

A photograph of a person wearing a cowboy hat and blue jeans, seen from the back, embracing another person. They are lying on a red and green checkered blanket. The text 'L. R. Wards' is overlaid in a yellow, serif font.

L. R. Wards

A
Pleasant
Surprise

A Pleasant Surprise

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*For my good friend Aimee and all others who feel the
inspiration of writing. Go with your dreams!*

CHAPTER ONE

“Dammit Logan, quit your bloody dallying and load the feed.” Lee bellowed from the other side of the truck. “Wyatt’s doing all the work.”

Logan tossed a look over his shoulder, taking his eyes from the pretty brunette for a moment, “Sure thing pa.” he called before settling his eyes back on her, “Duty calls Natalie.” He smirked completely unaffected by his father’s bellowing.

“No problem.” She said starting to back up and casting an unsure glance at his father. Every time she met Lee Strickland he was intimidating to her. Half the time he didn’t say a word and she still felt his presence. However, when he did speak, he had this voice that was able to elicit responses from people other than his sons. Logan might not seem affected but she nearly jumped to his commands. He was an old time cowboy who raised his sons under the same traditions as he was raised. Although she knew they probably had to deal with an incredible amount of discipline growing up, they sure turned into fine men. Her eyes guided to the oldest brother just emerging from the warehouse where they kept the feed.

Wyatt Strickland was every bit a cowboy like his father. She was sure that she was in love with him. When she was sixteen she was with her father when they delivered a load of lumber out to the ranch and he was working on a fence close to the road. It was a hot day so he’d disposed of his shirt and was bare from the waist up. His horse was tied to a post close by with his shirt tossed absently on the saddle horn. She even remembered the color. Pale green.

The presence of the horse let her know that he rode out to fix the fence and didn’t take the truck. It was admirable to her that he did things that way. Most men checked the fences by vehicle.

A Pleasant Surprise

At least she thought they did.

Nothing could erase that memory from her mind. He was incredibly tan, muscular and coated with a layer of perspiration while he concentrated heavily on the task at hand, not even seeming to notice the truck go by. He wore his cream Stetson pulled low over his brow to protect his face from the sun and the vision was incredibly sexy.

Her eyes watched him in the side mirror until he was out of sight. To a young naïve girl at the time, it was an incredible sight and she never forgot it. Even now she was remembering that day as if it happened just yesterday until Logan's voice pulled her back to the present.

"Tell Missy, I'll phone her later." Logan said giving her a charming grin that worked quite well on the opposite sex when he wanted it to. Yet, Natalie's eyes were drawn to something else past him but she nodded that she heard him.

As he turned to do as his father asked, he saw what drew her attention. He spotted Wyatt coming out of the warehouse with a fifty five pound bag of feed on each shoulder.

Because he wore a sleeveless t-shirt his thick arms were clearly visible as they surrounded each sack revealing the size of the muscles that he possessed. Muscles all earned from hard work. Not once did he break stride or slow down showing that it was no effort at all to tote such weight and he'd already made half a dozen trips.

Logan shook his head. When his brother was around women didn't notice him at all and he was quite conceited where his looks were concerned. Logan knew he had charm and the looks to back it up, but Wyatt had that thick, hard body and although he wasn't ugly he had a quiet strength about him that attracted women. Yet, he didn't indulge as often as Logan did.

Logan wasn't soft and flabby by any means because he'd worked alongside Wyatt since he was five, but his older brother

had a good forty five pounds of muscle on him he was sure of it. It wasn't that Logan was lazy, it was just that his brother worked like a bloody machine and Logan needed a social life.

As Wyatt turned to go back to the warehouse Logan fell in step beside him, "Natalie Taylor is watching you."

Wyatt shrugged as he entered the building "She's not my type."

Logan smiled as Wyatt tossed another two bags on his thick shoulders. Natalie Taylor was the daughter of the General store owner that also sold bulk feed and lumber. It was the only store like that to serve their community of around twenty-two thousand including the surrounding ranchers and farmers. She was quite pretty, but young. He was sure she wasn't even twenty yet, and Wyatt was twenty seven, two years his senior. However, if he thought she was a little freer with her affections, like her older cousin Missy, he would have gone out with her years ago. Still, there was that other thing. She wasn't interested in him.

Missy on the other hand gave him what he wanted, when he wanted. She was the daughter of a lawyer and her family was quite well off. She liked to play the deviant child and go against her parents, so Logan snatched her up. She certainly wasn't a virgin when they had sex for the first time, but he definitely wasn't complaining. He picked her up in the bar and rocked his truck for almost three straight hours. Ever since then it had been a routine to get together. He liked her because of what she could do, but he certainly didn't love her and she definitely wasn't a girl you'd take home to mom.

After he packed two sacks on his shoulders mimicking Wyatt's load, he walked toward the truck following him. He could see Natalie sweeping off the porch of the store. Unlike Missy, Natalie was definitely someone you'd take home to mom. Already he knew his mom would adore her. Yet again, she wasn't interested in him and he doubted very much that he could fall in

A Pleasant Surprise

love with her. He liked feisty experienced women. Even Missy didn't bring that affection out of him and she was more along his expectations experience wise.

She glanced up and smiled at him before she cast one in Wyatt's direction then quickly resumed her chore. She was shy around Wyatt, but she was nice to him and he liked that about her. Her hair was really long and although she had it in a braid down her back, he was sure it reached her bottom. He'd never seen it unbound. Her eyes were a stunning jade green and when he first met her, he'd thought she had contacts but when he took a closer look he realized that they were actually her own. A man could get lost in large gorgeous eyes like that, but again, it wasn't him she was interested in.

She moved here four years ago when her mother died. Apparently the story was that her parents had divorced and she stayed with her mother when her father moved back to Martindale where he was born. It took him almost three months to get that out of her. Now she talked to him easily, but unlike other women that he spoke too, Natalie showed absolutely no attraction toward him and it took him some time to figure out why.

Wyatt.

There was no doubt that Wyatt was attractive to the opposite sex, but he didn't seem to take much notice in it. It probably had something to do with his responsibilities at the ranch. As it was, their father put most of it on him. Logan was fine with that because he liked to have a bit of a life besides cattle.

Problem was, his strong quiet attitude made him more striking. He'd heard it quite often from women when his brother was around.

There was another reason why he probably wasn't that interested in a relationship. The last serious relationship he was in was disastrous. He was engaged once several years before

Natalie moved here, but it turned out she was not faithful. Whenever Wyatt went out of town, she indulged herself with other men. Logan was pretty sure that destroyed him for getting involved again after all they'd been dating since high school.

She was still around town married to a banker, but he knew that she was still up to her old ways. Rumours carried easily around here. It was obvious now that back then she wanted a man with money and their family didn't have any. Wyatt was trying to save for the big wedding she wanted along with the engagement ring, but thankfully he'd found out about her before he paid for anything. Since then, oil was discovered on their land and Logan could have laughed in her face when she found out the family was now richer than her now banker husband.

She'd even called a few times after that, but Wyatt didn't acknowledge her or even answer the call. He never let on that he had any harsh feelings over it, but then again, that was Wyatt. Emotions weren't something he advertised openly.

Even though they had money, plenty of it, their father made sure that the two of them never got out of a hard day's work. If people thought that Wyatt could look hard at times, their father took the cake. He was a large man, something Wyatt inherited in stature whereas Logan was leaner, in an athletic sense. Both of them possessed their father's height and although the man was in his seventies, he still stood over six feet tall. In the past few years he had slowed down some. Others didn't notice, but his sons did. Oh, he still tried to keep up with them, but to save his pride; they would go out of their way to complete tasks prior to him getting there.

He tossed the two oat sacks on top of Wyatt's in the back of the truck and turned to follow him back to the warehouse. Then he noticed Wyatt glance over at Natalie who had her back turned while continuing to sweep off the porch of the store. It was very subtle, almost invisible and Wyatt didn't even slow his stride

A Pleasant Surprise

when he did it, but Logan probably knew his brother better than anyone. Wyatt wouldn't have even spent one iota on something that didn't interest him. Everything he did had a purpose.

After his fiancé left him for the banker, Wyatt went to back to school because they had the money then. He spent four years getting a degree in business and put it to use. Before the ranch didn't make money until the oil money came along, but Wyatt changed that. He made some wicked investments and this year the ranch was in the black, no debts.

Logan finished high school but didn't carry on his education. He'd learned enough from his father and Wyatt that he figured he could carry on the family tradition. That didn't mean he wasn't smart, he was, but he wanted to be a rancher and nothing else. He'd already purchased some land adjoining theirs and wanted to build a house on it. The only problem was that his mother didn't want them to leave home quite yet. Whenever either one of them brought it up she'd slap them with some sort of guilt trip of how their father is getting old and can't run everything on his own.

Wyatt never said much to that affect, but did what he always did, worked hard.

Logan had other aspirations. He wanted to branch out and have his own place soon. He was twenty five and saved up enough to build the house he wanted on the land he owned. He even had enough money to purchase good breeding stock. Yet he knew that his father and mother would have a problem with it. They knew that he was irresponsible in some ways and it most likely was warranted, but he worked hard too, maybe not as hard as Wyatt, but not many people had the stealth of a well oiled machine.

It was obvious that Wyatt was going to inherit the Strickland ranch when their parents died, and he didn't mind. He just wanted a place to call his own. Somewhere close to his brother,

his family. Wyatt knew that he'd purchased a section off theirs, but their parents didn't. Wyatt wouldn't say a word to them either, he didn't talk much to begin with, but he certainly didn't betray confidence. Actually he was hoping to count on Wyatt to help him build the house he wanted there.

When they came out with the last few bags, Natalie wasn't on the porch anymore. There were several more vehicles in the yard so she was probably inside tending to the store. Because it was the only store in the vicinity, it usually became really busy around mid morning and she was the only employee until the afternoon when her father arrived to take over.

Everyone knew that her father was a drinker and didn't show his face until later in the day, so she normally did just about everything until then. Although he didn't seem abusive toward her and she seemed to genuinely have affection for him, but in a way, it was a sad case. He supposed she felt a sense of duty there in looking after things while he slept it off, but she was a prisoner of sorts also.

Logan actually liked visiting with her when they went to get supplies. She was sweet and despite the way she looked, not the least bit conceited. She also didn't flirt with him and he could be himself around her. It was a first for him with a woman actually, and he found himself caring about her in a friendship sense, and he didn't have women friends so that said a lot about her personality. She was really likable.

"Come on Logan." Wyatt said patting his shoulder as he walked by. Logan didn't realize that he was standing there looking at the storefront. "Pa's going to start bellowing again if we're not ready to go when he comes out." He added, keeping his long steady stride.

Logan grinned, "When doesn't he bellow?" Their father wasn't at the truck when they came out with the last four sacks. Most likely he was in the store paying his tab.

A Pleasant Surprise

“When you work.” Wyatt answered with amusement walking around the side of the truck with Logan behind him.

“I work, just not like you. I need my play time too.” He returned feeling a little defensive.

“Play time with Missy Barnett is going to get you in trouble.” Wyatt suddenly said turning to him. His tone was no longer amusing. He’d become quite serious as he centered his dark brown eyes on him.

That was the first time Wyatt ever voiced an opinion about his love life. “How’d you know about that?” He’d actually never taken Missy out in public and thought it was an undiscovered secret. It was no secret that he was a playboy but he didn’t like to be gossiped about at all.

“Everyone knows about that. You may be subtle, but a woman like Missy isn’t.”

“Jesus—*everyone*?” he couldn’t believe that Missy would tell people about their indiscretions. Women did gossip a bit, and he knew a few of his past acquaintances that did, but it never came back to his family before.

“Yes.” He said opening the door of the truck.

“It hasn’t been going on that long.” He said feeling the need to explain.

“So what does that tell you about that kind of woman?” he added with a knowing look. “Ask me how they work.”

Logan knew exactly what he was referring to. Wyatt had experience with a woman who didn’t care about her reputation as long as she got her claws into a man that had status.

“Does ma know?” If his mother did find out, more than likely she’d tear a strip off of him before he went over and put Missy in her place for disrespecting herself.

“I don’t think so, but it’s only a matter of time.” Wyatt answered. “That girl has no social graces.”

“Ah Hell.” He got in the truck ahead of Wyatt just as their

father exited the store from paying his bill. It was a shame really because she was a fantastic lay and he'd have to stop seeing Missy now. He certainly didn't want to deal with what Wyatt went through. Emotionally there was no damage, but his reputation meant something to him. Further, he'd like to get married and settle down with kids. Well, not in the next year, but several years down the road after he'd gotten his house built and his stock established, and what decent girl would date a man like him with a reputation like that?

Lee Strickland got in the truck and started it after a brief glance at his sons. He may seem like a hard man with strict rules, but he had made sacrifices to make them into the men they were today. When Wyatt was tossed from a horse at the age of four, he ached to embrace him and wipe his tears, but instead he put him back in the saddle. The next time he got tossed, Wyatt got on by himself. No tears were shed. It was then that he knew he made the right decision. Both boys grew into solid, honest, trustworthy men.

Yet he was worried about the youngest for quite some time now. Logan seemed restless and his wife had told him that she feared he wanted to leave home. Lee knew that they'd have to face that some day and despite how hard he was on his boys, he wanted his family close to him. If he'd realized it sooner, he would have bought that section next to his ranch for Logan when it came up for sale, but it sold quickly. At least if he left, he'd be a short drive away. He loved those two boys more than his own life but not once did he tell them that. He needed them to be sturdy hardworking men, and they turned out all right. Not only that, he wasn't an emotional man that gushed his feelings. He was sure they knew how he felt despite how abrupt he was with them because they respected him and their mother. They had manners and a good heads on their shoulders.

When the ranch struck it rich several years back he never

A Pleasant Surprise

gave them a cent that they didn't earn, and Wyatt put his to use by going to college. He and Dolly were extremely proud of that. He didn't want the boys to be reliant on an inheritance because money doesn't make the man. "I ordered some lumber for that branding coral." He said bluntly, "Natalie is going to try and deliver it after church tomorrow. You boys get those ranch hands to help you fix those broken posts when we get back."

"Yes sir." Logan said respectfully.

"Tomorrow we'll finish it." Lee continued.

Wyatt never said anything but Logan knew he heard his father as clear as day. Then out of the blue he did say something.

"Sending that young girl out with a load of lumber is unreasonable." Wyatt said evenly as if he was discussing the weather.

Lee silently agreed with that. "She's all Hunter has." He said not making excuses but stating a fact, "The boy that works the lumber yard only works on weekends and after school. He's too young to drive."

"Her father makes enough money to hire more help." Wyatt countered casting a glance at his father, "She should be going to school."

"She graduated." Logan said.

Wyatt's brows lifted as he redirected his attention to Logan.

"Several years ago." Logan continued seeing his older brother's unspoken question. Actually now that Wyatt mentioned it Logan could see why he thought she was around eighteen. She never wore makeup and her fashion wasn't something a woman of twenty wore. Her clothing usually consisted of shapeless one piece dresses unless she was out in the yard, then she'd slip on a pair of denim overalls. Also her hair was always in some sort of a braid. He bet that if she let it loose around her shoulders she'd look the age she was.

"Then she should be in college, not looking after her ham-

fisted parent.” Wyatt added.

“True.” His father agreed, “But not all kids have had the privilege you two have.”

Logan coughed causing his father to glare at him. “I give you discipline boy, it builds character—a good man.”

Wyatt chuckled and turned back to the scenery outside the window. Logan always pushed the old man’s buttons.

“I swear to god I didn’t whip your hide enough. I should start doing that again.”

“You’re too damn old to catch me now.” Logan dared say with a wide smile.

“I can still shoot straight.” His father added with a sideways warning lacking complete amusement. Logan clamped his mouth shut.

Wyatt just grinned.

CHAPTER TWO

Sunday morning Wyatt paused outside the church doors to help his mother down the stairs. She was a short round woman with all grey hair.

It was interesting to those who knew the family were surprised that a woman barely five feet tall could produce such large strapping sons. Regardless, she came from a long line of rancher’s wives and was as tough as hell. Again, people who knew her didn’t let her size fool them. She also dished out a few good wallops when they deserved it.

Wyatt had no problem helping his mother because he, like Logan, was very respectful when it came to their parents. His mother raised them with strong morals in that area. If she asked them to do anything, they would, no hesitation, no questions.

At the same time Wyatt was helping his mother, Natalie came out onto the steps and waited patiently for them to get out

A Pleasant Surprise

of the way. She smiled shyly at him as she walked by. He reached up and tipped his hat in respect and when those deep brown eyes met hers, her stomach lurched. It wasn't often that he looked directly at her, or even acknowledged her, so it took her by surprise. She quickly averted her eyes unable to hold that hypnotic stare of his.

"Hey Nat." Logan said drawing her attention through the leaving crowd of people.

She liked Logan. He was down to earth and genuinely nice to her without any sort of hidden agenda. She widened her smile and walked over to him. "Hi."

"Pa says you have a load of lumber to bring out?"

"Yes, I had Randy load it on the flat bed yesterday. I'll bring it out right away. The store is closed so I don't have to worry about customers."

"Why don't you stay for lunch then? Ma makes a wicked Sunday brunch."

"Oh—" she cast a quick glance at Wyatt who was looking directly back at her. She quickly averted her gaze, "—I really don't—"

"—nonsense," came his mother's interruption hearing the conversation, "You are a skinny gal. If you work Sunday for the Stricklands, we feed you." She patted her arm. "I expect you to be there." She said as if there was no objection.

She looked back at Logan who gave her a helpless grin and a shrug of his shoulders as if to say, 'did you expect anything different?'

She had always thought of Logan as a friend, but his family inviting her for a meal was new and it made her nervous. However, she didn't have the heart to tell Mrs. Strickland no. It was obvious that she drew a great deal of respect from her sons and they thought the world of her as did a lot of people in the town. There was more than once that she went out of her way for

a family in need. "All right." She said reluctantly not wanting to disappoint her, "I'll leave a note for my father."

Wyatt's eyes narrowed slightly at that comment, but she didn't seem to notice.

After saying goodbye she headed back down the sidewalk toward the direction of home.

Lee came up behind them at that time and took his wife's arm placing it on his before addressing his sons. "I want you two to go and check on the cattle down at the river before you come home."

Wyatt nodded as his parents walked off but his eyes stayed on Natalie. They were told early this morning that they might need to check on the cattle so they took different trucks to church.

"He won't even let us get out of our Sunday suits." Logan said shaking his head.

"We won't be getting out of the truck most likely." Wyatt responded.

"What if we have to pull a bloody cow from the muddy banks?" Logan protested.

"They we look good doing it." He smirked.

"Ah hell, I need to get out of that house." Logan said wearily.

Wyatt laughed and gave Logan a shove toward the truck, "You whine like an old woman."

Upon leaving the church parking lot Logan was surprised that he turned east instead of west. "Where are we going?"

"Natalie lives twelve blocks from here. That's a long walk in those shoes." He said nonchalantly while cruising up beside her and rolling down the passenger window.

Natalie stopped seeing the brothers in their big fancy dodge truck coast up beside her.

"Wyatt's concerned about your feet Natalie." Logan said opening the door and getting out, "Get in and we'll give you ride

A Pleasant Surprise

home.” He near laughed at the dumbstruck look on her face at his statement

She glanced at Wyatt, “I’m fine.” She nodded toward the direction of her house, “I walk this way every week.”

“And you spend too much time on your feet.” Wyatt countered.

She didn’t know what to say to that. Wyatt probably spoke a whole eight sentences to her over the four years of her living here and she’d been walking from church every Sunday just like today during that time.

“Come on honey, contrary to popular belief, he doesn’t bite.” Logan added.

Her eyes widened slowly, “What?”

Logan burst into laughter, “Nothing, just get in.” He was still chuckling when she reluctantly got in and Logan shot his brother and amused glance before he got in a shut the door. He couldn’t possibly fathom meeting a girl as naïve as this one was.

Natalie couldn’t even meet the other brother’s eyes after Logan said that. Then Wyatt’s fingers accidentally brushed her thigh when he palmed the stick shift and lowered it into second gear. He didn’t seem to notice, but she certainly did. Before it happened again she moved herself closer to Logan who had his arm slung across the back of her seat. She was practically touching him but it didn’t bother her like touching Wyatt did.

Logan looked down at the top of her head over the movement and then at Wyatt who obviously noticed her shift in the seat and shrugged an indifferent shoulder over it.

Normally Logan would be flattered, but he began to think that she was afraid of his brother which was really odd, because he took her small glances at Wyatt as shy admiration. He himself had never had a woman move away from him if they were attracted. He guessed that Wyatt could seem intimidating. His size after all, was that in itself. He also had that hard stare that

could unsettle just about anyone and if he was unhappy with someone, he didn't have to say a word, they knew it.

Before long they pulled into her driveway. The house was just behind the store. It was a modest two story home that was nice, but nothing fancy. It actually looked like it could use a paintjob and a couple of shutters seemed to be hanging at awkward angles.

Wyatt eyed the place through the dusty windshield. He didn't appreciate that Natalie's father had let the home go. A home is a man's castle and it said a lot about who you were.

Logan got out and told her that he'd see her in about an hour because they had to go check on the cattle before they went home.

She just waved without saying a word and went into the house. She had to get changed before she took the lumber out anyway.

When he got back he turned to Wyatt, "I think she's scared of you."

"No she's not." Was all Wyatt said as he watched her go in the house before he shifted the truck into reverse.

Logan waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. "She acts like it."

"Maybe."

Again no elaboration. Well, that was Wyatt's prerogative. He leaned back in the seat comfortably for the drive to the river.

"Oh lord." Natalie said coming out of the house as the ranch truck the brothers were driving came to a halt in the driveway and two large men got out covered in mud to their waists. Logan was clearly angry. Wyatt as usual didn't seem emotional in the least.

Logan did say he'd be an hour but it had been almost two and now she knew why.

A Pleasant Surprise

“Best bloody hat I had!” he burst swiping the mud splotted Stetson off his head and looking at it.

Dolly Strickland came out and stood beside Natalie. They were waiting for the boys for lunch. Lee had gone to supervise the unloading of lumber when they didn’t return. He already knew they had hit a snag, but that was to be expected. Cattle ranching wasn’t a clear cut business and if you thought it was predictable, you were in the wrong business.

Natalie was shocked at the boys’ appearance, but Dolly acted as if it was a normal sight.

As they started to go in the house Dolly stepped in front of them with hands on the hips of her stout frame while she stared up at them, “Not on your life. To the hose.” She pointed to the side of the house that had the tap.

Natalie thought it was almost comical seeing those towering men stand over their short mother with looks of hopelessness on their faces. Then after a moment Logan looked ready to explode. Wyatt just turned and did as he was told.

“Ma that water is ice *cold*.” Logan argued.

“That’s too bad, besides I can’t see that thick hide of yours feeling the temperature difference. Quit arguing.” She scolded with a narrowing of her eyes.

He clenched his jaw to stop another protest. Arguing with his dear mother in front of Natalie was disrespectful and as much as he wanted to hit his own shower, he couldn’t disobey her.

“Natalie will hold the hose for you boys. Won’t you dear?” She said without a second thought. “I need to get brunch on the table.”

No, I won’t! She thought fearfully. How could the woman expect her to stand there and hose down a man whose very presence took her breath away? She turned sharply to see Dolly totter back into the house as if that suggestion was a simple one.

“Sure, come on Nat.” Logan said following the same path

that Wyatt took moments ago. "It's hard to hold the hose and wash at the same time."

Natalie bit her lip and hesitantly did as Dolly asked. When she rounded the corner she stilled, frozen in her tracks. Her mouth fell open at the sight that met her.

Wyatt had stripped off his suit jacket, shirt and tie, and was in the process of removing his slacks. Every tan inch of him was covered with thick muscle that swelled with each fluid movement of use as he finished undressing. He hadn't changed one bit in four years and if anything, got more bulk on his body. Never in her life did she see a man as beautiful as that, or even more, close to being naked. Her eyes roved down every sinful part of him in complete hypnosis. How could any man possibly be that perfect?

Logan started doing the same and when he looked up, Natalie was gone. "See, you scared her again."

Wyatt grinned, "Yeah, sure I did." He said tossing his slacks carelessly in a pile and turning on the hose. He had boxer shorts on so it wasn't as if he was naked, but obviously she felt it was too much. She also didn't know that he knew she watched him. He wasn't sure how long she'd been doing that, but he finally noticed about six months ago. He was a smart man and those looks weren't from a woman who was frightened of a man. They were subtle glances of appreciation.

"Well, she acts like a timid little mouse around you."

"She's a timid mouse." Wyatt confirmed, "Probably never kissed a man, and Ma sends her to hose down two half naked men in their prime."

"Hey I never even thought of that." Logan stood straight, undressed except for his own boxer shorts while waiting for his turn. It completely made sense then. Wyatt and Logan were both used to forward women, not one with a temperament of humility.

"Yeah well I have." He sucked in a breath running the cold

A Pleasant Surprise

water over his bare skin.

“Why don’t you ask her out?”

He shook his head, “I’m too busy and as I said before, she’s not my type. She’d probably faint if I said hi to her.”

“She’s cute.”

She was more than cute and Wyatt knew that, but he didn’t have time for a relationship, nor did he want one. Also Natalie would take time to woo and he had no energy to invest in any female at the moment. She was sweet like Logan said but he knew she wouldn’t say shit if her mouth was full of it. Although he liked her modesty he preferred a woman with a little more backbone. As for his meddling brother, he turned the cold hose on him full blast.

Natalie was sitting on the porch step when the boys came back from around the side of the house, holding their soiled clothes in one hand and their shoes in the other. She was still beet red from seeing him almost naked and she didn’t want questions from Dolly so she stayed outside until she felt the heat in her cheeks subside. That didn’t last, because when they came around the house, her face went as red as the paint on the barn. They glistened under the sun like a pair of bronze statues carved to perfection.

“Honey could you go in the house and get a garbage bag for these clothes, or mother’s going to shoot us for dripping on the hardwood.” Logan asked setting his shoes on the step below her.

“Sure.” She got up quickly and went in the house like her feet were on fire. That way she wouldn’t have to see the two of them. They exchanged an amused glance at her quick exit.

“See?” Logan gestured toward the front door. “She acts like this when you’re around.”

“That’s her problem Logan.” Wyatt actually started to get a little irritated.

“I know her differently.” He explained, “She’s not as shy as

you think.”

“I don’t care.” He said fixing his stare on his brother.

