

# Chief Cook and Bottle Washer

by Rita Hestand

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## Dedication:

For all the new and would be Moms out there, this book is dedicated to all the mundane chores and nice things you do everyday to make your child's day better. God bless you...Rita Hestand!

## Other books in this series

Courting Abby

Hannah's Man

Along Came Love

## Prologue

A horn blared, metal crashed, shattering Emma Smith's concentration and jolting her against the steering wheel. She scrambled out of her truck, only to find a tall stranger with an accusing finger pointed straight at her. His flashlight and the blinding rain made it impossible to see him clearly.

"Are you crazy or something, lady? Didn't you see me coming?"

When she didn't answer, he rattled on. "Are you hurt, is your truck damaged?" The man demanded, oblivious to the raging spring storm. His voice was edged with concern and withheld anger.

A stupid question if there ever was one. No one could see in this kind of a storm. Momentarily blinded by his flashlight, all she could see now was a tall, broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped dark shadow with a Stetson, and a condescending voice. A cowboy, she should have known. Just her luck.

"In case you hadn't noticed," she said, shaking with indignation, "it's pouring cats and dogs out here. I couldn't see the hood of my own truck much less yours. I couldn't see you coming around that bend in the road."

Perhaps he deserved an apology at the very least, but Emma didn't feel much like apologizing to a man with a finger in her face. She wished he'd put that flashlight away. Her hand shielded her eyes from the glare.

Maybe it was better if she didn't see him. When he suddenly clammed up, and stared so long and hard, Emma glanced at herself.

Oh God, in her hurry to get to the store for milk, she had slipped on that ridiculous t-shirt her brothers had given her for her last birthday. 'I'm over 21 and up for grabs!' Not to mention the t-shirt now clung to her like a second skin. She felt a hot blush bloom on her cheeks.

Damnation!

She hadn't planned on getting out in this mess in the middle of the night, but the baby needed milk, she had no choice. Thank God Bertha had enough sense to insist the baby stay with her. Just the thought of the baby being with her during the accident made her shudder.

The fact that she didn't have a bra on only compounded her misery. But dammit it was too late to worry over something that trivial.

"I hope you have insurance, 'cause I don't." She flailed her voice at him.

"Well that figures!" he boomed. He didn't sound too surprised though.

Probably figured her for a real airhead.

He flashed the light first at his truck, then hers. A headlight dangled from his grill. She heard him draw breath, as though steadying his next outburst. Her truck was none the worse for wear.

Emma shook, she didn't want to, but she was cold, angry, and a tad put out by this ogler. What had happened to good old fashioned manners?

"Look, I'll be glad—"

"Isn't that Bertha Martin's old truck?" The stranger interrupted flashing his light toward her truck again.

"It was. I just bought it. You know Bertha?"

"Sure, everyone around here knows Bertha," he said gruffly then cast her another glance. "But she wouldn't sell it. It belonged to her dead husband."

"I don't know anything about her dead husband, but she did sell it to me. Just yesterday as a matter of fact. I haven't even had the title changed yet, but I intend to."

Now the light was back on her face.

"What's your name?"

"Emma Smith."

He made some kind of disgusted grunt and half turned away, then back to her. "Okay, this isn't getting us anywhere so let's get back to our problem. Now what are you going to do about this to make it right?"

"Well naturally I'll pay for it."

"Sure you will," came his condescending voice again. "Okay, let's get this out of the way and be done with it. This isn't the kind of weather to be exchanging trivialities. Let's just exchange names and addresses. You can send me the money."

"You'd trust me?"

"Not exactly, first I'd like to see a little identification."

He moved closer, and she backed up, within arms length of him. Without thought she reached out and put her hand on his chest to stay him. As though he might come closer. She hadn't thought touching a stranger could affect her in any way, but the instant her hand came in contact with warm flesh, all her senses came alive. As though that touch made her conscious of him being a man.

"Look cowboy," she said gulping and trying to sound sophisticated but knew she hadn't come off that good. "I don't have insurance, I'll admit that much. But this ought to cover it." She whipped out a small wad of bills from her front jean pocket and thrust them into his big warm hand. "Now leave me alone, will ya?"

She turned away to escape him when she heard his voice lower to a husky note.

"Ma'am a little identification and an apology would have been enough." The cowboy's words followed her to her truck door. She glanced at the ominous shadow in the rain. The money had fallen from his hands to the ground and he hadn't even bothered to pick it up. Her full paycheck, and he hadn't bothered to pick it up.

"I pay for my mistakes mister."

"I'll take that as an apology, then."

Before he had time to move any closer, she slammed the truck door, jerked it in reverse and took off, spewing mud and water all over his truck in the process. She drove at least two miles down the road, glancing in her rear-view mirror as she went. The cowboy hadn't moved.

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Deke Travers moved his hand over his jaw as he stared at the money at his feet. Damn, the woman put him in one helluva awkward position. She'd paid for the accident so to speak, but he was nearly certain she'd stolen Bertha Martin old pickup. He sensed a desperation in this little gal. But he couldn't really see her as a thief. Still it looked like she had stolen the damn truck. He had no choice.

Even if she was the prettiest thing he'd seen in a long time. He had to forget those perfect pouting breasts, and the gentle sway of her hips. Somehow.

He spent the entire trip back to the ranch berating himself for what he was about to do. But Bertha Martin was a friend and he had no choice. He had to report this to the police.

He'd have bet his last dollar the woman was no thief. Something about the look in her face told him that much. The way she faced him, open and direct. The way she threw that money meant she had to be running from something though. But what?

She hadn't shown him any ID and he certainly didn't buy that name she gave him. Emma Smith. A real phony. Yep, he'd probably been took in this time. The Sheriff would laugh at him for that one.

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Emma shook all the way into town. She prayed the little store would be open so she could be on her way.

The lights were just going out as she opened the old screen door to the store, "Mrs. Wharton, could I just get some milk, please?"

"Why sure honey. What are you doing out this late at night?" The woman turned the light on again and opened the door for her.

"I-I, I was making a pie for the cafe tomorrow and I ran out of milk."

"Well land sakes why you baking' so late, hon?"

"I guess I'm a night owl. Bertha reminded me the store would close soon."

"I heard you were staying' with Bertha. That's real nice, she gets kinda lonely stuck out there in the middle of nowhere. But you know when her husband died she wouldn't budge from that place. You'd think with the cafe bein' in town she'd move a little closer," Mrs. Wharton was saying.

"It's hard to move away from your home, I guess."

The woman glanced at Emma as she put the milk on the counter and dug change out of her pocket. Damn, she didn't have enough money left to pay for the milk. She shifted her weight and glanced up at the woman.

Mrs. Wharton looked at her a little funny, then smiled.

"You're only a dime short, honey. Don't fret. I'll stop by for some coffee, how's that?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Wharton, I'm sorry."

"It's only a dime, Emma. Don't fret about it. We're all glad to have you here. We don't get many young folks these days."

"Thanks Mrs. Wharton."

Emma practically ran back to her truck. She laid her head on the steering wheel and felt a hot tear sting her eye. She wouldn't cry. She just wouldn't. Things would get better. They had to. But that thought died the moment she pulled into the old gravel drive at Bertha's place. The Sheriff's car was there, his lights flashing.

Dear God, he had come to take the baby away from her!

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## Chapter One

"You better get your eyes off that cute little wiggle and get over to the store, 'cause Rusty's on his way to tear into Lon," Cal Travers tapped his oldest son, on the shoulder as he hefted a large burlap sack off the ground and into the back of his Chevy S-10.

"What cute little wiggle?" Deke Travers stopped long enough to scowl at his father.

"The one you been gawkin' at for the past ten minutes. The one Bertha's been talkin' to. That pretty little red-head by the Cafe." Cal's heavy grey brow shot upward.

"She's the one I was telling you about. The one that ran into me a couple of months back. I'm sure of it." Deke slanted a glance toward the Lone Star Cafe again. She did have a cute little wiggle, but darn if he'd admit it to his dad.

"The one that threw money in your face? The one you thought stole Bertha's truck."

"Yeah, that one." Deke nodded. "Guess I won't live that one down for a while. Will I?"

"Not if I can help it."

Deke glanced at his father again. "So why didn't you stop Rusty?"

"Nope, gave that job to you when I officially retired. Thirty years of herdin' you boys is long enough. It's not my fault that none of you married and divided the land, like I suggested. You're the oldest, so—."

"Can't you see I'm busy?" Deke grunted as he lifted another sack and shoved it into the back of the truck, slamming the tailgate harder than necessary. He peered over his shoulder at his dad and instantly regretted snapping at him.

Cal Travers had once been a tall, muscular, hard-as-nails cowboy but his long bout with emphysema had taken its toll. The disease had left him a bent, frail looking man who had too many coughing spells and not enough stamina to sit in a saddle all day.

"I sympathize son, but somebody's got to do it." Cal smiled thoughtfully as he rolled a cigarette paper and stuffed it in the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah," Deke muttered grabbing the short end of the cigarette and pulling it from his father's mouth with disgust.

The cigarette hit the hot pavement and rolled. Cal watched it roll, his forehead wrinkling into a frown.

"No more of those for you, old man. You know what the doc said. I won't have you smoking and toting an oxygen machine."

Deke squared his shoulders, forcing the tension from his body. Damn, he hated talking down to his father like that, but it was necessary and Deke always did what was necessary. "Guess someone should get a grip on Rusty's temper."

The responsibility of his three younger brothers, his dad and the ranch had taken a toll on Deke nerves, lately. If it wasn't Rusty playing the town bully, it was Clint high-tailin' it for the rodeo every time he turned his back. Not only that, but handling his old man could be a task. The only one he could depend on was Jake, and he felt guilty about that. Destined for better things than running a ranch, Jake should be in law school. It was time the younger two took more responsibility.

Taking long strides Deke reached the end of the boardwalk and turned the corner. A crowd built outside Tate's General Store. Somebody was putting on a good show and he could just imagine who that somebody was.

"Rusty starting something again?" Deke asked one of the men in the crowd hanging outside the door.

"Looks that way."

"Then why aren't you in there stopping him, little brother?" Deke demanded, grabbing Clint Travers by the collar and dragging him inside the store.

"I thought it was kinda interesting, Deke." Clint smiled innocently at his brother, as he held the door open with the heel of his boot and watched.

"I've had enough of you, Lon. You know Jennifer's my girl."

Rusty Travers looked like a gun-fighter about to draw with his feet spread wide and his hands at his sides. Only he had no gun, and the only advantage he had over Lon Sutton was about three inches and twenty pounds of muscle.

Lon was building an ice-cream sundae for a little girl on the one and only bar stool, looking dumbfounded at Rusty.

"Gee Rusty, I didn't mean to step on nobody's toes, but she ask me to dance. What could I do? I couldn't insult her," Lon explained, handing the sundae to the little girl, and drying his hands on a his make-shift apron.

"You could have said no, that's what you could've done." Rusty swiped his brow, and narrowed his gaze. "Now, why don't you stop stallin' and step out from behind that counter and away from Susie. I'm here to see it don't happen again."

"It won't happen again, Rusty, I promise." Lon backed himself against the counter.

Rusty pushed back his hat from his forehead with the tip of a finger, and shot a quick glance over his shoulder.

Deke frowned, knowing nothing sparked his brothers sense of humor easier than a building crowd. "I aim to see it don't. Come on, let's get this over with. I got stuff to do."

Lon's face turned beet red. Sweat trickled down his forehead and into his eyes. He didn't swipe the sweat, Deke noted, his face firming into a instant frown.

"That's right, little brother, you sure as heck do. You're gonna get your butt to work, and pronto." Deke grabbed his brother by the back of his jeans and gave him a slight toss toward the door. No easy feat considering Rusty was an inch over six foot and built like a human brick.

"Aw come on Deke," Rusty said turning around with a huge grin. "I was Just funnin' him a little."

Deke turned to Lon, who looked a little white around the gills. "Sorry Lon. It won't happen again. The Travers boys aren't bullies. School's out Rusty. And I got a cure for all your funnin'. It's called an honest days work."

"Thanks Deke." Lon tossed an hesitant glance in Rusty's direction.

"But Deke . . . ." Rusty protested as his brother continued to haul him out the door.

Deke shot him a reproving glance and Rusty clamped up.

"Finish loading the truck and meet me over at the Lone Star." Deke left without a backward glance.

"Sure thing, big brother."

Deke headed for the Lone Star Cafe, not knowing whether to laugh at his brother or stay mad a while. Although he knew he couldn't stay mad long. Rusty was harmless and everyone in town knew it. Still, one of these days he was going to bite off more than he could chew. Deke worried about Rusty, and Clint who'd ran off to the rodeo the moment a young local girl broke his heart. Clint hadn't been the same since.

He'd reason that his brothers were grown, yet not worrying would be down-right unnatural.

Deke heard familiar voices coming from the cafe. He wondered about the little lady that had been staying with Bertha. It was all over town. News like that traveled fast. He hadn't seen her leave town, so she must be there. She intrigued him. Not many women intrigued Deke these days, but that little gal he tangled with on the road was full of spit-fire.

Half a dozen farmers and ranchers gathered about the first few tables, as Deke strode inside. He got a big whiff of french fries and hamburgers sizzling on the grill, his mouth watered. After a couple of quick hellos, Deke settled into a booth. He took off his hat and glanced about. No sign of her. So why did disappointment linger.

Wiping the sweat from his brow with a kerchief, he stuck it in his back jean pocket. He'd done a day's work and it was barely past noon. Sweat trickled down his back and arms, reminding him how nice a shower was going to feel later. The loud window units

in the back of the cafe worked overtime to cool the place down and drowned the Clint Black song on the jukebox.

June was barely over and the temperature had already hit one hundred. July and August would be scorchers. Deke didn't want to think about that, though. He was already thinking along the lines of selling part of his herd to cut down expenses. He didn't want to think about the irrigation system he hadn't finished installing, either. He didn't want to think of the water shortages that would prevail once summer really kicked in. Tired of worrying over everything, he just wanted to kick back.

Through the small cut-out window at the kitchen, he spotted a young woman. It was her! Damn if his blood didn't heat up just looking at her. He barely got a glimpse of her, she was moving about so much. But it was her. Steam rose around her, creating a ghost like appearance. Wisps of dark red hair pulled back in a long braid, caught his attention. She swiped the sweat from her brow, and then big, whiskey brown eyes met his gaze. Deke's heart did a bounce in his chest. Just a glimpse, just a moment out of time. A shy, smile curled her lips as she looked away.

Not flirting, just being friendly, Deke reasoned. So why did he have such a jackass grin on his face? She was the same woman who'd knocked his headlight out on his truck months ago. The same woman that set his loins afire every time he thought about her perfectly formed breast peeking from beneath a wet t-shirt. "21 and up for grabs", dangled in his mind. Naturally at the time, his mind shouldn't have been on her anatomy, but some things went beyond a man's control.

Pretty, unmarried girls were hard to come by these days in Devil's Corner. Whether she was married remained a mystery.

That thought gave Deke a spark of an idea. Why hadn't it occurred to him before? His dad had teased them about it, over the years, but no one had taken him seriously. No one listened. Till now. Deke wrestled with the notion for a minute, deciding he'd hit on something. Something big.

Things never happened on their own, Deke decided that long ago when his brothers started wandering away from the ranch every summer. You had to give them a little push. Sometimes you had to make things happen. What better way to make things happen than a romance.

But first he needed some information, and the information highway of Devil's Corner was on her way over to his booth now. Bertha Martin, owner of the Lone Star Cafe was a big beautiful woman with a heart the size of Texas on her sleeve. She swallowed Deke with her big green eyes and welcoming smile. Tossing her salt and pepper curls away from her eyes, she headed straight towards him.

Deke glanced through the dusty plate-glass windows, as he picked a tact to follow with Bertha.

He stared out the window for a second. Dust blew down the main street like a silent ghost. You could almost hear the wind through the glass whistling. It sent a chill through him, and he knew the reason. It reminded him of the loneliness he faced every day out on the ranch.

He dashed those thoughts. This time giving the small town the once over. Devil's Corner wasn't even a town, officially. Just a community. Didn't have a mayor, a sheriff or a jail. Didn't need one. It was too small, and everyone knew everyone else's business, anyway. Especially Bertha. No secrets here, no strangers, and no crime rate.

No, he corrected himself, there was one stranger.

"Deke, did ya bring Cal into town with ya?"

Taking her pencil out from behind her ear, she placed a hand on the booth and perched a generous hip against the seat behind him.

"Yeah, he's over at the Feed & Grain. We're all here to pick up supplies."

The clatter of dishes being gathered distracted Bertha for a moment, then she turned her smile on Deke again.

"He'll be in directly. So what's new Bertha?" Deke tried not to blurt out his curiosity too quickly. Anyone with a lick of horse sense knew you had to go through a few friendly formalities before you started asking any real questions. It was only polite.

"Not much, Deke. Jonesy sold out and moved to Dallas with his kids."

"Figured that would happen."

"Talbot got elected deputy sheriff over at Sweetwater."

"I'll be damned. Don't tell Jake about it, he had his eye on that job too, you know."

"He should have gone after it. Jake would have beat Talbot any day."

Deke nodded a slight frown lining his sun-tanned face. "Jake's needed elsewhere, right now. But he'll get his day, I'll see to that. As soon as I get those other two settled down."

"Having a time keeping them tied down to the ranch Deke? Well, you know the saying, 'some was born to ranch, others weren't'."

"Don't tell my two youngest brothers that."

"I guess you done seen, I hired a new cook." Bertha nodded toward the kitchen.

"I got a glimpse. Who is she?" He wasn't about to tell Bertha he'd been staring at her backside for ten minutes or longer this morning.

"Her name's Emma Smith."

Deke's rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Surely that wasn't her real name. Bertha would swallow anything.

"Oh I know what you're thinking, it don't sound too original does it. But that's her name. Saw it on her driver's license when you sent the Sheriff out."

"Sorry 'bout that Bertha. I just thought it odd, you selling that truck after all these years."

"Gotta let go sometime, Deke. It's way past that time, you know."

"I guess."

"Anyway, she stayed with me about a month. Seems she gave you all of her first paycheck, to pay the damages on your truck."

Deke swallowed hard. He never meant to put a hardship on the little lady.

"I had no idea Bertha. I wish I could figure a way to make it up to her."

"She's as survivor. Anyway, she moved into the old Gilmore place. She's a sweet little thing. Do almost anything to repay me. Told her it wasn't necessary. She keeps to herself these days. Kinda mysterious little thing, but polite as all get out. She got off the bus a couple of months back and had no where to go. Kinda stranded I guess. Looked a might desperate so I gave her a job and a place to stay."

"What would a gal like that want with an old beat up truck?"

"Said she's got business in Sweetwater and she don't want to stand out on the highway waitin' on a bus."

"Business in Sweetwater?"

"Yeah, somethin' about a lawyer . . . I didn't pry."

"A lawyer. Divorce, maybe?"

"I don't know."

"So what happened to Andy?" Deke settled back in his seat.

"Andy took off again."

Deke glanced through the hole again, but couldn't see her. "What's her story? I mean, people don't just suddenly show up in Devil's Corner. This ain't Sweetwater or Abilene."

"That's true enough but she don't offer much information. Kinda quiet. Nervous little thing too."

"Nervous?" Deke found himself asking, curiosity aroused.

"Bites her nails right down to the quick. Always lookin' over her shoulder. I'd bet she's running away from something or somebody."

Deke's jaw tightened, seeing her as a possible abused person, or running away from a bad marriage. Poor kid. The thought of Emma Smith being abused didn't set well with him, but he pushed it from his mind. The way she'd thrown that money at him, shocked him. He hadn't expected her to do a fool thing like that. He'd picked it up, took it home and put it in a jar and never gave it another thought, till now. "So what happened to Andy?" His eyes drifted back to the kitchen. Darn it all, he couldn't keep his eyes off Emma.

Bertha chuckled. "Got the hots for some little filly over in Abilene. Same old story. Took off after her. He'll be back, though. Always comes back with his tail between his legs. Trouble is, I ain't sure I wanna hire Andy back. I mean, Emma is the best cook I've ever had. You should try the chicken fried steak, and her gravy is better than mine. Must've been born in a kitchen."

"Emma?" Deke rolled the name off his tongue as though he could taste it. Damn, it was just a name, but he liked it.

"You interested, Deke?"

"Not me. I've got enough to ride herd on. What with Cal smoking all the time, and Rusty jumping every man who even looks at his girl, and Clint with his broken heart and rodeos."

"Too bad Clint didn't grab Abby."

"Yeah, she probably wised up and took off."

"She sure loved that boy."

"Everybody knew it but Clint. Funny thing though, he's quit going over there so much any more."

"Too bad. Heard she went to stay with some of her folks for a while. So you losin' Jake too?"

"No, he's the only one I got to depend on. Makes me feel downright mean for holding him back from doing what he really wants to do. With his education he damned sure don't need to be herding cows. But you know as well as I do, it'd take a stick of dynamite to get him off the ranch when I need him so bad."

Bertha nodded sympathetically. "You got your hands full, you and Jake. But you ain't gettin' any younger Deke. It's high time you were settlin' down with a brood of your own, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask."

"One of these days, Deke Travers, you're gonna be so knee deep in love you won't know what hit you."

When Deke refused to acknowledge her keen insight, she took out her pad. "You wanna order now, or wait on the rest of 'em."

"I'll wait."

"Suit yourself. Oh hey, Steve's back, better keep an eye on Clint." Bertha turned away.

Deke's frown clouded his face. "You could have spent the rest of the day not telling me that, Bertha."

"Sorry, thought you'd wanna know."

"Thanks, and you could bring me a tall glass of tea, and some lemon."

Bertha shot a smile at him over her shoulder, "You handsome blue eyed devil, if I was ten years younger, I'd be makin' a play for you myself. You Travers boys are too good lookin' for your own good. Every one of ya, even ole Cal."

Deke grinned and relaxed, leaning his head against the back of the booth, he closed his eyes. Steve Brewer was not good news. Same age as Clint, he usually spent the better part of

summer trying to talk Clint into women, whiskey and rodeos. And not in that order.

Deke cast a quick glance toward the kitchen again. It had been a long time since a woman interested him enough to take a second look. But Emma Smith, if that was her real name, was a

stranger, and Deke was simply curious as the next fella. He knew he didn't have time for a woman. The only thing he had time for was sweat-drooling, back-breaking work, and corralling the rest of the Travers bunch. But his brothers needed settling down, and he knew one sure way to do it.

He needed to find out if the new cook was married, divorced, widowed or single. What had brought her to this one-horse town, anyway? And why did she need a lawyer? She didn't look the criminal type. No, he'd bet his last dime she wasn't a criminal, more a victim than a criminal.

He was knee deep in jumping to a few conclusions on his own when he heard the door bang open and knew his brothers and father had arrived. No one entered a room like the Travers boys.

With a round of howdy's they clamored loudly over to the corner booth and crowded in. Shoulder to shoulder with Jake, Deke eyed his two wayward brothers with a knowing look.

"Get everything loaded?"

"All set," they chorused.

"What are we gonna do about a housekeeper and cook?" Clint asked staring directly at Deke for an answer.

"I guess we'll have to put an ad in the Sweetwater paper," Deke said glumly. "I'll give 'em a call when we get back to the ranch."

His eyes traveled to the kitchen again, but he didn't say anything. Not yet.

"Boy when everybody found out ole Dill ran off with Mattie, they hooted," Rusty was saying. "Some figured it out. I guess we're just slow."

"Or blind," Jake added with a slight smile.

"Yeah, only I'm not laughing," Deke added roughly. "In case you rounders don't know it, they put us in a hellova bind."

Cal leaned forward. "I've been thinking on that son. If Clint stays home this summer, he can handle it. He's better than Dill and that's saying something. But we can't do without a cook. Not for our bunch."

"Well I can't promise—" Clint began.

Deke figured Clint would object. He considered his dad's statement and smiled.

"Not a bad idea, dad, but where do you suggest we start looking for such a 'miracle worker'?" Jake tackled the menu as though he meant to order everything on it. "I mean we're a little on the spoiled side, Mattie had been with us for over ten years. She knew how each of us liked our steaks and eggs."

"That's a fact."

"It could take a while. What are we gonna do in the meantime?" Clint asked, his brow furrowing.

"Oh I don't know, maybe we could let Dad do the light housekeeping and you do the cooking. Since you're so good over a camp-fire." Deke injected his smile broadening.

"Aw now, I ain't gonna cook. I knew this was coming. Sure I can slap a steak over a fire, and heat biscuits, but cook for our small army, forget it. We gotta find somebody and quick. I'm no dough boy."

"Somebody for what?" Bertha asked as she came toward them with a big smile aimed directly at Cal. Deke watched his father's face light up, knowing the mutual losses they suffered had brought them together. Cal liked Bertha and everybody knew it, but their romance so to speak wasn't going anywhere. What was wrong with the Travers men, none of them had a relationship going except Rusty. And that was on the skids half the time.

"We need a housekeeper and cook, Bertha. Know anyone lookin' for work?" Jake asked innocently.

"I heard about Dill and Mattie. It's about time. They been flirtin' with each other for years. I guess that sorta leaves you fellas high and dry though, don't it?" Bertha scratched her chin with the end of her pencil.

Just then the door shimmied open and in walked a bedraggled Andy Thomas. He slapped his hat on his knee to get rid of the dust. Bertha turned and waved, then nodded at Deke, "See, I told you he'd be back. And from the looks of it, he didn't fare too well with that little gal. Now he's come a grovelin'."

Deke's brow shot upward. "What ya gonna do Bertha?"

"Don't know. I can't just oust the poor little thing. But the truth is, Andy's been with me a long time. I sorta feel responsible for him too."

"What are you talkin' about Bertha?" Cal asked as though confused by the entire conversation.

"Yeah, what are you talkin' about?" Clint chimed as everyone stared at her as though she'd grown two heads.

Deke pushed Jake out of his seat and scooted out of the booth. He glanced from Andy, then toward the kitchen. He had an idea. He really wasn't sure about this Emma Smith, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Besides, gut instincts told him he owed her one. "Don't fret Bertha. Come with me, I think I can straighten this whole thing out to our mutual benefit."

"Straighten out what?" Cal asked.

"What's goin' on? What mutual benefit?" Rusty hollered.

Bertha waved them down. "Don't know, but Deke's got a better head on his shoulders than any of you other cowpokes."

The brothers stared at each other, their mouths hanging open. Cal shrugged.

Deke went directly over to Andy. "Andy, heard you left town."

"Yeah, I knew I'd be back though, and so did Bertha, didn't ya?" Andy's voice rose a notch, and a light sweat peppered his brow.

"Sure, I knew. But I done hired me a cook Andy."

"Done hired a cook? But you knew I'd be back." Andy twirled his hat in his hands nervously. "Aw man, now what am I gonna do? I don't know anything but slingin' hash, Bertha, you know that."

Deke put a hand on Bertha's shoulder, and one on Andy's. "Looks like we got a problem. But I gotta hunch I can solve this to everyone's satisfaction. Let's go in the kitchen and see if we can straighten this out."

The brothers watched them stroll toward the kitchen.

"What's Deke up to?"

"Damned if I know."

Deke pushed open the swinging doors of the kitchen. Fresh baked pies, hamburgers sizzling on the grill, only added to Deke's hunger. Putting aside the fact that he was nearly starved, he approached Emma with a smile and a nod.

But it wasn't the food that made Deke heat up like a branding iron, as his eyes slowly slid over Emma, to just below the waist. Seeing her in broad daylight had done much more than peaked his interest. For the first time in a long time his body reacted. Not that her dirty white apron, nor her baggy jeans and T-shirt gave away any secrets to her slim little figure, but it merely hinted of a woman that couldn't be hid. And Emma had an outstanding backside. Yes sir, outstanding, Deke cleared his throat and raised his glance back to the warmth of her gaze as she turned around. Too red dots decorated her cheeks. Those red dots indicated the woman had character and values. He liked Emma Smith.

The scuff on her boots belied the fact that she wasn't some city slicker. He rubbed the stubble on his chin. He had to choose his words, so as not to offend. Emma looked anything but happy that a crowd had suddenly gathered in her kitchen. He doubted from her expression that she recognized him. Although he couldn't understand why his voice hadn't given him away unless the storm had detracted from that, too.

Deke wondered if Clint would be attracted to her, if he'd thank him later. Young enough, pretty enough, and to top it off Emma could cook. He couldn't lose with this deal.

Deke eyed her more closely. Small and delicate, yet sturdy too, he decided quickly. Something about that stubborn set chin of hers told him she was from a healthy stock. A heart-shaped face stared up at him as he came to stand only inches from her.

He towered over her, but she didn't shrink. If anything, she bowed up a little more. A woman with spirit.

She continued to slap hamburgers on the grill as she watched Deke from the corner of her eye. She was a suspicious little creature.

"Emma," he tipped his hat at her as she turned to stare and looked directly into eyes that made his heart trip a little faster. Those eyes could glue a man to the floor, make him

forget what he was thinking. "I'm Deke Travers ma'am, and it seems we have a slight problem."

"Oh?" Emma's brow shot upward as she backed away from the grill, a hot spatula in one hand, and a fresh sack of buns in the other. The expression on her face was serious, not smiling. Deke noted the death grip on the spatula. He watched as she laid the buns down, wiped her hands on her apron and glanced from one to the other. Obviously she was sizing him up too. She still didn't shrink. He liked that, too.

"Yeah, you see, Andy here used to be the cook."

Emma's eyes widened as Deke directed her attention to Andy, who stood a few feet away, a little slouched, a little guilty looking. Emma obviously sized Andy up too.

"He's been here for a good ten years. He's the son, Bertha never had." Maybe he shouldn't pour it on so thick, Deke thought when he saw that frown appear on Emma's face. "He's probably not as good a cook as you, but he's family." It was the truth and it was thick as syrup.

Bertha nodded.

Emma tipped her nose a little higher and went back to the grill, flipped a hamburger with a vengeance then turned back to her audience. She folded her arms over her chest, still frowning at Deke. Still griping that spatula with a death grip. He couldn't help but wonder what had happened in her life to take things so seriously.

"So?" Emma finally spoke.

"Well, you see, a little over three months ago, he got a wild hair and took off after a gal. Now he's back, naturally wanting his job back. Bertha and Andy are friends. Friends in a small town are important."

"I see. And what's all this got to do with being in my kitchen?" Emma backed up to the counter, gripping it till her knuckles turned white.

"No ma'am." Deke moved decidedly closer. "You don't see." He wanted to wipe that worried look off Emma's face. He liked this little gal, and he didn't even know why. He knew that whatever her problems were, they were her own. She wasn't the criminal kind. He'd always prided himself in sizing up a person quick. He had to, he was the boss of a sizable ranch. "We don't do things that way in Devil's Corner. Bertha wouldn't feel right about firing a good cook. And she says you're good. Andy wouldn't feel right about taking a job away from a pretty little lady like yourself. So they are at a stalemate. But I think I can solve this."

Emma watched them all carefully, then looked at Deke suspiciously. "How's that?"

Everyone stared at him.

He twirled his hat in his hands, and rocked his boots back and forth against the wooden floor. "It just so happens—I need a cook and housekeeper. And I think you'd fit the bill nicely."

Emma's mouth flew open to obviously object, but he went on before she had the chance.

"Now wait, hear me out. I know this is kinda sudden. But we're all in a pickle. Bertha says you can cook. I believe her. It smells and looks like heaven in here."

