



# THE MAN WHO HAD EVERYTHING

CHRISTINE RIMMER



*Cherish*<sup>TM</sup>

Christine Rimmer

**The Man Who Had Everything**

«HarperCollins»

## **Rimmer C.**

The Man Who Had Everything / C. Rimmer — «HarperCollins»,

Rich, ruthless and sexy! There's a reason Grant Clifton's one of the most eligible bachelors in Montana: this rancher turned business whiz makes women melt like snow on a hot summer's day! And this mover and shaker's appeal isn't lost on Stephanie Julen, the beautiful young forewoman of Grant's family ranch. Grant and Steph have known one another forever, and the tragedy that shattered both their lives years ago drew them closer together. But the Canyon's golden boy has always thought of shy Steph as a little sister. Until, suddenly, he realizes she's all grown up and is not his sister at all!**SPECIAL BONUS FEATURES INSIDE** Including exclusive free story *Marrying Molly*

## Содержание

The Man Who Had Everything	6
The Man Who Had Everything	7
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	48

*More things he shouldn't be doing...*

He shouldn't be wrapping his arms around Steph and pulling her close. Shouldn't be finding the taste of her even sweeter than he'd dared to imagine.

Shouldn't be. But he was.

He pulled her up and into him.

*Wrong*, he thought. But that didn't stop him. And she didn't seem to mind. Far from it – she kissed him right back. He didn't want it ever to end.

But he knew it had to. Exerting a superhuman effort, he lifted his mouth from hers. There was a moment, and they stared at each other.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what the hell my problem is. I shouldn't have done that."

And Steph smiled a smile that became so bright it blinded him. "Oh, yeah," she said. "You should have. And I'm really glad you did."

# **The Man Who Had Everything and Marrying Molly**

Christine Rimmer



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

## The Man Who Had Everything

CHRISTINE RIMMER

*CHRISTINE RIMMER*

came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been everything, including an actress, a sales clerk and a waitress. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job – she was merely gaining life experience for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but also 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. Visit Christine at her new home on the web at [www.christinerimmer.com](http://www.christinerimmer.com).

Dear Reader,

In Thunder Canyon, Montana, big changes are taking place. A modern-day gold rush and a fabulously successful new resort have signalled sudden prosperity and growth in the picturesque mountain town.

Ex-rancher Grant Clifton is having the time of his life, making money hand over fist, doing work he loves. Beautiful women flock to him. His life is just the way he'd never dared to dream it might be. It's perfect...

Until the day he finally sees Steph Julen – the girl next door, his honorary little sister – as the grown woman she's somehow become. Sparks fly and all hell breaks loose when the man who has everything realises there's something missing in his life, after all: love. It's not what he planned on, not what he bargained for.

Too bad. Steph is one determined girl and she's out to get her man.

Yours,

*Christine Rimmer*

For all you MONTANA fans.

You are the very best!

Chapter One

Grant Clifton set out that sunny Sunday afternoon with the best of intentions.

He meant for Stephanie Julen and her mom, Marie, to know of his plans good and early, so they could start getting used to the idea. He had it all laid out in his mind, just how he'd tell them.

First, he would remind them that you can't hold on to the past forever. That sometimes you've got to let go of what used to be, let the wave of progress and prosperity take you. Dump the excess baggage and move on.

In his own life, Grant was doing exactly that. And loving every minute of it. He would make Steph and Marie understand that it was time for them to move on, too.

Since the sun was shining bright and proud in the wide Montana sky, Grant called down to the stables and had one of the grooms tack up Titan, the big black gelding he rode whenever he got the chance—which wasn't all that often lately. He worked behind a desk now. His days as a rancher were behind him.

In his private suite of rooms on-site at the Thunder Canyon Resort, he changed into Wranglers and boots and a plain blue chambray shirt. When he got to the stables, Titan was ready to go. The gelding whickered in greeting and tossed his fine black head, eager to be off. The groom loaned Grant a spare hat and he grinned to himself as he rode out.

A Clifton without a battered straw Resistol close at hand to stave off the glare of the summer sun? His dad would never approve.

Fact was, John Clifton probably wouldn't have approved of a lot of things lately. Too bad. Grant settled the hat lower on his brow and refused to let his grin fade as he let Titan have his head and the horse took off at a gallop.

On Titan's strong back, the ride to the house at Clifton's Pride Ranch took about an hour. Once he'd left the sprawling resort behind, Grant rode cross-country, stopping now and then to open a gate, going back and closing it once his horse went through.

In the distance, the high mountains still bore their white caps. And the grasses, which would be fading to gold soon enough, lay green and lush beneath the gelding's hooves, rippling in the ever-present Montana wind.

As Titan ambled up and down the cuts and draws, Grant rehearsed what he would say. Yeah, he knew Steph and her mom would be disappointed. But he would remind them that he would always take care of them. He would make sure they had work when they left the ranch. That much would never change: He would watch out for them.

In no time, it seemed, he reached Clifton land.

He took a couple of dirt roads he knew of and then approached another pasture gate, patiently shutting it behind him once his horse went through. A few cows, lying down near the fence, got up from their grassy bed and looked at him expectantly. He tipped his borrowed hat at them, mounted up again and rode on.

Ahead, cottonwoods loomed, lush and green, lining the banks of Cottonwood Creek. They seemed taller and thicker than he remembered, obscuring the creek completely now. Grant clicked his tongue and urged the horse onward, his mind on getting it over with, getting Steph and her mom together and breaking the news that he'd had a great offer and he was selling Clifton's Pride.

The horse mounted a grassy slope and carried him in beneath the screen of wind-ruffled trees, where the ground was mossy and soft and Titan's hooves hardly made a sound. Grant could smell water, hear the soft gurgling of the creek not far ahead. He topped another slight rise and the creek lay below, crystal clear and inviting.

But it wasn't the sight of the creek that stole the breath from Grant Clifton's lungs.

He drew on the reins without thinking. Soundlessly Titan came to a stop.

A woman stood at creekside. A naked woman. Beads of water gleamed on her golden skin and her hair, clinging in soaked tendrils to her shoulders, dripped a shining wet trail down the center of her slim, straight back.

She faced the opposite bank. As he stared, she lifted both hands and smoothed her hair, cupping the delicate shape of her skull, catching the wet strands at her nape, wringing gently, so that more water trickled in little gleaming trails along that amazing back, between those two little dimples that rode the base of her spine...

Grant's gaze followed the path of the water. Sweet Lord. The lower he looked, the harder he lusted. He sat frozen in place astride the gelding, feeling the blood pool hot in his groin, his pulse pounding so deep and hungry and loud, he was surprised the woman didn't hear it and turn.

What the hell was she doing there, naked beneath the cottonwoods on Clifton land?

Not that he planned to ask. Not right now.

He would have smiled—if only if he hadn't been aching so bad with desire. Make no mistake. He'd find out who she was one way or another. He'd get to know her. Well.

But now would probably be a bad time to introduce himself.

Light as a breath, he laid the reins to Titan's neck. The horse started to turn—and the woman raised her slim arms to the sky and let out a laugh, a sound all at once free and husky and glorious.

His mind reeled. He knew that laugh.

Steph's laugh.

Grant drew the horse up short again.

Impossible.

This beautiful, naked stranger, fully a woman... *Steph?*

His head spun with denials. Stephanie Julen was hardly more than a kid, she was like a little sister to him, she was...

Twenty-one.

Damn it. Couldn't be. No way.

The woman who couldn't be Steph laughed again, and then, without warning, in midlaugh, she turned.

And she saw him there, frozen in place, at the top of the bank. The green eyes that always looked at him with trust and admiration widened in shock as she formed his name on a low cry.

"Grant?" Frantic, she tried to cover herself, one hand to her small, perfect breasts, the other to the patch of dark gold curls between her smooth, amazing thighs. "Oh, God..."

At least he had the presence of mind to lay the reins at the horse's neck again and, that time, to follow through.

Once he faced the way he'd come, he called over his shoulder, "Get dressed." He kept his voice as calm and level as possible, given his own stunned, disbelieving state of arousal. "Ride on back to the house with me..."

Behind him, she was dead silent—except for a low, agonized groan.

"Come on." He kept his gaze resolutely front and he forced all hint of gruffness from his tone. "It's okay." He spoke gently. Soothingly. "I'm sorry I...surprised you."

Behind him, down the bank, he heard frenzied rustling sounds as she scrambled to get into her clothes. He waited, taking slow breaths, knowing he had to be calm and unruffled, totally unconcerned, in order to put her at ease again.

*At ease.* Damn. Didn't he wish?

Within a couple of minutes that only *seemed* to last for eternity, he heard the soft thuds of hooves behind him. She came up beside him mounted on her favorite mare, Trixiebelle.

Unbelievable. He'd been so busy gaping at her naked backside and planning how he would get her into his bed, he hadn't even noticed she had her horse down there by the creek with her.

Titan chuffed in greeting and Trixiebelle snorted a response.

Grant put on a smile and turned it on Steph, not allowing it to waver, even as another bolt of lust went zinging through him.

Her clothes were as wet as the rest of her. Her shirt clung to the fine, sleek curves he'd never noticed till moments ago—curves that from this afternoon onward would remain seared into his brain.

Impossible. Wanting Steph. It had to be illegal. Or, at the very least, immoral.

Didn't it?

Her hair hung in damp ropes on her shoulders and her sweet, innocent face was flaming red. "How long were you..." Her voice faltered. She swallowed and made herself finish. "...watching me?"

"I wasn't," he baldly lied, somehow managing to keep his easy smile in place at the same time. "I'd just topped the rise when you saw me." He turned Titan again and started down the bank to creekside. She followed.

Since she would know the best place to cross, he pulled back once they reached the bank and signaled her to take the lead.

All too aware of the man behind her, Steph rode Trixiebelle into the shallows. Once on the other side, they climbed the far bank and emerged from under the dappling shade of the cottonwoods into open pasture. Grant caught up with her and rode at her side.

She didn't look at him. She couldn't bear to meet his eyes right yet—and if only her silly cheeks would stop blushing.

Really. It wasn't *that* big a deal.

Okay, it was embarrassing. Way embarrassing. She'd never in a million years expected Grant to appear on horseback out of nowhere during the rare moment she'd chosen to indulge herself in a quick, *private* skinny-dip.

He had to know she hadn't expected him—or anyone, for that matter—didn't he?

After all, he hardly ever came to the ranch anymore. In the six months since he'd hired her to take over the job of foreman, this was the first time she'd seen him out on the land. As a rule, when he did drop by, he always stuck to the roads and arrived at the ranch house in that fancy black Range Rover of his.

Grant didn't have time for the ranch these days. He was too busy at the resort. In two short years, he's gone from sales associate to comanager. And he played as hard as he worked. Not a lot of nights went by that he didn't have some new out-of-town beauty hanging on his arm. The women loved him. He was thirty-two, single and getting rich fast.

Steph dared to slide him a glance. He was looking straight ahead.

He was also way too handsome. Always had been. His profile could take a girl's breath away: that sculpted nose, that fine mouth, that firm jaw. He was six foot four, lean, rangy and muscular—all at the same time. She had no doubt he'd seen a lot of naked women. To him, a naked female wouldn't be anything new.

She felt a stab of pure green jealousy as she thought of all those beautiful women he dated. Stephanie had loved Grant Clifton with all of her yearning heart since she was five years old. Of course, she knew he would never return her love. He cared for her. A lot. But not in *that* way.

And she was okay with that...

Or so she kept telling herself.

And what do you know? She wasn't blushing anymore. Her heart had stopped jumping around in her chest like a spooked jackrabbit and her pulse had even slowed a tad. Maybe hopeless blazing jealousy had its uses, after all.

So all right. He'd seen her naked. Best to get over it. Let it go. Move on.

But for some idiotic reason, she couldn't stop herself from launching into a totally lame explanation. "Me and Rufus pulled a cow out of that pond in the far pasture..."

Rufus Dale had been the top hand on Clifton's Pride for as long as Steph could remember. He'd stepped up to run things when Grant started working at the resort. But arthritis had forced the old cowboy to slow down *and* given Steph her chance to take over for him.

She babbled on, "I sent him on back to the bunkhouse. You know how he gets these days. He hates that he can't do all the things that used to be so easy for him."

Grant didn't say anything. He didn't look at her, either. Was he mad at her, after all, for being out there in the altogether where anyone could ride up on her?

She tried again. "I was covered in mud. I got to the creek and it was just too darn tempting. I jumped in with my clothes on, to rinse everything off at once and, well, then I was all soggy—like now." She cast a rueful glance down at her wet shirt and jeans. "And it's a warm day and I couldn't help thinking how *good* the water would feel without... uh. Well, you know."

He grunted. Didn't he? Hadn't that been a grunt she heard?

"Uh, Grant?"

A grunt. A definite grunt. One with sort of a question mark at the end of it.

"I really didn't expect anyone to ride by. I truly didn't..."

"Steph."

She gulped. "Yeah?"

A pause. Her dread increased. Was he irritated? Amused? What? She just couldn't tell.

Then he actually looked at her again and gave her one of those gorgeous heartbreaker smiles of his. "Don't sweat it, okay? I know the feeling."

She felt her mouth bloom wide in a giant smile. “You do?” God. She sounded like such a dumb, innocent kid...

But he was nice about it. He was *always* nice. “Oh, yeah. Nothin’ like a cold, clear creek on a hot day.”

She clicked her tongue at Trixie Belle, who was showing more interest in cropping grass than in moving it along. “Well,” she said, and couldn’t think of a single clever thing to say. She finished lamely, “Good...”

They rode in silence the rest of the way. Stephanie tried to concentrate on the beauty of the green, rolling land around them and not to think about how he really must be irritated with her no matter how hard he tried to ease her embarrassment. He was so quiet, so reluctant to turn her way.

Bart, the old spotted hound, came out to meet them when they got to the house. He wiggled in delight, whining for attention from his old master.

Grant dismounted and took a moment to greet him, “There’s a good boy.” He gave the dog a nice scratch behind the ear.

Rufus emerged from the tack room as they walked their horses into the barn. He shook Grant’s hand in greeting and then started giving orders.

“Go on in the house, you two. Leave the horses to me. I’m still good for a few things around here, you know.”

So they thanked him and headed across the open dirt yard to the plain, white-shingled, two-story house. On the wide front porch, Steph paused to pull off her muddy boots.

Inside, the old wood floors had a warm scuffed gleam and a short walk through the front hall past the simple oak staircase led them to the kitchen in back.

Marie Julen had the oven door open. She pulled a sheet of cookies out and set it on a rack to cool. And then she turned, her face breaking into a welcoming grin at the sight of Grant. “Well, look what the cat drug in.”

Grant grinned. “Sure does smell good in here.”

“Get over here, you.”

In two long strides, he was across the room, grabbing Steph’s mom in a hug. When he pulled back, he held her by her plump shoulders. “You bake those cookies just for me?”

She grinned up at him. “Well, of course I did—even though I had no idea at all that you were coming to visit today.” She sent Steph a knowing look, taking in her soggy clothes and wet hair. “I’m guessing that cow is now safely out of the pond.”

Steph nodded. “And I really need a shower—hey!” She faked a warning look at Grant, who’d already grabbed a couple of cookies. “Leave some for me.”

“I’m makin’ no promises.” He winked at her when he said it and she dared to hope that the awkwardness between them was past.

