



MILLS & BOON

Vintage INTRIGUE

**The Cowboy's
Hidden Agenda**

KATHLEEN CREIGHTON

Mills & Boon Vintage Intrigue

Kathleen Creighton

The Cowboy's Hidden Agenda

«HarperCollins»

Creighton K.

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CAPTOR...OR LOVER? One minute they'd been dancing...the next Laurie Brown found herself abducted, with a charming renegade, Apache cowboy Johnny Bronco, as her jailer. She was angry at his deception, but more furious with her own body for wanting the man with the fierce eyes and the skin-shivering voice. For wanting the man who held a politician's daughter captive in the name of blackmail...Though logic said otherwise, the mysterious cowboy's kindness and sympathy hinted at a hidden agenda. And even more inexplicable was the feeling that, if she could trust him, everything might turn out all right....

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“You weren’t in any danger.”

It was a bald-faced lie and Johnny knew it. Nevertheless, he felt entirely justified in adding bitterly, “I’d think you could trust me just a little.”

Laurie’s bark of laughter made him wince. “Trust you? This from the man who kidnapped me?”

He swung around to face her, blocking her way. “I’m also the man who saved your life,” he retorted. “Don’t forget that.”

All he could do was stare back at her, with his heart thumping and his breath like fire in his lungs. Suddenly he absolutely knew what was going to happen—what had to happen—if he didn’t find some way to stop himself from kissing her.

Stop himself? It would have been easier to stop his own beating heart.

Dear Reader,

Once again Intimate Moments is offering you six exciting and romantic reading choices, starting with *Rogue’s Reform* by perennial reader favorite Marilyn Pappano. This latest title in her popular HEARTBREAK CANYON miniseries features a hero who’d spent his life courting trouble—until he found himself courting the lovely woman carrying his child after one night of unforgettable passion.

Award-winner Kathleen Creighton goes back INTO THE HEARTLAND with *The Cowboy’s Hidden Agenda*, a compelling tale of secret identity and kidnapping—and an irresistible hero by the name of Johnny Bronco. Carla Cassidy’s *In a Heartbeat* will have you smiling through tears. In other words, it provides a perfect emotional experience. In *Anything for Her Marriage*, Karen Templeton proves why readers look forward to her books, telling a tale of a pregnant bride, a marriage of convenience and love that knows no limits. With *Every Little Thing* Linda Winstead Jones makes a return to the line, offering a romantic and suspenseful pairing of opposites. Finally, welcome Linda Castillo, who debuts with *Remember the Night*. You’ll certainly remember her and be looking forward to her return.

Enjoy—and come back next month for still more of the best and most exciting romantic reading around, available every month only in *Silhouette Intimate Moments*.

Yours,



Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

The Cowboy's Hidden Agenda

Kathleen Creighton



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KATHLEEN CREIGHTON

has roots deep in the California soil, but has relocated to South Carolina. As a child, she enjoyed listening to old timers' tales, and her fascination with the past only deepened as she grew older. Today, she says she is interested in everything—art, music, gardening, zoology, anthropology and history—but people are at the top of her list. She also has a lifelong passion for writing, and now combines her two loves in romance novels.

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Chapter 1

It was a coyote's wail that broke the fragile bonds of sleep. Lauren opened her eyes to find a thin silvery light streaming through the window bars above her cot—whether from the moon or approaching dawn she had no way of knowing. They'd taken away her watch, along with her shoes.

But they hadn't bound or gagged her. Thank heaven for small favors. She'd actually enjoyed, if that was the word, a fairly comfortable night on the narrow metal-frame bed, soothed to sleep by the familiar lullabies of lowing cattle and whickering horses. In the old saddle house they'd chosen for her temporary prison, the comforting smells of leather and wool and horse sweat and liniment had taken her back to places of her childhood, to those rare and wonderful long-ago summers of freedom on the Topsy Pee Ranch.

For that small kindness she supposed she had her jailer to thank—though her stomach clenched and her heart bumped in frustrated anger at the idea of being in the smallest way beholden to him. Him. The Indian. The one they called Bronco.

If only... The words hurled themselves like trapped sparrows against the barriers of her mind. If only...

But what could she have done differently? How might she have steered her course away from this disaster?

You know the answer to that, her mind replied. You should have stayed home in Des Moines, taken the firm's job offer, married Benjamin and never come to Texas at all.

No! Her heart rejected that with a silent cry that was also a plea for understanding. I had to do it. If I'd stayed, part of me—maybe the best part—would surely have died.

So if she truly did believe that coming back to West Texas, to the Topsy Pee Ranch, had been the right thing to do, where had things gone so wrong? How had she come to be locked up in a makeshift prison somewhere in Arizona with an Apache cowboy named Bronco for her jailer?

As if the very intensity of her thoughts had conjured him up, there was a loud creak and a whisper of cool air, fragrant with mesquite and juniper, and a man's shape was silhouetted against the window bars. A voice spoke softly, raising the fine hairs on her skin.

“Rise and shine, Laurie Brown. You decent? If you are, I'll turn on some light.”

Grudgingly she sat up, and even though she was fully clothed, pulled the rough woolen blanket around her. One hand went automatically to her hair, fingers raking through it to comb it away from her face. The aroma of coffee taunted her.

“I'm decent.” She bit the words off like a miser handing out tips, resenting every one. “How about you?” His chuckle was barely a ripple in the darkness.

Light stabbed at her eyes, and she turned her head away from its source, away from him, not wanting to look at him, remember his face or the things she'd thought and felt when she'd first laid eyes on him. Embarrassing, foolish things...

“Next up, comin' outta chute number three—Johnny Bronco, up on Ol' Number Seven. This is a local boy, ladies and gentlemen—”

As if too volatile to be contained a moment longer, horse and rider erupted from the gate, interrupting the announcer's drone like a shout. All around the dusty arena the spectators seemed to draw and hold their collective breath.

Almost against her will, Lauren moved closer to the steel pole-and-bar fence; in spite of her lifelong love affair with horses—or perhaps because of it—she'd never cared much for rodeos. But as she braced a hand on the crossbar and ducked her head to get a clearer view, her pulse began to pound in almost perfect sync with the thud of the bronc's hooves on the baked earth. She'd never seen a man ride an exploding bomb before.

As always, it was the horse that drew her attention first—though he was no great beauty, a rusty black with the scruffy jug-headed look of a wild mustang; the mean eyes, laid-back ears and bared teeth of a born outlaw. He didn't just buck with the rhythmic crow-hopping motion of the average bronc, either. This one was a real high roller, employing the wickedly erratic corkscrew action of a Brahma bull.

No way a man could stay up on such a beast for eight seconds, she thought in the instant it took her to transfer her gaze from horse to rider. Then she, like the crowd around her, caught her breath and forgot to let it go again.

Johnny Bronco. Had she heard the announcer right? Could that really be his name? If so, Lauren thought, no man had ever been more aptly named. Like the horse, he was no great beauty—the same powerfully compact hard-muscled body, the same dark angry look, with hair as long and black and coarse, worn in a ponytail that snapped the air in time with the mustang's tail, like two flags whipped by the same wind. A man too wild and rough-hewn for beauty. And yet...together man and horse were somehow transformed. Together they were beautiful.

To Lauren time seemed to slow, as around horse and rider the dust rose and caught the sunlight, becoming a swirling golden cloud, a medium more dense, yet more forgiving than air. Within it the two appeared to twist and turn with the effortless grace of dancers, so that the gritty battle of wills between man and animal became more like a form of epic ballet.

A buzzer sounded, shattering the fantasy. Lauren jerked back from the fence as the bronc hurtled past, the rider gripping the bucking strap with both hands now that the required eight seconds had passed. She felt the spatter of coarse sand against her jeans, smelled the sweat of man and animal, tasted the grit of dust, heard the grunts of effort, the slap of leather against horsehide and the announcer's voice on the loudspeaker:

“Nice ride! Ladies and gentlemen, how 'bout a nice hand for the hometown boy!”

Needing no encouragement, the spectators cheered and stomped the aluminum-and-wood bleachers, while out in the arena the two pickup riders moved in on either side of the still-agitated bronc. While one leaned over to release the bucking cinch from the black mustang's flanks and grab hold of his halter, the other moved into position to pluck the rider from his back. Once more Lauren stepped up to the fence, in time to watch Johnny Bronco slip deftly onto the back of the pickup horse, then to the ground. She found herself grinning in admiration as she watched him make his way back to the chutes, walking with the cowboy's loose-legged stride, slapping away dust and tipping his hat to the crowd in a cursory self-conscious way. Not a man accustomed to or comfortable with the limelight, Lauren surmised. It was something she understood.

And then suddenly, when he was almost to the fence, he raised his head and seemed to look straight at her. As if he'd sensed my presence...as if he felt my eyes on him....

As quickly as the thought formed in her mind she squelched it, feeling vaguely furtive and embarrassed, as if she'd been caught indulging in an inappropriate private act in public. The romantic lurking inside her had popped up again, in spite of all her efforts to deny—or at least ignore—it. What? she scoffed at herself. Just because the man was obviously Native American, did she automatically assume him to be possessed of heightened spiritual perceptions? Naive nonsense.

But she felt her smile fade as the cowboy's jet-black eyes went on staring into hers. And once again she drew a breath and forgot to let it go.

He had broad cheekbones, a chin with a slight but definite cleft, and full lips curved in a natural sneer. But it was the eyes that made him seem exotic and somehow dangerous—black and bright as chips of obsidian, with eyebrows that began low beside an arrogant nose and swept up and out from there like a raven's wings, giving him the fierce wild look of a warrior chieftain leading his hordes into battle across a windswept plain.

The smallest of movements scattered the exotic pictures in her mind. The cowboy's head and shoulders had realigned themselves ever so slightly, a subtle acknowledgment of her silent scrutiny.

Her embarrassment warmed to a conflagration. It had only been a second, she knew it had, but she felt guilty about staring, as if she'd invaded his privacy in some obscure way.

