

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

**Fifty Ways To Say
I'm Pregnant**

CHRISTINE RIMMER

Christine Rimmer
Fifty Ways To Say I'm Pregnant

Аннотация

There must be fifty ways to say I'm pregnant! So why couldn't Starr Bravo think of at least one? Maybe because though she'd been in love with rancher Beau Tisdale since she was sixteen, they'd agreed that this "summer of love" was just that. That when September rolled around, they'd go their separate ways—she to her glamorous job in New York City, he back to ranch life. But now—too late—she knew that the life she wanted was right here, with Beau and their unborn child. And she needed to get the words out—Beau, I'm pregnant—before their baby did it for her! So why couldn't she just tell him? Maybe because there were three words she was longing to hear from him first?

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**“That day all those years ago,
those horrible things you said
to me...did you mean them?”**

“No,” Beau said softly. “I didn’t mean them.”

Starr let out a long sigh. “I knew it. But...why?”

All these years he’d nursed a hopeless yearning that someday they’d talk about this. And here they were, and it was happening just the way he’d always dreamed it....

He said, “I only knew then that I was headed for a bad place and I had to make sure you didn’t try to follow me there.”

“Oh,” she said softly. “Well, it worked. Because it made me see that I had to make some changes or I could end up...” She didn’t seem to know how to finish.

So Beau did it for her. “...Following the wrong guy down the road to nowhere?”

Tears welled in Starr’s eyes as she turned to him again. “Yes, I guess that’s it. But look...I didn’t go down that road. And you... well, Beau. You have done it. You’ve found your way back.”

Fifty Ways To Say I'm Pregnant

Christine Rimmer



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For all those wonderful readers who wouldn't quit asking, "But what about Beau and Starr...?"

CHRISTINE RIMMER

came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been everything from an actress to a phone sales representative to a playwright. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves, who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oklahoma.

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Prologue

Starr Bravo, home for the summer after her first year of college, stood at the kitchen sink peeling carrots for the stew already simmering on the stove.

“Stah light, stah bwight,” chanted a small voice not far from her feet. Starr had tried teaching her half brother, Ethan, the children’s rhyme just last night. The toddler remembered the first part and seemed to think it referred to his big sister, personally. “Stah light, stah bwight...” Something with wheels rolled up the back of her bare leg.

“Hey!” She paused with a carrot half-peeled to glance over her shoulder and fake a scowl at him.

He beamed up at her as he rolled his tiny toy truck back down the side of her calf. “Vrrooom, vroom...”

“Stop that.” The words were firm, but she couldn’t keep an adoring grin from pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“Vroom, vroom...” Ethan rolled the little truck off across the floor, fat legs working at a speedy crawl.

Starr’s stepmother, Tess, was sitting at the long pine table snapping beans, Edna Heller at her side. Years ago, Edna had been the Rising Sun Ranch’s housekeeper, but now the slim woman in her late fifties was just plain family—and Ethan, vrooming with enthusiasm, had his toy truck rolling straight for her left foot.

Edna crossed her ankles and scooted them under her chair.
“Don’t you even try it, young man.”

“Vroom, vroom, vroom...”

Starr turned back to her carrot, peeled it swiftly clean and set it on the counter, smiling to herself, thinking how good it was to be home.

Out the window, past the flattened patches of still-green grass and the slanting roofs of the barn and the sheds, she could see the snowy crests of the Bighorn Mountains in the distance, swathed in a few white wisps of cloud. The green slopes of rolling prairie land, dotted here and there with stands of cottonwoods, lay spread below the mountains in overlapping swells of sun and shadow. Closer still, in the pasture behind the barn, a windmill whirled in the afternoon breeze, the sun catching in its vanes, making a golden blur.

As she reached for the next carrot in the pile, a pickup truck—dark green and caked with mud—rolled into the rear yard. Starr spotted the driver and forgot all about that next carrot.

Beau Tisdale.

She dropped her peeler in the sink.

Bold as you please, he pushed open the driver’s door and jumped to the ground. He wore dusty Wranglers and dustier boots, a faded chambray work shirt, sweat-dark along his chest, under the arms and down his back. His battered straw Resistol shaded his features, but she knew him, anyway. Knew the strong, wide set of his shoulders, the lean hard waist, the long, muscled

legs....

Yeah, she knew him. Though she damn well wished she didn't.

At the table, Ethan was driving his miniature truck in and out between the chairs. "Vroom, vroom, vroom," he growled as he went.

Tess laughed. "Ethan John, you will get yourself stepped on."
"Vroom, vrrrooom, vrrrooommmm..."

Outside, some other cowpuncher Starr didn't recognize got out on the passenger side and went around to the tailgate. Beau joined him. The two of them pulled on work gloves and started unloading the fencing wire and posts piled high in the pickup's bed. Quickly and methodically, they set to stacking everything against the side of the barn.

Starr watched them for a while, kind of simmering inside. In spite of being a rotten lying jerk as a person, Beau was a good worker, strong and always with his mind on the job, never a wasted movement. She could practically see the muscles flexing under that sweat-stained shirt....

She grabbed a towel. "Beau Tisdale is here." Wiping her hands, she turned to the women at the table, trying with all her might to keep her voice offhand. "He's got a pickup piled with fence wire and posts, which he is in the process of unloading as I speak."

Tess and Edna shared a look—and then they both went back to snapping those beans. "Oh, yes," said Tess, her eyes on the bean she was snapping and her voice as studiously casual as Starr's had

tried to be. “Daniel got some kind of deal from the suppliers on fixed-knot fence. It’s more expensive than barb wire, but safer for the stock. Lasts longer, too, they say. Daniel and Beau convinced your father to give it a try. So I’d imagine Beau’s just bringing some of it by.”

Daniel Hart, an old guy with no family to speak of, owned a nearby ranch. A couple of years ago, when Beau was fresh out of the slammer, he’d hired on with Mr. Hart. The job, evidently, had worked out just fine.

“Well, isn’t that just so helpful of Beau,” Starr said, ladling on the saccharine. She tipped her chin at a defiant angle. Yeah, she had an attitude when it came to Beau—and she didn’t care who knew it, either.

“Yes, it is,” said her stepmother, curly head bowed over those beans. “Very helpful.”

Tossing the towel aside, Starr whirled back to the window and snatched up her peeler. Slammer, she thought the word again, with relish, as she grabbed the next carrot and began scraping away. Fresh out of the slammer...

She made short work of the carrot and the next one, too. In no time the carrots were all done. She started in on a big potato. Beyond the window, Beau and the unknown cowboy were unloading the last of the fencing materials.

And okay, if you wanted to be strictly factual about it, Beau had gone to the state honor farm and not the penitentiary when he did his time. He’d gotten that break because both Tess and Zach,

Starr's dad, had spoken up for him at the trial. Starr only called it the slammer secretly, to herself. Yeah, it was mean-spirited of her—but she figured she had a right to be a little bit mean-spirited where Beau Tisdale was concerned.

Her father had done a lot for Beau, standing up for him in court like that, after what Beau did. And then, when Beau got out, her dad had been the one who set him up with the job at the Hart place.

Ferociously, Starr scraped away potato skin, baring the naked white meat beneath.

And this wasn't the first time in the past few years that she'd seen Beau around the Rising Sun. She gouged at one of the stubborn eyes that dotted the otherwise smooth-peeled surface. Oh, yeah, she'd seen him and her dad together, out leaning on the horse pasture fence, side by side. And more than once, she'd spotted Beau riding in with the hands after a long day's work poisoning weeds or scattering bulls or doing God knew what all.

Yeah, okay. In a lot of ways, ranching was a community endeavor. Folks from different ranches worked together to get the tough stuff done. But this was more than that. When she was home for Easter, she'd even seen her dad patting Beau on the back. A friendly gesture. Like they were good pals or something....

Tess and her dad were fine people. They would always do what they could to help the disadvantaged. Starr was proud of them for that, and she had no problem with them making it so Beau didn't

have to do hard time. She could even accept her dad's finding him a job, giving him a new start.

But her dad making friends with him? That was one step too far.

"You're going to mangle that poor potato until there's not a thing left of it."

Starr froze in midgouge. She'd been so absorbed in her fury at Beau, she hadn't even heard her stepmother approach.

"Starr..." Tess's soft voice soothed and reproached at the same time. Starr gritted her teeth and went on gouging eyes—until Tess's slim, work-roughened hand came around and settled over her own. "Come on, give me that potato...."

Outside, Beau and the other hand were getting back into the cab. Doors slammed, one and then the other.

