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HOT
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NIGHTS

Brenda Jackson

SCANDALISING
THE CEO

Katherine Garbera

Mills & Boon Desire

Brenda Jackson

**Hot Westmoreland Nights /
Scandalising the CEO**

«HarperCollins»

Jackson B.

Hot Westmoreland Nights / Scandalising the CEO / B. Jackson —
«HarperCollins», — (Mills & Boon Desire)

Hot Westmoreland Nights He knew better than to lust after the hired help. But Ramsey Westmoreland's new cook was just so delectable...it was enough to make the rancher rethink his rules. When temptation got the better of him, he discovered Chloe Burton was just as hot in the bedroom as she was in the kitchen. Though their affair was growing steamier, Ramsey couldn't help but question Chloe's motives. Scandalising the CEO Ainsley Patterson was exactly the type of woman CEO Steven Devonshire desired. Business had brought them together and they both had the same need to succeed. Why not tempt her with an offer she couldn't refuse? But Ainsley's buxom-bombshell looks hid the dowdy journalist he'd once ignored. So if Steven wanted her now, he'd have to pull out all the stops...

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HOT WESTMORELAND NIGHTS

BRENDA JACKSON

“When I get around to kissing you, I’ll feel better knowing your mouth doesn’t belong to any other man. Legally or otherwise.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she opened her mouth, probably to tell him just where he could take his own mouth—legally or otherwise—but instead of saying anything right then, she just clamped her lips together.

He chuckled. “Tightening those lips shut won’t keep me from a kiss, if that’s what I want to do, Chloe.”

Chloe folded her arms across her chest. “Is there a reason for this madness?”

“Is that what this is? Madness?” he asked.

She lifted her chin and glared at him. “You got another name for it?”

“What about *hunger*?”

About the Author

BRENDA JACKSON is a die “heart” romantic who married her childhood sweetheart and still proudly wears the “going steady” ring he gave her when she was fifteen. Because she’s always believed in the power of love, Brenda’s stories always have happy endings. In her reallife love story, Brenda and her husband of thirty-six years live in Jacksonville, Florida, and have two sons.

A *New York Times* bestselling author of more than fifty romance titles, Brenda is a recent retiree who worked thirty-seven years in management at a major insurance company. She divides her time between family, writing and traveling with Gerald. You may write to Brenda at PO Box 28267, Jacksonville, Florida 32226, USA, by e-mail at WriterBJackson@aol.com or visit her website at www.brendajackson.net.

To the love of my life, Gerald Jackson, Sr.

To all the members of the Brenda Jackson Book Club. You are a very special group and I appreciate each and every one of you!

To Val Manning of Rancho Terre Norte in Colorado for assisting my research on sheep ranching. You were simply wonderful.

“Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”

—Proverbs 16:24

Dear Reader,

Family is important to me and I love writing about the love and escapades that go on within a family structure. Can you imagine being in your middle twenties and helping a cousin barely a year older than you to raise your other young family members—all thirteen of them?

You’ve met Dillon Westmoreland in *Westmoreland’s Way*. The second oldest of the Denver clan is Ramsey, a man who doesn’t have marriage or love on his mind. Ramsey’s only ambition is to make his sheep-ranching business a success. At least that was his only ambition until he met Chloe Burton. Now he’s faced with something he thought could not happen to him, and that was the possibility of falling in love.

And Chloe has her own agenda, which doesn’t include a serious involvement with Ramsey. She’s done the serious thing with a man and it left her deciding it wasn’t worth the trouble. Ramsey becomes a challenge to her peace of mind.

I hope that you find Ramsey and Chloe’s story a very special one, and in the coming months I look forward to venturing into the lives of those other Westmorelands, as well.

Happy reading!

Brenda Jackson

Prologue

Chloe Burton pressed her face to the windowpane as she watched the man sprint across the street. Her heart began pounding in her chest. He had to be, without a doubt, the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

She stared as he stopped to talk to another man in front of a feed store. He was tall, dark and every inch of sexy from the Stetson he wore on his head to the well-worn leather boots on his feet. And from the way his jeans and western shirt fit his body, it was quite obvious he possessed powerful legs, strong arms, taut abs, tight buns and broad muscular shoulders. He had everything it took to separate the men from the boys.

And when he pushed back his hat, she saw dark eyes and a medium skin tone. Then she looked at his mouth and she couldn't help licking her lips at the sight of his. His lips were full, firm and luscious. She could imagine those lips and his mouth doing other things.

Just looking at him was enough to corrupt a woman's mind, she thought. Even from this distance, her body felt flushed, hot and unsettled. Nothing like this had ever happened to her while ogling a man in all her twenty-eight years.

Actually, over the past year the only male who had gotten her time and attention had been her *e-mail*. And that was mainly because her last relationship with Daren Fulbright had been totally unsatisfying, a complete waste of the year she'd put into it, and she was in no hurry to get into another. No doubt there were some who thought she'd given up on love much too quickly, and perhaps that was true since these days she much preferred curling up with a good book during her free time than with someone of the opposite sex. And now, here she was practically drooling at just the sight of a man. He might be major eye candy, but the man was a complete stranger to her. Even so, the way he was standing with both hands in his jeans pockets, legs braced apart, was a pose she would carry to her dreams.

And he was smiling, evidently enjoying his conversation. He had dimples, incredibly sexy dimples in not one but both cheeks.

"What are you staring at, Clo?"

Chloe nearly jumped. She'd forgotten she had a lunch date. In fact she had forgotten everything once her sights had landed on the sexy man across the street. She glanced over the table at her best friend from college, Lucia Conyers.

"Take a look at that man across the street in the blue shirt, Lucia, and tell me what you see. Would he not be perfect for Denver's first issue of *Simply Irresistible* or what?" Chloe asked with so much excitement in her voice she almost couldn't stand it.

Chloe was the owner of *Simply Irresistible*, a magazine for today's up-and-coming woman. The magazine had started out as a regional publication in the southeast, but had expanded to a national audience during the past few years. By far the magazine's most popular edition was the annual "Irresistible Man" issue. The feature included a cover shoot and an in-depth story on a man who the magazine felt deserved the honor because he was simply irresistible. As the magazine had expanded, Chloe had convinced Lucia to come on board to manage its Denver office.

When Lucia didn't say anything, Chloe's smile widened. "Well?"

Lucia glanced across the booth at her. "Since you asked, I'll tell you what I see. I see one of the Westmorelands, and in this case it's Ramsey Westmoreland. And to answer your other question as to whether he would be perfect for the cover man on *Simply Irresistible*, my answer would be a resounding yes, but he won't do it."

Chloe raised a brow. "I take it that you know him," she said watching her friend closely.

Lucia smiled. "Yes, but not as well as I know the younger Westmorelands. There's a lot of them and he's one of the oldest. I went to school with his younger siblings and cousins. He has several

brothers and male cousins who look just as good. Maybe one of them will agree to do it, but you can forget Ramsey.”

Chloe glanced back out the window and knew two things. First, there was no way that she could forget him. Second, from the sound of things it seemed that Lucia was interested in one of those “younger” male Westmorelands. She could hear the wistfulness in her friend’s voice.

“He’s the one I want, Lucia,” she said with both determination and conviction in her voice. “And since you know him, then just ask him. He might surprise you and not turn you down. Of course he’ll get paid for his services.”

Lucia laughed and shook her head. “Getting paid isn’t the issue, Clo. Ramsey is one of the wealthiest sheep ranchers in this part of Colorado. But everyone knows what a private person he is. Trust me, he won’t do it.”

Chloe hoped she was wrong. “But you will ask him?”

“Yes, but I suggest you move on and find another man.”

Chloe glanced back out the window. The man was the epitome of what she was looking for in her “Irresistible Man” issue and she was determined to have him.

“Um, I don’t like that look on your face, Chloe. I’ve seen it before and know exactly what it means.”

Chloe couldn’t help but smile. She could only blame her smile on her father, Senator Jamison Burton of Florida, the man who’d raised her alone after her mother died of cervical cancer when Chloe was three. Her father was the one man she most admired and he’d always taught her that if people wanted something bad enough, they wouldn’t give up until they got it.

She glanced out the window and watched as Ramsey Westmoreland ended his conversation and entered the feed store with a swagger that almost made her breathless. She *would* be seeing him again.

One

“I can’t believe you’re not posing for the cover of that magazine, Ram.”

Ramsey Westmoreland didn’t bother to look up from arranging a bale of straw in the lambing stall. He’d figured his youngest sister Bailey would show up sooner or later, because news traveled pretty fast within the Westmoreland family. And of course, Bailey made it her life’s work to know everything about her five brothers, down to their every heartbeat.

“I’m not going away, Ramsey, until you tell me what I want to know.”

He couldn’t help but smile at the threat because he knew if he gave her an order to leave that she *would* follow it. She might like to express her emotions and display her defiance every once in a while, and God help him when she did, but when it was all said and done, Bailey knew how far to take things with him. He would be the first to admit that she had tested his limits plenty, especially during those years when she and their cousin Bane had been almost inseparable. The two thought getting into trouble was a way of life.

Since then Bailey had finished high school and was now attending college, and Bane had surprised everyone with his decision last month to join the military with the goal of becoming a Navy Seal. All was quiet on the Westmoreland front and Ramsey would be the first to admit, but only to himself, things had been a little boring.

“There’s nothing to tell,” he decided to respond. “I was contacted about doing that cover and I turned them down.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” He figured she was probably glaring at him right now.

“Why, Ram? Just think of the exposure.”

He finally decided to look up and the gaze that sharpened on Bailey was so keen, had it been anyone else they would have had the good sense to take a step back. But not twenty-one-year-old Bailey Joleen Westmoreland. Of his three sisters—Megan, who was almost twenty-five and Gemma, who was twenty-three—Bailey was the boldest and could test the patience of Job, so to try the patience of her oldest brother was a piece of cake.

“I don’t want exposure, Bailey. I think the Westmorelands got enough exposure all those years when we had to deal with the trouble you, Bane and the twins got into.”

Not an ounce of regret flared in her eyes. “That was then. This is now. And this would have been good exposure.”

He almost laughed at that one. “Good exposure for who exactly?” he asked, getting to his feet.

He had a lot to do and little time for chitchat. Nellie, who’d had the responsibility of preparing the meals for him and the ranch hands for the past two years, had to leave suddenly yesterday when she’d gotten word that her only sister back in Kansas had emergency surgery for a ruptured appendix. She intended to stay and help out and it would be at least two weeks before she returned.