Then, when he was almost past her, the sneer softened for an instant into a smile. For that instant it seemed to her as if the smile was inside her and touching all her senses at once: she felt it like a warm breath against her skin, heard its music like the tinkle of wind chimes, smelled its fragrance and tasted its sweetness like aching memories of long summer days in childhood. Just for an instant...

Then he was reaching for the top bar and pulling himself up and over the fence with the fluid grace of a wild animal. It was then, with her perceptions returning to dusty sweaty reality, that Lauren realized the spurs on his boots had no rowels.

The breath she'd forgotten a while back gusted from her along with a little exclamation of surprise. A bareback bronc rider without spurs? What was that? She knew competitors in that event, assuming they managed to avoid being bucked off for the mandatory eight seconds, were judged in part on how vigorously they employed their spurs to the animal's neck and withers. Which was a big part of why Lauren didn't care for the rough-stock events. Timed events, like roping—now that was different. She considered a well-trained working quarter horse a wonder and a joy to behold, sheer beauty on four hooves, and never tired of watching horses and riders working together in perfect sync. But as far as she was concerned, the bucking events were just so much macho...well, bull. Grown men trying to show one another how tough they were by tormenting bigger, faster and stronger animals, and risking life and limb in the process. What could be dumber than that? But here was a man who'd just taken one of the most breathtaking rides she'd ever seen, and without once resorting to the barbarity of spurs!

"Ma'am?" A short distance away, the man called Bronco had dropped to the ground beside the fence and paused to regard her with those fierce brows pulled down in a frown and a question.

Lauren had to wait for the crowd's roar as a new rider burst from the chute, a moment that seemed to take forever, tethered as she was to those terrible eyes. When it had subsided, it was all she could do to hang on to her poise as she made a gesture toward his scuffed dust-caked boots and tried to explain. "I was just noticing you don't wear spurs. How'd you get that horse to buck like that?"

It seemed another interminable time before he answered her. A time in which his face remained absolutely deadpan, only those obsidian eyes moving as they subjected her to a thorough and frank appraisal. "Horse and I have an understanding," Johnny Bronco finally drawled.

His voice was a surprise—warm and deep, but with an unexpected roughness to its texture. Like a bearskin rug.

"An understanding..."

Under those forbidding brows, his eyes glittered now with something she'd have sworn was amusement. "He makes me look good, I don't hurt him. That way we both come out ahead." He touched a finger briefly to the brim of his white cowboy hat before he turned.

As she watched him walk away, his contestant's number flapping between his broad shoulders, Lauren discovered that she was smiling, and that, for no apparent reason, her heart was beating hard and fast.

An understanding...

He'd spoken almost those same words to her yesterday, she remembered, moments after she'd tromped on his instep with the heel of her cowboy boot. Just after he'd subdued her with embarrassing ease.

"Let's you and me come to an understanding, Laurie Brown," he'd whispered in her ear in that skin-shivering voice that she imagined must resemble the warning growl of an alpha-male wolf. "You don't give me trouble and I don't hurt you. That way we both come out of this unbloodied."

She thought she must have begun hating him at that moment.

“Brought you some breakfast,” he said now, his tone so indifferent, his face so empty of expression she wondered if she’d imagined that chuckle. He placed a foil-covered paper plate on the foot of the cot and held out a heavy crockery mug, adding, “Coffee?” with aloof courtesy, like a waiter.

Lauren took the mug and curled her hands around it, judging for a moment its weight and the heat of its contents and considering its possible effectiveness as a weapon.

It was a fleeting thought. Gazing into the shimmering black liquid, she saw instead a pair of glittering eyes, and was sure that her captor would already have read the notion in her mind. She remembered all too well the feel of his hands on her arms, the hard press of his body, like something not made of human flesh, bone and sinew, with reflexes quicker than thought. She remembered pain, too bright and sharp to bear but gone before she even had time to gasp. And still not something she cared to experience again anytime soon.

She ducked her head and sipped the steaming brew, then shuddered and thrust the mug away. “I take it with cream and sugar.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he said dryly as he moved to the door in that silent gliding way that was so different from the cowboy’s swagger she’d seen yesterday, watching him cross the rodeo arena. He paused with a hand on the door latch. “This morning you’ll drink it black. And you’ve got ten minutes to do it in. I’ll be back to take you to the john, then we ride.”

“Ride!” Lauren rose, clutching the blanket to her chest with one hand, the mug of coffee with the other. “Ride where? Where are you taking me?” Oh, how she hated the stark hope and fear in her voice.

A moment later she wondered if that might have been what made him hesitate, then turn his head to regard her along one shoulder. His dark gaze swept over her once, up and down, before he replied in a dispassionate tone that made her think, for some reason, of cops and military officers. “You’re being moved to a secure location.”

“Secure!” Jangling with adrenaline, she cast a wild look around her. “Who do you people think I am—Houdini?” And how, she thought hopelessly, will anyone find me then? At least they can trace me this far. People knew I was coming here to see, of all things, a man about a horse....

“Miss?”

Lauren started as a hand touched her elbow. She turned slowly, reluctant to leave behind the image of the black-ponytailed bronc rider nimbly dodging a collision with two miniature cowboys chasing each other through the sparse crowd with war whoops and whirling lariats. One frame stayed in her mind, though, as she faced the bronze-skinned barrel-chested man who’d spoken to her. It was that of a gloved hand resting briefly, almost tenderly, on a child’s dark head, and a chuckle drifting back to her on the dust-spangled wind.

“Miss,” the barrel-chested man said again, in a firm but deferent tone that identified him unmistakably as officialdom—even before Lauren noticed the red ribbon emblazoned with “Official” attached to the pocket of his white Western-style shirt. “I’m gonna have to ask you to move away from the fence, if you would. We don’t want to see anybody get hurt. If you’ll take a seat in the bleachers...”

“Sorry,” Lauren said cheerfully, dusting her hands as she yielded to the guiding hand on her elbow. “Actually—” and she flashed a smile at the official “—I’m looking for someone. Gil McCullough. You wouldn’t happen to know where I can find him, would you? I’m supposed to talk to him about a horse.”

“Gil?” The official’s eyes and body language registered surprise. Clearly he’d pegged her as a flatlander and a tourist in spite of her scuffed boots, well-worn jeans and light-blue long-sleeved shirt, Western-style but plain—working ranch-hand clothes. Probably her blond hair, she thought, and wished she’d thought to stuff it all up inside her hat and out of the way. In this crowd she stood out like a sore thumb—which, come to think of it, probably explained why the bronc rider had noticed her. So much for the notion of kindred souls.

“Well,” the official said affably, “he’s got a’ plenty of ’em.” He jerked his head in the direction of the campers and horse trailers parked in rows behind the arena. “That’s his outfit over there—white trailers with the big ol’ orange sun on ’em? Just go on over there and ask around. Somebody’ll know where he’s at.”

Lauren murmured her thanks, but instead of looking toward the trailer, her eyes were searching the hard-baked landscape and the clumps of cottonwoods that skirted it for some sign of the cowboy known as Bronco. But he appeared to have vanished into the crowds milling around the bucking chutes and refreshment stands. Or maybe, she thought, he’d simply been swallowed up in the shimmering heat waves, like a desert mirage.

A collective gasp rose suddenly from the crowd in the bleachers as a rider bit the dust—hard. The official headed for the arena fence as the announcer’s voice provided reassurance—“He’s okay, ladies and gentlemen, he’s okay. Let’s give the man a big hand—that’s all the reward he’s gonna get today.”

While the crowd cheerfully applauded the hapless rider, Lauren went off to find the man she’d come all the way to Arizona to see. With any luck, if she could manage to talk McCullough down enough on his asking price, tomorrow she’d be heading home to West Texas with one of the best quarter horse studs east of the continental divide for company.

“...expecting company—”

“What?” Lauren interrupted, and gave her head a shake, momentarily confused at hearing the word in her mind spoken out loud and panicked to realize she hadn’t any idea of the context.

Bronco’s eyes gave her no clue. “We’d just as soon you not be here when it arrives.” He glanced at his wrist. “Your ten minutes are now eight. If you plan on breakfast before we mount up, I’d suggest you get to it.” He thumbed the latch and pushed open the heavy wood-plank door.

The chilled air made Lauren gasp, lending a note of panic to the question she’d meant to ask with more dignity and calm:

“Are you going to kill me?”

Bronco halted as if she’d thrown something at him, one foot still on the plank step, the other already on the ground. Then he pivoted slowly back to face her. With his arms braced, one on the door, the other on the frame, he appeared to bar the way as if he actually thought she might try a break for freedom.

In contrast to the tension and the unspoken dominance in his posture, his chuckle sounded almost friendly. “Kill you? Why would we do that? You’re worth too much to us alive.”

“Worth what? Us? We? Wait—” Who are you people?

But the door had closed between them, and her only answer was the heavy thunk of the steel bar dropping across it.

Lauren stood and stared at the rough boards while her heart bumped painfully against her breastbone and her eyes burned in their sockets. Silent sobs scoured her throat. But though her jaws cramped and her body trembled with the strain, she held them back. She would not cry. If she did... well, for one thing, she’d never forgive herself.

Besides, something told her that once she gave in to the fear she was beaten. She didn’t know who these people were or why they’d taken her prisoner, or why they thought she’d be of value to them, but as long as she was alive and kept her wits about her, they hadn’t won. No sir. It would take a lot more than being locked up in a saddle house to defeat Lauren Elizabeth Brown! Hadn’t her aunt Lucy told her once that she was descended from a woman who’d survived an Indian attack by setting fire to her own homestead, then tying her baby up in her apron and climbing down into a well? And come to think of it, hadn’t Aunt Lucy herself, all of five feet tall and a hundred pounds soaking wet, once thwarted her own kidnapers by setting fire to the Chicago high-rise they were holding her in?

