

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a sunset. The sky is filled with clouds that are illuminated from below by the setting sun, creating a palette of deep oranges, yellows, and purples. The sun itself is not visible, but its light creates a bright glow on the horizon. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of bare trees are visible against the colorful sky. In the distance, the faint outlines of mountains can be seen. The overall mood is peaceful and scenic.

*Montana
Sunset;
Mitchell's
Story*

L. R. Wards

Montana Sunset: Mitchell

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Dear passionate readers;

After such wonderful feedback from Montana Sunset, and numerous requests for a sequel, I thought I'd do just that. Here is the oldest of the Wightmen brothers. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did writing it for you!

L. R.

PROLOGUE

It was Monday and Jesse felt the nervousness creep in. The odd thing was, she rarely got nervous, but she couldn't help herself. There were very few things that made her that way and lately she'd been feeling a lot of it. She brushed her long blond hair back over her shoulder and picked up her purse off the table beside the door. Every Monday, Wednesday, and sometimes Friday she went out to the Wightman's Copperhead Ranch to do bookwork for them and during those two to three days the nervousness appeared and she knew the reason why.

Mitch was home.

Although it was just for a month or so for a visit and to help out at the Ranch, she couldn't help the way she felt around him and wished he'd notice her. She'd been in love with him since she could remember and he wouldn't give her the time of day despite her efforts to get noticed. Regardless she was persistent and kept trying. Not in a blatant way, but just subtle enough that a man who was interested would detect the clues. She wasn't going to chase him, no way! It would only get her heartache and Mitch wasn't a man that liked women who chased him. Besides she already had dealt with heartache from him.

So during those few days she worked out at the ranch, she took extra care to wear something nice, put a little makeup on and maybe a hint of perfume in case she saw him. If she saw him. The man was like a ghost. He'd been home for several weeks now and she hadn't seen nor heard from him. It made her think that he was purposely going out of his way to avoid her.

Last Friday when she was out there she made a point of being so bold to ask Jasper, his younger brother, where Mitch was, and if he really was home. Jasper gave her a wry handsome grin a typical trademark of all the Wightman males.

“I think he spent the last three days on the range.”

Her eyes widened, “You mean he slept out there?” *Did men still do that sort of thing?* She thought.

“Yeah.”

“My goodness Jasper, it’s fall!”

“Obviously someone forgot to tell him that.” came his reply before he walked away whistling a tune.

She placed her hands on her hips in anger and disbelief. He was avoiding her; she knew he was, wasn’t he? That would mean that there was some sort of feeling in that unreadable cowboy, even if it was aversive. She dropped her hands and sighed heavily turning back to the study and her work, *sure there was*. He’d shunned her years ago. He cared more about the boots on his feet than he did about her beyond a family friend. Even *that* might be pushing it. She shook her head to dispel the memory and went back to concentrating on work. Keeping that stubborn man out of her head was a task in itself. She was such a lovesick fool!

There was a time when they were all close, but then she went and ruined it by telling him of her crush. To this day she wished she never said anything because she missed his playfulness like a nudge to the shoulder, a hand ruffling her hair or even a friendly greeting for Pete’s sake! The other two brothers still treated her as if nothing had changed, but the one she cared about most avoided her. Maybe if he wasn’t so handsome she’d be more immune.

That was a lie and she knew it. He was handsome in a rough way, not a male model way that appealed to most women who had that knight in shining armour fantasy. However, Jesse didn’t have a fairytale fantasy; she was in love with him because he was intelligent, deeply mysterious and had a quiet strength about him that was intensely attractive. That wasn’t to say that he wasn’t the type to ride a horse in to a castle and rescue a

woman from a dragon, because he was perfectly capable. He was the type of man that could be homely and still attract women because of those qualities. Sometimes she wished it was true so she didn't have any competition because women did find him attractive. More than she liked to admit. She'd known him since she could walk and as far as she was concerned, that gave her first dibs. All of those other women that lusted after him now could just go away.

Even though his hair was in a brush cut now, and she preferred the muss of black hair that the brothers possessed, it still didn't take away from his appeal. He had dimples around that hard sensuous mouth of his too. They were only visible when he grinned, which didn't seem to be often around her, and maybe it was a good thing, because her heart threatened to beat out of her chest when he did

And no man could look more sinful in jeans, she thought. The way the fabric stretched across his long muscular thighs would drive any woman crazy. He was the only man she ever wondered what he would look like without them. That wasn't just it. She fantasized about his body wondering if it was hard and thick with muscle all over.

Without realizing it she was staring at the far wall chewing on the end of a pencil. When she finally came to her senses she chastised herself for easily falling into a daydream about him and resumed her work.

After about an hour of work a noise made her get up and walk to the window. Peering out, she saw one of the ranch trucks racing across a field toward the house with a man leaning out of the driver's window shouting and waving. Then she saw another man run over and open the gate as the pickup raced through. Now she could see several men inside the cab and one of them was leaning against the passenger door. She instantly recognized him—Oh God it's Mitch! From his posture in the truck, she knew

he was hurt.

She turned and ran to the front door as the truck skidded to a stop outside. Pushing open the screen door Jesse's hand covered her mouth thinking the worst. Then two men started helping Mitch out of the truck only to be shoved aside and have him stand on his own. Obviously it wasn't as bad as she first thought.

He cast a glare at them and walked a little unsteadily up the porch and by her without a look as he went into the house. She saw that he was holding his side and blood was soaking the cloth of his shirt around it and dripping down on his chaps. The other two men followed him. Maybe it was bad, but after all, this was Mitch. He could take a jab that could bring anyone else to their knees, yet he'd still be standing.

"Mitch you're bleeding!" she said looking at his shirt where his hand was covering the wound. This got him to finally turn and look at her with an expression that said 'you think?' She prayed for patience, "Couch—study!" she pointed to the direction where she wanted him. 'I'll be right back.' She rushed out of the door to her jeep where Jarrett had a spare Medical kit. It wasn't like a first aid kit that some people carried in their vehicles; it was better supplied with extra things like sutures, syringes, and some certain medications.

"It's just a damn scratch!" He bellowed, "let me go Ian." He growled as the man tried to help him again causing him to pause, "Hell, I'm not a bloody invalid."

"Not until Adam tells me to, and he told me to bring you to Jesse to get you fixed up." Ian argued, not wanting to ignore other brother's orders.

"I'll break your bloody neck." He warned.

"Yeah, well, Adam in a good mood is scarier than you in a bad one." He replied a little uneasily wondering if he was jumping the gun, after all they were brothers, and Mitch was

bigger and older.

Mitch gave a snort. *If only he knew*, he thought. Then his eyes sought out Jesse through the window who was bending over the seat of her jeep giving him a good view of her backside and he groaned. Unfortunately it was misinterpreted.

“See, boss, you need some help.”

Like hell he did. He didn’t feel much pain. The bull was feeling his oats and took it out on Mitch. Normally he would have been a little quicker, but at the same time his mind wasn’t where it was supposed to be. “I just need a bandage.” He said not wanting Jesse near him. Ian and Jeb ignored him and helped him sit on the sofa. Finally he gave in just so he wouldn’t be tempted to turn and look out the window again at that tight little feminine ass.

“I would love to be in your place right now, wound or not, just to let her touch me,” said Jeb, “Jesse’s a peach and she’s damn sexy too!”

“Shut the hell up.” Mitch glowered not feeling Jeb’s enthusiasm. His mood was quickly growing from bad to worse. Truth was, his side did start to hurt, but having Jesse treat him just wouldn’t do.

Jeb pursed his lips not saying another word after the hard look he got following that statement. He never witnessed that icy stare from Mitch before but obviously he hit a nerve, “Sorry.” He mumbled just as Jesse came back in with a large black bag in both hands. He knew the brothers were protective of her because she was pretty much part of the family, but that still didn’t mean he couldn’t admire the scenery when they weren’t looking.

Mitch knew it was Jarrett’s bag she was carrying. Besides being Mitch’s best friend, he was Jesse’s brother and a physician and usually had a good stock of medical supplies in their vehicles in case of situations like this. “I’m fine.” He said maybe a little too clipped from the look she gave him, but she quickly masked it

and went about setting out supplies on the coffee table adjacent to the sofa.

“Take off your shirt.” She said without looking at him in a voice well practiced with professionalism, despite the way her hands were shaking. It seemed like forever since she laid her eyes on him except from a distance and he affected her so strongly. He was a large muscular man, rugged and handsome and all male. *All potent male*, she thought to herself as if someone dipped him in a river of it. She did her best not to look at him directly either because she knew her emotions were clearly visible in her eyes and she needed a few moments to mask them and still her hands. He didn’t like her, she was sure of it just from the way he was reacting now and since he’d come home a few weeks ago she hardly saw him.

At first she thought it was because of his career when he was away from home that changed him. She was sure he had seen some terrible things during that time, but as time passed, she noticed that his ill temper never reflected on anyone else.

It broke her heart, no, it shattered it, she corrected with an inward wince of hurt. She tried her best not to let it show as time passed and continue on with her life as best she could.

After she was sure she’d gotten herself under control, she turned her attention back to Mitch who sat rigid and unyielding on the sofa while still wearing his shirt, “Your shirt Mitch?”

“Like hell.” Was his answer followed by his unwavering gaze.

She stopped and looked at him trying her best to be as professional as she could. She worked the other two days of the week at her brother’s clinic in town and was used to all kinds of people, but Mitch was different because she was crazy about him and he wouldn’t show her the time of day. However, he was hurt and she was going to fix him up whether he liked it or not. She ground her teeth together trying her best not to look insulted,

“You take off your shirt Mitch or I’ll have the boys hold you down and do it myself.” She said with equal sternness trying to ignore the look of those narrowing pale grey eyes of his.

She watched him pause for a moment and glared at her before he complied wincing as he moved. She wanted to step forward and help him but also knew she’d be making a mistake after that look. For some reason she repulsed him. He was always terse or cool around her, yet very cordial and kind around everyone else. It hurt her many times, but she never let on.

When he was done he sat back in the cushions and cocked one brow and centered his eyes on her as if to say, *happy?* Problem was that lazy pose defined his abdominal muscles just above his belt buckle which was lightly dusted with dark hair that swirled about his navel and she couldn’t help but draw her eyes there.

Jesse had to turn away and pretend to arrange her supplies so she could regain her composure. Being dipped in a river of masculinity was an understatement. He was rolled, battered and baked in it. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on him and like she thought every inch of him was muscle basted with tan skin. *Oh my*, she thought, *get a grip Jesse he doesn’t even like you*. Yet, she still couldn’t get the image of his body out of her mind.

“I’ve had worse than this.” He grumbled watching her work. His pale eyes steady on her form, studying and memorizing every line of it.

“I’m sure you have.” She agreed not meeting his gaze. This would leave a nasty scar if he didn’t get it stitched and as she flicked another gaze across his tight flat stomach, she could see that he was no stranger to it. There were half a dozen more scattered over him of different shapes and sizes letting her know that the he was right about having worse.

She tugged her skirt up above her knees a bit to relieve

the tension of the fabric on her thighs as she knelt on the floor next to his leg unaware that silver grey eyes followed that subtle move before they cast back on her face.

As she bent over to examine his wound her forearm accidentally brushed his hard muscled thigh and she bit her lip to stop her own gasp and kept her head bent so he wouldn't see her expression.

There was a four inch gouge in his left side, but it wasn't deep enough to harm anything internally. However, it sure hit a few good blood vessels by the amount of blood still seeping out. "Mitch this is going to need stitches." She said trying to ignore the hardness of him. Every time he took a breath, his abdomen contracted and fell away from the belted top of his jeans, revealing more fine hair and tanned taut skin. Was he like that all over? Firm, tanned with a dusting of hair? The thought made her feel usually warm and despite her efforts she could feel her cheeks pink up. She was supposed to be a professional and had patched up plenty of people, yet she couldn't get her head centered on the task because she was too distracted by his sinfully masculine body.

"Just patch the damn thing and let me go." He said abruptly.

She took a deep breath trying to control her own temper. He usually didn't say much at all, but she certainly didn't appreciate the terseness in which he did talk to her. If she didn't love him maybe it wouldn't have affected her that way, but she did. "Maybe I should call Jarrett." Truthfully she was madder at herself for acting like a lovesick teenager, than she was at him. He was clueless of how she felt and it made her want to weep. Not only did it seem like forever since she'd seen him, she still reacted the same way she did years ago when he was around. Her feelings hadn't changed one bit.

"It's a waste of a phone call." He said of her suggestion to

call her brother.

She could feel her teeth grounding together, “Why are you being so stubborn?”

“Because I don’t like some woman coddling me.”

“I’m not coddling!” She protested angrily. And I’m not just *some* woman, she wanted to yell at him.

“You are coddling Jesse, and if you’re done admiring the scenery, I’d like to put my shirt back on and get back to work.”

She froze and her mouth fell open. He *knew* she was looking at him. There’s no way she could possibly feel more ashamed at being caught and angry that he embarrassed her in front of Ian and Jeb. She finally stood up having enough of his gritty attitude and her own vulnerability towards him and dumped the antiseptic directly on the wound causing him to jump up and curse at the sting it caused. He towered over her, but she was too hurt to care. Then she tossed a pack of gauze and tape at him. “fix it yourself then.” She looked at the other two wide-eyed ranch hands, “when he’s done drag him back out to the field so the cow can finish the job.” She said turning and stomping out of the room.

“It was a bull.” He said after a moment to the empty doorway still holding his stinging wound.

Ian released a slow whistle, “Wow, that was hot.”

“Hubba.” Said Jeb

“Shut up.” Mitch said watching the door that Jesse just went through with an unreadable expression. Then he turned his attention to his own wound. It wasn’t bleeding much anymore and maybe she was right about the stitches. He shrugged and took a few minutes patching it up. It wasn’t as bad as it first looked and he had some practice in repairing his own injuries. This was nothing compared to some of the things he had to self doctor.

Jesse was still fuming the next day when she was at the

clinic. She and Jarrett usually took his vehicle, a Land Rover, so they could go together. He'd bought her a jeep last year that she loved and babied like a man would with a classic car. Yet, she rode with him because she cherished the few minutes in the morning and after work she could spend with him those two days a week more, because she really didn't see him much anymore with his busy schedule and he was her only family left.

She took a moment to watch him. He was a handsome man with a very nice profile and around Mitch's age, but with blonde hair and green eyes like her. The Wightman brothers, Jarrett and the police chief grew up together, went through school together, and even played on the same football team leading the team to the championships three years in a row. They were like a pack of tightly coiled testosterone when they were together, not an ugly man among them. They had a reputation to go along with that. Even her brother who she thought the sun rose and set on was a bit of a rounder in his younger years, but he settled down more now. Oh, he still had women, but not in Prosper. He was a professional and a reputation like that he didn't need. However, he made frequent trips to the city on the weekends to meet up with these women and was very discreet about it.

She didn't ask and he didn't tell. Like all men, she knew that Jarrett had needs. Did that mean that Mitch had women too, women that she didn't know about? As the day wore on she started looking at the women that came through the doors of the clinic wondering what type he liked if not her. Although she didn't judge them. She never judged other women in such a way because she wouldn't want to be judged in such a way.

She had just hung up the phone when a deep familiar voice made her look up. Mitch was standing there looking down at her.

"Is he?"

She had to rewind her brain to hear what he said. His presence always unnerved her. "I'll see if he's got a minute." She said standing up from her chair remembering that he asked if Jarrett was available. She started to turn away when his hand shot out and wrapped around her wrist causing her to shoot her gaze to his grasp then to his striking eyes. He never touched her voluntarily anymore and it was shocking to say the least. His hand was large and warm, and although he didn't hurt her, his grip was calculated to hold her firmly. Her mouth parted in a silent gasp drawing his pale gaze for a moment before he returned it to her eyes.

"I didn't mean to be so harsh Jess." He said watching her intently. "About yesterday."

She studied his expression for a moment which was useless because it was completely unreadable, "No?" she finally said. "You seemed very sure to me."

He released her then and stood straight regarding her coolly, "Like I said, I don't like to be coddled."

"Well you don't need to worry about that again." She returned in the same icy tone to hide her hurt and saw something flash in his silver gaze that she couldn't recognize. "Excuse me." She said finally turning away. Why did he have to show up here? He looked so striking in a black Stetson, a tan leather sheepskin jacket, a checked shirt and jeans that it was hard not to look at him, but the harsh words he said to her the day before cut her and she used them to pull her eyes away from him.

Jarrett had just finished with his last patient of the day and she found him in his office, "Mitch would like to see you."

Jarrett perked up, "Send him in—something wrong Jess?" he said catching her expression.

She forced a smile, "No, of course not. I just haven't been sleeping much lately," she admitted. Mitch's words had hurt her more deeply than she admitted to anyone, even herself but it was

enough to make her lay awake at night fretting about it.

“Why is that?” came Mitch’s deep baritone voice behind her.

He didn’t wait out front like everyone else did, but took it upon himself to follow her down the hall to Jarrett’s office and overheard her. How he didn’t make any noise with that large frame of his, surprise her, but she was sure he was talented in many ways she didn’t know about. “No reason,” she heard herself say and shrug before she turned and walked away to hide the rising blush in her cheeks.

Mitch’s eyes followed her until she disappeared around the corner.

“What do I owe the visit?”

Jarrett’s voice pulled him back to the reason why he was here. He stepped in and closed the door, “I got gored by a bull yesterday.”

“Jess said you did.”

“She did?” What else did she tell him? That he was a complete bastard to her? After a moment he realized she didn’t say anything because Jarrett’s expression didn’t alter from his original friendly greeting. Truth was he deserved an ass kicking for how he treated her, but it was necessary.

“She said you were too damn stubborn to get stitches.” He grinned leaning back against his desk and crossing his arms across his chest, “If you want them now, I’m afraid it’s pointless, unless you’re still bleeding.”

He shook his head, “No, Meagan insists I get an antibiotic so I don’t get infected.” He said a bit awkwardly.

Jarrett laughed, “She rules you too, does she?” he said of his younger brother’s wife and stood up from the desk, “Unbutton your shirt Mitch, let me have a look. I have an inkling you already stitched it up on your own and I need to see your handiwork.” His statement was met by an arrogant grin as Mitch

undid his shirt.

Jarrett examined the wound and nodded,, “Not bad—for an amateur.” He said shooting him an amused look. “It’s going to leave a scar.”

“I have plenty of scars already; one more isn’t going to make a difference.” He said doing his shirt up “You’re just afraid I’ll put you out of business.” He added in the same amused tone.

He chuckled, “Sure I am.” He turned and grabbed a prescription pad of the desk and scribbled on it. “when are you going back overseas?”

“Two weeks.”

“It seems like you just got here.” He tore off the prescription and handed it to him. “It’s a shame. You’ll miss Christmas again. Jesse, Meagan and Helen have this huge dinner planned out at the ranch.” He said watching his reaction.

“Shame, but I’ll be home in ten months. I’m retiring. Adam could use the extra help around the ranch with the baby on the way.” He paused looking at his friend, “I’m developing distaste for it too. I’m tired of killing people I don’t know, or who didn’t do anything to me and mine.” Jarrett, besides his brothers were the only other person he confided in about his experiences in the war. However, he didn’t tell them the half of it because some things he could never talk about.

Jarrett didn’t miss the weariness he displayed on his expression and his posture, “I prefer saving lives myself.”

“Yeah, I’ve done that too, but in my line of work, we kill people to save people. I want out before I’m permanently screwed up.”

“Maybe you’ll settle down like Adam.”

Mitch let out a laugh, “I highly doubt it.”

Jarrett stared at him thoughtfully for a moment, “Would you do me a favour?”

“Hell, anything, just ask.”

“Would you mind taking Jesse home, I have a shitload of work to catch up on and she never complains, but I’ll feel better knowing she’s not waiting for me.”

Anything but that, he thought. Forcing a smile he nodded, ‘Not a problem.’

Jesse was waiting at the counter with her purse in her hands when he came down the hall, “Come on, I told Jarrett I’d take you home.” He said.

She glanced past him at the empty corridor thinking she would over spice the chilli she was going to make for them tonight for this. “I can walk.”

Mitch stopped and stared down at her, “It’s pouring rain.” He said gesturing toward the glass door of the clinic.

“Is it?” she turned and looked out the doors and nearly cursed out loud at the sheets of rain hitting the pavement. Something she never would do, but riding in a vehicle for a few minutes with Mitch wasn’t her idea of fun. He hated her, and more than likely Jarrett put him up to this because he somehow knew how she felt about him. However, he didn’t know how their last meeting went.

Mitch’s eyes ran down her body when she turned to look out the front of the clinic, pausing on her feminine attributes. Yet, no one could brag that they knew what he was thinking, because his expression was carefully masked. His eyes darted up to her face as she turned back toward him.

Her eyes went back to his. He wasn’t happy about this either obviously by the angry look in his eyes. *This isn’t going to go well*, she thought as she headed toward the door.

“Wait.” He said causing her to turn. He removed his hat and plunked it on her head and pursed his lips to stop from smiling. She looked like a child playing dress up in it. “For the rain. I parked across the street.”

“Oh.” She said trying not to take that gesture as anything

else than chivalrous.

Mitch's mother was adamant at making sure the three brothers had manners towards women, and God rest her soul, she did do a good job despite his recent animosity.

Once in the truck she handed his hat back to him, 'thanks.'

He nodded taking it and putting it back on his head at a slant making him look undeniably arrogantly handsome.

"I need to swing by the pharmacy before it closes." He said, "Do you mind?"

"No." she said wondering what he was getting, but it was none of her business. He obviously went to see Jarrett for more than just a visit. After a brief thought she almost smiled wondering if it was an antibiotic. She doubted very much he had an infection with the amount of disinfectant she dumped on him yesterday. It was the whole bottle. She had to stop a smile of satisfaction at that.

"Something amuses you?" he said seeing her expression.

"It's nothing."

"I gather it has something to do with yesterday."

She should have known. "You deserved that." She heard herself say feeling his eyes on the side of her head as she remained rigid staring out the windshield. After a moment of silence he spoke.

"Yeah, maybe your right about that." He said evenly as he pulled into the pharmacy parking lot, "I'll be only a minute."

She never said anything and he never waited for an answer as he got out and sauntered into the store. At least he wasn't as harsh as he had been lately, but she was still very uncomfortable sharing a ride home with him. She knew he didn't like her, or at least didn't want to be around her, and Jarrett probably asked him for a favour which he couldn't refuse. She reached up and moved her hair out of her face as she

watched him through the window and the rain.

He as a large man, but moved as though he was as lithe as a panther. Leave it to her to compare him to a predatory wildcat. At that moment, he lifted his head and although there was some distance between them besides the rain and the windows her heart leapt. Was he looking at her? Maybe because of the wet windshield the view was distorted and blurred and she was mistaken. Mitch didn't look at her, ever.

CHAPTER ONE:

Ten Months later

Mitch Wightman left the supermarket with a package diapers under one thick arm and a bag of other assorted baby items in the other. He'd parked across the street, and with a quick glance down both ways, crossed the road with an easy long legged stride to a big black Chevrolet dually with the ranch logo on the door.

It was a warm day, but cloudy with a slight breeze. Not too hot or too cold. The perfect day to get some much needed work done at the ranch. He began running through things in his head. There was fencing to mend and hay to cut, but first he had to fix the baler. He already picked up the replacement parts. Most people with money like he did would scoff at doing such things, but it was when he was his happiest because he was in his element. However, he'd like to push that particular baler off a cliff, but his brother wouldn't spring for another one so they were stuck with it.

One thing people could say about Mitch is that he loved the outdoors and he had a strong muscular body to prove it. In fact all of the Wightman boys did. Their father made sure that they understood the value of a dollar, and made them work for every cent they got. It gave them knowledge that a forty grand a

year education couldn't give them and common sense on how the ranch or any other business should be run. However, his younger brother Adam did have a degree in commerce from Harvard and because of it, turned the ranch into a money making multi-million dollar business. It wasn't just the ranch they owned. They had half a dozen feedlots, two construction companies and money from their father who made them rich from his own endeavours. However Adam handled all the finances which was fine with Mitch, but that still meant he couldn't get a new baler.

Unlike Adam, Mitch didn't go to a fancy college, but went off and joined the military because he felt he needed to build his character. Even though he was ten months older than Adam, Adam was the one who'd get him out of fights, and protect him. Now you wouldn't know it, but he was smaller in stature and build then making him a prime target for bullies. Now he was as big as Adam, or just slightly bigger. He'd had a growth spurt at twenty one of all times and gained the bulk of muscle he had now in training. He served for three years before he was recruited in Special Forces. It was there that he earned the reputation that showed in his expression that he gave off now. Women would vie for his attention and men would avoid him when he was angry.

When he signed up for the military, the only men he'd ever gotten in a brawl with were his brothers. But he'd learned a lot since then. Men in town who used to pick fights with him in school would cross the street just so they wouldn't run into him today. Mitch didn't hold grudges, but they didn't know that. He smirked, kids are cruel sometimes, and he had no animosity towards others when they were children, but if they wanted to avoid him that was okay with him. He wasn't out to make friends or impress anyone nowadays.

While he stuffed his purchases inside the truck he was silently hoping he'd gotten everything Meagan had asked him to

get. She made him a list, but he forgot it. This domestication thing was new to him but he was trying his best to fill in. His brother Adam was away for a week at a cattle convention in Las Vegas and thank God he'd be back by the weekend, because he certainly wasn't meant for this. Jasper, his youngest brother, was in Germany looking at some new breeding program and would be gone for a few weeks yet, so Meagan couldn't go to him and ask.

Since Mitch came home he began to realize that Jasper and Meagan were really close, whereas he was a little more difficult to get to know. It made him feel like a bit of an outsider because he'd been gone so long and things had changed in the household during that time. However, it did make him feel better when she finally came to him for help. He would do just about anything for her if she'd asked him because he really cared about family, and she was part of his family now being married to Adam.

Normally Adam would have taken his wife to Las Vegas, but because their baby was only a few months old, she didn't want to leave him even though there were more than enough capable hands out at the Ranch. Sin city really wasn't a place for a baby either and Meagan told Adam that. Then he tried to get her to leave their son with her aunt, but she didn't want to leave him. He really couldn't blame her, she was a new mom and was quite protective of her little one despite how capable Helen was. Seeing his brother's reluctance to leave his wife and son, Mitch offered to go in his brother's stead, but he wasn't much of a business head and was glad in a way when Adam turned him down. He'd rather be fixing fences and tossing bales anyway.

Several times their father had tried to get him involved in their business, but Mitch resigned a long time ago that it wasn't for him. It wasn't that he couldn't do it, he just preferred the outdoors to an office seat. All three of the Wightman men were

completely different from one another, yet closer than most brothers were. Jasper, had enough charm and charisma to sweet talk his way out of a hanging, whereas Adam would probably beat the snot out of the lynch mob. On the other hand, Mitch was probably a little more like Adam but he would wait until the opportunity arose, a weakness to show, then he'd take them down. Six years in Special Forces taught him patience among other things he'd rather not talk about.

He'd taken an honourable discharge from the military several months ago and decided to help out at the Ranch since the birth of his Nephew. Mitch loved children and was completely in love with Adam and Meagan's baby. He was a tiny version of Adam and had a cry that attested to that, and all the brothers doted on him like a messiah. He had to hand it to Meagan because it took one hell of a woman to live in a house with three rangy cowboys and Adam's meaner than hell temper. Although Adam seemed to have settled down somewhat since the birth of his son, he was still a force to be reckoned with. Not only that, to everyone's amusement Meagan wasn't the least affected by it. If he could have designed a perfect woman for Adam, Meagan surpassed his wildest imagination. She'd even got him to quit smoking which everyone thought was another impossible feat. He'd never thought he'd see the day when his brother would marry because the last woman he intended on marrying ran off with another man. It wrecked him toward women. Then again, he wasn't prepared for that little cowgirl to walk into his life either.

Mitch smiled to himself thinking that she pretty much ruled all of them, not just Adam. Old Henry, their lead ranch hand said more than once that Adam's temper could skin the paint off the barn and he probably wasn't wrong in that statement. Mitch on the other hand, had good control of his temper, at most times anyway. Not much got him riled anymore.

Maybe it was due to the fact that he was the older of two wild brothers and it gave him more of a steady temperament hauling them out of one brawl or another. Intense situations seemed to make him wiser. He also didn't talk about himself that much. Although his brothers knew him well enough, he kept his thoughts to himself. Unlike Adam who just took what he wanted or made his intentions known when he was unhappy with someone or something, Mitch didn't say much. Meagan, his brother's wife could not argue with that. Adam wanted her and pretty much dragged her off by her hair until she gave in.

He chuckled lightly as he got in behind the wheel of the truck. He'd never seen his brother give in to anyone in his life until Meagan came along. She had his hell bent brother wrapped around her delicate finger. In fact she had all of them wrapped around her finger, he grinned. Regardless, they were all protective of her and the new addition to the Wightman family. Maybe it had something to do with her kidnapping last year that took her from them for a horrifying few hours.

Just then he caught sight of a familiar stunning blonde pause across the street from the bank.

Jesse.

Sensual, gorgeous, and undeniably sexy, couldn't even describe half of her. Wearing a white lacy camisole top and a little above the knee tan skirt that showed her splendid legs, she stood waiting for an opening to cross the road not even the least bit aware of the striking pose she exhibited. However, the male drivers in the traffic did, and stopped immediately seeing such an amazing looking woman trying to cross the street. The wind blew a few strands of her hair across her lovely face, and with a completely innocent gesture that near made him groan out loud, he watched her glance down the street and sweep her naturally long blond hair back off her shoulder before she stretched one of those long legs out, stepped off the curb and walked hurriedly

across to avoid oncoming traffic. Something so sensual was definitely forbidden and probably should have been locked away to save men from themselves.

About nine or ten months back she tried to patch him up when he was gored by a bull, but he couldn't let her, wouldn't let her. He knew that as soon as she touched him, he would be lost. Instead he got angry and wasn't very nice to her. He regretted that, because Jesse was only trying to help him and he saw the hurt through the anger in her eyes even though she tried to hide it. It tore him up knowing that he'd hurt her even if a little. He wasn't normally such a jerk, but Jesse was a soft spot for him. Something she could never know.

When Jarrett asked him to take her home the day after the incident with the bull it was pouring rain and when she got in his truck, a confined space, he caught the scent of perfume and the dampness in the air just expounded the freshness of her. It was all he could do not to reach across the seat and pull her onto his lap. He swore he near ground his teeth into ashes resisting her feminine allure. She wouldn't even meet his gaze, and she looked vulnerable. He knew it was because of him and tried his damndest not to be curt with her, but remained impassive. It was hard though. He'd rather sew himself up without an anaesthetic again than ignore her, it was less painful.

