulder, “Ben go see what she’s screaming about.” Ben nodded and trotted toward the coop.

“No,” Beth protested, “He’s just a kid.”

“He’s capable, trust me.” He mused looking at her pale complexion. “Can I put you down now?”

She turned and looked at him and shook her head rapidly wide-eyed making her green eyes more appealing.

He would have laughed but she felt too damn good and it was having a serious affect on him to have him cling to him like she was. He could feel and hear the rapid breaths she was taking because her breasts were actually nestled in the crook of his neck. Obviously she was too scared to realize how dangerous that was to a man especially the breasts this woman had. He could tell they were moderately bigger than her small frame should normally allow, but from the feel of them against his jaw and neck, they weren’t augmented. They were soft, warm and he near groaned—probably nicely pliable under his large hands.

It wasn’t as if she stayed still either, she kept trying to squirm and currently had her bottom planted on his forearm while his other arm held her folded legs against him tightly. He needed to hold her because of the amount of wiggling she was doing, he was sure she would end up planting one of those sneakered toes into his groin by accident. Which right now, probably wouldn’t be a good idea because he was getting harder by the second.

Just then Ben came out holding what looked like a small garter snake causing her to screech and try and wiggle on him

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more.

“It’s harmless Beth—“ Ben said grinning, “They don’t bite.”

Nancy laughed and went back in the house as Ben tossed it off into the long grass behind the coop.

“Beth.”

This time it was Marshal’s voice and she looked at him. His face was barely inches from hers when he spoke and his voice sounded strained. “I am a man for Christ’s sake, quit your damn wiggling.” He said through clenched teeth.

Beth froze seeing his eyes darken, but not in anger. It was something else and it sent a warm flushing feeling through her entire body, “Oh.” She said in a barely audible whisper finally realizing that she was clinging to him. He felt amazing. There was no other way to describe it. He was hard and obviously strong from how easily he was holding her. She could feel the muscles in his arm contract under her bottom and she couldn’t help the blush that heated up her cheeks feeling it there. It didn’t help that she was so intimately pressed against him either.

“I gotta set you down.” He added relaxing his hold causing her to slide down him until her feet landed softly on the ground. He should have realized his mistake at doing that because the feel of her soft feminine body moving down his had him as hard as granite.

As for Beth, it didn’t go unnoticed either. He didn’t release her right away and their gazes were still locked on one another. She even completely forgot about the snake with his strong arm wrapped around her. Then she began to realize other things, like he was half naked and smelled like sweat and male and she was clinging to him like her life depended on it. For some reason it flooded all five senses not just her nostrils this time, and the warm flushing became more pronounced. “Oh dear.” She said breathlessly.

Marshal never felt the urge to toss a woman over his shoulder and drag her off to bed like he did in that moment. There was that raw look of wonder again and it just about had him undone. “Stay out of my room.” He said tersely looking down at her. He couldn’t help but be irritated. He was as hot as hell for her and there was nothing he could do about it in a full household.

She only nodded.

He said something rough under his breath before turning and walking away.

Beth just watched the shape of his strong receding bare back and wide shoulders and bit her bottom lip. *Gosh, he was built nice*, she thought.

Marshal stripped off the rest of his clothes and only turned the cold tap on glancing around his now spotless bathroom. She even replaced the towels, he smirked. *Well, she was efficient it seemed*. Glancing down at his erection he shook his head, *among other things*. Then he sharply inhaled as he stepped under the icy water as hit his flesh numbing it instantly. After what she did to him, he should have dragged her in there with him. Time and time again he told himself not to get involved. She was his employee and the last time that happened he ended up with a lot of trouble. It wasn’t as if he seduced her, she was well experienced and willing. He just didn’t realize that she had another agenda.

As a businessman, it was just one of those lines you didn’t cross but he stupidly did. Now he was dangerously close to doing it again.

Beth was completely unnerved by the whole situation and the snake had nothing to do with it. Marshal Davis was possibly the sexiest man alive and although she tried, she could no longer resist her feelings for him. There’s no way she could even let him know because he was obviously interested in another type of

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woman. A woman that she could never be, but she could see why a man would be attracted to her. Her body and demeanour screamed volumes. It was obvious that she knew exactly what to do with a man like Marshal whereas Beth knew nothing about intimacy.

She sighed heavily and went back in the house to gather her things before she said goodbye to Nancy. Marshal was still in the shower, but she had to get out of there to clear her head. If her father knew that she was attracted to him, there was no telling what he would do. Then she stopped remembering that her car was dead as she was coming out of the house. However, it wasn't where she left it the day before. She scanned the yard and saw it down by a shop and someone had taken the time to wash it.

Beth was walking toward the building when a tall lanky man that looked to be in his late sixties came out wiping his hands on a greasy rag.

"I'm Slim." He said grinning and then he nodded toward the car, "The boss asked me to fix it for you. She purrs like a kitten now."

First of all, Slim suited him. He was quite gangly with short cropped gray hair and all of his clothes hung loosely on him. "Thank you so much." She said and meant it. "What was wrong with it?"

"Just the starter. I also changed the oil and the plugs. She'll do you good now." He said cheerfully, "These old Veedubs are death proof."

"Veedub?"

"Volkswagen."

"Oh." She laughed, "As you can see I know nothing about vehicles."

"It's fine miss. If you have any more problems, just park it outside here and I'll take care of it."

“You don’t need to.” She said.

He shook his head giving her another smile, “boss’s orders.”

“Thanks again.” She said trying to hide her blush as she got in the car.

When she drove up to the front of her house she saw several other vehicles there and knew they had company. One was quite luxurious and the other was an expensive sports car so she knew they were probably potential clients and she had to be ready to entertain.

Her mother met her at the door. “Your father has company for dinner, I’m glad you made it. He was going to call over to the Davis’.”

She kissed her mother on the cheek, “Well, I’m home now. I’ll just put my stuff in my room and be right down.” There were many unspoken rules in her house and she knew to fix her appearance before she went downstairs. She also knew not to take too long. Not five minutes later she walked into the sitting room.

“Ah, there she is!” Theo said, with a look in his eyes that said it’s about time, despite the enthusiastic greeting.

Beth forced a smile and said her polite hello’s to the couple.

“This is my daughter Beth,” Theo said, “Beth, this is Joe Maynard, his wife Henrietta, and their son Tim. Joe owns several construction companies around town.”

The couple greeted her politely but it was Tim who stood and shook her hand holding on to it a little longer than appropriate. This brought her eyes to his. He was a handsome man that looked to be about in his late twenties with blond hair and sharp blue eyes. He was tall like Marshal but not as nicely built, but then again there weren’t many men that were built like him.

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“Your father says you’re going to college in the fall.” He said not taking his eyes off her and not letting go of her hand either. “Taking English Lit.”

“I am.” She said meeting his gaze again. Then she noticed a flash of something in his eyes. It was definite interest, but there was something else that she couldn’t quite read but her body suddenly became uncomfortable. She withdrew her hand and slipped it into the pocket of her slacks so he couldn’t take it again. He didn’t even seem to notice, but gave her a handsome smile instead. It had occurred to her then that he thought she’d be interested in him. Obviously he was used to a woman’s attention, but she really wasn’t interested. He was handsome and tall, but he was no Marshal Davis.

During supper Tim made sure he sat beside her and flattered her endlessly which Beth realized must work on other woman, but somehow it only made her more uncomfortable. Her parents were in deep conversation with the Maynards and either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“—of course I’m sure Beth would love to go to the dance this Saturday with Tim.”

That brought Beth’s eyes up to her father’s who held a warning in them not to disobey him. Obviously they had been discussing her and because of Tim’s attention and nonstop chatter she missed part of the conversation between the parents. Unfortunately she didn’t want to go and certainly didn’t understand her father at all. He was usually so possessive, but lately it seemed as if he was almost pimping her out to get clients.

“I would like that.” Said Tim.

She glanced up at him and forced a smile while her mind was travelling a hundred miles a minute trying to think of excuses to get out of the commitment, but then she caught her father’s eyes again and knew it wasn’t wise, “I’d love to.” She finally said.

“Tim has a degree in accounting,” his mother prattled on, “Why he handles all of our accounts—“

Beth returned her attention to her dinner feeling those blue eyes on the top of her head while his parents bragged about him to her parents. It was obvious that the expensive sports car belonged to him. Flashiness like that deterred her. As far as she knew Marshal only drove a big truck which he also used around the ranch.

After their company left, she was called into her father’s study.

“Don’t anger him.” Her mother begged as she walked by her.

“I won’t.” Beth said still feeling the sting of his hand from the other day.

“Shut the door.” He said taking a seat behind the desk and indicated for her to sit in the chair on the other side.

Beth could see that he already poured himself a drink. He never drank in front of others, ever. She sat down on the edge of the leather covered wingback chair. This whole room was designed for style and nothing in it was comfortable and welcoming. She folded her hands on her lap and waited.

“Tim’s very successful.” He finally said studying her expression.

“I heard.” She said keeping her expression carefully guarded.

He narrowed his gaze slightly trying to see if she was being sarcastic something he’d always tried to get rid of out of her, but every now and then she’d let it slip and he had to discipline her. However, she was turning into a young woman now so she needed to act like it.

Satisfied that she wasn’t being sarcastic, he continued, “I want you to go to the dance with him, and when he asks you out again, you go.”

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Her eyes widened.

“His family is worth a lot of money and have just taken me on as their lawyer, so if Tim shows you interest, I want you to play along.” He took a drink of his glass but kept his eyes on her to see if there was any betrayal in her eyes or expression that she wouldn’t obey him. Beth was pretty, very pretty and he knew how the opposite sex looked at her. She would be twenty-one soon and she should start pulling her weight around there. He’d already got her inside Marshal’s door, now there were the Maynards.

“But papa—“ he held up his hand cutting her off.

“Just play along Beth, that’s all I ask. Don’t you think he’s handsome?”

She actually did, but that didn’t mean she was attracted to him. She nodded.

“Good. You never know, maybe something will come out of this.”

She doubted it.

“How are things with Marshal Davis, you’ve been getting home late.”

“He owns a lot of businesses besides the ranch, therefore there’s piles of—“

“That’s not what I meant Beth. I know he’s got a lot of property and responsibilities, but I want you to start making suggestions about me to get my foot in the door. His previous lawyer is ready for retirement.”

“Okay.” She nodded visibly relieved that he didn’t know she stayed late at the Davis’ because the home was much more welcoming and comfortable than her own family’s

“Good, now go help your mother clean up.”

“Yes sir.” She said standing up to leave wishing someone would get her out of this hell. Then she had to deal with her mother praising Tim all through the rest of the evening as she

helped her tidy up. Beth never told her how she really felt about him because she knew it would be pointless. She knew her mother loved her but her father still wielded control over her.

Beth went to bed that night and stared at the ceiling. Tim was handsome and he seemed to be very attentive but for some reason she didn't feel that excitement like she did when Marshal was around. However, Marshal seemed to have no problem in that area and it was obvious that other women felt that too judging from the bodacious blonde that was flouncing all over him earlier that day. She released a frustrated breath thinking this was getting way too complicated for her young life. Her father just told her that he was going to use her to get accounts. Somehow it seemed so dishonest, especially when she felt like she was lying to honest people like Marshal. He didn't strike her as the type of person to be so forgiving. Yet he'd shown her such a tender side of him when she had that breakdown earlier and didn't pry in regards to it, or embarrass her about it either.

It actually made her comfortable around him even though she was physically unsettled she knew she could talk to him about anything, and it would never get passed him. He would just listen if she needed him to, but she still couldn't tell him her secrets. She had kept those to herself for many years and never confided them in anyone. They moved quite a bit, and her father was possessive of her, so she never had any close friends. It was done purposely of course, so no one would know what her and her mother had to deal with.

The next day, she parked in her usual spot in the driveway when she noticed several cattle hauling Semi trailers down by the corrals. Obviously they were moving cattle today. It was easy to pick out Marshal's large form among the mix of men. Then he turned and saw her and lifted a hand in greeting.

She waved back before he turned back to his task. Even

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that small gesture of acknowledgment from him seemed to pick up her spirits.

When she got inside she just smiled and shook her head at the two large boxes on waiting for her on the desk. She tossed her purse aside, and removed her coat before she sat down and dug in.

Several hours later she was halfway through the first box when the sound of a woman clearing her throat made her lift her head to see Cindy Parson walk in the room and look around as if she had every right to do so.

“So this is where he keeps you.” She said strutting over to her desk and wiping her finger along it before looking at it as if the desk she sat at was filthy.

“Can I help you?” Beth said forcing a grin. It was that or punch the woman in the nose and she was certain that Marshal wouldn’t take her assaulting his girlfriend to well.

“No, I’m just waiting for Marshal, he’s loading cattle.” She smiled down at the younger woman, “He invited me for lunch.”

Good for him, thought Beth.

“You know if you did something with your hair, you might look pretty.” She said suddenly.

Beth shot her eyes up to the other woman and narrowed her gaze. First of all Beth new she wasn’t ugly by any means, secondly, there was nothing wrong with her hair. She liked it long and free as it was today. Cindy was trying to grate her and it was working. However, Beth was also a master at keeping her expression passive, “Oh do you think so?” She said leaning back in her chair and making a point to tease it with her fingers as she gave her an innocent look.

Cindy narrowed her eyes, “I was just trying to help.”

“Is that what that was?” Beth smirked, “Because it sounded like you were being condescending.”

“Okay little girl,” Cindy said narrowing her eyes, “I’m

letting you know right now that Marshal is mine and if you get any thoughts in your head about him, you'd better get rid of them immediately."

"Funny, he gave me the impression that he didn't belong to anyone." She said starting to get irritated that the woman was dictating to her.

"He's the most eligible bachelor around, rich and my father's business partner, so don't you go batting those big eyes at him for anything, or I'll make your life a living hell." Cindy warned venomously, "I've lived around here my whole life and the people know me, so it's not so hard to spread gossip about the new girl and have it believed."

That was probably the only thing that would work on Beth because gossip would ruin her easily, especially if her father heard anything he would make her pay dearly. Cindy saw her expression and grinned smugly knowing that she found her Achilles heel. Beth glared at her, "Does he know that all that makeup just covers your scales?"

"Don't push me, I'll tear you to pieces." Cindy said viciously.

Beth squeezed her hands into fists and gave the woman an icy glare, "Get out of here before I throw you out."

Cindy made a sound swung around and made a dramatic exit leaving Beth glaring at her back. She may have been the abused child of an alcoholic, but there was no way in hell she'd take it from anyone else. She had some pride. Yet, she was visibly trembling with rage. How someone could be so cruel was beyond her. For some reason she thought it was limited to alcoholics like her father, but apparently it wasn't.

About ten minutes later she heard Marshal come in the house. There was no mistaking his large footsteps on the porch.

"Hey, Beth are you coming for lunch?" he said while leaning in the room.

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She looked up to see that he'd removed his hat and his hair was ruffled like he'd run his fingers through it. It made him look rough but devastatingly handsome. She would have liked to but she knew he had arranged a date with Cindy and even though she didn't care much for the woman she didn't want to interfere. Not only that, she couldn't stomach her falling all over him. "I'm fine."

He pursed his lips and stared at her with a scrutinizing narrowing of his eyes, "Something's up."

She shook her head, "No, I just started making headway and I don't want to quit."

"To my endless supply of receipts." He said

He had a point.

"I have another box in the truck that I haven't brought in yet." He said drawing himself to his full height to look down on her suspiciously.

She made an exasperated sound and met his gaze. It was obvious she was making excuses and he knew it.

"I'm not hungry."

"Liar."

She narrowed her gaze at him, "just because I don't want to sit and eat with you and your girlfriend, doesn't mean you can force me because you're my boss. I was hired to do a job, and I'm doing it. I don't need you to make sure I eat, I'm a big girl. Is that more than enough truth for you?" She didn't mean to sound so harsh, but that blonde witch did anger her even though she didn't show it. Also it irked her that he liked women like that.

He cocked an eyebrow at her defensiveness, "Is that right?"

"Just go away." She added feeling like an idiot letting emotions get the better of her.

He sauntered up to her desk in that sexy lazy stride he possessed, placed his hands palms down on her desk and leaned

down so his face was mere inches from hers. She could smell leather, sweat and a hint of his cologne. Her eyes widened at the hard look in his eyes.

“If you don’t get your ass to lunch, I’m going to drag you in there kicking and screaming. You’re thin enough to blow away in the wind and I won’t be responsible if you faint on the job. I’m not a bloody sweatshop owner.” He gritted out. You’d think the way she’d been looking at him lately that she held some sort of attraction to him, however when he started thinking like that she would throw one out there to make him doubt it. He didn’t want her attracted to him anyway, because she was too young, and an employee of his. After he’d gotten involved with one of his employees eight years ago she sued him when he refused to marry her. Apparently she didn’t care about him at all but wanted to marry into money so when he rejected her, she said she’d take the thing that meant most to him then, his money. She’d claimed that he didn’t allow for breaks, days off and sited emotional abuse. That part he actually might have agreed to after he cursed her all the way out the front door after he found out her true intentions.

“Fine.” She finally said, unable to resist the look in his eyes. She stood up and marched out of the study, down to the dining room. When she entered Cindy was already seated and shot her a hateful look. Then it suddenly changed to one of delight as Marshal stepped in behind her. She immediately shot to her feet and hung off his arm telling him how much she missed him.

Beth couldn’t stand it, “I’ll go see if Nancy needs help.” She made a face and went into the kitchen.

“Marshal darling,” Cindy said sparing a glance at the door Beth just went through, “Why do you need that woman? She obviously got some hang ups.”

“So do I.” Marshal said unmoved as he pulled her chair

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out for her. He refused to listen to someone else speak about his employees.

“Yes, but she’s not very pleasant.” She said sitting down and batting her eyes at him, “I went to say hello and welcome her to the neighbourhood and she practically threw me out of your study.”

“She what?” Marshal said curiously. He knew that she was in a mood when he showed up, but he certainly didn’t expect her to be rude to other people. Mind you, Cindy was prone to gossip which is why he never told her anything. She was too presumptuous too, but she was the daughter of a business partner and put up with her out of respect for her father.

Seeing that she had his attention she continued, “Yes, she obviously is a little possessive where you’re concerned.”

Was she? He certainly didn’t notice, but then again women act differently toward one another when a man is involved, “I’ll speak to her.” He would ask her himself if she threatened to throw Cindy out of the house and watch her expression closely when he did to see if she was lying. Somehow Cindy’s words did miff him a little even if he didn’t show her that. It brought his mind back to the woman that tried to sue him all those years ago. Could Beth be that vicious? Was he misreading her all along? Part of him wanted to not listen to Cindy, but she had no reason to lie to him. Her father was a friend of his and he’d bailed him out when he needed money by buying into the Parson’s two feedlots. Since then, with Marshal’s help, they were doing fairly well. Lately he’d considered telling Ed that he could buy him out now that he could afford it. He was stretching himself thin and he wasn’t getting any younger. Two less feedlots would probably give him some extra time.

“Would you darling?” Cindy smiled to herself.

Beth came back in at that time with a bowl of salad and Nancy was behind her with a delicious smelling casserole.

Instantly she became aware of Marshal's glare and gave him a questioning look as she took her seat. Maybe she really made him angry by refusing to have lunch with them. Unable to take that look anymore she averted her eyes to her plate and ate in silence. For once she was thankful that Cindy chatted on about herself and when lunch was finally over she breathed a sigh of relief as Cindy asked Marshal to see her out.

Beth started gathering the dishes.

"I'm sure you have enough work of your own, young lady." Nancy said taking the plates from her.

"I suppose." She said turning to leave.

"Don't let her bother you." Nancy said.

"I'm trying." Beth answered not even willing to deny it. As soon as she sat down at her desk Marshal came in with enough noise to wake the dead. She didn't even need to look up to know he was angry. His glare through lunch told her. She just didn't understand how he could get so worked up because she wanted to skip lunch.

"I don't need you to be rude to my friends." He gritted out.

She snapped her head up, "Rude?"

"Cindy told me what you did. I won't tolerate it. If you want to behave like a spoiled adolescent then go home."

"What I did?" she said in surprise.

"Did you threaten to throw her out of here?"

"Well yes—but she—"

"Beth, you have no right!" he barked, "You are just an employee and the next time you take it upon yourself to tell my friends what they can and can't do, I'll fire you so damn fast it'll make your head spin!" He'd worked himself up after Cindy had left by thinking about the whole incident. The more he thought about it the less he trusted Beth and the more he began to wonder if she was deceiving him. Something wasn't right about

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her, she had too many secrets. He'd let his temper rise, and it hadn't calmed down when he sought her out moments after Cindy drove away. He was also angry at himself for being attracted to her and deflected that onto her also.

Beth ground her teeth together knowing that it would be pointless to defend herself. He was raging mad and no matter what she said, he would take Cindy's word over hers. Like Cindy said, she'd lived here all her life and Beth was new in town, who would believe her? On top of that, if she lost this job, her father would most defiantly snap and take it out on her.

"Do you hear me?" he said pointing a finger at her.

"Yes." She ground out angry and completely hurt at the same time. Whatever door she started opening towards this man because of the tenderness and understanding he'd shown her just closed with a snap. What he didn't see was her judging how quick he could make it around the desk that was between them. She would have never thought that a man like him would strike her, but for some reason, that habit was hard to break.

"Good!" he said before he stormed out of there.