She could almost hear Aunt Lucy’s funny rusty-nail voice saying, “Just don’t lose your head, Lolly Brown. Keep your wits about you, and you’ll be all right.”

Keep your wits about you. Think, Lolly, think!

Lolly. She hadn't thought of that childhood nickname in years. Her brother Ethan had begun calling her that because when he was little he couldn't pronounce the name Lauren. She remembered how she'd hated it when he'd learned that stupid song: "Lollypop, Lollypop, oh, Lolly Lollypop..." She'd punched him good for singing it, too, more than once. But nobody had called her that since... oh, Lord, it must have been since she was ten or eleven years old. Yes, it had been—the year her parents divorced, the year she'd gotten her first horse, Star. The year Dixie had come to live with them. The year...

Then the memories were tumbling in on her, memories of the one time before in her life when she'd known fear like this. When she'd felt as utterly and desperately alone. This wasn't the first time she'd been taken and held against her will.

That other time, of course, she hadn't been alone. Even now, sixteen years later, she could feel Ethan's small hand creeping into hers, feel his warm body snuggling against her for warmth and comfort, hear his quivering voice whispering, "Lolly? Will you sing me a song?" even though he knew she couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Ethan—her baby brother—twenty-two years old now, and a premed junior at UCLA. But she could still remember as if it were yesterday the overwhelming burden of responsibility that had made her feel even more alone. This time, at least, she had only herself to think about.

Oh, but that's not true.

No, it wasn't true at all. Because suddenly she knew why she was here, locked in this saddle house on an Arizona horse ranch. She knew why she was worth something to these people, even if she didn't know exactly who they were.

It was because they knew who she was.

"Hi, I'm Lauren Brown—we spoke on the phone? About that bay stud you have for sale?"

Gil McCullough's vivid blue gaze narrowed as it swept over her in openly masculine appraisal, producing a charming fan of creases in the tanned skin at the corners of his eyes. He held the hand she'd offered just a beat longer than necessary, while his smile broadened to reveal strong vaguely predatory teeth.

"Well, hello, Lauren Brown. I sure do remember our phone conversation, but tell you the truth, I wasn't expecting to see you till tomorrow." And yet his tone said plainly he didn't mind all that much that she'd come early. It was a ploy Lauren recognized, designed to disarm her and at the same time put her on the defensive.

In fact, the man McCullough was himself a type she recognized, and about what she might have expected from the brief conversation she'd had with him on the phone. He was big, lean and weathered, with a full head of silver-gray hair worn in a crewcut, a cowboy's squint and a strong clean-shaven jaw. A handsome man, which she also could have guessed, given his supreme self-confidence and slightly seductive tone on the telephone. The only surprise was an almost military bearing that set him well apart from the ranchers she'd come to know back in Texas. Most of them, neighbors of the Topsy Pee, were rump-sprung, stove-up and gimpy-legged by the time they were fifty, from too much time spent either on top of or getting thrown off some four-legged beast or other. She'd have to peg Gil McCullough as more the executive type, one who'd come to ranching as a hobby after acquiring his wealth in some other more dependable line of work. The type who patrolled his lands and herds from four-wheel-drive vehicles and sleek single-engine airplanes. In any case, an alpha male through and through, absolutely certain of his dominance over men and women alike.

Fortunately Lauren wasn't intimidated by such men. Or attracted to them, either. She couldn't be and have much hope of surviving—and thriving—in the legal profession. She'd managed to do both those things by meeting such men head-on, armed with her own arsenal of brains and self-assurance—tempered, when necessary, with a judiciously applied veneer of feminine charm.

“When necessary” meant she wasn’t above employing a healthy dollop of that charm now. Which was why, before answering, she took off her hat and finger-combed her blond hair back from her damp forehead as she slanted a smile to meet the rancher’s mildly rebuking frown. “Well, now, Mr. McCullough—”

“Aw, call me Gil, honey—please.”

“Well, Gil, honey,” she said softly, teasingly, “you know, you weren’t very forthcoming about giving me a price. I figured I’d better get on over here and talk to you face-to-face, see if we can agree on the numbers before I take a look at the horse.”

McCullough laughed playfully, showing those formidable teeth. “Well, yeah, but that’s the idea, don’t you see? You’ve got to come see ol’ Cochise Red before I tell you my price.”

Lauren laughed, too, even producing a dimple. “Oh, but that’s not fair. See, I know what you’re up to. You’re trying to get me out there to see him so I’ll fall in love with him. Get me so set on having him, I’ll agree to any price!” Several of the men lounging in the cottonwood shade near the camper laughed, and someone called, “She’s got your number, Gil.”

McCullough drew himself up in mock offense, a subtly aggressive posture disguised as banter. “You bet I am. Hey, listen—let me tell you something. Cochise Red’s one helluva horse. Whoever gets him’s gonna have to pay me what he’s worth. And tell you something else—whoever meets my price is gonna get their money’s worth.”

“Oh, I believe you, Gil,” said Lauren earnestly. “Everything I’ve seen and heard so far tells me I’m probably going to get my heart broken, but—” she sighed heavily and ducked her head in order to settle her hat back in place “—you have to understand, if it was my money I was spending...” She looked up again, and this time injected wistfulness into her smile. “But unfortunately, it’s not up to me. I’m just the agent for the Parish family—I thought you understood that. I’m authorized to go only so high, and if your asking price is beyond my limit, well, much as I hate to think I’ve come all this way for nothing, there’s just no point in taking it any further. Sorry to have bothered you, Mr. McCullough. Maybe we can do business another time.” She tilted her head in a little nod of farewell, then pivoted and began to walk away, hips swaying, fingertips tucked in the pockets of her jeans, head down, watching her boots scuff through the dust. A picture of dejection, with a tinge of sex appeal.

She’d gone maybe five steps—which was a couple more than she’d estimated it would take—when McCullough fell into step beside her and draped a fatherly arm across her shoulders. She halted instantly, and he took the arm away when she turned.

“Ah, hell,” he said, and appealed briefly to the cloudless sky as if for guidance, his squint perplexed. “You know what, I’d really hate for you to come all the way from Texas for nothing. What you and me need to do is sit down somewhere, have us a cold beer and a nice dinner, and talk. What do you say?”

“Well, I—”

“Tell you what.” His hand was on her shoulder again, his head lowered close to hers. “Right now I’ve got to go find my heeler—sounds like they’ve started in on the steer wrestlin’, and that means team ropin’s comin’ up next. But why don’t we—”

“You rope?” Lauren was surprised; she hadn’t taken him for the working type.

McCullough winked, showing those teeth again. “I like to keep my hand in now and then.” He reached out to waylay a cowboy with a contestant’s number on his back coming from the direction of the arena. “Hey, Dub, seen Bronco anywhere?”

The cowboy jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Last I seen he was over at the stock pens.”

McCullough laughed. “Talkin’ the steers into lettin’ him rope ’em, I imagine.”

“Bronco,” said Lauren, when the cowboy had shared the joke and the laughter and moved on. “Is that the same one I just saw up on a bareback bronc?”

“That’s the one.”

Lauren smiled as McCullough walked her on, his arm friendly across her shoulders. “Does he rope as well as he rides?”

“Honey,” the rancher drawled, “anything involving a horse, there’s nobody in this world better. Tell you what,” he added more briskly, giving her a quick squeeze before releasing her, “why don’t you meet me for dinner tonight? A lot of the rodeo crowd, they like to get together evenings at Smoky Joe’s—know where it is? Can’t miss it—just outside of town on the highway. You’ll hear it before you see it. ’Bout eight o’clock? Good—we’ll see you there.”

And he left her to go angling off toward the livestock pens with that curiously military stride, now and then nodding to acquaintances as he moved through the crowd.

Left behind, Lauren exhaled in an exasperated gust. Then she shrugged and glanced at her watch. Maybe she’d stick around and watch the team-roping before heading back into town. After that she’d see about checking into a motel, maybe catch up on the sleep she’d missed last night before it was time to put on her war paint and strap on her armor and head for the showdown with McCullough.

She smiled to herself, exhilarated at the thought of the battle ahead. She knew McCullough’s type. If she played him right, the stallion Cochise Red was as good as hers.

Chapter 2

Bronco stood with his back and one foot propped against a corral fence post and watched the eastern sky turn from indigo to purple to mauve, to a gaudy shade of salmon streaked with gold. Ordinarily sunrise was his favorite time of day—something in his genes, he guessed, remnants of an ancient reverence of his father's people for the Creator Sun. But this morning the appearance of that molten sliver brought him no joy. This morning it was only a prod and a portent: Time to go—bad times coming. He and the woman must be well away before they got here.

Lauren Brown. He knew Gil figured she was his trump card, but Bronco knew for a fact that taking her would prove to be the biggest mistake McCullough ever made. He also knew there was no point in trying to tell the commander that; Bronco had run into officers like him before. A smart man but arrogant, and a fanatic on top of it—a bad combination, especially when combined with some real power. It was such men, Bronco believed, who made the decisions that lost wars and turned the tides of history.

By this time, though, he himself was pretty fatalistic about the whole thing. The commander had been dead-set on this plan, and now that he'd put it in motion, Bronco figured there wasn't much anybody could do to stop it. A bad business, destined for a bad end—for somebody. Bronco meant to make damn sure it wasn't him.

He glanced at his watch, then looked over toward the small split-log building with the reflected glow of pinkish-yellow light showing in its barred window. After a moment he straightened and pushed away from the fence post. Her ten minutes was up. He slapped his gloves once against his Levis, then drew them on and headed for the saddle house. On the way he couldn't help but notice that his boots were hitting the hard dirt in the same rhythm as the song inside his head, the one that kept singing: She's bad news...bad news...bad news.

But the picture in his mind that went with the song didn't look like bad news. It was the picture of Lauren Brown walking into Smoky Joe's last night, looking like a Texas sunflower....