That look said enough. Logan knew he was raising his ire, but Wyatt had the wrong idea of what Natalie was like. Yes, she was a little shy, but witty and smart, not this fragile flower he seemed to think she was. However, there was another reason he brought her up. “Willie Vanderzandt has been after her for several weeks. She told me that the other day. Only I don’t think she realizes that it could be serious.”

Wyatt near winced. Willie was three bricks short of a two brick load as far as he was concerned. He had a criminal record by the time he was fourteen and his father had the money and the means to keep him out of jail. He was the same age as Logan and about as wild as a feral cat. Wyatt was pretty sure he had the makings of a sociopath. He never worked a day in his life and got kicks out of torturing small animals.

Because of some incident when he was twelve, the court prevented him from owning any, but several cats and dogs in his neighbourhood went missing and people suspected it was him. That was over ten years ago. Now he was sure it was people he took his sadist tendencies out on. He roared around town in a red sports car with no care to people crossing the street. Wyatt always saw him with some different gal in the passenger seat every time.

“Apparently he can see through those shapeless knee length dresses she wears.”

So could Wyatt. Hell, he was sure that any man with an experienced eye could see that she was built just right. “Maybe we should keep an eye on her then.”

Logan knew what that statement entailed. He also had concerns about Willie chasing Natalie. She wouldn’t have much defence against a man like that. Her father was hardly around, and she really had no one else that he knew of, so he could

A Pleasant Surprise

understand the sudden protectiveness that Wyatt felt. It was the way they were raised. Their parents would feel the same when he told them.

At that moment she came out with a large garbage bag and held it open so they could dump their soaked and muddy clothes in it. She tied it keeping her eyes averted the whole time to something across the yard. Logan told her to leave it on the porch because it would be going to the dump. There was no way they'd get that river mud out of the cloth. Wyatt went in the house to have a quick shower before lunch and Logan decided to do the same.

When he came down stairs Wyatt was in the kitchen pouring himself a cup of coffee. He'd traded in his Sunday suit for a pair of jeans and denim work shirt. Logan did the same except his shirt was checked brown and white. Their father wanted them to finish that corral this afternoon so they both expected to get dirty, not like pulling a calf from the river bank, but enough to warrant old work clothes.

When they entered the dining room, their parents were already seated on each end of the table, with Natalie on Dolly's right. Wyatt sat across from Natalie and Logan sat beside her.

"It's about time." Lee said, "I'm starving." It was a rule in the house that the family always had Sunday brunch together because it was hard to get together during the week with the constant upkeep around the place.

As usual Wyatt didn't say anything except for a brief prayer of thanks before they all dug in.

Talk mostly turned to business until out of the blue Wyatt spoke to Natalie. She had to reach down and wrap her fingers around her seat on either side of her thighs from fear of falling out of it because of the surprise she felt.

"Logan said that Willie's been chasing you." It wasn't a question and Wyatt didn't mean for it to be one. She stared back

at him with those large pretty eyes and didn't say anything.

"Is that true?" Lee said in surprise looking at the young woman, "Is that creep got his mind set on you?"

Finally she found her tongue although she had to do some digging, "I can handle him." She said to Lee unable to respond to Wyatt. He always left her so tongue tied, especially when he had taken it upon himself to start talking to her. She was sure he didn't even know that she existed even though he insisted on giving her a ride home earlier. Still, he never said anything to her, Logan did all of the talking.

Wyatt narrowed his gaze, "Don't fool yourself, he's not normal. How can you defend yourself against someone like that?"

This made her bring her gaze back to his. He had these eyes that to her, were as if made from warm chocolate. With his dark hair, and those thick lashes, it was a wicked combination. Gosh, she really loved chocolate!

His hair was still damp from the shower and the top few buttons of his shirt were open to which she couldn't help but lower her gaze to the dark matt of hair showing.

He also had a day's worth of stubble on that strong square jaw which was fashionably trimmed. She liked that look. He was nicely tanned too, which she found out earlier, was present all over his body, not just his face. She concluded that he must work outside without a shirt often enough to look like that because Wyatt certainly wasn't a tanning bed type of person. Images of him bare chested while fixing the fence four years ago popped into her mind.

She still hadn't responded to his question. *Jesus*, Wyatt thought, *could she be any more shy? This was painful.* He set his fork down on his plate and stared back at her waiting for her to answer.

The sound of metal hitting porcelain reached her ears

A Pleasant Surprise

pulling her out of her daydream. She actually felt herself flush when she realized that everyone had gone silent. Her eyes darted to his and the impatient look he held. She was completely distracted and started searching her memory for the question he asked. "I can say no to him and I have." she finally stated feeling stupid. He was so easily distracting.

"How tall are you?"

She looked confused, "five foot five."

"How much do you weigh?"

"What does that—"

"How much Nat." he interrupted in that same calm tone that he always used.

The use of his name on her lips brought her eyes there. He had a nice mouth. She always thought he did. It also curved into a really nice smile on rare occasions. He had straight even teeth like Logan did, but she wished Wyatt would smile more often and maybe once or twice at her. "One twenty." She flushed slightly. It wasn't something a woman liked to talk about.

"Jesus, you're a bloody feather." He sat straight.

"I'm not." She protested, "That's normal for a girl my height."

Now that was a first. She never stuck up for herself in all the years he'd known her. Then again men weren't supposed to comment on a woman's appearance unless it was a flattering remark. Some women were sensitive about that. His eyes lowered over the front of her then back up to her face. There was a slight flush to her cheeks at that gesture but her sudden defensiveness made him take another look at her—literally. Maybe it was just him, but she didn't seem used to a man looking at her like that from her embarrassed reaction. "Anyway," he continued, "that means that Willie has about half a foot on you and another fifty or so pounds. So if he comes after you, what kind of 'defence' do you have?" he mocked with a lift of a single

brow.

She lifted her chin slightly finally realizing that he was pointing out how helpless she was, "I can shoot as good as any man."

That took Wyatt back, "You have access to a gun—a timid thing like you?"

Her mouth fell open. Did he really think that she was some shrinking violet? She had been running her father's store for four years and had to deal with more than one angry cowboy over an unpaid bill. Then again, she might act a little evasive around him, but that's because every time she got within ten feet of him, her heart sped up and her whole body became weak and nervous, so it was easier to evade him than answer him. "Why, that's so unfair—"

"You'd end up blowing your foot off." He interrupted.

She opened her mouth to protest again, but Dolly cut her off.

"Maybe Wyatt has a point dear. Let him show you how to shoot properly, and then we'd all feel better. I know I would. You're alone at that store more than you should be, and we're only saying that out of concern."

Her eyes guided to the older woman. There was a show of worry in her expression. Then they went back to the man across from her who was folding his arms across his thick chest. It caused the material to be pulled tight across his upper chest and biceps clearly defining how well built he was.

Beside her she was sure Logan released a muffled snicker and she kicked him under the table causing him to cough. Her father may have been a drunk, but he was really good with a gun and taught her well. At least she always thought he did. You couldn't really live in Texas without knowing how to shoot a gun.

"A woman belongs at home, not running things." Lee started.

"Oh you'd have us all rounded up like those cattle and

A Pleasant Surprise

branded,” Dolly quipped not even bothered by her husband’s comment. He spouted off like that every now and then, but he certainly didn’t marry a woman who listened to those old traditions. She was a good cowgirl in her time and worked beside her father on the range and she did with Lee before she had the boys. Lee married her because he loved her. He may have been hard on their sons, but he’d never dare to speak to her in the same manner.

A chuckle came from Logan over his mother’s stern response. She was right.

“Just the same.” Lee pointed his fork at Natalie, “Your father should act like a man.”

Natalie flushed. She felt like she was in front of a firing squad and Wyatt had yet returned to his meal, but kept staring at her. She knew he was waiting for her to concede, but hell would freeze over first. Finally she bolstered her courage and looked him straight in the eye, “I’m fine. Things have been this way for awhile and it’s always worked out. Besides my sister is coming next week and—“

“Sister?” Logan perked up, “You have a sister?”

She tossed him a don’t-even-think-it look, “Yes.”

“You never mentioned it.”

“You never asked,” she felt herself smile for the first time she arrived there. She was starting a degree in Social Work program in the city when Natalie came to live with her father. She was twenty-three now and had just got laid off from her job. She’d called Natalie and asked her if she minded that she came to live there until she got back on her feet. Of course she didn’t mind. She was her sister.

“How old is she? Better yet, how’s she look.”

“Mind your manners Logan.” His mother chastised.

He gave her a charming smile, “Yes ma’am.” He leaned over and whispered in Nat’s ear, “You and I are going to talk later.”

She gave him an unsure look. It was no secret that he and her older cousin Missy had something going on and she didn't want to expose her sister to his wicked charms.

After lunch Wyatt stood on the porch and watched her drive away in the flat deck with his arms folded across his chest and his long legs apart in a determined stance.

"That really got you going." Logan said coming to stand beside him taking up the same view.

"Yeah, I really don't want to have her get hurt."

"I know what you mean. Natalie's a peach."

"Christ, I wish she had someone else in that house of hers besides her father." Wyatt said out loud to himself.

"Maybe we should pay Willie our own little private visit." It meant that they would be doing more than just talking.

Wyatt looked at him, "I'm not sure if that would do more harm than good. He may go after her full tilt if we take him aside and teach him a lesson."

"Yeah, that's all we need to do is lend to her trouble." It was a good thing that Wyatt had a level head on his shoulders because Logan wouldn't have thought twice about going and busting Willie up in warning.

"I may have an idea."

That perked his interest, but before he could ask Wyatt, Missy drove up in her little car and Wyatt turned giving his brother a 'remember what I said' look before he went in the house.

Logan really did mean to break it off with her. He even took her into the privacy of the barn to talk but within five minutes she was on her knees satisfying him. Now any man with half the amount of lust he carried around couldn't say no to that sultry pouty mouth. Soon he had his palms flat on the wall looking down at her because she had a talent there that could make a

man's knees weak.

A half an hour later Wyatt went in there looking for him for another task that needed to get done when he heard familiar sounds coming from the stall they kept spare bales in and stopped. After a few seconds, he easily figured out what was going on and turned and walked out. He knew Logan was young and not thinking with the right part of his body when it came to Missy. She was a pretty girl but, that's as far as it went. There was nothing else attractive about her and he'd have to speak to Logan again about her once she was done pleasing him. He knew women like that were easy to find for a handsome man like him, and Logan needed to get out before he ended up in trouble. He should know.

When he met Sandy, the woman he was thinking of marrying, they were both in their senior year of high school. He had been with other girls, but Sandy had experience, and he had to admit he confused lust with love. The problem was, she didn't. When he was out of town at football games in which he was a quarterback, she was sharing her talents. He didn't find out until years later when he came home early from a convention and caught her in bed with her current husband. His friends knew what she was like but didn't want to tell him. Now looking back on it all the signs were there, but he chose to ignore them. He'd not let a woman get that close again. Funny thing was, he was almost relieved. Oh, he felt betrayed and maybe hurt at the time, but that quickly passed. In a sense he really wasn't ready to get married, but like Logan he wasn't thinking right when it came to a woman with experience like she had. He'd had plenty of relationships since and was able to separate those elements much better.

It wasn't that he hated women or harboured ill feelings for them, he just didn't trust a certain type and Missy was like that. His thoughts flicked to Natalie for a second. He'd be lying to

himself if he denied that she was pretty and possibly the nicest girl he'd ever met. At brunch he also discovered that she did have a little determination in her. All along he thought she'd run and hide at the sound of a thunderclap. Turns out he was wrong. Obviously she was like that around him only. It made him take another look at her.

She had a lovely oval shaped face with pretty eyes topped with nicely manicured brows. Her hair was brown but in the sun there were streaks of red that were attractive. Her mouth was actually very noticeable and it was possibly the first thing he noticed on her when he met her four years ago. It was supple and she had nice full lips. Lips that looked so soft that they'd part nicely under a man's mouth. He shook his head displacing the vision. Obviously it had been a while without female companionship and that's what he chalked it up to.

It was interesting that he was so obtuse when it came to realizing that about her, after all he'd known her for four years. Well, it wasn't as if he'd spent every day at the store and he was preoccupied with going to college when she came to live there. He was twenty one when he split up with Sandy, and he left for college after that only to return in the summer and work his ass off for his father. When he graduated two years ago, he'd been busy getting the ranch to operate in the black. Now it was, and his life slowed down enough for him to notice her.

Next week after church Natalie started home on her own again when that familiar royal blue Dodge truck pulled up beside her. This time it was just Wyatt behind the wheel. He rolled down the passenger window, "Get in Natalie."

It wasn't even a request. It wasn't said harshly at all but there was a slight edge of authority visible in his tone. She stopped and looked at him, "I'm fine."

"I didn't ask." He continued keeping his eyes on hers.

A Pleasant Surprise

First it was hard to conquer that nervousness that crept up when he was around. Second Logan wasn't there to shield her so she countered with a little defensiveness to hide her anxiety, but he still didn't seem deterred. "What is with your concern all of a sudden? Willie's been hounding me for a couple of weeks, he hasn't done anything stupid."

"He will."

"How do you know?"

"Look you haven't lived here all your life so I'll tell you." And he did. He told her about the animals and the rumours of his sadistic behaviour toward woman.

"Oh lord." She said wide-eyed. Now her apprehensiveness was replaced by fear.

"Now get in *please*." He repeated a little more gently.

This time she didn't hesitate. She looked around as she fumbled for the latch almost as if Willie was going to jump out from behind a bush and grab her.

That new information gave her the push she needed even though Willie didn't come across that way toward her. He was definitely determined to get her to go out with him, but she didn't like the way he came across and politely turned him down.

A few minutes later Wyatt pulled into her driveway like the week before only it was vacant, "Where's your car?"

"Dad went to the city to order supplies for the store."

He glanced around the yard then next door to the store.

"It's not that bad. I'll be fine. I mean, what you told me did frighten me a little, but just so you know he didn't seem upset or anything when I turned him down."

"Sociopaths usually don't. They are a master at containing their feelings."

"Oh." *I guess you do learn something new every day*, she thought. She didn't even know what a sociopath was and she was too embarrassed to ask. She made a mental note to look it up on

the computer at the house.

"Maybe I'll come in for a bit until your father comes home."

Didn't this man ever ask permission for anything? "Dad probably won't be home until late tomorrow night." Why all of a sudden did Wyatt deem himself her protector? After all, she'd been here for four years. Maybe this new information about Willie worried him more than he was letting on and that made her fearful. Maybe she had a reason to be afraid of him even though he never threatened her.

"Then maybe I should take you home with me."

Her heart started thumping hard in her chest at that statement. Yet, it was said so casually as if he was ordering coffee. Did he bring women home often? She really couldn't see it because of how righteous his parents were, so she concluded that it was all because of Willie. Oh how she wished it was out of affection, but she knew that a man that looked the way Wyatt did would never be interested in a normal girl like her. That meant that he really was concerned about Willie, more than he showed on the outside, meaning it *was* serious and it scared her. "Are you really *that* worried?" she said.

He looked at her, "We all are. I think we just want to be cautious."

Well that ruined her hope that he was behind this, not his whole family. She wished he'd see her as a woman, not some clerk at a store but she also knew she wasn't all that pretty and Wyatt was drop dead gorgeous and all man.

"Go pack an overnight bag and leave a note for your father. I'll bring you home tomorrow before the store opens. While you're doing that, I'll call ma and let her know to make up the spare room."

"Okay." She got out and went in the house while he waited. Funny thing was that her knees still felt quite weak at his sudden attention. She knew he was just being concerned because that's

A Pleasant Surprise

the kind of man he was. Maybe his family put him up to this because he was the most capable to protect her out of all of them. Yet, she couldn't help but have some hopefulness there.

After she packed her bag and changed, she went downstairs to write her father a note. The phone rang while she just finished writing it. It was her cousin Missy. It sounded as if she was crying. "What happened?"

"Logan dumped me today!" she wailed, "I can't believe it!"

Natalie was naïve but she was no fool when it came to her cousin's promiscuous behaviour. Her mother had always taught her that type of behaviour was never respected by a man. Although she never judged Missy because if she thought her father was a terrible alcoholic, Missy's was ten times worse. She told her that when her father drank heavily he'd hit her.

Wyatt came in the house then unannounced and saw her on the phone. "I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you." She said into the receiver as she turned away. If she expected to for him to give her privacy, he didn't.

"Can *you* talk to him?" Missy pleaded.

"Me?"

"I know you're friends. He says you are."

"Missy, I can't ask Logan to take you back, that's *crazy*." She cast a glance over her shoulder and saw Wyatt put his hands on his hips in annoyance. Why didn't he give her some privacy?

"Please!" Missy begged.

She could feel Wyatt's eyes on her back and knew she needed to get off the phone. She had a suspicion that he was close to saying something offensive and Missy would hear it. Quickly she agreed to talk to Logan then hung up and turned to him.

"Logan isn't interested in her." Wyatt said abruptly. "So your words will fall on deaf ears."

"Well maybe he shouldn't have slept with her then." She

shot back. She didn't like to hear Missy cry even if she'd created part of this problem. Not only that, it was a conversation that should have been given privacy.

"Sweetheart don't pretend that it wasn't satisfying both sides there. I know for a fact that it was."

She flushed clear to the roots of her hair.

"Missy shouldn't have been saying things around town." Wyatt Continued, "It's a small town and she knows better on how rumours get embellished."

"She's just a little lost." Natalie defended weakly. She actually agreed with that but she wasn't going to say anything negative against her cousin.

Lost? He thought comically, that woman was *not* lost. She knew exactly what she was doing. "Christ woman, you have got to be the most naïve person I've ever met."

"Wyatt, her life hasn't been easy—"

"Neither has yours, nor mine. You aren't jumping into bed with every man that pays attention to you. We all have pains growing up and that is just an excuse. It's how we handle them that makes us who we are." He said.

Actually he had a very valid point. She was basically ignored by her mother because she was in her older sister's shadow, and her father hardly knew she existed, but she certainly didn't stand around and feel sorry for herself or jump into bed with the first man that showed her affection. She was too self-respecting. Although she was sure her mother loved her, but Jenny was always outgoing and vibrant and she always seemed to be in her shadow. Furthermore, she wasn't experienced because no man has ever paid attention to her but Willie. Well, Logan did, but he was just a friend and had no interest in her. He liked women like Missy and she was the furthest from that. "You shouldn't think like that. Some people have it worse than others."

"That's a perception."

A Pleasant Surprise

“Her father hits her. She told me.”

“My father hit me too.” He could have added that he deserved every strike. He may not seem like it now but he was a little wild when he was younger. Worse than Logan.

She looked up at him, “He wouldn’t today.”

“No,” he smirked, “He’d need a two by four to clout me with, but I don’t misbehave like I used to. At the time I was disrespectful to both of my parents and did some pretty bad things. Now I wouldn’t think of it.”

“I don’t believe that parents should hit their children.”

He stared down at her thoughtfully for a moment. Maybe she was right in a lot of ways, but he wasn’t damaged from his father’s harsh discipline in the least. Yet, he doubted he could ever raise one of his large hands to his own child. However her statement made him realize something else about her. “You like kids?”

She nodded, “I used to volunteer when I went to school at a daycare.”

“No kidding?” Every time he thought he had her figured out, she just kept surprising him.

“I wanted to be a teacher.”

“You still can.”

She shrugged, “My dad needs me.”

“Your dad needs to quit hitting the sauce and take some responsibility.”

“Wyatt, that isn’t your business.” She said embarrassed and defensive at the same time. She didn’t like the stories that circulated about her father and she wasn’t so naïve to think that there wasn’t any. Her father was an alcoholic, but he was never mean to her.

“So?” he said unaffected.

She narrowed her gaze at him. For the past few years she’d wished he’d talk to her, now that he had started in the past few

days, she wished he'd stop. He was intrusive to her private life and that bothered her especially when he thought he had every right to be. Yet she was conflicted. The other half of her that was ruled by her heart wanted him to be attracted to her. She chastised herself inwardly. How could any woman be as mixed up as she was?

"How old are you?"

She didn't seem the harm in answering that question, so she told him, "Twenty."

"Have you even been kissed by a man?"

Her eyes widened, "that's none of your business."

"That's a no." he said bluntly. Although he wasn't sure if her defensiveness was a cover for things she had done. For all he knew she learned to hide her indiscretions because of Missy's publicised reputation. Regardless, if he was right, how the hell could she go twenty years without being kissed?

"Oh lord, what is with you lately?" she said in exasperation.

"A girl who looks like you should have been kissed a dozen times by now. Yet, here is this naïve beautiful woman wasting her life away looking after her father."

"W—what did you just say?"

He frowned. Didn't she know how she looked to the opposite sex? His eyes went over her face again. This time the blush was unmistakable. It couldn't be possible that no one had ever said that to her before. She may not dress appropriately for the body she had, but she was definitely a fine woman. "Are you ready to go?" he finally said changing the subject.

She quickly snapped out of it and reached for her bag, "of course."

He turned and left the house with her following him after she locked the door. Her mind was still reeling from the beautiful woman comment. Did he really think she was? Or was he just being a gentleman? This was going to drive her crazy. In

A Pleasant Surprise

fact she never said a word after that until he spoke because it was being tossed around in her mind over and over again.

“I need to make a side trip to check on the cattle by the river.” He said after prolonged silence.

“Sure.” She said softly as he pulled off the pavement down a long gravelled road.

Soon they came to a gate and he got out opening it. Her eyes travelled over him. He looked devastating in a western cut suit. Last week it was a nice dark brown color that matched those warm mocha eyes of his. This week it was navy with a white shirt, western tie, and a cream Stetson. Yet, she knew what body he possessed under that clothing because of the incident last Sunday. It was hard not to look at him and see that all over again in her mind.

He got back in and pulled through the gate before he got out and shut it. She thought at that moment that she could have easily done that for him instead of feeling useless.

When he got back in she told him that.

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. “I’ll take you up on it on the way back then.” He said as if it didn’t bother him at all.

She supposed he did things by himself often and wasn’t used to any sort of help. She had to admire that about him. He was certainly a rare breed.

The drive to the river took another twenty minutes and Natalie wasn’t prepared for what she saw. A mother cow was bawling on the bank while it’s calf was sunk to its belly in the mud. “Oh Wyatt, that poor thing!” she exclaimed sitting straight in her seat.

“It’s the perks of an extra wet spring. Normally the river bed is hard this time of year.” He sighed opening the door, “There goes another suit.”

“Can I help?”

He paused and looked at her for a moment. Then at her attire. She'd changed out of her Sunday dress but she wore those stupid denim coveralls that weren't flattering in the least. He supposed he could make her feel useful and he may get home in time for brunch. "Can you drive a stick?"

"I can." She said proudly. "The flat deck is a stick shift."

"All right. Get the rope out of the lock box in the back."

"Okay." She said feeling glad she could help.

Wyatt stripped off his jacket and tie. Then he rolled up his sleeves.

"What can I do?" She said coming back holding the rope unable to take her eyes off his thick forearms that he exposed. Thankfully he didn't seem to notice as he instructed her. She was always doing stupid things like that and was surprised he didn't notice any of them, but she supposed it was because the feeling of attraction wasn't an issue for him, so the signs were ignored.

"Tie that end to the push bar on the front of the truck. When I give a shout, shift it into reverse and back up. That'll pull him out." He said taking the other end and making his way down the bank in the thick mud.

She felt terrible for him, but he didn't even seem to mind. She guessed that this was the norm for being a rancher. Mind you Wyatt didn't get riled about much. In fact the annoyance he'd been showing her lately was the first time she'd ever caught any sort of emotion leaving his expression. He was usually very even tempered.

She got in behind the wheel and had to adjust the seat because it was set to Wyatt's long legs. Then she rolled down the window while watching him. She had to give it to him. That mud was incredibly thick, yet Wyatt moved through it easily. It gave her an idea how incredibly strong those legs of his were but she supposed he was practically born on a horse and that strength was normal for men like him. It looked like he was

about knee deep when he reached the calf and slung the rope around its head.

He looked up and waved for her to back up, and she did slowly. She was amazed that the little animal just popped out of the mud. She was worried about strangling him with the rope, but Wyatt seemed to know how to knot it right. That shouldn't have surprised her at all.

She shifted the truck into neutral leaving it at an idle when the calf's mother trotted up to him and began to nudge him. *Gosh that was just so cute*, she thought. She quickly got out and took the rope off its neck. She wasn't sure if she should help him to his feet, but it seemed that he got up with the nudging. She smiled as it trotted off beside her a little wobbly.

"Hey."

Natalie forgot about Wyatt because the unity of mother and calf was so heart warming. She turned and saw him wave at her again.

"Throw me the rope." He stayed stationary for too long and his boots set in the thick medium.

It took her a moment to figure out why and when she did she laughed. He was stuck.

"The longer you make fun of me, the more I'm going to make you pay when I get out of here." He called back hearing her laugh. It was very pleasant to hear that come from her. He was certain that he never experienced it before because he wouldn't have forgotten.

"I could just leave you, so you'd better be nice." She heard herself tease back.

He put his hands on his hips. His white shirt was covered in splotches of mud. His arms and legs were thick with it. His dark eyes narrowed in a profound challenge. "Honey, if you don't I'll make sure that when ma tells you to hose me down and this time, I'll hold you to it."

She snapped her mouth shut. Did he know that she ogled him that day? Did he suspect that she left because she couldn't bear looking at him without her emotions raw in her expression? Her face flamed and she quickly turned around to retrieve the rope missing his grin and his soft chuckle.

After he escaped the suctioning grip of the mud he stood there looking down at his filthy clothes. Even though he was wealthy enough to easily replace them, he still felt it was a waste of money. His father's ideals were too strong in him.

She untied the rope from the bumper to put it back where she got it before she came back to him.

"I'll end up spending the day cleaning out the truck—again." He said to himself thinking about the mud coming off his clothes. Last time it took about four hours. Even though they owned a ranch their equipment was always kept clean and was well maintained. It showed discipline and respect.

"It's better than saving calves all day." She offered optimistically.

"Calves." He smirked, "Not *calfs*."

She wasn't offended, but she should have known the plural of the word. Of course it didn't help that the sexiest man alive in her eyes was standing there slathered in mud and coarse images were flooding through her brain of his naked body being hosed off again.

"You were great by the way. I was worried you'd floor the accelerator and take that animal's head clean off."

"I wouldn't!" she exclaimed appalled at the image he just gave her.

