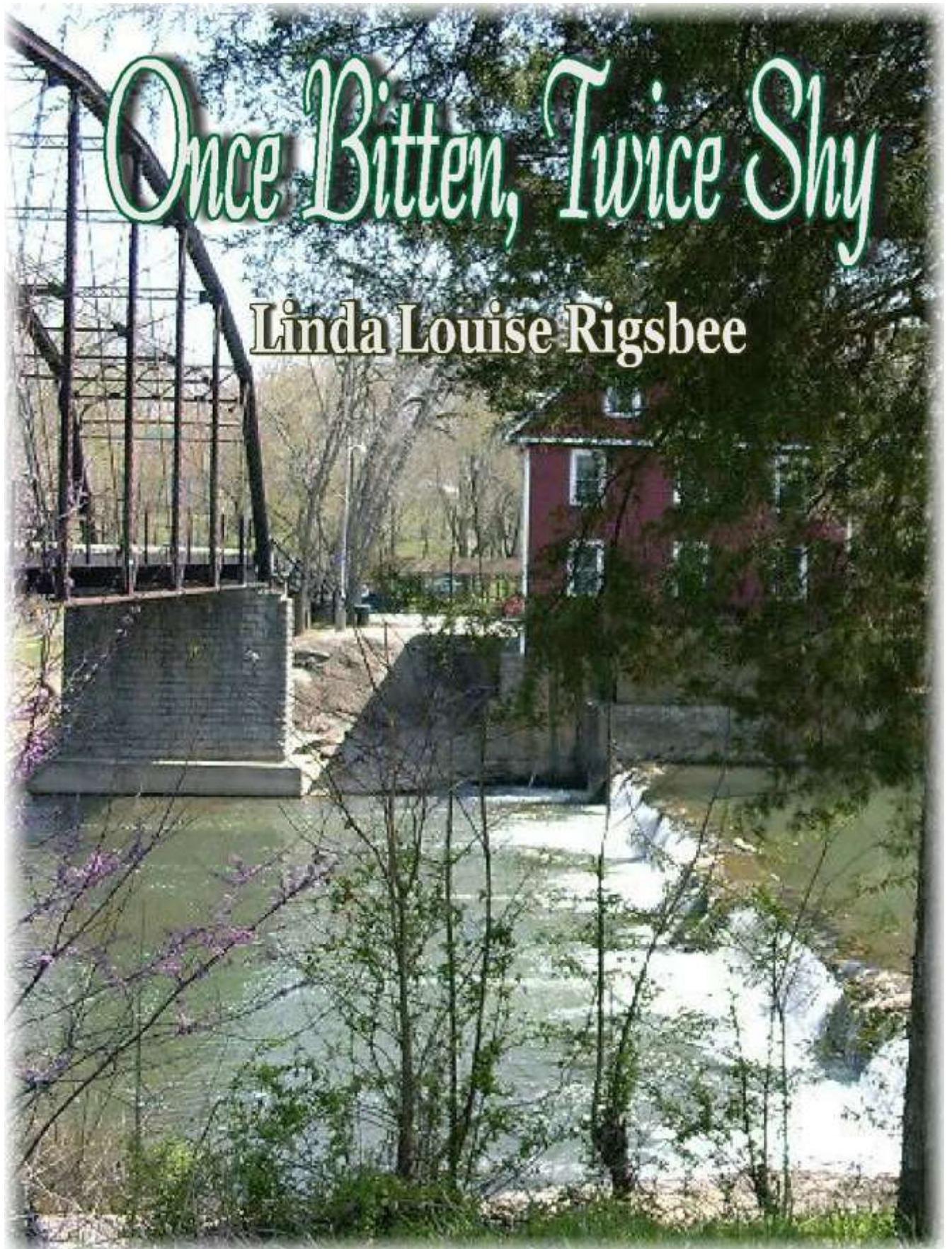


Once Bitten, Twice Shy

Linda Louise Rigsbee



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Prologue

He poured carbonated red grape juice into a long-stemmed glass and set the bottle back in the refrigerator. With the glass in one hand and the letter in another, he sauntered into his office. The handwriting on the letter was neat and feminine. Taking a sip of the wine colored liquid, he sat the glass in a coaster on the smooth mahogany desk and dropped the letter beside it. The room was too warm. Every time the weather got cold outside, other residents in the complex cranked their heaters up and then he had to adjust his own thermostat. He removed his jacket, folding it carefully and placing it over the back of the visitor's chair. Loosening his tie, he dropped into the leather office chair and picked up the envelope. "Alexander Mathew Barnett," he read aloud. His laugh was little more than an expulsion of air. Only in the last year had his sister started writing, and it was always stiff and formal. At least she was willing to communicate now. No doubt the opening of dialog was due to her roommate. Carmen must be quite a woman to inspire such admiration from Katie. He'd like to meet her sometime. He pulled out a drawer and selected a wooden handled letter opener with gold inlay. Slicing the end of the envelope open with one smooth movement, he placed the letter opener back where it belonged and shoved the drawer shut. Pressing on the sides of the envelope to open the end, he blew into it, exposing the letter inside. As he plucked the letter out, a picture fell on the table, face down.

"*Carmen at the fair,*" was written on the back of it.

He flipped it over as he opened the letter. One glance led to a double-take and then he abandoned the letter. He sat up straight and picked up the picture, whistling in admiration. Blond curls framed one of the prettiest faces he had ever seen. The smile with those full lips was sad, sweet and somehow innocent. She was squatting beside a goat, one knee lower than the other.

He leaned back in his chair, the letter forgotten as he studied the girl in the picture. She looked to be about twenty-two or three. In his mind's eye, he had pictured her much older – probably because of the way Katie spoke of her. A girl that young didn't usually have much common sense.

The swell of well developed breasts peeked from a tank top that might have looked suggestive on someone else. This lady wore it with the finesse of a duchess. In modest shorts, her legs were smooth – shapely, without the sharp angles of a muscular build. Slim ankles and lean upper thighs gave her the look of a model. And yet, according to Katie, she ran a budding goat dairy on a run-down farm in Northwest Arkansas.

He tossed the picture on the desk and leaned forward to pick up the letter. Yes, he definitely wanted to meet her.

According to Katie's letter, kidding season was almost on them and they were getting the barn ready. She said they were working their tails off. He grunted. If he knew Katie, Carmen was probably doing most of the work outside. Katie wasn't lazy, but she didn't like getting dirt under her fingernails. She'd make some man a nice housewife one day.

Once again she was inviting him to visit, but this time she said Carmen had offered

to let him use a room upstairs. They were a long way from the nearest hotel and Katie wanted to see him as much as possible. That didn't sound like Katie. When she left his apartment, all she took was a suitcase full of clothes. She even left his picture on her nightstand – a final insult that still stung. At the time she had told him if she never saw him again, it would be too soon. Granted, she was in the middle of a tantrum, but two years had passed without a word from her except notification when their aunt died. She had been cool toward him at the funeral, but that may have been due to the fact that she was grieving. Then a few months later she had sent the first letter, saying that she had a roommate and was working on a farm. That was a shocker. Well, she would turn 21 in a few months and her inheritance would be available. She could buy her own place then.

He carefully folded the letter and placed it back in the envelope. Retrieving the glass of grape sparkly, he picked up the picture and leaned back in the chair. There he sat for a while, sipping the juice while he studied the picture again. Something about her stirred his insides in a way that he thought might never happen again. Once before he had felt that way about a woman and she had literally left him waiting at the altar while she ran off with another man. Katie said it was because he was so controlling. Maybe she was right. Maybe he would never find a compatible mate. So far he'd managed to chase two women off before he reached thirty.

He tossed the picture back on the table and drained the glass. He wasn't going to go through that pain again. No woman was worth that. He stood and took the glass to the kitchen. Rinsing it, he placed it in the dishwasher and shut the door. A quick glance around the kitchen revealed sparkling clean countertops. Sterile was the word that came to mind. That described his life right now. Between college and work, there wasn't much time left for anything else.

He turned, starting for the living room, and then stopped. Retracing his steps to the office, he retrieved the picture. Striding back to the kitchen, he deliberately removed the caduceus magnet and centered the picture on the refrigerator door – eye level. Smiling, he anchored it with the magnet. A man could always dream.

The doorbell demanded his attention and he answered the door to find a tall young man standing in the hallway.

"So, where are you going on your vacation?" The younger man said with a big grin.

"Come in, Gerald," Alex responded dryly as he stepped aside to allow the lanky salesman into the room. "Forced vacation . . . isn't that an oxy-moron?"

Gerald walked into the room and favored Alex with a wry smile. "You're the only person I've ever known who has had to be forced to take a vacation." He strolled into the kitchen and glanced around. "Not a speck of food in sight."

Alex chuckled. "There's some sandwich stuff in the refrigerator. Help yourself."

Gerald stopped with one hand on the refrigerator door, his attention fixed on the photo.

"What's this?" he said, leaning down to examine it. "Wow!" He moved the magnet and plucked the picture from the door.

"My sister's room mate," Alex said, removing it from his hand and replacing it on the refrigerator. "What you're after is *inside* the refrigerator."

Gerald grinned at him. "Private stock, huh?"

"No, I've never met her."

Gerald opened the refrigerator door. "Why not? Didn't you say your sister has been asking you to visit?" He piled ham, sandwich spread, lettuce, a tomato and bread in his arms and allowed the door to shut on its own. "What are you waiting for?"

“She has a boyfriend.”

Gerald piled the food on the table and looked up at Alex. “Your sister or her roommate?”

Alex pulled out a chair. “Both. Shove some of that food over here.”

Gerald got a couple of plates from the cabinet and two knives. “Who’d think mighty-might would let a little thing like a boyfriend stop him.” He shoved a plate and knife toward Alex and then sat down.

The nickname had been given him by three other salesmen at the office. It wasn’t that he was so small. They were simply very tall – all well over six feet. Still, his tenacity was what had inspired the name, not his size.

Alex built a sandwich without responding.

Gerald stood and grabbed the picture from the refrigerator again. Sitting back down, he examined it.

“Maybe I’ll go visit your sister. I might get lucky.”

Alex reached over and snatched the picture from his hand, tucking it into his shirt pocket.

“Don’t talk about her that way.”

Gerald put his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. “I wasn’t talking about your sister.”

Alex gave him a level look. “I didn’t think you were.”

Gerald grinned. “Well, well. You might not know it yet, buddy, but you’re hooked.”

Alex gathered his sandwich and lifted it. “My life is complicated enough,” he said, and took a bite out of the sandwich.

They ate in silence for a while and finally Gerald spoke, his tone conversational.

“So when are you leaving?”

Without looking up, Alex responded. “In a week or so, I guess. It sounds like they could use some help.”

Nothing more was said about the subject.

After Gerald left, Alex showered and changed into jeans, a western shirt and square-toed boots. Tucking the picture in his shirt pocket, he left the apartment and drove straight to the stable. There he saddled Ed and rode out to the exercise field. He did some of his best thinking in the saddle.

Chapter One

Carmen Pullock hunkered down into her heavy chore coat and scooted her chair closer to the potbellied stove. The wooden chair legs grated against the rough hardwood floor, echoing off the bare walls of her sparsely furnished living room. She clamped a rubber boot over a new knothole in the floor. Another place for a tin can lid. Not that it could keep the cold outside. The frigid air would simply sneak under the house and ooze up through the cracks in the floor. A rug would help, but it wouldn't stop the wind from climbing the insulationless walls or seeping through the gaps around the mopboards. Winters in Northwest Arkansas were usually mild, but this was the coldest in her memory.

"Happy Birthday," she muttered bitterly. Nothing seemed to be working out lately - not the dairy, and certainly not her love life.

The stove popped an angry protest about the growing flames and she flinched. The cantankerous old piece of junk. It would be another hour before the room was warm enough to hide her breath. Meanwhile, the wind whistled around the eaves and rattled the plastic covering on the windows, persistently seeking a port of entry. The ancient farmhouse needed repair - or a demolition crew. Neither of which she could afford. The house and eighty wild acres of Arkansas hills and hollows she had recently inherited represented her total wealth. Well, almost. But every dime spent on the house meant that much less she could invest in the dairy - and the dairy was the one thing that stood a chance of stimulating her anemic savings account. If the dairy didn't prove profitable, she would have to go back to Wal-Mart. Working for someone else wasn't her idea of a career. Besides, if the dairy went belly up, it would please Josh too much.

A door slammed down the hall and Katie sprinted into the room, hugging herself. Her words were barely comprehensible through chattering teeth as she leaned over the stove.

"Wh. . . en d. . d. . id it . . t go out?"

"Huh? Oh, the stove?" Carmen made a face. "I don't know. I was so tired last night I didn't even wake up to add wood. I had to break an icicle off my lip this morning when I woke up."

Katie giggled. "Only you would think of such a thing." Blue eyes sparkled like sapphires in her round face, and a dimple danced at the corner of her generous mouth. She leaned down; peering through the soot smudged glass on the stove door. "It looks like it's starting to burn good." She straightened and spread plump hands out toward the stove. "Alex sure picked a fine time to visit, didn't he?"

There was no *good* time for Katie's brother to visit, but this had to be the worst. Frozen water pipes and unheated bedrooms had to be something new for a wealthy socialite. Surely Katie must realize he would be slumming it - and why. Carmen grabbed a chunk of wood from the box and jerked the stove door open. She tossed the fuel in and slammed the door before sparks could hop out on the stove pad.

"If he had the sense God gave a goose, he'd stay in Houston until spring."

Katie rolled her eyes. "Spring will be too late to witness the kidding. Anyway, he studied veterinary medicine for three years. All that education might come in handy if we have trouble."

Carmen eyed Katie sourly. "That was nearly seven years ago. I imagine he's forgotten half of the information, and the other half is probably outdated. I don't want him practicing on my hand picked stock. I can't afford to loose any of them at this point. If we need help, we can hire a real vet."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Carmen, they're goats, not race horses." At Carmen's sharp look, she shrugged. "Anyway, we could use a man around the place for a while."

Alex wasn't likely to be much help with the farm, but it wouldn't do any good to argue the point with Katie. Let her find out when he arrived. Carmen ran bluntly manicured fingers through her cropped off curls as her tongue explored a new crack in her dry lips.

"Josh is all the help we need, and he's right down the road." Actually, Josh was more than she needed, and Katie was more than she could afford.

Katie gnawed on her lower lip and let her gaze shift to a watermark on the yellowed wallpaper. "Yeah, but you two haven't seen much of each other lately, and . . ."

"That's what I thought," Carmen interrupted caustically, and gave the wood box a swift kick. "You're trying to play matchmaker again, aren't you?"

Blue eyes flashed in a face staining quickly with red. "Of course not. I told you it was *his* idea to come up to see me."

Carmen pushed away from the warming stove and stood. "And if you'd gone down there one of the zillion times he's invited you in the last two years, he wouldn't feel obligated to come up now."

Katie scowled. "I wish you'd get out of this black mood you've been in lately. Last month you said it would be fine if he came up for a visit. Don't you think it's a little late to back out now? He's probably already on the plane."

Carmen took a deep breath and let it out slowly. How could she explain her mood to Katie when she had so little understanding of it herself? At any rate, Katie was right. It was too late to change her mind now - and what difference did it make why Alex was coming? At least he was finally making an effort to see his sister - and Katie was actually excited about his visit. Didn't they know how fortunate they were to have each other - to have *any* family? She headed for the door, tossing a grumpy reply over her shoulder.

"I'm not backing out. But he's going to miss the telephone and television -- and that tiny bedroom upstairs isn't exactly the Hotel Hilton."

Katie rolled her eyes. "Oh Carmen, just because he's wealthy doesn't mean he's a preppie." She shrugged into her coat. "Anyway, I suppose I owe him something for the three years he bossed me around. Especially considering the way I deserted him after graduation."

Carmen paused with her hand on the doorknob. Inviting Alex to visit this farm sounded more like a payback than a gesture of appreciation.

"I know you think he was high handed about it, but as your guardian, it was his responsibility to encourage you to get a good education. After all, didn't you say your parents left a will dedicating money for that purpose? You said he quit college to take care of you. Obviously he thought . . ."

"I cheated him out of his chance at a good education?" Katie cut in defensively.

"Obviously he thought family ties were more important than education," Carmen persisted. "Anyway, there's nothing stopping him from finishing school now if he's still interested in becoming a veterinarian. The truth is, he probably likes being a salesman,

and why not? He travels all over the world and makes enough money to do it in style. He has everything.”

Katie contemplated Carmen with eyes wiser than her twenty years. “Not everything. Money can’t buy love.”

Carmen sighed impatiently. “Neither can poverty.”

The last thing she wanted to hear this morning was how poor little Alex had been jilted at the altar. Alex had a lot going for him. If he was having problems finding a virtuous mate, fault more likely lay in a character flaw than his looks - as Katie had so often implied. Being ugly as a mud fence hadn’t stopped Alex from becoming a financial success. And being attractive hadn’t improved her life much. Carmen jerked the door open and gasped at the rush of frigid air.

“And he doesn’t have to do chores in all kinds of weather,” she concluded with a shiver.

They darted outside and closed the door before the room lost the little warmth it had gained. The wind yanked Carmen’s hair with icy fingers. She pulled her hood up against its furious roar. Ahead of her, Katie stepped off the wooden porch into the ankle high snow and followed the trail Carmen had broken earlier on her trip to light the stove in the dairy. The sun wouldn’t be up for another hour, but the block walls of the dairy loomed clearly in the white landscape. The snow crunched under their feet and the icy wind carried Katie’s words back in a cloud of steam.

“I didn’t run off just because he wanted me to go to college, you know. I left because he’s a smothering mother hen. Always telling me what to do - ordering me around. That may be your idea of an ideal relationship, but I had to get away from him if I was going to have a life of my own.”

Carmen took a few extra steps to catch up with Katie’s stride. A life of her own? Katie had gone directly from Alex to her Aunt Polly. When her aunt had died, Katie had moved in with Carmen. It was hard to imagine Katie conducting her life without the help of others. No wonder Alex concocted this ridiculous trip to coax Katie back to Houston. He had his work cut out for him, though. Katie might have been brought up by a socialite, but she was all redneck now. There was only one thing Katie treasured more than the farm. Bill Carlson, co-owner of Carl & Son’s Feed Store. Fortunately, Bill was equally smitten with Katie. Yeah, sometimes it actually worked out that way. Carmen eyed Katie coolly and responded in a dry tone.

“Being bossed around isn’t my idea of marital bliss. I don’t want to be completely dominated. I know it’s an archaic idea for a woman to want the man to wear the pants, but I’m entitled to my opinion the same as you and Lori. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be cherished and protected. For the right man, I’m willing to turn over the running of the farm and become his helpmate. After all, it worked for Mom and Dad.”

Katie laughed without humor. “Yeah, but your mother and father were from a different generation. Being subservient is taking a backward step for women.”

Carmen shook her head. “I have no intention of being subservient - and how is that taking a backward step, anyway? I think it was a backward step when women started stooping to the morals of men.”

Katie breathed a heavy sigh of resignation. “All right, all right. Do me a favor and don’t climb back up on your soapbox. Anyway, you don’t know what it’s like to have a bossy brother. Then again, you did have Josh. Obviously he isn’t as overbearing as Alex.”

“Give Alex a break. Being left in charge of your kid sister when you’re not much more than a kid yourself isn’t a fair test. I don’t know anything about your brother - except the fact that he got you through school. Considering the things you say you did,

that was an accomplishment in itself. Josh never had to deal with anything like that. He appointed himself as my big brother . . . when we were still toddlers, I think. The worst of it is, now he thinks he has some kind of claim staked on me. The way I figure it, he's more in love with the idea of having a woman worship him than he is with me. Sure, he says he wants a woman who doesn't work out of the home, but he thinks she should spend all her time doing housework and raising children. I didn't get a degree in animal husbandry so I could sit in the house knitting booties."

They paused in front of the dairy door and Katie stared down at Carmen in surprise. "That's a strange thing to come from your lips. I thought having children was your greatest dream."

"It is, but it isn't my only dream. I haven't given up on that horse ranch dream yet. The trouble is; Josh doesn't care what I want. That's obvious by the way he acts about the goats. Do you know he actually gave me an ultimatum? Either the goats or him."

Katie jerked on the dairy door and the crack of frozen boards echoed in the pregnant silence. She stared at Carmen. "Imagine that," she finally said dryly. "I wondered what you two weren't talking about. If it's that important to him, why don't you just sell the goats? I'm the one who talked you into this goat dairy business."

"It isn't about the goats." Carmen threw her hands in the air. "Oh, never mind." Why did she waste the breath discussing this matter with Katie? Much as she liked Katie, they were miles apart in their opinions and dreams. She ducked under Katie's arm and entered the dairy.

Katie followed her into the dairy and closed the door against the wind. "If you're so displeased with Josh, why don't you shop around some?"

Carmen laughed shortly. "Like Josh would let me. Anyway, none of the guys are interested - and if they were, Josh would see to it that they became *uninterested*."

Katie stared at her. "You sound like you've given the idea a lot of thought." When Carmen didn't respond, Katie shrugged, "Anyway, there are plenty of guys interested. You are right about one thing, though. They figure Josh is tough competition - but do you really think Josh could scare them off if they knew you were interested?"

Who else was interested? Not that it mattered. She wasn't much in the mood for shopping around anyway. As a matter of fact, she was starting to think that her idea of the right man was nothing more than a pipe dream. Was she setting her sights too high? She sighed heavily.

"There aren't plenty of guys around here." She shrugged. "All of which is neither here nor there. The last thing I want is to have men fighting over me."

"Oh, great. Then stay single the rest of your life. You've got a good start on it now."

Carmen blinked. "I'm only twenty-five. What about your brother? He's what - thirty-five? He's not married yet. Harp at him for a while. Give me a rest."

"He's not quite thirty. And anyway he's not interested in getting married. You are. If you keep on waiting, you're going to be having children in your fifties, like your parents. That's why you're alone now." Katie shook her head in dismay. "What's so terrible about Josh, anyway? He just happens to be the most eligible bachelor in Benton County. Not to mention the best looking man I've ever laid eyes on. Lori's been drooling over him for years. If you don't want him, why don't you throw him back so she can have a chance at catching him?"

It wasn't that she didn't want Josh. But shouldn't there be magic in his kiss? Sure, she loved him, but not in the wild and crazy way girls did in the romance stories. Maybe that kind of love didn't exist. Or maybe that kind of excitement existed only in newfound relationships. She and Josh had always known each other. No, that wasn't

the only problem. Josh wasn't exactly the romantic type - nor was she. Still, it sure would be nice to have someone open doors, send flowers, and compliment her on a nice dress or a job well done. Why couldn't Josh express his feelings for her in some way besides jealousy?

Carmen jerked her arm out of the coat sleeve. "Josh wants to wear the pants, but he doesn't have much respect for a subservient woman. He says women should stay home and watch the kids, but I've heard him talk about some of the girls that do. He says they're too lazy to work."

Katie shrugged. "Some of them are. They got married so they wouldn't have to work. It's different with you. You have the goats."

Carmen slammed her hands on her hips and raised her brows at Katie. "And he wants me to get rid of them. I rest my case."

Katie sighed. "So help him with his farm, start your horse ranch. What an opportunity! When you combine your property with his, you'll have over two hundred acres."

Carmen groaned. "Are we talking about a marriage or a dynasty?"

Carmen wiggled out of her coat and hung it on the rack. Why couldn't Katie understand that there was a principle involved? Josh didn't know about the horse ranch, and she wasn't about to tell him - not as long as he was holding the goats over her head like a club. For all he knew, the goats were her greatest dream. If he was so determined to crush that dream, how could she trust him with her future happiness?