Johnny Bronco's Saturday-night routine was a well-established tradition at Smoky Joe's Bar and Grill. He'd generally arrive around seven o'clock, choose his favorite table along the back wall near the rest-room door and order a hamburger medium well along with the first of what usually amounted to about six beers. He'd work on the burger and the beers between trips to the dance floor and the men's room and trying to hit on any good-looking women that happened to be in the place, until along about eleven, twelve o'clock when he'd pick a fight and get himself thrown out on his butt. The regular patrons of Smoky Joe's didn't seem to mind this, had even come to expect it as an essential part of the evening's entertainment, and the management didn't hold it against him as long as nothing got broken and nobody got hurt.

Anyway, people around there tended to cut Johnny Bronco quite a bit of slack, just as they had way back in the days when he'd been the hometown football hero, all-conference wide receiver and all-time leading scorer for the White Mountain Mustangs. Locally, there were two things a man could do that would pretty much guarantee him universal respect: be good with a football or be good with horses. Johnny Bronco happened to be both. It was a pretty sure bet that after the kind of show he'd put on out at the rodeo arena that afternoon, he wasn't going to have to pay for very many of those beers.

The regular crowd in Smoky Joe's had been so enthusiastic in their congratulations, in fact, that by the time Lauren Brown walked in at eight-fifteen Bronco was well ahead of the game. There were three long-necked bottles lined up on the table in front of him and a fourth cradled against the front of his bright red dancin' shirt, and he was grinning and keeping time with the heel of his boot as he watched the energetic bunch on the dance floor muddle through the steps of "Elvira."

He knew the minute she walked in. He'd been watching for her, of course, but even if he hadn't, she'd have been hard to miss. He'd already noticed she was tall for a woman, reed-slender in her snug-fitting jeans and expensive stack-heeled boots and a waist-length scoop-necked knit shirt the color of sunflowers. She was the kind of woman who looked her best astride a horse—or a man, for that matter. Long strong legs, round firm breasts—not too big, just the right size to fill a man's hands with nothing going to waste. And then there was that hair—a thick curving fall to her shoulders, the exact shade of winter grass on a cold sunny day in the high country. He could almost smell its fresh sweet fragrance, see it ripple when the wind caught it.

Bronco checked his watch again and smiled to himself. Fifteen minutes late—just enough to let McCullough know she wasn't at his beck and call, not quite enough so that he'd be able to justify getting pissed off about it. Hell, she'd just bat her baby blues and show him her dimple, and ol' Gil would have no choice but to chalk it up to feminine privilege. A dangerous combination for a woman—headstrong and smart. Bronco knew he'd do well not to underestimate her.

He reminded himself of that now as he lifted the bar away from the saddle-house door. He was half expecting her to ambush him with the coffee mug; he hadn't missed the way her eyes had sharpened when he'd handed it to her, or the barely imperceptible tensing of her wrists as she'd tested its weight. She was gutsy, that one, on top of headstrong and smart.

He was relieved when he found her more or less where he'd left her; he'd had to hurt her once, and it was something he hoped never to have to do again.

She was sitting on the cot with her overnight bag on her knees. He could see her knuckles whiten on the handles when she saw him, as if she wanted nothing in this world so much as to chuck it at him. He couldn't blame her for that, or the fact that her voice, when she spoke, was taut with rage.

“You went to my motel room?”

Bronco grunted. “Well, I didn't personally.”

“I suppose you—they—somebody checked me out?”

He twitched a shoulder. “Didn't have to. You know those Motel 6 kind of places—they're generally pay in advance.”

“So, you—they just cleaned it out. Packed up my things.” Her voice burned with frost, in sharp contrast to the warm pink blossoming in her cheeks. “You went through everything?”

Bronco didn't bother to answer that, just lifted a pair of saddlebags from a sawhorse near the door, smacked them once to get rid of some of the dust and tossed them to her. “If there's anything in there you want to take along, better put it in here. And do it fast. We're leavin'. Now.”

She threw him a look of pure hatred, which strangely enough he found exhilarating, rather like watching a bolt of lightning rip across a slate-black sky. He hid his smile from her, though; it wasn't going to do either of them any good to make her madder than she already was.

He stood and leaned against the door with his arms folded across his chest and watched her transfer the contents of the overnighter to the saddlebags. He was trained to be observant, and it struck him that her movements weren't quite coordinated, as if she was trembling violently inside. And not all from anger, he imagined. There was fear there, too, as hard as she might try to hide it. He tried to imagine what it must be like for her, one minute to be going about her business and then without warning to find herself forcibly taken prisoner, with no idea why or what it was all about or what was going to happen to her. He thought she was holding up pretty well, considering.

Although, as smart as the lady was, he wouldn't be a bit surprised if she'd gotten the whole thing figured out by now.

Finished with her packing, she rose and put herself to rights, shaking each foot to settle the pant legs down over the tops of her boots, jamming her shirttails any which way into the waistband of her jeans, skimming back her hair and fastening it with a rubber band she'd retrieved from the saddlebags. Efficient, Bronco observed. No nonsense, no fuss, and a surprising lack of vanity for so beautiful a woman. For a woman soon to become one of the world's most famous and recognizable.

“Ready?”

She was standing before him with the saddlebags over one shoulder, storm-cloud eyes almost level with his. He was aware of a disturbance in his insides as he gazed back at her, a sensation that felt oddly like thunder rolls.

“Got a jacket?” he drawled, keeping his eyes veiled.

She cut him a look that was pure acid. “Are you nuts? It’s August. This is Arizona.”

He didn’t argue with her. He’d find something for her to wear. She was going to learn soon enough how chilly a summer monsoon could be at seven-thousand-foot elevation.

Instead, he opened the door and held it for her with mocking gallantry, which she acknowledged with a look that for once he couldn’t quite figure out.

“I should never have danced with you,” she muttered bitterly as she passed him.

To that, Bronco could only add a fervent, if silent, Amen.

He wasn’t quite sure why he was doing it; he did know for sure it wasn’t going to make his bosses happy. But hell, he was Johnny Bronco, and if he didn’t try to hit on the prettiest girl in the place at least once tonight, people were going to think something was wrong with him.

He placed the fourth beer bottle, now empty, on the table, lining it up precisely with the three already there, then pushed back his chair. He wove through the noisy crowd, rocking his body slightly in time to the heavy country beat, aware of the glances and smiles that followed him on his way. But his step was steady, a self-confident swagger; if he kept to his usual timetable, the effects of the alcohol weren’t due to kick in until beer number six. That was still a good two hours off. This was party time.

McCullough saw him coming and waved him over, relaxed and jovial. Lauren turned to see who was moving up behind her, and when she did, her hair rippled across her shoulder blades like a sea of long grass when the wind touches it. Bronco saw the flare of recognition in her eyes, heard the sharp hiss of her breath. Then she was facing forward again while he traded greetings and shot the usual masculine bull with Gil.

But he’d marked the subtle changes in her body—the stillness, the tension, a certain awkwardness that hadn’t been there before—that let him know she was aware of him in ways she hadn’t been aware of Gil McCullough. Like a mare when she senses the stallion’s presence. He felt a similar current go through his own body, like a charge of electricity—unnerving in itself, but more so because it wasn’t supposed to happen. It wasn’t part of the charade.

Nor could he have pretended his accelerated heartbeat when he braced his hands on the back of her chair and leaned close to her to make himself heard above the crowd noise. It was an angle calculated to give him a nice view of her breasts and the sweet valley between them, a view he’d availed himself of with more women than he’d ever care to account for. He tried to recall whether it had ever caused his pulse to quicken and his temperature to rise the way it was doing now.

“Would you like to dance?” he growled with his lips close to her ear.

She leaned away and turned her head to look up at him. “Do you dance as well as you ride?” She said it lightly, and both the comment and the body language were meant to be flirtatious. But somehow to Bronco they didn’t look or sound true, as if she hadn’t had much practice at it.

Which wasn’t something anybody would have said about him. “You’ll have to judge that for yourself,” he drawled, dropping his eyelids to half-mast. He straightened, moved back a step and held out his hand.

For a moment that seemed a lot longer she looked into his eyes, while his heart hammered against his breastbone and his knowledge of the trouble he was walking her into pulsed like a strobe light in his mind.

Lady, can’t you tell when the wolves are gathering? Get the hell outta Dodge while you still can! Forget about that horse you want so badly. Just get in your truck and drive on back to Texas. Can’t you sense the danger you’re in?

Then again, he thought, maybe she did sense it, just didn't have enough experience with that sort of thing to know what it was that was making her feel so tense and edgy.

She opened her mouth in indecision, then threw a questioning look at McCullough, who waved her on with an overdone joviality that rang as sour as her flirting did.

"Ah hell, honey, you can go ahead. I'm an old married man." But the look he sent Bronco carried another message: Screw this up for us, boy, and I'll kill you myself.

Bronco stretched his lips in a smile. "I don't bite."

"Oh, well, then forget it," she joked, giving her head an airy little flip. Her hair swept forward across her shoulder, and Bronco caught a whiff of green apples.

She said something to him as they were making their way toward the dance floor, something he couldn't quite hear with all the noise. He said, "Beg pardon?" and moved in close behind her, putting his hands on her bare arms. He felt her flesh twitch beneath his fingers, like the hide of a nervous horse.

She nodded her head toward the dance floor, where the band was doing its best to organize a crowd already too boozed up for coordination into something resembling a line. "I've never done this before—line dancing."

He gave her arms a squeeze that was meant to encourage, nothing more. But he felt her heat warm him as if somebody'd turned the sun on and hit him full in the chest with it.

"It's easy," he said, and even he was startled at the growl in his voice. "Just keep your eyes on the person in front of you and do whatever they do."

The song had started, and the wooden dance floor vibrated to the more-or-less synchronized stomping of several dozen pairs of boots. Holding Lauren lightly by her upper arms, Bronco guided her into one of the swaying, dipping, turning lines.

"Give it a couple beats to get the rhythm," he rasped with his lips close to her hair, and knew a moment's light-headedness from the scent.