"I'm glad. Pa would make me pay for the loss of the calf and I already have to replace another expensive suit."

"Maybe you should just bring a change of clothes."

"Next time I will." He said. Actually he'd meant to. However, he was distracted this morning when he was thinking

A Pleasant Surprise

about her. He was concerned for her and Logan and he had a long talk after he caught up with him again.

First it was over Missy. He did finally agree to break things off with her, which he found out at Natalie's that he did, but he was really reluctant and Wyatt knew why after hearing the noises from the stall the other day. At least he let his head rule that decision and followed through with it. Second they discussed taking turns watching Natalie. She wasn't really their business but even their father agreed that someone needed to keep an eye on her.

Suddenly a movement caught his eye. He turned his head to see his truck rolling toward the river, "Oh shit." He broke into a run but it was too late. The truck hit the edge of the bank and bounced down it submersing the front end in up to the windshield. Just his luck, the only area where mud wasn't waist deep. If it was the truck would have stopped immediately. Not his lucky day.

Natalie was appalled and embarrassed realizing it was her fault. She never set the brake! Her eyes guided to Wyatt as he reached up removed his hat and scratched his head looking down at his truck. She was speechless and unsure of his reaction about the whole thing. So she just stood there as stiff as a tree waiting for his response. Dread crept through her as he replaced his Stetson and slowly turned around to look at her. His expression was again, completely unreadable.

"Oh gosh, Wyatt I'm so sorry!" she finally burst out.

He turned and looked back at the truck again, "Well, I guess that means that you're going to volunteer to go down that bank and get my phone out of the glove box unless you want to walk the rest of the way home."

Without even waiting for him to say it again she rushed by him and started to go down the bank. She only made it halfway down before she got herself stuck. She felt like weeping. In all

sense she looked like some silly girl who couldn't drive.

"Come on honey, it's not that bad." He said moving down beside her. He was actually only kidding, but he supposed she didn't know him all that well to understand his dry humour. He fully intended on getting his phone himself.

"I wrecked your truck." She sobbed.

He chuckled, "No, it's just embedded in the river. I'll call Logan to bring the loader out. We'll haul it out of there. There'll be no permanent damage."

She looked up at him, "how could you not be mad?"

He shrugged, "It was an accident. Besides, I've done worse. I ran the plough tractor through my mother's garden and flipped it in the gully behind the ranch house when I was sixteen and stinking drunk. Now that was a warranted punishment." What he didn't say is that he was with the old police chief's daughter and they were in the middle of something that caused his distraction.

Her eyes widened, "Oh dear, I bet Lee was really mad."

"Not as mad as my mother. I'd rather take a beating from pa any day over her wrath." He put his arm around her shoulders, "Now dry up, because no one is upset about this but you."

She nodded and he released her going the rest of the way until he was waist deep in the river to get at his phone. His brief touch was still tingling her shoulders. In all the years she'd known him, he'd never touched her. No wonder why, if she reacted so silly about it. Oh, how she wished he would notice her as a woman.

She loved this newly discovered side of him. She knew he was self-respecting man, but his patience was unusual. Logan was a bit more of a hot head, but Wyatt was definitely not like him that way. He was sure Logan would be fired up if she drove his truck into the river. He was angry about his hat getting muddy and it was a lot less expensive.

A Pleasant Surprise

She saw him cast a glance in her direction as he talked on the phone and knew that she was being discussed. Well, Logan would never let her live this down and she deserved it. She should have set the brake, but he was so darn distracting.

When he was done he slipped the phone into his shirt pocket and made his way back to her, “Come on let’s wait up top. Logan will be about fifteen minutes or so. Those loaders don’t travel too fast.” As it was, he was digging out a ditch further up the road, so it was a lucky thing that he called him.

She tried to move, but like he was earlier, she got stuck, “Uh—Wyatt?” She didn’t realize how much hold the mud had on her. He moved easily in it even though he got stuck before, but that wasn’t until after he had helped the calf. Even now he moved as if it wasn’t much of a bother. Then again, his legs were much longer than hers and it just lent to the amount of strength this man had.

He stopped and looked down at her. The mud was past her knees now and even though it only reached the tops of his calves, he knew she was embedded in it, “Now, who’s laughing?” he said with a glitter in his dark eyes.

“Oh gosh, just help.” She said absently reaching for him.

He moved close and wrapped his thick arms around her to lift her out then he paused.

Natalie’s face came level with his hard chest and she heard her own quick intake of breath. He smelled like expensive cologne and soap, but she would have never known he did unless she got that close to him. Willie wore it like he bathed in it. In fact you could smell the man coming before he walked in a room. It was then that she noticed that he’d gone completely still, and her eyes lifted slowly to his. He was staring down at her with all amusement wiped from his expression.

“What?” she said breathlessly. Although where she found the strength to say that much, she’d never know. She suddenly

noticed that he had his arms wrapped around her and she him and their bodies were right against one another. His was warm and hard and her breasts pressed were against his ribcage.

"I'm just wondering—" he paused searching her eyes with his, "—if you're body is soft like this everywhere." He said huskily. Wyatt did not expect the woman to feel so damn good in his arms. Although he didn't show it, it took him by complete surprise.

Natalie had no idea on how to respond to that. In fact she didn't know in what reference to take it. His voice had deepened to the point that she felt it reverberate in his chest and vibrate through hers. To her complete and utter shock, he bent his head and inhaled her scent from her hair. Never in her life did she allow a man to get so forward with her, but she couldn't stop it. It was doing crazy things to her insides. Things that were new and unfamiliar. Things she liked.

"You smell like lilacs." He said in the same tone casting his eyes to her mouth, "I wonder if you taste the same."

Her eyes darted to his. What did that mean?

He removed one of his arms from around her and when he did she felt his other slide further around her back and it spanned over the lower curve of her spine. Now she knew that he was no longer in the middle of helping her get free. That was an intimate gesture and what happened next just confirmed it.

His free hand slid to her jaw and traced a path there while she tipped her face up to look at him. Then he cupped it and tilted her head easily as his eyes went to her mouth again. She had the sweetest bow mouth he'd ever seen on a woman. His thumb moved to her chin and applied slight pressure. She parted her lips as he lowered his head.

Natalie could have never in a million years imagine that Wyatt was going to kiss her, but the feel of his hard firm mouth on hers was new and exciting. He nibbled at her lower lip and

she released a gasp as a wave of pleasure pulsed low in her abdomen. Her fingers curled into the cloth of his shirt at that feeling and when he slanted his mouth over hers she felt her toes go numb. Slowly and masterfully he coaxed her until she started to respond.

The first time she felt his tongue caress the opening of her mouth she released a muffled whimper. Nothing could have prepared her for that. It was such a brief yet sinfully intimate gesture that it affected her deeply. Heat swirled low in her in her pelvis for a brief moment and she knew that if she wasn't set in mud, she would have fallen over.

That was enough, thought Wyatt. He couldn't take much more. Reluctantly he lifted his head and looked down at her, "You do." He said softly studying her flushed dazed expression. Her lips formed this sweet little moue as she stared up at him blankly.

"Do?" she finally asked.

"Taste good." He finished with a rakish grin. Then he wrapped his arms around her and in a single fluid motion effortlessly pulled her out of the suction she was in. At the same time the sound of the loader coming down the road caught his attention. "Looks like our saviour is here."

Natalie didn't know what to say. She was completely dumfounded over that kiss. She thought she was crazy about this man before, now she was more in love with him than she thought she could be. Her eyes guided up to his as his attention was drawn toward the big yellow machine coming down the hill toward them. Was she just a curiosity to him? He certainly didn't seem to be affected like she was. Then again she never kissed anyone before in her life so maybe all his kisses curled a woman's toes. She knew one thing though, if he wrapped those big strong arms around any woman like he did around her, they would be in love with him in half a second.

He was right, she was naïve. Only she didn't realize how much until he kissed her.

Logan hopped down from the loader and burst into laughter at the truck submersed in the river. Wyatt didn't seem affected at all, but Natalie blushed to the roots of her hair.

"I should ask what you two were doing to not notice the truck rolling toward the bank, but I know that's a waste of breath." He turned back toward the loader to get the tow rope.

If it was likely, she flushed further. Natalie glanced up at Wyatt again, but his expression showed nothing. It was like the whole incident was completely forgotten. How could he not let that statement affect him? Did he already shrug that incident off?

Wyatt took one end of the thick tow rope and waded back down to the truck while she watched and within a half an hour the truck was back on the bank dripping wet and caked with mud.

"Will it start?" She asked as Logan came to stand beside her.

"Probably."

Wyatt got in and to her complete surprise after a few sputters it roared to life.

"The water didn't get in the engine, so no damage honey. Don't worry about it." Logan said knowing she felt terrible.

"He told you it was my fault." She said looking up at him with embarrassment.

"No, it was a guess." He smiled looking down at her, "Wyatt would never forget to set the brake."

"Gosh I feel so stupid."

"We've been down here a million times this year, you haven't. Don't be so hard on yourself. You won't make the same mistake twice."

"You two are just too nice to me." She breathed deeply. "My father would have had a fit."

A Pleasant Surprise

“So would ours, but we’re not telling him.” He grinned.

Her eyes widened.

“He’d never get mad at you Nat, he thinks you’re a treat. He’d most likely take it out on us. That’s why we won’t tell him.”

“Now I feel guilty and stupid.”

“Like I said, nothing got wrecked, so don’t worry about it. Besides you are caked in mud because you were helping Wyatt.”

“Actually, I did this to myself when he told me to get the phone out of the glove compartment because I sunk his truck. Now that I think of it, I think he was only teasing me, but who knows with him.” She said a little exasperated.

“He probably was. Wyatt would never expect a woman to do such a thing.” Logan chuckled. “By the way, aren’t you cold?”

“Yes, a little.” *A lot*, but she didn’t want to complain because it seemed minute in view of what she did. The dampness of the mud soaked her skin and she couldn’t really feel her toes anymore, but she didn’t realize it at the time because Wyatt’s body was warm and distracting. Now she felt herself start to shiver.

“Wyatt says you’re staying with us tonight.” He said casually but his eyes studied her expression carefully. He was sure she didn’t want to stay with them, but he also knew that Wyatt wouldn’t take no for an answer. He was right from what she said next.

“He insisted.” Wondering why Logan didn’t find it odd that his older brother invited a woman home to look after her. Finally it dawned on her that was the subject of a discussion that she was unaware of. Although it felt really nice to have someone care about her the way the Stricklands did, she honestly thought that Willie wasn’t much of a threat and that the two men were reading too much into it.

“Yeah, I think he has a good point though.”

She shrugged, “Willie hasn’t been aggressive in that way at

all. He's asked me out about a dozen times but there was nothing there that indicated that he was going to stalk me."

"Just the same, we feel better." He watched Wyatt get out of the truck, "Maybe Wyatt should go and talk to him." He thought out loud. He knew Wyatt didn't want to for good reason, but he worried about her.

"What? No, that's not necessary." She contested, "I don't need him telling Willie something like that. He'll think that I went crying to him or something when he really hadn't done anything to warrant it. That alone might make him mad. I mean, maybe there's nothing there and Willie's just being a flirt."

Logan nodded, "Okay, maybe you have a point, but Wyatt could put a stop to anything that Willie *thinks* will happen between you two."

She didn't doubt that. He was huge. Even if he didn't say anything, his size was intimidating.

Wyatt walked over to them, "the front of the seat is a little wet but, in all, it's nothing that a few days of airing out can't cure."

"Oh Wyatt, I'm so sorry." She said sincerely.

He shifted his gaze to her, "I know you are, there's no harm done. Go get in the truck before you catch a chill, you're shivering. I turned the heater on."

She was surprised he noticed that so quickly.

"I'll be there in a minute." He said turning his attention to Logan as if she was already gone.

She released a disappointed sigh and did as he asked. Whatever they shared earlier was already dismissed from his mind. Her eyes settled on the two men once she was inside the truck. She watched Wyatt shake his brother's hand to thank him for the tow. Then Logan glanced at her as if they were talking about her. She really wished she knew what they were saying. Yet she couldn't help but admire the both of them. They were a

A Pleasant Surprise

handsome pair. Wyatt was bigger than Logan, but they were about the same height. All her friends thought they were two of the dreamiest men in Martindale and they were both single.

She felt for the broken hearts they lay behind them, including Missy's. Really they couldn't help how they were. It wasn't just that they were ruggedly handsome, but they were hardworking respectable cowboys and wealthy to boot. What was she thinking in taking that kiss so personally? Wyatt probably kissed a hundred women in his life. She was only another statistic.

If he were to settle down, it would probably be with some beautiful socialite, not a small town girl like her. She wasn't fancy by any means and although she liked the outdoors she wouldn't know what to do if a man asked her out on a date.

It was too bad she wasn't more assertive like Missy, or her sister, Jenny. She would probably be brave enough to ask him to the fall fair next week. It entailed a local rodeo, amusement rides, and horticulture displays.

She'd seen him there once, but he was actually with another woman.

She volunteered at the soup kitchen pavilion to raise money for families on assistance. He didn't see her as he walked by with this gorgeous blonde on his arm, but she stopped and noticed. Even then she felt the surge of disappointment knowing she could never look like that woman if that's what he preferred.

He looked so devastating in a cream Stetson, jeans, and a brown western cut shirt that brought out those chocolate eyes of his. The woman had her arm looped through his as he seemed to be explaining the local sights. It was interesting because she only had her eyes on him the whole time and he could have been talking about the stock market or the price of tea in China and she didn't seem like she would have cared.

Natalie wondered if he kissed that woman like he did her.

She bit her bottom lip thinking about it. It bothered her that he might have, but really, he couldn't help how attractive he was and it wasn't like he belonged to her even though he kissed her. She may have been naïve but she certainly wasn't stupid.

That woman he was with was dressed in everything you shouldn't wear to a rodeo. She had on a cream low cut dress and pumps. Everyone knows you wear a good pair of boots to something like that because of the things you step in. However, she probably didn't get one spot on that dress. She seemed that sophisticated.

She heard that he was engaged once, but it didn't work out. She'd seen that woman a couple of times, but again, she was gorgeous. She wasn't blonde, which surprised her, but more of a brunette like her. It seemed that his tastes varied.

Just then he turned and she averted her gaze to her folded hands on her lap. The last thing she wanted to do was let him see her pine over him. Just because he kissed her didn't mean that she acted like some silly school girl and fawned all over him.

He got in and without a word swung the truck around, waved at Logan getting in the loader and headed back toward the ranch.

She shifted her eyes to the cattle now milling about in a distant field wondering how that little calf was.

"Are you warm?"

She near jumped at the sound of his deep heavenly voice. "I'm better thanks." She said bringing her eyes to his and forcing a pleasant smile.

"Good," he reached over and turned the heat down a notch.

Natalie noticed that the gate she promised to drive through was already open. "I should close that."

"Logan will." He said with a glance down to her legs, "You're going to catch a chill."

"Wyatt you were in the mud longer than I, I'll be fine."

A Pleasant Surprise

“I’m used to it.” He said returning his attention to the road that he just pulled out onto. “I’ll get ma to make you some soup when we get to the house. Then a hot bath will hopefully help.”

Her eyes widened but he didn’t see it. It was completely awkward him telling her about a hot bath.

A short while later, he pulled up in front on the driveway, shifted the truck into neutral and turned to her. “I’ll go park the truck. Ma will show you where to put your things.” He reached into the back and got her bag giving it to her.

“Thanks for everything Wyatt.”

He smiled slightly, “No problem”

With that she got out and he pulled away. She stood there for a moment watching the truck wondering how he could just act so normal after what they shared.

“Oh dear.”

Dolly’s voice came from behind her. She spun around clutching her bag to see the older woman standing in the open door of the house. She didn’t even hear it open because again, her mind was wandering to Wyatt.

“Did Wyatt put you to *work*?” she said disapprovingly running her eyes down her filthy clothes.

“Actually—“

“You poor thing.” She said coming down the steps and taking her hand, “I’ll show you your room and you can get washed up before dinner. Why you’re doing that, I’m going to have words with that boy of mine.” She said practically hauling her up the stairs and down the hall to one of the rooms.

“Your floors.” She stuttered out as she followed her down the hall dripping mud everywhere. She remembered last week when the men had to hose off outside so they didn’t get her floors dirty yet here she was pulling a muddy girl down the high polished hardwood.

“Pooh on the floors.” She answered.

“Mrs Strickland, it was my fault, Wyatt didn’t do this.” She defended.

“Nonsense.” Dolly said opening the door, “A gentleman never lets a lady do work like that.”

“I didn’t—“

“Now you get out of those clothes and I’ll make sure you get a hot meal.”

She shut the door leaving Natalie standing there with a blank look on her face.

Meanwhile, Wyatt had already stripped down and was hosing off outside in the same cold water as the week before. Then as before, he plucked his clothes up and headed around the front of the house just to be met by his mother with an angry stance. He knew exactly what this was about, “Ma, I didn’t make her do anything. She jumped in the mud on her own. She was trying to be helpful.” If one thing was certain, their mother raised gentlemen, and to bring home a girl as filthy as he just did would be inexcusable in her books because it was his job to make sure she stayed safe.

“Ridiculous.” She countered shaking a finger at him, “She’s near frozen and just your very presence makes experienced women defenceless. You didn’t have to say a word and that girl would do anything for you.”

Wyatt shifted uncomfortably. His mother was way too wise sometimes. He already knew he shouldn’t have kissed her from the star struck look in her eyes, but he couldn’t help himself. When he wrapped his arms around her it became apparent that she was all woman. It was something that had escaped him the past few years until he started noticing her recently. Yes, she was pretty, but that feel of her warmed him more than he liked to admit. It wasn’t often that a woman could do that to him without some sort of foreplay, but there wasn’t any. None. Yet, that shy sweet gal with the gloriously pouty mouth was able to send those

sensations through him. If he was smart, he wouldn't have kissed her, but he certainly couldn't turn back time. Now he had to deal with the repercussions.

"Natalie is a good girl and if you dare corrupt her you'd better put a ring on her finger."

"Jesus." He muttered unable to help himself.

"And—" she added narrowing her eyes to a deadly look only a mother could give, "Don't you dare take the lord's name in vain around me or I'll take my rolling pin to your thick skull."

"Sorry ma." He said humbly.

After a prolonged stare that could make a large man like Wyatt feel it all the way to his spine, she gave a curt nod and went in the house.

Wyatt was thankful that they lived out in the country, because the sight of a large half naked muscular man, standing at the foot of the porch humbled, while holding muddy clothes while a five foot nothing elderly woman scolded him, would make him the laughing stock of their town.

He gave his head a mental shake and went up the stairs into the house.

Natalie sunk low in the big claw foot bathtub allowing the hot water to soak through her pores. Dolly had come back after a moment and filled the tub for her not taking 'no' for an answer. Natalie relented finally and was really glad she did. She never had someone dote on her before and it was really nice.

She stuck her toes out of the other end and played with the spout and smiled. She even washed her hair.

An abrupt knock came on the door of her room outside the bathroom and she realized that she'd forgotten to close the bathroom door. She shot upward with a splash of water. It was Logan, but he didn't come in.

"Ma says dinner in five Nat."

"Okay."

As she came down the stairs Logan was on the phone in the foyer. Right away she knew it was Missy because he was abruptly telling her it was over.

She quickly darted into the dining room pretending she didn't hear anything. *Poor Missy*, she thought to herself. Logan would have been hard for her to get over because he was so charming and paid attention to her. He was also considered quite a catch and being seen with him really fed her self esteem.

"Sit there dear." Dolly said pointing to the chair beside Wyatt, who looked as if he endured another shower.

Wyatt stood up and pulled her chair out.

She mumbled a shy thanks.

"Where's that boy?" Lee said nodding to Logan's seat.

"He's on the phone." Dolly said.

"Logan!" Lee bellowed causing Natalie to actually jump.

Wyatt chuckled, "Don't let it bother you. It's all wind." He whispered causing her to laugh. His eyes went to her damp hair. He knew it was long, but Christ it was all the way down her back and it looked as soft as shimmering satin. He could smell the shampoo off it from sitting next to her and ached to reach over and run his fingers through her tresses.

Logan appeared suddenly followed by mumbles from Lee of his sons being disrespectful with company around. To Natalie it looked as if that phone conversation didn't go to well from the sour expression on his face.

Like Wyatt, Logan seemed unaffected by his father's complaining and her eyes guided to the Patriarch. He had hard lines on his face, but his eyes were kind. His hair had long since gone grey along with the thick moustache above his lip. It was obvious where his sons got his stature because he was still a big man and she was sure he was in his seventies. As before she always thought he was intimidating, but now over the past few

A Pleasant Surprise

weeks she realized that he had a large heart because he seemed oddly protective of her over Willie. It just made her realize that he wasn't as hard as he put off.

Mrs. Strickland was the opposite. She was short, round, and very pleasant to be around, but she was no pushover. She had that look about her that if she spoke her sons wouldn't even think about disobeying her. She actually witnessed that last week when they came home muddy. Natalie had only known her at church and was surprised that she easily invited her into her home because she really didn't know her. The overall affection the Stricklands seem to be doting on her was possibly more than she'd been used to her whole life and that was hard to admit.

Even though Dolly was older than her mother was, she had to admit that she liked the affection that she'd been showing her. It was something she knew she could get use to easily. Although she did love her own mother, she felt ignored by her and the sudden attention Dolly gave her made her feel cared about.

"Logan, you say grace since you decided to gift us with your presence." Lee said.

Logan gave Natalie a wink and did as his father asked.

Natalie enjoyed having dinner with the Strickland family. She never had that opportunity with her own parents or her sister. Her mother worked full time and when she wasn't working she was on dates. When Jenny and her needed to eat they usually sat down together and it was still a rare occurrence. On top of that, both of them had afterschool jobs and rarely had the same time off together.

"Why so quiet?" Logan asked seeing her thoughtful expression. Usually the dinner table was full of talk and tonight was no different but Natalie sat quiet.

She forced a smile, "I was just thinking of my family."

"Of course dear," Dolly said, "Sometimes things like this remind us of the good times. That's why Lee insists on it."

“Actually, I was thinking that we hardly ever sat down like this.”

Dolly exchanged a look with her husband. They were both thinking the same thing. To them, these simple get-togethers were the only time they could spend with their sons. Dolly couldn’t imagine not having that. She realized that Natalie’s upbringing was sorely lacking and her heart went out to her. She always liked this shy young woman.

“Really?” Logan said, “I take it you didn’t spend much time together as a family then?”

She shook her head, “Mom and Dad divorced when Jenny and I were young. Mom worked a lot.” She said keeping out the numerous boyfriends, “So we pretty much became latchkey kids.”

“How horrible.” Dolly said reaching for her hand.

“Oh it wasn’t that bad. We just didn’t know what we were missing, but now I think it would have been nice to do this at least once in a while.”

Logan looked at Wyatt who never said anything but stared down at the top of Natalie’s head. He knew he was just as surprised to hear that about Natalie’s childhood as he was. It meant that she’d been ignored her whole life, not just in the past few years.

The mood became quite sombre and Natalie shifted in her chair a little beginning to seem uncomfortable with the attention she was getting.

“So how old did you say your sister was?” Logan said seeing Natalie’s growing discomfort and graciously changed the subject.

That brought several chuckles from around the table and Natalie shot him a grateful look, “None of your business.”

Wyatt actually laughed at that.

Natalie stopped breathing at that deep infectious sound. He had a wonderful laugh and it was a few times she heard that from

A Pleasant Surprise

him. Now that she felt oddly close to him, it just affected her more, if that was possible. It bothered her that he didn't mention the kiss, or acknowledge her after it. Yet, he probably normally didn't because of his experience and the women he dated didn't need it. She silently chastised herself because she was acting like some insecure greenhorn.

After dinner, Natalie helped Dolly clean up as the men went back to work.

"They sure work hard." Natalie finally said while she helped Dolly do the dishes.

"They do," Dolly agreed, "Strickland men have that way about them." She eyed the younger woman as she handed her a plate, "So do you dear. Too much for my tastes. You should be looking for a man."

Natalie couldn't help but blush. When Dolly said that, the incident of that kiss instantly flooded her mind.

"Or," she added with a glint seeing her expression, "Do you already have one?"

She shook her head rapidly.

"Sure you don't." she said not believing her as she pulled the plug on the sink, "Or is it that he doesn't return the affection?"

"I—uh—just don't have time." She said evading the question. Dolly was really insightful and she was worried that Wyatt's name would appear on her forehead like a neon sign if she kept asking questions. "I should go to bed. I have to get up early to go back and open the store."

Dolly tsked, "Well, I'll make sure one of the boys drives you home tomorrow."

"Thanks." She said giving her the drying towel and leaving the kitchen.

Dolly watched her go thinking that she seemed a little sad for such a young woman.

The brothers came in just before midnight. Usually they were in the house earlier, but some of the cattle broke through a fence and they saddled up to go round them up by moonlight. Lee had retired several hours before that.

“Wyatt, you need to take Natalie to work tomorrow.” Dolly said meeting them at the door in her housecoat.

“Yes ma, I know.” Even though he didn’t mention it to his family, he had already told her that before they left her house that afternoon.

“I can feel the ache all the way to my bones.” Logan said.

“I hear ya.” Wyatt agreed.

Dolly went back upstairs to bed.

Logan waited until he was sure his mother was no longer within earshot before he spoke again, “Say what happened with you and Natalie down by the river this morning?”

“What makes you say anything did?” Wyatt removed his denim jacket and hung it up.

Logan grinned, “The male Strickland sized muddy palm print on her jaw.”

Wyatt sat down on the bench in the foyer and removed his boots unmoved as if the question was completely expected. “She got stuck in the mud and I helped her out.” He finally said after a minute.

“And,” Logan continued, “The petite hand marks on your upper chest.”

Wyatt shot him a warning look, “Like I said.”

“And lastly, the one on her backside.”

This time Wyatt sat straight and just looked at him.

There was a lot in that look and Logan knew he was pushing it with his brother. “Okay, fine. However, if you can tell me about my love life, expect the same courtesy.”

“There’s no love life Logan, so put your mind to rest.” He

said irritably.

Unknown to both of them, Natalie stood at the top of the stairs clutching the lace of her nightgown at her throat hearing the conversation. She was having trouble sleeping and was going to go and get a glass of warm milk. Instead she heard the entire exchange. Wyatt's words struck her deep. She was wondering if he was going to acknowledge what had happened between them earlier, but he said it was *nothing*. She, on the other hand, thought it was one of the most amazing things that had ever happened to her in her dull life. It hurt her to hear him talk about her like it was nothing. Even though part of her did expect it, it still hurt.