Ramsey understood and supported her decision, although Nellie’s absence left him in a bind. Today was the start of shearing and with over twenty or so men involved, he was in desperate need of a cook to take Nellie’s place. He had placed a call to one of these temporary employment agencies yesterday afternoon and was told they had just the person who would be perfect as a fill-in and the woman was to show up this morning.

“It would be good exposure for you and the ranch. It could put you in the public eye and let everyone know how successful you are as a sheep rancher.”

Ramsey shook his head. Being in the public eye was something he could definitely pass on. He was close to his family, but when it came to outsiders he was basically a loner and preferred things that way. Everyone knew how much he enjoyed his privacy. Bailey knew it too, so he wondered, why was she harassing him?

“The ranch doesn’t need *that* kind of exposure. I was asked to pose for some girly magazine, Bail.” He had never read a copy of *Simply Irresistible*, but the name alone made his jaw twitch. He could just imagine the articles that were between the covers.

“You should be flattered they want you on the cover, Ram.”

He rolled his eyes. “Whatever.” He then checked his watch for two reasons. This was Monday and he knew Bailey had a class at the university this morning *and* his temporary cook was ten minutes late.

“I wish you would reconsider.”

He glanced back at her. “No,” he said firmly. “And shouldn’t you be in class about now?” He moved out of the barn and walked back toward the sprawling home he had finished building the previous year.

Bailey followed, right on his heels. He couldn’t help but recall that she used to do that same thing when he took over the responsibility of raising her when she was seven and he was twenty-one. They’d lost both parents and a beloved aunt and uncle in an airplane accident. During that time she would rarely let him out of her sight. He fought back a smile at the fond memory.

“Yes, I have a class this morning, but I thought I’d drop by to talk some sense into you,” he heard her say.

He turned around, placed his hands in his pockets. At that moment he couldn’t stop the smile that touched his lips. “Fine. You’ve tried and failed. Goodbye, Bailey.”

He watched her place her hands on her hips and lift her chin. No one had to warn him about Westmoreland stubbornness. Hers could be more lethal than most, but over the past twenty-one years he’d learned to deal with it.

“I think you’re making a mistake. I subscribe to that magazine and I think you’d be surprised,” she was saying. “It’s not just a ‘girly’ magazine. It has a number of good articles for women, including some on health issues. However, once a year they feature a man on the cover. They try to find a man who’s every woman’s fantasy lover.”

A woman’s fantasy lover? Now that was a laugh, Ramsey thought. He was nothing more than a hardworking Colorado sheep rancher and since he’d doubled the size of his herd this past year, he couldn’t recall the last time he’d been intimately involved with a woman. Working sunup to sundown, seven days a week had become a way of life for him.

“It will be my mistake to make, brat. I’ll survive and so will you. Now scat.”

A half-hour later he was alone and standing in his kitchen and clicking off his cell phone after talking to Colin Lawrence, a member of his shearing crew. Because of a snowstorm that had hit the area a few weeks ago, they were already behind in shearing and needed to get that done within the next two weeks in time for lambing to begin. Starting today everything would be moving rather fast to stay on schedule.

Colin had called to say a few of the pregnant ewes had somehow gotten out of the shearing pen and begun to wander. The dogs were having a hard time getting them back in the pen without stressing out the pregnant sheep. The last thing he needed was for any more shearing time to be lost, which meant that he had to get to the shearing plant on the north range as soon as possible.

He headed toward the door when he heard a car pull up outside. He glanced at his watch, agitated. It was about time the cook showed up. The woman was almost an hour late and that was not acceptable. And he intended to let her know about his displeasure.

Chloe brought the car to a stop in front of a huge two-story ranch-style structure and drew in a deep breath. She simply refused to take no for an answer regardless of what Ramsey Westmoreland had told Lucia. His refusal to be the cover story for her magazine was the reason she had ended a much-deserved vacation in the Bahamas to fly directly here. She intended to try to convince the man herself.

As she checked her GPS while traveling farther and farther away from Denver's city limits and heading into a rural area the locals referred to as Westmoreland Country, she had asked herself why on earth would anyone want to live so far from civilization. That in itself was a mystery to her. She hadn't passed a single shopping mall along the way.

Looking out the car's window, she couldn't get out of her mind the man she had seen that day a couple of weeks ago. That was why she refused to move on and select someone else. The bottom line was that she didn't want anyone else. Ramsey Westmoreland was not only the man made for the title of *Simply Irresistible*, but he *was* simply irresistible.

Once she had turned off the main road, she saw the huge wooden marker that proudly proclaimed The Shady Tree Ranch. Beside it another smaller marker read *This is Westmoreland Country*. Lucia had said each of the fifteen Westmorelands owned a hundred acres of land where they had established their private residences. The main house sat on three hundred acres.

Once she turned off the main road, there had been several turnoffs, each denoted by smaller brick markers that indicated which Westmoreland the private driveway belonged to. She had traveled past Jason's Place, Zane's Hideout, Canyon's Bluff and Derringer's Dungeon before finally reaching Ramsey's Web.

She had done her research and knew everything she needed to know about Ramsey Westmoreland for now. He was thirty-six. A graduate of Tuskegee University's agricultural economics program, and had been in the sheep ranching business for about five years. Before that he and his cousin Dillon, who was older than Ramsey by only seven months, had run Blue Ridge Land Development, a multimillion-dollar company started by their fathers. Once the company had become successful Ramsey had turned the management of Blue Ridge over to Dillon to become the rancher he'd always wanted to be.

She also knew about the death of his parents and aunt and uncle in a car crash while Ramsey was in his final year of college. For the last fifteen years, Ramsey and Dillon had been responsible for their younger siblings. Dillon had gotten married three months ago, and he and his wife Pamela split their time between Dillon's home here and Pamela's home in a small town in Wyoming.

As far as Chloe was concerned, Ramsey Westmoreland was a success story and the type of man that women not only would want to fantasize about, but also one they would want to get to know in the article that would appear in her magazine.

She couldn't stop the fluttering in her stomach thinking that she was on property he owned and she would be seeing him again. If he had the ability to wreck her senses weeks after first setting eyes on him, she could just imagine what seeing him again would do. But she intended to handle herself as the professional that she was, while at the same time trying to convince him that sheep produced wool that eventually got weaved into articles of clothing—dresses, coats, jackets and such—that were mainly purchased by women.

She took another deep breath and opened the car door and got out at the same time the front door was swung open and the man who'd tormented her dreams for the past couple of weeks stepped out on the porch with a scowl on his face, and said in a firm voice, "You are late."

Ramsey tried not to stare at the woman but couldn't help it. And this was supposed to be his temporary cook? She looked more like a model than a damn cook. There was no doubt in his mind that she would be able to generate plenty of heat in the kitchen or any other room she set foot in.

She was definitely a beauty with dark brown curly hair that flowed to her shoulders, dark brown eyes that looked seductive rather than contrite and a perfectly shaped mouth. And seeing her dressed in a pair of jeans that hugged her hips and pink blouse beneath a black leather jacket, made her look ultra-feminine and made him blatantly aware of his sexuality, while reminding him of just how long it had been since he'd been with a woman.

Ramsey hadn't expected this gut-stirring lust. He didn't need the attraction nor did he want it. It would be best for all concerned if she just got back in her car and returned to wherever she'd come

from. But that wasn't possible. He had over twenty men to feed come lunchtime. He had managed to get through breakfast and thank goodness no one had complained. They had understood Nellie's emergency and had tolerated the slightly burned biscuits, scorched eggs and the overly crisp bacon. He had promised them a better meal for lunch. When they saw this woman they would definitely think *she* was a delicious treat.

"Excuse me. What did you say?"

He glanced across the yard where she was still standing by her car. Feeling frustrated as hell and fighting for control he walked down the steps, not taking his eyes off her. "I said you are late and your pay will be docked accordingly. The agency said you would be here at eight and it's now after nine. I have twenty men you'll need to feed at lunchtime. I hope there won't be a problem because I have plenty to do this morning and the agency assured me that you knew your way around a kitchen."

Chloe resisted the urge to ask what he was talking about. Instead she spoke up and said, "Yes, I know my way around a kitchen."

"Then get to it. I'll be back for lunch and we can talk then, but I can tell you now that one of my pet peeves is tardiness," he said, moving toward his truck.

From what Chloe gathered he was expecting a cook who evidently was late in arriving. She should speak up now and explain to him that she was not the cook but he seemed to be in such a hurry. "Wait!"

He paused, turned sensual dark eyes on her and she felt a heated sensation rush up her spine at the same time she felt the tenderness in the nipples pressed against her blouse. "Look, lady, I don't have time to wait. I'm needed over at the shearing plant as we speak. You'll find everything you need in the kitchen."

His voice was hard, yet at the same time it sounded sexy. And she couldn't believe it when he hopped into his truck and pulled off. She couldn't do anything but stand there and watch him leave.

So much for having her say to convince him to do the magazine cover. For crying out loud, he thought she was a cook of all things. What she should do was to just get into her car and leave and come back another time, she thought. But where was this cook he was expecting? And did she hear him correctly when he said that come lunchtime there would twenty men to feed?

Chloe rubbed her hands down her face. Surely there was someone she could call who had his cell—who could get word to him of the grave mistake he'd made.

She turned toward the front door. He had left it wide open on the assumption that she would go inside, and at the moment she didn't have the common sense not to do so. If nothing else she could call Lucia. There was a chance Lucia knew how to contact a family member who would get word to him.

As Chloe walked up the steps it was easy to tell with the fresh-looking paint around the trim, white siding and brick sides that this was a relatively new house. There were a lot of windows facing the front, which provided a good view of the mountains and that were perfectly positioned to take advantage of the sunlight whenever it did appear, which wasn't too often this time of year. The porch wrapped around the front of the house, and the rocking chair and swing looked inviting enough to sit in the afternoons and just relax, even now in March when the weather was still cold.

And speaking of March weather, she tightened her jacket around her and walked into the living room, closed the door behind her and turned around. The place was huge and in the midst of the room, a spiral staircase led to the upstairs. There wasn't a whole lot of furniture in the room, but what was there looked rugged and sturdy. Few pictures hung on the wall and they were classic Norman Rockwell. The floor was hardwood with several area rugs scattered about.

She was about to walk through the living room to where she figured the kitchen was located when the phone rang. She quickly moved toward it, hoping it was either Ramsey Westmoreland or someone who knew how to reach him.

"Hello."

“This is Marie Dodson at the employment agency. May I speak with Mr. Ramsey Westmoreland, please?”

“He isn’t here.”

“Oh. Then please let him know there was a mix-up and the woman who was supposed to show up at his place this morning as a live-in cook for two weeks was sent somewhere else.”