She turned for the stairs as her mom tempted him with her fine cooking. “Pot roast for dinner.”

Stephanie’s heart lifted as she heard him answer, “Sounds too good to pass up. I’ll stay.”

Grant was downright relieved when Steph went upstairs.

He needed a little time to collect himself, to get used to the idea that she’d somehow grown up right under his nose, to get over his shock at how damn beautiful she was. How could she have changed so much, so fast? Shouldn’t he have noticed she was becoming a woman—a beautiful woman—before now?

He needed to stop thinking about her. He needed to remember his purpose here today. It wasn’t going to be easy, telling them about the sale.

But then again, now he’d said he’d stay for dinner, there was no big rush to get into it. He’d break the news during the meal. That way Rufus and the other hand, Jim Baylis, would be there, too. He could tell them all at once, answer whatever questions they had right then and there, *and* reassure them that he’d find other work for all of them.

Steph already gave riding lessons at the resort, by appointment only. He was thinking he could get her something full-time at the stables. And maybe he could arrange to get Marie something where there would be cooking involved. Not at the resort, but possibly in town. She did love to cook and she was damn good at it, too.

He washed his hands in the sink and took a seat at the kitchen table. Marie, as usual, read his mind.

“Beer?”

“You bet.”

She set the frosty bottle in front of him and then went back to the oven to take a peek at the other sheet of cookies she had baking in there. A born ranch wife, Marie loved taking care of the house and keeping the hands fed and happy. When she was needed, she would get out with the rest of them and drive cattle to higher summer pastures or work the chutes at branding time.

As he watched her bustling about, he couldn't help comparing mother to daughter. Steph had inherited Marie's light hair and green eyes, but she'd got her height and build from her dad. Andre Julen had been as tall and lean as Marie was short and round.

When Grant was growing up, the Julens had owned and worked the next ranch over, the Triple J. Marie and Grant's mom, Helen, were the best of friends. So were Andre and John. Grant's sister, Elise, and Steph used to play together, running up and down the stairs, giggling and whispering little-girl secrets while their mothers sat at the table where Grant sat now. Marie and Helen would drink strong black coffee and share gossip while they did the mending or snapped the beans for dinner.

Helen and Elise Clifton lived in Billings now. They'd signed over control of the ranch to him, though they still shared in any profits—including the big windfall that would come with the sale. His mom and sister seemed happy in Billings.

Marie and Steph, though....

For them, losing the Triple J six years ago had been like losing a husband and a father all over again. They were ranch folk to the bone....

“I heard that resort of yours is full up for the Fourth of July.” Marie put the lid back on the cast-iron pot.

The Fourth was three days away, on Wednesday. Grant tipped his beer at Marie. “You bet we are.” Teasing her, he quoted from a recent brochure. “Treat yourself to magnificent mountain views, sumptuous luxury, and thrilling recreation at Thunder Canyon Resort.” He brought his beer to his heart and really hammed it up. “You've come to us for the best in winter sports and entertainment. Now, you're invited to explore our winding mountain trails, weaving in and out of lush forests, dotted with cascading streams.” He paused, dramatically, then announced, “Thunder Canyon Resort. The ultimate vacation or conference spot—peaceful, refreshing, with an endless variety of activities. Come to relax. Come to party. We offer fun and excitement, rejuvenation of mind, body and soul in a majestic setting, year-round.”

Marie laughed and clapped her hands and joked, “Sign me up.”

He shrugged. “I admit, after Independence Day, things'll slow down. But hey. We're doing all right—and Marie, you've got to quit calling it *my* resort.” Grant did have shares in the partnership, but the resort had started out as the dream child of the most powerful family in the area, the Douglasses.

“They're lucky to have you working with them,” Marie declared, loyal as the second mom she'd always been to him.

He thought about the sale of the ranch again. And hated himself a little. But he'd made his decision. He was never coming back here and neither were his mom or Elise. For the old man's sake, he'd given Clifton's Pride his best shot, but he wasn't a rancher and he never would be. Better to get out while a great offer was dangling right in front of his nose.

Marie added, “Everyone knows it was your idea to keep the resort open year-round.' Nother beer?”

Grant thanked her, but decided to stroll on out to the barn and have a few words with Rufus instead.

The grizzled cowboy sat on a bale of hay, his hat beside him, rolling a cancer stick in those stiff, knobby hands of his.

“Try not to burn the barn down while you’re killin’ yourself with that thing,” Grant advised.

Rufus only grunted and stuck the rolled cigarette behind his ear. “You leavin’ already? I just took the saddle off your horse.” Stiffly, shaking his gray head, he started to rise.

Grant waved him back down. “I’m staying for dinner.”

“Smart thinkin’. That Marie, she can cook.” Rufus nodded sagely as he settled back on the bale. “Pot roast, I hear.”

“That is the rumor...”

The old cowboy took the cigarette from behind his ear, shook his head at it and stuck it back there without lighting it. “She’s doin’ just fine, in case you wanted to know.”

Grant knew exactly who *she* was. But for some reason he refused to examine too closely, he played it dumb. “Who? Marie?”

“No,” Rufus said with great patience. “Not Marie. I mean little Stephanie—who ain’t so little as she used to be, in case you didn’t notice.”

Grant ordered the image of her glorious bare backside to get the hell out of his mind and played it noncommittal with a deceptively easy shrug. “Yeah. Seems like only yesterday she was running around the yard in pigtails.”

“She’s a born rancher, that gal. Works hard. Loves every minute of it. And smart as a whip. You keep her on as top hand, I got a feeling she’ll shock us all and make this ranch a profitable operation.”

Clifton’s Pride turning a profit?

Now, that *would* be an accomplishment. Even John Clifton, who’d given it his all, hadn’t really managed to do that. Somehow, the Cliftons always got by. But a profit?

Not a chance. And for seven years after his dad’s tragic death, Grant had tried his damndest to make a success of the place himself. Same old, same old. Somehow he stayed afloat. Barely. But that was the best he ever did.

It had been the same when Rufus took over. The ranch had yet to go under, but it was no moneymaker and Grant didn’t believe it ever would be.

He sent Rufus a narrow-eyed look and muttered darkly, “You weren’t thrilled in the least when I hired her on to take over for you. And now, all of a sudden, you’re her biggest booster?”

Rufus picked up his hat and hit it on his thigh. “It’s true. I had my doubts about her runnin’ things. But I’m a man who’s willing to give credit where credit is due. That girl has got gumption. She’s got stamina. She knows what she’s doin’. She also has ideas and they are good ones.”

“Damn, Rufus. You’re starting to scare me. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so gung ho about anyone—or anything—in all the years you been working here.”

Rufus chortled and said something else.

But Grant didn’t hear a word of it. He just happened to glance toward the wide-open doors that led to the yard.

He saw Steph.

Steph. In clean Wranglers, fresh boots and a little red shirt that clung to those fine slender curves he’d only that very day realized she had. Her golden hair hung, dry now, sleek and shining as pure silk, to her shoulders.

And those slim hips of hers? They swayed easy.

She tempted him with every step and all she was doing was walking toward him.

Grant watched her coming, struck dumb all over again by how beautiful she was. His breath was all tangled up in his throat and his heart was doing something impossible inside his chest and all of a sudden his jeans were too damn tight.

Damn. He was making a total fool of himself.

All Rufus had to do was look down to see how sweet, innocent, smart-as-a-whip Stephanie affected the boss.

How in the hell, Grant wondered, could this be happening to him?

Chapter Two

Stephanie entered the barn, the bright sun outside lighting her gold hair from behind, creating a halo around her suddenly shadowed face. Grant, his senses spinning, somehow managed to get his boots under him and rise from the bale.

She came right for them. “Hey, you two. Mom said I’d find you out here.” She reached him, slid her warm, callused hand into his and flashed him a smile. “C’mon. Got some things I want to show you.”

Prickles of awareness seemed to shoot up his arm from the hand she was clutching. Her scent taunted him: shampoo, sunshine and sweetness. It took a serious effort of will not to yank her close and slam his mouth down on hers—with Rufus sitting right there, fingering that cigarette he hadn’t quite gotten around to lighting yet.

*This is bad. This is...not like me*, Grant reminded himself.

And it wasn’t. Not like him in the least.

Yeah. All right. He knew that in town, folks considered him something of a ladies’ man.

And he did like a pretty woman. What man didn’t? But he never obsessed over any of them, never got tongue-tied as a green kid in their presence.

Not until today, anyway.

Stephanie. Of all the women in the world...

By some minor miracle, he found his voice. “Show me what?”

“You’ll see.” She beamed up at him, those shining eyes green as a matched pair of four-leaf clovers. “Come on.” She tugged on his hand.

He let her pull him along, vaguely aware of a chuckle from Rufus behind them and the hissing snap as the cowboy struck a match.

Inside, she led him to the office, which was off the entry hall, not far from the front door. She tugged him over to the desk and pushed him down into the worn leather swivel chair that used to be his dad’s.

He sent her a wary glance. “What’s this about?”

“You’ll see.” She turned on the new computer she’d asked him to buy for her when she started in as top hand.

“What?” he demanded, his senses so full of her, he thought he’d explode.

“Don’t be so impatient. Give it a chance to boot up.” She leaned over his chair, her gaze on the computer screen, that fragrant hair swinging forward. He watched, transfixed, as she tucked that golden hank of loose hair back behind her ear. He stared at her profile and longed to reach up and run the back of his hand down the smooth golden skin of her throat, to get a fistful of that shining hair and bring it to his mouth so he could feel the silkiness against his lips. “There,” she announced. By then, she had her hand on the mouse. She started clicking. “Look at that.” She beamed with pride.

He tore his hungry gaze from her face and made himself look at the monitor. “Okay. A spreadsheet.”

She laughed. The musical sound seemed to shiver all through him. “Oh, come on. Who’s got the fancy business degree from UM? Not me, that’s for sure.” She pointed. “Look. That’s a lot of calves, wouldn’t you say? And look at the totals in the yearling column. They’re high. I think it’s going to be a fine year.”

He peered closer at the spreadsheet, frowning. She was right. The yearling count *was* pretty high. He muttered gruffly, “Not bad...”

“I’m working on making sure they’re all nice and fat come shipping day. And as far as the calves? I think the total is high there because of that new feed mixture I gave their mamas before calving time. Healthy cows make healthy calves.” She laughed again. “Well, duh.

As if you didn’t know. And you just watch. Next year, when those calves are ready for market, they’ll be weighing in at close to seven hundred pounds each—which is really what I’m leading up to here. Yeah, my new feed mixture is looking like a real success. But bottom line? Winter feeding is expensive. Not only because of all the hay we have to put up, but also in the labor-intensive work of caring for and feeding our pregnant cows in the winter months when the feed has got to be brought to them. If you really stop and think about it, *we* work for the cows. My idea is to start letting our cows work for us, letting them find their own feed, which they would do, if there was any available during the winter months...”

He watched her mouth move and kept thinking about what it might feel like under his. What it might *taste* like...

She gave him a big smile. “There are changes going on in the industry, Grant. Ranchers are learning that just because a thing has always been done a certain way doesn’t automatically mean it’s the best, most efficient and profitable way. What I’m getting to here is that lots of ranchers now are switching from spring to summer calving. And you know what?”

He cleared his throat. “Uh. What?”

“It’s working for them, Grant. Matching the nutritional needs of the herd to the forage available can cut production costs and improve profitability...” Her sweet, husky voice trailed off. “Grant? You with me here?”

“Yeah.”

“You seem...distracted.”

“No. Really. I’m not.”

She leaned in a little closer to him, a tiny frown forming between her smooth brows, the amazing scent of her taunting him even more cruelly than a moment before. “Is it...” She spoke so softly, almost shyly, the savvy ranch foreman suddenly replaced by a nervous young girl. “...about earlier?”

He flat out could not think. His mind was one big ball of mush. “Uh. Earlier?”

A flush swept up her satiny throat and stained her cheeks a tempting pink. “Um. You know. At the creek...” Her gold-tipped lashes swept down. And she swore. A very bad word.

It shocked him enough that he let out a laugh. “Steph. Shame on you.”

With a low, frustrated sound, she straightened and stepped back. He felt equal parts relief and despair—relief that she was far enough away he wasn’t quite so tempted to grab her. Despair that the delicious smell of her no longer swam all around him.

“Damn it,” she said—a much milder oath than that time. “I am so...dumb. Just...really, completely childish and dumb.”

“Uh. Steph.”

“*What?*” She glared at him.

“What are you talking about?”

She flung out a hand. “Oh, please. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Er. I do?”

“I keep...beating this silly dead horse to death over and over again. It’s just not that huge a deal that you saw me naked, right?” She looked at him pleadingly.

For her sake—and his—he told a whopper of a lie. “No. Not at all. Not a huge deal at all.”

“Exactly. It’s no big deal and I need to act like a grown-up and let it go. But no. Every time you look at me funny, I’m just sure you’re thinking how annoyed or amused or...*whatever* you are at me and it gets me all...flustered and I instantly start babbling away about the whole stupid thing all over again. Oh, I just... Will somebody shoot me? Please. Will somebody just put me clean out of my misery?”

He rose. “Steph.”

She put up a hand. “Oh, wait. I know you’re going to say something nice. That’s how you are. Always so good. So understanding. So...um...” Her eyes widened as he did exactly what he shouldn’t do and closed the distance between them. “Wonderful...” she whispered. “Just a wonderful man.”

Getting close again was bad enough. But the last thing he ought to do was to put his hands on her. He knew that. He did.

So why the hell was he reaching out and clasping her shoulders?

Damn. Her bones felt so delicate. And the warm silk of her skin where the red shirt ended and her flesh began...

There were no words for that, for the miracle of her skin under his hands. There was nothing. But the scent of her, the *feel* of her...

She swallowed. “Grant?”

He remembered to speak. “I’m not that wonderful. Take my word for it.”

“Oh, Grant...”

“And I want you to know...” The thing was, he could stand here holding her shoulders and looking in her shining eyes for the next decade or so. Just stand here and stare at that dimple in her chin, at her slightly parted lips, her clover-green eyes...

“What?” she asked.

He frowned and, like an idiot, he parroted, “What?”

“You want me to know, what?” Wildly she scanned his face.

And he had no idea what. Not a hint. Not a clue.

And something was happening. Something was changing.

Something about Steph. She was...suddenly different. All at once her nervousness, her girlish embarrassment, had vanished.

Now, he looked down at a woman, a beautiful woman, a woman sure of what she wanted.

“Oh, Grant...” They were the same words she’d said not a minute before.

The same.

And yet totally different.

She lifted her hands and rested them on his chest and before he could remember that he should stop her, she slid them up to encircle his neck.

He shouldn’t be doing this, shouldn’t be standing here way too close to her, shouldn’t be looking down at that mouth of hers, thinking how he’d like nothing better than to cover it with his own.

He shouldn’t...

“Oh, Grant. Oh, yeah.” And she lifted up on tiptoe and pressed that soft, wide mouth to his.

Chapter Three

More things he shouldn’t be doing...

He shouldn’t be wrapping his arms around her and pulling her close, shouldn’t be easing his tongue between those softly parted lips of hers. Shouldn’t be sweeping his tongue over the eager surface of hers. Shouldn’t be finding the taste of her even sweeter than he’d dared to imagine.

Shouldn’t be.

But he was.

