



MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

Expecting His Brother's Baby

KAREN ROSE SMITH

Karen Smith Rose
Expecting His Brother's Baby
Серия «Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish»

Аннотация

SHE WAS THE WOMAN HE' D ALWAYS WANTED BUT COULDN' T HAVE...Old and forbidden desires began to reemerge when Brock Warner returned to Wyoming to help Kylie run his family's ranch. He hadn't pursued her years ago because she'd been too young and achingly innocent—and then his brother had claimed Kylie for his own.**OR COULD HE?**Kylie's failing marriage had ended with her unfaithful husband's death. Now she was left only with bittersweet memories, an empty bank account and a baby on the way. Brock's homecoming had her thinking back to the kiss they'd once shared. And had her wondering about what could have been....

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Kylie's hand pressed to her belly, and she was so very grateful for her unborn child.

Alex's child.

Whenever she looked at Brock and felt things she shouldn't feel, all she had to do was think about her baby. It was hard enough for one man to accept another's offspring. In Brock's case, it would be impossible. Whenever he looked at her, he probably thought about his half brother, Alex—the younger son, the one their father had loved.

How could she have such mixed feelings about all of it? How could she be grieving for Alex, but when Brock walked into the room she felt...touched in some way? Touched by an excitement, an electricity, a bond that had begun when she was seventeen and had never ended.

Had she loved Alex? Yes, she had. But she had to admit, Brock had always affected her...had always made her heart skip faster.

Dear Reader,

When I connect with someone either in friendship or in love, those bonds are lasting. My husband and I have been married thirty-five years. At our first meeting, did I know we'd be committed to each other for a lifetime? I feel I did. And he did, too. After a few months of dating, we certainly did. We had the

same values, goals and dreams.

The hero and heroine in *Expecting His Brother's Baby* met when Kylie was seventeen. Was she too young to fall in love? Although she buried her feelings for Brock, the roots stayed strong. But so many obstacles blocked their connection.

Can love conquer all?

I believe true love can.

All my best,

Karen Rose Smith

Expecting His Brother's Baby

Karen Rose Smith



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KAREN ROSE SMITH

read Zane Grey when she was in grade school, and she loved his books. She also had a crush on Roy Rogers and especially his palomino, Trigger! Around horses as a child, she found them fascinating and intuitive. Her **BABY BONDS** series set in Wyoming sprang from childhood wishes and adult dreams. When an acquaintance adopted two of the wild mustangs from the western rangelands and invited Karen to visit them, plotlines weren't far behind. For more background on the books in the series as well as photos and info about the wild mustangs, stop by Karen's Web site at www.karenrosesmith.com or write to her at P.O. Box 1545, Hanover, PA 17331.

Thanks to Gale Jacobs, who invited me to visit her adopted mustangs and learn their stories.

With appreciation to Francee and Dick Shaulles.

Thanks for opening your home and ranch to us.

Your family embodies the meaning of ranch life.

We'll never forget our visit.

With appreciation to Ken Martin, who knows and understands the mustangs so well. Grey Face and his band had to be part of this book.

For information about wild mustangs, visit

www.wildhorsepreservation.com. For adoption

information go to www.wildhorseandburro.blm.gov.

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Prologue

Wild Horse Junction, Wyoming

Kylie Warner didn't often compare herself to other women. She'd been a tomboy all her life, more comfortable on a horse than anywhere else. Function, rather than fashion, had always directed her clothing choice. But meeting this pert and sexily dressed waitress from Clementine's—Wild Horse Junction's watering hole—Kylie felt as if she'd let herself go. With her straight blond hair drawn back in a ponytail and her parka fitting snugly over her maternity outfit, she wondered what had happened to her sense of womanly pride since Alex died.

"I'm Trish," the waitress said with a smile that looked more forced than genuine. "We can use the boss's office. He went home for dinner."

When Trish had called Kylie, she'd said she wanted to talk about boarding her horse at Saddle Ridge Ranch.

Since her pregnancy, Kylie hadn't been able to take on training horses...or even giving lessons. After her baby was born, she was hoping to jump in again with both feet. Until she could, boarding horses would help keep Saddle Ridge from sinking deeper into debt.

At seven-and-a-half-months pregnant, she was driving herself hard, concentrating on the life growing inside of her, managing Saddle Ridge as well as working as office manager at Wild

Horse's temporary employment agency. No wonder she hadn't gotten her hair trimmed in months or applied more than lipstick before she left the ranch every morning.

As she followed the brunette in the short black skirt down the hall to the saloon's office, the hairs on the nape of Kylie's neck prickled. Something about Trish Hammond's demeanor seemed...off. Kylie's hand protectively went to her tummy. The fingers of her other hand gripped her purse tighter.

This is about boarding a horse, she scolded herself. Relax.

Yet once she stood inside the small cluttered office and Trish Hammond closed the door, her uneasiness grew. Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she looked the waitress in the eye. "You have one horse to board?"

Trish's red blouse clung to her breasts as she gave an offhanded shrug. "I never exactly told you I had a horse to board. I just said I wanted to talk about it. Really, I had another reason for asking you here. I have something you might want. It belonged to your husband."

Trish opened her cowhide purse, the same shade of red as her boots, and extracted something shiny.

Kylie felt suddenly queasy as she recognized the belt buckle. Alex had several of them that he'd won at rodeos. Bull riding had always been his passion...and it had killed him.

Her mouth went dry. Her heart raced. Her worst fears, which had gnawed at her over the past couple of years, had also urged her to hide her head in the sand. Yet she knew she had to play

this out. She knew she had to finally face the truth.

Taking the buckle from Trish, she turned it over and saw the engraving on the back. Alex had been dead for four months, but he still had the power to hurt her. The date on the belt buckle was April, the month before she'd gotten pregnant.

When she lifted her gaze to Trish's, she knew this was the woman who'd been calling the ranch and hanging up whenever Alex wasn't home. This was the woman who had been her competitor and she hadn't even known it. It had been Trish's initial on the note on the cocktail napkin Kylie had found when she'd sorted through Alex's clothes.

Why had Trish called her here? To humiliate her? To see for herself the woman Alex had married, yet betrayed? Kylie could attack. She could sling accusations. She could show how much she was shaken by this proof that Alex had cared for someone else, maybe as much as he'd cared for her, perhaps even more. But she knew anything she did or said could affect her baby. She could gain satisfaction for a minute, but anxiety from words flung in pain would last a lot longer. Her hands trembled and she wouldn't let Trish Hammond see that.

Whatever Trish's reasons for needing this confrontation, Kylie wouldn't give her the satisfaction of a scene. She laid the buckle on the desk. "If Alex gave that to you, then he wanted you to have it." She turned to leave.

Obviously Trish had wanted to get a much bigger rise out of her because she asked, "Didn't you mind sharing your husband?"

Fury rocked Kylie. She didn't think she'd ever been this angry in her whole life. But she also knew her life with her son or daughter was more important than any hurt this woman could inflict.

Still, she couldn't keep the fierceness from her voice. "I believed in the vows I made. I tried to hold my marriage together, but I couldn't do it alone."

As tears burned her eyes, she turned her back on the other woman and left Clementine's quickly. Outside she blindly made her way to her small blue pickup at the edge of the parking lot. Rooting for her keys, she finally found them as she tried not to think...tried not to feel...tried not to remember.

However, as she climbed into her truck and turned the ignition switch, she did remember—the weeks at a time Alex had gone on the road following the circuit, the nights of loneliness, the days of chores and finally facing the fact that Saddle Ridge was sinking deeper and deeper into debt and her husband wouldn't listen to her about it.

Backing out of her parking space, she veered toward the lot's entrance and Wild Horse Way. Once on the road she turned on the heater, knowing she was too cold inside for the warmer air to do any good. Tears began falling then as she relived her decision to leave Alex if he didn't go to a counselor with her. Before he'd left for his last rodeo in Las Vegas, they'd argued. He'd accused her of getting pregnant on purpose to keep him at home more. She'd insisted their marriage didn't stand a chance unless they

tried couples' therapy. That had been the main reason for her wanting to take the job at the temp agency. Not only to earn more money to pay for the bills, but to pay for counseling so they could put their marriage back together and maybe start over.