Chloe nodded and tapped her perfectly painted nail against the pad beside the phone. “All right, I’ll be sure to tell him.”

“He told me that his regular cook had to leave town unexpectedly due to a family emergency. I do hate leaving him in a bind like this with so many men to feed,” the woman said with regret in her voice.

“I’m sure he will understand,” was the only response Chloe felt she could make. “As a matter of fact, I think he’s made other arrangements,” Chloe added.

Moments later she was hanging up the phone, hoping that Ramsey Westmoreland *would* understand. But with what she guessed would be twenty hungry men come lunchtime, she wasn’t so sure.

At that moment an idea flowed through her mind. Although her father had spoiled her rotten, he was a person who never forgot where he came from and believed in helping those less fortunate. That had been the main reason why she had spent her summers while home from college working at the homeless shelters. And since she enjoyed cooking, for three full summers while all her friends had spent time on the Florida beaches, she had volunteered her time helping out in the shelter’s kitchens where large amounts of foods had to be cooked and served.

Mama Francine, who had worked as a cook at the shelter for years, had taught her all she needed to know, regardless of whether Chloe had wanted the education. Now it seemed all Mama Francine’s cooking instructions about how to prepare food for a large group hadn’t gone to waste.

Chloe tapped her finger to her chin. Maybe if she helped Ramsey Westmoreland out of this bind with lunch today, he just might be grateful enough to return the favor by doing her cover story. Especially if she made sure he felt he owed her big time. She smiled, liking the thought of that.

After glancing at her watch she took off her jacket and rolled up her sleeves as she headed toward the kitchen. One good favor deserved another and she was counting on Ramsey Westmoreland seeing things that way.

Two

Ramsey's jaw tightened as he slowed his truck to a stop. He had been in such a hurry to get out of the woman's presence that he hadn't taken time to even ask for her name. All he could think about was how his testosterone level had suddenly kicked into gear and that a sexual hunger, unlike any he'd ever experienced before, had begun sliding up his spine.

And the woman was his cook? A live-in cook for two weeks? How in the hell was he supposed to handle something like that? He couldn't imagine sharing space of any kind with her. There was something about her that drew him, made him think of things he hadn't thought of in a long time, had no business thinking about now. Lustful things.

Crap!

He slid the truck into gear to start moving again. What he should do is to turn around, go back and tell her as nicely as he could that she wouldn't work out. Then he'd call the employment agency and request that they send out a replacement.

He checked his watch, wondering how much time it would take to get another cook out to his place. Would the agency be able to find someone else right away? At least in time for lunch? Probably not, which meant he was stuck with the woman at least through today. But what if the agency couldn't find anyone else by tomorrow? What then?

He brought the truck to another stop and rubbed his hand down his face. This wasn't good. The shearers had been at it since six that morning after eating the pitiful breakfast that he had prepared. And he of all people knew his men worked hard and expected a good meal at lunch to keep going until the end of the day. And as their employer it was his job to make sure they got it.

As he turned his truck toward the area where the shearing plant was located he set his jaw in determination as he thought about the challenges that lay ahead with his new cook. He grabbed his cell phone off the seat beside him and figured that maybe he should call the house and check on her, make sure things were running smoothly, and then he quickly decided against it. Although he hadn't given the woman time to say much of anything, he had liked the sound that had flowed from her lips with the few words that she'd spoken.

She looked young, maybe a year or two older than his sister Megan who would be turning twenty-five in a few months. Why would a woman that young want to be a ranch cook? The scowl on his face deepened. Sniffing behind any woman was something he hadn't done in a long time and was something he wouldn't be doing now.

A satisfied smile touched Chloe's face as she glanced around the huge kitchen thinking she had somehow pulled it off. Granted she'd had to call Mama Francine and the older woman had walked her through the peach cobbler recipe, but once Chloe had begun moving around, getting familiar with her surroundings, she had felt within her element. She had made herself at home. She enjoyed cooking, although she would prefer not doing so on a constant basis for a small army.

Ramsey Westmoreland had a well-equipped kitchen with beautiful granite countertops and a number of shining stainless steel pots hanging from a rack. There was an industrial-size refrigerator, a large stove and a spacious walk-in pantry filled to capacity and in neat order. She had been able to find everything she had needed without any problems.

She had glanced through the cook's log that was kept on the kitchen counter. She saw that on most Mondays the men were fed chicken and dumplings, string beans and bread pudding for lunch. To Chloe's way of thinking that menu sounded bland and she had a mind to fix something different. She'd decided on lasagna, a tossed salad and Texas toast. For dessert she figured the peach cobbler would do the trick.

And she had set the table differently. Although she figured when it was time to eat a hungry man didn't care how the table looked, she decided to spruce things up with a different tablecloth, a springy yellow instead of the plaid one that had been on the table and appeared to have seen better days.

It seems that knowing he would always feed a huge work crew, Mr. Westmoreland had built a spacious banquet-size dining room off from the eat-in kitchen with tables and chairs to comfortably accommodate around fifty people. To her way of thinking, it was a smart move and showed just how much he cared for his employees. They would feel important enough to eat under the boss's roof instead of them being relegated to eating in the bunkhouse. To her that said a lot about the kind of employer he was.

She checked her watch. With less than fifteen minutes left she figured it was time to place the serving dishes on the table when she heard a vehicle pull up outside. She glanced out the window and saw it was the truck Ramsey Westmoreland had been driving that morning.

She stiffened, then drew in a deep breath, fighting for control and refusing to come unglued. No matter how handsome the man was, the only thing she wanted was for him to agree to do her magazine cover. She glanced out the window and saw he hadn't gotten out the truck yet and figured because he had arrived that his men were probably not too far behind.

With that thought in mind she moved to the stove to go about getting everything prepared.

Ramsey leaned back in the leather seat and stared at his house, not sure if he was ready to get out of the truck and go inside. He sniffed the air and then out of curiosity he rolled down the window.

Was that something Italian? He inhaled sharply thinking that it certainly smelled like it. When was the last time he and his men had something besides chicken and dumplings on Monday? Nellie was a fantastic cook, but she detested change. When it came to lunch his men could expect chicken and dumplings on Monday, shepherd's pie on Tuesday, chili on Wednesday, beef stew on Thursday and baked chicken on Friday. Nellie was known to keep things simple.

Deciding he couldn't sit in his truck forever, he opened the door to get out. By the time he rounded the front of his truck his front door opened. He stopped walking, literally froze in his tracks as he stared at the woman who stepped out on the porch.

His eyes hadn't played tricks on him that morning. She was a pleasant sight for the sorest of eyes and so stunningly beautiful that he felt every male hormone inside his body shift into overdrive. He struggled, unsuccessfully, to control the attraction he felt toward her. But when a knot twisted in his stomach, he knew he had to get her gone and off his property as soon as reasonably possible. Her being here for any amount of time was not going to work.

Chloe was going through her own issues as she studied the fierce frown on Ramsey Westmoreland's face. She wondered what had him so uptight. She had been the one who'd spent the last two hours in the kitchen over a hot stove, so she saw no reason for what she perceived as an unpleasant demeanor. If he knew the real deal and how she had helped him out of a sticky situation he would be kissing her feet.

And speaking of kissing her feet ...

Her mind paused, got stuck on that thought as a vision played out in her head of his actually kissing her feet before his mouth traveled upward to tackle other parts of her body. The very idea made her tighten her hands into fists at her sides at the same time a wave of heated desire suffused her senses.

Jeez. She had been dealing with all kinds of emotions and sensations since entering the man's home, and for her misery he owed her big time.

Yet at the moment, Ramsey Westmoreland was more than a little intimidating. Chloe wasn't sure if she wanted this man indebted to her in any way. He had the look of a man who shared humor only when it suited him. A man who wouldn't hesitate to offer his opinions and not necessarily in a tactful way. He would tell you exactly what he thought. And she had a feeling that he was not a man who made foolish mistakes, or one who could easily be led around by a woman. The latter perversely

bothered her because she was used to being in total control of any relationships she got involved in. But then, she and this man were not involved.

Deciding they had wasted enough time sizing up each other, she spoke up. “You were in such a hurry to leave this morning that I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself. I’m Chloe Burton.”

“You were late this morning.”

She couldn’t help the frown that settled on her face. Was he thinking of reminding her of it at every turn? Evidently he had very little tolerance for certain things. “No one told me that once I left Denver’s city limits that I would be headed for the boondocks, away from normal civilization. You’re lucky I made it here at all. So the way I see it is you really should be counting your blessings, Mr. Westmoreland.”

Chloe could tell by the way his brow lifted that he was somewhat surprised by her flippant tone. She noted his rigid stance and drew in a fortifying breath, thinking he really shouldn’t be so uptight. Life was serious, but there was no reason to take it to the edge. Her father had been that way until a heart attack brought on by stress had nearly done him in a few years ago.

“So when can I expect the other men? I made a feast,” she said, deciding to change the subject.

His gaze narrowed at her with shimmering intensity. “They’ll finish up and should be here any minute, so we need to talk before they arrive.”

Chloe decided then and there that she didn’t want to talk. His voice was just like the rest of him, sexy as hell. There was richness to his Western accent that caused a tightness in her throat. Being in his presence for the past few moments had frazzled her nerves, had blood pounding through her veins and had unceremoniously reminded her of the hormones he’d awakened since the first time she had set eyes on him. It also stirred warm emotions, confusing feelings she hadn’t felt in a while ... if ever. That was not good.

“What do we have to talk about? You’ve made it clear I was late and my pay would be docked. What else are you out for? Blood?”

Ramsey tensed. Evidently at some point the woman had forgotten that she was the employee and he the employer. Maybe her past employers found her attitude amusing, but he didn’t. He opened his mouth to state such a thing, but closed it when he heard the trucks pull up, which signaled the arrival of his men.

“We’ll have to wait and talk after lunch,” he said tersely. And then without saying anything else, he turned and headed toward the bunkhouse to wash up for lunch.

Ramsey leaned back in his chair thinking he had eaten lasagna before but never this delicious. And from glancing around the room at his men, he figured they were thinking the same thing. And there had been more than enough, which was a good thing because a number of the men had asked for seconds.

And he hadn’t been able not to notice that he wasn’t the only one who enjoyed seeing Ms. Burton work the room as she made sure everyone had everything they needed. Initially he’d been amused when the guys first arrived and a number of them, once they’d noticed there wasn’t a ring on her finger, had tried their hand at flirting. But she had maintained a degree of professionalism that had impressed him. Even Eric Boston and Thelon Hinton, the two hard-core womanizers in the group, had pretty much backed off when it became obvious that she wasn’t returning their interest. That surprised him because those two had a reputation in Denver of being sought-after ladies’ men.