"But you've never eaten my cooking, have you?"

"No ma'am. Never."

"And you'd hire me, on Bertha's word?"

"Well sure. Bertha don't lie, ma'am."

Bertha took one step toward her and smiled. "Deke's fine people Emma. I'll vouch for that."

Emma glanced from one to the other. Her frown dissolved into what looked like confusion. "Let me get this straight. You want me to work for you? A stranger! Just like that. Without knowing a thing about me."

"Oh I'll get you to fill out an application, if you want. But it's not necessary. Bertha's word is good enough for me. You'd be working for the 4 Bar None Ranch. It's a good size spread, with a hardy bunch of cow punchers to feed everyday. You'd do the cookin' and cleanin'. The cleaning's not much, laundry mostly. We're a hard working bunch and we'd need a couple of square meals a day." When she tossed him another suspicious look he went on. "Look, it's like this, I can't spare the time to advertize. Around here we go by word of mouth more than anything. I could put an ad in the Sweetwater paper, but it would take a while, and my boys might starve in the meantime. We just don't get that many new people around here. It's as simple as that. Now, I realize you don't know us, but Bertha can vouch for me and my brothers. She's known us all our lives. We're locals. And if you need references, I can get all you'll need."

"But-t you don't even know me. And I certainly don't know you."

"Don't need to. You gotta recommendation already. Don't know where you're from ma'am but we don't stand on formalities out here. There just isn't time."

A long silence stretched, as Deke waited for an answer.

"So what do you say?"

"What kind of pay?" Emma's brow shot up, her arms still folded, her frown still in place.

"\$500. a month with room and board." Deke wondered why it was taking her so long to answer.

Emma chewed nervously at her bottom lip for a moment. "I don't know. The money sounds good, but you're a total stranger. You might be used to doing business this quickly but I like to think things through."

She gave Deke a quick once over. And then after a wink and nod from Bertha she added, "I don't guess I have much choice do I? I'd have to pack."

"Naturally."

"You'd take me on just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Then I should tell you—" She began only to be cut short.

He raised a hand to stay her words. "No ma'am. Your life is your business. I'm looking for an cook, not a wife."

Why that word shot out of his mouth he wasn't sure, but it was out and he wasn't about to retract it.

"But you should know—."

"You married?" He blurted. He'd be up front, and hoped she'd be the same. He didn't have time to pussyfoot around. He needed an answer.

"No, but . . . ."

Great, as long as she wasn't married, that was the main thing. There was plenty of time to unravel Emma Smith. Right now he was too busy putting his plan into action.

"Then we can straighten out the details later. Right now, I just don't have the time."

He glanced out the kitchen window and swore under his breath, "Dammit, Steve's out there talking to Clint. Run out there and tell Clint he better not run off with him, will ya Andy. We gotta eat and get back. The ranch is a ways from town, and we still got a days work to do when we get back."

Andy nodded.

"Look, we'd be taking you on for as long as you'd want to stay." He heard himself say, despite his reservations. "You'd be family. Be treated as such. How does that sound? I can personally guarantee no one would lay a hand on you."

"It sounds . . . nice." Her voice suddenly softened. "But do you always hire on the spot like this?"

"No, but that's just it. I'm in a spot, so's everybody else. Besides, I got a nose for good people. Now, I'll tell you beforehand it's lonely out there. Some gals don't like all that quiet. It's understandable. And if you find you're one of those, you're free to leave, just give me some time to replace you. Is all I ask."

"There'd be no problem there," Emma murmured.

She was definitely hiding from someone. He'd find out, but right now he wasn't too anxious to add to his own problems.

"So what do you say?"

"I say, good luck Andy, and goodbye, Bertha. I guess I'm working for you—Mr.—uh, Travers, did you say?" She handed the apron to Andy who walked back into the kitchen.

"Great, problem solved, Bertha. The ranch is about thirty miles south of town. Bertha will give you directions. Come as soon as you can."

Deke left them all standing with their mouths open as he rejoined his brothers.

"So what have you been up to, big brother?" Jake cast him a suspicious glance as Deke slid into the booth again.

"I just hired us a cook and housekeeper." Deke declared his eyes going around the table stopping on Clint. He'd found a solution. The smell of Emma's cooking was making his mouth water.

He knew just how to settle Clint's roaming butt down. If Clint couldn't read the signs from Abby, then Deke would do a little matchmaking himself. Marry him off. And poor unsuspecting Emma would be the first bride on the 4 Bar None Ranch in over thirty one years.

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## Chapter Two

"What have I done," Emma muttered aloud. "Taking a job with a complete stranger, heading for God only knows where, with the truck from hell."

The old truck spit out one big puff of smoke, and died right in the middle of the road, as though on cue. She turned the ignition. Nothing happened. Steam sputtered from the hood. Emma groaned.

She glanced over at Sammie Jo. Luckily the baby had gone to sleep. Emma envied her. Fifteen month old Sammie Jo constantly surprised her with her amazing ability to adapt to almost any situation.

Lightly kissing her on the forehead, Emma slid out of the truck, and raised the hood. She jerked her hand away from the hot hood. She should have known better, she silently scolded herself. She'd looked under hoods before.

Noticing a big puddle of water beneath the engine and steam rising from its source, she grimaced. This wasn't good! Melting rubber permeated the air. Tugging the hose she spotted a huge hole and jumped away before it spat in her face. How many times had Charlie warned her about busted hoses. Good thing he wasn't around, he'd certainly have a good laugh at her expense.

Not the right time to think about Charlie, either. He was history. All cowboys were. From now on she was setting her cap for a man in a business suit with a nine to five job. If she set her cap at all. If she could juggle motherhood and a job she might not need or want a husband.

For once in her life, there was no one to reprimand her, not her father, her three brothers, nor Charlie.

If only she had checked the water before she left the gas station. How could she have been so stupid?

"Now what?" She shaded her eyes and glanced down the road. From the looks of the map Bertha had drawn it was still miles to the ranch. Too far to walk with a baby.

"Just my luck."

She glanced through the windshield at Sammie Jo. The baby needed feeding and changing. Her diaper had to be drenched, and Emma felt lucky she wasn't screaming her head off from teething.

"Serves me right," Emma said shaking her head with disgust. "after all Charlie taught me, you'd think I'd learn."

Charlie again. She should have put him entirely out of her mind by now. Should have. Still as time went on she found herself wondering if he hadn't been right all along, she couldn't handle this.

What had he said? Funny, a few months ago she could quote him word for word. "You know nothing about babies. It isn't your place. You're deliberately ruining our chances of marriage. Let her grandfather take her."

Grandfather? Sammie Jo for all general purposes didn't have a grandfather. It had been Mr. Collins himself that refused to believe Kate was having his son's baby. That's why Kate made her promise to take care of Sammie Jo. That's why she left Emma custody in her will.

That had done it. Charlie clearly wanted no part of Emma if she was going to take the baby and raise it as her own. It wasn't right, he had said. It wasn't as if the baby didn't have kinfolk. And just remembering those words brought all her determination front and center.

Joel Collins hadn't wanted that responsibility. Emma had. She loved Sammie Jo with all her heart and soul. But the elder Mr. Collins became interested after Kate died. He even wrote a letter requesting to see the baby. Fear of losing Sammie Jo had put Emma on the run.

Hot, tired, and frustrated she leaned negligently against the side of the truck, feeling the sweat trickle down her back and stick to her T-shirt. Panic threatened, draining her strength. Shaking her head, she threw her hands on her hips. She could handle this. She

slid her boot against the gravel and watched as the dust settled on top. Things could be worse.

Six months of being mother, father, and sibling to Sammie Jo had taken its toll on Emma. Six months and still she couldn't be certain of her rights. She had to find a lawyer.

In normal times Frank, her oldest brother would be around to help, but these weren't normal times. She left anything close to normal back in East Texas. For the first time in twenty-four years she was truly on her own. A year ago she might have thought it exciting. Now she knew better.

"Oh Frank, where are you now?"

She glanced at Sammie Jo again. Somehow, looking at the baby made her stronger. "Thank God you're such a good baby."

Sammie Jo leaned to one side of her car seat, sweating and sleeping, an angelic expression on her face. Emma envied her again.

Turning around she looked down the long dusty road. Six thirty and still hot enough to boil sweat. The sun exuded a bright orange haze in the lower western sky. Would her new boss be expecting his supper from her tonight? Something about the man seemed so familiar she only wished she could put her finger on it. Maybe she'd seen him in Devil's Corners before. Still, that mystery would have to wait, she had other, more immediate problems.

Would she even have a job when she reached the ranch. And then there was the slight problem of Sammie Jo. The fact that she hadn't mentioned the baby.

First things first, she sighed, rule number one by Frank Smith. "Take care of yourself first, then tend to the rest. And never go anywhere without water." He would say. Now she remembered it. God, she missed him. She missed Sam and Jesse too, but Frank had been her protector from the day she was born. Her oldest brother had protected her from their over-bearing father who refused to acknowledge he even had a daughter. Somehow none of that seemed to matter now. She was on her own and no one was going to step in and help.

She walked to the back of the truck and hauled her big jug of water to the side so she could get a drink. She gulped it, then took a dampened wipe to Sammie Jo's forehead. The baby sighed, but didn't wake.

If it weren't for the baby, she could walk the distance and get help, but she couldn't leave Sammie Jo, and she doubted she could carry her as far as she needed. Sammie Jo could walk now, but not in those sad excuse for sandals, Emma grimaced. Shoes she meant to replace last Saturday but she had to work. She bit her lower lip. When was being a mother suppose to get easier?

She opened the door to her side of the truck, allowing what little breeze there was to filter through the cab. Sitting on the sideboard, Emma occasionally glanced from the baby to the road.

She'd wait a while, and if no miracles occurred she would try to start the truck again. She believed in miracles, hopes, dreams. Even Charlie hadn't ruined that for her. Hopes and dreams had kept her going.

Minutes ticked in her head as the heat bore down on her.

Finally checking her watch she decided to give it another try. The engine made a loud noise, but nothing happened and she didn't want to run the battery down, so she turned off the ignition, hopped out of the truck and began to pace.

Second rule, don't panic. Frank would have told her in that same steady voice of his to calm down and take a long look at her troubles before she got all riled.

She couldn't sit here in the middle of nowhere and do nothing, although it seemed the better part of valor. Third rule, act.

Act?

What did a woman with a fifteen month old baby do in the middle of the Texas desert with a broken down truck? Where were the manuals for such disasters?

Emma had always coped with one problem at a time, as they arose. She felt proud she could. But life had become a nightmare since she'd left home, with new problems arising and no one to depend on to help her resolve them. She was tired of being alone, tired of struggling to make ends meet. What did she know how to do, besides cook and clean? If her father hadn't insisted that she had an obligation to fulfill to her brothers and him, she might have gone on to college. She had good enough grades. But her father was from the old school. He believed a woman's place was in the home. So that's where Emma had dutifully stayed for the past twenty-four years.

Kate's dying had changed all that. Oh dear, she didn't want to think of Kate's dying again. It had left such a profound silence within her. The dry lump in her throat swelled.

Poor Kate, dying at the tender age of twenty of kidney failure. She had risked her very life to bring Sammie Jo into the world, knowing she had severe diabetes. Knowing it could kill her. Yet she had braved it with jubilation. The doctors had warned her. She wouldn't listen. She was already in love with the prospect of being a mother. What a beautiful mother Kate had been for those precious eleven months. Kate had fought such a brave struggle to regain her strength after Sammie Jo was born. But she'd had been too weak, and her illness had caught up to her. And Emma had lost her lifelong friend, closest female cousin, and the exuberance of her own youth. A tear rolled down Emma's cheek. A tear for Kate, and a tear for Sammie Jo. Emma gulped the sigh back and swiped her cheek with the tail of her T-shirt.

She wouldn't cry. Hal T. Smith wouldn't cry. She was his daughter, and she wouldn't cry either.

She had an immediate problem to take care of. She couldn't indulge in memories right now. Tears were wasted energy, her father had told her years ago. Besides, it did no good. Kate was gone, Joel had left her and the baby, and Emma now had a baby to tend to.

It was half an hour later that Emma spotted something in the distance. At first she wasn't sure, but as it got closer she jumped, yelled and laughed.

"Thank God," she nearly shouted. And then it hit her. My God, he was the one she had run into. That silhouette stood out in the evening sun like a ghost come back to haunt her.

It was the boss on horseback. Like a knight in shining armor. She'd be rescued, or would she?

Feeling that same strange tension she had felt when she first met Deke Travers on that stormy night, she gathered herself. Her heartbeat quickened, her palms itched, and she felt all of fourteen again. She didn't want to feel fourteen, she didn't want to be

attracted to this man that might soon be an enemy, but darn it, she couldn't help herself. Something about this gorgeous cowboy made her feel things she'd never experienced before. Not even with Charlie.

Shutting the truck door, she approached the rider on his big black stallion.

"I'm so glad you happened by this way, Mr. Travers. The truck blew a hose, I think. Got too hot. I tried to restart it, it just won't budge. I should have known better." She was talking too fast, but the look on his face was stern and he didn't seem happy to see her, like she expected.

Of course he wasn't happy. She was late.

He eyed her keenly. Electric blue eyes caught her attention and she couldn't stop staring. His eyes seemed to look right through her as though he could see past all those lies to her soul.

He looked like something out of the past, in his rough-worn jeans, checkered shirt, and sweat-rimmed straw hat. Big and formidable and all cowboy. The kind her brothers had warned her to stay away from, the kind Kate had warned her to stay away from. The kind that made her heart beat a little faster.

She'd have to control that reaction, she quickly decided. He was the boss. She was the employee. Best kept that way. Especially till she found out if she still had a job. She had a mission and she was going to carry it through no matter what.

Emma continued to stare, while he dismounted and brushed past her to the hood of the truck. Emma got a quick whiff of cowhide and leather. Familiar and appealing in the same breath. He paused for a second, his head dipping to her fender, then he continued toward it.

Dear God! It was him! The man she ran into a couple of months ago on the road. She hoped she was wrong, but something in his pause by the fender told her she wasn't.

"You were right, it was a water hose," he said simply slicing it with his pocket knife and trying to fit the remainder of it back in place. A trick she'd seen her brothers do a time or two. Why hadn't she remembered it? She wasn't some helpless little ninny. Had she been thinking straight she would have remembered and been on her way by now. She kicked herself mentally.

After maneuvering about for several minutes he turned to look at her and he grinned. "Try it now."

His smile slid over her like Jello on a hot rock, melting what little reserve Emma could muster. The man could be lethal with a smile like that. Her legs felt like butter and she wasn't sure they'd hold her, but somehow she managed to walk back to the truck. She shouldn't let any man, especially this man, affect her, but darn if she could help it. He was the kind of man that women were naturally drawn to—beyond their own will. A man's man.

Emma's heart plummeted to the ground suddenly. Hadn't Charlie's memory punished her enough? She didn't want another man, ever. She didn't need to be kicked in the gut again. Once was enough.

No sir, she didn't need another man. Especially another cowboy. Charlie had loved her, or so he had said. But when she'd arrived that evening after the funeral with the baby in tow, Charlie wanted no more to do with her. He didn't want any part of a ready-made family.

She climbed back into the cab of the truck and turned the ignition. It stirred this time, but still didn't start. She no longer cared whether it did or not. She wouldn't have a job waiting at this man's ranch.

"Probably lost most of your water." He looked around the hood at her and stopped—dead in his tracks.

"I don't have enough in my canteen to do any good." She saw his face and stopped too.

Lord, it was worse than she feared. His eyes made contact with the tiny figure beside her. A muscle flickered in his cheek, as his eyes fastened on Sammie Jo for the first time. His face wore a uninvited frown. He looked from the baby to her. A question hovering in the depths of those oh so blue eyes.

"That's—a baby," his tone held accusations, coming to stand beside Emma as though he were afraid Sammie Jo might wake up and attack him.

"Y—yes, it is." She blew a tendril of hair from her face, wondering what might happen now. So he didn't like babies either, well, that figured. What more could go wrong today. Why were babies such a threat to men. Her brothers had reacted the same way when she came home with Sammie Jo. The same way Charlie had reacted. As though an alien had invaded their home. And her father had hit the roof, insisting the child be returned to his father.

She averted her eyes, unable to face his scrutiny. What could she say?

From his expression Deke wasn't pleased with her or Sammie Jo at the moment.

"Look, I can explain. This is Sammie Jo, my daughter."

"Your daughter? Oh yeah, you're right, that explains everything." His incredible blue eyes landed on her now more intently. "That explains why you didn't mention a baby in the kitchen at Bertha's."

She realized he aimed that frown straight at her, and she wasn't sure what she should do or say. He had a right to be mad. But dammit, she needed this job. Her tongue felt full of West Texas dust. She didn't need his friendship. She needed the job.

Shrugging her shoulders, and accepting the inevitable, she answered. "I tried to explain, but you insisted we could fill in the gaps later." Emma held herself steady, her gaze holding his. She wasn't about to back down no matter what. Instead she waited.

"Yeah, but a kid? Hell and damnation woman, why didn't you tell me you had a kid?"

"I tried . . . back at Bertha's. But you insisted details were unimportant. Besides, what does a kid have to do with my being able to cook and clean?" Now her hands were on her hips, challenging him, her chin lifting a degree.

He ran a hand over his face, "Yeah, I guess you did, at that. I guess I should have listened." He sighed heavily as though something was very wrong, but he didn't know what to do about it. He looked at the ground, then back at her. "So, where's the daddy?"

The last question she expected to hear, rolled from his lips. Emma's heart skipped a beat, sweat rolled down her cheek. "There is no daddy." She blurted unable to keep a hint of bitterness out of her voice. Then after seeing his questioning glance she tried to explain. "I mean, he didn't stick around."

Deke Travers shook his head, banged his fist on the old truck and muttered something under his breath.

Emma had supplied more than enough information on the subject. She felt duty bound with him staring at her as though she'd suddenly become a rattlesnake about to strike him. She hadn't lied. Exactly. That part was true. Joel had left Kate high and dry. Devastating Kate. She'd been so sure they'd be married.

So much for believing in cowboys.

"And you are the one that ran into me that night in the rain, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I honestly didn't realize it, till now. If you remember it was pouring rain that night and I never got a good look at you. Not with that flashlight staring me in the face. I wasn't about to give you my life story in the pouring rain. And you didn't give me a lot of room in that kitchen. You approached me, remember."

"That suppose to satisfy me?"

"I did pay you for the damages."

"Yeah, you did. Do you always go around throwing money in men's faces?"

"Only when I'm wrong. And I was wrong."

He nodded slowly, not taking his eyes from her. The way he studied her made her squirm.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"I'm not used to being deceived."

"I'm sorry. But you don't understand the circumstances."

He didn't say anything. Just stood there staring.

"Well—do I still have a job?" She asked not understanding why this cuter-than-sin-cowboy was so upset with her and the baby. And she hadn't exactly lied, she just hadn't told him everything. She wasn't aware she held her breath for his answer, either.

"I don't usually hire people I can't trust."

She nodded, not looking at him, but rather the toe of her uninteresting boot, "Then will you at least help me get this thing back on the road and we won't be bothering you again."

He hesitated. So long in fact that she had to look up at him. He sighed heavily again. "I still need a cook," he said with tired resignation. But the light had gone out of those blue eyes, and he stared at her with a troubled expression.

He took his hat off, displaying a thick head of rich chocolate brown hair, swept high and back. The kind of hair that makes a woman's palm itch. In fact, he made her downright uncomfortable all over. Maybe she should get out of here. Run.

He wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve. "Try the ignition again."

Emma missed his smile. He had an easy on the eyes kind of smile. Only she was sure he didn't use it enough, and didn't realize it's power.

"Okay." She gave him a quick appraisal and wished she hadn't. The man was lethal. Every movement he made with that drop dead gorgeous body put her on alert. She was sure he wasn't exuding it purposely on her account. No, his muscles hadn't flexed against the back of his shirt for her benefit. He probably didn't realize his own potential. The way he walked and carried himself blatantly said, "I'm all man."

The truck rumbled, and Emma looked up.

"We need water." He said his voice full of strangled frustration each time he looked at her.

"There's a jug in the back of the truck."

"Good. Hopefully, it will be enough."

"I filled it before we left town," Emma watched him, saw his muscles tense as she neared him again. Saw the muscle in his jaw wiggle. He was probably gritting his teeth to keep from shouting at her. The way Frank often had when she'd done something stupid. The way Charlie had when she'd told him she was leaving.

"Mr. Travers . . ." Emma called, but he ignored her and got the water and took it around front. She followed. He hadn't given her so much as a backward glance.

He ignored her, and Emma was determined not to allow him the pleasure.

"Deke, call me Deke." He said when she came to stand beside him. Her hands rested on her hips, her feet apart. "We don't stand on formalities, Emma." He cast her another glance, this time from head to foot, bold, assessing. If the truth were known it was the most blatantly sexual assessment she encountered with a man. Charlie certainly never looked at her in that manner.

Emma floundered. At that moment she wished she had worn something more attractive, but her meager wardrobe consisted of jeans, T-shirts, and one nice white shirt for dress. Working ranch girls didn't run around in pretty dresses. They dressed for work. Back home that was all she needed, a few jeans and T-shirts. Suddenly that didn't seem quite enough. Reality told her nothing would impress this cowboy though, and she had better sense than to try. But she hadn't wanted to impress anyone when she left home with Sammie Jo. Men were the furthest thing from

her mind, after Charlie dumped her.

Actually, that wasn't right either. She had dumped him. Reluctantly. She had practically forced him into instant fatherhood with her decision to keep Sammie Jo.

Maybe it wasn't fair to Charlie. Forcing him to make a choice. But it was all she could do, she had an obligation to fulfill and nothing was going to stop her.

She shook those memories away.

She shouldn't be comparing Deke Travers to Charlie. Charlie was the one man she had ever dated, ever cared much about. She'd had no time for men in her life, and nothing had changed.

Still it was hard not to compare them. But, this man was her boss. If she still had a job. A man to be reckoned with. A man who didn't like deceptions, didn't like games, and maybe even didn't like women.

Despite his anger and impatience, she couldn't stop the train of thought that engulfed her. Deke Travers made her feel warm and feminine for some reason. Not like any man she'd been around. He made her want to go out and buy the prettiest dress she could find, just to show him. But Emma was no fool, she knew she couldn't hold a man like Deke. She wouldn't know where to begin. She had no experience beguiling men.

"Y-you don't like babies?"

She had searched for something to say, to alleviate the tension between them. And what tension. She sensed he was only inches from wringing her neck, by the hard set of his jaw. So why had she blurted out her next thought?

For a moment he didn't answer. Just stared at her. Then as though her question deserved some sort of answer, he went around to Sammie Jo's window and stared down into the sleeping little face. His stern features softened momentarily and a hint of a smile played at his mouth. Just enough to let Emma know he was human, very human. The boss might bark a lot, but Emma decided he had a heart of gold. She might not know how to charm a man, but she certainly knew how to read one.

"She's a cute little heifer, it'd be hard not to like her. It's just I wasn't expecting her, is all. I guess we can accommodate you both though. I mean the house is plenty big. Just see she doesn't wander off too far. Horses, cows and babies don't usually mix too well."

"She won't be a bother. She's a wonderful baby, hardly ever cries."

"Cries?" He looked at Emma again, another frown lining his forehead. He looked as confused as the feelings he stirred. "Oh, yeah, well, that's good."

"Look. I could go back the same way I came."

"Don't tempt me Emma. I'm already regretting the offer."

Well darnation, didn't the man realize that babies cried? "I'm sorry I sprang this on you, Mr. Travers. It wasn't fair. But consider this, in my position, what would you do? A woman alone can't always play her hand out." She reconsidered her tact. After all she had surprised him with this and he was handling it.

"You obviously needed a cook, and I was going to lose my job back at Bertha's. You said so yourself. I have a child to support. I gathered you hired me out of desperation, and I took the job for the same reasons. As you can clearly see."

He didn't say a word.

"I really am a good cook, and I can handle a big house too. I've had three older brothers to pick up after most of my life. I grew up on a small ranch back in East Texas, so I'm sure I can adjust to yours."

Deke Travers turned about to look at her again. He seemed to be studying her words. "Three brothers, huh? Where were they when this jerk came along?"

Emma scrambled for an answer, knowing he meant Joel and not knowing what to say. "My brothers don't run my life. No man does."

"No man runs from responsibilities, either," Deke Travers shot her a questioning look.

Emma's heart fluttered. God, he'd be hard not to fall in love with. Such old fashioned principles struck a chord with her. Of course she had more sense than that. He couldn't be for real, he was a cowboy for God's sake. He was a lot like Frank. Thinking of Joel she added, "Then maybe he wasn't much of a man."

"Took you a while to figure that one out, I guess."

"I guess so." She lied. Let him blame her, no one was going to desecrate Kate's name while she was around. She really should set the man straight though before he got the wrong impression of her, but right now was certainly not the time. She had a broke down truck, a hot and tired baby, and a job she needed to secure before she admitted anything else. Lies or no lies.

Deke Travers might be hard not to like. He was obviously one of the good guys who wore white hats and saved ladies in distress. But the truth could wait another day. Hadn't he heard of a little white lie. A lie to protect someone you love? Some times it was necessary.

He nodded and filled the thirsty tank. "Now, wanna try it again."

Silently Emma wished they could start over. She wished she could bring back that fantastic smile to his lips. The one that heated her skin, and made her prickle. But goodness, her mind was flighty. Must be the heat. He stirred something within her, with just a look. And that had never happened before, not even with Charlie.

This time the truck started and spurted. Emma waved.

"Remember two things Emma." He came to stand just in front of her, his legs far apart, his eyes narrowing on her. "I don't like deception, in any form. For any reason. And two, I'm always fair."

Emma opened her mouth to spill her guts, but a clap of thunder to the north broke his attention.

"We better be getting to the house. Looks like a norther. Okay, little lady, follow me. We're on our way home."

Deke nodded, mounted and headed west without another word.

"Home?" Emma repeated as Sammie Jo woke up and let out a wail.

Emma reached over and gave her a quick pat on the shoulder. "It's going to be all right, Sammie Jo. You'll see. I'll tell him everything as soon as I'm sure where I stand. I've got to talk to a lawyer, darling. I've got to get this settled."

Emma forced the worries from her mind. She wished he would have given her time to say something but it didn't seem in the cards, as Frank used to say. Perhaps it was for the best. She'd tell him the truth at the first opportunity.

Home, Emma sighed to herself as she stared at the retreating horse and rider. She was so hungry for the word home she could almost taste it. Yet hard lessons had taught her that home was where you made it. And she was determined to make one.

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## Chapter Three

Sprawled in the middle of a vast prairie, the ranch conjured many images of the old west. Aside from the main house, there were two barns, a shed, and a bunkhouse. The place was bigger and much more spread out than the ranch she had been raised on. She drove around a circular gravel drive that led to the walkway of the house. A one story white frame house that spread over well manicured lawns. Its very atmosphere spelled home. White rocking chairs adorned the long veranda, and between two of the old rockers there was a checker table all set up, as if waiting for someone to arrive.

A Sheltie came up to the truck and barked loudly, wagging its tail ready to greet her and eager for a pat.

"Down Denver," Deke called as he dismounted, loosened the stirrups and handed the reins of his fine stallion to a ranch hand. Coming around the truck he gave the dog an affectionate pat.

Like all good cowboys, he took care of his animals first.

"Brush her down good, will ya Pete." He gave the animal a quick affectionate pat on the rump as he was led away.

"Sure thing boss."

Two cowboys stood negligently against the porch railing watching her. Emma smiled at them shyly. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the bunkhouse cowboys gather at the edge of the porch, some scratching their chins, others digging their boots into the gravel. They had to be the hired men, they were covered with dust, and reeked of saddle leather and cows, she noted as they moved closer.

Then an older man came through the front door of the house and stood on the edge of the steps. His smile was wide and welcoming as he raised a hand to wave at Deke. It was also very familiar, since Deke Travers wore an identical smile.

"Howdy," the older man called out to her as Emma got out of the truck and came around to the other side. He coughed harshly, then smiled again as he gathered his strength. Emma warmed to his friendliness. This man had a way about him that Emma related to. He wasn't as tall as the other men, and a little bent, but his face glowed with life.

"Howdy," Emma said just before she whirled about to get Sammie Jo out of her car seat. She felt a pack of eyes on her now, as she turned her back to them. Naturally they'd be curious. Probably surprised as Deke had been about the baby. She had trouble again with the buckle on the seat and Deke reached around her to help as though he'd done it a thousand times. One clip of the hand and Sammie Jo was free. There wasn't enough room for the three of them.

The intimacy made Emma back away. She bit a nail nervously to keep from brushing hands with Deke Travers. It was a unnecessary action, and she should have been grateful, but Deke Travers was affecting her like no man she could recall.

God, she was acting like a schoolgirl. She didn't want to be shy, she wanted to appear sophisticated and in charge of herself. She wanted to portray independence.

Deke shot her a questioning glance, but said nothing. She recognized the amused smile on his lips. He knew exactly how his nearness was affecting her.

Sammie Jo wailed loudly, shocking Emma back to the present and two more cowboys came outside and up to the truck. Brothers, Emma deduced quickly. Denver followed, wagging his tail and licking at her leg every now and then as if to welcome her too.

"Dad, boys, this is our new cook, Emma Smith." Deke said very matter-of-factly as he helped Emma with the baby. The way he moved about with her seemed so natural, it spooked Emma. Charlie certainly hadn't been this easy with the baby. In fact, she'd never been that at ease with the baby.

Emma picked Sammie Jo up and carried her on her hip, handing her shoulder bag to Deke. Deke didn't flinch. Not one cowboy laughed or smirked.

"I'm very pleased to meet you all." She said as she juggled the baby for a moment.

There was a temporary silence, and then everyone started moving at once towards them. Sammie Jo let out a loud screech as her fingers went straight to her mouth, and big huge tears pelted down her chubby little cheeks. Again a silence and then clamoring near them again.

"Hey now, come here little squirt. What's wrong with you?" Cal Travers started cooing before Emma got to the porch, his hands outstretched for the baby as though he had expected her all along.

It didn't immediately dawn on Emma to reject his offer to take Sammie Jo. He was only being kind, and obviously saying and doing all the right things, because before Emma could voice her feelings on the matter, Sammie Jo had shut up.

"This is Sammie Jo," Deke said as his two younger brothers crowded around the baby as though she were some alien being. One tried to tickle her, one cooed at her, and Sammie Jo just cried louder.

"Look at her little toes. She's like a little cherub." One of the younger cowboys smiled.

The men began gathering around the porch all smiling and making amusing little remarks about the baby. Sammie Jo stopped crying for a minute, eyed them, then burst into tears again. Cal patted her on the back, and hugged her against him.

The wranglers laughed.

"Ya'll quit and stop staring. Got no manners, Sammie Jo. Well now, it's obvious you got a tooth problem, and I know just the cure. I've had a few of those, myself," Cal was saying as he took her in the house and slammed the screen door behind him ignoring the ogling crowd. Emma's mouth fell open in surprise.

She glanced at Deke for an explanation, but he was shaking his head as though he didn't know what had gotten into his dad, either.

"I'm Rusty, the youngest and most handsome as you probably already noticed." One of the brothers stepped right up to her, and took his hat off. His smile was wide and generous, his hair was cherry brown red, and his eyes almost as blue as his brother's.