Funny thing was, if anyone else had hurt her like that, he'd take them behind the barn and teach them a lesson or two about hurt, but more than anything he was protecting her—from himself.

His silver grey eyes followed her and noted that she moved with an unequalled sensual femininity that was completely natural to her. The vehicles that stopped took their time moving again even when she was up on the curb on the opposite side of the street, probably taking in such a glorious sight a moment longer until several honks from other drivers got

them moving. He really couldn't blame them, and stifled the urge to get out, haul her aside and give her hell for looking so damn alluring. Meagan wasn't the only woman he was protective of and Jesse should be more aware of the image she gave off. He knew she had to be partially aware, but that scene just told him that she didn't completely understand the affect she had on men. Everyone who knew Jesse, knew that she didn't like to draw attention to herself despite how attractive she was because she wasn't just beautiful, she was intelligent and kind and most men didn't notice the smart and sweet part of her. They saw her as a showpiece. He gritted his teeth together remembering one incident of many.

Several years ago their town Prosper, was chosen to film part of a movie and the lead actor, who was a well known movie star tried his best to get her to date him. He was thankful that she refused. That life would ruin the sweetness she possessed. Time and time again, she refused his advances despite the numerous gifts and flowers he tried showering her with. Yet, the man in his self conceit thought she was just playing hard to get and wouldn't give up so finally Adam, Jasper and her brother Jarrett had a nice little talk with him. Needless to say, no charges were pressed. The man wanted to avoid the publicity. Mitch was overseas at the time, but he heard about it from Jasper. Jesse wasn't a woman who was interested in jewels or flowers. She was a hometown girl who wanted a home town man who was hardworking and honest.

He should know.

A long time ago she had a crush on him, but he'd shunned her, feigning disinterest. Unfortunately, he'd hurt her and Jesse was the last person on earth he ever wanted to hurt, but he didn't know how to handle her confession and it completely blindsided him so he did the only thing that came to him and lashed out. He'd already was in the military home on a few weeks leave, and

he couldn't leave a girlfriend behind. Not only that she was the sister of his best friend, one of the town's two doctors. Dating your best friend's sister seemed like a betrayal and he respected Jarrett too much to do that to him. Truthfully, Jesse deserved better than he could give her.

He pushed his Stetson high on his brow and brushed his dark bangs out of his eyes while watching her through the dusty windshield. The woman was a piece of art. Everything about her rang sophistication and elegance. It was an enticing grace she carried herself with too, for she and Jarrett grew up very poor so she wasn't a socialite but she certainly fit in like she was born to it.

He pursed his lips, took a deep breath through his nostrils and let it out slowly as his sharp eyes ran over her figure. *Man, did she grow up.*

She must've been about twenty-two by now and by rights she should be modelling. She had a perfect hourglass figure with a killer derriere and a healthy bosom and unlike some of the women he'd known, it was all natural, all hers. Why someone like her would be interested in a man like him, he'll never know. Although he knew he wasn't ugly for he had the Wightman height, build and looks. He was well over six feet, with jet black hair and silver grey eyes, but his demeanour wasn't pleasant and frightened most gentle women off.

Momentarily his view was cut off while she disappeared behind a black van parked in front of the doors before she re-emerged and went through the double doors to the town's bank.

He shook his head and sighed heavily knowing he shouldn't be looking or thinking about her like that. Anyway, he'd heard she was dating the mayor's son now. He doubted very much she would reconsider going out with him especially since she had a boyfriend.. He was still a bit rowdy and it was something that sweet little woman wasn't used to in a man.

Definitely not marriage material, even for a goddess like Jesse. He wouldn't make a very good husband. He was sure of it. She deserved better.

Although she spent several days a week out at the ranch doing the books for them, he made a point to stay away from her over the past few months since he came home permanently except for a brief greeting. Unfortunately he was even terse to her over those. Whenever she was around he felt tense and found himself looking at her more than he should. Not only that, he didn't miss the way she looked at him. He'd been around enough women to know desire when he saw it in their expressions, and when Jesse did just that over the incident ten months ago, it heated him up—quickly. Too quickly. So when she was out at the ranch he made a point of staying out of the house and away from her.

He wasn't relationship material. He was damaged, and she needed someone who was better than him.

Starting the engine he cast one more glance in the direction of the bank and paused. His eyes roamed over the entrance with adapted military expertise, his face suddenly becoming unreadable. Without hesitating he cut the engine and leaned over to remove the glock 9 mm from the glove compartment.

Inside the bank, Jesse screamed as she was forced to her knees while the bank robber tightened his grip in her hair. She'd just walked in and was grabbed from behind as the crazy man yelled and buried several rounds from his gun in the ceiling while snaking an arm around her neck dragging her over to the teller. He threw a duffle bag at her. Once there he shoved her to her knees and she could feel the muzzle of the gun against her head.

"Fill it!" he said to the teller while twisting around while tightening his grip on Jesse's hair who whimpered in response. "Shut up bitch." He gritted through the balaclava. Knowing the

terrified beauty wasn't going to give him any more trouble, he lifted his head and focused back on the teller, "I said—money in the bag—now!" he yelled shoving the gun in her direction momentarily removing it from Jesse's head.

The teller blinked and then instantly pulled herself out of initial shock after glancing at Jesse to do as the robber asked. Within seconds she was sobbing as the full impact of the situation finally hit her while she stuffed the money from her drawer in the bag.

Minutes later the robber emerged with the duffle bag over one shoulder while using Jesse as a human shield, but Mitch was ready. He stood next to the van with his gun centered on the man's head. It didn't take long for him to take care of the driver who now lay unconscious on the pavement. It gave him time to phone police Chief Duncan McPherson and alert him to the robbery. What he didn't count on was Jesse being used as a hostage. Although inside he was scared to death of her getting hurt, his expression was trained to reveal nothing.

The robber headed toward the van and stopped with his arm around Jesse's neck. She released a whimper. "You be nice to me doll and I'll let you go when I'm done with you." He said with a wicked sneer. All kinds of things were going through his mind over what he was going to do to her when he got her alone. He was going to ditch the driver and maybe find a quiet spot away from the main highway, pull off and take some time to play with her. Depending on how good she was, he may keep her for a while.

He felt himself grinning under the mask just thinking about it. Then he stopped and tightened his grip seeing a big man in a black Stetson sheltered by the front of van training a gun on him, "Who the fuck are you?"

"Let her go. You're not going anywhere. The police are on their way." His eyes guided to Jesse's terrified pale face. It was

tear streaked, pale, and her lip quivered but he had to hand it to her, she didn't scream, in fact, she didn't say a word. If anything she seemed to calm down a bit seeing him there.

The robber pointed the gun to Jesse's head, "Back away from the van or I'll kill her!"

Mitch glanced at Jesse as she bit her bottom lip to no doubt keep from screaming, "Do you trust me?" he asked her.

Her large green eyes centered on him and she nodded subtly.

"Trust!" the man yelled, "I'll show you trust!" he cocked the gun with his thumb, but he was dead before he was able to fire it.

Mitch rushed forward as Jesse crumpled to the sidewalk. He kicked the robber's gun aside hearing sirens in the distance. He didn't have to check and see if the man was breathing. Mitch never missed. An expert shot between the eyes usually only had one outcome. Giving the dead man a brief glance, he then turned and crouched beside Jesse. "Are you okay honey? Are you hurt?" He wasn't prepared for her flinging her arms around him and sobbing into his neck nearly knocking him back off the balls of his feet. It wasn't a comfortable position for him with any woman because he wasn't an affectionate man, and he stayed away from Jesse for reasons beyond that. However, her trembling soft body thrust against his made him feel oddly protective, among other things. He could feel every lush outline of her form pressing against his and completely forgot about the robbery or the dead man behind him. He had to get her off him, "Jess." He said with less conviction than he meant as he contracted his free hand on her waist to gently push her away.

"P—please Mitch, just hold me." She muffled a sob into his neck while tightening her arms.

She was terrified and he was trying to push her away. What kind of a man, a friend, was he? Jesse needed this and

regardless of his screaming instincts to release her, he couldn't let her go. The problem was, now that he touched her, he doubted he ever would.

Slowly his free hand circled around her back pulling her closer, tighter into him. He'd never held her before and he shouldn't have because he didn't realize how perfectly she would fit against him. Her face was buried in his neck with her breasts pressing against his chest as she clutched at him. He clenched his jaw as he fought to ignore her warm breath against his skin. The position they were in, with him crouching down and her between his thighs, seemed intimate and made him oddly uncomfortable. He was sure that the audience that started to gather hardly saw an inch of her cradled by his large frame except when the wind picked up, her fair hair scattered to the side draping over his shoulder and arm.

Slowly he stood up pulling her with him to change the intimate position they were in. She felt so small and vulnerable in his arms and something clicked within him then, something primal and instinctual. Never in all the years of knowing her did he touch her so intimately and right then and there he knew he shouldn't have, but she needed it. In fact he always knew he shouldn't touch her. He didn't trust himself around her and turns out he reacted like he thought he would. She was warm and as soft as a kitten and smelled like lavender. He turned his head into her soft hair and inhaled deeply completely unaffected by the dead man a few feet away but completely affected by her.

Mitch could hear the screeching of tires and sirens around them and he still didn't let her go. Even when Duncan reached out and took his gun from his other hand, nodded to him and told him to bring Jesse down to the station for a statement he didn't let her go. Instead he slid his free hand up her back and placed his palm over the side of her head spanning his fingers into her soft hair to cradle her it against his shoulder. She

smelled good, felt good, and God forgive him, he was in trouble.

Duncan, like Jarrett, knew him since grade school and knew his background. In fact he'd helped him find Adam's wife when she was kidnapped last year. He was perfectly capable of handling a situation like this and they knew it. So he wasn't a suspect and he obviously trusted him to take Jesse to the station when they were both ready to go. Activity continued on around them but he still didn't loosen his grip and she was showing no signs of it either.

Everybody there knew Mitch either because of his friendship with Duncan, or they'd known him as one of the three hell raising Wightman brothers from living in Prosper most of their lives. So there were several expressions of surprise as they stopped to look at the large cowboy hold one of the victims with protective posturing. There were a few that also knew that Mitch wasn't in a relationship and also knew a little more about him than most people. Yet the way he held the woman was not a normal move for him, whether she was a victim or not.

Finally he pulled back from her feeling her trembling decrease slightly, "Jesse, are you okay?" he said again dipping his head to meet her gaze and trying to ignore how his body was reacting. It just made him think of what it would be like if they were alone. That thought made him drop his arms suddenly. He could never be alone with her.

She looked up at him with red rimmed eyes and slowly nodded, "you saved me." She said wiping the tears off her cheeks with a swipe of her hand.

"Don't look at me as a hero honey, I was just doing what any other gun toting cowboy would do." He said with a sloppy grin trying to lighten the situation. It was more of a self preservation move because her vulnerability was making him sink quick, but thankfully she smiled.

Slowly she nodded, "Sure you were." She started to turn

her head out of human curiosity to look at the man lying behind her now covered with a white sheet and he stopped her by placing a rough calloused hand on her jaw.

“Come on, we’ll meet Duncan at the station, there’s nothing here you need to see. It’ll give you nightmares. I’ll take you.” He doubted very much she was in any shape to drive.

“I—I should call Jarrett.” She heard herself say.

“I’ll do it.” He said putting his arm around her waist and leading her through the police cars and flashing lights to his truck. After settling her into the passenger seat he walked around and got in behind the wheel.

“How did you know?” she said staring at his handsome profile as his attention was on the scene across the street.

He cast her a sideways glance, “About the robbery?”

She nodded

He shrugged and started the vehicle, “Instinctual I guess.” He said as if it was an everyday occurrence to thwart a bank robbery.

“Mitch—“ she tried to keep her voice from cracking, but it was fruitless.

“Aw hell honey, I don’t handle weeping women well.” He said watching her for a moment as the tears began to pour from her eyes again. It made her eyes look like big emeralds in the snow.

Then surprising himself he reached for her again as if he had no control over his own body, “Shush, you’re tougher than this.” It was true. Even when both of her parents were killed in a car crash she was around eight, she didn’t cry then. When he rejected her, she didn’t cry, although he could see her eyes moisten, she didn’t give in to it. Jesse was a tough gal who knew more hurt than a girl would at her age and she was still sweet as hell, but here she was crying and he felt the need to comfort her. Holding her once was risky enough, twice near had him pushed

over the edge. She trembled in his arms and he was seriously losing his mind. Why did she have to feel and smell so damn good? He was very close to dragging her back to her place and making love to her until they were both thoroughly exhausted to help her eliminate the memory of this event. The problem was, she had no idea that he affected her that way and she never should. But hell, his body was sure alive with knowing.

She nodded against his chest in response to his question.

Jesse was very kind, everyone knew this, and although he'd never admit it to anyone, it felt good killing the bastard that threatened her life. The last six years in Special Forces had hardened him and getting involved wasn't an option. He was messed up from the things he'd done.

Jesus, though, *did* a woman have to smell and feel so damn good? Trying as hard as he could he tried to ignore those things but with Jesse it was impossible. It wasn't fair to her and she was with someone else now. Not only that, he was wrecked for family life as far as he was concerned. He had nightmares about the things he'd done and seen overseas and he doubted very much that he could find it in himself to love someone like they deserved. Beginning to feel uncomfortable, he pulled back a bit, "We'd better get going." He said swallowing hard.

Again she nodded and seemed aware of his discomfort pulling back and sitting straight in her seat. Her head turned to look out the side window to avoid the activity across the street. Mitch was right; she didn't need those images burned into her mind. Her hands clutched her skirt and nervously twisted on her lap, "I need to phone Jarrett." She repeated.

"Yeah, when you give your statement I'll phone Jarrett and tell him what happened." He reminded her casting her a concerned look. She'd forgotten that he already volunteered to do that for her which meant that she was dealing with some shock.

“He’s not home Mitch, he went to that course in Texas.” She suddenly remembered.

Shit, he’d forgotten about that. His eyes guided over her body taking in her posture. She was still terrified. He couldn’t possibly just drop her off at home alone and this was something that wouldn’t just fade away with the day. She and Jarrett lived together, and although they had to struggle to make ends meet years ago, they were well off now, but didn’t employ servants. Sighing, knowing this was so wrong, he pulled out his phone and called home. He shouldn’t do this, because it meant that she would be around the house more than usual but he couldn’t abandon her. It was Henry that answered. He relayed the events over the phone while swung her head in his direction when he told him to have Helen make up a spare room for her. He hadn’t even got the phone flipped closed when she started to protest.

“Mitch, I’ll be fine. I don’t need to impose on your family.” She said in surprise at his sudden protectiveness.

He smiled, “you’re not imposing. Besides Meagan is going crazy without Adam. She’ll love the company.” He said giving her a determined look, “I insist. You shouldn’t be alone after that.” That seemed to get her thinking. He shifted the truck into drive and pulled away from the curb. “Do you need to see a doctor?” He said casting her a sideways look while turning a corner.

She couldn’t remember when Mitch spoke to her more than just one or two words and although she’d just been through a terrifying situation, his reassurance made her heart contract in her chest. Did that mean that he really was worried about her despite the way he’d been to her lately? After a moment, she knew he was. The Wightmans have always been good to her and Jarrett and she shouldn’t get her hopes up just because Mitch paid her more attention than usual because he was obviously just being that way over what she’d just been through. “No.” she said

quickly, "I'm not that upset. I mean, I am but not to that point."

He shrugged, she would know if she needed a doctor and he didn't want to push the subject with her. He knew she worked part-time with her brother at his clinic when she wasn't out at the Ranch so if she felt she didn't need one he wouldn't argue.

Jarrett may be away for two months, but if she needed someone to talk to she could always phone him, she thought. Confiding in the other doctor at Jarrett's clinic didn't sit well with her. She liked him well enough, but she was a private person. She would much rather talk to the Wightmans or Meagan. However, she really didn't feel the need to do any of that. The truth was, the way Mitch handled her couldn't have been any less than perfect. He was supportive and protective and she really needed that. Not only that, she wasn't some delicate flower that needed to be coddled and although she had another breakdown when they were in the truck, she doubted very much that any other woman would have handled herself so well. Just thinking of his strong arms around her made her feel safe and the frightening incident had already started to fade because of it. She wouldn't know what she would have done if he wasn't there. An involuntary shudder ran through her and he caught it.

"If you're sure?" he said not too convinced after that display.

"Very." She answered, "I'll be fine. I just need to put this behind me."

Although she told him she was fine, he was still concerned. He would support her decision to not see another clinician because he certainly wouldn't want to be told to do just that and he'd seen plenty of horrors. When she released that shudder moments ago it was all he could do not to pull the truck over and pull her into his embrace again.

He shouldn't have touched her.

At the Police station, true to his word he phoned and left

a message on Jarrett's phone while she was giving her statement with a request to call him back immediately.

Duncan took him into his office to take his and Mitch opened the blinds and sat so he could see Jesse through the large window that overlooked the squad room.

Duncan didn't miss the protective move, but decided not to say anything about it. He knew how close Jesse was to their family and Mitch had every reason to be wary of letting her out of his sight after what had happened. Finally, he set his pen down after Mitch's statement and leaned back in his chair looking at him closely.

"What?"

"I think we have a problem."

He arched his brows, "With my statement? Duncan I gave you the gun permit I—"

"No, none of that." He waved his hand as if doubting Mitch's word wasn't even close to what he was going to say, "It seems that fella you killed has two brothers with rap sheets longer than his. One's in jail but the other one isn't and his last known address turned up empty. He hasn't checked in with his parole officer in more than three months." He nodded toward Jesse through the glass window, "I wonder if he'll seek revenge. These guys are known for it. The reason the one fella is out on parole was because the only witness against him was suspiciously killed, or he would have had a longer sentence. I suspect our bank robber had something to do with that. Why that punk picked my town to rob a bank in I'll never know, maybe he thought a small town like Prosper was an easy mark, but then again, he didn't count on you. Anyway, I thought you should know. If he feels like his brother was wrongly killed he may come looking for you, or worse, Jesse."

"We can't tell Jesse." Mitch said immediately. "she'll never feel safe. I'll keep her out at the ranch until Jarrett comes

home. He's gone for eight weeks to an anaesthesiology course in Texas." He kept telling himself he was doing the right thing despite his apprehension at her being around him. Why the hell did he touch her? "Who was the driver?"

"The one with the skull you fractured?" Duncan grinned as Mitch nodded, "Just a local thug. He must've met him somewhere and hired him to drive. Chances are the man wouldn't have lived after our thief got his money. So you probably saved his life."

Mitch couldn't care less if the man lived or died, as long as Jesse was okay. "You wouldn't happen to have a photo of this other brother would you?"

"They're being faxed over from a buddy I have in the FBI although I don't doubt the guy changed his appearance by now. His name is Mike Armstrong. The one you killed is named Art. I let you know as soon as they come in." he paused eyeing his friend, "I feel responsible for putting this on you." Duncan said with unease in his expression, "The truth of it is, we have no evidence that the other brother is around here and I can't spare the man power. Bud's sick as hell, and Rick and Erick have been working overtime to cover his shifts."

Mitch shrugged, "I can handle it." Truthfully this was nothing he couldn't handle. He wasn't bragging about himself either, it was a fact and Duncan knew it. He stood up and shook Duncan's hand, "Thanks for everything."

"I'll send a deputy out from time to time to check on you guys if you want." Duncan said taking his friends hand and casting a concerned glance at Jesse.

"No, she'd get suspicious. Jesse's not stupid." He countered, "My family will keep her safe."

Duncan beamed, "Yeah," he paused casting a glance at her, "Why she's dating that puffball, I'll never know."

"The mayor's son?" Mitch arched his brows.

“His name is Charlie Goemer. He’s an idiot. Not too nice to her either I hear.”

“Oh?” He felt a little ire prick him. How could anyone not be nice to Jesse? Then again, there was one time he wasn’t either even if it was for her own protection.

“Nothing violent, so calm yourself,” he smiled knowingly seeing Mitch’s expression darken, “However, he’s disrespectful to her quite a bit in public. It just doesn’t make sense. Jesse’s a strong independent woman who could give lessons to even the upper class, yet she takes that abuse?”

Mitch turned and looked at her. She was that in spades, he thought. However, Duncan was right, it didn’t make sense. Jesse was a strong willed woman who knew herself well, and for a man, or anyone to walk on her was unfathomable. She wouldn’t have hesitated and fought back. He should know after she dumped the antiseptic on his open wound when she had enough of his constant antagonism. However, he wanted to ask her about this man she was seeing, but knew it wasn’t any of his business. Adam would have wrung it out of her if he knew what the guy was like toward Jesse, but Mitch wasn’t like that. He had reasons for wanting his life to be private, and he refused to invade someone else’s even though it was Jesse.

“Didn’t she use to be sweet on you?” Duncan would have asked her out if he wasn’t aware of her having her eyes on Mitch. He didn’t like the idea of dating a woman who had the hots for another man despite how sexy she was.

This brought Mitch’s gaze back to him with an expression of mind-your-own-business. Duncan knew damn well that Jesse had a crush on him years ago. “Can I have my gun back?”

Duncan stifled a chuckle and fished his firearm out of the drawer along with the permit, “Like you’d miss it. I’m sure you have an arsenal somewhere.” Mitch’s smirk was his answer, “I thought so. You should look into coming to work for me. I could

use a good deputy.”

“Adam keeps me busy enough.” He said although it didn’t sound like a bad idea.

When he walked out to Jesse she turned and looked up at him. The look of helplessness on her lovely face tugged at him. He was doing the right thing by taking her home even though warning bells were going off in his head. If this brother that Duncan told him about was close, he probably would come after either one of them. In a way he understood. If it were either one of his brothers that was shot dead, he would hunt down everyone involved. “Come on Jess, I’ll stop by your place so you can pick some things up.” He reached down and cupped her elbow helping her stand.

“Did you call Jarrett?” she asked softly not wanting to hold his gaze anymore because she felt like weeping all over again.

“Yeah, his phone is off. I left a message. He’ll call as soon as he gets it.” He reassured her.

Jarrett and Jesse lived in a modest house not too far from Jarrett’s clinic. It was situated on a corner lot and was a nineteenth century Victorian style three story house painted slate blue with white trim and a wrap around veranda.

“You don’t have to come in Mitch, I’ll only be a minute, and you’ve done so much already.” She said.

“You’re sure?” He really didn’t want to. Being alone with Jesse in her house was too damn tempting. He had problems keeping his eyes off those exquisite legs of hers as it was. She was wearing an enticing little skirt and when she sat in the truck, crossed her legs revealing more thigh. It was hard enough not to reach over and touch them to see if they felt as good as they looked. She had an even tan down them and they looked as smooth as satin with not one trace of a flaw. Why he kept glancing at them when she wasn’t looking, he didn’t know,

especially when he felt his stomach muscles tighten in response followed by familiar heat entering his groin wondering if the rest of her body was that delicious. “Pack enough for about a week Jess.” He would bring her back in for more later once she figured out she needed to stay longer.

She smiled and nodded before she got out of the truck.

Mitchell watched her go into the house thinking he was getting involved where he shouldn’t be. She had a boyfriend, she could go stay with him for a few days, couldn’t she? As soon as he thought it, he knew he wouldn’t even consider that because it didn’t sit well with him. What the heck would a man like Charlie know about protecting Jesse? Then another thought entered his mind that he wasn’t the least bit happy about. Were they sleeping together?

True to her word she was less than ten minutes. Wow, what any man would give for a woman to get packed and ready like that, he thought. Like a gentleman, he got out and helped her with her bag thinking that she was mostly raised around them and a brother Jarrett, with really no female influence, so it did make sense. Also there was the fact that she did her best not to flaunt her looks that attested to that. However, she could hide in a sack, behind a tree and be painted green and she couldn’t hide how beautiful she was. She really didn’t dress like a woman who knew how she looked either, but she was still a force to be reckoned with in the casual clothes she usually wore. He’d seen her dressed up at social events and she was so stunning and had enough sensuality to make any man drool.

“Thanks.” She said shyly avoiding his gaze and walked around to the passenger side as he set her bag behind the seat. Jesse knew spending a few days with Mitch would be her undoing. She was in love with him. No man could ever measure up to Mitch in her eyes. She was devastated when he left town to join the military. Once when he came back on leave, she thought

was the only time that she was able to gather her courage and tell him how she felt. She was sixteen, young and foolish. Thinking she'd never see him again she foolishly confessed how she felt and he shot her down cruelly. He was ten years older than her and told her coldly to get her head out of the clouds.

His dislike was confirmed when he all but told her she repulsed him when she tried to patch him up all those months ago, and it hurt. He didn't want her touching him and never really said the words but the look was in his eyes.

So she honestly thought he didn't like her until today when he held her and she felt his strong arms tighten when she trembled, heard his strong heartbeat in his chest, and the concern in his voice. Then he looked at her before she got out of the truck and there was no mistaking the worry in his eyes. He actually did care about her! The revelation sent waves of emotion crashing through her. In all the years she'd known him, he'd never looked at her like that and if he did, she never saw it. She prayed to God that she wasn't mistaken and it was genuine. Mitch wasn't an easy man to read in the least. Adam usually bluntly told people how he felt, and Jasper was always a charmer, but Mitch was different. He was a quiet man, who didn't let many people close to him. She knew he changed when he was away, but she didn't care because her heart didn't lie.

In truth Jesse knew how she looked to the opposite sex, but not once did she use her looks to her advantage, it was more of a curse. She got too much attention. Attention that she didn't want. A few times she ended up in situations that she tried to avoid because of it but thankfully one of the Wightman's or her brother were there to rescue her. She didn't date much anymore because of those reasons, but she did have Charlie and he wasn't a threat.

Mitch was the only one that didn't look at her or treat her that way, and she ended up falling in love with him over it. He

was also the only one that she tried to get to *look* at her, and to this day, she hadn't any luck.

He usually was a gentleman despite his rough look and could be as charming as Jasper if he wanted to regardless of the way he'd treated her lately. Although, he did look as though he lived a hard few years, but she could see the handsome tough cowboy that left all those years ago. He had some silver hair around his temples and he grew out that army style brush cut, making him look like a typical cowboy off the range. She knew he had a temper like his brother Adam, but rarely did he display it. In fact she can't remember ever seeing him lose his cool except for that one incident when she tried to patch him up, but even then he was only irritable. He was a tall muscular man too and he moved like a man who knew himself well and knew what he was capable of, but didn't advertise those hidden talents at all. In fact most of the townsfolk thought he was serving in the military but not special forces except for a few of his close friends. The only way she knew is her brother was his best friend and talked a little about it.

"Are you feeling better honey?" he said softly seeing her thoughtful expression.

Even though it was common for him to call a woman honey, it still sent a thrill through her every time he said it. "A bit." It was a soft side of him that she hadn't seen in a long time, and God forgive her she was going to savour it as best she could while it was offered.

Mitch nodded and returned his attention to the road as he pulled out of her driveway. Unfortunately she didn't know the history of the criminal that he killed in town and he would talk to his brothers and Henry about it making sure she wouldn't know until it's necessary. Also he'd put another call in to Jarrett later and let him know what was going on.

A half an hour later he pulled up in front of the ranch

house. Actually it was a two story southern style mansion with enough rooms to house the town's football team. Getting out, he grabbed her bag and was met at the door by Meagan, Helen, and old Henry who immediately enveloped Jesse. He couldn't blame them, everyone liked her and she was the last person anyone would want to see hurt even though he'd done his damndest to do just that these past few days.

Helen was Meagan's aunt and was hired to do the cooking when Adam hired Meagan as a groom. She was a big jolly woman with an Aunt Jemima type smile that everyone loved. Furthermore, she probably was the best damn cook in Montana and it was hard not to let the weight pile on. Thankfully, he was energetic and worked hard around the ranch keeping himself fit. Henry on the other hand was probably as much in love with Helen as he was with her cooking, and because he was in his sixties, he began to look like he loved her cooking more. It wasn't much of a difference, just a bit of a pot around his midriff that got him teased excessively.

Henry was the Wightman's lead ranch hand. He was in his mid sixties, around the same age as their father, and still could wrangle a hell bent steer if he needed too. Henry was one of the few men that the boys listened to and was sort of a substitute father for them while their father was away. All three of them had great respect for the man even though he looked as if the cat dragged him in most times. Mitch swore that his hat was probably as old as him and he wore it like an old prospector would, with the front brim straight up and the back pulled low.

"I made up Meagan's old room for her." Helen said to Mitch. "It's got a nice view, and it's large enough to keep her comfortable."

Next to my room, he thought to himself. Well at least he could keep a close eye on her. He reached in the group and took Jesse's arm causing Helen and Meagan to exchange a surprised

look. "I'll show her up and get her settled, you guys save your questions for later. Let her have some time to catch her breath." He said with obvious protectiveness. Henry gave him an amused glance before he turned away trying to hide a smile.

"Of course," said Meagan without blinking an eye and giving Jesse a friendly squeeze on the hand. "If you need anything, let us know."

"I will, thanks for putting up with me." She said genuinely.

"Are you kidding?" Meagan laughed, "Having another woman around here will be a blessing. It's like having a herd of bulls in the house at the best of times." This got a laugh from Jesse.

"Thanks Meagan. You are such a doll." Mitch tugged lightly on her arm and she thought it was odd that he was being so protective, but she certainly wasn't going to judge it. It warmed her to know that he cared about her, if even a little. When she turned and looked at him he had a stern determined look on his face and her heart skipped a beat. It took her some time to figure out why. Mitch never really ever looked at her pointedly before, so it was new to her. Quite frankly, she liked it. She liked his hand on her arm, his protectiveness and the way he looked at her. It seemed as though he actually noticed her for once. It was too bad she nearly had to die to finally be discovered. Although shock wasn't new to her, because she'd dealt with it before through the death of her parents and she was aware it would take some time to fade this from her memory. However, having Mitch close was a blessing. He was extremely distracting and made the horrid day into just a bad dream.

He didn't release her until he opened the door to her room and set her bag on the bed. Then for some reason he went into the bathroom flicked on the light, looked around before turning it off and coming back out. "why'd you do that?" She

said questioning his perusal of her room.

He stopped and looked at her trying to figure out what she meant. He pointed a finger over his shoulder, "The bathroom?" He said arching his brows as if he didn't realize he just did that.

She nodded.

"I guess it's just habit." He said shrugging his thick shoulders.