"You know," she continued as she scooped grain into a stanchion, "it really galls me that Josh is always encouraging Lori with her work, but he never misses an opportunity to belittle mine."

Katie tossed her coat at the rack and watched anxiously as the pole danced around the concrete floor before settling down.

"Oh, I wouldn't take it personally. He can understand a career in real estate. Goats are a mystery to him - not to mention an embarrassment. Everyone teases him, you know - Josh and the goat lady. You know how he hates to be cut out of the herd."

"I know, and that's another thing that bothers me. What's wrong with being different? Everyone admires a person who does their own thing - as long as it's cool." She strode across the room to the stainless steel sink. "I'm going to make this dairy a success if it kills me." She turned on the faucet, plunging her hands under the icy stream of water and gasped. "And it just might."

Katie joined her at the sink. "You're so competitive. Which is more important? Proving you can make this dairy profitable, or enjoying your work?"

Carmen caught her breath and stared at Katie. "I enjoy my work. And I'm not competitive. I'm conscientious. If you're going to do a job, you might as well do it right."

Katie took the towel from Carmen's hands. "Do tell," she responded dryly. She wiped her hands and tossed the towel on the counter. "All the same, you'd better take a good, long look at what you're thinking about giving up."

Carmen picked up the towel and hung it on the rack. "I'd be less than honest if I said the security Josh can offer wasn't tempting - that and the idea of having an instant family. His folks were there when I was born and they're like second parents to me, but I'm not going to marry Josh because I'm lonely and poor."

Katie opened the barn door and let four goats into the dairy. They sprinted across the floor and leaped up to the elevated platforms, poking their soft muzzles into the stanchions to gobble the grain. Katie glanced at Carmen.

"So what kind of man are you looking for?"

"I'm not *looking* for a man," Carmen answered sullenly as she examined the first doe for signs of impending birth.

"Okay," Katie responded amiably as she worked with another doe. "Just for the sake of conversation, what kind of man would appeal to you?"

What kind of man? Carmen shrugged. "Well for starters, I'd want a man to be taller than me."

Katie's eyes twinkled. "That shouldn't be hard to find." She sobered. "But seriously, there are a lot of women who love men shorter than them. Does physical appearance make so much difference?"

Carmen frowned. "I don't give a hoot what he looks like. I just don't want our kids to go through life being teased about being short."

Katie nodded. "I guess so, but I wonder sometimes if heredity is the major factor. I mean, look at Alex and I. We're both short, and both Mom and Dad were average height." She hesitated, as if wanting to elaborate and then shrugged.

No doubt Katie was going to say something about short people and thought better of it for fear of hurting feelings. Still, there must have been someone in the family who was short. Never having met Alex or any other members of the family besides their Aunt Polly, it was hard to guess. Aunt Polly wasn't exactly tall.

"Whatever," Carmen finally replied. "Other than that, I'd want a man who was confident and assertive."

Katie laughed. "So you've just described Josh."

Carmen wrinkled her nose. "Oh, and one more thing - religious . . . and understanding."

"That's two more . . . and too much. Josh is religious, but there aren't many men who would claim to understand women. Are you sure you wouldn't settle for tall, dark and handsome?"

Carmen sighed heavily. "I know, Josh."

Katie shrugged and turned her palms up in resignation. "I'm just trying to pry your eyes open."

Carmen continued to work with the goat. Her eyes were wide open - probably for the first time in her life. Open enough to see that Josh would be a fine catch . . . for *someone*.

She tried to focus on the job at hand. It would be at least four more weeks before the dairy would be in full production again, but each goat received a ration of oats and corn as well as a thorough examination. It was a ritual they had been performing morning and night for the past two weeks. The brief winter rest was over and the grueling days of spring and summer were in the near future.

Into this chaos, Katie had invited her sophisticated brother. The supply of chevon and chicken in the freezer was getting low, but they still had plenty of home canned corn and green beans. He was bound to be bored, cold and disappointed. The best she could hope for was that he wouldn't spend much time in the dairy.

They completed the morning chores and then Katie headed out to pick up her brother at the airport. Carmen held the gate open as the old truck sputtered through - and then died.

Carmen tapped on the window and Katie rolled it down.

"Are you sure you can handle this thing on snow?"

Katie laughed shortly as she whirled the motor over and pumped the accelerator. "This thing wouldn't be easy to handle on a red carpet, but I think I can make it all right. The snow is getting mushy. If I don't get stuck in the mud, I should be able to make it to

the highway.”

The engine turned over and backfired, black smoke frothing out of the tail pipe. Katie scraped gears and smirked through her hand.

“See you in a little while.”

Carmen glanced up at the sky. The clouds were breaking up and the wind had switched around to the south. It was a good twenty degrees warmer than when they got up this morning and the snow was even beginning to melt - a sure thing to bring on kidding.

“Well, be careful. If you have any problems, call Josh. You have his number, don’t you?”

“I have it. But if I make it to the airport, I’m sure Alex can handle anything after that. No need to rout Josh out and make him drive 60 miles for nothing.”

Carmen nodded. She wished she could share Katie’s faith in her brother, but the only picture she could summons was a short, pale, overweight man with more brains for business than aptitude in mechanics. Why that picture settled into her brain, she couldn’t say. The only picture Katie had of her family was an old family photo. Alex was an obvious six-year-old with two missing front teeth. Katie was an infant. Surely she had other pictures, but for the time being, Katie wasn’t displaying them. When Carmen asked if she had more current pictures of her family, Katie grew sullen. Hopefully she hadn’t thrown away all her pictures in a fit of anger. Since Katie had invited him up several times, she had obviously matured enough to forgive him.

Carmen closed the gate and sloshed back to the barn. The goats were going to need more hay and alfalfa pellets. After that the chickens needed to be fed and she needed to get that chevon roast in the oven so it would be ready for lunch. They had some canned peaches left. Did Alex like peach pie?

An hour later she was back in the barn, - and just in time. Two of the goats had gone into labor. She transferred them to the building on the release side of the dairy where they had set up temporary kidding stalls. She forked some hay into each of the stalls and checked the herd again. Two of the does had hollow looking stomachs and their udders were shiny. Better keep an eye on them. She returned to the first stall to find two new arrivals and another on the way. Everything looked normal, so she gave the doe her privacy. In the next stall the goat was laying on her side, straining . . . could be a problem there.

She hurried to the house and checked the roast. The pie was done, so she put it on the counter to cool. Pouring some coffee into a thermos, she headed for the barn again. Katie should be back soon.

The warm wind assisted the sun in melting the snow and most of it was already gone, leaving a trail of sloppy mud to the barn. Inside the dairy she shucked her coat and rubber boots, slipping into a pair of western boots she always kept in the barn. Abandoning her thermos on the counter, she stoked the fire and returned to the kidding stalls.

Three pair of blue eyes stared back at her from the first stall. Tiny pink cleft muzzles lifted in a cute imitation of their mother’s broken cry of joy. Each cleansing lick from the doe nearly knocked them off their feet, but they staggered close to her for more nourishment.

An agonizing bleat from the next stall indicated all was not well there. Carmen moved to the next stall to find the doe lying on her side, pawing at the ground and panting. As the doe strained, one tiny hoof emerged - and then disappeared as the contraction subsided. One hoof? Two hoofs and a nose should be the proper

presentation. Was something wrong?

Carmen entered the stall and knelt beside the doe. "Come on girl," she said, tugging on the collar. "Get on your feet. It'll be easier that way."

The doe lurched to her feet and immediately went into another contraction. Squatting, the doe strained again and one hoof presented again, only to disappear again after the contraction ended.

What did the books say to do in this situation? Elevate the rear, wasn't it? That way the kid could reposition naturally. She tugged on the back end of the goat, but that method was obviously going to take someone much taller. Maybe if she made the doe kneel. She tugged at each front foot until the goat was on her knees, her hind end in the air. But that lasted no more than a few minutes before the doe dropped to the ground and strained with another contraction. Had it been long enough?

Within seconds the one hoof was visible again and the doe was screaming in agony. What now? Manually reposition the kid inside the doe? Something she had only read about. And where was that book? Oh yes, with all the emergency supplies they had gathered for this occasion.

Racing to the dairy, she jerked out a drawer and removed the book, some disposable gloves, a pair of scissors, some cord and a bottle of iodine. She slammed the drawer shut and crammed the supplies into her arms. Where was Katie? She should be here by now. Alex might or might not be able to help. At any rate, he might not find the task at hand as unpleasant as she anticipated it would be. If he did, at least one of them could go call for help.

She darted back to the kidding stall and knelt beside the goat again. The goat was still on her side, pawing the ground with her forelegs and bleating miserably as she strained in vain. The poor thing. She must be in agony. Maybe it would be a good idea to run down to Josh's place and call the vet. But there wasn't time right now.

Carmen flipped through the book to the part on kidding problems and scanned down the directions. Fighting down a wave of nausea, she knelt at the tail of the goat. This was no time to get squeamish. She tugged the gloves on and waited until the contraction passed. Taking a deep breath, she hesitantly inserted her hand into the birth canal and carefully slid it along the tiny leg until she felt the muzzle. Where was the other leg? And then she felt another soft hoof. Her fingers explored the leg, feeling for a hock to make sure it wasn't a hind leg. Reaching under the tiny limb with a finger, she gently pulled the leg forward.

"Carmen?" Katie called through the open door of the dairy. "Where are you?"

"In here . . . in the second kidding stall. Hurry."

Carmen stood and backed away as the doe lurched to her feet and went into another contraction. This time both legs presented and then the little pink nose. The doe cried out again and heaved, expelling the tiny body.

"Finally," Carmen said with a sigh, glancing up at Katie. "I thought . . ."

Her entire thought train derailed as she gaped at the man beside Katie. Could this *hunk* be Katie's brother?

Soft chocolate eyes regarded her with veiled humor and his mouth held the promise of a smile. The bronze features were smooth and perfectly formed - almost too perfect, and yet, not effeminate. His black curly hair was cut short, every hair in place. His angular jaws were freshly shaven. He was lean, with broad shoulders, narrow hips and a flat abdomen. His gray suit looked expensive and the silk tie added a touch of elegance. Michael Angelo couldn't have created anything better.

Carmen clamped her sagging jaw shut and tore her gaze from him, an

uncomfortable warmth flooding her neck and face. She glued her attention on the doe, which was now licking life into her infant. Carmen peeled the gloves from her hands and tried to make her voice sound casual.

"The kid had one leg caught back underneath it. For a little while there I was afraid I might have to go for help."

"You've done this before, I presume?"

The warm baritone voice induced a fresh bout of blushing. She laughed nervously. "Then you presumed wrong." She retrieved the book from the floor, along with all the other supplies. "I think she can handle the rest, though."

"Oh," Katie said. "This is my brother, Alex Barnett. Alex, this is Carmen Pullock."

Alex held out a hand and smiled. "Your picture doesn't do you justice. You're much more beautiful in person."

The color returned with a vengeance. Flowery words. She ran a hand through her hair. She must look a sight. Had she even combed her hair this morning? And what about her clothes - all wrinkled and dirty. Was he mocking her, or did he think she was naive enough to believe his outrageous flattery?

She accepted his hand and gave him a saccharine smile.

"Why thank you. I labored all day to look like this. It's nice to meet someone with such a discerning eye."

Tiny lines materialized around the dark eyes as his smile broadened into a grin. A large dimple formed in the upper part of his right cheek, lending character to the smooth features.

"A beautiful blond with a quick wit?"

His humor was infectious. She tugged her hand from his and grinned, shrugging one shoulder.

"Go figure."

He nodded at the doe, sobering. "Do you need help?"

She eyed his clothes skeptically. In that garb he'd make a better spectator than anything else.

"No. Why don't we go in for lunch? The roast should be done by now. You two go ahead while I put this stuff up."

Her last thought as she watched him open the door for Katie was that he'd make a good pinup. Shaking her head, she deposited the supplies on the counter. She kicked her cowboy boots off and pulled the mud boots on. At best he was going to be a distraction - at worst he would be one more thing to stumble over in the barn. Not that he was going to spend much time in the barn, anyway. The barn represented work, and by the look of him and the feel of his smooth hands, he knew how to avoid physical labor.

Chapter Two

When she left the dairy on her way to the house, Carmen was further convinced of Alex's love of fine things. Parked beside her truck was a sporty looking rental car. If he found it embarrassing to ride in her truck, what would he think of the little room upstairs?

She sighed. At least the room was clean. She glanced down at her clothes. More than she could say for herself at the moment. Warmth crawled up her neck at the thought of the impression she must have given Alex. He probably thought she was a hick.

Fortunately, Alex was nowhere in sight when she entered the house. She cleaned up as much as possible without changing clothes. In less than an hour she would be out in the barn again. Combing her hair, she was thankful for the natural curls that softly framed her face. Leaning forward, she examined a suspicious looking line at the side of her eye. A wrinkle? She wiped it away and breathed a sigh of relief. Only an eyelash, this time. Tossing the brush on the dresser, she turned away from the mirror. There was no sense in fretting over it. There was only one way to keep from getting old, and life in an old withered body still sounded better than the alternative.

Katie was alone in the kitchen when Carmen entered. She turned excitedly.

"Well, what did you think?"

"About what?"

Katie rolled her eyes. "Alex, of course."

Carmen shrugged. "He seems like a nice guy."

"That's all?" Katie frowned. "I thought I was picking up on some major vibes out there."

Carmen dropped into a chair at the table. "You were picking up on my surprise. I wasn't expecting someone so elegant."

"*Elegant?*" Katie practically spit the word out. "He just came from the office. What did you expect, overalls? I thought he looked nice."

"Sure, but I don't think the goats were impressed - by him or his fancy rental car. I guess he couldn't picture himself in my old jalopy. And by the way, where did he see a picture of me?"

Katie's expression and tone were caustic. "He got the car because he wanted to do a little sightseeing while he was here. He didn't want you to feel obligated to drive him around."

Carmen eyed her suspiciously. "And the *picture?*"

Katie busied herself setting the table. "I sent him a picture of you."

Carmen eyed her back suspiciously. "What Picture?"

Katie examined a spoon absently and tossed it in the sink. "The one of you at the county fair . . . with Tessa."

Carmen stared at her. "Why? Of all the pictures . . . I thought you were going to throw that picture away. It was sweltering hot and my tank top and shorts were displaying too much cleavage and bare leg - remember? We both agreed. If you wanted to send him a picture of me . . ."

It hit her like a sack of corn. Of course. How could she be so blind?

"You *are* playing matchmaker."

Katie blushed. "I am not," she declared hotly. Anyway, that picture wasn't so bad. Even Josh thought it was a good likeness of you."

There was no point in arguing, but what about Alex? Did he suspect? She gave Katie a level look. "Don't start playing cupid on me. I've got enough to do on this farm without looking after a pretty boy."

Katie gasped. "Alex isn't a . . ." She flounced into a chair, elbows on the table and chin in her hands. "What's the use? Once you get something into your head, dynamite couldn't blast it out." She stared sourly at Carmen a moment. "Anyway, being good looking doesn't disqualify him from physical labor. I seem to remember you moaning one time that Josh viewed you as nothing more than an arm ornament." She shook a finger at Carmen. "I sure hope you like crow, 'cause you're going to be eating a bunch of it before Alex leaves."

Carmen glanced around the table and shook her head. Maybe Alex was no pretty boy, but he was certainly accustomed to more lavish surroundings. Maybe it was time they started paying more attention to the aesthetic value of things. She stood and scooted her chair up to the cabinets. Using it as a ladder, she climbed on the counter, stretching from her knees to reach the top shelf.

"Now what are you doing?" Katie asked, hands on hips.

"Getting some serving bowls. Those pans are all black on the bottom and . . ."

"So who cares? I thought we agreed there was no point in using your mother's old dishes when we could just serve our food from the pans we cook it in? Why dirty up more dishes? Who are *you* trying to impress?"

Carmen frowned down at Katie. "I'm not trying to impress anyone. It's fine to skimp on manners when it's just the two of us, but we don't have to look like complete rednecks in front of our guests."

She stretched to capacity and gripped the edge of the bowl. The heavy bowl made an uncontrolled dive off the shelf into her hand, flipping before she caught it with the other. In her clumsy attempt to catch it, she teetered for a moment before regaining her balance.

"Careful there," a deep voice commanded

Her concentration during the balancing act had been so focused that she hadn't seen Alex enter the kitchen. Her face felt warm again. How much of their conversation had he heard, and what did he think about finding her on the counter. She glanced down at him and felt her face flush. In his absence, Alex had changed into clothes more suitable for farm work. Until that moment, she would have sworn he couldn't look better. The indigo jeans hugged his lean hips in a tantalizing way and outlined the long muscles in his thighs. A western cut shirt made the most of his broad shoulders. As his square toed western boots clicked across the floor, a large belt buckle traced the graceful swing of his stride. Strong warm hands gripped her arm, guiding her down to the chair. He threw a stern look at Katie.

"Couldn't you get that for her?"

Katie's brows shot up. "For starters, she didn't ask." She eyed the bowl skeptically. "And I didn't think we needed serving bowls. We don't normally use them."

Carmen climbed off the chair and squirmed out of his lingering grip on her arm. She cast Alex a scorching look. "If I had needed help, I would have asked for it." Her unfriendly gaze shifted to Katie. "And this *is* a special occasion."

Katie's hand flew to her mouth and her eyes grew large. "Oh, I forgot. It's your birthday."

Carmen's face flamed. "I wasn't talking about my stupid birthday. I was talking about having your brother as a guest for lunch . . . and you know it."

Katie glanced at Alex and laughed. "The old spinster is in a bad mood today."

Alex dragged the chair to the table and held it for Carmen.

"Twenty five, I hear. That's a tough age. Old enough to think you should have accumulated more by now, and young enough to feel challenged to do something about it while you have the time. Been there - done that."

If he hadn't been so accurate, it might have been amusing. She had planned to be married by now and starting a family, but the prospect was looking farther away with each day she and Josh avoided each other. Normally it was Josh who showered her with wisdom. It was somehow unseemly for this newcomer to take up where Josh had left off. She left the bowl on the cabinet and settled into the chair, treating Alex to a wry smile.

"I see Katie has filled you in on everything you'll need to know on this farm. She has an uncanny way of sticking to pertinent details."

Alex tousled her hair as if she were a child. "So give me some pertinent facts." He pushed Katie's chair forward and seated himself at the table. "Like, why you decided to start a goat dairy?"

Carmen passed him the pan of meat and vegetables. "Actually, it was Katie's idea. I agreed because I figured goats would be easier to handle than cattle."

He nodded, forking some of the meat onto his plate. "You seem to have it all in control - both the dairy and the house. A genuine home cooked meal. It looks delicious."

She dished up some vegetables and glanced at Katie, who was attempting to pile more food on Alex's plate. How much had Katie told Alex, and why?

He held up a hand to Katie. "No, thanks. I don't eat the way I used to." He took a bite of food, obviously savoring its flavor before he swallowed. "It is delicious - especially the venison. It's been a while since I had a good deer roast."

Carmen glanced up as Katie handed her the potatoes. "It's not deer. It's chevon."

Alex paused with the fork half way to his mouth and studied the meat uneasily. "Chevon?"

"Goat," Carmen said, barely suppressing a smile as she plunged a spoon into the bowl of mashed potatoes. "One of last year's wethers, to be exact."

He turned his fork over, examining the meat more thoroughly. Finally his attention shifted back to Carmen. "I'm afraid to ask, but what's a wether?"

Katie laughed. "A fixed billy goat. You know, like a steer?"

His attention never wavered and Carmen kept her expression bland as she slapped the potatoes on her plate and then returned the spoon to the bowl.

The dark eyes began to twinkle and the smooth lips slowly twisted into a wry smile.

"Are you pulling my leg, Heidi?"

Such a disarming smile. She poured gravy over her mashed potatoes.

"You don't have to eat it if you don't want to."

"Oh, no. I like it." He sampled the meat again and shrugged. "It still tastes like venison."

The conversation drifted from farming to the weather. There was work to do in the barn and Katie could use some quality time with her brother, so Carmen left them in the kitchen, doing dishes. With any luck, she would have the chores done before Alex was free.

Inside the dairy, Carmen filled two buckets with warm water and heaved them out of

the sink. Taking mincing steps so that the water wouldn't slosh out of the buckets, she worked her way toward the barn door. Some day she was going to pipe water into the barn.

The dairy door swung open with a blast of cold air and Alex paused in the doorway. He glanced at the buckets and shut the door. Striding across to her side, he reached for them.

"Let me get those."

Carmen continued at a snail's pace across the floor. "I can carry them. I'm used to it."

The smile on his lips charmed, but the dark eyes mocked her. "How do you get used to carrying something half your size?"

She hesitated, trying to think of a good comeback. The pause allowed him time to commandeer the buckets. Looking up into his face, it occurred to her that he was considerably shorter than Josh, and yet he didn't seem short. She forced a smile.

"Thanks, but I've been doing this for a long time now. Just because I'm small doesn't mean I'm inefficient."

His expression became guarded. "Nor did I think so. I merely wanted to help. Now, where do I put these?"

Maybe she was being over-sensitive. She pointed down the row of stalls. "One of them goes in the Toggenburg's stall and the other one goes in the Lamancha's." Behind her, she heard Katie enter the barn. At least she wouldn't have to explain every move to Katie.

Alex glanced down the line of stalls and quirked a brow at Carmen. "Which one is the Toggenburg?"

"The brown one with the white stripes on its face and white belly. The one I was working with when you arrived." Some vet *he'd* make.

He nodded and started for the last stall. "And the LaMancha?"

"The one with no ears - right next to the Toggenburg." Two occupied stalls and he couldn't figure out where to put the water. What was he going to do when the barn was teeming with goats? She checked the first stall to see if more hay was needed and called instructions without looking in his direction.

"Be sure to put the bucket in the corner so it won't get knocked over."

No hay needed here. She stepped away from the stall and her gaze was instantly drawn to Alex. His broad shoulders swayed gracefully with the swing of his stride. Something about the way he moved was captivating. He stopped at the last stall and deftly lifted the bucket over the gate, placing it on the floor with ease.

"What are you doing?" Katie spoke in a low voice over Carmen's shoulder.

Carmen jumped. "Nothing," she answered too quickly, her face growing warm.

Katie lifted her brows. "You're ogling my brother, aren't you?"

There was little point in denying the fact that she was watching Alex - and enjoying what she was seeing. "If you knew," she snapped, "then why did you ask?" She turned to the next stall. Now Katie was going to think her cupid act was working.

Katie followed Carmen, her voice a mixture of surprise and humor. "To see if you'd admit it, I guess." She continued to watch Carmen thoughtfully. "Come on, he's not *that* good looking."

Carmen's face burned even hotter. "I didn't say he was good looking at all. I was just trying to make sure he put the water in the correct stalls."

It was one thing to covertly admire Alex, but quite another to stand here discussing him as though he were high dollar merchandise at a low bid auction . . . and why was Katie

so concerned? Shouldn't she feel victorious? Carmen shrugged off an uncomfortable feeling that something was amiss.

"Are there any more goats in labor?"

"I don't know," Katie answered, dropping the subject as Alex approached. "It's supposed to rain tonight. It's so warm out there - like spring. That's probably what brought the kidding on."

Alex paused beside them. "Will the Toggenburg kid develop markings like its mother when it matures?"

Carmen sighed. Finally, a subject she could discuss by the hour without feeling uncomfortable.