"Starr..."

"Fine. Take it." She slapped the potato into Tess's hand and threw the peeler in the sink. Outside, the dirty green pickup drove off. Flipping on the tap, she swiftly rinsed her hands and grabbed for the towel again. "I could use a break, anyway."

She tossed the towel on the counter and marched out of there, ignoring the way Ethan sat chewing on his toy truck, staring at her with wide, bewildered eyes and Edna pursed up her mouth and shook her head over her beans—and Tess just stood there, looking worried, the peeled, gouged potato still cradled in her hand.

About five minutes later, Starr heard a careful tap on her door.

“Starr?” Tess’s voice.

By then, Starr was beginning to feel just a little bit ashamed. No matter how angry it got her to see Beau Tisdale making himself at home on the Rising Sun, she shouldn’t have gone off like that. She wasn’t the sulky, messed-up kid she’d once been. Now, besides being someone you could count on and a straight-A student, she took pride in being the kind of person who never descended to throwing fits, or flying off the handle when something bugged her.

“May I come in?” Tess asked from the other side of the door.

“Yeah,” Starr said grudgingly. “Okay, come on.”

Tess slipped around the door and closed it behind her by leaning back against it, one hand still on the knob. “You okay?”

Starr let a good thirty seconds elapse before answering. She spent the time tugging at the hem of her shorts and pretending to study the swirling blue-and-purple pattern on her bedspread. Tess had sewn the spread for her—along with the dark blue curtains—when Starr was sixteen and came back to live at the Rising Sun.

“Yeah,” Starr gave out, at last. “I’m okay.”

Cautiously, Tess approached the bed. Starr signaled her willingness to talk by sliding over and making a space for her. Tess took the space, settling into it so gently that the mattress hardly shifted.

After that, for a minute or two, they just sat there, neither seeming to know quite where to begin.

Tess broke the silence. “Those curtains...” She nudged Starr and indicated the curtains she had made three years before. “I was hanging them when I looked down into the rear yard and saw you and Beau going into the barn....”

“God.” Starr dropped her head back and groaned at the ceiling. “Do you have to remind me of that day—let alone of that guy?”

Tess wrapped an arm around her shoulder and gave an encouraging squeeze. “Well, yes. I think I do. I think maybe this is something we’ve waited a little too long to talk about.”

Hurt welled up, making her throat feel too tight. She jerked out of the comforting circle of Tess’s arm and hitched a leg up on the bed, facing her stepmother more fully. “I just don’t get it, you know? Dad’s like...his friend now. How can Dad do that, after what Beau Tisdale did to me?”

“Oh, honey...” Tess reached out again.

Starr ducked away. “Uh-uh. Don’t try to make it all better. It’s not all better. You were there. You were the one who caught us together. And you were there later, too, in the yard, after Dad told him to go. You saw how he threw my heart down on the ground and stomped on it with his worn-out old boot.”

“Starr—”

Starr threw up both hands. “Don’t...make any excuses for him.”

“But I—”

“Uh-uh. No.” They stared at each other, and then Starr

allowed, “Okay. I know it wasn’t really his fault, that thing with his awful brothers making him sit point for them while they rustled our cattle. I know he turned it around there at the end, went against his brothers and helped you take them in. I can understand, I really can, why you and Dad stood up for him at court over that. And why Dad set him up with old man Hart. But the other...what happened the day before you and Dad caught Beau and his brothers out by the Farley breaks. What happened...with Beau and me...” The old hurt felt so new and fresh at that moment, it closed off her throat and stole the rest of the words right out of her mouth. She hung her head and blinked back tears—stupid, pointless tears, for a man who didn’t deserve them.

Light as warm breeze, Tess’s hand stroked her hair. Starr lifted her head. “Tess, I trusted him—and three years ago, you know how I was. I didn’t trust anyone then. But I did trust Beau. And he took my trust and threw it back in my face.”

Tess spoke softly. “Honey, I think there was more to it than that. I think it’s time you started to look at what happened through the eyes of a woman, because you are becoming a woman now, and a fine one. You are no longer that same hurt, confused girl you were then.”

“What are you talking about? You were there. You saw. He did it right out in the yard, with you and Dad and probably Edna and any ranch hand who bothered to look out his trailer window watching while it happened.”

“Starr—”

“No!” She shook her head, hard. “How can you make excuses for him? You know what he did.” Oh, she could still remember it like it was yesterday—a hot day, in June, a day kind of like this one....

Her own heart pounding hard in her ears, Starr came running down the stairs, Tess following after her. She ran straight through the great room and out to the entrance hall, flinging back the front door and racing out to the porch.

Across the yard, the door to Beau’s trailer opened. Her dad came out. He started up the driveway, heading for the back of the house. But when he saw her on the porch, he changed direction and came straight to the foot of the front steps. “What’s the matter?”

Starr leaned on the porch rail, tears pushing at the back of her throat. “Daddy, what happened? Did you talk to him? Did he tell you—?”

“Starr.” Her dad had a tired look, his tanned face drawn and tight-lipped. “I thought you said you’d stay in your room.”

“I couldn’t,” she cried. “I had to know. Did he tell you, how we have something special between us? Do you understand now that he never meant anything wrong to happen, that he—?”

“Starr. Beau is leaving. I’m going to go get his pay and then he’ll be gone.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She gaped at her father. “What? No. You can’t do that. That’s not right, not fair...”

She pushed away from the railing and darted to the steps.

Her dad blocked her path. "Go back upstairs."

Why wouldn't he understand? Why couldn't he see? "I have to talk to him."

"No, you don't. Just let the damn fool go."

Hot fury swirled through her, that he would speak of Beau that way. "He is not a fool! He...he cares for me, that's all. He just wanted to be with me, like I want to be with him."

It was all there in her dad's sad eyes: that she was sixteen and Beau was twenty-one, that she was a Bravo and Beau was one of those shiftless, no-good Tisdales....

Unfair. It was so unfair. She'd told him that she'd never had sex with any guy, whatever everybody seemed to think of her—that she and Beau hadn't done anything but kissing out there in the barn, that, yeah, Beau had unbuttoned her shirt. But that was all. It hadn't gone any further.

"Starr," her dad said. "Go upstairs."

No way. She dodged to slide around him, but he seemed to sense she would do it and stepped in her path once more. She ran square into his chest as he grabbed her by both arms.

"No!" she cried, shouting now. She had to get through him, had to get to Beau. "Let me go!" she screamed. "Let me talk to him!"

"Starr, listen." Her dad's big hands held on tight, though she kicked and squirmed and beat on his chest. "Starr. Settle down."

She was wild by then, twisting and flailing. "No! I won't! I

won't! Let me go!"

From behind her, Tess said, "He's coming."

Her dad swore. Starr froze and craned around him to see. Beau was coming out of his trailer across the yard. "Beau!" she called, all her desperate yearning there in his name. "Beau, he won't let me talk to you!" She tried again to break free, catching her dad off-guard, sliding around him, almost succeeding that time. But somehow, he managed to catch one arm as she flew by. He hauled her back against his chest, grabbing the other arm, too, holding her like that, with her arms behind her as she yanked and squirmed and tried to kick back at him, to get herself free, to run to Beau.

Beau came at them, fast, long strides stirring the dirt under his boots. He stopped a few feet from where Starr stood, with her father holding her arms and her body yearning toward him.

She saw the bruise then—a big, mean one on Beau's chin, and she gasped in outrage. "Beau. He hit you!" She turned a hot glare over her shoulder, at her dad.

Beau said, his voice flat with no caring in it, "Forget it. It's nothing."

She swung her head front, facing Beau again and she gave him her outrage, her fury for his sake. "No. He had no right to hit you! You didn't do anything wrong. He can't—"

"Starr." His eyes were so cold. She couldn't see the man she'd thought she loved in them anywhere. "He had a right."

"No!" It came out all ragged, a cry of pure distress. She'd

stopped struggling to get free of her dad's grip. Now, she just stood there and looked at Beau, at his dead eyes and his expressionless face. Oh, where are you? her heart cried. Where have you gone to? What are you telling me?

Slowly, Beau smiled. A knowing smile—knowing and ugly. And then, very low, he chuckled. It was a dirty, insulting sound.

“Tisdale,” her dad warned in a growl.

“Zach,” Tess said from back on the porch. “Let him tell her.”

For a moment nothing happened, then, with no warning, her dad let go of her. She staggered a little at the sudden lack of restraint and reached out toward Beau. “Beau, please—”

He cut her off, his tone evil with nasty, intimate humor. “You thought you'd heard every line, didn't you, big-city girl? Heard 'em all and never fell for a one. But the lonesome cowboy routine got you goin', didn't it?”