Beth waited until she heard the front door slam before she got up and got her purse and coat. The emotional damage was done and she knew it was hopeless to find someone who understood her because Marshal had been through what she was going through and he didn't understand the pain she lived with everyday or he would have never spoken to her like that. She struggled to blink back tears feeling so painfully alone. Heading for the front door she bit her bottom lip to resist letting them fall, but she ended up nearly bumping into Nancy.

"What was he bellowing—" she stopped and saw the look on Beth's face, "Oh dear."

"I'm done for today Nancy. I'll be back on Monday." She said bowing her head and rushing by her.

Nancy stuck her hands on her hips watching the young

girl rush toward her car hiding her face so no one could see her cry.

Chapter Four

When Marshal came into the dining room for supper that night, exhausted, hungry and filthy Nancy tossed what looked like a peanut butter sandwich in front of him. No plate, no utensils, nothing. Just a plain sandwich. He looked across the table to see Ben eating a huge steak with potatoes and greens.

Ben raised his head and stopped chewing while looking back and forth between the two adults.

“What the hell is this?” He said staring at the sandwich.

“That’s for upsetting the young miss.” She said glaring at him.

“What are you talking about?” he said taken back.

“She left here in tears after you tore the hide off of her bones.”

He gave her a hard stare, “she threatened to throw Cindy out.”

“Really?” Said Nancy unmoved, “And I supposed she was completely unprovoked.”

“Cindy had no reason to do anything to Beth.” He said getting to his feet and glaring down at her.

“Sure she didn’t. That girl would have you leg shackled and to the preacher faster than you can spit if you don’t open your eyes.” she shot back before she turned and left.

“Ah hell—“ he said under his breath looking down at his pitiful dinner then at Ben who still had the same chunk of beef in his mouth and was staring at him in surprise. He might have found it comical if he wasn’t so irritated.

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“Did you really yell at Beth?” Ben said arching his brows.

“Don’t eat with your mouth full.” He scolded evading the question while looking the door Nancy just went through. He certainly couldn’t fire her because she was practically part of the homestead, but killing her came to mind. He muttered a curse under his breath and headed for the front door. He’d get dinner in town. As far as he was concerned, Beth had no right to tell Cindy what to do in his house even if she showed up unannounced and uninvited, Marshal knew she had a few hard knocks and needed a friend.

As for Beth, she needed to be brought down a notch. She was born into privilege and obviously used to doing things her way. He wasn’t wrong in speaking to her the way he did and if she was crying it was probably faked to get sympathy from Nancy.

So why was he feeling guilty?

When he pulled up in front of the diner half an hour later, he was surprised about what he saw through the window. There was Beth sitting with Tim Maynard of all people, but that wasn’t what surprised him. It was the hot emotion of jealousy he felt instantly at the sight.

Tim was wealthy and closer to Beth’s age than he was. He also had a track record with women that Marshal heard all about. He was no different at Tim’s age, but he was wiser now and Beth didn’t strike him to be a worldly woman enough to resist Tim’s charm.

He watched her as he headed for the front door. She hadn’t noticed him yet because she seemed very involved in what Tim had to say and it rubbed him. If she was upset like Nancy said, she certainly didn’t look it now. Maybe she was that good of an actress that she even had Nancy fooled. Regardless, he was going to see for himself.

When he stepped in through the door she did notice him

and instead of going and placing an order he walked up to her table keeping his eyes on her. *No*, he thought, *she doesn't look upset*. He couldn't help but feel a little guilty when Nancy told him she was. If she was, she didn't look it now. Then he noticed a slight flicker in her eyes as she watched him approach her before she quickly masked it and steeled her expression. It made him remember when she burst into tears unexpectedly a few days ago. He was pretty sure she didn't fake that episode because her reaction was too genuine. He knew enough about her to know that she would find that embarrassing because she tried so hard to guard her feelings.

Tim looked up, "Hi Marsh." He said in a friendly greeting.

"Tim." He said politely before refocusing his attention on her, "I need to speak with you." He saw her shift uncomfortably in her seat.

"Can't it wait until Monday?" she said not wanting to talk to him at all. Just seeing him made her want to cry again. This was becoming a bad habit.

"No." He said bluntly.

Beth knew he wouldn't hesitate to haul her out of her seat if she refused. She had a dose of his temper that afternoon and certainly didn't want to push it in case he fired her. Her father's angry face flashed in her mind and it was what got her to stand up.

"I'll only be a minute." She said to Tim forcing a pleasant smile.

"No problem." He said giving Marshal and unsure look.

Before she could say or do anything, he took her arm and led her out of the diner and out of sight of its patrons about ten yards from the front door down the sidewalk before he turned her to face him. "Nancy says she thought you left upset today."

"She's wrong." She said quickly almost too quickly because his gaze looked suspicious.

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“Did I upset you?”

“No.” she said abruptly not liking to remember.

Despite her denial, she couldn't meet his gaze and it was the indicator he needed to see. For someone so young she guarded her feelings very well and he was stupid enough not to notice because she was young and that behaviour wasn't common for her age. Furthermore that emotional meltdown she had a few days ago made him think that she was open with expressing her feelings after all, she had no problem giving him hell. Yet, there were those other few times that she was defensive when he probed her personal life and of course the time he grabbed her in the stables. Maybe her emotions ran deeper than he first thought and she'd formed a protective wall around them. If that was true, he screwed up. Maybe she was letting him see little bits of herself because she trusted him and he just crushed her by treating her the way he did.

“Maybe I was a little harsh Beth.”

A little, she wanted to say, but this was probably as close as Marshal ever got to an apology.

“However—“

So much for that, she thought.

“—I still want you to be polite and cordial to my guests.”

“Fine.” She said resigned to leave it alone. She knew he wouldn't believe her, no matter what she said about Cindy threatening her first. “Is there anything else? I'm on a date.”

He gritted his teeth, “Tim Maynard is a ladies' man.”

She lifted her chin, “As you said earlier. I am an employee and therefore your business is yours and mine is mine.” She turned around and went back in the diner.

He asked for that. His eyes guided over her backside as she went back through the door wondering if he was completely wrong about her. Truthfully, he'd never met anyone like her and she was a complete mystery.

“Everything all right?” Tim asked as she sat across from him.

“Fine, he was just asking where I left some receipts.” She lied. Just then he stepped back through the door and up to the counter without a word. She tried to look interested in what Tim had to say but her eyes kept flicking over his shoulder to Marshal as he got his food and left without another glance in her direction. *Just an employee*, she thought to herself.

She returned her attention back to Tim who didn't even seem to notice that she had been stealing glances at Marshal because he was quite enraptured in discussing his accomplishments. It's funny, she thought, Marshal never talked about himself except when he told her about his own father. However his father was long since dead and he could talk about it without worrying about the consequences whereas, she had no place to go and no money. When Marshal paid her next week, she would hand it over to her father. He always made sure he left her mother and her no options.

She really didn't want to go out with Tim after what had happened earlier with Marshal, but after supper he showed up to the house and asked her to go for coffee. Her father gave her one of those looks that she couldn't disobey so she went. Tim was handsome, but she wasn't attracted to him. It was odd really, because any girl her age would be. He was only twenty five, but was already wealthy. Yet, she couldn't get past his ego. All he did was talk about himself while casting several looks to her chest. Most men did because she was small, so her chest looked a little bigger, but she was only a c-cup, which she always thought was perfectly normal for a woman. She usually wore clothing that downplayed it, but obviously he still noticed it. Maybe Marshal was right about him being a ladies' man, but it didn't matter because she had no say in going out with him.

An hour later Tim dropped her off telling her what time

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he'd pick her up for the dance tomorrow night. She held her breath at the look in his eyes. It was almost as if he wanted to kiss her, but she made sure she was out of the car before he did after saying a polite thank you.

Her father was waiting for her when she returned.

"How was your date?" he asked while studying her expression.

"It was nice." She was bored to tears.

"Tim comes from a wealthy family." He said watching her carefully, "I think it's good that you're dating him."

She wanted to tell him that she wasn't interested, but she knew it would be pointless. She also knew she couldn't tell Tim anything because she didn't trust him. She didn't trust many people and she was worried that if she told Tim how she really felt, he'd go to her father, "Yes Papa." She said.

"Do you like him?"

"I do." She answered truthfully, *but not the way you think*, she added to herself.

"Good." He nodded his approval.

The next day she was thankful that her father went to the office to work while leaving specific instructions for her to go and get a new gown and visit the salon to get her hair done. She complained about it over breakfast after she made the appointment and her mother shook her head.

"Be thankful that he's spending money on you dear."

"He's putting me out there as a showpiece for one of his new clients."

Her mother took a heavy breath, "I know, but what are your options?"

"Options?"

She nodded, "I've been married to your father for almost twenty five years and I will never have a way out." She held up

her hand as Beth was going to speak, “Let me finish dear. I loved him when I first married him, or I thought I did. My father was a lot like him and I thought I was being set free when I married him. Only I found out when the honeymoon was over that I jumped from the fire into the ashes.”

“Leave him mom—“ As she was saying it her mother shook her head.

“I can’t. He’ll find me. He’s done it before.”

“What?” that was surprising.

“I left when I was pregnant with you. I feared for you and that he’d treat you the same as he did me.”

“He found you?”

She nodded, “You’re father is worth a lot more than he lets on. He hired private detectives and tracked me down. He never laid a hand on me when I was pregnant, but several weeks after you were born, he beat me so bad I was in the hospital for three days.”

“Oh God! Didn’t the police suspect anything?”

She shook her head, “He was a prominent businessman and has a way with people—you know that. He told people I fell down the stairs. I was so terrified for you that I agreed. He threatened to take it out on you if I told the truth. You were just a baby.”

“Oh mom,” she said sadly, “I didn’t know. I mean I always wondered why you didn’t leave.”

“Your father likes the illusion of a perfect family. Ever since then, he’s handled all of the money, the bills, and our accounts so I could never leave again. I get a small allowance to buy groceries, and he sets up accounts at the boutiques for clothing, but it’s all about control Beth. If you can get out, and Tim offers you marriage, you should take it.”

“Mom, I’m not attracted to him that way.” Her mother looked surprised by that confession.

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“You seemed to get along so well at dinner the other night.”

She shook her head, “He’s charming, but I don’t find him that interesting.” Boring as paint.

“Well don’t let on to your father, he has plans for you there.”

Beth groaned, her mother just confirmed what she was thinking. She stood up, “I’ve got to go, I’ve got an appointment at nine-thirty.” She made a face thinking her father was selling her to the highest bidder.

On the way to town she reflected heavily on that last conversation. After hearing her mother’s story it was no wonder she didn’t know what the problem was, she’d have given anything to get out of this house and Tim seemed like a good solution. Beth didn’t see it that way. She had plans. She was going to get her college degree then leave. Her father would have absolutely no control over her life when she was educated and could make a choices and he could go to hell. Hopefully he didn’t have it in his head to marry her off before then.

After she parked her car and walked into the salon she realized that everyone who was anyone was going to this dance tonight because the place was full and there were a few more patrons there trying to get a last minute appointment.

The hairstylist told Beth that she was lucky she got an appointment because there was a last minute cancellation. Like with most people in this town she was very friendly and Beth had to admit she did like the ambience over Chicago. She introduced herself as Lori Tasker and chatted non-stop about her life which was very refreshing. She was married to the police chief and had a baby girl that was about nine months old which actually surprised Beth because she looked quite young. She was very slender, with almost a runway model build, and short brown hair and stunning blue eyes. She reminded Beth of a pixie with her

delicate pretty features.

“I’m twenty-two.” She said smiling at Beth’s reflection.

Beth laughed, “Was it that obvious?”

“I get it a lot.” She beamed, “My mother looks half her age, so I inherited it. Now—“ she said pausing after she finished trimming Beth’s hair, “How do you want this styled for tonight?”

“I have no idea. Surprise me.”

She smiled, “Who’s your date?”

“Tim Maynard.” Beth was surprised that Lori’s smile evaporated, “What?”

She shook her head and forced a smile, “It’s nothing.”

“You don’t like him that much do you?” she said seeing Lori’s expression

She shrugged while reaching for the blow dryer, “It’s nothing personal, he always seemed pleasant enough, it’s just gossip.” She said, “And I usually don’t put much into it or like to gossip myself. However—“ she winked trying to dispel the other girl’s worries, “He is a dish.”

Beth wasn’t convinced, but Lori flicked on the dryer before Beth could ask her anymore about it.

Lori continued to chatter on after that and Beth never did have a chance to ask her again, or pry because Lori did look uncomfortable talking about gossip and she didn’t like it either. However Lori also asked her about herself and found out that she was going to the college in the fall and working for Marshal Davis.

“Oh,” said Lori with more excitement this time, “That man could write the book on sex appeal.” That made Beth laugh. She was right. “Next to my husband of course.” She added with a grin.

About that time no other than Cindy came in the door. Beth saw her in the reflection at the counter. She looked up to see Beth and her eyes narrowed. As the clerk led her by her chair

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she paused and made a face before continuing on but didn't say anything.

Lori didn't miss it and gave Beth a questioning look.

She shrugged, "She's dating Marshal and thinks I have a thing for him."

The other woman smiled, "Is that right. Well, if Cindy thinks she can get Marshal Davis, she'll get old waiting."

"He doesn't want marriage?"

"No, he was set up by a previous employee and doesn't put much trust into woman—"she paused looking at Beth.

It was too late Beth already saw her expression, "let me guess. It was his secretary." The way he treated her and had been treating her at arm's length made sense now.

Lori was embarrassed, "Sorry Beth. I should keep my mouth shut."

"Well at least a few things make sense. He doesn't trust many people."

"No, he doesn't. My husband and he are good friends, but other than his brother, I don't think he has many. Don't get me wrong, he's really well liked and respected in the community. He's known to be honest in business too, but keeps his personal life to himself."

"Like Cindy," she mumbled out loud glancing down the salon to see the woman take a seat in a chair.

Lori leaned down and spoke quietly, "Cindy thinks she has him on a hook, but he's only dating her because he feels sorry for her. He wouldn't marry a woman like that."

"He feels sorry for her?" she said suddenly remembering how he was to her when he held her after her meltdown in the coffee shop.

Lori shook her head, "He does, it was just that Cindy was jilted by her fiancé, and he ran off with all of her savings about a year ago. Marshal knows what that felt like when his secretary

sued him for assault because he wouldn't marry her. He had an affair with her, but she turned out to be a gold digger and he dropped her. That was her revenge."

"Oh no!"

"She didn't win. However, he's careful who he dates now. They have to have money and not expect anything from him in that sense." She inclined her head slightly where Cindy was sitting, "The only reason he sees her is because her father and him are business partners at a couple of feedlots. Otherwise he'd not even look in her direction."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because she spends every second day in here getting dolled up and she spends money like it's going out of style. Marshal needs a hometown girl, not a debutante."

There goes that. Beth certainly wasn't a hometown girl. She may not spend endless hours in front of a mirror but she was closer to a socialite. Her father made sure she had taken etiquette classes so not to embarrass him. She also had to take dance classes until just last year. "I thought you didn't like gossip." She suddenly remembered.

"That bit about Marshal you'll hear and I'd rather you know it from me than other versions around town. My husband was a character witness for him at the time. It happened about eight or nine years ago."

Shortly after Lori was finished styling her hair and Beth had to admit that it looked very nice. She had managed to pile it on top of her head very neatly, when she couldn't even manage her long curls in a pony tail. She actually looked like a sophisticated lady, but the best part was she made a friend.

"We should get together sometime Beth." She said as she walked her to the door.

"I'd like that."

"Most of my friends moved away when they finished high

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school and my little girl keeps me busy too. I don't like visiting bars or anything like that which is what my single friends usually do."

"Me either." She said not wanting to tell her that she was only nineteen because it might get back to Marshal. No only that she was sure that scene wouldn't appeal to her anyway.

"We could go fishing on Sunday. My husband has the day off and he can watch Abigail."

"Fishing?"

"You've never fished?"

Beth shook her head. Nor did she horseback ride or know what a feedlot was. This place was such a cultural shock compared to Chicago, but she had to admit, she liked meeting the friendly people like Lori.

"Well then it will be loads of fun." She reassured her.

"Do I need to bring anything?"

"Just yourself, I'll handle the rest."

After Beth said goodbye and she went to the fashion boutique that her father told her to shop at. He'd left her an open account there. She'd found a flattering gown of dark velvet green with a halter top and an ankle length skirt. It may have actually shown her cleavage a little too much for her conservative tastes, but it was so beautiful that she bought it. There was a matching sheer that she could use to cover herself if need be.

she drove home in the late afternoon feeling cheerful. It wasn't an emotion that she had often, but she'd made a friend today and she seemed so nice.

Tim arrived around eight with his flashy car practically spit polished and waited downstairs while she finished getting ready. She saw him pull up through the window of her bedroom. She felt herself getting nervous not because of Tim, but she knew that Marshal was going to be there with Cindy.

Beth's mother came in at that moment interrupting her

thoughts and carrying a black velvet case.

‘What’s that?’

‘My diamonds. You’re father wants you to wear them.’

She rolled her eyes. “Mom you know I’m not into jewellery.” Probably because she didn’t own any or didn’t want anything her father would give her.

“It doesn’t matter. He’ll make sure you don’t leave the house without them.” She said opening the box and taking out a diamond necklace with matching earrings.”

Beth relented and put them on.

“You look beautiful honey.” She said while playing with a few loose strands of hair around Beth’s neck. “You’ll knock Tim’s socks off.”

Beth smiled at her mother, “Thanks.” Not that she really wanted to knock Tim’s socks off in the least.

“Come, you need to get a move on, or your father will be up here in a minute, you know he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

No he didn’t. She nodded, took a deep breath and went out the door.

“Wow!” Tim said as his eyes lay on Beth, ‘You’re beautiful.’

Beth did blush, “thank you.” She actually did feel beautiful in the expensive material.

“I’ll be the envy of the night.” He added drinking up her gorgeous figure in the gown and letting his imagination run wild on what she looked like without it. When he’d met her those other two times she was wearing very conservative clothing, now she looked like a playboy model in that gown.

As he led her out to his car and helped her in she was thinking that she should have complimented him to, but from the look of his expression and his posture, he already knew how good he looked and she didn’t want him to get the wrong impression.

He got in the driver’s side and started the powerful

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engine, sent her a handsome grin and tore up the drive on the way out. Beth actually found herself laughing. Maybe this night won't be so bad after all.

Beth waited until Tim gave detailed instructions to the Valet who was going to park the car before he came over and escorted her through the doors. For the first hour he walked her through the crowd and introduced her to the town's elite. At first she had her arm looped over Tim's but somewhere in the course of the evening he took her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. Several times she tried to tug her hand away but he just tightened his grip not even indicating that he noticed her reluctance at all. For some reason she wasn't comfortable holding his hand, like they were more than just acquaintances, but he obviously had other plans. She started to get worried. Her father was pushing Tim on her and she was hoping that he didn't have interest in that way so he'd be the one to reject her. She didn't mind being friends, but if her father found out she had rejected him, he'd be furious.

Marshal's tall form was visible as the crowd broke and he was taking her to the dance floor. Beth couldn't believe how packed the dance was.

"Hey, there's Marshal." Tim said, just as the other man turned around and spotted them.

Beth frowned seeing Cindy clinging to his arm as soon as Marshal moved to face them but was able to hide it before he saw her. She felt her stomach jump when he let his eyes rake over her form slowly and swore she saw a glint of approval in them until they settled on their joined hands and he frowned.

"Oh look," said Cindy leaning closer to Marshal, "Isn't that your employee—Barb—"

"—Beth." He corrected before Beth could say anything without taking his eyes off of Beth.

She felt like squirming under that gaze and finally averted

her own. She could see the disapproval in his eyes at their joined hands as Tim greeted them. Even if she didn't see those signs, he told her how he felt about her going out with Tim. Yet, why should she care? He wasn't very nice to her that day to begin with and since when could he dictate who she could be with?

"We were trying to find a table." Tim said.

"You can sit with us." Marshal offered, "John is saving our table."

"Great." Said Tim and Beth near groaned.

It was hard enough enduring his glare briefly, how was she supposed to deal with it for the rest of the night?

Marshal clenched his jaw to resist the urge to reach over and remove Beth's hand from Tim's. Now he understood what seeing red meant. It wasn't too long ago that he held her in his arms and he wondered if Tim had that privilege. From the way he was clutching her hand, he thought so. He didn't like it, not one bit.

When they sat down he spent the better part of his time watching her unknown to John's amused look. He drew some satisfaction that she seemed uncomfortable under his hard stare because he didn't want her having fun with Tim.

"Dance with me darling." Cindy said trying to stifle her growing frustration that Marshal hadn't paid her any attention because he couldn't take his eyes off of the beautiful auburn-haired woman sitting across from them. Finally he looked at her, but his expression was completely indifferent and she felt like scratching the other woman's eyes out. As Marshal stood and pulled out her chair she was thinking of how to get revenge. Shortly after some elderly woman asked John and he kindly obliged her.

After the couple headed to the dance floor, Tim turned to Beth, "Wow, I don't think I've ever seen him look so angry."

"No?"

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‘Obviously something chafed his mood; he’s usually easy going even though he’s a private person.’

Well it was obvious now that he didn’t approve of her being there with Tim, but he wasn’t that nice to her on Friday over Cindy, so she was really confused. She certainly wasn’t going to tell Tim that. “Maybe he and Cindy had an argument.” She hedged.