She should have known better. She'd seen the type of women that Wyatt dated, and she was on the other end of the extreme scale. She wasn't voluptuous, or sexy. She looked down at her full length flannel nightgown. *Definitely not sexy.*

Wyatt, in contrast, was every bit seductive to her sex.

Quietly she went back to bed hoping the sound of her breaking heart didn't reach the men downstairs.

CHAPTER THREE

The next morning she entered the dining room just to find only Wyatt present at the table.

She paused, "Where is everyone?" She was hoping there would be more than him after hearing what he said last night. She had time to mull it over and was a little angry at him. She was a person after all, and men should just go around kissing girls to see what they 'taste like', whatever that meant.

"Ma's collecting eggs and Logan and Pa are gone to work already." He said looking at her.

She looked at her watch. It was only six thirty in the morning.

“We have early mornings around here.” Wyatt answered knowing what she was thinking.”The perks of owning a large spread.” He gestured toward the platters of eggs, sausage and bacon that his mother left on the table, “Apparently she left all of this for you. Something about you being too skinny.”

She actually felt defensive because that was the second time Wyatt mentioned her weight and she was still miffed and hurt about last night, “I’m not that skinny.”

He set his mug down and looked at her for a moment. There was no mistaking her defensive tone. Then he took in her attire, *how many bloody coveralls does this woman own?* He thought to himself. Again she had a pair of denim coveralls on when he thought she muddled up the only set she had.

Feeling a little nervous she cast him a wary glance and sat down to help herself to the breakfast. It actually smelled terrific and she’d be crazy to pass it up. No one cooked for her and quite frankly, Dolly was an incredible cook.

“I never said that.” He finally said referring to her weight.

She looked up at him. “You did.”

His brows rose, “When?”

“Just now—“

“I was repeating what my mother said. I never said I agreed with it.”

She flushed slightly, “Then there was last week.”

He looked a little confused.

“Last week you said I was a feather.”

After a moment he nodded remembering that he did say that, “I meant in comparison to Willie.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I never said you were scrawny Nat. I personally think that you’re just right.” He said easily.

This time her face flushed dark red.

“Well you did bring it up.” He continued like it didn’t bother

him at all to compliment a woman.

“Can we just talk about something else?”

He smiled but hid it behind his cup of coffee. It was easy to see that his compliment embarrassed her. However, he had to admit that her defensiveness raised his interest more. He honestly didn’t realize that she misunderstood that statement he made over brunch last week. Actually he probably should have been a little more aware because of how naïve she was, but he really wasn’t accustomed to being around someone like her. That kiss alone should have told him everything. It was obvious that she wasn’t all that experienced even if she tasted as good as she did. One thing was certain, if another man had sampled that delicious mouth of hers, she definitely wouldn’t be single.

His eyes guided over her and down to her mouth as she ate. She really did have a beautiful mouth. Her cousin was pretty, but Natalie was beautiful. She just didn’t realize it. “Sure,” He finally said in answer to her question, “how about you helping me scrub out a ranch truck after work?”

She darted his eyes to his. It took her a little less time to figure out that he was teasing her than she did back at the river about his phone. She smiled, “I should be doing that for you.”

“Well, it’s that or I start building the new barn that pa wants.”

“Another one?”

“Yes, it’s easier to keep track of the calving if we are able to isolate the cows.”

She tipped her head not understanding anything about cattle.

He saw that and explained, “It’s easier to watch them with security cameras in the stalls than run outside every hour to check the herd.”

“Really? People do that?”

He nodded, “They have been domesticated for so long that

we can have a lot of trouble with calving, especially if they do it for the first time. After that we have a history.”

“Is it cost effective?”

Now that was an interesting question coming from her and one that he was very interested in answering. “Yes, very. First, we can see if there’s trouble and we don’t have to go hunt down the cow in the herd if she is in trouble. It’s very cost effective. We don’t usually lose the calf and we don’t have to pay someone to go out every hour in the middle of the night.”

“How do you know when they go in labour?”

“We keep track of the breeding.”

“Oh.” She really had a lot to learn. Cattle ranching was very common around there and she only knew the feed side of it.

Just before seven thirty in the morning they pulled up in front of her store, “When does your sister get here?” He said nonchalantly.

“If she doesn’t have car trouble, she was thinking this evening.”

“The fair is next weekend, did you want to invite her along so we can show her how we Texans like to have a good time.”

She tried, but she couldn’t help her mouth from falling open, “I—well.”

“Unless you’re volunteering again this year.” He continued guiding his eyes to her mouth again. *Jesus, it was so damn kissable* he thought to himself. Images of that mouth moving over his skin momentarily distracted him.

How did he know she did that? She was sure he didn’t notice her in the booth that year. “Don’t you have a date?”

“No. I haven’t asked anyone yet.” He said with a smirk.

“We wouldn’t want to get in your way.” He looked amused at that statement.

“You wouldn’t be.”

A Pleasant Surprise

“Well, okay then.” She said hesitantly, “Dad closes down the store that weekend so I guess we can go. I’ll talk to Jenny when she comes.’

“See you then.” It took every muscle fibre in his body to resist reaching for her. He wanted to taste her again. Actually he’d be lying if he didn’t want more than that. He knew now that she felt damn good under those shapeless outfits.

She got out of the truck puzzled by that whole conversation. Was that him asking her and her sister out for next weekend? She made a frustrated noise under her breath and went up the stairs to the store. He made absolutely no sense. Was he just inviting her so he could keep an eye on her? It wasn’t as if he blatantly asked her out. He just basically said that they’d hang out together. If she wasn’t so darn stupid around him, she’d just ask, but she couldn’t. She heard him last night. He said she was nothing. If he said it to her face, it would literally crush her.

It was late that afternoon when she saw her sister’s little Honda Civic pull up to the front of the store. Thankfully it wasn’t busy at the time and she rushed out to meet her. Jenny was taller than her, slender and very pretty. As usual she dressed if someone was just about to take her picture for a fashion magazine. Today she wore a very pretty, pale green summer dress. They looked somewhat alike but Jenny was always more sophisticated than she was. Her hair was shorter and more auburn but they had the same eyes.

Jenny squealed when she saw Natalie who rushed down the front steps to embrace her. “Oh gosh, Nat, I missed you!”

“Me too!”

She looked past her to the front door of the store, “Where’s dad?” Somehow she expected her father to be there too.

When Natalie didn’t answer she brought her attention back to her little sister, “Is it worse?” she asked referring to his

alcoholism.

She shrugged, "It depends. Sometimes it is."

She put her arm around her sister's shoulders, "Well, I'm here now so I can help around here. I bet you're ready for some time off."

"I don't mind. It hasn't been that bad."

She smiled down at her, "you never complained no matter how tough things were."

"Because they weren't that bad. Missy has it a lot worse."

Jenny rolled her eyes, "Missy acts like she does. She's twenty five, and still living at home because it's convenient for her."

"Jenny." Natalie said in a tone for Jenny to drop the subject but she didn't.

"Well she is. If she's so abused she wouldn't be living there still."

"We can't judge her situation."

"Certainly we can." Jenny said looking at her younger sister. She sighed seeing her wrinkle her brow in disapproval. "I know I've only been a social worker for just over a year, but I've seen some pretty horrific things compared to what Missy keeps telling us. She certainly doesn't act like a child that has been slapped around."

"We can't accuse her of lying either Jenny."

"No, you're right. In fact, we have to take everything at face value."

"What does that mean?" she knew without a doubt that her sister was more worldly than her because she'd probably seen things that Natalie couldn't even imagine.

"It means—" she gave her sister a knowing look, "—that Missy never has any bruises. Most women that have been abused usually date a man who is like the abuser. Also, I've never seen uncle Albert being the least bit menacing toward her. I think he's

A Pleasant Surprise

a lot like dad when it comes to his booze. He just takes it to his room or the study and drinks alone. Furthermore, from the things you've told me she doesn't hang out with men that hit her."

That was true. Logan would never lay a hand on a woman.

"Come on pumpkin. Show me the place." She said wanting to change the subject and using a childhood nickname to distract her. Their mother had given it to her because she was a chubby baby and it stuck through their childhood even after she slimmed down.

Natalie would protect anyone that she thought was struggling with personal issues. That's one of the things she loved about her, but it also left her vulnerable to be hurt. Once the truth came out about Missy's lies, she knew Natalie would be really upset. In a way she was glad that she didn't have a job and was here so she could keep an eye on her younger sister. She had grown up a lot since she'd last seen her four years ago. Oh they talked just about every weekend on the phone and she missed her like crazy, but Natalie would believe anything anyone told her.

The sisters walked up the steps to the store. Once inside Jenny looked around the interior, "Wow, you've done a terrific job."

"Jen!"

Her father's voice caught her attention. "Dad!" she ran forward as their father came down an aisle with his arms open. Jenny rushed forward and jumped into her father's arms.

Natalie watched and bit her bottom lip. Jenny always seemed to shine in her parents eyes. She was the smart one, the pretty one and she went to college. She can't remember the last time her father embraced her.

"Nat said you were coming home."

"Well, just until I get on my feet."

“Natalie,” her father said over Jenny’s head, “Did you want to bring her luggage to the house.”

“Dad, I’m quite capable of doing that.” Jenny said.

“Nonsense. I’ll watch the store and Natalie can do that while I spend some time with you.”

Natalie didn’t wait for them to finish debating and instead went out to Jenny’s car and took the two bags out of the back seat. She then walked around the store toward the house. She knew her sister felt bad about the way her parents treated her, but it wasn’t her fault. She had long since gotten used to being second best. Normally she might feel a twinge of jealousy over her father’s favouritism, but she really didn’t mind. She was preoccupied. Other things were starting to bother her. Mostly about Wyatt. If Wyatt got a glimpse of her older sister she would no longer exist.

Natalie had to admit that she was very happy that her sister was with them. As usual their father went to the den after supper with a bottle of whiskey but at least Natalie had someone to talk to. Also, Jenny came back to the store and asked her to show her how to run the till and help with her job. The afternoon went quickly and they laughed like they were teenagers all over again. Natalie never realized how lonely she’d been for company.

It was also Jenny that made supper. It was a wonderful spaghetti dinner and they sat at the table well after they were done eating.

“I’m sorry Dad asked you to do that.” Jenny said after a while, “The luggage.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Well, you’re not my lackey.” She said a little tersely. “I never did understand our parents that way.”

“I always had you Jenny.” Natalie said genuinely.

Jenny smiled, “I really missed you.”

A Pleasant Surprise

“Me too.”

“I’m going to help you in the store too. I know it’ll take a few days for me to get the hang of things, but that way you can take some time for yourself. I know dad hardly has anything to do with it. I may love him, but I’m not stupid.”

“I don’t mind. I give myself a salary, and the store makes really good money.”

“That’s not the point. I’m the oldest and I should take more responsibility here. Dad always had a drinking problem, but I basically dumped him on you and went to school.”

“Don’t feel guilty about that. I’m really proud of you.”

“Maybe we can make arrangements for you to go this time. Did you still want to be a teacher?”

She nodded, “I’m young though. Dad’s health isn’t as good as it was last year. He goes to the doctor every few months. I don’t know exactly what’s wrong because he won’t tell me, but I suspect it’s his liver with the amount that he drinks. He still won’t stop drinking no matter what the doctor tells him.”

“I’ve given up a long time ago on telling him that.” Jenny said solemnly, “It’s the addiction. It’s a selfish thing and the only person it frustrates is us, so I focus on time that we have left with him.”

Natalie looked away thinking Jenny could say that because she hadn’t been living here for the past four years, but Natalie knew there wasn’t much time left with him. He started looking pasty and the white part of his eyes started discolouring. She read somewhere that it was because of liver damage. Soon she’d be alone. Jenny would find a job and leave, and her father would die so she would have no one. Jenny easily made friends, whereas Natalie didn’t. She loved her sister but she knew that she didn’t understand her.

The next day Wyatt’s truck pulled up in front of the store

and as usual Natalie felt her heart hammering wildly in her chest when he got out. Obviously the truck still ran and it looked spotless so it was obvious that he cleaned it. She still felt terrible over that. She didn't even tell her sister because it was so embarrassing and she felt completely incompetent. She watched him through the window by the till and thought he'd grown more handsome in his absence.

He was wearing a white western cut shirt with black piping, a black Stetson and jeans fastened with a large shiny belt buckle. Her eyes dropped to his worn boots as he came toward the stairs. You could always tell a cowboy at heart because of their boots. Wyatt's were well used. Even his walk was a testament to how darn masculine he was. It was a confident walk that spoke volumes.

He trotted up the front steps and into the store tipping his hat at her as he walked by. She quickly averted her gaze until he was down the aisle. What could she say? His very presence could render any woman speechless. Well, almost any woman. She suddenly heard her sister's voice and a deep chuckle follow. She'd forgotten about Jenny who was determined to pull her weight and help at the store from now on.

All her hopes and dreams shattered in that moment. Even though she suspected that Wyatt would probably find her attractive, the reality of it hurt.

After another minute she heard his boots on the planked floor as he walked back down the aisle followed by her sister's 'it was nice to meet you.'

Wyatt set his supplies on the counter and stared down at the top of Natalie's head.

"Is that all for you?" she asked politely like she would any customer as she rang it up and placed them in bags. The whole time she was unable to meet his eyes.

He drew his brows together, reached over the counter,

cupped her chin and made her raise her eyes to his, “Okay, what’s bothering you?”

She shrugged, “Nothing.” She thought she lied beautifully but he didn’t fall for it.

He released her and placed his hands, palms down, on the counter, “That’s bull.”

She bit her bottom lip and his eyes went there, “Stop that honey, you’ll leave a mark.” He liked her mouth, as pouty and perfect as it was. He certainly didn’t want her to scar it.

She instantly released her lip and looked at him.

“Now, out with it. Was Willie in here?”

“No.” she said and that’s all she said.

He waited for her to elaborate but she didn’t. “Sweetheart, I don’t have time for twenty questions. I’ve got a bloody fence to fix.” He said with a slight edge while pointing to the bucket of fencing staple she just bought. “Now, I know you got some guff in there somewhere, so spill it.”

She focused on him as hard as it was, and took a deep breath. What did she have to lose? She already knew that her fantasies were fading to dust. “You never talked to me.” She said softly.

“Talk to you?” why didn’t this gal ever act predictable?

Her eyes darted toward the direction that he’d just come from, where her sister was.

It took him a minute to figure out what she was referring to. When he finally understood he had to prevent a smile from forming because what she was thinking was ridiculous. His brows rose, “I’m talking to you right now, but you’re not very forthcoming.”

“I mean like that.” She tipped her head in the direction of her sister who suddenly appeared and cast her an amused glance as she arranged things on a shelf purposely within hearing distance. She’d lived here for four years and Wyatt had never

walked up to her and started talking to her for no reason.

"Maybe because if I looked at you, you high-tailed it away from me."

"That's not true." Of course it was.

"Liar."

"It's not your sister I had in my arms the other day." He continued.

Her eyes shot to his in surprise and her cheeks flushed sparing a glance at Jenny who didn't seem to hear.

"What?" he asked seeing her expression.

"You told Logan it was nothing."

He quirked a brow, "Eavesdropping?"

"I wasn't!" she protested, "I couldn't sleep."

He leaned forward so his face was only a few inches from hers. His voice became a husky deep whisper so her sister wouldn't hear. "So, did you want me to inform my brother that you taste like warm honey?"

Her eyes shot wide and her breath caught in her throat.

Ah, this started making sense now, he thought to himself. "Did you want me to tell him that our little store girl boiled my blood over a kiss?" He continued in that same deep tone while lifting a large hand and forming a curve with it. "Or that my hand had the privilege of learning the contours of your perfectly shaped backside?"

"Oh gosh." She finally breathed unable to take her eyes away. Vaguely she did remember his hand smoothing down her back and cupping her bottom. At the time she was immersed in mud to her knees and it was cold in contrast to his warm hand. She felt heat ebb low in her stomach at that memory.

He stood erect and ran his eyes over her face. This time his voice was back to normal, "I mean, if you want him to tease the hell out of you, I can definitely tell him the truth."

"No!" she protested quickly with her cheeks flaming red.

A Pleasant Surprise

“Also I asked you to the fair this weekend. Quit being so damn insecure.” He added irritably. Thinking about that kiss had him worked up all over again. She may not have been able to tell at the time, but it knocked him completely off balance. He knew he shouldn’t have touched her, but that mouth of hers was exquisite. He was sure he’d never tasted anything so perfect.

“I—I mean—you, well, it just seemed like you asked because she was new in town and you were being friendly.” She stuttered.

The corner of his mouth pulled up in a partial smile, “You thought I was being friendly?”

She nodded.

He chuckled while shaking his head. Then he took his bags and left the store without another word. He couldn’t answer that statement, it was the most ridiculous thing he ever heard.

Natalie went over to the window and stared at him in puzzlement. What did all of that mean? She wasn’t brainless, but he kept throwing things out there that might indicate that he was interested in her. Then when she got her hopes up, he would crush them. First his forgotten kiss at the river, then telling Logan that nothing was going on. On top of that, he was more talkative to Jenny than he’d ever been with her, and when she was hurt over it, he twisted into it being her fault.

“Why the frown sis?”

Natalie turned and saw Jenny standing beside her. For some reason she didn’t hear her approach. Maybe it had something to do with that large muscular man out in the parking lot.

“Now *that* is what a man should look like.” Jenny said appreciatively running her eyes over Wyatt followed by a long whistle of appreciation.

Natalie just stared at her. She loved her sister, but she didn’t like that at all. Of course Wyatt was as sexy as sin, but Jenny being interested in him worried her.

“What church does he go to, because I’d change religion in a minute to follow him around?” her sister added. When she didn’t answer for the second time Jenny’s eyes went to her. She was only teasing, but her sister was dead serious. It took her a moment to finally catch on to that expression of fear Natalie was wearing. She instantly regretted making light of her affections. She saw the way that gorgeous hunk of a cowboy was toward her baby sister and it was obvious the affection was returned. “Yours huh?”

“Mine?”

“That handsome cowboy.” She nodded to Wyatt who was just putting his bags in the back of the truck. “Lord, look at how his butt looks in those jeans. They’re just right aren’t they, not one wrinkle. They’re tight, but not too tight. It just goes to show how darn nice he is all over.”

She cleared her throat because Jenny was right jeans definitely were the choice of wear for Wyatt and rightly so. “No he’s not mine.” she finally said to answer Jenny’s question. Wyatt didn’t belong to anyone. However she couldn’t stop that wave of jealousy from wafting through her and settling in the pit of her stomach. She didn’t want any other woman appreciating the way Wyatt looked except for her.

“Sure he isn’t. I saw the way he touched you. You should have said something before he came in the store. I wouldn’t have been so flirtatious.”

“He’s not mine Jenny.” She felt the need to repeat herself unable to help the blush that crept up her cheeks, “and shame on you for spying.”

Jenny laughed, “Oh right, like I could pass up watching that sexy man swagger back down the aisle.”

Natalie knew exactly how she felt, “Still.” She protested. “He’s not mine.”

“No? So if I make a play for him, that’s okay.” She grinned

seeing her sister frown, "Yeah, okay." She said, "Forget I said anything."

Natalie released an exasperated breath, "Fine. If you need to be so nosy, I've been crazy about him for years, but he never noticed me."

Jenny looked down at her sister's denim coveralls and grey t-shirt, "Gee, I wonder why." Then her eyes went to her hair. "Why don't you invest in a pair of jeans and a blouse?"

She shrugged, "What difference would it make?"

"More than you think." She reached behind her and pulled the elastic out of her hair, "And wear your hair down, it's gorgeous. I regret ever cutting mine off."

"It wouldn't make a difference. I see the type of women he dates. They all look like models."

"You're pretty too Natalie. You just don't advertise it." Jenny argued, "You dress like a boy."

"It wouldn't matter." She answered watching Wyatt's truck pull away.

Jenny pursed her lips staring down at her little sister. She knew that they didn't give her much to go on. She had always felt guilty over the attention her parents gave her and how Natalie got displaced. Funny thing was, she never felt sorry for herself. She reached over and took her sister's hand and squeezed it causing her to look at her.

"Why don't we go shopping in the city tomorrow? I'll help you pick out some clothing."

"Do I look that ragged?" she said with a slight smile knowing she did.

"You do dress like a boy." She repeated.

"I dress like a nobody." She corrected. She always thought her sister was prettier and why fight it.

"Natalie, you said you were crazy about him. Why don't you invest a little more effort in yourself?"

“What’s the point?”

“I can’t believe you said that.” Jenny said with frustration, “That big handsome man likes you—” She paused and stared at her for a moment, “Have you ever had—?” her sister’s rising tell tale blush answered that question before she finished. “Oh lord, no wonder why. All of this makes sense now.”

“You have?” it was something they never discussed. They talked about boys they liked growing up, but not sex. In fact the question near knocked her over.

“I went to college.” She smirked as if that was the clearest explanation possible.

Natalie rubbed her face with her hands, “Wyatt’s right!” she burst.

“About what?”

“I am naïve.”

Jenny laughed, “Well, yes you are, but you’re so damn lovable too!”

She gave her sister a mock glare.

Natalie was wrong. That big strapping man did notice her. she just didn’t know how to interpret the signs. He touched her with a rare gentleness that a man like that didn’t display often. Jenny envied it instantly but at the same time she was happy for her. Only the amazing thing about it was men only coveted woman like that if they had slept with them, yet her sister just admitted that she was still a virgin.

She sighed to herself. She should have known that it would have taken a special man to notice her baby sister the way she always seen her. She wished her Natalie had more confidence in herself.

Jenny then realized that she could help her out. “Tomorrow, we are going shopping. I’ll make sure dad’s here to mind the store.”

“Wyatt wants to take us to the fair on Saturday.” Natalie

A Pleasant Surprise

finally said. "I should have mentioned something yesterday, but I was excited to see you."

"Really? That sounds great. A real fair. How exciting!" She said enthusiastically.

"He has a brother."

"Oh do tell!" Jenny lit up.

"Don't get so excited. First, there's some things you need to know. He and Missy—well, Logan broke up with her a few days ago. I just don't want you to get blindsided by it." Natalie explained.

"Missy went out with his brother?" she asked, then shrugged, "You know, it really doesn't matter because I'm not worried about her feelings and I don't behave the way she does. So, tell me about his brother."

Natalie wished everyone would quit saying things about Missy. She really wasn't that bad. "Logan's about twenty five, but he's a hard worker, but unlike Wyatt, he jokes around a lot."

"If he looks like that—" she nodded toward the direction Wyatt's truck had gone, "I'm game."

"What about Missy?" Natalie finally asked.

"What about her?" Jenny said lifting her carefully manicured brows.

"Logan's a dish too Jen, Missy said she wasn't done trying to get him back."

"How does Logan feel?"

She shrugged, "I think—well, it was physical." She flushed again.

Jenny smiled.

CHAPTER FOUR

"So," Logan said looking over at his brother who cast him a glance taking his attention from the road for a moment,

“Nothing’s going on huh?”

“Nope.” He said easily as he pulled up in front of Natalie’s house, shifted the truck into neutral and set the brake.

“Jesus, you’re so full of shit.” Logan said. His brother came home last week and told him that they were double dating to the fair and that Logan was taking Natalie’s sister. He didn’t ask, but told him. Logan didn’t protest because if the sister looked anything like Natalie, he was all for it. He also didn’t ask Wyatt anything else because he wasn’t sure if this was just protectiveness on his part or what, but today when he met him in the foyer, Wyatt was dressed up and he even put on some cologne. He only did that when he was going out with a woman.

A slight smile pulled at Wyatt’s mouth as he got out of the truck. Logan followed suit and they went up the stairs together.

“Oh wow.” Exclaimed Jenny as she watched them from the front window. *What a sexy pair*, she thought to herself, *like matching stud bookends*. She chuckled at the thought while her eyes guided to Logan. She thought Wyatt was devastating, but the brother certainly just as much, if not more handsome.

Logan wore a black Stetson, a jade shirt and new jeans topped with a large belt buckle like his brother’s. Wyatt wore a blue and white striped western cut shirt and a cream Stetson.

“Nat, your fella is here!” she turned and hollered up the stairs before going and answering the door.

“Ma’am.” Said Logan tipping his hat in greeting.

“Hi.” She said trying not to faint at the sight of Logan. Gosh, he was very handsome up close. It’s no wonder Natalie never wanted to leave Martindale. With men like this around she wouldn’t have either. They were just so darn—manly.

“Wow.” Wyatt said under his breath drawing her attention. His eyes were focused past her.

Jenny turned to see what drew his interest and smiled. Natalie came down the stairs wearing jeans, a stylish pink

A Pleasant Surprise

western style blouse with silver buttons and a white hat. It wasn't a Stetson by any means, but it sure made her look like she fit in. Her hair was unbound and he loved how long it was. She was radiant. Jenny made sure that her makeup was done too, so gone was the tomboy, hello gorgeous young woman.

"So—" Logan said to Jenny with one of his jaw dropping charming grins, "—you're the sister?"

"The one and only." She said with a flirtatious laugh. She had on a cream blouse, a full length denim skirt and boots that would suit walking around the fairgrounds. Natalie had already warned her about the pumps she wanted to wear, so she ended up doing some shopping of her own.

Wyatt stepped forward with an appreciative smile, "hey."

Natalie tried not to act so nervous. She felt out of sorts wearing snug clothes but Jenny assured her that they weren't that tight. However from the appreciative perusal that Wyatt just gave her she began to wonder, "Do I have a wart on my nose?" she said staring up at him as she reached the bottom step.

"It wasn't your nose I was looking at." He said with a sensual smile.

Her eyes popped wide and then she near gasp as he reached over and took her hand encasing it in his, "Ready?" he said turning to the other two.

"You bet." Logan said slinging his arm around Jenny's shoulders like they'd been dating for months. She shot her sister a look that near made her laugh. Jenny was confident in herself and knew how she looked to the opposite sex, but when it came to Logan's self esteem, she probably started to feel a little overwhelmed at his sudden forwardness. Natalie just gave her a smile and Jenny grinned tossing her eyes toward the tall cowboy as if to say what-a-stud.