He ran an eager hand down the curve of her back and cupped her firm, sleek bottom, pulling her up and into him, nice and tight. So she could feel exactly how she affected him...

*Wrong*, he thought.

*Shouldn’t*...

But that didn’t stop him. He kissed those soft-sighing lips of hers and when she sighed again, he kissed her some more.

She didn’t seem to mind.

Far from it. She kissed him right back.

It was good. The best. Better than the best. He didn't want it ever to end.

But he knew that it had to. Exerting a superhuman effort of will, he lifted his mouth from hers.

There was a moment. Breath held. They stared at each other. Her eyes were greener than ever, her lips slightly swollen from that kiss he shouldn't have shared with her.

"I'm sorry," he said, and clasped her shoulders again to put her gently away from him. "I don't know what the hell my problem is. I shouldn't have done that."

And she smiled, a smile that trembled a little at first, and then grew wider. A smile that became so bright, it blinded him. "Oh, yeah," she said. "You should have. And I'm real glad you did."

For the first time ever, Marie's famous pot roast had no taste.

Not to Grant, anyway. The last thing he could think about that evening was food.

In his mind, there was only Steph: her smile, her laughter, the memory of her kiss, the look in her eyes across the table whenever their glances happened to meet.

He had a really big problem here and he knew it. He kept almost forgetting *who* she was, kept losing sight of the fact that he was sworn to look out for her, that he could never, *ever* hurt her, that the last thing he would ever do was to take her to bed.

He was all wrong for her and he knew it. She was a find-the-right-guy-and-marry-him kind of girl. An innocent in her heart. Hell. He was reasonably sure she was still a virgin.

A virgin. Oh God.

Grant didn't go out with virgins.

And wasn't up for the whole marriage-and-family deal. Not now. Not ever.

And even if she didn't expect him to marry her, a girl like Steph would at least want something approximating what women liked to call a *relationship*. Grant didn't have *relationships*.

When it came to women, he liked things free and easy, fun and open-ended.

And sitting at the dinner table that evening, he felt trapped. Boxed in by his own burning lust for sweet little Stephanie Julen.

He needed to stay away from her. Oh, yeah. Since he couldn't keep his hands off her once he got close, the solution was simple: He would keep his distance. Yeah. That should work. If he just stayed away...

He poked more food he didn't taste into his mouth and resolutely chewed.

Marie asked, "Grant, are you feeling all right?"

He swallowed. Hard. "Uh, yeah. I'm just fine."

"You're looking a little strange. Is the pot roast okay?"

"The best. As always."

Rufus let loose with one of those low, knowing chortles of his. Grant sent him a dark look.

The old cowboy shrugged. "Hell, Marie. This is the best you ever made. Nothin' wrong with this here pot roast, nosirree. It's tender and juicy. Perfect in every way. Just like the potatoes and the carrots and these rolls of yours that are fluffy as little pillows. Uh-uh. If the boss has got a problem, it's not with the food." He forked up a big bite and stuffed it into his mouth.

"I don't know what you're talking about, old man. I've got no problem at all." Grant scowled at Rufus for all he was worth.

"Hear that?" Rufus grinned good and wide. "Boss says he ain't got a problem." He raised his beer. "I'll drink to that."

Grant looked away from the old man—and saw that Jim, the new hand, was staring at Steph. Grant resisted the urge to tell the fool to get his eyes back in his head where they belonged.

After all, who was he to tell Jim not to look at Steph? The cowhand seemed like a nice enough guy. Steph had mentioned after she hired him that he was a good worker. Rufus said he kept his area of the bunkhouse clean and in order. Maybe Jim was hoping to settle down, find himself a suitable woman and ask her to be his wife. If so, he'd be a lot better match for Steph than Grant ever would.

But Steph wasn't looking at the hired hand. Steph was looking at *him*. And every time she looked at him, he wanted to jump up and grab her and carry her off someplace nice and private, someplace where he could peel off that red shirt and those snug jeans and have another long look at what he'd seen down by the creek.

He covered pretty well, he thought. Except for Rufus's sly remarks and the occasional shining glance from Steph, they all kind of carried on as usual.

There was pie and ice cream after the meal. Grant dutifully packed it away. And then, at last, Marie started clearing off.

"It was great, Marie. Thanks." He slid his napkin in at the side of his plate and pushed back his chair. "And it's an hour's ride back to the resort. I think I'd better get moving."

Rufus grunted. "Your horse is ready to go. Tacked him up before I came in to eat."

"Preciate that." He pushed his chair under the table, and turned for the entry hall. The hat he'd borrowed waited on the peg by the front door. He grabbed it, yanked the door back and fled.

Too bad Steph was right behind him.

She caught up with him out on the porch. He didn't know what the hell to say to her. So he said nothing. She didn't seem to mind, just strolled along at his side across the yard to the post beside the barn where Rufus had hitched Titan.

As they reached the big gelding, she spoke. "Nice out now. Cooling off a little..."

The sun was just sliding behind the mountains, but it would be a while yet till dark. "Yeah," he said, without actually looking at her. "Nice." He took the reins and mounted. Then he made the mistake of glancing down at her.

She smiled. That wide, glowing, happy smile. Something tightened in his chest.

"How about a picnic?" she asked. "I can't tomorrow. We've got too many fences that need fixing around here—not to mention a couple of ditches that have to be burned out so those fat yearlings I've been bragging on won't die of thirst. But I could get away Tuesday. Say, noon? I'll meet you out by that big, dead cottonwood over in the Danvers pasture." He'd ridden by that tree earlier on his way to the ranch. Once, it had been on Triple J land. She asked, "You know where I mean?"

*Tell her how you just can't make it.* "Yeah. I know."

"It's about midway between here and the resort, so it won't take you all that long to get there. Over the fence from that pasture is Parks Service land and some nice shade trees. I'll bring the blanket and Mom's cold chicken. And the beer."

*Tell her no, you can't make it. Tell her it's just not possible. Tell her now.*

"All right. Noon on Tuesday," he heard himself say.

"Good night, Grant." She stepped back.

He tipped his hat and turned his horse to go.

The whole ride back, he called himself a hundred kinds of damn fool. Now, he'd have to call her. Tell her how something had come up and he just couldn't make it on Tuesday, no way.

He was so busy stewing over how he shouldn't have kissed her, shouldn't have agreed to any damn picnic, that he didn't even think about what he'd forgotten to do until he was back in his suite at the resort, changing his clothes. He stopped with one leg out of his Wranglers and gaped at his image in the wall-to-wall mirror of his dressing area.

*He'd never told them he was selling the ranch.*

"Mom?" Steph leaned in the archway from the front hall.

Marie looked up from her mending and smiled a tired smile. She took off the dimstore glasses she wore for close work and rubbed the bridge of her nose. In the pool of light cast by the lamp, her round face looked shadowed and lined, older than her forty-nine years. "Off to bed?"

"Mmm-hmm." It wasn't quite nine yet, but Steph—and her mother, too—would be up and working long before first light. "Just wanted to say good-night."

Marie set her mending in her lap and reached to pat the arm of the sofa a few feet from her favorite chair. “Sit a minute.”

Something in her mother’s tone alerted Steph. “What’s wrong?”

“Come on. Just sit with me. Not for long...”

Reluctantly, sensing she wasn’t going to like what her mother had to say, Steph left the archway. She took the spot at the end of the sofa. “What is it?”

Suddenly Marie just had to take a couple more stitches in the sock she was mending. Steph stared at her bent head, feeling fondness mixed with apprehension. She loved and respected her mother. Most of the time, the two of them saw eye to eye.

But tonight, Steph had a feeling they were about to disagree.

At last, Marie looked up again. “You and Grant got something going on between you?”

Steph couldn’t hide her trembling smile. “Oh, I hope so.”

Marie stitched some more. Then, abruptly, she lowered her work to her lap again. “He’s far from ready to settle down.”

“I know, Mom.”

“You two want different things from life.”

“True. But...you never know how things might turn out.”

Her mother shook her head. “You should see yourself. Pink cheeks and stars in your eyes...”

“Is that so bad?”

“You watch your heart, honey.”

“Oh, Mom. There’s nothing to watch. My heart belongs to him and it always has.”

Grant had meetings all day Monday. From concierge to housekeeping to the AspenGlow Spa to food service to sales to public relations—and more—Grant was responsible for overseeing it all.

The longest meeting was first thing. From nine until eleven-thirty, he pored over plans for the projected 18-hole, par seventy-two championship golf course, which was still in the early stages of development, with construction scheduled to begin next summer.

At eleven forty-five, he met with his assistant to go over the calendar for the week. After that, he *could* have stolen a few minutes to call the ranch and tell them about the sale.

But no. It really wasn’t the kind of news he wanted to deliver in a phone call. He felt he owed it to the hands and Steph and her mom to give it to them face-to-face. And there was just no opportunity for that, not that day.

True, he had no appointments that evening. He could make the time to drive out there after six. And maybe he should...

But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed best to clear his calendar for a few hours Tuesday afternoon and meet Steph for that picnic as planned. He could tell her then. And after he told her, he could ride back to the ranch with her and share the news with the rest of them.

In the meantime, he needed to prove to himself that what had happened the day before was not going to happen again. He needed to be sure that yesterday was just...some kind of fluke. A strange, over-the-top reaction to seeing Steph naked down by the creek, an offshoot of the sudden realization that she wasn’t a kid anymore.

Now that he had some distance from the situation, he knew there was really nothing to worry about. Steph might be all grown-up, but she was still like a sister to him. A sister. Nothing more.

And there were a whole lot of pretty women in the world. A nice romantic evening with a fun, friendly gorgeous female would do the trick, put things firmly back into perspective for him.

As luck would have it, just such a woman called while he was in the first of his afternoon meetings. She left him a message in voice mail. She lived in San Diego and had come for the skiing in January when they’d hooked up. He’d enjoyed every moment he’d spent with her.

“I had such a great time last winter,” her recorded voice teased, “I decided to try my luck over the Fourth. I’m up in the Thunder Ridge condos with a girlfriend. Give me a buzz when you get in. I can’t wait to see you. *All of you...*”

He returned her call and set up a date for that night. His receptionist beeped him just as he was saying goodbye.

He hung up and punched the other line. “What?”

“Eva Post’s on two.”

Eva was his realtor. “Eva. Hey.”

“Grant. I’ve got the offer. It’s exactly as promised. The acceptance deadline is tomorrow at five, so we need to get together. We’ll go over all the points in detail, as a matter of course, before you sign. But I guarantee you’re going to be very happy. They’re giving you everything you asked for.”

“What about the closing date?”

“September first. The buyer was hoping we could make it sooner, but I explained that you needed time to shut your operation down.”

“September first...” It was a reasonable date and he knew it. But still, it seemed like no time at all.

“No worries, I promise,” Eva coaxed. “It’s in the contract that you can take whatever time you need over the next *six* months to sell off the stock and equipment. As long as the main house, the bunkhouse and the foreman’s cottage are ready for the buyer to move in by nine-one, she’s happy.”

*She* was Melanie McFarlane, an Easterner who’d shown up in town a few weeks ago and was staying in the main lodge at the resort. Melanie came from money. She had a degree in hotel management and she was buying Clifton’s Pride as an “investment,” she said. She planned to make the place into a guest ranch.

Grant’s father would never have allowed such a thing. But John Clifton was dead. The price was more than right and Melanie’s financing was rock-solid.

The only problem: Grant’s concern for his people. Damn it, he should have carried through yesterday as planned, not let himself get side-tracked by the new, grown-up Steph. It was plain wrong for him to sell Clifton’s Pride out from under them before he’d even *told* them he was doing it. And as things stood now, he wouldn’t be telling them until tomorrow afternoon.

Eva asked, “How about four o’clock? You can come out to my office, or I can come to you.”

“Four o’clock...today?”

“Not working for you?”

“How about tomorrow? Late afternoon. Say, four-thirty?”

“That’s cutting it right down to the wire,” the realtor warned. He said nothing. After a moment, she let it go. “My office?” she suggested.

“No. Mine.”

The realtor agreed and said goodbye.

It would work out fine, Grant promised himself. He’d tell Steph and the others the news tomorrow—and return to the office to sign the papers afterward.

Grant’s date sent him a sultry look from under her thick black lashes. They stood at the door to her friend’s condo. From her expression, he had a pretty good idea what was coming next.

And it was.

“My roommate’s away for the night,” she said. “Come in for a drink? Just so happens I’ve got a magnum of Cristal chilling.” He saw her expectations in her dark eyes. They’d had one fine time last January. Lots of laughs and some good, hot sex. She had every reason to assume it would be the same tonight.

He’d *planned* for it to be the same tonight.

But since yesterday, nothing seemed to be going as he planned.

Through drinks in the resort's lounge and dinner in the Gallatin Room, he kept wondering what the hell he was doing there. Wondering made him distracted and that caused long, awkward lags in the conversation. She'd asked him three or four times if he was all right.

He'd sworn he was fine, but they both knew the night was one big loser. Surprising, now he thought about it, that she'd even bothered to invite him in. He wished she hadn't—not now that he realized he just couldn't give her what she wanted from him.

So much for putting things back in perspective with the help of a fun, friendly, gorgeous gal.

"Thanks," he said. "But I've got an early meeting tomorrow."

She blinked. But she recovered quickly. He knew what she was thinking: If he was fool enough to turn her down, it was *his* loss. She moved close and he got a whiff of her perfume. Musky. Exotic. A scent he'd found damn sexy last winter.

Hell. He still found it sexy. Just...not for him.

She touched his cheek, her hand smooth and cool. He thought of Steph's hand—sun-warmed, rough with calluses—and it hit him like a mule kick to the gut.

All his denials meant exactly nothing.

He wanted Steph so bad, it was causing him to do the strangest things—like forgetting to tell her he was selling the ranch she loved so damn much. Like turning down a hot night with a fine, sexy woman, an experienced woman who knew a lot of really impressive, inventive ways to please a man...

He was in big trouble and he didn't know what to do about it.

"Night, then," his date said, and went in.

He returned to his offices in the resort's corporate headquarters down the hill from main lodge. There was always plenty of work to catch up on and he didn't feel a whole lot like sleeping anyway.

By the next morning, Grant had himself convinced all over again that he really had no problem when it came to Stephanie. No problem at all.

He would meet her at noon, as agreed. He'd feel what he'd always felt toward her before Sunday: fondness and protectiveness—along with some serious apprehension, which was only natural since she was bound to be upset when she learned about the sale of Clifton's Pride.

Riley Douglas, who was technically comanager of the resort, but who had a lot of irons in the fire and pretty much left the job to Grant, came by at nine. Grant brought him up to speed on the progress with the golf course. Then they discussed the pros and cons of opening a third full-service restaurant at the main lodge. They already had the upscale Gallatin Room and the Grubstake, where you could get a great burger and all-day breakfast. Grant thought they needed something in the middle range.

Riley agreed. "Come up with a few specifics—like who, what, how and how much. Then we'll bring it before the board."

Grant asked after Caleb, Riley's dad. The resort had been Caleb's brainchild. The wealthy rancher had provided the land, put together the investor group and overseen the original project's development. Without the drive and influence of Caleb Douglas, the resort wouldn't exist—let alone been a raging success from the day it opened for business last November.

Riley shook his head. "Sad to say my dad is gettin' old, slowing down a little..."

"Give him my best, will you—and your mom, too?"

Riley promised that he would.