"No, I used a Saanen buck. That's why the kid is all white."

"What about the Lamancha? What happened to its ears? Did they freeze off?"

Katie giggled. "No, that's just a characteristic of the breed. It's a descendant of the Mexican earless goat."

Alex nodded, soberly absorbing the information. Was he actually interested, or was he already bored? He glanced around. "What else do you have?"

"Follow me." Carmen led him through the dairy. If he wasn't genuinely interested, he was going to be as bored as Josh was with the dairy. Now there was a thought. Bore him completely out of her hair. Maybe then she could get some work done. They left Katie behind in the dairy and entered the other side of the barn.

"We have a barn on each side of the dairy." Carmen began the tour as if it were a documentary. "We bring the goats in from this side and let them out the other when we're milking, but during the inclement days they stay in this barn."

Things didn't stay dull for long, though. As soon as Brutus saw them, he lunged to his feet and growled at Alex. The huge white dog lowered his head and bared his teeth at the stranger.

Alex halted, watching the dog cautiously. If he was frightened, he gave no indication. But then, why should he be afraid? It wasn't as if she was going to allow Brutus to attack their guest.

"Hush, Brutus," She said, stepping around the dog. Brutus ceased his snarling, but he continued to keep a wary eye on Alex. Behind her, she heard Alex let out a long breath.

"Now *that's* a dog - Great Pyrenees?" At her nod he continued. "Do you have a coyote problem?"

She glanced up at him and smiled. "Not now."

He chuckled. "I'll bet."

He moved through the herd, feeling a shoulder here, looking in a mouth there. "Teeth on the bottom only in the front, just like a cow. How much milk does a goat give?"

She plucked a piece of twine from the hay on the floor. This wasn't working out exactly the way she had planned. The worst of it was she was beginning to enjoy it. She wound the twine around her finger. "It depends on heredity, what you feed them, time of the year and a lot of other factors. I have some that give over two gallons a day and I've sold some that only gave a quart each milking."

He stopped beside Tessa. "Is this the one you took to the fair?"

She nodded. At least he noticed there was a goat in the picture. In fact, he must have given the goat a good deal of attention to be able to identify her from the other Toggenburgs.

"Her name is Tessa."

He glanced up sharply. "Tessa?"

Something about his tone put her on edge. "I know. You guys think it's silly to name farm animals, but it's easier for Katie and me that way. Anyway, I always liked that name."

The dark eyes searched her face suspiciously for a few more moments and then he shrugged. "There's nothing wrong with naming your animals. I have a horse named Ed."

She stared at him. "A horse? But I thought you lived in Houston. Where do you keep it?"

He rubbed Tessa behind the ears and his expression became distant.

"I board him at a stable and ride him on weekends. I'm afraid I've been neglecting him lately, though. I thought about selling him, but sometimes he's the only one I have to talk to." His attention shifted to the barn again and he glanced up at Carmen. His dark features brightened and his eyes twinkled with humor. "You'd be surprised at the things he's told me."

Carmen tore her gaze from his face again. "Mr. Ed, the talking horse," she said casually. "I know what you mean, though. Animals seem to sense your mood. And they accept you no matter what."

He laced fingers behind his head and stretched his back, glancing around at the herd as he spoke. "I never knew there were so many goat breeds."

What was it about him that served as a magnet for her eyes? It wasn't as though she ogled every good-looking man she saw. She eagerly latched on to his comment, hoping to divert her own mind to something less disturbing.

"Oh, there are a lot more breeds. Let's see." She held a hand up in front of her face and started naming them. "Oberhasli, Pygmy, Nigerian Dwarf, Angora . . . that's the one everybody confuses with a sheep . . ." her voice drifted off as she realized she had finally lost his attention. Why didn't she feel victorious? Wasn't this what she was trying to achieve? The truth was it was nice having someone even act interested.

In the next instant she realized a doe standing away from the herd had attracted his attention. He moved toward it cautiously.

"I think this one is getting close to delivering."

Even from a distance it was obvious that his calculation was accurate. Years might have elapsed since his last formal training, but Alex certainly had an instinct for veterinary medicine.

As they approached, the goat pawed the ground and called softly. On each side of her tail were deep hollows and her stomach was low and distended. It was time to put her into a kidding stall.

The friendly herd followed them, crowding the expectant mother. Carmen left Alex with the doe and ducked into the dairy, returning with a scoop of alfalfa pellets she distributed in the long narrow feed trough along the wall. Dodging a caprine avalanche, she joined Alex again.

"We need to get her to a kidding stall."

A cacophony of bleats, chomping and scuffling of hooves drowned out her words. Alex leaned down, resting a hand on her waist as he tried to separate her words from the noise of the feeding goats.

Maybe it was the faint smell of expensive cologne, or the feel of his warm hand through her blouse, or even the fact that it had been so long since anyone had taken an interest in her work. Whatever the cause, her heart did a flip-flop and warmth flooded her face. She gently removed his hand from her waist and stepped away from him,

repeating the statement in a voice close to a shout.

He nodded and leaned down, encircling the goat's legs with his arms. Straightening, he turned and carried the goat through the dairy. Katie glanced up as he walked through, and winked at Carmen.

"Chow down. Lots more crow where that came from."

There was no point in responding, so Carmen merely shrugged and followed Alex to one of the kidding stalls. If Alex hadn't been here, the goat would have walked. Big deal. It was probably better for her anyway. She opened the gate for Alex and he deposited the goat on the hay. Straightening, he met her gaze.

"If you don't have anything else for me to do, I'd like to stay here and watch."

If she didn't have anything else? Who asked him to do any work in the first place? She swallowed a bitter response.

"You're welcome to do as you please. You're a guest, not a hired hand."

A slow smile twisted his lips and added a twinkle to his eyes. "I'll try not to get in your way."

Her cheeks flushed hot with blood. Had Katie been blabbering again? She shrugged.

"Suit yourself. Let me know if anything goes wrong."

She turned on one heel and left the barn. It was time to feed the chickens. That was one place he wouldn't be trying to show her up.

Chapter Three

Carmen trudged through the sticky mud toward the chicken shed. There was no point in getting all worked up. Obviously Alex was showing off for Katie. After all, he had less than two weeks to convince her to move back to Houston. How he expected to achieve that by feigning interest in the goats was a mystery, but at least he cared enough to make an effort. A month ago, before the letter announcing his visit, she would have said otherwise. Why the sudden interest in Katie? Did it have anything to do with the fact that she would be twenty-one soon, and gain control of her inheritance? How much of his wealth actually belonged to Katie? Now there was a thought - not a very nice one, either.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a cacophony of squawks and wings beating against the chicken coop walls. She broke into a run, screaming for Katie. Something was after the chickens - probably that dad-burned skunk again.

Her foot slipped on a large wet rock, spilling her face first into the mud. For a long agonizing moment her knees and elbows took turns at the ground. Finally she made it to the chicken coop door. She turned the wooden latch and threw the door open, ducking as a chicken flew over her head. It took an instant for her eyes to adjust to the dim coop interior, and then she found herself staring into the desperate eyes of a red fox.

He cowered in the corner, clutching a white hen in his mouth. The rest of the chickens were flogging all over the tiny coop, bouncing off the walls in a state of panic.

Carmen pulled the coop door shut and the fox snarled around the hen, backing deeper into the corner. As Carmen glanced around the coop for something to use as a weapon, one of the chickens ricocheted off the wall and hit her head. Her knees hit the floor with a grinding jolt, and the fox seized the opportunity. He grabbed the hen by the wing and headed for a sliver of light shining through the coop door. Carmen lunged at him and he leaped straight into the air, dropping the chicken. He hit the floor on all fours and snapped at the hen as she rolled by. The hen scrambled, dragging a broken wing and squawking her anguish. Furious at the loss, the fox made a snarling lunge at Carmen.

This time Carmen backed away. It was a mistake. Sensing her fear, he moved closer, his teeth bared in an ugly snarl.

The coop door swung open and Alex assessed the situation quickly. In an instant he entered the coop and pushed Carmen back, putting himself between her and the fox. Waving his hands, he yelled and the fox darted out the coop door - without the hen.

"Are you all right?" Alex asked, holding out a hand to help her from the floor.

She nodded, loosing the breath she had been unconsciously holding.

"I was expecting to find a skunk, and when I saw it was only a fox, I thought . . ."

her voice trailed off at the amusement in his eyes.

"You look a sight," he said, as he plucked a feather from her hair. "You look like you've been tarred and feathered."

She glanced down at her clothes, covered with mud, and realized her face was also caked with slime. She could blush all she wanted. He'd never see it. She grinned as

her face warmed the mud.

"I bet that fox thought this old hen was more than he bargained for."

"Yeah," Alex responded dryly. "It looked like you had the upper hand. Why didn't you simply let him escape?"

"He had one of my chickens."

Alex shook his head in wonder. "Is one chicken worth your life?"

What would one chicken mean to someone like Alex?

"Don't you think that's getting a little melodramatic? He might have bit me, but he'd . . ."

"And how would you be sure he wasn't rabid? You'd have to take shots . . ."

"Oh, give it a rest, Alex."

Her voice was sharp enough to parry his verbal onslaught. How could he possibly understand? She stooped to gather the wounded hen.

"Thanks for your help, but around here we're waging a constant war against nature. If it isn't the skunks and opossum killing the chickens, it's the weeds taking over the garden. You do what you can and get on with life. The fox is gone. That's the end of it."

She lifted the wing and examined the bloody breast.

"She probably won't live, anyway."

Alex reached for the chicken. "Can I look at it?"

Why not? He couldn't do the chicken any more harm. Let him play vet if it made him feel better. She handed the hen to him and stood.

"I have some supplies in the barn, if you want to mess with it. I'm going to get out of these wet clothes."

Her teeth were beginning to chatter. Was it the fact that the danger was now over, or the cold? Probably a little of both.

She left him in the coop with the chicken and marched across the yard to the house, her boots making sucking noises each time she lifted her foot from the mud. Somehow he'd managed to best her again. He must think she was a pansy. But what did it matter? Why let it bother her? Maybe Katie was right. Maybe she was too competitive.

She glanced up at the sky. A bank of clouds was building to the northeast. Good. The rain would pack down the mud and melt the rest of the snow. It was unseasonably warm for the end of February, but this was the time of year that they might expect a few nice days. Maybe tomorrow would be warm.

"Carmen?" Alex called after her.

She stopped and turned. He tucked the chicken under his arm and hesitantly joined her at the porch steps.

"I don't know when Katie intended to tell you, but we made arrangements to take you out for supper tonight."

Carmen stared at him, warmth flooding up her neck again.

"That was nice, but . . ."

"We've already invited Bill, Lori and Josh. They're supposed to meet us at the restaurant. Nothing fancy."

"I really wish you hadn't done that."

It would be awkward enough talking to Josh, without having an audience. Alex glanced away uncomfortably, but she didn't miss the hurt in his eyes. She smiled encouragingly. "I suppose I could use a few hours away from this place, though. Thanks for giving me some warning."

His attention swung back to her and the dark eyes brightened as he noted her smile.

"Yeah, well I didn't want you to go in and start supper or something."

The excitement at the coop had cost Alex his chance to watch a birth, but he accepted the loss in good humor. He seemed to have an even nature, but maybe he was on his best behavior.

Carmen dressed in the nicest slacks that she owned and was relieved to discover that Alex and Katie were both dressed casually. She stopped at the door on her way out and grabbed her work boots.

Alex whisked them into the car, making sure their doors were securely closed before he slipped into the driver's seat. Evidently he was in his element now. He probably ate out all the time, and had a female companion to look after as well. Life on her farm must be immensely boring for him. This evening outing was a perfect opportunity to show Katie what she could gain by moving back with him.

At the restaurant, Alex whipped the car in between Josh's gray truck and Lori's little red sports car. Carmen had her door open and was exiting the car when she glanced up to find Alex ready to help her out. Her cheeks warmed again. She smiled up at him.

"I figured how to get the door open by myself."

His lips twisted into a smile as he helped Katie out. "I'm forever amazed at your ingenuity."

He must think she was the biggest hick he'd ever seen. She lagged behind so he could open the restaurant door for them, but once inside he surrendered their care to Josh and Bill. Lori was odd-man-out, so she inherited the benefit of his manners. Lori would appreciate him.

"Come on," Josh said curtly to Carmen, and led her to the table with a stride she couldn't hope to match. At the table, he slung a long leg over a chair and dropped into it, kicking out the chair next to him for Carmen. Smoky gray eyes glanced up to determine her response to the crude invitation. She sat down and pulled her chair up to the table, glancing to see how Bill would react. Bill and Katie were in deep conversation and sat down in unison, completely oblivious to what was going on around them. Alex held a chair for Lori, and Josh glanced uncomfortably at Carmen, running a hand through unruly red hair as he spoke under his breath in a sarcastic tone.

"A real lady's man. Who'd have guessed?"

Alex glanced at Josh as he lowered himself to the chair beside Lori. If the displeased look on his face was any indication, he must have heard Josh.

Carmen shrugged. "Women like to be treated like ladies now and then, Josh. You ought to try it some time."

Her tone was light, but Josh scowled at her. It wasn't a nice thing to say, and at the moment she wished she could take it back. What was the point in antagonizing him?

"Pretty words and fancy manners don't mean anything. You know how I feel and I'll be darned if I'm going to grovel at your feet. I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but I wish the old Carmen would come back."

The *old* Carmen? Had she changed so much? Certainly she was more independent, but hadn't Josh become more assertive?

Lori came to her rescue. "Knock it off, Josh. This is her birthday, not a debate team meeting."

Lori always did have a way with Josh, even back when they were kids and she had a monstrous crush on him. Josh dropped the subject, baring beautiful white teeth in a smile that bore closer resemblance to a grimace.

"That's right, she's one year older today. Tell me Carmen. How does it feel to be a quarter of a century old?"

She made a face at him. "I'll let you find out next month." This was no place to bring

up the issue that time was slipping away from them.

Alex cleared his throat. "Well, lets get this thing on the road. I'm about to starve to death. Everybody order what you want - my treat."

Josh shot a disgusted look at Alex. "I can take care of my own feed bill."

Alex smiled tolerantly. "Suit yourself."

Lori wrinkled her nose at Josh. "If you want to enjoy this evening, you'd better get that chip off your shoulder. It's been a long time since we all went out to eat together. Too long, don't you think?"

"Too long," Katie agreed with an elbow into Bills ribs.

"Yeah," Bill chimed in. "We've all been keeping our noses too close to the grindstone. A good way to get it knocked out of joint."

He was rewarded with an adoring smile from Katie and a chuckle from Josh. Lori and Alex both looked relieved. They made an attractive couple, both so sophisticated in appearance. By the end of the meal, it was obvious that they had hit it off well together.

It was past nine when Alex and Josh paid their bills, and the faint sound of thunder met them at the door. Katie begged Alex to let her drive, and he caved in. She could play him like a fiddle - or was Alex merely that amiable? In any case, Katie managed to get the car stuck less than a hundred yards from the gate. To her credit, the little car wasn't meant for rough country, but Katie let up on the accelerator when the car started to bog down.

"Keep it going," Alex warned her in a conversational tone, but it was already too late.

The little car slowed to a standstill, but Katie continued spinning the tires."

"Easy, now," Alex spoke gently, and reached for the door handle. "Let me give you a push."

Carmen slid out of the car, thankful she had thought to bring her boots and coat. As she followed, Alex glanced back at her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to get Josh."

He shook his head. "No, I can handle it. The car isn't that heavy. You go ahead and get back in. No need in two people getting muddy."

"I'll help. No point in adding my weight to what you already have to push."

His teeth flashed pink in the red glow of the taillights. "Yeah, you must weigh all of fifty pounds."

She eyed his lean build. "Ninety-five, and you're no heavyweight, yourself."

He positioned his hands on the trunk. "I weigh nearly twice as much as you."

She positioned her hands on the opposite side of the car and grinned back at him.

"With or without your ego?"

He chuckled and called to Katie that they were ready. Katie hit the accelerator and the wheels spun wildly, instantly coating Carmen and Alex with mud.

"Ho!" Alex yelled as he jumped away from the car. And then they were both laughing. Carmen stepped around him.

"I'd better go get the gate. When you push this thing out of the mud, she's going to be plumb through the gate before we can get to it."

"Good idea."

He explained the situation to Katie and added. "Easy this time. And keep going once you get started."

Carmen sloshed through the mud, and by the time she opened the gate, the car was out of the mud. Alex waved Katie through and closed the gate. Caked with mud, they

both decided to walk to the house while Katie parked the car.

"I'm sorry your birthday turned out this way," Alex said as he fell into stride beside her.

She shrugged. "Oh, don't worry about it. This has been a typical day for me - with the exception of a nice evening out. Thanks."

Thunder rumbled again and a cold drop of rain gnawed at the mud on her cheek. Maybe Katie was right. Maybe she needed to get out more. In spite of the mud and weather, she felt much better.

"Do you like living like this?"

"Like this? If you mean cold and muddy, no, but it isn't always this way. When you live on a farm you learn to expect days like this and roll with the punches."

"No, I wasn't talking about the mud and cold. I meant living out here in the middle of nowhere with questionable transportation and no way to get help. I admire your courage."

Courage? She shrugged. "It's not all that bad. Not when you grow up with it. Shoot, Dad put a bathroom in the house the year after I graduated. I can remember more than one time with a case of flu in the dead of winter - running back and forth to the outhouse. I have it made, now." She shrugged again. "I made the decision to work the farm instead of selling the place and getting a job at some factory. The farm doesn't pay as much, but it's more rewarding. Anyway, I always figured I'd raise my children on this place. It's a wonderful place to grow up. There's a spot down yonder on the creek where all us kids used to swim in the summer. Me, Lori, Josh and Bill."

He was silent for a few minutes as they sloshed toward the house. The only sound was the sucking sound their boots made in the mud and the soothing sound of flowing water down at the creek. The raindrops were heavier now, working the mud on her face into a slimy mess. Yet she was disappointed when they reached the porch steps. Alex was a delightful companion. He had such a cute personality. Was that what Katie meant all those times she indicated his looks weren't his strongest point? It was strange he hadn't ever married.

"I imagine this is a lot different from where you live in Houston," she prompted.

"Like another world," he responded with a sigh as he followed her up the steps. The screen door squealed as he opened it. "It was nice of you to let me visit."

He was gazing down at her, their faces illuminated by light coming through the window in the door. Something about his expression started an uneasy feeling in her stomach. Where was Katie?

He reached out and touched her face, his fingers sliding in the mud. He grinned. "Is this how you keep that beautiful complexion?"

She pushed his hand away and her laugh sounded nervous.

"If it is, you're going to have the prettiest face around."

He laughed and pushed the door open for her. Let's get cleaned up and see if there are any more baby goats.

She shook her head. "Not me. I'm beat. I'm going to take a shower and go to bed. I've got to leave them sometime. I can't watch them twenty-four hours a day, you know. If you want to check on them, go ahead."

The feel of his warm fingers on her cheek, the uneasy stomach - they were all warning bells. She was feeling rejected and he was lonely and experienced. Those factors went together like sulfur and a spark. Now was not the time to be in the barn alone with him this late at night.

Chapter Four

The pre-dawn was unnaturally quiet . . . and cold. The stove must be out again. She pulled the warm blankets over her head. Why didn't Katie take some initiative to get the fire going in the dairy? Or even in the house? She threw the covers back and rolled out of bed, gasping when her bare feet hit the cold floor. It wasn't Katie's farm and this pity party wasn't getting the chores done.

Muffled steps hurried down the hall toward her door and Katie pounded on the door. "Carmen, get up. It snowed again - and I mean *snowed*."

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Carmen trudged across the room and drew the curtains back from her window. It was still snowing - huge flakes that lit softly on the heavy blanket of snow on the ground. The cedar tree was bent over with the weight of a heavy load of wet snow. It was beautiful.

She grabbed her jeans as Katie beat on the door again.

"Carmen? Did you hear me?"

"I heard you," she answered testily. "I'm getting my clothes on. Did the stove go out again?"

"Yes, but don't worry about it. I'll get Alex."

"Don't bother him . . ." but the answer was an echo of footsteps, retreating down the hall and thumping up the stairs.

Poor Bill. Did he have any idea what he was getting himself into? She dressed hurriedly and was tugging on her boots when Katie returned.

"He's not up there." Her voice was approaching panic. "He's not anywhere in the house. I hope he didn't freeze!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Katie. I'm sure he has enough sense to come in out of the cold. He's probably in the barn."

Katie gave her a sour look. "Who, *pretty boy*?"

Carmen grinned. "Are you still in a snit about that?"

Katie shrugged. "I wasn't mad." She turned toward the kitchen. "I'll fix breakfast while you go check on him."

Carmen slipped into her coat and stepped out on the porch. Snow had drifted across the steps and onto the porch. There must be a good twelve inches on the ground already. She carefully felt her way down the steps and pushed a trail across the yard to the barn. Had Alex spent the night in the barn, or had it snowed this much in a few hours?

The dairy was warm, a fire burning brightly in the home made wood stove. Alex was here . . . and *he* knew how to light a fire. The door to the kidding stalls was open and she stepped through, moving swiftly as she checked each stall. She paused at the last stall and smiled. In the hay beside their mother, lay two tiny bodies, soft and clean. And propped against the wall, breathing softly in sleep, was Alex.

How long had he been asleep? It couldn't have been too long since he stoked the stove. She leaned over the gate, calling his name softly so that the goats wouldn't be frightened.

Instantly he was awake - not simply sitting there with his eyes open, but completely

awake. She smiled at him mischievously.

“Fine goat herder you are. Falling asleep in the hay.”

He stood and stretched. Wincing, he rubbed his neck and grinned at her. Why did some people look so good in the morning? And how must she appear to him? In her concern for his safety, she hadn't showered or changed clothes - or even combed her hair. Of course, as long as she kept the hood up, he needn't know her hair was a mess.

He ran fingers through hair that didn't need straightening and brushed the straw from his pants.

She moved away from the gate, tearing her gaze from his lean muscular thighs. “I guess it must have snowed since you came out here. I didn't see any tracks from the house.”

“Snow?” In one lithe movement he vaulted the gate and bolted toward the door. “I slept here last night,” he threw over his shoulder.

The sky hung like a gray sheet over the white landscape and huge flakes continued to fall. Daylight was making a feeble attempt to break through the heavy cloud cover. Alex stared in amazed appreciation.

“It looks like a Christmas card. I was hoping to see some snow, but this is fantastic.”

Was this the first time he had seen snow? She stepped out into the frigid morning, her boots sinking into the snow with a squeaking sound.

“Katie should have breakfast ready. Let's go in and eat before I start the chores.”

Normally the animals were her first concern, but if Alex had spent the night in the barn, he needed the warmth a good hot meal could offer. Thanks to him, there was nothing in the barn that couldn't wait.

Half way to the house she turned to find him slowly following, absorbed in the beauty of the winter storm. She reached down, scooping up a hand full of the moist snow, and forced it into a loose ball.

“So you were hoping it would snow, were you?”

With deadly accuracy, she threw the ball at him, laughing when it bounced off his leather coat and sprayed a mist of white crystals in his face.

He sputtered and wiped the snow from his face, grinning at her as he proceeded to make a snowball of his own.

She squealed and bent over to collect more snow. As she straightened, his snowball was already in the air. She ducked and the ball of ice grazed off her hood. Again she lobbed a snowball at him, but in her haste she missed him by a wide margin.