"Well, I guess you picked up a lot of habits while you were away." She said going to her bag and unzipping it.

"I did, and not all of them were good." He answered watching her with his expression closing up. She had no idea what he'd seen and done, and he wanted to keep it that way. His eyes guided over her slender form. The light filtered in from the large window in the room and illuminated her fair hair giving her a halo like appearance. However, the things running through his mind about her had nothing to do with angels. Uncomfortable with his thoughts he turned his head, "If you need me during the night, I'm next door." He added a little more abrupt than he meant. Truth of it was, he had difficulty erasing the feel of her from his arms and he didn't like that. Not one bit.

She sighed, only Mitch could say that and make it *not* sound sexual. "I'll be fine." She said pulling out her overnight clothes and toiletries

Mitch watched her for a moment thinking that she seemed sad in a way. Although she'd just dealt with a traumatic event, it didn't seem to be part of this. Maybe it was the tone of his voice a moment ago. He took a step toward her with intent to ask her what was wrong until she pulled out a long slinky satin nightgown with no thought to him still being in the room. If his mind was wandering about her before, now it was alive with vivid images of her voluptuous body wearing that smooth burgundy piece. He groaned out loud before he could stop himself and

marched out of the room shutting the door behind him leaving a puzzled Jesse staring at the closed door.

Mitch stripped off his clothes in his room and had a cold shower. He planted his palms against the cool tile and bowed his head allowing the water to cascade over his head and down his body. These eight weeks were going to be impossible. Unfortunately she didn't know she was staying that long. However, he would make sure that Jarrett would know and he would insist that on Jesse. She loved her big brother and would normally do as he asked.

Turning his head sideways under the stream of water his mind still was on her. He and his team had taken control of cities that were less hostile on him than resisting Jesse. Especially if he reacted to her in such a way. Something happened today within him toward her. He didn't know what sparked it, but it was certainly there. Maybe it always was always a slow ember of attraction, but it just ignited to a flash fire when he touched her. He was able to resist her before, but for some reason he was having trouble today. Was it the vulnerability he saw? Did he feel oddly beholden to Jarrett and Jesse to protect her because they'd known each other so long?

After a moment of thought, he shook his head. That wasn't it. It didn't fit. Jesse was always unsurpassed in her beauty and maybe he always felt she was a little out of his league, and that she was meant for bigger and better things besides a small town relationship. Also, it didn't help that she was a woman now either. When she was sixteen, he felt as though she was still a child however, now there was no doubt from the way she was shaped, that there was any child left in her.

His eyes glanced down his body. At least the cold water was helping with his erection. It didn't help that it had been a long time since he had a woman either. Like his brothers he was rowdy in his younger years and gained a lot of experience where

women were concerned. Although he never fell in love and unlike Adam, he'd never even come close to marriage. But there's only so much of meaningless relationships a man could take. It somehow made him feel empty in the end almost as if it was a reflection on his entire life. Swearing he shut the taps off with unneeded force and reached for his towel. He needed to stay professional. Jesse had a boyfriend even if the man was an ass. He had to remind himself that he was just protecting a friend. "I shouldn't have fucking *touched* her." He growled to himself.

CHAPTER TWO

Two hours later Mitch was bent over the baler with another ranch hand replacing a broken chain when his phone rang. He'd asked Henry to stay around the house and keep an eye on her. He was just a phone call away if he was needed. His stallion was hobbled and grazing a few feet away and at a full out gallop he could be back to the house within minutes. He had to get out of there after the shower and despite his earlier thoughts about the baler, he was thankful for the distraction from Jesse. His phone rang again. Pulling it out he glanced at the number not recognizing it.

He flipped it open and "Yeah, Mitch."

"Mr. Wightman?"

"One of them." He answered evenly.

"I'm Doctor Simmons from Las Vegas General Hospital. We have your brother here."

"Adam? Is he all right?" Mitch said in alarm.

"He's fine. He was struck by a drunk driver while crossing the street, but he has a concussion. Now, we're going to keep him overnight—" he paused as if it was a painful thing to say, "he's not happy, but I think I have him convinced. However,

he shouldn't fly for the next two days, and he should have someone with him when he travels home."

Mitch breathed a sigh of relief. Meagan would be out of her mind. And as for the Doctor's statement about him not being happy, it was probably an understatement. Adam broke his leg falling from a horse when he was a kid and had limped several miles home with it. He was sure that staying in a hospital for a bump on the head was infuriating him. "Only a concussion?"

"Yes, your brother is lucky. I attest that to his size. I guess he put a rather large dent in the sedan that hit him. From what the police said, he was still lucid enough to pound the man senseless before they pulled him off him and he finally collapsed. Unfortunately he knew that we had the driver down the hall in another room and actually had to restrain him until the man was released into police custody this morning. We wouldn't have had him in here if your brother didn't knock out a few of his teeth and break his nose."

Mitch almost laughed, if he wasn't so worried about Adam. He was certain that Mitch had made the hospital staff's night a living hell. "I'm sure that didn't go over too well."

"You have no idea." The other man said with a tone of helplessness, "I understand that he flew his own plane, but I recommend that he doesn't fly for at least two weeks however he can go home on a commercial flight."

"It's all right, I have my pilot's license too. I can come and bring him and the plane home." That would mean he needed to take Jesse with him. Things were getting worse by the day. Being alone with Jesse for two days in Sin city may have him committing a few sins of his own.

"He shouldn't get on a plane for at least twenty four hours after we release him, and I would like to keep him for two days, but he's quite—resistive." Said the Doctor in a tone that made Mitch chuckle.

“Yeah, that’s Adam. I’ll be there tonight. I need to take a commercial flight. You can let him know I’m coming, it might settle him down a bit.”

“I’ll do that.” The doctor said before he hung up.

“Something wrong Mitch?” Said Red not being able to help overhearing.

“Yeah, some fool got drunk and ran his car into Adam.”

“Geez, is he all right?”

“The driver or Adam?” He smirked and told him what happened.

Red laughed, “I should have known.”

Mitch made his way toward his stallion a few yards away, “You can finish the rest on your own and bale the quarter. I’ve got to go and get Adam. I’ll let Henry know in case you have any more trouble with it.” He said over his shoulder. Henry could fix just about anything.

“Sure thing.” Came the reply.

He also had to tell Jesse the truth about the bank robber’s brother and wasn’t looking forward to it. There was no other way to get her to agree to go to Vegas with him otherwise. She would know something was up and she knew Mitch well enough to figure that out. Mitch didn’t take women with him when he travelled.

He found her in Adam’s study entering the accounts. She worked for them two to three days a week and apparently she felt because she was staying with them that she needed to get some extra work done. She was sitting in the high back leather office chair that Adam usually occupied and looked dwarfed in it as she was scanning papers and typing on the laptop. She glanced up over the screen when she saw him.

“Hi—Mitch is something wrong?” she said noticing his face.

He didn’t realize that his apprehension was showing and

quickly masked it. He was worried about Adam, and more importantly, her. “Yeah, Adam’s been in an accident.” That shot her to her feet.

“Oh God—Meagan—“

He raised a hand, “No, he’s fine. However, I need to fly to Vegas and get him.” He paused, “You need to come with me.”

“To Vegas?” she said with surprise, “Why?”

He gestured toward the sofa, “Come here, I need to tell you something.” Her expression became worried again.

“This is about today isn’t it?” she said as she came out from behind the desk and took a seat on the soft cushion. ,

Mitch remained standing as she sat down. He wasn’t the least surprised that she figured out what this was about because she was intelligent just like her older brother, and perceptive. “Yeah,” he ran his hand through his dark hair not quite sure on how to lay it out, but he did know not to sugar coat it. Jesse would find that patronizing, “Apparently that man I killed had a brother. No one seems to know where he is, but there seems to be some history with them about revenge. Duncan’s looking into things for me as we speak.” He saw her pale at his words, but he kept talking, “I need to go and get Adam, and you need to come with me. I can’t protect you when you’re here by yourself. This brother may be close, or he may have heard that I shot his brother. Nothing says he’ll come after you, but I can’t take that chance.”

Jesse thought about what he told her. Everything made sense now; his protectiveness, his constant reassurance and touch, and his insistence that she stay at the ranch. Again she had gotten her hopes up thinking that she was actually making some sort of headway with him, just to have her heart crushed yet again. Unable to keep the expression of misery hidden from him she nodded.

Mitch saw her expression and misinterpreted it, “I won’t

let him get near you Jess.”

After a moment of silence she spoke, “Are you sure—I mean, that he’ll come after us?” her eyes stung with the prick of tears and she silently chastised herself for being so stupid. Mitch was *not* interested in her, and maybe she should smarten up and realized that this was a complete lost cause. If only she could convince her heart.

“Almost one hundred percent.” He said softly not wanting to upset her more than she already was. His muscles ached from resisting holding her again. He could see she was distressed, but he had to stop touching her. She was driving him crazy

“This history you spoke of, you know more than you’re telling me.” She asked remembering the rest of it.

“I am, and it’s not important. I need you to book two tickets on the next commercial flight and see if you can get one of the penthouse suites in Vegas so I’ll have you close at hand. I’m not even considering a separate hotel room for you.”

She nodded, but didn’t say anything. Normally she’d be jumping for joy over his protectiveness, but now she knew it was just obligation. However she also knew that if Mitch was concerned about this brother, she should actually be frantic. Not much got him worried, but she was too busy hearing her heart break all over again.

Mitch knew that she was frightened, but she was definitely putting on a good front, “As I said, I won’t let him touch you honey.” This got him a small smile.

“I know you won’t.” she stood up, rubbed her forehead with her hand clearly upset, “I guess after I book the reservations, I’ll go pack again.”

“Hey.” Mitch said softly, reaching out and cupping her chin, which he knew he shouldn’t do, but he felt he needed to reassure her, “We’ll get the brother too Jesse.” The whole time he was touching her he was thinking that her skin was

unbelievably soft. *Was her whole body like this?*

Her large green eyes searched his for a moment before she nodded, “I just don’t want you to feel so responsible. You already saved my life once Mitch.” Although he completely misunderstood her distress, his continuous concern still made gave her a small sense of hope. Maybe it was obligation, but she needed something to cling to.

Unable to touch her a moment longer because of the way his body kept reacting around her, he reluctantly released her. “What are friends for?” He saw her wince at that statement. Obviously she didn’t consider him as a friend, maybe more of her boss, or friend of her brother. For some reason that bothered him. Maybe he was wrong and it was the thought of him protecting her that made her uneasy.

There went her small clinging. *Friends?* It was almost a curse word to her. She wanted to be more than friends, but knew he would never love her like she did him. “I just feel guilty that you feel responsible for me.”

“I’m the best person around to protect you Jesse, even you know that.” He and his men did several stints as mercenaries and several times he escorted government officials in hostile territory in the Middle East. There had been more than once that they’d taken heavy fire and one man was nothing compared to that.

“I do.” She said without hesitation rubbing her palms worriedly along her thighs.

Obviously protecting her wasn’t the problem. It must’ve been the friend statement after all. That was odd, because she had a boyfriend. Did that mean she still harboured some feelings for him? Just thinking about that made him grow warm and he immediately got angry at himself. This just won’t do. He would have liked to ask her more about it, but he had a number of things on his mind that he had to deal with and maybe part of

him was afraid of her answer, "All right then Jesse, book the flight, pack and I'll go break the news to Meagan."

"Okay." She said turning away and heading back to the phone on the desk while he left the study.

He found Meagan out in the back garden weeding with her aunt Helen and Seth asleep in a stroller beside her. He was surprised that she took the news so well about Adam. At first she was worried but as he relayed the rest of the story she relaxed a bit and actually laughed when he reached the part about Adam clobbering the driver.

"You'll bring him home safe Mitch," she said looking up at him with nothing less than pure trust in her sapphire gaze, "I know you will. It'll take a lot more than a car to dent that head of his."

Mitch had to smile at that. Something he found himself doing more and more since he'd come home. Meagan was always so cheerful in contrast to Adam, yet he'd changed since the birth of his child and seemed to smile more now too. He couldn't blame him, Meagan was a gem.

"You can go too dear." Helen offered, "I'll watch Seth."

Meagan shook her head. "'I trust Mitch, he'll bring my husband home.'" She said glancing back at her large brother in law. I can't leave my baby just yet." She added looking down at the sleeping boy with nothing less than an expression of unmasked love.

"I will." Mitch felt an odd longing in his gut watching the display. Would Jesse like children someday? Of course she would. What if she married the man she was dating now? Without realizing it he ground his teeth together. That didn't sit well with him at all. From what Duncan said the guy was a chump and not good enough for her.

Jesse came out of the house then and told Adam that their flight was leaving in three hours.

Meagan swung her head at the two of them, “Your flight? You’re going with him?” she flicked her eyes to Mitch.

“I have to. It seems that the man Mitch killed today in town has a brother that may come after us.”

“Oh no!” she looked at Mitch to see if he was teasing, but his expression was serious and he nodded once. Her concern for her husband was momentarily forgotten thinking of her friend’s safety. “Gosh, maybe we should let Duncan know.”

“Duncan already knows Meagan,” Mitch said, “He suggests I keep an eye on her until the brother’s whereabouts is known.” He gave her a reassuring smile, “Don’t worry, I won’t let anything happen to her.”

Meagan blushed slightly. It was true she was worried about Jesse, but she wasn’t the least bit worried that Mitch couldn’t protect her and hoped she didn’t sound as if she was. She knew firsthand what he was capable of. He had helped save her from her stepfather last year and she felt she owed him a great deal for what he did. “Mitch—I didn’t mean—”

He held up his hand and cut her off, “It’s all right, we all care about Jesse. You didn’t insult me.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. Mitch was the hardest of the brothers to understand, and after a few months, she gave up trying, however she didn’t want him to think that she didn’t have faith in him. Mostly because he loved his family and she had seen the way he adored Seth. Even though his expression was hard and unreadable at times, there was no doubt he cared about his family and that mattered enough to let him be. He wasn’t as open with his thoughts as Adam, or Jasper, but from some of the stories that Adam had told her about his military career, she perfectly understood why he was closed up at times. Now there was Jesse’s safety to consider and even though Mitch was reassuring she still worried for her friend. Jesse was the first friend she made when she came to work for Adam and she

certainly didn't want to lose her. Also Meagan knew that she was in love with Mitch. Adam had told her when she thought his interests lay with Jessie. Soon she came to realize that Jasper and Adam thought of her as a little sister, however Mitch didn't look at her the same as Adam or Jasper did. He looked at Jesse the way that Adam looked at her.

Mitch turned to Jesse, "Go get packed. We'll leave after supper."

Jesse squeezed Meagan's hand seeing her concern, "We'll be fine. I'll see you in a couple of days."

Helen waited until Mitch and Jesse left before she said anything, "I don't think that is a good idea." Her eyes followed Mitch's protective movement of placing his hand on the small of Jesse's back. She was certain that he didn't even know he did such a thing. In all the months of the man returning home, he had never seen him touch a woman and certainly not like that.

"What?" Megan said with puzzlement. Did her aunt mean Mitch going and getting Adam?

"Those two alone in a city like Las Vegas."

Meagan turned and looked at her aunt still misunderstanding what she meant, "Helen Mitch really can protect her."

She managed a grin, "But who'll protect her from him." She patted Meagan's shoulder

Mitch and Jesse just made their flight and when the plane landed in Las Vegas they took a cab to the Hotel. He was in the beginning of a foul mood but tried his best not to show it to Jesse. The concierge couldn't stop ogling Jesse long enough to take his credit card. It was just his luck that she decided to wear the cutest pale blue dress that showed off her flawless hourglass figure and as she stood a distance behind him to study the intricate design of the lobby with awe. Her waist length blond hair hung loosely over one shoulder. Many men stopped to stare

at her, not just the concierge. He had to admit she was a sight giving off that small town girl look with a flare of innocence. Mitch finally snapped his fingers in front of the stunned man's face to get his attention, "Do you mind?" he said leaning over the smaller man and glaring at him, "That's my girl you're eyeballing." He lied. He didn't like any man staring at Jesse with lust in their eyes except for him. The man sputtered apologies and quickly processed his credit card, while Mitch still glowered over him like a cat ready to pounce.

After they tossed their luggage on their beds in separate rooms, he and Jesse went to the hospital to get Adam. Obviously from the look of relief on the nurses' faces at seeing him, Adam wasn't handling hospitalization well.

"Thank bloody God!" said Adam when they walked into his room, "I'm going crazy." Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he sat up and winced holding the side of his head. The pain of sitting too quickly with a concussion. Obviously he was waiting for them because he was already dressed and his bag was packed. He was stretched out on top of the bed when they entered the room.

"Are you okay?" Jesse said giving the large man a hug.

Mitch gritted his teeth and had to restrain himself from pulling her away from his brother. What the hell was wrong with him? Adam was married. Happily married and completely lost in love over his wife, yet he was acting like a jealous teenager because he touched Jesse.

He patted her back affectionately, "Yeah, the doc says I'll live." He looked up at Mitch as he released Jesse, "did they tell you that son-of-a-bitch was down the hall from me?"

Mitch actually grinned, "He wouldn't have been if you didn't try and kill him."

"Too bad I didn't succeed. They put a damn cop at the door so I wouldn't go and finish the job. The guy runs me over

and I get the cop!" He said angrily. "Get me out of here Mitch. This place is all backwards. If we were in Prosper, Duncan would put me in a room with the guy for a half hour."

Actually Mitch was probably right and couldn't help but laugh, "You do know we don't have a lawyer in the family Adam. He could still charge you with assault."

Adam just grinned unemotionally, "He could try."

Mitch shook his head, "Are they pressing charges against him?"

"Yeah, the police told me this is his third offense. He's going to jail for a long time."

"Good thing," Mitch said, "to protect him from you."

Adam nodded, then his expression softened, "How's Meagan? She must be frantic."

"Worried and she misses you. She took the news better than I thought she would. Did you phone her yet?"

"I'll phone her when we get settled at the hotel for the night. I told the Doctor to phone you instead because she would have probably panicked. I knew you could break the news to her better in person." He smiled, "I bet that babe has grown in the week I've been gone."

"He eats as much as you, so probably." He nodded toward a luggage case on a nearby chair, "That yours?"

"Yeah the hotel sent it over last night."

"I'll take it while you go sign out. I already took care of the paperwork." He picked it up, "Come on Jesse."

Adam's eyes guided back to her, "What are you doing here honey?" He cast Mitch a suspicious look. Did Mitch actually give in to Jesse?

"It's a long story." She said losing her smile.

"I'll tell you over dinner. I'm starving," said Mitch.

"Amen to that. This hospital food isn't even fit for our dogs." He agreed not missing the grim expression on his

brother's face. This definitely wasn't what he thought it was, but he was hungry enough to wait until dinner to hear it.

Adam sat back in his chair at dinner and released a long slow whistle while looking at Jesse as Mitch's words sunk in. Then his eyes flicked to Mitch, "You're sure about this?"

"Yes." Mitch confirmed, "Duncan said he'd fax a picture out to the ranch when he receives it."

"Well hell, didn't these guys pick the wrong family to tangle with." He grinned.

"No one said they were smart." Mitch added.

Adam chuckled then turned his attention to Jesse, "Are you going to see the sights while you're here. It'll take your mind off of things and Vegas is not a boring city."

"Oh," she spared a glance at Mitch, "I don't know."

"Mitch will take you out on the town. I would but I think I'd better keep to the hotel. I have one nasty headache." He said purposely looking at Jesse to avoid the scowl he knew his brother was giving him.

Mitch steeled his expression, "I don't mind Jesse." Although when she returned her attention back to Adam, he shot him a look that would probably shrivel a normal man, but his brother was used to his demeanour.

"Yeah, you could take in a show, or take her down to the tables for a bit." He continued stifling the urge to grin at Mitch's heated expression. He could feel his eyes on him burning holes in his skin.

Ah hell, thought Mitch, Adam was doing this deliberately and he knew it. Adam knew that Mitch would rather cut off his arm than hurt her again. That was the pains of your brother knowing you so well.

"Do you have anything fancy to wear?" Adam continued much to the chagrin of his brother.

"I don't think I packed anything remotely fancy." She said

allowing the excitement she felt reach her expression, "But I could stop and get something."

"I guess that makes two of us." Mitch said without as much enthusiasm. He was not impressed that his brother put him in this situation, but he wasn't willing to spoil it for Jesse. Her expression of delight was too much for him to refuse. As far as he knew she'd never been out of Prosper in her whole life, which was a shame. Mitch loved travelling and had spent many years in the military which took him all over the world. He would love to take Jesse some of those places and open up her mind to different cultures. *Get a grip Mitch*, he silently scolded himself, *Jesse is not mine*. However, looking at the anticipation on her face made him know that he couldn't disappoint her. Thankfully she didn't seem to notice his own sour expression and that he was ready to rip his brother's arms off.

"Well, I guess that solves it." Adam said tossing his napkin on his plate, standing up and stretching, followed by a wince. "I'll take care of the bill; you two may as well go visit the shops." He said giving a wink to Jesse before he turned and walked away.

Jesse waited until Adam was out of earshot, "You really don't have to do this."

Maybe she *did* see his expression earlier. "I don't mind Jesse. Adam is right; you should make the most of this trip."

"Are you sure? I don't want to put you out." She said giving him a sideways look as if probing for some indication that he didn't want to do it.

"Positive." He added with a false smile hoping that it was convincing. It wasn't that he didn't want to take a beautiful woman out on the town. He just didn't want to take *Jesse* out on the town. He'd seen her in evening dresses before. She was a force to be reckoned with. Not only that, throughout the day he found himself wanting to clobber other men for gawking at her.

Also, if he thought he was having trouble controlling his body before, this was going to be a test of willpower. And he was right.

When Mitch returned to the hotel room from picking up a suit at one of the many shops the hotel had, Adam was watching television on the large plasma screen while reclining on the sofa drinking what looked like a glass of whiskey. He tossed the zipped wrapper that contained the suit at the end of the sofa that Adam was lounging on. "Where's Jesse?" He said looking around the immense room. He left her at an expensive boutique, one of many inside the hotel and told them to charge anything she wants to his room. Despite her protests he'd finally convinced her and left her there while he searched out a men's shop. Then he went and purchased tickets for a popular show he knew she'd like. He wasn't too concerned about her being attacked here because they left Prosper only a few hours ago and if the bank robber's brother was there, he would have to catch the next available flight out which wasn't until the next day.

"Getting changed." He said giving him an amused glance.

"I'm not going to forget this Adam." He said taking a step toward him with his expression darkening.

"Hey, I'm injured." He said holding up a hand and grinning, "Not only that, Meagan will clobber you if you pound on me when I just got out of the hospital." He added with a chuckle, "If you think my temper is bad, you should see hers when she's pissed off. Not only that Jesse's never been out of Prosper, this is good for her and who better to show her around than you."

"She's got a boyfriend Adam."

His brother spared him a sly glance and gave a single shrug of his thick shoulder, "So? It's you she loves."

"She doesn't love me." He said through gritted teeth. Jesse could have anyone and although she confessed that crush years ago, she was grown up now and it was obvious that she

moved on.

“Yeah, think what you want, but Jesse is still in love with you, boyfriend or not. You’re just too damn stubborn to notice.” He said with a scrutinizing look.

“Stay out of it Adam.” Mitch warned. He refused to listen to anymore of this garbage especially because of the feelings she began to arouse in him today. Truth was, he wished things were different, but they weren’t and Jesse *had* moved on. As far as Mitch was concerned he wasn’t a great catch regardless of his looks and Jesse was better off with someone else. Maybe not Charlie, but someone.

“Yeah, I should.” He said sparing his brother another look before taking a large gulp from his glass.

Mitch swore, then looked at the glass in his hand, “I’m sure you aren’t supposed to be drinking with a head injury and aren’t you on some sort of pain narcotic.”

“I flushed those down the toilet when I came back here. I don’t need some drugs to make my head dizzy.” He lifted his glass and grinned, “This does a good job.” He paused for a minute, “You don’t happen to have a smoke on you?”

“I thought you had quit.” Mitch said reaching into his shirt pocket and withdrawing a pack then tossing it at his brother.

“I did.” He said pulling a cigarette out and taking the lighter Mitch gave him to light it with.

Mitch watched with amusement as he took a long draw of it and relaxed back against the plush cushions, “Damn, that tastes good.”

Mitch took the pack and his lighter and tucked it away, “And that’s all you’re getting.” He said, “If Meagan finds out I gave you one she’ll shoot me.”

“She’ll find out.” Adam said taking another enjoyable draw off it, “Because I’ll tell her.” His eyes flicked to his older

brother, “We don’t keep secrets.”

Mitch shook his head at the lovesick look on his brother’s face, grabbed his suit and headed for his room. Love like that had to last a lifetime.

CHAPTER THREE

Jesse took a deep breath and let it out slowly while looking at herself in the mirror of her bathroom. She had already decided that tonight presented the opportunity to get to know him again, and she was going to. After today, despite her earlier disappointment, she was going to see if there was some sort of attraction. Mitch may be able to keep his expression masked, but she still thought she felt something from him. Now that she was old enough and had some experience with the signs of mutual attraction. It was just too bad that Mitch hid his feelings so well or she’d be more certain. Either way, tonight she was going to test it.

She turned from side to side admiring the dress she chose for tonight. It was an elegant black halter top dress that defined her figure perfectly. It dipped low between her breasts showing off some cleavage, not enough to be scandalous, but enough to be enticing to the opposite sex. Smiling, she knew it was wrong, but her intention was true. She never used her looks for anything, but she certainly would to help Mitch act on his feelings if they were there.

She hoped to *God* that she wasn’t wrong. Making a fool out of herself twice in front of Mitch would be more than she could bear. She was running on shreds of bravery as it is and for him to reject her again would be devastating.

With one final look she was satisfied and went out to meet him. It only took her a few seconds to see that her plan backfired. Mitch was devastating.

He was sharing a drink and a cigarette with his brother and neither one of them noticed her yet. Mitch was sharply dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and a high mandarin collar. He may not have looked like a cowboy tonight, but he was still dripping in masculine sex appeal. The dark color set off his neatly combed hair, dark tanned skin and silver eyes. The grey hair at his temples made him look very distinguished. In fact he looked like he was worth a million dollars, literally.

He was talking casually with Adam while one of his hands was thrust into the pocket of his slacks and the other held a glass of liquor and his smoke between his fingers. He was so appealing that her mouth ran dry. By rights she should be drooling. Never in her life did she feel such attraction to a man to the point that her body reacted involuntarily. Her heart hammered in her chest and her breathing hitched in her throat.

As if sensing her standing there he turned his head and settled his eyes on hers, then, very slowly and deliberately they travelled down her body and back up again, pausing on what made her feminine. If she thought her mouth was dry before, that heated look made her tongue feel like sandpaper. Did he have any idea how he affected women? She swallowed thickly at the smouldering look of approval he gave her.

“Nice.” He said softly while approaching her.

She barely heard him over the thumping of her heart, “Thank you.” She said a little more breathless than she expected and averted her gaze unable to hold those eyes of his. His expression may have said nothing, but his eyes said plenty.

Behind them Adam turned away to hide his smile. “See you kids later.” He said with an edge of humour.

Mitch ignored him and held out his arm which she took as she smiled up at him. “I thought we’d catch Phantom of the Opera and then take a late dinner.”

Jesse froze and looked up at him, complete wonder filled

her expression, “The Phantom of the Opera? I always wanted to see that!” she clutched his arm, “I’m so excited.”

“Yeah, I know.” He smiled glad that he forked out almost four hundred dollars for VIP seats for her, not that the money mattered, but he was determined to have her enjoy herself. She heard her tell Meagan that she always wanted to see the show. He didn’t know why he went out of his way to find last minute tickets for her, but part of him wanted to impress her. However, looking at her in that hot little number, made him more impressed than he could possibly imagine. Every gorgeous part of her was defined beautifully in that dress, and yet, she looked as elegant and regal as a Roman goddess. He wanted to say that she was his, if only for one night, but Jesse was all class, and a woman like that wasn’t meant for a one night stand. He respected her too much. Oh, but what a thought to be entangled in her sweet naked limbs for a few hours! He had been with many beautiful women in his life, some very exotic, but none of them could hold a candle to the green-eyed beauty standing before him.

Before he could stop himself he engulfed her hand in his and led her toward the door, she waved at Adam as they left with a smile that could melt a man’s heart. And it nearly did. He stared down at the top of her head and felt an odd emotion tugging at him again. The same thing he felt when he held her seconds after he killed the bank robber, but it was more pronounced and it unsettled him.

twenty five minutes later he led her through the busy throng of the lobby toward the theatre seats. Because the show had only premiered a week before, it was still popular, so he found himself taking her hand again to lead her the rest of the way to the VIP section.

After the show started he found himself watching her more than the production. The euphoric look on her face was

more rewarding than any show he'd been to. *Jesus Mitch, you're in trouble*, he thought to himself because he was unable to take his eyes off of her. During several dramatic scenes her hand searched out his and squeezed with the intensity of the performance. The problem was, he liked it—a lot.

When the final curtain was drawn she stood and clapped enthusiastically almost weeping. Her eyes turned to Mitch's full of life, "That was amazing!"

"Apparently." He grinned.

She stared at him for a moment, noticing his lack of excitement, "You've seen this before, haven't you?"

He nodded keeping his grin.

"Mitch, we could have done something you wanted to do." She said with exasperation.

"I did." He answered taking her hand and leading her through the seats to the aisle. "I could see this show a hundred times and not get bored." He added thinking it was more exciting watching her reaction than the production itself, and he loved the Phantom.

He did? Sometimes Mitch just didn't make any sense to her. Why take her to a show he'd already seen. Lord, it was hard to think with his large hand wrapped around hers and why did he have to look so handsome? Once in the lobby he released her hand as if he suddenly realized he was holding it and cupped her elbow instead as he led her outside to hail a cab.

He took her too an expensive popular Italian restaurant and took the liberty of ordering for the both of them. Jesse kept talk to that of the ranch knowing that he didn't like to talk about himself. She wanted him to bring up his life, not her and she knew not to pry into that area of his past. She already knew a lot about him, but she wanted to know what he did while he was away from Prosper and the ranch.

He felt his abdomen tighten in response to recalling her

excitement. Is that what she looked like when a man made love to her? If it was, he wanted to bring her so much pleasure that it made her tilt her head back with a look of pure joy while he drove himself deeply in her. *Oh Christ Mitch—stop*, he chastised himself silently. “So is your evening going well?” He said with a slight crack in his voice. Thankfully she didn’t seem to notice.