This couldn't be happening. “Wh—what are you saying?”

He made a low, smug sound. “You know damn well what I'm saying.”

She shook her head, fiercely, as if she could shake his cruel words right out of her head. “No....”

“Fraid so.” Beau lowered his voice, as if sharing a dirty secret with her. “Come on, you know how guys are.”

Starr kept shaking her head. “No! You wouldn't. You couldn't. All those things you said—”

He shrugged. “They didn't mean squat. I was after one thing. And we both know what that was.”

“No...” She only got it out on a whisper that time.

Beau went on smiling that mean, hurtful smile. “Yeah.”

Her dad cut in then. “Okay, enough. Go on, Tisdale. Around back. I’ll get your money.”

And without another word to her, Beau turned and walked away.

“It hurt, Tess,” Starr said, softly now, head bowed again, shoulders slumped. “I don’t think you know how much it hurt....”

Tess didn’t argue. She only reached out and brushed a hand against Starr’s arm, a gesture that spoke better than words could have—of comfort, of understanding....

Starr faced her stepmother again. “And it...shamed me, so bad. To have him say those terrible things. And right in front of everyone, too.”

“I know it did,” Tess whispered. “And...I am so sorry.”

Starr made a low sound. “Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault.”

Tess pressed her lips together. And then she sighed. “You’re wrong there. It was my fault. At least a little.”

“But how?” Starr blinked. “No. I don’t see how you can say that.”

Tess sat up just a fraction straighter. “I say it because it’s true. Zach would have stopped Beau from saying those things. But I told your father to let Beau go ahead.” She paused, looking deeply into Starr’s eyes. “Don’t you remember?”

Starr looked away. She was back out in the yard again, on that day three years ago, in the process of getting her poor heart

broken. “Zach,” Tess had said. “Let him tell her . . .”

“Yeah.” She turned to Tess again. “I remember. But that doesn’t put you at fault.”

Tess raised a hand. “Yes. In a way, it does. Because I knew what Beau would say. I knew what he was trying to do. And I thought it was the best thing for you, to go ahead and let him do it. Let him hurt and shame you so bad that your powerful feeling for him would sour into hate, that you’d never want to speak to him again, and most important, that you wouldn’t go ruining your life chasing after him . . .”

“Well, so? You were right. I needed to hear him say what he said. I needed to hear from his own lying mouth what a dirty low-down rat he is. You had it right, that’s all. If he hadn’t said those things, I just might have wrecked my life running after him.”

“But you didn’t run after him,” Tess said with a rueful kind of smile half curving her mouth. “And since then, you’ve pretty much turned your life around, haven’t you?”

“Well, yeah.” She made a humping sound. She had been flunking school the year before, running pretty wild down in San Diego, with the money her mother threw at her to keep her out of her hair—and no supervision at all. “Okay,” she admitted. “I guess in a twisted sort of way, Beau did me a favor. Those rotten things he said made me want nothing to do with him. And since he landed himself in jail not long after that, it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I set my mind on making my life something better than it was then. So, okay. If you look it

that way, he did me a big favor.”

Tess’s smile stretched a little wider. “He did, didn’t he?”

“But it doesn’t make him any less of a creep. Yeah, he helped me, in a backhanded way. But it wasn’t like he said those things for my sake or anything.”

Tess wasn’t smiling by then. “But Starr. What if that’s exactly what he did? What if he hurt you because he knew it would set you free?”

Starr blinked and scooted back a little. She had a shivery feeling down inside, a kind of giddy strangeness in her stomach. “No. You don’t really think...”

“Yes, I do. I suspected it then. But now, after seeing the way he’s managed to make something of his own life against near-impossible odds, I’m pretty much positive he said what he said for your sake. He knew he was in big trouble, Starr. His brothers were up to no good, and they’d been battering and abusing him for so long, he had a real hard time standing up to them. He was headed for trouble with the law, and he knew it—and he didn’t want to drag you down with him.”

The hurt, cold place at the center of her heart felt somehow a little bit warmer right then. “You think?”

“I do.” Tess reached out and pressed a loving hand against the side of Starr’s face. “So. Maybe you can find it in your heart to forgive the guy a little?”

Starr took Tess’s cradling hand and gave it a squeeze before letting go. “You know, you are... a real mom to me.”

Tess's lower lip trembled just a little. "Why, honey. What a beautiful thing to say."

"It's only the truth—and I know how you are. So respectful of my mother's place in my life. So I want you to know it's nothing against my mother's memory, I promise." Starr's natural mother had lived in San Diego with her much-older, very wealthy second husband—until she'd died in a freeway pileup two years before. When Starr thought of Leila Wickerston Bravo Marks, it was always with a feeling of sad regret—that they'd never shared the kind of closeness that Starr had with Tess, that her mother had never understood her and never had much time for her. Leila had lavished money on Starr, but love and attention were always in short supply.

"My mother was my mother," Starr said, trying not to sound as grim as the subject always made her feel. "I know that—and about Beau..."

"Umm?"

"I'll think about what you said. I can kind of see the sense in it. And I do know that Beau has worked hard to make a life for himself after the mess he started out with. I guess he doesn't need to have me staring daggers at his back every time he comes around."

Tess leaned close enough to brush a kiss right between Starr's eyes. When she pulled back, a tear was trailing down her soft cheek. She swiped it away with the back of a hand. "I am so proud of you. And so is your dad." She reached out again and smoothed

a hank of Starr's hair, guiding it back behind her ear. Then she grinned. "But I have to say, I kind of miss that rhinestone you used wear in your nose."

Starr gave her a sideways look. "Hey. I've still got the navel ring—and a tiny ladybug tattoo right on my—"

"Don't—" Tess put up a hand "—mention that to your dad."

Starr wiggled her eyebrows. "He doesn't ask, I don't tell..."

Tess laughed at that, a happy, trilling laugh. Starr thought how good it was to know her, that Tess was not only the mother she'd always needed, Tess was also a true friend. Tess jumped off the bed. "Come on." She brushed at the front of her jeans, as if they'd managed to get wrinkles in them somehow. "There are beans to snap, potatoes to peel—and tonight, if you're lucky, you, Jobeth, Edna and I will fight to the death in a brutal game of Scrabble." Jobeth was Tess's daughter by her first husband. She was eleven now, and right where she wanted to be—out with Zach, who had adopted her that first year he and Tess got together. Jobeth loved every aspect of ranching, from pulling calves to branding to gathering day.

Starr groaned. "It's a thrill a minute around this place."

Tess was already at the door. "Coming?"

Starr smiled then. "You know what? It's great to be home."

Chapter One

Three years later...

Blame it on that sliver of moon hanging from a star in the summer sky. Blame it on the two beers he had that he probably shouldn't have. Blame it on the sight of her—that black hair shining like a crow's wing by the light of the paper lanterns strung overhead, those eyes that unforgettable heart-stopping amethyst-blue. Blame it on the yearning inside him, the yearning that, after all those years, still remained with him, tender as an old wound that never did heal quite right.

Blame it on...

Hell. Blame it on whatever you damn well please.

At the annual Medicine Creek Merchant Society's Independence Day dance, out under the stars in Patriot Park, after six endless years of keeping strictly away from her, Beau Tisdale decided he would ask Starr Bravo for a dance.

It was no picnic mustering the courage to do it. He stood for a while under the night-shadowed branches of a cottonwood a ways from the bunting-draped temporary dance floor, nursing a third longneck, watching her as he worked up his nerve.

Twice, she danced with Barnaby Cotes, the sneaky weasel who ran Cotes Clothing and Gift on Main Street and was too old for her by half. Then Tim Cally, a hand on the Rising Sun for decades, led her out on the floor. Beau smiled at that. Tim was

nearing sixty and a little stiff in the joints, but he could still do a fair two-step. He held Starr lightly and not too close. Beau didn't mind watching that—not that he had any right to mind or not to mind where Starr was concerned.

He tipped up the longneck and took a deep drink. Just one damn dance, he was thinking. What can it hurt?

Stupid question. It'd hurt plenty if those violet eyes went to ice on him, if she turned him down flat. A man does have his pride, after all.

But he didn't guess she'd begrudge him a dance. She'd seemed civil enough to him in the last few years. When he'd pass her on the street or see her on the Rising Sun, she'd give him a cool smile and a nod, anyway. If he was lucky, he'd even get a plain, politely spoken, "Hi, Beau."