She nodded and he let go of her. She fixed her eyes on the overstuffed backsides of the couple in front of her—tourists in fancy Western clothes all duded up with embroidery and fringe, and just as obviously lost as she was. After a few bars of trying her best to follow their giggling and stumbling, she looked over at Bronco, lips wry and eyes shining with laughter, and lifted her hands in a hopeless shrug.

Without missing a beat, Bronco stepped over in front of her, at the same time guiding her into position behind him. He placed her hands on his hips, covered them with his own and held them firmly in place there as he moved through the sequence of steps, hip waggles, leg kicks and all. It took only a few beats before she was moving with him as naturally as breathing.

Though his own breathing could hardly be described as natural. Having her there behind him, knowing she was so close, her body almost but not quite touching him, made his skin shiver and his spine contract and the fine hairs on the back of his neck lift with awareness. And that wasn't the only thing that was lifting. The stirrings elsewhere in his body were downright uncomfortable, given the tightness of his jeans.

His only regret was that he couldn't see her. And yet...he could see her. With his eyes closed he watched her slender body pick up the rhythm, move with innate grace and in perfect harmony with his, her laughter like sunbeams, illuminating the pictures in his mind. Except that, in those pictures, she was naked in his embrace, and around them all was warmth and light and peace, a world in perfect harmony...

...until the dance steps called for a pivot, and he turned but she didn't, and he found himself face-to-face, chest to chest with her, with her hands still clamped on his belt. Her little "Oh!" of dismay was like a thunderclap. A wakeup call.

While he stood staring at her with his fingers wrapped around her elbows and his senses in dangerous disarray, the crowd around them began to clap and whoop and holler. The line dance had

ended. The band segued into a slow country standard, and after a moment's hesitation she moved—just a little, but it was enough. Enough to bring her right into his arms.

What could he do? He hadn't meant to take it any further than that, but against his better judgment he went ahead and danced with her again—not only that one, but the next. But the perfect harmony he'd felt with her before was gone. He'd handled live explosives with less constraint. All the while he was holding her body close to his he kept telling himself, What in the hell were you thinking? You know who this is. You know what you're going to have to do....

He thought, I never should have danced with her....

Bronco's own quarters were in the foreman's cottage, in the shade of a big cottonwood about halfway between the main house and the horse barns. Normally he shared it with Ron Masters, the ex-navy demolitions expert who was McCullough's second in command, but since Masters was currently busy up at the high base camp getting ready for unwelcome visitors, he figured it would be okay to let his prisoner come in to use the john. By a bachelor's standards it was clean enough—a less objectionable choice, anyway, than the bunkhouse could have afforded her.

He went in with her while he checked for escape routes and potentially lethal weapons, then left her with the succinct warning, "Five minutes—then I'm comin' in after you."

While he waited for her, he took a sweatshirt out of a drawer and a poncho from the closet. He laid the poncho out on his bed, placed the sweatshirt in the middle of it and rolled them both into an oblong bundle the right size for tying onto the back of a saddle. Then he leaned across the bed, fingered back the window shade and looked out.

Though the sun was up, it was early yet. The air coming through the dusty screen was still cool and smelled of juniper and wild grass. There were no signs of life from the main house; McCullough had left last night to follow Ron and pick him up after he'd dumped Lauren's truck and trailer. They'd be going straight on to the base camp after that. He could just see the back end of Katie McCullough's SUV parked in the semicircular drive in front of the house, though, and that worried him. He hoped it didn't mean she'd changed her mind about going to stay with her mother in El Paso until after the dust had settled. The last thing he wanted was for this to turn into another Ruby Ridge.

Time was running out.

The thought had no sooner entered his mind when he heard the faint click of the bathroom-door handle. He was there waiting beside the door when it opened.

His prisoner didn't say anything, just glanced at him as she moved past him, carrying the saddlebags over one arm. She smelled of mint toothpaste. Her hair looked damp around her forehead and her face had a just-scrubbed look. Her shirt was rather fiercely tucked into the waistband of her jeans, giving her slender curves more definition than they should have had, a taut and tidy look he found unexpectedly erotic.

Shutting out thoughts he had no business thinking, Bronco watched her move into his bedroom, easing into his personal space the way a familiar melody comes to the mind.

"So this is where you live?" She asked the question with casual curiosity, as if she was some easy woman he'd picked up in a bar and brought home for the night and this was the morning after. Her eyes traveled around the room, taking in the neatly made twin beds and the rolled-up bundle on his, then came back to him. "Nice digs." Her lips twitched in an aborted attempt at a smile. "Not exactly what I expected."

Bronco grunted, feeling as if she'd sucker-punched him. It was an old wound, and he reacted with reflexive anger, lashing coldly at her, "It's a room. What were you expecting—a tepee?"

He regretted the remark when he saw her flinch. What the hell was the matter with him? She hadn't meant it like that, and he knew it.

He was glad she didn't try to flounder through some guilt-ridden apology. She leveled a shaming look at him, then said quietly, "Night before last I saw you get dead drunk, start a brawl and get tossed into the parking lot, remember? This room—beds all made, that squeaky-clean bathroom in there—

they don't exactly go with that 'drunken Indian' image, do they? You don't fit that image." And though her eyes narrowed in speculation when she said it, there was something else there, too—a whisper of suppressed excitement in her breathing, a certain tension in her body.

Bronco felt himself go quiet and wary. "Well, now, what kind of image do you think I fit?"

"I don't know," she said softly, thoughtfully.

"I'm just a plain ol' horse wrangler," Bronco muttered, turning to retrieve the rolled-up poncho so she couldn't see his eyes. Acting—playing a part—was one thing, but outright lying didn't come easy to him and never had. "Believe what you want—"

She broke in with a snort of anger before he'd finished. "Yeah, right. And this is just a horse ranch, Gil McCullough is John Wayne and I'm Maureen O'Hara, and that's why I spent last night locked in a tack room with bars on the windows while a bunch of people I don't even know cleaned out my motel room. What do you think I am, stupid?" Her voice trembled, and the tears she had yet to shed shimmered in her eyes.

"No, I don't think you're stupid," Bronco said evenly as he took her arm. What he did think—about her and the whole damned mess—didn't bear looking at too closely. "Time to go. Come on."

It surprised him when she struggled against his grip, twisting to look at him. "Who are you people? What's this all about? What do you want with me?"

You'll find out soon enough, he thought grimly as he hustled his captive out the door of the cottage and down the wooden steps. A whinny rose from the corrals behind the stables. His body tensed and he paused, listening. He heard nothing out of the ordinary, but a thrill of urgency rippled down his spine as he tightened his hold on her and quickened his step.

She went with him unresisting for several paces. But her voice, when she spoke again, had gone tense and quiet. "It's about my father, isn't it?" He didn't answer her. After a moment he heard her take a deep breath. "Well, whatever you people are planning, it's not going to work. My father won't let you get away with this. He won't be blackmailed, either."

This time Bronco did reply, on an exhalation that was almost prayerful. "Laurie Brown, for your own sake, I sincerely hope you are mistaken."

A council of war was taking place in a seventh-floor room at the Watergate in Washington, D.C. Present were the acting U.S. attorney general, Patricia Graham; Henry Vallejo and Vernon Lee, heads of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the FBI, respectively; and last but not least, the former attorney general, now the top contender for his party's nomination for president of the United States, Everett Charleton Brown, known to friends and family as Rhett.

Three of the four people in the room were seated around a table littered with coffee cups and the sort of mess created by people in the process of deciding among equally untenable options. The fourth, Rhett Brown, was up and pacing. He hadn't slept, and looked it. He knew his hair was ruffled, his tie askew, and that he needed a shower and a shave. He could have used a toothbrush, too; his mouth tasted like the bottom of a Dumpster, after too many cups of coffee and the Philly steak sandwich he'd forced himself to eat late last night against his better judgment.

He looked at his watch and his heart ached. How much longer could he put off calling Dixie? Don't tell anyone, they'd said, with the usual warning of dire consequences if he disobeyed that directive. But how was he going to get through this without Dixie by his side? He'd have to tell her soon. She had a right to know. To prepare herself for the worst.

The worst. His mind slammed shut on that thought. Cold to the depths of his soul, he pivoted to face the group at the table.

"Okay—" he huffed out a breath and drove a hand through his hair "—we know what they want." Their demand had made that clear. They wanted him out of the presidential race. They meant to keep Lauren until after the national convention, to insure that he would refuse the nomination. And after that...what then? He ground his teeth thinking about it. "So. Let's summarize. What do we know about these people, these...Sons Of Liberty? Who, where, what, why and how many."

Not, he thought, that it mattered much how many they were. Look at Oklahoma City. How many had it taken to destroy more than two hundred lives? How many would it take to kill one small person? Just one. Lolly, his precious little girl.

Pat Graham looked at him. The burnt-umber eyes that were a legacy of her African-American heritage lit with compassion. A veteran of the civil-rights struggles of the 1960s, she knew all about pain and fear and loss. Rhett couldn't imagine anyone he'd rather have succeed him as attorney general, or anyone he'd rather have beside him now. How many years had they worked together on the weapons-control project? She'd begged to be put on it in the beginning, he remembered, when he'd considered it too inflammatory a position for a woman. With her courage and passion she'd made him ashamed of that view. Illegal-weapons trafficking wasn't just a political hot-button issue to Pat Graham. She'd grown up in a south-central L.A. neighborhood where the slaughter of children with assault rifles and semiautomatic handguns had become so common that it seldom even made the evening news anymore. To her, keeping guns off the nation's streets and out of the hands of its children was a true crusade of the heart.

She swiveled back to the table and nodded at the FBI director. "Vern, you want to do the honors?"