She brightened, “Oh yes! Mitch I’m having such a wonderful time. You’re spoiling me.”

“Maybe you deserve it.” He shouldn’t have said that because her reaction told him plenty.

She couldn’t help herself and blushed.

“Have you phoned your boyfriend and told him what happened?” He had to redirect her because of his previous slip. Yes, she did deserve to be spoiled, but not by him. Certainly not by him. When her hopeful expression vanished, he knew he crushed her, but he couldn’t give her false hopes.

Only Mitch could crush her hopes with such a statement. Truth was, she hadn’t even thought of Charlie. She shook her head, “No.”

He cocked a brow, “Don’t you think he’ll worry if you don’t answer your phone?” He could have kicked himself from the disappointed expression she wore now. He pursed his lips and steeled against telling her why he was doing such a thing. He didn’t want her to fall for him again.

“I have a date with him on Saturday Mitch. I’ll tell him then. Our relationship isn’t what you think.” She said feeling her previous excitement drain out of her. “We don’t call each other every single day.”

He took a drink from his wine glass trying to ignore her fallen expression, yet her words interested him. “Then enlighten me.”

“Well.” She paused studying him, “I don’t love him.”

“How long have you been together?” he said keeping the

relief out of his expression. It was a feeling that caught him by surprise. He had no right to feel it because he had turned her away.

“About three months.”

That was plenty of time to fall in love, wasn't it? he thought. He sat back in his seat and studied her for a moment, “Why would you date someone that you don't love?”

Because he was the furthest from you I could get, she wanted to say, *I didn't want to get hurt again,* “I like him, just not enough to marry him.” Actually she was going to break up with him on Saturday for reasons she didn't want to discuss with Mitch. Her mind was made up before the incident today and now that she was spending an evening with him, she realized how right she was in going through with it. Charlie didn't give her a fraction of the excitement that Mitch could stir in her and she didn't want that kind of life.

His brows arched, “Did he ask you?” He didn't expect the phenomenal amount of relief he felt at that statement.

“No,” she said giving him a but-he-will look.

“I see.” Mitch said reading her expression. She wasn't bragging. As far as he knew, every man she dated in the last four years asked her, but then she abruptly ended it. So if she didn't love him, did that mean they weren't sleeping together? He itched to ask her the question. Without even knowing the man, it bothered him to think that Charlie's hands were on her. Yet he knew women had needs just like men did and if she was dating this man for a few months, she might be. Hell, he wanted his hands on her and he only had one date with her. Was this a date? Apparently it was. His brother had purposely set this up and he already vowed to get even.

She studied his expression. First he was hot, then he was cold and now he was completely withdrawn. So when she asked him the question she couldn't keep a little terseness out of her

voice. "Why all of a sudden are you interested in my love life?"

One word shot in his mind, *competition*. He stifled it. He wasn't after Jesse. Oh, he wanted her in every way a man wanted a woman, but it was an impulse he could never act on. He wasn't relationship material and didn't want to hurt her again. Yet, not five minutes went by that night that he didn't imagine them entwined and naked making love with all the raging passion he knew she possessed. It was a good thing he was sitting down, because every time he thought like that he ended up as stiff as a board. No woman in his life was able to have that affect on him, so why the hell did Jesse? It had to have been because he hadn't had a woman in a while. Since he'd been home he thought about taking several women up on their offers, but for some reason there didn't seem any attraction to it. Loveless sex worked very well for him in the past to help release the tension he was feeling now, but here was possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever known sitting across from him, and he knew that screwing another woman would do nothing for him. He wanted Jesse. He wanted those long gorgeous legs of hers wrapped around his hips while he plunged deep into her body over and over again. He near released a groan as his erection became painful at the image flashing in his mind.

He had to end this now or he was going to act on his thoughts. As it was, he was very close to arranging another hotel room and ravishing her all night. Then he remembered that she asked a question. *What the hell was it?* Oh yes, "I just want to make sure that he's good to you." He lied.

And doesn't hurt me like you, she thought. Then she saw his expression close up and knew the night was over. It was confirmed when he indicated to the waiter for the bill.

"We should go." He said tersely after he signed the credit card receipt not looking at her.

Jesse only nodded knowing that tone in his voice as he

pulled back her chair and helped her stand. She knew he was a charmer when he wanted to be, and probably most women he went out with felt like she did tonight. He made her feel important, adored, and crazy in love with him. What the heck was wrong with him that he didn't act on the feelings he had for her? She knew she wasn't wrong about that although doubt started to creep back in over his lack of enthusiasm for her.

When they got back to the Hotel room, Adam was still up. "Did you call Meagan?" Mitch said.

"Yeah," his eyes glanced back and forth between the two, "did you have fun?"

"Oh I did." Beamed Jesse sitting down next to Adam and spent the next five minutes telling him about the show. When she turned around to confirm it with Mitch he was no longer there. Did she say something wrong? She didn't even hear him leave.

Mitch was in the shower. A cold shower. He was hard from the moment he saw her in that dress and it was becoming more and more unbearable around her. Every pair of male eyes within eyesight were on her throughout the entire evening and he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride that she was with him, followed by that possessiveness he'd been feeling all day. Then he found himself touching her too much throughout the evening. It was his own damn fault for touching her in the first place, now he just couldn't seem to get enough of her. This wouldn't do. He couldn't be around her. Once they got back to the ranch he was going to make himself as scarce as possible. Adam would be home and handling the business again so he wouldn't be needed in the house much. He turned off the taps and reached for a towel. These showers were becoming more and more common.

Jesse couldn't have been more depressed when the warm and caring Mitch had all but vanished the next morning. In his

place was the reserved unreadable Mitch. When she spoke to him, he only gave her monosyllable answers yet would have no problem taking time to answer his brother in extended form. Was he angry with her? As far as she knew there was nothing that could have set him off. He'd shown her an amazing time the night before, he was cordial, gentlemanly, and acted as if he was interested in what she had to say. More importantly, he acted as if he was interested in her despite the coolness that crept in at the end of the evening.

The flight home was no different. At least Adam was his usual self with her. She always considered him a friend, but her mind kept drifting to Mitch as he flew the plane with practiced expertise wishing he would at least initiate some sort of conversation just to let her know that he wasn't upset with her in some way. Then she remembered the odd way that he just disappeared the night before when she was talking to Adam. Adam didn't seem to be bothered by it in the least. Maybe it was something he did often and those who knew him better than her were used to it. Maybe she was getting herself worked up for nothing.

Mitch guided the plane down to their private airstrip on the ranch. Jesse could see one of the pickups waiting by the hanger with Meagan sitting on the hood waiting. She felt a longing in her heart when Adam picked her up and kissed her soundly while she clung to him. Adam was a hard man, yet Meagan was able to break through that crusty exterior and he fell hard for her. There was no doubt that he was head over heels in love with his wife because it was written all over his expression when he looked at her. Jesse turned away unable to watch the affectionate display. She felt like she was invading their privacy.

As soon as they were back at the house, Mitch changed into his range gear and was out of the house quicker than Jesse could blink. Adam went and retrieved his son from Helen who

was watching him while Meagan went and got them airstrip, and spent the next hour playing with him while Meagan helped her aunt in the kitchen.

Jesse resigned herself back to the accounts and sighed heavily. If the next eight weeks were going to be like this, she'd rather be at home, even if there were murderers after her. It hurt her to know that Mitch was avoiding her. It was like nothing had changed regardless of the wonderful night they had. For a few short hours he let his mask down and treated her like a man should treat a women, but now she was back to being an employee. She stood up and rubbed her arms absently and walked to the big window that overlooked the front of the house.

In the distance she could see men working on replacing poles around the corral and from the distinctive looks of one, it was Mitch. Not just from his large size, but from the familiarity of the way he moved. She sighed heavily. *She knew the way he moved.* This was insane. She was driving herself crazy thinking about him nonstop and have none of it returned. She knew then that she could not stay here for eight weeks like he asked. Being lovesick over a man that could easily ignore his feelings, was difficult enough, but she was living in his house, and seeing him constantly would definitely drive her mad. She also knew she was in the room next to his and found herself wondering if he was going to lay awake at night like she knew she would, like she did the night before. Turning she looked at the unfinished work on Adam's desk. She couldn't concentrate enough to finish. Maybe tomorrow would be different. She doubted it, and walked back over to clean things up thinking she'd go see if Helen and Meagan needed help with lunch.

Everyone came in for lunch except Mitch and it was then she'd made up her mind to go home. There was no doubt in her mind that he was avoiding her, yet staying close enough to keep an eye on her. It wasn't an easy decision and she was glad that he

had joined them later for supper so she could make the announcement.

“I’ve decided that I’m going to go stay at our house in town.” You could have heard a pin drop after that statement, then there was an explosion of protests from everyone except Mitch who watched her intently. Finally Adam told them to all shut up before he turned to her. She could see he was angry, but she wasn’t going to change her mind despite how intimidating he could be. Also, she would rather look at him than Mitch even though he didn’t say anything, she could feel his eyes on her and she knew he wasn’t happy.

“Like hell you are.” Adam said as if his word was final.

Jesse guided her eyes to him, “Adam, I’m not a prisoner and I’m not going to let this criminal interrupt my life.”

“You are not going home.” He repeated.

She lifted her chin defiantly, “I am. I’ve imposed on your family enough and I’m not doing this anymore. I’m a big girl, and I know the consequences. Chances are that man that you’re all worried about is a long ways from here.”

“Dammit Jesse!”

Meagan placed a hand on her husband’s arm to calm him down. He took a fierce breath and became silent after casting her a helpless expression. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?” Meagan said softly. “Jesse, we think of you as family and thinking you are in danger is very scary for all of us.”

Is it, she thought finally letting her eyes go to Mitch. He was looking right back at her, with his expression masked. Yet he still didn’t say anything. It was obvious he didn’t want her here, and wasn’t protesting her choice in the least. “I’m going.” She said standing up. “I need someone to give me a ride home, or I’ll call a cab.”

“You’ll do no such thing, “ said Meagan looking at Mitch helplessly, “Of course we’ll give you a ride, if that’s what you want

to do?”

“It is. Thank you for being so kind to me.” She said before she left the room.

Adam waited a minute waiting until Jesse was out of earshot before he turned his anger on Mitch, “What the hell did you do?”

Mitch stared back at him calmly, “Absolutely nothing.”

Adam pointed to the door that Jesse just went through, “No? Then what the hell was that about? Jesse can’t go home Mitch!” she said letting his voice rise, “If she does, and something happens—”

“Dammit Adam!” Mitch finally expressed some of the anger that he felt at her confession, “I’m not her bloody husband! She can do as she pleases.” Inside he was a wreck. Knowing that she was putting herself at risk just to get away from him was tearing him to pieces. He knew why she was doing it. He’d been cold to her since that night they shared and Jesse was a sensitive woman who needed reassurance yet he hadn’t given it to her because he knew it would be a lie. He couldn’t lead her on and give her nothing for it.

Adam stood up, placed his knuckles on the table and leaned toward Mitch glowering with rage, “Then you go and live with her until Jarrett comes home, because unlike you I can’t have her death on my conscience.”

“Adam!” Meagan interrupted flicking an apologetic look to Mitch, “I think that’s enough from both of you.” She scolded. Adam let out a string of curses and stomped out of the dining room. A moment later the front door slammed with enough force to vibrate through the house. Her eyes closed for a moment praying for patience.

“Mitch, you’re the best person to protect her.” Henry finally said.

“Yeah, I know that.” He answered regaining his control.

He seemed to lose that a lot lately where Jesse was concerned.

“Would you at least talk to her?” Meagan offered, “She’ll listen to you.”

That was the last thing he wanted to do, but Meagan was right. He nodded once, “I’ll try.”

Several minutes later he was knocking on her bedroom door.

“come in.”

He opened the door to see her laying out her clothes before packing them up.

She glanced up at him, “Here to try and convince me to stay?” she said returning her attention to her packing while trying to keep her turbid emotions off her face.

“No.”

“Good because I’m not staying.” She said shoving her clothes into her bag with more force than needed.

“Are you that afraid of me?” that made her stop what she was doing and turned to look at him.

“I’m not.”

“Liar.”

“Mitch—“

He raised his hand to cut her off, “We had a good time in Vegas Jesse. I enjoyed myself a lot, but I can’t be in a relationship. I told you that years ago.”

She turned her head away and crossed her arms under her breasts. He *knew* how she felt when all along she thought he didn’t. “Well I can’t be in the same house with a man, that is warm one day and cold the next.”

“We can be friends.” He found himself nearly choking on the word. The way she was standing in front of the big window with the sun shining through made her skirt become semi transparent and he could see the outline of her incredible legs all the way up to where they joined her body. Those images that had

been haunting him for the last forty-eight hours started seeping back in.

She managed a weak smile and looked at him again, “No, I can’t because the way I think about you is more than a friend and everyday I’m around you my feelings deepen.” She waved an arm, “And you avoiding being in the same room as me is hurtful.” There she said it. It wasn’t easy but it was done and she thought her heart stopped while she was waiting for his response.

Should her confession rattle him so much? “I’m not avoiding you.” He finally answered ignoring the rest of her confession.

“Now who’s lying?” she said cocking her head.

“Does your boyfriend know where you are.”

“so now you’re trying to change the subject. Nice.” She said.

“How serious are you about Charlie?” he said ignoring her statement.

Jesse’s mouth parted in anger at his persistence about Charlie and ignoring what she’d just told him. Then it dawned on her. It couldn’t be that could it? He was jealous? Mitch didn’t get jealous. In fact he hardly even knew she existed except when her life was threatened. “See?” she said waving her arm, “You won’t even talk to me. I tell you how I feel and you change the subject. I swear you’re driving me insane.” She bit out while turning back to her packing. In two long strides he was beside her stilling his hand with his.

“Jesse—“

She shook him off, “Stop it Mitch!” she blurted, “You big ape! You have done nothing but give me mixed signals for the last two days. I can’t think anymore. At first I thought maybe, just maybe there was some inkling of concern for me—“

“There is.” He said interrupting.

She shook her head, “—Like a sister of a best friend, but I

want more.” His expression became masked and Jesse knew that closed up look. “Just leave me alone. You’ve been doing such a good job at it up until now.”

He dropped his hand to his side and shifted his stance uncomfortably while studying her vulnerable expression. Looking at her now made him want to gather her in his arms and kiss her, to take away her hurt and let her know how he really felt, but he knew she’d be better off without him. “Jesse you have a boyfriend.”

Jesse placed her hands on her hips angry that he hadn’t left yet and even angrier that he kept bringing up Charlie, “Mitch, my personal life is none of your business. You gave up that right six years ago.”

He narrowed his eyes more angry at himself than her but she got it anyway. “Is that why you decided to settle for someone who was less than a man?” He said it and regretted it because her eyes dilated in anger. It was none of his business, and he really hadn’t met Charlie to make a judgement about him.

“You did not just say that.” She breathed with wide-eyed astonishment.

“I sure as hell did Jesse. I don’t like the idea that you are with this guy because you don’t think you can get a man that you are worthy of.”

“For heaven’s sake Mitch, that man, the only man I ever wanted turned me down!” the look on his face was priceless. If she could have framed it she would have. She didn’t think she ever would see Mitch Wightman knocked off balance.

He turned away and Jesse thought he’d had enough and was leaving but instead he shut the door and with a loud click, locked it.

Jesse was too stunned to say anything. Then he turned back to her with a dark look in his eyes and tossed his hat on a table as he started walking toward her. The chaps he wore were

rubbing leather on leather and was the only sound in the room for a moment. He was almost touching her when he stopped and lifted his hand to brush a healthy mass of hair off her shoulder and cup her jaw, “that man was a fool.” he said huskily.

She tilted her head up to meet his gaze. Her eyes searched his for any sort of indication that he was leading her on. She saw nothing to that affect, “Was he?”

“I said, how serious are you about this Charlie?”

She blinked a couple of times as if she didn’t know who he was talking about, “Oh, Charlie. I’m not serious about him at all.”

“Duncan said he was a jerk.” To his surprise she smiled.

“He’s the only one that’s the furthest from you.” She said not denying it.

“Hate me that much?”

“Of course not. I just didn’t want to get hurt again.” She said honestly.

“Honey, I couldn’t think of any other way to get you away from me. I’m not a family man.” He confessed uneasily.

“You don’t know that.” She countered feeling her heart ready to explode in her chest. It was the first time he’d ever given her an indication of why he’d rejected her. Mitch never explained himself and maybe all those years ago, if she wasn’t so hurt she would have pushed him for one. However, for him to even give her the slightest indication that he remembered, or considered her made her realize that he cared.

He looked away for a moment, “You’re too good for me.”

She reached up and placed her hands on his chest causing him to bring his eyes back to hers, “do you believe that? Mitch that’s the furthest from the truth you could possibly get. I have only ever thought of you as the one for me. I don’t want some flashy guy who’ll give me something I want because I ask for it. I want someone who makes my heart swell with pride, and love

whenever he looks at me. I want a man who'll *make* me feel beautiful, not continuously tell me I am. A man who appreciates my brain as well as my personality, and not base a relationship on my looks." She said searching his eyes hoping for some sort of indication that she was getting through to him, "I want someone who'll make me laugh and hold me when I cry. Someone who's willing to fight for me, who's strong in character and humble at the same time. I know it's you."

Her hands on him started that burning in him again. "I'm too old for you." He said allowing his hands to settle on her waist.

"No you're not. Ten years is not much of a difference."

"Honey I'm running out of options." He said with an expression of helplessness.

She smiled up at him knowing for the first time in six years that she had actually gotten through to him, "Then quit making excuses, shut up and kiss me"

He didn't wait for a second invitation and smothered her mouth with his in an act of aggressive possession.

Jesse forgot what a large and strong man he was until his arms came around her pulling her tightly against him. Normally that's where she'd draw the line in intimacy but this was Mitch and she loved him. The feel of his strong thick arms around her made her feel safe, loved and seemed to be the most natural thing in the world so she didn't stop him and he didn't seem to want to either. Without realizing it her hands moved to the buttons on his shirt aching to feel the flesh that covered the bulge of muscles she felt through his shirt. At the same time her hands hit his warm skin he delved his tongue into her mouth and she moaned.

As soon as he felt Jesse's soft hands on him, he lost it. In a smooth movement he bent down and lifted her off her feet, walked several strides to her bed and deposited her on it, coming down on top of her without severing his mouth from

hers. She pushed his shirt off his shoulders savouring the bulk of muscles, "You're so perfect," she murmured against his mouth.

He was, Christ! The woman looked, felt and tasted like a Goddess. He shifted and settled a long leg between her thighs. She moulded perfectly under him as if she was designed for it. Her soft body was exquisite, warm and he was losing his mind. One of her smooth thighs slid up to his hip and he finally tore his mouth off of hers, "Jesse—we can't—I can't."

Ignoring his protest, her hands tightened on his neck urging him back down on top of her and for a moment he gave in, capturing her mouth again in a hot tongue delving kiss. She had finally gotten through to him and didn't want to lose this moment. She had dreamt about this and gave in to him as if her life depended on it.

She tasted like fresh honey and her mouth was soft and pliable just like the rest of her. His rough hand slid along the length of her silky leg groaning against her mouth at the feel of her skin. He swore she only wore skirts to drive him mad with want. Again he tried to pull himself away from her. This time he raised himself several inches about her and locked his eyes on hers. She had large almond shaped emerald eyes and right now they were smouldering with desire. e groaned and with what little resistance he had left, lifted himself all the way off her, sitting erect on the side of the bed while falling his head in one of his hands rubbing his forehead.

"Mitch." She said softly.

"This is crazy." He said out loud to himself not looking at her. He felt the bed shift as she moved to sit beside him. Then she felt her hand on his bare shoulder. He reached up and gently removed it, finally looking at her, "You shouldn't touch me Jesse, I'm just about past the point of no return as it is." He saw puzzlement in her expression then her eyes widened slightly as she got his meaning.

“Oh.” She said folding her hands on her lap. “Are you having regrets?”

He stared at her in astonishment, “Regrets? Good lord Jesse!” he stood up and abruptly pulled his shirt back up his shoulders with a brief shrug of his thick arms and buttoned it while looking at her, “you just don’t understand. I shouldn’t have touched you—at all—ever.”

She averted her eyes thinking that she was wrong. He didn’t find her attractive even though she poured her heart out to him, he just needed a woman to fill a void and she was it. In all the months he’d been home, she hadn’t seen nor heard any kind of rumour about him with a woman.

Mitch saw her hurtful expression, “Hold on! Don’t jump to conclusions honey. It’s not what you think. This has nothing to do with you.”

She brought her eyes back to his, “It’s no secret how I feel. You know, I’ve told you—“

“That was years ago.” He interrupted surprised that she brought that up.

“My feelings don’t change Mitch. To me it was yesterday.” She added with a hurt tone placing her hand on her chest, “Ever day it felt that way and what I said to you moments ago was exactly how I felt back then. I’m older now and able to interpret my feelings into words for you.” She felt tears prick her eyes, “You’re the only man that has been able to make me cry.”

“You didn’t cry then.” He said with his brows arched. He saw the moisture in her eyes that day, but she never gave into it.

“I did. You just didn’t see me. It’s not easy for me to be vulnerable.”

He studied her soft expression for a moment, “No honey, I suppose not.” He said quietly while looking over her head at the wall for a moment in thought, before he sighed heavily and sat beside her. He owed her an explanation and she deserved no

less. “Look, I’m not an easy man to get along with—no don’t interrupt me, let me finish. You know me as well as anyone to know that I’m not a talker. So this is important if you want to know the truth.” She nodded and gave him her full attention. “I’ve done some things and seen things that I’m not proud of and I won’t settle well. I’m still a bit of a hell raiser despite my age—“

“I don’t care.”

He managed a smile. She probably didn’t, “I also have a problem sleeping with my best friend’s sister. I don’t get emotionally involved Jesse. I never have with a woman. I’ve tried, but I’m damaged because of my past. It’s important to me that you understand that.” He searched her expression and it told him everything. She didn’t understand.

“Can I speak now?”

He nodded and saw a defiant lift of her delicate chin.

“First of all, that damaged thing is horse crap.” He stared at her a moment then laughed, “Second, maybe you never had the right woman to care about.” She lifted her hand and traced his mouth that was on hers only moments ago. He seized her hand while giving her a warning look and placed it gently back in her lap causing her to smile at him “Obviously you have a weakness towards me. I’m naïve in a few ways Mitch, but you *are* attracted to me. Maybe I was too emotionally vulnerable around you to actually see it, but now I know.” She tilted her lovely head, “And, you *can’t* take it back.”

He shook his head at her perceptiveness, “A corpse would be attracted to you sweetheart.” He admitted easily, “You’re beautiful.”

She may have heard that hundreds of times from the opposite sex, but hearing it from him made her insides heat up and pulse and she actually blushed. “Anyway,” she continued, “my feelings have never changed for you, even when you were overseas.” This time his brows arched, “Obviously you thought

they did,” she said reading his expression, “But they haven’t—“

“honey, you can have any man with your looks and your personality—“

“I don’t want any other man, I never have.” She interrupted.

“Charlie?”

She shrugged, “Just because I date other men doesn’t mean I still don’t feel the way I do. He’s probably the last person I’d never get serious about. Dating him keeps the predators away thinking I’m in a relationship.”

“are you serious?” She was dating a man that she wasn’t in love with so she wouldn’t have to deal with suitors? Now Duncan’s comments made sense. She put up with the man’s attitude because she didn’t really care.

“Very.” She said

He wanted to deny her affection, deny the fact that he wanted her, but he would be lying. “You kept men away because of what you felt for me?”

“Yes.” She admitted without hesitation.

He ran his hand through his hair in disbelief and turned his head away from her, “I’m not husband material.”

“I never said I wanted marriage, but if you’re offering—“ she grinned when he snapped his head abruptly around.

“Hell Jesse.” He stated uneasily flicking her a matching glance causing her to laugh.

“As for your other concern with my brother, I’m twenty-two. I am old enough to choose my own relationships, besides he’ll be glad it’s not Charlie.”

“You’ll waste your time on me.” He said seriously. “You may not like me once you realize what I am.”

She stood up and faced him placing her hands on either side of his head, “Let me decide that Mitch. I’m willing to take that chance rather than not trying us at all.” Her emerald eyes

searched his pale grey ones, "Tell me that you don't care about me just like you did six years ago and I'll never bother you again." Her heart hammered in her chest while waiting for his answer. *Please say you care*, she thought over and over again while he contemplated her words.

Finally he let out a huff of air followed by a curse, "You know damn well that would be a lie if I say that."

"I wasn't sure." She answered with an explosion of elation running through every limb, "You hide your feelings well." Truthfully she felt like weeping. That confession was the closest he ever came to admitting anything to her and she felt an overwhelming wave of emotion over it.

"No regrets." He repeated then sighed again, "I have a temper. I'm foul mouthed, selfish and I don't like to explain myself."

"I'm strong willed, stubborn, outspoken, and spoiled by a big brother that no man can measure up to except one." She countered.

"point taken." He said with a chuckle pulling her into his embrace, "If you didn't smell so heavenly I would've walked out of here." He leaned back to look at her, "Now you are staying, right?"

"If you give me a reason." She searched his expression hopefully.

"Blackmail? Jesse I'm shocked." He said huskily while staring down at her.

"Hey, I'm not above manipulation." she added feeling a little braver, "So, Mitch, what do you say? Want to give me a shot?"

He could think of a million things he'd like to give her right now starting with his tongue in her...ah hell, *stop it Mitch*, he scolded himself.

After a moment she got a slight nod. It may not have

been much but it was enough to send a thrill through her. She gave him a devastating smile and circled her arms around his middle laying her head against his chest while inhaling deeply, “You smell terrific too. Oh, and by the way—I would like a spring wedding.”

He pulled back and kissed her lightly on the forehead releasing her at the same time, “Dream on.” He said with a glint in his eyes.

“No problem. I’ve been doing that for years.” She said watching him grab his hat, unlock the door and with a final heated appraisal, left. She stood there for a full moment absorbing his rare display of affection. Then she remembered that nothing really got solved. Were they together now? Did she end it with Charlie on an assumption? Truthfully she had to. There was only so much of that man she could handle. He had some deep seated insecurities, and he’d become very sarcastic towards her lately despite her efforts to make him feel good about himself. In fact she was becoming a little afraid of him. She never mentioned this to Jarrett or anyone else, because she wanted to handle it on her own. Now that Mitch had shown interest in her, Charlie was history. She had a date with him this coming Saturday and she’d break up with him then. He was beginning to get to pushy about intimacy too. She’d let him kiss her and once he managed to get his hands up her shirt and touch her breasts but he was getting more insistent on taking their relationship to the next level. The level that she wouldn’t go to with him. She liked him in the beginning, but certainly didn’t love him and now she wasn’t sure she liked him anymore.

The last time they’d gone out to dinner together, he insulted her etiquette, which was faultless, but obviously it made him feel better to do such a thing and she nearly left then. When they got outside the restaurant and away from an audience she had it out with him. For a moment he lifted his hand and she

stopped talking while her eyes were intent on watching that gesture. It was almost as if he was going to strike her. Then it seemed as if he came to his senses and he swatted at some unseen bug before he lowered it, but it was too late. Jesse saw the intention in his eyes. Instead he told her that she was being a nagging girlfriend which made her rage, but she didn't argue again. That gesture scared her. She had never been struck by a man, or another woman for that matter, but she helped out at her brother's clinic every now and then and had seen women that were abused by their husbands or boyfriend. She promised herself that she would never be one of those women

A short time later, Jesse made her way downstairs to find Meagan sitting on the floor in the living room with Seth Angus Wightman between her knees while she leaned over making baby noises at him. She grinned as a giggle erupted from the infant. "oh gosh! That's so darn cute!"

"Hi," Meagan lifted her head and smiled patting the floor beside her, "Come sit down. Like any Wightman male, he loves to be doted on by women."

"No doubt." Jesse laughed taking the offered seat beside her by kneeling on the soft carpet.

"I'm glad you're okay Jesse." Meagan said sincerely. "When Mitch told us what happened, I was concerned you'd be in shock."

"Mitch was very good to me." She said, "And maybe it's because I've dealt with a lot of shock at an early age—I don't know." She answered honestly. However, for some reason having him there through it all made it seem so much easier than a person would think.

"I don't think I would handle it that well." She paused remembering what her mother and step father did to her. A shiver ran through her. When she was first pregnant with Seth, her mother kidnapped her and along with her stepfather, had

intentions on ransoming her to Adam. However, her step father had his own dark plans for her and she'd been lucky in the past to escape him. Adam saved her just in time and to this day she couldn't think about it without it affecting her. With his help it still took weeks to get past having the lights out in the bedroom even with him beside her. She was terrified of going to town alone, or anywhere for that matter. Now it still took effort but she was able to do it.

"But you have." Jesse answered seeing Meagan's expression.

Meagan returned her attention to her son, "I guess—Aw—he fell asleep." She bent over and kissed one of his chubby cheeks.

Jesse couldn't be happier for Adam and Meagan, but looking at the baby made her wish that she had one herself. She may have been young, but she still wished she had a family having lost hers at a young age. Jarrett did his best to provide love and raise her as best he could and they were very close because of it, but the thought of a baby of her own would make her very happy. However, she was raised with strict morals and wouldn't even consider having a child out of wedlock.

"Adam said you were in love with Mitch." Meagan said suddenly.

Jesse brought her eyes to her friend's in astonishment. "He what?"

"Sorry." Meagan flushed, "I thought you told him."

"I didn't. No one knows." She said not denying it. How Mitch's younger brother found out, she'll never know. She never told anyone on how she felt. Was it that obvious? She near groaned in embarrassment, if it was, then she must've looked like a silly little girl with a crush. No wonder he discouraged her all those years ago if she acted like a pesky teenager in love.

"Well, I never thought he would be that perceptive."

Meagan smiled. "Short of beating the man over the head with a two by four to get your point across, he's usually not so sensitive to others."

Jesse laughed, "Very true. However, I doubt that thick skull of his would feel it." This time Meagan laughed. Adam was a large man and it took a lot to affect him and despite the love he showed her and their son, he wasn't a very sensitive man. He and Mitch were about the same height and build, but she'd come to know Mitch as being the more quiet of the three and it was one of the things that attracted her. He usually never said much unless he thought it was important. Adam could bring the house down around their ears with the amount of bellowing he did when he was angry.

"I'd better get him to bed." Meagan said bending over and scooping him up in her arms.

"He's a sound sleeper."

"Very." She smiled looking at Jesse, "Would you like to hold him?"