"You don't need to be so protective." Natalie said once he found a parking spot. Logan and Jenny were already out of the

truck, waiting by the tailgate. Neither one of them stopped talking all the way there. Natalie and Wyatt never said a word. Well, Wyatt was just being his usual self, but Natalie couldn't believe that he held her hand and came to the conclusion that he was giving people a premise because they were worried about Willie around her.

"No?" he said staring down at her.

"I told you before that Willie doesn't seem all that aggressive. Maybe he likes a different kind of woman."

"No he doesn't." he said opening the door and getting out. Then he extended his hand.

"How do you know?" she said sliding over through the driver's door with his help.

"Because I wouldn't." he answered shutting the door behind her without taking his eyes off of her.

Her mouth fell open.

"Are you two going to stare at each other all day? The beer gardens have been open for an hour. We won't find a seat." Logan teased.

Wyatt never indicated that it bothered him at all, but Natalie flushed clear to the roots of her hair and gave him a glare as she walked by him. He gave her a look of mock innocence and Jenny burst into laughter.

"What did you want to do first?" he asked her.

"I don't know."

"Did you want to see the horticultural displays? The rodeo doesn't start for another few hours."

"I'd like that." She would. She always enjoyed the judging competitions. On her breaks last year she liked going and looking at the entries.

"We have time."

"We'll be in the beer gardens." Logan said gripping Jenny's hand and dragging her happily along with him. "I see enough

damn plants at home.”

Jenny’s laughter trailed through the crowd.

Natalie had to admit that it was really neat to see those two hit it off so well. Well, Logan wouldn’t have a problem with women and Jenny was pretty. She just hoped that he didn’t break her heart like he did Missy’s.

“She’s fine.” Wyatt said seeing her wrinkled brow.

Her eyes darted to him.

“You’re sister—“ he continued, “—I already read him the riot act.”

She smiled, “You’re a nice man Wyatt.” To her complete surprise he grinned. It wasn’t often that Wyatt displayed those nice even teeth of his, but now she knew why. It was completely devastating to the opposite sex.

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew what was going through my head right now.”

She tilted her head in confusion so he elaborated, “I never realized what a nice proportionate body you possessed. Oh, I knew it was nice, but honey, you are drawing stares.”

At those words she glanced around and saw more than a few male eyes on her. Were they looking at her?

“Your waist is small enough for a man like me to span my hands round it.” He didn’t add that it was a treat to make love to a woman that was easy to manoeuvre because he knew she would faint. She was shorter than most women that he’d dated too so that just reinforced his previous thoughts.

Although, he really didn’t date much now, especially in the past few years but he still had needs. Logan had this idea that Sandy ruined him, but it wasn’t like that at all. He just never found someone that interested him beyond a physical urge every now and then. Natalie started to interest him physically and he was also curious about her. Nothing he expected from her happened, she just kept surprising him and he liked that.

As it was, she was taking his subtle sexual contexts well. He expected her to run and hide a few days back when he told her that he liked the feel of her mouth and her ass, but she actually looked slightly aroused despite the rising blush. It was another thing that he found alluring besides her growing self esteem.

“Wyatt—stop.” She breathed looking up at him.

He reached up and took a strand of her hair between his fingers, “Silky soft.” His eyes followed the gesture and then centered on hers, “I bet you’re like that all over.” He added deeply.

“There’s a crowd.” She murmured completely hypnotized by those warm burnt sienna colored eyes of his.

“So?” he smiled slowly, “I don’t care.”

“Wyatt, quit teasing.” She knew he had that dry sense of humor that most men found funny, but right now she was feeling insulted. She was sure that he knew she liked him. How could he not, every woman would. Also, she certainly wasn’t protesting at the river when he kissed her, in fact, she encouraged him. Her feelings were fragile around him and he was so out of her reach and experienced with woman that she didn’t have a chance.

He released her hair and placed his hands on his hips while staring down at her. She thought he was *teasing* her? Wasn’t he obvious with the way he’d been with her the past few days and the things he was saying? Any other woman would have leapt on him the moment he kissed them, but he didn’t want to frighten her so he was taking it easy because he knew she wasn’t very experienced. Now, however, he realized that she was way more innocent than he first thought. Well, she did mention that she never kissed a man before, but honestly, he thought that she wasn’t being truthful because no one that looks like she did could have reached her age not being kissed. “Have you ever had a boyfriend before?”

A Pleasant Surprise

“What does that have to do with this?”

“Quit evading the question.”

She rolled her eyes, slightly embarrassed, “Okay, no.”

“A regular date?”

“Are you just asking me these things so you can embarrass me further.”

“No.” he said honestly feeling that familiar dread in the pit of his stomach when he knew he wouldn’t like the answer.

She studied him for a moment, then shook her head.

“Oh Jesus.” He murmured under his breath. She was a bloody virgin. No wonder this didn’t make any sense to her and why her reactions were so unpredictable. He knew she was naïve, but not *that* naïve. Why the hell didn’t he figure this out sooner? Was he that blind to it because of the way he started to feel about her? Christ, he’d been saying things to her that a nun would understand, but she was as green as grass. This last premonition shut him down completely emotionally and physically. He certainly didn’t want a virgin. Women like that were needy after their innocence was taken. No man wanted a needy woman no matter how goddam gorgeous she was. Well he did, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to.

Natalie couldn’t figure out the expression on his face, or why he asked her those questions. It seemed as if the warmth he showed her moments ago had suddenly flooded out of him. “Wyatt, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong except maybe my mother is to damn smart for her own good.”

What the heck did that mean? She didn’t have a chance to ask because he changed the subject.

“Comon,” he said turning away, “Let’s go see those displays.”

She fell in step beside him and spared him a couple of glances on the way to the pavilion. He didn’t even look at her or touch her again. Suddenly the old reserved Wyatt was back. The

one that hardly said a word to her in the last four years and she couldn't figure out what brought about that change.

"Jenny!"

"Oh shit." Logan muttered as Missy's shrill voice split his ears.

"Hi Missy." Jenny said shooting Logan an amused look by widening her eyes very subtly and grinning from ear to ear.

Missy planted herself next to Jenny at the table that they sat at uninvited, "So how long are you in town?" she gave Logan a quick appraisal but he seemed focused on something else in the crowd.

"For as long as Nat needs me."

"Oh." She said trying to hide her disappointment and failing miserably.

"I take it you and Logan know each other." She said with a slight tone of amusement.

"Yes." She said shooting him a look, "We dated."

"No we didn't." he countered evenly.

"We did so!" she stood and said in a louder voice.

"Missy, sit down." Jenny said calmly. Missy glared at him and sat down. "There's no need to cause a scene."

"He won't talk to me." She waved a hand toward him.

"There's nothing to say." He said meeting her eyes. Logan wasn't intimidated by her behaviour in the least. If anything, it was pissing him off. It made him wonder what the hell he saw in her in the first place. Well, he knew what, but there was nothing beyond that. Just because a woman gave good head didn't mean that you marry them. Okay, great head, but still.

She glared at him, "You don't break up with someone after—"

"

"Careful." He said slowly knowing exactly what she just about said. "You've already said enough about your reputation

A Pleasant Surprise

Missy, don't make it worse."

She made a nasty sound in the back of her throat, slapped the top of the table, shot him a hateful look, got up and stormed off.

"Wow." Jenny said bringing her eyes back to Logan, "You are a *complete* heartbreaker."

"Does that bother you?" he said

He tilted his head ever so slightly to make himself look completely sexy. The brim of his hat cast a shadow across his eyes creating a mysterious look about him. It caused her eyes to drop to his masculine mouth. She actually had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from gasping. Instead she forced a grin, "No." This man was way too conceited for her, but looking at him now, she didn't care. She didn't lie to Natalie about having some experience with men in college, but this man, right now, made her feel like a woman who had only boys he was that potent.

He grinned causing dimples to appear at either side of that sensuous mouth.

Jenny picked up her beer and took a large drink before setting it down and locking her eyes on him, "Oh, darling, we are in trouble."

He chuckled, "Hell, I like you already."

Her eyes guided past him to see her sister and Wyatt move through the crowd toward them. Natalie didn't look as happy as she was earlier and even from where she was sitting she could see that Wyatt looked distant. Then she saw him place his hand on her back and say something to her. She guided her eyes through the throng of people to her and Logan, said something back to him and started making her way toward them. Wyatt turned and went to the booth more than likely to get them something to drink.

"Why so glum?" Logan said as Natalie took a seat next to her

sister.

“I’m not.” She said thinking that she lied very well. Wyatt was still a complete gentleman as they wandered through the horticultural pavilion, but he was different and she couldn’t figure it out. He almost looked bored. “Are you guys having fun?”

“Always baby.” Logan teased.

She rolled her eyes. You put a woman in Logan’s hands and he was in heaven.

“Missy stopped by to say hello.” Jenny told her with amusement glittering in her green eyes.

“Oh oh.” She turned her attention to him, “Logan, you know how she felt about you—“

“Honey, the feelings weren’t returned. Did you want me to lead her on?” he said raising his brows.

No, she didn’t. “I guess not.”

Just then Wyatt sat down beside Logan and set a beer down in front of her.

“Enough talk of Missy.” Jenny said with a smile, “Let’s enjoy ourselves.” She picked up her cup and took another long drink.

Natalie couldn’t but think how men could so easily turn off of women. Her eyes guided to Wyatt as his brother talked to him about the rodeo that was going to start in about an hour. He shut down and she didn’t know why. Then she directed her attention to Jenny, who seemed engrossed in Logan’s discussion. Her sister even acted as if it was all Missy’s fault. Was she missing something? Missy was still their cousin and a human being. Even if she told some lies, she was always nice to her.

Natalie was frustrated at all three of them and picked up her beer swallowing half the cup. When she set it down Wyatt’s eyes were on hers obviously seeing her inhale the alcohol and one brow raised in question. She averted her gaze and continued to drink her beer. She didn’t owe him anything.

A Pleasant Surprise

She was on her third beer when they seated in the bleachers for the rodeo and when she went to order a forth by raising her hand, Wyatt's lifted up and encased it in his. "I think that's enough."

Her eyes went to his and she narrowed her gaze, "And who made you my conscience?" The three large cups of beer seemed to remove every stitch of her shyness. She was at a point where she didn't care what he thought.

"Just because you're pissed off at everyone right now doesn't mean you hide it in liquor."

That was interesting. She didn't think he even noticed how she felt over the way Missy was treated. She had to give him credit. For someone who didn't seem interested or aware of what was going on around him, he sure picked up a lot. "It's better than turning into an iceberg." She accused.

"Iceberg?" he cocked a single brow and stared down at her with an amused glint in his eyes.

"One minute your warm, the next you act as if I'm some disease."

"Is that what this is about?" he said raising his brows.

"You don't even deny it."

"No." because she was right and he was an honest man.

She removed her hand from his and folded her arms under her breasts waiting for an explanation, but it didn't come. After a few minutes of staring at each other she spoke again, "Wyatt you are the most frustrating person I've ever met."

"Because I don't blather on about crap that's unimportant." He said as a matter of factly.

"Missy is important to me."

"That's good."

"What if the shoe was on the other foot and it was Logan that got jilted."

"Logan is a full grown man, as am I. He'll handle it, and I

was jilted practically at the altar, and handled it.”

She'd forgotten about that. Her expression softened. It never occurred to her that he understood more than he let on, but he never said anything darn it! “So what's with the cold shoulder toward me then?”

“Did you expect a torrid love affair Nat?” he said arching his brows.

She actually flushed despite the beer she'd had that made her feel brave and was thankful that the crowd was loud enough to drown out their conversation beyond their own ears. “No.” she said weakly. She should have known better. She wasn't pretty or his type yet she'd assumed from the way he was toward her lately that he started caring about her.

He released a heavy sigh looking down at her. As he thought a woman untouched was needy. His protectiveness over her lately was seen as affection by her. However, he did find her very attractive, but that was normal with a man and a woman who looked the way she did. “I don't seduce virgins.” He said finally not liking to explain himself. “They're too damn needy.”

Her mouth fell open and her face flamed.

“You wanted to know.” He said casually.

She grew angry again, “You are so presumptuous to think you could seduce me.”

“Am I?”

She nodded.

He leaned down so his face was inches from hers, “All right Natalie, since you brought it up tell me right now that when I touch you that you don't heat up a few degrees and your heart doesn't pound rapidly in your chest and then there's this sensuous feeling low in your pelvis that—” Her eyes widened and he paused. He was getting too intimate with his explanation and he was sure that she hadn't been spoken to like that before even if he was right. “My point is that I have experience, and you don't.

A Pleasant Surprise

I know what arouses a woman. I know the signs and how to act on them, use them, and manipulate them to get what I want. You on the other hand are as green as grass. You know how it feels when I touch you and it's strange, but you like it—“

“Stop.” She interrupted feeling her cheeks flame hotter, but he didn't.

“—you like it,” he repeated, “and if I was unconscionable, I'd act on those signs, but I have morals, and I won't seduce a woman who has no idea what hit her.”

“You are such a jerk!” She stood up and moved by him to the steps, went down them and started walking back through the crowd. She was mad at herself more than anything because he was right, so very right and she was naïve—stupid not to see it.

“Natalie.” Jenny stood up just to have her arm grabbed by Logan. She looked down and he shook his head as Wyatt got up and followed the same path.

Logan heard some of what was said, but not all of it and he had to admire Wyatt for his restraint because Natalie was a bit of a knockout that day, but he wouldn't compromise her. It probably wasn't easy for him to say something like that to her because they both thought she was sweet, but he didn't want her to daydream over him either.

“What happened?” Jenny said sitting down slowly.

“Lover spat.” He teased

Natalie wiped her tears with the heel of her hand as she made her way to the entrance of the fair grounds. She felt completely humiliated. She should have known that her feelings were as plain as the sky on her face the whole time and that Wyatt had the expertise to see them. She really was stupid.

Suddenly she felt a strong hand wrap around her upper arm

“Hey.” He said softly as he turned her toward him, “I'm sorry.”

She nodded but couldn't meet his eyes. "It's okay. I should have known better." It wasn't just what he said, it was four years of pining after a man who wouldn't want anything to do with her. She'd spent days upon days thinking about him, and it all seemed like a big waste of time. Wyatt would never have someone like her.

He cupped her head and tilted her face up to his, "I mean it. I shouldn't have been so blunt." The tears he saw disturbed him. He'd made her cry and it was inexcusable.

"Maybe that was the only way to get through to me."

He shook his head, "No, I could have been kinder."

"No, you were right Wyatt. I was stupid." She conceded. It was her stupid ideals with this man that landed her in this mess.

"Hey," he said fixing his stare on hers, "I don't like to hear that. One thing you are not—is stupid."

She nodded just wanting the conversation to end.

"How about I take you home?" He offered feeling guilty over his harsh treatment of her. It wasn't often he made women cry, but there had been a few times and unlike them, it wasn't because he wouldn't buy her a diamond necklace or deny to marry her. She was crying because he embarrassed and degraded her. His mother would shoot him as quick as she could get her hands on a rifle.

"What about my sister and Logan?" she sniffed.

"I don't think they'd even notice we were missing." He smirked and squeezed her shoulders, "Besides, Logan needs to know that an intelligent woman can also be attractive."

She gave a small smile at the compliment he gave her sister. He was probably right. Well about the not noticing them thing. She still didn't like everyone picking on Missy, but she'd rather not confront him with that again. She felt defeated and really just wanted to get home.

"He can call me or someone else if he needs a ride, but I

have a feeling he'll be staying until the place closes at midnight."

"Okay then." She said and allowed him to lead her through the gates toward the truck.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Hey, where have you been?" Logan said as Wyatt came in the front doors. He'd been home for an hour and it was almost midnight.

"Natalie's until her father came home, then I ended up going to Smithy's for a drink."

"Oh." Smithy was the police Chief. He'd come from Austin about two years ago and all three of them met at a fishing tournament and instantly hit it off. Actually his name was Brad Smith, but his nickname was 'Smithy.' Most people called him that. He was a pretty easy going guy for his profession and was using this as his retirement job. He was about twenty years older than Wyatt. "Is she okay?"

He nodded and glanced away, "I'm beat." He said sitting down on the bench at the door to remove his boots.

"You missed a good show." Logan said watching him. Was he acting a little strangely?

"I expect I did."

"How's Smithy?"

"Drunk."

Logan chuckled, "How long were you there?"

Wyatt tossed his boot onto the floor toppling the other one over and looked at him. "Long enough."

Wyatt's expression didn't give anything away but the single pulse of the muscle along his jaw did. Logan put his hands in his jeans pockets and nodded. Despite it being an innocent question, Wyatt didn't appreciate this conversation for some reason, "All right then. I'm off to bed. Pa wants to break ground for that

barn tomorrow.”

“I suspected.” That would give him four or five hours sleep. He’d be fine.

Logan gave him a suspicious glance and went up stairs, something was off here, but Wyatt didn’t want to discuss it, so there was no discussion. He wondered if he and Nat had another fight and she probably burst into tears. Wyatt would have felt guilty over hurting her and that’s what he didn’t want to discuss.

Wyatt watched his brother go up the stairs and swore under his breath several times before he stood up stretched his back and followed him. His guilty conscience was killing him. He’d never felt guilty about a woman before, but Natalie had a way of getting under his skin. He’d felt like a bastard talking to her the way he did. Then when he took her home, her father had gone to the city again, so he stuck around to make sure that Willie hadn’t come calling. After that he went to Smithy’s.

The next morning, Natalie stood under the hot water of the shower for longer than usual. Her muscles were sore and needed the heat. She was doing her best to push Wyatt out of her mind. She was sure she wouldn’t see much of him anymore after yesterday. She really wanted to see him, maybe call him, but she couldn’t get that ‘needy’ statement out of her head. She sighed, he was right, she was ‘needy, and ‘naïve’.

“Natalie.” Jenny’s voice shouted through the door, “Missy’s on the phone.”

“Tell her I’ll call her back in ten.” She hollered back.

“Okay.”

Natalie shut off the taps and dried herself off. This whole thing was one big soap opera. She had some perspective now that she had time to think about it. She did agree with Logan and Wyatt about Missy, because she understood why Logan broke it off with her. Like he said, he didn’t care about her. However, she still cared about her cousin’s feelings.

A Pleasant Surprise

She got dressed and brushed out her long hair before she went downstairs and called her cousin.

"I have a plan." Missy said as soon as she answered the phone.

"You do?" Natalie said absently seeing a note on the table by her sister. It said she was going to go and open the store for her today and to take it easy and show up when she wanted to. She smiled at her thoughtfulness.

"I do. I'm going to seduce Wyatt."

You could have heard a pin drop in the long silent pause at her end. "Pardon me?"

"I am. Then Logan will see how much he's missing."

Natalie swallowed hard. "And how are you going to go about that?" Her answer was a laugh that basically said that was a ridiculous question.

"Nat, I know you're not that worldly, but I know what makes a man tick. It's not going to be that hard."

She didn't know what to say to that. She loved Missy, but the thought of her and Wyatt in bed together made her sick to her stomach. "Missy, that's callous don't you think?"

"And what Logan did to me wasn't?"

"He was honest with you." She heard herself say.

"Oh sure, just because you two are friends, you're going to take his side—"

"That's not true. I care about you." She protested. In fact she seemed to be the only one that kept sticking up for her.

"Sure you do. You're just like Jenny. She was sitting all cozy with him at the fair yesterday. I could just scream."

"That doesn't mean that you involve Wyatt."

"Why not? He's a man, just like any other."

"It's not fair."

"Who's cousin are you anyway?"

"Gosh Missy, it's not about that. What kind of a reputation

are you going to create.”

“I don’t care. You have no idea what I did for Logan Natalie, and it’s because you’re just a fresh little virgin.”

Natalie was appalled that she’d say such a thing. Who the heck didn’t know that in town? Was it that obvious? “That’s mean.”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound so negative,” Missy explained lowering her voice a little, “I just don’t think you understand how much it hurts to care about someone and have them step on your heart.”

Didn’t she? Because right now her heart was breaking listening to how Missy was going to go after Wyatt. What if he actually fell for it?

“Anyway, I just thought I’d let you in on things seeing you’re my only ally left.”

“That’s not true, Jenny loves you.”

“Sure she does, that’s why she’s with my man.” She hung up the phone.

Natalie followed suit and put her elbows on the table and her knuckles to her forehead. This was all going to come crashing down sooner or later, and she was stuck in the middle.

When she wandered into the store, Logan was leaning on the counter flirting with Jenny who was completely enamoured. He erected himself when he saw her and gave her a charming grin, “Hey Nat.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be erecting a barn?”

He chuckled, “Yes. Wyatt’s started it already.” He tilted his head, “How’d you know?”

She flushed and walked by him, “Wyatt mentioned it last evening.” She mumbled.

“Really?” he said arching his brows. “So things are good there?” He knew Wyatt had hurt her feelings, but knowing his brother, he would have apologized and hopefully made amends.

A Pleasant Surprise

He tried getting something out of him last night, but it was easier interrogating a rock than Wyatt. It was more expressive.

"None of your business." she said turning and going down one of the aisles to the back store room so either one of them couldn't see how red she was getting. She was going to busy herself with stocking shelves until he left.

Logan eyed her back with increasing curiosity.

"Leave my sister be Logan, she's not used to that type of attention." Jenny said in warning.

"Sure thing Kitten, see you tonight." He said with a wink before leaving.

"He's gone Nat." Jenny called and a moment later he sister appeared.

"He's such a brat." She frowned.

"Isn't he though?" Jenny said with breathless appreciation.

Natalie rolled her eyes and the phone rang. She reached over the counter and answered it. Because they were a small town a lot of parts had to be ordered from Austin. They received phone calls regularly when their orders were in.

"I've got to go to the bus depot." She said to her sister as she hung up. Usually she had to wait until her father got up and took over the store in the afternoon, but Jenny was here now.

"Go, I've got this." Jenny answered.

"Are you sure?"

She dug into her pocket and removed her cell phone, "here, if a customer comes in that I can't help, I'll just call you."

"Good Idea." She took the phone, grabbed the keys off the hook behind the counter and told her sister she shouldn't be more than an hour when she left.

They had several vehicles that the store used. There was the flat deck for lumber orders, the car for their personal use, and an old eighty six blue ford that worked very well for quick trips to the town to pick up customers orders from the bus depot.

Usually she kept them mechanically sound in the garage in town, but lately her father had gotten more scarce so she hadn't been able to get the ford in and it'd been acting up lately.

What she should have done is asked the bus depot clerk which packages were there and take the car, but she was already halfway to town when it started to sputter. Thankfully it did make it in. Tomorrow she would have to make sure that it got fixed. She pulled up in front of the Depot and noticed Wyatt's truck at the post office next door.

Just seeing his truck set her heart off at an unreasonable pace. Then to her complete chagrin, Willie saw her as he was cruising by and pulled a u-turn in the middle of the street to coast along the curb beside her.

"Hi doll."

She lifted her hand and waved but didn't say anything and kept walking toward the bus depot door.

At the same time Wyatt stepped out of the post office just as she was heading into the depot. He walked over and pulled open the door for her with a smile and a tilt of his hat.

She gave him a fearful look and he glanced past her to see Willie eyeing her from his red convertible. Instantly his face converted from gentle surprise to something more hard and fierce.

"I'll take care of this." He said before he walked over to him.

Natalie stood just inside the door and watched through the glass as Wyatt leaned down, place his hands on the window ledge and say something. Willie's smile fell slightly while looking up at Wyatt from his seat in the car and he glanced by Wyatt to the door she was peeking out of. She quickly withdrew with a gasp. She was sure he couldn't see her through the glass, but that's how much he affected her.

A moment later she heard him squeal away from the curb. She was shaking when she retrieved her packages and went back

A Pleasant Surprise

out to the truck. Wyatt was leaning against it waiting for her.

When she came out he went forward and took them from her.

“What did you say to him?”

“I can’t repeat it to a lady.” He said without looking at her and putting the parcels in the bed of the truck.

“Oh Wyatt, maybe you shouldn’t have.” She said feeling that fear prick her again.

“I also can’t repeat what he said.” He continued while staring down at her and placing his hand on the box rail.

“Oh dear.” She said with wide eyes. She could only imagine what was said and even though she wasn’t worldly, if Wyatt couldn’t repeat it, it had to be bad. Then there was how close he was standing to her. She caught a whiff of his expensive cologne and remembered all too well the last time she had it fill her nostrils. A deep hot pulse hit her low in the abdomen and she couldn’t say another word but stare up into those deep brown eyes of his.

He gave her a sloppy smile. It wasn’t to laugh at the situation, it was to put her at ease. If he didn’t seem upset then she wouldn’t be so worried. “Yeah, but I didn’t say it nicely. I mean it about staying away from him.”

She never said anything. In fact she didn’t notice that he even spoke.

His sloppy smile widened to a grin, “Natalie, are you here?”

Oh gosh, she was an idiot! “I’ll do my best.” She finally said after she brought herself out of the trance she was in.

“Honey, he’s not the least bit bothered from what I said, so just take extra care okay?”

His concern was genuine and that made her frightened again.

“Maybe I should come over again tonight.” He offered.

Her eyes darted to his, “Wyatt—I—I mean, my sister—”

He chuckled, bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead, “Shh, don’t get so uptight. It wasn’t meant the way you think.”

“Gosh, I’m so foolish.” She blushed.

“The only fool here is me.” He said with a smile. “I’ll see you.” After he ran a long lean finger down her cheek while locking his eyes with hers, he walked away.

She stood there and watched him unable to not appreciate that sexy swagger he possessed. He waved as he drove by her. She wondered what he meant by the ‘fool’ statement. She certainly didn’t think he was. In fact, she thought he was incredible.

CHAPTER SIX

When she got back, *by the grace of god*, she thought, she was met by a very enthusiastic sister. She made a mental note to have the truck looked at on the weekend.

“Hey, Logan said he and Wyatt want to take us to the movies tonight.” Jenny said practically jumping up and down.

She honestly didn’t think she’d really get to see Wyatt that way again. Even though he apologized for his behaviour the day before, she wasn’t so blind to think that he wanted to see her that regard. Maybe he was doing it for Logan so he could go out with Jenny and she didn’t feel left out. Well she certainly wasn’t a pity case! “Really?” she said trying to keep the anger out of her voice.

“Yes, he said that they couldn’t make dinner plans because they’re working on the barn—by the way, how did you know about that? I don’t remember them mentioning it yesterday.”