After Riley took off, there were a couple of food service issues to settle and some calls to return. Grant had the decks more or less cleared by eleven and at eleven-twenty he was mounted on Titan and headed for the Danvers pasture.

Once he left the stable yard behind, he urged the horse to a gallop, all too aware of a certain rising feeling in his chest, an eagerness in his blood.

Steph was there, waiting on Trixie Belle, beside the twisted old cottonwood in the pasture that had once been part of her father's land. He saw her and his heart started pounding hard and deep and needful. Heat streaked through him, searing as it went.

Trixie Belle danced to the side as he rode up. With a horsewoman's sure skill, Steph calmed the mare. Her strong, capable hand on the horse's neck, she beamed him a wide, happy smile—a smile that made his head spin and his blood race even faster through his veins.

Damn. She was beautiful. So beautiful, it hurt. Her hat hung down her back and her hair, pulled loosely into a single braid, caught the sun in golden gleams. And those eyes...

Green as spring grass.

"Come on," she said, and pointed to a stand of birch trees maybe a quarter of a mile away. "Over there." She turned the horse and took off.

Hopelessly ensnared, forgetting everything but the color of her eyes and the way her hair shone like a handful of nuggets in the sunlight, he followed.

#### Chapter Four

Steph spread the blanket in the dappled shade of the trees.

She had plans for today. Big ones. Romantic ones. Plans that involved slow, lazy kisses and tender, arousing caresses.

And, just maybe, even more.

Funny, but she wasn't the least bit nervous. She *was* excited. Kind of tingly all over. Her heart felt full to bursting.

At last. After all these years of loving Grant Clifton and knowing his feelings for her were strictly the brotherly kind, she saw her chance with him.

And she was taking that chance, going all the way with it. No matter what anyone thought. No matter what her mother said.

"Here we go." He was back with the rocks she'd sent him to find. He knelt and placed four nice, big flat ones, each on a corner of the blanket to hold it in place against the ever-present wind.

"Great." She sent him a glance that lingered a little too long. Heat arced between them. He was the one who looked away, rising again and stepping back.

Oh, yes. She was certain. He wanted her and she did have a chance with him.

No, she wasn't quite so naive as her mom seemed to think. She didn't imagine that Grant loved her. Uh-uh. He did not. And as dewy-eyed as she was feeling, she intended to remember that. He thought she was innocent. But she wasn't—not in her heart. Not in her tough and pragmatic rancher's mind.

Stephanie Julen was a realist and she knew what Grant felt for her: He wanted her. A lot. He wanted her—and he didn't *want* to want her. He'd always considered it his job to protect her.

And now he intended to protect her from himself.

She was a whole lot more woman than he realized, however. And as a woman, she would do all in her power to see that he put those noble intentions aside and got what he wanted. After all, it was only what *she* wanted, too.

It had taken her a while to catch on, painful hours on Sunday—between the time he found her at the creek and the kiss they shared in the office. She'd been so sure he was mad at her or shocked or disgusted or something else equally upsetting.

But eventually, she'd figured it out. That strange look in his eyes every time he glanced her way...why, it was a *hungry* look.

And if she'd had a single doubt that he desired her, the kiss had burned all uncertainty clean away.

Oh, that kiss. He'd kissed her as if he wanted to gobble her right up.

And, well, Steph wouldn't mind at all being gobbled. Not as long as it was Grant doing the gobbling. Oh, my, yes. She got chills all through her every time she thought about that kiss, about

the hard, strong feel of his body pressed close to hers, about the way he'd swept his big hand down and cupped her bottom and pressed her closer still.

She'd felt what she did to him then, oh, yes, she had. She'd felt what he wanted to do to *her*. She'd felt it and known that she was getting her chance with him. At last.

*No regrets*, she promised herself. She would take things with Grant as they came. Ride this wild horse and just hope against hope that maybe she'd manage to stay on.

He was a good man. And a generous one. A protector of the weak and the needy. A man you could count on when you were down.

But he was not looking for a wife. What did he need with a lifetime commitment, or even a steady girl? The women flocked to him and he seemed to thoroughly enjoy his bachelor lifestyle.

Stephanie really hoped she could make him see that even a man who had everything needed the right woman to stand by his side. But she wasn't counting on anything. She had no expectations of how it would all work out.

He stood back, watching from under the brim of his hat, as she went to where they'd hobbled the horses and began taking their lunch from the insulated saddlebags. She glanced over her shoulder, sent him another smile and thrilled to the lovely flare of heat that sparked in his eyes.

"I couldn't resist the urge to race you over here," she said. "And that means the beer is nothing but foam about now. You'll have to wait for it."

"It's fine," he said, his voice low and a little bit ragged.

"I've got lemonade, though."

"I love lemonade."

She laughed. "No, you don't. But until the beer settles, lemonade is what you're getting." She unloaded the plastic jar of lemonade, the food and the forks and paper goods, taking way too much pleasure out of knowing that he watched every move she made—hungrily, like some big mountain lion stretched out on a tree limb, his tail flicking lazily, eyeing his dinner. She loved knowing it wasn't just her mom's cold chicken he was hungry for.

Once she had all the food out, she dropped to the blanket and took off her boots.

"What are you doing?" he growled.

She had to cover a laugh. For a ladies' man, he sure was acting edgy and nervous today. She wiggled her stocking foot at him and answered in an easy tone. "Just getting comfortable." She set her boots in the grass, tucked her legs to the side and patted the empty space next to her. "Come on. Let's eat."

He approached with caution and again, she had to hide a smile. But when he reached her, he turned, dropped to the edge of the blanket—and took off his own boots. She watched the muscles in his back bunch and stretch beneath the worn fabric of his old Western shirt and felt a heat down low in her belly, a sort of melting, lazy sensation. She wanted...

His mouth on hers. His knowing hands stroking her body.

*Whoa, girl. Slow down a little. All in good time.*

He set the boots away from the blanket, set his hat on them and faced her, drawing his long legs up, sitting cross-legged. She served him: a paper cup of lemonade, a breast and a drumstick, a mound of potato salad, a buttered roll and some carrot sticks. Over the years, she'd watched him eat hundreds of times. She knew how much food he liked, what parts of the chicken he preferred.

"It's good," he said, as he dug in.

She was filling her own plate from the plastic containers. "Oh, yeah." She tasted the potato salad. "Mmm. My mom. She sure can cook."

He waved the drumstick at her. "You mean you didn't fry this chicken yourself?"

She laughed, glad that he seemed to be relaxing a little. "Don't worry. I wouldn't do that to you." She knew how to cook. Marie had insisted on teaching her the basics, at least. But she was always much too impatient to hang around the kitchen. She wanted to be out the door and on the back

of a horse. So her biscuits ended up gooey in the center and half the time her chicken got charred. “I know my limitations. I’m a rancher, not a ranch wife.”

He set the chicken leg back on his plate. Suddenly he seemed kind of thoughtful. “You’re happy, huh? Working cattle? Up before dawn to get the chores done, freezing your butt off all winter, dripping sweat while you fix fences and burn out ditches in the blazing summer sun?”

She tipped her head to the side and studied his face. “What kind of question is that? You know me. Does a dog have fleas? Do bats fly?”

He frowned. But when he spoke, his voice sounded offhand. “Just making sure you remember there are other options for you.”

“Too bad there’s nothing else I want to do.”

“But there are other things you *could* do. As I recall, you got As and Bs in high school.”

“I’ll have you know I got straight As.”

“I’m impressed.” “I did my best in school. That doesn’t mean I enjoyed being there.” She wouldn’t have gone past the eighth grade if her mom and Grant hadn’t insisted she get her diploma. And she still believed she could have held on to the Triple J, if only she’d been able to work full-time, instead of spending five days out of seven at Thunder Canyon High.

He advised in a weary tone, “You scrunch up your face like that, it might get stuck.”

“Hah,” she said. “You sound like Mom.”

He chuckled. “Just don’t be bitter. Believe me, it was the best thing. You’d have regretted not finishing high school.”

“No. I wouldn’t have. But it’s okay—and I’m *not* bitter.” She wrinkled her nose at him again. “Well, not much, anyway...”

He ate half of his flaky, perfect dinner roll. She chomped a carrot stick and got to work on a tender, crispy-skinned thigh. Eventually he said, “What I was trying to tell you is that I’m doin’ pretty well now. I could help you out, if you decided you might want to give college a try...”

Emotion tightened her throat. Not because she felt she’d missed out on college, not because she wanted it. She didn’t. Not in the least.

It was just that he was always so good to her, so generous. “Oh, Grant. Thank you. But no. I’m pretty much a self-starter. If I need to know something, I find a way to learn it. I never had a yen for any formal higher education. All I’ve ever wanted was a chance to do exactly what I’m doing now.” “I see.” His voice was flat. He set his plate down beside him, only half-finished.

Distress made a leaden sensation in her stomach. “Okay. I don’t get it. What did I say?”

He stared at her for a long, strange moment. And then he shrugged and picked up his plate again. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“But you—”

“No buts, Steph. I am positive to the millionth degree.” He grinned as he said it.

She grunted. “Oh, very funny.”

The Christmas she was seven, five years before their dads were killed, her mom had tried to talk her into asking Santa for one of those fancy American Girl dolls, the kind that came with a whole perfect miniature wardrobe—and a doll-size trunk to put all those fine clothes in.

Steph had sworn that a doll was the last thing she needed. She wanted a pony more than anything. She knew she was old enough for a horse of her own.

Grant, a high-school senior that year, had been over at the house, for some reason long lost to her now. She’d been following her mom around the kitchen, arguing endlessly, “I mean it, Mama. Don’t you get me any doll. I don’t want a doll and if you get me one I’ll rip its head off. I need my own horse. I got work to do. Just ask Daddy. He’ll tell you I’m his best helper and his best helper needs a horse.”

Grant had stuck his head in from the living room to tease, “Oh, come on, Steffie, you know you want a pretty little doll.”

She still remembered whipping around to glare at him, shaking a finger as she lectured him, “Do not call me Steffie. And I don’t want any doll.”

“You sure?”

“I am positive, Grant Clifton,” she’d smartly informed him. “Positive to the millionth degree.”

Now, he lifted his drumstick to her in a salute. “You were one feisty kid.”

She faked a groan. “Oh, please. Feisty? Not me. I was a *practical* kid. And I got my first horse that Christmas, if you recall.”

Malomar, her sweet-natured bay mare, had ended up sold at auction with the rest of the Triple J stock. It was one of her saddest memories: her mare being led into that horse trailer, the trailer kicking up dust as it rolled away.

That memory, somehow, was almost as bad as seeing her dad’s lifeless body with that big red hole in the side of his head on the day that he died. The death of a parent was an enormous and terrible thing—too terrible in some ways for a young mind to comprehend. But the end of her life as she’d known and loved it?

That had been horrible, too. And by then, three years after her dad died, she’d been old enough to understand what was happening when she watched Malomar being taken away.

But she wasn’t dwelling on any sad memories today. Uh-uh. She had the man she loved sitting right beside her, and he was finally seeing her as a woman grown. She fully intended to enjoy every minute of this afternoon.

They ate in silence for a little while, finishing off their drumsticks and potato salad, sipping their lemonade.

Finally Grant said, “I remember that you got your horse that Christmas, just like you wanted—and promptly fell off her and broke your collarbone.”

She confessed, “It’s true. I was never what you’d call a cautious kid.”

“Uh-uh. You were brave and bold and nobody ever told you what to do.” Those sky-blue eyes of his gleamed at her. She saw admiration in them.

For the fearless kid she’d once been? Or the woman she was now?

Or maybe...both? Her heart skipped a beat at the thought.

And then he was frowning again. “Look. Steph. There’s something I really have to—”

“Oh, don’t,” she cried before he could finish.

Now he seemed puzzled. “Don’t?”

“That’s right. Don’t. I know just what you’re going to say and I don’t want to hear it, okay?”

He actually gulped. “Er, you *know*?”

She set her plate aside and wiped her hands on a paper towel. “Of course, I know. How could I not? Something like this, a woman always knows. I admit, you had me wondering at first. But I got the message eventually. Really, it’s all just so...perfectly obvious.”

“Obvious.” He gaped at her.

“Yes.”

He set his own plate down. And he knocked back the rest of his lemonade, crushing the paper cup in his big fist when he finished. And he swore under his breath. “Steph.”

“Yeah?”

“What, exactly, are you talking about?”

Should she say it right out? Probably not. Her mom always used to tell her that men didn’t like it when a woman got too direct, when a woman dared to take the lead in an obvious way.

But her mom was from a different generation, after all. From a time when women were expected to wait around for men to make the first move.

Thank God it wasn’t like that anymore.

But still, what if she spooked him by laying it right out there, bold as you please? She didn't want to scare him off.

A sudden gust of wind stirred the trees around them and tried to blow the paper plates away, with only chicken bones to hold them down.

"Oops." Swiftly she gathered up the remains of their meal, stuffed it in the trash bag she'd brought and weighted the bag down with a rock. "There," she said unnecessarily when that job was done. He was sitting so still, watching her, kind of narrow-eyed, waiting for her to explain herself.

She stalled some more. "Hey. Want a beer?" She started to rise.

"Stay here." He reached for his boots. "I can get it." He pulled on his boots and grabbed the trash bag from under the rock. "You want one?"

She didn't much care for beer. "No."

She watched him go to the horses, something inside her kind of aching in a joyous way. His shoulders were so broad, his waist so hard and narrow. And he truly did have one fine butt.

And how could she tell him—that she knew he wanted her though he didn't *want* to want her? How could she make him understand that she didn't expect anything from him?

Except maybe his kisses and his eager embrace. Just this...wonder. And this joy.

And as for the rest? Well, why not just let the rest take care of itself?

He stuffed the trash in the saddlebags, got a beer and returned to her. She stewed some more over what to say to him as he set the can on one of the rocks and pulled off his boots all over again. He popped the tab and took a long drink. She watched his Adam's apple bounce up and down and continued her internal debate: What to say?

How to say it?

Finally he set down what was left of the beer. "Well?"

"Um. Yeah. Okay. I..." The words were right there, inside her mind, so clear. *I know that you're attracted to me, but you're thinking it's not right because you're not looking for anything permanent. You're telling yourself you won't take advantage of me. But oh, please. Take advantage. Take advantage right now....*

So clear. And so much easier to think than to actually say.

"What?" His gaze locked on hers. "Say it."

"It's...a beautiful day, don't you think?" Oh, Lord. How lame could she get?

"Steph..." His eyes said he couldn't make up his mind between reaching out and grabbing her—or jumping up and running clean away from her as fast as he could go.

"A beautiful day..." She said those lame words again and that time, she swayed toward him. He stiffened. She landed against his chest and looked up at him longingly. "And it's just you and me, all alone on this blanket under the trees..." She put her hand over his heart. Oh, it felt so good. So perfect, just leaning against him. Her breath was all knotted up in her throat. She wanted to stay right where she was, forever, yet she was absolutely certain that any second now, he would push her away.

But he didn't. With a low groan, he gathered her close. "Damn it, Steph."

She laid a finger against his wonderful mouth. "Shh. Okay? Just...shh."

He stared down at her. She could feel the warmth and the strength of him, the shape of him, so hard and manly. And cradled close against him like this, she could feel his heart, too, beating away in there, firm and deep. He said gruffly, "I can't...think, when I touch you."