Tim glanced at the couple on the floor and shrugged as if it wasn’t important, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Sure, a soda water would be nice.”

“Nothing else?” he said raising his brows. “I could get you something a little more potent.”

‘Oh, no thanks Tim, I don’t like alcohol.’ She near shuddered.

“Have you ever had a drink?” he said leaning closer to her, “It’ll help you loosen up a bit. You seem a little uptight.”

“Do I?” It occurred to her that he noticed that she was trying to pull her hand out of his and he misinterpreted it as discomfort in the crowd instead. Tim was obviously too conceited to think it was because she might not be attracted to him. However as a child of an alcoholic she vowed never to touch the stuff.

“I’ll be right back then.” He said getting up and leaving.

Almost on cue Marshal took his seat across from her, his eyes still giving her that hard stare, “Where’s Tim?”

“Getting me a soda,” she narrowed her eyes back at him, “Where’s Cindy?”

“Ladies room. Are you sleeping with him?”

Beth felt like she’d been slapped, “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“That’s none of your business.” She whispered harshly hoping no one heard them.

He stood up, “Come on—let’s dance.” He added just as

tersely.

She would have refused if he didn't take her arm and practically haul her out of the chair. It's funny because if anyone else grabbed her like that she would have panicked. Only Marshal seemed to be the one to get away with just about anything he did to her.

Once on the floor he held her tight against him, "I told you he was a womanizer."

"I don't need advice Doctor Ruth." She shot back.

He chuckled and she felt the heavenly sound through to the bone. Did he have any idea how sexy that sounded?

"Just watch yourself around him Beth."

She pulled back and looked up at him just to find him staring down at her. His eyes were lighter, less angry now and if she didn't know better he looked genuinely concerned, "Why do you say that?" First Lori and then Marshal.

"I told you, he has a reputation with women."

"I can handle myself."

"That remains to be seen." He said deeply. Hell she smelled like lavender and she looked like a piece of sensual art all done up in that gown. Never in his life did a woman illicit such a heated reaction from him just by being wrapped up in a glorious velvet and silk gown that clung to every sensual curve she owned. He wanted to be the one to unwrap her bit by bit and taste every soft luscious inch of her. She actually surprised him when he first saw her enter the dance hall. His immediate thoughts were that she was too good for this place. Just the way she carried herself made her look so elegant and classy that he could see nothing else at that moment, but her.

She stared up at him. It was almost as if he was referring to something else. He didn't loosen his tight hold through the remainder of the dance and she liked the tiny thrills that went through her every time his thighs rubbed against her legs.

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Everything around them seemed to disappear so that it was just them on the dance floor and she savoured it, even if it was short lived. However when they returned to the table Cindy was openly scowling knocking a hole in her brief bliss. On the other hand, Tim didn't seem affected by the least and jumped up to pull a chair out for her asking her if she enjoyed herself.

It wasn't long after that Cindy dragged Marshal back on to the dance floor while she sipped her drink. "Tim this is a little sweet." She said referring to her soda.

"It's ginger ale they were out of soda water," he said giving her a charming grin, "How about we show these old people how the younger generation dances?"

She laughed and nodded.

As the night went on Beth found herself actually enjoying herself and Tim's company regardless of Marshal's continuous suspicious looks. Then she started feeling a little light headed and wondered if it was because she didn't have supper. She started leaning on Tim to steady herself.

Marshal narrowed his eyes at her when she gripped Tim's arm to help her stand up to go to the ladies room then came back and did the same thing to sit down. To him, she seemed a little unsteady. "What are you drinking?"

"Soda." She said smiling.

"We should go." Tim said suddenly rising to his feet. "People are going to start heading home in the next half an hour and I want to get my car out of the lot before someone runs into it."

Beth swayed slightly getting to her own and Marshal jumped up to help her before she could grab Tim's arm. She heard Cindy give an indignant huff. Then Marshal framed her face in his large hands and studied her expression.

"Soda?" she nodded followed by a beaming smile.

Tim cleared his throat and took Beth's arm, "I'll take her

home Marshal.”

“I didn’t have supper,” she breathed unable to ignore the feel of his hands on her skin.

Marshal glanced over at Tim and reluctantly released her just as Cindy wrapped her arms around one of his.

“I’m ready to go too darling.” She said ignoring the other couple.

“All right,” he looked pointedly at Tim, “You take her right home, she doesn’t look well.”

“I will.” Tim said making a salute.

Beth actually giggled causing him to set his light blue eyes on her and flash her a rakish grin.

Marshal narrowed his eyes suspiciously but Cindy started tugging on his arm telling him she’d like to leave but not before having a vision of strangling the younger woman.

Beth started to feel more and more light headed as Tim drove her home. The street lights started to blur into a continuous line of light.

“Are you all right honey?” Tim asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe I should pull over. There’s spot just up here.

Beth didn’t notice that Tim pulled down a side road off the highway from her place out of sight of the passing traffic. Before she knew it, he was out of the car and opening her door to help her out. “Where are we?”

“I just thought you need a minute before we continue and—” he added with humour in his tone, “—I just had my car detailed.”

She smiled

“—and it looks like you need some fresh air.” He said leaning her against the car after he closed the door. “Wait here.”

Beth heard the sound of a trunk opening and a moment later Tim was back with a blanket which he spread out a short

distance away. Because of the way she was feeling it wasn't until he'd gotten her flat on her back and covered her body with his that she realized what he was doing.

Chapter Five

Marshal dropped Cindy off and ignored her blatant suggestions to stay the night. Something was niggling him and it was hard to ignore. He got in the truck and started the engine recalling the night's events. He may not have known Beth all that well, but she didn't seem like herself. If he'd fathom a guess, he would have assumed that she was drunk, but she said she wasn't drinking. Then there was Tim's abrupt interruption when he was trying to figure out what was wrong with her. Lifting his hand he looked at his watch. It was eleven thirty and he knew Beth's parents went to bed early. She didn't own a cell phone either. He made a note to rectify that come Monday.

Looking at his watch again, he sighed and pulled out his own phone to call the Winter's house. He'll apologize tomorrow if he woke them, but maybe they were waiting up for Beth to come home after all it was her first night out in a new town. He breathed a sigh of relief as her mother answered after the second ring.

"Laura, It's Marshal Davis, I hope I didn't wake you."

"No of course not. What can I do for you?"

"Is Beth home yet?"

"No, I've been waiting up for her. Is everything okay?"

"I'm sure it is. She left with Tim the same time I did, but she wasn't feeling so good."

"Oh,"

"Don't worry, I'm sure she will be home soon. Will you call me if she gets home in the next few minutes?"

“Certainly.” She said and he gave her his mobile number.

After he hung up, Marshal shifted the truck into gear and started for home. First he’d cruise by Tim’s apartment and see if his car was there.

When he arrived, the flashy car was nowhere to be seen so he turned around in the middle of the street and started toward home. If Tim took her home, he’ll pass him on the way to his ranch.

Twenty minutes later he swerved to avoid hitting someone walking in the middle of the road and nailed his brakes angrily. Part of it was his fault because he was checking his phone to see if it was working because he’d yet to hear from Beth’s mother. He only took his eyes off the road for a second and when he looked up there was someone there. He pulled the truck over to the side of the road and rubbed his forehead. Who was so damn stupid? He left the vehicle running and got out. What he saw shocked him to the core. It was Beth. She was staggering down the middle of the road trying to hold up her torn dress. “Beth?” His answer was a wretched sob.

“Marshal!”

He ran over to her and gripped her shoulders, “What the hell happened!”

“I don’t know!” She sobbed clutching at his jacket. “I remember small pieces.”

Without another word he reached down and picked her up to carry her to his truck setting her in the passenger side before he got in and spun around in the middle of the road heading back to town. He reached over and took her hand drawing her across the seat so she was leaning against him. She turned her face into his shoulder and he took a deep worried breath before letting it out.

“Where are we going?” she said finally looking out the windshield.

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She sounded so vulnerable his chest clenched, “To the hospital.” He said softly.

“No! Marshal, I can’t. I have to go home—my father—” she sat up straight swaying slightly.

“—Will probably shoot Tim himself if he finds him before I do.” He gritted out angrily and circled his arm around her shoulders to pull her against him again. “Stay put.” He added gently contracting his arm protectively around her.

“Can you please just take me home?” She pleaded wrapping her fingers around his suit lapel again.

He spared her a glance and saw the fear in her expression, “Are you serious? You need to get checked out.”

“I need to sleep because I feel terrible.” She tried convincing him.

“Well Beth, you look worse than you feel, trust me.”

“I have to go home Marshal, they can’t treat me if I refuse treatment.”

He said something under his breath that Beth wouldn’t ever repeat even in private. Then he pulled the truck over and reached for his phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling your mother and telling her that you’re okay before I drag you kicking and screaming to the hospital.”

“Oh God!” she choked.

After he told Laura what he was going to do he hung up and stared at his phone for a minute. She didn’t sound the too concerned even though she agreed to his wishes.

“What did she say?”

“She wants me to take you to the hospital.”

Beth buried her face in her hands. “Was my father awake?”

“She didn’t say.” He cast her a curious glance, “Why?”

Beth felt relief. Her mother would cover for her

somehow. She shook her head, “No reason, let’s go.”

Her sudden about face confused him but he let it go because he had other priorities at the moment. He shifted the truck into gear again and tore off down the road. Once at the hospital, Marshal removed his suit jacket and placed it around her pulling the collar up high around her so he could shelter her from other people that might recognize her. He didn’t stop in the waiting room, but ushered her into the first empty examination room he found before he went to see about someone to look at her.

“Matt,” he said when he saw a familiar face. What luck it was to find one of his close friends working tonight, especially when he didn’t have many of them.

Doctor Lawford looked up to see Marshal Davis with a look on his face that said this wasn’t a social visit, “Hi Marshal—what can I do for you.”

“Can I see you alone for a moment?”

“Certainly,” he turned to one of the nurses near him and handed her the chart he was working on following it with several instructions. After she acknowledged him, he walked around the counter and shook Marshal’s hand, “What is it?”

“One of my employees got into trouble.”

“You don’t—“ ‘

“No, it was Tim Maynard.” He said knowing Matt was wondering about a repeat of what happened eight years ago. “Look, I need a favour. This can’t go on the books. She’s very embarrassed.”

Matt didn’t hesitate to agree, “I’ll take a look at her. Where is she?”

Marshal showed him then shut the door and waited just outside of the room while Matt examined her. He could hear subtle voices within, one male and one female, and he was thankful that she was at least answering his questions.

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A half an hour later Matt emerged closing the door behind him.

“How is she?” Marshal said shoving his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

“She wasn’t raped.”

Marshal was visibly relieved, “Thank God.” He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand.

“However, he left quite a few bruises on her.” He saw Marshal stiffen and his expression harden.

“She is quite intoxicated Marshal. It looks like she’s fallen down a few times, from the scrapes on her knees and her hands.”

That visibly shocked him, “No, that’s impossible, she was only drinking soda at the dance, I was sitting at the same table with her when—that bastard!” he finally realized that Tim was putting alcohol in her drink. “We’d better call in the chief.”

“I’ve already spoken to her about that, she refuses to press charges.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“It won’t do you any good Marshal, she insists, she’ll lie if she has to.”

He released another explanative.

“Right now what she needs is a friend,” Matt said placing his hand on Marshal’s shoulder. “Maybe she’ll come around.”

“I doubt it; she’s as stubborn as hell.” He managed a small smile.

Inside the room, Beth pulled Marshal’s coat tight around her to cover her torn gown. She turned her head and inhaled his scent deeply. Nothing could have smelled that pleasant at such a time and she found it quite soothing. When he walked in a few minutes later, she started protesting, “I won’t do it.” She said seeing his hardened expression.

Marshal knew that she was traumatized and arguing with

her wouldn't get him anywhere but only upset her more, "that's fine Beth. Come on I'll take you home."

She eyed him suspiciously, "I don't believe you'd give up that easily."

His eyes met hers, "I think you've had enough stress, don't you."

"Yes, thank you." She said quietly letting him help her off of the gurney.

The next morning Marshal barged into Tim's office building marching straight into Tim's office, slamming the door behind him. It was Sunday and he knew he was at the office because he first stopped at the apartment and a neighbour told him that he usually went to work on Sunday when he was thundering on the door with his fist. Fortunately for Marshal and unfortunately for Tim, he left the front door open. *Gotta love small towns*, he thought to himself as she marched into his office unannounced.

Tim jumped up and stood behind his chair when the door flew open with a crash. Marshal approached him with a deadly look on his face. Beth may not press charges, but he was going to teach him a lesson.

"Nothing happened Marshal!" Tim said holding up his hands, "I swear to God—I feel like a complete leech!"

"When I'm through with you, you're going to feel a hell of a lot more than that!" he said moving around the desk.

Tim manoeuvred himself and his chair around the other side to try and keep a safe distance between them so he could explain. He'd never seen Marshal so angry, but he knew of the man's reputation when he did get angry. Even if it was a rare occurrence for him to lose his temper, from what he'd heard, it made up for all of those times he didn't. He really did feel terrible about what he'd done. He didn't realize that Beth was so

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inexperienced, “I swear to God I didn’t know she was that drunk! I thought she was in to me! I felt she needed to loosen up a bit—I was wrong.” he reached up and undid a few of the buttons of his shirt and loosened his tie to show him a bandage that his shirt collar covered, “She clawed me good.”

“That’s nothing compared to what I’m going to do.” Marshal said coming around the desk. “I hope your dental insurance is paid up.”

“I swear to God Marsh, I didn’t know she wasn’t that kind of girl until she fought back, then I stopped. She got up and ran away. I looked for her for over an hour!” He had stopped trying to evade the large man knowing it was pointless and maybe he did deserve a thrashing after what he did to Beth regardless of how guilty he felt. It was then Marshal was able to reach out and grab him by the tie. “Ask her mother for Christ sake! I called after I couldn’t find her and she told me she was with you.”

“I took her to the hospital!” he said bringing the other man’s face close to his, “You shook her up.”

Just when he thought he couldn’t feel any worse, he did. “My God! I didn’t know. I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! I’m going to apologize—I swear! I had flowers delivered this morning. Phone her mother—ask her! I was worried.”

Marshal called him a name that made Tim flush before he gave him a warning shake and released him. “I should pound you senseless.”

“I was stupid, I know that now.” He said breathing heavy and holding up a hand in surrender. “I didn’t realize that she wasn’t experienced—I mean look at her!”

“That’s no excuse.” Marshal said not giving an inch. Just because a woman looked the way Beth did, meant nothing. Tim was just too young to understand that.

“I know that. I’ll apologize in person. I just wanted to give her some time.”

“You apologize then stay the hell away from her. She may not want to press charges—“ the other man blanched at that statement, “—but I’ll tear you to bits if you so much as look at her sideways—do you got that?”

“I do.” He said quickly. Somehow he knew that it wasn’t an empty threat. Usually Marshal kept to himself but Tim didn’t blame him, Beth was sweet and what he did was pretty inexcusable. It smartened him up towards woman because he was overly confident in thinking that she did want him.

“You have a lot of growing up to do Tim if you think every pretty girl out there wants you!” Tim just nodded. Marshal studied the younger man’s expression, he seriously did look guilty but that didn’t change what Beth went through and he told him that before he left.

Even if Tim felt guilty, he knew it would take Beth some time to get over what had happened to her. Hopefully it wouldn’t take ruin her for an intimate relationship in the future. He gritted his teeth thinking of Beth being intimidate with another man. He didn’t want her to be. Especially after he had her in his arms, remembered how she felt and smelled. Yet, he had to remember that she was his employee and the last time he had gotten involved with one of his staff, she made him look like an abusive tyrant that had let to a six week trial and his tarnished reputation.

Before he realized what he was doing, he was pulling into Bobby Tasker’s driveway. Even though Beth didn’t want to press charges he could still let the Chief know what happened unofficially.

Bobby met him at the door with a lace trimmed apron on and a dishtowel in his hand causing Marshal to laugh despite his foul mood.

“Don’t knock it.” The other man said, “Someday you’ll be doing dishes and changing diapers.” Bobby was an ex-marine

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and had the body and menacing demeanour to prove it, but seeing a big man like him domesticated was too much to bear.

“Bite your tongue.” Marshal said with mock shock.

“Well Lori’s fishing with that new girl Beth—“ he didn’t miss the interested expression that Marshal gave at the mention of the woman’s name, but he knew better than to pry, “—so I’m stuck doing housework and looking after Abby. Now is this an official visit or unofficial?” he said raising his brows at the look he was getting at the mention of Beth’s name.

“A little of both—you got a minute?”

“Sure. Come in—you can dry the dishes.”

Marshal laughed again and stepped in the house behind Bobby.

After a half an hour of listening to Marshal tell his story over a cup of coffee, Bobby let out a long slow whistle, “Well I’m sure he won’t forget you.”

“I told him to stay away from Beth.”

“I don’t doubt he will.” He cast Marshal a sideways glance, “You can be convincing.”

Marshal gave an emotionless grin, “I can.”

“Like you said Marsh, he’s young and foolish. I’ve known Tim since he was a toddler. He’s spoiled by his parents, but he’s not mean.”

“Yeah, that’s probably what kept me from breaking his jaw.”

“Maybe Tim was spellbound. Lori said she was gorgeous.” He said smirking behind his cup of coffee while his eyes were set on the other man.

“You said they went fishing?” he said changing the subject after seeing Bobby’s expression. Of course she was gorgeous and sexy, sensual and she smelled like heaven—he gritted his teeth and looked past Bobby to the front yard through the window.

Bobby grinned seeing the odd look in his friend’s eyes

despite his effort to hide it, “Yes, Lori said she was a city girl, but she was going to teach her.”

“Where’d they go?” he said flicking him a gaze.

“Finn’s creek.” He sat back in his chair and eyed his friend with a look of amusement, “Why?”

“No reason.”

“Sure there isn’t.”

Marshal frowned causing Bobby to widen his smile.

At that moment there was a noise from down the hall and Bobby got to his feet as did Marshal. He gave his friend a thoughtful look, “That’s Abby waking from her nap. Tell you what, I’ll call Lori’s mother to see if she’ll baby sit, so you go get your gear and meet me back here in an hour. We’ll show those women how to fish properly.” He added with a mischievous grin.

“You’re on.”

Two hours later Marshal was pulling his truck up beside Lori’s jeep. In the distance they could see to people fishing wearing hip waders while standing in thigh deep water. It was easy to see which one was Beth from the way she kept fumbling with the pole.

“Hey, we got company.” Lori said and waved at the occupants and smiled.

Beth turned to see Marshal’s truck pull up beside Lori’s vehicle and near groaned. She remembered what had happened when she woke up this morning sober and was completely ashamed that she didn’t catch on to what Tim was trying to do. Never will she knowingly take a drink of alcohol again. Not that she wanted to in the first place, but it made sense how silly she was feeling and acting. Thank God her father hadn’t found out, then when the large bouquet of flowers arrived before she left the house that morning along with an apology note, her father was still in bed. She quickly disposed of the note and her mother said

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she'd put the flowers in her room before he got up. He never went in there and if he somehow discovered them she'd just tell them that they were from Tim.

She was equally relieved when Marshal had dropped her off the night before and her mother met them at the door and ushered her in quietly after thanking Marshal for all of his help. She hoped that he wouldn't say anything to her father because she knew he would blame her for what had happened. So it wasn't just Tim she was worried about in talking to her father. She knew that she had to somehow ask Marshal not to mention anything, but she wasn't sure on how to even breach that subject without giving anything away.

As for Tim she remembered the shock look on his face when she raked her nails down his neck and screamed at him. Before he could react she got up and ran into the night. She was terrified he would retaliate, but after the brief note of apology she had to realize that not all men were as violent as her father. Like Marshal, who had held her when she wept and carried her tenderly to his truck when he found her wandering down the middle of the road. He seemed so harsh, yet he had such a soft side that she near cried at his tenderness when she was in the hospital. Yet after his outburst the day before, she was still wary of trusting him with anything.

She watched him and another man retrieve some gear from the bed of the truck and after seeing the distinct shape of fishing pose, she knew they were going to fish with them and released a groan.

If she thought Marshal was tall, the other man was at least a few inches taller than him as they walked side by side carrying the gear. Splashing beside her made her know that Lori was getting out of the water to greet them. She set her pole down and the taller man gathered her in his arms and planted a kiss on her mouth making Beth blush and avert her gaze to Marshal.

Obviously that was Chief Tasker. She narrowed her gaze on him knowing why he'd brought him here.

"What are you doing here?" she said with quiet suspiciousness as he approached the shore to where she was fishing. He grinned at her not even moved by her tone as he set down his gear and shook out his hip waders in preparation to put them on.

"I'm here to show you how to fish properly." He said as if it was a perfectly acceptable reason, "Girls don't know how to fish." He added with a mocking expression. Lori was actually very good at fishing and she and Bobby entered tournaments which they always seemed to win, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"If you're here to see if I'm going to have a nervous breakdown, I'm fine." She added while casting a glance over at the other coupled who were walking hand in hand toward the creek, but absorbed in conversation.

"Over what?" he said giving her a look of innocence.

Stunned, she just stared at him. Even though he'd let those other incidents go where she'd revealed a vulnerable side of herself, she was certain he'd want to get her to talk about this. She knew it bothered him that she didn't press charges, and he even brought the Chief of police here, so she assumed he was going to get her to try and confess to him what had happened. She pointed to Bobby, "So you're saying you didn't bring him here to talk to me?"