“Maybe it was before then.” She said not meeting her sister’s eyes. Thankfully she was too excited about her date to notice Natalie’s avoidance.

“Anyway, it’s some new western.”

A Pleasant Surprise

Natalie smiled, “Usually they don’t play much else here but that’ll be a late night Jen, and someone—“

“I’ll even get up and open the store tomorrow so you can sleep in.” she offered knowing she was going to protest. “I know this sounds silly because I just met him, but I really like Logan.”

What female didn’t? She thought to herself, but she nodded, “It’ll be fun.” She said despite feeling the opposite. However, she couldn’t let Jenny down. She was so happy.

“Oh you are the best!”

However, things didn’t turn out that way. It was only Logan that showed up at the door. He gave Natalie and apologetic look, “Wyatt wanted to Nat, but dad has a list of things for him to do tomorrow and he’s completely beat. He was still out framing when I left. I may be able to sneak off unnoticed, but Wyatt can’t.”

She forced a smile, “That’s fine.”

Logan could see that she went through some trouble to make herself look nice. Actually she looked really good. She wore a pleated navy skirt, and cream colored sweater with matching pumps. “I should have called before I left the house.” He said guiltily. “You could come with us.”

“No, it’s okay.” She said feeling her face hurt at the forced smile, “please have fun. I’m tired anyway. I think I’ll just go to bed with a book.”

Jenny felt terrible seeing her sister so crestfallen, “She was lying.” She said as Logan led her to the truck.

“Of course she was.” He agreed.

“She’s crazy about him, you know.”

“That’s been obvious for years.” He said helping her in before walking around to the driver’s side.

“Does he know?” she asked when Logan got in.

His answer was a chuckle. “If you know anything about Wyatt, you wouldn’t even ask that question. Nothing escapes

him.”

“Oh poor Natalie.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, Wyatt’s too damn smart for his own good. He never gives anything away, but he certainly has no problem figuring others out without much trouble.”

“how does he feel about her?”

Logan pulled out onto the road, but managed to cast her a glance, “Like I said—he doesn’t give much away.”

“So he’s said nothing?”

“Not a thing. When I ask him, he refuses to answer me and instead gives me a look that says he’ll knock my teeth out if I keep hounding him.”

Her eyes widened, “Wow, leave it to Nat to find a complicated man.”

“that he is.” Logan agreed.

Back at the house, Natalie took off her clothes feeling like an idiot. Wyatt never stated that they had anything going on, but she’d lie if she said she wasn’t looking forward to going out with him on a real date.

Now only wearing her underwear she walked into the bathroom to wash up. She may have seen him today, but there seemed to be so much unspoken things between them. She wished she could say something to someone, but she knew it was only Wyatt she could talk to. Her sister wouldn’t understand, and the things she felt weren’t easy to talk about. It had been too long since she’d had a confidant. She stood in the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. He said she was beautiful, but she still didn’t see it.

Wyatt had just gotten out of the shower as Natalie herself was just getting ready for bed. He was exhausted.

Wrapping a towel around his lean hips he went out to his room and looked at the clock. He thought about calling her, but it was getting late, and if he did call, he certainly wouldn’t be

A Pleasant Surprise

getting any sleep tonight and he needed it desperately. Logan said he'd tell her, but he knew she would be disappointed. If he had time, he'll go see her tomorrow, but he was certain that he wouldn't. Hopefully she wasn't too upset and understood. He'd try and call her around noon. He ran his fingers through his wet hair, removed his towel tossing it on the end of the bed before he got under the covers. It took a lot for his body to feel muscle soreness, but the past couple of days made him feel it to the teeth.

The next day when she got up, Jenny had left a note saying she was already at the store and take her time. She had to admit, that having her sister around was wonderful and she did exactly what Jenny told her to do. Took her time.

She sat down and read the paper, drank some tea and enjoyed the early morning before she wandered over to the store. Like yesterday Logan had beaten her to it and was visiting Jenny.

"Hi." He said when she walked in smiling at him with a glint in her eyes.

"Hi yourself." She said casting Jenny a knowing look before returning her gaze to him. "Shouldn't you be raising a barn?"

"Ah, the same question as yesterday." He chuckled.

"It seems like Wyatt is the only one building it." She teased.

"Well, he's capable." Logan said unaffected, "Besides, I find something here much more attractive."

"Oh lord." Natalie said, "*Like* yesterday, I'm stocking shelves." She said walking to the back ignoring his laughter.

"Logan, leave her be, I don't think she slept much last night."

"Me either." He said deeply casting his eyes to her chest. "That little petting session after the movie left me with a permanent hard on."

Her eyes popped wide, "shush, my goodness, my sister—"

He flashed her a gorgeous grin stretched up over the counter and planted a kiss squarely on her mouth before he left the store chuckling.

Jenny was stunned, but gosh, he was so darn charming! Her eyes went to the empty aisle that her sister went down and she thought about following her when another customer entered the store. Now if she hadn't met Logan, this man would seem much more handsome to her. He had blonde hair and striking blue eyes and as soon as he saw her he broke into a smile that showed unnaturally white teeth.

Natalie came out of the store room with a box of leather fencing gloves when she heard Willie's voice and froze. She backed herself against one of the shelves hoping that he wouldn't see her. Ever since Wyatt and Logan told her about him, she was terrified every time his name came up even though she said she wasn't that worried. She'd forgotten to mention anything to Jenny about him.

Just then the phone rang and Jenny answered it. With that, Willie left the store and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Nat?"

"Right here." She said coming down the aisle.

"Look there's a customer's order in at the bus depot. I'm going to go and get it today."

"There's something I have to tell you." Natalie said setting down the box of gloves on the counter.

"Save it." She said grabbing the keys off the hook, "I'll be back inside an hour. The bus depot's only open until eleven. That only gives me twenty minutes to get to town."

"Okay."

"See you when I come back." She said with a smile as she left.

Wyatt and Logan had just come in for supper. It had started

raining so their father told them to cut the day short.

Wyatt was thankful because he needed to call Natalie and apologize. He was too damn tired to do it the night before, but he should have. Especially after Logan told him how crestfallen she looked.

It actually bothered him the way he was around her. he called her needy, yet he found himself thinking about her all the time. It was his own damn fault too.

Suddenly, the phone in the hall rang. Their mother was in the kitchen and their father was washing up, so Wyatt answered it. "Jesus. Calm down Nat, I can't understand you." He stood erect and placed a hand on his hip, "What the hell are you saying?"

Logan stopped and stared at him. There was genuine concern in his voice.

"Have you called the cops?"

Cops? "Wyatt—" Logan started but Wyatt held up his hand to cut him off as he listened intently.

"Where the hell is your father? Well—wake him the hell up, lock the store—dammit Natalie who gives a shit about the bloody business—we're on our way." He hung up. "Jesus she's really messed up." He said looking at his brother.

"What the hell happened?"

"Come on. I'll explain on the way." He said grabbing his keys and rushing out of the house.

Logan followed him without hesitation.

When they pulled up in front of the house Natalie was standing on the porch looking as white as a sheet with her arms folded under her breasts. Her father was pacing behind her. His hair was messed up and he had a two day growth of stubble. It also looked as though he hadn't changed his clothes in several days.

"Did you call the station?" Logan asked her as they got out of

the truck. It was still raining, and water was pouring off the roof of the veranda. Wyatt noticed that there were no eaves to divert the flow from the steps. It would explain why Natalie looked soaked. Both men trotted up the steps ducking under the flow of water.

She nodded, "They said I had to wait twenty four hours."

"Jesus Nat, you're soaked." He said pulling her into his arms rubbing her to warm her up. She was trembling to. He looked over her head to his brother, "Give Smithy a call."

Logan nodded, pulled out his phone and called Brad.

"Why isn't anyone doing anything?" Her father raged behind them waving an arm in the air. "Jenny's a good girl."

Wyatt had to bite his tongue to stop himself from saying anything. If the man took some responsibility for his store and his daughters maybe one of them wouldn't have gone missing. Even now, seeing Natalie shivering from her soaked clothing because she was too worried and shocked to be concerned about herself, angered him. Her father should be in control here.

"What was she driving?" Logan said pulling the phone away from his ear and looking Natalie.

"The ford." She said shakily. "Wyatt, oh god, it wasn't running right and I forgot to tell her."

"That doesn't matter," Wyatt said calmly then looked at his brother, "Logan, it's that two tone blue ford—mid eighties with the store emblem on the door and there's a busted rear passenger taillight.

Was there? Natalie thought. It never ceased to amaze her how perceptive this man was.

Logan nodded and repeated it to Brad.

"We'll find her Nat." Wyatt said calmly although he was not feeling so calm on the inside. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Logan talked a moment longer before he hung up and came

over to them.

Natalie pulled out of Wyatt's embrace then, because if he held her a moment longer she was going to burst into tears. "What did he say?"

"He said that he was sending his men out as we spoke."

"Thank you."

He nodded and looked over her head at her father who had stopped pacing and came over to them.

Hunter stood behind Natalie and thanked the both of them. Logan stepped forward, "how about some coffee Hunter?"

"That's a good plan." The older man said and went into the house as Logan held the door open for him. He gave Wyatt a worried look before he followed him in.

Wyatt knew exactly what Logan was thinking, but kept it to himself. "Was there anything she said before she left for the bus depot? Anything else she had to do?" He hated to think that man hours and money was spent looking for someone who was getting her hair done, or grocery shopping.

She shook her head, "No, I'm sure she didn't have any other stops. She said she'd be home in an hour."

"This may sound insulting, but have you tried her cell phone?"

She nodded and dug it out of her coverall pocket to show him, "She left it by the cash register." Her bottom lip started to tremble.

He cupped her face and pressed his mouth against her cheek, "Don't cry baby, we'll do our best."

"I know. It's just that with everything—I mean you and I—"

"Shh—I shouldn't have done that to you yesterday. It just made you more vulnerable."

She hiccupped and he pulled her against his chest. Just then his phone rang, and he released her with an apology to answer it. Natalie watched him closely as he turned away from her to talk.

He said very few words before he hung up and put it away. Then he slowly turned back to her, "Tell me everything that happened that morning."

"Why?"

"Just trust me." He told Smithy that he'd call him back after he talked to Natalie. Smithy told him something that was going to upset her and he needed the information before she got so upset that shock set in.

She felt her panic rise but she did. She told him about Missy's phone call, which didn't get any reaction out of him, then about all of the customers that were in the store this morning including Willie. "Why?" His expression suddenly became empathetic, "Smithy was on his way out and they found the truck. It's about four miles south of here, towards town, on the side of the road with the hood up." He flipped open his phone and dialled Brad again. When he answered, he gave him the information about Willie.

"Is Jenny there?" she said after he hung up.

He shook his head. "The bus depot clerk said she didn't show."

"Oh God!" She felt her knees give out.

He rushed over and grabbed her before she hit the porch floor. "We'll find her Natalie."

"I should have went—I should have—"

"Then it would be you missing. How do you think that would have affected me?"

Her wet eyes sought out his. What did he just say?

"Come on, I think we need to get you in the house, you're freezing. Brad's looking as we speak."

She nodded and let him help her stand straight.

When they went inside it was only Logan drinking a mug of coffee.

"Where's Hunter?" Wyatt said looking around the kitchen.

A Pleasant Surprise

Logan just gave him a look that said ‘you need to ask?’

“Any more coffee?”

Logan nodded, set his mug down and retrieved two cups from the cupboard.

“Not for me please, Logan I don’t drink coffee.” Natalie finally said. She wasn’t surprised about her father. It was hard waking him up to tell him about Jenny and he’d just come out onto the porch when the men pulled up. She still didn’t think he understood how serious this was.

“How about tea? I’ll make it.” He offered.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks Logan.”

About ten minutes later two police cars pulled up in front of the house. It was Smithy and two of his deputies.

Wyatt had to give Natalie credit. She was amazing as she recounted her day almost word for word on what she told him. He admired her bravery. All along he thought she was some timid little waif, but she was incredibly strong and he was glad for the decisions he made in regards to her over the last forty eight hours.

Brad went outside to talk to his men for a minute and Logan pulled Wyatt aside.

“Wyatt.” Logan said, “I phoned dad already and let him know where we were.”

“All right.” He was sitting on the arm of the easy chair Natalie was in. His arm was around her shoulders. She was sitting erect with her hands folded on her lap. At the same time she was staring at nothing in particular. Wyatt had been talking to her and was relieved she was lucid enough to answer his questions.

“Can I talk to you a minute?” Logan said casting a glance at Natalie.

Wyatt looked down at Natalie. “Go get into something dry.”

She shook her head, “I’m fine, but I’ll go wash my face.” She

stood up and walked out of the room without looking at either one of them.

Logan waited until she was gone, "I was thinking about going in with Brad to lend hand, maybe round up a couple of the men from the ranch."

"That'll be a good idea. I can't leave her. She has no one else." Wyatt really wanted to help, but he knew like Logan did from that exchange he gave him before he followed Hunter in the house, that something was seriously wrong.

"Yeah, I know."

"Where'd the old man go?" Wyatt asked now that Natalie was out of earshot.

"He took two bottles of whiskey and locked himself in the study. The man is completely useless."

"Shit."

"I don't know how she coped so long without someone here. It's a horrible existence."

"Not if it's all you know." He cast a glance over his shoulder seeing if she was back yet.

"I'll call as soon as we hear anything" Logan offered.

Wyatt nodded and stood up, "I'd appreciate that. I probably won't be home tonight. Let ma and pa know."

"I suspected." He nodded toward the empty hall, "Something's going on between you two huh?"

He placed his hands on his hips and rested his stance on one leg while staring at his brother. "I wish you'd mind your own damn business."

"She's my friend Wyatt. That's why I'm curious. I'm concerned because I don't want her hurt. Now I don't have many female friends, men yes, but not women, and she's a doll. She's young and naïve and I know for a fact that she's been nuts about you for years."

Wyatt reached up and removed his hat to run his fingers

through his hair before he replaced it. "Yeah, I know how she is."

"Just don't hurt her, okay?"

"That's not going to be a problem."

Jesus, that still didn't give him anything. He thought about pushing him more, but he knew Wyatt wouldn't give him a damn thing. It was the way he was. However, the way he just said that statement was solid in promise, so he just nodded.

Natalie was rinsing a cloth in the hall bathroom and washing her face when a soft knock came. "Yes?"

"Nat, are you okay?" came the deep voice on the other side of the door.

Wyatt. "I'm fine."

"Open the door."

She tossed the cloth in the sink and did as he asked. She couldn't resist him no matter how much of an emotional mess she was. He was standing there with a serious look on his face. "I'm staying tonight."

"Dad's—"

"Already in the sauce. Nothing's going to wake him even if you shout my name like the other night."

She swore she blushed right out of her socks, "Wyatt, for crying out loud! Logan's still here!"

"No he left a few minutes ago." He couldn't help but smile a little, "Look, nothing has to happen, but I'm not leaving you alone."

She took a deep breath while staring up at him, "Thanks Wyatt, I'm terrified."

"For Jenny, I am too."

"Do you think it was Willie?"

"It's too soon to tell." He reached over and took her hand and pulled her toward him.

Several hours later his phone rang and he opened his eyes and reached for it trying not to wake Natalie who was sleeping in

the crook of his arm. He wasn't sleeping, but he did have his eyes shut resting them. They had gone to her room and he'd rubbed her back until she drifted off. Glancing at the clock, he realized that he'd just barely gotten her to sleep about an hour ago and was worried the phone might wake her. Yet, she must've been exhausted because she didn't even move.

The caller ID let him know it was his brother. "Yeah." He whispered while putting the phone to his ear.

"I just thought I'd let you know that we haven't found her yet, but we did find Willie. Brad's got him in lock up. He's ranting about rights and saying that he was with his father the time Jenny disappeared."

"Idiot. What does his father say?"

"His father says he was, but I don't think that Willie knew that Natalie was in the shop when he came in, so that'll take care of that alibi."

"Yeah, blows it to hell."

"Brad's going to let him stew for a few hours before he interrogates him again."

"thanks."

"How's she?"

"Finally asleep."

"Good. I'll talk to you tomorrow. I'll call you as soon as we have anything."

"Sure thing." He hung up and looked down at Natalie. She was still sound asleep.

The day of the fair when he dropped her off, well he meant to, but her father wasn't home yet and he didn't want to leave her because of Willie, so he followed her into the house.

The look of vulnerability was still burned in his head when he made her cry. Logan was right, she was sweet. Every inch of her was. She made him some coffee and she started talking about things, only from his questions. He liked that humility in

her.

Now it made sense why Logan respected her because he wasn't big on respecting women. He was usually too busy sleeping with them. She may not have had a college education but she was smart. She had great business sense. It was her that made the store successful, and when he thought about it, he remembered that it was no more than a dilapidated hovel that sold feed several years back. At first he thought that her father finally grew some brains, but as it turned out, Natalie happened.

She went to refill his coffee cup and he reached out and grasped her wrist gently while coming to his feet and towering over her small frame.

"Wyatt?"

"I'm just wanting a kiss Nat." his said thickly. He couldn't stand it anymore. The memory of her mouth was killing him.

"but y—you said—"

"I've said a few stupid things in my life. That was one of them."

"Are you sure?" She said in a barely audible voice.

"Completely."

Before he knew it he'd pinned her against the wall by the stairs and took her mouth under his. She didn't protest, not once. He knew he could be intimidating because he was a big man, but she handled him well considering she'd never been with a man before. "Tell me no." he said huskily in her ear before he took her mouth again.

"I can't." she breathed against his lips as he started pulling her shirt out of her jeans.

"Baby, I'm not going to give you another chance. I don't take things halfway, especially with you." He murmured against the skin of her neck as his fingers deftly undid her silver buttons and pushed her shirt off her shoulders.

She moved her hands over his chest not seeming to hear

him.

His hands circled down to her waist. He was right, he could span his hands around it. Then they slid down to her hips where the top of her jeans started. She had nice wide hips that complimented her small waist. It was a shame that she kept things hidden in unshaped clothes because her body was a perfect ten. "Take my shirt off." He could feel her fingers shake as she struggled with the buttons. She managed to get the top three undone before he took one of her hands and put it against his chest. "Tell me what you feel?"

"You're so hard," she breathed, "And warm."

"That's all?" He said teasing her ear lobe with his tongue causing her to gasp.

"—sexy—"

He chuckled sinfully against her mouth, "Open up for me Nat." he said against her lips.

She parted them slightly and he applied more pressure with his causing her to open them further. He slipped his tongue inside and caressed hers.

She groaned.

His hand came up and shaped under her chin against her neck to tilt her head slightly. He hoped to hell he didn't frighten her with his aggressiveness, but she tasted so damn sweet! His other hand moved up her ribcage and stopped by the side of her breast. He felt her suck in a breath at that gesture, "I'm not going to hurt you." He said as he slid his thumb underneath caressing the underside. At the same time he kissed her deep to cut off any protest she may have.

Just then car lights reflected off the wall by his head.

"Ah hell." Wyatt said raising his head, "I think your father's home."

"What?"

He looked down at her and saw that she was still dazed and

couldn't help himself but grin. He took her hand, bent down and picked up her shirt, "to your room." He took her upstairs to the bedroom.

Once inside he shut the door and pulled her against him. He didn't kiss her again, but just waited.

"Wyatt—what is it?"

He looked down at her and put a finger to his lips just as her father's footsteps came down the hall.

"Oh god, dad?" her eyes shot wide.

He nodded.

"I didn't even hear him," she whispered.

Wyatt's smile grew, "Thanks."

She narrowed her gaze at him in mock anger.

He tightened his grip until the bare skin of her belly met the buckle of his belt. She felt completely exquisite and soft. "I should go." He groaned looking down at her. Her mouth was slightly swollen and her face was flushed with passion.

"Are we being crazy?" she whispered hoping her father didn't hear.

"Completely." He said dropping his smile and moving his hands up her back.

"Is this—I mean—with women?"

"Do you mean that women allow me to touch them like this?" Why she would bring up that at a time like this, he'd never know. However, he had to remember that she was innocent and insecure over his affection for her.

She nodded.

"Natalie, don't compare yourself, it's cheap."

"Well, you said so yourself that I have no experience. I can't help it, I'm curious."

"I'm here with you, not someone else. Doesn't that say something?"

"Again, I don't know."

“Take my word for it. There is no comparison.”

She just stared up at him. Her face was flushed with passion, curious and fascinated.

Unable to help himself, he bent his head to kiss her again. He really didn't mean to carry it so far, but she was downright irresistible. There was something about that innocent stare he couldn't walk away from. Slowly he began backing her toward her bed and in the process unsnapped her bra and slipped it off her arms.

Natalie awoke sometime in the night next to a large, warm, hard body. She felt safe next to him and she doubted that she would have gotten any sleep at all if he wasn't there. He led her to her room, made her change into a nightgown before he undid the top few buttons of his shirt and got in beside her.

“If I take my clothes off, I'll have you again.” He told her softly.

Somehow she couldn't see the downside of that. He was so gentle with her the other night that she cried. If she thought she was in love with him before, that night just confirmed it. Heat pulsed low in her pelvis remembering his naked muscular body cover hers. Oh, and the way he kissed her! She could have died right then and there and been happy about it.

He'd spend a long time teasing and coaxing her until she was delirious with want. She begged him to take her.

“Just a minute baby, I need to make sure you're ready.” He murmured against her mouth as his hand slipped down her flat abdomen between her thighs.

At first she tried to stop him, but then he started whispering endearments huskily in her ear while moving his body against hers, and she would have jumped off a bridge for him after that. He was definitely a man who knew how to use his body to seduce a woman.

A Pleasant Surprise

She gasped at the unfamiliarity of his touch, but seconds later she was arching toward him. When he removed his hand, she cried out.

“Just a minute, I need to protect you.” He said reaching over the bed for his jeans.

She heard a rustle of denim as he removed his wallet and took something out of it. A moment later he was back over her raised up on his forearms while he manoeuvred between her thighs. Then he bent down and kissed her at the same time he moved his hips up pushing himself into her.

The sensation was nothing like she expected. It was so sweet! She must’ve said it out loud for he growled a deep throaty agreement and released a deep chesty groan as he moved again. Deeper. That time it hurt. She gasped with the pinch and he thrust again, harder, deeper and it was gone. Her eyes flew wide at the sensation that followed and he brought his full weight down on her as he began a steady rhythm cued by years of experience.

She knew she was saying things, but what, she couldn’t remember, but she did recall a change in his breathing pattern. It became ragged. Now that she thought about it, her hands had moved all over him and she remembered her nails anchoring themselves in his shoulders. Perspiration covered both of them as his pattern changed. It was then she really felt it. Pulsing waves of pleasure started to sing through her. She gripped him trying to get closer, reaching for that unknown level. She knew it was there, but unsure on how to—then her body tensed and excruciating waves washed through her. She did shout his name like he said. She was sure she shouted it several times. Moments later he released his own shout of release and relaxed on top of her.

“Christ, that was amazing.” He murmured deeply in her ear.

“Really?” She said after she caught her breath.

Wyatt was awake and watching her concentrate on something while staring at the far wall. From the look on her face he knew what it was. Last night.

It was true. He never had a woman so sweet. She was completely sensual in every way a man desired. Yet, the way she dressed and acted lent to the impression that she wasn't. Hell, he was so glad he discovered this! "Hey."

His deep voice brought her out of that memory, "Hi." She said. She wasn't sure how long he was awake and staring at her because she was daydreaming about that one incredible night. It seemed to be the only thing that took her mind off of her sister.

"Logan called. They got Willie, but he hasn't confessed." He said reaching up and running his fingers down the hairline of her temple.

"We don't know if it was him." She breathed softly.

"He said he was with his father when he was at the store talking to your sister." He explained, "He wouldn't have said that if he was innocent."

"Wyatt, he didn't know I was there." She said fighting to come out of the spell he weaved on her. His fingertips were calloused like his hands, and she admired that he was a man that worked hard. In fact she loved those roughened hands on her, all over her.

"No."

She started to tremble, "Will he get out?"

"That depends on the judge if he gets bail." Wyatt already knew he would because his family had money, and his father would make sure that he had a good lawyer. He tightened his arms around her, "Listen honey, I won't let him touch you. I promise."

"You don't need to do this." She said.

He reached under her and moved her up him a little more so he could come level with her eyes, "I do."

A Pleasant Surprise

“I thought you said I was needy.”

He grinned, “I also told you I said stupid things before.”

She leaned down and kissed him and he moved a hand behind her head. After a moment things started to get heavy and he moved her back from him, “Not so soon Nat.” he said with a brief smile. “Although I want to, you must be feeling the effects of last weekend.”

She was. It was the reason why she had such a long shower the next day. Every muscle was screaming with ache. But it didn’t matter. She loved him and wanted to be with him.

“Soon.” He said seeing her disappointment. What she didn’t know is that he had a raging erection from the moment he lay down with her, but he knew she’d be sore.

After he left her the night before, he gave Smithy a call because he needed a drink. The guilt he was feeling at taking her innocence was eating him up. He couldn’t quite go home yet until he got his expression under control either. Logan would see right through him. As it was, he was suspicious, but didn’t pry.

He did exactly what he said he wouldn’t do and play on her emotions. He did feel guilty because she was emotionally vulnerable around him. Although he cared about her, he also wanted her and could no longer resist the lust she evoked in him.

Hell, though, it wasn’t supposed to be that good. She was like a bloody sensuous goddess, and he got a little rough near the end, but she didn’t even notice. That’s how he knew she was sore. Although he had to admit that he did have enough control to arouse her properly so that it didn’t hurt her as much as it could have. Just thinking about how wet she was when he took her made his groin heat up painfully. To a man, it was important that a woman was able to get aroused the way she was because it said a lot about his abilities as a lover. Wyatt never doubted himself there, but Natalie was untouched, and knowing that he could evoke that in her fired his ego. He couldn’t let her go now.

He actually considered not seeing her again until he got that phone call. It had nothing to do with her and the way they were together, it had to do with him. He was her first, and became unreasonably possessive immediately afterward. He'd never been that way about a woman. That included his ex-fiancé.

He had lain in bed the night before thinking about how to end this nicely. Now, he couldn't walk away, not yet. Hell, as soon as he laid eyes on her again, it disappeared from his mind. He still had the fresh memories of her soft perfectly shaped body wrapped around his. Maybe after he'd spent some more time with her, it would wear off—he hoped. Then there was Jenny.