"Good," she told him, feeling braver now, her love and her yearning leading her on. "Because you don't need to think. I don't *want* you to think."

His lip twitched. It was almost a smile. "Always so damn sure of yourself."

"Oh, no," she cried. "I'm not sure of myself at all. But I am sure about how I feel. Sure about... what I want."

"This is crazy." But his arms tightened around her.

"Oh, no. Not crazy. Right. Exactly right."

“You smell like sunshine,” he whispered, the sound rough, as if it hurt him, just to get those words out. “And the way you feel, in my arms, when I touch you...”

“Just kiss me,” she whispered back, lifting her mouth to him. “Just kiss me and the rest will take care of itself.”

“Shouldn’t...” The single word came out on another groan.

“Oh, yes. You should...” So...heady. This magic. This power she was finding she had over him. The magic of wanting. The power of desire.

Who knew it could be like this between a man and woman? She never would have guessed. Every nerve in her body seemed to be singing. She was shivery—but with wonderful, heavy, lazy heat.

“Damn. You’re killing me, you know that?”

“Oh, Grant...”

He took her by the arms then, and she was sure all over again that he would set her away from him.

But in the end, he only grabbed her closer as his warm mouth swooped down and covered hers.

Oh, it was amazing. Her senses swam at the feel of him, pressing her close, his hands stroking her back as his tongue traced the seam where her lips met. With a sigh, she let them part for him.

He speared his tongue inside. She sucked on it, boldly, and when he retreated, she followed him, into the warm, hot cave beyond those wonderful lips of his.

She clutched his shoulders as he guided her down onto the blanket. He kissed her more deeply, still, his tongue delving in, sweeping along the edges of her teeth, stroking her own tongue in a long, wet glide.

Oh, it was heaven.

Just as she’d dreamed it might be.

His hand cupped her breast. Beneath her shirt and bra, her nipple hardened, aching. She moaned and lifted her body toward him, wanting more.

Wanting everything. Ready to have it all, at last, right there, on that blanket, in the lovely, shadowed, private place beneath the birch trees...

To have it all with Grant, as she’d always dreamed. To be fully a woman at last, with the only man she’d ever loved.

He kissed her chin, nipping it, whispering her name against her eager flesh. He kissed the side of her neck, opening his mouth there, licking her skin, making her shiver in the most delicious way...

He kissed the hollow of her throat and she stretched her neck back, spearing her fingers into his hair, cupping his head and cradling him close, urging him to kiss her some more, to keep on kissing her.

To never stop.

“Oh, Grant,” she whispered, “Oh, Grant. Yes. Please. Yes...”

His warm hand trailed downward. She wanted... more.

To be closer, to have his hand *there*, where she was aching and yearning, hot and eager. To have *him*, completely. To *be* with him in the most passionate, intimate way.

She moaned his name again.

And then, out of nowhere, for no reason at all...he tore himself away from her. With a low groan, and a guttural, “No!” he was gone.

“Grant?” She opened her eyes to see him sitting back on his bent legs, his strong hands on his knees, face flushed, mouth swollen, eyes heavy with the same need that made her legs and arms feel weighted, that made her body so lazy and hungry and hot. She lifted yearning arms to him. “Come back here. Back here to me...”

He swore. “No. This is all wrong. I didn’t come here for this.”

“But I don’t...”

“Damn it, Steph. Listen. Listen to me.”

Stunned, punch-drunk with longing, she dragged herself to a sitting position. “I don’t understand. What’s the matter? What happened?”

He rocked back on his stocking feet and rose above her. She stared up at him, so tall and strong, glaring down at her, the leaves of the birches rustling above his head, the blue, clear sky beyond...

A sudden chill swept through her. She wrapped her arms around herself against a cold that came from deep inside. “What? Say it. Whatever it is, just please, say it. Now.”

And at last, he did. “I came out here to tell you I’m selling Clifton’s Pride.”

#### Chapter Five

Grant stared down into her flushed, bewildered face. Right then, there were no words to describe how thoroughly he despised himself. As he watched, the hectic color drained from her cheeks and her mouth formed a round, shocked O.

On a husk of breath, she pleaded, “No...”

He forced a nod. “Yeah. It’s true. I’m selling the ranch.”

She gaped some more, then whispered, “When?”

“I’m signing the contract today, at four-thirty.”

She swallowed, caught her upper lip between her teeth, worried it, let it go. “Today.”

“That’s right.”

“When...do we have to be out?”

“By the end of August. The new owner wants to take possession September first.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment. “Not quite two months, then... Who?”

“What?”

“Who will be the new owner?”

“Her name’s Melanie McFarlane. From out of town. She wants to make it a guest ranch.”

“A guest ranch,” she repeated as if the very words made her sick.

Grant felt like something squirming and loathsome, something you’d find buried in sour soil under a giant rock. He made himself confess the rest. “I meant to tell you Sunday,” he said, as if that mattered. As if that made any difference at all.

“Oh,” she said. “You meant to tell us. But you... forgot?”

“I was...distracted.”

Color stained her cheeks again and he knew that *she* knew why he hadn’t. Because he’d seen her down by the creek, seen her as a woman for the first time. Because his senses, his mind, all of him, had been filled with her. No room left to remember what he *should* have done.

She hitched in a hard breath. “Distracted. By me?”

“Yeah.”

“And again, today, right? It’s all my fault...”

“I didn’t say that. Of course, it’s not your fault.”

“You met me here to tell me you were selling the ranch. And I *distracted* you again.”

“No. Wait. You’re getting it all wrong. There’s no excuse for my not telling you. I know there’s not. I’m not blaming you.”

She only stared at him. And he saw it all, his own complete culpability, right there in her upturned face, in those amazing leaf-green eyes of hers: the kiss on Sunday. And worse than that, what he’d almost done just now, out in the open beneath birches, where anyone might ride by and see them. He’d been too busy kissing her to tell her the thing she most needed to know, too absorbed in the feel and the taste of her, too stupefied by his own lust for her, to be straight with her.

His throat felt like two angry hands were squeezing it. Still, roughly, he made himself say the things he’d planned to say before he made such a complete mockery of her innocent trust in him. “It’s time to move on. To let go of the past. The world is changing, Steph. The day of the small, family ranch is over. Thunder Canyon isn’t the sleepy mountain town it once was. Growth and change are inevitable and we all need to get with the program, we need to—”

She put up a hand. “Wait.”

“Uh. What?”

“Don’t give me a load of that *progress* crap, please. The last couple of years, it’s about *all* I’ve heard. I don’t need to hear anymore. Bottom line is you’re selling Clifton’s Pride. I get it. It’s your ranch, after all, and your choice to make. You can let that buyer of yours turn a fine working ranch into some silly showplace where city people can play at being cowboys if you want to.”

He winced. “Look. What matters is, you’re going to be okay. I’ll see to it, I swear to you, we’ll get you a good job. Your mom, too...and I meant what I said about college. If you think you might change your mind, now you’ll be leaving the ranch, I’ll be glad to foot the bill...”

She just sat there, staring up at him. It was damned unnerving. He couldn’t tell what she might be thinking—he only knew it wasn’t good.

After the silence stretched out for way too long, she finally asked, “Well. Are you done?”

“I...” Hell. What more was there to say? “Yeah. I’m done.”

“Great.” She grabbed her boots from the edge of the blanket and yanked them on. Then she settled her hat on her head, gathered her legs under her and stood.

“Put your boots on,” she said in a voice so controlled it made him want to grab her and shake her and beg her to yell at him, to go ahead and get it out, tell him exactly what she thought of him. After all, it couldn’t be worse than what he thought of himself.

But he didn’t grab her. He knew if he did, he’d only try to kiss her again.

God. He was low. *Lower* than low.

He sat, put his hat on and then his boots.

She asked in a tone that was heartbreakingly civil, “Now, would you please get off the blanket so I can roll it up?”

He glanced at his Rolex. There was time—to ride to the ranch, say what needed saying—and get back to his office by four-thirty to meet Eva. He grabbed his beer and gulped the rest of it down, then shook out the can and crushed it.

She took it from him and put it in her saddlebags. He rolled the blanket. She took that from him, too, and tied it behind her saddle.

They mounted up.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, her clean-scrubbed, beautiful face absolutely expressionless.

“Uh. Tomorrow?”

She looked at him as if she wondered where he’d put his brains. “It’s the Fourth, remember? The parade?”

That’s right. Every year, the town put on an Independence Day parade. They’d both agreed to ride the resort’s float. Terrific. Another opportunity for her to treat him like the pond scum he was. “Of course, I remember.”

Something flashed in her eyes. He couldn’t read the emotion. Anger? Hurt? Some bleak combination of both? He didn’t know.

He felt like a stranger, an interloper, someone evil and cruel. And still, even now, when she looked at him as if she didn’t know him, didn’t *want* to know him, *he* only wanted to drag her right off that mare of hers and into his hungry arms. He wanted to touch her all over, to take off her shirt and her jeans and her boots, to strip her naked and finish what they’d started a little while ago.

She tightened her knees on Trixiebella and off she went. Grant shook himself and urged Titan to follow.

Steph reined in and leveled a far too patient look at him. “In case you’ve forgotten, the resort’s that way.”

“I’m going with you.”

She blew out a hard breath. “Haven’t you done enough?”

“I have to tell them.”

“No, you don’t. I’ll do it.”

“No. That wouldn’t be right.”

Her glance slid away. He knew what she was thinking—after the way he’d behaved, he had no place talking about what was right. But in the end, she only said, “Suit yourself,” and clicked her tongue for Trixiebelle to get moving again.

At the ranch, she went on in the barn to unsaddle the mare. Grant watched her go. She hadn’t said a word to him the whole ride.

He hitched Titan to the rail by the front porch and mounted the steps.

Inside, he followed his nose to the kitchen where something wonderful was in the oven and Marie stood at the peninsula of counter between the kitchen and the breakfast area, rolling out dough for pies. Sliced apples, dusted in sugar and cinnamon, waited in a bowl nearby.

He forced a hearty tone. “How come it always smells so good in here?”

She stopped rolling and grinned at him. She had flour on her nose. “Stick around awhile and you just might get yourself a warm piece of pie.”

He hadn’t bothered hanging his hat by the door. Instead he held it in his hands. Which seemed sadly fitting. He fiddled with the tattered brim. “Believe me, I’m tempted. But I’ve got to get back...”

Marie tipped her head to the side and frowned. “Okay. What’s the matter? You got a look like someone just shot your best mule.”

He swore.

She plunked the rolling pin down and wiped her hands on the apron she’d tied over her jeans. “I’ll get you a beer...”

“No, thanks. Marie, I’ve got something I have to say.”

She made a small sound of mingled distress and expectation.

And he went ahead and told her, flat out. “I’m selling the ranch. You’ll all have to be out by the thirty-first of August.”

What had he imagined? That she’d go all to pieces? Not Marie Julen. Like her daughter, she was stronger and tougher than that.

“Well,” she said evenly, after a moment. “All right.” And she picked up the rolling pin again and got back to work rolling out that pie dough.

He stood there in the doorway from the central hall and wondered what to do next.

Marie glanced his way again. “Grant. It’s okay. It’s not the end of the world. Things change. Life goes on.”

He almost laughed. “That’s what *I* was going to say to *you*.”

She pointed her rolling pin at the table. “Will you sit down, please? You’re making me nervous, looming there in the doorway like that.”

“No, I really have to get back.”

“Good enough, then.”

But he just stood there and watched her plump, clever hands as she carefully folded the circle of flattened pie dough into quarters, lifted it off the floured board and gently set it in the waiting pie pan.

He remembered that he’d offered her no reassurances. “Marie, I promise you. I’ll see you’re taken care of.”

“Well, of course you will.” She opened the folded crust, shaped it to fit the sides of the pan and took up a rolling cutter.

He watched her expertly trim the excess crust from the edge, turning the pan in a circle as she worked. “There’ll be another job, a good job,” he vowed. “I was thinking you might want to be cooking, maybe something in town, at a coffee shop, something like that...”

She had a second crust ready and took the cutter to it, sectioning it into strips to make one of those fancy lattice-type top crusts that always made her pies stand out for looks, as well as flavor.

“Grant.” She spoke chidingly, her skilled, swift hands continuing their work. “Stop beating yourself up. We’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

“I told Steph.”

Those busy hands hesitated—but only for a second. “Ah.”

“I don’t think she’s ever going to forgive me.”

“You give her time, she’ll be okay.”

“Damn it, Marie. I don’t know about that.”

Behind him, down at the other end of the central hall, he heard the front door open. Steph. Her footsteps approached.

He made himself turn to face her, found her mouth set in a stern line and her eyes flat, giving him nothing.

“Did you tell her?” she asked.

Marie said sweetly, “Yes, he did.” A glance back over his shoulder showed him she hadn’t even looked up from laying the strips of dough in a crosswise pattern onto a floured sheet of aluminum foil.

“You leaving, then?” Steph said. It wasn’t really a question.

The thing was, even while she was looking at him with those dead eyes, he still wanted to reach for her, haul her up close, breathe in the warm, sweet scent of her hair, feel her body snug and soft all along the length of his. He wanted to lower his head and crush his mouth to those unwilling lips—until she sighed and opened for him.

But of course, he did no such thing. He said, “I have to talk to Rufus and Jim.”

“Don’t worry. I already told them.”

“Great,” he said, guiltily tamping down a flare of resentment at her for taking a job that should have been his. “Still, I want to have a few words with them.”

“They’re in the barn.”

“Well. All right, then.” He hit his hat on his thigh. “See you later, Marie.”

Marie sent him a smile as loving and warm as any she’d ever bestowed on him. “Ride safe, now.”

“I will. He nodded at the cold-eyed woman standing beside him. “Steph.”

“Grant.” She said his name as if it made a bad taste in her mouth.

In the barn, he reassured Rufus and Jim that he’d find other jobs for them. Jim nodded and thanked him.

Rufus said, “Hell, boy. I know you’ll take care of us. Haven’t you always?” He *didn’t* say anything about how John Clifton was probably rolling over in his grave at the thought that his own son planned to sell the ranch he’d sweated blood over, the ranch that had been in the Clifton family for five generations.

Grant was damn grateful for Rufus’s silence on that subject.

He tipped his hat at the cowboys and left the barn. Out in the sun, Titan was waiting, hitched where he’d left him. He mounted up and got the hell out of there.

\* \* \*

Grant rode Titan harder than he should have. He reached the resort in forty minutes. He turned the lathered horse over to the head groom and went up to the lodge. In his suite, he showered and changed into business clothes and went down the hill to the office complex.

Once he’d settled behind his desk, he called his assistant in. She gave him his messages, reminding him that he had an important dinner that night with two of the resort’s main backers.

He hadn’t forgotten. “Drinks in the Lounge at seven-thirty. Dinner at eight in the Gallatin Room. Right?”

She smiled and nodded. “You have some voice mail, too.”

“I’ll check it now.”

She left him. He played through his voice mail. Nothing urgent. He checked e-mail—or at least, he brought up his e-mail program and stared at the screen.

Really, though, all he saw was Steph. Her sweet, open face, smiling up at him, eyes shining with admiration and trust. And the way she'd looked Sunday, right after he kissed her, soft mouth red and swollen, eyes full of dreams...

Did she hate him now? Was she ever going to forgive him for the way he'd behaved, for selling off Clifton's Pride when she was so happy there?