She never seemed overjoyed to set eyes on him, but it wasn't near as bad as it had been those first couple of years after he got off the honor farm. In those years, when she looked at him, he felt knee-high to a skunk and twice as foul-smelling. She'd hated him then, pure and simple, for the hard and heartless things he'd said to her that day in the yard at the Rising Sun.

But she didn't seem to hate him anymore. Maybe she'd figured out a few things. Or maybe it was just a long time down a dusty road and what some cowboy had said to her six years ago when she was still a girl didn't mean a thing to her now.

No, he couldn't say she was exactly falling all over herself to get next to him in recent years. But if he asked for a dance, he

figured he had at least a fifty-fifty chance she'd say yes....

She sat out the next dance, another two-step, strolling instead over to one of the picnic tables not far from the bandstand to take her place with Tess and Zach and Jobeth. Zach's cousin Nate Bravo sat with them, along with his wife Meggie May, who was round as a corn-fed hen with their third child. Zach had told him the other day that Tess was pregnant, too. "Three months along," Zach had said quietly, pride and happiness glowing in his eyes.

As Beau watched, Jobeth ducked low, hunching her shoulders to the table, as if she'd like to melt right on through the rough wood planks. And Starr, sitting next to her, threw back her shining head and laughed.

Beau stood transfixed at the free, joyous sound. The band played on, a fast one, but Starr Bravo's laugh was a whole other kind of music, the very sweetest kind. Jobeth elbowed her stepsister in the side and Starr made a show of composing herself. Jobeth straightened. In the light of the red, white and blue lanterns overhead, Jobeth's face looked more than a little bit flushed. She said something snappish to Starr, who leaned sideways enough to bump her shoulder in the affectionate way that a sister will do. Jobeth still looked mulish, but Beau could see the reluctant smile that twitched the corners of her mouth.

About then, Beau caught sight of Nick Colerby lurking near the Bravo table. The dark-haired kid was about Jobeth's age and had teased and tormented Starr's sister from elementary school onward. Maybe Jobeth was worried he might ask her to dance.

And the toe-tapping song was ending. If he didn't hustle his butt over there, some other lucky cowhand would be getting the next dance with Starr. Beau drained the last of his beer and chucked the empty in a recycling can as he went by. He walked fast, hoping speed would get him where he was going before he lost his nerve. As a result, in no time at all, he found himself standing right there by the table full of Bravos.

Tess and Meggie beamed up at him.

"Hi, Beau."

"How're you doin'?"

His throat felt like it had a fence post lodged in it. He cleared it, raising his hat in a polite salute and then settling it back in place. "Well, I'm fine. Just fine."

"Nice night," said Zach.

"Yeah. Real nice."

About then, Jobeth giggled into her hand. A sideways glance and he saw that Starr was the one giving her the elbow, that time.

"Where's Daniel?" asked Tess. "He always enjoys a celebration. I'd have thought he'd come out tonight."

To keep his gaze from lingering too long on Starr, Beau made himself focus on Zach's pretty wife. "Daniel's feeling a little under the weather." Beau had left the older man in his ancient easy chair, reading *Western Horseman*, looking kind of pale, vowing there was nothing wrong with him that a few antacids and a good night's rest wouldn't cure.

Twin lines of concern formed between Tess's smooth brows.

“Nothing serious, I hope?”

“He says he’s just tired. But I’m keeping my eye on him.”

Tess smiled her gentle smile. “Good. He needs someone to look out for him a little. He pushes himself too hard sometimes.”

“That he does.” The band struck up the next number. A slow one. It was now or never. “Ahem. Starr, I wonder if I might have this dance?”

The second the words were out, he wanted to suck them right back in. They couldn’t have sounded stiffer if he was a damn corpse. He’d meant to be casual and easy. How ’bout a dance? maybe, or Come on. Let’s dance....

Jobeth giggled again. If he’d had a pistol on him, he’d have fired a shot past her head just to shut that girl up. And then the giggle ended on a sharp, startled, “Oh!” She scowled at her sister and he put it together. Starr must have kicked her under the table.

And Starr was...getting up. It was going to happen. He would have his dance. “Sure, Beau. That would be nice.” God bless America, was there ever a woman so blasted beautiful? She’d let that inky hair, once chopped and spiky, grow long. It flowed past her shoulders when she wore it loose, but tonight it was anchored up at the back, little wisps of it kissing her velvety cheeks. And those eyes...

They were the eyes he saw in his dreams, lupine-blue. His breath was all tangled up in his chest. His heart stopped—and then set to pounding like a herd of spooked mustangs.

She walked around the table toward him, not smiling exactly,

but friendly enough. Her snug red top hooked at one shoulder, leaving the other bare, revealing skin so pure and fine-textured, it seemed to glow in the lantern light.

She held out her hand and the mustangs in his chest started bucking and snorting. Damn, he was a sad case for certain.

Her hand was slim and smooth and cool. His own felt hot and he knew it was rough. But she didn't seem to mind.

Her smile bloomed wide. The wild horses inside him went suddenly calm as he smiled back. "Come on, then," she said. He let her lead the way across the flattened grass of the clearing and up the two steps to the dance floor.

She tucked herself into his arms as if she'd been born to be there. Between that red top and her low-riding jeans, a narrow section of bare waist tempted him. She was never going to know how powerfully he wanted to ease his fingers under the stretchy material and wrap his hand around that silky inward curve....

Uh-uh. He grasped her waist lightly, and his fingers didn't stray where they had no right to go. He breathed in the scent of her. It was as he remembered it, hinting of some wonderful exotic flower, causing an old memory to stir...

Jasmine, he thought. She smells like jasmine.

Years and years before, when he was six or maybe seven, his mother had dared to try and leave his father. She'd taken Beau with her, to her people in Arkansas. On the cyclone fence in his grandmother's side yard, grew a lush green vine thick with tiny trumpet-shaped flowers, the sweet scent so heady he would

ignore the bees that swarmed over it, just to get close and breathe in their perfume. “That’s jasmine, Beau, sweetie,” his mother had told him, bending close, that heart-shaped gold locket she always wore falling out on its chain, gleaming in the sunlight.

His father had come after them soon enough and brought them back. And Beau had never smelled jasmine again.

Until Starr.

Careful, he thought. Don’t hold her too close....

For a moment or two, they simply danced, her head tucked against his shoulder, her scent enticing him, the feel of her under his hands making all his senses spin.

Then she lifted her head and met his eyes. “So...how’ve you been?” It was a safe, general-type question and he found he was grateful to her for asking it. Talking was good. It kept him from getting too lost in the feel and the smell of her.

“Working,” he said. “Keeping my nose clean.”

She tipped her head to the side. The wisps of midnight hair stirred against her cheeks. “Happy?”

The question, for some reason, seemed unbearably personal—intimate, even. As if she asked for the secrets in his deepest heart. His gut tightened and he almost missed a step. But he recovered. He pulled her a bit closer and felt the tips of her full breasts brush his chest. His Wranglers got tighter. Down, damn it, he thought. “I’m doin’ okay.” It sounded easy and offhand. Relief curled through him that his voice had not betrayed him. He relaxed again. “You?”

She shrugged, one slim shoulder—the gleaming bare one—lifting, her slim waist shifting a fraction beneath his careful hand. “Yeah. I am.” She grinned, as if the thought pleased her. “I’m happy.”

“Heard you graduated from C.U. last month.”

“That’s right. B.A. in journalism. Dean’s honor list.” She chuckled. “And yes, I am bragging.”

“You got the right. It’s a big accomplishment.” A few years before, with Daniel’s encouragement, he’d managed to pass his high school equivalency. But he didn’t say that. Yeah, it was a major step for him. He hadn’t made it past the ninth grade and he’d never expected to get a chance to go back. But a high school diploma looked pretty puny alongside a college degree. “I think Zach mentioned you were heading to New York City in the fall...”

“That’s right. Grandmother Elaine pulled some strings.” Zach’s parents lived in New York. “CityWide Magazine,” she said. “It’s a weekly. I’ll start as an editorial assistant right after Labor Day.”

“Well,” he said, striving for words that were brilliant and meaningful and finding nothing but, “that sounds just great.”

“And for the summer, as usual, I’ll be at Jerry Esponda’s beck and call.” For as long as Beau could remember, Jerry had been publisher, editor-in-chief, reporter and printer of the local weekly The Medicine Creek Clarion. No doubt he appreciated Starr’s help every summer.

“Jerry’ll be real sorry to see you go.”