They had to find Jenny and he couldn't abandon Natalie right now. Although he and Logan suspected the worse, there was still the chance that she was still alive. Then again they knew what that sick bastard was capable of. Natalie didn't.

That was another reason he couldn't take advantage of her. He should have never taken her innocence. When Logan told him not to hurt her, he knew he couldn't do such a thing. It would crush her and he couldn't be responsible for that.

Wyatt got up around five in the morning and went downstairs. He called his parents to let them know he wouldn't be home.

"Is she doing okay?" Lee asked.

"She's coping."

"I sent Rick and a few others to help with the search last night. They haven't come back yet. Don't worry about work around here son, it can wait. Take care of that gal."

"I will." He hung up and familiarized himself with the kitchen, made coffee and dug out bacon and eggs for breakfast.

Hunter came wandering into the kitchen about then and looked around scratching his head, "I smell bacon."

Wyatt turned and looked at him. "There's coffee too."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll have a cup." He walked over to the

cupboard and got a mug.

Wyatt waited for the man to say something about him being in the house. As it was his shirt was untucked and hung past his waist and the top buttons of it were open. Any experienced man or woman would know he spent the night from the look of his hair too. He'd neatened it a bit with his fingers but it still had that bed look about it.

"Natalie up yet." Hunter said casually as if it was normal that Wyatt was in his kitchen early in the morning.

"No." If this was his daughter and he woke up to a man that spent the night, he'd have words with him, but Hunter acted as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

"They hear from Jenny yet?"

"No." Wyatt said still amazed at the man's complete oblivion.

"I'm going back to bed. You won't mind waking me if they hear anything will you?"

"Not at all." Wyatt said unable to help the disgust in his expression. He couldn't believe his behaviour. How he could sleep with his daughter missing was beyond him. It took him hours to get Natalie to fall asleep and it was out of sheer exhaustion that she finally did.

"Thanks." Hunter said wandering off with his cup of coffee.

About a half an hour later Natalie came into the kitchen, "It smells like heaven in here.

"I made you breakfast. Sit down."

"Wyatt I need to go open the store."

He removed the pan of scrambled eggs from the stove and turned to her leaning back against the counter, "You're kidding right?" What was she thinking? Her sister was missing.

She ran her hand across her forehead, "I can't just sit here thinking about Jenny. I'll go nuts."

"You can't go to work and deal with customers either Nat."

He knew she was being strong but he had visions of her huddled in the back weeping when it finally hit her that they may not find Jenny.

"It's better than doing nothing!" she shot back, "My god, Jenny could be hurt—or worse!"

He left the counter and moved toward her embracing her, "Hush. We aren't going to think like that. Willie's in custody and Smithy will get something out of him."

"What if he has her somewhere and she can't get help—what if—"

He placed a finger over her mouth, "No *what ifs*." he said softly, "give Brad some time. He's old style army. If anyone can get a confession, he can."

She nodded.

"I think I'll take you to our house and go help in the search. Ma will take care of you."

"What about dad?"

Wyatt couldn't help it and let his anger show, "I don't think he even realizes there's a problem."

"Wyatt, I can't leave him!"

"Look, you are going to need someone reliable to be around in case this turns bad—" she started to tremble, "—and you're fooling yourself to think your father is capable of a human drop of decency."

Her eyes flew wide, "You can't judge him based on what you've seen."

"Like hell I can't. His oldest daughter has gone missing and he's neither comforted you nor even tossed a kind word in your direction because he's too concerned where his next drop of liquor is coming from."

"You don't know him!" she shot at him clearly embarrassed at her father's behaviour.

"I know enough to see that you've been alone your entire life

A Pleasant Surprise

even though you've been surrounded by family. He was out here a moment ago and never said a word to find a man in his kitchen looking like he spent the night."

"Oh God." She flushed, "He saw you!"

"He saw me, asked me about news of Jenny and went back to bed."

"He couldn't have—"

"He did." He interrupted tersely. "For all he knows I was gratifying myself in your arms all night." That thought made him pause for a moment as vivid images flooded his mind.

"Wyatt!"

"If it was my daughter, the man in the kitchen wouldn't be walking out of my house, he'd be crawling. I'd also cut his balls off."

Her eyes widened at that statement because she wouldn't doubt it for a moment. "Maybe he thinks I'm old enough—"

"I wouldn't care what age she was either." He interrupted again. "he wouldn't get a finger on her unless he was married to her."

"You hypocrite!" she shouted back at him while poking his chest with a finger.

"You are not my daughter." He answered calmly countering her rising voice, "You're my lover. I'm allowed a different perspective."

"The same perspective you gave me about being a needy virgin!" she argued, "Some saviour!"

"Yeah, well, you have a lot to do with that decision the other night. If you weren't so damn sexy, I wouldn't have seduced you."

She was about to argue whatever point he threw at her but having someone mention her in the same sentence as 'sexy' took her by surprise. To top it off, it was *Wyatt* who said it. The only man that she never thought would.

“Cat got your tongue?” he smiled, “What a surprise.”

“Sexy?” she said with all anger out of her voice.

“More so when you are angry with me.” He added. He knew she was worried to death about her sister and part of her temper came from that stress, but he meant it when he called her sexy.

“You’re teasing.” She said sceptically.

“I’d never tease a woman about a compliment.” He answered, “Especially you.”

She wasn’t sure what that second thing was he said because her heart started pounding in her ears. Yet she just couldn’t take her eyes off of his, “Say that again.”

“Sweetheart, you *are* coming home with me.” He said firmly, “I won’t take no for an answer.”

“What about my father?”

“We’ll notify him as soon as we hear anything, but honey, he’s not going to even notice that you aren’t here.”

She took a deep breath and looked away. She knew Wyatt was right. It hurt to admit that her father just didn’t seem to care.

“Why don’t you go and pack some things?”

Her eyes guided back to him, “Are you sure?”

“Quit doubting things. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. The only regret I have is you’ll be in a separate room because having you under my roof and not being able to touch you may just kill me.”

She flushed, “God, Wyatt!”

He grinned, “And even if I paid you a visit, you have this incredible habit to say very scandalous things loud enough that it would wake the household. My mother would castrate me if she knew.”

Her eyes flew wide, “I’m going now.” She said rushing from the room followed by his chuckle. Did she actually do that? She remembered that there might have been some things said, but

she certainly can't remember what. He had her so wound up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dolly was waiting on the porch for Wyatt and Natalie. He'd phoned when she was packing a bag to tell her that he was bringing the young woman home. She'd been preoccupied with worry for her, so she was glad that Wyatt chose to do that. They all knew that girl didn't have anyone in her life except maybe her sister, so she needed someone to help her through this and quite frankly both her boys, although they may be gentlemen, were not accustomed to comforting women.

Natalie saw her standing there when they drove up and a wave of sadness went through her. It was obvious from the look on her face that she was concerned for her whereas her father hardly lifted a brow when she told him she was going to go stay at the Stricklands for a bit. Instead he said, "have fun." She felt like screaming at him, but what good would it have done?

Her heart was heavy over his disinterest. Wyatt seemed to be right about how her father seemed to care about his next drink than his own daughters.

Her eyes guided to him and his strong profile as he parked the truck. He had been so caring through all of this. It was something she didn't expect from someone like him. She honestly didn't think a man as masculine as he was, had a tender side. Yet, he'd been very good to her. In her heart she hoped that it was more than just because she needed someone right now, but he never gave anything away.

Wyatt got out, walked around the truck and opened her door. Then he took her bag that was on her lap with one hand, and took her hand with his other helping her out of the truck. Even when she got out he didn't release it. She looked up at him but he was not looking back at her, but at his mother.

"You poor dear!" Dolly said coming down the stairs wringing her hands, "We'll take good care of you."

"I got her ma." He said pulling her close to his side. "I'll get her settled."

"Of course." She said as if it was expected.

Wyatt led her into the house and up the stairs to the room she was in before. He tossed her bag on the bed and turned to her taking her in his arms again, "I'll phone you as soon as I hear anything."

"I know." She said laying her head against his chest.

He moved back a bit so he could bend down to kiss her. It was gentle, sweet and comforting. It nearly made her cry. Then he left without a backward look.

"I don't think I can do that Smithy." Logan said helplessly. They were in Smithy's office at the police station while the police chief was sitting at his desk on the phone to the Austin police. Logan was standing next to him shaking his head when saw his brother walk into the police station. He breathed a sigh of relief, "Oh thank God. Ask Wyatt." He said nodding toward his older brother.

Smithy waved catching his attention through the open door while still on the phone.

"What's going on?" Wyatt said coming into the office and seeing Logan's concerned expression.

"They found a body in Austin that matches Jenny's description. They need someone to ID her, and I can't do it." Logan said helplessly, "I mean I can do a lot of things Wyatt but not that."

"They'll send a fax." Smithy said to Wyatt.

"Yeah all right." Wyatt agreed reluctantly. It was him or Natalie doing the job because chances were her father wasn't sober enough, or could possibly identify her even if she was alive

and standing next to him.

Smithy returned to his phone conversation with the Austin police.

“Thanks.” Logan said, “That’s too damn much for me.”

“I’m just thinking of Natalie.” Even though Wyatt wasn’t keen on this, it’ll protect Natalie. A beep came from the fax machine against the wall.

“Fax is in.” Smithy said hanging up the phone. He got up and went over to the machine pulling out a piece of paper. “Wyatt?”

Wyatt reluctantly went over and looked at it. It was only a head shot but it was vivid enough so that he’d never forget it. “Damn.” He said looking down at the lifeless face. Seeing something on TV like this still didn’t prepare you for it.

“Is it her?” Smithy said unaffected. He’d seen plenty of dead people so this wasn’t a surprise to him. He felt bad about putting the boys through this, but it was probably better than exposing her family to it. Also, at least her face wasn’t mutilated, so it wasn’t such a shock.

“I—no.” he said seeing a beauty mark next to her mouth. He pointed to it, “She doesn’t have one of those.” Jesus, that was about the hardest thing he ever had to do.

“Wyatt?” Logan said a distance away. He went to the other side of the office and waited by the window that overlooked the rest of the desks in the station. He couldn’t even be near them when they looked at it because he might get a glimpse.

He lifted his eyes to his brother’s and shook his head.

“Thank God.” He said placing his hands on Smithy’s desk before his knees gave out.

“Does it look like her?”

“A little.” He said, “But Jenny’s hair is more auburn.” He turned away not able to look at the photo anymore. Except for the paleness of the woman’s skin, it looked like she was sleeping.

"I'll phone the station in Austin and let them know." Brad said walking back toward his desk.

"Is Natalie okay?"

"She's with ma." Wyatt told him, "I brought her home."

"Well, I don't blame you. Hunter doesn't even seem to think she exists." Logan said with disgust. "Jesus, it sure explains a lot though, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." It certainly explained why Natalie dressed like she was invisible and kept the attention off of herself. Because it was familiar and she felt safe. "Has Willie said anything?"

"Smithy told him he had a witness that could place him at the store, but he still denies it. He got a search warrant for his place and property and his men are going through his house and we're working on one for his father's place."

"I saw him the day before yesterday. He was in town trying to get Natalie to notice him when she was going into the bus depot." Wyatt told him, "I threatened to rip his arms off and shove them up his ass if he even tried to speak to her." He cleared his throat, "Actually it was a little more colourful."

"I expect it was." Logan said with a slight smile. "What did he say?"

"Something very crass and unrepeatable in regards to her mouth and a part of his anatomy." He answered. "Before I could reach for him with the intention of choking the shit out of him, he tore out of there."

"Chicken shit."

"*I was* going to hurt him Logan." Wyatt said seriously.

"Still. Maybe he should be a man instead of picking on helpless women." Logan said angrily, "I know he took her."

"I suspect so." Wyatt agreed.

"Smithy won't let me in there to talk some sense into him."

"Yeah well I think that a bruised and bleeding suspect in front of the judge doesn't bode well for our police department."

A Pleasant Surprise

“Probably. His lawyer is in there anyway. Some friend of his father’s from Austin.”

At that time a deputy walked in with several evidence bags in his hands. He tossed them on Smithy’s desk, “This is all we found at Willie’s house.”

Wyatt picked up one that held a bunch of jewellery, women’s jewellery, “What the hell does he need this for?”

“It looks like a collection.” Smithy said taking the bag and turning it to see the contents. Some of those rings look worn. None of this stuff looks brand new.”

“Trophy’s or gifts?” Logan asked.

“Who knows?” He spared the boys a glance, “But I’m going to go and ask.” He took the bag and went toward the door that housed the jail. Then he stopped and turned back toward them, “You boys know this land well, don’t you?”

“Yes sir.” Said Logan.

He walked back over to the desk and took out a couple of badges, “I’m deputizing both of you as of now. Screw the formalities. I want you to take a look around this prick’s land and see what you can find. The warrant covers all of it. We’ve checked the outbuildings and the house, but there may be something we’re missing. Take some men with you. Chances are he’ll be back out on bail by this afternoon after he goes in front of the judge. So find something.”

“You got it.” Wyatt said taking the badges and giving one to his brother as Smithy went back toward the jail.

“We’ll need to go home and get some horses.”

“Yeah, I’ll phone the boys and tell them to hitch up the trailer.” He said pulling his phone out of his pocket.

Natalie was sitting on the front porch sipping a cup of tea that Dolly insisted she have. She had to admit that it was calmer here. She felt very comfortable in the Strickland’s home, even

though it wasn't her own.

Just then she saw Wyatt's truck come up the long gravel drive and she stood up. *Yes, it was his truck* she thought as it got closer. She walked over to the banister as it drove by the house to the corrals in the distance. It was definitely Wyatt at the wheel. He didn't even notice her as he went by. She was hoping he'd at least stop and let her know if any progress was made with Willie.

She stood there for about three quarters of an hour when she saw another ranch truck go by with the gooseneck horse trailer loaded with horses and Wyatt's truck following behind it.

What were they up to?

Even so he didn't seem to notice her standing there. Logan lifted his hand as they drove by, but other than that, there was no acknowledgement.

At that moment Dolly came out onto the porch with the phone, "Here honey, it's Wyatt."

Her heart jumped at the sound of his name as she took the phone. "Wyatt?"

"Nat, we don't have much time. Brad wants us to go search Willie's land before he gets out on bail. That's why I didn't stop. I'll let you know if we find anything."

"Thanks."

"I'll see you later." He said before he hung up.

She handed the phone to Dolly, thanking her.

"My boy is sweet on you." Dolly said with a smile.

"I—no I don't think so." She flushed looking at the older woman.

She patted her arm, "Don't worry dear, I don't mind having you as a daughter in law in the least." She said before she went back in the house leaving her gaping. Wyatt was not the marrying kind at all. In fact he never let her know that there was even a relationship of any kind going on between them. Her heart sunk after that statement Dolly made. She felt like she let

everyone down. She should have never let Wyatt get as far as he did with her the other night.

It's not that she blamed him. She blamed herself. He said he could easily seduce her and he was right. She had absolutely no defences against him. Now, Dolly thought she was going to be part of the family just because he was being protective of her. How could she tell her that it wasn't true?

She refused to put any hope into what they shared because he had already told her his views on that. Yes, that's the way it is, she thought to herself. She would not be one of those women that put hopes into something that there was no hint to.

She looked down at her empty tea cup and made a firm promise not to, despite Dolly's words. It was hard to deny that her heart leapt when she said that, but she didn't know what Wyatt said to her at the fair. She knew he wasn't ready to settle down and what made Dolly think that it would be with a nobody like her?

Enough was enough, when this whole thing was over, she was returning back to her life as dull and boring as it was. It was safe. She was getting tired of wearing her heart in her expression and Wyatt could return back to doing whatever he did as soon as they found her sister. God, she hoped they did.

However, they came home at supper empty handed. Wyatt and Logan didn't say much throughout supper but they both looked completely exhausted. She knew they were doing their best even if they came home to eat something. She couldn't have asked for more from them. They had already put everything on hold to help her out.

For that reason Natalie didn't push them because she knew they'd tell her if they had anything. Yet she was dying to know of any news. Thank goodness Lee didn't have the same reservations.

"Did that little bastard get out on bail?" the old man said.

Wyatt looked at Natalie as he spoke to his father, "Yeah Pa, he did." He really didn't want Natalie to know because she was afraid of him, but out of respect, he had to answer his father.

She did her best to keep her fear from her expression but from the sympathetic look Logan gave her, she knew it wasn't working.

"He came home just as we were loading the horses." Logan said, "Smiling as if he had us all beat."

Natalie felt like weeping.

He grinned, "Of course it disappeared when Wyatt punched him in the face—"

"For heaven's sake Wyatt!" Dolly said with exasperation. "He'll press charges."

"He had it comin' ma." Logan defended his brother. "He taunted us about Jenny." Actually he was taunting Wyatt about Natalie, but Logan new that Wyatt wouldn't want that said out loud at the dinner table in front of his family. Willie had no class. Even if he didn't take Jenny, just the way he was talking about Natalie should have had him thrown in jail. He was a heartless animal.

"What?" Natalie said looking at Wyatt who was still staring at her without any show of emotion. "Is that true?"

"It sure as hell felt good." He finally said calmly not answering her question. He made a mental note to thank Logan later. It wasn't often his brother had insight where he was concerned. He'd asked Logan not to repeat the crude things Willie was saying, but he just made sure that she didn't know it was about her all together.

She's as sweet as candy isn't she Wyatt? Willie taunted, I heard from her cousin that's she's never known a man. I bet that innocence is ripe for the plucking, and before the end of the week I'm going to have that sweet little mouth of hers wrapped around my—and that's when Wyatt hit him.

A Pleasant Surprise

For the first time in what seemed like forever she felt herself smile. Wyatt returned it. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.” He said in that same controlled tone he possessed.

“Now Wyatt—” Dolly started.

“Leave the boy be,” Lee interrupted with a firm look as he spoke to his wife, “I doubt I would have shown that much control. If I know Wyatt, he wouldn’t strike unless it was necessary.” He shifted his eyes back to his oldest son who gave a subtle nod that he was correct.

To both Wyatt and Logan’s surprise their mother just looked at both boys then told them to eat more protein to keep up their strength. It wasn’t often that their mother would drop an argument lightly so this was monumental, but Wyatt felt right in doing what he did despite the complaint that Willie threatened to file against him.

He smirked remembering him backing away after he got up off the ground yelling threats. It was a nasal threat because he was sure that he broke the man’s nose from the amount of blood that was pouring out of it.

At that moment the phone rang, and Wyatt got up to answer it. Normally the phone was ignored at mealtime, but this might be about Jenny. It was the police chief.

“Wyatt, Willie’s filed a restraining order against you. Did you break his nose?”

“Yeah.”

Brad actually chuckled, “Well you could have been a little more subtle. Thankfully the judge was sympathetic because of the situation with Natalie’s sister. My men said that he also provoked you. No charges are being filed, but you can’t help us out anymore because of it.”

“I figured it would end up like that, but he pissed me off.” Wyatt explained, “He was disrespectful of Nat.”

“He is an arrogant little prick isn’t he?” He paused, “Look there’s another reason why I called you. That jewellery—well it all checked out. Apparently some of it was his mothers, and the few girlfriends we’ve been able to get a hold of actually did give him those pieces.”

“Ah hell. What can I tell my girl?” He bowed his head and reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I hate to tell you all that, but you need to know. Another thing, Wyatt, I haven’t lived around here my whole life, but you and Logan have. You know this guy. Are you sure he’s capable of kidnapping?”

“There were those incidents when we were younger.” Wyatt said, “And along with Natalie spotting him in the store earlier that day which he denied, it just seemed to fit.”

“That’s something he still didn’t confess to. However, we have his car in the city so the investigators can go through it. DNA will tell. I just wonder if we’re being too preoccupied with this creep and the real culprit is getting away.”

“I’m starting to wonder.” Wyatt himself was beginning to have doubts. He spent the better part of the day combing Willie’s land and found nothing even with the hunting dogs that one of his men brought with them. There was no scent anywhere. Not only that, he started to doubt that Willie was smart enough to take Jenny so spontaneously and not leave a trace anywhere. “Look I’ll talk to Natalie again and see if there was anything else that we missed.”

“Good idea. Get some sleep and maybe bring her in tomorrow morning.”

“No problem.” Wyatt hung up and wondered if they were chasing a dead end.

“Is there news?”

Wyatt turned to see Natalie standing there wringing her hands with worry.

A Pleasant Surprise

“No.”

She took a deep breath to instil courage in herself. It was hard to stay strong knowing her sister was out there hurt, or worse.

“However, we should talk—about that day.”

“I’ve told you everything.”

“I know, but—“ he motioned her toward the door of the study, “I told Brad I’d go over everything again with you. There may have been something else that we didn’t pay attention to.”

She took another deep breath and nodded stepping into the room.

He shut the door and turned to her, “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Drink?”

He grinned, “Whiskey, vodka, brandy—“

She rapidly shook her head.

“Afraid you’re going to tear into me again?” he said smiling.

“That was awful,” she admitted. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“Beer and you were angry with me, all of us.” He chuckled walking over to the wet bar and pouring two glasses of an amber liquid despite her denial. “Besides, I admire your backbone.” He added without turning around.

“Y—you do?”

“Yes. I honestly didn’t think you had one.” He turned and walked back to her holding the glasses extending one to her, “It’s brandy.” He said seeing her confusion, “I have a feeling you’ve never tried it before, so it’ll be a nice change from beer.”

She took the glass and sniffed it before taking a sip. It instantly warmed her throat. “That’s sort of nice.”

“Sit down honey.” He said motioning toward the couch. When she did, he sat beside her and slung his free arm over the back of the couch behind her. “Now take me through your day

again.”

“okay. First I got up and showered.”

“Say that again.” He said lifting a single brow.

“I showered.” She said innocently. “why?”

He leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes.

“Wyatt?”

He lifted a hand, “give me a moment. I’m just getting an image of you naked, soaped up.” He deep released a deep throaty sound of appreciation.

“Oh my god!” How could a man speak so openly about something so intimate?

He opened his eyes and turned his head toward her, “Hey, you brought it up.”

“You asked me to!” she said still appalled.

He moved his arm and brushed her long hair back off her face, “I like your hair like this.”

“Like what?”

“Left long.” He answered. Then he had to take a step back mentally and refocus on what was important here. Her sweet naïve responses were so damn distracting, and then there was that image of her naked. God, he near groaned out loud again. His eyes shifted to hers and he near smiled at her wide-eyed expression, “sorry baby, what else happened after your shower?”

Baby? Was it a shame to love the way that sounded on his lips? He could have called her something insulting, but if he said it the way he just said baby, she’d still melt. He had such a deep wonderful voice. She cleared her throat trying to focus, “When I was in the shower, Jenny told me that Missy was on the phone. I called her back when I got out.”

“Did Missy say anything out of the ordinary?”

Natalie met his eyes and bit her top lip.

His eyes guided there and he placed his thumb on them followed by a slanted warning look.

A Pleasant Surprise

“Sorry.’ She murmured against his thumb.

Her mouth was so damn soft and supple. “Now what did she say because I can see it must’ve been something.”

“She said she was—oh gosh Wyatt this can’t be relevant!”

“She was?” he urged softly.

She couldn’t say it.

“Nat, what’s the problem?”

“It’s not important what she said.”

“It may be.”

She shook her head.

“Natalie, you know my patience runs thin especially after forty eight hours without sleep.” He said irritably. Another minute passed and she still didn’t say anything, “Jesus.”

“I just can’t.” she burst out, “I can’t. Everyone’s picking on her and I can’t tell you what she said.”

“No one is picking on your cousin. No one has spread rumours about her like she did to Logan.”

That still didn’t sway her. “She needs a friend Wyatt.”

“Yeah well it isn’t going to be you because I won’t allow it.”

She felt herself prickle, “Excuse me.”

“You heard me little girl. I won’t have my girlfriend running around associating herself with a woman like that. I don’t trust her. She’d sell you to the first person that offered.”

“What did you just say?” her mouth hung open.

“I said she sell you for a buck.” He reiterated.

“Before that.”

He stared at her.

“Wyatt.”

“Jesus Nat, are you that foolish?” He said finally getting what she was talking about. “We’ve *been* together!”

She flushed bright scarlet.

He released a curse under his breath that if his mother had heard it, she’d ban him from the house for a week. “You can’t

seriously think that I'd just love you and leave you." He said incredulously. Never mind that he'd actually thought about it, but it was more for his own self preservation. He was falling hard for her.

The tears came then, full force and along with it wretched sobs. She felt so horribly alone.

"Oh hell," he said softly taking her glass and setting it on the coffee table with his, "Stop." He reached over and pulled him to her. She was so small next to him and her body fit so easily within his. She felt good too. Too damn good. So good that he never wanted to let her go.

The door to his study opened and his mother looked in. He looked over Natalie's head and shook his. She nodded and shut the door again. She must've heard Natalie's cries outside the doors. No one would disturb them now, she would make sure of it.

Wyatt knew that she hadn't let go like this in a long time and so much had happened to her lately. He admired her strength. If it was Logan that had gone missing, he doubted he would be able to hold himself together the way she was.

It was almost thirty minutes of her sobbing against him before she started to subside, "Hey, honey what did you expect from that night?"

She shook her head against his chest. His shirt had been soaked with her tears but he didn't complain. He didn't even loosen his hold even slightly. "I don't know." She finally said.

"I should remember that you aren't wise to a man's affections, but I forget because you're so damn distracting."

She lifted her face away from him red and swollen with her tears so she could look at him, "I thought you were just being protective."

"In the beginning, yes, but not since we've been together. I told you it was incredible." He explained, "Honey, I couldn't be

any clearer than I was with you that night.”

“You know I haven’t been with anyone else. How do I know that wasn’t normal?”

“Take my word for it.” he smiled down at her, “Regardless of how distracting you are, I made the decision prior to that. I could never touch you without a commitment. I would never disrespect you.”

“Really?” she sniffed.

“Really.” He said smoothing her wet hair off her cheeks and framing her face in his large hands, “Now, tell me what Missy said.”

“I’ll feel terrible betraying her trust Wyatt.”

“Missy can look after herself. Most times she gets by on other people’s reputations.”

She grit her teeth to stop from objecting to his opinion. She knew it wouldn’t be any use.

“Either you tell me or Brad tomorrow morning.”

“I’d rather tell Brad.” She said too quickly.

“Ah,” he said raising his brows, “this has something to do with me.”

“How—Wyatt for crying out loud, can’t anyone keep secrets from you?”