He tried to tell himself that maybe, if she hated him, that would be for the best. If she hated him, she'd stay clear of him. It would be a hell of a lot easier to keep his hands off her if she refused to come near him. She'd be safe from him.

He wanted that. He did. He wanted to...protect her from himself—and any other guys like him. From guys who didn't want to get serious. Guys who would steal her tender innocence and then, in the end, walk away and leave her hurting.

The phone rang. He let his assistant answer, but took it when she buzzed him to tell him it was Caleb Douglas.

Since failing health had pretty much forced him to retire, Caleb was at loose ends a lot of the time. Grant listened to the old guy ramble on for a while before finally cutting the monologue short, saying he had a meeting he had to get to.

After the call from Caleb, he took calls from a tour packager and from Arletta Hall. In her fifties, Arletta owned a gift shop in town. She reminded him that he was expected to be at the big parking lot on the corner of North Main and Cedar Street the next day at 11:00 a.m. sharp.

He promised he'd be there, rigged out in the costume she'd dropped off at the concierge for him last Friday, ready to climb on the float and smile and wave his way down Main Street.

"Does it fit all right?" Arletta fussed. "It's fine," he replied automatically, though he'd yet to take it out of the box she'd delivered it in.

Arletta wanted him to know how pleased she was that he'd allowed her to take charge of the resort's float. "Honored," she declared. "I am honored. And those young people you sent to help me have done an excellent job. I think you'll be pleased with the results."

He thanked her for everything, but she kept on talking. About how well the float had turned out and how excited she was for him to see it, what a big day tomorrow was going to be, what with so many events planned.

"Truly, Grant, I believe this will be the most exciting Fourth of July our town has ever seen. Every hotel and motel is full, and the merchants are doing a record business—including Yours Truly, and I'm just pleased as punch about that, I don't mind telling you. Why, we're a boomtown all over again, aren't we? And so much of it is due to you and the Douglasses. That resort of yours has been a real shot in the arm to our economy. We get tourists year-round now..." She yammered on.

When she finally had to stop for a breath, he thanked her for her kind words and gently reminded her that it wasn't *his* resort—and he really did have to go.

"Oh, well. I know, don't I, how busy you are? I understand. No problem. No problem at all."

"See you tomorrow, Arletta."

"Don't forget now. Eleven sharp."

"I'll be there."

"In costume."

"Yes. In costume."

She finally said goodbye, just as his assistant buzzed to tell him that Eva Post had arrived.

"Send her in."

"Grant. Hello." A handsome woman of forty or so, Eva wore a trim gray pantsuit and bloodred lipstick. She carried one of those soft, oversize briefcases. Grant rose to greet her. They shook hands and he indicated one of the leather armchairs opposite his desk.

Eva sat and unzipped her briefcase. She pulled out a folder.

Grant saw that folder clutched in her slim hand with its long, red fingernails and something inside him rebelled.

Sternly he reminded himself of all the reasons he was selling. It made absolutely no sense for him to hold on to a ranch he didn't need, a ranch that never more than broke even, a ranch that stood for the past when Grant was the kind of man who looked toward the future.

But those reasons? They didn't mean squat.

It was no good. He couldn't do it.

"Hold on," he said.

She paused, the folder still in her hand, and sent him a baffled look. "Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry. I've changed my mind. I won't be selling Clifton's Pride, after all."

Chapter Six

Eva Post stared at him as if he'd gone stark-raving out of his mind.

And damn it. Maybe he had.

She tried a laugh. "You're joking."

"No. I'm not." What the hell? He couldn't quite believe it himself. But still, it was true.

He couldn't sell Clifton's Pride. He just...couldn't do it. Period. End of story.

Eva took a moment to collect herself. She set the folder on the edge of his desk and bent to prop her briefcase against her chair. Then she sat up straight again and folded her hands in her lap.

Cautiously she inquired, "Is there...something about this deal you're not satisfied with? I assure you, Grant, the terms are exactly as we discussed."

"It's not the terms. The terms are fine. More than fair."

"Well, then, what's holding you back?"

He remembered the expression on Steph's face just before he left her that day. She'd looked at him as if she didn't know him at all—as if she didn't *care* to know him.

That hurt. That really got to him. Steph's respect meant a lot to him. It cut him to the core to think he'd lost it.

But losing Steph's high regard wasn't all of it.

He told Eva, "The offer was *too* good, really."

She looked at him as if he made no sense at all. And when she spoke, her tone was patronizing. "Grant. Please. If the offer's too good, why are you telling me you're turning it down?"

"What I meant was, the offer was so good, I jumped at it without thinking it through, without stopping to realize that I really *can't* sell."

"Why not?"

He'd said enough. He stood and held out his hand. "I apologize again for wasting your time." In actuality, he hadn't wasted all that much of Eva's time. He hadn't asked her to represent him until after Melanie had put the offer on the table. "But I'm not selling and that's the end of it."

Eva rose and they shook. He walked her to the door.

Before she went out, she turned and gave it one more try. "You have to realize that Ms. McFarlane is actively seeking the right property for her needs. If you don't respond to this offer and she finds something else that suits her requirements—"

"Eva." He almost smiled. "Why am I getting the feeling you still can't believe I just changed my mind?"

She pursed that red, red mouth. "I doubt you'll get this kind of deal from anyone else."

"I'm sure I won't. But the truth is, I wasn't looking to sell in the first place. Melanie approached *me*."

The realtor refused to believe he meant what he said. "This is a good deal. A terrific deal."

"It sure is. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm passing it up."

An hour after Grant showed Eva out, Melanie McFarlane called. He knew he owed the woman some kind of explanation for backing out of their deal. Too bad he didn't have one—nothing anyone else, particularly an eager and generous buyer, would understand.

Still, she deserved to hear it straight from his own mouth. He took the call.

Melanie wasted no time on idle chitchat. “My real estate agent talked to *your* real estate agent a few minutes ago. What's going on, Grant? I thought we had a contract.”

He apologized for waffling on her and then told her what he'd told Eva: that he regretted any inconvenience he'd caused her, but he'd changed his mind.

Melanie McFarlane was a damned determined woman. “Change it back,” she said cheerfully in that brisk New England accent of hers. “What do you need with a ranch? You've got your hands full at the resort and you know it.”

“Sorry,” he said again. “I know I've inconvenienced you and I regret that. But I'm giving it to you straight here. I'm not selling.”

Melanie kept talking. “Your realtor implied there might be some chance you'll be ready to sell, after all, in the near future.”

“My realtor, understandably, hates to lose a sale. But she's mistaken. I won't change my mind. And again, I apologize for this. I never should have told you I'd be willing to sell.”

“You're serious. I can't believe this.”

He did understand her disappointment. Clifton's Pride would be a fine site for a guest ranch. It had a number of interesting, not-too-challenging trails, perfect for novice riders. It was picturesque, with varied terrain and spectacular mountain views. Most important, the ranch house and outbuildings were right off the main highway. To make a go of a guest ranch, access was key. Visitors needed to be able to get there with relative ease.

She demanded, “Is it the price?”

“No.”

“I can talk to my banker. I might be willing to up the offer, if that's what it's going to take.”

“I'm sorry. I'm not selling.”

A deadly silence. Then, “Until I find something else, the offer remains open. I like to think I have good instincts, and right now I have a feeling you'll come to your senses—soon, I hope. When you do, let me know.” The line went dead.

Grant hung up and scrubbed his hands down his face. He hoped he hadn't made an enemy of the McFarlane woman. In the resort business, a man did his best to get along with everyone. And she *was* a McFarlane. Her family owned the world-famous McFarlane Hotels.

No, he didn't blame her for being furious with him. Hell. He was furious with himself. He should never have agreed to sell to her in the first place.

He buzzed his assistant and told her to send flowers and a fruit basket up to Melanie's suite, rattling off another apology to go on the card.

After that, well, he hoped Melanie McFarlane would find another suitable property real damn soon and quit waiting around for him to change his mind.

Grant said good-night to the investor group at a little after eleven and went to his suite.

He started to change into an old pair of sweats, thinking he'd have a drink or two, watch the late news and hope that the alcohol would ease him to sleep. But then, what do you know?

He ended up reaching for his Wranglers instead.

The stables were closed at that time of night. He could have dragged the head groom from sleep with a call. There were, after all, certain privileges that went with being the boss—among them, the right to inconvenience the help.

But as much as the idea of a midnight horseback ride appealed to his troubled mind right then, the Range Rover was faster. And he didn't have to wake anybody to get to it, since it was always ready and waiting in his private space in the main lodge's underground garage.

He made it to the ranch house in twenty minutes flat, pulling into the circular dirt driveway, cutting his engine and dousing the headlights as he rolled up opposite the porch.

For a minute or two, he just sat there, staring at the darkened house where he'd grown up, at the small pool of brightness cast by the porch light, at the bugs recklessly hurling themselves against the bare bulb beneath the plain tin fixture. Bart appeared from the shadows at the end of the porch, tail wagging, sniffing the air in a hopeful way. Never had been much of a guard dog, that mutt.

Grant got out of the vehicle. He shut the car door as quietly as he could and went to sit on the steps with the old dog. Bart sniffed at him a bit and then flopped down beside him, yawning hugely and resting his head on his front paws with a low, contented whine. Grant petted the dog as he pondered what exactly he hoped to accomplish, showing up there in the middle of the night when the house was shut up tight and all sane ranch folk were sound asleep in their beds.

Rufus emerged from the bunkhouse across the yard, long johns showing up ghostly white through the shadows, the dark length of a shotgun visible in his right hand. Grant gave him a wave. After a second or two, Rufus waved in return and went back inside.

More time went by. Five minutes? Ten? Grant didn't bother to check his watch. He just sat there with Bart, his arms looped around his spread knees, knowing that eventually the door behind him would open and a soft, husky voice would ask him what he was doing there.

It happened, finally: the click of the lock and the soft creak of the door as she pulled it inward. Then another, louder creaking as she came through the screen. She shut it with care. Bare feet brushing lightly on the porch boards, she approached and sat beside him.

He didn't look at her. Not at first. There was her scent on the night and the warmth of her body next to his. It was more than enough.

She spoke first. "So...what's up?"

He looked down at her slender feet. "You forgot your slippers."

She made a small sound. It might have been a chuckle. Then she said, "Mom lectured me."

"For what?"

"She told me I was too hard on you. She said Clifton's Pride is your place to sell as you see fit, that you've always been so good to us and I should be more grateful."

He shrugged, looking out at the night again, listening to the long, lost wail of a lone coyote somewhere out there in the dark. On his other side, Bart stirred, woofed softly, then dropped his head back on his paws again. "You tell her how I laid you down on that blanket and kissed you—how I almost did a whole lot more than just kissing?"

She made a sound that could only be called a snort. "Oh, please. She's my mom. Some things a mom doesn't need to know—and besides, Grant Clifton, you weren't the only one doing the kissing. You weren't the only one who wanted to do a whole lot more."

He looked at her then. So beautiful, it pierced him right to the core, her gold hair tangled, eyes a little droopy from sleep, wearing an old sweater over a skimpy pajama top, and wrinkled pajama bottoms printed with sunflowers. "Feisty," he said.

She snorted again. "I am not—and never have been—feisty."

"Right."

"Next you'll be calling me spunky."

"Never."

"You call me spunky, I'm out of here."

"I won't call you spunky. Ever." He raised a hand, palm out. "I swear it."

"See that you don't—and I guess I might as well tell you the rest of what Mom said."

He looked out at the dark yard again. "Guess you might as well."

"She said she can see how it would be hard for you to tell us how you're selling the ranch, because you care about us and you don't want us hurting and you know how much we've loved being here. Mom says I should look in my heart and find a little kindness and understanding there. And

you know what?” She waited till he turned his gaze her way and arched a brow. “Now I’ve had a little time to stew over it, I think Mom’s right. I really hate when that happens.”

He wanted to touch her—to reach out and smooth her hair, maybe guide a few wild strands behind her ear, to brush her cheek with the back of his hand.

But he didn’t. He knew one touch would never be enough.

She said, “See, all I’ve ever wanted is my own ranch to run. I kind of let myself forget that this place isn’t mine, you know?”

“I know.”

“So...forgive me for being so thoughtless and cruel to you?” She stuck out a hand. “Shake on it.”

He took her hand. Mistake. Because then, he couldn’t stop himself from turning it over and pressing a kiss in the warm, callused heart of her palm.

“Oh, Grant...” she whispered on an indrawn breath.

He made himself release her. It was a real hard thing to do. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“Oh. See, now. Of course, you would say that.”

“I’m not just saying it. It’s the truth.”

She started arguing. “But—”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Steph...” He sought the words—and found them, somehow. “I’m never going to be...the right guy for you. Whatever we might have together, it wouldn’t be a forever kind of thing. I just...don’t want that.”

“That?” She looked confused.

He elaborated, “I don’t want marriage. Kids. All that. I’m not...my dad, you know?”

“I never thought you were.”

“What I mean is, I’m not like him. I’m not...the salt of the earth. Not a family man. What I want, it’s not what you want. When I was a kid, I thought it was. I told myself all I needed in life was a chance to walk in my dad’s big, muddy boots. But that was a lie. A lie to please him—and to please me, too, I suppose. Because I loved him and wished I *could* be like him. Because the world is built on men like him.”

“He was a fine man.”

“Yeah. The best. But I’m not him and I never will be. I’m...restless inside, you know? I want to be out there, mixing it up, meeting new people, making things happen. I always knew, deep down, that I had more talent for business than for running cattle. I loved every minute of business school—the whole time telling myself and my dad that I planned to use what I’d learned to help keep Clifton’s Pride in the black. But what I really wanted, what I dreamed of, is what I have now. I like the fast life. I like the progress a few around these parts hate. I enjoy my designer suits and high-powered meetings. I like making money. I like being single. And I plan to stay that way.”

She considered his words, her elbow braced on her knee and her chin cradled on her hand. Then she nodded. “Okay.”

It was a damn sight removed from what he’d expected her to say. “Okay?” he demanded. “That’s all. Okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, with another strong nod. “Okay. I don’t want you to be anybody you don’t *want* to be. And don’t assume you know what I want. I might end up surprising you.”

He had a very scary feeling she just might. And he wanted to kiss her. Damned if he didn’t *always* want to kiss her lately. Kiss her, and a whole lot more.

“So we understand each other, then?” he asked, thinking that he didn’t understand a thing.

“You bet.”

“And I’ve got to go.” *Because if I don’t, I’m going to lay you down right here on the front porch, take off that sweater and that tiny little top and those sunflower pj’s and finish what I started this afternoon...*

“See you tomorrow, then,” she said, with just a hint of a smile in the corners of that mouth he was aching to kiss.

He stood and started walking, putting her behind him where she couldn’t see the bulge at the zipper of his jeans. He got in the Range Rover and started it up, leaning out the window before he drove away.

By then, she stood on the top step, arms wrapped around herself, looking so sweet and pretty, it took all the will he possessed not to jump down from the car again and grab her tight in his arms.

“I changed my mind,” he said over the low rumble of the engine.

She grinned wide. “What? You mean you’re going to come back here and kiss me, after all?”

Her words sent another bolt of heat straight to his groin. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Oh, get over yourself.”

He told her then, flat out. “I turned down that offer. I’m not selling Clifton’s Pride.”

She gasped then. And she looked at him with such hope. With such gratitude and joy. Like he was Santa come with Christmas on the Fourth of July. “You’re serious.”