"We're fishing Beth." He said in that same tone of innocence.

She blew out a frustrated breath, "Sure you are."

He chuckled, "You shouldn't be so suspicious, and not everyone has an ulterior motive."

"You're not fooling me—Oh!" she felt a sharp tug on her rod, then another which jerked her forward slightly on the

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slippery rocks.

“Don’t let go!” Marshal hollered. He knew that if a fish could jerk her pole like that, it was a big one. Now, everyone in town was crazy about fishing, and if someone let go of a big fish like that they’d never live it down.

She didn’t want to, but another jerk on the pole knocked her off balance, but before she lost her footing she heard splashing and suddenly strong hands grip her, but that only lasted a few seconds. Marshal did slip on the rocks under his feet in his haste to save her from slipping. Unfortunately he happened to have a hold of Beth.

Bobby and Lori stopped and watched in stunned silence from the shore as the two fell sideways and disappeared under the water before they came up sputtering.

“Don’t let go of that pole!” Marshal shouted as Beth began to float away.

“Are you crazy!” she said after she spit out a mouthful of water, “I’m drowning!”

“Stand up you fool!” he bellowed back while scrambling through the water and the uneven creek bed just to fall in the water a few more times trying to reach her, “But don’t you dare let go of that bloody pole!”

Beth tried to stand up but her hip waders were full of water. However, she could feel the creek bed with her hand and managed to push her head up enough to breath, just as Marshal reached her. He immediately undid the buckles of her waders and grabbed her about the waist to lift her out of them. At least she realized that the water wasn’t that deep and stopped panicking.

The two spectators on the shore were spellbound by the splashing of limbs mixed with a deep masculine voice and a shrill female one as they continued to holler at one another while the flow of water pulled them further down the creek.

“Well that’s something you don’t see every day.” Bobby finally said deadpan.

Lori shrieked with laughter.

Marshal finally was able to pull her up against him to stop her from slipping back down into the water and further down the creek. They were both completely saturated.

Beth realized then that the creek wasn’t deep at all but only came to her waist. She released a laugh at how silly she felt. However, when looked up to see his hard expression while water dripped down his thick ebony bangs to trail down his face he didn’t look the least bit amused. Immediately her laughter stopped and she became worried. She half expected him to holler at her again, but he didn’t. He just stared at her.

Marshal, on the other hand, wasn’t angry at all. He was fixated. Did she have any idea how thin that water made her clothing? Every stitch clung to her like it was part of skin. His eyes lowered to her breasts and her taught nipples that were clearly defined through the fabric. The cool water was certainly not helping his reaction though. He was heating up. Unable to help himself he released her hip and cupped one of the healthy mounds in his hand.

Beth gasped, “Marshal—“ But she didn’t pull away or stop him and after a moment she realized why. *Oh lord, that was incredible!*

His eyes sought out hers again, “How old are you really?” he said huskily.

“T—twenty-one.” She breathed. How she found the strength to lie like that was beyond her.

His thumb traced over the hard nub of her nipple and she tilted her head back, “Liar.” He murmured lowering his mouth to her arched neck. His other circled around to her back to hold her firmly against him.

His mouth was hot against her drenched skin and nothing

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could have prepared her for the sensations coursing through her as he continued to caress her breast with his large strong hand. Somewhere in there, she forgot that she didn't like to be touched. What Tim did to her the day before was completely obliterated as if it had never happened.

"Are you older than eighteen?" He murmured against her earlobe.

"Y—yes!" she gasped.

Thank God, he thought as his other hand moved downward to cup her bottom and pull her hips tightly against his. "Good, because I would hate to think a teenager could do this to me." He lifted her slightly so she could feel the length of his erection against her belly.

Beth knotted her fingers in his shirt at his chest to pull herself closer to him. She didn't even realize that her feet were no longer on the creek bed because of the things he was doing to her. "I—I'm not a teenager—" she stuttered out.

"No baby, your definitely not." He said deeply, "Every inch of you is pure woman."

That blunt statement went through her like hot electricity. How could something that seemed so simple, sound so darn sinful. She lifted her head and looked up at him and for a brief moment that was all they did, but he didn't stop what he was doing to her breast. Her eyes guided to his mouth that looked even more sensual and inviting it did that first day she stared at it. How she wished he would kiss her!

Marshal couldn't get past how beautiful she looked full of desire with her long wet hair plastered around her finely sculpted face. Her eyes had taken on a deep green hue that resembled wet emeralds, her skin was flushed despite the cool water of the creek and that gloriously pouty mouth of hers had parted with an invitation. His hand contracted on her bottom pulling her tighter against his erection and at the same time he released her breast,

knotted his fingers in her long hair, pulled back her head, and slammed his mouth down on hers with a guttural groan.

They should have been shivering, the both of them being drenched in creek water, but the heat they created from body against body could have melted a glacier.

Her mouth was soft and pliable under his hard one and she tasted like fresh rain. Her body fit against his like it was built for him. Every inch of her softness melded against his hard form with definitive accuracy as if they'd been doing this for years. Not once did she hesitate or stop him and he wasn't the least bit gentle. As his mouth teased hers there were brief moments that indicated that she wasn't experienced, but as his tongue sought out hers, the lack of uncertainty she showed eliminated all of that. Her fingers tangled in the cloth of his shirt capturing some of his chest hair and pulling it painfully and he liked it. That little bit of pain she gave him mixed with the pleasure they created made this real.

“Marsh!”

Bobby's voice brought his head up. They were hidden by a grove of trees and obviously Lori and Bobby lost track of them. Thankfully they weren't seen. He looked down at Beth who acted as though she didn't hear the other man's voice and it caused him to grin. He ran his thumb across her swollen bottom lip and his eyes followed the movement, “We have forgotten about Lori and Bobby.”

“Who?” she said in complete innocence.

He groaned and took her mouth again and she threaded her fingers through his thick hair in an attempt to get closer.

“Hey Marsh!” Bobby's voice was closer this time.

Marshal cursed and lifted his head again, “We're fine!” he hollered back, “Just looking for her pole!”

“Lori got worried,” came the response.

“We'll be along in a minute.” He answered lowering his

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eyes to hers, then her mouth, then back up to hers again. “You go first.” He said softly, “I need at least five minutes more.”

“Go?”

“Stop it Beth. I’m as hard as a rock right now and that wide-eyed innocence you have is making this more difficult.” Still she looked quite confused. He released a heavy sigh, and took her hand from his tangled hair placing it below the water against his solid erection as he raised a single dark brow.

“Oh!” her eyes widened more, “Gosh—I’m sorry! I didn’t realize—“

“Well, you can do something about it later, but I’m sure you don’t want an audience if I make love to you right now.”

She shook her head rapidly causing him to chuckle. Then he lowered his head and kissed her forehead tenderly, “You go first, I’ll be along, and—“ he added more thickly, “—release my crotch or I’m going to make you finish what you’ve started.”

Beth must’ve flushed a hundred shades of red when she realized what she was doing, “It’s your fault.” She blurted out snapping her hand back.

“Sure it is.” He said noticing her flushed skin, “you had absolutely nothing to do with it.”

“Y—you put my hand there!” she defended.

“Yes, but I didn’t ask you to stroke me.” He said deeply. “Although I wouldn’t normally complain, but like I said before, we’ll end up with an audience.”

“Oh God!” She quickly turned and rushed out of the creek without another word totally appalled with her behaviour because she *was* doing exactly that! She was feeling the length of him through his wet jeans and not only was she curious, she was so filled with desire to touch him, that she’d lost herself. She couldn’t even turn around and look at him out of complete shame. She’d never acted like that before in her life. Firstly, she’d never seen that part of a man, not even in a magazine, and

secondly, she never thought it could be so big and hard. Climbing though the brush was a Godsend so she could get her embarrassment under control. By the time she reached the other couple she was wet, ashamed, and cold.

“Oh my!” Lori saw her first. Not only was she soaked and shivering, she clearly looked upset.

“Can you take me home?”

“Of course.” She said grabbing her stuff, “Just let me tell Bobby, he’s in the creek fishing.” She indicated toward him as he was casting his line in the water.

“I’ll do this.” Beth said helping her pick up their gear thankful that it was just Lori there.

“No, you must be cold. The keys are in the jeep, just go turn it on and I’ll be right there. I don’t mind Beth. There’s a blanket in the back seat, wrap it around yourself so you don’t catch a cold.” She said with a reassuring smile.

Beth nodded, “Thanks.” She would have normally protested but she was worried that Marshal would return any minute and possibly say something that would make her want to disappear. She knew he didn’t care about what people thought about him, so she had to get out of there.

After she started the vehicle and wrapped a blanket around herself she stared at her hand, the one that had touched him wondering how she could have done such a thing, or even let him touch her back. It was true that she wanted him to kiss her, but that just wasn’t any kiss. It was soul searing. She plunked her head back on the seat staring at the roof wondering how in the world she could get past that and go back to work for him. Obviously from the way he spoke to her he thought she had some experience, *all woman, make love, stroke*— “Oh lord, oh lord—I’m in trouble.” She shut her eyes tightly. And why shouldn’t he think that way? She’d responded to him like she knew what she was doing. Where it came from, she had no

flipping idea!

Her mother suppressed a smile seeing Beth still wet from fishing. “I see it didn’t go to well.”

“You have no idea.” She mumbled walking by her.

“Beth.” Her father said hearing her voice. He came into the foray and stopped, “What the hell happened to you?”

“I fell in the creek.”

He shook his head, “you are a clumsy girl but at least you can still come to church with us. Go get changed.”

“yes sir.” She said making her way by him. It would probably do her some good to go, she was feeling so out of sorts, ashamed, and guilty for what had happened earlier. Maybe Father Davis will lend an ear to her turmoil. She needed someone to talk to and there was no one else.

Chapter Six

The next day she dressed in an ankle length denim skirt and a long sleeved pink blouse doing her best to cover every inch of her skin. She was thankful that Marshal wasn’t around when she showed up for work. Nancy opened the door and gave her a wide generous smile.

“Well Beth it’s good to see that Mr. Davis didn’t scare you away.”

Beth shrugged, “he apologized—sort of.”

The older woman arched her brows, “Really? Well that has to be a first. I guess that means I have to cook him supper.”

Beth tilted her head in confusion.

“I gave him a cold sandwich on Friday.”

Beth was shocked, “You didn’t!” Then she remembered that he was at the diner ordering food and burst into laughter, “You are brave.”

“Yes, and he deserved it! He’s too big to turn over my knee, but I can get back at him other ways. That floozy shows up when she pleases and always frowns at my food. Then she feeds him some garbage about you insulting her.”

Beth was about to say she did threaten to throw her out when Nancy held up her hand.

“I’m sure if you did say something it was deserved. Besides no one insults my food!”

“The nerve.” Beth said with another laugh.

“she requests green tea and some vegetarian dish which I wouldn’t feed a cow and I know she doesn’t eat when Mr Davis is around.” Nancy said scowling, “Nothing about that woman is truthful.”

Beth near coughed because she thought she was no different. Marshal knew she wasn’t twenty one, and he knew she had secrets. Yet, she’d never act out of character to impress anyone. “Where’s Ben.” She said trying to change the subject.

“He’s gone to baseball camp for a week.”

“Really?”

Nancy nodded, “Mr. Davis has him in just about every sport you can imagine. He says it builds character and gives the boy options for scholarships.” She added with pride, “He’s really good at just about everything.”

“I’m not surprised, he’s probably a head taller than the other twelve year olds there.”

“Actually he’s in the fourteen to eighteen camp because of his size. It gives him an advantage in learning with the older kids.”

“Does he enjoy it?” She had to ask because her father enrolled her in all sorts of things she didn’t want to take and she hated every minute of it. She was hoping Marshal wasn’t pushing Ben too much.

“He suggested it.” Nancy grinned. She knew exactly why

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Beth asked. Every parent wants their child to be some sort of prodigy but Marshal would never force Ben to do anything he didn't want to do. He used to play hockey up until a year ago, but decided he wanted to focus more on his schooling besides baseball and football.

"He is an amazing kid." Beth said shaking her head as she turned to go in the study.

"No argument there. Mr. Davis did an incredible job on raising him."

He did, thought Beth. Ben was happy and that mattered a lot to her that a child his age was especially knowing that his mother abandoned him. He didn't seem to let it hold him back in the least. She had to give it to Marshal, he was a good father—

Good Father?

For some reason those two words never seemed possible for her to say let alone think. Again she felt the sting of tears over something so insignificant as words. "Get a grip Beth." She scolded herself quietly. Why is it she always had the need to weep lately? She shut the doors to the study and tossed her purse on the corner of the desk while she rubbed her forehead trying to cope with her emotions.

Feeling better, she finally lifted her head just to see two boxes of receipts sitting on the other end of the desk. She groaned and walked around it to sit down. This man works way too much to be human. *And he's way to sinful to be real*, she thought to herself remembering his mouth and hands on her the day before. A warm flushing went through her and settled low in her pelvis. Instinctively she put her hand flat on her lower belly and shut her eyes. This wasn't normal was it? Nothing in her life made that feeling happen. It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't addictive.

Get to work Beth, and get that man out of your head, she thought to herself and immediately started rummaging through

the box to do just that.

Marshal saw Beth drive up and go in the house. He was across the yard talking to Slim about the haybine when his eyes guided to her as she got out of her car and went up the steps. He didn't sleep last night at all. His mind was too occupied with the feel and taste of her. What he wouldn't have given to carry through with yesterday, but he didn't want to embarrass her. It took longer than he thought to quell his desire so he spent a good half an hour looking for her pole. He finally found it wedged between two rocks, but the monster she had on the line was long gone, hook and all. At least he had something to show Bobby so he wouldn't suspect anything, but that was pointless seeing the look in his eyes when he returned and Lori and Beth were long gone.

"She was cold. Lori took her home." Bobby said without Marshal asking. "At least Lori was right, she is gorgeous."

"How long have we been friends?" said Marshal tossing the pole next to their gear.

"Almost twenty years." Bobby said, "Why?"

"If you want to stay that way, shut the hell up."

Bobby's answer was a boisterous laugh.

"Mr Davis!"

Marshal was pulled out of his thoughts by Nancy as she waved at him from across the yard. He tossed down the cigarette he was smoking and stomped it out with a twist of his toe before he headed toward her. She wouldn't hesitate to give him hell if he smoked around her.

"I'm heading in town to get some errands done. The young miss gave me your letters to mail off and then I have to get some groceries, I'll be home before supper."

"Does that mean you're making me supper?" he said cocking a brow.

"I will." She said with mock innocence, "What makes you

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think I won't."

"Because I've been surviving on diner food for two days now."

"I've forgiven you." She said in the same stern tone she always used.

"Well, gee, thanks."

"For now." She added with a sharp look before she turned away to head toward one of the ranch trucks, "Beth is hard at work again, maybe you should force her to take a break before she works herself into an early grave." She called over her shoulder.

Marshal heard part of that as the truck started up and drove away, but his eyes were fixed on the front door of the house. There was a reason why he stayed away from it while Beth was there.

It was true that he craved to touch her again, but then there were the other things he couldn't ignore. She had secrets and she lied to him about her age, but she really didn't need to, he would have hired her anyway. She was the most qualified. Then there was the odd incident about not wanting to go to the hospital when she was obviously injured. Oddly it seemed as if she was worried about what her parents thought but it wasn't her fault. Didn't she know that? However, if there was any damage from what Tim had done, Marshal seemed to have found a good therapy for it because she didn't mind him touching her anymore.

Anymore?

It was true she did shy away from him the first time he laid his hand on her and he assumed it was because of a past abusive boyfriend. Her reaction to Tim actually confirmed that. If she'd told him no and pushed him off her or just pushed him, he was sure that Tim wouldn't have taken it too far. However from the looks of those scratch marks, she actually panicked.

But she'd let *him* touch her.
She trusted him somehow.

Then there was that incident where she threatened to throw Cindy out of the study which didn't make sense anywhere with what he knew of Beth. It seemed that she only hauled out her claws if she was backed into a corner. Did Cindy say something to her to provoke her? Nancy seemed to think so, but Cindy had no reason to lie to him. Then there was Ben, he liked Beth whereas he didn't like Cindy because she treated him like he was a toddler. Ben had told him that she had offered to help him with his homework after he practically threw her out of the house last Friday. It just added to his guilt. Maybe he was wrong about her and Cindy really did provoke her. Why? He made his intentions with Cindy as clear as day. He wasn't after a relationship with her, ever. She was the daughter of a good friend and his business partner and he didn't mind accompanying her to certain events until she felt brave enough to start dating again. He never even laid a hand on her, not like he did Beth. In fact it had been almost a year since he touched a woman like that despite his reputation.

He'd been in too high of a demand with work, and Ben to find time to put an effort into dating and before he knew it almost a year had passed. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck and looked out over the yard. Could that be it? He hadn't had a woman for that long that this one seemed to set him on fire?

"Hell." He said under his breath. That wasn't it and he knew it. His eyes guided back to the door of the house and before he knew it he was walking across the yard and up the steps.

When the door to the study opened Beth jumped up and when she saw Marshal she slid in behind the chair putting more furniture in between them. What she didn't know was Tim had

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tried that on Saturday and it didn't save him, "Don't—" she said holding up a hand. She instantly recognized that look. It was the same one he wore when he had kissed her in the creek the day before. Despite her denial, her body instantly reacted to him. Her heart rate increased, her breathing became shallow, and her knees weakened, but it was that familiar warmth stirring in her belly that was the most distracting.

He never said a word as he walked toward her nor did he even pause.

"Marshal—" she went around the opposite side.

"If you want to play this little cat and mouse game, I'm all for it." He said locking his eyes on hers and placing his hands on the surface of the desk, "But when I catch you, I'll make sure you pay for making me wait."

Her eyes widened, "That shouldn't have happened—I mean yesterday."

"Maybe not," he said moving around the side of her desk just to have her mimic his move to get away from him. "But it did, and a fool could see how you've been looking at me for the past few days."

She turned and looked over her shoulder at the open door.

"You won't make it." He said narrowing his eyes dangerously and letting a smile pull at the corner of his mouth knowing she was judging the distance to the door.

She looked at him and seeing his expression couldn't help herself but give him a challenging grin. So much for her resistance. He was incredibly irresistible and he knew it from the dark look in his eyes. "I'll scream." She threatened matching his stare.

"I love a screamer." He returned as his eyes moved over her front, "And those clothes don't hide a damn thing because I have your wet clothed body burned in my mind from yesterday."

“Oh lord.” She said breathlessly and cast another glance at the door.

“I promised you a riding lesson.” He said allowing a sinful smile spread across his tanned face.

“Then go to the stable, I’ll meet you there.” She challenged moving again as he dodged around the side of the desk.

“The type I have in mind doesn’t include a horse.”

“Oh heavens!” What a blatant statement. Normally she should have been offended, but that flushing she felt earlier managed to spread throughout her entire body and she could feel her cheeks warm up.

Her shocked pause was all he needed to dart around the side of the desk and seize her. She screeched but the sound was cut off by his mouth. She didn’t fight him, she didn’t even try and he felt arrogant at his seductive talent. His hands contracted around her back as his mouth moved over hers. He could feel her arms wrap around his neck and her fingers thread into his hair. She released this sensual moan of surrender that vibrated down his body in a wave of pleasure and pulsed through his groin. With an incredible effort he lifted his head and stared down at her. Her eyes were half closed but she was looking up at him. “I should stop.” He said huskily. She only nodded and pulled his mouth down to hers again for another long searing kiss.

She was getting adventurous because her tongue sought out his and it was Marshal’s turn to groan. Without lifting his mouth from hers, he turned her and pushed her against her desk while he pulled her blouse out of the waist of her skirt. Something hit the floor with a loud thud, but neither one of them noticed or cared. A moment later, Marshal’s hand was on her bare breast and she gasped at the new sensation. Somehow he’d gotten her blouse open and her bra undone and she had no

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recollection of how or when he did that.

“Jesus, you are so beautiful.” He said moving back to look down at her chest. His eyes lifted back up to hers and he could easily see the desire in them, “Beautiful everywhere.” He added bending his head so he could take her nipple in his mouth.

“Oh!” Beth tightened her grip on his hair. If she thought his hands created such desire in her, this surpassed it. She sobbed with pleasure and he showed no signs of slowing down.

“What are you wearing under this.” He said moving his hand up her bare thigh.

She didn’t even realize that he’d lifted her skirt up.

“Bikini briefs—sexy.” He growled pulling her tight against him so he could kiss her again while his fingers circled the seam of her underwear.

“Marshal—“ she moaned against his mouth.

“That’s right honey, say my name.” he murmured against her lips.

The sound of a vehicle door closing finally snapped him out of it. He turned and looked over his shoulder realizing he left the study door open. “Set yourself right.” He said harshly while releasing her and reaching the door in several long strides to shut and lock it. After that he just kept his hand on the handle and rested his forehead against the door breathing deeply keeping his back to her, “Hurry up Beth, someone’s here.” He added without turning around. She wasn’t the only one caught off guard. He didn’t mean for it to get so far, but she was doing something to him and he had no control over the way he was reacting around her. It was like a heroin addiction. He knew that if he turned around and saw her vulnerable, he would continue ravishing her and be damn who was here. He wanted her that badly.

He took another deep breath, unlocked the door, and stepped through it, shutting it behind him.