Not to be outdone, he already had another one formed and raised his hand to throw it at her. She turned and ran, her laughter muffled in the waterlogged air. From the corner of her eye she saw the gray truck pushing a trail down the drive and dodged out of its path, completely forgetting about the stump hidden under the snow.

Her knee hit the solid chunk of wood with a nauseating thump. She dropped to the snow, clutching her knee and moaning. A truck door slammed and strong hands plucked her out of the snow.

“Here now Shorty. What are you doing running around here like a chicken with its head cut off?” Josh lifted her into his arms and started for the house.

“Put me down,” she managed on the end of an agonized moan.

“Is she all right?” Alex asked as he caught up with them.

Josh turned his head sharply and snorted. “I should have known.” He released her abruptly and she staggered on the injured leg, nearly falling in the snow again.

Alex reached out to steady her and grinned. “Maybe you should have stayed where you were.”

"In the barn?" she asked innocently, and glanced up in time to see the poisonous look Josh was shooting at Alex.

Fortunately Alex didn't notice. He laughed and tousled her hair. With a rush of blood to her face, she realized the hood had slipped off her head. She tugged the hood back over her head and glanced at Josh.

"You're just in time for breakfast. Come on in and join us."

She limped toward the house, pushing away the helping arm Alex offered. Josh had left childhood behind long ago and this little frolic in the snow probably looked anything but innocent to him.

Katie met them at the door. "There you are, Alex. What took you two so long? Oh, hi Josh."

"He was asleep," Carmen answered. "I had to wake him up with a snow ball." She grinned up at Alex as she hung her coat. "I've got to go comb my hair. I'll meet you guys in the kitchen." She could shower and change after the chores were done.

In her room she ran a comb threw her curls and stared back at the violet eyes haunting her from the mirror. It was time to give Josh some kind of answer. It wasn't only her life that had been on hold. He was ready to start a family as well - had been for a long time. It was unfair to string Josh along this way. If she was having this much trouble making a decision, he couldn't be the right man.

Alex was lifting a pot of coffee from the stove when she entered the room. Josh glanced up from his plate of sausage and eggs and reached over, pulling out a chair for her. She dropped into the chair and scooted it forward. Alex picked the coffeepot back up again and she realized he had intended to push her chair in for her. She blushed as he leaned over her shoulder to fill her cup.

"So tell me," she began, trying to hide her embarrassment. "Did you get to witness the birth?"

He chuckled. "Yes, sleepy head. Too bad you couldn't stay awake."

"No problems, I gather." She sipped her coffee, aware that Josh was watching her intently.

"No, I couldn't believe how easy she made it look." Alex replaced the pot on the burner and resumed his place at the table. Lifting the cup of fresh coffee to his lips, he glanced up at her.

"I'd hate to have to put that many cows in that little barn. I guess the feed bill is considerably smaller, too. Other than that and their size, what's the advantage?"

Josh snorted. "It bugs the heck out of me."

Carmen ignored his remark. "The land would get overgrown with brush in the summer if I didn't have the goats to keep it cleared off."

Josh shook his head. "If you hadn't sold off all the farm equipment, you could have kept it brush hogged. I could run a passel of cattle on that land."

She stared at her plate. "I had to sell something to pay for the funeral."

Josh grimaced. "I would have paid for that, but you wouldn't hear of it. Your father was like an uncle to me."

She put a hand on his arm. "I know you would have, but it was *my* debt, not yours. Anyway, I didn't figure I'd be running the farm for a while."

Josh groaned. "Yeah, then along came Katie with her wild ideas about a goat dairy. That's when all the trouble started."

Alex pushed his empty plate back and swigged the rest of his coffee. "Katie, why don't you and I go check on the goats?"

Katie gulped her coffee and followed him out the door, pausing to mouth "mother

hen” to Carmen. Then she made a face at Josh and left the room.

Josh was silent until they heard the front door close. “What’s this about you two sleeping in the barn last night?” he asked, jabbing a fork into his eggs.

Carmen stared at him. “Not that it’s any of your business, but he slept in the barn and I slept in my room.”

He glanced up sharply. “What do you mean; it isn’t any of my business? We’re practically engaged. I don’t like . . .”

“We’re not engaged,” she cut him off sharply, “practically or otherwise.” It wasn’t the way she had planned to break the news, but he was being so irrational.

He stared at her. “So that’s how it is. Some pretty dandy comes along and right away you drop me like a . . .”

“And I haven’t dropped you, either.” She ran a hand through her hair and moaned. “Oh, let’s not talk about this right now. I’m tired and I have a splitting head ache.”

He chased a piece of sausage around his plate with the fork. “You’re tired because you work too hard.” He dropped the fork and turned to her. “Marry me, Carmen. Sell this place to Katie, or lease it to her. It’s just a matter of time until she and Bill get married and you know how Bill always liked this place. He can take care of it right. Or you can merge it with mine, I don’t care. Let’s not wait any longer.”

She stood and began removing the plates from the table. He had no regard for the sentimental value of the farm where she grew up, nor any confidence that she was capable of running it. Sure, Bill could fix up the place. He had a good income and access to his father’s equipment. It wasn’t fair. Josh wasn’t considering her obstacles. But then, he didn’t expect a woman to be able to work a farm . . . it wasn’t natural.

“Josh, have you ever considered the thought that we’re not right for each other? I mean, we grew up together, so we have a lot in common, but . . .”

He slammed his hands on the table and lurched from his chair.

“It’s Alex, isn’t it? The way he fussed over you at the restaurant and you two frolicking in the snow this morning like two lovers.”

“Oh Josh, get real. He’s been here less than two days.” She placed the dishes on the counter beside the sink. “Why do you always do this?”

“Do what?”

Was it possible he actually didn’t know? She clamped her hands on her hips and scowled up at him.

“Every time I even *look* at another man you get crazy. If you’re like this now, what would you be like after we got married?”

He kicked his chair aside, his face growing red with anger.

“Carmen, I want to marry you in the worst way, but if you think I’m going to be the kind of man to stand back while my woman flirts with another man, you’re sadly mistaken.”

It was ludicrous. There was no hope for him. She picked up a coffee cup and met his cold gaze.

“Well, you said it. You want to marry me in the worst way. When I get married, I want it to be in the best way. I want mutual trust and love. I want a partner - someone I can work *beside*, not after.”

He stared at her for a moment and then shook his head. “Don’t do it, Carmen. He’s a walk away Joe if I’ve ever seen one.” He paused and his expression turned sour.

“You’d better give it some thought, Shorty. When he’s tired of playing house with you, I might not be available any more.”

It was her turn to stare, and tears burned her eyes. They had saved themselves for each other and now he was telling her he didn’t want her if she was tainted. He had no

faith in her self-control; her moral commitment. What kind of person did he think she was? And who did he think *he* was? It was the final blow.

“Of all the hard headed, vain . . . OH!”

She slammed the coffee cup in the sink and the hot liquid splashed against the window. She pointed at the door with a trembling finger.

“Josh Reynolds, you can march your jealous carcass right out that door and don’t you come back until you can talk to me like I’m a reasonably intelligent and decent person.”

His face contorted in rage and one long step brought him close enough to grab her shoulders. He shook her so hard that her head throbbed.

“Don’t issue orders to me like I’m a little boy. You hear me?”

For the first time she knew fear of him. He had always been hot headed, but violent anger had always been directed toward someone else - a man. Her neck popped, sending a shot of pain down her back.

“Josh,” she cried frantically. “You’re hurting me.”

“Josh!” The masculine voice was sharp and commanding.

Josh released her and turned on Alex, who waited tensely in the kitchen doorway; hopelessly outmatched, but obviously determined. Even when Josh moved toward him with raised fists, Alex didn’t falter. He reminded her of a Banty rooster facing it off with a big Leghorn.

Josh swung, and Alex ducked. With lightning speed, Alex moved in close, jerking one of Josh’s legs out from under him. Josh hit the floor with enough force to take the breath out of the average man. But Josh wasn’t the average man. He rolled over, springing to his feet and lunged at Alex. Josh had the advantage of size, but Alex was faster. Alex feigned and then hooked Josh’s leg again with the toe of his boot, sending Josh to the floor twice in as many minutes. Josh wasn’t as fast to rise this time, and when he finally regained his footing, he shook his head. Alex watched him suspiciously when he lifted his hands in submission, but Josh moved around him and left the house.

Carmen let out her breath slowly. Josh was no stranger to a fistfight, and he was considered by many to be a formidable opponent. Josh didn’t walk away because he was afraid to tackle Alex. Of that she was certain. Maybe Alex had knocked a little sense into him. She watched Alex with newfound respect. He was no dandy, and that was a fact.

Alex stared after Josh, obviously surprised by the unnecessary surrender. He took a deep breath and turned his attention to Carmen.

“Are you all right?”

She rubbed her neck. “I think so. I felt something pop in my neck, but I don’t think it’s serious.”

He swore under his breath as he crossed the room to examine her neck.

“Maybe we should take you in to see a doctor.”

“In this snow?” She twisted her neck. “You know, my headache is gone.” She giggled nervously as his warm fingers touched her neck. “Maybe I should thank him.”

“For what? Trying to break your neck?” He began massaging the stiff muscles.

“Has he ever been violent like this before?”

He must think they were in an abusive relationship.

“No, and he wasn’t trying to break my neck. He has a hot temper, but this is the first time he was ever anything but gentle with me. I shouldn’t have provoked him.”

“He wasn’t so gentle this morning,” he replied in a dry tone. “And don’t make excuses for him.”

His fingers left her neck, working down the muscles on either side of her spine. He didn't ask how she had provoked him. Had he heard their conversation? Maybe he figured it wasn't any of his business - or he didn't want to know. Probably the latter.

She closed her eyes, and in spite of the situation, his fingers slowly siphoned the tenseness from her back. And then his hands were on her waist, turning her to face him. She opened her eyes to find him gazing down at her. Her heart fluttered lightly as she met his gaze, and began to pound as his hands slid up her arms in a gentle caress. Her lips parted, but the command to remove his hands never escaped her mouth. He gently gripped her shoulders and leaned forward. Hypnotized by his somber gaze, she lifted her face to accept his affection.

He blinked and caught his breath, gently pushing her away.

"I almost forgot. Katie sent me in to get some cat food."

Warmth flooded her face as she stepped away from him. What was she thinking of? He must think she was as easy as a primed pump. She made a job of searching through the cabinet for the cat food and avoided his gaze as she handed him the box.

"She came back, did she?"

He took the box from her hand. "Yeah, and she brought some company."

Involuntarily she glanced up at him. "She didn't."

The dark eyes sparkled with humor. "I'm afraid so. Why don't you have her fixed so this won't happen again?"

"I can't afford it. Anyway, she's just a stray that wandered up one day and attached herself to us."

He lifted the box and grinned. "I'm not surprised. Don't you know feeding a cat is the same as throwing out a welcome mat?"

She smiled and shrugged a shoulder. "Oh well, now she'll have plenty of reason to kill off the mice."

He shook his head. "You're kind of tough on wildlife, aren't you?" He turned toward the door. "I told Katie I'd be right back."

After he left, Carmen turned to the sink of dishes. Maybe Josh wasn't so crazy after all. Had Alex contemplated kissing her, and if so, why had he changed his mind? Maybe it was never on his mind - only hers. She blushed again at the thought. And why was it on *her* mind? No wonder Josh was so concerned. Josh was probably right about Alex, though. He was a walk away Joe. There was certainly nothing here to hold him, and a little country hick would be the last female he would consider seriously. No, they were both vulnerable right now. Alex was bored and she was depressed. Right now, any affection would be welcome; and Alex was obviously an affectionate person.

She sighed. There were chores to do and she'd best get at them.

A few minutes later she was kicking snow around in the chicken yard until the toe of her boot struck something solid. She buried a gloved hand in the snow and extracted the half tire that served as a watering trough. Flipping it over, she stomped on the bottom until the ice broke loose. The chickens fought for position in the tiny coop door as they watched her pour a bucket of water into the tire. They squawked and pecked at each other as she broke a trail from the tire to the coop. She jumped aside, allowing the fowl avalanche to plunge down the trail. Pushing each other aside, they buried their beaks in the water and lifted their heads, eyeing her suspiciously as the water trickled down their throats. Then they sneezed and shook the cold water from their waddles and drank again. They seemed unconcerned that their feet were buried in snow. Did they know winter would soon be replaced by spring? She glanced at the low gray clouds. It had stopped snowing, but it looked like it could start again any minute.

She sighed deeply. Would winter be less miserable if the house was warm? Not that it mattered. It would be years before she could afford to remodel it. But wouldn't a fireplace and central heat be nice - and windows that would permit the light to brighten a room without seeping cold air - a place like Josh's?

She trudged through the snow to the shed and filled a plastic bucket with pellets. Had she made the right decision - and if so, why the empty feeling? Losing Josh was like losing a brother. Why couldn't they simply be friends?

Inside the coup, she dumped the pellets into the hanging feeder. It was done now, and for that much she felt a sense of relief. She left the chicken coup and broke another trail to the barn. Katie and Alex weren't there. They were probably in the house by now. Was Alex avoiding her?

A sweep through the barn failed to reveal any imminent births. Maybe the goats had some kind of control over commencement of labor. The middle of a snowstorm was no time to give birth.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten more than two bites of her breakfast. A cup of coffee and some toast would be nice. She headed for the house.

Alex was lounging on the couch, reading a book when she entered the house. The sound of running water from the bathroom proclaimed that Katie was taking a shower. Carmen hung her coat and tugged the boots off her wet feet.

"I might as well go barefoot," she muttered, limping to the stove.

Alex glanced up and smiled. "You need some hip boots. Maybe you should borrow mine."

She glanced at him with mock innocence. "You brought some hip boots?"

He grinned, his eyes twinkling again. "No."

She made a face at him. "Well, with all that bull you've been peddling, somebody around here is bound to need them eventually."

He laughed and tossed the book on the couch. "Carmen, I'm going to miss you. Why don't you come back with me?"

He was joking, of course, but it was nice to think someone enjoyed her weird sense of humor. Certainly Josh never had. She plopped down in the chair and pulled her socks off, holding her feet up to the stove.

"No, I think I'll stay here where it's warm and sunny."

He pushed away from the couch and sauntered over to the stove, holding his hands over its warmth.

"Well, if you ever decide to get down my way, drop in and see me." He gazed down at her soberly. "And I really mean that."

Yep, he was a salesman, all right. He even had to qualify his statements as to their sincerity. Of course, what were the odds that she would ever get down to Houston? Zilch. She wiggled her toes.

"Well, if you ever get back up this way again, you be sure to drop by. We'll have us a good old mess of Poke weed and fat back."

Alex chuckled. Turning his back to the stove, he held his hands behind him. He gazed out the window at the winter scene.

"March came in like a lion, didn't it?"

She nodded.

His gaze shifted to her. "It must be nice to only have a birthday once every four years."

She met that delicious chocolate gaze and smiled. "It does get awkward, but we

celebrate it on the 28th when there isn't a 29th."

For a moment he gazed into her eyes, his expression unreadable. Finally he spoke.

"Amethyst is the birthstone for February."

Color flooded her cheeks. "I know." So that was why he was looking into her eyes that way. She straightened in the chair, acutely aware that he was still watching her.

"You're a beautiful woman," he said in a conversational tone.

She stood, avoiding his eyes, and headed for the kitchen. From behind her his voice instructed gently.

"If it bothers you; say thank you and just let it drop."

She swung around and smiled at him.

"Thank you. Just let it drop."

The smile began in his eyes; then touched his lips; and finally the dimple appeared.

"Not likely," he said.

She shrugged and turned toward the kitchen again.

"I'm hungry. I didn't eat much this morning. I'm going to see what I can find. Would you like a snack?"

He didn't respond and she didn't look back. If he wanted something, he could come get it.

Chapter Five

The next morning dawned clear and crisp outside, but the stove was warming the living room as Carmen came through. She plunged into her coat and stomped into her boots. Alex was at it again.

Crunching across the yard to the dairy, she found the stove there burning warm as well. Alex had broken the ice off the top of the water trough by the time she got there and every stall was filled with fresh hay. She should have been delighted instead of feeling frustrated. Did he have to be underfoot all the time? She was standing in the middle of the dairy, scowling, when he emerged from the barn.

“Hey, Heidi.” His smile faded as he noted her expression. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” she answered shortly. “Everything is absolutely perfect.”

He arched a brow, a smile lurking in those dark eyes.

“And that’s a bad thing?”

Even his voice held a mocking note. He knew why she was upset. Knew and wanted to rub it in. She swung around and headed for the door.

“The chickens need to be fed and watered.”

“Done.”

She paused mid-stride and threw a response over her shoulder without looking at him.

“Then I guess I’ll clean my room. I know you haven’t been there.”

Although at the moment she wouldn’t swear to it. Why did he have to be so good at everything? Couldn’t he stumble - just once?

As her fingers closed around the doorknob, Alex brought her up short.

“Hey. Where are you going? I thought we might have a chance to talk a little. Am I that boring?”

She glanced back at him. “Talk?” she echoed stupidly.

He moved toward her, his lips twisting into a sardonic smile.

“Yeah, you know. When you open your mouth and something totally off the wall slips out. You’re good at it.”

Great. Now she was supposed to be an entertainment committee to a sophisticated fat cat. She eyed him sourly.

“Why? Do you need some more quaint hill talk to add to your collection? I haven’t given you enough to keep the office entertained for a while?”

He stared at her, his expression going sober.

“Is that what you think I’m doing? Making fun of you?” He shook his head. “I enjoy your little colloquialisms. They have a spicy flavor I find refreshing.”

She met his solemn gaze. It was ridiculous to stand here, trying to match wits with such a polished salesman. She shrugged.

“If conversation is all you have in mind, why don’t we go in and talk over a cup of coffee - maybe play a game or two with Katie.”

He looked disappointed. “That sounds fine to me.”

Maybe conversation wasn’t all he had in mind. If so, she didn’t give him time to pursue anything else for the next three days. As the weather improved, the goats

began kidding in earnest. Still, no matter how early she got up, the stove was always burning and Alex preceded her to the dairy. One thing became obvious. Alex should have stayed in college. He had a way with animals, winning Brutus' love and respect, and the trust of the entire dairy herd as well.

Yet his help was troubling enough to make her look forward to his departure. With his organization, the barn would never be the same again. It was obvious he was used to running things, but his help often became an attempt to take over the barn. Why did men always seem to confuse helping out with assuming command?

And yet, in spite of his efforts, Alex couldn't work miracles. One day he caught her in the dairy and gently informed her that the hen had passed away.

She heaved a warm bucket of water from the sink and suppressed a smile as she met his concerned gaze. If he was expecting tears, he was going to be surprised.

"It's all right," she consoled him. "I didn't expect her to live. She was two years old - ready for the pot, anyway."

He frowned. "If you felt that way, why didn't you let the fox have it?"

Obviously he felt his efforts to save the hen were not appreciated. Actually, she hadn't given much thought to his motive for working on the hen, assuming it was merely something to pass the time. She was ransacking her brain for a good save when he reached down and grabbed the bucket.

"Women!" He ground out, shaking his head in disgust. "If I live to be a thousand years old I'll never understand them. One minute they're all sweet and caring and the next they stab you in the back."

She stared after him as he strode away from her. What was *that* all about? And whom was she stabbing in the back - the chicken, the fox or Alex? She followed him to one of the stalls, trying to remember the circumstances of his rejected love.

The girl had been poor, beautiful and with the voice of a dove. That much she remembered Katie saying. Apparently he had given her a car, bought clothes for her and generally made a fool out of himself over her. He had even footed the bill for their almost wedding. From there on the details were sketchy. Apparently the girl had hocked the ring and run off with a Nashville agent, leaving Alex at the altar to explain everything to the guests.

Carmen worked at the hay with the toe of her boot. So what was the connection? The only thing she had in common with that girl was the fact that they were both poor. Apparently he thought she was heartless, as well - over a stupid bird? How long had it been since he had been jilted - five years? And he was still bitter? She jammed her hands in her pockets.

"Once bitten, twice shy," she muttered under her breath.

He glanced back at her. "What?"

"Nothing." She held the gate as he carried the bucket of water into the stall.

He exited the stall and closed the gate, staring down at her defiantly.

"I threw the hen into the woods, so the fox will probably get it anyway."

"You *what*?" Carmen glared up at him. "Of all the . . . Now he'll get a taste for chickens and start raiding my hen house every night. Thanks a lot for training him to hunt my chickens."

He stared at her in surprise. "Hello? The fox was *already* in your chicken house. That's why the chicken died, remember? I'm not *training* him to do anything."

"Well, you didn't have to give the chicken to the fox. We could have slaughtered it."

"How thoughtless of me," he said dryly. "Maybe you'd like me to hike out to the highway and scrape up some road kill for supper."

She met his bittersweet chocolate gaze defiantly, their noses literally inches apart. And then the bitterness was gone from his eyes, leaving only the sweetness . . . and a touch of something else. An uneasy feeling began in the pit of her stomach. He smelled faintly of cologne and leather and his lips were smooth and . . . Wait a minute. Weren't they in the middle of an argument?

She took a quick step backward, blood racing up her neck and warming her cheeks. "Oh, what's the use? In a little while you'll be gone. If the fox gets fat on my hens, it's no skin off your nose. You'll be propped on your backside eating shrimp and steak. I'm wasting my breath."

A smile played at the corners of his mouth and danced in his eyes. The jerk. He knew she had been flustered by his close presence and he was enjoying it.

"Well, anyway," he concluded. "I poured cement in the hole he dug under the hen house. He won't be back in there." He moved toward her. "Now why don't we discuss what's really on our minds."

She turned away from him and started for the barn door. "The only thing on my mind is keeping this farm solvent." Did he think she was going to fall into his arms? She glanced over her shoulder as she reached the door. "If I need any help, I can always depend on Josh."

His crestfallen look should have been a victory, but instead she wished she could eat the words. It was a mean thing to say, especially since he had been working so hard to help. She paused in the doorway and stared at the floor. It served no purpose to smash his magnificent ego.

"I'm sorry. No wonder you think I'm insensitive. The truth is, you've been a lot of help to us." She glanced up and met his wary gaze. "I didn't mean to be disrespectful."

He brushed his hands on his pants. "Yeah, well no offense taken." He eyed her appreciably. "And just for the record, I think you're quite a woman."

He was quite the man with flowery statements, but did they mean anything? It didn't matter, anyway. In only three more days he'd be gone. Three more days and she'd have the dairy back to herself again.

She stepped into the dairy, leaving him pondering over one of the goats. It wasn't his ego - or the way he did everything so well. It was the weather that made her so irritable. She switched on the radio and picked up the broom. Oh, spring, hurry up. A slow waltz began playing and she closed her eyes, imagining the bright sunlight and flowers bursting from swollen buds. She moved in rhythm with the music, brushing the floor softly as she hummed along.

Suddenly strong warm hands were on her waist, sweeping her into gentle arms. She opened her eyes and gasped as Alex took the broom away and pulled her into the middle of the room.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"We're going to dance." His bronze features were smooth except for the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. Those eyes were warm, reflecting a mood somewhere between sober and light humor.

"That's silly," she said, hesitantly following his steps.

"Is it?" His deep voice was as soft and warm as his gaze.

He gracefully swung her around. It was silly, but it was also fun. She laughed as she put an arm on his shoulder and fell into step with him. They dipped and whirled and danced around the dairy floor until the music ended.

She gazed up at him, idly wondering when he was going to release her. They stood that way for a few moments. Finally he gently pulled her toward him.

“Did I say I was going to miss you?” His voice was warm and husky.