As she avoided a pothole in the road, tears fell harder. She increased her speed outside of town. Her heart hurt so badly she knew it might finally break. Picturing the satisfaction in Trish Hammond's eyes as she'd handed Kylie the belt buckle, Kylie couldn't hold in the sobs that broke loose now.

Distracted, she barely registered the upcoming pothole. As she hit it, her truck listed and fell to the right, banging onto the road. She lost control and, in horror, knew she was going to land in the ravine.

One prayer passed her lips. "Lord, keep my baby safe."

Then the truck lurched sideways and fell sharply, throwing her against the door. When her head hit the steering wheel, a gray fog swept over her. Closing her eyes, she let it engulf her, relieved to escape the pain of a broken heart.

Chapter One

Panic gripped Kylie as Brock Warner entered her room Sunday afternoon. Unfortunately, her enforced stay in the hospital since Friday had given her too much time to remember her confrontation with Trish Hammond. All she'd been able to think about was her husband's infidelity.

Now here was his half brother! How had he found out about her accident? Was he going to try to convince her to sell Saddle Ridge?

"What are you doing here?" Her emotions were so raw the question had just popped out.

Shoving his black Stetson higher on his forehead, Brock stopped beside the chair where Kylie sat. "Dix called me. He was worried sick about you."

Her foreman shouldn't have meddled. "I'm fine."

"Don't you just look fine." Brock's thick black eyebrows quirked up as he took notice of her sling, then the bruise on her forehead.

Her brother-in-law's Apache blood was evident in the hue of his skin, the dark somberness of his eyes and the jet blackness of his hair. Brock Warner emanated a sensuality when he walked, when he talked and when he smiled, in a way she'd seen in few men. It had given her a jumbled, off-balance sensation when she was a teenager...and still did now. She remembered the night she

graduated from high school, the night she'd kissed him and—

She stood, pride and courage taking over for her and her unborn child. "I'm sorry Dix dragged you here from... wherever you were."

"Texas," Brock filled in. "Between consultations."

"When did you arrive?" she asked warily, her gaze taking in everything about him. She hadn't seen him since Jack Warner's funeral five years ago... when Brock's new wife had accompanied him.

"I got in about an hour ago. Dix looked worn out, so I offered to come get you."

Concern for Dix took away her annoyance at his interference. He'd been a friend of her father's and had looked out for her in a quiet way since he'd gotten her a job at Saddle Ridge. They were both worn out. Trying to keep the ranch afloat without any outside help had been wearing on them long before Alex had died.

Brock's gaze softened a bit as it slid from her loose blond hair to her maternity top. "I'm sorry about what happened to Alex."

Brock had said that on the phone after he'd missed Alex's funeral. He'd been doing whatever geologists did somewhere in Central America. Away from civilization, he hadn't called his home in Texas for messages in over a week. When he finally had, he'd phoned her and learned about the bull-riding accident that had taken his brother's life. By that time, though, Alex was buried and she hadn't wanted Brock to learn the condition of

Saddle Ridge. It was during that phone call she'd told him she was pregnant but managing perfectly fine.

"I'm sorry for your loss, too," she said quietly, knowing Brock had cared deeply about Alex.

"The last time I talked to him he was in Utah. I should have kept in touch more often," Brock said with real regret.

The crack in Kylie's heart grew a little wider when she thought about the last time she had talked to Alex. After he'd left early for his last rodeo, she was sure their marriage had been over. With what she'd found out from Trish Hammond, it had been over long before that day.

A smiling nurse bustled into the room, cast an admiring look at Brock, then handed Kylie a few papers. "Here are Dr. Marco's instructions. I understand he went over them with you this morning."

Kylie studied the checklist. For the most part, she was supposed to rest for the next two weeks.

Brock took them from her hands. "I spoke with your doctor a few minutes ago. I told him I'd make sure you followed his recommendations."

"What do you mean you'll make sure? Go back to Texas, I don't need you here. Dix should never have called you."

"You should have called me long before this. One look at the place—" He shook his head. "There will be time enough for this discussion. Right now, let's get you home."

When Brock took her elbow, Kylie's knees felt wobbly. She

could smell the piney musk of his aftershave, feel the strength in his large hand. She had once dreamed of more than friendship with Brock Warner, but he'd dismissed her as too young for his consideration. He'd come home with a wife and that had told Kylie, more than anything else, that she'd never belong in his life.

Six months after that, she'd married Alex.

She and Alex had gone to school together. He'd teased her in the play yard. They'd shared homework. When her pop died and she'd had to sell their homestead to pay debts, when she'd moved to Saddle Ridge and taken a room above the barn to be a groom to the horses, Alex had still seemed more like a brother than a suitor. Then suddenly, after his dad died, he'd turned the full extent of his cowboy charm on her. Not only that, he'd needed her. He'd poured out his grief to her and she'd shared his loss... because she'd lost her own dad. Never one to sit still long enough to figure out numbers, Alex had asked her to help him with the bookkeeping, and he'd found her suggestions made sense. Yet he'd had his own agenda. Marrying her had only been a part of it.

Now, she didn't know if he'd ever really loved her. She had loved him, in a loyal, until-death-do-us-part kind of way. She'd wanted to have children with him. She'd wanted to raise a brood—sons and daughters who would always have each other and the legacy of Saddle Ridge to depend upon. But Alex had wanted to postpone having kids and it wasn't until they'd been married a couple of years that she'd really understood he'd never grown up himself, that he'd intended to ride the rodeo circuit until he was

too old to care about conquering the next ornery bull.

When a volunteer came into the room with a wheelchair, Kylie pulled away from Brock's clasp. "I can walk. I don't need—"

"Hospital policy," the nurse announced cheerily.

Brock hefted up the worn, leather duffel bag that had been her pop's. "I'll take this to the car and meet you at the front entrance."

As Brock left the hospital room, Kylie almost felt dizzy with relief. Then she reminded herself the woozy feeling probably had come from the concussion. Concussion or not, she was clearheaded about one important fact—she would never depend on Brock Warner. He was not going to look after her...or interfere in her life.

A short time later, Brock picked her up at the hospital's entrance in a white SUV. They'd driven in silence for about five minutes when Kylie cut the awkward tension. "Did you rent this?"

"Yes. For now. But after what happened to your truck, I'll be going to look for something to replace it."

"Dix said it could be repaired."

"It had a broken ball joint and it's fifteen years old. With over one hundred and fifty thousand miles, it's time to let go of it, Kylie."

Holding on to the first vehicle she'd ever owned hadn't been strictly sentimentality. She simply couldn't afford to replace it. "I'll check the paper for used trucks."

"Don't worry about that. I'll take care of it. The ranch could

use a new one. What happened to the crew-cab Alex won?"

So Brock had known about that, Kylie realized. Two years ago, a prize at one of the rodeo competitions had been a brand-spanking-new silver truck but it had been a gas guzzler. "I sold it."

"Why didn't you keep it and get rid of yours?"

Because she couldn't have gotten anything for hers. "I did what I thought was best."

The message she sent was clear—the truck she drove was none of his business.

Brock's jaw tightened and deep furrows dented his forehead.

Turning away from him, she stared out the side window. If he thought he could come in here and just ride rough-shod over her, he was sadly mistaken.

"Why didn't you call me and tell me Saddle Ridge was going to hell?" Brock demanded of Dix an hour later.

The pre-Thanksgiving wind held an icy bite as Brock turned from the foreman to scrutinize the outside of the barn, with its peeling paint, the few horses loose in the corral and the acres of land that used to be peppered with at least five hundred head of Angus, but now only boasted about fifty.

Brock shook his head with disbelief.