It was then Beth realized her state of undress and began

fumbling with her clothes. How he managed to do such things to her, she'll never know, but now she was embarrassed at her behaviour all over again. She could feel her blush rising as she struggled with the buttons of her blouse. He had practically bent her back over her desk and ravished her and she would have let him. She knew she would. Tucking in her blouse she rushed to the mirror over the fireplace and fixed her hair. It was in a chignon but it was pointless to try and save it. She undid the clips and let it fall around her shoulders just as a familiar voice grated her nerves.

“Marshal Darling!”

At the sound of that voice Beth cringed inwardly.

Cindy.

How could she forget that Marshal already had a girlfriend? What was wrong with her? Did he affect every woman like he did her? She could have forgotten her own name. Narrowing her gaze at her reflection she made a silent promise not to let that happen again. Then she said a prayer to God to help her resist the man because she certainly had no will of her own.

“What happened to your hair?”

Her voice was closer now and she knew they were just outside the doors of the study. Beth looked down at her hands and smiled, *I happened*. Let him explain his way out of that. However, he surprised her and didn't even give Cindy an answer. She could hear his voice clearly through the thick wooden doors.

“Cindy, I can't have lunch with you today. I'm too busy.”

“Oh?”

Was that impatience she heard in his tone? Beth turned and looked at the closed doors almost seeing his rigid stance as he stared down at the blonde through the thick wood.

“Well, I thought you'd find some time with little old me, won't you?”

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“Not today. I’ve told you before that I’m a busy man and I don’t have time to entertain. Last Friday was a surprise, but don’t get into the habit.”

Beth heard one of those indignant huffs that Cindy seemed to be prone to emitting. “It’s that secretary of yours isn’t it? She told you I wasn’t nice to her didn’t she? Well she’s lying. I was nice to her and she ridiculed me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

There was a pause. An uncomfortable one and Beth almost felt sorry for the woman. It was obvious now to Marshal that something had happened that day and it wasn’t all her fault. Marshal’s voice lowered, but not to be polite. She could almost hear the anger in his tone.

“We’ve discussed this before. I have no interest in you Cindy, but now I see that something more happened on Friday than you let on.”

“No! She was so mean!” Cindy defended herself, but it was stated weakly and Beth knew that Marshal set that hard stare on her that she’d seen before and unlike her, Cindy was crumpling under it.

“She’s my employee and you seem to think you can interfere in my household affairs.”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“Cindy, I tore the hide off of her after you told me what she did!” he bellowed causing the other woman to gasp. “She left here in bloody tears!”

“I didn’t know!” she returned, “She looked plenty comfortable in the salon the next day and with Tim at the dance. Everyone knows they’re sleeping together. It’s all over town!”

Beth froze and felt that tingly sensation of dread go through her.

“And how did that happen?”

“She went home with him on Saturday after the dance

Marshal, just ask her!” she lied.

“That’s funny,” he returned, “I didn’t think she was that talented to be in two places at once, because she was with me.”

Another shocked gasp.

“No—you drove me home!”

“Then I picked up Beth.”

Beth sunk in a chair and buried her face in her hands. If her father caught wind of this, he would kill her. Marshal didn’t tell Cindy he’d taken her to the hospital because he knew she didn’t want anyone to know about that incident, but he’d just damaged her reputation more. Cindy would tell everyone that she was a loose woman. It was obvious that it was her that was spreading the rumour about Tim, and Marshal felt the need to defend her.

Her father would interrogate her mother and find out the truth if he found out about the rumour. It was only a matter of time and she would be punished.

“How could you!” Cindy said in a shrill voice.

“Easy—look at her.”

A few seconds later a door slammed and then the sound of a vehicle tearing up the drive reached Beth’s ears, but she didn’t lift her head out of her hands. How was she going to get out of this?

Marshal opened the door and saw her hunched over in the chair with her face in her hands. It confused him because he’d just straightened Cindy out. “Beth?”

“You should have told her that you took me right home.” She said still not lifting her head.

“What the hell for?”

Finally her she lifted her head to meet his eyes, “She thinks we slept together.”

“Who cares? It’s better than thinking that you slept with that playboy.” He added unable to determine why she was so

worried.

“Marshal, I care.” She said exasperated.

“Honey in another ten minutes it would have been true if she didn’t interrupt us.”

“No it wouldn’t!” she said shooting to her feet trying to deny it even though he was right, “I can’t—it can’t happen.”

“Beth, what is wrong with you?” He said approaching her in several long strides and gripping her shoulders, “You are not a child. There is nothing wrong with this. One minute you’re on fire, the next you’re ice cold.”

“There is, you just don’t understand.”

“Then tell me.” He said gently, “Tell me why you shy away from men, but not me. Tell me why you didn’t want to go to the hospital that night. Was it because of some abusive boyfriend in your past?”

She couldn’t let him know, so she turned the tables on him. “didn’t you have some issue with a previous secretary?” he released her as if he was burned.

“Don’t you dare bring that up.” He said coolly. “It was a long time ago and if I know anything, you’re nothing like she was.”

“Then stay out of my life and I’ll stay out of yours!” She shot back moving by him to get her purse. “I can’t finish today.”

It was then he realized that she was using another defence tactic, “Beth—“

“I’ll come back tomorrow,” She said not looking at him as she made her way to the door, “but please don’t touch me again.”

Marshal placed his hands on his hips and watched her go. He didn’t move to stop her even though he wanted to. What he really wanted to do was pick up her stubborn ass like a conquering caveman and haul her down the hall to his bedroom and make love to her until she forgot her own name and maybe his for that matter. However, something was still nagging him

about her and he needed some answers. Maybe Bobby could help him by checking to see if her name comes up in the database somewhere. If someone had taken their hands to her, and she pressed charges Bobby would find it.

When she got home her father was waiting for her. He never said a word when she stepped in the door, but grabbed her by the hair and dragged her down the hall, "Tim was here earlier." He flung her to the floor of his study and slammed the door behind them.

Beth managed to crawl backwards wide-eyed with fear. She knew that look, and knew what happened with it.

"You lying bitch!"

"Dad I can explain!" she held up her hand, but it didn't stop the kick that landed in her side. She cried out and he bent over and twisted his hand in her hair painfully. "He said he came to apologize about the other night. I didn't know what he was talking about. Apparently my daughter denied his advances!" he spat at her, "I told you to win him over!"

"He attacked me!" she defended.

"So!" He stood up and kicked her again. Somewhere in the distance she could hear her mother yelling, but she blacked out shortly after that.

When she came to, there was a cool cloth on her forehead.

"Beth."

It was her mother.

She cracked open her eyes and saw the bruise forming under her mother's left eye, "Oh mom." She groaned.

She shook her head and touched the tender swollen flesh under her eye, "I'm all right honey." She smiled and patted her hand, "He doesn't know everything dear. Tim didn't tell him about the hospital visit." She took a shuddering breath, "If he did, I'm sure you wouldn't be alive."

"What did he tell him?" she winced as she moved.

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Bruised ribs. Nothing new. She was just thankful that they weren't cracked even though they were still painful.

"Just that he misunderstood your affections and carried it too far. He came to apologize and unfortunately your father was home for lunch. He heard everything." She smoothed hair off of Beth's cheek, "That poor man would have not said anything if he knew, I'm sure he wouldn't." she nodded toward the flowers, "He seemed so sincere."

Sure he did, she thought, especially when he had her flat on her back. Her mother seemed to have forgotten that Marshal had taken her to the hospital that night because of Tim. She knew not to say anything because she knew that her mother wanted to marry her out of this house, but Tim wasn't an option. She didn't love him. In fact she could hardly be in the same room as him. It was then that images of that night flickered in her mind and it just confirmed things. Tim was shocked at her reaction and she remembered him saying that her mother told him that she was in to him. Maybe Tim wasn't so bad, but every time someone tried to help her she ended up in worse condition. She groaned and rolled over to her side. "Where's dad." She said not looking at her mother.

"he locked himself in the study. He won't bother you again tonight." She said softly.

That meant he was deep into his cups. It was funny how she could no longer cry over the abuse, but every time she got around Marshal she was a fountain. She pinched her eyes shut, "could you go get me some aspirin and leave me be?"

"Sure thing." She said getting up. Then she paused at the door, "Honey, maybe you should reconsider dating Tim."

"Aspirin mom please." She repeated not wanting to discuss that option. Tim repulsed her, whereas Marshal inflamed her. There was no way she could settle for someone like Tim when she discovered how Marshal made her feel when he

touched her.

Chapter Seven

The next morning she was walking down the stairs carefully to minimize the pain she felt when she heard her father's voice call her. She made her way toward the sitting room to find him standing there with his hands behind his back and a stern look on his face.

"Sit down."

Even though it hurt, she did and managed to without wincing. To show weakness in front of her father would just empower him over her.

"I want you to call Tim back and tell him you've changed your mind about seeing him."

Her mouth fell open, "Dad I—"

"Don't!" he said pointing a finger at her, "I won't let you ruin this. You'll do as I say. He comes from a good family and I want this match."

She suppressed a shiver at the menacing look in his eyes, "Yes father." She said in defeat.

"Good. Now how are things coming with Marshal Davis?"

She coughed.

He seemed not to notice her sudden discomfort, "Beth."

"He seems to trust me. I'll talk to him today about hiring you." She lied straight faced.

"Good girl." He smiled down at her, "Now call Tim." He said pointing to the phone beside her.

That meant he was going to witness the phone call to make sure she would do as she was told.

Luckily when she went to work for Marshal that day he was nowhere to be seen and the day flew by quickly. At four o'clock she packed up and left thanking God for not seeing him.

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She couldn't face him knowing she had a date with Tim at five. How could she explain that she was out with a man that had assaulted her? Marshal wouldn't understand.

She went home and changed into something simple yet elegant a summery floral print dress with a shoulder straps and a high straight neckline as not to entice anyone. She left her hair loose around her shoulders.

Tim showed up at five on the nose and her parents both waved her out the door. He opened the car door for her and slid into the driver's side. However, he didn't start the car right away. Instead he turned to her, "I wanted to apologize in person Beth—"

She held up her hand and forced a smile, "It's okay. I understand, can we go, my parents are watching."

He glanced by her not knowing how she knew that without looking, but sure enough the curtain was pulled aside to the main window and both of them were watching, "Wow, you're good." He said smiling and straightened in his seat. "So, I want to take you to dinner at Chez Louis for a proper apology."

"Sure." She said not looking at him as he started the powerful motor. She couldn't look at him. It felt so wrong being there after what he'd done and she'd basically begged him on the phone to take her out while her father loomed over her. However, maybe she could tell him something so he would understand that she needed to keep up the pretence. She near groaned knowing there was nothing she could say or try to do to convince Tim that she wasn't interested after this. She must look desperate and submissive to easily forgive him for what he did and no he would probably expect something from her. If things couldn't get any worse for her they did.

Of all things to see when being helped out of the car in front of a fancy restaurant by Tim, but Marshal. She was sure she felt Tim stiffen as he saw the familiar big dually cruise by.

She wasn't feeling so well all of a sudden either, especially when the familiar squealing of tires breaking on pavement reached her ears without even looking in his direction.

"Oh shit." Tim mumbled.

"Ignore him." She managed despite her growing fear. She knew he was thinking she was crazy, or better yet a manipulative underhanded woman that used him for attention. "Let's go in."

"Beth, I can't." Tim said not taking his eyes off of the menacing cowboy that was now walking back toward them, "He told me to stay away from you."

"He what?" she said finally lifting her eyes to Tim's pale face then to Marshal who had his fists clenched at his sides.

"Beth get in the truck!"

She actually flinched even though she tried to stop it.

"You'd better go." Tim said

She shook her head as Marshal glared openly at Tim. She couldn't. The constant pain in her ribs told her to do everything possible not to let Marshal control this.

"She called me." He blurted out, "She wanted to get back together after—"

"You lie!" he said reaching for the younger man.

"He's not." Beth interrupted near cringing as he set his dark eyes on hers first full of disbelief then anger and pausing his hand barely inches from Tim's throat. "I did call him. I wanted to make up." His gaze narrowed and she could feel the heat of that stare clear to the back of her skull, "Go away Marshal." She added with as much brevity as she could muster, "I'm only your employee not your ward." Then came that prolonged stare as he tried to read her expression, but she kept it well guarded, and even managed to lift her chin slightly in defiance.

He said something rude enough to make both Beth and Tim flush, "You two deserve each other!" he bellowed waving an angry hand before he turned on his heel and made his way back

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toward his truck still running in the middle of the street.

Beth wanted to cry at the look of betrayal on his face. He'd helped her when no one else had and she'd betrayed him. Not only that, she was certain he would fire her and her father would be even angrier because he would need to know why. Then the hospital incident would be known and he would certainly beat her within an inch of her life this time.

Oddly enough it was Marshal's opinion of her that bothered her more than the threat to her life.

"Beth?"

She looked up at Tim.

"I think we need to talk." He said shooting an apprehensive look at the truck that was now speeding away.

"I'm sorry about that."

"I probably deserved it after what I did, but his expression says a lot. Why did you call me up and ask me out? I wasn't very nice to you."

She shrugged.

"I can be callous and conceited, but I know when a girl is interested in me and despite all the encouragement I had from your parents, I can finally see that you definitely aren't interested in me."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not going to lie and say my ego hasn't taken a bashing, but I probably deserved it. I really should have seen the signs before." He nodded toward the doors of the restaurant, "Let's have dinner and talk about this. Obviously your parents are pushing you into something you don't want."

She couldn't help the look of surprise on her face but he actually gave her a reassuring smile as he led her toward the doors. Maybe Tim wasn't as bad as she first thought, but she still wasn't interested in him. She couldn't get rid of that sickening feeling that she'd hurt Marshal in some way. The last person she

ever wanted to do that to.

Dinner was pleasant even though it still couldn't erase Marshal's expression from her mind. Tim, as usual, talked about himself, but he seemed to understand that area about parents pushing you into something you didn't want to do because he actually wanted to be a teacher, but his parents pushed him into finance. Unfortunately he didn't understand or know the pressure she was under, but at least he was sympathetic something she was sure he didn't display very often.

"So," he said waving a finger between them, "Did you want to keep up this dating thing so your parents don't get angry with you?"

"Tim—I—"

"Look," he smiled and took her hand in his, "I don't mind. I told you that I understood the pressure that parents can create, and let me do this for you. It'll be my way of paying you back for what I did to you. Then we'll be even. I'll even break the engagement and make you look like the jilted fiancé."

She laughed despite that heavy feeling in her gut, "Thanks."

Over the next three days she hadn't seen Marshal, and apparently she wasn't fired. Nancy had told her the next morning that Marshal came home in a rage, booked a flight, and took off to some cattleman's convention in Texas. One he hadn't had any intention on going to. The boxes of paperwork were delivered by someone she'd never seen around the ranch, but he was polite enough.

She breathed a sigh of relief that he wasn't around. At least she had some reprieve before her father found out. She was certain Nancy had something to do with her still having a job by the twinkle in the other woman's eyes.

It didn't matter anyway. She was sure that

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Marshal would never forgive her and she didn't blame him in the least.

On Thursday Tim took her to a local art exhibit in town and to add to her sinking mood, Cindy was there. She never said anything to Tim about how the woman hated her but it didn't take him long to figure it out. She was barely in the door of the gallery when Cindy approached her with two of her friends giving her a contemptuous look.

"Well if it isn't the new popular girl." She said causing the other two women to giggle. "Hello Tim." She added

Tim looked back and forth at the two, "Cindy." He answered.

"I see you've forgiven her for running with Marshal."

"Pardon me?" He said arching his brows

"It's no secret that she was busy with both of you the night of the dance." She said scornfully looking down her nose at Beth who had paled considerably.

"Cindy," Tim said keeping his voice calm and polite, "You shouldn't talk about things you don't know anything about." He paused, "Least of all you."

Beth saw Cindy turn bright red, but she still tried to keep her dignity, "Well, I can see that your loyalty doesn't belong to the locals, I guess we'll go sample the wine—right girls." She said to the other two standing beside her.

Beth watched her leave knowing that she'd probably be the first to inform Marshal that Tim and her had been seen all over town together looking cozy.

"Don't let her bother you Beth. She has no right to judge you."

"She'll tell Marshal." She said before she could stop herself.

"So that's it." He said smiling.

Beth flushed, "She was already telling him lies about me.

My father would be mad if I lost the job.” She added hoping to mislead him. It was true that she cared about Marshal probably more than she did about anyone else in her life, but that was a secret she didn’t want others to know, not even Marshal.

“Oh?” he finally said, “Your dad *wants* you to work for Marshal.”

“He wants Marshal’s business.”

“I can understand that. I would love his business too.”

She laughed, “Well, I don’t think he’d be too keen on that.”

“Not likely.” He said sheepishly, “I kind of screwed that pooch.”

“I don’t think he dislikes you as much as you think, because from what I’ve heard he probably would have torn you to pieces a few days ago when he seen us together.”

“That’s true, or he would have done it in my office the next day after you were shook up.” He said guiltily, “God Beth, I am so sorry.”

“H—he did what?”

“I take it he didn’t tell you that he came storming into my office the next day after the dance and threatened to kill me after what I did to you. He also told me to apologize and stay away from you.”

Just when she thought she couldn’t feel any worse. He’d protected her and she had rejected him when he thought she leapt back into the fire he’d pulled her out of. “I didn’t know.” She said quietly.

“I deserved it. I’ve never forced a woman in my life. I never knew you would react so strongly to alcohol. You just seemed so uptight.” He sighed heavily, “I felt like a bloody rapist. Maybe I should have let him pound the arrogance out of me.”

She shook her head, “I think I’ve been able to put things

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into perspective. My parents gave you the impression that I was sweet on you,” his nodding confirmed it, “I’m sorry they did that.”

“Like I said, I should have seen the signs Beth, but I didn’t. I have to admit though, I’ve never been friends with a girl before, and usually I can’t help but want to get them into bed sooner or later.” He grinned, “Usually I do.”

“Tim!”

“I’m not saying I don’t see you that way because a dead man would with that body you have, but I’m learning to listen and see a woman as more than that because of our friendship, so it’s a good thing.”

“Gee, should I thank you.” She slanted him an amused look.

He took her hand while chuckling, “No, but lets enjoy the night and forget about Cindy.”

“I’m worried Marshal will believe her.”

“Yeah, well Cindy’s good at spreading rumours. People know what she’s like.”

“Yes but some people will believe her.” She repeated, “She told him something before and he was really mad at me.”

“She’s one to talk.” He said frowning at the woman across the room, “She’s no angel.”

“What do you mean?”

“She told people that her fiancé took off with her money, but that’s not what had happened.”

“What?”

“She’d spent her trust that her dead mother left her, and then she fooled around with her fiancé’s best friend. Cindy likes expensive things, and her father didn’t have the money to support her. And Marshal, being the respectable person his is, helped out a fellow rancher, by buying into his two feedlots, to help ease the debt. I suspect he’s also seen with her to help her

out in the social scene because he is well respected. Cindy spread that story to gain sympathy, but a few of us know the truth.”

“Oh dear.”

“ A lot of people felt sorry for her because she was practically left at the altar. Derek, her ex-fiancé is a good man. He generally seemed to care about her, but his best friend knew better and probably went about it the wrong way. It was easy to get her into bed all he had to do was flash her some jewellery.”

“How do you know this?”

“I’m Derek’s best friend.”

That night when Beth crawled into bed she reflected heavily on the evening. Tim wasn’t as bad as she first thought. She still didn’t have the same affection as she did for Marshal. She’d let Marshal touch her, kiss her and she let him know part of her that she never shared with anyone. How could he believe her now, if she confessed to him after seeing the look on his face when she told him to go away?

Marshal, she thought pinching her eyes shut. What would he do even if he believed her? There was nothing anyone could do.

He was certainly going to fire her when he came back after Cindy talked to him despite Nancy sticking up for her. Reaching up she rubbed her forehead while worrying. She kept digging this deep hole and soon she wouldn’t see a way out. That horrible sick feeling in her stomach had just gotten worse over the past few days and she realized that it was guilt. The crazy thing was she had betrayed the only person she ever really loved and there was no way to change things.

The next day, mid-afternoon, Marshal was loading his luggage into his truck while thinking this past week did nothing for his temper. He’d sat through endless lectures of beef cattle

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and treatment of illnesses not listening to a single word. He was furious that Beth would go out with Tim after what he'd done. That wasn't the only thing that miffed him. He'd touched her and felt possessive where she was concerned yet, she could easily toss him over for that playboy. He thought Beth's feelings and intelligence ran deeper than that, so it completely caught him off guard. Didn't she know that the electricity between them was rare?

There were so many things about her that just didn't add up and he thought he was able to read women well, but as soon as he thought he had a handle on that little spitfire, she'd switch direction. Quite frankly it was driving him nuts and he wanted to throttle her!

Nancy was no help either. After he came home in a temper, hollering that he was firing the lying bitch, she threatened to quit. It actually made him pause, because of all the years that he'd known her, she'd never said those words.

"Take a few days and cool down," she said standing there with her hands on her hips staring up at him with no fear, "there's something going on in that little one's life that none of us know about and you will not add to her stress! She does good work and helps out an old woman like me without one complaint." Nancy knew Beth didn't like going home, and she may have lied about the bruise on her cheek, but it didn't take long for her to put things together. What surprised her is that Marshal hadn't figured it out. After all, he was an intelligent man and a survivor of abuse himself. She eyed the large brute thinking that maybe there was something more going on here. However, Nancy didn't interfere in such things as that, but she could certainly prevent Marshal from getting rid of her.