She laughed softly, and gently pushed away from him. “Yes, and I didn’t believe you then, either.”

She could feel the blood pumping in her neck. Could he see it? She needed to put some distance between them.

“Why not?” He pulled her close again and leaned down, softly brushing her lips with his.

The effect was devastating. Her heart pounded wildly. What was he thinking of? She squirmed out of his arms.

“Stop it.” The words didn’t come out with the conviction she intended, and he reached for her again.

“Why? Didn’t you like it?”

She dodged his hand. “You egotistical . . . jerk. What kind of girl do you think I am? What about Josh?”

He stopped, his expression growing wary again. “What about him? Are you two engaged?”

“Practically,” she lied, dodging backwards and putting a stanchion between them.

He leaped up on the stanchion. “Then maybe it’s time somebody let him know what it’s going to take to keep a woman like you.” He stepped off the stanchion and moved toward her.

She took a quick step back, glancing around for something to use as a weapon.

“What do you mean, *a woman like me*?”

He chuckled softly. “Don’t get your hackles up. I only meant you’re special.” He followed her.

She made a lunge and grabbed the broom, wielding the handle like a club.

“Sure, I’m special. And don’t you forget it.”

Her voice was as crisp as the morning air and twice as sharp. Gone was the desire, replaced with genuine concern. Surely he wasn’t going to attack her. Fueled by her own imagination, she took a swing at him with the broom.

His eyes flashed and one hand shot out, snatching the broom from her hands.

She screamed and darted for the door, but he caught her and pulled her close again. She turned her face away from him. Where was Katie?

“I won’t forget it,” he spoke softly against her neck, and then abruptly released her.

She staggered away from him and grabbed the doorknob.

“From now on, I’ll thank you to keep your hands to yourself.”

Was it fear or the heady feeling of his strong arms that left her shaken?

Alex pushed her aside and opened the door. “Carmen, I want you, and some day I’ll have you - but not that way. I want you to come to me all sweet and willing - without dragging Josh along.”

She stared after him as he strode down the path to the porch. Alex *wanted* her? What possible interest could he have in her? And wasn’t he everything she had taken pains to avoid? He was a polished businessman who would be as disappointed in her rustic lifestyle as she would be with his lavish way of living. His idea of roughing it was probably a car without a navigational system. Her idea of selecting the right fork brought to mind the choice between a table fork and a pitchfork. No, Alex certainly didn’t meet her requirements for husband material. Obviously there was a mutual physical attraction between them, but that was all. That physical attraction was responsible for the pounding of her heart right now. Or was it fear? No, a moment ago she had been startled by his uncharacteristic advance, but not frightened. Alex would

never hurt her - for some reason she was certain of that fact. Sure, he had stepped over the line, but hadn't she invited him by encouraging his attention? In the kitchen after Josh left, and here now, when she had willingly danced with him. And hadn't she thrown Josh at him? Dragged him along, as Alex put it. He must have heard their conversation in the kitchen. How could he have missed it? Then he knew she lied when she said they were practically engaged.

Why did things always seem to work out this way? She and Josh had everything in common, yet there were no sparks. What did she and Alex have in common? Zilch. Yet his presence was electrifying - had been since the first day. Had he felt the same then? Had Katie been right . . . again?

But Katie had planned it this way. She had probably pumped Alex full of information about her. Misinformation, no doubt. Otherwise he wouldn't be interested at all.

She sighed as she trudged toward the house. The entire situation was ludicrous. The best thing she could do was put his impulsive statement out of her mind. No doubt Alex would, as soon as he got back to civilization - and sanity.

The next three days flew by without incident - probably because they were all too busy to start any mischief. The kids were taken off their mothers and the dairy was semi-operational. That meant milking morning and night and bottle feeding the kids - all twenty-seven of them.

Alex never mentioned their conversation again, and she was careful not to be caught alone with him. By now he was probably wishing he hadn't said anything. He had become the perfect gentleman, and that suited her fine. Yet, if their days were filled with work, their evenings were filled with camaraderie. They played everything from cards to Clue, and the conversation was dominated by childhood memories shared between Alex and Katie. As the days passed, it was obvious that Alex had fallen back into Katie's good graces. As Carmen expected, when Alex was ready to leave, he invited Katie to go back with him.

Katie didn't give the question a moment's consideration. "No," she answered with a shake of the head. "I like it here. Why don't you move up here?"

Alex laughed shortly and glanced at Carmen. "I'm kind of tied to Houston at the moment. Maybe you'll change your mind."

For a crazy instant, Carmen wasn't sure who he was talking to. Surely he didn't expect her to hop on a plane and fly down there with him. No, it was mere chance that he was looking at *her* while he spoke to Katie.

He hugged Katie good-bye and motioned for Carmen to follow him as he stepped out on the porch. Carmen shrugged at Katie's questioning look, and stepped through the door, closing it against prying ears. If he was getting ready to make an indecent proposal, she didn't want Katie to hear the squelching reply she had planned.

They stood on the porch, awkwardly staring off into the cold night. Carmen started to shiver and Alex set his suitcase on the porch.

"Well, Carmen. Do you think you could shake loose a good-bye kiss?"

It was dark and she couldn't see his expression, but his voice sounded controlled. Was he angry that she hadn't volunteered? Of course, there was no reason to refuse. After all, he was on his way to the airport. What could happen now? Obviously he wanted to forget his earlier remark about wanting her. He was making a point of saying good-bye. Now they could part friends. She moved toward him hesitantly.

His warm fingers touched her face - finding his mark, no doubt. She tipped her head back and leaned forward, offering a cheek.

Instead, he took her face in his hands, caressing her cheeks with his thumbs. Finally he kissed her softly on the lips - a questioning kiss, brief and timid. For some reason, it was a kiss that left her desiring more.

She clutched his wrists, the logical side of her brain preparing to remove his hands from her face, the emotional side wishing he would repeat the kiss. He smelled of leather and cologne and his breath was warm on her cheek. What was he waiting for - an answer to that questioning kiss? It was on her mind to move away, but instead she found her face lifting to his - seeking out his lips.

His hands dropped to her waist and he pulled her close. This time there was nothing timid about his kiss. His lips were warm and inviting, lingering on hers. Her heart pounded wildly as she pressed closer, her arms encircling his neck. Inside his leather jacket it was warm and cozy - falsely secure.

That was when the logical part of her brain jerked her back to reality. This was supposed to be a good-bye kiss, not an invitation. She pushed away from him and drug in deeply of the cold night air. Her laugh sounded nervous.

“Now *that* was a good bye kiss.”

He chuckled softly. “More like hello.” He picked up his suitcase. “Well, I hate to leave, but I’d better get going or I’ll miss my plane.”

She watched from the porch as he strode to his car. There, he tossed his suitcase in the back and dug in his pockets for the keys. In the glow of the dome light he glanced up at her. Slowly and deliberately he threw her a kiss.

It was silly - and romantic. Something Josh would have considered both childish and demeaning. Yet somehow Alex pulled it off without appearing either.

Unsure how to respond, she merely stood there, hands at her side. He chuckled softly and climbed into the car. The dome light went off as he shut the door. The engine turned over once and then headlights blinded her until he turned the car around. She watched his tail lights disappear down the road and wondered if she would ever see him again. If the kiss was any indication, yes. But did he kiss every girl that way? Probably so.

She sighed and turned to the house. Not that it mattered. There were too many miles between them to make her secret desires anything more than a dream.

Chapter Six

Carmen woke with a start. Had she been dreaming or was Brutus barking? The throaty bark filled the air again and she rolled out of bed into the cold morning. Now what? She jerked jeans over her nightgown and waited until she reached the front door before tugging on her boots. The house groaned as a gust of wind bombarded it. She dived into her coat, snapping it as she opened the front door. The outline of the dairy was dim in the early dawn light, but the intermittent barking from Brutus was like a beacon. She slogged through the slushy snow, splashing icy water on the legs of her jeans. A gust of wind tore the hood from her head and snatched at her hair. At least it wasn't a cold wind, and the snow was melting. As she vaulted over the fence, the cause of Brutus's excitement became obvious. The barn door was open and the goats were scattering, forcing the dog to race from one end of the lot to the other. His huge feet splashed through the wet snow, slinging it at the goats. The scene was total chaos, with goats dashing every which way in an attempt to avoid each spray of slushy snow.

"Brutus! Stop!"

The sharp command brought the dog up short. He tilted his huge head to the side and whined. He had no idea what he was doing wrong. As the airborne snow settled, so did the goats. The barn door was wide open, the latch torn loose - probably by the wind.

"Come on, boy."

Brutus followed her into the barn, anxiously looking over his shoulder at his dispersed herd. Carmen poured grain into the feeders and the smell of oats and honey brought a tidal wave of goats into the barn. A quick count indicated they were still one goat short. A quick glance around the barn confirmed it was Tessa.

Carmen closed the barn door and propped it shut with a board. Turning her attention to the hills, she saw a single trail leading up into the rocks. No doubt Tessa was in labor and searching for a private place to give birth - some place high in the rocks, away from the water but sheltered from the wind. There were a dozen such places, and the snow had melted over part of the rocky areas, making tracking almost impossible.

She glanced at the house. The safe thing to do was to tell Katie where she was going, but the few minutes it would take might mean the life of the kid. Anyway, she knew every nook and cranny of her acreage. She slogged down the trail, scanning the woods ahead as she neared. Yes, there was where the goat had entered, but how long ago, and where was Tessa now? The trail swerved only to avoid trees, and it was soon evident where the goat was headed. When the trail stopped at the edge of a rock strewn clearing, Carmen continued. She found the goat and her newborn kid exactly where she expected them - and barely in time.

The kid lay on its side, legs stretched out. Carmen knelt beside it, ignoring the anxious mutterings of its mother. The kid had been cleaned and its copper colored fur was still damp. The air funneling up from the snow-covered hollows was frigid and the little doeling was dying of hypothermia.

Tucking the kid under her coat, Carmen started back down the hill. Tessa followed,

voicing her objection in annoyed bleats. The kid was heavy and Carmen stumbled several times.

“Slow down,” she cautioned herself out loud. “You’re going to break your neck.”

The rocks were slippery with half-thawed ice, and when she carelessly stepped on the edge of one, her foot slipped, wedging between two rocks. Her body continued its momentum down the hill and she fell, twisting so that she wouldn’t fall on the kid. She screamed as pain shot through her ankle and up her leg. A cold feeling constricted her throat and she convulsed in a dry heave. The kid struggled weakly, voicing a faint cry. Tessa scrambled over the rocks to reach her infant, stepping on Carmen’s fingers in the process. Carmen screamed again and Tessa danced a few steps away, calling to her kid. The kid tried to get up, but it wasn’t strong enough - or was it injured in the fall?

Carmen rolled over and worked her foot out of the crevice. Was the ankle broken? She tried to stand, but the pain was excruciating. The kid needed shelter and warmth. She staggered to her feet again and hobbled to a large rock. Below, the house was bathed in the first rays of morning sun. Katie should be up by now.

A shout brought no response. She tried the foot again and found that it was less painful this time. Lifting the kid into her arms again, she hopped and limped a few steps, rested and moved again. Slowly she made her way down the hill and into the barn lot. This time when she called, Katie came from the barn.

“Oh my gosh! What happened? I came out here and the dairy was cold - I wondered where you were. Are you all right?”

Carmen nodded. “Here, take the kid. Get it in by the stove while I put Tessa in a stall.” She limped a few more steps. “Did you get the stove burning?”

Katie shook her head. “No, but I’ll do that right now.” She darted for the barn, the kid’s feet dangling like limp ropes.

Carmen managed to get Tessa into a stall, and then hobbled to the dairy for some warm water. Katie was kneeling beside the stove, her soot smudged forehead wrinkled in a frown as she lit another match. A pile of burned matches on the stove pad suggested a problem.

What she wouldn’t have given to see Alex walk into the barn at that moment. It was a contradictory thought - and totally unfair to Josh. If he had known what was happening, Josh would have unselfishly given his instant support. In fact, he had always been there for them.

“Here, Katie. You get Tessa some warm water. I’ll get that.”

They quickly switched places and Carmen checked the kid. Not much time left. She rearranged the fuel and added some pine needles and leaves. Striking a match, she dropped it into the middle and gently blew on the flame. In a few minutes the kindling was burning. She shut the stove door and picked up the kid. Tucking it under her coat, she limped to the cabinet and drug out a few towels. She rubbed the kid vigorously until it bleated a complaint. The stove was beginning to warm so she lay the kid down in front of it on some towels. Now Tessa needed a rub down.

Katie met her at the door. “She’s shivering and she’s really upset. Maybe you should put the kid with her.”

Carmen nodded. “As soon as I dry her off. Did you put some more hay in her stall?”

Katie shook her head. “No but . . .”

“Never mind,” Carmen moaned. “Just get the milking started. You *can* do that, can’t you?”

Katie stared at her. “Of course.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I never know what you want to do next.”

Carmen sighed. "It's all right. I didn't mean to be such a grump."

Katie smiled sympathetically. "You're hurting pretty bad, aren't you? You'd better go in and get out of those wet clothes. Your lips are blue and your teeth are chattering. I'll take care of the milking."

"As soon as I dry Tessa off and get the kid in here, I'll go in and change. Then I'll come back out and we'll finish the milking."

It was brave talk. She wasn't sure she could even make it to the house. She rubbed Tessa down and carried the kid back to her. When Carmen left the barn, the kid was nursing.

She managed to get to the house without falling more than five times. Her clothes were soaking wet and her backside was numb with cold. She lit the stove in the house and went to the bedroom for some dry clothes. The last thing she remembered was sitting down on the bed to tug her wet jeans off her bare feet.

The next thing she knew, Katie was pounding on her door.

"Carmen? Are you all right? Carmen!"

"I'm all right," she heard herself answer weakly. Her bare body was ice cold. She must have blacked out. She grabbed a pair of thermal underwear from her drawer and pulled them on with shaking hands. Next, she crawled into some sweats. The best thing she could do now was soak in some warm bath water, but there wasn't time. How long had she been out?

Katie was huddling over the stove when Carmen entered the living room. She took one look at Carmen and headed for the kitchen.

"I'll get you some hot coffee."

Carmen dropped into the chair beside the stove and pulled some heavy socks over her cold feet.

"What about the milking?"

Katie came from the kitchen, balancing a full cup of steaming coffee.

"I finished it. What happened to you? Did you pass out?"

Carmen took the cup of coffee and sipped it, feeling the warmth all the way down to her stomach.

"I guess I must have fallen asleep."

Katie stared at her. "Are you sure you're going to be all right? Do you want me to get you something else? Some toast?"

"Toast would be fine." Katie was in her element now. When it came to managing the house, she was a master - with the exception of lighting the stove. But then, most people didn't have to deal with that. Bill was going to get himself a fine helpmate. She called after Katie. "How about some of those left over biscuits instead? They were delicious."

Katie stopped at the door and smiled her relief. "Coming right up."

Something about her expression reminded Carmen of Alex. A pang of loneliness swept over her. Three weeks, and they hadn't heard a word from him. Josh's words crept through her mind like an icy wind. *He's a walk away Joe if I ever saw one.* Josh had always been a good judge of character.

By the next day, Carmen knew she was in trouble. Her throat was sore and she was sneezing and coughing. Inside of a week the bad cold went to her chest. Katie tried to keep her inside, but there was too much to do. Katie could never handle the place on her own and Carmen refused to let her recruit Josh. Nights were sleepless bouts of coughing, and days were endless hours of work. If she wasn't better by Friday, she'd

go see the doctor.

At last, the first signs of spring were evident. The crocuses were in full bloom and the daffodils along the fence were swollen, ready to give birth to their bright yellow blossoms. Even the ground was beginning to green with new shoots of grass. It wouldn't be long now.

Carmen paused on her way to the house, the breath rattling in her chest. Her hacking cough had become unproductive, and even breathing was a chore. The rain trickled down the back of her neck and she pulled up her hood, sloshing toward the house again. A cup of hot coffee and a nap - then she would feel better. The house looked so far away as it shimmered in heat waves. No, it wasn't hot. What in the . . .? The sky darkened. Too late she realized she was going to faint. The last thing she remembered was the wet ground rushing toward her face.

Chapter Seven

Carmen woke to a dim light shining through her bedroom window - only the window was in the wrong place - and the bed was hard. Something was stuck under her nose and when she tried to move her hand, something tugged on it. She tried to sit up and push the hot covers away. Hands urged her back to the bed, and a masculine voice whispered.

“Shhh. Try to sleep. I’ll stay here with you.”

“Alex?” She managed to croak. The hands weren’t as gentle as she remembered them. And then everything went black again.

The next time she opened her eyes, sunshine filtered through alabaster blinds on a hospital window. An old woman in the next bed spoke to her in a gravelly voice that quavered with age.

“Are you feeling better, honey?”

Carmen tried to sit up again. That was when she realized she had an IV in her hand and an oxygen hose under her nose. Surely she couldn’t be *that* sick. She glanced at the woman, trying a scratchy voice.

“I guess I must be better. I’m awake. What time is it? I must have slept through the whole night.”

The woman craned her neck to look at something on a table behind the drawn curtain.

“It’s ten O’clock, and you’ve been sleeping longer than you think. They brought you in here Monday evening, and this is Wednesday morning. They said you had double pneumonia or something like that. You were one very sick girl.”

A dark head peeked around the door and Katie stepped into the room. “You’re awake - and lucid.” She placed a bouquet of brightly colored flowers on the table. “These are from Alex.”

Carmen admired the flowers. “They’re beautiful - so cheerful.” She glanced up at Katie. “Where is he?”

“Alex?” Katie turned the crank at the base of the bed. “In Houston, I expect.”

The head of the bed rose so Carmen had a better view of Katie. “When did he leave?”

Katie stared at her. “You *have* been sick. He left four weeks ago. Don’t you remember?”

Carmen frowned. “But I thought he was here last night. I must have been dreaming.”

Katie shook her head and nodded at the recliner. “Probably Josh. He spent last night in that chair.”

“Josh? Why would he do that?”

Katie rolled her eyes. “Girl, you must have amnesia or something. He’s your boyfriend. Remember good old Josh?” She straightened the sheet. “Fine thing. He spends the night worrying over your bed while you’re dreaming about Alex.”

Carmen blushed. “I wasn’t dreaming about Alex. I just thought . . . well, it never

occurred to me that Josh would do such a thing.” Obviously Katie didn’t know they had split up.

Katie laughed shortly. “But you thought Alex would come all this way to hang over your bed?” Her expression turned anxious. “Do you have something you want to tell me?”

Carmen knew her face must be scarlet. “I wasn’t completely awake. I wasn’t thinking right. Where is Josh now?”

“He went to get something to eat.”

Carmen threw the sheets back. “I’ve got to get out of here. Who’s taking care of the farm?”

Katie gave her an exasperated look. “Don’t you ever think of anything but that farm? I took care of the goats this morning and Josh will take care of them tonight. We turned the chickens loose so they could fend for themselves. There’s enough green stuff out there now and they’re starting to lay again. Bill is helping out when he gets off work. We’ve got it all under control, so just relax and get well.”

“I’m sorry. I hate putting you out this way.” The import of Katie’s words struck with a vengeance. “Josh? Josh is taking care of the goats?”

A tall lean figure stepped into the room and cool gray eyes surveyed her. “I’ve been running a farm all my life. Why is it so surprising that I can run yours? Goats have two spigots instead of four, but the milking machinery is basically the same.” He dropped into the chair and slung a long leg over the arm.

“I never thought I’d hear you say that,” Carmen retorted dryly, and then realized she had nothing on but the thin hospital gown. She snatched the blanket and modestly drew it up to her chin.

Josh grinned. “So, how are you feeling?”

She smiled bravely. “I’m fine now. I’m ready to go home.”

He laughed shortly. “You might as well settle down, Shorty. The doctor says you’re going to be here for a few more days.”

“But I can’t ask you two to take care of my farm that long. Anyway, I simply can’t afford it.”

Josh shrugged. “Then you’d better start making funeral arrangements.”

Leave it to Josh to be so callused. And yet, it had been Josh who had stood vigil beside her sick bed, not Alex. She wasn’t being completely fair, though. What commitment had Alex made? Zilch. She was on her own. His silence was proof enough. It would be wise to flush him from her mind - day and night.

She slept most of that day and the next, and by Friday she was slept out. Feeling better than she had in months, she nagged the doctor to discharge her from the hospital.

He frowned at her over the rim of his thick glasses.

“If your fever stays down, I’ll let you go home tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I have chores to do and I can’t afford this hospital bill, anyway.”

He shrugged. “I understand you have friends doing your chores, and your hospital bill has already been paid through tomorrow, so stop worrying and complete your convalescence.”

She sat up and stared at him. “Someone paid my hospital bill? Who?”

He shrugged again, writing something on her chart. “I don’t know. I’ve been taking care of you since you were born. I was concerned that you would insist on checking out too early, so I stopped by the office to see what arrangements could be made for paying

your bill. Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters. I need to know who to reimburse."

He tucked the pen in his pocket and returned the chart to the end of her bed. "Let me guess. You don't take charity. Anyway, I thought you didn't have the money for the bill. How are you going to pay them back?"

She rolled her eyes and dropped back on the pillow. "I didn't say that. I said I couldn't afford it. I have some money saved back for emergencies." She gave him a sour look. "I pay my own bills. If I was incapable, that would be different."

He lifted a silver brow. "The way you go on all the time, someone must have thought you were incapable." He winked. "Or maybe they wanted you to stay in the hospital a little longer so they could enjoy some peace and quiet while you're away."

"Very funny." She lifted her hand and the IV cord hung limply. "When do I get this umbilical cord removed?"

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his smock. "As soon as you start eating better."

She scowled at him. "I eat."

He smiled. "Sure, the nurses tell me you're not eating much of anything. Are you feeling poorly?"

"No." Her answer came swift and certain.

He laughed. "You're a terrible patient, you know that? We're all going to be glad to see you leave." His eyes were dancing with humor.

"And you have a lousy bedside manner," she grinned. "I promise to eat everything on my plate, warden."

He nodded. "See that you do."

She made a point of eating everything on her plate and even wore a trail down the hallway with her portable IV carrier. Surely that would convince them that she was healthy enough to go home. Yet, when Josh arrived that evening, she was napping.

He grinned. "What's this? I thought you were ready to go home."

The nurse smiled up at him on her way out of the room. "She's been up and down the hall all day walking her pet." She pointed at the IV carrier.

Carmen sat up in the bed, holding the sheet securely over her gown.

"The doctor says I can go home tomorrow."

Josh nodded. "You just remember. When you get there, you need to rest. I'll be over to help."

She smiled at him. "I was beginning to think I'd never see you again."

He met her gaze solemnly. "Did that thought bother you?"

She nodded with equal sincerity. "Immensely. I missed you."

He nodded. "I'm right down the road. All you had to do was holler."

He glanced up sharply at someone in the doorway and Carmen followed his gaze. Her heart skipped a beat as a lean figure in a business suit entered the room. Delicious chocolate eyes twinkled down at her as he pinched her toe.

"Hey, Heidi."

"Alex," she gasped. "When did you get in?"

He lifted a sleeve and consulted his watch. "Exactly thirty three minutes ago. I went from the office to class and then from class to the plane. Are you impressed?"

She frowned. "Class?"

Josh stood and cleared his throat. "Well, visiting time is almost over. I need to get back to the house." He offered a hand to Alex. "Thanks for coming up."

Alex accepted his hand. "Thanks for looking after the girls."

Josh shrugged and glanced at Carmen. "I've always been there when they needed me."