"Maybe instead of waiting for a call from me, you should have come home to see what was going on."

Brock stared out over the sections of Warner land. "There was no place for me here. There never was, and you know that."

“What I know is that you can be as stubborn as your father was.”

His father.

Jack Warner hadn't been a real parent to him, though he'd fathered him and given him his name. He'd married Brock's mother to save face. The smart, handsome, rich Jack Warner couldn't handle the reputation of being a scoundrel, of sleeping with a woman and then turning his back on her when she got pregnant...even if she were Apache. He'd married her and Brock had been born here, but had never felt as if Jack Warner had cared one bit for him. And he'd always known why. His skin was the wrong color. His hair was coal-black, like his mother's, not blond like his father's. The bottom line was Jack had never loved Brock's mother. He hadn't really wanted her as a wife. He'd never wanted Brock.

Brock glanced over at the house where he'd grown up but never really belonged. The roof was missing a few shingles and the porch steps looked as if they should be replaced. “When did this start happening?”

“After your daddy passed.”

That brought Brock's gaze to Dix's again. “Alex let it go like this?”

“You think this happened in the four months since he died? Look again, son. This neglect has taken years. Kylie's worked harder than any man I know. The two of us have tried to keep up, but we couldn't. With Alex gone so much—”

“Bull riding?”

“Bull riding. Chasing the next belt buckle or purse. Always expecting to win the Grand Championship and never doin’ it. I do understand why you didn’t come back here since your daddy died. His will was a slap in the face, leaving the place to Alex, and only giving you half of it if he sold it. But why didn’t you come back here after Alex died?”

“I was in a jungle. I never got the message about Alex until after the funeral. I called Kylie then. Didn’t she tell you?”

“No, she didn’t. What did she tell you?”

“She mentioned she was pregnant, but she said everything was fine.”

“And just what else was she supposed to say with you in another country and her here?”

“She could have told me the truth.”

“In Kylie’s mind, she probably was fine,” Dix admitted, blowing out a huge breath. “She has plans to turn this place around after the baby’s born.”

“What kind of plans?”

“Teaching more classes. Boarding more horses. Training more two-year-olds.”

“She’s dreaming.”

“Yes, she is. About her baby’s future. She didn’t tell you what was going on because she didn’t want you to know, is my guess. You proved you didn’t care about Saddle Ridge by staying away. I wouldn’t have called you, except the doc says she’s supposed to

take it easy for the next couple of weeks. I knew I couldn't handle this myself. I hate admitting it, but it's true." Dix's red beard was laced with some gray now. The lines on his weathered face were deep and counted every one of his sixty-two years.

"No hands at all? Not even part-time?"

"We couldn't afford them! I shouldn't even be talking to you about this. Kylie should. But she's still shaken up and I don't want her worrying so much. It's not good for her or the baby."

Brock had been back home in Texas when Dix had called him yesterday to tell him about Kylie's accident. He didn't know what to make of any of this.

After his dad had divorced his mom, she'd gone back to live with her family on a reservation in Arizona. He'd been four years old, and he could still remember the tears in her eyes when she'd claimed Saddle Ridge was where his future lay. As he'd grown older, he'd understood what she'd meant. If he stayed at the ranch, he could eventually go to college and become anything he wanted to be. If he went to Arizona and lived on the reservation with her, he wouldn't be happy. He wouldn't get the same kind of education. He wouldn't grow up to be everything a man could be.

He'd visited his mother, mostly in the summers, but his life had been empty without her. Jack Warner had never been warm to Brock. He'd hired a housekeeper, and Brock had had all his needs met. But after Jack remarried and Alex was born, with his blond hair and his blue eyes just like his mom and dad, Brock often thought about leaving and going to live with his mother

in Arizona. Yet as each year passed and his mother encouraged him to stay, he'd bonded with his half brother, found satisfaction in school work and tending to the horses, and he'd always felt a kinship with the land.

"With the holidays comin'," Dix continued, "Kylie's driving herself harder. She's on a committee for the First Night celebration in town. She has presents to make, as well as things to ready for the baby."

"The last thing she needs to be worried about is Christmas presents, decorations and a New Year's Eve party."

"Don't go tellin' her that, or you'll get your head handed to you on a platter. You might anyway," he muttered. "She likes to do everything on her own."

"Didn't you call me so I'd get back here and talk some sense into her?"

"Not exactly. I called you because she needs help. I need help. You've got a vested interest in this place—"

"The terms of the will apply to Kylie the same as they did to Alex. I've only got a vested interest if she sells it." Brock zipped up his windbreaker. He'd have to get warmer clothes if he was going to stay here through the winter.

Through the winter. When had he made that decision?

"You are going to help, aren't you?" Dix asked now, looking worried, maybe wondering if the boy he'd known had become a man who was different from that boy.

"Yes, I'll help. I have paperwork to finish on a project and a

few loose ends to tie up, but nothing else is pending right now.”

“It won’t be a hardship to take some time off?”

Brock knew Dix meant financially. He made more money than he knew what to do with. Maybe because he worked all the time, more often than not in locations where most men wouldn’t go. Maybe because saving had always been more important than immediate gratification. He’d also invested in a few wells over the years that had hit big. A few months on Saddle Ridge wouldn’t be a problem. A few months until Kylie’s baby was born...until Alex’s baby was born.

“No hardship.”

“Kylie’s had a lot on her shoulders, son. Remember that,” Dix warned him.

He’d remember that. Unfortunately, staying at Saddle Ridge he’d remember a lot more. He’d have to face the fact those memories still might have power over him.

While he was here this time, he’d shake loose of their power for good.

An hour later Brock stepped over the threshold once more into the two-story ranch house. Immediately he spotted Kylie on the sofa, stretched out, asleep. She looked like a pregnant princess. But he knew she’d never been coddled like a princess. He knew she’d always been a hard worker, intent on living each day to its fullest.

Now what? His brother’s wife was smack-dab in the middle of a ranch that needed manpower, capital and something

much more intangible to invigorate it. Why hadn't Alex done something about the condition of the place? Why hadn't he asked for help if he'd needed it? Because of pride? Whether he and Alex had wanted to admit it or not, Jack Warner had fostered competition between them. There was nothing to compete over. As a child, Brock had known he'd never have his father's affection.

This place brought back memories Brock didn't want to revisit, and he focused on the physical surroundings. Some of the furniture was newer than the rest. Dix had informed him that new furniture had been Alex's wedding present to Kylie.

Some wedding present, Brock thought. It was striped teal-and-wine with huge, rolled arms and Brock suspected Kylie had chosen it rather than Alex having picked it out as a surprise. Automatically, Brock thought about the strand of Tahitian pearls he'd given Marta before their wedding. She'd loved them. She'd said she loved him. But she couldn't have walked away so easily if she had. He couldn't have gotten over her so quickly if he had loved her the way a husband should love a wife.

Love. Lust. Convenience. Need. Physical satisfaction. Who knew how much any of that played into a relationship? Who really knew how to figure out what was love and what was something else?

Watching Kylie like this, he was transported back to a night in the barn when she'd been seventeen and he'd been twenty-two, home for her graduation...and Alex's. Proud of her, he'd

given her a present. She'd kissed him. For a few moments he'd forgotten she was underage and he was a hell of a lot more experienced. But after those few moments, he'd ended it, backed away and done what was best for both of them. Later that weekend, Alex had informed him he was going to marry Kylie someday.

Brock had returned to his Ph.D. work, focused on life away from Saddle Ridge and married Marta shortly after he'd met her. Too soon, too fast, too different.

As if Kylie could feel his gaze on her, she opened her blue eyes, then pushed herself into a sitting position. Her hair fell over her shoulders as she did, and Brock remembered tugging her ponytail to tease her. He remembered how the night she'd kissed him, he'd threaded his fingers into the silky strands.

"I thought you might be hungry," he said gruffly. "How do you feel? And don't tell me fine."

"My shoulder's hurting," she admitted, adjusting the sling.