Another thing that had impressed him about Chloe Burton was the way she had set up the employee dining room. It was obvious she had taken the time to spruce things up a bit, changing the decor of the men’s surroundings. Changing the menu had also been a plus.

He had good men who worked hard. Moreover, they would be putting in long hours during the next two weeks. Most had been with him since he’d started the operation and were family men who went home for dinner and returned for work each day. After shearing, which occurred once a

year, some of his men would turn their attention to lambing, while the others would resume their roles as sheepherders.

“I see you can’t keep your eyes off her either, Ram.”

Ramsey shot a sharp glance over at Callum Austell. When Ramsey had decided to become a sheep rancher he had flown over to Australia to spend six months on one of the country’s largest sheep ranches. It was there that he’d met the Aussie, who happened to be the youngest son of the ranch owner. Callum had agreed to come to the States to help Ramsey start his operation. Now three years later, Callum was still here with him. He was the one who’d basically taught Ramsey everything he knew about sheep. He considered Callum a good friend.

“You must be seeing things, Aussie,” was Ramsey’s reply, even though he knew Callum was right. Okay, so he was looking at her, but because he was her employer he needed to make sure she did her job right and that she conducted herself properly. He had twenty-five employees year round and not including Nellie, they were all men. And he was a hands-on boss, so he was familiar with everything that went on with his ranch and if needed, he could fill in for any of his men.

“I think not, but if you want to convince yourself of it, then go ahead,” was Callum’s comeback. “All I got to say is that you should be impressed with the way she handled Eric and Thel. I think she might have broken their hearts.”

Ramsey couldn’t help but snort at that. If that was true, it was about time some woman did. He glanced down at his watch. Lunch was almost over and the men, knowing his policy about punctuality, were standing to leave and were giving Chloe Burton all kinds of compliments. He stood as well, but unlike his men he had no intentions of going anywhere until he had a talk with his cook.

After grabbing his hat off the hat rack, Callum rounded the table and halted in front of Ramsey and studied his features. “I hope you don’t plan on ruining things for the rest of us. We like her cooking. And we like her. We would like to keep her around, at least until Nellie comes back.”

Callum had quietly spoken his words, just for Ramsey’s benefit. Without glancing over at Callum, Ramsey said, “We’ll see.”

And for now that was all he would say on the matter. Yes, the woman had impressed him and his men with her cooking skills, and yes, she had carried herself in a professional way. But Callum had been right. Just like his men he hadn’t been able to stop looking at her and that wasn’t a good thing. He had been sitting at the table eating his lasagna and imagining eating her instead. His mind was so filled with lust it wasn’t funny, and the flame that burned deep inside him wasn’t amusing, either.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the last of the men had gone, all but Callum, who threw him a daggered look before walking out the door and closing it behind him. Ramsey pulled in a deep, frustrated breath. The impression Chloe had already made on his men was not a good thing. Even if she stayed for two weeks she would have to leave when Nellie returned anyway.

He heard the rattling of the dishes and glanced over at Chloe, watching her as she cleared the table. His gaze slowly swept over her figure, liking the way the jeans fit across her backside. He figured her height was probably around five-eight and he would bet all the wool his sheep would be producing this year that she had long beautiful legs. The kind that would be a killer pair in a miniskirt.

He shook his head thinking about his fetish for seeing women in short skirts. He was a leg man all the way. So why was seeing this woman in jeans having basically the same effect?

Really it didn’t matter because he planned to let her go as soon as he could get in a replacement. Temptation was temptation and he would hate to suddenly develop sleepwalking tendencies knowing she would be in the guest bedroom down the hall from him.

Hell, such a thought no matter how tempting, didn’t sit well with him, mainly because he made the Double Creek Sheep Ranch one of the most successful in the United States. He’d done so by staying focused on what needed to be done and not by getting caught up in a woman. He didn’t intend to get caught up on one now.

He leaned against the counter, deciding not to interrupt what she was doing just yet. Not when he had her within his scope. Whether he liked it, he was enjoying the view.

* * *

The man was agitated about something, Chloe could sense it, but at the moment she refused to let him get on her last nerve. She had plenty of work to do and didn't have time for a confrontation. After she was finished clearing the table she would break the news to Mr. Westmoreland that she was not his cook, that she had done him a favor and that she expected one in return.

The room was quiet, but she could hear his breathing, strong and steady. But even though she refused to look over at him, she was well aware he was looking at her, checking her out. And she knew he was paying a lot of attention to her backside, probably had his gaze locked on it real tight, which would account for the heat she actually felt on that part of her anatomy. She'd been told by more than one man that she had a nice derriere, curvy and shapely, just the way a man liked. *Whoopie*, she thought sarcastically.

But still, she would be the first to admit that just the thought that Ramsey Westmoreland's gaze was on her bottom almost made her breath catch in her throat. His eyes, whenever she looked into them, were filled with intensity and she could actually feel that intensity now focused directly on her.

Not able to stand it a minute longer, she swung around and frowned deeply. "We can talk now."

His dark eyes remained steady on her, even when he nodded and said, "All right. First I want to say you did a heck of a job with lunch today. The men were impressed and so was I."

She blinked. A compliment hadn't been what she'd been expecting. The man definitely had a way of delivering it with mixed emotions. His words were syrupy and sweet, while the texture of his voice was brooding. "Thank you, I'm glad everyone enjoyed it."

"They also enjoyed you." At the lift of her brow he clarified and said, "Enjoyed you being here I mean."

She wondered where he was about to go with that comment and figured she would know soon enough. "I enjoyed being here as well," she responded as she placed the dishes in the sink. It was time to come clean and let him know her real purpose for being there. "Mr. Westmoreland, I think that you—"

"Ramsey. I prefer you call me Ramsey. Everyone around here does. Some even call me Ram."

She couldn't help but smile at that.

"You find something amusing, Ms. Burton?"

She met his gaze and her smile widened even more. "You can call me Chloe, and what I find amusing is the fact that a ram is a male sheep and you are in the sheep business. Unique, don't you think?"

He shrugged muscular shoulders. "Never gave it much thought."

She lifted a brow. "Are you trying to tell me that no one has ever made the connection before?"

"If they did, they knew better than to mention it."

Chloe wanted to just throw her hands up in the air and give up. It was quite evident that even when they were trying to hold a civil conversation they had the ability to rub each other the wrong way. That made her wonder about him, the man she wanted to be on the cover of *Simply Irresistible*. He looked better than chocolate cake oozing with deep, rich chocolate icing—her favorite—but it was becoming quite evident he was a complex man. She couldn't help wonder what made Ramsey tick? What would it take to make him become relaxed, more laid-back? she wondered. Although she could see that around his men he was pretty mild-mannered and friendly. It was obvious they had a good working relationship while maintaining a degree of respect. That meant he was reserving his uptightness mainly for her. She wondered why.

The research she'd done indicated he dated when the mood or the urge probably hit him. Yet he didn't have any steady woman in his life. His last serious relationship had been with the woman he'd become engaged to, a woman by the name of Danielle McKay. However, she had ruined what

was to have been his wedding day by stopping the minister in the middle of the wedding and walking out. That had been over ten years ago. Surely he'd gotten over that incident by now.

In addition to the cover photo for the magazine, she wanted an interview with him and had a feeling getting him to talk would be just as difficult as getting him to agree to the cover photo. Talk about pulling teeth. She had planned to send one of her seasoned reporters to talk to him and now she could clearly see that just wouldn't work.

Suddenly an idea popped into her head. She might as well go about killing two birds with one stone. She wanted him to do the magazine cover and she wanted an article on him as well. His profession intrigued her. For instance, why had he gotten into sheep ranching versus cattle or horse ranching?

An insider's view of his operation might be good reading information to her readers. And the best way to find out everything she wanted to know about him was to hang around and get to know him for herself. The man was without a doubt masculine perfection and she wondered if there was more to Ramsey Westmoreland than a handsome face and a hard, muscular body.

Chloe nibbled on her lower lip. Now was the time to come clean and tell him the truth, but something was holding her back from doing so. He owed her for lunch today and she intended to collect, but she wanted more from him than just the photo cover. She wanted to interview him for a piece in the magazine as well. Women loved wool and she could do an article informing them of the entire process of getting it off the sheep and into the stores. At lunch a number of the shearers had explained how things were done, but she wanted to hear it from Ramsey.

"What made you get into sheep ranching?" she decided to ask. There was no sense in wasting time getting the information she needed.

She glanced over at him when he didn't say anything and felt heat thrum through her body when he shifted his gaze to her face. From his expression she could tell he was surprised by her question.

"Why do you want to know?"

He was a suspicious sort and she would add that to the list of his characteristics. "I'm just curious. You have a big spread and a good number of men to help you run things. Most people around here have cattle or horses, but you have sheep. Why?"

Taking his time, Ramsey pondered Chloe's question. It was one he had asked himself many times and whenever he did he would always come up with the same answer. "Being a rancher was a dream my father and I shared from the time he took me with him to visit a friend of his in Maryland who owned a sheep farm. I couldn't have been any more than twelve at the time. In college I majored in agriculture economics, so I would know everything there was to know about farming and ranching, although my plans were to join the family's real estate business like everyone else. It was Dad's intent to one day retire and just have a small flock of sheep, but he died before he had a chance to fulfill his dream."

"I'm sorry, Ramsey."

She had spoken quietly and he saw his sorrow reflected in her eyes. He quickly wondered why he had shared that with her. He wasn't sure why he had answered her question at all. What was it about her that had made him feel comfortable enough with her to bare his soul? "Look, Chloe, what I need to talk to you about is—"

At that moment his cell phone went off. "Excuse me," he said before fishing it out of his back pocket. "Yes?"

She watched, nearly mesmerized as a huge smile touched his face, curving his lips. If she hadn't seen it, she would not have believed it. Did he reserve his frowns just for her?

"Dillon, when did you get in?" He paused. "No problem, I'm on my way."

He quickly returned the phone to his jeans pocket and glanced over at her. "I need to run. We still need to talk. I'll be back in an hour or so." He turned to move toward the back door.

"I'll be gone by then."

He stopped and pivoted around and lifted a questioning brow while staring at her. “Gone where?”

There were those intense eyes again and she drew a breath. “Back to town.”

He leaned back against the counter again. “Did the agency not tell you that I hired you as a live-in cook? The men will be expecting another meal in the morning around five.”

“Five!”