Vernon Lee cleared his throat and shuffled through papers already in ruffled disarray. "Okay. We know they call themselves SOL." He pronounced it "soul" and went on to explain, "That's Spanish for sun. That's their signature, their logo—the rising sun. The good news is—" he leaned back in the upholstered chair, leaving one hand palm down on the papers in front of him "—we know quite a bit about them. The leader of the group is a man named Gilbert McCullough—ex-marine, war hero, spent five years as a POW in Vietnam. Supposedly he's a legitimate rancher out in Arizona now—owns several thousand acres of land, most of it pretty rugged. Raises cattle and horses. And runs a fair-size militia on the side. Actually," he added almost as an afterthought, "SOL is one of the better run of these kinds of groups. Well organized, well trained, well disciplined."

Vernon leaned forward again, forearms on the tabletop, hands clasped. "And that's the bad news, I'm afraid. They're careful. They don't make mistakes. They cover their tracks. We believe McCullough's goal is to eventually arm and unite all the various militia groups in that part of the country under one supreme commander—himself. That's an ambitious undertaking for a man who never achieved a military rank above sergeant. Also expensive. We believe the group is directly responsible for a large number of bank robberies and truck hijackings in the Southwest and upper Midwest, but so far we can't prove it. They've learned from others' mistakes, it seems. They pay their taxes, for example, stay on the good side of local authorities. Up until now they've been real careful not to give us any excuse to go after 'em."

Rhett rubbed at his burning eye sockets. Well, he thought, we sure as hell have an excuse to go after them now. And if we do, and if we make one mistake in the process, I'll bury my only daughter.

He drew a steadying breath. "Okay. Give me an idea what the situation is out there. Local law enforcement—" He stopped as the head of ATF made a soft inarticulate sound. "Sorry, Henry, what was that? This is your bailiwick, after all."

Up till now Henry Vallejo had been sitting with his chin tucked against his barrel chest, watching his fingers turn a pencil end over end. He shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. "We don't believe local law can be trusted. It's highly likely some are members of SOL themselves. We know for sure some are sympathetic to the cause. The code of the Old West, you know. Those people out there do love their guns."

Rhett frowned. "You suspect, or you know that for a fact?"

"Fact." Henry squirmed uneasily and glanced at Vernon Lee. "Uh...our intelligence sources have confirmed it."

"Intelligence sources?" Rhett felt his chest quiver with a new excitement as he moved in beside Henry and leaned down close to him, gripping the table with his hands. "Are you telling me you've

infiltrated this group? You have a man on the inside?” He looked across the table at Pat, who raised her eyebrows. He transferred the look to Vernon Lee. Vernon shrugged. Henry cleared his throat. No one appeared to be breathing. “Henry,” said Rhett, his voice turning soft and dangerous as he came back to the ATF Director, “are you telling me you knew about this? Before last night? You knew they planned to kidnap my daughter?”

At the look on Rhett’s face, Henry reared back in alarm and held up a hand. Pat Graham pushed back her chair. “Rhett—”

“You knew? And you let it happen? You stood by and let these people kidnap my daughter?”

“Look, I’d only gotten the word from my guy the night before. There wasn’t anything he could do, not without jeopardizing his own position—”

“Jeopardizing his position? What the hell’s the matter with you?”

The ATF man was on his feet and facing him. So was Pat Graham, who had taken Rhett’s arm in a calming grip. Which, since she was five-two and 110 pounds on a good day, was a little like a Jack Russell terrier trying to corral a Great Dane.

Vallejo’s face was flushed. “Look, Rhett. I know how you must be feeling. But think about it. You know how long it takes to get a man in position with one of these groups—they’re paranoid as hell. This man is one of the best agents we’ve got. I couldn’t risk him. For what? We keep your daughter from being taken—this time. What then? These people are hell-bent on keeping you out of the White House. As far as they’re concerned, you are the great Satan. They’ll stop at nothing—and I mean, nothing—to keep you from accepting that nomination. How many people do you figure would die if they pull off an Oklahoma City at the Dallas Convention Center? Are you prepared to pay that price for your daughter’s safety?”

As if suddenly realizing what he was asking, Vallejo halted and put a sympathetic hand on Rhett’s arm. “This way we have a shot at getting the whole organization, Rhett, don’t you see? We can bring them down. Put the whole operation out of business. It’s the chance we’ve been waiting for.”

“And my daughter?” Rhett asked in a dead-soft voice.

“My man will do everything he can to keep her safe. I promise you that.”

Rhett’s eyes burned into Vallejo’s. His fingers closed around the other man’s forearm in a grip of iron. “You promise. He’ll keep her safe. You trust him to be able to do that, this man of yours?”

“I’d trust him with my own life. More importantly, with my daughter’s life,” Vallejo said softly. “He’s the best there is.”

After a long tense moment, Rhett let out the breath he’d been holding. Around him, three others did likewise. “Okay.” His mouth was dry as ashes, his voice a croak. “So, when do we move on them?”

Vallejo looked at his watch. “We’re getting our people in position now. As soon as my man lets me know she’s safely away, we’re good to go.”

God help you, Rhett thought, his mind holding fast to the knowledge that somewhere out in the Arizona wilderness, an unknown man held his daughter’s life in his hands. God go with you—whoever you are.

Chapter 3

Bronco heaved a silent sigh of relief as the last of the McCullough ranch's horse barns and outbuildings sank from sight behind the crest of a juniper-studded hill. He wouldn't feel safely away until they'd reached timber, but there was at least a measure of comfort in knowing that they were beyond visual range of the ranch and the road leading to it.

He studied the sky, taking note of the thunderheads gathering over the Superstitions, every nerve ending in his body straining for sounds he didn't want to hear. But he heard only the call of a mourning dove, the screeches of scrub jays feeding among the junipers. He altered his touch on the reins imperceptibly, and Sierra, the long-legged Appaloosa mare he was riding, dropped back even with Linda, the slower stockier gray he'd chosen for his prisoner. Meanwhile the magnificent blood bay at the end of a lead rope adjusted his pace to a graceful trot. Bronco didn't spare him a glance; he knew the stallion would follow willingly. That was why he'd made sure both saddle horses were mares—Cochise Red would consider them his by right.

With the worst of the pressure off, at least for the moment, Special Agent John Bracco of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms took a moment to study the woman who had complicated his life so unexpectedly.

Other than the fact that she looked every bit as good on a horse as he'd thought she would, Lauren Brown wasn't what he'd expected—not that he'd had a lot of time to form expectations one way or the other. This thing had come upon him with the speed and unpredictability of an avalanche. One minute all he'd had to deal with was figuring out which of two terrorists acts he was going to have to prevent—the assassination of a presidential candidate or a missile attack on the convention center—preferably while keeping his own cover intact. And the next...well, the woman had practically fallen into their laps.

Bronco was fairly sure Gil had had no idea who Lauren Brown was when she'd first contacted him on behalf of some ranch in Texas about buying his champion quarter horse stud. It wasn't until the commander had run his customary background and credit check on her that he'd realized what he had. The opportunity had seemed to him God-given, the possibilities she presented beyond even his most optimistic dreams. Even then, smart paranoid that he was, Gil had held off on the final decision to go ahead with the plan until after he'd met the woman. Until he was sure she wasn't the bait for some elaborate government trap.

A trap. Bronco let out a slow breath. McCullough was indeed riding into a trap, just not the one he'd been looking out for. Like Julius Caesar, whose betrayal had come, not at the hands of Cleopatra or any other woman, but through his closest and most trusted friend.

"He really is magnificent, isn't he?" Lauren's voice brought him back from that troubling place. She sounded almost wistful as she watched the stallion dip and weave like a kite at the end of a string, and Bronco knew she must be thinking of the innocent, even joyous quest that had brought her to this. She glanced over at him, and an unexpected smile of irony played around her lips. "I'd sure love to ride him, just once..." She left her words hanging there, sounding like a condemned prisoner's last request.

No, she wasn't at all what he'd expected.

What, exactly, had he expected of Lauren Elizabeth Brown, daughter of former U.S. attorney general Everett Charleton Brown? About to become First Daughter, if the polls were to be believed. About to be instantly recognized the world over, with every move, every breath, every step scrutinized and analyzed to death by both the legitimate and tabloid media.

He knew her parents had divorced when Lauren was ten, that her father had subsequently married Dixie Parish, of the folk-singing Parish Family, which counted among its many real-estate holdings that horse ranch in West Texas. He knew she'd been born and raised in Des Moines, Iowa,

that she was a graduate of Iowa University and Harvard Law School, and that she'd passed the bar on the first try. A bright lady with a bright future—a future that reportedly included marriage to an equally brilliant member of a fine old Des Moines law firm. The media were already salivating over the prospect of a White House wedding. Oh, yes, and there was one brother, Ethan, currently attending UCLA, scheduled to begin his senior year in the fall.

That was what Bronco knew about Lauren Brown—pretty much what the rest of the world knew. What surprised him was the discovery that he would like to have known more. A lot more.

For one thing, he wanted to know what had brought a big-city lawyer to a West Texas horse ranch hundreds of miles from the man she supposedly loved. Bronco had never been in love and didn't expect to be, but he was pretty sure that if he ever did love a woman enough to want to marry her, he'd want her near him every day of his life. He'd want her voice and her laughter lighting up his days, and her body warming his bed at night. He'd want the scent of her in his sheets and in his pores. If a man and woman pledged to join their lives together, they should be together. And stay together. That was the way he saw it.

And he wanted to know why a woman raised in a Midwestern city looked so natural and right astride a horse in the mountains of Arizona. This was wild country, the land of his ancestors—Indee, the People. A beautiful land, but harsh and unforgiving of those who didn't understand and respect her delicate balance. The bones of many strong men lay bleaching in forgotten canyons as mute testimony to that. And yet, this woman, tawny-haired and wraith-slender, seemed almost to belong in this sunburned landscape, as much at home here as the deer and antelope he'd hunted as a boy.