As she began to rise, he moved toward the sofa. "What do you need?"

Her eyes were troubled when they met his. "An ice pack."

"The doc gave you something for pain, didn't he?"

"I won't put medication in my body if I don't have to...because of the baby."

"Stay put," he ordered. "I'll get the ice."

Returning to her with the pack wrapped in a towel, he asked, "Do you want to take the sling off?"

“I guess I have to.”

Before he reconsidered what he was doing, he sat next to her and helped her remove the sling. As she lifted her hair and he slipped the sling over her head, his palm brushed the side of her cheek. His pulse raced, and he decided it was an adrenaline shot because he didn't want to hurt her. However, when the sling lay in her lap and he pressed the ice pack to her shoulder, the adrenaline didn't stop and his heart pounded hard against his chest.

Her cornflower-blue eyes shimmered a bit before she closed them.

“Kylie?”

“I'm fine,” she murmured, not opening her eyes.

“Those are two words you're not going to use around me. Remember?” Ever since he'd known her, she'd never let anyone know she wasn't fine.

“When did you become such a bully?” she grumbled.

“When I moved to Texas, I found life on my own and getting my own way was a heck of a lot more fun than trying to please anyone here.”

Her eyes opened then and a bit of the shimmer remained. “You always get your own way in Texas?”

He chuckled. “Most of the time.” Then when he considered his life there, he became serious. “There are people in Texas who respect me.” His friends and colleagues didn't care that he had Apache blood...and didn't look at him as if he were an outsider.

“There are people here who respect you.”

“I needed to be away from Saddle Ridge to find my life.”

“Have you found it?”

“Yes,” he answered tersely, then changed the subject. “Are you hungry?”

“No. But I have to eat for the baby.”

Although he’d been trying to ignore her rounded tummy, now his gaze dropped to it. “Do you know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“I want to be surprised.”

“What did Alex want?” he asked, curious.

“I’m sure he wanted a boy. Don’t all men?”

He could tell she was trying too hard to give him a smile. What was going on behind those eyes? “Maybe. Maybe not.”

Their gazes met again and he felt too much. This time he broke eye contact and glanced around the room. Suddenly he realized what was missing. “Where’s your TV?”

“I don’t have time to watch TV.”

“That’s not what I asked you. At Christmas last year, Alex said he bought himself a big-screen plasma TV so he could watch his tapes and improve his rodeo technique.”

Taking the ice pack and moving it to a different part of her shoulder, she asked, “Does it matter?”

“It might. What happened to it?”

“I needed the money from it to pay bills.”

Brock didn’t like the picture that was coming into clearer focus. “I want to look at the books.”

Again her expression was troubled. “I can’t prevent you from

doing that.”

“But you’d like to. Why?”

Her cheeks became rosy with color. “On your own admission, you couldn’t wait to leave here. You rarely came back after you went to school. You haven’t come back since your dad died. So why do you want to get involved now?”

The problem was, he couldn’t give her just one reason. The problem was, he wasn’t certain why he was here or what he expected from coming home. It wasn’t his place now, though—it was hers. Unless she decided to sell it. “I came back because Dix admitted he couldn’t handle you and the ranch.”

“I’m going to be—” She stopped.

“It’ll be at least two weeks—maybe longer—until you’re really back on your feet. That’s what the doctor said. By then you’ll be dealing with the last two months of your pregnancy. How much do you think you’ll be able to help Dix? Face reality, Kylie.”

Without any warning she let the ice pack drop to the sofa and stood. “I’ve faced more reality than you can ever imagine. So don’t preach to me, Brock.” She headed out of the living room to a hall at the back of the house.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“To the bathroom. Don’t think you’re going to follow me there.”

Brock raked his hand through his hair. Making Kylie’s supper would be the easy part. Sitting together and pretending there weren’t issues and problems to be resolved between them would

be the difficult part. With her pregnancy and all, she really should be staying on the first floor. After Jack had had a heart attack a few years before he died, he'd renovated the downstairs, closing the back porch into a bedroom and modernizing and expanding the bath so it included a shower. Kylie should really be spending the latter part of her pregnancy down here. He could help her move her things. But right now wasn't the time to suggest it. Maybe after he'd cooked them a meal, maybe after they'd talked superficially about something other than Saddle Ridge, she'd relax around him and he'd relax around her.

A little devil in his ear told him he was dreaming if he thought that was going to happen.

The bottom line here was he had to tread carefully. He had to remind himself she was still grieving over Alex, and the loss would be with her for a long time. If he tried to take over, he might trample everything she held dear. Then she'd hate him.

He couldn't abide the thought of Kylie Armstrong Warner hating him. That realization made him decidedly uneasy.

Leaning back in his kitchen chair, Brock swiped at his mouth with his napkin and tossed it onto the table. His plate was clean. Frustration with Kylie was growing minute by minute. Frustration with himself for caring how she was reacting to him wasn't much better. The fact that his gut twisted every time she smiled had him totally unsettled. He was damned uncomfortable.

"When are you going to stop pretending with me?" he asked, hoping to clear the air. For the past fifteen minutes she'd pushed

food around on her plate, not eating much of anything. He suspected she was hurting but she wouldn't admit it.

"We've known each other for years," he went on. "I won't be insulted if you don't like the way I cooked the steak."

She studied him for a moment. "We spent some time together years ago on your short visits home. I haven't laid eyes on you for five years. I'm not sure we do know each other."

Okay, he'd asked for that. Maybe he should have put things a different way. "Years ago, you said what you were thinking. You were as easy to read as the proverbial open book. Now you're acting as if you want me to go away and never come back when it's obvious you need help here. I'm trying to make sense of what's going on. Alex never mentioned this place was headed downstream. Why not?"

Her answer was quick coming. "Do you really think he'd tell you? He'd never want you to know that he'd failed to succeed in managing what Jack had left him."

"What if I'd come back and seen it?"

"But you didn't. The decline of Saddle Ridge didn't happen overnight. It's been slow. There were times when I thought that with or without Alex's help I could turn it around—"

She stopped.

"What do you mean with or without Alex's help?"

The guarded expression was back on her face, the shadows in her eyes.

"Why wouldn't Alex want to keep Saddle Ridge going?" he

pressed.

“Oh, he wanted to keep it going. Rather, he wanted me to keep it going.”

“And what was he doing?” Brock asked cautiously.

“You know what he was doing. He was riding the rodeo circuit, chasing the wildest bull.”

That’s what Dix had said. Brock thought about the times Alex had called him. Often he’d been away from Saddle Ridge. And whenever Brock had called Alex—those times had been too few—at Alex’s direction, he’d gotten hold of him on his cell phone.

So Kylie wouldn’t answer?

The same tension that had looped around them ever since he’d stepped into Kylie’s hospital room surrounded them now. It was broken when the door opened and Dix came in.

The foreman took off his Stetson and when he entered the kitchen, he looked like a man who was facing his executioner. “Are you still talking to me?” he asked Kylie.

“Do I have any choice?” she returned with a half smile that told Brock she couldn’t stay mad at Dix for long.

“You do,” the older man answered, “but the horses don’t like a woman in a snit any more than I do.”

She laughed. The sound was so genuine, so free, that Brock remembered the girl she’d been.

“Well then, that decides it,” she said, getting to her feet and wincing because she’d moved too fast.

Every protective instinct in Brock urged him to push back his

chair, put his arm around her shoulders and make sure she got to the sofa safely. Yet he stayed put because he knew she wouldn't tolerate it.

Kylie was lifting her plate to take it to the sink when Brock said, "I'll get the dishes."

Dix's gaze cut from one of them to the other. "Looks like everything's under control in here," he muttered.

"In a week I'll be back in the barn," Kylie told him.

"Only to visit." Brock's voice was steel.

"You don't have anything to worry about," Dix assured her. "Feather's doing fine. She even let me put a blanket on her rump this afternoon. Of course she does miss you, but I'll tend to her real good."

"Feather?" Brock asked.