"Yeah, and modest too." Deke said good-naturedly just behind her.

Emma smiled. How could she resist such open charm, and he was right, he was handsome.

"The name's Clint, ma'am." The other brother took off his hat, gallantly and practically paved the road for her to enter the house. The brooding silent type, Emma suspicioned.

"My brothers," Deke assured her as he opened the door for her. "You'll meet all the boys later. But I'd say by the look on their faces they are all glad to see you."

"Haven't had a cook in a while?" Emma knew these cowboys saw food written all over her.

"A week or two."

"Been eating whose cooking?"

"Mine, my brothers, everyone took a hand."

Emma glanced at the men crowding around the porch with welcomes written on their faces. She smiled. "I hope I can remember all your names."

The men nodded. "Don't worry, you just call, we'll come runnin'."

Emma nodded.

But Deke's slight touch kept her ultra aware of his presence. She felt as though every movement, he made was protective. She'd never been quite so aware of a man before, of the way his body moved, the way he seemed to control everything. It felt like someone had put all her senses on alert.

Emma wasn't prepared for what she saw inside, either. The house was big and roomy, and comfortably lived in. But what astounded her most was that it was clean. Clothes were picked up, floors shined, furniture dusted, dishes put away. She'd been prepared for the worst. They hadn't had a cook or housekeeper in a week, and the house still looked clean. This said a lot for their character.

Nothing like her own home, she winced with memory. Of course at home the boys had completely depended on her to pick up. Yes, she had been the chief cook and bottle washer for longer than she cared to remember.

"Your home—" Emma began.

"Needs a better hand," Deke replied as he took her by the elbow.

It was a simple act, so why did Emma feel as though he had wrapped her in his arms. She felt herself flush. She realized with a rush she was reacting to the boss too easily. He was much too good looking, and his protectiveness could make a girl swoon. She'd have to watch herself.

"I was going to say—it is beautiful." Emma finished. She wondered if she sounded dignified. She had always wanted to be a dignified woman. But seemed like when you tried the hardest, it just didn't come out natural.

Deke glanced at her and turned his head to the side as though he didn't quite believe her.

"I mean, it's lovely. Really. It's so homey."

"Lived in is more like it. I guess Mattie did a right fair job of it." Someone said just behind her.

"Mattie?" Emma repeated.

"Our old housekeeper. She'd been with us for over ten years. Hell she ran this place with an iron thumb." Rusty furnished the information with a chuckle. "Oh, excuse the language, ma'am."

Emma glanced at him and smiled. "Been?" She liked this handsome young man, he reminded her of her youngest brother, Sam just a little. Only Sam wasn't quite as handsome nor a ladies man. No, Sam was just an honest, hard-working cowboy.

"Yeah, she up and married the best wrangler we had. And not a one of us knew what was goin' on under our noses." Rusty explained coming to stand just beside her.

Rusty was cute, not quite as mature as the others, but cute. He had a lean, tall body, with lots of hair and a pleasing personality. His blue eyes sparkled with humor and Emma instantly liked him. In fact, it was hard to find anything wrong with the Travers men.

Clint set her suitcase down in the small hallway that led to the rest of the house. He wasn't as tall as the others, but just as lean, only his hair was almost black and his eyes a very dark blue. A lady killer, Emma deduced. Just from the way he walked, she decided he had to be a rodeo man. Something about a man that rides a bronc, makes his legs bow just a bit.

As Deke headed her for the kitchen, Emma got a quick glimpse of a big brown, well worn leather couch, a couple of oversized recliners, and a huge loomed rug in front of the stone fireplace. There were trophies on the mantle, pictures, and an old eight day clock.

"Someone an athlete in the family?" she asked.

"Clint, he's a rodeo bull rider."

Emma nodded, there it was. She'd guessed as much.

The kitchen was ultra modern with all the conveniences a woman could ask for. It surprised Emma. Out in the middle of nowhere with all the conveniences of city life. The refrigerator was a huge commercial size, the stove had two built-in ovens, the dishwasher was oversized. Everything was big and beautiful. There were long counters to work from and lots of cabinet space. She wondered if they had built this kitchen themselves. No one had that kind of space unless they made it.

Cal Travers had already gotten a bowl of ice-cream for Sammie Jo and was feeding her as Emma approached the huge table just the other side of the kitchen.

"Yes sirree, nothing like a bowl of ice-cream for those sore chompers, huh, Sammie Jo? Papa Cal knows, don't he?" Cal was saying as he looked up at Emma with interest. "She's a right friendly little tyke, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. But I've never seen her go to a stranger so easily."

Sammie Jo looked as though she couldn't be happier. Emma watched their interchange with fascination. After all, Sammie Jo didn't usually take to strangers. At her age she was usually leery of anyone or anything new, unless curiosity got the best of her. Emma imagined her teeth hurt so bad she just didn't care. Either that or the senior Mr. Travers made an immediate impression on her.

The old man looked frail, but the sparkle of life was in those nearly transparent blue eyes. A man to fall in love with. A man very unlike her own father. Cal Travers emitted a warmth Emma had seldom been exposed to. She liked him. He made her feel at home.

"You must have a way with children, Mr. Travers."

"Call me Cal. The Mr. makes me feel old. Never thought much about it, but the Mrs. used to look just as surprised as you do. Kids, calves, puppies, all the same. All they need is love, and understanding. My wife taught me that, a long time ago. I just never told her," Cal said whimsically.

"She must be a wonderful lady," Emma said.

"Was wonderful, yes, the best." Cal's voice drifted off. His eyes taking on memories.

Emma felt his sorrow almost as if it were her own, it seemed so profound, as though it might have happened yesterday. These people astounded her. She felt as though she had found an identical family to her own so very far from home. Except her family had never been this much like a real family. No, they were nothing alike. She just got a good dose of lonesome in her soul.

"Well Emma, welcome to your new home and family," Deke said turning her loose and pulling out a chair for her. He sat down on the other side of the table and eyed her for a moment before speaking again.

"I want you to know we don't expect much from you. Just a couple of decent meals a day and a little laundry would be nice. We aren't the best at that," Deke was saying. "Dad here, can't tell the reds from the whites."

"Now don't go telling her about the red thermal. God, that was embarrassing," Cal clipped.

Clint smiled. "Embarrassing for all of us, even though it was Dad that goofed up."

"Don't pay them any attention. I just hate doing laundry."

Emma chuckled. "Most men do. And that sounds reasonable. What time does everyone get up around here?"

"We work dawn to dusk."

"So fivish be okay?"

"Great."

Emma smiled and nodded, her eyes going around the room.

Yes, it looked as though things might work out here. This family wasn't a lot different than her own by size. She could handle the house easily enough. They weren't slobs.

Sammie Jo had just finished the ice-cream when she fell asleep in Cal's arms. Her little face was almost in a smile now, no sign of tears. Emma rushed to take her, but the old man was having none of that.

"Oh, I'll take her."

"She needs to go to bed. Poor little thing is tuckered, and in this heat there's no wonder. Look at those red cheeks. That ice-cream was just the trick, she wouldn't have been able to eat a regular supper anyhow. I hope you don't mind. I just felt so sorry for her is all."

"No, no I don't mind at all. I'm glad you thought of it. I have a playpen for her to sleep in." Emma motioned toward the truck.

No sooner had she said it, than Rusty was bringing it inside, "Where should I put it?" He asked.

"In her room. Mattie's old room," Deke added as he shook his head. "Come on down the hall, Emma, we'll show you your room and you can get her settled down." Deke was insisting, again taking her elbow and guiding her.

She wished he wouldn't do that, it made her feel funny and very aware of the man. She didn't want to be aware of the boss. Strange how that mere touch set off such sparks. She was probably just tired and over-reacting to his kindness. Emma wasn't the kind to flirt. She'd been around men all her life, but not intimately, and this feeling was shocking her into a new awareness. Maybe she ought to concentrate on Charlie.

Her brothers had teased her about not wanting to date. So much so, she finally began taking Charlie's flirtation seriously. Charlie had been their neighbor for years. Her father had told her repeatedly she'd never find a man of her own in jeans and T-shirts. She should be wearing dresses, he had said with a firm shake to his head. But he'd never spare a dime for such a luxury. And she had Charlie, with or without a dress. But she didn't want to think about that now. She wasn't here for a man.

The room they offered her had a beautiful canopy bed in the middle. Another thing she hadn't expected. It was decorated with delicate white lace and yellow flowers. An antique dresser matched the bed, and a trunk full of blankets propped at the foot. An old fashioned tapestry lamp adorned the dresser.

Nothing about this ranch house looked dreary or old, or dirty, Emma thought. It would be a real pleasure taking care of a place like this. Someday her and Sammie Jo would have a place like this—a real home. She peeked out the window and saw a few ranch hands gathering about. There was a half a dozen or more so Emma figured this had to be a good size spread.

"Shouldn't I be starting supper?" she asked when no one seemed in too big a hurry to leave.

"Not tonight. Tonight is on us. Sort of a welcome. Rusty's got the fire going out back, we'll have some big steaks and baked potatoes in no time. Don't worry, after tonight, that chore will be yours. So enjoy it while you can. Just remember most of the men are meat and potato kind of men. If you can fix biscuits all the better." Deke winked. "Now, this will be your room Emma. We hope you like it here and will consider it your home. Make yourself at home. The bath's down the hall, and I've taken the liberty of putting a sign on the door when it's occupied, so we'll all know you're in there. I'm afraid we've only got one bath, these old houses were never equipped with

more than one, I'm afraid. But I'm sure we can make allowances. Better find Jake and let him know about all this, too, I guess."

"Jake?"

"Our other brother," Clint added with a smile. "He'll be in directly. He's the serious one. The strong silent type. Most of the women fall for him right away."

"Most of 'em." Rusty winked at her.

"Too bad he don't have a roving eye," Clint quipped.

"Oh. I never asked but will I be cooking for the boys in the bunkhouse too?"

"Yes ma'am. But if you get in a strap, Little Jim will help you out. He's the trail cook. Most of the time. Clint's a right fair hand at it too, when he's around. So you will have plenty of help if you need it," Cal Travers added. "And they all eat in the kitchen. They all use the back door. And they all drink a lot of coffee. We don't allow liquor on the job, so you don't have to worry about that from our men."

"Just like home."

"Home? Where you from, Emma?" Rusty asked innocently as he went about setting the playpen up and Cal laid the baby down. Sammie Jo sighed and rolled to one side, sound asleep. Deke had pulled out a small blanket from her bag and covered her with it. Clint put her suitcase in the closet. Emma stood around looking silly.

"I'm from around Greenville. East Texas. I grew up on a spread not half this size. I have three brothers. My mother died when I was three. So I guess I'll feel right at home, here."

Emma was overcome with how easily these men adapted to having a woman and baby around. Nothing seemed to shock them. At least they appeared to adapt.

"If there's anything you need, just ask. Any of the boys around here will be glad to fetch it for you or Sammie Jo. All our men are trustworthy and been with us for years. Not a sorry one of the bunch. Deke's a right good judge of character, and if he says someone's okay, you can bet on it," Cal explained.

Emma glanced up at Deke and felt a blush creeping up her cheeks. Had he said she was okay? Even with the lies? Something about him made her feel things she hadn't felt since she was a kid with a crush on Billy Daniels, in the fourth grade. But that was silly too. She wasn't here to romance the boss, she was the cook!

Strange, now that she thought on it, her feelings for Charlie weren't on the same level. Charlie had been around for so long, a good friend of Jesse's, and they had started going to dances together. Charlie hadn't been the romantic type. He just took her, assuming she was going since she had her dress shirt on. He never told her he loved her in so many words, he expected her to assume it. She had. Up until Kate died. That changed everything. But she didn't blame Kate.

Surely she'd get over this infatuation with the new boss. Probably as soon as he produced his wife.

"I don't mean to be noisy, but where are the women on this ranch?" Emma asked.

"Women?" They chorused as though they hadn't heard the word in a long time.

"Yes, wives, sisters."

"Well gee, I never thought of it as strange, but I guess another woman might. Mom died a few years after Rusty was born. There are no sisters. There aren't any wives at the 4 Bar None." Clint explained. "Least ways, not yet."

"I see. Well, we have a lot in common. There weren't a lot of women around where I was raised either. Just my cousin, Kate."

She didn't want to think about Kate right now. Her emotions were still raw.

Emma glanced at Deke's face and felt her heartbeat quicken. The look he gave her said he'd guessed how much Kate had meant to her. How could he know.

Why did he always look at her like that. As though he could see right through her. Like he liked what he saw, or something. She wasn't used to it. He was staring at her with that quizzical expression. She suddenly wished they were all married. She knew one thing for certain—she was in big trouble.

They left her alone, and Emma bounced on the feather bed. It was so soft, she'd never slept on a bed like this before. She smelled the sheets. They smelled of sunshine and she grinned. She twirled about her room happily.

"What a nice family, and beautiful home. Oh Sammie Jo we are finally off to a good start."

Sammie Jo let out a little whimper, rolled over and closed her eyes again.

Emma unpacked and set her clothes out for her and the baby for the next day. She sighed heavily when she realized she had nothing beautiful to unpack. Maybe someday, she'd have pretty dresses, like her Dad said she needed. If someday ever came.

She twirled around the room, and suddenly the door swung open and Deke nearly barged right into her. She reached for his arms to steady her, and realized with one slight squeeze she was holding on to a real man. A man that wasn't her father, or her brother or Charlie. A man that looked at her with probing eyes and a sexy smile. Every nerve in her body sprang to awareness. She temporarily felt paralyzed to the spot.

"I'm sorry." She stepped away finally, letting her hands fall to her sides. God, he must have thought she was pitiful.

"Yeah, uh, I brought you some linens for your bed and bath. Anything else you need—for the baby or such?" he asked looking down into her wide eyes.

"No—thank you." She managed to sound relatively normal.

"Okay, supper will be ready in about an hour. So come on down when you're ready."

"Thanks, I will."

His eyes traveled about the room, and stopped at the closet where she had hung her T-shirts and jeans. He made no comment but he must have noticed there were no fancy dresses.

"We're all glad you're here, Emma," he said in a soft voice.

"Thanks," Emma nodded and backed towards the bed.

Then he was gone and Emma felt every kind of fool. She was sexually attracted to her boss! Not only was he the sexiest thing in jeans she'd ever seen, but he was super kind and gentle with her and the baby. "Never love a cowboy," Kate's advice echoed in her head.

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## Chapter Four

The backyard barbecue was turning into an all out party, Deke mused as he watched Emma being introduced to the bunkhouse men. Clint manned the steaks on the open pit, Rusty grabbed his guitar every now and then. As usual he was the life of the party. The boys from the bunkhouse seemed to take right to Emma, as though she weren't a stranger at all.

"Son, you sure know how to pick 'em," Cal said just behind him. "I think Emma's gonna work out real fine."

Deke watched her with quiet satisfaction. Yes siree, Emma was a natural here on the ranch. He liked the way she wore her jeans, soft and faded, and comfortable, not skin tight and askin' for trouble. Her crisp white blouse was practical too. Emma was no show off, but she didn't have to be. She had the thickest long brown hair that hung just past her shoulders, and big whiskey colored eyes that a man could get lost in. She smiled a lot, joined into the conversations easily. A good choice.

Now all he had to do was sit back and wait till his wayward brother Clint decided to take the bait. He watched them with curious intent.

Sammie Jo had been the life of the party for the first couple of hours, but her short nap when they arrived hadn't been enough and she gave out quickly. Not surprising at all considering most the boys had hoisted her piggy-back here and there and fed her a double dose of home-made peach ice-cream. It was a wonder the kid wasn't sick.

Deke had taken her himself and laid her in the playpen, covering her as she sighed in blissful sleep. There was something about babies that just naturally melted a cowboy's heart. Besides, she was a cute little thing, the kind of kid a man could get hooked on easily. "Funny," Deke stared at her a long time. "You don't look much like your mama."

The baby had blond hair that tended to curl in all sorts of places, and big blue eyes that innocently captured the heart.

During his absence someone produced a fiddle and a guitar and Emma was being shuffled from one man to another as Deke again took to the sidelines. He leaned negligently against the trunk of an elm and watched as Rusty took the first dance with Emma. She went into Rusty arms and Deke felt something in his gut tighten. Shrugging it off as heartburn, he continued to watch. Emma was a fair dancer and Rusty seemed almost interested, but Deke wasn't sure. Rusty was as loyal as his dog, Denver. It was more than obvious that Rusty was too young, or Emma was older than she looked. He hadn't bothered with those details, and didn't figure it would really matter.

When Clint grabbed her for a dance a few minutes later, Deke was almost certain he saw a little interest in Emma's eyes, but who could tell with a woman. Funny how heartburn seemed to attack him at such times.

Emma was no flirt, he acknowledged, and if he wasn't mistaken she was doing everything to dissuade flirtations. He liked that. She'd be a challenge, and if there was one thing Clint liked, it was a challenge.

Perhaps she had a syndrome about being the cook. Maybe she thought she wasn't good enough. Or maybe she wasn't interested. He hadn't considered how she might feel about them. Talk about overlooking a few things. Well, he'd do his best. Whatever it took. The Travers boys were going to settle down whether they wanted to or not, Deke decided.

"You don't dance?" Emma finally made her way around the group of men and stared through the darkness of trees at him.

"Not any of that fast stuff," Deke glanced at the fiddler and smiled. And he certainly didn't want to dance a slow dance with Emma. He wasn't baiting his own hook. He was too aware of her to pull that sweet little body of Emma's against his own. He knew better. He'd dealt with temptation before, and it wasn't one of his strong points. Instead he nodded in the direction of a tall man approaching them.

"I think it's time you met my other brother. Emma this is Jake, the serious one of the bunch." Deke almost guided Emma into Jake's arms.

Now why had he done that? Emma wasn't for Jake, he reminded himself a little too late. He practically pushed her into Jake's arms. And Jake didn't seem to mind a bit. Not if that big grin on his face was any sign.

"Emma," Jake tipped his hat, smiled and took her into his arms more fully. "Hank rode out to tell me we had company, but he didn't tell me she was a knockout in blue-jeans."

Deke firmed his lips together. Since when did his oldest brother ever take to flirting? Jake was the serious type, not a flirt. So why didn't he beg off the dancing? Why had he taken Emma in his arms as though she belonged there and waltzed her around the big backyard patio as though they were made for each other? This wasn't what Deke had planned. He'd better inform Jake of what was going on before Jake spoiled everything.

He watched them dance several dances, and saw Jake's hand tighten around her a bit as he twirled her into his arms and out again. He saw Emma smile at Jake and something like a sledge hammer hit Deke square in the head.

This wasn't supposed to happen. She wasn't supposed to fall for Jake. She wasn't for him! It was wrong, all wrong, and all his fault.

He had to stop this before it went too far. Before Emma set her sights for Jake. Didn't she know he was the wrong brother?

Without thinking, Deke waited till Jake twirled Emma about one more time, and grabbed her hand from Jake's. Deke forgot he couldn't dance this kind of dance and took control. He made a few mock moves and then suddenly, the fiddler slowed the music and Emma was in his arms. All of her!

Good Lord, the woman was soft and smelled so sweet like one of those flowers his mother used to plant near the house. She was smiling at him just like she smiled at Jake. He had to shake himself from enjoying just being this close to the woman and start thinking of how he could redirect her interest.

"Jake's a good dancer," Deke acknowledged. God, he shouldn't have said Jake, he meant Clint. What was wrong with him?

"You're not so bad yourself." She smiled.

"But Clint is the best," Deke needed to include his younger brother in the conversation.

"Yes, he's very good too," She smiled and glanced at the tall cowboy who was watching them with interest.

"It's hard to believe none of you Travers men are married," she chuckled softly into the night air.

He liked the sound of her voice, and when she chuckled it tickled his toes. A cowboy's toes shouldn't tickle, he warned himself and straightened the foolish grin on his face. But what was he getting so shook up about, she was just being friendly.

"Jake was married a while."

"Really, what happened. I mean—didn't it work out?" Emma was trying to be polite.

"No it didn't. Jake has the habit of falling for women that aren't his type. He's a very quiet man, studious in fact. He married a young gal that hadn't sewn all her oats yet."

"How terrible for Jake," Emma murmured as her eyes drifted to the tall cowboy in the shadows now.

"Maybe, maybe not. It put his head on straight, no doubt about that."

"And you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, why haven't you married? Aren't you the oldest?" Emma asked then instantly covered her mouth. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be so nosy."

"That's alright Emma, you're practically family now. It's no secret I'm no ladies man. Besides, I don't have time for a family of my own. I've got a ranch to run, and a couple of fun-loving brothers to corral, not to mention my dad." Deke returned evenly.

"I don't understand, your dad's fun loving, too?" Emma said, almost stopping.

Deke nearly stumbled into her, causing their bodies to join in the most interesting and terrifying places. Deke drew in a breath as her breast slammed against him, and her hips sank near his thigh.

God, she was soft as a feather pillow, and twice as warm. He had an urge to keep her just that way, but soon realized the stupidity of that kind of thinking.

"Sorry," he corrected, pulling her away from him and holding her more at a distance. "No, my father's been ill now for a while. He has emphysema and doesn't have the stamina he used to. He won't quit the damned cigarettes, excuse my language."

Emma smiled sadly and glanced at Cal Travers in the distance. He was stirring the beans on the open pit as Clint flipped another steak.

"I'm sorry for that. He's a very nice man."

"Yeah," Deke said quietly with a soft sigh, only this time his expression held weariness. "I'd just like to keep him around a lot longer."

"Is he on medication?" Emma asked.

"Sure. But a lot of good that will do if he doesn't stop smoking."

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The next morning Emma listened for sounds in the house and heard nothing. Good, they weren't up yet. She sighed with contentment. For the past six months she had gotten up at the crack of dawn with Sammie Jo and had breakfast. A few cherished moments of relaxation with her favorite person.

"Mama," Sammie Jo cried and stretched her chubby little arms out to Emma.

"That's right darling, I am. And things are going to change for us now, Sammie Jo, for the better. You'll see."

Running a brush through her thick red hair, Emma pulled it back into a high ponytail. She grimaced as she glanced in the mirror to examine herself. Homely her dad had called her, average, she had decided long ago, even though her brothers called her a looker. She had no illusions of glamour. The freckles of youth had faded, but she hadn't filled out much over the years. Especially her bust. Still, she was grateful. Emma had inherited her mother's natural talent for taking things in her stride, finding a practical outlook safer.

Despite everything, she had grown up without too many scars and she was probably all the better for them. So what if her father never appreciated or acted like he loved her. So what if he'd treated her like a boy instead of a girl. She was none the worse for wear. She had a life now, a baby to love, that was enough. She didn't need a man. Look what it got Kate!

Throwing shorts and a T-shirt on Sammie Jo, she donned a pair of faded jeans and T-shirt for herself and rushed downstairs with the baby on her hip.

Luckily the Travers men had set everything up for her last night so she wouldn't have any trouble this morning. They had shown her where to find everything and offered to run into Sweetwater if she found she needed anything.

Emma hummed a familiar country tune to the baby while she worked, it seemed to soothe Sammie Jo as she played with her cup of orange juice.

"Cack-cack!" Sammie Jo cried when Emma stopped humming long enough to lift the big iron skillet from the bottom drawer. It was heavy and it took both hands to lift it. She placed it on the stove and turned the fire on under it. After adjusting the flame she returned to the long block of home-made sausage she had placed on the cutting board.

"Cack-cack!" Sammie Jo demanded louder.

Emma glanced at her and shook her head, "No cack-cack before breakfast, darling. You know the rules. We're going to have sausage and eggs and biscuits this morning. Besides, you love biscuits, remember."

"Cack-cack," Sammie Jo kept insisting as she hammered her cup on the tray, a definite frown lining her forehead.

"Now—now darling, we must be quiet so Mommy can work," Emma said and shook her head while humming another tune, hoping to settle her down so she didn't make so much noise. After meeting the men on the ranch last night she was sure no one was used to having a strange female around, much less a child. She wanted to extend every courtesy. Even though everyone went out of their way to make her as comfortable as possible, it was obvious the two of them were a novelty.

Sammie Jo refused to cooperate with Emma's plans this morning and immediately tried standing up in the high chair. A trick she had been developing lately much to Emma's chagrin. As if she didn't have enough to contend with.

"Sit down, darling, you'll fall."

Emma had her hands full with chopping the sausage as Sammie Jo stretched for the glass jar of crackers that she had sampled the night before on the counter.

"Sammie Jo—no!" Emma cried thrusting a handful of sausage to the skillet and stretching to catch the baby all at the same time. A feat that was near impossible from where she stood.

Emma was in a weird position when the high chair began to tip and only a firm big hand saved Sammie Jo from sailing to the floor. Emma didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She must have looked like a bad juggler as she glanced up in time to see Deke Travers holding the highchair. A big, warm hand, that completely covered hers, sent a riot of sensations through Emma.

How could she have sensations jolting through her when she was trying to save her baby?

She felt the grease on her hands almost melt from the contact. Embarrassment flooded her and she moved her hand away. She had to get over this silly reaction to the

man. He was her boss, for heaven's sake, and had no personal interest in her whatsoever. He probably found her amusing, if anything.

Flustered that he had seen her incompetence, Emma grabbed the baby from the high chair and cradled her protectively against her chest as she removed a carton of eggs from the refrigerator. Sammie Jo's mouth was wet and managed to get Emma wet in the process. She glanced down and shrieked. Orange juice all over her clean white T-shirt. Aiming at composure she was far from feeling, she put Sammie Jo on the floor.

"Thank you, Mr. Travers." Silently she muttered a prayer. She didn't know why her heart raced except that everything Sammie Jo did seemed to cause havoc, and she didn't know how to stop or prevent it.

"Emma we aren't going to get along if you keep calling me Mr. The name's Deke and I'd appreciate it if you'd call me that, in the future. Mr. is much too formal. That coffee smells good enough to eat. Where'd you learn to make it?"

"My father taught me very early on to make a good pot of coffee. He said a woman could get by making biscuits half-way, but the coffee better be good."

Sammie Jo glanced at Deke then Emma then she let out a loud wail.

Emma sighed heavily, her face turning into an immediate frown. Deke's expression turned to mush the minute the baby began crying. The same hand that had covered Emma's now stretched to ruffle Sammie Jo's curls. "This highchair is pretty worn out, maybe you ought to consider replacing it."

"Oh yes—I've been meaning to. It's on the list."

"List?"

"Of improvements."

He still looked confused so she babbled on. "Oh, there are so many things I need to take care of. Lately I've been working so much, I simply haven't had the time to see to it. I'm not a shopper. You must think me a horrible mother," Emma said turning away from his probing gaze. She found Deke Travers just a little too disconcerting this early in the morning. His fresh scrubbed and cleaned-shaven appearance did things to her equilibrium that she didn't want to think about. And the fact that he was just now buttoning his shirt had her floundering.

"Emma would you relax. You aren't on trial here. As a matter of fact, I think you're a very nice mother. I couldn't help but overhear you reading to her last night. My mother used to read to me. I really liked that."

"I read to her every night." Emma flipped a sausage. "It seems to help her get to sleep."

He nodded. "At first, when I realized what you were doing, I had to peek in. Been a long time since anyone around here did much reading, except the cattleman's journal. But one look on her little face, and I understood. She's enraptured by your voice."

"Understood what?"

"That only a loving mother would read to a child that couldn't understand for an hour and a half."

"You listened—that long?" Emma's mouth flew open.

"No, not exactly." Deke shifted uncomfortably. "I hope you don't think I was snooping but I went out to check on a couple of things and when I came back you were both still wrapped up in that rocker. She was asleep, like a little angel, and you were smiling at her as you read the same story, must have been three times."

"It was her favorite and she was teething. I read to soothe her."

"Don't apologize. I thought it was kinda sweet. Did your mother read to you when you were little?"

"I don't remember. I was too young. Oh but you're wrong about not understanding. Doctors encourage reading even before they are born. They might not understand all the words, but it's the communications," Emma recited Kate's doctor's speech nearly word for word. The endless trips to the doctor with Kate had been a real eye opener for Emma. Little did she know how much she would need the information for herself.

"I'd say you communicate very nicely, Emma. There's something kinda nice about having a woman and a baby in the house."

Their eyes met for only a moment then Deke glanced away and cleared his throat. "Well, I'll have one of the boys look out in the old shed and see if we can find something better than this chair. We must have had some kind of contraption for eating when we were kids."

"Oh please don't bother . . . ."

"It's no bother." His eyes met hers for a long moment, then he cleared his throat again and looked away. "Don't act like I'm doing you such a favor all the time. I needed a cook. You needed a job. Your gratitude is not what I'm after."

Sausage sizzled in the big iron skillet on the stove and Deke didn't waste any time in moving towards it, flipping it with the spatula she had lain down.

"I thought I'd fix sausage and eggs this morning, since you have an abundance of both and you told me last night the boys always liked them." Emma tried to sound calm, when every nerve in her body seemed to scream at her. God, he was being nice. And she was completely overreacting. He was only her boss, not a vampire about to scoop down upon her neck and bite her. Although the very thought sent a wave of goose-bumps over her skin. She had to quit reacting. She wasn't in the market, she reminded herself, and Deke Travers certainly had no personal interest in her.

"That's a good choice. Smells great. I didn't expect you to be up so early, especially since you have a baby to tend to." Deke watched her carefully.

"That's part of the reason I am up. Sammie Jo goes to bed early but she also gets up early too. I didn't want her waking everyone in the house. She's learning to talk and sometimes it comes out rather high pitched."

Deke moved to get his hat off the back porch table. "She's a cute little critter. Don't worry so much about her." Deke glanced down at the tyke on the floor then at her. "Look. I'm sorry if I snapped at you back on the road yesterday. I guess it's my fault you're so jumpy about her, but not to worry, we all like Sammie Jo and if you need a little extra time to take care of her, we'll certainly understand. The baby just took me by surprise is all. But we like kids, all of us, we just haven't had any since Rusty was a baby. And it looks like you're going to work out just fine. You certainly know your way around a kitchen. So quit worrying. You aren't on trial here. You should have guessed from the little barbecue last night, everyone here likes you. The boys will appreciate a good breakfast before they start tackling the herd this morning. And that coffee will have them running in here any minute. I've been stuck with that job for the past week, myself. And from the looks on their faces not doing too well, either."

"I'm sorry I'm so uptight. It's just been hard these past few months. And I should have told you about Sammie Jo to begin with. In fact I need to tell you ..."

"It'll hold Emma, we'll talk later." He winked.

He was reassuring her, and it took her by surprise. She hadn't expected such understanding, considering she'd practically lied to the man about being Sammie Jo's mother. Of course he didn't know everything yet. And hopefully by the time he did, it wouldn't matter. She'd be gone by then. Although why that thought didn't make her feel better she wasn't sure. "It should be ready soon." She tried to smile. "Do you want to eat now or later?"

Lying didn't set well with Emma. She had the urge to make him sit down and explain the whole thing to him.

If he fired her, what would she do? Where would she go from here? No, for now she'd better just hold her tongue and wait.

Sammie Jo gurgled and Deke winked down at her. "Later. The boys will probably be here as soon as the smell reaches the bunkhouse. Most of them are heavy coffee drinkers, up at the crack of dawn. Comes from the long hours in the saddle I guess."

"And your brothers?"