“Yes.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “Did your other cook live here?”

“No. But then I didn’t have to worry about her getting here early enough to have breakfast ready for my men. Nellie and her husband have a house less than ten miles away. She arrived every morning at three and left in the late afternoon.”

He then lifted a brow. “Just what did that employment agency tell you? This is shearing time here at the ranch and it happens only once a year. I own over three thousand sheep and have only a two-week window to get the wool off. Unlike a lot of sheep ranchers who hire a sheep shearing crew from year to year, my men are trained to do all the job duties here. That means they will work around the clock. I have to make sure they eat a hearty breakfast and are fed a good lunch. I can’t wake up tomorrow morning and worry about whether you’ll show up.”

“I’ll be back in the morning,” she heard herself say. “I promise.”

Ramsey frowned. Hadn’t he made up his mind that they could not stay under the same roof? Wasn’t it his intent to talk to her about remaining as his cook only until he’d found a replacement? So why was he making a big deal of her staying over tonight? He should be overjoyed that she was leaving.

He inwardly shrugged and figured he only cared because of his concern that she would not be here on time in the morning to feed his men. “I’m going to need you here on time, Chloe,” he said in a voice that sounded pretty damn curt even to his own ears.

“I said I would be here, didn’t I?” she all but snapped back in a tone that said he would get just as good as he gave.

His glare locked on her face and then he nodded stiffly. “I’m taking you at your word. Lock the door behind you when you leave and I’ll see you in the morning.” He then headed for the door.

He turned and met her gaze one more time and she didn’t release her breath until the door had closed behind him.

Three

“Please tell me you’re joking, Clo.”

Chloe sat her luggage down near her feet and turned to Lucia who had a worried look on her face. Chloe had decided to return to Ramsey’s place tonight instead of trying to find her way there again in the early morning when it would still be dark outside. “Come on, Lou, it’s not that serious. I’m doing Ramsey Westmoreland a favor and in the end he will be doing me a favor.”

Lucia rolled her eyes. “He won’t see things that way when he finds out what you’re really about. You’re not only invading his privacy, but you’re also being deceitful.”

“I’m not.”

“You are, too, and all hell is going to break loose when he learns the truth. I live in this town, you don’t. You’ll be back in sunny Florida and I’ll be here feeling the heat of the Westmorelands’ wrath. When it comes to anyone messing with one of them, they all stick together.”

Chloe crossed her arms beneath her breasts and gave her best friend a pointed look. “And which Westmoreland are you concerned with pissing off, Lucia?”

Chloe knew she had hit the jackpot when Lucia dropped her gaze and began looking everywhere but at her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Chloe had no intentions of believing that. “Yeah, right. You don’t want to make waves with the Westmorelands for a reason, so fess up. Which one is it? Ramsey?”

“No,” Lucia said quickly. “It’s no one.”

Chloe didn’t believe that any more than she believed there was a lost colony off the California coast. “Okay, Lou, this is Clo. You can’t lie straight even on your best days, so I’m going to ask you one more time, who is he and don’t waste my time telling me he’s not a Westmoreland.”

Reluctantly, Lucia met her gaze and then in a quiet and flat voice she said, “It’s Ramsey’s brother, Derringer.”

Chloe raised a brow. Her best friend’s expression was filled with so much love it almost hurt her to look at it. “Derringer Westmoreland? When did all this take place?”

She had known Lucia since her first year of college and the man’s name had never come up, yet judging by the expression on Lucia’s face whatever she felt for the man ran deep and had been there a long time.

A faint smile touched Lucia’s lips. “I’ve loved him forever.”

Chloe was shocked. “Forever? And I’m just hearing about him?”

Lucia shrugged. “There was never a point. My crush began in high school, but he saw me as nothing more than one of his sister’s friends. I thought I’d gotten over him when I left for college but since returning home four years ago I’ve discovered that isn’t the case.”

Lucia’s face warmed when she said, “Last month I ran into him, and for the first time in years we were close enough to speak.” A smile then touched her face. “And he asked me—”

“Out on a date?” Chloe asked excitedly.

“I wish. He dropped by my dad’s paint store and I was working behind the counter and Derringer asked me to hand him a can of paint thinner.”

Chloe couldn’t help the grin that curved her lips. Evidently that little incident had made Lou’s day. Just being around Ramsey Westmoreland put a spark in *her* day. Now where had that thought come from? Chloe wondered.

“Now that I know how you feel about Derringer Westmoreland, I will tell Ramsey the truth as soon as reasonably possible. I still want to make him feel indebted to me first for a while and then I’ll level with him and come clean.”

Lucia nodded. “I know how much having Ramsey on the cover of your magazine as well as doing that article on him means to you.”

Chloe met Lucia's gaze and smiled. "Yes, I don't want you to worry about it because I believe in the end we'll both get what we want."

Ramsey looked up from the breeding charts he had spread over his desk and considered going into the kitchen to eat that last bit of peach cobbler that had been left from lunch. It had been so delicious his mouth was beginning to water just thinking about it.

And his mouth was beginning to water just thinking about something else as well. More specifically, someone else. Chloe Burton. Talk about looking yummy. He threw his pencil down and leaned back in his chair. At that moment he couldn't help but think about snug-fitting jeans that covered a curvaceous backside and a blouse that fit perfectly over a tempting pair of breasts. He was getting aroused at the memory.

Damn.

Deciding he needed a beer more so than any peach cobbler, he got up to make his way to the kitchen. Moments later he was leaning against the counter and tipping the bottle to his lips and taking a much-needed drink. Lowering the bottle he then glanced around the room and for the first time noticed just how large and quiet his home was. Usually he welcomed the silence, but for some reason it bothered him tonight.

He studied the ceramic floor as he thought about his greatgrandfather, Raphael Westmoreland, who had owned over eighteen hundred acres of land on the outskirts of Denver's city limits. When each Westmoreland reached the age of twenty-five they were given a one-hundred-acre tract of land. It was why he, his siblings and cousins all lived in close proximity to each other. As the oldest cousin, in addition to receiving his one hundred acres, Dillon had also inherited Shady Tree Ranch, the Westmoreland family home. The huge two-story dwelling sat on three hundred acres and hosted the majority of the family functions. Since Dillon had married Pamela it seemed the Westmorelands had reason to celebrate a lot. Everyone adored Dillon's wife, found her totally different from his first wife, and had welcomed Pamela and her three sisters into the family with open arms.

He lifted his head when he heard a knock at his door and glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was close to eleven, but that didn't mean a damn thing to any of his siblings or cousins. They felt they had a right to come calling at any time. He shook his head as he made it to the door, thinking it was probably his sister Megan. She was twenty-four years old and an anesthesiologist at the hospital in town.

Without bothering to ask who it was, he slung his front door open to find Chloe Burton standing on his porch and tightly gripping a piece of luggage. He was so surprised to see her that he could only stand and stare.

He could tell by the way she was nibbling on her lower lip that she was nervous, but that wasn't what held his attention, although the action caused a tightening in his gut. What had him transfixed was her outfit. She had almost ruined a saucy minidress by wearing leggings. He would have loved to see her bare legs and almost sighed in disappointment. But then he had to admit she still looked gorgeous and sexy as hell. Good enough to eat after first lapping her all over. He swallowed knowing at that moment that he was in trouble.

"I know I said I'd come back in the morning, but I figured not to take any chances getting here late. Besides, I need to get things set up, if the men eat at five. I'll need to be in the kitchen at least by four. So ... here I am."

Yes, here she was, and although he wished otherwise, ideas continued to pop up in his head, literally pound his brain, regarding all the things he'd like to do to her. Even now he wished like hell he could ignore the ache that was stirring in the lower part of his body, as well as the heavy thudding doing havoc to his chest. But he couldn't.

She stared at him and he stared back at her as his insides began filling with lust of the thickest kind. He should have followed his mind earlier and contacted the employment agency to see if they could send in a replacement by morning, but he had failed to do so mainly because deep down he

really hadn't wanted to. He grudgingly admitted that he had been looking forward to seeing her in the morning. But she was here now and he wasn't quite sure just how to handle her unexpected arrival.

He watched as she raised her brows. "So are you going to let me in or do I get to stand out here all night?"

At that moment he couldn't help but quirk his lips in a smile. She was almost as bad as Bailey with her sassy mouth. A mouth that at that moment snagged his gaze. Breath slammed through his lungs when she took that time to moisten her lower lip with the tip of her tongue.

He fought the heat flaring in his midsection. "Yes, I'm going to let you in," he said, reaching out and taking the luggage out of her hand and stepping back and moving aside.

"I appreciate it," she responded, stepping over the threshold.

When she walked past him every cell in Ramsey's body began throbbing as he took in her scent. Whatever perfume she was wearing was lethal and could wrap a man up in all kinds of sensuous thoughts.

She glanced over at him. "So where's my room?"

He gave her a tight smile. "Upstairs. Please follow me." A part of him wished he was leading her to his bedroom instead of the guest room. Damn, he needed another beer.

They walked up the stairs and when they reached the landing they walked down the hall. "Nice place."

He glanced over his shoulder. "I'm sure you've seen it before."

She arched her brow. "No, I haven't. Earlier today when you left your door wide open, I had no reason to snoop around up here. My job was in the kitchen area and no other part of your house."

He wondered if she could be believed, and when he glanced over his shoulder again he couldn't help but note how she was checking out several of the bedrooms they passed. Maybe she hadn't come *snooping* after all. He had five guest rooms all with their own private baths. At twenty-three, Gemma was the interior designer in the family. She had been more than happy to spend his money to lavishly decorate each of his bedrooms. And she was dying to get started on the rooms downstairs once he gave her the go-ahead. That wouldn't be for a while. He was still recovering from having her underfoot when she'd done the upstairs.

"Sorry, my mistake," he apologized by saying.

When they reached the bedroom that she would be using, he stood back to let her enter. He could tell from her expression that he had made a wise choice. She liked it, which meant she was a frilly, lacy and soft colors kind of girl. While she was standing in the middle of the room, scanning the room in awe, he placed her luggage on the bed.

His first inclination was to bid her good-night and leave her standing right there, but something about the expression on her face stopped him. She actually seemed absorbed. He somehow understood. Gemma's interior design work could do that to you. He would be one of the first to admit that his sister was good. The money used to send her to college had been well spent.

He doubted there was ever a time Gemma hadn't wanted to be an interior designer. He could vividly recall how she had made curtains for his first car—a bright red Chevy—when she was eight. To not hurt her feelings he had mounted the things in the car's rear window hoping that none of his friends saw them.