"He has, for a fact," Carmen instantly agreed. "Even when I was a little girl. I remember the time he was . . ." but Josh lifted a hand.

"I remember it all like it was yesterday," he answered in a forlorn tone. "See you later." And then he was gone.

Carmen stared after him. They had shared so many memories - so many good times. When had he stopped viewing her as a little sister? More important, when would she stop viewing him as a big brother?"

Alex sauntered over to the bed and gazed down at her with a strange expression. "He's very special to you, isn't he?" His voice was gentle, and yet it seemed a little pensive.

She smiled up at him. "Of course. We grew up together." She tucked the sheet under her arms and rested her chin on her hands. "Now tell me what kind of class you're attending."

He tousled her hair. "Veterinary medicine, but don't tell Katie. I want it to be a surprise. I graduate next month, so I'll let her know with an invitation."

She caught her breath. "Veterinary medicine? How long have you been . . . So that was why you came up to watch the goats kid."

"Yeah," he responded dryly. "We don't have any goats down in Texas." He leaned a shoulder against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. "So, how are you feeling?"

So he *had* come up to entice Katie back. Apparently he had seen how futile it was, though. That would explain his silence. But why was he back now? She sighed.

"Too good to be in the hospital. The doctor says I can go home tomorrow, though. I can hardly wait."

He nodded, watching her with a skeptical expression. "So you can work yourself back in here again?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "A little work is good for convalescence. I'm fine. I just caught a little cold, that's all."

The dark eyes studied her reflectively. "Sure, everyone winds up in the hospital when they catch a cold. It's routine."

He felt her forehead and she grinned up at him.

"I already have a doctor. I don't need a vet."

He traced her jaw line with a finger. "Don't you?" He smiled tenderly. "I can't get that kiss out of my mind."

Warmth flooded up her neck and her heart hammered against her ribs. So he was still interested - and yet . . . She wrinkled her nose at him.

"Sure. It kept your mind so busy that your hands didn't get a chance to write."

The dark eyes lost some of their softness. "I'm sorry, but I was busy."

She pushed his hand away. "So was I."

His eyes flashed, but his tone remained conversational. "That would explain the fact that you didn't write either, wouldn't it?"

She dropped back on the pillow and smiled up at him. "I hate it when you do that."

"What?" He straightened her IV cord.

"You know."

His amused gaze returned to her face.

"Sure, but I want to hear it from your lips."

She rolled her eyes. "When you're right."

He chuckled. "Sweet music to my ears."

"Stop gloating. It doesn't become you."

He laughed and leaned down, kissing her cheek. "Good night, Heidi. I'll pick you up in the morning."

"Alex?"

"Hum?"

"What are you going to do when you graduate? I mean - well, you have a good job . . ."

He took her hand in his. "A very good job. It put me through school and, along with the interest from my inheritance, gave me enough to start a clinic." He hesitated, and then shrugged. "I never intended to be a salesman all my life, and the company hasn't been the same since it changed hands. Ethics have gone out the door and greed is in. They figure if it makes money, it must be a wise business choice. I don't like operating that way - or representing a company that does. I figure if you have to sacrifice your ethics to keep a job, it's time to look for another one. I always wanted to be a veterinarian, so I decided to fulfill that dream. I've made arrangements to quit my job this fall and work my residency at a clinic in Houston."

She smiled up at him and squeezed his hand. "Good for you - but why the big secret?"

He shrugged again and looked uncomfortable. "I guess I just like surprises. Kind of silly, when you get to thinking about it, I guess."

She gazed up into those warm eyes. "I think it's sweet."

His neck darkened, but he continued to hold her hand. "Now don't go mushy on me."

She laughed softly. "Katie has no idea how lucky she was to have you to look after her back then, does she? I worry about her sometimes. I know Bill will take good care of her, but . . ."

Alex grimaced. "She's not heavily endowed with common sense or ambition, but she does have attributes."

"Of course," Carmen answered instantly. Did he think she was trying to say Katie was stupid? "I just thought . . . well, you must have had a rough time trying to raise her."

He laughed shortly. "Yeah, my only child."

She turned her hand over, so that her palm touched the warmth of his. "It's not too late for you to start a family, you know."

He dropped her hand as if it had suddenly become too hot to hold, and glanced at his watch. "Well, I'd better get out of here before they kick me out."

Warmth flooded up her neck and she avoided his eyes. "I suppose so." She bit her lip and stared at the blanket. How could she have been so bold - so desperate? So fickle. Hadn't she been considering Josh as a partner less than thirty minutes ago?

After Alex left, she stared at the empty doorway.

Had Alex written off marriage completely? And why should it matter to her? After all, they came from two different worlds. She didn't want to live in Houston any more than he wanted to live on a goat farm. Not that he was interested anyway. Obviously he had reconsidered his intentions toward her - or had she misread them from the start?

She shook her head and dropped back on the pillow. Why was she even considering a man who didn't want children? For the right man, she might give up the farm and go live in the city, but children? No, there could be no compromise on that

subject.

But then, many a man didn't want children until he had them. Maybe Alex was simply burned out on raising children after giving up so much for Katie - only to have her run away. If that were the case, his attitude would change quickly enough when he held his first baby.

She woke early the next morning and dressed, making a trip to the office before Alex arrived. She had expected to find Alex had paid the hospital bill, but that wasn't the case. Instead, she discovered it was Josh. Why would Josh pay something so expensive? Was he trying to buy her back? No, that wasn't his style. Still, she felt guilty - and confused. She had missed Josh, but it wasn't the gut-wrenching loneliness she felt when Alex left. Maybe that was because Josh was only a mile down the road. Why was she so infatuated with Alex? Was he merely a change in pace? Was it his money? No, the idea turned her stomach. Anyway, if money were the only issue, she should find Josh irresistible. Maybe it was because Alex was so attractive. Of course, Josh was as good looking, if not better looking in a rugged kind of way. Then *what?* She couldn't be in love with Alex. They hadn't known each other long enough. Yet she had an ever growing feeling that Alex was *the one*. Until last night, she had been convinced that he was too sophisticated to be interested in farming. But now?

She sighed. It was ridiculous. The only reason Alex was here right now was to help Katie run the farm - and maybe convince her to go back to Houston with him. Yet according to Katie, she had told him she would never move back to Houston; that she intended to marry Bill.

A brisk step in the hallway brought her attention sharply back to the present. Her heart did a flip-flop as Alex came through the door, dressed in a blue western shirt and denim jeans. He was so elegant in a suit and so masculine in western attire. Which was the real Alex? His dark eyes lit up when he saw her and he smiled warmly.

"I see you're ready to go. They were dispatching a wheelchair for you when I came in."

Her heart was pounding for a man who didn't think of her as anything more than a little sister.

"I don't need a wheel chair," she grumbled.

He chuckled. "I told them they'd have to strap you down to get you into it. They weren't impressed. In fact, I think they were looking forward to it." He sat on the edge of the bed. "It's hospital policy. Humor them. Otherwise, I'll have to carry you down to the car."

She smiled reluctantly. "In the interest of safety," she answered dryly, "I think I'll take the wheel chair."

This light banter was one of the things she had missed most about him - that and his confidence. Was it merely a facade, or did he always have a clear view of where he was headed and the confidence to get him there? Again she wondered why he had never married. He must have loved her deeply - that girl who had walked all over his heart. Could the footprints ever be removed?

They talked all the way to the car and all the way home. Yet she couldn't remember anything of importance that they had discussed. It was simply idle conversation about everything from the weather to politics. He certainly was a good conversationalist.

Carmen had barely settled in at home before Lori drove up and whisked Alex away. Reminding herself that Alex had made no commitment, she still couldn't put the picture of him opening the car door for Lori out of her mind. Lori was so tall and sophisticated -

the kind of woman he would want to marry. She tried to feel happy for them, but all she could feel was animosity toward Lori. It wasn't as if Lori would know how she felt. Everyone still thought she was going to marry Josh.

Sitting on the couch feeling sorry for herself wasn't accomplishing anything. What she needed was something to get her mind off Alex and Lori. Some work in the barn would be nice.

Alex and Lori had been gone over two hours when Josh drove into the yard. Carmen was scooping hay out of one of the kidding stalls when he found her at the barn.

He scowled from the doorway. "I thought Alex was going to help you girls. You shouldn't be out here working like that. You're going to get sick again."

She smiled up at him. "I'm fine - and Alex doesn't even know I'm out here."

"What about Katie?"

"She's in the house sewing. I snuck out, so don't go blaming anyone else."

He leaned against the barn door jam and frowned at her. "You're crazy, you know that?"

Tires crunched on gravel and he glanced out the door. It was Lori and Alex. Alex got out of the car and leaned down to say something to Lori. Then he shut the door and glanced at Josh's truck - and the barn. He headed for the house as Lori turned the car around.

"What are they up to?" Josh asked.

Carmen shrugged. "I don't know. It's none of my business. Oh, and that reminds me. I owe you some money."

He shifted his attention to her. "How's that?"

"The hospital bill. Did you think I wouldn't find out? Why did you pay it?"

He shrugged. "You had enough to worry about. Anyway, I wanted to do something."

She rolled her eyes. "You *were* doing something. You were doing my chores."

He shrugged again. "It wasn't enough. I felt bad about . . . I just wanted to help."

"You felt bad? How do you think I would have felt if I couldn't pay you back?"

"I never intended for you to pay me back. Anyway," he smiled wryly, "when we get married it will be my bill."

She stabbed the pitchfork into the dirt floor. "Now there's a good reason to get married," she said sourly.

He crammed his hands into his pockets and stared down at her. "We have a lot more reasons than that, don't we? We've been dating since high school. Has there ever been anyone else you considered marrying?"

He was watching her intently. He wanted to know where she stood with Alex. Actually, until she met Alex, even *she* had assumed that Josh would eventually be her husband - though she wasn't in any big hurry. But was it Alex who had come between them, or did he simply show up at a critical time? Hadn't she been drifting from Josh for the last few months - before she knew anything about Alex? And what did it matter? Alex was interested in Lori, so he was out of the picture anyway. Still, marrying Josh while another man was so capable of lighting her fire didn't seem fair - especially when Josh couldn't.

"It's Alex, isn't it?" When she glanced up questioningly, he shook his head. "I knew it when he walked into the hospital room last night. Your face never lit up that way for me. What's he got that I don't have?"

She gnawed on her lower lip and finally met his gaze. "I have no idea. Maybe

nothing, but I need the time to be sure.”

She might as well have punched him in the stomach. He winced visibly. “Well, that’s trite.”

It was her turn to flinch at the sting of his words. “I’m sorry, Josh. But when I get married, I intend to take my vows seriously. I don’t want any unfinished business cropping up later.”

In two long strides he was standing before her, gathering her into his arms and kissing her.

“I love you, Carmen. I always have. That ought to be worth something. Haven’t I always been there for you?”

It was true. He was everything a woman could ask for. And yet, where was the excitement? She stretched as far as she could and laced her fingers behind his neck, pulling his mouth down to hers again. With all her heart, she tried to create the excitement she had felt when Alex kissed her. It had to be there, somewhere. But all she managed to do was arouse Josh. He lifted her by the waist and crushed her body against his, bruising her lips passionately. Her feet literally inches from the floor, she could do nothing but endure his onslaught. Finally he released her, and when her feet touched the floor again, she took a deep breath.

Apparently he mistook her breathless state as an indication of passion. He smiled down at her smugly.

“Think about that for a while.”

She would - unfortunately.

He swung on one heel and left the barn, striding to his truck. Without looking back, he hopped into his truck and drove away. In that moment, she knew they would never be man and wife. Her only hope was to retain his friendship. The sadness she felt as his truck disappeared down the road was borne of fear. Fear that she was also losing the only brother she had ever known.

“Well, wasn’t that a touching scene?” The voice was caustic.

She caught her breath, squinting into the shadows. “Alex?” It sounded like his voice, but she had never heard that tone.

He moved out of the shadows. “No wonder he keeps hanging around. You must be proud. Keeping both of us on the string like that.”

It was so unfair - so true. And what right did *he* have to talk? He’d spent the last few hours with Lori. Tears of anger and shame burned her eyes as she swung away from him.

“Shut up!”

The words were strangled from her throat by a sob. She couldn’t let him see her cry. She darted for the door.

Alex grabbed her arm as she passed, whirling her to face him.

“Whoa, there. What’s this?”

“Let me go.” She jerked her arm, but his grip was strong. She turned her face away from him so he wouldn’t see the tears coursing down her cheeks.

He pulled her close. “Don’t confuse love with pity, Carmen. I did that once, and I nearly made the mistake of my life. Don’t let him force you into a decision you’re not ready to make.”

She jerked her head around and stared up at him. “Pity? Josh? Why would I pity him?”

He gazed down at her for a moment.

“Because he loves a woman who can’t return his love?”

"I love him."

His dark gaze was intense. "Do you? Then how do you explain this?"

He pulled her into his arms and claimed her lips. It was all wrong, and all she felt was anger. She jerked away from him and swung a hand at his face. He grabbed her hand.

"All right, so now you're angry. But tell me you didn't feel anything the last time we kissed. Tell me you don't feel anything for me at all, and I'll leave - and never come back."

She stared at him mutely. She couldn't tell him. Not only because it would be a lie, but also because she didn't want him to leave and never come back.

He smiled wryly. "That's what I thought. So why are you going to marry him? Because you can't let him down?"

She snatched her hand from his grip. "What do you care?"

He gazed down at her for a moment, his eyes dark with emotion.

"Because I care about your happiness. I thought we were friends."

Only friends? She met his gaze and knew her lip was quivering. She swallowed down a lump in her throat and tore her gaze from his.

"We are." She turned toward the door.

"I came in here to tell you something." His voice followed her and when she stopped, he continued.

"After this last incident, Bill insisted that Katie get a phone. I know it's a major expense, so I made arrangements today. Just send me the bill and I'll take care of it."

She swung around and faced him. "*You* took care of it? What is this, a contest between you guys? How much testosterone does it take to manage a farm? I'm sick and tired of you guys butting into my financial affairs. If Bill wants . . ."

"That's enough, Carmen." His voice was controlled. "Bill is right. If it had been Katie who was sick, would you have been able to get her into the truck and to the hospital?"

She stared up at him. Why hadn't she thought of that before? Probably because she wasn't in a financial situation to do anything about it anyway. She turned away from him so that he couldn't see she was ready to cry again. What was it with the tears lately, anyway?

"I suppose you're right," she muttered as she headed for the door.

"Carmen." He reached for her arm, but she evaded his grasp and continued toward the door. Not now, she couldn't let him see her cry - couldn't let him feel pity for her. But he called after her.

"It isn't violating any moral issue for you, is it?" She stopped, and glanced over her shoulder. "Moral issue? A telephone?"

He took a step toward her. "I know you don't have a TV. I thought . . ."

"I don't have anything against a telephone." She kept her back to him. The diversion was helping her get her emotions under control. "Only the two grand it will take to put the lines down this way, and cell phone reception is unreliable. I can't imagine what would make you think such a thing."

A pause, then, "You have such old fashioned ideas sometimes."

She nodded. "So I've been told. A product of being an only child of aging parents, no doubt." She wiped the tears from her cheek. "I don't ask people to adhere to my values, but I do ask that they respect my right to exercise my own. If you thought it might offend me, why didn't you ask me first?"

He was silent and she glanced around to gauge his response. His neck was red and for the first time since she had met him, he didn't have a quick answer. Finally he

shrugged. "I'm not used to asking permission. I guess I was out of line, but . . ." He shrugged again. "I'm sorry."

She gazed up at him with newfound admiration. "I respect a man who is decisive and follows through - as long as he confines it to his own household."

His brows shot up. "Coming from a liberated woman like you, that sounds a little strange. Couldn't you be tried by the women's movement for treason?"

There was a twinkle in his eye that coaxed a smile to her lips.

"Make no mistake. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself, but if you think I want to spend the rest of my life like this, you don't know me at all. I have no intention of marrying a man for support - financial or any other. But when I do marry, he's going to be man enough to wear the pants - and he will."

He eyed her skeptically. "I've heard a few women claim they believed that, but it's a little hard to believe, in this day. A woman turning her life over to a man is . . ."

"I didn't say anything about turning my life over to a man," she interrupted sternly. "A marriage is a partnership, not a dictatorship. Still, what business could survive without a person with final authority on decisions? And how could that person make wise decisions without the input from the accounting department, the lawyer and sales? Someone has to be head of the household - final authority. I'm old fashioned enough to believe it should be the man - as long as he's the most qualified. And the man I marry will have to qualify."

He gazed down at her. "A tall order to fill."

She shrugged. "Not necessarily. I've met three men in my life that qualify on those grounds, and I don't get around that much. There are a lot of good men out there."

"Three?" His eyes began to twinkle again. "I'd bet one was your father, or you wouldn't feel this way. Another would be Josh, because you are still considering him. Who's the third?"

Warmth crawled up her neck and she smiled up at him wryly.

"We kind of strayed from the subject, didn't we? As I recall, I was telling you guys to keep your own stables clean."

He was silent a moment, and his gaze became guarded. "Meaning, if I can't take care of my own stable, I shouldn't be meddling in yours?"

He *would* take it that way. Was he referring to his failed romance? She shook her head.

"No, meaning you should mind your own business - meaning this isn't your stable."

He quirked a brow, and the dark eyes twinkled with the very devil.

"Not yet."

She stared up at him. He was teasing, of course. He found this entire conversation amusing. And what was worse, now he thought she was setting a trap for him. Why couldn't she learn to keep her big mouth shut?

When his humor failed to bring a smile to her lips he crammed his hands into his pockets and stared at the ground.

"I suppose a guy should be careful whose filly he's trying to shoo into his stable - especially when she's still wearing another man's halter."

He glanced up and smiled at her. "Of course, she might be skittish if she didn't know how secure the structure was. A man would have to be careful not to move too fast."

She stared at him. Was he trying to say he was interested in marriage? Alex? No. He said he wanted her, but in truth, he was still involved with the past. She met his gaze.

"Any filly would be skittish about going into a stable where the ghost of another

lingered.”

The smile faded from his lips and the dark eyes veiled over again. Was he angry? Hurt? It was true, though. Alex wasn't over his last relationship yet. His silence was all the proof she needed.

He was the third man - the only man for her, because he could do something that neither her father nor Josh could. He could make her enjoy being second mate. And with that thought she was certain she loved him. Was there a chance for them - if she was willing to wait?

Chapter Eight

Sunday night Alex left again, but this time with a promise to come back for Easter. This time they didn't kiss good bye, and Carmen was sure that Lori was the reason. Alex and Lori had been together most of the day. Apparently their conversation in the barn had scared him off. If he thought Lori was less complicated, he was in for another shock. But then, he wasn't looking for a permanent relationship, and Lori wouldn't be nudging him to get married. Lori would be content with things the way they were.

Time was galloping by and now she was further from her goal than ever. Before Alex came on the scene, marriage was only a yes down the road. Now she couldn't marry Josh - and couldn't bring herself to break the news to him. Why burn that bridge when she might get desperate enough to cross it? Maybe her feelings for Alex were nothing more than temporary infatuation.

Alex might have given up on her, but Josh had doubled his efforts. He was around nearly every day now, and when he didn't show up, he called on the phone. He was actually making an effort to please her as well. He'd even taken her dancing once, and yesterday he picked her a mess of greens. He wouldn't be caught dead with a bouquet of wildflowers and there was no way he was going to waste money on flowers that would wither and die within a week. It wasn't the money he objected to so much as the irrational logic. She tried to help him drive Alex from her mind, but at times it seemed an impossible chore. The man in her dreams often started out as Josh, but always ended up being Alex. Yet even in her dreams, Alex was the only one who could excite her. Maybe that was why the days before his arrival were so long. Easter weekend finally drew near.

Good Friday was exactly that - warm and sunny with only a few marshmallow clouds drifting overhead. Katie was busy sewing something for her hope chest, so Carmen grabbed her cane pole and some liver from the refrigerator, and strolled down to the pond. Kicking off her shoes, she rolled up her pants legs and settled in for a good time. She baited the hook and threw it in the pond, watching as tiny waves rippled out from the bobber and gently lapped at the grassy shore. Dropping to the ground, she plucked a piece of grass and tucked it between her lips as she leaned back against the old apple tree. Above her, bees buzzed around the aromatic apple blossoms. Somewhere in the distance a meadowlark began its melodic whistle, and a hen sang industriously up by the house. From the lip of the pond, the panoramic scene was breathtaking. The hills were a profusion of snowy dogwood and pink plum and cherry blossoms. Wild phlox filled the air with a heavenly scent that rivaled lilacs. Nature was at her peak, blending the wild blooms with various shades of green. She closed her eyes and dozed in the warm sun. It was a heavenly day.

A light wind whispered across the grass and a cloud drifted over, blocking the sun from her face. She opened her eyes and blinked at the form above her.
"Alex?"

She snatched the piece of grass from her mouth and scrambled to her feet, feeling the blood burning her neck and cheeks. He looked delicious in that dark suit.

Alex laughed. "Oh, if I only had a camera."

She unrolled her pants legs and slipped into her shoes, giving him a chagrined smile.

"I didn't think you were coming in until this afternoon."

He brushed some grass from her back.

"I didn't have any classes today and I decided to take off work. I was lucky enough to get an early flight." He reached down and grabbed her cane pole from the ground.

"What's this?"

At that moment, the bobber plunged under the surface of the water. Alex jerked the pole, setting the hook, and then glanced at her as the fish fought for freedom.

"Now what? There's no reel."

"Pull back on the line, like this."

She grabbed the line and pulled it toward them. She stepped back and watched as he excitedly hauled the little mud cat to the shore and released it.

He stooped to rinse his hands in the pond and smiled up at her.

"You really know how to live, you know that, Heidi?"

He stood and shook the water from his hands. "This brings back childhood memories." He glanced around. "Only the country wasn't near as pretty." His gaze fell on her and his smile broadened, including the dimple. "Beauty everywhere I look - and to think I only have three days to enjoy it." He reached for her and she dodged playfully.

"Come on. I'll show you the swimming hole." She darted around the apple tree and half skipped, half ran down the hill toward the creek. At the path she slowed, and he caught up with her, following her to the edge of the creek.

A huge white sycamore skeleton sprawled on the gravel beach, its bark long gone. She kicked a pile of leaves from the branches where the floodwaters had deposited it a few weeks ago. Climbing up the trunk, she found a smooth spot and sat down.

Alex leaned against the trunk and grinned up at her.

"Like a little lynx. Do you do this often?"

She wrinkled her nose. "You mean climb trees?"

"And run through the fields like a little filly."

She grinned. "Make up your mind. Am I a horse or a cat?"

He grabbed her leg and with a quick jerk, dislodged her from the tree - right into his waiting arms. She squealed and he lowered her feet to the ground, gently pulling her close.

"I missed you," he whispered against her lips and then proceeded to show her how much. His lips were as warm as the hands that gripped her waist.

For a moment she returned his kiss passionately, her arms encircling his neck and drawing him closer.

"I missed you too," she whispered breathlessly.

They shouldn't be alone out here in the woods, necking like this. She should do something. She drew back and met his hungry gaze. It was a mistake. In an instant he pulled her back into his arms and reclaimed her lips. She did nothing - nothing to stop him, anyway. It was as if they were one person, clinging to each other - neither wanting to be the first to end the embrace. But it had already gone too far and his fingers were sliding down her neck, into her blouse.

She pushed away from him, gasping for air.

"Alex, don't do that."

He reached for her again, his voice husky with emotion.