Deke frowned. "They'll drift in, but don't you worry about them. If they aren't here with the rest of the men, then don't cater to them and fix them a hot breakfast. Jake will be here in a few minutes, but Rusty and Clint sleep in till the last minute. Don't coddle 'em. You start that and you'll be doing it from here on out."

"Oh I won't. I think I mentioned I had brothers too. And I certainly never coddled them." Emma chuckled. "As soon as my old man turned me loose with the spatula I told my brothers if they weren't there when it was ready, they were too late. And it worked."

"Sounds like you know what you're doing. Well, I'll be back soon, I've got a sick cow to check on and then I'll be in." Deke informed her, giving Sammie Jo another glance. "If you need anything Dad's always around the place somewhere."

"What's wrong with her?" Emma glanced up from the stove.

"Who?"

"The sick cow?" she asked not able to keep her concern out of her voice.

"Colic I expect." Her question seemed to take him by surprise. "Several ranchers in the area have complained with the same thing. I think we got a bad load of grain last month. It shouldn't happen again though, I've ordered my grain from a different supplier. Ordinarily we'd have our own grain, but we've had drought problems this year and there simply wasn't enough to go around. If we'd a got that irrigation system in we'd be set, but that's neither here nor there."

"Have you called the vet?" Emma asked.

"Yeah, he'll be out shortly, and I'll probably be close to the house most of the day." He gave her a slight smile, his eyes traveling lazily over her. The smile suddenly faded to a slight frown. "Where'd you say you were from?"

"Up around Greenville. My dad's got a small spread. Nothing to compare to this."

"I can't imagine you leaving there. That's real pretty country. Wasn't he willing to lend a hand with the kid?"

Emma turned beet red. How could she explain her father to anyone. She didn't understand him herself. "My father doesn't like children, especially girls."

She wanted to slap her hand over her mouth as soon as she'd said that, but it was too late, and Deke had heard every word of it, from the looks of his frown. His gaze traveled

over her again and he nodded. "I see. Well, I'll just take a cup of coffee with me out to the barn."

"All right, see you later, then." Emma glanced down at herself and wondered what the frown was all about. Perhaps he expected her to wear a dress. She hadn't given her wardrobe a second thought.

But from the looks of things, Deke had. He shot her a long glance over his shoulder again then headed out the back door.

She had no time to wonder when Sammie Jo spilled her orange juice, Emma quickly wiped it from the floor and set her in the highchair once more, this time locking and tightening the belt. Once she was satisfied, she tipped Sammie Jo's chin upward and looked into her beautiful eyes. "Now you sit still while I get breakfast ready young lady. I have lots of work to do this morning, and we want to make a good impression here, don't we?"

Sammie Jo grabbed her juice, and banged the edge of it against the highchair, "Cack-cack."

"Oh, okay, maybe just one." Emma smiled and handed her a cracker assured that it would keep her satisfied all of two seconds. She was learning.

A couple of the men from the bunkhouse wandered in from the back door and began helping themselves to the coffee.

"Miss Emma, Sammie Jo," Sandy, the cow boss acknowledged with a big smile on his face.

"We couldn't help ourselves Miss Emma, the coffee smelled too good." Little Jim the camp cook declared.

"Help yourselves boys, breakfast is only a few minutes away. Coffee will be ready every morning, just come on in and wash up."

Their expressions reassured her that her culinary skills hadn't failed her. Although why she worried she didn't know. The one thing she knew she could handle was cooking, she'd been doing it since she was big enough to reach the counter. Her own father had been the hardest man in the state to please when it came to coffee and Emma had spent a whole summer learning how to perfect it to his pleasure. She'd succeeded but all she got for her effort was a grunt, and an unthankful remark.

"Took you long enough to figure it out, girl." Her father's words echoed in her head.

Emma didn't want to think about her father right now. She was miles from home and he could no longer hurt her. Besides, she had toughened under his roof. She was a survivor. He had unknowingly taught her to survive on her own, and she had to admit she was proud of herself.

One of the men sauntered over to Sammie Jo and started playing with her. Sammie Jo giggled joyfully. She loved company.

"Let me give you a hand, Emma." Cal Travers wandered into the kitchen, and upon seeing the crowd rushed to help set the long table extended almost to the back porch.

"Thanks, Mr. Travers." Emma wiped her floured hands on her apron and took the biscuits from the oven. Every man there stared at the biscuits as if they'd never seen anything like it.

"Is something wrong?" Emma asked startled by their stares as she placed the biscuits in the center of the table.

"Wrong, hell no—I mean, heck no, ma'am. We just ain't seen such fine lookin' food in a long time." Little Jim remarked. "Why I ain't seen biscuits rise like that since my ma was alive."

Emma blushed at the compliment, unsure of what to do or say next, so she went back to her task. "Well sit down and help yourselves boys, I've got sausage and eggs coming and the gravy is on the way too," Emma said, happy that they appreciated her efforts. It was strange what a lift a compliment could be. Yes, she smiled to herself, her job was pretty secure here if their expressions were any sign.

"You're gonna spoil 'em rotten, Emma." Cal Travers sided up to her and whispered.

"They do a hard day's work, they deserve a good meal. And it's a joy to cook for men that appreciate it," Emma replied.

"You sound as though you've cooked for some that didn't."

"At least one, yes," Emma answered going to the gravy and pouring it into a big bowl.

She chanced a glance at Cal who seemed to consider her remark a moment, then she took the gravy to the table, thankful that he didn't pry any further. It would do no good to rehash old problems, especially with her new bosses.

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Deke smelled the biscuits baking all the way out to the barn. His mouth watered. He nodded. He'd done right by hiring Emma. He knew that much. The woman could cook. She was a ranch woman too, and that was in her favor. He hadn't had to tell her much of anything, she seemed to catch on right away to what he expected without too many questions.

He liked her quiet, self-assured attitude. He liked her.

He gulped down the coffee quickly then cleaned out a stall. He didn't like what he set himself up to doing, but he didn't have much choice, the way he saw it. His brothers needed settling down. They needed a taste of responsibility. With Emma they'd get more than a taste of it.

He moved Too Bit, one of his heartiest heifers into the last stall in the barn and checked her over, thoroughly. Rubbing her belly, he nodded.

"You'll be okay once the doc gets you something for that belly, Too Bit. And I won't be doing that to you again. I promise."

Dammit, if the crops hadn't burnt up in the hot Texas sun, this wouldn't have happened, but Deke always managed to roll with the punches. So had all the other ranchers around. At least that's what his father kept telling him. Sometimes he wondered.

If Clint hadn't run off last summer for the rodeo, they might have gotten the irrigation system in for their crops. Yeah, Clint and that good for nothing Steve. If only Clint wouldn't listen to Steve so much. But Steve could be pretty persuasive with all the big money he was winning in the Rodeo. And then there was Rusty. He hadn't been much good since he fell for that Jennifer gal. At least that wasn't serious. Deke doubted Jennifer could be faithful to her own shadow yet. She was in her prime and knew it. Rusty would be better off with a gal like Emma, steady, independent, a ranch woman. He'd start considering Rusty's wife next.

But Deke's mind wasn't on Too Bit, or the ranch this morning, although he did care about them both. No, today his mind was on a certain young woman who remained a mystery. Emma looked and acted as though she could handle just about anything anyone might throw her way, except—that baby flustered her. Motherhood didn't seem to come natural to her. He wondered if that were commonplace? Did all young mothers get flustered by their own children that easily? He'd seen a case or two of it in his stock through the years, but never in humans. He might never be sure of that one, because he knew very little about the subject and aimed to keep it that way.

Maybe it was because Emma didn't have a steady man behind her to reassure her. Yeah, that might explain a lot of things.

And why would a little gal like Emma wear such clothes? Not that there was a darn thing wrong with jeans and T-shirts, but her jeans fit kinda baggy like, as though she weren't accustomed to showing off her figure. Who had raised her to be so unaware of her own natural beauty?

She was a fine looking woman. "Damn good looking." He blurted. Couldn't be past twenty-three or four. She was little but sturdy, and healthy looking. She had beautiful white teeth and olive skin, fine bones, great hair—and God he'd better quit thinking along those lines. That's what got him into trouble the last time. Not keeping his mind on his business. Women and lying just seemed to go together, even with Emma. He knew to stay clear of women. Couldn't trust them. How had he let himself fall for that little gal in Sweetwater was beyond him now. Well he wouldn't be a fool again.

Besides, Emma wasn't for him, she was going to be his sister-in-law and he'd better get used to the idea now. Those were the things that Clint should be appreciating. Clint talked more than usual last night. Could be Emma brought out the best in him. Just like Abby had at one time, but then Clint hadn't been interested in his neighbor as a girlfriend, no they were just good friends. At least they used to be.

Maybe it was the way she dressed that drove her husband off? And maybe he shouldn't be worrying about her husband or the way she dressed. It might be understandable though, but still, Emma seemed to have a lot going for her other than just good looks. Trouble was, a lot of men didn't look that deep.

Had the snake even had the decency to marry her? Deke doubted they had married since Emma was so dead set against talking about him, and there was no ring on her finger either. Not even a white ring around the finger, like she had been wearing one and just took it off. Bile burned in Deke's throat as he thought about the rattlesnake that had gotten Emma pregnant and left her. What kind of man was he?

Her clothes weren't his business he told himself, but how would she ever get Clint to look at her as a prospect if she didn't wear something a little more feminine? Evidently that family of hers hadn't given her much appreciation, she blushed every time he threw her a compliment. Yeah, Emma must have had it pretty rough.

What could he say to her? He'd embarrass her and run her clean off the property if he even mentioned her clothes. No, he supposed Emma was the kind of gal that needed a reason to fancy herself up. He'd think on that a while.

Most men had to be baited, he reckoned. Clint was too blind to see past his nose. If he couldn't see how taken their neighbor was with him, he had to be blind. He needed bait, and Emma wasn't furnishing much, even though he had seen past the clothes real fast. Of course he was older.

Clint liked her, Deke acknowledged as he closed the stall gate. Clint had spent time with her last night, joking, cutting up and trying to impress. Emma had responded with short sweet smiles at him too.

Emma was obviously a practical woman. Damn, that could be a problem. Not to mention the baby. Or the fact that his brother was about as marriage shy as they come. He'd never envisioned such details just to marry a brother off. There was more to matchmaking than finding the right woman, and he didn't have the time to fool with it. Well, he'd just let nature take its course and see how things went first. Then if there was no progress he'd have to help it along. Somehow!

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## Chapter Five

A week had passed and nothing was happening between Emma and Clint. Oh they were polite as they could be, talkative, helpful, but nothing was going on between Clint and Emma. It was as if an "Off limits" sign was hung around her neck.

It looked seriously as though Deke might have to lend a hand with nature. Clint just didn't know a good thing when he saw it.

Jake had been riding fence most of the week so Deke didn't have to worry about him. But Deke had purposely let Clint slack off a little giving him time and opportunity to get to know Emma better.

Clint hadn't taken the hint. Oh they'd had general conversations at dinner time. He'd helped her off and on with Sammie Jo. Yet Clint treated her as though she was the last person on his mind. Why? It made no sense to him. He'd gotten dumped good and proper only months ago, so now he was having nothing to do with women?

Deke shook his head as he shod one of the horses in the barn. "Looks like I'm going to have to do something to wake those brothers of mine up."

It was Saturday and very early. A light morning mist had made the barn humid. What Deke and every other rancher in the area needed was a good hard rain. Deke shucked his thoughts and dug into his work with a vengeance when Rusty clamored into the barn nosily.

"Deke, I thought you'd be on your way to Sweetwater by now."

"What for?" Deke questioned not even glancing up to see his brother's expression. He instinctively knew by the sound of his walk which brother ambled into the barn.

"To fetch a gal for the dance, tonight."

"I'd forgotten about that. I've had a few other things on my mind lately. I doubt I'll go, and if I do I'll probably just go stag. Besides, I've got too much work to do to run off to Sweetwater. With Too Bit coming down sick and some of the other ranchers having the same problems I'm not sure dancing is in order right now."

"There'll always be problems here at the ranch, Deke. Lord knows you know that. Why don't you let your hair down and have some fun. I wouldn't miss the shindig. I'm takin' Jennifer."

"Are you and Jennifer getting serious?" Deke held his breath for the answer and looked up at his younger brother.

"She's my girl, isn't she?"

"Is she?" Deke continued with his work.

"You don't like Jennifer much, do you, Deke?" Rusty's voice held a note of disappointment as he waited for his brother's answer.

"It's not that." Deke didn't want Rusty thinking he didn't care for Jennifer, because some day they might get married. "She's just so young, immature. I mean if I was serious, I'd be looking for a girl with staying power. A ranch girl. And I'd be buying her a ring or something, because Jennifer is not the steady kind of girl."

"And what do you know about girls? You haven't had a date since last year." Rusty seemed satisfied with his comeback. Never disrespectful, Rusty felt comfortable arguing with his big brother. Deke liked that. He admired honesty more than any quality in a person. And if the Travers boys were anything, they were honest. They could say anything to each other without getting mad. They were a close knit family and Deke wanted to keep it that way.

"True. But I've been around the barn a few times kid, and don't you forget it. I'm telling you. If you want to keep a gal you've got to hog-tie her. Put a brand on her."

"I don't see you hog-tying anyone. Besides, I'm too young to settle down yet."

Deke ignored his young brother's reasoning. He needed Rusty's help, and Clint's help too. How could he make them see this without hurting them. The ranch was too big for him alone. "How old do you think you need to be?" Deke asked as he continued to file the shoe.

"'Bout your age, I'd say," Rusty answered with a big smile on his face.

"My age!" Deke shouted. He'd walked into that one. Shaking his head he asked innocently. "Don't you think that's a little too old?"

"Nope, I think you're just about the right age for settling down with a good woman. So why don't you?"

"Why don't I what?" Deke asked not paying too much attention to his brother any longer. It was obvious Rusty was just wasting time, talking nonsense and Deke had a lot of work to do, today. He wished for once Rusty and Clint would just do what needed to be done without him having to point it out to them every time. He wished they took more pride in the land, because it belonged to all of them. This was their real future, why couldn't they see it?

"Why don't you settle down?"

"With who? Last time I looked you had to have a partner for that kind of stuff." He let go of the horse and rubbed the leg for a few minutes. "That ought to do you."

"What about Thelma?"

"Thelma who?"

"Thelma, the gal you went out with over in Sweetwater last year."

"Not on your life."

Rusty laughed. "Why not?"

"Because when I took Thelma home, I found out she had a husband. And I'm not in to dating married women or liars."

"So you give up on all of them because of one?"

"I think you should quit worrying about me, and start worrying about yourself little brother. I'm over-the-hill anyway." Deke grunted as he hoisted a saddle up on the stall railing. "Where's Clint?"

"In the house, talkin' to Emma I think."

"Go—" Deke stopped himself from saying good. He didn't want Rusty catching on to his plan. Rusty couldn't keep a secret. He certainly didn't need Rusty interrupting his plan, he was having enough trouble as it was. "Well when he comes out tell him I'll be out on the south pasture, we're castrating today. You boys get your gear and hustle your butts out there, pronto."

Rusty nodded. "You know Deke, I've never said nothing before about it, but you've done a great job with this place. Made some real improvements, kept it out of red ink. That's saying something bro."

"This place as you call it, is our home, little brother. And in case you're in any doubt, it belongs to all of us. It's our ranch." Deke emphasized his point with a slight frown.

"Yeah, I know. But just because we were born on a ranch don't mean we're necessarily cut out to be ranchers Deke. I mean, look at Clint. He's been doing fantastic in the rodeo circuit this past year. And I've even considered trying my hand at it. There's good money in it." Deke got the message loud and clear.

Deke's head reared and he answered adamantly, "Have you ever seen a retired rodeo champ, Rusty?"

"Well no, but—"

"But nothing. Take a good look at one of them next time you run off to watch Clint ride. They are a bunch of busted up cowpokes who can hardly set the saddle any more. And not a one of them over probably thirty five. What kind of future is that?"

"Yeah, I've heard all the stories, but Clint sorta has his heart in it, if you've paid any attention." Rusty hesitated to add.

Deke sighed. "I have. That's why we've got to get his heart out of it, somehow."

"How do you plan on doin' that, bro?" Rusty asked twisting his head.

"I'm working on it. By the way, did either of you think to invite Emma to the dance?"

Rusty scratched his chin, and picked up a piece of straw from the floor of the barn. His blue eyes evaded Deke's as he put the piece of straw to his lips. "I hadn't even thought about it. Maybe Clint will invite her."

"Yeah, maybe so," Deke said with a shrug.

All the way out to the south pasture Deke fretted over the possibility of Clint not thinking about it. What was wrong with those boys? Didn't they recognize quality when they saw it? Why weren't they beating down her door to ask her out? She knew how to cook, she knew how to clean, and she was fair at taking care of the kid. It was obvious how much she loved Sammie Jo, and she'd be a great mother if she ever quit worrying about other people so much.

He was in the middle of the castrating process, two hours later when it hit him. He hadn't taken his mind off the problem all morning. He was edgy and biting everyone's head off and no one knew what was wrong with him. Deke had to get this plan into action so he could go back to ranching. There was no other way. Until he settled things, he wasn't going to get anything done.

Emma might not have anything to wear, and she might refuse the offer in the first place. God, he hadn't thought twice about the way she might feel or think.

He didn't give the possibility a chance to fester, he walked over to the straw boss. "Take over Sandy, I'll be back later." Then he headed back to the house.

All the way back, he tried to figure an angle to bring the dance up with Emma. Had Clint asked her out? Had she accepted? Maybe he'd run into Clint first and could ask him.

How did a man tackle a conversation so personal about a woman's wardrobe. Well, since he knew nothing about such things he'd just come out in the open with it, and hope Emma wouldn't be insulted.

Yeah, a direct approach would be best. He hoped.

Emma hung the living room rug on the clothesline and beat it with a broom to get the dust out. In her action her breast were outlined more decidedly than Deke cared to notice. He felt himself grow warm in all the wrong places, and for all the wrong reasons. Dammit, he had to stop reacting like a teenage boy with the hots. This woman might someday be his sister-in-law.

She stopped beating the rug when Deke rode up. Sweat trickled down her forehead.

"Hi," she said shyly.

"Hi, Emma. Where's Sammie Jo?" Maybe he did need to find himself a woman, cause Emma was sure reminding him how long it had been since he'd been near one. Every move she made alerted him to his own body.

"Asleep. She still likes a nap every day." Her eyes traveled him slowly.

"Well, I guess Clint talked to you about the dance tonight, didn't he?" Deke asked hoping his brother hadn't forgotten.

"He mentioned something about a dance." She went back to beating the rug.

"Are you going?" Deke blurted out when she didn't respond with an answer.

"Me?" She whipped about to face him. "I wasn't asked, and besides, I have a baby, remember. I don't do dances anymore."

Damn, maybe Sammie Jo was the reason Clint hadn't asked. Maybe Clint didn't even see her as eligible. Built in baby-sitters didn't grow on trees. Still, there was dad. "I remember, but I'm sure Dad would enjoy watching her. They really get along well. Don't be shy about asking. I'm surprised he hasn't said something to you about it," Deke said watching her face. He hadn't realized it before, but he'd been thinking about that face all morning. And other things, like how she laughed, how she smiled, and about the night he'd caught her reading a fairy tale story to the baby. Something had hit deep inside him when he saw her cuddling that baby to her, her face shining with love.

"That's very sweet of him, but I don't think I'll go."

"Why not?" he blurted out then regretted it when he saw her face pale. "I mean it would give you a chance to meet a lot of people in the area."

"I'm not much of a dancer. Charlie used to say I had two left feet." She hit the rug once more her voice going lower as though she might be ashamed of the fact. She had no party clothes, she couldn't dance, she had a baby. How many reasons did he need to hear?

"Who is this Charlie, you keep referring to?"

"Oh, just a friend."

She wasn't going. And if she didn't go, how would Clint ever see her as a real woman. If she dolled up, he'd notice, he'd have to. Clint wasn't blind, most of the time.

"Sounds like a kinda important friend."

"He was my boyfriend. My ex-boyfriend."

"Sammie Jo's daddy?"

"No. Charlie had nothing to do with Sammie Jo. That was the problem. He couldn't see me as a mother."

"I see. So this Charlie, you still have feelings for him?"

She looked away. "I thought I did."

"Well, then would you go with me?" Deke found himself asking and wondering how he got himself into such deep waters. He knew it was a mistake, even before it was out of his mouth, but he couldn't recall his words.

"You? Is that proper? I mean, you're my boss. I'm sure you must know dozens of girls to ask. Don't you have a girl, Deke?"

"I'm askin' you. And it'd be more than proper. It would give you a chance to meet people around here. You're young Emma, you should get out more."

Emma put her hand on her hip and leaned into it, staring at him with a frown. "And you are old, I suppose?" When he didn't answer she dropped the broom and sighed, "Thanks for asking, but—I don't have any party clothes."

It took a lot to admit it, but that was the real reason she didn't want to go. She was embarrassed.

"We'll make a run to Sweetwater, and you can get what you need. I've got to pick up some supplies, anyway." Deke turned away and started walking, so she wouldn't refuse.

"B-but—"

Good, he had her where he wanted her. He'd take her to town, find a nice dress shop and let her have whatever she wanted. She'd show that rodeo brother of his.

He didn't need any supplies, and he knew it. But Emma didn't. He'd make it look real good. And his plan would work, tonight.

First he needed to find his dad, though. He didn't go around inviting his father to baby-sit, but this was important, and if need be, he'd tell him all about his plan.

Cal was talking to the vet, when Deke caught up to him.

"So how's she lookin', doc?" He glanced from Too Bit to the two men in front of him.

"She's fine. Just a bad lot of grain looks like, nearly everybody had some sick ones from it. Although I checked with the manufacturer the other day about this same thing, and no one outside this area has had the least bit of trouble. It's an ingestion problem. So it's got to be the grain. Good thing we caught it early. It could have been a disaster. Although with this drought it might not be a bad idea to check your springs and creek beds."

"Tainted?"

"Could be."

Deke nodded with an exasperated frown. "Let's hope not. So, you going to the barn dance, tonight, doc?" Deke asked glancing at his dad.

"Probably not. I've got a couple of problems over at the River's Ranch. Be there most the night. I guess you boys will be there, though."

"Wouldn't miss it," Deke replied with a grin.

Cal seemed to study him as the doc moved towards his truck. After a short conversation, and the doc left, Cal came back to stand in front of Deke. "You planning on going to the dance?"

"Y-yeah. I thought I'd take Emma, introduce her to the people in the area. She'll probably get a little tired of being surrounded by nothing but men. We don't want her wandering off because she's got no lady friends."

"Good thinkin' son. I'm glad you asked her. Although I'm a little surprised Clint or Jake didn't ask her to go with them."

"Yeah. When Clint overlooked the matter, I felt it my responsibility to take her. Her being new here. Jake's been too busy, and Clint still doesn't have his head on straight about women, I guess. Well listen dad. I've got to make a run into Sweetwater, and Emma needs a few things. Would you watch Sammie Jo for her?"

Cal bent his head in a quick smile then glanced up at his son, putting his hand on his shoulder. "Be glad to. Ya'll go on, we'll be just fine. And I'll watch her tonight, too."

"Don't you want to go to the dance?" Deke held his breath.

"We might go," Cal said at last, letting out a little chuckle.

"We?"

"Yeah, me and Sammie Jo might go to the dance together. At least that way, I'll have an excuse not to dance with all the widows in the county."

"I thought you kinda liked some of them. Especially Bertha."

"Let's just say I like to keep them guessing."

"I wouldn't wait too long, women tend to be a little on the fickle side, Dad."

Deke nodded and went to pull the truck around front. Emma came out of the house with her purse on her shoulder and Cal took Sammie Jo out of her arms. Sammie Jo was eager to go with Cal, cause he promised to show her a real pig. And because of the older man Sammie Jo was showing signs of saying some real words. Pig was one of them.

Funny, Deke smiled as he watched his father with the little tyke. Cal Travers hadn't lit a cigarette in a week. Emma and Sammie Jo fit in well with the Travers bunch.

Emma got into the truck and hugged the door. Deke noticed she wore a newer pair of jeans and she had on a nice white blouse instead of a T-shirt. The blouse wasn't sexy like the T-shirt, but Deke was beginning to realize that the more a woman hid, the more curious a man seemed to get. He certainly was.

Deke didn't say a word to her for a long while. But the bumps and ruts in the road threw Emma much closer and conversation seemed easier than the sudden electric silence.

"Emma, I realize your finances are pretty low, and I don't want to embarrass you. So let me give you some money for a nice dress and we'll call it payday."

"I couldn't do that."

"Okay, then let me give this back to you. It's the money you threw at me the night you ran into me. I never spent it. My insurance took care of it."

Emma hesitated, staring at the money. "I really shouldn't spend the money on me. Sammie Jo should come first. I need to buy a highchair, and I had planned on getting her some new shoes too." She looked directly at him. "Maybe I shouldn't go."

"Trying to stand me up."

"No, of course not."

Deke cast her a curious glance. "I feel the same way sometimes Emma. I know the ranch needs supplies more than I need anything, but sometimes you've got to be good to yourself. That way, you can be good to others. Do you know what I mean?"

Emma was silent a moment, then looked at him. Her big eyes drew him in. "Yes, I think I understand. All right, just this once. I'll give in."

"Once is all it will take. And don't worry about the shoes for Sammie Jo. I'll spring for that. She's walkin' pretty good right now, so I'd say she needs something sturdier than sandals. Somethin' like a pair of boots."

"Boots?" Emma laughed, "But she's only . . . ."

"I know, but the way that kid gets around the yard and barn, she's gonna need something to keep the mud off her." Deke chuckled.

"You noticed?"

"Couldn't help but notice, she was muddier than a pig with an itch the other day. Must have took you an hour to clean the tub after you bathed her."

"It did. Okay you win. You're the boss." Emma laughed.

"You have a nice laugh Emma, you should do it more often."

Pink dotted her cheeks.

"So, tell me, where's the baby's father? What was his name, Charlie."

"His name was Joel, and I have no idea where he might be. He's a lot like Clint, he goes where the wind blows him. Charlie was our closest neighbor's son. My brother's best friend."

"Oh yeah. That's right. The man who didn't want to be burdened with a kid."

"That's right."

"Too bad for him," he blurted, as he braked too quickly from a passing car and skidded. An unfamiliar car sped past at high speed, forcing him to the edge of the road. Emma bumped her head on the dash, and Deke stopped the truck, pulling off the side of the highway.

"Damned fool idiot. He should have looked where he was going." Deke declared as he reached over to check Emma. His heart was hammering so hard he couldn't think straight. "Are you all right?"

His hand was on her arm, and he felt her pulse speed up, or was that his own? He wasn't sure, he didn't care. All he wanted was to be closer, suddenly. To touch her cheek, to what? Something about touching Emma sent a shock wave of reactions through him. Maybe it was the contrast of soft skin against calluses. He didn't know. Just then she looked up at him, with such wide eyed anticipation. He couldn't stop himself from tipping her chin up, and feather touching her lips with his own. And her lips were as sweet as he'd been imagining all day. He felt like a bear stealing honey from a bee-hive.

"God, I thought you were hurt," he murmured against her cheek as he kissed her thoroughly on the lips again. So sweet.

Emma felt soft and warm, and yielding and he wanted more of her than what the truck would allow. A lot more. But good sense prevailed when his arm knocked the horn and jolted him back to reality. He sighed heavily knowing the rest of the day and night would be painful to get through. He definitely needed to find himself a woman.

What had he been thinking? Emma wasn't for him! God, he was blowing his own plans. It had to be the circumstance of riding in a enclosed truck with her, smelling that sweet smell of lilacs that was all her own, and the brushing of her hair against his arm. That and the fact that he hadn't been with a woman in a while. Nothing else made sense.

That was one mistake he wasn't about to repeat. But what could he say to her? Hell, he wasn't sorry, he wanted to do it all over again. But maybe apologizing, would impress

upon her that he wasn't interested in carrying it any further. Yet he didn't want to hurt her feelings. She had to know she wasn't for him. Best he set her straight right now.

"I'm sorry Emma, I shouldn't have done that. I was way out of line."

Emma pinked again, and he thought he saw a flash of anger in those warm brown eyes. "It won't happen again."

"No, it won't."

He nodded slowly not liking the sound of that any better than his apology.

When he found himself in a bad situation he usually kept his mouth shut, so that's what he did.

He could see by the startled look on her face she was as confused as he was.

Half hour later he took Emma to one of the local dress shops in Sweetwater and stood around a few minutes waiting on her. Emma looked at several dresses then turned back to him.

"It's a little expensive, here, don't you think?"

"I don't know, I've never shopped here, myself." He found himself irritated. And why not, he had lost his mind back there on the road. Being out of control wasn't where he wanted to be.

"Look, maybe this isn't a good idea. Maybe you don't really want to take me to the dance, tonight," Emma suggested.

"I invited you, didn't I? Now, find yourself a dress." He didn't mean to bark at her, but he wasn't really barking at her, he was barking at himself. He should have known better, controlled his urges. But there was something about her . . .

"I can't Deke. I've never bought a dress before." She didn't look at him, and he felt all his anger drain away as though it had never been.

Deke frowned, then suddenly it dawned on him. Emma had never been treated like a woman in her family. She as much as said so before. It didn't take much deducing that those three ignorant brothers of hers and that ram-rod father hadn't so much as paid attention to the fact that she had grown into a lovely young woman under their noses.

"Maybe the saleslady can help." Deke looked around for one and saw her with another customer. After a short time he went over and asked the woman for help.

"What kind of dance is it?" The middle aged saleslady asked.

"A country dance. She needs something pretty."

"I see. Okay. You look like a size 3 or 5 to me. Let's see what we have. Would you like to try it on?"

"Yes, I guess so." Emma nodded.

"There's a chair over in the corner by the mirror, if you'd like to wait, for her." The lady smiled at Deke.

"Sure."

"Uh—why don't you go get your supplies?" Emma suggested.

"That's okay, we can do that later," Deke insisted.

Emma seemed uncomfortable with him staying, but he was determined to set his plans into action tonight, before he made a bigger jackass of himself.

He waited and watched as Emma tried on several dresses. Some were much too sophisticated for the dance, but they looked great on her. He liked them all, and was sure that once Clint saw her dressed like this, he'd forget all about his broken heart.

After nearly an hour of trying on dresses, Emma finally modeled one that struck Deke as perfect. It was a dark blue sundress with big white flowers on the flared skirt, squared off at the neck and low in the back.

"I don't think this one is right," Emma protested as she checked the price tag.

Deke's eyes were on the dress, and her. "It's perfect, look at yourself Emma, you're beautiful."

Emma turned around and around. That's when Deke realized her expression was worth every penny of it. Hadn't she ever heard the words? What kind of fool men had she been raised with?

"It's lovely, really," the lady said and smiled at Deke.

Emma thanked her and Deke too as they left the store.

She was so tied up in knots he knew she'd never settle down unless he changed the subject.

"Let's go find me a decent shirt and tie."

"Okay," Emma agreed happily.

The men's shop where Cal Travers traded was more western, but Deke had little trouble locating his kind of clothes. He picked out a couple of shirts, and even asked her opinion, then she shyly handed him a bolero tie. He nodded with a smile.

Feeling a little awkward himself, Deke blurted out, "So, did you buy your husband's clothes a lot?"