"Whoever decorated this part of your home did a fantastic job," Chloe said, as her gaze returned to Ramsey.

Chloe noted that he was looking at her again, with the same intensity that he'd looked at her earlier that day. And as she stared back his gaze never wavered, it held hers deep within its scope. Without words, with barely a breath, something was taking place between them. She wished she could dismiss her theory and believe she was just imagining things, but there was no make-believe with the heat consuming her body. Her breasts suddenly felt swollen and her nipples seemed tender against the fabric of her dress.

Her gaze moved from his face and scanned his body downward and was glad to see she was not the only one affected by the moment. He was aroused. Fully. There was no way he could hide it and he wasn't trying to. Her gaze shifted back to his face and what she saw in the depths of his eyes almost took her breath away. There were promises of hot, lusty nights, more pleasure than she could probably stand, kisses that would start at her mouth and end between her thighs and an explosion that would shatter every single thing within her. She paused for breath at the thought that those were real promises she saw in his gaze and not a figment of her imagination.

Then she also saw something else in the depths of his eyes beside those promises. She saw a warning. If she couldn't stand the heat, then she needed to stay out of the kitchen. At that moment she pulled in a wary breath. Was Ramsey Westmoreland the one man she could not handle?

"I'll leave you alone to unpack," he finally said, breaking the intense sexual tension that surrounded them. "You have your own bathroom, which I believe you'll find more than sufficient."

She nodded. Her ability to speak had escaped her.

"Good night, Chloe. I'll see you in the morning."

She could only stand and stare after him as he left the room.

There was no doubt about it. He had to get her out of his house, Ramsey thought, as he paced his bedroom hours later. What had happened in the guest room tonight was uncalled for, but still pretty much unclear. He had come within seconds of crossing that room, bending his head and taking her mouth with his to satisfy the hunger he felt. The hunger he was still feeling. The thought of his tongue mingling with hers while he held her tight against the heat of his chest caused the hot stab of arousal to nearly knock him to his knees.

And where on earth had such passion come from? It had nearly taken over him, transformed his brains into mush and had filled his mind with naughty thoughts of all the things he wanted to do to her. He pulled in a deep breath deciding he needed to analyze the situation. He needed to determine just how they had come to this point.

He would be the first to admit there had been a strong sexual attraction from the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. A rush of hot blood had shot through his veins, had hammered away at his insides, and an awareness as profound as anything he'd ever encountered before had zinged through him with the force of a volcano erupting. Every nerve, every bone and every muscle in his body had been affected.

And things hadn't gotten any better during the lunch hour when he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her just as Callum had claimed. And he had a feeling that the reason Eric and Thel had probably backed off hadn't been because of any feeling of defeat where she was concerned. They had retreated because they'd picked up on his interest. If Callum had noticed his staring at her, then there was a strong possibility others had as well. And because doing such a thing was so unlike him, they probably figured he was being territorial. Had he been?

He rubbed his hands down his face as he uttered a frustrated curse. She was probably in her bed, sleeping peacefully between the sheets, while he was the one walking the floor with an erection that was keeping him awake. He seriously considered going into her room, getting her up and asking her to leave. How crazy was that? To even contemplate doing such a thing showed just how close to the edge he was.

Of his four brothers he was the one who could generally take a woman or leave her just where she stood. His love 'em and leave 'em attitude unnerved his siblings who thought he spent more time sleeping with his sheep than with women. Considering the time he'd done duty as a sheepherder over the past year, that accusation was not a lie. But it really wasn't any of their business. And he had been quick to point out—especially to his brothers and male cousins—that they were spending enough time chasing women without him, boosting profits for the condom industries and making it quite obvious they were men on the prowl the majority of the time. He cringed at the reputations some of them had.

And he had been quick to assure them that his decision to not bed women as often as they did had nothing to do with Danielle McKay, the woman who had walked off, leaving him standing at the altar ten years ago at a church filled with over two hundred guests. The really sad thing was that his family had liked her, until they'd discovered the truth as to why she had walked out on him in front of everyone with an "I'm sorry," instead of an "I do."

She had later confessed to having an affair that had resulted in a pregnancy. To her credit, at least she'd had the decency to not go through with the wedding instead of passing the kid off as his. But what his family hadn't known and what he'd kept hidden was that it had been a sense of obligation and not love that had driven him to ask Danielle to marry him in the first place. So in reality, her calling off the wedding had been a blessing in disguise.

He pulled in a deep breath. If anything, thoughts of Danielle should have reduced the size of his erection but they hadn't. That meant thoughts of Chloe outweighed thoughts of Danielle by a large margin. He doubted Danielle ever got him this aroused without even touching her. As far as he was concerned, this sort of physical reaction to a woman had to be cruel and unusual punishment.

Ramsey moved toward the bed, swearing with every step. He had to get up just as early as Chloe did. There were early morning chores that had to be done. Already a few of his nosy family members had called asking questions after a number of his men had bragged about his new cook and how pretty she was. News carried in Westmoreland Country and no doubt some were anticipating his next move and taking bets as to how quick he would be getting her from under his roof.

As far as he was concerned that was a no-brainer. She was definitely on her way out of there. He was determined that no matter what, he would be contacting the employment agency about finding him a replacement.

Four

When Chloe heard a sound behind her she didn't stop beating the huge bowl full of eggs because she knew who it was. She was determined that nothing about Ramsey Westmoreland was going to unnerve her today. After all, he wasn't the only man alive with a lot of sexual appeal, although he happened to be the only one who seemed to hold her interest.

She considered turning around to greet him and then decided because he was the one who'd entered the kitchen, he should be the one to make the gesture. If he didn't, it wouldn't be any sweat off her back, namely because she didn't have any sweat left after those naughty dreams last night where he'd had a starring role.

"Morning."

Okay, he'd done the proper thing and spoke first, but did he have to do so with such a deep huskiness in his voice? Such raw sexuality in his tone? It had only been one word for crying out loud. Yet the sound that had emitted from his lips was sending shudders through her body and had the potential to do other things she just didn't want to think about this early in the morning. It wasn't even four yet. And it was going to be a busy morning and an even busier noon.

Reluctantly, she turned around, deciding she would at least return his greeting. "Good—"

She swallowed the other word. And was that a moan she'd heard that had just passed her lips? Ramsey Westmoreland had the nerve, the sheer audacity to be standing in the middle of the kitchen putting on a shirt. At least now he was buttoning it up. But not before she'd caught a glimpse of his naked chest, ultra-fine biceps, sculpted shoulders and muscular arms. And it didn't help matters that his jeans were riding low on his hips and he was barefoot. It was quite obvious he had just taken a shower and had shaved. But still, he had that early-morning take-me-as-I-am look and she was tempted to do just that.

She wished she had the strength not to let her gaze hone in on such a powerful muscled body, but you could call her weak and she would answer. She was seeing firsthand why she wanted him as her *Simply Irresistible* man.

His gaze met hers when he'd noticed her looking and held on to her eyes until the last button was done. What a pity, she thought. She had enjoyed the show.

"I can't believe you beat me up," he said, now slipping a belt through the loops of his jeans.

Chloe wondered if it was the norm for him to get dressed in the middle of his kitchen. "I couldn't sleep," she decided to say. "Unfamiliar bed." There was no reason to tell him what had really kept her awake.

"But you did get enough sleep to function this morning," he stated. "The men will be hungry," he added.

She snorted, not caring how it sounded. "Mama Francine said men are always hungry. Even when their stomachs are full."

He leaned against the counter. "And who is Mama Francine?"

Too late she realized she might have said too much, but quickly decided telling him about Mama Francine wasn't giving anything away. "She's the person who taught me how to cook."

He nodded and she turned back to her eggs. She wasn't sure how many men would want their eggs scrambled, but she wanted to have the mixture ready just in case. And Mama Francine had taught her how to flip eggs, so those who didn't want their egg scrambled could tell her just how they liked it.

She heard him move, but refused to look up again. Besides, she knew he was moving toward her with a slow walk and glancing around inspecting everything while doing so. And with every step he took closer to her she felt his heat. It was even more powerful than what the stove was generating.

"I'm impressed."

She couldn't help but smile as she glanced over her shoulder. "Again?"

“Yep. You’re serving both bacon and sausage.”

She lifted a brow. Curious. “Something’s wrong with that?”

He shrugged. “No. It’s just that usually Nellie did one or the other.”

She gazed him a pointed look. “Well, I’m not Nellie.”

His heavy-lidded eyes raked over her. Slowly. Thoroughly. Then he said in a voice drenched with masculine awareness. “I can see that.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she said nothing at all before turning back around, placing the egg mixture aside to give attention to the pan of biscuits.

She knew he was staring at her legs and was tempted to pull her skirt down. However, doing so would give him the impression she was uncomfortable with what she was wearing. She wasn’t nor should she be. It was a decent length and, therefore, it was appropriate. It hit just a little above the knee, but she was wearing leggings underneath. If he were to see her in some of the other outfits she owned, the ones that barely covered her thighs, he would probably be shocked.

“And we’re getting homemade biscuits, too?”

She couldn’t help the grin that touched her lips when she moved to open the oven door and slide the pan of biscuits inside. “Another abnormality?”

“Around here, yes.”

That made Chloe wonder why this Nellie didn’t prepare more of a variety of foods for breakfast. After closing the oven door she turned around, trying to ignore how responsive certain parts of her body were to Ramsey’s nearness. He looked like he needed another five hours of sleep to do him justice, yet at the same time he looked sexy as sin. “May I ask you a question, Ramsey?”

He shrugged those massive shoulders again. “Depends on what you want to know.”

She crossed her arms under her breasts and wondered if that had been a good thing when his eyes, half-asleep or not, followed the movement and seemed to be staring right through the material of her blouse to her nipples. At least the nipples thought so and were tingling at the attention they were getting. They were tingling and getting hard all at the same time.

“I want to know why this Nellie didn’t offer more of a variety to the men at breakfast time.”

She watched as a grin quirked his lips. “If you knew Nellie you wouldn’t have to ask that question.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know Nellie, so I’m asking it.”

He tilted his head to the side, focusing those ever-so-intense eyes on her. And weakling that she was, immediately felt her body’s response to his gaze. She wondered if he could detect it. It seemed so unreal that she would react to him this way when Daren couldn’t get a spark of response out of her no matter how much he tried. But then, he hadn’t tried too often. He’d been more interested in building his political future by parading Senator Burton’s daughter out in front of those he felt he needed to impress. And when they were alone he was more into surfing the Internet for political blogs than getting into her. And those times when he had given her his attention, he might as well not have bothered. To say Daren hadn’t had a romantic bone in his body was an understatement. However, the final straw came when he’d actually suggested they participate in a threesome. He claimed that kind of sexual kinkiness was a total turn on for him. For a man who couldn’t even handle a twosome to fix his mouth to propose such a thing was too much. She’d sent him packing with the few items he had kept at her place and with a clear understanding not to come back.