“As a bad case of hoof and mouth.”

“Oh, Grant. Are you sure?”

“I am.”

She shut her eyes, sucked in a long breath, and then asked, as if it pained her to do it, “It’s not... because of how mean I was to you, not because of the hard things I said about turning Clifton’s Pride into a dude ranch?”

He answered truthfully. “That was part of it, yeah. But not all. I don’t know exactly why I changed my mind. I just know that, when it came time to sign on the dotted line, I couldn’t do it.”

She hugged herself tighter, rubbing her arms against the nighttime chill. “I’m glad. It’s selfish and I know it. But, Grant, I’m so glad.”

He found himself wishing he *could* be the man for her. That man would be one lucky sonofagun. And he was going to hate that man when he started coming around. He’d be hard-pressed not to beat the poor guy to a bloody pulp just for living, just for being what Grant could never be.

He brought it back around to business. “You said you could make this place turn a profit. Rufus seems to think you can, too.”

“It’ll take time. But, yeah. I’m gonna do it. You just watch me.”

“Oh, I will.” He put the Range Rover in gear and drove away, sticking a hand out the window to give her a last wave, watching her in his rearview mirror as he rolled around the circle and headed for the highway.

During the drive back to the resort, he almost let himself wonder, what their lives might have been...

If things had gone on the way they’d started out. If the Julens still owned the Triple J and Grant still worked Clifton’s Pride at his father’s side. If Marie and Grant’s mom still sat at the kitchen table together in the long summer afternoons.

If Andre Julen and John Clifton hadn’t been murdered in cold blood out by the Callister Breaks nine years ago.

Chapter Seven

The dream was always the same—and much too real. It was like living that dark day all over again.

It started with Grant and Steph on horseback, just the way it had been that Saturday in September almost nine years ago. It was well past noon, the sun arcing toward the western mountains.

Well past noon and cool out, rain on the way, clouds boiling up ahead of them to the northeast, rolling on down from Canada.

Steph, on Malomar, her hat down her back and her pigtails tied with green ribbons, was babbling away about how much she hated school. Grant rode along in silence, almost wishing he was twelve again like the mouthy kid beside him. Twelve. Oh, yeah, with years of the school she so despised ahead of him.

He'd graduated from UM the year before. He was a rancher full-time now. And he had an ache inside him, an ache that got worse every day. He missed the excitement and challenge of being out among other people more, of rubbing elbows with the rest of the world.

Steph stopped babbling long enough that he turned to look at her.

"You didn't hear a word I said," she accused.

"Sure I did."

"Repeat it to me."

"Don't be a snot. I got your meaning. It's not like I haven't heard it a hundred times before. You hate school, but your dad and mom want you to go, to be with other kids, get yourself a little social interaction, learn to get along with different folks. But you'd rather be driving the yearlings to market. You'd eat dust, working the drag gladly, if only your folks would give you a break and your mom would homeschool you, so you could spend more time on a horse."

"I'm not a snot." She laid on the preteen nobility good and heavy. "And I am so sorry to bore you."

"Steph. Don't sulk, okay?"

"Oh, fine." She was a good-natured kid at heart and couldn't ever hold on to a pout all that long. She flipped a braid back over her shoulder and sent him a grin. "And okay. I guess you *were* listening. Pretty much." She pointed at the rising black clouds. "Storm coming."

"Oh, yeah." The wind held that metallic smell of bad weather on the way.

Ahead, erupting from the rolling prairie, a series of sharp outcroppings appeared: the Callister Breaks, a kind of minibadlands, an ancient fault area of sharp-faced low cliffs, dry ravines and gullies. The Breaks lay half on Clifton's Pride and half on the Triple J.

"Wonder what they're up to?" Steph asked no one in particular. "They should have been home hours ago..."

Their dads had headed out together at daybreak from the Clifton place to check on the mineral barrels in the most distant pastures. They took one of the Clifton pickups, the bed packed with halved fifty-gallon drums filled with a molasses-sweetened mineral supplement that the cattle lapped up.

The two men had said they'd be back at the Clifton house by noon. It was almost three now...

Grant and Steph rode on as the sky grew darker.

"We don't come up on them soon," Grant said as they crested a rise, "we'll have to head back or take cover."

And that was when Steph pointed. "Look..."

Down there in the next ravine was the pickup, half the full barrels traded out for empty ones, both cab doors hanging open.

Grant's heart lurched up and lodged in his throat. "Stay here," he told her.

But she didn't. She urged Malomar to a gallop and down they went. They raced to the abandoned pickup, and past it, up the next rise, as lightning split the sky and thunder rolled across the land.

Below, they saw two familiar figures, tied together, heads drooping, not moving...

And the tire tracks of pickups and trailers and even an abandoned panel from a portable chute.

"Rustlers!" Steph cried.

The sky opened up and the rain poured down.

"Wait here," he commanded. Even from that distance, he could see the blood.

But she no more obeyed him that time than she had the time before. The rain beat at their faces, soaking them to the skin in an instant, as they raced toward the two still figures on the wet ground below.

After that, the dream had no coherence—just as the rest of that day, when it happened, had none.

It was all brutal images.

Two dead men who had once been their fathers, tied together, the blood on the ground mixing with the pelting rain, so the mud ran rusty. He dismounted first and went to them.

Steph cried silently, tears running down soft cheeks already soaked with rain. “Daddy...” She whispered the word, but it echoed in his head, raw and ragged, gaining volume until it was loud as a shout. “Oh, Daddy, oh, no...”

And she was off Malomar before he could order her to stay in the saddle. She knelt in the mud and the blood, taking her dad’s hanging head in her arms, pulling him close so his blood smeared her shirt.

Grant left her there. He took his rifle from his saddle holster, mounted up and went hunting. He didn’t go far. Out of that ravine, and into the next one.

Just over the rise from where their fathers sat, murdered, bleeding out on the muddy ground, he found a man. Gutshot. Dying. John Clifton and Andre Julen hadn’t gone easily. They’d taken at least one of their murderers down with them.

Grant knelt in the driving rain, took the dying man’s head in his lap.

“Names. I want names,” he commanded. “They left you here, didn’t they, to die? Tell me who they are and you get even, at least. You get to know you died doing one thing right.”

And the man whispered. Two names.

Grant left him there, moaning, pleading for help that was bound to be too long in coming, for rescue that would only happen too late. He checked out that ravine, found no one else. In his head was a roaring sound, louder than the thunder that rolled across the land—a roaring, and one word, repeating, over and over in an endless loop.

*No, no, no, no...*

He saw himself returning to Steph, to the bodies that once had been fine men.

She’d cut the ropes that bound his father to hers. She sat between them, there in the mud, holding one up on either side of her, her braids soaked through, caked with mud and the dead men’s blood, one green ribbon gone, the other no more than a straggling wet string.

“I didn’t want them tied,” she told him, eyes wild as the storm that raged around them. “They would hate that, being tied. But they were falling over. They shouldn’t be left to lie there in the mud...”

He knew he should dismount, get down to her, where he could pull her free of death, and hold her. That he needed to tell her some nice lies, to reassure her that it would be all right. Because that was what a man did at a time like this, he looked after the young ones and the females. And Steph was both.

But as he sat there astride his horse, looking down at her in the mud, before he could act on what he knew he should do, she looked up at him and she said, “Get the pickup. I’ll wait here. I’ll wait with them...”

“Steph—”

“Get it.”

“You sure?”

She nodded. Lightning turned everything bright white. “Just go on.” Thunder cracked, so loud it sounded like it was inside his head. She commanded, “You get it. Get the pickup now.”

Time jumped. They were lurching through the mud in the pickup, the two dead men in the bed in back. Steph sagged against the window on the passenger side, covered in mud and their fathers’

blood. She had her eyes closed. She opened them and glanced his way. He thought that he'd never seen eyes so old.

And then, with only a sigh, she shut them again.

And all at once he stood in the front room of the ranch house, holding his mother as she sobbed in his arms, calling for his father, yelling at God to please, please take her, too...

Grant lurched up from the pillows. The breath souged in and out of him, loud and hard. He stared into the darkness, he whispered, "No..."

It took a few minutes. It always did.

He sat, staring, shivering, panting as if he'd run a long race, shaking his head, repeating that one word, "No, no, no, no," as, slowly, the past receded and he came to know where he was. Slowly he realized that it was over—long over, that terrible day nine years ago.

Eventually he reached for the bedside lamp. The light popped on and he blinked against the sudden brightness. He was covered in sweat.

For several more minutes once the light was on, he sat there, unmoving, staring in the general direction of the dark plasma television screen mounted on the opposite wall.

He reminded himself of the things he always forced himself to recall when the dream came to him: that it had all happened years ago, that he'd caught up with the other two rustlers himself and seen that they paid for what they'd done.

Things had been made about as right as they could be made, he told himself. There was nothing to do but let it go, forget the past.

Still, though, occasionally, less and less often as the years passed, the dream came to him. He would live that awful day again.

And maybe, he thought for the first time as he sat in his king-size bed, satin sheets soaked through with his sweat, staring at nothing...

Maybe that was right. Good.

Maybe it wasn't bad to have to remember the brutal murder of two good men. To remember how senseless it was. How cruel and random.

Maybe now and then, it was right and fitting to take a minute to mourn for John Clifton and Andre Julen and all that had been lost with them.

To live again his mother's grief and pain.

And to remember Steph. Twelve years old. Taking it on the chin, stalwart as any man. Propping up the dead men with her own young body.

Steph.

Brave and solid as they come on the day her daddy died.

Chapter Eight

The offices were formally closed the next day for the holiday. Grant went down there anyway. He had a few calls to make and some e-mails to return.

Then there was an issue with the concierge. He dealt with that. And head of housekeeping needed a little support with an angry guest who felt her room had not been properly made up and refused to be pacified until she'd talked with the manager. He gave the guest a free night and let the supervisor deal with the employee in question.

It was ten-thirty when he got back to his suite and dragged out the big box Arletta Hall had dropped off last week, the one with his costume inside. He took off the lid and stared down at a pair of ancient, battered boots, a grimy bandanna, an ugly floppy hat and some dirty pink long johns.

He was supposed to be a gold miner—a tribute not only to Thunder Canyon's first gold rush over a century before, but also to the gold fever that had struck two years ago, when somebody found a nugget in an abandoned mine shaft after a local kid fell in there during a snowstorm and the whole town went wild looking for him.

All right. Maybe old-time miners did run around in dirty long johns. Maybe they were too wild with gold fever to bother wearing pants. But the damn thing was a little *too* authentic. It actually had one of those button flaps in back so a man wouldn't have to pull them down when he paid a visit to the outhouse. And in front, well, if he wore that thing by itself around Steph, no one would have any doubt about how glad he was to see her.

Something had to be done. And fast.

Arletta's chunky charm bracelet clattered as she put her hands together and moaned in dismay. "Jeans? But I really don't think jeans are the look we should be going for..."

Behind him, Grant heard a low, husky chuckle and knew it was coming from Steph. "They're *old*, these jeans," he reasoned. "Nice and faded and worn." He'd borrowed them from the groom at the stables, the same one who always had a hat to loan. "And I want to be a more *responsible* kind of gold miner. You know, a guy who remembers to put on his pants in the morning."

"Oh. Well. I just don't think we want to go this way..." Arletta moaned some more, all fluttery indecision. Townspeople milled around them, busy getting ready to play their own parts in the parade.

Grant leaned down to whisper in the shopkeeper's pink ear—she was a tiny little skinny thing, no more than four feet tall and she smelled like baby powder. "Listen, Arletta," he whispered low. "If you think I'm running around in dirty long johns with no pants, you'll have to find yourself another prospector..."

"Oh, dear Lord. No. We can't have that." She sucked it up. At last. "It's all right. Those jeans will just have to do."

He gave her a grin. "Arletta, you're the best."

"Oh. My." She simpered up at him. "You charmer, you..." She tugged on the dirty bandanna around his neck. "There. That's better. And the hat looks just great, I must say—and tell me now. What do you think of the float?"

They turned to admire it together. It consisted of a papier-mâché mountain topped with sparkly cotton snow. A miniature prairie lay below, complete with split rail fences, a creek made of crinkled up aluminum foil, a couple of homemade cottonwoods and some papier-mâché livestock happily munching away at the AstroTurf grass. There was also a log cabin trailing a construction paper cloud of smoke from the chimney and, clinging to the side of the mountain, a miniature replica of the resort's sprawling main lodge. A sparkly rainbow bearing the glittery words, Thunder Canyon Resort, arched over the whole creation.

Grant swept off his hat and held it to his chest. "Magnificent," he solemnly intoned.

Arletta did more simpering. "Oh, I am so pleased you think so." She grabbed a gold pan from a pile of props and also a baseball-size hunk of papier-mâché, spray-painted gold. "Here you go. Your gold pan and your nugget."

He hefted the hunk of papier-mâché. "Hey. With a nugget this size, I don't need this damn gold pan. In fact, I think I'll just head over to the Hitching Post right now and order a round of drinks for everyone, on me. Isn't that what miners do when they make a big strike, head for the bar and get seriously hammered?"

"You are such a kidder," giggled Arletta. Then she chided, "The gold pan is part of the costume—and you can join your rowdy friends at the Hitching Post later. After the parade."

He pretended to look crestfallen. "Yes, ma'am."

"Now, we have to get you in place. And Stephanie, too..." She signaled Steph, who waited a few yards away, wearing a leather cowgirl outfit with a short skirt and a tooled jacket, both skirt and jacket heavy on the leather fringe. Fancy red boots and a big white hat completed the costume. She had Trixie Belle with her, all tacked up in a red and white saddle, with bridle to match. It was a real Dale Evans-style getup. And she looked damn cute in it.

"This way, you two..." Arletta instructed.

The shopkeeper showed them where they were supposed to stand. Trixie Belle, a real trouper, didn't balk once as Steph led her up onto the float and into position and then swung herself into the saddle before Grant could jump up there and offer to help.

As if a skilled horsewoman liked Steph needed a hand up. She'd laugh at him if he offered. And she'd probably suspect that he was only trying to get a look under that short skirt, anyway.

*Get a look under her skirt?*

Where the hell had that come from?

He was thirty-two years old, for crying out loud. Far past the age when a guy tried to find ways to sneak a peek up a girl's skirt.

"Grant. Are you with me here?" Arletta was frowning, looking slightly miffed. "I need your full attention, now."

He shook himself and tried to appear alert. "You got it."

She pointed. "Stand there."

He took his place by the crinkled foil stream and Arletta stood back to study the picture they made. "Hmm," she said, somehow managing to be both thoughtful and agitated at the same time. "Hmm... oh, no. Oh, my..."

"What?" Grant demanded, beginning to worry that his fly might be open.

"It's too spotty."

Grant cast a quick glance Steph's way. He could tell she was trying real hard not to laugh. "Uh... spotty?" he carefully inquired.

Arletta frowned with great seriousness. "Yes. The composition. It's simply not...pulled together."

The high school band had started to play at the front of the line. "I think we're going to be rolling in a minute or two here," he warned.

"You're right. Action must be taken." Arletta started pointing again. "Grant. Lean that pan against the rail fence. And go stand by the horse—yes. Right there. At the head. Stephanie, let him hold the reins." Steph muffled a snort of amusement as she handed them over. "Much better, yes..." Arletta kept rattling off instructions. "Grant, you'll have to wave with that nugget, hold it up nice and high so everyone can see you've really struck it rich. Do it."