"We weren't married," Emma responded woodenly.

Deke had the sinking feeling he'd opened a can of worms. He frowned. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried. Say, let's go get the baby a pair of boots and then go eat."

"Okay. I'm starved."

"Me too," he added, but not for food. He was hungry for more information about Emma. This beautiful young woman had obviously had a rough life, and he suddenly wished there was more he could do to make things easier for her and Sammie Jo.

His mind kept filtering back to how Emma had looked in that dress and he was having difficulty walking, just thinking about it. Clint would love it. And why that indigestion was bothering him again, he didn't know.

"What do you feel like eating, Emma?" he asked as they set the new pair of red cowboy boots in the floorboard of the truck.

"You promise you won't laugh?"

"I promise."

"A hamburger. A greasy spoon hamburger loaded with everything, and big french fries smothered in ketchup."

"I'd have never guessed. I'm kind of fond of them myself, and I know a little place that makes the best home-made hamburgers in town. Wanta try it?"

"Sounds great. I miss them sometimes because I rarely cook them myself. And I rarely eat out."

"Oh, I'd think you'd have a lot of men wanting to buy you dinner."

"Afraid not. I didn't date much at home. Probably wouldn't have dated Charlie if he hadn't been such a good friend of Jesse's."

"Are you sure you're over this Charlie? You sure talk about him a lot."

"I'm sure. Why?"

"You don't talk about the baby's father as much as you do Charlie. Was he just some spur of the moment romance?"

"I didn't know him as well, I guess."

In less than thirty minutes they were parked under an awning of a fifties style drive-in and munching inside the truck on a juicy hamburger, french fries and milk shakes.

"How come you don't wear dresses Emma?" Deke asked biting into his burger and trying not to look at her. He knew she was probably embarrassed. He knew it wasn't his business, but he really wanted to know more about her.

He had blurted that out, too. God, he had no class. But how was he ever going to find out anything about this woman if he didn't ask?

"My dad always treated me like one of the boys. He didn't know how to handle a girl. He could never have taken me in a shop and bought me a dress like you did. He'd die of embarrassment. I think part of his problem was that my mother died on him. He just couldn't handle women from then on. I think it must have been very painful for him. He never talked about it though."

"You have a very understanding and forgiving nature, Emma. Most girls would be bitter, hurt even. You don't even talk down this Joel character, I have to admire you for that."

"My brothers made up for a lot. They were protective of me, and fun for me. Besides, they all told me that it was a rough old world out there and I better figure on it."

"You are really something. It's a wonder you survived. It's a wonder you aren't a little mixed up, because of your father's attitude."

"What can I say, he was my dad. You don't choose your parents. You live with them. I didn't always enjoy living like that. I guess when I was little I had my share of hurt feelings. But it toughened me. But a woman around would have been nice. Especially in my teens. With three older brothers I got my share of teasing. It was awkward. There were things I had to ask my friends to buy for me and my cousin Kate."

"I'm sorry Emma. At least now I understand. I just thought you were trying to hide something. Last girl I dated, she was nice, real nice, and real married. Just can't tolerate a liar."

When a silence ensued he picked the conversation again. "What about your husband, did he buy dresses for you? I mean your-boyfriend."

"No, he didn't buy anything for me. We weren't married. And I'd like to tell you . . ."

Just then someone Deke knew stopped by and Deke rolled down his window and started talking to him. It was a lengthy conversation and Emma sat very quietly against the door jam, like a frightened rabbit. Deke introduced her of course but she remained quiet.

When the man left, Deke turned to her. "Sorry, just an old high school friend. Well, I guess we better be getting back. The dance starts pretty early."

"What about your supplies? You didn't really have any supplies to pick up, did you. You did this just for me!" Emma shook her head and smiled at him. "I hope I don't embarrass you or make a fool of myself. I really don't know how to dance that well."

"I'll tell you a secret, I don't either. Half the people there don't. Hell we are all country people Emma. Nobody there is gonna look at what your feet are doing. What I'm trying to tell you is—who cares? We just like to let loose and have a little fun."

Emma laughed, a heady sound to Deke. Deke reached over and wiped a tiny spot of mustard off her mouth and Emma seemed to freeze.

He backed off, turned the ignition on and backed the truck out of the parking lot before he did what he'd been wanting to do all afternoon. Because what he wanted to do—what he knew he shouldn't be wanting to do—was kiss Emma over and over and over.

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## Chapter Six

The silence in the cab of the truck thickened with every passing fence post. Emma wrung her hands, wishing she could still bite her fingernails and look composed.

"You're worried about the stock, aren't you?" Emma asked unable to keep silent any longer, and watching his expression change dramatically. She shouldn't have agreed to come to the dance, what with Jake announcing that more cattle were sick. Guilt riddled her. She should be home with Sammie Jo.

Deke's fingers tensed on the steering column, his forehead creasing. "A little. With more cattle coming down sick, it means it might not be the grain. It might be the water."

"The water?" Emma gasped.

"Yeah, we haven't had rain in over a month, it's been a hundred or over, every day, the water around here is stagnant. Enough to poison a herd." Deke replied.

"I never dreamed." Emma stared at him. "What are you gonna do?"

"Test the area we've been watering in and move them to a safer one. If it's true it'll go before the Cattlemen's Association for further discussions and actions. We'll have to have the authorities out here and check it but I'm pretty sure what they'll find." Deke's voice sounded hollow, worry lines crowded his smooth forehead.

"Maybe we shouldn't go to the dance. It's not necessary on my account. I didn't realize what was going on when Jake came in this evening, I only knew it had to be serious by the look on his face."

"No need you worrying about it Emma. Nothing we can do about it tonight. I'll talk with some of the other ranchers, see what's going on with them."

"Why don't we just turn around," Emma began, her worry multiplying with the seconds that ticked by. His mind was on the ranch, hers on Sammie Jo, this wasn't right. The entire day hadn't been right for that matter. What with that kiss that sizzled her brain, she wasn't thinking straight. She didn't want to be responsible for him losing time he needed at the ranch. She remembered how Frank and her brothers had fretted over every little detail of ranch problems while carrying out their responsibilities to her. She felt a burden.

"Emma," Deke reached for her hand almost on reflex. "Stop fretting. It's all right. We'll go to the dance, you'll have a good time, meet some neighbors, and I'll talk to some of the other ranchers there. Maybe someone there has some ideas."

Emma tried to ignore the electrical charge that ran through her from Deke's touch. She wondered if he felt anything, or if he was merely being kind. She couldn't tell from the hooded glances he'd been giving her. Ignoring the pounding of her own heart, her eyes landed on his hand, and he moved it slowly.

"I knew this was all wrong from the beginning," Emma cried out. "I never should have gone into Sweetwater for a new dress. I should have spent that money on Sammie Jo. I don't know what came over me, I'm usually not that self-indulgent."

"Feeling guilty?" Deke questioned, his glance taking her in with one swoop of his long dark lashes. Emma wondered how a man's lashes could be so long, so dramatic and still belong to a man.

"A little, yes." She saw his sardonic look. "Okay, a lot."

His eyes swept her approvingly, a slow burning smile spreading over his handsome face. Damn, why did this particular cowboy have to have such an effect on her? "Don't be, Emma, it was worth it."

A momentary bubble of elation jolted her awareness, even though she tried to squash it. A compliment she wouldn't soon forget, she decided as he gave her a quick wink. He had kissed her this afternoon, reassured her just now with a touch of his hand, and now this beautiful compliment, how could the evening get any better?

After another short silence, she admitted it. "I've never left Sammie Jo at night before. Maybe that accounts for my nerves."

"You're not afraid dad can't handle it are you?"

"No, no of course not. Cal seems very good with her. Very good. But she's still so little, and I don't want her to think I've deserted her. She needs me, I should be there. I'm not here to attend dances, and buy pretty dresses. I'm the cook, for heaven's sake."

"Social status means very little out here, Emma. Being a cook is a decent job. Besides, you are much more than that to us."

Emma tried to smile.

"Ya know Emma, you may or may not realize it, but Sammie Jo has been good for Dad. He's been sick a lot this past year. He's been in and out of hospitals with respiratory problems. He has a severe case of Emphysema and the doctors warned him if he didn't quit smoking, he'd be on an oxygen machine. They meant it."

"I didn't realize it was that serious. I knew there were some problems, I've heard him wheeze. He coughs some, but he seems to be doing better now than when I first arrived." Emma let herself relax, holding her hand in her lap and leaning herself against the seat comfortably, although she still hugged the door.

"Do you know why?" Deke shot her a glance, his mouth tipping upward.

"No."

"Sammie Jo." The lines in Deke's forehead suddenly disappeared. "I knew that little gal would warm his heart, but I didn't dare hope she'd turn him around."

Emma watched the play of emotions cross his expressions. This man loved his family, just like she loved Sammie Jo. "I don't understand." Emma couldn't put the two unrelated things together.

"Sammie Jo distracts him so much, he doesn't reach for a cigarette anymore. He's nearly stopped smoking. God, that's a miracle in itself." His voice thickened with that same emotion. "I haven't said a word to him about it, because if he realized it, he might go right back to doing it, out of pure contrariness."

"Smoking is a hard habit to quit, I've been told. Never took it up myself, never had the time. But I had an aunt that died of lung cancer. She smoked right up till she died, the doctors scolding her every step of the way. Said she'd just soon die as to give it up. She was eighty though and had been smoking most of her life."

Deke turned the air-condition vents towards her. "She must of been a tough rascal. That's not a pretty way to go, if there is one." He fell silent a moment then looked at her. "You don't talk about your family much Emma. Except your brothers. I take it you were close to them?"

"Yes, very close." Emma smiled in fond remembrance a tremor of loneliness shooting through her.

"Or Sammie Jo's dad. How come?"

Emma shrugged, "I don't like dwelling in the past. Besides, he wasn't worth talking about . . ."

"Where'd you meet him?"

Emma grew uncomfortable, she should tell him the truth now that he opened the gate for it. But something kept her silent. Perhaps because they were going to a dance and the evening had started out so nicely. She didn't want to ruin that feeling. "Joel grew up in the same small community. Like Devil's Corner, everyone knew everyone."

"And Charlie?"

"Charlie was our next door neighbor, so to speak."

"What about your father? Did he kick you and Sammie Jo out?"

Emma shook her head and looked him straight faced. "No, it was nothing that serious. I guess I've given you the wrong impression about my father, but he wasn't a mean person. Just a little near-sighted."

Emma preferred thinking of her father in this manner. She never felt sorry for herself, she simply lived the life she'd been dealt.

"It's just—he's not comfortable around women. I learned how to cope with it, through the years, but I didn't want to subject Sammie Jo to his biased way of life. We are better off going it on our own, anyway."

"You're not alone anymore Emma." Deke braked the truck and came to a standstill. His arm rested along the back of the seat and heat radiated up her spine from the realization. Their expressions met and held for a long second, till good sense prevailed. His words held her heart captive.

For just a hesitating second she thought Deke was going to kiss her again, but he motioned that they had arrived and the moment was broken.

The community dance hall was held at an old abandoned warehouse out in the middle of an empty field. Emma didn't know what to expect from the looks of it. However, from the moment they walked inside, the atmosphere changed.

Dim lights, a live country band, and lots of conversation floated about the huge old building wrapped in a have-fun decor. People were dressed in every fashion, from jeans and T-shirts to fancy square-dance dresses to evening attire.

The sawdust dance floor took up a large portion of the middle area, as punch-bowls and snack tables lines both sides. Small tables were put together all around, and the place was packed with people mingling everywhere.

Deke's mood lightened the moment they stepped inside. He'd been howdy'd to death. He took Emma by the elbow and guided her about, introducing her to friends and neighbors. Before they were seated good she was asked to dance. Emma glanced at Deke and he winked. "Go ahead, have some fun, Emma."

Emma tried to beg off, but the old gentleman was having none of that and swung her into a quick two-step. Emma did her best to keep up, although the routine wasn't familiar

and she stumbled a couple of times. Didn't rattle the old man a bit, he just kept on dancing.

After the first dance, the man's wife appeared and took him in tow. Silently grateful, Emma walked back to the table.

"That was Henry Parish," Deke informed her. "He's the custodian at the Sweetwater First National Bank. He used to have one of the biggest spreads this side of the Red River. But unfortunately, he only had one son, not enough to keep the ranch going. He's seventy-four years old and hasn't missed a dance in over fifty years." Deke informed her. "Have a seat Emma, I'll get us some punch. Are you hungry?"

"No, not really. You mean to tell me they've had this particular dance for over fifty years?"

"Not in the same building, of course, but yes, that's right."

Emma gasped.

"I'll be right back," Deke said, as he bent closer. Close enough for Emma to get a whiff of his clean woodsy after-shave. "Remember you are here to enjoy yourself, Emma. Relax."

Emma nodded woodenly, glancing about. Regrettably she was letting the boss affect her, she knew better.

Afraid she might stand out like some kind of idiot while on the dance floor, she looked around to see if anyone was staring. No one was. Everyone here seemed to be either absorbed in conversation with friends or dancing.

Emma let out a little sigh of relief and relaxed into the chair as she watched several couples on the floor. By the way they danced she could pick out the ones that had been together for a while. They seemed to melt into a routine of dances, their movements coordinated. She'd wanted to line dance since she had been a kid, but had been afraid to try.

Deke was detained by a beautiful young blonde woman while Emma was whipped upon the dance floor several more times. Finally, Clint rescued her.

"So, you enjoying the dance, Emma?"

"Yes, It's—fascinating."

"My big brother treating you right?"

"Y-yes, he went to get some punch," Emma replied glancing about and seeing him still standing beside the blonde.

"Uh-huh, got snagged by Lori Martin again, I see. She's had her eye on Deke a long time, but he never took the hint. My brother is kinda dense about women. He's had his head filled with cattle and ranching' too long. He needs to relax and forget about responsibility."

"Why hasn't he married, or any of you for that matter?" As soon as the question was out, she wanted to bite her tongue, but it never stood to reason why these gorgeous men were not married.

"Deke's been carrying the load since Dad got sick, reckon he just don't have the time. As for me, well, I've come close a time or two." Clint's eyes took on a somber expression. Then a broad smile burst across his face as he pulled her closer. "Rusty, he's a one woman man, and he'll probably be the first to settle down. Jake, well, Jake's got bigger plans. He just don't want to leave Deke in no spot. I look for Jake to be movin' on, anytime now."

"Would he leave Deke in a spot?" Emma queried.

"No. Not intentionally. But he can't stay here forever. Even Deke wouldn't hold him back. You see Jake's studying law. Put two years in at SMU. Worked his butt off to get there too. Yeah, I reckon he's the only one with a head on his shoulders. His education got interrupted, a little, but he's planning on going back first of next year. He'll probably end up a lawyer or at least a sheriff. Jake's a tough one, law is what he's interested in. He'll be the only one of the bunch to really make anything of himself."

"You don't believe that. Everyone has potential, Clint. Everyone. Tell me, are you going back to the rodeo?" Emma looked him in the eye, unable to understand why a man with so much future would want to break his neck on a bull.

"Probably. Don't have any better sense. Had an Uncle like that. Guess it's in the blood."

Emma tried to smile.

"Ranching is sorta dull. I mean, heck, I was raised on a ranch, know everything there is to know about it. It's so stationary. Once you get a taste of rodeo life, it sorta sticks. And I've seen that same look in Deke's eye, too. I know it's dangerous." He whirled her about with a quick dip. "But I like it."

Emma laughed, just as Deke stepped up to the two of them.

"May I cut in?" His face was like a storm cloud.

Why did he look so angry?

"Sure big brother, but don't hog her, she's a sweet change from the locals around here." Clint laughed and let Emma go into Deke's arms.

"Where's Abby?"

"Don't know. I run into her old man, said she left town a while back and hasn't been back."

"That's strange," Deke frowned.

"Yeah, it sure is." Clint hung his head and walked off.

Dancing with Deke was immensely different, Emma quickly decided as he took her in his arms and cradled her softly against him. It wasn't necessarily the kind of dance that a man has to pull a woman close, but he did, and she didn't resist.

Their body heat seemed to make both of them aware of each other and Deke quickly pulled back just a little. She inhaled the scent of wood, hay, and leather. His cheek felt amazingly soft when he finally managed to relax enough to let her rest there.

Emma felt stiff though. Dancing with Clint was easy, he did all the fancy moves, and all she had to do was follow. But with Deke she felt an immediate awareness that left her awkward again. As though her feet didn't belong on the floor. She sensed he was pulling away from her for some reason and it made her nervous. If he didn't want to dance with her, why had he broken in?

"You know Deke, you aren't obligated to dance with me," Emma muttered. "You've done your share at making me feel at home."

"That's what you think," Deke pulled away so he could probe her.

Her hands sweat into his as he stared down into her puzzled face. She wished he wouldn't look at her like that—so intense.

"It's pretty obvious, you don't want to dance with me," she blurted, wanting to run away, before she cried or said something she'd regret.

"I told you I don't dance," he explained, pulling her up closer, so that her body fit against his.

"You're doing a pretty fair job of it," she barely recognized her own voice.

Strange how they seem to fit so perfectly together. Her lack of composure had her slipping into overdrive—again. Being in Deke's arms played havoc with her heart and mind, and Emma couldn't stop the feeling of drowning into him. She couldn't afford to. She couldn't afford another Charlie.

Her legs no longer belonged to her, her mouth went dry, her hands melded into his, her heart pounded so loud she feared detection. God, what was wrong with her? None of the other men affected her this way. They were only dancing. She had to get a grip on reality.

The music changed somewhere in between their heated glances and slowing conversation.

This would never do, Emma's mind screamed in alarm. She couldn't allow herself to make a fool of herself. She needed to escape Deke's wonderful arms. She'd beg off politely.

But the music ensconced her, into a dream-like state. Away from reality. Those big protective arms of his became her cocoon. Oh yes, this must be what people called a little bit of heaven, Emma sighed as her head came to rest comfortably on his shoulder and her eyes closed momentarily.

"You smell nice Emma," his words were softly spoken, "like Jasmines", his lips almost touching her cheek. He sounded sincere, yet almost regretful. As though he said those kinds of things against his own nature.

But Emma didn't care anymore, she was in Deke's arms, where she wanted to be, and she wanted to enjoy it—just a little. Even though her brain kept whispering hints of alarm, she ignored it.

Oh yes, she was enjoying herself now. All the months of pent up frustration, the months of running and hiding, and trying to make ends meet didn't seem to matter. Now she was safe, and warm, and drifting on some gossamer cloud. A cloud where only she and Deke seemed to exist.

"Waltz across Texas with you in my arms," the country singer wailed, as Deke continued to hold her close, continued to whisper sweet little words into her ear, until she forgot everything but Deke Travers.

Maybe she imagined them. Maybe she invented them. She couldn't be sure, the way she was feeling.

All to soon someone tapped Deke on the shoulder and she was whisked into a quick two-step again and lost in the crowd, with a stranger. Emma glanced about, her eyes flying open and around the room for Deke, but she no longer saw him, and her mind came back to reality with a fast jerk.

God, what had she been thinking. Letting a dance carry her away like that. She probably dreamed Deke's words. Of course she had, Mr. Cowboy wouldn't say he wanted her on a dance floor, in front of all these people. Wanted her? She'd better get a grip on reality fast. Deke Travers was her boss, and only being kind to her. She had better sense than to go making something of it.

Mingling during the next number she spotted Bertha.

"So, how's workin' at the 4 Bar None?" Bertha came up beside her.

"I'm enjoying it, Bertha." Emma replied glad to see a familiar face.

"I guess this place is a little overwhelming for a first timer. But neighbors so seldom get together out here. Holding a dance once a month was a good excuse to catch up on all the gossip."

"We never did anything this big, back home, I mean, not as a community," Emma said as she smiled and her nervous foot began to keep time with the music.

"So where is that beautiful little baby of yours? I was anxious to see her again," Bertha blurted giving her a quick once over, as a friend passed and she waved.

"Cal's watching her," Emma replied, sipping the punch she hadn't gotten around to drinking.

"Is he now. That rascal. I sorta wish he'd have come. He could've brought her with him."

"He said he might."

"I hope so. So how they treatin' you at the 4 Bar None?"

"Oh it's wonderful out there Bertha, so quiet and peaceful, and the Travers bunch are so nice."

Bertha chuckled.

Emma watched a couple out on the floor, kissing, dancing, and all wrapped up in each other.

Bertha chuckled as her gaze flitted from Emma to the couple. "That's Bill Gillespi and his new bride. Been married all of four days now."

"They certainly look happy with each other, don't they?"

"Four days, honey! They're still honeymooners. Wait till they been married a while. Then she'll be over at the food table arranging things, and he'll be off like your man, Deke there, talking to the other ranchers."

Emma looked in the direction Bertha was staring. Deke stood in the middle of a small crowd of men, his face serious, his head nodding.

"Oh, he's not mine, Bertha. He was kind enough to escort me here so I might meet some of my neighbors, that's all."

"Uh-huh. Well, Deke rarely escorts anyone. I can tell you that much. Rarely dances, so don't kid me, honey. I just never figured it would be him." Bertha was studying Deke like a fly under a microscope.

"Never be him? What are you talking about, Bertha?"

"Half the town's laid money it would be Jake or Clint."

"What would be Jake or Clint."

"Why the one you'd want to marry, of course." Bertha chuckled as though there was a big joke somewhere, and she wasn't getting the punch line.

"Marry!" Emma shrieked.

"Well, that's what everyone's hoping of course. And who'd blame you with all those gorgeous men to choose from."

Emma felt her anger surge from nowhere. "You mean people here are taking bets on me—and them?"

"Oh now, don't be offended, hon. We don't mean no harm. It's just we don't have much to speculate on out here. Most of the locals are done took. It's purely natural that we'd think you'd pick one of those boys. You could do a lot worse for yourself. There ain't a throw away in the bunch."

"But Bertha, I'm not here to pick a husband!" Emma cried loud enough for a couple to over-hear and smirk. Wanting to set the record straight, Emma went on to explain. "I have a child to take care of. I don't have the time for a husband, nor to look for one."

"That's all the more reason to look. A woman alone with a baby. You need a man, and don't you go thinkin' you don't. Besides, what's to look for, they're right at your back door. Anyway, you don't never go lookin' for a husband, they just sorta happen. Oh now, don't go gettin' riled up about it, honey. It's only natural. So why the hell not? And if for no better reason than the baby itself."

Emma nearly spewed her punch in Bertha's face. She might have gone on with her protest if she hadn't spotted Cal coming her way with the cutest little angel on his hip.

"You brought her!" Emma cooed, taking Sammie Jo into her arms immediately and hugging her.

"There's my little scamp. Come here darlin, say hello to Bertha." Bertha grabbed Sammie Jo up into her big arms and hugged her tight.

Sammie Jo giggled.

Cal shook his head. "Just like a woman, gotta start all that hugging and kissing."

"Oh Cal, she looks so cute, but where did you get that dress and boots?" Emma eyed him suspiciously.

"Remind me later, I'll tell you all about it. Excuse me ladies, won't you? I better go shake some hands, or I'll be accused of flirting." Cal chuckled as he sauntered away from them. "Save me a dance, Bertha."

"Sure darlin'. Oh that Cal." Bertha shook her head and watched him move into the same circle where Deke stood. "He's a wonder. You know, he looks better somehow than the last time I saw him. Deke must be really gettin' after him about the cigarettes."

"No, actually, he's slowed down on his own," Emma remarked as she took Sammie Jo from Bertha.

"This little doll is going to be the belle of the party, aren't you sweetheart?" Bertha glanced at Sammie Jo.

From out of nowhere, Jennifer and Rusty appeared next to them. "Hey there Sammie Jo, want ta meet someone?" Rusty stepped up to them and took the baby into his arms.

Jennifer smiled at them and looked at Sammie Jo. "Oh, she's so precious. Is she yours?"

That question haunted Emma. By all that was holy, she was, so she answered. "Yes, this is Sammie Jo—my daughter."

"Oh, you are such a little doll. And you look just like a rodeo queen," Jennifer cooed.

"Yeah, and Uncle Rusty is gonna show you how to two-step, right now darlin'." He took Sammie Jo out onto the dance floor. He held her tight and she snuggled right into his arms. It seemed Sammie Jo couldn't resist the Travers' charm any more than Emma.

Deke had started moving toward them from his circle of friends, he was halfway there when Emma was approached by Clyde Montana.

"Come on little gal, let's dance," the man pulled on Emma's arm and started dragging her out toward the dance floor.

"Uh, no, please, I'd rather sit this one out, if you don't mind."

"Oh but I do. I insist. I've had my eye on you all night. You've been dancin' with everyone but me . . ."

"Clyde, why don't you sit this one out," Bertha called from the distance.

"Sit it out. Not on your life. I'm gonna dance . . ."

"Clyde, she doesn't want . . ." Bertha began.

"Yes she does," Clyde muttered between gritted teeth. "My ole lady is sore and I'm gonna give her somethin' to be sore about," Clyde announced too loudly.

His hand on Emma's arm was biting into the flesh now and Emma tried to squirm free, but Clyde was having none of that. He slung her almost to the floor as he whirled about, drunkenly.

"Your not setting a very good example, Clyde," Deke said not far from his ear.

Deke's hand reached out to catch Emma before she fell, and his discerning frown was aimed for Clyde.

"Now back off, Deke. This is between me and the little lady." Clyde lunged for Emma.

"Afraid not, Clyde. This lady's with me." Deke interrupted and shoved Clyde against the dance floor.

Deke pulled Emma to his side and they were about to break through the small crowd gathering to watch when Clyde lunged at Deke and got in a hard right hook to Deke's jaw.

Deke staggered but wasted no time in reacting, a quick left sent Clyde sailing to the floor. "Now go home and sober up, Clyde and we'll let bygones be bygones."

It all happened in the briefest of moments. What came over Emma she wasn't sure, but Clyde came off the floor and lunged once more at Deke, and before she could stop to consider her actions, Emma stepped between them and Clyde's right hook took her down. The crowd shrieked with shock.

Deke started for Clyde, his face turned dark with fury, every muscle tensed with barely checked anger.

"No Deke, Emma needs you. Why don't you take her home." Cal put his hand out to his son.

"Yeah, go on." Rusty stepped between the two men and glanced down at Emma who was being rescued by Cal. "Take her on home Deke. We'll take care of Clyde. And don't worry, we'll bring Sammie Jo home."

"Dear Lord, I can't believe even you, Clyde Montana would hit a woman." Bertha rebuked him.

Clyde's face turned a pale shade, "Well don't blame me, she's the one that stepped between. Darn fool woman, don't she know better than to step between two men like that? Darn fool woman. Deke—I didn't mean . . ."

Deke's eyes blazed at the man, his restraint barely contained, his jaw so set no one said anything for a full minute as the two stared each other down. "This isn't over Clyde, you owe this little lady an apology. And you'll damn sure pay her doctor bill, too."

"Sure Deke . . ." Clyde muttered miserably as he swayed and fell to the floor in a stupor.

Deke's fist doubled, but he suddenly reached down and scooped Emma up into his arms, cradling her against him, and carried her out of the building and into the warm night air.

"Oh I've ruined the party," Emma groaned helplessly against Deke's pale blue shirt. Clyde had merely knocked the breath out of her, hitting her between the ribs. "I'm sorry Deke. I don't know what came over me in there. I'm always jumping in the middle of my brother's fights. I should have better sense by now."

"Emma," Deke cajoled, his jaw quivering with something akin to rage.

"What?" Emma stopped, leaning against the truck for support and staring up into his face. His blue eyed stare caught her breath for there was no anger, only a strange unbidden desire.

"Shut up," he said gently, taking her face into his hands and turning her so he could easily touch his lips to hers. He shattered all coherent thoughts into a thousand stars. Emma swayed against him, into him. Moaning again, only this time it wasn't from a blow to her stomach.

No this time it was pure and pleasurable delight. Warm inviting lips mingled against her own, at first tender and giving, and then more demanding as she let out a little gasp and he took the opportunity to explore deeper. Like velvet, his mouth moved over hers, his tongue slowly probing the sweet inner recesses.

Long dizzying seconds later he released her with a groan. His eyes blazed into her like a hot branding iron. "I'm not apologizing for that kiss Emma. I probably should, but I'm not."

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## Chapter Seven

When Deke zoomed into the driveway, the gravel flew every which way. He braked the truck and jerked open his door, but he didn't get out. Instead he just sat there, his hands on the steering wheel, tightening and untightening. His eyes stared unseeing out the cab window, with a glazed look to them. "Don't ever do that again." He gritted.

"Do what?" Emma faltered not knowing for sure what she'd done or why he was so upset.

"Come between me and someone in a situation like that. Don't you realize you might have been hurt? God, when I think what he might have done to you, it makes my skin crawl." He gripped the steering column till his hands paled.

"It was stupid, I know. And I'm sor . . ."

"If he'd hit you in the face, you'd have a hellova black eye right now. As it is, you'll probably have a bruise for days. I know he hurt you. Does it hurt when you breath?"

"N-no. I guess I moved to the best spot, he just knocked the wind out of me, honestly. You don't have to feel so responsible about it, Deke. At home I was always getting in the middle of my brother's fights. I'll have to admit I did get a few bruises. Dad said it served me right for jumping into a man's place. You'd think I'd learn, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not your brother, and your dad is a man I'd like to sit down and have a couple of conversations with, too." Deke frowned. "And then there's Charlie."

"Yes, Charlie," she echoed. "I know you're not my brother, but my instincts are still the same." She glanced at him again but he still wasn't looking at her. "And as for my

dad, well he's really not so bad, once you get to know him. I hope I haven't painted you a wrong picture."

"I'm not sure I'd want to get to know him." Deke muttered gripping the wheel again and looking away from her. She saw his jaw tighten in the brilliant moonlight filtering through the cab of the truck. Felt the tension in his shoulders as he hunched forward.

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Emma glared at him not sure whether to be mad or glad. She couldn't help it, she always got riled when anyone talked about her family. They had their faults, and she realized that, but no one talked about them but her. But after careful consideration, she realized Deke wouldn't be getting to know her father.

"Nothing Emma," Deke grunted getting out of the truck and slamming his door. Coming to her side, he stared at her through the window for a moment, then opened it and helped her out. "The last thing I want to do is argue with you right now."

"Then don't say anything about my family," she snapped, unable to look away from those probing eyes, fully aware of the warm hands that spanned her waist to help her down. Big strong hands. A new tension gripped her. She should move away, a voice inside her head cried. She wasn't used to dealing with a force like Deke Travers, especially in such a dark mood.

"Not family Emma, just your father. Family doesn't treat people the way your father treated you. But I'll lay it aside for now, because I don't want you mad when I kiss you again." He murmured, his head lowering as his eyes fastened onto her lips with raw determination. His voice had lowered, his eyes glittered, his hold tightened. "You deserve better."

"Your going to k . . ." her words died on her lips as his mouth fastened onto hers like a whisper at first. Mesmerizing.

For a moment she thought she simply imagined the kiss as he moved away so that the moonlight flushed her face. Emma's entire body went limp against the truck. She sighed aloud. She couldn't fake a composure she was far from feeling. It simply was not there. Charlie never kissed her like that. Her mind and body wasn't accustomed to such full-fledged awareness. Like being awakened from a long sleep, Emma simply stared at him, wordlessly when he raised his head.