“Honey there’s only a couple of things that would prevent you from telling me about Missy, but volunteer information to Brad. One, is protecting your family and I think I’ve figured out all of the skeletons there. The second is me. I’m not a fool to think you don’t have feelings for me, so I’m thinking she said something about me. Something you don’t want to repeat.”

“I hate that you know things like that.”

“I see that.”

“I can’t repeat this to you Wyatt. Please don’t make me.”

His expression altered. He thought about it for a moment. Obviously Missy said something profound to Natalie about him.

It embarrassed her and she was trying to be noble to protect her cousin because she felt beholden to her. "All right baby. Promise me you'll tell Brad everything though. It could be important."

She quickly agreed, "I will." Still, she couldn't possibly see how Missy's conversation had anything to do with Jenny's disappearance.

"Good." His eyes guided to her mouth, "Now I'm so bloody tired that I can't see straight but not too tired to enjoy a beautiful woman."

"Here?"

"Anywhere." He smiled as he bent his head.

"Wyatt, your mother—"

"Will make sure we're not disturbed because I'm comforting you." He said against her mouth right before he kissed her.

She wanted to deny him because of where they were, but she loved him so she couldn't.

He pushed her back onto the sofa and brought his body down on her. "Honey, you have no idea what you do to me."

"I thought you were tired." She gasped as his hands moved up under her shirt.

"I'm exhausted." He groaned moving on top of her.

"We should get some sleep." She argued weakly.

"uh huh." He murmured against her mouth.

"Oh Wyatt, do that again." She breathed as his hand moved over one of her breasts.

"Baby you don't need to ask twice."

Soon he had her clothes off, and his. He sat back on the couch and coaxed her over his lap. Then he lifted and turned her so she was straddling his powerful thighs. All along he spoke in a low husky voice to encourage her.

"Is this what people do?" she gasped as he placed his hands on his hips and pulled her intimately against him.

"Sometimes." He said moving his mouth up the soft skin of

her neck.

“I feel—exposed,” she said breathlessly arching her back.

“I like it. A lot. You have no idea what your body can do to a man like me.” he growled moving his large hands under her bottom. “Jesus honey, you are damn perfect.” With that lifted her up easily and positioned her on his erection. He released a deep throaty groan he slid into her.

“Oh lord Wyatt,” she moaned. The sensation was nothing like she ever felt. The other night it was different and she did enjoy it more than she thought she would, but this time, those exquisite pulses deep within her started instantly.

He kissed her then. Deep and hard while tangling his fingers in her long hair. It blanketed her back like a silk sheer. He adjusted his hips moving deeper in her causing her to respond. He moved his arms around her back never removing his mouth from hers and contracting them to guide each movement of her body on his.

It was then that she realized that she had control and the more she moved, the more amazing it felt. Her fingers curled into his thick shoulders and she found her own rhythm. Soon he released her and palmed her breasts adding to the pleasure of her arousal. She knew she was making noises, but she was at a point where she didn't care if anyone heard her. It was heavenly! Wyatt's strength was an aphrodisiac in itself and having control of this made her feel sexy and powerful. Afterwards she realized that he did that purposely to convince her that she was capable of being that woman he said he was.

And did she ever!

Suddenly she found herself in all of that and no more coaxing was needed. She arched back placed her hands on his knees and mastered a rhythm that had him groaning with every movement. He placed his hands back on her hips, not to move her but to get a feel for her rhythm and counter it with her own.

It was only when she felt herself build for a climax did she lose her rhythm. It was then that Wyatt took over. The alpha male in him kicked in and he flipped her onto her back instantly and grabbed the armrest above her head to lend to the force of movement. Her legs wrapped around his hips and she took every powerful thrust with vigour.

His mouth covered hers drowning out both of their climactic shouts. She realized then that he was still in control despite her being out of her mind with lust.

He lifted his head and looked at her. A slow scandalous smile spread across his face.

Her eyes searched his. Her expression of wonder was hard to hide, not that she'd want to. "oh my." She breathed.

His hand came up and brushed her long hair out of her eyes, "*Damn.*" He said, "How come whenever you and I make love, the parents are around?"

She giggled.

"I feel like a bloody teenager. You drive me wild."

"I liked that."

He moved his hips and made her gasp, "Say that again." He said huskily.

"Oh lord, I *loved* that." She pinched her eyes shut and trembled.

"Better." He said arrogantly.

"Wyatt." She said looking up at him with her heart in her eyes, "No one could mistake you for being less than a virile man."

He chuckled and it vibrated deep in his chest, "Get some sleep, we have an early morning." He lifted himself off her then turned taking her with him to settle on the couch for the night.

It was early morning when Wyatt awoke. Normally he didn't fall asleep so easily, but she drained him—literally. The couch fit his length which is the reason he bought it and she had slept

belly down on top of him. He had to admit, she felt darn sensual too with her bare skin against his. He lifted his head and glanced at his watch. It was barely five in the morning. He'd pulled the afghan over them that was on the back of the couch after they'd made love and they slept unmoved for several hours. He reached down and moved the blanket up to her shoulders before laying one hand across her back and the other in her soft hair. She didn't snore, but she made these sweet little mewling sounds as she slept that were utterly irresistible. It was something he could live with the rest of his life.

The rest of his life.

There was a soft knock at the door and Wyatt immediately lifted his head to see it open a crack and Logan peek in. He made a motion with his hand to tell him he was leaving. Wyatt nodded. Logan then grinned, reached down and locked the door from the inside before giving him a nod and shut it.

Wyatt was grateful because he'd meant to do that last night just in case, but well, he got a little distracted. He chuckled to himself and moved his hand up and down Natalie's back. Hell, did he ever. Now he knew why Natalie didn't set the brake on the truck. He chuckled causing her to stir.

"What time is it?" she murmured.

"Not even five am. Go back to sleep." He said softly rubbing her back.

"Gosh, I'm so tired." She moaned stretching on top of him.

"Keep that up honey, and I won't let you sleep." One of her thighs happened to be resting on his groin and he could deal with it if she didn't move. If she moved again though, he'd have to take her again.

She lifted her head and looked at him with a smile, "I hurt everywhere."

"Good, that means we did everything right." He chuckled.

She smiled and laid her head back on his chest, "this doesn't

seem right. My sister's still missing and here I am enjoying being in your arms."

"This is better than sitting around and crying in our cups." He countered.

"I suppose, but is it normal to feel guilty?"

"For you, yes. For me, no." As far as he was concerned, this was nothing to feel guilty about. Making love to a beautiful woman when they both needed distraction left guilt out of the picture for him. They weren't able to do anything more for Jenny and this was the best possible way to pass the time that he could think of.

"Do you think Willie has Jenny?" she shuddered.

"At first I thought so. Now, I'm not so sure he's smart enough to coax her into his car."

"I thought about that. Jenny's not like me. She wouldn't have believed whatever story he had."

"So maybe it was another customer. Someone she'd met before." He suggested.

"Maybe." She lifted her head and looked toward the door, "Wyatt—your family, I should get dressed."

"Lay still, my family won't bother us. The door is locked. Besides, I want you to try and get a few more hours before we head to town." Of course he never said Logan looked in and locked it for him because she'd never show her face to him again. He knew Logan wouldn't say a word out of respect for her, but if she knew, she'd be ashamed. "Brad won't be in until later anyway."

She yawned and closed her eyes. *Maybe for just a few minutes.* Besides, lying on top of such a warm solid man was too comfortable to pass up. She'd only slept for a couple of hours the night before and try as she could, she couldn't keep her eyes open.

"We'll find Jenny, Nat." *Dead or alive*, he thought to

himself, “so go back to sleep.”

“I trust you Wyatt.” She murmured before she drifted off.

Yeah, I know you do baby. He thought to himself. That was a problem. Not for her, but him. That statement made his chest clench in emotion. He loved that she put such faith in him, but what if he couldn’t come through for her? She’d be devastated.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“What’s that about?” Logan asked taking a seat beside Wyatt who was leaning back in a chair with his long jean clad legs stretched out in front of him. His arms were folded across his thick chest as he had his attention on Natalie through Brad’s office window. After Logan saw to things at the ranch in Wyatt’s stead, he made his way in to down to see if they had any progress.

“They’re going over that day Jenny disappeared again.” Wyatt said without taking his eyes off of her.

Wyatt had taken Natalie to see Brad at the police station after he woke her up again an hour later. He made her some strong coffee and insisted she drink it to help wake her up, “You need to have your wits about you.” He told her watching her wrinkle her nose as she forced it down.

“Does it have to taste so bad?”

He grinned, “Bad? Darling that’s a cowboy’s heroin.”

She laughed, “No wonder you don’t need much sleep.”

He was drawn out of that memory when Brad glanced over her head at him. It was obvious that she was talking about him after that look.

Wyatt kept his eyes on her when he elaborated on Logan’s question. “Brad wanted to talk to her about that day. He doesn’t think that Willie’s smart enough to steal a woman.”

“He may be right.” Logan said reluctantly following Wyatt’s stare. Brad was sitting on the corner of his desk while Natalie sat in a chair in front of him. Her back was to them. “Damn I wish I could hear that.”

“Yeah. Me too. It has to do with me.” Wyatt admitted.

“Really?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. I have a feeling Missy told her that she was going to start chasing me to get back at you.” He smirked, “It could be the only thing that Natalie wouldn’t tell me.”

“I can see Natalie wanting to protect her. Man, that gal just doesn’t get it does she?” Logan should have taken Wyatt’s advice a lot sooner. Missy didn’t take his rejection well. She screeched like a bloody harpy even before he finished telling her it was over. He was hoping that they could at least remain on good terms, but she was wailing and threatening to tell his mother about their escapades. Logan told her to go ahead before he walked away leaving her standing in her doorway. In a sense he was worried about his mother finding out because she’d give him hell over being so irresponsible to get involved with someone like Missy. Then she’d most likely tear a strip off of Missy for being so loose with her body. What Missy didn’t know is that he knew she was afraid of his mother and wouldn’t dare go and tell her.

Wyatt turned his attention toward his brother, “I warned you about her.”

“Yeah well, she has a few talents that were hard to break up with.” Logan grinned.

“Shit like that gets you in trouble Logan.” Wyatt said unable to return his brother’s humour.

“Yeah I know.” He said then thought for a minute, “You would think that with her cousin missing, she’d be comforting Natalie or even give her a phone call.”

Wyatt furrowed his brow, “You’d think.” Missy was selfish

and this just proved it. Logan agreed from what he said next.

"It just goes to show how selfish that woman was I guess." His brother took on an expression he recognized. Before he could ask him, he got to his feet.

Wyatt nodded toward the office, "Brad's waving at us to come in."

When the men went in the room, Wyatt stood behind Natalie and put his hands on her shoulders protectively. He could see from the worried expression that she had some difficulty telling Brad what Missy had said. He was pretty sure he already knew what was said so he didn't push her.

"Just so both you boys know, I've got a detail on Willie. He hasn't left his house since yesterday. If he has that girl, he doesn't seem too anxious to go see her." His eyes went to Natalie, "Your girl seems to think it's still him, but I'm not so sure."

"Me either." Wyatt said from behind her.

She twisted around to look at him, "Wyatt I can't think of anyone else—"

"Actually." He interrupted, "I think we took a whole wrong perspective on this." He said while flicking his gaze to her before settling it back on Brad.

She started to get up but he squeezed her shoulders and kept her seated, "I think we should take a look at Missy's house."

Her face contorted in horror then anger, "How could you think that!"

"I think that she was obsessed with Logan, Natalie."

"She's not that crazy!"

Logan looked back and forth at the two. He wanted to protest also but he knew his brother. He was able to see what other people couldn't. Maybe it was his quiet analytical demeanour that gave him that insight, whereas Logan never had that talent. Though he was certain about one thing. Wyatt was

usually right.

She shrugged out of his grip and came to her feet facing him, "Don't you dare do this Wyatt. You never liked Missy!"

"Can you two give us a moment?" Wyatt said to Brad and Logan without taking his eyes off of her.

"Sure thing." Brad said shutting the door after they left.

"Natalie, think about this." He said softly.

"Think about what! You insult my father, my family. Now you're blaming my cousin for my sister's disappearance." She pointed a finger at him, "Well, just because your life is so perfect—"

"My life is far from perfect." He countered still keeping his voice calm. She was upset, and he knew she'd be when he brought up his idea about Missy considering how protective she was of her. "You have to admit it seems odd that she hasn't even called you."

"Maybe she doesn't know about Jenny." She argued refusing to believe him.

"Everyone knows." Who was she kidding? This was a small town. News like that would spread like wildfire.

"Don't do this." She said letting the tears fall, "It'll destroy her. You just didn't think my cousin was good enough for your brother."

Actually she was right, but it had nothing to do with his suspicions. "We have to be sure Nat." He wasn't sure about Willie, but he sure as hell was about Missy. Everything fit.

She stared at him for a moment before she walked past him, yanking open the door.

"Hey." He reached for her.

"Please don't." she said turning to look at him. "I'm going home. Logan can drive me. I refuse to let you insult my family further."

"You're putting your faith into someone who doesn't deserve

it.” He said dropping his hand and narrowing his gaze. He was tired of her defending a woman who didn’t merit it. Missy created her own drama and Natalie was too damn nice to see it.

“I don’t care.” She said marching out of there.

“Logan. Give her a ride home.” Wyatt said standing in the door of Brad’s office nodding toward Natalie’s stiff marching back.

Logan gave a single nod and trotted after Natalie.

“She didn’t take it too well did she?” Brad spoke.

“Not at all.” He said watching Logan help her in the truck through the window, “Shit.” He turned to Brad, “There better be a missing sister at or around Missy or I’m up shit creek.”

“That’s the girl you showed up at my house over, isn’t it?” Brad finally realized.

“Yes.” It was the night after they’d been together and Wyatt was knocking on the door by nine thirty with a case of beer under his arm. He just couldn’t go home yet because he needed to get his mind off of the guilt that he was dealing with. It didn’t help that she literally blew his mind either. He had some thinking to do and there was no one better than Smithy. He never mentioned anything to him and they mostly just shot the breeze with talk of what they’d been doing lately but it helped clear his mind. He should have known that Brad would figure it was over a woman.

A look of dawning realization came over Brad’s expression, “So this makes sense—why you’re so protective.” He grinned, “Wow, I’d never thought I’d see the day you got in deep with a woman. All I can say is you sure know how to pick them.”

“She draws that out of me. The protectiveness.” He said clenching his jaw. He was angry at her and himself. More and more he was thinking that Missy had a hand in this and Natalie couldn’t see it.

“She sure is pretty. Why if I was twenty years younger—“ he

laughed because Wyatt shot him a look of warning. "I'm only saying."

"She's a sweet as all get out too. I didn't have a hope in hell." Wyatt said.

"No, I can honestly see that you didn't."

"So what do we do first? Knock on Missy's door? Go see Nat's uncle?"

"I guess I'll go see a judge about a warrant." Brad said going back in his office and getting his hat. When he came out he stopped by Wyatt, "Want to come?"

"I wouldn't mind seeing this thing through." He answered. "if we're wrong, I got some begging to do."

Brad chuckled and slapped him on the shoulder, "She'll forgive you. I think that girl's in love."

Natalie was still fuming during the ride home. For the first time she could remember Logan hadn't said a word. Her eyes went to him a couple of times and he seemed to be busy watching the road. But she knew him. It was obvious he sided with Wyatt and it made her angrier. Maybe it was a good thing he didn't say anything because she was tired of hearing those things about Missy.

When they pulled up in front of her house she started to get out when she felt his hand on her arm. "Nat, he cares about you."

She turned and looked at him. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes, "She was all I had when there was no one else Logan. Now you are asking me to think horrible things about her."

Logan thought that her life was sorely lacking if she thought Missy was the best thing going. He released her arm and she got out of the truck and went in the house. He saw her father open the door, so at least he knew someone was there even if he was useless. For all he knew Willie may seek out revenge for that assault the day before.

A Pleasant Surprise

He thought about going and talking to her but he'd never seen her so angry and wasn't sure how'd she react. She was protecting Missy. If only Missy could appreciate what a wonderful cousin she had.

Several hours later, Wyatt was leaning against the side of the police SUV that Brad drove watching him and his deputies knock on Missy's father's door. Her father would most likely be at work, but Missy, if he knew her like he did, would just be getting out of bed.

Sure enough she answered the door in a housecoat.

He watched Brad give her the warrant and speak to her. She looked past him and saw him. He just pleasantly tipped his hat at her.

Reluctantly she stepped aside as the deputies went in the house. Smithy turned and came back down the stairs.

Wyatt straightened as he approached, "Do you know this property at all?"

"No. I've never been here."

"Well, you're still deputized, so did you want to take a few men and search the perimeter?"

"I suppose."

"She didn't seem to upset to let the men in the house, so I'm suspecting that if she has your girl's sister, she's not there."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Orville." Brad said to a man on the porch, "Go with Wyatt."

"Yes sir." The deputy said as he came down the stairs.

Several hours had gone by and Natalie sat at the kitchen table staring at the far wall. She'd said some horrible things to Wyatt and felt awful for it. Well they might not seem so terrible for someone like her sister or Missy to say, but it wasn't in her nature to talk to someone like that. Especially someone she was

in love with. Was she being so blind that she couldn't see what was really going on? Was Missy guilty?

The phone rang at that moment and she got up to answer it.

"Nat?"

"Missy—oh gosh are you okay?"

"Listen there are cops everywhere here and I needed to call you. You've been the only one I could turn to." She started crying.

"What is going on?" she heard Missy release a sob.

"Gosh, Nat, I'm so sorry. I was crazy about Logan, and I saw Jenny with him—I well—I went crazy, stupid crazy."

There was a knot in the pit of Natalie's stomach that started to burn and grow with every word that came out of Missy's mouth.

"You see, I'm pretty sure that I'm in love with him and I—I did something bad."

"Oh god, say it isn't true!" Natalie defended her and she felt so betrayed.

"I'm so sorry—she's fine. I didn't hurt her."

It was then that all the repressed anger burst forth from Natalie, "In love! Missy you don't have a bloody clue what that is!" for the next five minutes Natalie cut loose on her cousin. She was angry for the lies the woman told her, for telling her she was going after Wyatt, her Wyatt, and for her promiscuity.

Missy was a mess of tears when Natalie stopped yelling, "Now, dear cousin." She said with uncanny calmness, "Tell the police chief where Jenny is or I'll never speak to you again." She hung up.

Missy's face was wet with tears when she turned toward Brad who was talking to one of his deputies just inside the door, "She's in the garden shed." She said.

Both men turned and looked at her.

"I didn't hurt her—I swear. I just wanted her out of the way." She said through sobbing breaths.

A Pleasant Surprise

Wyatt was coming back from the back of the property when Brad came out of the house, "She's in the shed." He said pointing to an obscure shack with no windows by the driveway about a hundred yards from the house. It hadn't been checked yet because it was too obvious, but Brad didn't take into consideration that Missy wasn't an expert kidnaper.

Wyatt was already heading toward the garden shed. Brad was right behind him.

The door had a lock and before he went back to get the key from Missy, Brad hollered for one of the men to get the bolt cutters out of the back of his jimmy.

When the opened the door Jenny stood up from a small make shift cot against the back wall. To the men's chagrin it looked as though she just woke up from a nap. If she was awake when they drove by the building she probably would have made some noise.

"Oh thank God!" She said, "Missy is driving me nuts!"

Wyatt blinked then to everyone's surprise he burst into laughter, "Jesus, two goddam days and that's all you have to say?"

She shrugged, "I could sure use a shower."

"Everyone's been looking for you for two days straight."

"Poor Natalie." Jenny finally said, "I bet she was worried sick."

"You could say that. She near bit my head off."

"Really? Wow, my poor sister."

"Are you really okay?" Wyatt asked again. He was grateful that Jenny cared about Natalie, because she didn't seem to really have someone in her life until then.

"Besides not having a TV, a shower, or a decent toilet and my cousin acting a bit like a lunatic, I'm fine. She didn't hurt me."

"We thought Willie VanderZandt had you." Brad spoke up

amused as Wyatt over the discovery.

“The nice looking fella—blonde hair, blue eyes?” she asked.

“That’s him.”

“Oh Please, he reeked of creepiness.” Jenny said insulted.

“I’ll get your statement then, and drive you home if you don’t mind.” Brad said clapping Wyatt on the shoulder.

“I’d prefer to see my sister first.”

“Sure, I’ll take you. I can get a statement later.”

Two weeks had gone by and things around Natalie’s house had returned to normal. Well, except for her.

Jenny had refused to press charges against her cousin, but said she would if she didn’t get counselling. The judge wasn’t so sympathetic and put her on probation which included that she keep her distance from Logan and enforced the counselling three days a week. He threatened to toss her in jail as soon as she came within a hundred yards of him.

Logan and Jenny had been seeing each other everyday, but she hadn’t seen Wyatt at all and Logan didn’t say a word to her. She didn’t blame him. She behaved badly toward him and felt really guilty and stupid. He was right all along, it was Missy and she fought him the whole time.

She really messed up and didn’t blame him at all that he wanted nothing to do with her.

She really wanted to ask Logan or her sister about him but she knew that would be cowardly. If she had any courage left she would call him herself.

“You’re driving me crazy with your depressed state.” Her sister said out of the blue one day when they were doing inventory.

Natalie never said anything but just kept counting the boxes on the shelves.

“Logan won’t tell me anything. That’s why I haven’t said

anything to you.”

“I’m fine Jenny. Drop it.”

“You look like hell.” She said walking over to her, “Did you want to talk about it?”

She stopped and looked at her older sister, “Do I look like I need a confidant?”

“Don’t get snippy Natalie. You’re moping around here driving me crazy. Why don’t you go and get in the truck and go see him?”

“Because I said some terrible things Jenny!” she cried, “I was so mean. I took Missy’s side over Wyatt’s.”

“I’m sure you think you were being mean, but you weren’t.”

“I was.”

She took her sister’s hand, “you were advocating for someone who you thought had no one. If anything that was the most wonderful thing anyone could do and it just goes to show what a genuine rare person you are.”

“If I was so wonderful, he’d forgive me.”

“Maybe he’s waiting for you to make the next move. Logan told me that Wyatt hasn’t said a word about you but has been busy building that barn. I did ask.” She said more softly.

“I appreciate that.” She looked at her with watery eyes, “What if he throws me off of his property?”

“Then you have no regrets. At least you tried to apologize.”

“I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

“Sis, people can only wish to have someone as loyal and devoted as you were to Missy. No one should fault you for that.”

Wyatt and his father stood at the front of the now framed in barn when an approaching vehicle caught his attention. He was in the middle of telling his father his plans when he turned to see Natalie’s truck come up the road.

He placed his hands on his hips and watched as she got out.

She was by herself too. For some reason he expected her sister to be with her for moral support.

“I think this is about you son.” Lee said seeing where her attention was.

“I expect so.” He answered keeping his eyes on her. She was wearing worn jeans with a brown belt and a mauve t-shirt. Her hair was unbound just the way he liked it. She slid her hands into the pockets of her jeans and stood by the truck. It was a gesture of insecurity and Wyatt had to admit she was very attractive.

“I’ll leave you two then. Don’t make her sweat too much. I actually like this one.” Lee said with an amused glance before he walked away. He gave Natalie a ‘good-day’ as he walked by her.

Wyatt saw her give his father a small pleasant smile before she turned her attention back on him.

He reached up and nudged his Stetson back on his brow so her could see her fully. She was stunning still, but it looked as though she was beaten down some. He knew why. She was feeling guilty over the things she said to him.

Natalie took a deep breath and started to walk toward Wyatt. She swallowed hard knowing he expected her to go to him.

He was striking as usual, but not seeing him for several weeks just made her reaction worse. She wasn’t sure she could even walk to him. Just looking at him made her knees weak. He had on dusty jeans, a khaki shirt that was open revealing a white undershirt that clung to his chest and abdomen like a second skin. He stood there hooking a thumb in his belt loop and waited.

When she got there she felt so small next to his height and craned her neck up to look at him. He was looking back at her and in the bright sun his eyes took on a deep golden brown look. She felt so intimidated because as usually there was no emotion

in his expression.

She reached up and moved her hair back off her face and noticed that his eyes followed the gesture. "I'm sorry."

"For?" he cocked a brow.

He was going to make her beg. She deserved this. "for doubting you."

"You think you need to apologize for sticking up for someone who had no one else?"

She became confused.

"It wasn't a rhetorical question. Honey, that's not necessary."

"What?"

"To apologize."

"I—don't—"

He smiled slowly, "Baby, I just wish it didn't take you two weeks to come and see me."

Baby. God that sounded so amazing. She loved it when he called her that especially when they were together intimately. It was hard not to forget the sound of his deep husky voice in her ear. *Baby, baby...*

"Now if you're done being angry with me over your cousin we need to discuss our wedding."

Her eyes flew wide. Is that why he hadn't tried to come see her? He was waiting for her anger to subside. Didn't he know that it evaporated instantly when she embraced her sister?

"You didn't think I'd give up on you."

"Wedding?"

"Of course it took you long enough to come around. I've been waiting practically on bended knee for a bloody week."

"Wedding?"

"I bought the damn ring and carried it with me the whole time, but you never showed. Then I got to thinking how terrible it would have been if I actually lost it while working on the barn

so it's in my room."

"Wedding?"

He grinned, "It would have been unforgivable to lose the only ring I've ever bought for a woman—Natalie for god's sake snap out of it!" he laughed.

She started crying.

"Oh hell, you don't take teasing to well." He stepped forward and embraced her.

"I felt so stupid."

"Darling. How many times do I have to tell you that you're not stupid?" he soothed, "Stop crying."

"I'm so confused."

"About what date we should set. I thought a Christmas wedding would be great. I'd like to take you to the Caribbean for a honeymoon, then maybe we can look at having kids—"

"Kids?" she said looking up at him with a tear stained face.

"Lots, and obviously my side of the family throws males, but I'd love a little precious girl. And, I do remember you saying something about loving children."

"Oh Wyatt. I love you!" she flung her arms around him.

"I know you do. I've always known." He contracted his arms around her and lifted her up off the ground burying her face in his neck.

"So Lee, how do you feel about your future daughter in law." Dolly said watching the couple embrace from the porch. It was at a distance but the love between them was obvious.

"I like it, I like it a lot." Lee said putting his arm around his wife of thirty years, "Just think of what kind of grandkids those two handsome people will give us."

"Oh I've been thinking about that for several years." She smiled slyly.



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