Since then she had to focus all her energy—sexual and otherwise—into making her magazine a success and refused to think about having any type of a relationship with a man, and now, here she was, behaving like some supercharged, highly-sexed woman, ready to unzip his pants and jump his bones.

“Nellie figured that for breakfast she would give them just the basic, enough to get by so they could really be hungry by lunchtime,” he interrupted her thoughts by stating.

She raised a brow. In her opinion that didn't make much sense. "Wouldn't they be hungry at lunchtime anyway?"

"Yes."

Chloe opened her mouth to say something, then snapped it shut, deciding to leave it alone. She and Nellie were two different people and the way the woman ran her kitchen was none of Chloe's business. Chloe's concern, her aim, was to make sure by the time she confessed who she was, Ramsey would feel he was irrevocably in her debt. And if offering the men who worked for him a variety at breakfast was going to get brownie points with him, then so be it. Besides, after listening to the men yesterday, it was quite obvious that most of them would like a home-cooked meal and she had no problem giving them one. Besides, being back in the kitchen had made her realize just how much she enjoyed cooking.

She heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up. "Sounds like your men are starting to arrive."

He shook his head. "No, it's Callum. He always arrives earlier than the others. He and I usually have business to discuss in the mornings."

She nodded. She had noticed the man yesterday and could tell he and Ramsey had more than just an employer-employee relationship. They seemed to be close friends. "He's from the Outback, isn't he?"

Ramsey had moved to where the coffeepot was sitting to pour a cup of coffee. He took a sip and frowned. The woman could even make damn good coffee. "Yes," he finally said, answering her question.

Few people, including some members of Ramsey's own family, knew that Callum was a millionaire in his own right and owned a vast amount of land in Australia. He had several sheep ranches in Australia that were run by a very efficient staff. There was no need to tell her that the Aussie donated to charity the salary he earned as Ramsey's ranch manager.

Callum, at thirty-four, was the product of a wealthy white Australian father and an African American mother. His family had made billions in the sheep ranching business. Another thing she didn't need to know was that the only reason Callum was still hanging around here instead of moseying it back to Australia was because he didn't plan to leave without Gemma going with him.

Callum knew Ramsey well enough to know that when it came to his three sisters, Ramsey was a tad overprotective and would stop any advances on Megan, Gemma or Bailey cold. It had taken the Aussie a full year to convince Ramsey that his intentions toward Gemma were honorable and that he loved her and wanted to marry her. Both Ramsey and Dillon had given Callum their blessings for a marriage; however, they'd made it clear the final decision would be Gemma's. His sister had never given any indication that she was the least bit interested in Callum and was virtually clueless in regards to Callum's interest in her. As far as Ramsey was concerned maybe that was a good thing because Gemma was known to be a handful at times and would definitely have a lot to say about it; especially when she'd stated on more than one occasion that she never intended to ever give her heart to any man. That meant the Aussie had his work cut out for him if he intended to win her over.

Ramsey glanced around the kitchen before returning his gaze to Chloe. "It seems that you have everything under control."

"Sorry you thought that I wouldn't."

The mockery of her words had him frowning. Something told him that when it came to an attitude, hers was worse than his sister's. "It's not that I thought you wouldn't, Chloe. I think you more than proved your capabilities yesterday."

She lifted her chin. "Then what is it with you?"

He could pretend he had no idea what she was talking about, but he didn't. If the truth be told, he was the one with the attitude and was well aware it had probably been the pits since their initial meeting. He wasn't used to having to deal with a woman who made men pause when she walked into

a room. A woman who wore her sexuality like it was a brand with her name on it. A woman who even now had blood surging through his veins.

And a woman he wanted to kiss.

His heart was racing at the very thought of locking his mouth with hers, and he knew at that moment if she stayed another night under his roof he would be doing that very thing if for no other reason than to get her out of his system. It would only be right to give her fair warning.

“How old are you, Chloe?”

From her expression he could tell she was wondering what her age had to do with anything. “I’m twenty-eight.”

He nodded slowly, while his gaze continued to hold hers. “Then I would think you’d know what it is with me. But just in case you don’t have a clue, I’ll show you later.”

Chloe felt a slow burn in her midsection followed by the feel of her heart thudding erratically in her chest. The meaning behind his words was pretty clear. If it hadn’t been, then his eyes would have spelled things out for her. She could see the promises in the dark depths. Promises he wasn’t trying to hide. Promises he intended to keep.

Before she could level a response the back door opened and Callum Austell walked in. He looked first at her and then at Ramsey. The smile that touched the man’s lips would have been too deadly sexy if she hadn’t thought Ramsey had a monopoly on sexiness.

“Ram. Chloe. Did I come at a bad time?” Callum asked in a low tone.

Chloe watched an irritated frown touch Ramsey’s features and she drew in a deep breath. Lucia had warned her that he was a private person and she wasn’t sure just how he felt about his friend picking up on the sexual tension flowing between them. It was tension so thick you could probably cut it with a knife and then spread it on bread. Deciding she needed to play off Callum’s words, make the man think he was wrong in his assumption, she turned to Callum, opened her mouth to speak, but Ramsey beat her to it.

“No, you didn’t come at a bad time. Come on, Cal, let’s have that meeting.” He then sat the coffee cup he’d been holding on the counter with a thud and headed out of the room. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder at Callum who had halted beside her.

“You sure look nice this morning, Chloe,” Callum said in a husky tone with his deep Australian accent.

Chloe glanced up at the handsome man whom she figured was a year or two younger than Ramsey and couldn’t help wondering what he was about. Had he just delivered a polite comment or a blatant flirtation?

“You’re wasting my time, Cal. Are we meeting or what?” Ramsey called out in a sharp tone.

Callum looked across the room at Ramsey and smiled. “We’re meeting.”

And then he moved to follow Ramsey out of the room.

* * *

Ramsey clenched his jaw until he was in the office and then he all but slammed the door shut before facing Callum. The other man had the nerve, the very audacity, the damn gall, to smile. “What the hell was that about?” he asked through gritted teeth.

Callum gave him an innocent look, one Ramsey wasn’t buying or selling. “I don’t know what you mean, Ram.”

Ramsey leaned back against his desk and frowned. “You were flirting with her.”

Callum shrugged as another smile formed at the corners of his lips. “What if I was?”

Ramsey crossed his arms over his chest. “If you did it to get a rise out of me, then—”

“It worked,” Callum taunted as he eased his muscular frame into a chair across from the desk. “Come on, Ram. Go ahead and admit you want the woman, which is why you’re trying to get rid of her. When you know for yourself, even after eating just one meal, that she’s a lot better cook than

Nellie and her temperament is a vast improvement to what we're used to. I hate to say it but Nellie hasn't been missed around here and you know why."

Ramsey drew in a deep breath. Yes, he did know why. Nellie's disposition had begun deteriorating months ago after discovering her husband had been unfaithful to her. It was as if she had taken her hurt and anger out on the entire male population and his men knew it. They had tried being understanding, even sympathetic. But then after a while they'd become annoyed and just plain irritated. There was nothing worse than pissing a man off about his food.

Although Nellie's unexpected trip had placed him in a bind, he thought she needed the distance from his men for a while and vice versa. She still had a job when she returned, but the two of them would have a long talk first.

"Okay, so Nellie hasn't been missed, but when she comes back, she still has a job," he decided to speak up.

"Fine. Great. But in the meantime I think your men deserve a nice smile and friendly words every now and then, not to mention food they can eat without worrying about it being burned or overly seasoned."

Ramsey was silent.

"Look, I understand your problem with Chloe, Ram. Welcome to the club. I know how it is to want a woman so bad you ache," Callum said.

Ram frowned. He then narrowed his eyes on his friend. "You're referring to my sister," he said in a warning tone.

Callum snorted. "I'm referring to the woman I intend to marry who refuses to give me the time of day and it's getting damn near frustrating. Don't be surprised one day if you wake up and find us both gone." A smile touched Callum's lips. "I might resort to kidnapping."

Ram's frown deepened. "You'd better be joking." He then shook his head at Callum's outrageous threat. And then he couldn't help but chuckle. "Go ahead and kidnap her. I'll give you less than a week and you'll be bringing her back. Gemma will make your life a living hell if you did such a thing and I wouldn't be one to close my eyes on her if I were you. She likes getting even."

Ram smiled. Although he'd gone a little overboard he knew Callum got the picture. Of his three sisters, Gemma was the one who had a knack for not only speaking her mind but for backing up her thoughts. Callum knew this and was still in love with her. Go figure.

"Are you really thinking about letting Chloe go?" Callum asked and Ramsey figured he was now desperate to change the subject from Gemma back to Chloe. "I think it's a sin and a shame that your men will have to suffer just because you can't control your urges," Callum said.

Ramsey knew there was really no reason to deny what Callum had just said. It was true. He was finding it hard to control his urges around Chloe. And they were urges he'd been controlling just fine before she'd shown up.

"The men are taking a bet as to how long we'll keep her." Callum grinned and said, "I bet some will be surprised to find her still here this morning."

Ramsey didn't see anything amusing. He didn't like being reminded that others had noticed his interest in her yesterday. "She's not the only good cook around these parts."

"I'm sure she isn't, but not many would want to have to live on the ranch. Most would probably have homes of their own; families they had to take care of when they left here like Nellie." Callum rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Um, that makes me wonder."

Ramsey lifted a brow. "About what?"

"Why would a woman with her looks take a job where she'll have to live here in the middle of nowhere for two solid weeks. Doesn't she have any family?"

Ramsey considered Callum's question. To be honest Chloe's personal life hadn't crossed his mind, mainly because he hadn't intended for her to stay. In fact, he had planned to call the employment agency when it opened this morning to see how soon they could send a replacement. But Callum had

posed a good question. Evidently she did have a place in town because she had returned last night with her luggage in tow.

“What if she’s on the run and took the job to hide out here?”

Ramsey looked over at Callum. “On the run from what?”

“An abusive husband. A psycho fiancé. A possessive boyfriend. Hell, I don’t know, Ram. But if I were you I would find out.”

Ramsey’s frown hardened at the thought that Chloe might be running from a demented stalker. But then when he’d mentioned to her yesterday that she was hired as a live-in cook she’d seemed surprised. And last night she claimed that she’d only returned after deciding she didn’t want to risk being late this morning. What if there was more than that?