"I want you, Carmen."

His words were like a dash of cold water. He wanted her - like he wanted her in the barn that day. He wanted her and he was going to have her some day. He wasn't talking about marriage. He was talking about sex. How could she have been so . . . naive? And he expected her to come to him all sweet and willing. Tears blurred her vision as she slapped at his hand.

"That's all you ever wanted, wasn't it? A tumble in the hay with the farmers' daughter."

He stared at her. "Of all the . . . do you actually think I traveled six hundred miles just for a tumble in the hay with you? Do you think I'm that desperate or are you implying your reputation is that good?"

She blinked back a tear, but it escaped and slid down her cheek. That *did* sound a little vain.

"I don't have a reputation," she responded archly.

He grimaced. "Yes you do, and I might be the only man who could ruin it."

She frowned up at him. "Now who's being vain?"

His lips twisted into a lopsided smile.

"I'm being honest, and you know it."

Yes, she knew it, but this was one time she wasn't going to spill her guts. She rolled her eyes and stepped around him.

"It was just a kiss, Alex. Don't let your head swell up that way. It's unsightly."

He silently followed her up the trail and then fell in beside her as they crossed the field. He gazed down at her reflectively.

"Just a kiss?" His expression was pensive.

Hiding her desire for him seemed a wise thing to do a few minutes ago, but maybe he thought she kissed every man like that. In truth, she had never kissed any man like that, and it troubled her that he might think she was easy. She stared up at him, struggling over her next move.

Slowly a twinkle started in his eyes and a smile plucked at the corners of his mouth. He knew.

Warmth flooded up her neck and she smiled.

"Katie is going to be worried. I've been gone a long time."

He chuckled. "Bill picked Katie up a half hour ago."

Her heart lurched. They were alone? She wiped sweaty palms on her jeans and swallowed a lump in her throat. How could Katie run off like that?

Alex cleared his throat. "I thought we might go out for lunch and do some site seeing."

"That would be nice," she answered quickly.

This time the car he rented was a little white 4-door car. It was simple and comfortable. Lunch was at a rustic little seafood place in Rogers called Catfish John's, and afterward she directed him to the War Eagle Mill. The narrow black highway ribboned smoothly down hill under a canopy of trees. Soon a green river winked at them playfully between rocks and bushes, and roared impressively as they entered the clearing at the mill site. Three stories tall, the old mill stood picturesquely at the edge of the river, an old metal one-lane bridge at one side beckoned travelers to visit the lush pastures on the other side.

They spent the next fifteen minutes exploring the inside of the mill, and then they went out to the bridge. Alex took her hand as they started up the wooden ramp, and laced his fingers through hers. She glanced up at him and he pressed his warm palm against hers. Somehow he made it seem so intimate. He gazed down at her

somberly. What was going on behind those dark eyes?

They found a place on the side of the bridge and stared down at the water as it roared over the spillway. A car crossed the bridge behind them, leaving a wake of squeaking and groaning metal and wood.

Alex slipped a protective arm around her waist and gazed at the mill.

“Fascinating.”

She nodded and pointed at the old cypress water wheel.

“See? The water goes *under* the wheel to turn it. It’s the only working one like it in the United States.”

He smiled. “You have such an inquisitive mind, crammed full of unusual facts. That’s one of the things I love about you.”

She stared at him, but his attention was on the mill again. Love? Surely he didn’t mean love in the romantic sense. He must have meant love in a family way - like he loved his sister. On the other hand, that was no sisterly kiss. Maybe it meant nothing to him. She stared at the churning water. Why was everything so complicated?

Alex grabbed her hand again. “We’d better get back, Heidi. It’s almost milking time again.”

She nodded absently. It was always milking time any more - or time to feed the kids. Was that part of her problem? Was she too involved with the farm?

Alex took her home, changed into his western garb, and helped her with the chores. Afterward, she was writing some information down in her dairy journal when Alex wandered by.

“What’s that?” he asked.

She closed the book. “I keep records on each goat and how many pounds of milk she gives daily, when she reached peak production and how long she lactated. It’s for breeding and culling purposes.”

“Sounds interesting, may I look at it?”

She handed him the book and he followed her into the barn, flipping through the pages. She paused and gazed out the barn door at the scenic view.

Alex paused at the hay pile and sat down, cross-legged, while he examined a chart.

“This is darn good.”

“Thanks,” she said, and dropped to the hay beside him. “It’s been a lot of work, but it’s all beginning to pay off now. By the end of the summer I’ll have enough profit to roof the house.”

She stretched out on her stomach and absently poked a piece of straw into her mouth. Propping her chin up with her hands, she stared out at the hills. Maybe some day she would have enough to start her horse ranch.

Alex tossed the book aside and stretched out beside her, following her gaze through the door.

“It sure is beautiful country.”

She nodded. “I can’t imagine living anywhere else.” She glanced up at him. “I wanted to have a horse ranch. Did I ever tell you that?”

He was resting on one elbow, watching her in a disturbing way. “Katie said something about it once.”

She turned and looked back out the door. “She thinks I’ll never do it on my own.” She sighed. “Maybe she’s right. I’m always cutting off more than I can chew.”

He rubbed her back gently. “You’ll make it. Don’t lose faith in yourself.”

She smiled up at him. “You know, you’re the first person to tell me that. It feels good.”

He frowned. "That's terrible. Everybody should have someone to share their dreams with. His fingers worked at the tenseness along her back. "You know," he spoke slowly. "I always wanted a ranch too. I wanted to put native wildlife on it. You know, like buffalo, pronghorn, and Dall sheep - wildlife native to the United States. That's what got me started saving money." He sighed. "I almost forgot about it until you started talking about the horse ranch."

She stared out the door. "I think it's a wonderful dream. It sounds like a lot of fun - and expensive."

He laughed shortly. "Yeah, I got sidetracked, though. Then it didn't matter much."

His fingers were gently massaging the muscles on either side of her backbone - warm and relaxing. She closed her eyes. The barn smelled of fresh hay, oats and molasses.

"It's so peaceful this time of year," she said sleepily. "I feel fat and lazy."

He chuckled softly. "Well, you're not - either one."

His fingers slipped under her shirt, warmly working at the muscles in her back. "I've got an idea."

She stiffened, resisting an urge to tell him to remove his hand. After all, it would have been perfectly acceptable if she were in a swim suit and he had been applying sun lotion. They were fully dressed and he was merely rubbing her back. Besides, it felt delightful.

"What?"

"Why don't I bring Ed up here and stable him? I've been spending all my free time up here anyway, and that way you could give him some exercise when I'm not here. I'd pay you."

His fingers were working up her back, relaxing every muscle. She sighed deeply. "I'd be glad to keep him here, but I don't want any money."

"Nonsense. I pay to board him now."

His hand slipped to her side, gently exploring upward until it reached her breast. Her heart pounded and she rolled over on her back, dislodging his hand.

He smiled down at her. "Besides, I've been neglecting him lately. Another filly has caught my eye."

She propped up on one elbow and met his gaze. "Has she? How many fillies do you have now?"

The smile faded from his lips. "Don't go there." He traced her jaw with a finger and his gaze became tender. "So beautiful."

She stared at him. "You were thinking of her."

He frowned. "Her?"

She made a face. "The girl who jil . . . left you."

His gaze sharpened. "She has a name, you know."

"What?"

He hesitated and then ground out. "Tessa."

Carmen stared at him. So that was why he acted that way when she told him what she named her goat. Did he think she had named the goat after his girlfriend? She dropped back on the hay and wrinkled her nose at him.

"I always hated that name."

The dark gaze softened and a smile played at the corners of his mouth. He clamped one hand around her waist and slid her closer, leaning over her as he spoke.

"That filly left the stable long time ago. Stop leaving grain out for her."

She saw it coming too late, and he had her pinned to the floor on her back before

she could squirm away. Her heart pounded as he moved over her and claimed her lips. She jerked her head to the side.

"Don't, Alex," she panted.

As he slid away, his belt buckle gouged into her stomach and she cried out in pain.

"Hey! What's going on here?"

Josh strode across the barn, his hands balled into fists, gray eyes smoldering like hot coals.

Alex was on his feet instantly, watching Josh intently. Alex reached one hand down to help Carmen to her feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked without looking at her.

"Yes."

He stepped away from her, facing off with Josh.

"It isn't what it looks like."

Josh smiled without humor. "Now that's a familiar line. Seems like I heard it just this morning - from your lips." He moved toward Alex. "I think it's about time to let you know who's . . ."

Carmen lunged at Josh, grabbing his arm and jerking on it.

"No, Josh. Don't."

Josh glanced down at her coldly and flexed his arm.

"Get out of the way."

She fell to the floor and Alex glanced at her, allowing his attention to stray from Josh for a second. Josh swung at Alex, grazing his head with a fist as Alex ducked.

Carmen was on her feet again, and jumped between them.

"Stop it. You're not going to fight in my barn."

This time Alex gently pushed her aside.

"Get back, Carmen, before you get hurt."

She staggered back, but she wasn't about to let them fight over her. She stepped in between them again, distracting Alex to the point that Josh came close to hitting him. Alex pushed her away again.

"Then get back before you get *me* hurt."

But before she could get out of the way, Josh bounced a blow off her shoulder. Wincing, she fell to the floor, turning pleading eyes on Josh.

He lowered his fists and shook his head.

"It looks like Carmen is the only one getting anything out of this."

He eyed Alex disdainfully. "I don't know what it is about you that inspires women to defend you, but I'm getting tired of talking to you about it."

Alex kneeled beside Carmen and felt her shoulder. "Does it hurt badly?"

She shook her head. "He barely hit me."

Alex glanced up at Josh coolly.

"I told you before. There's nothing going on between Lori and me."

Josh snorted. "Sure, like nothing was going on here."

Alex gave him a level look. "What goes on between Carmen and me is none of your business."

"It is if you hurt her."

Alex scowled at him.

"Touching, but don't you think your concern is a little belated?"

Josh shook a finger at Alex. "Listen, you little strutting Banty. Maybe the women are impressed by you, but I'm not. If you want Carmen, you'd better make your intentions honorable. If you toy with her and then run off, I'm going to be on you like

ugly on a bear.”

Alex stood, eyeing him coldly. “I’m getting tired of your threats and insinuations. If you’re trying to pick a fight, have after it. I’m not running, and I don’t need any woman to protect me.”

Carmen stared from one of them to the other, unable to believe her ears and eyes. What had Josh caught Alex and Lori doing? And why was Josh worried about what might be happening between Alex and Lori, anyway? Josh was making fight sounds, but if he had wanted to fight Alex, nothing she could have done would have stopped him. So why was he holding back? Two things came to mind. He admired Alex for his courage - and he thought Alex might be telling the truth.

She struggled to rise and Alex helped her to her feet. She turned to Josh.

“Alex is a guest here, and I’d appreciate it if you’d keep that in mind the next time you show up.”

Josh wiped his forehead with a sleeve and gazed down at her. “I didn’t mean to hit you.”

She nodded, rubbing her shoulder. “I know.”

He shook his head and left the barn. She stood beside Alex and listened to the truck door slam and the engine race when Josh started it. After Josh left the farm, she stared at the empty doorway. Well, that bridge was burned to a crisp.

Chapter Nine

Nothing more was said about the incident at the barn. Apparently Alex didn't want to talk about his relationship with Lori. In fact, it wasn't any of her business. After all, she had no claim on Alex. So when Lori picked him up again Easter Sunday morning, Carmen said nothing - except a prayer that Josh wouldn't catch him. If Alex was interested in Lori, Josh had no right to insist he make an honest woman of Carmen. That was another thing that irked her. Apparently Josh thought they were having an affair. Of course, it did look suspicious, and if she had come across Lori and Alex doing the same thing . . . She caught her breath. But it *wasn't* innocent. They were doing exactly what Josh had thought. Would it have looked any better if he had come in a few minutes earlier when Alex had his hand under her shirt? And hadn't she been a willing participant? Alex *had* forced himself on her - taken advantage of her. The only thing Josh didn't know was that Alex had stopped when she protested. Unwittingly, she had set Alex up for a fall. And yet his only attempt at defense had been to tell Josh that things weren't as they appeared. He wasn't defending himself, though. He was defending her honor. She was willing to bet the farm on it.

Still, if Alex had been trying to get somewhere with her, why wouldn't he have tried with Lori? And hadn't he told Josh that it wasn't what it looked like - when it was exactly what it looked like? Should she fight for him, or was she better off without him?

Alex was back by lunch and unusually quiet when they sat down to eat. No doubt he was thinking about Lori. Katie glanced at him questioningly a few times, but he gave his attention to his food. Finally Katie could bare the silence no longer.

"I have an announcement to make."

She had their undivided attention.

"Bill and I are getting married - next weekend."

Alex lifted one brow. "Don't you think that's a little sudden?"

She scowled at him. "We've been dating for over a year."

Alex smiled. "I meant the wedding date. It doesn't give me much time for preparations."

She shrugged. "We don't want a big wedding, and we've already made the arrangements." She gnawed on her lower lip and shifted in her chair. "We didn't want you to pay for our wedding."

He lifted his tea glass and examined the amber liquid. "I don't mind, you know. I've put the past behind me." His gaze shifted meaningfully to Carmen.

Katie didn't miss the exchange. "Are you two having an affair?" she asked tersely.

"*Katie!*" Carmen gasped.

Alex shook his head. "No, Katie. I can't even get on her shopping list."

Carmen and Katie stared at him. Did he *want* on her list? Was this fling with Lori a ploy? One thing was sure, her list only contained one name - and he was on it. He seemed to be waiting for a response, so she shrugged.

"You'd better be careful making that kind of remark. Some love struck girl is likely to take you up on it."

He was watching her intently. That wasn't the response he wanted.

"I was on one of those lists once," he said in a monotone. "I even got to the top. The trouble was, she forgot to scratch off the other name."

Carmen could feel her face getting hot. Was he telling her to scratch Josh's name off her list? Didn't he know it had already been erased? She shrugged again.

"I thought you had put that in the past."

His smile was sour. "The affair, not the experience. Completely forgetting about the past is tossing away a valuable lesson."

"Now Alex," Katie began in a scolding tone, "You can't keep throwing your past in Carmen's face. All women aren't alike, you know, and . . ."

He pointed his fork at her plate. "Eat your lunch."

Katie glanced at Carmen for support, but Carmen continued to stare at her plate. She wasn't about to say anything.

Katie picked at her food. "I heard she has a number fourteen record."

Alex attacked his food as if it were to blame for the havoc he had created at the table.

"Then I guess she married the right man," he commented casually.

Carmen pushed the beans around on her plate a little more and wished she were anywhere but here. Obviously Alex wasn't ready for marriage because he was still involved - with a woman who didn't love him. Her stomach was churning and her eyes burned with unshed tears. The kitchen clock ticked off thirty seconds before she put down her fork and pushed away from the table.

"I think I forgot to turn the water off when I filled the trough."

From the corner of her eye she saw Katie give Alex a poisonous look, but Carmen walked out without looking in his direction. He'd made it plain enough how he felt.

Once she was outside she viciously kicked at a stone. Why couldn't things work out - even one time? And why did she always have to make such a fool of herself? No wonder he wasn't interested - not in marriage, anyway. Was that what he was trying to tell her? If she were willing to take that tumble in the hay, he'd hang around a while longer? She kicked the stone again, sending it flying across the yard.

The screen door squealed and slammed, and then Alex spoke.

"I thought you were going to check the water. Aren't you headed in the wrong direction?"

She froze with her back to him. "If you came out here to rub it in, you can go back in the house. I got your point. I'm out of your hair - that's what you wanted, isn't it?"

Boots crunched on gravel behind her. "I came out here to apologize for airing my dirty laundry on your kitchen table."

"Apology accepted." She kept her back to him.

"And I haven't shown up on your doorstep so often because I want you out of my hair."

"I know. You came up to see Katie. I'm handy, that's all."

He laughed shortly. "Katie couldn't care less whether she sees me or not."

She turned and stared up at him. "Sure she does. And you care."

He nodded and grimaced. "That I do. But Katie isn't the one responsible for my visits."

Her heart skipped a beat. "No, the goats brought you the first time."

He quirked a brow. "Is that a fact?"

She stared at him. "I thought you said . . ." But he hadn't said anything. It was Katie who had said he was coming up to watch the goats kid. And it had been Katie who sent him that picture - to lure him up here?

Alex smiled. "I was intrigued by the girl Katie kept telling me about. When she sent me the picture, I had to come see for myself. You looked so innocent and sweet."

Warmth returned to her face. Was that all he saw in the picture?

"I didn't know . . ."

"I know," he interrupted, "and it made you that much more irresistible. But you kept . . . keep, pushing me away. Don't you know by now that I'm in love with you?"

Her heart was pounding. Finally. "But why didn't you say something earlier. It would have made things easier."

His brows arched. "I thought three days was being a pretty bold. Anyway, I was causing enough trouble between you and Josh as it was - and I wasn't sure where you stood with him." He touched her cheek. "I'm still not sure."

She put her hand over his. "Do you honestly think there could be anything between Josh and me after that scene in the barn yesterday?"

He gazed down at her somberly. "I could tell him it was my fault - that I was forcing myself on you. He'd believe me."

She shook her head. He'd nail your hide to the wall."

He stiffened. "He might try."

She laughed. "Somehow I get the idea he'd be taking on more than he could handle." She stepped closer to him. "But I wouldn't want to take a chance on losing you."

He smiled down at her, the dark eyes beginning to twinkle.

"Why not?"

She wrinkled her nose. "As if you didn't know. I think you knew before I did. Because I love you."

He drew her close in an embrace. "That's what I've been waiting to hear."

For a moment she laid her head on his chest, enjoying the smell of him and the feel of his hands on her back.

"Carmen," His voice was soft and husky.

She lifted her head and gazed into those delicious dark chocolate eyes.

His hands slid up her back in a slow caress that made her heart beat wildly. Warmth flooded her entire body so quickly that it was almost painful. Her breath came quickly as she leaned back into his hands. Never had she felt such an intense and thoroughly delightful emotion. Was this love?

When his lips found hers, the world ceased to exist around them. Her hands operated on their own as they pushed against the inside of his shirt collar and snaked up to his neck. Pressing against him, she forced his lips down on hers.

The magical moment was long, but not long enough. Alex was the one who finally broke the embrace – and spell.

"Let's go to my room," he said in an emotion-packed voice that was barely above a whisper.

His room? What were they doing? What was she thinking of – arousing him that way?

"Not now," she said, disentangling herself from his searching hands. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I was just so . . ." Aroused would have been the ideal word, but certainly wouldn't have defused him.

Stuffing trembling hands into her pockets, she took a step back from him.

"Inexperienced," she finally supplied.

His chuckle was soft. "I'm looking forward to experienced."

For the next half-hour they walked together and talked about her plans for a horse

ranch. In the few hours remaining before his departure, her head was so far in the clouds that she didn't even notice he said nothing about marriage. It wasn't until after he left and Katie jokingly asked if they had set a date, that she remembered. Even Katie looked apprehensive at her hesitation. Maybe she didn't want her wedding day overshadowed by theirs. Carmen shrugged.

"There hasn't been any talk of marriage between Alex and me."

Katie looked relieved, but Carmen's stomach took an uncomfortable lurch. Surely Alex was considering marriage now. They had simply overlooked the issue in their excitement.

Chapter Ten

Bill made arrangements to move in with Katie after they were married. There was plenty of room in the old house and Katie would continue helping with the chores until they found a place to live.

Alex called on Thursday to see if Carmen still wanted to keep Ed. She agreed and he made arrangements to drive up Friday. They were so busy with wedding arrangements that Carmen couldn't afford time to miss him - but somehow she managed to do it anyway.

Late Friday evening she was returning from the barn when he drove into the yard in a white Dodge Ram Pick up. It was a late model 4 x 4 with an extended cab, exactly like the one in Rogers that she had been drooling over the last three months. Behind the truck was a one-horse trailer - old, but in good condition. She got a glimpse of the horse in the trailer. It was an Appaloosa - her favorite breed. And to think she once thought she and Alex had nothing in common.

He was climbing out of the cab as she came around the front of the truck. He grinned and reached for her, drawing her close in an embrace. His kiss was ardent and she returned it with equal passion. When they finally drew apart, they were both breathless.

"I didn't know you were a pickup man," she teased.

He grinned and slipped an arm around her waist as they turned toward the trailer. She put an arm around his waist and together they strolled back to take a look at Ed.

Carmen stepped back as he unloaded the horse and then put her hand out to it. She moved too quickly and the stallion snorted.

"Easy boy," Alex said gently. "You're going to have to get it into your head to like her. You're expendable."

Carmen punched his arm playfully. "Alex. You're terrible."

He chuckled and handed her the reins.

"Here. Hold him a minute while I park the trailer and unhitch it. Where do you want me to put it?"

"Over there by the trail leading to the pond."

He nodded. "Are you sure it won't be in the way?"

"If it is, I can get Bill or Josh to move it."

He glanced at her sharply and then shook his head. Hopping into the cab he turned the truck around, expertly backing the trailer into the spot she had indicated. One thing was for sure; if anything needed moving, he was the one she was going to get to do it. She turned her attention to Ed.

She ran a hand along his sleek neck and patted the muscular shoulder. He was in excellent condition. Of course, she would have expected nothing less of any animal Alex owned.

"You're going to like it here, boy," she said, giving him another pat.

Something tugged on her belt loop and Alex swung her around, jerking her into his embrace. "Me Too," he said, and pulled her close, kissing her in a way that made her legs weak.

She stepped back, trying to take the electricity out of the air with a little humor. "Sure, you say that now, but come Monday morning you'll be six hundred miles away."

He gazed down at her soberly. "So, come back with me."

She laughed nervously. "What about Ed and the farm?"

He reached out and touched her temple lightly. "Katie and Bill can watch the farm and we can take Ed back with us. We can ride him along the beaches together all day." His fingers slid down her cheek in an exciting caress as his gaze searched her face hungrily. "And make love all night."

She swallowed down a surge of excitement. He was actually serious. But she couldn't leave the farm. It was her responsibility.

"It sounds nice, but I want time to make plans for *my* wedding."

He caught his breath and stepped back, lowering his hand. He snatched the reins from her hand and turned to Ed.

"Yeah. Well, I guess we can cross that bridge when we come to it," he answered curtly.

She stared at his back as he led Ed to the truck. What had she said wrong? Did he think she expected him to pay for her wedding? Did the prospect of marriage dig up old bones? She watched as he meticulously saddled Ed and tightened the cinch. Then he mounted and rode past her.

"I'm going to take him for a ride to loosen up. I'll be back in a little while."

He nudged the horse in the ribs and Ed broke into a lope. They stopped at the gate and Alex leaned down, opening the gate. He rode through and closed it, never looking her way.

Carmen turned toward the house, dashing a tear from her cheek with the back of her hand. He still wasn't over his last love.

Katie was on the couch sewing when Carmen entered the living room. Katie glanced up, the needle pausing in mid air.

"Wasn't that Alex?"

She nodded. "Yes, he took his horse for a ride." She kept her head down, pretending she had a sliver in her finger. At the moment she was glad she hadn't told Katie about their newfound relationship - because now it was lost. Was love always such a roller coaster of emotions? Sure, she and Josh had their share of ups and downs, but never like this. With Alex, the relationship seemed to be either grinding up a long hill or plunging perilously toward the depths of despair. There was so little time at the top.