"I adopted a mustang from the B.L.M."

The Bureau of Land Management thinned the wild mustang herds that roamed the western rangelands, then they put the horses up for adoption. The mustangs were descendants of the Spanish horses and, when trained, made great riding mounts with stout constitutions. But not just anyone had the patience to gentle a wild mustang. Kylie obviously did.

Reflexively, his gaze went to her rounding tummy. She'd make a wonderful mother. He'd seen her patience and kindness as she'd interacted with horses. She'd be the same with children.

"Thanks, Dix. I don't know what I'd do without you." The sincerity in her voice said she meant every word.

Flushing, her foreman dropped his hat back on his head. "I'll be in my quarters if you need me."

This afternoon Brock had learned Dix resided in the old apartment over the barn where Kylie had stayed when she'd moved to the ranch. The bunkhouse, which once housed four to six hands, no longer had running water or electricity. Brock still didn't understand what had happened here, and he intended to find out.

Every step Kylie took to the sofa seemed to be an effort, and Brock knew she was hurting. She was so petite, her pregnancy mainly showed at her tummy. Her cheeks might be a tiny bit fuller, her breasts might be a little bigger—

He stopped that thought before it could form. He stopped that thought before a picture went with it. She was a pregnant woman, for God's sake! He couldn't be attracted to her.

Could he? Hadn't he always noticed Kylie, but—being five years older—kept away from her? After Alex had declared his intentions to marry her and kept declaring them until he did it, Brock had stepped away for good. She was still his brother's wife. She was still carrying his brother's baby. And she loved Saddle Ridge.

He'd almost hated it. He'd hated what Jack Warner had felt about it. He'd hated the fact that his father had left it to his brother. He'd hated all the memories that had made him feel like a second-class citizen and his mother an outcast. Everyone had known Jack hadn't loved Conchita Vasco. He'd done his duty by

her. When he'd met someone else who was his kind, who would produce the blond son he'd craved, he'd divorced Brock's mother and never cared about seeing her again. He'd been a cold man. When his new wife had been diagnosed with breast cancer and died a few years later, he'd turned even colder.

Coming back here had rubbed every one of Brock's nerves raw. Being around Kylie wasn't helping. The best solution for both of them was to sell Saddle Ridge and move on. But he had the feeling that wasn't anywhere in her plans.

Brock was dropping plates into the dishwasher when the phone rang. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kylie reach for the cordless on the end table by the sofa. She obviously knew the person on the other end because she propped a pillow at the sofa's arm and curled into it, trying to make herself comfortable.

In spite of himself, Brock wondered about her life now. What had she done in her free time before she'd become pregnant? Did she still ride into the Painted Peaks, hoping to glimpse the bands of mustangs that hadn't inhabited the mountains for years? Did she ever return to Devil's Canyon in the Bighorns and feel as if she were standing on top of the world? He'd taken her there once...the day before her graduation.

Why was he remembering that now? Why was he remembering the peace and awe on her face as she'd studied the striated cliffs, the gorge, the river below? Why could he still remember her absolute delight when she'd spotted a band of mustangs?

He'd learned "why" wasn't a good question to ask. What should he do? was more easily answered. Action won over philosophizing any day.

Fifteen minutes later, the kitchen cleaned up, a pot of coffee brewed and a mug in his hand, he no longer heard Kylie's voice on the phone.

Going to the living room he sat in the armchair across from her. "A friend calling to see if you got home safe and sound?"

The smile left her face, and at first he thought she was going to put those guards up again. Instead, she asked, "Do you remember Shaye Bartholomew?"

He remembered both girls Kylie had run with. Shaye was a brunette and Gwen Langworthy had auburn curls that had bobbed everywhere. "I remember Shaye. Her father was a doctor—a cardiologist."

"Yes. He still is. At least until the New Year. Then, from what Shaye says, he's going to retire."

"I'm surprised Shaye stayed in Wild Horse Junction. She was a smart girl."

"Smart girls leave?" Kylie asked with a hint of amusement.

"If I remember correctly, Shaye was headed off to college." Kylie had been smart, too, so smart she'd skipped a grade and was a year younger than her friends. But she'd never had aspirations to go to college or to leave Wild Horse Junction. Not as far as Brock knew.

"Right now she's a social worker part-time. Last February,

Dylan Malloy's sister died. He was probably a year or two ahead of you in school. Anyway, his sister had a baby right before she passed on, and her will made Shaye legal guardian."

"Not her brother?"

"After Dylan's and Julia's parents died, he'd given up his own dreams to get his sister out of foster care. She lived with him. I guess as an adult, she hadn't wanted to burden him again with a baby. But along the way of figuring out whether Shaye or Dylan would be the best parent for Julia's son, they fell in love. They just married in July."

"What about Gwen? Are you still in touch with her?"

"Sure am. She's an obstetrical nurse practitioner. She's getting married after Christmas and I'm her matron of honor."

Bypassing details of the wedding, he remarked, "You said you're due the end of January. When's your exact due date?" He was surprised she was going to be in a wedding that late in her pregnancy.

"January twenty-ninth. I'll be as big as a house, but Gwen didn't seem to care. Both Shaye and I are standing up for her."

"I'm surprised the three of you are still close. That doesn't often happen—childhood friends holding on until adulthood."

"No, I guess it doesn't. But we were always more like sisters than friends. Shaye asked me to come for Thanksgiving dinner, but her place will be bedlam with all her family. I'm not sure I'll be ready for that by Thursday."

"Wise choice."

"I'm glad you approve," she responded somewhat acerbically.

"Kylie, I didn't mean to make it sound—"

"As if you know best?" she interrupted. "That's exactly how you've made it sound ever since you arrived." Shifting to the edge of the sofa, she used her good arm to push herself up. "I think I'm going to turn in. It's early, but the doctor said to rest, so that's what I'm going to do."

She knew he wasn't about to refute the doctor's orders. She could make her escape and he'd be left with his thoughts, as well as the mess Saddle Ridge was in.

"Where's your computer?" he asked.

"In the spare room upstairs. Why?"

"Because I want to start going over the books."

"Tonight? I really should show you the program I use."

"I'm computer savvy. I have to be with the work I do. I can figure out almost any program. Do you have a problem with me looking at the records?"

"Would it matter if I did?" she asked with a sigh.

"No, not if you want me to help you."

"That's the problem, Brock. I don't know if I want your help, not only for my sake, but for yours. You don't want to be here. You don't want to be involved with Saddle Ridge."

"You're my sister-in-law. Family helps family."

"Like Jack and Alex helped you?"

"I didn't need Alex's help. And Jack? Well, he put me through college. That's one of the reasons my mother left me here with

him. He gave me my future, so I really can't complain."

"He never gave you the love and care you needed. You have every right to complain," she said softly...compassionately.

"Let's not get into that, Kylie. The past is what it was. Now Jack and Alex are gone, and you have decisions to make."

"Such as?"

"Such as whether or not you're going to sell Saddle Ridge and start a really good life with the proceeds."

She frowned. "Which you'll get half of."

He studied her for a few seconds. "You think that's why I came?"

"I'm still not sure why you came."

Since he wasn't, either, he was going to let that subject drop. But then he said, "I didn't come here to hurt you. I know you're grieving. I know you miss Alex and the life you had. I also know it's better not to make major decisions right after a loved one dies. But you really have no choice."

"I'm managing," she protested.

"That's why I want to look at the books. To see if you are."

She put a weary hand to her forehead.

He thought it trembled a little. "We'll talk about this tomorrow. In the meantime, don't you think you should be sleeping downstairs?"

"Why?"

"It would be safer. If you need things from up there, I can bring them down."

The expression on her face brought him to his feet because he knew she was going to fight him on this and probably everything else.