“I don’t think she’s married or engaged because she’s not wearing a ring and there’s no indentation around her finger to indicate that she’s worn one in the past,” he said.

Callum chuckled. “You’re as bad as Eric and Thel if you noticed all of that about a woman’s finger.”

Ramsey shrugged his shoulders, refusing to let Callum bait him. “Whatever.”

“Well, it might be *whatever* if you don’t find out. If you make her leave, then you could very well be sending her to her death.”

Ramsey rolled his eyes. “Spare me the dramatics.”

Callum stood. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you if something were to happen to her.” He headed for the door.

Ramsey watched him about to leave. “Hey, where are you going? We haven’t had our meeting yet.”

Callum smiled over at him. “And we won’t. At least not this morning. I smell homemade biscuits and *both* bacon and sausage. If you’re still thinking about getting rid of her, then I need to make sure I eat well this morning. No telling what we might end up with for lunch.”

Ramsey had always been a man who’d prided himself on two things: strength of mind and self-control. He felt both take a flying leap when he walked into the dining area an hour later. His men were gone and Chloe was clearing off the table. She glanced over in his direction and the moment he looked into her eyes, he wanted to cross the room and pull her to him and kiss her until she was nothing more than a limp body in his arms.

“You missed breakfast, but I kept you something warming in the oven. The eggs will be made to order,” she said.

He nodded, surprised she had thought of him. “Thanks.” He had deliberately remained in his office, trying to concentrate on finishing reports he had failed to do last night. His men’s voices had carried to his office and he could tell from their conversations that they had enjoyed breakfast and were looking forward to lunch.

“Your men were wondering why you didn’t eat breakfast with them.”

He glanced over at her as he poured a cup of coffee, wondering if his men had been the ones speculating or if it had been her. “Were they?”

“Yes.”

When he didn’t say anything but sipped his coffee while watching her, she said. “If you’re ready to eat I’ll get your plate out of the oven.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate it.”

He moved toward the table and after sitting down he watched her and wondered if Callum’s speculations were true. Was she living here at the ranch as his cook because she was on the run from someone? He sipped his coffee thinking that he was not one to overreact, but what if some of what Callum assumed was true?

“How do you want your eggs, Ramsey?”

He blinked, realizing she had asked him a question. “Excuse me? What did you say?”

“Your eggs. Do you prefer scrambled, sunny-side up or over easy?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say he preferred them *over her* so he could lick them off, but thought better of it. She was wearing another short dress and like last night she had spoiled the effect by a pair of leggings. What was with those things? Why the hell were women wearing them under their dresses? He enjoyed seeing bare skin. Nothing was wrong with seeing a nice piece of feminine flesh on occasion. And although he'd never seen her legs, he had no reason to believe they weren't gorgeous, a real arousal-getter just like the rest of her.

The lower part of his body was already throbbing with the way her outfit fit over her bottom, showing a perfect shape. He could just imagine lying in bed with that backside curved against his front in spoon fashion, dipping his head to nibble on her neck and to place marks of passion there before moving toward ...

“Ramsey?”

He blinked again. “Yes?”

“How do you want your eggs?”

“Sunny-side up will be fine.”

He watched how she handled the frying pan. There was no doubt in his mind she knew what she was doing. And the way she cracked the egg was sure and precise. He couldn't help wondering about her cooking skills. Had she gone to culinary school? If so, why wasn't she working at a first-class restaurant somewhere? Why was she here on a sheep ranch on the outskirts of Denver? There was only one way to find out. He'd discovered that with some women if you got them talking they would tell you just about anything you wanted to know. It worked with Bailey, although it hadn't been a proven trick with Megan or Gemma.

As she cooked his eggs he studied her. She didn't look like a woman under any sort of duress. She seemed calm and looked cool. And she appeared to enjoy what she was doing.

His gaze moved to her face. She didn't have normal features. She was beautiful. Soft-looking brown skin, a sensual pair of eyes, a cute nose and a pair of lips he longed to taste. Her dark brown hair was shoulder length, lustrous curly strands. It didn't take much to imagine that hair spread across a pillow. His pillow. And those sensual dark eyes shimmering with arousal right as she shifted her body to spread her thighs, open her legs to fill the air with her scent while he stared down at her feminine mound, moist, ready, waiting for him to sample.

The surge of desire that swept through him at that moment was so fierce it almost took his breath away. He needed something stronger than a cup of coffee and was tempted to pull a beer out of the refrigerator. Instead he drew in a long, deep breath, shifted his gaze to look out the window. Think about something else. The bill that was soon to come due on his new tractor. The fact that Gemma was bugging him about decorating the rest of his house. Anything except making hot, carnal love to Chloe.

Trying to regain control of his libido and senses, he looked over toward her. She might know how to wield a frying pan and all that, but there was a refined air about her that disconnected her ability in the kitchen with the way she carried herself. It was as if she should be getting served instead of being the one doing the serving. “Are you married?”

She glanced over at him but only for a second. She went back to concentrating on cooking his eggs. “No.”

“You sure?”

Her head lifted and she stared at him, gave him a look like he'd suddenly grown two heads or something. “Of course I'm sure.” She held up her left hand. “See, no ring.”

He shrugged. “That doesn't mean anything these days.”

She frowned as she slid his egg from the frying pan onto the plate. “It would mean something to me.”

“Okay, so you're not married. Are you involved in a serious relationship?”

She set the plate in front of him and gave him a pointed look. “Is there a reason for these questions?”

He smiled. Because she asked he might as well go ahead and tell her. She was mature enough to handle it. “Yes, there’s a reason. When I get around to kissing you I’ll feel better knowing your mouth doesn’t belong to any other man. Legally or otherwise.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she opened her mouth, probably to tell him just where he could take his own mouth—legally or otherwise—but instead of saying anything right then, she just tightened her lips together.

He chuckled. “Tightening those lips shut won’t keep me from prying them apart for a kiss if that’s what I want to do, Chloe.”

Chloe folded her arms across her chest. “Is there a reason for this madness?”

“Is that what this is? Madness?” he asked as he began eating.

She lifted her chin and glared at him. “You got another name for it?”

“What about hunger?”

She frowned. “Hunger?”

“Yes, hunger of a sexual nature. I need to get you out my system and I figured I’ll start by kissing you to see if that will work.”

Chloe dropped her hands by her side. Not believing he’d said such a thing. And not believing her heart was thumping rapidly in her chest at the thought of him making good on his threat. “You’re nothing like Daren.”

He raised a dark brow. “Who’s Daren?”

“The last guy I was involved with.”

Ramsey ignored the twinge of jealousy that invaded his gut. “Is not being like Daren good or bad?”

She shrugged. “Not sure. Although, I think it would have been nice if he would have had even a fraction of that *hunger* thing.”

He immediately caught on to what she’d insinuated. “I can’t imagine any man hanging around you for long without wanting to gobble you alive. He must have been a real idiot.”

Chloe kept herself from smiling and refused to admit she’d thought the same thing. “He had his own ideas about what down to earth lovemaking was about. He suggested that we participate in a threesome.”

Ramsey frowned. He could handle the fact that her ex-boyfriend hadn’t had a passionate bone in his body, but the thought that the man had actually wanted to share her with someone else was as demented as it could get. No man in his right mind would share her.

“Then he wasn’t just an idiot,” Ramsey spoke up to say. “He was a crazy idiot. Any man who could get it into his mind to share you evidently doesn’t have the brain he was born with. There’s no way I would consider doing such a thing. I would want you all to myself.”

His gaze roamed over her. “It would be me and me alone who would leave a satisfied smile on your lips, Chloe.”

Chloe felt a tightening in her stomach as his gaze slowly swept over her, lingering in certain places and bestowing a visual caress in others. And his deep seductive voice was stirring all kinds of sensations to life inside her.

“How long were you with this guy?”

She wondered why he wanted to know. “A year.”

“And how long have the two of you been apart?”

Chloe wasn’t sure why he wanted to know that, either. Why she’d even shared anything with him about Daren in the first place was a mystery to her. But she had and evidently he was curious. “Two years. Now if you will excuse me I’m about to tackle the dishes.”

Ramsey watched her walk off over to the sink and, since she was doing her best to ignore him, he dug into his meal. Not surprisingly, everything was delicious and for the first time in a long while, he was enjoying his food. He was also enjoying watching Chloe while he ate. If she only knew all the things that were running through his mind while chewing on a piece of bacon and swallowing his toast.

She refused to look over at him which was probably a good thing. Instead she was trying to keep busy and continued to ignore him in the process. By the time he had finished breakfast and drained the last of his coffee, she had stacked all the dishes on the counter to load into the huge dishwasher. She wiped down the countertops until they gleamed.

Getting up from the table he crossed the kitchen to the sink to place his plate and cup in the sudsy water. And when he turned toward her she made a quick move to get out of his way. She wasn't fast enough and he reached out and took hold of her hand.

A shiver immediately rushed down Chloe's spine and she sucked in a sharp breath the instant Ramsey touched her. She tilted her head and looked up at him. He was standing in front of her and his gaze, she noticed, was intense as ever and centered directly on her lips. Then his eyes moved slowly up her face to her eyes. He smiled and then slid his gaze back down to her lips again.

She knew at that moment he was about to make good on his threat to kiss her. Heat began formulating at the center of her thighs, and the way he was staring at her lips made her hot. Wet. Then something within her began to ache. It was a hollowed emptiness she just realized was there. He moved a step closer and his scent inflamed everything within her, pulling her into the depths of his masculinity, swirling her about and drawing her under into his sensual spell.

She studied him, became enmeshed in the starkly strong features of his face. He was a very handsome man, so much so that her senses were betraying her, refusing to let her do the right thing and demand he remove his hand from hers. Instead she felt herself easing toward him at the same time he shifted his body even closer to hers.

Chloe found herself pinned between him and the counter, felt the hardness of his erection come to rest between her thighs like it had every right to be there. For the first time in her life she felt totally in sync with a man, fully aware of who he was and what he could do. And the thought of what he could do, what he *would* do sent an intense shiver up her spine. It made her anxious to the point where she felt her nerves beginning to quiver. She swallowed deeply and when that didn't help her she took her tongue and swiped it across her lower lip.

Not a good move.

She looked into his face and saw the effect doing such a thing had on him. By no means was she trying to encourage him and when she saw heat flare in his eyes, she knew something elementally male was taking place and he had no intention of fighting it.

He leaned forward and before she could catch her next breath, he bent his head and captured her lips.

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