“Well,” she said pertly. “I’m not gone yet.”

“Soon enough, though.”

“Yeah,” she softly agreed. “Soon enough.” She tucked her head back into his shoulder and they danced the rest of the song without speaking.

As they swayed to the music, he thought about how much things had changed since the last time he’d held her in his arms. She greeted the world with an open, easy smile now. She had her college degree and he had no doubt she would make it in the big city. And he...

Well, he was as free as a man can ever get from the wrongs he’d done in the past. He’d paid his debt to society and lived straight with the law and his neighbors—and himself—for five years now.

The music ended. Their dance was over.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and he released her, his arms dropping to his sides. Better to let go quick. She would never be his to keep. “Beau,” she said in a musing tone, “you have the strangest look on your face....”

Nearby, couples broke apart, some of them leaving the floor, others waiting, milling around a little, till the next song began. Still others climbed the steps in pairs from down on the grass.

He said, “I was thinking that we’ve done okay, you and me....”

She looked at him, real serious, for a second or two, and then she gave him a slow, dazzling smile. “Yeah, and who woulda

thought it, huh?”

He chuckled at that and tipped his hat to her. The band started up again, and damn, was he tempted to pull her close for one more dance. But another cowboy stepped in and Beau didn't challenge him.

Starr whirled off in the other man's arms. Beau left the dance floor. He stood watching for a little while and then he turned and headed for his pickup parked in the dirt lot on the other side of the trees.

About a half an hour later, he drove into the yard at the Hart Ranch. The lights were on in the kitchen and living room of the main house.

Beau checked the green-glowing dash clock. Not quite eleven. Not real late, but later than Daniel had said he planned to be up. Beau decided he'd better go on in and check on him before heading for the trailer he called home.

Daniel's dog, Whirlyboy, came off the front porch with a low whine of greeting, his tail wagging hopefully back and forth. "Hey, boy. How's it goin'?" Beau patted the hound's smooth head and Whirlyboy bumped companionably against his leg as Beau climbed the wooden steps to Daniel's front porch.

He paused at the door before he gave it a tap, thinking of Starr again, of her scent that reminded him of jasmine, of her musical laughter on the night air.

Whirlyboy bumped his leg again, eager for a chance to get beyond the door where his master waited.

“We’re goin’, we’re goin’.” Beau gave the dog another pat and set his mind to a more constructive subject: the work he had planned for tomorrow. If Daniel was still up, they could take a moment to confer a little. They wanted to move several head of cattle from one pasture, where they’d eaten the grass down, to another where the grass was still long and thick. And, as always, there were fences to check.

True, they didn’t need to do a whole lot of conferring on stuff that was already decided. But Beau liked sitting in Daniel’s kitchen over a cold drink or a hot cup of coffee, discussing the work ahead, or their plans for the herd. Daniel seemed to enjoy it, too.

Beau tapped on the door. When no answer came, he tapped again, Whirlyboy’s tail beating against his leg in anticipation.

Again, there was no answer, just the sound of the dog’s impatient panting, an owl hooting out by one of the sheds, the chirping of crickets in the grass—and he thought, from inside, the sound of low voices. Maybe the television in the front room?

Beau turned the knob and pushed open the door. “Daniel?” He stepped into the small entry hall. Whirlyboy slid in around him and headed straight for the front room to the left, disappearing through the open double doors. The lights were on in there and Beau could hear those televised voices droning away. “Daniel?”

No answer, just a sharp spurt of canned laughter. And Whirlyboy, whining in bursts of frustrated sound.

“Daniel?” Beau said a little louder than before.

“In here...” The voice was Daniel’s, but tight and low, the words kind of squeezed out around a groan. Beau moved into the doorway—and stopped dead at what he saw.

The worried hound sat whining in canine distress at Daniel’s feet, as the big man squirmed in his easy chair.

Daniel’s gray face ran sweat, his left hand pressed, clawlike, against his barrel chest. “Think...heart attack...”

No, screamed a frantic voice inside Beau’s head. Not Daniel—no! He’d seen his mother die, and his mean old daddy. One of his brothers was dead, too—Lyle got his in a prison-yard fight. It was enough, Beau thought.

Not Daniel. No way. I won’t let him go....

“Just hold on,” he told Daniel, his own voice surprising him, it was so level and calm. “I’ll get help.” Beau spun on his heel for the phone in the hall.

Chapter Two

From the Medicine Creek Clarion,
week of July 10 through July 16
Local Rancher Suffers Heart Attack

Daniel Hart, owner of the Hart Ranch, suffered a heart attack the evening of Friday, July 4. Mr. Hart had been feeling unwell during the day and was discovered by his ranch foreman, Beau Tisdale, in the midst of the attack.

After a swift trip via EMT helicopter to Sheridan, a skilled team of surgeons determined that open-heart surgery was required. "It was touch and go there for a while," reported the foreman when asked for comment. "But he made it through and he'll be okay."

Mr. Hart will be recuperating at Memorial Hospital in Sheridan "for as long as they make him stay," the foreman said. "He wants to get home the minute they'll let him out of here."

Prayers and good wishes are greatly appreciated.

"Beau's moving into the front bedroom at the house," said Tess. "So he'll be there at night. And they've hired a day nurse to look after Daniel for the first week at home." Tess stood at the counter rolling out pie dough.

Edna, at the stove, slid a heavy crock of beans onto the rack in the oven, pushed the rack in and shut the oven door. "I'm just not sure they should be sending him home." She clucked

her tongue, a thoroughly disapproving sound. “Hardly more than a week since that heart attack. And what was that operation he had? A triple bypass?”

“Quintuple,” Tess corrected.

“Well, see what I mean? When I had that coronary vasospasm seven years back, they kept me up in Sheridan for the same amount of time Daniel is staying there. And what I had wasn’t even a true heart attack, let alone the fact that in my case there was no surgery involved.”

From her place at the sink cleaning up after breakfast, Starr could see the tiny smile that tugged at Tess’s mouth. “Well, now, Edna. Every case is different. And I’d imagine they’ve made some big strides in medical science in the last seven years. I think we’ll just have to trust that the doctors know what they’re doing.”

“Humph,” said Edna and trotted over to the pantry door, vanishing inside.

“Rrrrooom, rrrrooomm.” Ethan appeared from the short hall that led to the stairs and the great room. He was flying his favorite plastic jet.

“Ethan,” said Tess, “Did you put those blocks in the bin like I told you?”

“Rrrrooom, rrooom, roommmm...” Ethan kept his jet airborne.

“Ethan John,” said his mother, pausing in the process of sprinkling flour on a half-flattened ball of dough. “Stop flying that plane and answer me.”

Ethan let his hands drop to his sides, plane and all, and made a big show of slumping his four-and-a-half-year-old shoulders. “Aw, Mommmm...” Tess pointed her rolling pin at him and gave him a narrow-eyed scowl. With a put-upon groan and a tragic expression, Ethan stomped back out the way he’d come.

Edna emerged from the pantry. She held two full Mason jars, one in each hand. “How about blackberry—and this nice apple butter I put up last fall?”

“Perfect,” said Tess.

Edna carried the jars to the table and set them down. “So. We’ll take the three pies and the beans and the jam over there. What else? We have some of last year’s tomatoes....”

As the two older women launched into a discussion of what else should go to the Hart place to welcome Mr. Hart home, Starr wiped up the sink and hung the breakfast pans on their hooks. She poured herself another cup of coffee at about the same time Tess and Edna decided that last year’s tomatoes would do just fine. And a couple of loaves of fresh bread, too. Edna would start on the bread right away.

Mug in hand, Starr turned from the coffeemaker and leaned against the counter. “Who’s going to take all this stuff over there?”

Tess carefully guided the flattened dough over a waiting pie. “Well, we thought we’d do it together, Edna and me.”

Casually, Starr blew across the top of the steaming mug. “Why don’t you let me?” She dared a hot sip as a thoroughly annoying

glance passed between Edna and Tess.

Starr knew they were both thinking about all that mess with Beau in the past. But come on, she was a grown woman now and had a right to make to her own decisions when it came to men—not that there was any decision to be made about Beau. There was nothing between them anymore.

Yeah, she'd danced with him on the Fourth. One dance. And she felt really good inside about that dance. They'd talked like two old friends, and laughed together. When she thought of Beau now, there was no bitterness. All that old garbage was over for good. That dance, to Starr, had signaled true peace between them. She felt really good about that.

But peace between her and Beau didn't mean she meant to run over there and jump the man's bones or anything. Taking the food was a neighborly gesture, and she wanted to do it—and who could say if Beau would even be at the house when she got there?