“You were Alex’s older brother, Brock, not mine. You say you want to help. Fine. There’s not much I can do about that. But helping doesn’t mean changing the way I live my life. Helping means taking some of the burden off of Dix. Helping means getting to know Feather until I can get back out into the barn. Helping means looking at my agenda, not setting one of your own. If you can help in those ways, I’d be more than grateful if you’d stay. But if you came here with the idea that I’m going to put Saddle Ridge up for sale and sell it to a developer so you can wipe away the memories and pretend you weren’t raised here, it’s not going to happen.”

Her blue eyes were shiny with emotion now. “I love this ranch. Every hill and valley, every fence post, every floor-board that creaks. It’s my son or daughter’s future. A way of life that’s vanishing. I won’t let it vanish for him or her.” She went to the stairway and took hold of the banister. “I’ll be careful, Brock. Believe me, I will.” She started up the steps.

Her shoulders held a courageous line, and in spite of the friction between them, he wanted to take her into his arms and tell her everything was going to be all right. But that was the last thing he intended to do. Truthfully, he didn’t know if everything would be all right. How could it be, when her husband was dead and she was in debt up to her pretty little ears? He had to find out

how much. He had to find out what it would take to dig her out.

“As soon as I warm up my coffee, I’ll work up in the spare room.”

She stopped and looked over her shoulder. “Do whatever you need to do. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He watched her until she reached the top of the stairs. Then she disappeared into the hall shadows. Moments later, he heard her bedroom door close.

Those had been tears in her eyes as she’d defended her dreams, and he felt like a heel for causing them. Snatching up his mug, he took it to the kitchen, hearing his father’s voice echo sarcastically in his head. Welcome home, Brock.

He refilled his mug, determined to block out his father’s indifference, along with the turmoil returning here had caused.

Chapter Two

When Kylie awakened, her room was pitch-black. No moon gave even an inkling of light. It was this time of night when she missed Alex most, and she wasn't even sure why. What she missed was the way they'd been together after they first married. What she missed was the friendship and true caring they'd once shared. Over the past year, Alex had been away more than he'd been home. In the middle of the night, she'd often awakened, wishing he were there holding her, smiling at her in that crooked, boyish way he had. The daytime hours were so busy and passed so fast, she didn't have time to think. At night she did. She had time to think, feel and miss what might have been.

She had turned in early because she'd been hurting and because she'd had to escape Brock's questions as well as the look of censure in his eyes. The corner of her heart that at seventeen had thought he could do no wrong begged to be unlocked. But if she unlocked it, all of her fears and worries and regrets would come pouring out. She didn't know if it was safe to give any of those to Brock. Her encounter with Trish Hammond was a sore that wouldn't heal. She badly needed salve for it. When she had some time alone with Gwen and Shaye, she'd probably tell them about it. But it wasn't something she could discuss easily. It wasn't anything she could discuss when other people were around. It was embarrassing and humiliating and so deep-down painful,

sometimes it took her breath away.

Alex had been unfaithful.

For how long? With more women than Trish? At the moment, she felt like Brock, wanting to evade or dismiss the past. She knew, in the long run, whatever happened to her would make her stronger. Still...right now she just plain hurt, emotionally and physically. Tears welled up in her eyes and she let them dribble down her cheeks. But then she stopped the self-pity, and as she had so often over the past months, she thought about her child.

Reaching to the nightstand, her fingers wrapped around her solution to insomnia—her tape player. There was a stack of cassettes there, too. She'd collected them over the years, and now switched on R. Carlos Nakai's Christmas music.

The haunting notes of flutes and bells had her rubbing her tummy tenderly. "What do you think, baby? I know this is one of your favorites. You always settle down when I play this one."

Her baby was a kicker, especially—it seemed—in the middle of the night. But this music always seemed to calm her little one, as well as her. Even if she didn't sleep while it played, she rested. Sweet visions of the mountains and the mustangs and the water rippling calm and serene filled the darkest time of night.

Using a technique she'd learned from a yoga class she'd taken with Gwen and Shaye many years before, she consciously relaxed her muscles, breathing out stress, breathing in peace.

Two soft raps on the door broke her focused concentration. "Kylie? Are you okay?"

“If I say I’m fine, will you throw a fit?”

She didn’t hear his sigh or see the roll of his eyes, but she knew he probably did both.

He answered gruffly, “You have a concussion.”

Yes, she did. The doctor had told her it would be better if she weren’t alone for the next few days. He’d probably told Dix the same thing. That’s why Brock was here. Some misguided sense of duty. He’d gotten the full gift of responsibility that Alex had lacked.

She switched off the tape player. “If you want to come in and see for yourself I’m not in a coma, feel free.” Propping herself a little higher on the pillows, she turned on the bedside lamp.

The doorknob turned, the door opened and then Brock was standing there in her bedroom, looking as if he’d rather be anywhere else on earth.

“I can tell you my name, where I live and who’s President of the United States,” she assured him.

“Has anyone ever mentioned that you can be the most frustrating woman on the planet?”

“Not within the last year or so. But I imagine Dix would like to at least once a day.”

Finally, Brock’s lips twitched up at the corners. “Is the music for you or the baby?”

“That’s a toss-up. Sometimes it settles him or her down so I can fall asleep again.”

“How’s the shoulder?”

“If I don’t move, it’s not so bad.”

“Do you need ice? You didn’t bring any up with you.”

“Sometimes the ice bag makes me feel like a popsicle. I was going to try to relax into oblivion.” He was still wearing his jeans and snap-button shirt. Obviously he hadn’t turned in yet. “Have you been on the computer this whole time?”

“Actually, not your computer, but mine. I got a call after you went to bed. I’m finishing up a data summary and analysis for a job I did last month. The company’s having a board meeting on Monday and the CEO would like it by Friday. I’ll get to your books, just not tonight. I’ll catch a couple of hours of sleep before I check the cattle with Dix.”

“Does that mean you’re not going to watch my every move the rest of the day?”

His dark eyes stayed pinned to her. “It means I’ll set out everything you need for breakfast and be back in to get you lunch. Don’t even try to argue. For the next few days, just consider yourself pampered.”

Kylie had never been pampered. The idea that Brock was going to do it made her feel all warm and tingly inside. Maybe she should just give in and enjoy a few days of rest.

All of a sudden the baby started a kicking storm. Her hand went to her tummy and she smiled.

“You felt something?” Brock asked, coming a few steps closer.

“Whether I’ve got a boy or a girl, he or she will probably be a kick boxer.” Something in Brock’s expression made her ask,

“Do you want to feel?”

In that moment, any camaraderie she'd felt with him fled. Heavy silence intensified the sound of the beating of her heart. She was wearing a flannel nightgown. When she'd shifted higher on her pillows, the coverlet had slipped and was only halfway covering her tummy. Nevertheless, she felt as if Brock could see right through her, could see beneath the quilt and her nightgown to the baby underneath.

“I think I'll pass,” he responded, his voice low and deep.

Because he didn't want to touch her? Because he didn't want to touch Alex's child? Because this baby was Jack Warner's heir and could inherit Brock's share of Saddle Ridge if she held onto the ranch? He had to resent her and the baby. There was no way they could have a common goal. No way he could help bring her dreams to fruition without trampling on his.

Had she thought they'd bond over Alex's child? How naive could she get?

She'd been foolish to suggest that he feel her baby kick. She'd made an awkward situation even more awkward, and anything she said now would just make matters worse.

Pulling the covers up to her chin, she looked away from his nearly black eyes, looked away from the beard stubble on his jaw, looked away from the man who had intrigued her almost all of her life.

“Good night, Brock,” she almost whispered, tired of always trying to figure out the best thing to do, tired of feeling as if

she were always swimming upstream against currents she'd never defeat.

“Good night, Kylie,” he returned, then left her room and closed the door.

Her throat tightened and she fought back tears, hating the hormone shifts that accompanied pregnancy. She thought about her wedding day and the album tucked away in the closet. She considered the days and nights Alex had been away and she'd been here alone. Then to her dismay, she all too vividly remembered the kiss she'd given Brock when she was seventeen and the way he'd kissed her back, just for a few moments. She felt guilty thinking about it, as if she were betraying Alex in some way. She'd wanted to be his wife. She'd expected their marriage to work. She'd thought they could be together more than they were apart.