"I'd love to." She said ecstatically holding out her arms while Meagan set him tenderly in them. Gosh, was a baby supposed to smell so good, she thought gathering him to her shoulder. Jesse smiled lowering her nose on his head and inhaling.

"Baby smell?" Meagan laughed.

"hmmm." She said closing her eyes. A noise from the hall distracted her. Jesse lifted her head and stilled. Mitch was standing in the door with his hat in hand and an odd look on his face. He was still wearing his batwing chaps over blue jeans and a tan chambray shirt. Could he possibly look any more masculine? "Mitch?"

He hesitated for a moment before he answered. Seeing Jesse hold a baby stirred him. An emotion he couldn't describe washed through him and it took him a moment to recover. When

he finally answered his voice was steady as rain, "I was just heading out to check the herd." He said, "Adam's in the study, if you need him."

"I should put him to bed." Meagan said holding out her arms to Jesse. She was trying her best to suppress the smile on her face, but it was a pathetic attempt. Thankfully they were too involved in gawking at each other that they didn't notice.

She handed the baby back to Meagan who smiled at Mitch as she walked by him.

"I'll be fine." She said, "You don't need to worry about me so much."

"No?" he reached up and ran his hand through his thick black hair, still trying to shove that emotion away that he got from seeing her holding his nephew, "I just want you to know that someone's here in case you get worried." He nodded toward the hall where Meagan went, "you like babies?"

She smiled, "I like babies." She repeated.

"You're really young Jesse to be thinking about that." This was moving too fast for him. Now he had images of her holding their child and it completely unsettled him. Not in the way most people would think, he actually found himself liking that image.

"I'm not. Meagan's barely twenty." She said wondering what concern it was of his.

"I meant, you don't want to go and marry the first guy that asks you so you could have one."

"Mitch—I'm not stupid." Then she grinned, "Does this mean the wedding is on?"

He let out a frustrated noise, cast her an uneasy glance and walked out of the house, slamming the door to cut off her laughter.

She had to admit, seeing Mitch uneasy was extremely appealing. It meant that he was off balance and it meant

something to her.

It seems slamming doors was common for the brothers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mitch was saddling his horse still prickling from Jesse's words. Marriage? He was the farthest from husband material as he could get. He sucked at communication even with his own family. How could he possibly establish a relationship? What was he thinking when he told her he'd give it a try.

He shouldn't have kissed her.

First he was stupid enough to touch her, then he kissed her. God, she was so beautiful and trusting when she asked him to give her a shot, how could he have turned such a creature down a second time. The first time was hard enough. He stopped what he was doing and fished out a cigarette. He wasn't much of a smoker, but every now and then he liked the calming effects it gave him. He took a long drag and stared out of the barn door deep in thought.

He'd made a commitment with her and he would keep it. He wanted her more than he was afraid of having someone know him. The real him. Somehow it no longer seemed important that he keep those emotions buried away from her, and that alone scared the hell out of him.

He phone rang then taking him from his thoughts. He pulled it out of his jeans pocket and looked at the caller ID.

Jarrett. Thank God.

Flipping it open and answering it he was met with a terse worried voice.

"Mitch what the hell is going on?"

"She's fine Jarrett." There was a pause and a muffled curse. "My phone went dead, I didn't know—oh Christ, are you sure she's okay? You're not bullshitting me are you so I don't

rush home?”

“No, I told her that she was going to stay with us for until you return and we have a bit of a problem.”

“I’m not going to like this am I?” he said followed by a rush of expelled air. If Mitch was concerned that meant it was something gravely serious. “It’s not that little weasel Charlie, I’ll kill him if he hurt her—“

“No it’s not the weasel.” Mitch interrupted unable to prevent the smile on his face while telling him what Duncan said earlier and Jarrett didn’t say a word until after he was done.

“I’ll call her tonight.” He finally said the concern etched deep in his voice, “I should come home though. Poor Jess.”

“No, we can protect her better if she were here. If you come home, she’ll want to go home too, and no offense, but I’m better with a gun.”

“Yeah, no arguing there.” Was the answer, “I still don’t like this—I feel helpless.”

“There’s something else.”

“Oh hell. Is this something worse?”

“That depends. I need your permission to see Jesse.” This time the pause was longer. When Jarrett finally answered it wasn’t what he expected.

“I don’t know what meds you’re on, but it’s good to see they’re working.” He chuckled.

“I’m not on any damn meds!” He shot back.

“Well something had to change your mind, she’s been crazy about you for years, and you’ve done your best to ignore her. Only you could accomplish that feat considering how she looks.”

“I couldn’t date her. Jesus Jarrett she’s your sister!”

“So?”

“You really don’t mind?”

“Where the hell would you get that idea? Mitch, you’re as

good as my brother anyway, you might as well make it official.”

“I’m not marrying her!”

“Sure, well, you have my blessing. Jesse would probably like a spring wedding.”

Mitch hung up on him cutting off his laughter. He said a few choice words while ramming the phone back in his pocket.

What the hell was wrong with everyone? He finished saddling his horse, and jumped into the saddle tearing out of the barn like he was on fire. He needed to ride this out.

It was after dark when he returned and everyone was in bed by the looks of the darkened windows. He gave his horse a rub down before he made his way to the house. How he was going to manage not touching that woman in his own house for the next two months was beyond him. He fully intended on making love to her, but not here. It was too damn public with all the people that lived in the house. Besides Meagan, Adam and Jasper, Henry and Helen lived in the house too. It was a large house, but it didn’t make a difference, it just seemed wrong. When he finally got her to himself, he wanted to take all night and ravish her like she deserved. He felt himself growing hard again. *Here comes another cold shower*, he thought making his way up the stairs to his room.

He paused by her door and listened wondering if she was asleep. Placing his hand on the door knob he nearly opened it concerned on how she was sleeping after yesterday’s events. Then he abruptly released it. If he went in there tonight, he wouldn’t come out and as turned on as he was for her, he wasn’t going to embarrass her in the household by being in her bed in the morning. Leaving in the middle of the night when he was done with her wasn’t an option either, she was worth more than that to him. He turned away when he heard a muffled noise from within her room. Without thinking he barged in noisily, “Jesse!”

She screamed, sitting upright while grasping the blankets

to her breast.

Several seconds later Adam was standing behind him with a gun in his hand wearing nothing but his boxers. "What the hell!"

Jesse gasped looking back and forth at the two with eyes as wide as saucers. "What are you doing?"

"You sounded like you were in pain." Mitch said feeling stupid.

"For gosh sakes, I had a bad dream!" she explained thoroughly embarrassed.

"Aw hell." Said Adam turning and leaving, "I left my warm beautiful wife for a Goddamn bad dream!"

"Thanks Adam." Mitch said closing the door after his brother left. Then he turned to Jesse, "It did sound like you were in pain. What was the dream about?"

After her initial embarrassment passed she took a deep breath, "It was nothing. I'm just having trouble getting the robbery out of my mind that's all." She explained.

"Do you want me to stay?"

Her eyes widened, "Mitch! Your family would—"

"I meant on the settee," he said exasperated pointing at the piece of furniture by the window.

She followed his gesture, "Mitch, there's no way you can fit on that!" she said running her eyes up his large form.

"I've slept on worse." He answered.

"I suppose you have," she said returning her gaze to his, 'How about you just open the adjoining door, she nodded to the door behind the dresser.

"I have an adjoining door?" He said with surprise and scanned the far wall. He'd lived here all of his life and never even paid attention to it. So much for astute senses.

She grinned despite her state of undress, "Some protector. Now, I'm worried."

“You be quiet.” He said with humour shoving the heavy dresser to the side with ease and opening the door. “I think my armoire is against the other side, no wonder I didn’t notice the door, I’ll go move it. Go back to sleep honey.” He said before shutting her bedroom door. It only took him a moment to pull the armoire out of the way to see her. She was still sitting up. “Jesse go to sleep.” He repeated.

“I will.” She smiled laying back down, “Thanks Mitch.”

“Anytime.” He answered knowing there was no way in hell he was getting any sleep with her half naked in an adjoining room. If she was any other woman he would’ve just gotten in bed with her, but he couldn’t do that to her as much as it was killing him not to. Images flooded into his mind of all the things he’d like to do to her and he shook his head absently to try and get rid of them. Although she clutched the blankets to her breast, he saw the thin straps of that nightgown she pulled out of her bag the other day and knew she was wearing it. She was too damn beautiful for her own good and he had enough trouble trying to keep his mind off of making love to her when she was fully clothed, how the hell was he going to manage knowing that she was half naked and vulnerable in the room next to his.

He stripped off his clothes trying to ignore his erection and got into bed, folding his hands behind his head he stared at the ceiling. Several times he turned and looked at the open door, but didn’t act on his urges. Holy hell, did he have urges! Another cold shower would be needed in the morning especially laying there thinking about her wearing that slinky burgundy satin nightgown he’d seen the other day. He ran a hand down his face in frustration, this would not do.

Finally in the early hours of the morning he drifted off to a restless sleep.

The next morning he was tired and cranky. Jesse was still sleeping when he got dressed and left his own room, but not

before peering in on her. She looked like a sleeping angel curled up in that big bed all vulnerable yet peaceful. What he wouldn't give to settle in beside her and pull her into the protective embrace of his arms.

Helen had a heavenly breakfast ready and he ate his fill before he left the house. Henry was out in one of the large shops they owned and waved at him when he saw him, "Red's hauling that baler in Mitch. The timing is all off again."

"Is Adam up yet?" he grimaced. They had a large round baler, but they also made square bales for the stock kept in the stables. Working on it frustrated the hell out of him because it was such a pain. If the timing was off even a little, the bales didn't get packed right. He couldn't blame Red because he knew the man was used to using it and watched him drive the proper speed when they baled. The equipment had been there since their father had left the ranch to the brothers so it was old and quite frankly worn out. Adam told Mitch to keep the machinery working because he wasn't going to spend any money on a new one when there was still life left in this one.

"Yeah," Henry grinned showing some missing teeth, "I already asked him for a new one, he won't spring for it. Says there's plenty of life left in that one."

"Not when I'm done with it." He growled thinking of shoving it into the lake.

"If you take your anger out on the equipment, he'll make you pay to replace it." Henry reminded him with amusement.

He was right. Turning he swore and walked toward the noise of the tractor coming home with the baler in tow.

It was a good four hours before he got the baler running to his satisfaction. He sent Red back out with it and was washing diesel and grease off his hands from the tap in the shop when Jesse walked in.

"Mitch?"

He lifted his head, “Hey baby.” He smiled while drying his hands as he watched her, it was like the clouds were lifted when he laid his eyes on her, then he saw her expression, “Something wrong?”

She smiled, “No, I just didn’t see you this morning.” the endearment made her heart swell and she started feeling a little better.

“Ah.” He said releasing the towel and walking over to her, “Missed me did you?” She was unsure of herself around him, he knew she was. By rights she should be, he never did give her much of an indication that he wanted her beside the brief foreplay the day before. That alone sealed his fate. The woman was completely intoxicating and he was too far gone under her spell to deny her anything. He wanted her.

“What a silly question. Of course I did.” She said giving him an uncertain smile. Did he change his mind about them, and was there a them?

He leaned down and brushed his mouth across hers, “Maybe we should take in a show tonight. Just you and me.”

“Do you really mean that Mitch?” she brightened. Never in her life had she been unsure about a relationship until Mitch. He wasn’t an easy man to read and she was insecure because of how she felt about him. Part of her was worried that she’d get hurt again, but she loved him and was willing to take that chance. However that tender kiss he just gave her made her feel a hundred percent better and she gave him a gorgeous smile for it.

“I do.” *Jesus she’s beautiful*, he thought looking down at her upturned face, *what did I do to deserve such a woman?* He never understood what she saw in him because he wasn’t such a great catch next to Jasper or Adam, but he did tell her he’d give it a try regardless of how reserved he was to continue. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her again. Not only that, he wanted her more than his next breath.

She cast him a sly look, "You know that people will see us in public together. Are you ready for that?"

"I don't give a shit what people think Jesse. However, I think you better talk to Charlie first."

"Oh dear! I forgot about him." She said wide-eyed.

Mitch didn't mean to laugh over Charlie's bad fortune, but he really couldn't help himself, "I'm that good huh?"

She flushed, "enough of pumping your ego. Like you need it."

"You're probably right," he grinned, "Now about Charlie—I'll take you to see him today and you break it off."

She made a salute causing him to chuckle. "You're not going to let him get by you are you?"

"Not when he thinks *my* girl is his."

She just stared at him for a moment completely stunned.

"What?" He said seeing her expression.

"I just never thought I'd ever hear that phrase from you." She blinked, "It makes me feel all warm inside."

He could think of quite a few things he'd like to be feeling right now. Lifting his head he glanced around the grounds to make sure no one was watching them. He may not care what people thought of him, but he didn't want her reputation ruined because of him. "Come here." He said huskily holding out his hand. She didn't hesitate and placed her hand in his allowing him to pull her into the shop out of view of others. They had a dozen employees at the ranch and he certainly didn't want them to see what he was about to do to her.

As soon as they were out of sight he crushed her mouth under his and pushed her back against a work bench.

"Mitch you're going to get me greasy." She breathed.

"So?" he smiled capturing her mouth again.

She giggled against this mouth. Then he parted her lips with his tongue and her giggle changed to a sensual groan of

surrender. *Oh Lord, the man could kiss a woman!* Heat pulsed low in her pelvis and she instinctively reached for the buttons on his shirt.

“Whoa.” He said lifting his head and seizing her hands, “I’d love to oblige you Jesse, but anyone could walk in here.” God would he love to oblige her!

It took her a moment to realize what he was talking about, “wow, the things you do to make me lose myself.” She couldn’t help herself and in her embarrassment, she laughed.

“That goes both ways.” He grinned down at her, “Now, give me another hour and I’ll get cleaned up.”

“Hmmm” she said running her eyes over him, “I like the dirty you better.” With a toss of her hair and a sexy smile she turned and walked out of the shop.

He groaned and fell his face in his hand, *I’m totally done for.*

True to his word he went and washed up before finding her with Meagan and her baby. “Ready?”

“As ever. I’ll see you later Meagan.” she bend over and touched Seth’s nose, “You two baby boy.” Then she turned and stopped. Mitch held his hand out with a rare smile that he wouldn’t ever display in public if his life depended on it. She couldn’t see Meagan’s face but she was sure it was laced with pure wonder.

“Come on Kitten, I only bite when you want me too.”

“Oh Gosh, be quiet.” She grumbled while her cheeks flushed and took his hand casting an embarrassed look at Meagan who looked like she saw a ghost.

He chuckled and led her out of the room away from a wide eyed Meagan.

“I think you left her speechless.” Jesse mused as Mitch opened the door of the truck for her.

However he didn’t release her hand but instead gave it a

squeeze so she would stop and look at him, “What is it?”

“You finally convinced me of your affections and yet you get embarrassed when I act on them.” He raised a brow, “I think—” he lifted his other hand and brushed it down her cheek in a caress that surprised her, “—You’d better get used to it, because I intend on doing that a lot.”

“What?” she said breathlessly looking into those piercing silver eyes of his. She couldn’t even remember what he was talking about when he touched in such a tender way.

He gave her a devastating grin and shook his head slightly, “Never mind. Get in.”

Something Mitch didn’t know was that Charlie Goemer was a lawyer. Nothing extravagant, he was an insurance lawyer, which still meant he had to be smart to a degree. “I think I’ll come with you.” He said looking at the building through the windshield.

“Oh no you don’t!” she protested quickly, “I need to be able to tell him without you hovering over him like some gigantic ogre scaring the heck out of him. I’m an adult and I can look after myself.”

He narrowed his gaze and looked at the glass paned door with Charlie’s name on it. “I don’t like this. What if he gets angry.” His eyes lit on her again, “I certainly wouldn’t be happy if you showed up and broke up with me in the middle of the day.”

“It’s not the middle of the day. He’s the only one still there. His secretary goes home at five.” She looked at her watch, “It’s five thirty.” She looked back at him, “This really has nothing to do with you. I had a date with him this Saturday and I was going to end it then. I decided a long time ago that we aren’t compatible—” she paused not wanting to tell him why, “—just stay here please.”

“You have five minutes then I’m coming in.” how could he possibly say no to those big green eyes of hers?

“Five minutes is more than what I could hope for,” she smiled getting out of the truck.

He watched her go through the doors and had an odd feeling that he shouldn't have let her do this alone. If any man was being dumped by such a gorgeous woman he wouldn't be happy. Hell, the man could be gay and not be happy if it was Jesse breaking up with him. Glancing at his watch he knew he promised her five minutes, but sitting in the truck worrying about her wasn't helping him at all. He was restless and finally got out of the truck and went in to the office. As he walked in he heard a distinct sound. It was a sound he heard before. The sound of body hitting floor, a hard floor. Instantly his instincts took over and he kicked the closed door of the office open to see a man standing over Jesse who was laying on the floor on her side holding an area on her head.

“You son of a—“ Mitch started toward him.

“No—“ Jesse lifted her free hand, but she was too late, Mitch had the man by the collar and planted one of his large fists in his jaw sending him backwards over the desk. Charlie hollered in pain as he somersaulted over the top of his desk, but Mitch didn't care he was heading around the side of the desk to pound on him some more.

“Mitch!” Jesse yelled, “I tripped, leave him alone!”

“You tripped?” he stopped partway between reaching for the terrified man again who raised his arms to protect himself.

“I did.” She said trying not to meet his gaze when she lied. It was too bad he caught it, narrowed his gaze at her then reached for Charlie again. Jesse got to her feet and rushed forward, “Don't do it Mitch!” she said putting a hand on his arm as he lifted the man off his feet. Charlie was the type of man to sue Mitch for assault and she couldn't bear that to happen because of her. “Please!”

He paused again then looked at Charlie, and with a curse

she would never repeat he shoved the man backwards without hitting him, "Get in the truck!" he told her with a look that could kill. She jumped at the fierceness in his voice, and maybe he shouldn't have been so harsh, but he didn't like being lied to, "Now!" he said a little softer, but not much.

She took a deep breath gave him an unforgiving look and abruptly left the office.

Mitch then turned his attention back to Charlie and lifted a threatening finger in his direction, "I want the truth. Did you hit her?"

Charlie thought about lying but for some reason he felt the guy would know if he did. There was plenty of time to get even, he told himself, but this wasn't the time. The man that stood before him was large and mean as hell and he wasn't going to tangle with him this way. He'd heard stories of the Wightman boys and he certainly didn't want to tangle with him. He could probably kill him with his bare hands and he wasn't going to take that chance. "I—I was going to." He admitted and paused when the large man's expression darkened, "she backed up and tripped over the table," he pointed to the coffee table that was shifted from its position parallel to the sofa. "I didn't touch her I swear!" he added when his expression showed no sign of lifting.

"Even meaning to is just as much as you did." He gritted out, "If you as much as come in ten feet of her I'll shoot you Charlie. Do you understand me?"

Charlie nodded rapidly.

Mitch gave him a final fierce look before left the man standing there shaking in his shoes. Now he had to face Jesse after he barked at her and knew it wouldn't go well. Hell though, she lied to him! When he got back in the truck she had her head turned while looking out the side window and her arms crossed under her breasts. "Jesse—"

"I'm not speaking to you right now." She said vehemently.

“You lied to me.” He said ignoring her statement, “That was unforgivable.”

She snapped her head around and narrowed her green eyes on his, “I lied because I knew you’d beat him into a coma. I told you I could handle myself.”

He sat straight, “You knew he’d try and hit you, didn’t you? Dammit Jesse! I should have gone in there with you.”

“And I told you I was a big girl. Mitch—” she said holding her hands up in exasperation, “—Charlie will press charges against you for assault!”

“So, let him. I have better lawyers.”

“Oh God!” she said.

“Jesse, you lied to me. I won’t tolerate that.”

“I had to.” She said feeling horribly guilty, “I knew what you’d do.”

“Nevertheless, Jesse if you want to establish trust between us, this is not the—“

“I’m sorry.” She blurted out, “I just didn’t know what else to do. I was worried you’d be arrested and—“

“All right,” he cut her off with the understanding that she was trying to protect him, “Did he hit you?”

One thing she could say about Mitch is that he could calm himself down about as quick as the weather changes in prosper and she was very thankful for it. If he had Adam’s demeanour, he *would* have put the man in a coma, then tore the hide off of her bones. She took a deep breath, “He tried, I backed up and tripped over the coffee table and hit my stupid head on the floor.”

It was the same story Charlie gave him. He nodded and looked at her head, “Does it hurt.”

“A little, call it karma for fibbing.”

He actually smiled, “no honey, you don’t deserve to get hurt for any reason.”

“You’re not mad anymore?”

“I am, but more at that punk.” He said thrusting a thumb over his shoulder toward Charlie’s office. “Come here, let me look at your head.”

“I’ll live.” She said feeling more and more ashamed at her actions.

He took her arm and jerked her toward him. She released a squeal of surprise as he caught her in an embrace and kissed the side of her head that she was holding earlier, “No more lies.”

“No more.” She said, “Mitch you’re the last person I want to lie to.”

“I understand why you did it, but unlike Adam, I do have the sense to think in the middle of a rage.”

She released a laugh that he said what she was already thinking, “I should have known.”

“However,” he added with a pointed look, “If he comes anywhere near you in the future, I did tell him that I’d shoot him.”

She groaned, “I would expect no less.”

“anyway honey, let’s go home so I can get a little more work done before I take you to that movie I promised.”

She pulled back to look at him, ‘you’re sure?’

“Just because we had a bit of a disagreement doesn’t mean I’m going to toss you aside.” He said with surprise taking in her expression, “That’s insane.”

“What can I say, I worry because of the past.”

‘Its just that Jesse, the past.” He said releasing her and starting the truck.

That was easy for him to say, she thought sitting straight. He never told her anything of his past, or what created those demons in him that she caught a glimpse of every now and then.

‘I mean it about Charlie, stay away from him or *I* will put him in a coma.” He said with a teasing tone but his eyes were

serious.

“It won’t be a problem.” And she meant it.

CHAPTER FIVE

It turned out that Jesse and he both liked science fiction movies. One would think, by looking at her she was into chick flicks, but she wasn’t. Being raised with a brother did give her some tomboy traits. Throughout the entire movie, Mitch had his arm across the back of her seat, as they shared a bucket of popcorn. She never felt so happy in all of her life with him finally accepting her. She could hardly even keep her mind on the movie with his potent male scent reaching her nostrils constantly and found herself remembering what he looked like without his shirt on all of those months ago. It let her imagination drip with thoughts of the rest of his body. Laying her head against his shoulder, she released a soft sigh and felt his hand squeeze his shoulder as he placed an adoring kiss on the top of her head. All of it was completely unlike him, but she wasn’t complaining in the least.

Jesse knew a lot of the people in the theatre that evening and because they were sitting in the middle she knew everyone behind them could see his affection for her. The soft whispers over that recent display just proved it. She was sure that by tomorrow it would be all over town. If he kept holding her like this, she didn’t care.

Once the movie was over, he took her hand and led her out of the theatre just to bump into Duncan and his date. Jesse recognized her as one of the waitresses that worked at the local diner in town with Jasper’s ex-girlfriend. Maggie something or other. She was a nice person as far as Jesse was concerned and pretty too, but Jesse always thought there was a sadness about her.

“Hey Mitch.” Duncan said shaking Mitch’s hand, pausing to see Mitch and Jesse’s joined hands before trying to cover up his surprise, “Did you enjoy the show?” he said hesitantly while nodding a greeting to Jesse.

Frankly Mitch couldn’t recall any of it. He was too busy staring at Jesse through the entire movie, “Yeah.”

“Have you met Maggie?” he said pulling the shy girl out from behind him where she somehow managed to manoeuvre herself.

“Hi!” said Jesse with enthusiasm, “I’m Jesse.”

“Jesse’s brother is one of the town’s physicians.”

This made the young woman raise her delicate brows, “I think I remember you. You work there right?”

“A couple of days a week, and the other,” she gave Mitch a smile, “I work for him.”

“Us,” Mitch added not wanting to give the young woman the wrong impression, “She works for my two brothers and I doing books. She’s amazing at numbers.” *Among other things*, he thought to himself.

“Let’s go get a coffee,” Duncan suggested, “We haven’t had a proper visit in ages, hell, we haven’t even done any fishing this fall.”

“True.” He glanced at Jesse to see if it was all right and she nodded without hesitation. She always liked Duncan, and Maggie seemed very nice even though she was really shy.

After they’d taken their seats and ordered coffee Duncan and Mitch started talking about the best fishing holes and lying to each other about the size of fish they caught at each of them. Jesse turned her attention to Maggie, “Where are you from?”

Maggie glanced at Duncan for a second before she gave a slight smile to Jesse, “Kentucky. Is it that obvious that I’m not from here?”

Jesse nodded, “I was born and raised here, so was Mitch

and Duncan, and I would know if you were too. It's a small town and people know everything that goes on."

Maggie reached up and scratched her shoulder over that statement, and Jesse had an odd feeling that it unsettled her.

She smiled, "You also have the cutest drawl that I've ever heard." She wanted ease the other girls discomfort and she did give her a bit of a smile at the compliment.

"So you two have known each other a long time." She said glancing at Mitch. He was a big man that Maggie found intimidating to say the least, but every time he set his eyes on his girl there was a glint of emotion that she didn't miss. He absolutely adored her. If she saw him as a stranger she would purposely avoid him because of his demeanour, despite how good looking he was.

"My whole life." Jesse answered, "Although I had to chase him forever before he finally caved in." she near jumped as she suddenly felt a large hand on her thigh giving it a reassuring squeeze. Glancing up at him he still was engrossed in conversation with Duncan but somehow managed to keep track of hers as well.

"I find that surprising." Said Maggie looking at the stunning blond. She was the type of person that wouldn't have to chase anyone in her life. In fact she was surprised she was as nice as she was. She'd seen her in the diner several times and would always make a point of saying hello. People who looked like Jesse didn't talk to people like her.

Jesse tilted her head at that statement, "Obviously you don't know Mitch." She was blatantly aware that he hadn't removed his hand from her thigh and her insides started pulsing again. Then to make things worse, he deftly curled his long fingers around the sensitive inner part making her release a cough to cover a squeal.

"The coffee is a little strong," said Duncan handing her a

napkin from the holder completely misunderstanding her reaction.

Jesse always liked Duncan and knew he'd come close to asking her out several times, but there was no way on God's green earth she would have accepted. He was one of Mitch's best friends, and she didn't like the idea that Mitch would think she'd gone out with a friend of his to get back at him. Not only that, as handsome as he was with his blond hair and blue eyes, she didn't think of him that way. "Yes it is." She said hearing her voice crack a little while retrieving it and thanking him. The rascal! She thought looking up at Mitch seeing a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Are you two going to the dance next weekend?" Duncan asked, "We could go together."

"Actually—" he gave Jesse an apprehensive look, "—due to some circumstances I don't think it would be wise."

Jesse couldn't help but look disappointed. She wanted more than anything to dance with Mitch, show him off, and let everyone know that they were together. She felt him squeeze her thigh.

"However—" he added staring down at her seeing her expression, "I guess if you're there Duncan, and Adam, then we'll have more than enough people in case they're needed." This got him one of her jaw dropping, heart stopping, salivating, ravishing grins. Before he could stop himself he bent down and kissed her, publically in front of his best friend and his date not giving a damn who was watching. It was just a brush on the mouth, but you could have heard crickets in the diner from that gesture as everyone in there stared completely stunned.

"Well, Maggie, I think this is our cue to leave." He grinned at the two of them who were just staring at each other.

"Yeah—later," said Mitch without taking his eyes off of her.

“Hey don’t worry about the coffee I got it.” Said Duncan knowing neither one of them heard him while taking Maggie’s hand and helping her out of the booth. The way Mitch was acting around Jesse probably would have him walk out of there without paying the bill. All he could think was, *it was about damn time.*

Mitch just gave him a wave of thanks and Duncan chuckled as he left.

“You’re crazy.” She murmured looking up at him.

“It seems that every part of you is soft.” He said tracing the inside of her thigh with his fingers while his gaze darkened.

“Mitch, someone may see.”

“Nope.” He said not taking his eyes off her.

He was right of course. The way he’d positioned himself next to her, no one could see past him. It was the heat that caress was stirring in her that made her uncomfortable. Images of him on top of her flashed in her mind from the other day. She had her thigh bent up around his hip and remembered the feel of his hands on her then. “You’re driving me crazy—stop.” She finally said flushing.

He chuckled and released her, “Come, let’s get out of here, seeing Duncan paid the bill. I don’t want him to change his mind and leave it with me.” He said taking her hand.

However he didn’t drive all the way home. He pulled off onto a side road and cut the engine.

“Mitch, what?”

“I’ve been dying for a feel of you again.” He said turning to her and unsnapping his seatbelt, “Come over here. This sexual tension we got going is killing me.”

She smiled while reaching down and undoing her own seatbelt before sliding across the seat into his arms. “My my, but you are affectionate.” She teased.

“Shut up honey, you started it.” He grinned reaching for her and crushing his mouth to hers without a further thought.

Soon he had her pulled across his lap and was ravishing her mouth with his, nibbling and teasing. One thing he could say about Jesse was that the woman could kiss. She responded so well that his erection was straining against his jeans seconds after he touched her. His hand slid up her leg and cupped her exquisite bottom making her gasp and pull back.

“Mitch we can’t—“

“No, I know, not here, but let me just touch you without a bloody audience for once.” He said huskily. “I won’t take it any further than you want to go.” He added.

“Its just—well your hand, is so warm.” She said and parted her mouth in another silent gasp as he caressed one cheek and then another.

“Its because I’m so hot for you right now that my skin is practically on fire,” he added in the same tone, “What color are these,” he said sliding his finger beneath the leg seam of her panties that were hidden from view.

She grinned and ran a hand up to the open vee in his shirt, “Green.”

“Pale, or dark?”

She laughed, “Pale.”

He groaned, “what I wouldn’t give to see you in them alone.”

If any other man said that to her, she’d be out of the truck quicker than a thunderclap, but it seemed to be the most comfortable thing to talk about with him. It was then she knew that no other man would ever do. Mitch was the only one for her, he always was. “Someday.” She said with a tone of promise.

“Soon.” He added taking her mouth again, “Very soon.” He released her bottom and moved his hand up over her hip to the side of her breast. Then he circled his thumb underneath testing to see how far she’d let him take it. She may have been a good kisser, but he could tell from his extensive experience with

women, that she hadn't much experience with petting. However, it was her that took his hand in hers and placed it on her breast with a downright sexy moan that his mouth absorbed, and it was her that shifted closer to him and spread her fingers under his shirt and over his chest.