“Don't you have to work?” asked Edna.

Starr took a sip of coffee. “I don't need to go in today.” Like her employer, she did any and everything over at the Clarion—including a little reporting on local goings-on. “I've got a piece for the *Ranching Life* section to finish up and I have to put together an article on what's going on with the plans for the county fair. I'll do those on my computer and send them over by e-mail. And I can take the opportunity while I'm at the Hart place to do a follow-up on how Mr. Hart's feeling.” Jerry had done the original piece, but he'd be pleased if Starr handed in an update. “And

besides,” she added, “you two have been baking pies and making beans. I’d like to do a little something to help out, too.”

“Well,” said Edna, still at the table beside the jars of preserves. That was all. Just, well, and nothing else.

Tess pinched the edges of her pie and sent Starr a soft smile. “Why not, if you’d like to? That’d be real nice.”

Edna’s baked beans were the slow-cooking kind. They didn’t come out of the oven until four. By then the pies had cooled and the bread was all wrapped and ready to go. They loaded everything into the old Suburban that Zach had bought Tess when they first got married. Starr had inherited the vehicle last year, when Zach bought his wife a new one.

As she was heading off down the long, dusty driveway, one of the ranch pickups came in. Her dad was driving, Jobeth at his side. Starr pulled to the bumpy shoulder so the pickup could get by. Her dad honked and Jobeth waved as they went past. The pickup was covered in mud and so were the two in cab. Starr grinned as she watched the filthy tailgate recede in her rearview mirror. They’d probably been out pulling something large and obstinate from a muddy pond.

It took about twenty-five minutes to get to the Hart place. Starr used a series of back roads made mostly by oil companies drilling test holes, seeking oil-bearing strata. Through the ride, she was aware of a rising feeling of anticipation.

Okay, it was silly. It didn’t mean anything, but she was really hoping that Beau would be at the house. Maybe they’d talk a little.

The Suburban lurched over a bump in the dirt road and Starr licked her lips and swallowed. She was kind of thirsty. She'd ask for a tall glass of iced tea. If Beau was there, he could keep her company out on Mr. Hart's big front porch while she drank it. Just being neighborly, of course.

And professional. She'd interview Beau on Mr. Hart's convalescence while she sipped that cool, refreshing tea.

Beau was standing on the porch, staring off into nowhere, trying pretty much unsuccessfully to get his mind around the enormity of what Daniel had just told him, when he spotted Tess's old Suburban coming up the drive.

For a moment or two, he just stared, his mind still back there in the bedroom, hearing, but hardly daring to believe, the things Daniel was saying to him. And then, as the vehicle drew closer, he frowned. He hadn't seen Tess driving it since Zach bought her the new one....

In fact, hadn't Zach said they'd passed the old one to Starr for her use whenever she was home?

Beau straightened from the post he'd been leaning against. With the wild mustangs on the loose in his chest again, he stuck his hands in his side pockets and waited for the Suburban to pull to a stop about ten feet from the base of the porch steps.

Starr beamed him a smile through her side window. The mustangs bucked high and his breath snagged hard in his throat. The window slid down and she stuck her head out. That midnight hair, loose around her angel face, caught the sun and gave off a

blue-black shine.

“Hey, Beau.”

Dazzled, he gulped to make his throat relax. “Hey.”

“How’s Mr. Hart?”

“Doing well. Real well. Chomping at the bit to get out of bed and back to work.”

“I heard you hired him a nurse.”

“Yeah. He’s already making the poor woman crazy with his demands to be up and about.”

“Hope she’s strong enough to make him stay in that bed until he’s well enough to get out of it.”

“You know Althea Hecht?” The nurse, a local woman, stood about five-eleven and weighed a hundred and eighty or so pounds, very little of it fat.

Starr was nodding. “Althea can keep him in line if anyone can—and I’ve got a Suburban full of food. Pies and Edna’s baked beans, fresh-baked bread and half a pantry’s worth of preserves.”

He came down the steps, his boots seeming to him like they barely skimmed the old boards. “My stomach is already growling.”

“Come on, then.” She leaned on her door. It swung open and she jumped lightly to the ground. “Help me get it all inside.”

He followed her around to the hatch in back, noticing the little spiral-top notebook and the pen she had stuck in a back pocket, but more interested in the way her womanly hips swayed as she walked, in that gleaming waterfall of shining raven hair.

Today was stacking up to be pretty nigh on perfect. Daniel Hart had called him the son he'd never had.

And Starr Bravo was right there in front of him, close enough to reach out and touch.

Beau led Starr into the house and signaled the way back to the kitchen. He fell in step behind her, where he could admire the sway of her hips a little more. Coming or going, Starr Bravo was a pleasure to look at.

They found Althea in the kitchen. She was brewing decaf for Daniel. The nurse and Starr greeted each other. Althea sighed over the scent of Tess's pies and grouched in a good-natured way over her patient's orneriness.

"'Real coffee, damn it,' he growls at me. 'Real coffee, strong and black.' Well, I didn't even bother to inform him that decaf is the closest he's getting to real coffee while he's in my care...."

Starr laughed, the sound making the dim old kitchen seem sunny and bright, as if someone had knocked out a wall and the warm daylight outside had come streaming in to push back every shadow, to fill every corner with golden light. "Althea, we know you can handle him."

Althea grunted. "You got that right. I give my patients the best care there is, no matter how hard some of them try to keep me from doing it."

Starr asked, "I wonder if could step in and say hello."

Althea poured the coffee. "Don't see why not."

Daniel was propped up on his pillows, looking grouchy, when

they entered. He'd let Whirlyboy in to lie on a rag rug in the corner. At the sight of Starr, the dog thumped his tail. The old man's scowl lightened to a grin. "Well, if it isn't Starr Bravo. How you been, girl?"

"I've been just fine." She went over and gave Whirlyboy a scratch behind the ear. "Home for my last summer and enjoying every minute of it. But what about you, Mr. Hart?"

Daniel made a low noise in his throat and his scowl returned—directed at Althea, who was easing the bed tray across his lap. "Better than some people would have you believe." The nurse got the coffee from where she'd set it on the bed stand and handed it over. He sniffed it suspiciously. "Not strong enough. I can tell by the smell of it, by the watery way it sloshes in the mug."

"It's all you're getting," Althea informed him with exaggerated sweetness. "I suggest you enjoy it."

Daniel slurped and grumbled some more. "It's not bad enough I'm a prisoner in my own bed. I can't even get a decent cup of coffee anymore." He set the cup down and winked at Beau. Beau gave him a nod in return and Daniel smiled at Starr. "But even if the coffee's bad, a pretty girl is always welcome. Brightens my day and that is a certainty."

Starr gave him a modest smile and told him her family had sent pies and some other things.

"I thank you," Daniel replied with a regal nod of his big, nearly bald head. "I always did appreciate Edna's slow-cooked beans. And there are no words to describe those pies of Tess's. Pass my

thanks to both of them, will you please?"

"I'll do that. And the word is you'll be on your feet again real soon."

"That's right." He sent Althea another look. "Real soon."

They spoke for a few minutes more—of the weather, which was mild, of the alfalfa crop, which looked like a good one this year. And, as always, about beef prices, which had been better, but could be worse.

As Beau led her from the room, Daniel urged her to come back and visit anytime. Starr paused in the doorway to promise she'd be around to check on him again soon. Beau felt his ears prick up when she said that. With a little luck, he might be there at the house the next time she came by.

"You'd better do what Althea tells you," she warned in a teasing way.

Daniel snorted. "Can't see as how I have any choice."

She turned to Beau and he led her through the hall and around through the front room, on the way to the door. She spoke before they reached the entry hall. "Beau?" He stopped and turned, pleasure running in a warm current all through him, that she was here in the place where he lived, saying his name in a friendly, hopeful tone. "I went off without the cooler. I'm a little thirsty. A cold drink would be so nice...."

Damn. He'd never even thought to offer her something. "I'm sorry."

She was looking right at him. And that warm current inside

him was going molten hot. “Nothing to be sorry about. Iced tea, maybe?”

He led her back to the kitchen and poured her the cold tea.

“Thanks. Maybe you’ll sit out on the porch with me while I drink this?”

“Be glad to.”

As soon as they got out there, before they even had a chance to sit down, she was pointing to the stand of cottonwoods and willows fifty yards or so away on the north side of the house. “Is that a creek over there?”