She should stop this, but it felt as if her whole body had turned to rubber, her mouth to mush. She felt pulled to this man, as though being with him made her whole. She didn't understand what was happening to her, and she didn't want to analyze it. She simply needed to enjoy it.

"I don't seem to be able to help myself, Emma. Kissing you sorta comes natural. Now open your mouth and let me in." He coaxed her slowly pulling her into his arms again and lowering his mouth to hers once more. This kiss was different, much different. His lips seduced hers.

Her mind whirled as she inhaled the distinct odor of him, a hint of pine, a bit of hay and cattle, and him. The man. She felt the texture of his oxford shirt rub against her skin like a friction. Felt the heaviness of his jeans against her thigh. His cheek was soft and close shaven, inviting a caress, his body hard, unyielding.

Instinctively Emma's arms flew up and around his neck, as his warm mouth explored hers. Her mind skidded, unaware of anything but this wonderful man and his masterful, conquering lips.

Like velvet and silk coming together their lips sampled the textures. Slowly almost shyly she opened her lips again and a heady warmth enflamed her. Had lightening struck her she could not have moved.

Somewhere along the way, her knees buckled, and his hat flew to the ground as her fingertips edged into the soft nape of his hair, and she heard the whimpering guttural sounds from her own voice floating against the gentle night breeze. Never had a man's kiss taken her to such dizzying heights.

She should end it, a little voice echoed. Here and now, before it went any further. But a longing as old as time quivered through her, making her head spin, her heart pound. It felt natural somehow, being in this cowboy's arms. As though she might belong there. The thought that he cared what happened to her made her heart swell. But her mind must be deluding her if she thought he could care this quickly, this deeply for her. It was too soon for real feelings, Emma cautioned her heart. After all, it had taken years to come to love Charlie. Love him? Had she ever loved Charlie?

As Deke's kiss deepened a sweet tinge of longing from deep within took control. A strange heat flushed over her. Her breast tightened against his chest. Her head fell back against his arms and his lips began to mingle against the softened flesh of her cheek, her neck, her ear. Goosebumps! The goosebumps sent tremors of delight swirling through her.

His lips tingled against hers once more like a feather. His big hands moved all along her back, burning a trail of fire within her, making her dress swish in the night air.

He was the good cowboy in the white hat who had ridden up to protect her, and she was the helpless maiden in distress. He made her swoon. He made her senseless. He made her long for something she knew she could not have.

Groaning aloud he crushed her into his embrace with announced urgency. Her lips were no longer bashful. She kissed him on his lower lip, his jaw, his eyelids, the tip of his nose, and back to the liquid warmth of his mating tongue. She needed to meld, to mesh with this big wonderful man.

It would probably never happen again, her mind reminded her, and she wasn't going to miss a moment of the pleasure. When he pulled away, she saw the longing in his brilliant eyes. She'd never seen that look before in a man's eyes. Not for her! Oh she'd read about it, dreamed about it, but never witnessed it. It gave her a heady, powerful feeling. To have a man want her was a new experience, to want him back even newer.

What was it about Deke Travers that made her heart pop, and sing, and bounce against her chest like a ping pong ball gone haywire? She was the cook for heaven's sake, and he was the boss, but none of that mattered as he guided her into a world of feelings and emotions, unexplored before.

"I have no right, Emma. But you taste so sweet, look so beautiful, smell so wonderful." Was that what this was, the senses overloading? Yes,—it had to be.

He pulled her slowly, unerringly back into the circle of his arms, gently cradling her. His lips grazed softly against her ear lobe and his warm breath fanned her.

"Oh Deke," she cried as her lips met his once more finding a strange and wonderful fulfillment there. Maybe that's all it was, but for a little while she was going to enjoy it.

Lost and mindless, they were heedless of approaching footsteps and when Jake rounded the truck, he cleared his throat and began an apology that was only half heard, half appreciated.

"Sor-ry Deke." Jake started backing his tracks.

Deke pulled away first, leaving Emma shaken. He couldn't possibly know that she could barely stand alone. Couldn't know the helplessness of new awareness surrounding her. Perhaps he thought she'd done this many times. At twenty four she should have been pretty experienced in necking with a man, but she felt inexperienced. Charlie's kisses never affected this way. No man's had.

Emma managed to open her eyes somehow, and her glance landed on Deke's chest. The quick rise and fall of his chest warned her that Deke's reactions met her own. But his expression was unreadable.

She remembered something Frank had told her once. "A man can want a woman whether it's advisable or not. Just remember that. You have all the controls."

Drifting slowly back to earth, Emma let the truck support her, for she knew she couldn't stand on her own. She wanted to bask in this new and wonderful feeling, to absorb it, and cherish it and remember it always.

She wouldn't make more of it than it was, but she'd always remember it.

"Something wrong Jake?" Deke asked his voice barely belying his control.

"Uh-well, yeah, you were right about the water," Jake said, his eyes going first over his brother, then Emma. "I thought I'd better tell you, I've already spoken with the authorities, they'll be out tomorrow."

"Damn, that's not good. Have you tested any of the other springs?"

"No, didn't have time."

"Looks like we've got our work cut out for us on this one."

"Yeah, looks like." Jake glanced at Emma again. It was obvious Jake wasn't comfortable with his intrusion and needed to escape.

"Well hell brother, don't let me interrupt your evening. There's nothing we can do tonight. Sorry Emma."

Emma mustered her control, willed her legs to move and began to walk past them to the house. "Nonsense, it was a lovely evening, thanks Deke."

Jake nodded to his brother and began moving off.

"Emma, I'll see you to the house. You need to get some rest. If you need anything just let us know," Deke was saying, his eyes darting questioningly to her as his hand glided about her gently. Deke seemed as honestly confused about kissing her as she did. As though it took him by storm too.

"Something wrong, Emma. Didn't you have a good time at the dance?" Jake asked from the distance.

"No-no everything is fine, Jake. It was a lovely dance," Emma managed to say not daring to meet Deke or Jake's glance.

"Yeah, only she managed to get between me and a bad mannered guest." Deke affirmed.

As Deke retold the story quickly, Emma moved away from his warm arms putting distance between them. She needed to get her head on straight again. What had she been thinking? Kissing the boss so shamelessly. After all, it had merely been a dance, and he had been a perfect gentleman. There was no need to exaggerate her importance to this man. He had kissed her goodnight, and sweet as it had been, she needed to put it away from her. Gain some distance.

"I wonder how long it will be before they bring Sammie Jo home?" Emma asked as Deke joined her on the porch.

Deke stopped, his eyes going over her thoroughly. "Don't you fret about that. You just get some rest. I'll see to Sammie Jo, tonight. I'll put the playpen in my room. You may need a doctor. If you want I'll have a look at those ribs, later. If they need setting we'll call the doc out. You let me know. You just turn in now, Emma."

"Oh that won't be necessary. I'll be fine. He really just knocked the wind out of me. And Sammie Jo is my responsibility."

Jake shook his head. "No use arguing with the man Emma. When he decides he's taking over, he just does." He quickly disappeared around the back of the house.

"Are you sure?" Emma gaze held question.

"I'm sure." Deke's eyes finally connected with hers and there was no question he still wanted her as much as he had a few moments ago. Emma flushed. Perhaps he was right. The way she was feeling she needed to sort her thoughts and feelings and get away from this powerful man.

"All right, maybe your right. But I think I'll have a nice soak in the tub if you don't mind. And Deke—"

"Yeah," Deke stared at her.

"I had a nice time, thanks."

"Goodnight Emma." A ring of frustration seem to haunt his voice and Emma wished she could erase that frown from his handsome face once more

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As Emma prepared for her bath she heard Deke and Jake talking in the living room. She should be scolding herself for acting so wantonly with the boss man but the feelings surging through her had nothing to do with guilt. Besides, it was just a kiss. Yet, he'd awakened a part of her that needed awakening. It was long overdue. She couldn't be ashamed of that, it was only natural. But of course falling for the boss man would be a mistake, she quickly realized. Deke had enough problems, and she certainly wouldn't complicate them for him. She'd take his kiss in stride and remember it always, even though she knew forgetting her own feelings would take some time. It always did with women, Kate had once told her. God, she had to forget somehow. He'd been a regular John Wayne tonight. And she loved John Wayne.

It was an hour or so later, Emma had been drifting off to sleep in the tub when she heard everyone come in and voices up and down the hallway. Quickly she pulled the plug and stepped out of the cool tub.

Her heart fluttered wildly at the sound of Deke's deep voice. Honestly, she was reacting like some silly schoolgirl. So Deke had kissed her. No need to make anything of it. He had taken her to a dance. He had kissed her goodnight. She was the one making a fool of herself, letting it go to her head.

She heard Rusty and Jennifer laughing and talking to Sammie Jo. She heard the baby giggle and bubble. A sad thought hit her. Sammie Jo seemed so happy here. What would happen when they had to leave? Because they would have to leave eventually.

Minutes later it grew quiet again. She'd heard the front door slam, heard Cal's bedroom door close, and Deke's boots crunching against the floor all the way down the hall.

She remembered his arms around her and her heart fluttered wildly. She scoffed at herself.

Drying and dressing in her terry robe, she crept down the hallway on tiptoe. It was dark and the only thing lighting her way was a light from Deke's doorway.

She hadn't heard a whimper out of Sammie Jo since everyone retired. Obviously Sammie Jo had quite a night of it.

She saw the door to Deke's bedroom ajar. She heard his voice, soft and lulling, and felt drawn by it. But he wasn't alone, she soon realized as she tiptoed up to the door. Sammie Jo was with him. And Deke was talking to her as though she understood every word. He pulled out an old book from a drawer and settled them both back into the rocking chair.

Then he began reading to Sammie Jo. He paused and glanced down at her. "This is the same story my Mama used to read to me every night. I remember it so well, I almost don't have to read it."

A story about some pig with a curly tail. Emma's heart gave a lurch.

She never imagined a big, busy cowboy like Deke Travers sitting in a rocking chair holding a baby, reading a story, and sounding as though he enjoyed every moment of it.

"What? You don't think I had a Mama?" He slanted the baby a weird expression. "Well I did. And she was almost as pretty as yours."

Emma's heart lurched again. What a strange and wonderful combination this man was. The kind of combination a woman could get her heart tangled up with. But of course not hers. No, she wasn't here for a man. She wasn't looking for a husband.

Still it didn't stop her lingering gaze. She silently feasted on him and Sammie Jo.

"You've had yourself quite a night, haven't you young lady. I remember my first dance. I hated it. Some little gal kept stepping on my toes and I hated it," he was saying.

Oh Lord, she'd stepped on his toes a million times tonight it seemed. Perhaps after all, he was just being kind to her and Sammie Jo.

Sammie Jo smiled at Deke, and laid her head against his flat, half-naked chest. His shirt was unbuttoned, as though he were in the process of getting ready for bed. Emma's breath stopped when she realized she was staring through the doorway at her boss. Something slithered through her body jolting her awareness. Guilty as charged, she kept on staring. Her hungry eyes traveled the length of him lazily. After all, he'd never know she was there and this way she could gaze till her heart's desire and no one would be the wiser. She'd never thought of men as beautiful, but Deke's body was so long, and lean and all man, it took her breath away. He wasn't Mr. Universe, but every piece of flesh was hard, sinewed man. She envied Sammie Jo cuddling against him.

She had to force herself to go to her room, and forget the entire evening, if she could. She was nearly at her door when she heard the sweetest of music coming from Deke's room.

Her head twisted in that direction again. She shouldn't, she really shouldn't, but the music was lovely, and her curiosity was unleashed.

It sounded like a—harmonica. How she loved music. Her brother had played the guitar. She'd enjoyed the live band at the dance, but this was such a sweet and lovely sound it drew her.

Emma edged towards Deke's doorway for a second time. It was a harmonica, she smiled as she peered through the half closed door. And Deke was playing it. A lovely ballad.

Emma's breath caught in her throat when she spotted Sammie Jo half asleep, snuggling against him, as he played, "When Irish eyes are Smiling".

"So, did you have a goodtime at the dance, sweetheart?" Deke was asking as he finished the tune and looked down at the baby, his hand smoothing the hair from the sweet little face that was nearly asleep.

Sammie Jo sighed.

Deke chuckled softly, "God, you are a sweet little thing. No wonder Dad is so taken with you. You're like a real medicine for him. Just what the doctor ordered. You're going to be a man-killer when you grow up. How could a man leave such a beautiful little thing like you, I wonder. He couldn't begin to imagine how lucky he could have been."

Sammie Jo slept so soundly Emma knew she was down for the night. She watched as Deke lowered her into the playpen, and spread a blanket over her. Then he leaned the distance over the crib and kissed Sammie Jo on the forehead. "Goodnight Sweet Pea."

Any thoughts of Deke not being able to handle Sammie Jo for the night disappeared as Emma crept back to her bedroom. She knew sleep was going to evade her though. Too many things had happened to get a good night's sleep.

But there was a sure fire cure for sleeplessness. She darted for the kitchen on tiptoe. She'd make herself a cup of hot chocolate and then she'd go right to sleep. She used to do it for her oldest brother when he'd had a particularly rough night of it. It always worked.

She heard Denver barking outside, although he sounded far away, she recognized his bark. Probably off chasing a coon, or the likes. She smiled, she loved to listen to dogs howling in the moonlight. It sounded romantic.

The moon lit the kitchen in a slight glow, but she turned the dim light over the sink on to fix her hot chocolate.

The milk was nearly ready when Deke walked in on her, jolting her back to an awareness she wasn't prepared for. She tightened the sash to her robe, subconsciously. Then her eyes took one swooping look at him and darted away. His shirt was still unbuttoned, leaving a good eye's view of a hairless chest.

"Can't sleep?" He asked, his voice a rough timber, as his eyes traveled her equally as slow.

"I'm so used to having Sammie Jo with me, I can't get to sleep without her." She didn't dare look at him after he spoke, afraid he might guess the real reason.

"So what are you making?" He asked moving closer.

"Hot chocolate." She moved away, her hands closing her robe tighter. He saw the action, obviously from his smile, but he didn't comment.

"Sounds good, enough for both of us, I hope."

"Sure," she added just a tad more milk and placed the jug in the refrigerator. When she turned about he was still staring and still just as close.

"How's the ribs?"

"Oh, I'll probably be sore, but they aren't broken." She assured him.

"That's good." He leaned close, against the counter, and she found a reason to move away as she reached for the cocoa.

"What was Sammie Jo's father like?" He blurted out of thin air.

It was the last question Emma expected to hear. And it more than brought her down to earth.

"Oh I don't know." She sighed wishing silently he wouldn't bring up this subject, either. "He was young, ambitious, and I guess you'd say restless." Emma answered as truthfully as she could.

"I don't get it."

Emma put the spoon down after adding cocoa and stirring it, then turned to face him, "Don't get what?"

"You don't seem like the kind of girl to get into this kind of predicament." He reached for the cups about the same time she did and their hands collided, they both moved away quickly.

Emma squirmed. Here it comes again, she felt her heart leap into a quandary. She'd have to lie again. And where would it end. Should she just tell him? But then it would only involve him in her problems. Problems she hadn't even begun to settle yet. He had enough to contend with. Better to lie and leave when she could than to make more trouble for this nice man and nice family.

"A man leads with his right hook, and a woman leads with her heart."

"Oh," An eyebrow went up.

"That's what my brother Frank used to say."

"This brother Frank you talk a lot about him. But not the others. Why?"

"We were very close the last few years. I think he was the only one that really realized how hard Dad was on me."

"I don't know how you stood it so long. Most girls would have married and moved awa—"

He stopped in mid sentence. "My God, that's it, isn't it. You were trying to get away from him any way you could. By getting pregnant."

Emma felt her stomach churn, her heart bumped against her chest for her dead cousin's situation had suddenly become hers. "No. I was very inexperienced. Young. Stupid."

"Then you were in love with this guy." Something in the way Deke said it made her look at him. As though those words disappointed him.

"I wasn't in love with Joel. I was just very wet behind the ears, so to speak. But I thought I was in love with Charlie." She hated the lies. "I don't know much about men, I'll admit, but with young girls it takes a while to learn all the rules."

"Rules, what rules?"

"About what a man really wants when he kisses a girl. About what he means when he says he loves her, wants her. Those kinds of rules. Girls take it more seriously, till they learn."

"And you've learned."

"I think so. I'd like to think so, at least."

"Did he know you were pregnant when he left?"

"Y-yes."

Some of it was true. If only she could just tell him. But he put so much stock in the truth and she had already compounded the lie.

Deke's fist hit the counter, "Damn Emma . . ."

"W-well, the hot chocolate is ready. Let's see if it works as good as they say it does."

"Emma—about tonight—"

"Look. It was a lovely evening. Please don't spoil it with apologies. I understand. It was a splendid dance, and you ended it with a goodnight kiss. Let's don't make any more of it than it was. Okay. I certainly haven't."

"Is that how you want it?" Deke questioned, his voice lowering.

"Yes, of course."

He sighed aloud, as though he were much relieved by the news. "I never dreamed you were such a level-headed girl, Emma. It's a pity this other guy didn't know it."

Suddenly the tension fled from the room. Deke seemed eager to talk about the ranch, the cattle, the poisoned ponds, anything, except the kisses they'd shared. Emma realized he was relieved, and it hurt, but she hid it behind a false front.

"So, don't you have a favorite brother?" She changed the subject.

"No—well, maybe. It's Jake. You might say he's the gifted one of the bunch." Deke smiled.

"You keep saying that. But how can one brother be so gifted and not the others? A man who loves the land and the ranch as much as you do, and you say Jake's meant for better things. I don't understand that."

"Don't get me wrong, the land means something. It means home, and family, and all the things that are really important. But Jake is more scholarly than the rest of us put together. He's going to amount to something. He could be a lawyer."

"Does he want to be a lawyer?"

"I honestly don't know. We thought he did, but I just don't know."

"And the other boys, and what they want, don't they count?"

"Sure, they count. Not a throw away in the Travers bunch, but Rusty, he'll hang around here, marry his sweetheart and bring up a parcel of kids, maybe take over here some day. Who knows. Clint, I just don't know about Clint. He comes on kinda strong, but it's all an act. He fell for a girl here while back and it didn't work out. Ever since, he's been running away."

"What's wrong with Clint?" Emma handed him his hot chocolate and sat down at the small kitchen table.

"The rodeo is wrong with Clint. He's a risk taker. And he's a lonely man. He's a charmer, but it's all just a front. Deep down he just needs a nice gal to settle him down. He was meant for ranching, best hand I have. But I'm losing him to his wild side. I feel that. Funny, I guess I grew up thinking they'd all want to stay here. I guess I assumed a little too much"

"That's how you figure it?" Emma frowned.

"Sure, why not?"

"Is that what he really wants?"

"Of course it is. Yeah, sure it is." Deke frowned.

"And what do you want Deke?"

"I've got what I want." He gulped the hot chocolate and made a grimace.

"Oh!" Emma sighed heavily, putting her hot chocolate to rest on the table. So he had every thing he wanted. So he was happy. Why did that make her the least bit sad?

"I'm not saying I don't have troubles, from time to time. I do. But I'm pretty damn lucky, Emma. I got a spread here to work for the rest of my life, if I want to. I've got a family I wouldn't trade in. It's a good life."

"And that's all?" Emma questioned.

"What more is there?" Deke sounded almost angry, only not at her, more with himself.

"Nothing—I guess. Well, it feels as though the hot chocolate is working, I think I'll turn in. Goodnight Deke, and thanks again for the dance."

"Night Emma, sleep well."

"Yeah," Emma quipped, not believing she would.

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## Chapter Eight

"I don't see any real problem with custody of the child, Ms. Smith." The lawyer came around the desk and peered at Emma from over the top of his glasses.

"Really?"

"More a matter of court papers being signed and waiting for the appropriate amount of time to pass," he explained.

"Time to pass, I don't understand." Emma knitted her hands in her lap.

"Yes, well, the papers will give you full custody rights, but we have to wait a certain amount of time to make sure it isn't contested. By the father or any other living relatives. Fathers, even bad ones still have rights, you know."

"Joel isn't interested in Sammie Jo."

"Any other relatives that might have an interest in the child?"

"No—uh, yes, Joel's grandfather."

"You think he might file a petition?"

"I don't know. I've never met him, personally."

"Perhaps you should. It might make it easier to resolve if you talked with him, if he saw you with the baby."

"I'll think about it."

"Good. And I'll contact you when it's time. You'll still be at the 4 Bar None?"

"Yes, as far as I know. If anything drastic changes, I'll let you know."

"Fine."

Emma realized she wasn't any further than she was six months ago to getting full custody. If she'd had the papers drawn up then, it would have been over by now. Damn, she hadn't planned on this.

She left the lawyer's office, with him telling her not to worry, even if the father or father's parents protested, they wouldn't have much to stand on since it was Emma who had taken care of the child. Good care of the child.

But the elder Mr. Collins could be a real challenge. He had the money and position to pull favors from judges.

Still Emma wanted it over and done with, and she wouldn't stop worrying till it was.

"Get things taken care of?" Clint met her outside the lawyer's office.

"Yes, for now. Thanks for driving me into town, Clint, I should have come sooner, is all."

Clint seemed to watch her with a curious eye, but never once on the drive home did he question her purpose and Emma was silently glad. The less the Travers knew, the better, for their own sake.

Clint talked all about the rodeo and how he was anxious to get back to it. Emma smiled, indulging him his need to talk about a taboo subject at home.

"What about girls Clint?"

"What about them?" Clint gripped the steering column a little tighter. "I don't get too serious about women anymore. Not that I'm against 'em. Just don't want to get tied down to one like Rusty."

"Never?"

"Maybe," he glanced over at her and winked. "When I'm done riding the circuit. But it'll take one heck of a girl to settle me down again. Got caught in that trap once, don't aim to try my hand at it again for a while."

"What happened—I mean, if you want to talk about it."

"She wanted the whole kit and caboodle. Marriage, kids, the house with the white picket fence."

"So, what happened? What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I mean if you were the settling down type. I guess she got tired of waiting, she ran off with a friend of mine. Not that it was serious with them either.. A real slick talker. Yeah, she played me for the sucker. Got me to believing in those kids and picket fences. Till I wised up. No ma'am it'll take one heck of a woman to settle me down now. About the only gal I've paid much attention to is Abby, and even she's gone now. We were good friends, I—I miss her."

"Did you love her Clint?" Emma's voice softened as she waited for his answer.

"Who Abby?" Clint shook his head no.

"Yes."

"Yes ma'am, I still do."

Then he turned the radio on and started singing aloud, getting Emma to sing along with him. They were laughing when they arrived home that evening, and Deke had the stormiest of scowls on his face when they burst into the kitchen.

He'd been busy with the health department officials and couldn't leave the ranch to take her into Sweetwater.

"Sounds like the two of you had a good time," Cal said as he fed Sammie Jo some mashed potatoes and green beans that Emma had set aside for her supper.

"Great time," Clint added with a wink to Emma.

Emma didn't understand why Clint played up the day so, but she didn't question him. Instead she went about putting on her apron and starting supper as though nothing had happened. She didn't even take the time to change into a regular t-shirt.

"Get your business taken care of, Emma?" Deke asked, handing Cal a napkin to wipe the baby's face.

"Yes, but I'll probably have to make another trip in shortly," Emma responded without looking directly at anyone.

"No problem, be glad to give you a lift, anytime, Emma." Clint winked again, and watched as everyone glanced at him questioningly.

"Thank you, I'll let you know." Emma smiled at Clint.

On the trip home she had gotten to know Clint much better and come to the same conclusion as Deke. Clint was suffering, but whatever it was it was deeper than what he spoke of. She wished she could help him, she hated seeing him in such pain and not being able to just let it out.

"So bro, did you test the other ponds yet?" Clint asked as everyone crowded around Sammie Jo, who was eating up the attention.

"Yeah, and fortunately a couple of the others weren't affected." Deke took Sammie Jo out of the highchair and held her in his arms, as though the act came naturally to him. "Still means moving the herd. We've lost about a half dozen head. It also means that irrigation system has to be fixed. We have no choice on that matter. And I'm going to need all the help I can get to finish it before winter sets in," Deke was saying, his eyes occasionally straying to Emma as he spoke and giving Sammie Jo the pleasure of an occasional smile.

"We've handled tougher things than this, we'll get through it." Clint slapped Deke on the back and smiled.

"You're certainly in a jovial mood."

"It's the good company I've been keeping." Clint winked and started out of the room. "Excuse me, I'm gonna get washed up for supper unless you need somethin' bro?"

"Go ahead." Deke watched Clint walk down the hall.

"Sounds like Clint might be coming out of that mood of his," Cal said chuckling.

"And it's about time. I was worried. Looks like Emma might be just the right medicine."

"We all were worried about him," Deke commented dryly, as though he weren't as pleased as his father about the news.

He shot Emma a glance but she turned away. Deke picked up his hat that he laid on the back of a chair and nodded. "Don't wait supper on my account."

He handed Sammie Jo to Cal. Cal and Emma both jumped when he slammed the door.

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For the next couple of weeks Emma kept her distance from Deke. He'd been out of sorts and jumpy for the past few days and Emma didn't want to make matters worse. She didn't want to make him any angrier and obviously it was she who made him angry. She didn't know if it was because Clint had taken her into town when she should have been here, working and taking care of Sammie Jo. Or maybe because Clint was paying extra attention to her suddenly.

Sammie Jo was walking much better now and getting into everything. She had won Cal's heart when she started getting his bed-slippers every evening and helping him put them on. Emma watched the exchange of love between them. Poor baby, she needed a family.

Still, Emma was a wreck trying to keep her out of things that would hurt her. At first it was little things, like the TV, radios, and Papa Cal's old dear hunting boots. But then

she ventured into the kitchen and Emma tried everything to turn Sammie Jo's attention on the few toys she had.

"Sammie Jo, no!" Emma cried out one evening after supper when Emma was doing the dishes. "The soap is not to eat. Go get your teddy, honey."

"She's really getting curious, isn't she?" Cal watched Emma distract the baby.

"Yes, and I'm so happy Rusty built that shelf over the washer so I could store all the poisons and cleaners up there. But she's climbing too. Just yesterday I caught her trying to get into that very shelf. She'd moved a chair over there. I can't believe she could figure that out for herself."

"They are smart. Half to watch 'em all the time."

Never had Emma realized what a chore raising a toddler could be. She thought she'd get some slack as Sammie Jo got older, but the problems seemed to multiply. Sammie Jo was such an explorer, a risk taker. Afraid of nothing, and curious about everything.

It was early on Saturday when Sammie Jo was sitting on the floor of the kitchen with her juice and a ball to play with, that she decided to get her own cracker. She had asked for one several times and Emma had ignored her. Not that she wanted to deprive her, she just knew she couldn't be hungry after eating a big meal.

Climbing was a new feat Sammie Jo had become very interested in and she pushed a chair up to the counter and climbed into it. She wasn't shy about her new bag of tricks and she wasn't scared. Straining for the jar, she only managed to push it off the counter. A loud crash reverberated from the kitchen.

Emma had gone to clean one of the bedrooms. She thought she heard a noise and realizing Sammie Jo hadn't followed her into the bedroom as she usually did, she ran toward the kitchen, holding her chest in fright. What now?

Sammie Jo was there, screaming at the top of her lungs. She had scooted the jar to the edge of the counter, knocked it off and broken it in a million pieces. When she had tried to retrieve her prize, a cracker, she had stepped into the broken shards of glass and her foot was bleeding. It was hard to tell if it was serious since blood covered most of her foot.

Emma let out a helpless scream. Deke came running into the kitchen from the barn, his face a complete storm cloud, his hands still dirty from working on repairing Emma's truck.

"What the h--"

"She got into the cracker jar. She must have knocked it off the counter. I thought she followed me into the bedroom. She always does. I should have made sure. It's all my fault. I'm so sorry. I'll clean this mess up as soon as I get her foot taken care of."

Emma was crying and holding Sammie Jo up to the sink to wash the baby's foot.

Sammie Jo screamed.

"Oh I know it hurts darling. Mommy will fix it and make it better," Emma cooed, but her own emotions were welling and she was in no better position than Sammie Jo.

"Hey now Sweet Pea, what have you done?" Deke's voice went from brittle to soft and assuring as he took Sammie Jo out of Emma's arms and cradled her against him.

The calm that was all Deke Travers seemed to take hold of Sammie Jo too and she stopped crying, "Dada."

"Yeah, well, that's as good as any, I guess. Let's get this doctored and put a bandage on it. Old Papa used to tell me that a bandage would cure anything." He glanced at

Emma who still held her chest in fright. "She's gonna be just fine. Just lacerated the skin. Get the peroxide from the bathroom, Emma."

"Yes, yes of course." Emma dashed from the room, unthinking, only doing what she was told. She couldn't think right now, the blood from Sammie Jo's foot had scared her out of her wits.

"Dada, owie," Sammie Jo whimpered against Deke's shirt front.

"Yes Sweet Pea, I know. But you're going to feel a lot better real soon. We'll get it fixed up. And we'll put a dandy bandage on it too so you can show Papa," Deke said as Emma dashed back with the bottle of peroxide.

Emma went red all over at Sammie Jo's referral to Deke as Dada. How could she have come to such a conclusion? And why Deke of all the men on the ranch?

"I'll need some tweezers to pull the glass out of her foot. I wanted to calm her down first. She'll be fine."

Emma's face went white.

"Are you okay?" Deke glanced at her with concern.

"Just can't stand the sight of blood."

"Take a deep breath and get the tweezers, honey."

A small word, but so heartwarming, Emma felt the tears well and stick in her throat. "I'll get it."

When she returned to the kitchen she found Deke talking very softly to Sammie Jo, and the baby had quit crying. Emma stopped and stared. Handing him the tweezers, she shook her head. "You really have a way with children."

Deke smiled down at the baby, "I don't know if it's all children, or just this one. I guess I picked it up from dad."

"Now that I can believe." Emma smiled, her cheeks were still damp from her tears, and her hands still shook.

"You know you'd do better not to get so worked up every time this little critter decides to get into something. It's natural, she's curious. This won't be the last of it. She's not afraid of the horses either. Dad let her ride with him the other day and she looked on top of the world."

"I'm only beginning to realize what a stunt girl she is. But it scares me. She's all I have, and I'm afraid for her. Afraid for me. I can't lose her."

Deke looked up this time, and their eyes met and held for a long moment. "She'll be fine. And she's not all you have Emma. You have us."

Emma was speechless. Us, not him, she thought vaguely then squashed the notion from her mind.

After he doctored the baby's foot and put a couple of bandages on her, Sammie Jo, smiled and got out of his lap. She walked and showed off her bandages to Uncle Rusty, and Papa Cal when they came in too.

"Why don't you go get your book, and I'll read you a story before napttime," Emma suggested, sweeping up the mess.

Sammie Jo scuttled off to the other room.

"Thanks Deke. I'm sorry we are such a bother."

"You're no bother, Emma." Deke walked over to her. His eyes held hers for a long moment. "Sorry I've been such a bear lately, but this water problem has got me in knots."

"I know, I wish I could help."

"You're a big help." He was very close to her, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath. She wanted to lean the distance, and go into his arms, but the sound of little feet brought her quickly to reality. What had she been thinking? The room was full of people now.

"I better get back to work," she said breathlessly.

"Yeah," Deke muttered, "so had I. See ya Sweet Pea," he echoed from the door his eyes going to the baby then to Emma.