"Tim assaulted her last week and now she's dating him!" he bellowed down at her, "I took her to the hospital. I patched her up!"

“So?” Nancy responded without hesitating, “You’re a good man. Don’t expect anything in return because you do nice things.”

“I expect her to stay away from that prick!”

“Watch your language young man. I may not be able to turn you over my knee but I can starve you to death.”

Despite her warning, he let out another vivid curse and ran his fingers through his hair roughly. He couldn’t tell Nancy that he wanted her, and he was more jealous than anything. Maybe Nancy was right and he needed a few days to calm down, so he took the trip, but it didn’t help. The only thing that did happen was that red haze disappeared in front of his eyes when he thought about that scene in the street when she told him to go away. Now he was just plain pissed off.

He got in the truck started it and headed toward the ranch thinking that he would have to talk to her about this or it was going to drive him crazy. He never thought that he would ever get involved to the point he was now with a woman again, but Beth was addictive. He had never met anyone like her. She was intriguing, passionate, and God help him, he wanted her. He wanted her naked beneath him and moaning like she did when he kissed her. Then he made the mistake of wondering if she reacted like that when Tim kissed her. Then he wondered if they had been together.

There came the red haze again only with a vengeance this time. The closer he got to the ranch the thicker it became.

Beth heard the truck pull up in front of the house and her heart started beating at record speed. Then a vehicle door slamming and heavy angry footsteps on the porch. She already knew he was in a rage, and the abrupt opening and slamming of the study door didn’t need to be an indicator. She couldn’t even look up. She already knew how angry he was and he had every right to be.

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“Are you sleeping with him?”

Even his voice was filled with barely controlled rage. She kept her head bowed and didn't say anything. This was the second time he'd brought that up and she knew no matter what she said, it wouldn't go well and for a man in a temper like he was, she didn't want to provoke him.

“Beth, I asked you a question.”

“No matter what I say you'll believe the worst of me.” She finally said after a pause.

“God dammit, look at me!”

She snapped her head up and centered her eyes on his. He wasn't just angry, he was raging.

“Did you?”

She still never said anything and his face contorted in anger.

“He assaulted you and you're dating him!” he said walking toward the desk she sat behind, “You are just as deceitful as every other woman out there.”

“It's not what you think.” She answered quietly. More and more she started to get fearful. Her father was just barely five foot five, but Marshal was huge in width and height and he could easily hurt her more than her father ever could.

“You're no better than a street slut!” he bit out

She paled. Her father wanted her to give herself to Tim, Cindy insinuated that she was doing it, but Marshal called her probably the worst thing she'd ever heard.

“Get the hell out of my house.” He added with equal venom. “Cindy was right about you. I shouldn't have been so stupid to actually feel something for a woman who has no heart.”

She stood up so fast the chair fell over backward. Ignoring it she grabbed her purse and made a wide beeline around him for the door not saying another word or meeting his gaze again. His words stung her to the bone and she felt she

deserved everyone of them. She could feel the heat of his gaze on her back as she rushed out of the room.

Marshal heard her car leave before he sat down on his sofa. He was surprised at his own viciousness. Never in his life did he treat another human being the way he'd just treated her. He laid his head back and let out a curse that would make his drunken father blush. She didn't even defend herself. She said nothing. Every other time he tore into her she had something to say, but why not this time?

Nancy was going to kill him. Obviously she wasn't home or she would have come in and nailed him with a rolling pin.

As it was, he wished she did, because she'd made the next few days miserable. He actually found a spider in his mashed potatoes the first night and decided to eat out after that until she cooled down.

On Saturday Ben came home from Baseball camp and when he found out what his uncle did, he took Nancy's side. Finally Marshal laid down the law and said there would be no more mention of Beth's name in the house or Nancy and Ben will both be homeless before he stormed out of the house.

"Wow." Said Ben, "She really got to him."

"Just remember Ben, Beth is a good girl no matter what you hear about her."

"I know." He said in agreement, "She's been really nice to me."

On Sunday Marshal found himself looking for her at church, but she wasn't there. Her mother and father were and her mother looked as though she hadn't slept in a few days. When the service was over, he resisted the urge to go and ask them how Beth was, but something held him back.

"Something on your mind Marshal?"

Marshal realized he was watching the Winters drive away when his brother spoke to him. He turned and looked at him

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shaking his head, "I fired Beth a few days ago."

John was surprised, "What for?"

He shrugged, "She was running around with Tim Maynard."

"So?"

"I had to take her to the hospital one night because he assaulted her."

"I see." He said not seeming the least bit surprised and Marshal caught it.

"You knew didn't you?"

"Beth came to see me a few weeks back," he said, "She told me."

"Really?"

"She also told me that no one has ever made her feel safe like you did that night." He added watching his brother's expression carefully and choosing his words even more carefully. She told him a great many things, but he couldn't reveal any of them.

"She did huh?" He said with peaked interest, "Then why did she go back to him?"

"You know I can't tell you that."

Marshal stared at him for a moment, "I take it there's a lot I don't understand."

John nodded, "have you seen her?"

"No, not since I practically threw her out of my house." John almost seemed to wince at his words which just made Marshal feel worse. "She wouldn't tell me the truth about anything. Hell, I still don't know how old she is."

"Maybe she had her reasons." He answered.

Marshal didn't feel like forgiving her despite his guilt, "She went back to Tim after I threatened him if he came near her again. She seemed so upset that night, but how easily she forgets."

“Marshal, it isn’t like you to get involved in someone’s personal life. Is there something else going on?”

He shrugged, “I liked her.”

“Liked?”

He gave his brother a sharp look, “A lot.”

“Oh.” Now this made sense. “Maybe you should check up on her Marsh. I haven’t seen her in several days and we actually had an appointment yesterday that she didn’t show up to.”

“Really?”

“I asked her father, but he said she was really sick and was sorry that she forgot to call.”

“I already put myself out there John.” He said shaking his head.

John took a deep breath, “I know what you think you see about her, but sometimes its all an illusion. What does your gut tell you?”

Marshal released a laugh, “To drag her to bed until I get my fill.”

“I said gut, not groin.” John added with a chuckle of his own.

“With a man, they go hand in hand. I’ve never wanted a woman so much in my life. Then I find out she’s with another man, I just flew into a rage. It was crazy and I was way too hard on her, but it doesn’t change that she made a choice. I can’t have her working for me when I know she’s with that guy and I want her.”

“So, what’s stopping you? Go get her.” John said as if it was the easiest thing on the planet to do.

Marshal stared at him as if he was insane.

“I said she felt safe with you Marshal, not Tim—remember?”

“That’s probably changed. I said some horrible things.” The guilt he felt was increasing. John was trying to tell him

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something without giving away Beth's confidence and he started to think he had everything wrong. Regardless, he couldn't take back what he said, it was too harsh. If she did trust him like John said, he'd crushed that. Also, what did John mean about her feeling safe? He knew not to ask him, because he wouldn't tell him. "I'll see you later." He said turning and heading toward the truck where Ben was waiting.

John watched him go with a sad heart. He couldn't break his vows for anyone even his brother. He knew Marshal needed love in his life, and Beth had plenty to offer. Only Marshal saw what he wanted to see with her because of his past experiences. Trust didn't come easy to him.

Before Marshal knew it an entire week had passed. He had resigned to doing the accounts himself even though it frustrated him to no end that he wasn't outside getting dirty with his men. He had to give it to Beth, she was highly organized and well skilled. The amount of effort she put into sorting his businesses and accounts on the computer were surprising. He easily found out how she organized things and continued to do the same. Again he felt the guilt nag him.

Several hours later he sought out Ben. He'd take him into town for lunch and maybe get his mind off the auburn-haired woman that seemed to be plaguing his thoughts lately.

Ben and he talked about baseball and school in the fall. He was careful not to mention Beth after his eruption last week. Nancy told him to respect his uncle's wishes because there was more going on here that he'd admit. Whatever that meant.

It just so happened that the diner was very busy, but they still managed to find a booth. After all it was Friday and during the lunch hour. Ben cringed when Cindy came into the diner, saw Marshal and lit up as she made her way over to them. She plunked herself down beside Ben hardly even acknowledging him.

“Marshal darling, could you possibly take me to the movie tonight? I really want to go see it and I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

Marshal somehow forgot about Cindy, He used to take her to the movie every week, but she hadn’t been coming around or even calling him like she used to, probably because he gave her hell last time they were together, “I suppose.”

“If you need a babysitter, I have a friend that can look after Ben.”

Ben cocked an eyebrow, “I’m twelve.”

Marshal smirked.

Cindy looked surprised, “You don’t need looked after?”

“Not since I was in diapers.” He added sarcastically.

Cindy didn’t seem to notice, “Well, I really don’t know that much about kids.”

Ben wanted to tell her that he wasn’t a kid, he was an adolescent, but Marshal shot him a look that said to leave it alone.

“So how’s your secretary?” Cindy said turning her attention back to Marshal knowing full well she didn’t work for him anymore.

“I don’t know.”

“I heard you let her go.”

Threw her out of his house was more like it. “I didn’t need her anymore.” He said.

“Well she must’ve been devastated. Poor thing tried to kill herself—“

Marshal was out of the diner before Cindy finished her sentence. Ben took a little longer because he had to wait until a shocked Cindy stood up to let him out. He trotted after his uncle, not knowing where they were going when they got back in the truck, but from the look on his uncle’s face, he didn’t ask.

A half an hour later they pulled into the Winters’

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driveway. Finally Marshal turned to Ben, “You wait here.”

He just nodded as his uncle got out of the truck and hurried up to the front door of the house.

Marshal’s heart was beating heavily in his chest. She never said anything when he yelled at her and threw her out of his house. She acted almost as if she was frightened of him. He saw that now. What the hell was the matter with him that he didn’t check and see if she was okay? He pounded on the front door until Laura opened it.

“Mr. Davis?”

“Where’s Beth?”

Her eyes widened at the abruptness of his voice. “She’s at the hospital.” She finally admitted.

“What happened?”

“It was an accident.” She said, “She fell down the stairs and ended up with a severe concussion.” She lied, “When—well, I mean, when you let her go, she was clearly upset and I gave her one of my sleeping pills. Unfortunately it had an adverse affect and she lost her footing when she came down for supper.”

“I heard she tried to kill herself.” He said feeling a bit of relief.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Laura stated defensively, “Beth isn’t crazy.”

“I wasn’t sure. She acted strangely when I let her go.”

Laura lifted her chin. It was one of the few times she felt the need to say anything in her daughter’s defence, “Is that right Mr. Davis. Well, she was a mess when she came home that day and never said a word to me, but ‘letting her go’ must’ve been an understatement for what you said to her because Beth could take a lot of criticism and I’ve never seen her cry like that before in my life. It’s why I gave her those stupid pills in the first place.”

“I didn’t realize I was harsh.” He said knowing he was feeling the guilt eat a hole in his gut, “I’m sorry I upset her. If she

wants, she can have her job back.” For some reason Laura did an about face and was now smiling.

“Oh really? That would make her happy.” She said, “If you want to go see her she’s at the hospital. Unfortunately she sprained her arm and broke a rib in the fall. The doctor said she should be all right. The concussion was a worry that’s why he kept her for the last week. They said she can come home tomorrow.”

Marshal was confused at the sudden mood change. A minute ago it seemed Laura wanted to take his head off. He actually expected her to blast him for even suggesting something so preposterous after the way he treated her. What really surprised him is Beth hadn’t said a word on what he did to her. “No, but tell her to take a few days before she comes back to work. I’ll handle things until then.” He couldn’t face her knowing he may have caused this. He’ll wait until she came back to the ranch before he talked to her, that way there wouldn’t be an audience.

That night he did take Cindy to the movie like he said he would. She was wearing a very seductive dress that did nothing for him. Beth wore a loose blouse and an ankle length skirt the last time he nearly made love to her against the desk, and it turned him on more than anything Cindy could wear. What the hell was wrong with him? His mind wasn’t on the movie at all. If someone were to ask him about it he wouldn’t have a clue on what to tell them. He just kept playing that scene over and over in his mind where he’d completely demoralized Beth. At the time he thought he was speaking the truth, but her reaction still baffled him. She was right too, he wouldn’t have believed anything she said, but how did she know that? Again he couldn’t help but think that some previous boyfriend was abusive to her, but Bobby had gotten back to him and told him there were no

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charges in the data base from her or her family to anyone. However, he had connections and would check further into it for him.

Cindy prattled on in his ear through the entire movie and he hardly heard a word. Somehow she'd convinced him to take her to the local pub afterwards to meet some friends. When he got there he saw Tim with some other woman on his arm standing by the bar.

"I'll be right back." He said to Cindy after he seated her at the table with her friends.

"Oh, don't be too long darling." She cooed

Marshal gritted his teeth and made his way to Tim. Usually Cindy's pet names didn't bother him, but he was still unsettled about Beth.

Tim gave him an apprehensive look when he saw him, leaned down and whispered in his companion's ear who gave him a ravishing smile before she cast a look at Marshal and walked away. Marshal near laughed at how easily women obeyed him. He had to admit Tim had a talent, that's why Beth didn't make sense. There was no way she'd be commanded to do such a thing.

"This is a public place Marsh." Tim said looking around.

"I'm calling a truce." He said holding out his hand.

"Thank God." Tim breathed a sigh of relief near making Marshal laugh despite his ongoing worry about Beth as he shook his hand. You'd never know he was that worried about Marshal pounding on him until that moment.

"I heard Beth fell down the stairs."

Tim nodded and took a drink from his glass.

"Laura said I upset her."

Tim raised his brows, "Is that what happened? She never said anything. I've been to see her a couple of times."

It looks like she doesn't keep secrets from just him.

“Who’s the girl?” he said nodding toward the blonde waiting patiently by the far wall talking to another woman.

“My date.” He answered truthfully.

“I thought you were seeing Beth?” he said letting his eyes narrow.

Tim eyed him for a moment, and then he nodded, softened his expression and set his glass down on the bar, “Look Marsh, I’ll tell you the truth because it’s obvious you care about her. Beth was pressured into dating me by her parents. I felt I owed her something for what I did, because her father was pretty mad at her for not doing what he said. I come from a wealthy family too and know what it’s like trying to live up to that role, so I told her I’d help her out. I even told her that I’ll break off the engagement.”

“What? Why the hell didn’t she tell me?”

“Gee, I wonder.” Tim said with an expression that said everything.

“I would never harm a woman,” he defended knowing Tim was talking about his temper.

“No, but your anger could clear a forest full of bear.” Tim offered, then saw the guilty look on Marshal’s face, “Look Marsh, it’s not like she lays her personal life out for everyone to see. I’ve discovered that about her. So don’t take this so hard. Anyway, I’m glad I made a good friend.” He looked at the blonde for a moment who gave him another welcoming smile, “However, I can’t ever deal with celibacy.” His eyes searched Marshal’s then glanced over his head at Cindy who was looking all too suspicious at the two of them, “Beth is a good girl Marsh. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. I’ve never met anyone like her, so take it easy on her.”

“I’ll do my best. It looks like you’re not the only one that needs to beg for her forgiveness.” Marshal felt his heart lighten for the first time in a week at Tim’s confession, but that was

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quickly squashed when he remembered what he accused her of. All along she was only being seen with Tim to please her father but she wasn't sleeping with him. Yet he'd accused her of being a tramp.

He made his way back over to Cindy who didn't even give him time to sit down before she started in on him.

"Tim is sure a busy man."

"He's young." Marshal said.

"I'm the same age." She defended, "Yet I don't run around like that. First he's with your secretary, then that bimbo."

"Beth."

"Excuse me?"

"Her name is Beth," he said with a firm stare, "And this conversation is over."

She folded her arms under her breasts, "I've known you longer but this is the second time you've taken her side."

"I haven't' taken her side at all and that's the problem, but it's going to change." He added tersely.

"Well she's obviously got something wrong with her to try and off herself." She added, "And over something as silly as losing a job. Her family has money and it's not like she needs it." Her eyes searched his expression, "Unless she was really hung up on you."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet to toss several large bills on the table in front of everyone, "There's for your drink, and the cab ride home." He said politely while getting to his feet much to the stunned looks of the other four people there. "It's nice to see you all again." He said to the others before he turned and walked away.

Completely humiliated, Cindy turned beet red, "Marsh—"

"You were really harsh Cindy." Said Deborah, one of her friends, "making comments about someone who tried to kill herself was a bit unkind." Usually she would never speak to

Cindy like that, but it really was mean.

Cindy glared at her and got to her feet, “You don’t know her.”

“Actually Lori Tasker says she’s really nice.”

“She’s good at fooling people.”

“Lori is a really good judge of character. I’ve known her since I was six.”

“And I’m not?”

“Everyone knows how you feel about Marshal Davis—and well, you can be a little vicious when you want something.”

Cindy looked around the table as a couple of nods followed that statement.

“Some friends you are!” she burst out, grabbing the money and stomping out of the pub.

Chapter Eight

Beth hissed through her teeth as she got out of bed. It took some effort to get dressed too. The last week and a half had been hell for her, and she had no visitors except for her father the night before telling her that she had her job back. *God*, she thought, *I don’t want it*. However, she knew this would happen again if she didn’t say yes.

Marshal was just like every other man in her life. She discovered that she couldn’t trust him either. He didn’t care about her, but he had no problem touching her. If he cared even a little he would have come to see her or at least called. The last time he lost his cool with her, he did apologize in his way, but this was much worse. It hurt more than her father tossing her down the stairs. Just then the door opened, and the object of her thoughts was standing in the opening filling the frame with his

large form.

She turned her head away not able to look at him.

“I should have come last night when I found out.” He said softly stepping in the room and shutting the door, “I didn’t realize I hurt you Beth.”

“I hate you.” She said vehemently. She was hurt. Physically and emotionally. Her father could hurt her physically, but Marshal managed to hurt her emotionally. It was actually more painful.

“I’m sure you do,” he said trying to resist the smile that pulled at his mouth. This was the feisty Beth he knew, “But you’ll have to be a little more patient with me. I’m not used to jealousy.”

That brought her head up, “W—what did you say?”

He approached her in several long strides, but didn’t touch her. “Let’s start over.”

His expression and his tone of voice were sincere. Yet, she’d just gone through something terrible and she was vulnerable because of it, so she wasn’t sure if she could trust her instincts. “You said some terrible things Marshal.” She practically whispered it. His confession had her reeling.

“I know. Normally I’m not such an idiot.” He explained.

She had to admit that she had come to like his blunt honesty and managed a smile, “Really, well, that’s pretty much all I’ve seen lately.”

“It’s your fault,” he said with amusement, “After I kissed you that first time in the creek, you’ve been driving me crazy.”

She flushed and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, “Do you have to bring that up?” she said averting her gaze. She felt his fingers under her chin as he tilted her head up so she would look at him.

“As often as I can.” He seriously then looked down at her tensor wrapped arm, “Does it hurt?”

“Only when I breathe. I have a broken rib.”

He chuckled, “Do you want me to carry you?”

“Not likely. I’d rather crawl.” She said narrowing her eyes.

His warm gaze searched hers, “Forgive me?”

“No.” she said softly. Could he possibly look any more handsome?

“Please.” He added seeing the smile tug at her lips.

“never.” She said less convincingly.

He bent and kissed her cheek, “You still look beautiful, even all banged up.”

“Marshal, you’re not playing fair.” She breathed.

“I never do when I see something I want.” He said grinning, then he looked around the room, “Where are your things?”

Trying to ignore the thrumming of her heart at that statement she answered him, “Why?”

“I told your father, that I’d take you home.” He said settling his gaze back on her, “I hired him to do a few things for me.”

“You did?” she almost breathed a sigh of relief knowing that this would take some of the pressure off of her.

“Yeah, I’m selling Cindy’s father back his two feedlots. He’s back on his own two feet now and doesn’t need me to help him out. Your father can handle the details.”

“he had some trouble?”

“He ran into some financial trouble several years ago and made some bad investments, so I helped him out.” He explained.

She just stared at him for a moment. Everything about him screamed the opposite, but now she knew better. Moments ago she thought he was just like everyone else in her life, but he admitted he hadn’t known she was here until last night. His tenderness was genuine too, and he apologized. Her father never

did.

Marshal may have had a temper, but now she knew that he had a kind heart. He'd held her when she needed it, and never pressed her for information even though it must've been eating him up with curiosity why she acted the way she did at times. He had taken her to the hospital out of concern and even though he wanted her to press charges against Tim, he didn't push it. He never pried into her life either. It was no wonder she was crazy in love for this man. When she was vulnerable, he always considered her feelings first.

In love?

Was she really? Of course she was especially when he used that tenderness that not many people saw, like now. If anyone thought he was irresistible just being who he was all decked out in his wranglers, and cowboy duds, they didn't know the half of it when he turned on the charm.

"You're a really nice man Marshal."

He winced, "Not to you I wasn't."

"Maybe I didn't make things too easy for you either." She relented.

He shook his head, "No, I should have listened to my gut." *My heart*, "I talked to Tim."

"Talked." She paled slightly wondering if he had hurt him.

Seeing her expression he grinned, "Only talked. He told me that your father pressured you into seeing him and he was playing along to get him off your back." He leaned down so his face was inches from hers, "You should have told me." He said sternly.

"Why? You made your intentions clear." She defended trying to ignore his closeness. He was doing it purposely because he knew she had no defences against him.