He had his hat, collected from the rack by the door on the way out. He beat it lightly against his thigh and slid it onto his head. “More like a big ditch. Feeds into the pond in the back pasture.”

She sipped from the tall, already sweat-frosted glass. “Umm. This is just what I needed. Thank you.”

“Welcome.” He looked at her soft red mouth. He could still recall, like it was yesterday, the tender, hungry feel of that mouth under his. She had the longest, blackest eyelashes of any woman he’d ever seen. He watched as they swept down and then up again.

“It’s a nice day,” she remarked. “A little hot.” Oh, yeah, he thought. Hot. That’s the right word. “We could just stroll on over there—to that ditch, I mean. I’ll bet it’s cool under the trees.”

“Sure.”

She wore Wranglers and good, serviceable boots and a plain white shirt with short sleeves, tucked in. No slice of bare belly to tempt him today. Once, in one of their brief stolen times

together, she'd confessed she had one of those navel rings—and a tattoo in a place where only the right man was ever going to see it.

The other night, he hadn't noticed any navel ring. Maybe she didn't wear it anymore.

Then again, he hadn't caught a glimpse of her navel, now had he? That red, one-shoulder shirt had stayed low enough to safely shield it from his hungry eyes.

She was halfway down the steps. He needed no encouragement to follow.

In the trees, it was cool, just as she'd predicted. They sat on the grassy slope that led down to the cheerfully bubbling stream and she sipped her tea. "Nice," she said with happy sigh.

He leaned back on an elbow, picked a small blue flower that grew in the grass, and twirled it by the stem for a second or two before tossing it out into the rushing water. It bobbed away, a spot of blue, until the current sucked it under.

She said, "Oh, I almost forgot..." The ice cubes clinked in her half-empty glass as she found a level place to set it. She reached into her back pocket and came out with that notebook and pen he'd seen earlier. "I was hoping to get a few quotes from you about how Mr. Hart's recovery is progressing."

"For the Clarion?"

"Uh-huh." She flipped open the notebook, held her pen poised.

He grinned. "Quotes from the foreman?"

She was close enough to reach out and give his arm a tap with

that pen. “Well, you are Mr. Hart’s top hand, aren’t you?”

“Considering I’m his only full-time, year-round hand, I guess saying I’m top hand wouldn’t be that far wrong.” He watched her silky black lashes sweep down and up again. Then he challenged, “It was you, wasn’t it—you told Jerry Esponda to put me down as Daniel’s foreman?”

She stuck out her chin at him. “So what if I did? Are you demanding a retraction?”

He leaned just a fraction closer to her and got an intoxicating whiff of jasmine for his pains. “I’m demanding nothing. You can relax.”

She leaned closer still. “That is such a relief . . .”

He looked from her eyes to her mouth and back again. She was doing it, too—that violet gaze tracking: Eyes. Lips. Eyes. Lips . . .

He wanted to kiss her so bad that his need had a taste—like honey, but with a bitter edge.

There had been other women in his life. Not that many. A few. He was a man, after all. But no matter how many other women he flirted with or kissed or took to bed, there would always be this woman, somewhere back in a yearning, hopeful corner of his heart.

Beau knew what he was, and what he would never be. Yet somehow, inevitably, in the last moments of loving, when need swallowed him whole, he would close his eyes and see Starr’s face.

Carefully, he canted back away from her. With mingled regret

and relief, he watched her do the same.

She sat up straight and made a few scratches at the pad with her pen. “So. He’s recovering quickly...”

Beau found another flower, picked it, twirled it, tossed it away. “Yeah. He’d be out stringing fence right now if Althea wasn’t holding him down.”

“Hmm. May I quote you on that?”

He gave a snort of laughter. “‘Recovering quickly’ sounds better, I think—and you know, you surprised the heck outta me when you came rolling up in that old Suburban.”

She granted him a pert glance. “I happen to love that SUV.”

“What about that little sports car you used to drive way back when?”

Something changed in her face. Maybe she was remembering the bold-seeming, unhappy girl she’d been once. “Sold it. It wasn’t much use in a Wyoming winter—let alone against all the ruts in the dirt roads on the Rising Sun.” Her expression went teasing again. “And is that all you have to tell me about Mr. Hart’s improving health?”

“That is the sum total of what I have to report. ‘Mr. Hart is recovering quickly,’ ranch foreman Beau Tisdale said. Put that in the paper—and you can add that bit about prayers and good wishes. Those never hurt.”

“Hah. So you did like being called the foreman.”

What he liked was the sound of her voice, the jasmine scent of her, the way the dapples of sun made blue lights in her hair.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a little huskier than he should have allowed it to be. “I liked it fine. And it didn’t seem to bother Daniel any when he saw it in the paper.” He’d been a little nervous that Daniel would assume he’d told Jerry he was ranch foreman, that Daniel might think he’d over-stepped himself. But that was yesterday, when the Clarion came out. Yesterday he hadn’t understood the extent of Daniel’s regard for him.

Hell. He still wasn’t sure he could believe what Daniel had said an hour ago....

“First of all, I need to tell you now, so the chance doesn’t slip away from me, that you are the son I never had....”

“Beau?” Starr was looking at him sideways, a soft smile on that unforgettable mouth. He cocked an eyebrow at her. Her smile widened. “What’s on your mind? You got the funniest look just now.”

Damned if he didn’t want to tell her. Strange. He wasn’t a man who shared his triumphs—or his hurts. But it was all so new. It almost didn’t seem real.

And he found that he wanted to talk about it, to say right out how his life was so suddenly and unbelievably changed. It would make it more real, to tell someone.

Not just anyone, though.

He wanted to tell Starr and only Starr. In a way, it was like some dream, that she was here now, at this moment, so soon after Daniel had told him.

It was also like a dream that all the old bad feelings between

them seemed gone at last, that he was talking to her so casually, like they were good friends. Six years ago, it had amazed him how easy she was to talk to. And here she was after all this time and that ease between them was back, like it had always been there, waiting for her to understand and forgive him for what he'd done that day in the yard at the Rising Sun....

“Beau?” She was looking at him so hopefully. She wanted to hear whatever he had on his mind.

He kind of edged into it, giving her a grin. “You got to promise you won’t go putting it in the paper....”

She blinked. “Well, yeah. Sure.” She kind of frowned and smiled at the same time. “What? Beau, what is it?”

“Just, you know, between you and me...”

“Of course, if you want it that way.”

“Yeah. I do. It’s not something the whole county needs to know.” There would be talk, when it came out. He was not blood kin to Daniel. He’d been in prison. And his name was Tisdale. In Medicine Creek, most anyone could tell you that the Tisdales were no good. A lot of folks would disbelieve—and disapprove—when they heard. But that wouldn’t be for years yet. Daniel was going to pull through just fine. And Beau planned to see that the older man took care of himself, just like a real son would.

“I will not tell a soul,” she vowed.

So he said it. “Today Daniel told me that he’s leaving the ranch to me.” He sat up, hooked an elbow on either knee and looked at the clear, sparkling stream for a moment. Then he

slanted a glance at Starr. “I gotta tell you, I’m having some trouble believing it’s true.”

“Oh, Beau...” Her voice trailed off. Her face seemed to glow. She looked so happy. Happy for him.

He grunted. “Pretty hard to believe, huh?”

She gave him a firm shake of her head. “No. No, it isn’t. Not hard to believe at all. But very good news. And, well, kind of right, you know?”

“You think so?” His own voice surprised him. He sounded just like he felt—young. Hopeful as a kid at Christmas. He’d learned early in his life that it didn’t pay to let anyone know how you felt.

But this was Starr he was telling. From the first, he’d found it way too easy to show her what was going on inside him.

Now she was nodding. “Oh, yeah. I do think so. My dad’s always saying how hard you work for Mr. Hart. And how great it’s turned out, him taking you on.”

“Zach’s been real good to me, too. I’m grateful.”

“So is Mr. Hart, don’t you think? I mean, that you came along. After all, he’s got no blood family left. And now, it’s kind of like you’re his family, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he said, still marveling at the way it all worked out. “That’s how I feel about it. It truly is...”

She reached across the small distance between them and laid her soft hand on his arm. A warm glow seemed to radiate from the place where she touched him. The wind whispered through the trees and the cottonwood fluff blew around in the air and the

warm sun glinted off the rushing stream.

Eventually, she let go, but it seemed to Beau that he could still feel the warm clasp of her hand. With a small, contented sigh, she stretched out on the grass and laced her fingers behind her head. She stared up at the fluttering leaves of the cottonwood that sheltered them—and beyond, to the wide, blue sky overhead.