Close on the heels of that thought came another. As he studied her, it occurred to Bronco that in spite of the fact that she'd recently been forcibly abducted by armed men for purposes she could only guess at, she seemed almost happy. She rode with her body relaxed and graceful in the saddle, her face lifted to the warm wind and her eyes half-shut, her mouth softly smiling. As if, he thought as warmth stirred unexpectedly in his own body, in acceptance of a lover's caress. But why, he wondered, fighting off the image of soft lips, slowly parting, did she seem so unafraid? Had she no concept of the peril she was in? Her apparent innocence irritated him, even as her innate sensuality stirred and excited him.

Irritated, stirred and excited was not what Agent Bracco wanted to be. Not ever, actually, but especially not now, not with so much at stake. He told himself he'd have to do a better job of keeping himself in balance, focused on the task at hand. He couldn't afford to let himself be distracted just because that task happened to involve shielding and protecting an extraordinarily beautiful woman.

A grim smile stretched his lips as he watched the stallion prancing grandly along behind the little gray mare, so intent on establishing his own sexual dominion that he was oblivious to the lead rope that held him captive. It occurred to him that there wasn't a whole lot of difference between a man and any other male animal when he allowed himself to be governed by his...testosterone.

For some reason, the words the woman had spoken earlier that morning came back to him, carried on the wind like the scent of a far-off storm: I should never have danced with you.

He looks so hard and dangerous when he smiles like that, Lauren thought. I wonder what he can be thinking.

A shiver passed through her in spite of the Southwestern sun that burned like a branding iron across her shoulders. Because the only thing she knew for certain was that she could never be certain what that man was feeling. What a consummate actor he was! What a talented liar!

She told herself she was upset because she'd misjudged him so badly. That as a lawyer she felt she ought to be more adept at reading people. But in her heart she knew better. The real source of her shame and betrayal lay in the accusation that pounded now inside her head in time to the horse's hoofbeats.

Not, How could I have been so wrong about him?

But rather, How could I have been so attracted to him?

She couldn't even look at him now. Whenever she looked at him, her heart would begin to hammer and her eyes burn hot and her mind cloud over with rage. She wanted to fly at him in a screaming spitting clawing fury.

Why, she asked herself, did she feel so ashamed? Because she'd watched him ride and admired his skill?

No, her honest heart answered her. Because you watched him ride and thought him beautiful. Did she feel such anger because he'd danced with her and then betrayed her?

Again she was forced to hear her own truth: No—because you danced with him and your own body betrayed you.

With her face lifted to the wind and her eyes closed, she could see him standing beside her table at Smoky Joe's, looking down at her with the little yellow flame from the candle in the globe lamp on the table burning in his eyes. And as she gazed into them, the boisterous crowd seemed to close in around them, surrounding the two of them with a wall of noise and heat and cigarette smoke and darkness, so that all at once she was aware only of him—of his heat, his masculine scent and the blackness of his hair, lying like a skein of silk across one shoulder.

She remembered how warm his hands had been, covering hers. She'd felt the wiry, coiled-spring tension in his hips beneath her palms, the swaying rhythm, blatantly sexy—and her body had grown hot. She'd lost track of the music and the steps of the dance until suddenly she'd found herself face-to-face with him. Face-to-face and chest to chest. Frozen, she'd felt his arms come around her, gathering her in, and the cool silk of his hair against her cheek, his heart thumping in counterrhythm to hers.

Had that been a lie, too? Could he control the timing of his own pulse? With this man, even that seemed possible.

They'd danced that dance and then another, and with each note, each measure, it seemed to her, their bodies had moved infinitesimal fractions of inches closer together, until it felt as if they would melt into each other's pores.

He'd guided her with a touch so light and sure she wasn't even aware of it. She'd followed him effortlessly, as if they'd been moving together, dancing together for years, a lifetime. She'd felt weightless, light as cottonwood fluff floating on a summer wind. At the back of his neck, her fingers had begun of their own volition to explore the dark mystery of his hair, while on her back she'd felt his fingers moving, slowly navigating the bumps and hollows of her spine.

And then suddenly, just like that, it had ended. Bronco had taken her back to McCullough's table and left her there with polite but cursory thanks. Lauren had been so shaken she'd barely registered the conversation from that point on, was only dimly aware that she'd nodded acceptance of McCullough's asking price for Cochise Red without so much as an argument and agreed to go out to his ranch and take a look at the stallion the following day.

She didn't see what started the fight. All at once, it seemed, Smoky Joe's had erupted in bedlam. There was a roar of sound, and the crowd surged like a single entity toward the back of the room, toward the area near the dance floor.

Unaccustomed to violence of any kind, Lauren uttered an exclamation of alarm as she started to rise. Gil McCullough, who had begun to swear matter-of-factly in a low voice, gestured for her to stay put and at the same time waved a couple of his men, who'd been leaning against the bar nearby nursing long-necked bottles of beer, over to the table.

About then the crowd parted raggedly and Johnny Bronco emerged, struggling and swinging clumsily in the grip of two beefy-looking guys wearing black cowboy hats and vests that said "Smoky Joe's" across the back. Before Lauren had time to draw breath, they'd hustled Bronco out the front door.

The two Smoky Joe's employees walked back into the bar, dusting their hands and grinning, waving to mixed cheers and boos from the crowd. They gave a thumbs-up to a couple of uniformed

deputy sheriffs sitting at the bar, who merely smiled and shook their heads before returning to their burger and fries. McCullough leaned back in his chair and spoke to his men.

“See he gets home,” he growled in an undertone, then turned back to her with a smile of apology. “Ol’ Bronco’s the best damned horse wrangler west of the Mississippi, but he can’t hold his liquor worth beans. Never could. It’s a racial thing, I guess. He’s a half-breed Apache, you know.”

Lauren sat silently, sipping her beer. She didn’t reply, partly because she was still too shaken by the close and unaccustomed brush with violence, but also because the comment made her intensely uncomfortable. Her firsthand knowledge of Native Americans was limited, but she disliked the term half-breed, and had been raised to consider blanket statements about race objectionable on general principles.

Unperturbed by her silence, Gil shook his head. “It’s a sad story, a sad story. Unfortunately not a very unusual one in this part of the country. He grew up around here, you know.”

Lauren nodded; she remembered the rodeo announcer saying he was a “local boy.”

“Yeah, ol’ Johnny was quite a hero in these parts a while back.”

“Really?” Lauren murmured, interested in spite of herself. The beer was warming her insides, easing her pulse back to normal. She focused on her companion’s clean-shaven face and close-cropped gray hair, and tried to block out the images that wanted to linger in her mind—images of a dark angry face, hard-edged features crisscrossed with strands of long black hair...

“Football,” Gil clarified after taking a small drink of the beer he’d been nursing most of the evening. “Best damned wide receiver I ever saw—hands like a magician. All-conference, all-state his senior year—had colleges lined up to offer him scholarships.” He shook his head again and made a smacking sound with his lips. “What a waste.”

“What happened?”

The rancher shrugged. “The drinking got him. Finally either flunked out or got kicked out—depends on who you hear it from. Bronco, he doesn’t like to talk about it much. He always was wild, drank too much even when he was in high school. Came by it naturally—his old man was a drunk, died in a car accident when Bronco was in junior high. Kid never had a chance.”

“He must not be doing all that badly,” Lauren remarked with an edgy shrug. “You hired him.” And then she wondered why she felt a need to defend a man she didn’t know at all, especially from a man who obviously knew him very well.

Pictures flashed in lightning-quick succession through her mind: Bronco up on Old Number 7, whirling in slow motion in a golden fog of sun-shot dust; a pair of scuffed and well-broken-in boots, spurs without rowels; a wry smile in a dark face, and the words spoken in a soft deep voice. Horse and I have an understanding....

“I hired him because when it comes to horses, he’s the best there is,” Gil said as if he’d seen the images in her mind. But his narrowed eyes had a speculative glint that made her squirm inwardly as he watched her. As a lawyer she knew that feeling. It was the one she got when she thought she might have given away too much. Showed the opposition a few too many of her cards. “And because I thought the kid had had some bad breaks,” the rancher went on in a voice with added undercurrents. “I helped him straighten himself out after he got kicked out of the military. Haven’t regretted it yet.”

“Well...” Lauren could think of nothing else to say. She suddenly felt depressed without the least idea why. “I think I’m going to have to call it a night,” she said to Gil. “It’s been a long day.” That’s all it is, she thought. She’d driven more than five hundred miles to get here and had very little sleep, and now the beer. She was just tired.

She settled on a time to meet with Gil the following day and jotted down directions to his ranch. Mindful of the lateness of the hour and the rowdy nature of the crowd, he graciously walked her to her truck, which, since she was pulling a fair-size horse trailer, she’d parked far out on the periphery of the parking lot.

As she crossed the hard-baked dirt, bleached by the light of mercury lamps to the color of old bones, she thought about the man who'd been dumped there only minutes before.

"Don't worry about Bronco," Gil said as she unlocked her truck. "My boys'll see he gets home all right."

Unnerved by the ease with which the rancher seemed to read her mind, she said dryly, "I'd just hate to think he was somewhere on the road right now." She climbed behind the wheel and Gil closed the door. He waited with typical Western gallantry until she'd started the engine, then touched the brim of his hat.

"Drive safe now."

"Yeah, thanks, I will. See you tomorrow."

He left her with a wave and headed off across the parking lot, but Lauren didn't watch him go. Nor did she immediately put the truck in gear and pull out onto the highway. Safely, blessedly alone, she sat and stared through the windshield, cringing inwardly as she opened the door on her own self-doubts.

What's wrong with me? How could I have been so attracted to a man who's clearly nothing but bad news?

It must be some sort of wild gene, she thought, passed down to her from that pioneer ancestor, the one Aunt Lucy had told her about. How else to explain it? She was Lauren Brown, a bright sensible Iowa attorney, a good girl, one who'd always done the right thing, lived by the rules, lived up to everyone's expectations. She was engaged to marry the perfect man, a good man, not to mention handsome, witty and kind.

Why, then, had Benjamin never made her feel the way she'd felt tonight, dancing with Johnny Bronco?