He waved with the fake nugget.

"Oh, yes. That's it. And Stephanie, take off your hat, wave with it. Big smiles, both of you. Big, big smiles." Grant smiled for all he was worth. Evidently Steph, mounted behind, was doing the same. Because Arletta clapped her hands and cried out gleefully, "Exactly! We've got it. That's perfect! Wonderful! Just right!"

And just in time, too. The float gave a lurch and started moving—slowly, like a big ocean liner inching from port. They pulled away from Arletta, who continued to gesture wildly and rattle off instructions. "Wave, Grant! That's it. Wave that nugget. Smiling, you two. Don't forget. Smiling, smiling! That's the way..."

He felt the toe of Steph's fancy boot gently nudge him in the middle of the back.

"What?" he growled out of the corner of his mouth as he waved his nugget high and proud.

She nudged him again, but she didn't say a word. He glanced back at her and she was waving that big hat of hers, smiling wide at the crowds that lined the covered sidewalks to either side. People cheered and stomped in appreciation and kids ran out in the street to grab the candy and bubble gum the driver of the truck that pulled the float was tossing in handfuls out his open window.

Up ahead, the band played "Yankee Doodle Dandy." Grant looked out at the crowd and thought that he'd never seen so many people crowding the streets of his town.

This Thunder Canyon Fourth of July Parade was the biggest one ever, by far.

Even in that silly miner's getup, with the fake nugget in his hand, Grant felt a surge of real pride—that his town was growing. Thriving. That *he* was a part of Thunder Canyon's new prosperity. That

his own efforts had contributed, at least a little, to the boom that had started with a modern-day gold rush and continued with the swift and rousing success of the Thunder Canyon Resort.

### Chapter Nine

As the float rolled down Main Street, past the charming century-old brick buildings and covered sidewalks of Thunder Canyon's Old Town, Steph waved her hat wildly—and planned her next move with Grant.

Her mom wouldn't have approved of her scheming in the least. Partly because Marie Julen was a woman who found scheming beneath her—and partly because she remained doubtful about her daughter's decision to grab her chance with Grant while she could.

Too bad. Steph was all grown-up now, old enough to make her own decisions. Yeah, she and Grant had had a rough patch in their new relationship when he'd considered selling the ranch. But they'd gotten through that. Things were looking up in big way.

And today was a day tailor-made to suit her plans. A great opportunity for the two of them to be together, to enjoy each other's company. To have a little fun.

The celebrations would continue all day and into the night. There would be the annual races, right there on Main Street. And after the races, over at the fairgrounds, the big Independence Day Rodeo. She planned to sit next to Grant for the rodeo—except during the barrel races where she was a contestant.

She figured she could leave him on his own while she competed. By then, he'd feel duty-bound to root for her while she raced—especially since the resort was her sponsor and had paid a pretty penny for her top-of-the-line gear.

After the rodeo, she'd get him to take her to dinner. And after dinner, the big Independence Day dance.

She just had to make sure that, when the parade was over, Grant didn't get away.

The problem was Trixie Belle. She needed to get the mare back to her trailer and over to the fairgrounds for the rodeo. But if she took the time to do all that, she just knew Grant would find some way to disappear on her. It never paid to give a skittish man the time to have second thoughts. To keep him with her for the day, she'd have to stay close at his side from the moment the float pulled to a stop.

She *needed* someone to take care of Trixie Belle—and what do you know? As the float finished its ride down Main and turned into the parking lot of a local motel called the Wander-On Inn, she spotted Rufus and Jim. The hands stood right there on the sidewalk, at the edge of the lot.

She waved at them and shouted, "Rufus! Hey, meet us when this thing comes to a stop!"

Rufus pulled a sour face, but he and Jim were there waiting when she led Trixie Belle down off the float. Arletta, who'd somehow managed to race down Main through the packed crowds and was waiting when the parade trailed into the motel lot, had cornered Grant again and was gushing all over him.

Great.

She had a minute or two, at least, before he'd have time to make his escape.

"Rufus—"

The old cowboy grunted. "You say my name that way, gal, and I know I'm about to be gettin' my orders."

"I just wonder if you'd mind taking Trixie Belle back to the parking lot at Cedar Street? Her trailer's there, hitched to my pickup, along with my racing costume and barrel saddle. If you could—"

"Hell. Why not?" He knew where to meet her and what time. He rattled them off. "Right?"

"Thanks."

"No thanks are needed—and you better hurry. Looks like your gold miner's gettin' away."

She laughed and paused long enough to kiss his grizzled cheek. "You know too much, you realize that."

"I'm arthritic, not blind. Best get a move on." Beside him, Jim was looking at the ground.

Steph knew the hand was kind of sweet on her, but she'd never encouraged him. She'd always kept things strictly professional between them.

Now, when he finally glanced up, she gave him a quick, no-nonsense nod—not ignoring him, but not encouraging him, either—and then whirled, her mind instantly back on the man who filled her heart. Grant was heading off into the crowd.

“Hey, Mr. Miner!”

He stopped. Turned.

She stuck out a hip and propped a fist on it. “Buy a girl a drink?”

He grunted. “It’s barely noon.”

She hurried to catch up and looped her arm with his. “A root beer will do.” She linked her arm with his. “Love that hat.” It was leather, floppy and silly and it made her smile. And he was so big and tall and handsome, even in his pink long-john shirt and dirty bandanna. Just looking up at him had her heart beating faster. He was her favorite cowboy and he always had been.

He groused, “As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about where I could go to change.” The good news was he made no effort to pull away from her. In fact, he looked down at her as if he never wanted to leave her side—and hated himself because of it.

She could almost feel sorry for him. If she wasn’t so dang happy to be the object of his guilty lust. “You can’t change your clothes.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Well, if *you* change, then *I’ll* change. You know you’d hate that.”

A smile tried to tug at the edges of his scowl. “Okay. I admit it. You look damn cute in that skirt.”

“Thank you.” She shook the arm that wasn’t clutching his, making the fringe dance. “It’s this fringe, right? You just love a lot of fringe on a woman.”

“Er...that’s it. The fringe.”

The loudspeakers over by the grandstand in front of the town hall crackled to life and over the noise of the crowd, they heard the voice of the honorable Philo T. Brookhurst, town mayor. “Folks, step back off the street now. Time to cordon off Main from South Main to Nugget. We’re gearing up fast for the annual Thunder Canyon Races. Get your kids ready to win a twenty-dollar prize.”

She let go of his arm and grabbed his hand. “Come on. The toddlers run first. They’re always so cute, the way they forget where they’re going and wander off in all directions. Let’s get us a good spot.”

She hauled him along behind her, weaving her way through the crowd. He didn’t try to protest, so she figured she had him—for the moment anyway.

And she did. She had him.

He stayed close at her side. He bought her that root beer and they watched the races, every one of them, from the plump toddlers on up to the final race for “octogenarians and above.” A ninety-five-year-old woman won that one. She held up her twenty-dollar prize and let out a whoop you could hear all the way to Billings. Then the old gal threw her arms around the mayor’s thick neck and planted a big smacker right on his handlebar moustache.

Steph leaned close to Grant and teased in a whisper, “Now *that* is a feisty woman.”

“Yeah.” He sent her a smoldering look, one that strayed to her mouth. She wished with all her heart that he would kiss her. Right there on Main Street, with the whole town watching. But he didn’t. He only whispered back, “Damn spunky, and that is no lie.”

After the races, Steph gave Grant no time to start making those see-you-later noises. She asked him for a ride over to the fairgrounds. After all, she told him sweetly, Rufus had taken her pickup to pull Trixie Belle’s trailer over there for her.

What could he say? He would never leave her stranded without a ride.

He’d parked his black Range Rover behind the town hall.

“Very nice,” she told him, once she’d climbed up into the plush embrace of the leather passenger seat. She sniffed the air. “Mmm. Smells like money in here.”

“Smart aleck,” he muttered as he stuck the key into the ignition. Before he could turn it over, she reached across and laid her hand on his.

Heat. Oh, she did love the feel of that. Every time she touched him, a jolt of something hot and bright went zipping all through her body. Making her grin. Making her shiver in the most delightful way.

“Steph,” he warned, low and rough.

She leaned closer. “Kiss me.”

He was looking at her mouth again. “You’re just asking for trouble, you know that?”

“Uh-uh. I’m not...”

“Oh, no?”

“What I’m asking for is a kiss.” She dared to let her fingers trail up his arm. Amazing, that arm. So warm and hard and muscular beneath the grimy pink sleeve of his long johns.

“A kiss?” he repeated, still staring at her mouth.

“Yeah. A long, slow, wet one.” She brushed the side of his neck with her forefinger and felt a shudder go through him. “That’s what I want. And I know that *you* know the kind I mean...”

He said her name again, this time kind of desperately.

“Oh, yeah,” she whispered as he leaned in that extra fraction of an inch and pressed his lips to hers.

Oh, my. He tasted so good. She opened her mouth and sucked his tongue inside, throwing her arms around him, letting out a moan of pure joy.

He stopped it much too soon. Taking her by the elbows, he peeled her off him and held her at arm’s length.

She tried to look innocent. “What? You don’t like kissing me?”

He said something under his breath, a very bad word. “You know I do. And if you keep this up...”

“What? You’ll make love to me? Oh, now wouldn’t that be horrible?”

“You’re just a kid and you—”

She swore then, a word every bit as bad as the one he’d used. “Maybe you’d like to see my driver’s license. It’s got my birthday right on there, in case you forgot how old I am.”

“You know what I mean. You don’t...date a lot.”

Gently she pulled free of his grip. “And you do. I know that. I’m not some dreamy fool, though you keep trying to convince yourself I am.”

He actually looked flustered, his face red and his blue eyes full of tender indecision. “I...meant what I said last night, that’s all. It wouldn’t last. And you’d end up hating me. I couldn’t take that.”

She held his eyes and banished all hint of teasing from her tone as she told him, “No matter what happens, Grant, I’ll never hate you.”

“You say that now...”

“Because it’s true.” She hooked her seat belt. When he didn’t move, she slanted him another glance. “Come on. Let’s go. The barrel race is up first. I have to track Rufus down and get my horse.”

For a moment, she thought he’d say more. But then he only swore again and reached for the key to start the engine.

\* \* \*

She lost the barrel race.

Got too close to the second barrel, knocked it clean over. And that was it. The five-second penalty for tipping a barrel took her right out of the running in a race where the difference between first and second place was in fractions of a second.

She gave Trixie Belle an apple and handed her over to Rufus, who said he'd see to getting her home. "Jim can take the other truck back and I'll take yours." He shook a gnarled finger at her. "You watch yourself now. Don't go stealin' some innocent cowboy's heart..."

With teasing solemnity, she vowed, "You know I would never do any such thing." The ranch hand snorted and waved her away and she went to find Grant, who'd saved her a place in the stands. He threw an arm around her and pulled her close.

"Hey, tough luck. At least *we* know you're the best."

She thought that she wouldn't mind losing every race she entered, if it meant Grant would put his arm around her and tell her how great she was. "Truth is, I'm thinking my barrel racing days are over. I just don't have the time to practice like I used to. After all, I've got a ranch to run—not to mention teaching the occasional resort-happy tenderfoot how to stay in the saddle."

He looked at her admiringly. "You're a good sport, Steph. Always have been."

It wasn't the kind of compliment the average woman could appreciate. But Steph recognized high praise when she heard it.

He sat right there at her side through the whole rodeo, from roping to calf wrestling, bareback and bronc riding and bull riding, too. It was a dream of a day and she never wanted it to end.

They were back at his four-by-four at a little before five. "Take me to dinner," she commanded.

"This is getting damn dangerous," he said.

But he didn't say no.

He drove to a friendly Italian place he liked in New Town, east of the historic area around Main. He said they'd never get seats anywhere in Old Town, where all the restaurants would be packed with tourists and folks down from the resort, looking for a little taste of Thunder Canyon hospitality.

They shared a bottle of Chianti and she told him more about her plans for improvements at Clifton's Pride. He talked about the new golf course that a world-famous golf pro was designing for the resort, about his ideas for further expansion, about how much he loved the work he was doing.

She grinned across the table at him. "You don't have to say how much you love your work. It's right there in your eyes every time you mention it."

He teased, "Are you telling me I'm boring you?"

"Uh-uh. Not in the least. I like to see you happy, with your eyes shining, all full of your big plans."

He leaned close again. "You do, huh?"

"I do." She raised her wineglass. He touched his against it.

When he set the glass down, he said, "This is nice."

And she nodded. "Yeah. It is. Real nice."

"Too nice..." His tone had turned bleak.

And after that, he grew quiet. Oh, he was kind and gentle as ever. If she asked a question, he answered it. He wasn't rude or anything.

But she knew what had happened. He'd caught himself having a good time with her—in a man-and-woman kind of way.

And that scared him to death.

"I'm taking you home now," he said, when they left the restaurant. His strong jaw was set. It was a statement of purpose from which she knew he would not waver.

Steph didn't argue. She could see it in his eyes: She'd gotten as far as she was going to get with him that day.

Grant let Steph off in front of the ranch house. She leaned on her door and got out with no fanfare.

"Thanks," she said. "I had a great time."

He nodded. She shut the door. He waited, the engine idling, until she went inside.

And then he sat there a moment longer, wishing she was still in the passenger seat beside him, cursing himself for a long-gone fool.

He headed back to town. He wasn't ready yet to return to the resort, where he was the boss with all that being the boss entailed.

Steph's scent lingered, very faint and very tempting, in the car. Or maybe not. Maybe he only imagined it. But whether he could actually still smell her or not, he found himself breathing through his nose, just to get another whiff of her.

This was beyond bad. He'd spent practically the whole day with her. He still didn't quite know how that had happened. Somehow, every time he'd told himself he needed to cut the contact short, she would look at him with those green eyes.

And he would be lost.

He had to face it, he supposed: Steph Julen had it all. The total package.

There was not only her scent and her sweet, clean-scrubbed face and fine, slim body. There was also that husky, humor-filled voice of hers. There was how smart she was, how charming. How *good*.

She was a good person. He wanted the best for her. Even more so now, when he was finally realizing what a terrific woman she'd become.

At the corner where Thunder Canyon Road turned sharply east and became Main, across from the Wander-On Inn, the Hitching Post loomed. The big brick building was famous in Thunder Canyon history, as it had once been The Shady Lady Saloon, the town's most notorious watering hole, run by the mysterious Shady Lady herself, Lily Divine, back in the 1890s.

Grant turned into the lot, which was packed. But luck was with him. He found a space in the last row as a muddy pickup slid out and drove away.

Inside, the place was jumping. The jukebox played country-western at full volume. Grant knew that later in the evening a local band would be taking the stage at the far end of the barnlike space.

One side was a restaurant, the other the bar, with no wall to separate the two. Grant stuck to the bar side, elbowing his way up through the crowd and sliding onto a stool as another man vacated it.

The portrait on the wall behind the bar was of a well-endowed blond beauty, resting seductively on a red-velvet chaise lounge, wearing nothing but pearls and a few bits of almost-transparent black fabric strategically placed to hint at more than they revealed. The lady was none other than the notorious Lily herself and that painting had hung in the exact same spot over a century before when she owned and ran the place.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.