One question played loudly in her head. What would have happened if Brock hadn't come to Jack Warner's funeral with a wife on his arm?

She didn't have the answer to that one and expected she never would.

Kylie descended the steps the following morning, surprised she had slept so late. It was 10:00 a.m., and she never slept past 6:00. But she supposed her body was trying to heal itself. It was healing itself and keeping her baby safe.

When she reached the kitchen, she spotted the cereal on the table, the toaster pushed to the edge of the counter and the place

set for her. It was as if Brock didn't even want her on tiptoes reaching into the cupboards.

His words when she'd asked if he wanted to feel the baby were still clear in her head. I think I'll pass. He was taking care of her out of misguided duty. He didn't really want to be involved.

Suddenly, the front door opened and Brock came inside, along with a rush of cold, Wyoming air. He was wearing a down parka that looked like one of Dix's, and his Stetson was pulled low. "I thought you might be getting up around now. How do you feel?"

"Better," she responded, then assured him, "Really."

Unzipping his coat, he hung it on the hook in the kitchen, then plopped his hat on the hat caddy beside the door. "I'm going to make a pot of coffee. I want to ride the parameters of the property and see just what condition the land is in."

"You remember how to ride?" she teased.

"That's not something I'll ever be likely to forget. Sometimes on a site I've ridden to hard-to-reach places."

"Hard to reach and dangerous?" she asked, thinking about the continents and countries where he might have found oil.

"Sometimes. That's when the pay was really good."

"Did your wife go with you? I know she was a geologist, too."

"Ex-wife," he reminded her, his shoulders more rigid, his deep brown eyes on the alert. "At the beginning, we worked jobs together. Then she got tired of the traveling and decided to take a staff job in Houston."

"You didn't want to take that kind of position?"

“Not particularly. I like the field work.”

Suddenly she wanted to know a lot more. “Is that what caused a rift between you?”

The clock ticked, the furnace fan switched on and finally Brock answered, “It doesn’t matter what happened between us. It’s over.”

After a brief hesitation, she asked, “Did you want it to be over? Or did she?”

“It was a mutual decision.”

She thought of Alex on the road. A husband and wife couldn’t have a marriage if one of them wasn’t there.

Although she didn’t say the thought aloud, Brock must have read her mind because he added defensively, “There was more than one reason why we divorced.”

“Do you still see her?”

“Enough questions, Kylie.” He looked angry and she didn’t know if that was because she was digging into his past, because she’d touched a nerve or because he was simply a private man.

Going to the coffeepot, he took it from the machine, filled the carafe with water and dumped it into the back.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” she said softly.

“Yes, you did. But what’s happened in my life has nothing to do with what’s going on here now.”

She wasn’t so sure of that. However, she took his very strong hint and changed the subject. “Speaking of what’s happening here now, how’s Feather?”

“She’s a looker,” he agreed. “Wary of me.”

“She won’t be for long if you’re patient with her.”

“We’ll see. Dix said you have a special oatmeal treat you give her.”

She pointed to a stoneware canister on the counter. “I make them myself when I have time. There’s about half a jar there. She also loves licorice hard candy.”

“I’ll remember that the next time I get into town. You’d better eat breakfast or it’s going to be time for lunch.”

As the coffee bubbled and brewed, Kylie went to the refrigerator for the container of milk. It was a gallon jug and more economical to buy it that way. But the container was still three quarters full and heavy.

Brock saw her go for the handle and was quickly beside her, his hand covering hers. “I’ll get it.”

She didn’t argue. She usually used two hands to maneuver it.

At the table he asked, “Do you want a glass of milk besides what’s on your cereal?”

“Half a glass.”

After he poured the milk into the bowl and the glass, he set the jug on the table and really studied her. They were standing close—close enough that she could smell the pine of his aftershave, the scent of Brock that hadn’t changed all these years. She’d pulled the upper part of her hair back in a ponytail and let the rest flow long. Now he touched her forehead beneath her bangs. With anyone else she probably would have shied away. The area

where she'd hit her head was tender.

His thumb was calloused, but oh, so gentle as it traced the edges of the bruise. "It's changing color. It'll be gone in a few days."

"I hope my shoulder heals as quickly. There are so many things I want to be doing."

"Like?"

"Like finishing making Christmas gifts. Like decorating for the holidays. Like getting the nursery ready. Like doing anything in the barn I possibly can. I can't stay out of the barn, Brock. I need the smell of hay to live."

Shaking his head, his hand tenderly cupped her cheek. "You can breathe in the hay. You just can't shovel it or move it. When you're feeling better, you can feed Feather her snacks. But that's about it, Kylie. You know it and so do I."

His touch on her skin sent tingling through her body. Why was she reacting like this? Because she already missed being held? Because she missed the intimacy between a man and a woman? Because when Brock touched her, she felt cared for and almost cherished in a way she'd never felt with Alex?

This was wrong...for both of them. When she stepped away from him, his eyes became flat and unreadable.

The front door flew open. Gwen Langworthy and Garrett Maxwell tumbled inside.

Seeing her in the kitchen, Gwen called, "Dix told us to come on in."

Gwen was carrying a chocolate bundt cake wrapped in plastic wrap.

In his arms Garrett lugged a huge carton. Taking it to the kitchen, he set it on the table. "I've got meat loaf and scalloped potatoes, a tray of lasagna and a frozen apple pie."

Kylie's eyes misted. "You shouldn't have gone to all of this trouble."

Maneuvering around the table, Gwen gave Kylie a hug. "No trouble. We had to eat. I just made double."

"Garrett, this is Brock Warner, Alex's brother. Brock, this is Garrett Maxwell, Gwen's fiancé."

Brock shook the man's hand. "Congratulations are in order. You're marrying after Christmas?"

"December twenty-eighth," Garrett answered with a grin.

Brock turned to Gwen. "And I remember you from the days you came riding here after Kylie moved in. You haven't changed."

"I don't know if that's good or bad," Gwen responded wryly. She patted Kylie's shoulder. "We can't stay and visit with you now. We have a meeting with a contractor this afternoon to talk about enlarging Garrett's house."

"So there will be room for Tiffany and the baby?"

"For them or just for us. We want Tiffany and Amy to stay as long as they need to," Garrett interjected. "But already Tiffany is talking about getting an apartment with another young mother in the spring."

"I'm going to miss them terribly when they leave," Gwen admitted.

Kylie briefly filled in Brock. "Someone left a baby inside Gwen's sunroom. After a search, she and Garrett found Tiffany, the young mom who hadn't wanted to give up her baby, but hadn't known what else to do. Gwen took them both in."

"It was a kind thing to do," Brock said.

Garrett dropped his arm around Gwen's shoulders. "She likes mothering. If Tiffany and Amy move out, we'll just have to work on producing some kids of our own."

Her cheeks flushed, Gwen murmured, "Well, they aren't going anywhere yet. And that's another reason we stopped by. How would the two of you like to join us for Thanksgiving dinner? Garrett's mom is flying in and my dad and a lady he's seeing will be joining us, too, along with Tiffany and Amy, of course."

Before Kylie could consider the invitation, Brock broke in. "The doctor wants Kylie to rest. Especially for the first week. She's still pretty sore and tired and—"

"I'm right here, Brock. I can answer for myself." She gazed up at Gwen. "I'd really love to come, but I can't. I have to take care of myself and the baby. Maybe next week we can get together. I should be feeling a lot better by then." She glanced up at Brock. "You could consider going for Thanksgiving dinner at Gwen's."

Appearing startled at that suggestion, he shook his head. "On Wednesday I'm picking up a turkey for us. We're not going to let Thanksgiving go by without roasting a bird."

“You’re going to cook?” Kylie looked amazed.

“I’m going to cook. I’ve developed skills over the past few years you know nothing about.”