His thumb rubbed over her nipple through her clothes and she arched toward him. Holy hell he was having a tough enough time trying to control himself without her damn help, "Jesse—"

"I remember—" she said moving herself closer to him, "That you told me to shut up—" she said huskily as she spread his shirt open and ran her mouth down his neck. "Mitch, your hard everywhere." She moaned against this skin.

"You got that right." He groaned roughly feeling his painful erection. Somehow she manoeuvred onto his lap completely with her knees straddling his thighs and when she sat that lush bottom of hers down on his legs he had to stop her because he was close to spilling in his jeans. She meant too much to him to take her in the cab of the truck, but his original plan got out of hand quick, then when the curve of her ass settled on his thighs, he couldn't help himself and ran his hands up her smooth legs to cup her cheeks and haul her roughly against his rigid sex.

She could feel his need for her and it only heightened her own. Then she felt his fingers slip under the material of her panties.

"Damn, Jesse, you're so wet." He groaned slipping his fingers inside her as his other hand undid her bra and slipped under the material of her blouse to cup one of her breasts.

Jesse buried her face in his neck and cried out at the invasion, but it didn't stop him because it certainly wasn't a cry of pain. It felt—incredible! "Oh God Mitch—what—" another groan severed her barely legible words. Then she arched herself back with another sensual cry as waves of pleasure washed through

her, giving him full access to her breasts while he pleased her. He shoved her blouse up to expose her upper half and covered one of her nipples with his hot mouth suckling and teasing her noises of pleasure were spilling from that gorgeous mouth of hers.

“I can’t—“ she breathed not being able to bear the building pressure that started deep in her pelvis. Surely she would die!

Mitch could feel the familiar tightening of her climax and repositioned his fingers to heighten her experience. Her hands tightened in his hair as she screamed her release which he instantly cut off with his mouth and his tongue mimicking the movement of his fingers within her. She shuddered and trembled against him before coming completely still breathing rapidly onto his bare shoulder.

Mitch near came himself over that display. Actually he was surprised he didn’t. He felt arrogant that he was able to drive her so wild so quickly. However, it didn’t go unpunished, if he didn’t get her off his lap, one more rub against him would definitely make him come.

She was incredibly beautiful in the height of passion and had gotten just as much pleasure out of being able to do this to her as she experienced it.

“I—“ she paused and swallowed trying to catch her breath, “I didn’t think that was ever possible.”

“No one has done that to you before?” He loved bringing pleasure to a woman, and more so with Jesse but to discover that no man had, floored him. Especially when she reacted to his touch the way she did.

“Absolutely not.” She said with a satiated grin against his neck.

Despite her admission, he still found it hard to believe. She was extremely passionate and his touch seemed to set her on

fire. "I'm just getting started." He said turning his head and kissing her causing her to sit straight back on his lap and kiss him back. Slowly he pulled her away from him, "But not here, not now. The rest can wait." He refastened her bra and pulled down her blouse.

"Mitch, you never had—I mean—" she started to feel guilty that he didn't have any satisfaction. That he did everything for her pleasure.

"I had just as much pleasure as you did honey. No, I didn't have release, but I'm sure you can make that up to me in the future. However, this isn't the place to claim you completely—and—" he added as her eyes guided back to his mouth, "—I don't have any protection on me. Unless you're on the pill." She shook her head and flushed at the intimacy of the question. It was just as well. As much as he wanted her, he didn't want to degrade her this way by taking her in the seat of the truck. A truck that every one of their employees had been in. It was too impersonal and insulting. What he had planned would take most of the night.

Slowly she smiled and Mitch felt his breath catch in his throat. Yes, Jesse was beautiful, but somehow seeing the glow of satisfaction on her expression and knowing that he caused it, made her completely stunning. He gave her a long passionate kiss before he released her and told her to get back in her seat.

When they came in the house Adam was waiting for him and Mitch knew that look. He wanted to speak to him. He did his best to shelter Jesse from Adam's intelligent eyes because she actually looked thoroughly ravished and usually everyone else was in bed at this hour or he would have snuck her in the back door. He almost grinned at that, because it was something he'd done plenty of times as a teenager.

Thankfully Adam turned and went into his study giving them privacy and Mitch gave Jesse a kiss on the cheek and told

her to go to bed.

“Is something wrong?” she said not understanding the unspoken look between the brothers.

“Absolutely nothing.” He reassured. She gave him a look that said she didn’t believe him, but nodded, “Okay.”

After she left he walked into Adam’s study and closed the door. However before Adam could get a word out Mitch spoke first. “Don’t even bother lecturing me Adam. You were no different.”

“I just want to make sure you know what you’re doing.” Adam explained. He wasn’t angry at all. He was concerned. He knew Mitch better than anyone and Jesse was vulnerable where he was concerned.

“Hell, no I don’t.” was his answer. “One minute I do, the next, I’m all off balance.”

“This isn’t some sort of protective syndrome, just because you rescued her—”

“Have you not noticed that woman? Give me a break Adam,” he cursed in frustration, “Is there any goddam whiskey left in that bottle you keep in the drawer?” he gestured angrily towards the desk. “If you’re insisting on prying into my personal life, get me a damn drink!”

“Yeah,” Adam grinned and retrieved it and two glasses out of the drawer filling them. His eyes flicked to his older brother, “It’s not that I don’t approve. Hell, we all love Jesse.” He carried a glass over to his brother and handed it to him, “I’m worried that you’ll get too caught up over her, that you’ll let your guard down.” He said talking a generous gulp and sitting in a chair while Mitch planted himself on the sofa.

“I’ve thought about it.” He said honestly.

“Remember when that prick took Meagan? I wasn’t fit to tie my own shoes.” Adam’s expression darkened just remembering it.

Mitch leaned forward placing his forearms on his thighs while cradling the glass in hand watching the amber swirling liquid while he thought of how to explain this to Adam. His brother was a mess when that happened to his wife, and he knew where he was coming from. Finally he lifted his head “I remember how you were, but if I break it off with Jesse, that’ll be the end of it. She’ll never forgive me. I would rather get shot than hurt her again. And contrary to what you think, I have thought about this—” he breathed deeply, “—I’ve thought about it for six fucking years when she first told me she loved me.” He raised his eyes to Adam, “So, if you think I’m running blindly into this relationship, you are mistaken.”

“Six years—” Adam said with surprise. He was sure that Mitch didn’t want anything to do with Jesse when she poured her heart out to him all those years ago. He remembered seeing her on the porch swing when she thought no one was watching, her head bent and wiping her eyes. He’d broken her heart then. It didn’t take long for him to figure out what happened because of the way she was always looking at his older brother. He never did ask Mitch about it because it wasn’t his business, but he sure wanted to.

“Yeah Adam.” He darted a finger between the two of them, “We never get involved in each other’s personal lives, but I’ll admit I swear to God something died in me that day when I did that to her. I think you can understand now that you have Meagan, but it wasn’t easy. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my life.” He sat straight, “No one knew until now, how I felt about that. I tried to ignore it myself, but I can’t anymore. I want her.” He took a long swallow from his glass before he continued, “If that means I’ll take a beating for letting my guard down, I’m willing to take that risk. I can’t help but remember how I felt when she had a gun to her head. It was like a slap in the face of how stupid I’ve been.”

“All right Mitch. I just wanted to know if you’re sure.” He said softly, “I can see you are. If it was Meagan, like you said, I would do the same.” He leaned back in his chair and lifted the glass of whiskey in a salute, “One thing about us Wightman men is that we live hard and love hard.”

“Amen to that.” Mitch said as he mimicked Adams cheer and drank the rest of his glass.

CHAPTER SIX

Several hours later Mitch thought, *screw propriety*, as he stripped of his clothes except for his boxers and went through the adjoining door to Jesse’s room. Even though they hadn’t slept together yet, he was still going to get in bed with her knowing that she would offer very little protest after the way she reacted to him earlier. Another night of restlessness wasn’t an option and he knew he wasn’t going to get any sleep if he didn’t have her heavenly body against his. Like he told Adam earlier, he’d kept her at a distance for six years. Six years is more than long enough to wait to sleep next to her and he arrogantly knew she wanted it to.

She was already sound asleep curled up like he’d seen her the other night. Curled up like a contented kitten. The bed shifted with his weight and she moaned softly in her sleep and instinctively rolled toward him when he stretched his large form out next to hers. He’d meant what he said to Adam about not wanting to lose her again. He loved her. He always had. He was just too damn stupid to realize it. That’s why he could never get attached to other women after her confession. The reason he knew this, was he was already emotionally involved with her, more than anyone else in his life.

“Mitch?” Jesse said sleepily, realizing that hard warm body that she had just wrapped herself around was not a dream.

“Go to sleep babe. I locked both of our doors, no one will other us.”

“Are you kidding me?” she said moving closer to him, “the most gorgeous sexiest man I’ve ever met crawls in bed with me naked and you want me to go to sleep. You’re out of your mind.”

He chuckled, she had a point. It’s the same way he felt about her. “I didn’t crawl into your bed to take advantage of you and I’m not completely naked.” He groaned as her hand slid low over his abdomen. The erection he’d had all day, that he finally got rid of when speaking to his brother, sprang to life again.

“Then let me take advantage of you.” She murmured in his ear. “I love that you came in here to be with me. Your forwardness is very appealing.”

Her sweet breath against his skin was his undoing. He hauled her on top of him, wrapped his thick arms around her, and kissed her. Her legs fell to either side of his causing the junction of her softness to come down on his erection. “Baby you are killing me.” He groaned while sitting up and moving her off him.

“What are you doing? Oh Mitch, don’t leave.” She said as he was getting off the bed.

He gave her a sinful smile, “I’m not leaving, I’m going to grab a condom before I go insane with need.”

“I—“ she flushed and paused in mid-sentence as her actions were finally dawning on her. Maybe it was because she was half asleep when he crawled in next to her that made her so courageous, but her bravery drained out of her at that statement.

“I’ll only be a moment,” He said before leaning over and kissing her long and hard before getting off the bed and heading back to his room. He retrieved several from his bedside table and went back into her room placing them on hers. Then he crawled back under the covers after he stripped off his underwear, “Now where were we.” He said reaching for her.

“Mitch, I have to tell you something.” She said backing away from his grasp.

The concern in her expression and tone made him pause, “Okay.”

“I just don’t want you to be disappointed.” She continued.

His brows rose, “When we make love? God Jess, it’s obvious that we’ll be good together after what we shared earlier. Don’t you understand that?”

“Yes—No, I mean, I don’t know.” She said softly, “I know what—how I’ve reacted around you, but I’ve never been with a man before.”

All at once Mitch thought it was Christmas and something inside him burst with emotion that he’d never felt before. It actually mattered to him that she was untouched. Never in his life could he ever remember thinking that about a woman that he’d been before.

“Mitch?” she said uncertainly unable to read his eyes in the dim light of the room that filtered in through the window. To her surprise a sinful grin draped slowly across his handsome face. Now *that* she could see.

“Damn Jesse, just when I think you can’t get any more beautiful to me.” he said still grinning and moving toward her. “Have I got things to show you.” He said flattening her out on the bed and shifting himself on top of her causing her to laugh softly. “First—“ he said lifting himself above her as he pulled at the hem of her nightgown halfway up her thighs then stopped, “We are getting rid of the barriers. She moved to help him and he stopped her by pushing her flat down on the bed with a large hand on her shoulder followed by a sensual grin, “Oh no. I’m going to make this the night of your life, you just need to be as still as you possibly can—“

“Lay still?” she said in astonishment, “that’s impossible, you know you drive me wild.” Then she closed her eyes as the

weight of his body came down on top of hers causing her to suck in a deep breath. Feeling his hard naked body against hers was strangely pleasing and erotic.

He felt arrogant at her reaction to him especially after her confession, "Just wait." He said moving off her and sitting straight so he was straddling her legs, then he moved down her body to the end of the bed. First he lifted one of her dainty feet and nipped the inside of her ankle followed by a flick of his tongue. That alone near made her come off the bed and she sat up just to be shoved back down again with a warning look.

"You are driving me crazy already." She moaned as he continued up the inside of her leg.

His eyes glinted, "Keep your voice down too."

"You ask the impossible." She breathed.

"Your legs are incredible." He murmured against the soft skin of her inner thigh. "I've never seen legs like this before in my life."

"Oh God—that feels so—" She gasped as he lifted her leg up and kissed a spot behind her knee, "This can't be normal!"

"Shush—" he said chuckling repeating the act to the second leg sinfully loving her reaction to his touch.

She wanted to sit up, but the erotic thing was that trying to lay still was adding to her excitement and he was making her skin tingle. However she almost lost it when he parted her legs, ran both of his hands slowly and simultaneously up the inner side of her thighs up her body. Then his thumbs parted the soft skin there and entered her moist warmth. She arched completely off the bed and slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the cry.

Then when she thought it couldn't get any more tantalizing amazing, his mouth took over where his thumbs were and she gasped and fisted her hands in his hair biting her lip as not to cry out. Shards of pleasure shot through her like electricity. She never ever fathomed that a man's tongue could—

“Oh Mitch, you are killing me—“ she groaned trying to keep her voice low.

Mitch had his own problems resisting plunging himself deep within her, but he had to. He wanted her ready for him and he wanted to memorize every inch of her in the process. Jesse wasn't the type of woman to rush. She was passionate, loving and loaded with unexplored desire and he was given the privilege of showing her how to make love, and he wasn't taking the task lightly. So at the risk of him ending his pleasure too soon, he continued to tease her until he knew she was wild with need for him like he was for her.

He raised his head and shifted enough to lever his fingers into her causing her to release one of the sexiest noises he ever heard from deep in her throat. She was soaked already, but he didn't want to hurt her when he entered her. Although the way she was writhing around, she may not feel any pain at all. Slowly his mouth licked and nipped the skin of her abdomen moving up her body while baring inch upon inch of her by pushing up the satin night gown she wore. He could feel her hands on his shoulders, urging him on top of her, but he ignored her and took his time to taste every inch of her especially when he reached her breasts. She liked what he could do with his mouth on her breasts. He knew because of her reaction earlier, but now it was intensified because of the other things he'd been doing to her. They were beautiful, like every other part of her. She had beautiful lush, full breasts and he took his time teasing and toying with them.

“Please.” She begged, not quite knowing what she wanted tightening her fingers in his hair, “Mitch I can't take this.”

He lifted his head and kissed her soundly pulling his fingers out of her and reaching for a condom packet on the side table but she'd already moved her legs around his hips. Quickly he tore the packet with his teeth and raised himself up enough to

put it on before coming down on her. “Move your legs higher honey.” He rasped as he shifted and positioned himself. Then he drove into her with a swift thrust smothering her mouth to catch her cry and returning a rough groan of his own pleasure. Before she could recover he began to rock slowly in and out of her. She was tight, hot and wet, and it drove him completely wild. Within seconds she arched her head back against the pillow and tightened her thighs on his waist. He already knew he was lost when he touched her last week, now his mind was completely blown. She felt better than anything he could have imagined. Every part of her was now his and she moved in time with him like she was born for him. His tongue fought and played with hers matching their rhythm smothering their moans of ecstasy. If he didn’t feel the barrier break himself, he would have never guessed that she was a virgin from her responses to him.

She felt the rising fire burning within her like before, but she realized now that was just of fraction of what he created in her now for it wasn’t just in her pelvis. It was everywhere, scorching, and coiling throughout her body. She started digging her nails into his back to try and get closer to him without realizing that it was making him lose control. His rhythm changed, his breathing became shallower and more rapid as he reached down gripping one of her legs while raising himself off her to get better leverage and pushing it over his shoulder. Just when Jesse thought he couldn’t get any deeper, he did.

An explosion of pleasure pulsed from their joining and Jesse couldn’t stop herself from crying out. In an instant, Mitch’s mouth was smothering hers groaning again and again with each powerful downward movement of his hips hardly aware that her leg was sandwiched between them. Then she felt him tense and push hard into her while she still was shuddering from her own climax and released a deep growl of satisfaction before collapsing on top of her. She could feel the mixing of sweat between their

bodies, and didn't care. She couldn't move, could hardly breathe, not only from his weight but the whole experience. The feel of his warm breath on her neck was oddly alluring. "Mitch?" she said not realizing how breathless she sounded. After a moment of silence except for their heavy breathing she heard him muffle "um-hm."

"I can't breathe." She said smiling.

He groaned in disappointment that he had to move and shifted, lifting himself off of her enough to let her get a breath of air and released her leg that felt no less like jelly as it flopped back down on the mattress. His eyes sought out hers and slowly he bent and took her mouth under his with a long sensual kiss.

"I take it, you enjoyed that." She said softly looking up at him.

"Darling, you have *no* idea." He kissed her again before he moved off of her.

"Where are you going?" She was worried he was returning to his bed when she wanted him next to her.

"I'll be back. I need to get cleaned up." He said seeing her expression, "Don't you worry Jess, I'm not near done with you yet." He grinned devilishly while getting off the bed and heading for her bathroom, "Keep my spot warm." He added over his shoulder.

Jesse rolled on her side to catch a glimpse of his backside when he passed through the moonlight streaming in through the window. She purred getting that glimpse and he obviously heard her because he stopped for a moment but didn't turn around and instead gave a shake of his head before continuing and disappeared through the door into her bathroom. She sighed and flattened herself to her back tossing an arm across her forehead not being able to shake that image of his nakedness. He was so powerfully beautiful. Every inch of him was covered in thick muscle and she closed her eyes knowing that every inch of

that body was against hers only moments ago drawing unfathomable noises from her. Not in a million years did she think making love was anything like that. Her other hand moved to her flat abdomen that still pulsed and contracted reminisce of the pleasure he made her feel. She always knew, but now she was sure. There was no other man for her.

A few minutes later he returned, crawled in next to her and pulled her close. "I thought I told you to keep my spot warm," he teased.

She rolled to face him, "Mitch I couldn't cover half your spot and you know it."

He chuckled, and shook his head with a sinful grin on his face, "If I'd known you were so flexible, I would have—"

"You hush up." She said cutting him off and blushing at the same time as she snuggled closer, "Gosh is a man supposed to smell so darn good?"

"No." he said tersely, "Just me, only me."

She giggled.

"Ah hell." He said rolling away for a moment.

"What are you doing?" she said lifting herself up on her elbow. When he rolled back he had the other condom packet in his hand and like before tore a side off with his teeth. Finally she understood and really started to laugh.

"Quiet honey, I have six years to make up for." And he did.

When she woke the next morning Mitch was gone but she still couldn't help but smile at the night they shared and raised herself up to push her face into the pillow he used and inhaled deeply. Oh, his scent still lingered and a pulse of excitement went through her body. She could definitely get used to this! Slowly she worked her way out of bed and groaned. Every muscle in her body cried when she moved and she couldn't help but laugh. It served her right. The only thing that stole the

attention was the soreness between her legs but she didn't care. Somehow she always knew she was saving herself for him, and wasn't the least bit disappointed. Over and over again he made her cry with pleasure and drew things out of her she didn't know she was capable of. He was patient and coached her with experienced knowledge on the art of lovemaking. For him, she was willing to do just about anything and he made it seem so beautiful, so natural with her.

She even wanted to taste him like he did her, and he was patient, coaxing her with his hands and his words on what he liked. Although she had heard of her friends talking about oral sex, she always thought it sounded dirty, but it wasn't. To know that she could make a big strong man like Mitch groan with pleasure made her feel strangely powerful.

She had to wonder though, if it was as amazing to him as it was to her. She knew he had been with a lot of women in his youth and probably still did before her. It made her feel insecure to how she measured up. Did other woman draw such lust out of him? She prayed that didn't happen, and she really shouldn't think like that. She was more mature than that, but for some reason, only Mitch could make her feel so vulnerable.

Pushing those thoughts aside, she was determined to have a shower before she went down for breakfast, and after a few feeble attempts she was actually able to stand. Giggling at her own weakness she made her way to the shower.

When she entered the dining room a half an hour later she froze. There was Henry with Helen trapped against the wall while he nuzzled her neck and toyed with one of her plump breasts through her clothes. Oh dear, she thought and slowly, quietly backed out of the room. Obviously this wasn't common knowledge and she certainly didn't want to embarrass them. Hopefully they didn't notice her. They didn't seem to because they were too engrossed in each other. Still, seeing old Henry

with a woman seemed out of place in a way. She always saw him as a grandpa type and that scene made her blush. He was a man after all and even men his age obviously still had needs.

She needed something to do and because Jarrett was away, she wasn't working at his clinic for the next few months. Also, she'd caught up on all of the bookwork at the ranch. After some thought, she considered a walk around the ranch. It wasn't often she did that anymore. Not only that, she missed him and it would be distracting. It seemed silly because she'd only been awake less than an hour, but she already empty without him.

"I'll be—" Jeb said watching Jesse walk toward them. He and Ian were still replacing the old lumber on the corral when he caught sight of the blond bombshell. He let out a long slow whistle while hooking a boot on the bottom rail and resting his arms on the top one so he could watch her.

"Be careful Jeb," Ian said, "I learned the hard way that the women on this ranch are off limits."

Jeb cast him a glance and grinned, "Yeah, the way you chased after Adam's wife, I am really surprised he didn't shoot you."

"I didn't know he was interested in her at the time, hell Jeb, no one really knew." He defended. "He near terrified me into priesthood!"

Jeb threw his head back and howled with laughter. No doubt he did. However, Jesse had been around here when he first started at the ranch ten years ago, and if any of the brothers had interest in her, they would have acted on it by now, so in his books she was free game. She always took time to talk to them and besides being probably the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on, she was as sweet as Helen's apple pie and probably twice as delicious.

"Hi." Said Jesse pleasantly seeing the men.

"Hi," they answered in unison with Ian being a little more

hesitant. For some reason he still couldn't shake that episode when Adam threatened to kill him, and regardless of Jeb's obvious interest in Jesse, he was staying out of it.

"You sure look nice today Jesse."

"Thanks," she said stepping up on the bottom rail and peering into the corral the men were in. She heard compliments like that every day, and although they were flattering to a point, it didn't mean anything to her. However, when Mitch said things like he did last night, her insides went molten. She smiled and unfortunately Jeb misinterpreted it.

"I was wondering Jesse, there's this dance coming up this Friday and I was wondering if you wanted to go with me."

She gave him a small smile, "sorry Jeb, I'm seeing someone."

"That's that lawyer fella? Hell Jess, I didn't think he was your type."

"Actually Charlie and I broke it off." She explained.

And she was seeing someone already? He shouldn't have been surprised. His hand reached over and covered hers, "Come on Jess, we'll have fun."

Jesse felt bad for Jeb, because he was a nice respectable man, but he wasn't Mitch. "I can't." Mitch who touched every inch of her last night, who made her moan, and beg...oh heavens, she thought, she had it bad.

"I'll give you until the count of five to get you damn hands off my girl Jeb."

Jeb retracted his hand like he'd been burned and although he didn't turn around, he knew who it was. Only the tone in Mitch's voice wasn't one he was familiar with. Mitch wasn't one to get angry easy, but this was definite anger. Even all those months ago when he barked at him over that incident with the bull it didn't hold the deadly tone it did now. Slowly he turned around and held up his hands in surrender, "I didn't

know Mitch, or I wouldn't have even looked at her I swear!" Behind Mitch Jeb saw Ian grin and he made a mental note to beat the snot out of him later.

To his relief he seen Mitch relax a bit at his confession and was thankful to God that he didn't have Adam's raging temper.

"All right." Mitch said looking past him to Jesse and smiled, "Hi babe."

Jesse just blinked. She'd never seen him act so possessive like that, if even briefly, but wow it actually sent a thrill through her. Maybe it was because it solidified how he felt without saying the words.

Jeb took the opportunity to make himself scarce as Mitch walked over and took Jeb's spot next to Jesse leaning over the fence and giving her a brief kiss on the mouth, "what are you doing out here other than giving all my employees a hard-on?"

"Oh for gosh sakes." She said blushing, "I was not."

"It's not often you wear jeans, but yeah even hiding your gorgeous legs in those you're worth a hard on." Those same legs that were wrapped around him the night before.

She couldn't help but laugh, "Could you be any blunter?"

"Can't say I blame poor Jeb either." He continued with a sensual grin, "However, don't even think about looking at another man, I rather like my employees and busting their teeth out will make Adam mad at me." He studied her for a moment, "How are you anyway? Are you sore?" He said quietly so the other men wouldn't hear. He'd made love to her twice last night and although he meant to take it slow with her, she drove him nuts with her reaction to his touch and he got a little rough. Hell, he practically folded her in half the first time, so she must be sore.

Her eyes darted to his and she must've blushed clear to the roots of her hair, "Mitch." She said in quiet mortification,

“You obviously have no problem saying what’s on your mind, but that’s a little—“

He grinned widely at her embarrassment, finding it very attractive, “Baby, you are so damn irresistible.” He said starting to climb over the fence, ‘I’ll give you something to be embarrassed about!’

She jumped off her side of the fence and squealed at his intent as she turned and ran back toward the house. He would too!

He paused to watch her backside remembering how that perfect little ass felt last night as he took her again and again. Damn! He had it bad! He wasn’t lying about the erection either as he glanced down at the obvious bulge in his jeans below his belt. Hell, the woman could make the pope hard.

This morning when he woke up he already knew he was going to marry her. He had to. Never in his life did he feel so close to a woman when he made love to her or did a woman feel so damn good. Jesse had somehow gotten through to him and he didn’t want to let her go, ever. He hadn’t realized how empty his life was these past few years until she woke something up in him. He obsessed over her smell, her walk, her body—hell—everything stirred him about her. It just floored him how someone like her, as perfect as he thought she was, could fall in love with a hard-ass like him.

His phone rang, and he was so deep in thought over her, that he didn’t hear the first ring. Smiling he pulled it out and saw that it was Duncan.

“What’s up Duncan?”

“Hey Mitch. I need you down at Loggin’s creek to that spot where we went fishing last year.”

“Now?”

“this isn’t a fishing invitation. I think I found our bank robber’s brother—or what’s left of him, but the distinguishing

marks match the description from the FBI.”

“I’ll be there in a half an hour.” He said and hung up the phone while looking toward the house. That would mean that Jesse would go home and it bothered him. He still wanted her next to him and visiting her house in town would cause gossip. Not that her staying here didn’t, but most people knew Jesse was traumatized and her and Meagan were best friends, so she was staying with them until she recovered. However, if people started seeing just him come and go from her and Jarrett’s, talk would start. He was still determined to make her his wife, but he’d rather tell Jarrett face to face when he returned home. Hopefully she’d say yes after all, he wasn’t perfect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

True to Mitch’s word Duncan glanced at his watch seeing a half an hour had passed when the familiar ranch truck drove down the steep embankment. It must be the military in him, he thought as he walked over to the police barrier and lifted the tape for him.

“Are you sure it’s him?” Mitch said ducking under the tape while looking through the dozen or so people there going over the scene.

Duncan gave him a sideways look as he led him toward the body that was now covered in a white sheet, he almost sounded disappointed. Thinking he was mistaking he shook it off, “Well, the coroner is pretty sure, but they’ll still have to do an autopsy. The local wildlife had been feasting on him for several days, so parts of him are missing, including most of his face, but—” he bent over and lifted part of the sheet around the shoulder, showing a distinguishing tattoo of a skull and crossbones. “—this is one of the things that was kept out of the media.” He stood and nodded toward a woman crouching down

on the other side of a log not too far away, “Deborah thinks it’s him.”

“Hey Mitch!” she said giving him a wave. Mitch waved back. Deborah was the county’s only coroner; despite being from a small town she was pretty good. He looked back at Duncan, “Cause of death?”

“Deborah found an arm over there by the log that she’s bending over. Some animal chewed on it a bit but probably spit it out because the guy didn’t taste too good.” He said without batting an eye. He didn’t appreciate people like this coming into his town and harming the townspeople and as far as he was concerned he had this coming. “She can’t say for sure, but from the track marks on it she’s thinking heroin overdose. We’ll know more when the fingerprints and lab analysis comes back. They were probably planning to rob the bank together, but because his brother ended up dead, he found another sucker.”

“Yeah, well, I guess this pretty much lets me know that Jesse will be safe, but I’ll wait until I hear back from you before I let her go home.”

“So—“ Duncan turn a knowing smile on him, “—you finally couldn’t resist her anymore Mitch. Good to see you came to your senses.”

Mitch shrugged a large shoulder and couldn’t help but grin, “Hell Dunk, the woman is mighty irresistible.”

“so, am I going to be the best man at your wedding? Should I buy a tux?”

“That’s up to Jesse.” He heard himself saying causing Duncan to raise his brows.

“Wow, congratulations.” He said with surprise. He was only teasing, but Mitch’s reaction completely floored him. He was certain that Mitch resigned himself to being a bachelor for the rest of his life.

“Too soon, I haven’t asked her yet.” He paused, “she told

me she wants a spring wedding.”

“Maybe you should before some other fool does.” He said with a chuckle while slapping him on the back while they turned to walk back toward the truck.

Mitch shook his head, “It won’t happen, she loves me.” He said confidently, “What can I say, I’m irresistible too.”

“Lucky bastard.”

Mitch grinned again, “I am. Hey, what about that girl you were with the other night, she’s cute.”

“Yeah, she is. Sweet too. I thought I frighten her a little, but she still went out with me.”

Mitch didn’t miss it. Not once did she meet his gaze. It was obvious that she was a little timid, but not sure of what it was.

“She’s a little shy, but I don’t mind. Its actually quite refreshing.”

Mitch understood what he was talking about. Duncan was a nice looking man, and a nice looking man who was single and in a uniform had women throwing themselves at him a lot. “Are you bringing her to the dance on Friday?”

“She said yes, so yes.” He added smiling.

Mitch held out his hand as they reached the truck, “Thanks for keeping me informed.”

Duncan shook it, “Anything for you Mitch.” He paused, “I still have that job open.”

“I’ll let you know after the New Year. I have plans with Jess and the family for the next few months and I have to consider how she and my family feel, so I’ll let you know then.” His own words surprised him. Including Jesse in his decisions for the future was automatic and although it unsettled him, he had to admit he liked the image of a future with her more and more.

His brows rose, “You’re considering the job?” Duncan

asked, and was hoping, but he never thought that Mitch would leave his precious Ranch.

“Maybe.”

“That’s all I can hope for. See you later.”

“Yeah,” Mitch said as he got in the truck and Duncan waved as he pulled away.