He was talking to the baby, but Emma recognized the look in his eyes. As though he regretted having to leave her and the baby just now. She knew instantly that Deke felt the same way she did at that moment. The rest of the day went by in a blur as she tried to dispel the feelings washing over her every time she got a glimpse of Deke Travers.

The following Saturday was Clint's birthday and Emma baked him a big chocolate cake. She was fond of parties and had often longed for them herself as a child. Doing this for Clint made her feel as though she were a real part of their family. Besides, she suspected a party might be good for the young cowboy's morale.

She planned a small family party for him and invited the boys from the bunk house. She managed to surprise him. No one knew what she was up to. She decorated the dining room with what little supplies she could muster, and set the table nicely.

Clint turned red when after supper the boys filed into the dining room, with their spit and polish. "Gee, I haven't had a birthday party since I was a kid, Emma. You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble, but I'm glad you did. I've been smelling your cooking all day and wondered what was up. Come on in boys and take a load off."

"Just cut out the mushy stuff and blow out your candles," Cal said with a chuckle.

Clint looked around the table, blew out the candles and Sammie Jo put her arms around his neck. "Birthday," she said and kissed Clint on the cheek.

"Thanks darlin'." Clint said and smiled, kissing the baby on the cheek. "Now, how big a piece do you want, Sammie Jo?"

Sammie Jo stretched her little arms wide. "Big."

"You got it." Clint laughed.

Cal sat Sammie Jo in his lap and fed her cake, while Emma passed everyone a piece. He had bought Clint a pair of lizard boots which were not wrapped, but he had stuck a bow on them and gave them to him. Rusty produced a new rope for him. The boys in the bunkhouse made him a silver belt-buckle which they fashioned, "All around ranch hand". Clint chuckled. Jake bought him a new suit, western-cut of course, Emma suspected Clint wouldn't wear a regular suit.

Deke cleared his throat and looked seriously at his younger brother. "Clint, I know you've got your heart set on the rodeo, and you know how I feel about it. I'll always think your place is here, on the ranch, but just this once, I gave in. Your present is outside."

Clint's brows drew together. "Outside? Now what on earth could you have gotten me . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked out the back door. One of the hands drove up the back way with a big white horse trailer and a huge bow on it.

"Damn—a horse-trailer. That must have set you back considerable, bro. Dammit what'd you go a do a thing like that for?" Emotion choking his voice.

"Well, if I gotta have a brother in the rodeo, he's going to be there in style."

Clint went to look it over, as Emma watched from a distance. Deke held back, too. It was obvious the way Clint moved and checked every detail, how proud he was of the present.

"You've changed your mind about Clint and the rodeo?" Emma barely managed to get the words out. She felt as choked up about the gesture as Clint had been.

Deke turned to look at her. "No—I'll never change my mind about that. But I guess he deserves a chance to do what he wants to do. You taught me that." He glanced over at her and cleared his throat. "I just wish he wouldn't break his neck doing it."

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard," Emma said quietly. "You're really something, Deke Travers. You all are."

"Emma—" Deke reached for her, his hand nearly grazing hers, but she backed up and let a tear roll down her cheek. "You're pretty special too, honey. This party was just what he needed."

He reached to gently flick the tear away, and just as he would have kissed her she pulled out of his reach.

"I've got to get the coffee on." She said and fled from his nearness.

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Deke stood in the doorway, staring after his brother. He heard the crickets chirping, Denver barking in the distance, and felt the sadness surrounding him when he thought about Emma falling for Clint.

She admitted she hadn't been able to buy Clint a present, but Clint had only laughed and kissed her tenderly on the cheek, explaining the party was the next to best present.

Deke tensed now. He had to set things straight with his brother. He didn't want to hurt him, or his feelings. But dammit, Emma was wrong for Clint.

Later, when the party died down and Clint was out in the barn putting away his new gear, Deke joined him.

"Clint I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure big brother, what's on that serious mind of yours?"

"I had several things on my mind when I gave you that gift. I wanted to talk to you about them."

Clint glanced over at Deke. "Well shoot bro, get it off your chest. I could tell you've been wanting to say something for quite a while. I just wasn't sure what."

"I'm not going to lie to you Clint, about anything. I gave you that trailer for two reasons. One was unselfishly given, wanting to make you happy, encouraging you to keep your dreams."

"And the other?" Clint watched him intently.

Deke grabbed a piece of straw from a nearby bale and stuck it in his mouth. "The other is about Emma. I wanted you to miss the rodeo so bad you'd go back to it, and forget her."

"Forget her? Now Deke—"

"I know what you are about to say. I'm the biggest fool that ever lived, and I know it. You and Emma are good for each other, and I started out with the full intention of getting the two of you together, but . . ."

"You started out. You mean you wanted me to fall for Emma?"

Deke nodded, feeling like a fool.

Clint shook his head. "And now you don't."

"It doesn't much matter what I want. It's no longer in my hands. This is up to Emma. If she wants you, little brother, I certainly won't stand in her way."

Clint's eyes rounded on his brother with nothing short of merriment. "You big dumb dope. You think Emma is in love with me?"

"It sure looks that way. She baked you a cake, threw you a party, looks at you with those beautiful whiskey eyes of hers like I don't know." Deke sighed heavily. "She's a fine woman. And you're a good brother. I planned this, and it worked. So I guess I should be happy."

"You planned this?" Clint repeated.

"Yeah," Deke tried not to look miserable.

"If this don't beat all." Laughter bubbled from Clint. "Boy howdy, I never thought I'd see the big Deke Travers fall so hard, so fast. Look," Clint placed an affectionate hand on his brother's shoulder. "The three of us didn't want to conspire against you, Deke. It wasn't our intention, but you're such a nerd when it comes to women and what you really need. We decided to give you a little push in the right direction. And it looks like it worked."

"What are you talking about?" Deke frowned not liking the fact that his little brother was laughing at him.

"I'm saying Dad, Rusty, Jake and I and even the boys in the bunkhouse have been trying to get the two of you, you and Emma together. You're made for each other. Can't you see it? And that little gal may not know it yet, but she's in love with you too, along with little Sweet Pea."

"Why are you doin' this? You know she loves you." Deke looked deep into Clint's dark eyes finding nothing but humor there.

"Sure I love her. Who wouldn't. But like a sister, bro. Like a sister. Now why don't you get your butt in there and show her who the boss is around here?" Clint smiled.

"Why are you doing this?" Deke demanded.

Clint smiled slyly, "Because, dammit, a man doesn't say these things often, but I love you bro and I want to see you happy for a change."

"Me?"

"That's right, you. You've worked your damned tail off keeping this place going, out of the red so to speak. You've taken all your time and effort and put it in the ranch. Our home. And yes, bro, it's my home too. And I do love it here. I just love the rodeo too. So don't worry so much. I'll stick around till the irrigation system is working again. I'll help out till you don't need me anymore then I'm going back to what I love, the rodeo. Right now that's my love—the rodeo—and my family. Now get in there and tell her how you feel." Clint gave him a shove.

Deke stumbled, then smiled at Clint. "I can't believe my own family would ..."

"Would what? Conspire to make you happy?" Clint shot him a quick smile. "Count on it, bro. I've got to admit though, you had me worried."

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The house was quiet and dark. Only a light shining from under Emma's door lit the hallway. Deke knocked softly. "Emma?"

Emma cracked her door. "Yes."

The sight of her stole his breath. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure, but you'll have to be quiet. Sammie Jo is nearly asleep." she insisted opening the door wider.

The light shone through the thin material of her gown, outlining the perfect silhouette of a woman. Deke grew warm.

"Then come to my room."

"I don't think that's such a good idea," she insisted, jerking her hand free of his.

"Please Emma, it's important." He insisted, his intense gaze burning into her like a flame.

"I'm not dressed." Emma tried to dissuade him.

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. I'm in my gown, it's late, and you want me to come to your room. What do you think I am?" She protested as he continued to pull her into the hallway. She was shaking her head as he urged her silently into his room and closed the door behind him. His gaze burned into her as he coaxed her into his arms.

"I think." His head lowered, his lips grazed softly against the warmth of her shoulder and up toward her neck as she totally lost all breath. "You're the most beautiful, alluring, and sweet woman I've ever known. I think you're perfect," he whispered as his lips found hers with unerring accuracy.

"Deke," she mouthed breathlessly against his lips.

"Hmm . . ." he barely managed as he kissed her over and over again until she slumped in his arms, gave up, and threw her arms around his neck, pulling him ever closer.

Her small body seemed to fit him perfectly, melding against his like hot glue. Her breast needled his chest and he wanted nothing more than to go on kissing every part of her body. He wanted to know her like the back side of his hand. He wanted to taste her, inhale her, and feel her all over him.

It was all he could do to keep himself from throwing her on the bed. But Emma was not like other women. Emma was different and Deke had recognized that from the start. He knew he would have to give her some space, and take it slowly, although doing so would throw his own body into havoc.

"I'm not perfect Deke," she whispered between kisses.

"No? Convince me."

"This isn't right, I don't want you to think . . ." she began trying to stop the onslaught of kisses he reined on her. But the more he kissed, the less she pushed away.

"I don't think Emma. . . I feel when I'm around you."

"But I don't want . . ."

"What—my kisses?" he murmured taking her mouth once more, gently tugging on her lower lip between his teeth till her mouth opened and he absorbed her. She tasted sweet, like honey. And the eagerness of her thrusting tongue told him she did want . . . much more, just as he did.

"Emma," he whispered her name reverently, as he continued to kiss her into a mass of putty, playful putty. Warm putty.

When her breasts swelled against him, he pulled away enough to assuage the aching need to touch. One hand gently cupped a full breast, as his thumb passed over it several times. The thin material creating friction.

She groaned, "Oh please . . ."

"Please don't, or please do?" He chuckled softly, his eyes burning into hers.

"I'm only human, Deke," she whispered, as his mouth lowered and captured the peak of her breast through the thin material of her gown.

She groaned uncontrollably.

Slowly he lifted his head, his eyes like liquid pools of blue. "You're as beautiful as a bluebonnet in spring, you have a heart the size of Texas, a mind as pure as a snowflake, and you know how to make a man feel ten feet tall when he kisses you. Now do you know how you stand with me, Emma?"

His gaze held her captive. "I—I think so."

"There's so many things I want to say. But I've got to know something, Emma."

"What," she barely murmured.

"Do you love my brother Clint?"

She pulled away enough to look into his eyes, "Well yes, of course I do. Like a brother."

"God I'm glad you said that." He muttered pulling her closer and needing to taste her lips once more. "And Charlie, how do you feel about Charlie, now?"

"Charlie who?"

"Good, kiss me one more time before I let you go back to that cold bed of yours."

With that he smothered her next words with a kiss that threatened to undo all his better intentions. His lips touched her nose, her eyelids, her cheek, her earlobe, her neck, and slid to the valley of her breasts. There his lips swept over her gently, in a soft caress.

He turned her loose, reluctantly, his needs unfulfilled, his heart pounding like a drum.

"Deke," she was at the door, turning the knob, but a sob broke from her and she rushed back into his arms. "I don't want to go back to my cold bed, I don't want to be alone anymore."

"Oh God, Emma," He smothered his words into her hair as he fought the urge to give in and take what she offered him. Every time he held Emma he had the unerring feeling she'd never been touched. But that couldn't be. "Emma," his mouth found hers and he scooped her into his arms.

Her arms flew around him, as she pressed herself into him. Locked in an embrace he settled her on his bed, not pulling down the covers, fighting the urges that came natural to him. His lips trailed fire over her. He felt her tremble, and was about to pull away when a scream echoed through the house like nothing he had ever heard before.

Emma blinked. Deke jumped to his feet, and listened as the scream came again and they both dashed down the hallway.

"Oh Sammie Jo—"

Deke turned white as he stayed Emma at the doorway for a second. "Don't panic honey . . ."

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## Chapter Nine

Emma's worst nightmare became a reality. The screams weren't coming from the bedroom, but the kitchen. It was Sammie Jo.

Deke and Emma found her lying on the floor, a chair overturned, one arm very still.

"Oh my God," Emma covered her mouth to prevent a scream. "She wanted that candy bar this afternoon but I wouldn't let her have it, she hadn't had supper and I was afraid it would spoil her appetite. Now look. Is her arm broken?!"

"It's hard to tell." Deke seemed intent on investigating the area before touching Sammie Jo. He glanced at Emma and shook his head. "You can't blame yourself for this. It was an accident. She fell. Come here sweetheart, let's get a good look at you." Deke instructed, his voice taking on a quality of control Emma envied once more.

"Yes . . ." she scrambled closer, wondering why Sammie Jo was still screaming. Then she covered her mouth when she saw the candy bar only a few inches from the baby.

"Why is she still crying? It must be broken." Emma cried aloud. Deke examined the room carefully as he took the baby into his arms.

"I don't know yet. It's harder to tell with a baby. Most babies don't break bones at this age, but it depends on how they fall and how far, I guess. There now Sweet Pea, Daddy Deke is going to fix you up. Don't cry." Deke's voice reverberated through the house.

Sammie Jo seemed to be calmer, but her body jerked with each sob. When Deke tried to move the arm that she protected Sammie Jo screamed louder.

"Wake the others, tell them to call the emergency room at Rolling Plains Memorial and inform them what happened. We'll drive there now, it'll be quicker than waiting for an ambulance to come out here. I can't be sure it's not broken, and if it is it'll have to be set."

Emma still moved as though life no longer had a hold on her body. As though she were merely walking through each motion. She nodded, and rushed to wake Cal, her mind working overtime.

It wasn't necessary, four grown men scrambled down the hallway, half-dressed, all talking at the same time, all concerned looks on their faces.

"What's going on?" Cal asked as he neared the scene.

"Please call the hospital, Cal. Sammie Jo's been climbing again. We think her arm's broken. We have to take her in, now!"

Cal's face went white, "My God. Of course I will. You two go on. Kids don't usually break bones. Aw now, don't you worry everything is going to be all right, Emma. They know how to take care of these things."

"Damn . . ." Rusty uttered when he saw how helpless the baby looked as Deke carried her to the living room.

Then without even looking up Deke carried her straight to his truck.

"We'll follow, as soon as Dad gets the call made. Don't worry Emma, it will be all right." Jake reassured her as she ran out the door to the truck.

"Thanks," Emma murmured as she dashed towards the truck, Clint came running out to hand her a robe and watched them pull out of the drive. Deke gunned the truck into gear and sped off down the road, the dust flying.

But there was nothing reassuring about the ride to the hospital. Deke tried to dodge all the ruts in the road for the baby's sake. Sammie Jo screamed every time the arm moved. It seemed like such a long drive, and Emma's heart was pounding so hard her breath seemed to catch.

"My God, what have I done?" Emma felt close to hysterics.

"Nothing, you've done nothing, Emma." Deke reached for her hand, and covered it with his own. "You can't blame yourself for this. No one can watch a child constantly. Kids get into things. One of the first lessons a mother learns. It's no more your fault than it is mine."

"I should have been there. I knew she could get out of her bed. I knew she was curious. I should have been in there and this wouldn't have happened. I should have given her the candy when she wanted it."

"Emma, don't. Stop blaming yourself. There is no blame, it was an accident. She's going to be all right. You can't spoil her all the time just so she won't try other ways to get things. You did right. You are teaching her rights from wrongs, that's very important, Emma," Deke affirmed.

Nothing seemed to waver his conviction. Emma grasped on to his positive attitude like a lifeline. Deke was right, everything would be all right. They'd get her to the hospital and they'd know how to treat her.

"I still don't think it's broken. There's no swelling, no bruises," Deke was saying, cradling Sammie Jo's head in his lap and glancing down at the her.

"I know you are right about the teaching. But does she have to get hurt all the time? It's such a responsibility to have a tiny life in your hands." Her words died in her throat.

"It's okay Emma. I looked around, Sammie Jo climbed up on a chair and got to it, but she must have dropped it first because some of it was on the floor. The chair must have slipped when she tried to get down."

"God Deke, will the accidents ever stop?" Emma cried out the tears washing over her face uncaring.

"Don't do this Emma. It was just an accident. It's not your fault. Think of it this way, if it had been Rusty, Clint, or Jake, would you be blaming them now for not giving her the candy?"

"No. But I should have known, Deke. I'm her mother. I should have known. I'm a horrible mother. I've known it from the start. Maybe her grandparents should take her away from me," she blurted.

"Grandparents? Take her away? What are you talking about?"

"Her father's parents, they wanted to-to," she stopped because she really wasn't sure what they wanted at this point. Her mind spun, unable to force the words from her mouth. What had they wanted? Why had she run away, without knowing for sure? Why did she think she could handle this, alone? She had to be crazy.

"To what?" Deke asked glancing at her as he drove, his expression hard and unrelenting.

Emma broke down, cried aloud. "They wanted to see her."

"And that's bad?"

"I thought so, at the time, yes. I mean, when Joel took off I promised—I mean, I decided I wouldn't let him or his parents have anything to do with Sammie Jo. They didn't deserve it. Even his parents didn't believe she was his, at first."

Emma realized how this made her appear and wanted to correct the impression, but the condition of her mind at this moment made no sense. It was too late for honesty, now. "I don't know. I only know I can't chance losing her."

"You aren't making much sense Emma." Deke said, his face screwed up into a frown.

But Emma couldn't talk anymore, couldn't think. Her fears were swallowing her alive, as she bent down to kiss and hold the baby close. "It's all right darling. I won't let anything happen to you again, I promise."

Once they arrived at the hospital, the emergency crew of nurses and doctors took Sammie Jo. Deke and Emma were left in the lobby.

Deke settled Emma into a comfortable chair, while he gave out as much information as he could to the receptionist. Then they waited, together. During the entire time Deke rarely took his eyes off Emma.

The rest of the Travers men came into the lobby only minutes later. Cal seemed distraught but handling it. He was out of breath and both Emma and Deke went to his side. Rusty, Clint and Jake all took turns walking up and down the corridor as Deke and Emma tried to settle Cal down.

Finally, a nurse stepped out of the room where Sammie Jo had been taken. She spoke to the receptionist, then glanced at them.

"Are you the family?" she asked.

"Yes," they all chorused.

Emma sensed a wave of longing like she'd never known. Oh to be part of this big wonderful family. And how they had accepted her at such face value. And how she had lied to them. Dear God!

"She's going to be fine. She has what is commonly referred to as the "Grannie's Elbow", it's where the joint comes out of socket. It's common among children this age. But we'll want to keep her for a short period to be sure there is no other injury or internal bleeding from the fall, for observation."

Relief seemed to flow from the entire room, as though some giant breathed a sigh. Emma moved toward the nurse. "Can I see her?"

"No, not just yet. As soon as the doctor is through we will let you come in for a short period. Right now they are still working with her and the doctor ordered some x-rays. We want to make sure she isn't hurt internally. Why don't you go get a cup of coffee and come back, maybe then you can peek in on her. Are you the mother?"

"Y-yes," Emma said with a quick nod.

"We need a little more information on her. Could you step through the office and finish filling out this form, please."

Emma hesitated, then nodded glancing at Deke through the window.

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"What's this?" Emma cried as she carried the kitchen trash outside the next Sunday morning and saw Deke.

"This is Dandy, Little Jim's best horse," Deke replied riding up beside her on his black stallion with another rein in his hand and a smile to his lips.

"I don't understand," Emma said going straight up to the big bay and petting her on the nose. The horse nudged her as though she appreciated the affection. "Oh, you're a pretty one. I wish I had some sugar to give you."

"Thought we'd take a ride. You haven't really seen much of the spread."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful, but ..."

"Don't worry. Dad'll watch Sweet Pea."

"This is prearranged, I suppose." Emma glanced at Deke.

"Down to the last detail. Even got us a little lunch in case we're gone long." Deke hefted the wicker basket up to show her.

"Who made that?" Emma shrieked with delight.

"Clint, believe it or not. Said he was afraid you'd wake up last night and catch him in your kitchen and take the broom to him." Deke shot her an appraising look.

Her kitchen? When had it become her kitchen, Emma mused silently as she threw herself up on the bay and smiled, taking the reins.

"Smart man," Emma choked a smile from her lips, afraid to look Deke straight in the eye. She didn't and wouldn't read too much into this. Deke was merely being nice, knowing how depressed and worried she'd been since Sammie Jo came back from the hospital. They had all been so careful about where they laid things down, and putting dangerous objects out of reach. Emma especially spent hours rearranging things in the kitchen and washroom.

The horse felt comfortable beneath her, Emma sighed. It had been so long since she had ridden, she almost forgot the pleasure. A hint of fall was in the air this morning and a light breeze filtered over Emma's cheeks as she pushed back her hair and quickly tied it with a piece of string from her pocket.

"This is nice, Deke. Really. I've missed riding. I used to ride with my brothers a lot."

"I figured as much. As at home as you are in the kitchen you still don't seem like the kind to be cooped up too long." Deke smiled, but not at her.

They rode in silence for a long while. She needed the time to loosen up and get used to being in the saddle once more. She found the bay was co-operative in every way, almost second guessing her to each step.

"She's a fine animal." Emma patted her again.

"Jim used to use her a lot when he worked the herd, but he has a ropin' horse for the branding and castrating seasons. He kinda sticks to the bays, says they are more trainable and gentler on the backside than most."

"I can believe that," Emma said with a chuckle. "So, what are we gonna see?"

"As much as you want. I thought I'd take you along the mesa, show you the outlay of the land, then there's a real pretty spot I kinda like to visit now and again. Thought you'd enjoy a picnic."

"Sounds wonderful."

Again they were silent as they rode along side each other. Emma basked in this silent togetherness. The rightness of it thrilled her with illogical joy. Nature was a big part of this man, and in her heart Emma felt very much at home with the land and the man. But a silent voice whispered in her head not to fall in love with it. It could never be hers. Deke was only being kind.

An hour and a half into the trip, Deke stopped above a big bluff and stretched his arm out over the horizon. "All this is ours, Emma."

Emma did her best not to imagine he meant hers too. But the enormity of the ranch had her swooning aloud. "Oh—it's breathtaking. All this is yours? I never imagined you owned so much. I mean, our spread back home wasn't half this size."

Deke nodded. "That makes sense. You don't need as much land to graze. We raise all our own feed, and we need more pastureland than you would. It's not so big, if you compare properties, but it gets us by."

"Have you always owned this land?" Emma asked, still gazing out over the huge stretch of cattle roaming the pastures.

"As far back as my great-great-grandfather. He was one of the first to settle out in these parts. Wasn't much out here then. He bought up the land and moved his new bride from Virginia out here. Mail order at that. He fought the Indians for it. I've often thought it must've been hard for her, out here. This part of Texas was very sparsely populated at the time. The ones who survived were lucky."

"Was he in the Civil War?"

"Nope. Didn't believe in that one. Refused to take a side. I guess he probably had to fight a lot of neighbors back then cause the sentiments ran strong. There was a story, passed on by relatives and ancestors that grandma's sympathy lay with the north, and Papa the south. So in order to keep things together they just sorta ignored the whole thing, as much as they could. He believed all men were free to do as they pleased, including himself. Never owned a slave. Said the war was nonsense. Raised his kids never to fight each other over anything, said it wasn't worth it. I guess it's one tradition that's stuck." Deke glanced at her, a serious look on his face as he spoke.

Deke wiped his forehead and frowned, realizing how close he'd come to fighting with Clint over her. Good thing he'd gotten some sense and realized his ancestor was right. Still, something deep down inside of him told him there were things worth fighting for. He'd always fight for his land, his cattle, and . . . his woman!

His woman? Where had that come from? He looked at Emma, and the warmth inside him spread to every part of his body, tightening his loins, tensing his muscles, and melting the hardness that had taken years to accumulate.

What he felt for Emma was strange and new to him. He'd never felt so protective, so blatantly pulled by a woman before. He wanted to share so many things with her, give her so much, but he knew he had to use a gentle hand on her. Emma was skittish and like all fillies needed simmering with a slow hand.

He saw Emma's strengths too. She had bore her father's wrath and ignorance with tolerance and understanding that he could only guess at. She coped.

When he found the meadow he wanted to show her, he saw the light in her eyes. No blue-bonnets or buttercups littered the way, but an occasional sunflower peeked out from the roll of the hills and the grassland was plentiful like a thick heavy carpet. She relished the beauty of it as much as he did, he decided when he saw the light on her face. How could a man feel so at one with a woman, he wondered. So kindred.

"I thought junipers grew out here," Emma remarked.

"They do, but we've spent a lot of time pulling them up as fast as they sprout."

"But why? Even they have a beauty of their own."

"Sure, but they also consume the water that's here. I learned that trick by reading some of LBJ's tricks to good ranching. He pulled up every one. A wise man."

Emma quirked her head. "How interesting."

"I thought so. I've always been a heavy reader, when I find the time."

"I guess there is a lot to learn about cowboys. I always thought their minds were on cattle and that was it."

"Cattle, land, and . . . women, I'd say." He grinned.

If only she'd open up to him, tell him her fears, he'd help her solve them, get rid of them.

"So, are you glad you came?" he asked as he spread a blanket on the ground and set the picnic basket to the side.

"Oh yes, it's beautiful. Such a lovely day too. I don't know when I've enjoyed myself so much. Being in the saddle makes me feel young again. But I'll admit, I feel almost guilty for taking this time off."

"Well don't. You deserve it."

"I wish Sammie Jo could be here too." She sighed as she joined him on the blanket and opened the basket.

"Maybe next time we'll bring her along," Deke added getting some of the packed up food out of the basket. Clint had packed some of the left-over fried chicken and home-made pickles, and there were celery, carrot and apple stick slices, along with two generous portions of Emma's apple pie.

He was already planning for the future. It took him by surprise that his feelings run so deep, and so naturally for this woman. He prided himself in being sure about most things, but even his father had warned that women can be different. He'd take it easy, feel Emma out.

"So, why don't you invite Sammie Jo's grandparents here?" Deke asked matter-of-factly. He didn't know how to take this one easy, accept to blurt it out and hope she didn't get too riled in the process.

"No!" Emma responded too quickly, too adamantly. Her brown eyes went to pure panic. Her face turned red, and all the tension that had been gone a few minutes ago, was back in place.

"No, you're not even going to consider it?" Deke suggested gently.

"No." Emma turned away from his probing glances.

"I know I don't have any rights, but what about Sammie Jo? I mean, is this fair to her?"

"What do you mean?" Emma's eyes flashed pain and regret and anger all at the same time. Sending Deke a mixed message of confusion.

"Please," Emma said standing up and turning away, "don't ask me to explain this. Not now. Not today. This is so lovely. So peaceful. I don't want to argue with you about this. I'll handle it."

"Emma—let me help. I know something is bothering you. But it may only be your own fears. Can't you share it with me?"

Emma turned to look into his face, as he neared her. She looked so distraught. He wanted to comfort her, tell her everything would be alright, and make it right for her. The last thing on his mind was arguing with her.

A hand reached out to caress the softness of her cheek, and pull her closer. He saw those brown eyes grow warm again, with the same heat that poured through every muscle in his body. It was as though his hand had touched something much deeper than her cheek. As though he had touched her soul with his caring and she understood without words.

The moment was so magical, so mind boggling that all thoughts of the outside world spun away into the clouds, as he felt his body leaning closer, his head bending slowly, his lips pursing just above her.

But just as he would have kissed her, Jim rode up fast and furious.

"Boss—sorry for the interrupt, but we got a fire on the south ridge. It's moving pretty fast and if the wind picks up we'll be in trouble." Jim was out of breath and from the looks of his clothes had been battling the fire for a while.

"Emma, can you make it back by yourself?" Deke asked as he saddled up, all thoughts of emotions erased as though they had never been. His face hard and relentless on the hill above them.

"Yes, but I'm not going back, I'm coming with you." She said so matter-of-factly he almost dropped his reins as he spun in the saddle to look at her.

"Don't be ridiculous, we'll manage. You get back to the house."

"Not on your life." Emma mounted and wasted no time in following Jim ahead of Deke.

"Emma, for God's sake go home. This is no place for a woman," Deke demanded reining his horse beside her. "I'll have enough to worry about as it is. What more can go wrong this summer."

"I will not go to the house. I'm as cowboy as you are Deke Travers. This place is my home too now and Sammie Jo's and if it's burning I'm not going to sit idle and watch when I'm healthy enough to get out there and lend a hand. I'm going to help. Now let go of my reins and let's get this fire under control," Emma demanded frowning.

Jim let out a roar of approval and they all galloped over the hill towards the grassfire. Emma kept up with them as though born to ride.

The drought had brought more than just a water problem. The grass was pure tinder. Deke had concentrated so keenly on the water going bad, and moving the cattle, he hadn't considered other dangers lurking. He should have had his head on straight, he fussed at himself silently.

Half the men were already there, fighting it with all their might, while the others came barreling in. First one then three, then five. Clint and Jake were on the west side, using old blankets from their bedrolls to shovels from the old chuck wagon. Rusty wasn't to be found. Deke thanked his lucky stars his dad wasn't here. At least he wouldn't have to worry about him too.

Emma got down from her mount and grabbed a shovel that someone had laid in a clearing after exhaustion had taken its toll. Some of the men could barely beat the flames down. It was spreading quickly. Deke could feel the crackle of tinder beneath his boots and knew they would have to work fast and furious to get this under control.

Some of the neighbors happened by, seeing the smoke and immediately got to work helping. A fire could mean disaster for an entire community.

Deke set a backfire and continued to do battle, as Emma worked right along side of him. Never in all his life had he ever felt so proud of a woman. He never experienced

such a feeling of desire kindled with respect and admiration for a woman. A woman that would stand by his side despite the odds and work hard. Soot covered her face, her clothes, but she was unmindful. At this moment, with soot on her cheeks and sweat dripping from her forehead, and her t-shirt nearly black, she was undoubtedly the most beautiful woman Deke had ever seen in his life.

When she became too exhausted to help, she immediately went to giving the men water from her own mount that Deke had packed. She patched wounds, and delivered shovels that Clint had brought. Denver showed up with Rusty who was nursing a goose egg size lump on his head. Emma washed his wound and made him sit down while the others battled the blaze. It was a long, hard fight, but grass fires were a danger to everyone in the community and if they didn't keep fighting it till it was out it would spread.

Denver barked as the men worked vigorously. Doing his part, he barked at every new flame and before nightfall, the fire was nearly out. Deke posted several men around the fire and cautioned them to alarm the others if it began to break out again. Fires often backdrafted and kept going. It wasn't safe yet, but at least a minimal crew could handle it.

Drained and exhausted, the rest of the men drifted back to the ranch house. Neighbors patted neighbors on the back and smiled wearily for a job well done with a community effort. It was over, one field was destroyed but the rest looked good. Clint and Rusty still had enough energy to laugh and joke all the way home. Jake was his usual quiet self.

Cal had coffee waiting and Sammie Jo greeted everyone with hugs and kisses. Jake particularly took his time hugging the baby and kissing her till she giggled.

"Dada," she shouted at Deke as he strolled through the kitchen door and headed straight for the sink. He was the last to come inside and it looked as if Sammie Jo had her eyes trained on the door for the sight of him.

He'd never appreciated being welcomed home, quite so much as when he looked into the happy little face that seemed to adore him. He rolled his sleeves up and washed his hands, then half turned to the baby and smiled, "Hi sweetheart."

Sammie Jo giggled and reached for him.

Deke picked her up out of the highchair and kissed her, then tickled her under the chin and held her for a few minutes.