"I did?" he said softly locking his eyes on hers, "I thought I made them quite clear in the creek that day."

“I was just another body.” She said.

“No—and if you knew anything about sexual chemistry, you wouldn’t say that.”

She flushed beet red, “I know enough.”

“Liar.”

“Marshal—“ his closeness started to affect her. Somehow she’d forgotten the pain she was in. *Gosh he smelled so nice*, she missed that!

“Okay,” he erected himself smiling down at her, “I didn’t come here to make you uncomfortable.” Of course he did. He needed to see if she responded to him, and she certainly did, only what she didn’t know is that he reacted just as easily to her closeness. “I told your father I owed you an apology for treating you the way I did, and that I’d pick you up giving me a chance to do it properly. He didn’t seem to mind.” He had to change the subject because that hospital bed was looking inviting and it was crazy because she was injured and he knew what a broken rib felt like. It wasn’t like they could be intimate for several weeks, and they were going to be whether she knew it or not. “Now where’s your bag?”

Thank God, she didn’t want to see her father. “It’s in the closet. One of the nurses packed it for me after my shower this morning.”

He walked over and took the bag out of the closet then came back and took her uninjured hand with the other. She was too beaten down to protest. However, when he threaded his fingers through hers, she didn’t want to let go. It seemed like forever that she’d felt safe and it was then that she realized she could only ever feel that way with him.

As he led her out of the building she chastised herself constantly. Obviously she did forgive him and by rights she should have made him wait, but she really needed him right now. Not only that, how the heck could she possibly resist him?

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He opened the door to the truck and helped her in not missing how her face pinched in pain as she settled in the seat, “Did they give you something for pain?” he said with concern.

“Yes, not that long ago. It should start working soon.”

He felt better knowing that, “I’ll take it slow on the way home.” He said before he shut the door, walked around and got in the driver’s side.

“I’m still mad at you.” She said to him as he started the truck. She couldn’t give in so easily because she knew how vulnerable she was around him. To her surprise he smirked but didn’t look at her.

“Good.” He said checking his mirror before pulling away from the curb.

They made small talk mostly about Ben when he pulled up in front of her house. Instead of getting out he turned and looked at her, “So I guess you’ll have to tell your father the truth about Tim.”

She gaped at him.

“Beth, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because he expects me to be dating him.”

He felt irritation rise, “Well, he’s going to be a little confused when we start seeing each other.”

She shook her head, “He can’t know.”

Marshal was completely baffled. Then he got angry, “Beth, if you think I’m sneaking around just to make your father happy, you’re out of your tree. I’m a grown man, not a teenager, and you’re no child yourself.”

“You don’t understand what he’s like.” She said feeling more and more uncomfortable while glancing at the house. She’d seen the curtains move in the front window and knew they were being watched.

Marshal didn't miss the nervous glance toward the house, "Are you seriously that worried about how your father would react to us seeing each other?" he said exasperated, "Beth, I'm sure I am more than worthy."

She shook her head again, "I can't possibly." She started to get out of the truck, but he reached over and grabbed her arm causing her to freeze, "Please don't do that."

It was the tone of her voice and the visible trembling that she displayed that made him release her. Within seconds she was out of the truck with her bag and rushing toward the house. He wanted to stop her, but now he knew that she was frightened. Maybe not of him, but something had terrified her to the point where a sudden grab made her react so strongly. He knew she was attracted to him, it was impossible to hide, but she would act on it because—because of what?

He wouldn't push it now, but when he got home, he was going to call Bobby and see if he found anything out.

Beth was thankful that her father didn't call her into his study as she rushed into the house and into her room, because she was visibly crying. Why couldn't she be happy and have Marshal and not worry about her father hurting her, or worse.

The next day she pulled up in front of Marshal's ranch house. She was surprised to see the Chief's police car out front. As she got out of her car he was just coming out of the house shaking hands with Marshal.

"Hi Beth." He said, tipping his hat as he walked by her.

"What's going on?" she said with a worried look at the car as it pulled away, "Is Ben okay?"

"It's a friendly visit, nothing to worry about," Marshal said looking down at her. It somehow didn't surprise him that she'd be worried about Ben.

"Oh," she said with relief.

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“We need to talk.”

She stilled and looked up at him. Then she slowly shook her head. “I already explained—“

He narrowed his gaze and took her uninjured arm cutting off her statement, “Now Beth.” He said practically dragging her back in the house not giving her a chance to protest.

But he didn’t stop at the study, nor the kitchen or the living room. He kept pulling her down the hall, “Marshal?” It was then she realized that he was taking her to his bedroom and then she started to pull on her arm, “No! I told you—“

He turned on her, “The only time I can get a partial truth out of you is when I’m making love to you. So I’m not giving you a chance to back out this time.”

“no, you have to let go!” she paled and that familiar fear came back.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he remembered how she was that one day in the stable when she trembled under his grasp, but he thought he’d gotten beyond that until her reaction yesterday in the truck. He’d let her go both times, and well, he wasn’t going to do it anymore because he wanted some answers.

“Let go!” she started struggling. He released her so quickly that she lost her footing in a panic, fell backwards and landed on her rump causing pain to jolt through her from her injuries. She cried out and at the same time she felt her sweater moved up her rib cage showing distinct bruises.

Marshal froze at what he saw. After a week and a half the bruises had faded but what was left was too distinct to be mistaken for anything else but what they were. Boot marks. “Oh *Jesus!*”

Beth burst into tears and covered her face with her hands, “Oh God!”

Marshal went to his knees beside her and pushed up her sweater so he could see everything. She tried to stop him but

struggling just caused her more pain. Then he shot her a look, “Stop.” He said gently, “You’re only hurting yourself and I need to see how bad this is.”

She released a sob and laid her head back on the floor turning her face away from him. She heard him curse a few more times as his fingers brushed lightly over her bruises.

“Who did this?”

She never said anything. Tears fell down her cheeks. She was so ashamed that he found out that she just wanted to die.

“Beth.” He said softly leaning over her and turning her face to look up at him, “This isn’t your fault.” She released another sob and shook her head. “This isn’t anything to be embarrassed about either.”

“I—I fell down the stairs.” She finally choked out.

“Like hell you did. I’m calling the doctor.”

“No please.” She grabbed his shirt, “Don’t do this. I already saw a doctor.”

“You didn’t see Matt, because he would have recognized this immediately.” He made sure his voice was as gentle as he could make it even though he was raging inside, “Look no one is going to hurt you again.” He leaned over and took her upper arms, “come on, stand up. I’d lift you but by the looks of those bruises it would hurt more.”

She nodded and let him help her stand. Then he took her hand and led her into his room. He felt her hesitate, “honey I’m no brute, there’s no way I can touch you when you’re hurting.”

“Okay.” She resigned herself to his care as he led her to the bed, guided her to sit down, and picked up the phone beside it.

Beth watched him carefully. He wouldn’t hurt her intentionally. She knew that and maybe she needed someone to trust in her life, but it was so hard to let go of suspicion.

“Matt—It’s Marshal, do you have some time?—Good,

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bring your bag and come out to my place. See you then.” He hung up and sat beside her brushing her hair off her face to cup her chin. “It was your father wasn’t it?”

She averted her gaze.

“I should have seen the signs Beth, I’m sorry.”

She couldn’t stop the tears that slipped down her cheeks, “It’s not your fault.” She said in barely a whisper.”

His other hand came up and cupped her face as his eyes roved over her, “I knew you had secrets Beth, but this I should have seen. I told you what I dealt with as a kid. I don’t know why I didn’t recognize the symptoms, but maybe I didn’t want to relive those days either.” He bent down and kissed her wet cheek, “He won’t touch you again baby. Do you hear me? I promise.”

She nodded as more tears fell and when he put his arms around her to pull her against his chest she didn’t protest. It was the same position that Matt found them in three quarters of an hour later.

Nancy knocked on the door with Matt standing beside her holding his bag.

“Come in.” Marshal said.

Nancy opened the door and Matt stepped in. She closed the door behind them without saying a word.

“How bad is it this time?”

“I’m know at least one of the ribs is broken, but there’s a lot of bruising and pain.”

“Okay.” He set his bag down on the end of the bed, “I need you to lay down Beth. But remove your shirt first okay.” Matt looked at Marshal, “Maybe you should leave.”

“No!” Beth protested grabbing Marshal’s hand, “Please don’t leave.”

“Okay, I won’t, but get undressed and get under the covers. We’ll be right outside.”

She nodded.

When Marshal closed the door to his room he led Matt down the hall a ways, “It’s her father.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“No, actually she never said anything, but she didn’t deny it. She’s terrified. I don’t know how the doctor missed this.” He said running his hand through his hair. “She’s just so small Matt—“ he cursed, “I feel so damn guilty!”

Matt shook his head, “Marshal, there’s not much you could have done.”

“She used to stay here late, evade questions, act defensively when I got close to her. It was all there in front of me, yet I didn’t see it.” He looked at his friend, “Hell, Matt, I’ve lived through this.”

“It was a long time ago Marsh, and you know how easy it is for a family to hide dysfunction. Imagine how long this has been going on before you found out. Look I’ll make a few phone calls and see if I can get previous records from Chicago. We’ll build a case against him.”

“She won’t go for it.”

Matt gave him a reassuring smile, “I’m sure you can be convincing.”

“It hasn’t worked so far.”

“From what I seen in your room, she trusts you. Don’t give up.”

Marshal nodded maybe Matt was right about that. Maybe he was able to get close to her like no other. It hurt him to know that he’d damaged that in some way by throwing her out of his house that day. He couldn’t believe he did that knowing what she’d been through now. The guilt near tore him in half. “I’ll try.” He finally said.

“Her father is the lawyer right?”

“Mostly business and Corporate though, not criminal.” Marshal said seeing where this was going.

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“Is she twenty-one?”

“No.”

“Ah hell Marsh.”

“Yeah I know.” He ran a hand through his hair again.

“Are you sure you want to get involved?”

“I can’t send her back there.” He said gesturing toward the door.

“No I suppose you can’t.”

He took a heavy breath, “I have an idea. Tell her I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Sure thing.” Matt said, then he paused, “You’re a good man Marshal.”

“sure I am.” He said turning toward his study. If he was he would have seen the signs sooner.

Back inside marshal’s room Matt was pulling the blankets up over Beth’s naked upper half. “I’m going to give you something for the pain Beth.”

Normally she would protest, but she was hurting so much. “All right.”

“Tomorrow, I’m going to get marshal to bring you to the hospital for x-rays. I worry something more is broken.” What he didn’t tell her was that he wanted to see how many old breaks she had.

“I don’t care anymore Doctor Lawford. I’m so sick of everything.”

He gave her a reassuring smile as he took her hand in his, “You don’t realize how brave you are. There are many people out there that wouldn’t survive as long with the abuse you had to endure.”

“Thanks, but I certainly don’t feel like a survivor.”

“You will in time.” He said reaching for his bag to withdraw a syringe and a vial. “this will give you a decent night’s sleep—“

She started to get up, “No, I need to go home. My father will—“

“Don’t worry about that.”

She looked up to see Marshal standing in the doorway and quickly grabbed the blanket to cover her up to her neck. “Why?”

He stepped aside and John stepped in the room.

Her eyes darted back and forth, “what’s going on?”

“Hold off on that drug for a few minutes, won’t you Matt?”

Matt stood up as John produced a bible. His brows rose as figured out what Marshal was doing.

“Marshal, what is going on?” Beth asked again

“I hope you got some blood vials in that bag of yours because you’re going to have to push through the test to make this legal.”

“I do.” Said Matt

“Good.” He turned his attention to Beth, “We’re getting married.”

Her mouth fell open.

“Can you guys give us a minute?”

There were varying ‘sures’ before the room emptied and the door shut behind them. He sat on the bed where Matt sat only moments before.

“What did you say?” she was so stunned she could hardly hear her own voice,

“A woman only has to be eighteen in Montana to get married without parental consent.” He told her as he took her hand, “Matt will do the blood test and John will marry us. He brought the marriage license out with him thanks to a friend in town I was able to get it quickly.”

“Bobby?”

He nodded.

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“Pass me my clothes please.” She said pointing at the chair that held her bra and blouse.

Without thinking, he got up and did as she said. She dropped the blanket not even concerned that he was standing that gaping at her. Then with some effort she got out of bed and he realized that she was leaving. “Wait, you’re not leaving Beth.” He said grabbing her arm.

She faced him, “I’m not staying. You can’t force me to marry you.”

“You’re wrong about that. I’ll have Bobby here in a heartbeat and he’ll cuff you to my bed.” She visibly paled.

“You don’t know my father.” She released a sob, “Marshal, I can’t possibly ask this of you.”

“I’m not afraid of him.”

“Marshal, he’s not who he seems.”

“I’ve dealt with his kind before honey.” He smiled down at her, “I can handle him.”

“What about your friends, Cindy—“

“Cindy wasn’t my girlfriend, never was. Obviously she thought she was but nothing happened between us. I was helping her out because she was mistreated by a man, not like you, but enough to damage her self esteem. I don’t love her Beth, and sometimes I find it hard to even like her.”

“Really?” If her heart could have developed wings and fly, it just did at that confession.

“You however, have me spellbound. Now I know this is sudden but I’m doing us both a favour. You marry me, and I don’t have to worry about every husband seeking woman from here to the state line. In turn, I’ll protect you.”

But he didn’t love her, she thought. However, to get out of her father’s house, she could do this, then maybe in time, he would learn to love her like she did him. “We need to talk first.” She looked around the room, “Can we get out of here? I need

some air.”

“Sure.” He said opening the bedroom door. Matt and John were waiting in the hall. “We’ll be back in a bit.”

John nodded, “I’ll hit Nancy up for some coffee—Matt?”

“I’d love a cup.” Matt said following John into the kitchen as Marshal took Beth’s hand and led her out of the house.

Beth didn’t ask him where they were going but followed him obediently. Before long she realized he was taking her to the stables. She could have cried at his thoughtfulness. He knew she loved the horses. Then he stopped outside the doors and turned toward her “You must have the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen.”

What did he just say?

“A man could get lost in them and not even know it.”

She started feeling a little dizzy and finally realized that she was holding her breath. Slowly she released it still staring up at him, “Marshal—I—“

He chuckled and started walking again.

“Marshal, can we stop for a minute?”

“All right.” He stopped and faced her again.

“My father is an alcoholic.” She blurted out, “I know nothing about relationships, nothing about affection having not had it my whole life and I—“

“You don’t need to confess anything to me Beth.” He said shaking his head, “It makes no difference to me.”

“I need to. It’s important to me that you know these—things. I’m worried that you don’t understand what you’re getting into.”

He cupped her face in his large hands, “Its not necessary. I don’t care what kind of baggage you have. I really want to marry you honey. You plague my thoughts, my dreams, and my body has had a permanent hard on since I kissed you that day.”

She blushed so much she was sure she could glow in the

dark.

He released her. “I’ll wait for you to figure out what you want with our relationship. I mean if you don’t want to stay married,” he near choked out those words, but managed to keep his voice steady, “I’ll agree to it, but it’ll get you away from him. Then we can get an annulment.”

“Marshal no one would do this.” That word annulment near sliced her in two. She wanted Marshal. She didn’t want to be away from him, only he seemed to be able to say that so easily. Yet, she knew that she had to take this one step at a time. First she had to get away from her father, and he was giving her a way out.

“Maybe not, but I understand what you’re going through. I’m willing to help.”

She averted her gaze, “So where do we go from here?”

He placed his finger under her chin and lifted her gaze to his, “Wherever you want. I’m completely game.”

Beth could feel her cheeks flushing. The man affected her so easily, “There’s some more things you need to know about me—my father.”

Marshal looked up as another of his trucks pulled into the yard, “Not here.” He turned and led her toward the stables. “There are too many people about.”

“I thought you didn’t care what people thought?”

“I don’t—about me.” He said giving her a warm glance.

Once inside the stables he pulled her into a vacant stall. “Okay honey, I’m all ears.”

Beth took a deep breath, “Okay—here it goes. My father sent me here to apply for the job with you so he could get in good with you and hopefully gain business.”

“He sent his own daughter to seduce me?” he clarified angrily. Only he wasn’t angry with her. He wanted to kill Theo with his bare hands.

“No!” she defended, “That attraction you mentioned was as much of a shock to me as you. My father would kill me if he knew I liked you.” She could feel the hot sting of tears but tried her best not to let them fall.

Marshal stood straight and folded his arms across his chest.

“Marsh—that stance was completely intimidating and from his expression she couldn’t tell if he was angry or not. However, when he spoke, his voice was gentle.

“Quiet Beth, give me a minute to think this out. I know it wasn’t you.” He looked past her head for a moment before centering her gaze back on her, “I need you to be truthful with me from now on. Is that understood?”

“Yes.”

“How old are you really?”

She averted her gaze, “twenty.”

He released a heavy breath but kept his eyes on her.

Her eyes darted back to his, “Why?”

He rubbed his forehead. “God, I’m so much older than you.” He knew she was, but for some reason hearing it from her was devastating. He would forget himself because she was built so perfectly and acted well beyond her years, but her confession made him feel like a leech.

“I’m twenty-one next month.”

“If you think I can wait a whole month before I can touch you again, you’re out of your ever loving tree.”

His declaration brought a smile to her face.

“Christ Beth, I’m thirty four.” He added pinching his eyes shut.

She stepped up to him and in a rarer act of forwardness placed a hand on his thick chest, “Would it help if I told you I didn’t care?”

“Does he strike you often?” he said covering her hand

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with his in a gesture of affection.

She nodded, “He usually doesn’t hit my face.”

“Have you or your mother ever reported the abuse?”

“No. My father holds the purse strings Marsh, he’s threatened to cut off my funding for college.

“Let him. I’ll help you with college if you want. Marry me, and get out of there. I have a spare room in the house next to Nancy’s.”

‘You’re giving up so much Marshal. It’s hard for me to accept this—“

He released a blunt laugh, “You think so? I want you. I want you underneath me moaning with ecstasy—“ her eyes widened but he continued, “—and you think I’m being so generous. Look Beth, I won’t push you to come to my bed until you’re ready, but just so you know, I’m here if you need me.”

She never said anything but she did gape at him.

“What is it? The support, or the whole bed mate thing?”

This time she laughed, “The support and you are way too sure of yourself.”

“Maybe, but I’m only stating the obvious.” He said letting the desire he felt for her show.

She didn’t think those mocha eyes could darken the way she did, but she didn’t deny the warmth forming in her pelvis, “Okay, enough talk of that.”

“yeah, you’re right.” He said reaching for her, then he paused, “Which rib is broken?”

“It’s on the right.” She breathed.

“Then I’ll be careful.” He murmured, circling his arm around her, “I should be shot for wanting you so much.” He added covering her mouth with his.

An hour and a half later they were married in the backyard among Nancy’s flower garden with Ben as the best man, and Nancy as her bridesmaid.

Beth never thought she could ask for anything better despite the hasty marriage and the way it was done. Matt had taken her blood sample and left for town rushing the lab results.

What shocked her most, was the stunning diamond wedding ring he'd slipped on her finger.

"It was my mother's," he said softly looking down at her with pride.

She couldn't help herself and cried as Marshal sealed it with a kiss. Shortly after that he left without saying where he was going as Nancy insisted on her helping with dinner in the kitchen.

The whole time she couldn't help but wonder where Marshal went but Nancy kept her busy asking her what she preferred for her celebration. She continually chattered on and soon had Beth laughing at her. She thought she was amazing. Obviously she knew she was distracted.

"I've made up the other room as Mr. Davis requested." Said Nancy casting her a sideways glance as she strained the potatoes, "Although I hope I don't need to do that for very long."

Beth blushed, "Marshal was just helping me out."

"Sure he was." She said in a tone of disbelieve, "Believe me he was helping himself too, he's crazy about you. Why I've never seen home so raging when you were seen in town with Tim."

"Really?"

"not even when that other woman jilted him did he take it so hard.' She continued.

"I felt so bad." Beth confessed, "I never wanted to hurt him."

"I know you didn't dear." She turned and patted her arm.

Marshal pulled his truck into the driveway after bidding Bobby good day. He'd taken him with him when he went to see

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Beth's parents. He'd filed a restraining order against the both of them if they came within a hundred yards of his wife.

It was then that the older man's true colors came out. He turned purple he was so mad. Her mother on the other hand, started weeping in what Marshal realized, was relief. After several voiced threats and firing the man, he left Bobby to fill them in on what would happen if they violated the restraining order.

Beth turned as the door to the kitchen opened and Marshal walked in smiling. She smiled back. Then he shocked her by walking up, and pulling a bouquet of flowers out from behind his back followed by him bending his head and kissing her on the mouth in front of Nancy who just clucked her tongue and made a comment about young love.

Beth flushed to the roots of her hair.

"Hi baby." He grinned.

"What are the flowers for?" she cleared her throat because it suddenly felt choked up.

"For my wife." He said as if this had been going on for years.

"Thanks." She said averting her gaze.

"Dinner will be ready in five minutes Mr. Davis, if you can take your hands off her for a minute. If not it'll take longer and you'll starve."

He grinned at Nancy over Beth's head, "All right, I have a few calls to make." He returned his eyes to Beth, "five minutes." He repeated and left.

Beth held the flowers to her chest and breathed deeply. She was absolutely head over heels for that man.

Dinner was new to her because of the ambiance that was created. They laughed and Ben told them about this girl he met in town to which marshal teased him excessively. Ben surprised

them both by turning the tables on marshal and ribbing him about Beth.