Mitch thought about what Duncan said as he drove home. He *was* a lucky bastard, and he knew it. Especially when he pulled up to the house and there was Jesse as pretty as can be sitting on one of the porch swings. He knew he was making the right decision. She stood up when she saw him and he found himself imagining having children with her and greeting him every day like this for the rest of his life. It struck a chord deep within him, because it was something he never thought he’d do. She was already halfway down the stairs when he got out of the truck and neither one of them said a word when she rushed toward him and crushed her in his embrace and kissed her like he hadn’t seen her in a month.

“Ah hell.” Said Adam walking by them in the house, “Does discreet mean anything to you two?” Although he was one to talk, he was still all over his wife every chance he had. Grinning he removed his hat and chaps and thought maybe he should seek her out for some playing of his own.

“Where’d you go?” she said looking up at him when they finally broke apart.

“Duncan called. They think they’ve found the other brother.” He said watching her expression carefully hoping it didn’t upset her.

“Oh, is he under arrest?” she said with obvious relief.

“Not quite, he’s dead.” Mitch said studying her reaction.

“Oh.” Her eyes widened, “Mitch you—“

He laughed at her assumption, “No, not me. They think it was an overdose. Anyway, I still want you here until they

determine that it is him. Then I guess I'll take you home."

She frowned reflecting his feelings on her leaving, "for some reason I should be happy that I get to go home, but I'm not."

"Me either, but I'd rather not let people know that you're sleeping with me. I told you before that I don't care what people think about me, but I do about you."

She shrugged, "I don't care anymore."

"Honey it's different for a woman and you know it." He brushed his fingers down her jaw making her look at him, "We'll still find time to be together, I promise." Her smile made his heart hurt it was so beautiful.

"Promise?"

"Yes." He said kissing her again, "Now I hate to leave you, but I've got work to do." She nodded.

"I understand. I'll go help Helen with supper." Her face pinked up a bit remembering what she saw that morning.

"What is it?"

"Oh." She shook her head, "Ask me later. It's just something I saw earlier."

"All right honey." He kissed her again, briefly this time, "Later then."

At dinner there was more than just the surprise of Mitch letting them know about the bank robber's brother. Meagan and Adam announced that she was pregnant again.

"So soon?" Helen blurted out before she could stop herself. It's not that she didn't approve, but Meagan already had a baby that was only a few months old. Although Adam was an amazing husband and father, she wondered if Meagan was prepared for so much responsibility for she'd just turned twenty not too long ago. However, when she saw the joy on her and Adam's faces, she took everything back. Of course her niece was ready for another baby, she was happy and that's all that

mattered.

“Probably not soon enough,” teased Mitch while reaching over and shaking his brother’s hand. He knew how much his brother loved her, and probably like he was discovering with Jesse, couldn’t keep his hands off of her. Then he got up and gave his sister in law a genuine hug, “congratulations honey.” He said and spared a look at Jesse who was hugging Adam and met his eyes with a look that told him everything.

Later that night after they had finished making love, it was Jesse that brought it up. “I would like a baby too Mitch.”

His eyes studied her face that was still flushed with passion and he knew he would give her the moon if she asked for it. He nodded, “Yeah honey I know you do.”

“Not just any baby, I want your baby.” She added with a little hesitation worried that he’d run screaming for the hills at her confession.

Mitch propped himself up on an elbow and stared down at her, “You hold that thought for another few weeks until your brother comes home. Then we’ll talk again.”

“Why then?”

“Because—“ he bent down and kissed her, “I—“ he kissed her again, “—need his permission to ask you to marry me.” He finished with a particularly devastating kiss that turned her wide eyes of surprise into slits of desire.

“Mitch,” she said breathlessly in between his kisses, “Do you really mean it.”

“I never say anything I don’t mean honey.” He said positioning himself above her.

“what—how—“ she started to cry.

“shh—don’t—you kill me when I see tears come from those gorgeous eyes of yours.”

“I can’t help it.” She hiccupped.

He chuckled and nuzzled a sensitive spot in her neck, “Let

me help you feel better.”

Instantly her arms went around him and he did make her feel better, much better.

The next morning Jesse awoke alone. She knew Mitch was saving her from embarrassment with his family, but she was beginning not to care what people thought about them because she loved him. Last night seemed like a dream and she couldn't forget his proposal. Well, it wasn't exactly fireworks and balloons, but from Mitch, it was perfect. She reached up and felt a sore spot on the top of her head, they got a little carried away and her head hit the headboard a couple of times. She giggled to herself, well, maybe a little more than a *little*. Glancing at the clock on the wall, she crawled out of bed and headed to the shower. If she was lucky, she'd see him at breakfast before he went to work.

To her elation he was still there talking to Adam. Meagan and Henry had already left. When she entered Mitch looked up and smiled at her. Then he lifted his hand indicating for her to go to him, and she did just that only to be hauled across his lap and thoroughly kissed.

“Jesus.” Adam mumbled.

Jesse heard Adam's chair scrape as he stood up, then another curse as he left the room, but she didn't pay him any mind especially when she felt Mitch's hand under her top and on her breast. Finally she broke away when she felt herself begin to really heat up, “Mitch—not here!”

He chuckled, “You make me lose my head.” He said withdrawing his hand, “Later, I'll take you into town so you can choose a pretty gown for the dance tonight.”

“I have lots at my house.”

“Are they as hot as that number you wore in Vegas?”

She smiled, “You did notice.”

“Notice,” he said with raised brows, “I had to have a

twenty minute cold shower to cool myself down.”

She laughed, “You didn’t!”

“The hell I didn’t. Ever since you went and clung to me that day of the robbery, I’ve had a permanent erection.” He frowned as she laughed again, “Jess you don’t know how hard it is to work with one of those.” That made her laugh harder. “Hell you are a vixen!” he said, “I always knew I shouldn’t have let you touch me.”

Then something dawned on her, “Is that why you got angry at me when I tried to put the dressing on you.”

He never said anything, but she could see that it was true.

“Why Mitchell Wightman. Even then you liked me and all along I thought I repulsed you!”

“Repulsed!” he said incredulously, “Jesse, have you looked in a mirror? You had my heart from the moment you made that confession to me six years ago. I know I hurt you, but you were too young for me then, and I couldn’t leave a girlfriend behind, and the truth of it is, you *are* too good for me. You have no idea how much you floored me when you said your feelings hadn’t changed. I thought that when you matured, you’d realize it was just a silly crush.”

She stopped laughing and stared at him seriously. Her eyes began to sting with tears, “You really mean that? I mean about having your heart?”

“As I said before, as much as my next breath.” He answered softly.

“Mitch, you are the most amazing man I’ve ever known. I always knew it was only you I wanted. Don’t you see that?”

“Yes baby, I do now.” He admitted while brushing a long tendril of hair behind her ear.

“I love you so much it hurts.” She said in the same soft tone. She knew he wouldn’t say it back, but with the look he just gave her at her words, she didn’t care. It was soft with emotion

and filled with unspoken words. Then he pulled her toward him and gave her an amazing thigh twitching kiss, nibbling at her bottom lip and tracing the contours with his tongue before capturing her mouth fully. Finally he lifted his head.

“Look,” he said gently, studying her with a new emotion, “I would love nothing more than to spend the morning touching and kissing you, but I need to go and help the boys finish up the corral. Adam wants it done today so we can bring the calves in off the range. Later I’ll take you into town so you can stop at your place and pick out a gown for tonight.”

“I can go by myself—you said that dead man was probably his brother—”

“*Probably* still doesn’t sit well with me. So don’t you dare.” He gave her a stern look, “I’ll take you.”

“Okay okay.” She said holding up her hands in surrender.

“Now get your luscious little ass off my lap or I’m taking you back to bed.”

She jumped up laughing and he stood up and bent down to kiss her before he left the house. Jesse stood there for a moment realizing that Mitch had never been so affectionate with anyone like he was with her. She had seen him with women in town and at social events when she was younger, but he rarely touched them, or showed the public affection that he’d been showing her.

Helen walked in at that moment and asked Jesse what she wanted for breakfast. When she told her Helen made a face.

“No wonder you’re so thin.”

Jesse smiled, “I sit behind a desk all day Helen, I have to watch my figure.”

“Well, I’m sure Mitch is doing that enough for the both of you.” She said turning away and mumbling missing Jesse’s crimson cheeks, “Peach yoghurt and rice cakes—who ever heard of such a meal.” Helen was going to speak to Mitch about Jesse’s

choice of food. No girl could live on such a thing.

Late into the afternoon, Mitch was holding up one of the large logs on his shoulder for the top rail of the corral as Jeb was straddling the top of the completed fencing while pounding the eight inch spike in place.

“Damn it!” Jeb swore after several strikes with the sledge hammer. “I swear this one is made of granite.”

Mitch was sore and tired. The twelve foot long poles were heavy and they’d been at it all day, “Hurry the hell up, I got a date with Jesse, and if I’m late, I’ll take it out on you.”

Jeb paused for a moment to look down at his boss to see if he was serious. It only took a second to realize that by the hard stare from those pale eyes he received back, he was. So he started pounding with more force. His arms felt like jello after doing this repetitively all day and he began to wonder if he had any strength left until Mitch barked at him. “Hell boss you got it bad.” He mumbled in between whacks.

“Don’t I know it.” He grumbled back.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mitch told Adam that he’d be back in a while that he was taking Jesse in to get a dress for the dance this evening. He found him in the study going over the accounts that Jesse prepared earlier that week. His son Seth, was held snugly against his chest snoozing while Adam’s free hand was managing the laptop. Mitch couldn’t help but smile. His large hot tempered brother looked totally at home coddling his son as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “We’ll be back by supper. Get Duncan to call my cell if he hears from the coroner.” He added.

“Sure thing.” Adam said glancing up catching his brother’s smile, “What the hell are you grinning about.”

Mitch shrugged, “Nothing. Where’s Meagan?”

“I told her to go lay down, she looked exhausted. Seth didn’t sleep well last night, and she’s a little tired being pregnant, she works hard enough.” He said with unmistakable pride returning his attention to his accounts.

It was true. Meagan still worked as their groom, helped her aunt out in the kitchen, plus she was a wife and mother. Mitch didn’t know how she did it, but she was always happy. Mitch turned to leave, but Adam called his name. “yeah?”

“I was just wondering when you two are going to announce your engagement. Meagan needs time too—“

“Oh for crying out loud!” Mitch said.

It was Adam’s turn to grin, “Hell Mitch, you haven’t been able to keep your hands off her since we came back from Vegas. It’s obvious you love her and frankly you’re nauseating the hell out of me.”

Mitch released a bark of disbelief, “Your one to talk. Why last night I saw you toss that little wife over your shoulder and haul her off to bed.”

Adam’s grin widened remembering his wild night, “Yeah, well I *am* married.”

“Hell, isn’t anything kept a secret. Between every one of you it sounds like my wedding is already planned, Jarrett says Jesse wants a spring wedding, Duncan’s asking what kind of tux he should rent—“ that got a bark of laughter from Adam and a squeal of surprise from Seth.

Adam rubbed his son’s back while using soothing words to settle him back to sleep before he returned his attention back to his brother, “So, is there going to be a spring wedding?”

Mitch shrugged, “I’m all off balance about the whole thing Adam, but I want her to be happy.”

“She is happy Mitch,” Adam said, “Don’t fight this. I know you’re thinking you’re not worthy of her, or maybe once

she gets to know you her feelings would change because I thought the same thing once about Meagan. However, these women are special, and if they love us, that's something neither one of us should ignore."

That made a lot of sense to him, "I need to speak to Jarrett first."

"Somehow I don't think he'll stand in your way."

No he wouldn't, thought Mitch after all, he was the one who suggested Jesse have a spring wedding coinciding with her wishes. If he had any fight in him over Jesse it went out the window when he made love to her. They were good together, and he wasn't stupid enough to throw that away.

For twenty minutes Mitch was stretched out on Jesse's bed in her bedroom in town while one by one she pulled out a gown and held it up smiling sensuously asking him which one he preferred. It was comical, she thought because her bed looked very small with him in it because and he didn't quite fit with his feet stuck over the end of the footboard crossed at the ankles. However, she was so distracted by his large form sprawled on her little single bed with his hands stacked behind his head, in the most relaxed sexiest pose she'd ever seen him in, she couldn't help but drag her eyes up his body more than once every time she turned around with another dress to display.

"Smarten up kitten, or I'm going to make us late for dinner." He drawled seeing her heated glances.

She gave him a coy grin.

"Oh hell you are learning fast aren't you?" he said raising a brow.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." she added with a sly smile over her shoulder as she turned to pull out another gown.

"The hell with this." He said leaping off the bed and taking several long strides toward her.

She spun around, "What?"

"Don't you *what* me." He said as he took the gown out of her hands and tossed it in a nearby chair not removing his eyes from hers, "this is *what*." He said framing her face in his hands and crushing his mouth on hers.

"Oh lord," she groaned, "Mitch we shouldn't—"

"Hush up honey, I'm dying. We're in a relationship and people in relationships make love all of the time."

"That's not what I meant and—"

"Good, now shut up. You started this and you know it" He said taking her mouth again and smothering her giggle.

She didn't even resist, or even think about doing it after he kissed her. She wanted him. She always wanted him. Her hands slid around his neck as she kissed him back.

Mitch's hands pulled her blouse out of her skirt and worked it up over her breasts without removing his mouth from hers. It was then he realized that she had half of his shirt unbuttoned and was struggling with the last few in nervous haste. Quickly he helped her stripping it off his body in one deft movement and tossed it on the floor, then he lifted her blouse over her head stopping as it covered her eyes, "What a beautiful mouth." He said kissing her again while lifting it the rest of the way off her. She moaned and fumbled with his belt. He pulled her against him and started backing her toward her bed. Then he stopped finally looking at it, "There's no way in hell I can make love to you on that piece of doll furniture." He said thickly taking in the single bed. "Stay here." He leaned over and whipped off the coverlet and the pillows and tossed them on the floor before he turned back to her, "Now where the hell were we."

"Here." She said raising up on her toes to kiss him. Somehow she'd managed to undo the belt and button of his jeans having never done that except to her own. Now his jeans hung loosely on his hips and she couldn't help but take her time and

soak up the image he gave off. He looked like he should be in one of those calendars for men. Her hands started touching him in wide eyed wonder. "Wow." She whispered as she ran her hands over his washboard abs down the fine line of hair that dissected the lower half disappearing behind the waistband of his jockey shorts. "Having the light on makes this a whole lot better."

He grinned, "wow yourself." He murmured and reached behind her to unsnap her pink lacy bra. Then he sensuously and slowly hooked a finger under each strap and slid them down her slender arms revealing perfectly moulded breasts. "God baby, you're as perfect as I always knew you'd be." He said tossing the lacy garment to the side and spreading her arms away from her front. He could feel her arms move as if to try and cover herself. "Oh no you don't." he said bending down and taking one rosy bud in his mouth." The sensual cry she uttered at the contact near made him come undone. Soon her hands were scrunched in his hair as he alternated back and forth between her breasts while bending her back over a strong arm and simultaneously lowering her down on the blanket to the floor bringing his weight down on top of her.

"who knew a man could feel so good." She groaned as he moved back up and took her mouth again.

"And we're just getting started." He said against her mouth as he shifted and easily disposed of her skirt revealing matching pink lacy panties. He raised himself up on his arms and looked down between their bodies and groaned coming down on her again. Within minutes she was making these irresistible mewling sounds that were such an incredible turn on, he could barely contain himself. When he slid his hand down her flat abdomen, under the fine material of her underwear and into her moistness she made an unbelievable moan of ecstasy after an initial gasp. She gripped his shoulders and moved her hips in time with his movements. Unable to wait any longer he pulled

back much to her cry of protest to remove his jeans.

“Christ honey, give me a second. I need to protect you.” He rasped reaching for his wallet in the back pocket of his discarded jeans. He couldn’t take it anymore, the woman reacted to his touch like a she was on fire. He needed to get in her before he spilled himself. In a smooth quick movement he guided between her legs and placed his hands on her hips to shift her for his initial invasion. He thrust into her growling his own pleasure as her body accepted him and tightened at the same time she cried out.

The cry that she released at his initial invasion was so sensual he nearly lost it.

He shifted his hips again and she moaned.

“Mitch—I can’t—“ she gasped. “Is it supposed to feel—oh Lord!” she released a loud moan of pleasure.

“Hold on—almost there.” He rasped while increasing the force of his movements, as she lifted her hips to meet his. It was different than before. A new urgency possessed the both of them this time as they strived to get closer, deeper and unleash the tumult of white hot explosive pleasure of their climax.

Her mind and body was wild—reaching and grasping for that peak as she writhed beneath him. Then it hit her like an earth shattering electrical storm that made her cry out in intense pleasure. With a shout and a final thrust Mitch found his own. He nearly wasn’t able to hold out. He rolled on his side bringing her with him and it was a good five minutes before either one of them said anything. They couldn’t, they were both still trying to catch their breath.

“God you just keep blowing my mind.” He breathed.

She lifted herself up with some difficulty because her whole body felt completely boneless and stared down at him with a sensual smile. “Do you mean that Mitch?”

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling for a

moment still trying to catch his breath. She could see the perspiration covering his skin in fine beads. His naked chest and abdomen rose and fell with every inhalation. *He was so sinfully gorgeous*, she thought. “Mitch?”

“Um hmm?”

She smiled at the sound of satisfaction in his voice. “Do you mean it?”

He shifted his head and looked at her, “Hell yes.”

She lifted her brows and smiled at him adoringly, “Aw you say the sweetest things.” She said causing him to laugh. Then she paused and wiggled her feet, “Are my toes supposed to be tingling?” This time she was surprised by a devilish grin. “Oh no, ego boost.” She laughed seeing his arrogant expression.

“You little minx.” He chuckled, then sighed deeply.

“What?”

“We’re in trouble kitten.” He said running a finger across her swollen bottom lip.

“We are?” unable to help herself she reached out and ran her hand up his stomach causing him to give her a smouldering look.

“Yes.” He said grabbing her hand with his and kissing it, “what have I told you about touching me?”

She smiled, “Tell me what you mean about being in trouble.”

He kissed her hand again and laid it on his chest still holding it, “Because we are really really good at this, and it’s getting better and better.” His eyes raked down her naked form, “I can only imagine what it’ll be like with practice, and I’m already hard with wanting you again.”

Her emerald eyes glinted, “The fact that you want me Mitch, has my insides burning.”

He shot on top of her causing her to squeal in delight.

Several hours later a familiar noise woke him. It took a

minute to gain his senses of where he was. Jesse was curled up against him with her lovely face buried in his neck. They were on the floor beside her bed in a tangle of limbs and blankets. He smiled, kissed her cheek and moved over her to reach his cell phone. She groaned and opened her eyes as he put his finger to his lips and flipped it open.

“Mitch.” He said lazily wiping his tired eyes with his other hand.

“Mitch, where the hell are you?” It was Adam.

“In town.” What time was it? He thought looking at his watch and near laughed, they’d been asleep for over two hours.

“Christ, Meagan thought something might have happened to you.”

“No, we’re fine.” He reached out and ran two fingers down Jesse’s jaw, “Jesse’s just sorting through her enormous wardrobe for a gown.” Her eyes narrowed and he grinned.

“All right, but if you take much longer, Meagan’s sending out a search party.”

“I hear you. We’ll be home in an hour.” He hung up, and stared down at her, “that adjoining door to our rooms will remain open from now on.”

“yes boss.”

‘don’t get lippy.” He said groaning while reluctantly getting up, “Come on honey, you heard that conversation, the family is getting worried.”

“Oh, well worth it.” She smiled propping herself up on an elbow while watching his naked form as he picked his underwear and jeans up off the floor, “Gosh Mitch, you are gorgeous.”

He stopped and gave her a devilish grin, while pulling on his clothing leaving his jeans unbuttoned as they hung loosely on his lean hips, “Get dressed or we’ll be another four hours late.”

Laughing softly she rolled onto her side and sat up looking around her room, “My God Mitch, you have my clothes

everywhere.”

“I was in a hurry.” He chuckled while doing up his jeans before bending over and scooping his shirt up off the floor.

She laughed and reached for her underwear.

After they both got dressed she chose a gown of silver satin for tomorrow night with Mitch’s complete approval.

Mitch led her out of the house to the truck. He opened the door but before he let her get in, he gave her a thoroughly devastating kiss.

“What was that for?” she said wide-eyed.

“For letting me be your first.” He brushed his mouth over her again, “I never did thank you for that.”

She laughed, and pushed at him, “The neighbours are going to talk.”

He glanced around, she was probably right and reluctantly released her.

When they arrived back at the ranch Mitch took her hand and held it while leading her into the house. They both got speculative looks from everyone when they arrived ten minutes late for supper. Mitch just ignored them, but Jesse couldn’t help but be a little embarrassed. Although the family wouldn’t dare spread gossip about them, it was obvious the way they had been toward one another lately that their delay was probably more than Jesse just picking out a dress. Her thoughts were confirmed when Meagan actually blushed when meeting her gaze.

Mitch squeezed her hand then as if to say ‘don’t pay it any mind’ before he pulled out a chair next to his and helped her sit down. Obviously he noticed her discomfort. She wished she could be more like him in that regard but it mattered to her what the Wightmans thought about her, because they were like a second family to her.

She was thankful that during dinner conversation was friendly and jovial, but more thankful when it was over and she

could go get ready for the dance. She had just changed into her gown and was pinning up her hair when there was a knock at the door. She thought it might be Mitch but she doubted very much Mitch would knock.

It was Meagan standing there in a lovely pale pink, strapless dress.

“Hi, can I come in.”

“Of course,” said Jesse a little surprised at seeing her there, “I was just finishing my hair, and it’s your house.”

Meagan came in and shut the door behind her, “I didn’t mean to interrupt. The men are huddled in Adam’s study with the door closed like some sort of secret society.”

Jesse smiled, “So you felt left out?”

Meagan shook her head and laughed, “No, I just needed to apologize. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable at dinner Jesse.”

“Meagan—” Jesse interrupted not wanting to discuss it but Meagan held up her hand, “Please, I need to say this because I’ve been there.” She waited until Jesse gave her a nod to continue, “I think the world of you and Mitch, and besides Sarah, you’re my best friend. I never in a million years want you to think that I judge you.” She said looking a little uncomfortable herself. “I just wanted to explain because I know what it’s like.” She stopped pursing her lips to keep from smiling, “Not only that it’s so surprising to see Mitch go all soft like that.”

Jesse blushed, “he’s not.”

Meagan nodded, “He looks at you like he’s starving.”

“Meagan stop.”

“It’s true,” she continued, “Adam says he’s in love with you.”

This brought Jesse’s head up, “Did he tell him that?” She said softly in disbelief. She always thought it didn’t matter if he didn’t say it to her because she knew he wasn’t like this with

another woman, but hearing that from Meagan suddenly made her long for it. Silently she prayed that he did say it out loud to someone and when Meagan nodded, Jesse thought her heart burst, “That stubborn man wouldn’t tell me but he’d tell his brother?” She shook her head and crossed her arms under her breasts.

Meagan placed a hand on her arm, “Give him time Jesse, you know Mitch better than anyone. This whole thing probably hit him like a hammer, and it’s taking time for him to adjust. Adam was the same way, only he just yelled at me a lot and everyone else come to think of it.”

Jesse laughed, “I remember. I also remember that he was as white as a sheet when he found you in the hills and brought you home when you got thrown from your horse.”

“One small incident in a series of spitting arguments.” Meagan reminded her with a twinkle in her eyes, “But it was so worth it.” She said with a laugh showing Jesse her wedding ring to indicate that in the end the battles were worth it.

Just then Mitch walked in unannounced.

Meagan scolded him for being so bold because they could both be half dressed.

He shrugged his shoulders and cast a heated glance at Jesse who blushed profusely causing Meagan to roll her eyes before she left to find Adam.

“You make it obvious to everyone what’s going on between us Mitch.” She flustered.

“Good.” He answered gathering her in his arms, “I told you before I don’t give a shit what people think.”

“I care what your family thinks of me.” She protested but didn’t resist his embrace. If anything she gave in completely laying her head on his shoulder.

“My family thinks you’re an amazing woman, just like I do.” He answered while nuzzling her neck, “Hell woman, you

even smell amazing.” He said lifting his head and giving her a grin that could easily melt her internal organs.

It was her turn to roll her eyes, “How can I even get upset with you if you keep smiling at me like that?”

Just then Adam’s thunderous roar of impatience reached their ears from downstairs causing her eyes to widen.

“I think,” he said giving her a brief kiss on the mouth, “We’ll continue this discussion later, or he’ll be up here busting down the door.”

She nodded in agreement and took Mitch’s offered hand. Although she really wanted to ask him about the things that Meagan brought up. Did he really truly love her? If he did, why didn’t he tell her instead of his brother? She knew he and Adam were close, but for somehow she thought she had gotten closer to him than anyone. It shouldn’t have hurt her, but for some reason it did.

As soon as they entered the crowded dance hall a half an hour later. Adam leaned down and whispered something in his wife’s ear to which she gave him a generous smile and nodded before he left through the crowd.

Then Jesse spotted Duncan and Maggie through the crowd and waved. Duncan waved them over while pointing to the table letting them know he saved them seats. The music was loud but she liked it and the local band that was hired to play.

Mitch seated Meagan on one side of him and Jesse on the other after he shook Duncan’s hand and greeted Maggie.

Meagan smiled at Maggie, “I’ve met you before, you work a Sarah’s mother’s diner.”

“I do.” Maggie answered.

Meagan had to strain to hear her soft voice above the music and the noise of the crowd. She always thought she was nice, but very shy. It was a hard combination for being a waitress because the people of Prosper were very open and liked to talk.

The diner was one of those places the farmers and ranchers seemed to gather and talk about the crops, animals and usually town gossip. However, she noticed that Maggie never got involved and hardly said a word when her opinion was asked. To Meagan she seemed out of place in that job, but that didn't mean she didn't do it well, it just didn't seem to suit her. Also, dating Duncan was a bit of a surprise because he was outgoing and talkative besides being very likable. She thought that his strong personality would have frightened the new girl off, but from the several adoring looks she gave him, it was obvious that she did like him.

"Where did Adam go?" Jesse leaned forward to see past Mitch's large form to Meagan.

She just waved a dismissive hand, "He had something to do." Then she turned and began talking to Maggie again.

Jesse thought that brief answer was a little odd. Maybe he went to get them something to drink? The band began to play a song she liked and her other thoughts were pushed aside. Then she felt Mitch's hand take hers as he leaned over and spoke in her ear.

"come babe, let's dance." He said standing up and pulling her with him not giving her a chance to respond, not that she'd turn him down. She loved dancing, and she loved him.

It felt like she was in a dream to have him hold her so closely so she could feel the hard length of his strong warm body against hers. It reminded her of them together in bed and suddenly she felt as though she didn't care what people thought, at least she was with Mitch. Her hands were clasped in his large ones as he turned her about on the floor and kept her close to his body and she forgot about the other people around them. Yes, she loved him, there was no doubt. Sighing heavily she yielded against him and heard his soft chuckle.

"It's your own fault," she mumbled against his throat.

“Hm-mm” he answered turning his face into the side of her temple and brushing his mouth across the skin there.

Then to her disappointment the song ended too soon and they broke apart, but he didn’t release her hands. In fact he didn’t move but held her in place. Someone clearing their throat on the microphone brought her eyes to the stage to see Adam standing there holding a drink in his hand.

“What—“

Mitch squeezed her hand as his brother began to talk.

“My wife knows I’m not too good at words,” he said clearing his throat again as the crowd released a few chuckles, “but I somehow found myself volunteering for this.” He paused seeking out his brother in the crowd through the stage lights. “So I’m going to do my best—forgive me Mitch if I screw this up.”

Jesse’s eyes darted back to his and he gave her a look that made her heart skip a beat, but she couldn’t say anything because Adam continued to talk into the microphone,

“We all know what a sweetheart Jesse is right?” the crowd answered with whoops and hollers and much to her embarrassment, cat whistles. “Calm down—“ he paused looking through the crowd and receiving more chuckles, “And withhold those catcalls because Mitch might have something to say about it. “ There was a round of laughter, “and as of tonight—“ he continued, centering his eyes back on the couple as did everyone else, “—if she says yes, I would like to welcome her to the family.” He held his drink up just as Jesse’s mouth fell open. She shot her eyes to Mitch’s who released one of her hands and fished in his suit pocket for a moment pulling out a little black velvet box. Her hands clasped her mouth as he opened it to reveal a stunning engagement ring of white gold with a large diamond.

“It was my mothers.” He said as he got down on one knee in front of her and the hall was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop in anticipation of what came next. “You know I’m not big

on flashiness,” he said with a smile, “I’m a man who likes a simple life and if you are willing to accept that about me, I’ll do everything within my power to make you happy Jesse. In front of everyone here I’m telling you that I love you. Marry me.”

She was speechless. Tears poured from her eyes, but she did manage a nod which sent the crowd into ear splitting shouts and applause.

Mitch stood up and embraced her, “I would like a Christmas wedding instead of a spring wedding, because if I have to sleep alone until spring, I’ll be certifiable without you.” He said huskily into her ear. A choked sob and a nod was her answer.

The band started playing again and instead of leading her off the floor he held her for another dance, but they didn’t move much. Even when others danced around them giving pats on his shoulder and back with voiced congratulations to the both of them.

“Are you happy Jesse?” he asked her as the song ended.

“I am.” She said with tears still glistening in her eyes, ‘More than I can say.” She sniffed, “I need to go and get washed up. I’m sure my makeup is running.”

“You’re still beautiful.” He said sincerely, “but okay. I’ll wait for you at our table.”

She nodded, gave him a stunning smile, and reluctantly released his hand to go to the ladies room.

Mitch made his way back to their table to see Meagan sitting on Adam’s lap sharing with his arms around her protectively. He cocked a brow and took a seat beside him, “And you said I made you nauseous.”

“I did remind you that I married her.” Adam replied with a grin while planting a kiss on his wife’s cheek, which in turn made her smile as her eyes lit on Mitch causing him to shake his head.

“Where’s Jess?”

“The ladies room. I made her cry.” He said with a grin of his own.

“That whole thing made me cry too.” Said Meagan, “I’m jealous.”

“Jealous—“ Adam said, “Honey don’t you remember how I proposed—“ she slapped a hand over his mouth.

“No one needs to know.” She said flushing with embarrassment. His eyes glittered and narrowed in amusement at her discomfort. She knew that look and knew he was willing to spill the beans so she leaned into him, “It was amazing. Not one day has gone by that I didn’t think about it.” She whispered, “Now don’t say another word.” She added with a warning look. His answer was an arrogant chuckle.