Beau set his hat aside and stretched out beside her. For a while, they just lay there, watching the leaves above move in the wind, listening to the happy, bubbly sound of the stream at their feet and the occasional soft coo of a mourning dove somewhere nearby.

“Beau?” He turned from the view of the trees and the sky to meet her waiting eyes. She looked thoughtful and maybe a little bit anxious. “There’s been something I’ve been wishing I could ask you for a few years now.”

He had a pretty good idea where she was headed. “So ask.”

He watched her smooth throat move as she swallowed. “That day Tess caught us in the barn together, those horrible things you said to me out in the yard...”

“Yeah?”

“Did you mean them?”

Beau lay still, one hand on his stomach, the other cradling his head. She shifted, turning toward him on her side, propping her head on her hand. All that black hair spilled over her palm and fell along her arm to kiss the green, green grass.

“Well...” Her mouth trembled a little. “Did you?”

“No,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean those things I said. Those things were lies, pure and simple.” He felt the pained smile as it twisted his mouth. “And I put a lot of effort into being a convincing enough rat-bastard that you would think they were true.”

She let out a long sigh, as if she’d been holding her breath and just remembered to let it out. “I knew it. But I did want to hear you say it—just like I want to hear you tell me why you said those things...”

“Hell,” he replied, as if that was any kind of answer. All these years he’d nursed a hopeless yearning that someday they’d talk about this. Someday when she was a grown woman and he’d come through the bad things he’d done, come through to make himself another, better kind of life. And today, here they were, and it was happening just the way he’d always dreamed it might....

One hell of a day, this one. The day Daniel said he considered Beau as his son. The day Starr showed up with offerings of food from her family—and now seemed reluctant to leave.

He said, “I only knew then that I was headed for a bad place and I had to make sure you didn’t try to follow me there.”

“Oh,” she said so softly, the way a woman might exclaim upon unwrapping some beautiful and priceless gift. And then she called it exactly that—a gift. “Life is so strange, isn’t it?” she whispered, a certain reverence in her low voice. “I mean, what you did was so brave, really. It turned out to be like a...

gift. It hurt so damn much when you did it, but my life turned out different—so much better than the direction I was headed in then, because you said those awful things to me, because they made me think, and think hard, about my life. Made me reach out to my family. Made me see I had to make some changes, or I could end up...” She didn’t seem to know how to finish.

So he did it for her. “...following the wrong guy down the road to nowhere and never finding your way back?”

Tears welled in her eyes, making them shine all the brighter. She didn’t let him see them fall, but sat up, quickly, turning away. Touched in the deepest part of himself, he left her alone until she could get it together.

Finally, she turned to him again, her eyes still suspiciously shiny-looking, but her soft cheeks dry. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess that’s it. But look.” She raised her hands, palms up, as if to include everything—the rushing water, the summer sky, the trees whispering in the warm wind—even the faint cooing of that lone mourning dove. “I didn’t go down that road. And you...well, Beau. You have done it. You’ve found your way back.”

Chapter Three

For a while, they just sat there, side by side, staring off toward the stream and the open pasture that rolled away from them beyond the trees on the other side. Eventually, she picked up her tea, drained the last of it and tossed the remaining melted slivers of ice out into the water.

He put on his hat and got up, holding down a hand. She took it, tugging on it lightly as she rose. He felt a much stronger tug, down inside him—an ache for what might have been, if only he were someone that he would never be. Once she was on her feet, he made himself let go.

They hesitated, facing each other there on the bank, both knowing they should turn for the house, but neither making a move.

“Back then, all those years ago,” she said softly, “I’d never felt...oh, I don’t know. Accepted, I guess. I’d never felt accepted, or at home, with anyone. Not until I met you. For that short time we had, I felt I could tell you anything and you would understand. That you wouldn’t judge me, that you knew who I really was, deep down. And that you liked that person.”

“I did like that person.” The words came out before he even realized he would say them. “I liked that person a whole hell of a lot. I still do.”

Her smile was so shy. It trembled at the edges. “I’m glad to

hear that. And you know, today, after so much time has gone by...I feel just the same. That I could sit right back down in the grass again with you and we could talk forever. That I could tell you everything that's in my most secret heart and know I was telling it all to someone I can trust. I don't think I want to give that up right now, Beau. Not when I've just found it again." She bit her still-quivering lip to make it be still. "I guess what I'm getting at is...do you think that we might...?" Her words trailed off, but he knew where she was headed.

And it was impossible. "Starr—"

"Oh, wait," she cried. "Can't I finish?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them from doing something they shouldn't. "Go ahead."

"Well, it's just..." She looked down into her empty glass, then up at him again. "I do know we're going in different directions now. And I haven't forgotten the things you said once. That all you wanted in life was a real home and a chance to work hard every day building something that was your own. Against all the odds, you've got what you wanted. And I'm off to New York in the fall, to start a new job. In a few months, I'm gone. Off to live the life I've been studying and planning for. I'm not saying either of us should change, or start thinking about giving up the lives we've worked hard to make. I'm not really talking about anything permanent. I'm just saying that, well, there's a whole summer stretching out ahead of us. Why couldn't we spend a little time together, now and then, before I go?"

“Be...friends, you mean?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Friends. That’s what I mean.”

How could she ask for that? She had to know it would never work. He couldn’t even stand next to her on Daniel’s porch without wondering if she still had that navel ring, without wanting to grab her and kiss her—and to maybe get his chance to see that secret tattoo.

But she was so sweetly, adorably hopeful, so damned impossibly beautiful as she stood there in front of him, asking him why they couldn’t just be summertime friends. He didn’t have the heart—let alone the will—to say no.

And why the hell should he say no, a darker voice down inside him was whispering? Why shouldn’t he see her if she wanted to see him? He was a straight-ahead guy now, an upstanding citizen who put in an honest day’s work for his pay.

He might not be the right guy for her in the long run, but she wasn’t sixteen anymore. She was all grown up, old enough to make a woman’s decisions. Who said he had to deny himself her company, if she wanted to share it with him?

Because it’ll break your damn heart to see her go, fool, whispered another voice, a wiser one, in the back of his mind. It’ll break your damn heart—and just possibly hers, as well.

He found he was having a hell of a time trying to listen to that wiser voice. How could he do it? How could he say no when she stood right there, close enough to touch, gleaming black hair stirring in the wind, asking him so sweetly and sincerely to be

allowed to see him now and then?

“Tell you what.”

She laughed. “You look so serious.”

This is serious, damn it, he thought. What’ll we get but heartbreak, if we start this thing between us all over again? He said, “Think it over.”

Those silky brows drew together. “But it’s not a big deal. It’s only—”

He shook his head to silence her. It was a big deal, whether she was willing to admit it or not. “Think it over. Be real sure you want to get something started with me again—even just for the summer.”

“But Beau, I already told you. I do want to see you again. Now, whether I’d call that ‘getting something started—’”

“Call it whatever you damn well please.” She flinched and he realized he’d spoken too harshly. He gentled his tone. “I just want you to give it some thought before we start up with anything.”

“But...” She looked enchantingly bewildered. “Do you want to spend more time with me?”

Do bears like honey? He confessed, “Yeah. Yeah, I’d like that. I’d like it a lot.”

“Well, then...” A few strands of hair had got caught across her mouth. He kept his hands shoved hard in his pockets to keep from reaching out and smoothing those strands back over her soft cheek, behind the graceful curve of her ear. After a few seconds that seemed like a year, she brushed them away herself.

“Think about it,” he said, his heart pounding deep and hard, every beat seeming to call out her name. “Give it week. By next Friday, if you still think you want to go out with me, you give me a call.”

Those lashes swept down. “I know my own mind, Beau.”

“We’ll see.”

She looked straight at him then, violet eyes flashing with irritation. “I’m not asking for a lifetime. Just the summer. Just a chance to be together, now and then, for a little while...”

“And all I’m asking is that you give it some thought first.”

Her eyes went wide and she fell back a step. “Do you remember? You said almost the exact same words before you kissed me the first time?”

He did remember. They were in the tack room, off the barn at the Rising Sun. They’d been talking—about the wild stuff she’d done down in San Diego, about how he’d never been much farther than Cheyenne himself, except for that one trip to Arkansas with his mom all those years and years ago. He was leaning on a saddle horn. She slid right up close to him and lifted her mouth.

“Give it some thought,” he’d said. “Before you go offering up those sweet lips of yours...”

Yeah, he remembered. He remembered all of it—every magical, forbidden moment with her.

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