Cal had managed a plate full of sandwiches, but the men didn't balk about no hot food. Instead they all sat down after washing up and ate it clean.

The apple pie was finished with a flourish.

"Sorry I wasn't much help, boys," Cal fidgeted nervously as everyone was about to leave the table. The look on his face was apologetic.

Emma turned abruptly about, "Not much help? Why, you took a load off my mind. No one would know what to do without you Cal. Especially me. You took care of Sammie Jo, you fixed supper."

"Yeah, while you were out putting out the fire." Cal shook his head.

"So, we traded places for a while, so what? Honestly Cal, if no one else appreciates you, I do. In fact, I'm not sure what I'd do without you."

"Get outta here. Don't kid me."

"Kid you?" Emma frowned and came close to him, her hands still wet from the dishwater. "Taking care of that baby is a job. I should know. And you do it beautifully. And never, I mean never let anyone tell you any differently."

"Yes, ma'am." Cal half smiled up at her as she pointed a fistful of dishwater at him. "It's nice to be appreciated."

"And don't you forget it." Emma smiled. "Now, I'm going to clean up, and put the baby to bed. I think I'll turn in early. Thanks—for the ride, Deke."

"Yeah, not exactly what I had in mind at the time, but we'll get to it." He promised with a wink.

Cal watched as Emma took the baby to her room. "Now there goes one hell of a woman, son."

Deke nodded and glanced down the hallway, "Yeah, that's a fact."

"So did the two of you have a good time today, I mean before the fire?"

"She seemed to enjoy it."

His father was hinting at something else and Deke could guess what it was, but he didn't want to talk about it. He felt elated and frustrated at the same time. He was pretty sure how he felt about Emma, but he hadn't managed to convey it to her yet.

Something was bothering Emma, and he needed to know what it was. He wanted to solve all her problems. But that wouldn't happen till she opened up.

"Dad, Sammie Jo's grandparents want to see her."

"So—what's the problem. They could come here, and see her," Cal insisted.

"But Emma doesn't want them to see her."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. But she was frantic when I suggested it."

"That doesn't make any sense." Cal seemed to study the situation then added, "Why don't you invite them here. I mean, maybe she's just afraid to invite them, since this is where she works and all. Women can be funny about those kind of things. But the baby needs a family." Cal's voice drifted off.

"You think I should?"

"If you can find out who and where they live, sure. She'd probably thank you in the long run."

"I'll go talk to her."

"Yeah, you do that," Cal said patting him on the back. "I'm going to turn in, that little rascal can wear a full grown man out."

"I believe it." Deke said with a chuckle as he strolled toward Emma's room.

He knocked.

"Come in."

"Emma. I just wanted to thank you for the help today. I never seen a woman work so hard."

"This ranch is where I live and work. If it burned I wouldn't have a home or a job. It was just as important to me, as it was to you. Almost—I mean." She blushed.

"Thanks, anyway," he said and came to stand very close to her. His head dipped and his lips brushed hers lightly. He wanted nothing more than to curl his arms around her and hold her till daylight, but he knew better.

"Emma, what was Joel's last name?"

"Collins, why?" She scrambled away from him.

"I just wondered. Sam Collin's boy?"

"Yes, you know them?"

"No, but I've heard of them of course. Owns the biggest spread in the eastern part of the state. Sammie Jo doesn't even carry his name, does she?"

"No. Like I said he left before she was born. He doesn't deserve that or anything else."

"Emma—I think you should invite the grandparents out here."

"No," she practically screamed, pulling out of his reach. She put Sammie Jo in the playpen and moved to get her own gown out of the drawer.

"Think about it Emma. You said you were afraid they would take her away from you. And now I can understand why. They've got enough money. But you are the mother. They can't do that unless there is a very good reason. I see no good reason. You are a great mother, you love her, take care of her, provide for her. How could they be a threat?"

Emma backed away from his nearing presence. "She nearly broke her arm, because of my neglect. If I were as good a mother as you say, it would never have happened."

"But that was an accident. Look," he came closer taking her shoulders in his big hands and looking down into her angry face. "Everyone on this ranch would vouch for you if it came to that. But you are living in fear. A fear that might never occur. It's not right. Face it Emma. Deal with these people. Have you ever met them?"

"N-no, but—"

"You're a bigger person than that Emma. I know you are. I want to help you but I can't unless you let me. Face this, maybe it won't be as bad as you think." Deke prodded.

"I can't take the chance. I can't lose her. She's all I have."

"Is she? What about this . . ." he bent the distance to reclaim her trembling lips. Cold met hot and for a moment Emma went limp and responsive in his arms.

Deke groaned, needing to touch, be close, love. Love? God, he was in love with her! Why hadn't he seen it? The realization only made him want her more.

"Dada," Sammie Jo cried out, as Emma quickly shoved Deke away and wiped her mouth.

"No darling, he's not Dada. You can call him Uncle Deke, you can call him Mr. Travers, but you certainly can't call him Dada." Emma responded, looking at the baby with tears shimmering in her eyes. She glanced at Deke once more, "Please, promise me you won't interfere in this."

"I can't promise Emma—I care a little to damned much . . ."

He strode out of the room and down the hallway. His anger following him all the way. He loved her, but she was so stubborn, and so wrong about this. She wasn't facing reality. Sammie Jo was hers, no one in their right mind would even try to take her away from her. So what was really bothering her?

Deke fretted for a long while. Then he did as he always did when someone he loved was in trouble—he interfered. He took action.

He'd track down the grandparents and invite them to the ranch, all the while bragging on what a great job Emma was doing with the child. He'd make it sound so good they wouldn't dare try anything. And he'd put Emma's fears to rest once and for all. Then he'd deal with his own problem—being in love with Emma.

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## Chapter Ten

"Emma, I'd like to talk to you, if you can spare a minute," Deke's voice held no warmth. "You know we have a drier."

"I know, I just like the smell of hanging them outside. Besides, once it gets cold I'll be using it. So what can I do for you bossman?" She stopped and turned to face him, unaware of how close he stood. Something about Deke Travers made Emma go to mush just being around him.

"You're not going to like this." Deke began, moving away.

"Oh?"

"I got a hold of Sammie Jo's grandparents. They're coming."

"You did what?" her voice rose with each word as she whirled on him. Fear gripped her stomach, like acid. "But you promised." She neared him, wanting to pound something, wanting to shout, to curse.

"No, I didn't promise. I couldn't. I wasn't thinking of you, Emma. I was thinking of the baby. But you've got to face this fear. You aren't the kind of woman to run from something, you're too strong for that." Deke came towards her.

"How do you know how strong I am?" She flung the words at him. Emma pushed away from him, panic taking precedence. "You had no right to do this. You don't know how strong I am. You don't know what's best for me. Why couldn't you just mind your own business?"

"Maybe I am out of line, Emma. But you should know by now, I'm not the kind of man that looks for the rights and wrongs, but I act. This is a problem for you. I had to do something. You are tearing yourself up over nothing."

"Nothing!" Emma shouted now, hysteria yawning at her. "You don't understand," she said flinging away his support and running towards the house in panic.

"Emma . . ." he yelled, his voice vibrating the walls of the house as he stormed in behind her.

Tears blinded her, fear betrayed her. All was lost. Everything. She'd lose Sammie Jo. She had lost Deke, if she ever had him. She'd have to leave, her mind fastened onto the only thing it could—escape!

"Emma, listen. Nothing is going to happen. I'll stand by you. I'll be here, don't you see." He came inside her room and tried to take her into his arms, but she moved to put distance between them. She couldn't think with him holding her, and she needed to think.

"No," she cried. "I'm sure . . ." she struggled with her words, unable to keep focused when he offered her comfort and the need to be near him nearly outgrew the fear that was destroying her. "I'm sure you didn't mean any harm. But you don't know, and it's all my fault. Please—just leave me alone. Just get out—please." Her voice reached hysteria.

"Emma don't do this. Don't lock me out, let me help you," he pleaded coming closer.

"Please—Just get out."

"Okay," his voice held muted frustration. "But we're going to talk this through, Emma." He promised turning to leave.

Emma watched him leave. Her heart thudded like a heavy drum in her chest, a burden. Her eyes filled with all the unshed tears. Her fears shot out at her from every corner, as Sammie Jo sat in the corner, looking at a Pooh book, and crying.

"Mama. Mama . . ."

"Oh darling, he doesn't realize what he's done. He couldn't have known. It's my fault. But we can't stay here. We've got to leave, and without anyone knowing. We'll slip out after supper. I heard Cal say they were going to check on a bull over at the Andersons'. We'll leave after they've gone."

"Dada," Sammie Jo wailed looking past her to the door.

"No darling. How can I explain this to you, so you'll understand. He isn't your father."

Emma hurriedly packed the old suitcase full of her stuff. She left the dress Deke had bought her hanging in the closet.

She'd laid round steak out for supper and began preparing it. Sammie Jo was being especially good, playing with her Pooh book while Emma worked.

At the supper table, conversation flowed easily. Emma did her best to act as normal as possible, but occasionally when Deke shot her a curious glance, she'd look away.

"So, you want to go with us over to the Anderson's Emma. I know Helen would enjoy yours and Sammie Jo's company," Cal was saying as he helped himself to the mashed potatoes.

"No-I don't think so this time, Cal. But I appreciate being asked. I've got some things to do this evening."

"Just thought I'd ask. We won't be gone over a couple of hours," Cal added. "Want me to take Sammie Jo with us?"

"You've done quite enough babysitting for a while. You go on and enjoy yourselves, we'll be fine."

"I never considered babysitting Sammie Jo. I enjoy her company. I'd be glad to take her."

"Not this time, but thanks."

"You think you can get the bull at a good price, dad?" Jake was asking as though trying to distract his father.

"I'm sure of it. John's got a boy going to college this fall and he'll be needing all the cash he can get."

"That's right, James is, isn't he?" Clint added, scooping the gravy on top his potatoes.

"Yeah, seems like yesterday they settled here. But we're all gettin' older. I wouldn't mind being a grandpa myself." Cal glanced at Deke.

"Excuse me," Deke got up from the table, throwing his napkin in his plate, and leaving before anyone was through. "I've got business in town, tonight."

"Oh, a date?" Cal lifted a brow.

"Maybe," Deke glanced at Emma, then cleared his throat and walked out of the kitchen.

"He's kiddin'," Cal aimed his words at Emma.

Emma managed to act as though she didn't care. It wasn't her business if the bossman had a date. But her heart seemed to shrivel up and die at that moment. And from the short silence that ensued, she was sure everyone in the kitchen was aware of her feelings.

"Dada," Sammie Jo wailed as Deke strode out the front door.

"No darling, Mr. Travers, Uncle Deke, but not dada." Emma reassured her.

"Sounds to me like Sammie Jo's done picked herself a daddy." Cal smiled.

"Excuse me, I think she's ready for a bath." Emma grabbed the baby from the highchair and made a quick dash for the privacy of her room. Things were getting too complicated. All the Travers men seemed bent on getting her and Deke together. Only problem was, Deke didn't want to get together anymore. And because what he'd done, she couldn't stay here any longer.

She heard their voices as she escaped down the hall.

Emma couldn't stop the tears, and she had to distract herself from her own self pity. She ran bath water in the tub for Sammie Jo. Trying to drown out the voices in the kitchen and her head.

They must have wasted a half hour in the bathroom, because when they came out, no one was in the house.

Emma hurriedly dressed Sammie Jo, made sure everything was packed up, and taking the baby's hand walked silently out of the bedroom for the last time.

She wouldn't look back.

With sad resignation she headed away from the house towards the old truck, parked beside the barn. No one was about. Except Denver came running up to her for his usual pat on the head. Sammie Jo gurgled at the happy dog. Denver didn't seem to want to let them go. He barked loudly and danced all about them as they kept walking towards the truck.

"Oh stop it, you silly dog. I hate leaving you too, but we've got to go. Please let us leave in peace and quiet."

But it wasn't to be, Emma sighed as Deke's truck pulled up just in front of hers, making a hasty retreat impossible. He made the gravel fly as he braked. Leaving the headlights on as he got out of the truck, he slammed the door. It was almost dark and hard to see who was with him.

Emma put Sammie Jo in the carseat, threw her luggage in the back and started for the driver's side of the truck.

Deke marched up to her, and just as she would have gotten in, he slammed the door and held it there with his arm, above her head.

"Going somewhere?"

His voice sounded almost musical in the stillness of the night and Emma ached to turn into his arms and cry.

"We're leaving."

"Are you?"

"Yes, I left a note."

He nodded, his eyes piercing her through the darkness. "As I remember that's not the deal. I asked for two weeks notice."

"I'm sorry, this is an emergency," Emma gasped as she tried to move around those big arms that trapped her.

"Emergency or an escape?" He queried, his head bending in her direction, his words feathering the skin of her cheek. God he was close, her heart wanted to shout at him. Couldn't he see how he was affecting her? Didn't he care that her heart was breaking?

"Don't you think you should return to your company?" She asked glancing toward the truck.

"Company? Oh, yes, well, I think we both should. Come on," he began and pulled her by the arm towards the truck.

The couple in the truck got out and walked up to them.

"Emma, this is Mr. and Mrs. Collins. They've been anxious to meet you and Sammie Jo." He said shoving Emma gently towards them as he turned to walk away, "Excuse me, while I get the baby."

Deke got Sammie Jo out of her car seat.

"Dada," she cried and giggled, snuggling into his shirt collar.

"Hi darlin', I'm glad to see you too," Deke said.

Emma stood not knowing what to say. Fear gripped her heart. Tears stung her eyes as the couple extended their hands to her.

"We are so glad to finally meet you, Emma. We've heard so many good things about you, we couldn't wait to meet you. Mr. Travers there, sung your praises as a mother. And your family talked to us about you and Kate."

"Kate?" Deke queried from a distance.

"Your father didn't have much to say, but your brother Frank told us about Kate. If only we'd had a chance to meet her. Such a young little thing, and so brave to bring a child into the world knowing she probably couldn't carry it to term. She must have been remarkable."

"Kate?" Deke repeated as he reached them in two strides, hearing the conversation and not understanding their words.

"Yes, Kate, Sammie Jo's mother," Mrs. Collins explained.

Emma looked into his alarmed face and begged silently that he would keep still with his questions till later, till she could explain.

"Kate must have thought a lot of you to name you as Sammie Jo's guardian." Mr. Collins was saying as Mrs. Collins took Sammie Jo into her arms and smiled.

Sammie Jo looked at her for a minute then smiled.

"Oh my God," the older woman exclaimed. "Look, look at her, Sam. She's the spitting image of Joel."

"Come here child," the man directed his wife and the child into the light on at the porch. "Let me look at you."

When they stood beneath the burning porch light he shook his head and wept.

Emma nearly lost all composure. The man was crying.

"She looks just like him. Just like our Joel."

Fear gutted Emma. If Sammie Jo looked like Joel they would never let her go. Needing to lean on something, she grabbed for Deke.

He held her, but at arm's length. Still she gained his strength, pulled it from him.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Yes—I think so."

"Let's go inside. Emma made a carrot cake for supper, and I smell coffee brewing. Rusty said he'd put a pot on. Let's relax and visit a little. I'm sure this a big shock for you." Deke was explaining.

Emma reached for the baby, but Deke directed her inside the house instead.

In a whisper he explained. "Let them have a minute."

Emma nodded woodenly, feeling as though her world were void of emotions. She had lost Deke, that much she realized earlier, but now Sammie Jo?

"I'll get the cake and coffee," Emma resounded numbly, needing to leave their presence and escape for a moment. She'd been so brave. Hadn't cried once, even though her heart had broken into pieces when Deke had left this evening. Now he was back, with them! And he was heedlessly tearing her world up again.

Her hands shook as she cut the cake. She spilled coffee on the counter. And burned her hands in the process.

Deke walked in, looked at her, and took over. He wiped the mess up, ran cool water over her hand and looked into her eyes.

"I know this is hard on you. But you're a strong woman. I've known that from the start. You can face this."

Even though he wasn't offering her his undying love, he was offering her a pillar of strength to lean on. He had faith in her. He must have guessed she lied, and it had to have affected him. Yet, he was embracing her courage for her.

Emma squared her shoulders, swallowed her unshed tears and nodded. "Yes, I can take it."

Mrs. Collins was a beautiful blonde-headed woman with wisps of gray at her temples, and an understanding smile curled her lips as she held the baby, then offered her to her husband. She was small and dainty up against her big brawny man at her side. Emma saw Joel in her, and now, looking at Sammie Jo, she realized they were right. She did look like her father.

"Look at this . . ." Mrs. Collins pulled out a picture from her purse and handed it to Emma as she joined them.

"That was Joel when he was a baby. I wanted to compare it with the baby. But I didn't have to pull out the picture to realize she is the image of my son."

Emma took the picture and stared at it for a long moment. "Yes, you're right, she is."

Mr. Collins stood and paced for a moment then turned to Deke and Emma. "You'll have to excuse me. You see, Joel was killed three weeks ago in a bar room fight. He was a pretty heavy drinker. We tried everything to keep him away from the stuff, even had him admitted to one of those hospitals that specialize in alcohol related dependencies. It never worked for him. I pushed the boy too hard, I guess. Wanted him to take over my business. He just wasn't interested. He wanted to rodeo."

Deke nodded. "You shouldn't blame yourself or anyone for that matter. Sometimes, it just happens this way."

"Yeah, but it's damn hard to accept." Mr. Collins cleared his throat.

Mrs. Collins gathered Emma's hands in hers. "I'm so glad Kate had you to rely on. You were cousins, right?"

"Y-yes." Emma glanced awkwardly at Deke. A nerve in his jaw twitched but he said nothing, just listened to Mrs. Collins explaining the whole thing.

"And look at her. She's beautiful, and healthy, and happy. We want to be part of her life, forever."

Emma didn't have to have a truck run over her. She knew what was coming. But she didn't know how to stop it. She had to face the reality of it.

"We hope you'll let us continue to come and visit. She needs family. Lots of family, and lots of love," Mrs. Collins was saying.

"Excuse me." Emma cleared her throat, forcing away the choked tears. "Come and visit?"

"Yes. Often as we can get out here," Mrs. Collins offered.

"You mean, you don't want to take Sammie Jo—with you?"

The woman stared at Emma blankly for a second then blinked. "Oh dear me, is that what you thought? But of course it is. Oh my God. We've scared this poor girl silly, Sam. No wonder she has no color."

"Whaddayamean?" Sam frowned down at his wife.

"She thought we wanted to take the baby away from her, didn't you, dear?"

"Well—yes. Don't you?" Emma turned to face the woman.

Mrs. Collins blue eyes smiled at her. "Oh no, dear. Not at all. We're too old to raise a child again. We've retired and settled down and are looking forward to these restful years. Sam hasn't been well, had a heart attack two years ago. He pushes himself too hard and even though I'm healthy, I couldn't take care of her and Mr. Collins. I'm smart enough to know that. No—she needs a young woman—and man, too." the woman looked straight at Deke when she said that.

Could her fears all have been for nothing? Was it all this simple? She didn't have to do battle with anyone, argue her case, hire a lawyer, worry herself silly, nor-lie to the man she loved?

When Emma had no way of answering, Deke answered for her. "Well, that's a load off her mind, I'm sure. Emma worries about being a good enough mother."

Now for the first time Emma realized the impact. "I'm a wreck." Everyone looked at her.

"I have been from the beginning." She felt so humbled, so awkward. "Everything about being a mother scares me. I love her, she's my life, but she's at the age, she's into everything. Why, just the other day, she threw her elbow out of socket trying to reach something. I'm not sure—"

"Oh that's nothing. Joel got into cleaning fluid when he was a child. Oh yes, scared me out of ten years, I'm sure. I thought I'd killed him. I did."

"She's not exaggerating. She'd set her wedding rings in this stuff to clean 'em. Left it by the sink in a little cup. Joel eyed it all afternoon then that night climbed a chair and nosey little bugger that he was, tried to drink it. It was a time none of us forgot very easily Things like that happen. We rushed him to the hospital, and they pumped him and made him drink and watched him for hours. And he bounced back like nothing had happened. We nearly turned gray overnight."

"But that's all part of being a parent," Mrs. Collins insisted. "No one is perfect, my dear. No matter how much you love them, no matter how much you are there for them, you can't sit around watching them 24 hours a day. Children are curious. It's their nature. I'll leave my number and you call me anytime. Night or day. Send me pictures, better yet, get a camcorder and send me a tape."

Emma chuckled, the relief flowing through her body was like a tide being loosened from the sea. Air rushed into her lungs filling them with life. Her voice sounded like it had come in from a fog. Life filled her again.

"I thought I was a terrible mother. And I thought—" She let one tear escape now, but realized it was a happy tear. "I thought you wanted to take her away. I was so afraid. That's why I ran. After all, it was only a hand-written will."

Mrs. Collin put her arms around Emma. "Perhaps if we'd come and she was crying and dirty, and bruised, we might have thought that way. But anyone can see, she's been well cared for."

Cal came through the front door just then and Sammie Jo jumped out of Mr. Collins arms and ran to him. "Papa."

Cal flushed bright red but scooped her up into his arms. "Hello there Sweet Pea."

"Dad, this is Mr. and Mrs. Collins, Sammie Jo's grandparents."

"Oh, excuse me," he said and started to put the baby down.

"Don't on our account." Mr. Collins smiled. "We can see she adores you."

"Goes both ways," Cal countered smoothing Sammie Jo's curls from her face.

"Papa, horsey?"

"No darlin', not now. Maybe tomorrow we'll ride the horse. She loves horses." Cal explained sitting down on the couch beside Mr. Collins.

Emma stayed up way into the night talking with Mrs. Collins after Deke insisted they stay at the ranch for the weekend. Sammie Jo conked out in Emma's lap, a satisfied smile to her lips as she snuggled in her arms.

"Tell me about Kate. I so want to know her," Mrs. Collins insisted.

Deke was in the kitchen polishing his boots, but Emma couldn't be rude and not talk about Kate.

"She was twenty when she . . ."

"What made her decide to have the baby, I mean, if she knew she was sick."

Emma slumped back into the rocker, her eyes misting with memories she hadn't shared with anyone until now. Her voice was choked. She hadn't talked about Kate to anyone. "Mrs. Collins, you would have loved her."

"Please, please call me Margaret."

"All right, Margaret. Kate was full of life, never letting her illness get the best of her. Even when she was younger. She tried everything, playing softball, skating, dancing. She'd do anything. Sometimes she'd pay for doing them, but she'd keep on doing it, if she enjoyed it. She was so full of life, such a risk taker. When she found out she was pregnant, she changed, grew up a little, I guess. Still full of exuberance, but more thoughtful. She decided for herself, after her parents begged her not to try to have the child. She said it was her one and only chance at motherhood and God must have deemed it so. She wouldn't have missed it for the world. Oh, I wish you could have met her too. She was the most wonderful mother in the world. How she loved her baby."

"I only wish, Joel—"

Emma nodded, "I know. But in all fairness, Kate knew what she was doing. Only—it was the only time I know of in all her life that she actually thought things would work out. She thought Joel would marry her. Even before she knew she was pregnant."

"Poor girl. Joel never grew up. I suppose I spoiled him. He was my only child. Another reason I don't want to be solely responsible for another child in my life."

"Joel was a grown man. He made his own choices, obviously," Emma commented wanting to comfort her somehow, knowing what it felt like to lose someone you loved.

"And what will you tell Sammie Jo of her real father?"

"That he was an exciting, handsome man, who took too many chances and finally lost." Emma said lowly. "She needn't know every detail."

"Thank you for that, Emma." Margaret heard Deke in the kitchen and glanced that way. "Is there a chance you might marry someday?"

Emma sighed heavily. "I doubt it. I'm just a simple cook, and housekeeper, with a baby."

"Well, it's late, and I'm tired. I want to rest up for tomorrow. We have a wonderful weekend ahead of us, and I don't want to miss a moment of it. At least our trip here has accomplished several things. It put both our minds to rest, yours and mine, and it's given us a part of Joel he can never take away."

"I'm glad," Emma smiled, and showed her to her room.

The light was still on in the kitchen, but Emma didn't go in. Instead she went to her room, kissed her baby goodnight, and slept for ages.

The weekend went by in a blur, with Mr. and Mrs. Collins meeting everyone on the ranch, touring it, and having a blowout barbecue the night before they left.

Deke drove them back to Sweetwater on Sunday afternoon where they picked up their car at the hotel.

It was Sunday night and all was quiet. Emma had fixed a giant supper, to thank the Travers men for their hospitality. Rusty had a date with Jennifer. Clint announced at supper that he was thinking of joining the Jr. Rodeo Association in Sweetwater. He thought maybe in his spare time he could teach the younger set how to rodeo. Deke tried not to act shocked, or too pleased, but realized Clint had finally decided to stay home. Jake announced he was applying for some home courses this next semester, so he'd be around too.

Cal took Sammie Jo out for a late evening ride around the back pasture. Sammie Jo was screaming with joy and anxious to show off her ability to sit the saddle.

Deke went out front on the porch.

Emma didn't know what tact to take with him. She didn't know if he expected her to leave, or apologize or just go on about her business and leave him alone. She felt uncomfortable with him, and hated feeling that way.

"I guess I owe you an explanation," she started as she joined him on the porch, drying her hands on a cup towel.

"Nope," he said dryly.

"Of course I do. Unless—unless you want us to leave?" She bit a nail and waited.

"Nope." his voice was low and husky.

She went to stand in front of him, facing him. Her hands wrung the cup towel. "I wanted to tell you everything from the beginning. But we—we sorta started out wrong. You jumped to a few conclusions, and I let you."

"You sure did," he firmed his lips together.

"I was afraid—of losing her. Afraid to trust anyone."

"Yeah, I gathered that much." He shook his head slowly, still not giving her the benefit of a glance in her direction.

"When I realized you set such store in honesty, it was too late to tell you. I was afraid you'd fire me."

"Uh-huh," he added, nodding and moving away.

"You would have fired me, wouldn't you?" She asked coming to stand in front of him again.

"Probably."

Something was wrong. Something about this whole conversation was wrong. He should be shouting at her about now. He should be firing her now!

"So why didn't you?" She challenged her hands going to her hips with exasperation.

"Beats me," he said casting her one last look over his shoulder and walking off.

Emma's mouth dropped open, but nothing came out.

For days she worried over what he said, and what he didn't say. She hated this not knowing. Yet what was it she wanted to know? He obviously wasn't mad enough to fire her. That was good, wasn't it? She still had a job, a roof over her head, a way of earning a living for her baby.

Her baby! God the words sounded so nice. At last she could honestly call Sammie Jo her baby. The freedom to love her and keep her with her always.

She needed time to enjoy it, to embrace it.

The time had come and gone for the courts to award Sammie Jo to her. A piece of paper. All for a piece of paper.

But the tension that was mounting between her and Deke was so tight they couldn't be in the same room without a sizzle. Even Cal noticed it. No one seemed to want to be around them lately. Not even Sammie Jo.

"Why don't you two settle your differences, so the rest of us can relax?" Cal spouted one afternoon when Deke stormed out the door for the barn.

"What's to settle? What can I say?" Emma asked throwing her hands in the air in a gesture of helplessness.

"Don't know, but you'd better get to it, gal. He's steamin'."

"But—Cal?"

"Don't look at me, ask him." Cal pointed to the barn.

"You don't think I will, do ya?" Emma blurted, angry that everyone had suddenly turned against her in favor of Deke.

"Nope," Cal answered in that typically Travers' voice.

"Well I'll show you. Watch Sammie Jo for me. I'm going to settle this once and for all. I may be packing my bags when I come back, but at least I won't have to watch him storm about any longer."

"Go get 'em girl," Cal called after her with a chuckle.

Emma threw her apron in the air, letting it flow to the floor, straightened her jeans and blew a tendril of hair from her face as she marched with her head held high into the barn.

A dim light in one stall told Emma, Deke was still there.

She marched to the stall gate. "All right, Deke Travers. Let's have this out, here and now. I won't have you coming in every day and stomping about. What's wrong with you?"

"Shh-h." he raised his finger to his lips. "Josey time's comin'."

"She's calving?"

"Tonight," he said getting to his feet, and moving the lantern toward her.

"Can I help?" She asked, momentarily distracted by the sight of the cow in labor.

"Not yet. Now what did you want to know?" He asked staring down into her face.

She'd never seen him look quite so handsome. The urges inside her nearly overtook good sense. She wished she could touch that clean shaven cheek, kiss that stern set mouth, hold that tensed up body.

"I—I can't work for you like this," She began, moving away from the railing.

"No, why not?"

"You look and act like a thunder cloud about to burst every time I'm around. What's wrong with you?"

"You haven't figured it out?" He growled with a frown.

"No—I," she began but he was approaching her now, with such purpose. She gulped, her hands began to sweat, her lips trembled and her heart lurched as he swung the railing aside and pushed her backward until she was up against the barn wall, and surrounded by him. Penned by his big arms, staying her there.

She wet her lips, her eyes searching his for answers.

"Emma," he barely whispered, his head bent, his lips hovering just above hers, his long finger caressing the side of her cheek. He smiled down into her face. "What's wrong is I can't keep my mind on my business anymore. I can't eat, think, tend to cows, or sleep without thinking about you. I want you—" his voice faltered like a hushed whisper, as his lips brushed slightly against hers, like a feather teasing her. "I want you by my side, working with me, laughing with me, encouraging me when I'm down, holding my hand when I'm sick," his lips dipped against hers once more, this time for longer, breath-taking moments. Long enough for her to melt against him, to feel absorbed by him. "I want you all the time. I want Sammie Jo too. I want her to have my name not just my love. I want us to sleep together, love together, be with each other for the rest of our lives. I want to marry you Emma."

And then he did it. She totally fused against this powerful man as he took full possession of her mouth and body. He left no doubt of his sincerity in his kisses as he enveloped her soul. Soul mates, she had heard the expression, never envisioning there could be someone out there for herself, like Deke. But all doubts fled from her mind when Deke swooped her up into his arms and carried her to the stall.

He looked into her eyes and smiled the warmest smile she'd ever seen. "I'm not going to make love to you here, Emma. But you're gonna want me to before the night is over. Because we'll sit and help ole Josey bring a new life into the world, and share the precious moment with her, we're gonna be dreamin' about the same things for ourselves. And I promise you the day will come when I make you mine."

"How can you forgive me for all the lies?" she asked between kisses.

"I had to, darlin'," he caressed her cheek again, drawing an imaginary line down her cheek. "You were only doin' what nature told you to do. Taking care of your young, defending, protecting. A mother's instinct. And you didn't really lie, Emma. She is your daughter. Soon to be our daughter. And we'll have more, darlin'. I can guarantee that. And I only wish we could start on that tonight. But we've got work to do . . ."

"Oh Deke, I love you so," she whispered as they both reached to pet Josey.

"I know darlin'." He glanced at her surprised face. "I only wondered how long it would take you to realize it."

"Why Deke Travers, you conceited—," she laughed and pushed him into the hay, falling on top of him and he pulled her closer for another mind-boggling kiss. A kiss that went on and on forever and took her to places only dreamed of.

"Nope—convinced. You just convinced me. And if you don't get up, we aren't going to make it to the alter in white," he chuckled kissing her endlessly.

But Josey let out a loud moan and they raised up from the hay. "Okay Josey, we'll behave—for now . . .But later—me and the chief cook are gonna roll in the hay."

The End



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