Duncan came back to the table with drinks for them all, “I thought we should celebrate. It’s not a hundred year old scotch,” he said with amusement, “but whiskey’s good for anything.”

“Here here!” said Adam.

They all took their drinks and toasted to Mitch’s engagement.

After about ten minutes, Mitch turned to Duncan and Adam, “Jesse’s been gone too long,”

Adam nodded, and squeezed his wife’s thigh, “Can you go and get Jesse. Mitch is getting worried.”

“Sure.” She said rising from his lap and heading off to the ladies room.

Mitch didn’t wait for her to come back, he got up and hovered outside the door waiting. A few minutes later Meagan came out with her face pale.

“She’s not in there.”

He spared her a single glance before he barged in and searched the stalls one by one, whether they were occupied or not causing several women to scream at the sight of the large man

with a menacing look on his face. Within moments Duncan and Adam was with him. Meagan was quick in getting them.

“Maybe she’s talking to someone in the crowd or dancing.” Suggested Adam, but he already knew that she wasn’t. Jesse knew that they were still worried about her protection until the dead man was properly identified.

Duncan must’ve thought the same thing because he was already on the phone with his deputies.

“I won’t let anyone leave tonight until we interview all of the guests.” He said between orders on the phone.

Mitch stood there feeling ice water in his veins; he already knew that Jesse was long gone.

Adam stared at his brother with a familiar dread. It was barely a year ago that his wife was kidnapped and he knew all too well what his brother was going through. “We’ll find her Mitch.” The same words he’d spoken to him a year ago.

Mitch nodded again not saying anything. He was afraid to in case hearing the cracking of his own voice made him lose it.

An hour later the crowd had thinned as Duncan and his deputies sorted through them one by one taking names and information. Those they didn’t know well enough were retained for questioning. The rest of them were asked if anyone saw Jesse on her way in or out of the rest room. Only one older woman who knew Jesse from Jarrett’s clinic said she saw her with a man, but because of the lighting in the hall, couldn’t describe him all that well. She only knew the man she was with wasn’t her new fiancé because the fiancé was a giant having seen the proposal only a few minutes prior, and this man was much much shorter.

“Did she look frightened, calm?” asked Duncan.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t pay much attention.” She paused, “He did have his hand around her waist. I remember that much and it looked as if his other hand was inside his suit.

That meant he probably had a gun on her, thought

Duncan. He looked over at his other deputy, "Erik, bring me that mug shot." It was the one they got of Mike Armstrong. When he showed it to the woman she shook her head.

"that's not him."

"Are you sure, you said the light wasn't good."

"No, it's not. This guy was blond—not dark like that." She looked up at the hair on Duncan's head, "About your color, I think. Maybe not as light."

Was there a fourth brother they didn't know about? He thanked the woman and asked her to give her information to the deputy before he pulled out his phone and walked outside where it was quieter. He had to phone his friend in the FBI and find out for sure that there wasn't any more criminals in the Armstrong family that he should be concerned about.

Adam had sent his wife home with one of the Ranch hands that was at the dance. She was distraught and had no problem showing what he felt for Mitch and Jesse. He took some time reassuring her and trying to get her to calm down because of the baby and it seemed to help.

"You find her Adam." She said releasing another sob, then she cast a glance past him to Mitch who was sitting on the step smoking while staring off into the darkness of the night, "Keep him focused."

"I will honey. I'll phone you when I hear anything." He kissed her thoroughly before letting Red help her in the truck.

CHAPTER NINE

A week to the day of Jesse's disappearance, Mitch left the sheriff's office more disappointed than ever. All their leads ran cold. Mike was the dead man by the river and the Armstrongs had no close relatives, and the few distant relatives they had were nowhere near Prosper at the time of Jesse's abduction. A large

hollow feeling started to take over him and no matter how hopeful he tried to be, inside he was devastated.

Over and over again he told himself he should have never let her go alone that night of the dance, but he did. He did exactly what Adam warned him about and let his guard down. Then Mitch was left with the task of calling Jarrett who came home on the next available flight. The look on his friend's face, just added to his guilt even though he didn't blame him. "It could have happened to anyone Mitch." Jarrett told him, which didn't make him feel any better, if anything it made him feel worse.

Jesus, he needed a smoke, he thought pulling into the parking lot of the super market. He started smoking more and more since her disappearance. Jarrett offered him sedatives to help him sleep but he refused. He wasn't sleeping or eating much because of the guilt and worry he had for Jesse.

He wasn't a very religious man either, but he'd been praying every day for her safe return and hoping she was alive.

It was just his luck that he ended up behind Charlie Goemer of all people at the line up to the cashier. He felt like hell, probably looked like he was run over by a herd of rabid bulls, and when the man flashed him an odd look, he knew he did. He set his carton of cigarettes down behind Charlie's groceries holding on for them a moment with his head bent and then without hesitating reached for his gun.

Adam was on the phone with his father when his cell phone rang that was lying on his desk. "Dad, I've got to go my cell is ringing." He said picking it up and reading the caller ID, "It's Duncan."

Adam, Mitch, and Jasper's father moved to the city and left the boys the ranch after their mother died. He came home once or twice a year for visits, but it was still too painful for him. Besides that, he still ran his multimillion dollar empire with energy of someone half of his seventy years of age.

“All right son, I’ll let you know if our private investigators find out anything more.”

He hung up and flipped open his cell phone, “Duncan, please tell me you caught a break.”

“Actually, Adam we need you in town. It seems as though Mitch has snapped. He’s taken Charlie Goemer hostage in the supermarket and is threatening to kill him.”

Adam shot to his feet, “The hell you say!” That didn’t sound like Mitch at all. Even with Jesse missing this past week, Mitch looked lost, but not insane.

“Look he won’t let us in, and Charlie’s screaming. I think he’s beating the shit out of him. I tried calling him but he won’t answer his phone. We won’t go barging in there either because I know he’s armed and I’m not quite sure what frame of mind he’s in. Jesus, Adam I’ve never seen him like this.”

“I’m on my way. Duncan don’t do anything!”

“Well the mayor got wind of it and is demanding we go in there guns blazing. I may lose my job, but I sure as hell am not going to shoot Mitch, so hurry the hell up before he calls in the state troopers, because they won’t wait!”

Adam was already out of the house heading toward the ranch truck when he hung up the phone. He peeled out of there like he was escaping a burning building causing gravel and dust to fly everywhere and the truck to fishtail wildly while dialling Mitch’s phone. It rang and rang, but he didn’t answer. Adam cursed and stepped hard on the accelerator.

Mitch was leaning back against the checkout counter while sitting on the floor, knees bent, and his hands resting casually on his knees. One of them was holding his gun. He glanced over at Charlie who was barely recognizable with his face swollen and battered. The bastard had passed out on him again. *Well he had all night* he thought looking at the man who’s steady breathing told him he was still alive.

A wrapping on the window made him direct his attention to see his brother Adam standing out there with his hands held up. He knew Duncan had been out there for the last two hours with the whole police department trying to get him to answer his cell phone when he first grabbed Charlie by the collar and started pounding the crap out of him. People ran out of there screaming until the store was completely empty. He also knew it was Duncan who prevented his men from storming the place. It was something he counted on. He spared a glance at the unconscious man on the floor and slowly got to his feet, stepped over him and walked to the front door unlocking it to let Adam in.

Adam ever said a word, but he was more than surprised at the shape Charlie was in. He knew Mitch may have looked relaxed and maybe he could take him and wrestle the gun from him, but something told him this wasn't as it seemed and if he tried to unarm Mitch, he might make things worse. He seemed too calm. Almost as if he was under complete control of himself, and not the raving lunatic he was expecting.

He heard the click of the lock on the door and Mitch walked by him to take his spot beside Charlie again. Sliding down to the floor with obvious weariness. His knuckles showed signs of bruising and Adam knew that Mitch wasn't gentle. Hell, looking at the mess of the man sprawled on the floor told him that.

"You want to talk to me about this?" Adam asked.

Mitch looked up at him, "I want some answers." He said casting a glance at Charlie.

"Answers?"

"Yeah." He pointed to up to the top of the conveyer belt, "I was getting smokes."

Adam gave his head a mental shake. Mitch wasn't making any sense. However, Mitch was also the most level headed man he knew and for him to snap like this was unheard

of. On the other hand, Jesse meant everything to him and if it happened to Meagan he would probably be in worse shape. Worse thoughts filled his head, maybe the things that happened overseas began to surface and combined with this recent blow, he did finally lose it.

He crouched down on the balls of his feet in front of his brother, "Mitch, you need to tell me what's going on in that head of yours, because you're scaring the shit out of me. The state police are on their way, and Dunk's doing his best to calm the Mayor, but if I don't get you to surrender soon, we both will be neck deep in hell." He said keeping his voice as calm as he could.

Mitch lifted his eyes to Adam's and it dawned on him how crazy everything looked. Truth was, he did snap, but there was no other way. "Hell," he said not realizing how bad things really were, but he was so focused on Jesse.

"Come on Mitch, tell me what's going on."

Mitch started talking and his brother listened.

Jesse wasn't sure how many days had passed since she was taken from the dance, but she was starving, thirsty and the box he'd locked her in was stifling even in her underwear. He'd long since removed her gown when he forced her into the dark cubicle. At first she screamed terror for what seemed like hours, but no one came to her rescue, yet, there was a house next door. She saw it on the way in, but the way the box was built must've muffled her screams to dull noises that couldn't penetrate the wall of his house.

Her tears had dried up days ago and all she had left were wretched dry sobs. Her feet were bound as were her wrists and he let her out twice a day to use the bathroom but that was it and she couldn't even think about how he stood there and watched her with a sadistic twist of his mouth.

Even though she was locked in a box barely wide and

long enough for her to turn over, he felt the need to keep her tied. Another part of his sadism, she shuddered. He withheld food and water telling her that she must behave and do what he wanted her to do, but she refused and had gone without. It was sick the things he demanded of her and she would rather die than go through with them.

She could feel the skin of her wrists and ankles rubbed raw from the ropes. There was pain and in some ways she was glad because it kept her mind focused on something besides thinking of what Jarrett, Mitch and his family were going through—her poor Mitchell! He must be beside himself. Her body somehow found enough fluid to let a tear fall from one of her eyes. What she wouldn't give to be lying next to him right now!

When he'd first brought her there he'd left her long enough for her screams to die down before he had unlocked the box and hauled her out by her hair making her kneel at his feet and to try and get her to beg him to kiss her. Then he would feed her, he said while dangling food in her face to tempt her to give in, but she wouldn't.

A backhand across the face was her punishment for refusing his request sending her sprawling across the floor. Then he hauled her up so his face was inches from hers and he was furious. Little droplets of spittle hit her face from his mouth as he was telling her that in a few more days, she'd be doing things to him she never fathomed and liking it. He knew what he was talking about he said, because the other girls did the same thing and she was no different.

He could have forced her, she knew he could have, but for some reason he'd rather have her beg him for it. In fact it wasn't the first time he'd hit her. She felt the swollen skin of her cheek with her bound hands. The last time he did knocked her unconscious.

She near lost her mind then when he pulled her out of there and he taunted her that the police had been to the house inquiring about her. They were doing a door to door search and he invited them in to search all they wanted, but they wouldn't find her, because she was locked away, hidden from view. She felt desolate at his admission, not even hearing the doorbell. She remembered his cold laugh, telling of how he acted all concerned and how he was even going to go on the search party to make things look good and wish her poor fiancé his heartfelt condolences. She flung herself at him trying to claw at him with her bound hands, but he easily shoved her to the floor. Then he brought his booted foot down on one of her hands making her cry out.

"There!" he said, bending over her and gathering her long hair around his fist, "That's what I want to hear when I take you over and over again."

That was the last thing she remembered because he'd struck her again and knocked her out. She didn't know how long she was out for, or what time it was because it was pitch black and every time he pulled her out of there her eyes would sting from the light of the room. It took a while for her to focus on anything and from what she did notice, there wasn't any clocks. A sob of hopelessness escaped her. She was sure hours had passed since she'd last saw her captor. Then almost as if she brought it on by thinking it, terror flooded through her as she heard the lock on the box being opened. She couldn't go through this again and again and made up her mind then and there that she'd emerge fighting despite how weak she was and maybe he'd kill her this time.

When the lid was lifted she screamed and lunged with her hands and nails just to be held by strong arms, but she got at least one scratch in from the curse that was released, then she heard a different voice.

“Jesus! Don’t hurt her!”

She recognized Adam’s deep baritone and froze while opening and focusing her eyes. Then there was Mitch pushing through the men and grabbing her away from the one in front of her by shoving him out of the way, kneeling down and gathering her in his arms.

“Mitch!” she wretched clinging to him.

“Someone get me something to cover her!” he barked tightening his hold, then bowed his head over hers, “It’s all right baby, your safe.”

She was so overwhelmed with emotion she could only nod and try and get closer not missing the anguish in his voice. “You got him.” She managed brokenly.

“I got him.” Mitch responded thickly. She was trembling more than she did when the robber had a gun to her head. He felt such pain at her condition he could barely stand. Nonetheless he did, as Adam took off his coat and draped it over her. She was gaunt, and besides the dark circles under her eyes, she was terrified beyond imagination.

The last thing she heard was his soothing voice before everything went black.

When she came to it was Jarrett who sat beside her holding her hand. It took her a moment to take in her surroundings and realize that she was in the hospital.

“Hey sis.” Jarrett said trying to smile through the pained expression on his face.

She tried to sit up but he put a hand on her shoulder and made her lay down, “Don’t try it, not yet. You’re severely dehydrated,” he explained. “Lucky me that I was able to get a vein. Give it a few hours yet before you try and sit up.”

Her eyes darted around the room, “Where’s Mitch?”

Jarrett pursed his lips.

“Jarrett?” she narrowed her eyes, “Where’s my fiancé?”

He released a defeated sigh, "In surgery."

This time she managed to get up halfway before he pushed her back down, "What—what surgery?"

"It's all right Jesse, he'll live. He got shot in the arm, that's all. A little bullet can't stop that hulk. Don't worry." In fact he refused to leave Jesse's side even when Jarrett told him of the consequences of infection and blood loss. In the end it was Adam who threatened to beat some sense in him and Meagan's soft reassurance that Jesse wouldn't be alone when she woke up that finally convinced him.

"How did he get shot?" if he got shot in the arm, how did he pick her up?

"I'll let him tell you that story."

"d—did—" she started to tremble, unable to finish.

Jarrett stood up and leaned over the bed rail and squeezed her hand while looking down at her, "Honey, you settle down, or I'll have to give you something for that and I don't want to drug my sister. Yes, they got him. Charlie's been arrested for kidnapping, assault, unlawful confinement, and so on. They have enough on him to keep him behind bars forever." That seemed to relieve some of her fear and she relaxed a little.

Someone clearing their throat made her turn her head. It was Duncan standing in the doorway holding a large bouquet of flowers, "Can I come in?"

"Yes," said Jarrett, "come in Duncan." He returned his attention to Jesse, "Jess, Dunk needs to ask you some questions. If you can't answer them, don't force them they can wait, but the more you answer the best our chances are at putting Charlie away sooner, okay?"

"I'll be okay."

"I'm going to go check on Mitch and I'll be back and let you know how he's doing."

"Thanks." She said managing a slight smile.

He bent over and kissed her nose, "I love you sis, remember that. A lot of people love you."

She felt the sting of tears in her eyes, "I think that's what kept me going." She released a shudder of emotion as more tears fell, "Knowing that there were people who wouldn't give up on me."

"You're right. And quit crying, I just started to get some juice back in you and you're letting it leak out again." He teased lightly causing her to smile before he turned to Duncan. "Take it easy on her."

"As God is my witness," he reassured taking the seat next to the bed that Jarrett had just vacated and setting the bouquet down on the bedside table. Jarrett gave her hand a final squeeze and left.

"Thanks for the flowers." She said looking at them, "I love lilies."

"Actually, they're from Mitch. He ordered them before they hauled him off to surgery kicking and screaming. My bouquet isn't as flashy, but it's coming."

"thanks anyway." She smiled at the image Duncan gave her about Mitch.

He pulled out a note pad and pen while studying her expression that suddenly looked tormented as her eyes fixated on the objects. He paused placing the pad and pen on his lap, "I won't expect you to answer anything that you don't want to."

"No, I'll be fine." She said quickly, "Let's do this while things are fresh in my mind."

"You're a brave girl Jesse." He said picking up his notepad again.

"Get this shit off me." Mitch said pulling on the I.V. tubing.

"Mr. Wightman," exclaimed a nurse, "Please—you'll dislodge the needle."

“That’s my purpose.” He returned sitting up.

“You’re only out of recovery, please stay in bed!”

“I need to see Jesse—”

“Let him up Linda.” Said Jarrett to the nurse as he came through the door, “He’s going to go no matter what.”

“Damn rights,” he grumbled wincing while rotating the shoulder of the arm they took the bullet out. He noticed they wrapped it in thick gauze, obviously it missed the bone or he’d have a cast and a sling. That was a good sign, he thought flexing his hand and forming a fist with it. It didn’t hurt as much as it did earlier either.

“Leave the I.V. in Mitch. You can use the pole to walk down to see Jesse.” Jarrett said evenly as if he had complete authority over Mitch’s actions. He nodded to the nurse for her to unplug it from the wall and get it ready for him. “Besides you need the fluids because you were to damn stubborn to have that bullet out and lost enough blood.”

Mitch seemed to comply as he waited for the nurse to finish doing what Jarrett asked her, “Where are my damn pants and the rest of my clothes.” He said fidgeting with the gown, “These bloody things have my ass hanging—”

“I’ll get them.” Said the nurse cutting him off and rooting in the cupboard of the bedside table trying to hide her smile. She certainly didn’t mind a man like Mitch showing off his backside.

He thanked her for his jeans and stood up to pull them on pausing for a moment until the dizziness passed.

“That’s what the pole is for,” Jarrett said, pushing it toward him, “I know you won’t use a wheelchair, so humour me and hold on to it.”

“All right, All right,” he groaned stepping into his jeans and pulling them up. “Is Jesse awake?” He said sitting back on the bed and putting his socks and shoes on. Wincing every time he moved his injured arm.

“Yes, she’s talking to Duncan.”

This made him still and bring his eyes to Jarrett, “I would prefer to be there.”

“I’m sure you would, but she doesn’t need distractions and this is hard enough with one of us in the room when she tells her story.” He paused, “there may be some things she doesn’t wish to share with you yet.”

Mitch rubbed his forehead with the hand of his uninjured arm and nodded letting him know that he heard him, “Jarrett, do you think he hurt her—I mean—”

“I know what you mean, and I don’t know.” Jarrett said with a haunted voice, “What I do know is Jesse needs time to deal with this, and we need to be there for her.” She needs to know that you still want her.”

“Of course I do! What kind of a question—”

Jarrett held up his hand cutting him off, “I wasn’t saying that I didn’t think you do Mitch, of course you do. I’ve worked in trauma units in big cities where women feel violated after certain events and feel worthless to their husbands, boyfriends, and fiancés.” He added, “So please just be patient with her if she displays that.”

Mitch tossed his shirt over his shoulder leaving the gown on because the I.V. tubing was in the way and stood up again, “Yeah, I understand.” He said holding on to the pole like Jarrett told him. After that first wave of dizziness, he knew Jarrett was right and he certainly didn’t want to delay seeing Jesse by passing out. “Let’s go see her.”

It took Duncan all of his willpower not to go back to the jail and shoot Charlie Goemer after Jesse finished her story. She may not have been raped but the emotional scars would definitely need time to heal. It was a shame that Mitch only knocked out a few of his teeth and broke his nose. He was so angry he thought about having Jarrett treat him but changed his

mind at the last moment and called in the other physician. He didn't want to help this sicko's chance in court. He wanted him put away forever.

Just then Mitch's large frame filled the doorway, but his eyes were on the woman in the bed.

"Jesse." He said wheeling his I.V. pole ahead of him.

Without listening to Jarrett's previous orders she sat up as he approached the bed just to be gathered into his strong embrace.

Despite the sharp pain in his arm from the movement, he pulled her tight to his chest and looked over her head at Duncan. "Thanks for not shooting me."

Duncan grinned. "Yeah, what are friends for?" he said, "I'll leave you guys be. Take care Jesse, I'll be back later to check on you." He didn't wait for her to answer after hearing a muffled sob as she gripped Mitch.

Jarrett was in the doorway and when Duncan nodded to him, he shut the door behind them leaving Mitch and Jesse alone. "How is she?"

"Well, she was strong enough to give me the whole story Jarrett, so I think she'll recover in time." He paused seeing the worried look on his friend's face, 'She wasn't raped.' The look of relief that passed over his features was mirrored in his own when she told him what had happened. "although Mitch will feel responsible for everything else that happened."

"I don't doubt that." Jarrett agreed. Although he wanted to be with them when they found her, he knew his place was at the hospital preparing for their arrival and he was right. He was the only one that could get the I.V. into her. However, the condition she was in was appalling. She was half naked, despite Mitch's large coat covering her. Then there were the bruises on her body where Charlie had beaten her not to mention how dehydrated and starved she was. Secretly he wished that Mitch

had killed Charlie and made him suffer for what he did to his beautiful sweet sister. Despite his emotional vulnerability he did his best to treat her. There were other doctors there, but he wouldn't let anyone near her and they backed off after Adam gave them one of his hard looks.

Mitch, however, was a different challenge. He was visibly bleeding and refused to be looked not wanting to leave Jesse's side. Even after he was shot, he insisted on going with the police to get her just to make sure that she was alive. Jarrett didn't think anything could have drug that man away from his sister when they brought her to the hospital.

So he was thankful for Adam and Meagan's presence to convince him with a promise that Jarrett would remain with her in case she woke up. He considered it for a long time and when Adam said that he'd be no used to Jesse if he was dead, he finally caved. By rights he shouldn't be up and walking around a half an hour out of recovery, but he knew it would be pointless to try and stop him. It was obvious the man was completely in love with Jesse despite feeling guilty. He knew he did. Even though he never said anything, he saw the anguished look in his eyes as he stared down at her.

No one blamed Mitch, and when Jarrett found out how he found her, he was floored. If Mitch wasn't crazy about his sister, there was no way on God's green earth she would have been found and it was clear to all of them that Charlie had planned this for a while. So sooner or later he would have gotten to her, and no one would have found her. He shuddered at the thought. If anything he owed Mitch everything for what he'd done even if he didn't think he did enough.

For a long time Mitch just stood there holding her. "Honey I have to sit down, or I'm going to make a fool out of myself and pass out." He said when he knew the dizziness he was feeling was not going to subside.

She instantly released him, “Oh, Mitch, Jarrett said you were shot—are you okay?” then she finally really looked at him, “You look terrible!” There were dark circles under his eyes and he looked like he lost some weight, “You look like me.” She added.

He waved a dismissive hand, “I’m fine now that you’re safe.”

“How did you get shot?”

Then he pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat his large frame in it and took her hand in his, “Charlie’s dad grabbed a gun from one of the deputies when I was coming out of the supermarket.”

“The Mayor shot you with a gun at the supermarket?” she said wide-eyed, “What happened?”

“Did anyone tell you anything?”

she shook her head, “Jarrett said it was up to you.”

His expression darkened for a moment remembering, then his eyes settled on her and it softened immediately. He squeezed her hand affectionately and leaned closer, “First, I need to know what happened to you.” She shook her head with a look of fear on her expression.

“Listen Jesse, don’t you dare think I don’t want you. Jarrett told me about women going through the trauma that—“

‘He didn’t rape me. He didn’t, I swear!’ She blurted out followed by a new wave of tears, “Oh God Mitch, it was still horrible!”

Mitch shot to his feet and gathered her into his arms again ignoring his own dizziness, “Tell me baby, please. Tell me everything,” he murmured softly while she wept, “I’m not going to let you go no matter what, so take your time. I need to know what happened to you.”

It took some coaxing but she told him that Charlie was waiting for her when she came out of the rest room. He had a

gun and forced her outside and into his car. He was in a rage over Mitch's proposal and accused her of cheating on him and that he always had plans for her. She tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen and when she saw hate in his eyes, she knew she was in trouble. That's when he forced her into the box concealed beneath his bed. With difficulty she told him the rest of the abused she endured because she refused to do what he wanted.

"But I didn't do anything he wanted! I swear. I'd rather die." She choked out.

"Shh Jess, you're safe now." Inside he was a twisted mass of rage, but he dare not show any of it to Jesse. She was traumatized enough. "I'm never letting you out of my sight as long as I live." He said tightening his hold on her. "I should have never let you out of my sight to begin with."

Her gaze shot to his, 'Mitch, don't you dare blame yourself for this. I never did. I kept thinking that if I screamed, or fought him at the dance hall, it would have never happened, but I never once blamed you. There was many people in there and maybe if I resisted he would have left me be—"

"Or shot you." Mitch interrupted, "I don't doubt he would have so what you did, by not fighting him, was stay alive." He bent down and kissed her passionately, "I don't know what I would have done without you in my life. What you did was right in every way." Tears started to pour from her eyes again at his words. "If it takes the rest of my life to make this up to you, I will."

"You didn't do anything wrong Mitch, quit blaming yourself please, it's breaking my heart." She felt his arms tighten, "Other than a few bruises, it will take me some time to let this fade from my memory, but if I have you, I know I'll get through it."

"You have me." He said his voice thick with emotion,

“You’ll have me as long as you want me.”

“Forever is a long time.” She found it within herself to actually tease.

“Not long enough.” He added kissing the top of her head glad to see that she was starting to feel better enough to tease him, but he didn’t share her humour. He still felt solely responsible for her condition despite her assurances. She seemed to know this.

“You found me Mitch, didn’t you?” she reminded him, ‘Could anyone else do that?’

Probably not, it was by chance that he’d discovered it was Charlie. “I don’t know.”

“I do.” She said with conviction, “But how did you know— How did you know it was Charlie?” she had difficulty getting the man’s name out.

He released her and cupped her head in his hands to look at her and allowed a bit of a smile to pull at his mouth, “Peach yoghurt and rice cakes.” At her look of confusion he actually chuckled. “Helen came to me complaining that you wouldn’t eat her cooking and that I should talk to you because you were too damn skinny. She mentioned that all you wanted the one morning was peach yoghurt and rice cakes. Well, when I set my carton of cigarettes down behind Charlie’s groceries at the supermarket this morning I noticed what he was buying and a man like Charlie doesn’t eat Peach Yoghurt or rice cakes, that’s a female thing.”

“Mitch, that’s incredible.” She said in awe, “I can’t believe you knew that from his groceries.”

“Yeah well, then I proceeded to beat him to a pulp and people thought I went insane. I did in a way. I didn’t even think beyond getting him to tell me where you were. I knocked him unconscious several times. The second time he woke up, Adam was there and after I told him what I knew, he helped me.

Finally the little bastard confessed.” He didn’t mention that he threatened to pull out his fingernails one by one with pliers that he retrieved from the hardware department.

“then you got shot?”

“Yeah, the mayor seemed to think that I was nuts and was trying to kill his son. So, when Adam and I finally let the paramedics take Charlie and we walked out of the doors to surrender ourselves and tell Duncan where you were, he grabbed a gun from a deputy and tried to shoot me.” He shrugged his shoulder, “I’m glad he was a lousy shot.”

“Mitch you could’ve been killed!”

“You were well worth it.” He said bending over and brushing his mouth across hers again, “Now lay down, you’re looking pale again.”

“Don’t leave.” She said pleadingly doing as he asked.

“I’m not. Wild horses couldn’t drag me away.” He said releasing her and sitting down again and releasing a welcome sigh, “I don’t think I’ve slept since you went missing.”

“My poor Mitchell, you must’ve been so worried.” She said looking at the shadows under his eyes.

“Leave it to you Jesse, to think of someone else after what you’ve gone through.” He said with his eyes full of emotion for her. “I hope you don’t want a big wedding, because the day you get out of here, we’re going to the justice of the peace.”

For the first time in what seemed like forever she grinned, “Mitch, I’d get married to you today if I could.”

“I have a better idea. I’ll make arrangements for us in Vegas for a honeymoon, then I can really show you off and show you the time of your life.”

“I love that idea!” she exclaimed.

He leaned forward in the chair and his gaze grew smouldering, “If you think for once that I’m letting you out of the hotel room you’re out of your tree.”

Despite her condition she actually blushed, “I can’t wait.”

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later Mitch touched the plane down on their private runway at the ranch with precision smoothness and groaned.

“What is it?” said Jesse who was sitting beside him in the Cessna. She had just returned from her honeymoon and elopement. Their brother checked them out of the hospital the next day protesting but knew it was pointless. Mitch just took her directly to the plane. They got married that evening in a little chapel in Vegas and true to Mitch’s word, they didn’t leave the hotel room for a week. Which was probably a good thing, because they didn’t have any clothes. Eventually he had to phone his family and let them know they were still alive, but Jarrett had called them when they had left to let them know not to worry.

The following week he took her shopping and spoiled her beyond belief. She not only got a new wardrobe, but he took her to every show she wanted to see and showered her with attention. Jesse thought that her life couldn’t get any better and those horrible incidences in Prosper started to fade. Although she couldn’t ignore the knots in the pit of her stomach when he touched the plane down.

Mitch nodded to the hanger they were approaching. A big banner hung across the door that said, “Mitch got hitched.”

Jesse laughed, “Well, you can’t blame them, I chase you for years.”

He slanted her an amused look, “I’m really glad you didn’t give up.” He meant it when he said it.

He cut the engine of the plane and helped her out before retrieving the luggage. Someone had nicely left one of the ranch trucks there with the keys in it and Jesse walked a few steps away

hugging herself when she felt arms come around her from behind.

Mitch planted a kiss on her cheek, "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm just a little nervous being back here after what happened. But it could've been a lot worse." She turned around to face him and smiled. "If I didn't have you Mitch, I'd be lost."

"You and me both." He said sincerely, "I didn't realize how empty my life was without you." He released her and held up a piece of paper, "Just to prepare you, this was on the windshield. It seems my family has prepared us a reception at the ranch."

"How thoughtful."

"Yeah, well, it probably started several hours ago and every single one of them are probably sloshed by now except poor Meagan because she's expecting."

That made her laugh.

'so, if you want we can get back in the plane, or face them. What do you say Mrs. Wightman?"

"I vote to face them." She grinned at the sound of that endearment, "Mr. Wightman."

'Brave girl." He said bending his head to kiss her.



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