There was a flash of something primitive in Brock’s eyes that connected to something just as primitive in Kylie. With her gaze locked to his, she trembled. The idea of spending Thanksgiving day alone with Brock was scary, intimidating and...exciting.

She shouldn’t be feeling excitement now. She should be mourning Alex’s loss. She should be nurturing the good memories they’d had between them. She should be remembering their friendship.

But all she could remember was Trish’s satisfied expression. All she could feel was the deep betrayal a wife experiences when her husband turns to another woman instead of her.

Underneath all of it was the invisible bond she felt to Brock.

After Gwen and Garrett’s visit, Brock had skipped lunch to finish examining the property. As he came into the house that afternoon, he found Kylie washing out her soup bowl.

“You can just leave that in the sink.” He wished she’d stop cleaning up after herself. He wished she’d stay put on the sofa, rest and heal. But she wouldn’t want to hear that again from him.

To make conversation, he remarked, “Garrett said he used to be FBI.” He’d actually enjoyed talking to Gwen’s fiancé. They’d quickly established a rapport over computer lingo. Garrett was now a security specialist for Web sites and alarm systems. But mostly, Brock had been interested in his search-and-rescue work.

As a pilot, Garrett often took off at the beep of his cell phone to look for a lost child.

“Does Gwen know what she’s getting into, marrying a man like him?” Brock asked.

Kylie swung around to glare at him. “What do you mean? He’s a good man.”

“I don’t doubt that. But how does she feel when he takes off in his Skyhawk and she doesn’t know when he’s coming back?”

“Gwen’s strong. And she knows how important Garrett’s search-and-rescue missions are to him. She already went through a rough situation with him landing his plane in a snowstorm. That’s when they both realized how much they loved each other.”

Just from his conversation with her, Brock could tell Gwen was less traditional than Kylie, more assertive and just as stubborn.

“He invited me to the hangar to check out his plane.”

“Gwen’s dad hangs out there sometimes. He often acts as a spotter for Garrett.”

Kylie dried her hands on the dish towel. But as she tried to do it one-handed, the towel slipped through her fingers and fell to the floor. She stooped to retrieve it, but when she came up she wobbled a little.

In two long strides, Brock was beside her, his arm around her, steadying her. “What’s wrong?”

“I just got a little dizzy.” With his arm around her, she was practically in his arms...practically against his chest...practically

holding onto his shoulder.

“You came up too fast,” he murmured, his chin close to her cheek.

When she took a deep breath, her hand slipped from his shoulder. He felt the path of it scorch through his shirt. The heat of her body fired his. Remembering that kiss so long ago, he wondered how she’d kiss now that she was a woman.

Damn it, he couldn’t go there.

Straightening, he put some distance between them. Only a few inches, but it helped. “Maybe you’d better take a nap this afternoon.”

“I don’t want to have trouble getting to sleep tonight.”

“Then go prop your feet up on the sofa. I can start a fire and you can listen to music.”

“I need to go upstairs and finish the beadwork on a Christmas present.”

“One-handed?”

“I can use my other hand if I’m careful. I just can’t move my shoulder.”

“Christmas is still weeks away.”

“I have a lot to do. I’m preparing for a baby as well as Christmas. I don’t trust myself with a sewing machine yet, but I can work at the table for a little while.”

He’d seen the table set up with containers of beads, pieces of leather and special tools.

Wanting to keep an eye on her, he figured out how to do it. “I

could start going through the ranch's records while you're there. Then if there's something I don't understand, you could explain it." He wanted to start with the year before his father's death and look at the figures for each succeeding year to see where the money had gone, to examine what expenses had taken their toll, to read why Saddle Ridge had gone into a decline.

"All right. We can do that. I've kept the books since Jack died."

"You have?"

Drawing away from him, she pulled a pack of saltines from the counter and took out a few. "You know Alex always said he didn't have a head for figures."

"I know that's what he said. But I'm not sure I always believed him. He preferred being in the barn to sorting receipts."

"Wouldn't anybody?" she quipped.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"How about you?" she asked. "Which would you prefer?"

"I'd prefer the barn," he replied easily. "But I know reports and vet records and feed expenses all go along with it."

"Alex only liked to do the things he liked to do," she murmured.

There was something in her tone that made him look a little closer. Yes, he saw grief in her eyes, but was there more than that? Had she helped run the ranch into the ground, too? He couldn't see much evidence of that. Still, Kylie could have an expensive hobby he didn't know about besides making Christmas

presents for her friends.

“It would be nice if we could just forget the drudgery, but we can’t,” he remarked.

The statement was meant to be leading, and he waited for her to say something else. Something more. He wanted to know if the pain in her eyes was from grief and loss or regret. But she didn’t say more and the silence weighed heavily between them.

Finally he nodded to the saltines. “I don’t see how you can eat those. They taste like cardboard.”

“They don’t,” she protested with a smile. “Especially not when they’re fresh. I’m trying to stay away from that chocolate cake Gwen brought.”

“She brought it for you to eat.”

“Oh, and I’m sure I will. But I’m trying to be good for today. Are you ready to go up now?”

For some insane reason, he wanted to sweep her up into his arms and carry her up those stairs. He wanted to make sure she didn’t fall, didn’t trip, didn’t overuse her shoulder. He was just going to stick close to her for a few days until she was feeling better, yet he realized the thought of doing that was both a pleasure and a pain. When he was around her, he knew he should stay away from her. When he wasn’t around her, he worried about her. He attributed it all to his big-brother protective instincts taking over. She was such a little bit of a thing, even pregnant.

Had his brother felt this protective of her?

That question gave him a stone-cold feeling. He motioned

toward the staircase. "Ladies first."

Once upstairs in the spare room, Brock realized how bad an idea this was. The room was small, barely big enough for the computer setup, Kylie's sewing machine, her craft supplies and the table she worked on. There was a soft leather purse laying on the table with fringes that were partially beaded.

When Kylie sat in the wooden chair at the table, he asked, "Don't you want a pillow or something?"

"A pillow would just slide off. This chair's just right with the table." She switched on an intensity light where she was working.

Although he booted up the computer, that wasn't where his attention stayed. Maybe it was the scent of Kylie's shampoo, or some kind of lotion. She'd never been one for perfume. She'd always chosen natural scents. This combination was something like peach and spice. At least that's what it smelled like to him.

When he glanced at her over his shoulder, she was already busy at work. She had her left arm propped on the table and was using her hands to hold the leather. Her head was bent and her silky, glossy hair, more golden than any wheat field, fell lazily over her shoulder. As she used tweezers and wire, her fingers almost looked as if they were dancing.

Again he turned his focus to the computer screen and the icons there, clicked on the accounting program and found the year he was looking for. But Kylie working silently less than five feet away was a distraction he couldn't ignore.

Out of the blue she asked, "What size turkey did you order?"

“It’s big. I just told Vince Shafer to hold one for me. How long has he had the store on Bear Claw Road? He used to sell from his ranch.”

Kylie had her lips pursed as she concentrated on slipping the bead onto the piece of rawhide. “Mmm, about three years, I guess. It’s only been the last one or two he’s gone organic with some of the vegetables. I like that idea, especially now that I’m pregnant.” Her gaze came up to meet Brock’s and he saw there hopes and dreams and longings that twisted in his chest.

She broke eye contact first and went back to her beadwork.

“How did Alex feel about being a father-to-be?” Brock asked nonchalantly, though he was feeling anything but nonchalant.

She took her time in answering. When she did, it was evasive. “He was getting used to the idea.”

“My guess is, he did want a son so he’d be able to teach him all the secrets of bull riding.”

After a moment, Kylie responded, “We never really discussed that.” Then she stood. “I think I am going to take that nap. This position’s hurting my shoulder and...and I don’t want to make it worse than it is.”

When she walked to the door, Brock thought she was as graceful as ever, pregnant or not.

Then she was gone, just like that, leaving him with too many questions.

He was going to find the answers...and soon.

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