Johnny Bronco. What a name! Romantic notions aside, what he was was a half-Indian cowboy with a drinking problem, a propensity for violence and a undeniable way with horses and women. The last man in the world she'd ever let herself get mixed up with. What could she possibly see in a man like that? What could they possibly have in common?

As if in reply, once again a wave of remembered sensation swamped her. Oh, how vivid it seemed—the slide of silken hair through her fingers, the faint smell of leather and sweat, his body heat soaking into her breasts, his hand moving like a magician's, scattering shivers like pixie dust down her back. Even now, just the memories made her breathing quicken, her nipples harden, her skin prickle and chafe against the restrictions of her clothing.

Awash with longing, throat aching and eyes burning, Lauren angrily threw the truck into gear and drove out of Smoky Joe's parking lot into the Arizona night.

I should never have danced with him. The thought chilled her even now as she lifted her face to the hot August wind.

She opened her eyes when the gray mare abruptly slowed, then halted. Just ahead, Bronco was waiting for her beside a rock pile, in the shade of a massive bull pine.

Without her noticing, the land had changed dramatically. They'd been climbing steadily, she realized now, and the rolling hills dotted with juniper and sage, mesquite and palo verde had given way to sparse stands of piñons intermingled with bull pines and clumps of scrub brush.

While Cochise Red snuffed the ground and whickered an impatient greeting to the gray mare, Bronco placidly waited for Lauren to come to him, then reached out and took her reins. "We'll rest here a bit. Give the horses a breather."

For a moment she sat where she was, glaring resentfully at him while sweat pooled in the hollow of her throat and crawled in a chilly trickle between her breasts. But in a way it was almost a relief to look at him, to see him the way he was today, a vivid flesh-and-blood reminder that he wasn't the man she'd thought he was. The fantasy rodeo rider in a graceful pas de deux with a bucking bronc, the Saturday-night charmer in the red shirt and flowing black hair. Maybe they were parts of the

whole and maybe they were no more than clever disguises, but how could she ever know for certain? The only thing she did know was that this man, this Bronco, bore no resemblance whatsoever to the smiling man she'd danced with two nights ago. In his bleached blue shirt and saddle-worn jeans, with his long hair vanished into a neat club at the nape of his neck and his sweat-stained hat tilted low on his brow, he wore the lean and merciless look of a hunting wolf—or a born outlaw.

Once more, in spite of the heat, Lauren shivered.

Perhaps sensing her rider's unease, the gray mare sidestepped nervously as she dismounted. Lauren spoke to her softly and gave her a reassuring slap on the withers as she moved away from her.

"You mad at her about something?"

She started, then halted, despising herself for trembling inside as Bronco suddenly appeared beside her, one hand on the gray mare's bridle, blocking her way.

"Mad?" she said in a voice taut with confusion. "No, I was just... She seemed nervous. I was letting her know it was okay."

"Let me ask you a question." Now he spoke in a crooning tone. His hand lay gentle on the mare's sweat-darkened neck. Lauren focused on that hand and tried to ignore the way her breath caught in her throat as he moved up beside her. "If I was to slap you on your bare skin, exactly the same way you just slapped her, you think you'd like it?"

Her mouth dropped open, but with no hope of a reply.

"Her hide's as sensitive as yours is," he went on in that thick seductive murmur. His hands moved on the mare's neck with a caressing touch, like a lover's. "She can feel a gnat when it lands on her back. Think what a slap feels like."

As if she understood, the little mare turned an ear toward him, then her head, and blew a gust of breath against his shoulder. When she playfully nibbled his shirtsleeve, Bronco's answering chuckle was almost indistinguishable from the sounds the animal made.

"Ever watch the way horses do with each other? They nuzzle. Just touch each other gently with the softest part of their lips. That's the way you want to touch a horse. You stroke her nice and easy, light little massages like a horse's nuzzle—see there?"

Lauren nodded, but it was a lie; both he and the horse were a blur. His voice retreated to a distant hum; she felt light-headed. In her mind's eye she saw his hands, all right, those same hands, but the sleek shiny hide beneath the fingers wasn't sweat-streaked dappled gray, but a rich deep mahogany.

A voice intruded, Gil McCullough's voice, droning on and on about the accomplishments, pedigree and breeding track record of the stallion, Cochise Red. But Lauren wasn't listening. Her heart and all her senses had been hijacked by the magnificent animal cavorting out in the middle of the ring, showing off with a stallion's flare. The animal—and the man riding him. Oh, but they were beautiful together.

They seemed inseparable, man and horse, like something in mythology, two parts of the same being—the stallion's body, powerfully and compactly built for short bursts of unbelievable speed, lightning-quick turns and bone-jolting stops, and the man's as compact and strong, but lean and supple as a whip, with hands as gentle as a lover's. The man rode leaning well forward over the stallion's neck, long straight hair mingling with the coarse black mane, and the stallion's ears flicked as if the man spoke to him in a language only they understood.

Smiling, heart pounding in sheer exhilaration, Lauren turned to Gil McCullough. "Not fair! You knew I wasn't going to leave here without him once I'd seen him."

McCullough laughed. "You know what they say—all's fair in love, war and horse tradin'. Tell you what, let's you and me go on up to the house, have something cold to drink while we tend to the paperwork." He waved to Bronco out in the ring, then turned to stroll with her up the hard-baked slope toward the Spanish-style ranch house, which floated like a white ship in a sea of neat green lawn.

They went into Gil's study, where his wife, a petite middle-aged blond woman introduced to Lauren as Katie, brought them tall glasses of iced tea with lemon. A short time later Bronco came

in, accompanied by another man, this one oddly dressed for a ranch hand, Lauren thought, in what appeared to be combat fatigues. There was something hard and cold about his eyes, something that made her uneasy when he looked at her.

McCullough asked her for the keys to her truck. “Ron here’ll get your trailer backed around to the ramp while we’re finishing up the paperwork,” he told her as he handed her keys to the man in fatigues. “Soon as we’re done here, Bronco’ll get ol’ Red loaded up and you’ll be set to go.”

Lauren felt excitement vibrate through her. That magnificent animal was hers—well, okay, Dixie’s. But she could hardly wait to get him home to the Topsy Pee. She wondered how long it would take her to get up the courage to actually ride him.

She’d had no warning at all. Not the slightest uneasiness, no chilly little frisson or premonition of danger.

She’d laughed as she handed the check to Gil, passing a hand over her brow and joking about the number of zeros. “Well,” she’d said then, taking a deep breath, “I guess I’d better be off. I have a long drive ahead of me.”

Even now, with her eyes closed, she could see Gil’s smile, hear him saying, “Oh, I don’t think you’re going to be goin’ anywhere just yet, Lauren Brown. You’ll be staying on here with us for a while.” And feel again that first little chill, as if someone had drawn an ice cube along her spine.

Though she still had not really understood what was happening. Her eyes had flown first to Bronco—in appeal, for confirmation of the unbelievable. It had been a reflexive thing. But she had found his face impassive, his eyes unreadable as onyx.

“Want you to go along with Bronco here,” Gil had said almost gently. “He’ll take you to your quarters, see you’re comfortable.” As if she’d been a homesick child on the first day of summer camp.

Her mouth had dropped open then, but no sound had come out. She wondered, even if she had screamed, if it would have made any difference. Who would there have been to hear her? McCullough’s wife? That sweet middle-aged woman Katie—was she a party to this...whatever it was?

What in God’s name did they want with her? Was she being kidnapped? Robbed? Or... But beyond that her shocked mind simply refused to go.

Without a sound, Bronco had moved in beside her and taken her arms. Instantly, mockingly, her mind flashed back to the night before, to the dance floor in Smoky Joe’s—same hands, same body, same wiry strength, same all-enveloping heat. The irony of it was so shocking she gave a small incensed gasp. Bronco muttered something she couldn’t hear, and then she was moving, moving against her will, her feet going along with her body as if they’d had no other choice.

Had there been a choice? If she’d had presence of mind to go limp, what would it have gained her? Only, she was certain, the indignity of being carried. No, she’d had only one chance, and that had come later, outside, when Bronco had paused for some reason at the place where the lawns ended in a low stone wall and two steps dropped down to the hard-baked dirt. It was then, operating on pure gut instinct, that Lauren had seized the moment and stomped down with all her strength on his instep.

Her valiant effort produced only a muffled grunt. Instead of releasing her, Bronco’s grip on her arms tightened. There was a flash of blinding breath-stopping pain, and his voice, whispering the warning against her ear, so soft it sounded obscenely like an endearment. “Let’s have an understanding—you don’t try to get away, and I don’t have to hurt you.”

And then, in a more normal voice, a lazy almost insolent drawl, he’d said, “Look here, Laurie Brown, where do you think you’re gonna go? Look around you.”

That was when she realized her truck and horse trailer were gone. They had been taken from her along with her freedom, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

But she wasn’t giving up. She’d wait...and she’d watch. When the moment came, she’d be ready. “Are you okay?”

Lauren opened her eyes and found herself clinging to the gray mare's saddle, engulfed in a wave of dizziness. Bronco's arm slid around her, under her arm and folded across her rib cage.

"You need to sit down for a minute?"

She felt as though she couldn't breathe, as though he'd taken all her oxygen. She managed to gasp, "Don't touch me!" fighting the weakness, feeble with rage.

He let go of her with a little snort of laughter and muttered, "Suit yourself," then stepped away. She was left clinging to the saddle, feeling weak-kneed and childish.

"Am I allowed to go to the bathroom?" she asked, teeth clenched.

His reply came from the other side of the gray mare. "Doubt if you'll find a bathroom, but you're welcome to use a bush."

Her heart pounded. Was this the moment? How quickly could she mount up—more quickly than he could grab the reins? Don't be stupid. He's got a faster horse than you have, and he knows the terrain. Be patient, Lauren. This is not the time.

As she stalked into the brush she heard Bronco call, "I'd check real good for rattlers if I were you."

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