She had stopped eating to watch the two realizing that she never really felt more at ease than she did now. In fact, she'd forgotten about going home or letting her parents know that she was now married.

Married.

How could that slip her mind.

Marshal saw Beth pale and a blank look come over her face. He immediately dropped his fork and reached over and took her hand. "Beth, what is it?"

"M—my father—" she brought her frightened eyes to his, "I forgot—how could I forget—" she stuttered out.

"Beth," Marshal said softly, "I've been to see your parents already."

"How—when?"

"About a half an hour after I made you mine." He said giving her a reassuring smile, "He won't come near you again."

Never in her life had she experienced such overwhelming relief as she did at that moment. Tears poured out of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks in an endless stream.

"Come here," he said pulling her hand until she got out of her chair and let him pull her onto his lap.

Ben cleared his throat and stood up taking his plate with him as he went into the kitchen to leave his uncle and new wife alone.

Marshal pushed her head into the crook of his shoulder and soothed her with his deep gentle voice.

It took about ten minutes for the tears to finally stop and she lifted her head to look at him, "I don't know how to repay you." She sniffed loudly.

He kissed one of her wet cheeks, "I can think of about a dozen different ways." He said giving her a rakish grin.

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That made her laugh, “you are a rake.”

“Not normally, but your sweet little bottom on my lap has all sorts of things going through my head.” He reached up and brushed a strand of hair off her cheek, “I love your hair Beth, it’s your natural color, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

“Can you imagine how gorgeous our kids will be.’ He said before he could stop himself. He still wasn’t sure how she felt about him and although he’d told her something totally different to get him to marry her, he had his own selfish reasons. He wanted her more than he wanted any other woman in his life. Every time he looked at her, he burned with desire even with her face swollen and wet from her tears. All along he thought he was in love with that woman that jilted him years ago, but nothing came close to what he felt for the one sitting on his lap.

Beth’s mouth fell open, “Kids?”

“Maybe I spoke to soon.”

‘I—I like kids, no, I love kids!’ she blurted out before he could take it back. Then she saw a rush of emotion in his gaze causing it to darken.

“How’s that broken rib?” he said thickly.

“Matt gave me some pills, and it’s not so—“

His mouth cut off her words, but he didn’t stop there. He stood up with her in his arms and left the dining room. Once in his room he kicked the door shut with his foot. “So much for an annulment.” He murmured against her mouth.

“A what?” she said right before he took her mouth again.

Marshal was impatient and managed to tear her blouse trying to get it off causing her to chuckle against his mouth. A moment later he had her naked and flat on her back on his bed covering her soft body with his large hard one causing her to moan at the feel of his weight.

“Beth—“ he said letting his voice crack, “—We’ve got to

slow down, I'm worried about hurting you."

"You could never hurt me Marshal, I love you."

This time he emitted a hungry growl from deep within his chest and moved himself on top of her suggestively so she could feel every inch of desire he had for her.

Instinctively she reached down and wrapped her hand around the length of him causing him to hiss through clenched teeth against her mouth, "Baby don't! I won't last if you do that. I want you so bad that I don't need any coaxing. Trust me." His breathing was rapid and shallow and in turn it just excited her beyond the limits of her sane thoughts.

"I can't help it." She said in the same breathless tone he used, "I feel like I'm on fire."

He seized her hands and pinned them above her head with his own. "I promise, I'll let you touch me next time all you want." He grinned, "But right now, I can't hold back much longer and I have to make sure you're ready." He lifted himself up and looked down the length of her, "God, I've never seen a woman as beautiful as you."

"Marshal I'm burning up!" she groaned hardly hearing him.

He ducked his head and took one of her breasts in his hot mouth causing her to cry out and arch toward him. If her rib was broken, she didn't feel a darn thing. He continued to torture her with his mouth. Oh, but it was sweet torture! A thrilling ache swirled through her until it turned into a deep hot throbbing that churned through her whole body.

Marshal reached down and pulled her thigh up to his hip so he could settle between her legs. He had trouble thinking himself and was working purely on instinct to possess her. Yet, those enticing throaty noises she was making was driving him wild. Then she started moaning his name over and over again and he lost it.

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Lifting himself slightly, he moved into position and took her mouth at the same time he moved his hips down swiftly breaking that barrier of innocence. He'd suspected, but it still wasn't a reality until he felt it and heard her release a muffled cry against his mouth. Yet, he didn't stop, he couldn't. He still wasn't all the way in her. Slowly he withdrew and pushed back into her hearing her gasp this time, but he still kept moving his mouth over hers to tease and entice her responses. Knowing he had hurt her brought him back down to earth only for a moment until her softness finally enveloped the length of him. Then he groaned roughly, "Beth, are you all right?" he didn't know how he found the words to talk but her brief nod and feel of her fingernails digging into his shoulders while he continued to move in her encouraged him to maintain his rhythm.

Every thing about her had him bewitched. Her softness, the sweet noises she made, and the feel of her nails raking down the flesh of his back.

He could feel the pressure of his climax building and adjusted his rhythm making it more deep and forceful. Somehow he was still able to read her responses through his ecstasy and when she suddenly shifted and wrapped her legs tightly around his hips he completely lost it.

Perspiration coated their bodies and it eased the friction increasing their pleasure. Marshal saw stars when he exploded in her with a deep fulfilling growl burying his face in her neck. It was then he heard her soft sobs and dread prickled him. He lifted his head to see her tears. "Oh hell, I hurt you." He said kissing away the tears tenderly, "I'm so sorry."

"No you didn't." she protested, "I've just never felt so close to someone before in my life Marshal. I'm happy, so happy." She placed her hands on either side of his face feeling the rough stubble on his jaw and lifting her head to kiss him.

He moved up on her a bit and she gasped causing him to

stop and lift his head to look at her to see if he'd hurt her. Instead she was smiling.

"Can we do that again?"

His answer was a deep throaty chuckle, "Aren't you sore?"

She bit her bottom lip, "I don't know. After that, I feel sort of numb—everywhere. I never imagined that it could be so incredible." She said with wide eyes, "It was like I was floating on air."

"Numb?" he said with a wicked look while simultaneously pushing his hips into hers.

"Oh!" she arched her head back and shut her eyes with the pleasure.

"I don't think you're numb honey." He said seductively.

"Hmm, maybe not." She moaned.

Then to her complete surprise he slid out of her and rolled on to his back, "Come here." He said softly, "Don't look so disappointed. You have some good drugs on board but when they start to wear off, you'll feeling every bit of that rib and what I just did to you. I tried my best honey, but I wasn't that gentle."

She winced as she rolled toward him and he saw it.

"See?" he kissed her forehead when she snuggled against him.

"I think I see your point." She said feeling the growing discomfort.

"Are you on the pill?" he asked.

She lifted her head and looked at him, "No."

"Good."

"Good?"

He reached up and brushed her hair back off her shoulder following the caress with his eyes, "Because an annulment is out of the question because of what we just did and we're Catholic, so a divorce it out of the question." He smiled this time, "And if you're pregnant, it's kind of obvious that we consummated this

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marriage.”

“I think the whole household knows we’ve done that.” She blushed.

“No, they would have given us privacy when I carried you off to bed.” Then he grinned, “of course if they didn’t know I did that, the noises coming from my room would have warned them.”

“Oh gosh, I could just die.” She groaned causing him to laugh.

“Are you okay with that?” he asked sceptically.

“The household?”

“No, the baby?”

She glowed, “Oh Marshal, it’s probably the most precious gift anyone could give me. A little person I can love!”

The overwhelming joy on her face nearly made him flatten her out on her back again. “You would to, wouldn’t you?” he said softly.

“I would.” She answered seriously. “I’d give him everything that we missed out on.” She breathed deeply with emotion, “Cuddles, kisses, and I dote on him every single moment of every day.”

“Then—” he said losing his resistance and pushing her on her back again, “—I’d better get busy.”

It was three days when the newlyweds finally got dressed and came out of his room for breakfast. Nancy got tired of leaving cold sandwiches and coffee outside the door and threatened a strike if Marshal didn’t feed his new bride real food because she was skinny enough.

“I think you’re perfect.” He grinned down at her. They were in the middle of making love again when Nancy pounded on the door.

“Don’t stop!” she whispered harshly contracting her limbs

around him. She didn't even hear Nancy.

Marshal obliged her with several more powerful thrusts sending her over the edge of bliss.

He collapsed on her with a groan and Beth savoured the weight of his hard muscular body while her hands explored the contours of his back. She actually thought he was asleep until he spoke.

"Nancy's right. You'll waste away. I'm being selfish."

"I'm fine." She said with a smile in her voice, "never better."

He lifted his head and looked at her, "Just the same, we've pretty much destroyed the bed, the sheets and each other." He looked over at the clock on his bedside table, "Church starts in an hour. We need to go or John will be on my doorstep threatening me with holy power." He felt her shiver and leaned down to kiss her mouth, "I'll protect you." He said, "Legally you belong to me and I'll kill anyone who lays a hand on you, including your father." He said seriously.

She felt a thrill go through her at those words.

Mine.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

She didn't even hesitate, "Very much."

He smiled, kissed her lightly on the mouth then rolled off her, "Let's have a shower then and we'll find something for you to wear—"

"Oh gosh, Marshal I don't have any clothes."

"You do, they're in the spare room. I had your mother collect some of your things when I went and laid down the law to them." He grinned, "I never even thought about telling you sooner, but we were kind of busy."

She laughed and accepted his outstretched hand to help her out of bed.

All through John's sermon, Marshal held Beth's hand. She

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could feel her father's eyes on her but she dare not look. Marshal's strength gave her strength and she drew from it. They weren't the only one's staring. It seemed like a great number of the congregation had their eyes on the couple. Of course it wasn't common knowledge that they'd been married, but she was sure it was because Marshal wasn't one to be holding hands with a woman in public. She could hear the buzz of whispers behind her, but after all that had happened to her over the past few days, she didn't care. She had Marshal and that's all that mattered.

Outside, as everyone filed out of the church, she saw her father standing by his car. Her mother wasn't around and she knew he sent her away for a moment to see if she'd go and speak to him. Oddly enough he had his hands in the pockets of his slacks looking almost humbled.

"It's up to you honey." Marshal leaned down and spoke in her ear seeing her father waiting for her.

"I need to see what he has to say." She heard herself tell him.

"I'll be right here," he released her hand as she nodded and made her way toward him.

"Marshal says he'll kill you if you lay a hand on me." She said approaching her father warily.

He looked past her to the hulking cowboy in the dark grey suit and creamy Stetson. Even in his Sunday's best he was as intimidating as he was several days ago when he showed up at his door with the police chief, "I'm aware of that Beth. He already told me."

"What do you want?" she said feeling a little braver at her father's apprehension.

"I'm in counselling as of yesterday."

She shrugged not believing him.

"Ask your mother." He said seeing her expression. "I haven't had a drink since Marshal threatened me."

“There’s too much history dad.”

He nodded, “I know that.” He sighed heavily, “My father used to pound the snot out of me when—“

“that’s no excuse!” she said angrily. Her father glanced past her for a moment and held up his hands. It was then that she knew Marshal started coming toward them at the sound of her raised voice.

Seeing that he stopped, Theo continued, “No, you’re right. I thought that if you knew some my background you’d understand.”

“Mom said you threatened to kill me when she left you.”

He pinched his lips together, “I did.”

“I was a baby!”

He shifted his eyes past her again seeing if marshal was going to start toward them, but he didn’t this time but he still watched them with the precision of a hawk. “I didn’t—wouldn’t have touched you Beth. Despite what you think of me, I love your mother. I never touched you until you were about five.”

“Have you ever thought of the damage that you caused?” she said harshly, “You nearly ruined me.”

“No, not until the past few days. Beth, I’ve been a drunk for more than twenty years. You may not think so, but tossing you down those stairs made me feel guilty. I’m learning to rebuild myself, and it won’t be an easy fix.” He nodded toward Marshal, “I understand if you don’t want to be a part of my life, I burned that bridge, but don’t lock your mother out. She’s devastated.”

“You’d let her come see me?” she said in disbelief. It was something she never fathomed. Her father was a selfish man, he had always been that way. If anything that statement was earth shattering.

He nodded, “I told you I’ll try and make amends even if you don’t forgive me.”

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Marshal watched father and daughter closely. It would only take him a few seconds to reach them if he tried anything, but he doubted he would with him standing there like a threatening rabid dog behind Beth. He certainly didn't feel obligated to protect her, he wanted to. He was obsessed with her, everything about her. He was sure this was some sort of sickness. He watched her reach up and brush a stray strand of hair out of her eyes and found that gesture immaculately beautiful. Then a slight breeze picked up and pressed the skirt of the pale yellow eyelet dress she wore against those glorious legs of hers, legs she had wrapped around him just this morning and he felt his chest tighten with emotion for her.

My Angel, he thought, all mine.

If this was love, he could spend the rest of his life like this. He never thought he could be so happy with someone.

He watched her turn and start walking toward him as her father gave her a solemn look and walked off in a different direction, no doubt getting Laura.

"How did it go?" he asked seeing her confused expression.

She shrugged, "I don't know. He seemed sincere which isn't like him at all. I only know him as angry." She said glancing at her father who headed back into the church after a brief nod to John. "he said my mother can come visit."

"That's good news."

"I'll believe it when I see it." Her eyes went to his, "thank you for everything Marshal."

"I'm getting plenty out of it too honey." He said with a sinful grin causing her to blush. He took her hand and kissed it, "Come on, Ben's been sitting in the truck waiting patiently for twenty minutes. I promised him ice cream."

"Ooh, I love ice cream."

"Of course you do." He chuckled leading her toward the

truck.

The ice cream parlour was crowded with people just like the deli usually was, but it was a hot day. At least Ben and she found a booth while Marshal pushed his hulk of a body through the crowd to place an order.

“Well if it isn’t the town pump.”

Ben winced as his eyes guided to Cindy then to Beth.

Beth just stared at Ben and no one else. She kept her expression carefully guarded thinking that if she just ignored the woman she would go away. How wrong she was.

“I’m speaking to you. Or are you too good to speak to me because you’ve gotten Marshal to take your side?” she said viciously. “I heard you were even living with him.”

Still no response.

Cindy leaned down on the table, and looked at her. “you think you’re so special with that pretty face and young figure, but he’ll grow bored of you just like every other man you’ve been with around here. We’ve all heard about your reputation.” Cindy added letting her voice rise.

“Stop it.” Ben said darting his eyes around the room seeing everyone stopped what they were doing at the sound of Cindy’s shrill angry voice. “The only reputation she has is the one you gave her.” He defended in a manner well beyond his years. He could feel the prickling heat of anger flush his skin.

Cindy shot him an icy glare before staring at the top of Beth’s head burning a hole in her skull.

Beth averted her gaze before the older woman met her eyes. She couldn’t do this right now. Not with all what she’s been through the past few days. There was not a sound from the people around her and she knew they heard everything Cindy said. Humiliated was an understatement, she was almost suicidal she was so embarrassed.

“Just because you buddied up to his nephew, means

nothing.” She added, “Anyone could see through your façade.”

Beth clenched her fists on her lap resisting the urge to strike her.

“Well little girl, don’t you have anything to say, or does the truth hurt?”

“Cindy.” Came marshal’s calm deadly voice behind her.

She gasped and straightened to see him standing there with a menacing look on his face. “Oh, I didn’t see you.” She said innocently.

“Obviously.” He said quietly,

She sputtered, “I tried to tell you what she was like,” she said shrilly gesturing toward Beth who was beet red and now staring at the table top.

“Let me enlighten you Cindy because you’re obviously behind in the gossip.” He gritted out, “First of all, the reason she lives with me, is because she’s my wife.”

“*Wife!*” she shrieked while paling visibly. All her dreams were crushed in that moment.

“Secondly,” he added with his eyes darkening, “If you’re done tearing my wife to shreds in front of half the town, you should know that I married her because I love her more than my own life. Something a cold fish like you is completely incapable of.”

“No need to defend me Marshal, I can do this.” Said Beth who suddenly stood up and lifted her chin to meet the other woman’s eyes, “It’s too bad you don’t have any insight beyond your own needs. I feel sorry for you because you’re going to live a lonely life.”

Marshal placed his arm around his wife’s waist, “We were married three days ago. I should assure you, that I would never marry a loose woman.” He said giving her a speaking look before turning and leaving the parlour with Ben trotting along behind them.

Cindy stood in complete shock for almost a full minute as the Davis's got in the ranch truck and drove off. Then she looked around the parlour and didn't miss the many scornful looks. Marshal was well respected around town because he'd gone out of his way more than once for many of them there and so did John. Therefore, if he finally married, his wife would have to be very special to him like he just publically declared.

Instantly she felt shunned from the disapproving stares of the other customers and rushed out of the parlour.

"She'll not bother you again." Marshal said squeezing Beth's hand as he drove home.

"Sorry about your ice cream Ben."

"Nancy's got some at home." Ben said trying to reassure her. He'd never seen anyone as vicious as Cindy was. He was just as angry as his uncle, but he had to hand it to Beth, she was magnificent not succumbing to the other woman's taunts.

Beth stared at her husband until he looked down at her, "What?" he said with a look of concern.

"Did you mean it?" she asked apprehensively.

It took him a moment to realize what she meant and he gave her an adoring look, "Of course I did honey. I wouldn't have married you if I didn't."

"You said you did to protect—"

"I lied." He said squeezing her hand then bringing to his mouth to kiss it possessively, "I can do that too every now and then." His eyes glittered reminding her how she tried to do it with him.

"Oh Marsh!" She threw her arms around him kissing him all over the face, causing him to swerve the truck on the road and Ben to gasp, "Sorry." She said sheepishly sitting back in her seat.

He chuckled, "Don't apologize for that," he said pulling up in front of the house.

Ben rolled his eyes and got out of the truck giving them

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some privacy.

“I’m pretty sure I fell in love with you the first time I held you in my arms outside of the Deli when you wept.” He said softly while tilting her head up and kissing the corner of her mouth. “I was so obsessed with you after that and fought like hell to ignore my feelings. I even listened to Cindy because I felt no one could be as perfect as you were to me.”

“I’m not perfect.” She said shyly.

“Oh yes you are, to me anyway. I don’t care what anyone else thinks about us. I do love you Beth.” He said tenderly while moving his thumb across her cheek wiping away one of her tears.

She started crying, “How come I always cry around you?”

“Because you feel safe.” He said searching her eyes with his, “And you’re happy, just like me. I’ve never felt like this Beth, and if you don’t mind, I’d like to keep this up for the rest of our lives.”

She threw her arms around him again and he held her tightly as she wept, “I love you to Marshal.”

“I know you do baby, you told me that first night we made love.” He kissed the top of her head. “I’ve never felt so close to a woman that first night we were together. Being in love made that night more amazing than I could possibly describe to you. I know I was your first—and last,” he added tersely causing her to muffle an emotional laugh into his shoulder, “—but just take my word for it.”

She nodded.

“Now—“ he said pulling her back from him, “—I recall promising you a riding lesson. How about you go put that gorgeous ass into some jeans and I’ll saddle up Lily bell for you.” The look of joy on her face made his heart swell.

“Do you mean it?”

He nodded, and she didn’t wait a second longer scrambling out of the truck to his chuckle.

Epilogue

Marshal narrowed his eyes as the dark chestnut Quarterhorse barrelled up the driveway in a cloud of dust and skidded to a stop barely ten feet in front of him. He remained unmoved with his hands on his hips as the horse released a snort almost as if it knew better not to run the large man over.

“Are you trying to give your mother a stroke?” he said to the five year old in the saddle that was too big for his body. He actually had one that fit but Michael insisted on using his father’s. He swelled with more love than he thought possible for the boy recalling the day he was born. When the nurse handed him the squealing baby, Marshal held him and wept. Then barely a year later their daughter Jaymie was born and he repeated the incident all over again.

The dark haired hazel eyed boy gave his father a look of mock innocence, “Ben said you were no different at my age Dad.”

“No different?” he cocked that trademark brow in question.

“fearless.” The boy beamed.

Marshal resisted the grin that tried to spread across his face. Michael was every bit his father’s son, “Regardless, your mother will have my head if you get hurt again.”

The boy frowned looking exactly like his father when he did that.

“Last warning Mike or I’ll ground you off that stallion for a week.” Marshal warned, “It’s much easier dealing with my stubborn son than your worried mother.”

Mike rolled his eyes, “Okay, but walking and trotting is for sissies.”

Marshal couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped him, “humour me.” He said slanting his son an amused look before turning back to the house.

Michael glanced warily toward the house with his young

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brow creased wondering if his mother was watching him tear around the yard the way he was, “Okay dad.” He knew that he’d catch hell later if she was.

Inside the house Beth had to stifle a gasp as that big horse halted a few feet in front of her husband. It was almost comical because the horse seemed to sense that Marshal could do more damage if he didn’t stop. She shook her head, even the animals respected him.

Michael was a spitting image of Marshal all the way down to his stubbornness. Regardless she swelled with pride at the sight of her family. Marshal loved his children more than she could have ever imagined and neither one of them had ever laid a hand on them in anger.

Michael would definitely be a handful, but their daughter Jaymie, had her sweet nature. Beth looked down at her swollen belly and ran her hands over it lovingly. Although she’d be happy with a healthy baby she was secretly hoping that their third child will be a girl, because she could only handle one miniature Marshal.



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