Carmen went to her room and stayed there until the banging of pots and pans announced that Katie was cooking supper. She helped Katie until Alex returned and then declined to eat, using the excuse that she didn't feel well. It was the truth. In fact, she couldn't remember a time when she had felt worse. Physical ills were miserable, but this depression was unbearable. She curled up on her bed and cried herself to sleep.

Dawn brought cool air and dense fog. It was a good match for her mood. The dairy door groaned as she opened it and Ed whinnied from his stall in the barn. She smiled in spite of everything. It was going to be nice to hear him every morning.

She opened the barn door and flipped on the light. Ed peered over the stall at her and nickered softly.

"Hold your horses," she said, snickering over the pun.

She hurried to his stall and hugged his neck. He nibbled at her jacket and nickered again. She rubbed her cheek against the soft hair on his neck.

"You're such a sweetie," she said, patting his neck. "We're going to have to take a ride pretty soon. I thought maybe yesterday . . . but I guess he had a lot on his mind." She rubbed his jaw. "I guess he thinks I'm going to ransack his wallet or something." She moved back and patted him on the neck again. "I'll get you some hay."

She cut the strings and pulled a few leaves from a new bale of alfalfa hay. As she lifted the hay and turned, a figure moved in the hay on the floor. She screamed and leaped back before she realized it was Alex.

"What in the world are you doing in here?"

He lay with his arms behind his head and his eyes held a twinkle of humor that never reached his mouth.

"I couldn't sleep. I've been out here since about three this morning. I was just getting off to sleep when you turned the light on." The twinkle left his eyes. "Funny, the things you can say to an animal, isn't it?"

Warmth surged up her neck. "You were eavesdropping."

"No I wasn't, I was listening." He pushed up from the floor and brushed hay from his clothes. "Which was more than I was doing yesterday, it seems."

She handed Ed a clump of hay and he delicately plucked it from her fingers.

"You were listening," she said. "You just didn't like what you were hearing."

He made a face. "That's true. I wasn't here five minutes before you mentioned Josh. The next thing I knew you were talking about marriage."

She stared at him. "I was talking marriage? You were the one who started talking about riding the beaches and making I . . ."

A cold feeling gripped her throat and strangled the words from her lungs. He wasn't proposing marriage - he was proposing an affair. Her face flamed.

He smiled sourly. "Love, Carmen. Making Love. Are the words so difficult to say or does your rule book say it's something perverted."

She faced him coolly, trying to control her temper.

"No, Alex. There's nothing wrong with a man and woman making love - as long as it's sanctioned by marriage."

He rubbed the back of his neck and his gaze became somber.

"Carmen, if and when I decide to get married, I'll do the asking - without being prompted, coaxed, coerced or blackmailed."

Anger and humiliation boiled up inside her and spilled over in a froth of rage.

"Of all the . . . you egotistical, male chauvinistic pig! Why is it that men think a woman is perverted when she won't sacrifice her morals for him, but she's a slut when she gives in for the other guy? Men can use every ploy in the book to get a woman to submit, but if she mistakes that proposition for a proposal of marriage, right away she's blackmailing him."

He stared at her, his neck growing red. "All right, men are hormone driven fools. I was out of line. I apologize. You're so nai . . . innocent. I guess men have always got to push women as far as they'll go."

"Josh didn't," she shot at him.

His eyes flashed darkly. "Go ahead, Carmen. Beat me over the head with Josh. But tell me, if he's so much better than me, why aren't you asking *him* to marry you?"

She glared at him. "I didn't have to ask him. He was man enough to ask me."

They stared at each other, shocked by the things they were saying. This was no good. If they kept on lashing at each other like this, their relationship would be torn to

shreds. If they cared enough to fight like this, they had to care enough to make up.

She gazed up into his angry red face, knowing she had gone one step too far. Her lip quivered and a sob threatened to choke off her voice.

Alex moved around her. "If you want him that bad, don't let me stand in your way."

"Alex," she croaked, and grabbed his arm.

He paused, glancing down at her. His eyes were haunted. She had put that pain there. Only she could take it away.

"I don't want Josh. I want you. I love *you*."

He watched her suspiciously. "Why?"

She fought for control. If she cried, if she pleaded - he would pity her. That was one emotion she didn't want him to feel for her - anger, even rage, but not pity. She swallowed down a sob and wiped her eyes free of tears. Renewed with courage born of desperation, she met his gaze steadily.

"We've both said some things we shouldn't have said. And I . . . I didn't mean you weren't a man. I was angry and hurt. Maybe Josh never pushed me about sex because we're too much like sister and brother."

His gaze softened and he watched her reflectively. Finally he reached out and took her hand.

"I won't push you if you won't push me. I'm simply not ready to face that kind of commitment yet. Maybe I've been a bachelor too long. All I know is, I have doubts - and marriage is going to be hard enough with no doubts. When I get married it will be because I'm ready to put the effort into a permanent relationship. Neither of us knows each other that well yet. I thought, maybe if you came down and stayed with me a while . . ."

She touched his lips with her fingertips. "I know. I didn't realize you were feeling pushed - you always seem so sure of yourself. I won't say anything more about it."

Alex might have his doubts, but she didn't. Alex was *the one*. She was surer of that now than she had ever been. And he had said *when* I get married, not *if*. So he was serious all right. Was it too much to allow him time to think about it? After all, shouldn't she be doing some thinking as well? Could she entrust him with her heart?

He gazed down into her eyes and his voice was choked with emotion.

"I love you, Carmen. I'm afraid if I don't do something soon, Josh is going to get you back. He can give you things I can't."

She smiled up at him. "Josh can't give me anything more than you can. As a matter of fact, he can't give me the thing I want most. Love - the story book kind."

He took her in his arms then, and his lips were warm on hers. She slipped her arms around his neck and drew his mouth down harder on her own. They clung to each other, molding their bodies as one until the raging fire of passion consumed her. This time it was Alex who broke off the lovemaking.

"Carmen," he whispered huskily with a nervous laugh. "We'd better stop, or I'm going to get into trouble again."

She stepped away from him and raised a shaking hand to her bruised lips. "I'm sorry."

He leaned a shoulder against the wall. "If you want me to behave myself, we're going to have to stop this. Frankly, I don't think either of us can stand up to this kind of pressure."

Warmth crawled up her neck with the realization that she had lost control - and Alex had been aware of it. He could have taken advantage of the moment. After all, it wasn't violating any of his principles. And yet, in her moment of surrender, he had set

his desires aside and assumed responsibility. Yes, she had crossed that last hurdle of doubt. Alex had proven he could be trusted with her heart. He was man enough to wear the pants.

Chapter Eleven

So absorbed was Katie in her wedding, that she didn't notice Alex was always at Carmen's elbow. Nor did she find anything particularly unusual about the fact that Alex stayed all day Sunday and took a plane back to Houston, leaving his truck for Carmen to drive. He insisted that he would rather lease a car for a month than have to drive back, and he didn't like the idea of leaving her with only her old truck to drive.

He must have had a premonition, because the truck broke down on her way home the following week. She walked two miles to Josh's place. His truck was in the drive, but no one answered the door, so she walked down to the barn.

Josh wasn't alone, though. She was surprised to see him with Lori, rolling in the hay - and there was no question about what was going on this time.

She gasped and ran from the barn. At the gate, she finally paused to catch her breath, her face still burning. She shouldn't have walked in unannounced - but who would have thought Josh would be doing something like that? Lori didn't surprise her, but with Josh? But then, why not? Lori had never made a secret of her feelings for Josh. Even Josh had known. So how long had this been going on?

"Carmen, wait up."

Carmen glanced back to see a red-faced Josh striding toward her, still tucking in his shirt. She looked away from him, her face growing even warmer. What could he say?

He joined her at the gate and glanced around uncomfortably.

"Where's your truck."

She couldn't meet his gaze. "Down the road a couple of miles. It broke down and I thought you could give me a tow."

He glanced down at the barn. "I'll go get my chain."

"Forget it. The truck isn't in the middle of the road. I'll walk the rest of the way home and have Bill help me tonight when he gets off work." She opened the gate and stepped through. "Thanks anyway." She couldn't believe they were talking around this situation.

Josh strode off toward his truck. "No, I'll help you," he said over his shoulder.

"What about Lori?" Somebody had to bring up the subject.

"She was just leaving."

"Yeah, it looked like it," Carmen responded dryly. "Honestly, Josh. Why don't you just marry her?"

He opened his truck door and leaned the seat forward. "It isn't any of your business."

It wasn't, but the shock was beginning to wear off now and she was beginning to feel conspicuous.

"No, it wasn't any of your business when you thought you caught Alex and me, but it didn't stop you from making your nasty accusations. No wonder you thought we were . . ."

"That's enough, Carmen. I'm not going to even try to defend what you just saw, but I never cheated on you. This thing with Lori and me only started the other night. You made your feelings for Alex clear at the wedding - hanging all over each other and

making eyes at each other across the room. You made a fool out of me in front of everyone.”

She caught her breath and stared at him. “I’m sorry, Josh. I never meant to hurt you. I didn’t think you wanted anything to do with me anymore.” She hesitated, a dark thought invading her apology. “Surely you weren’t using Lori to get even. She’s had a crush on you forever.”

He jerked the chain out of his truck and stared down at her sourly.

“Don’t be vain. I wouldn’t hurt Lori just to get back at you.” He threw the chain in the truck bed. “And when you get around to wondering, Lori had enough respect for you and I that she wouldn’t horn in on our relationship, either. In fact, you’re the only one who violated a trust.”

“I never cheated on you,” she gasped. How could he say such a thing? Her eyes burned with threatening tears. “I told you we were through long time ago. In the kitchen when you and Alex . . .”

“Yeah, Alex,” he shot back. “Alex this, Alex that. Your little Texas stud had better stay out of my life or I’ll make him wish he’d never set foot in this state. First you and now Lori. What’s the matter with him? Can’t you keep him satisfied?”

She stared at him. What was he talking about? Alex was in Houston and he had been with her all the time he was up this last time. He couldn’t have been involved with Lori. Josh was jumping to conclusions again. She took a deep breath.

“Just because you sacrificed your virtue for a few moments of pleasure doesn’t mean I have tossed aside my innocence. And just because Alex went out with Lori a few times a while back doesn’t mean he’s unfaithful to me. Maybe if you’d try a trusting someone a little, you wouldn’t have to blame another man for the fact that you can’t hold a woman.”

His eyes flashed and he grabbed the front of her shirt, lifting her off the ground.

“Listen, little Miss high and mighty. You’re not doing so well at holding your man, either. Did you know he’s already called Lori several times this week?”

She gagged and clawed at his hands, struggling to take a breath. As little lights began to flash in her eyes, she managed to kick his shin. He let go of her shirt and she hit the ground like a sack of grain. She scrambled away from him, rubbing her neck as she gasped for air.

“What are you trying to do?” she croaked.

He stared down at her, obviously shocked by his own violence. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He reached down to help her up, but she ignored his hand. She staggered to her feet and tried a voice still scratchy. “I don’t know where all this anger is coming from, but you might as well get it in your head that you and I are history. I have every intention of marrying Alex, and I’m ready and willing to face a little competition. We’re not even engaged yet, so if he wants to talk to Lori, I’ll have to live with it. If you’re so concerned about Lori, I’d suggest you put a brand on her.”

He stared down at her for a moment and then started to laugh. “Hop in the truck. Let’s go get your rattle trap home.”

She glanced back at the barn. “What about Lori.”

He dug the keys out of his pocket. “Her car is parked around back. She had the crazy idea you’d be hurt if you saw it.”

She shook her head and strode around to the passenger side of the truck. As she climbed in the truck she glanced over at him and smiled wryly.

“Next time you see her, tell her I’m sorry I got in her way so long.”

He slammed his door and started the truck. Then he swung the truck around and honked, calling to Lori as she peeked out of the barn.

"I'll be back in a minute. Carmen's truck broke down and I'm going to tow it home for her."

She waved. Apparently they weren't on such bad terms after all. Finally something was working out for Josh.

Two weeks after the wedding, Carmen was browsing through some wedding pictures with Katie. Katie studied one of the pictures thoughtfully, and then flipped back to another. She pointed at a picture where Alex and Carmen were half hidden behind another couple.

"Are you and Alex holding hands, here?"

She flipped back to the other page. "And he has your elbow in his hand, here."

Carmen glanced at the picture and shrugged. "Looks like it."

Katie stared up at Carmen, her expression revealing surprise - and something else.

"You two *are* having an affair."

Carmen flipped the page. "A relationship."

Katie stared at her reflectively. "But I didn't think . . ." She seemed to be at loss for words.

Carmen laughed. "Oh, come on Katie. You set us up. Now you're surprised we fell in love?"

Katie shook her head and gazed at Carmen soberly. "I didn't set you two up. The last time I noticed, you were fighting with each other. I never would have thought . . . I mean, you two, of all people. I know you're looking for a husband and . . ."

Carmen waved a hand. "I know, and Alex is terrified of making a commitment. We've talked about it. I'm willing to wait. Isn't it strange how our dreams can change overnight?"

Why was Katie so shaken? Alex would come around eventually. It was simply going to take time. They loved each other. That was the important thing.

Nothing more was said about the matter until a week later when Katie and Bill moved into their new home. Carmen helped them move the last of their things into the house, and as she was leaving Katie took her aside.

"Carmen. Don't let Alex move in with you just because you're lonely. I know you think you're in love with him, but he can't make you happy. Talk to him about the things you want the most. You'll see. He'd be angry with me if I told you . . . things. Just talk to him, okay?"

Carmen stared at her. What could be so terrible about Alex that his own sister would fear to discuss with her best friend?

Carmen shook her head. "I'm not letting him move in with me - lonely or not. Not until we're married, anyway."

Katie sighed. "Talk to him."

"I will," Carmen finally promised, "but why won't you tell me?"

Did he have AIDS? The thought sent a chill up her spine. Surely Katie would have told her if he did. Was that why she seemed so concerned that they might be having an affair? Was that why Alex was suddenly interested in making up with Katie?

"I can't. He's my brother and it would embarrass him. But I feel obliged to warn you anyway. Just don't get more involved than you already are. I know how you feel about a family and all, and I don't think . . . well, just tell him how much you want children. Then he'll have to tell you."

Nothing Carmen said could coax Katie to say more. For the next few days, Carmen mulled the idea over in her mind. The only thing she could think of was some kind of disease. Yet Alex seemed so healthy. What dark secret had he been holding from her that he would be forced to reveal if he knew how she felt about children? Was it because he didn't want children? No, that couldn't be it. A lot of men started out not wanting children, but when they saw their own children it was another story. He would be embarrassed. The only other thing she could think of was that he was a pedophile. She caught her breath. Was there another reason why Katie ran away from home?

She shook the ugly thoughts from her head and straightened, leaning on the hoe as she glanced around the garden. Standing out here imagining the worst wasn't doing any more good than pumping Katie. She almost wished Katie had never said anything. Almost, but Katie wouldn't have said anything unless she considered it to be extremely important.

She glanced around the lush hills. Think of something else - anything else. The house on the hill caught her eye, immediately transporting her thoughts to another sector of her mind. Someone was building a log house so close that they could overlook her farm. For the owner it was probably the perfect place for a house, providing a spectacular view. Until now she had been completely secluded. Now she felt like she was in an arena. She hacked at a piece of grass with the hoe. Maybe it was time to sell the farm. It didn't look like she was ever going to fulfill her dream of raising a family on it anyway.

The telephone rang and she dropped the hoe, racing for the house. It was probably Katie. She was supposed to call today about her doctor visit. Carmen made it to the telephone on the sixth ring, gasping for breath as she picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Alex?"

A pause. "Someone else greets you that way?"

"No." She fought for control of her breath, but the increased pumping of her heart didn't help.

His voice gained an edge. "Is something wrong?" Another brief pause. "Has Josh been by?"

"No . . . Yes. I mean he pulled my truck home the other day, but . . ."

"I thought you were driving *my* truck?"

"Well, I am now. I blew a head gasket on mine. Josh said the engine is shot."

"Why don't you get rid of that pile of junk?"

"I can't afford to. Anyway, it has sentimental value. It belonged to Dad."

"Was it the first vehicle he owned?" the voice was sarcastic.

She laughed. "Well, he did buy it new. He was so proud of it."

"I understand. Say no more. Just drive mine for a while. I graduate next week and I'm going to take a week off and come see you - if you don't mind. Then I have to come back here and I'll be out of the country for about three weeks on a sales trip - the last one."

Next week? They could settle things then. She sighed. "I don't mind, but . . ."

"Don't worry. I'll stay with Katie or get a room. I just wanted to clear it with you first." Another pause. "I miss you, Carmen."

"I miss you, too. It's been so long. You should see Penny and Snowflake."

"Snowflake must be the little white doe you decided to keep. I guess that would make Penny Tessa's kid."

She sighed again. "Yes, but I don't think Penny is going to be a very good milk goat. She just doesn't have the temperament for it. She's always into something and the other day she was on the porch. I'm afraid she jumped the fence."

"Yeah, well maybe she'll grow out of it. How's Ed?"

"As sweet as ever. He gets along great with the goats. He's with them most of the time. I take him for a ride up the road every day, though. We're best friends, now."

"Great. He can tell me all your secrets."

If Ed could actually talk, she wouldn't be spending so much time pondering about Alex. It occurred to her to prompt Alex on the phone, but how would she broach the subject? Besides, it would be best to see his face when they talked. A week wasn't long.

Chapter Twelve

The week seemed more like a month, but finally Alex arrived and she picked him up at the airport. They had an entire week, so there was no need to rush into a conversation that might spoil everything. No reason except the fact that she was losing a lot of sleep.

Alex was there at dawn every morning to help with the chores and then they would take off in his truck. They went fishing one day and canoeing another. Yet the conversation never turned comfortably toward children. She was going to have to force it.

When the subject came up, though, it was completely unplanned. She was in the barn one morning before Alex arrived, struggling to trim Penny's hooves. Snowflake had taken the ordeal with remarkable ease, but Penny was using every ploy in the book. Carmen had Penny in the stanchion and was straddling her, trying to trim one hoof when the little doe simply lay down. She was hanging from the stanchion and suffocating. Carmen released her and shoved her off the stanchion.

"I always planned to fill this farm with kids, but they're going to be human and I hope none of them are like you!"

"What's the matter?"

Carmen swung around to find Alex watching her. She blushed.

"She's such a pill. I think I'll take her to the sale barn and let someone else fight with her for a while. I don't need the hassle."

He rubbed his jaw and eyed her reflectively. "You always planned to fill the farm with kids?"

Every muscle in her body tensed. "Children," she clarified.

His hand slipped around to the back of his neck.

"Yours?"

She laughed nervously. "I wouldn't want to raise anybody else's children, would you?" The metal clippers felt unusually cold in her clammy grip.

He picked Penny up and set her on the stanchion.

"I'm afraid I don't have a choice." He reached a hand out for the clippers. "Give me those."

"Why?" She surrendered the clippers.

"Because I'm going to show you how to do this."

He dumped Penny on her side and pinned her down with one knee.

"No, I mean why do you feel you have no choice?"

He clipped the nails back to expose pink quicks. Was he using the work to avoid answering her question? Finally he released the doe.

"See, that wasn't so hard."

"It didn't teach her anything, either. I can't do that each time when she's a mature milk goat."

They were drifting away from the subject. "But you didn't answer my question. What did you mean when you said you had no choice?"

He leaned against the stanchion and cleared his throat. "I can't have children."

She stared at him. Was he under court order? She took a deep breath and plunged on.

“Why not?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Mumps when I was twelve.”

She let out the breath in a gush of air. He was trying to delicately say that he was sterile. A whole lot better than she had imagined. . . . yet still a blow - maybe even worse than she had thought. There was nothing ugly between them. No reason why they couldn't get married - except one. Children were as much a part of her dreams as a husband was. She could follow her heart and marry the man she loved, but she would never be completely satisfied. Maybe she would even begin to resent him for it.

He was watching her intently and his face was pale under the tan.

“I'm sorry. It isn't one of those things that you tell someone until you've already become involved.”

She tucked her hands in her back pockets and stared at the floor. Of all the things Katie discussed with Alex, why hadn't this subject ever come up? But then, Katie didn't expect them to hit it off, either. Who would have? The city slicker and the country hick - even Josh had warned her. But no one had warned her about the truth.

“My God, Carmen. It isn't *that* bad. We can adopt children. It isn't like I don't want children.”

She gnawed on her lower lip. “It wouldn't be the same. I don't know if a man can understand this, but I want to hold a baby in my arms and know it's a part of me and the man I love. I want an infant. You can't adopt infants.”

“It happens. I can get a newborn baby for you, Carmen - if it means that much to you.”

She shook her head. “No. You don't understand. I don't want to raise an only child. I want four or five children, maybe more. Do you have any idea what it would be like to adopt that many children? What if the mother changed her mind? She has a right to, you know. I couldn't stand to love a child and lose it.”

His gaze was intense. “Then we could use AI. It doesn't matter to me if the baby isn't biologically mine.”

She shook her head again. “I couldn't do that. It's playing god.”

His hands balled into fists and the knuckles turned as white as the line around his lips. The dark eyes stood out like pockets of hot chocolate in his pale face.

“So what are you saying? Hit the road?”

“No,” she gasped. “I don't know what to say. I love you, but . . .”

“But I can't make you happy,” he ground out. He turned away from her and swore bitterly, driving his fist into the milk bucket. It shot off the counter, hitting the block wall and bouncing off to roll across the floor and stop at Carmen's feet.

She jumped back and stared the dent in its side. It was completely destroyed. She glanced at his hand, but if it was hurting, he didn't seem to notice. He ran fingers through his hair and stared at her through tortured eyes.

She wanted to tell him that it didn't matter, but it did. No wonder Katie had been so concerned. Katie knew a happy marriage with Alex was impossible. She wanted to strike out at someone - anyone, but there was no one to blame for this situation. There were some things that people simply took for granted. In a country filled with people aborting unwanted babies, how did this happen? How could God do this to them when all they wanted was to love each other and nurture their own children? Why were things always working out for other people? Katie was expecting a child now - Katie, who had trouble taking care of herself.

"All right," Alex said in a voice near a whisper. "I want you to be happy. That's more important to me than anything else. If you have to marry Josh to get that happiness, then I wish you both the best of luck."

He marched across the floor to the door and opened it. "And lots of babies." His voice broke and he stepped through the door, slamming it.

She stared after him. He was saying good bye. She started for the door to stop him, but half way to her destination she paused. She could bring him back, but for what? More torture? If she truly loved him, she would let him go. Let him find someone who wasn't interested in having children - someone like Lori.

The idea was like a blow from a club. Her knees buckled and she slumped to the floor, wracked by ragged sobs. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a nightmare. If only she could wake up.

More than an hour later she was pouring herself a cup of coffee and wondering if a person could get dehydrated from crying. Whenever she seemed to be getting herself under control, a fresh bout of sobs would begin. There had to be something they could do to salvage their relationship. How could she go on without him? When did the house get so empty - so lonely?

By evening she was exhausted. After chores, she went to bed and cried herself to sleep. That was no escape, either. Alex was there, looking at her in that tortured way again. She woke and prayed fervently for an answer, and then fell asleep again - to the same nightmare.

She woke abruptly, not knowing what had disturbed her sleep. She waited breathlessly, straining to hear the least noise. The night was unnaturally silent. The clock ticked thirty long seconds away and then the silence was ripped by a ferocious growl. Brutus.

She leaped from the bed and struggled into her jeans, tucking her nightgown in while she grabbed her boots. All pandemonium broke loose outside. One of the goats was voicing a terrified cry and with it mingled vicious snarls and anxious barking. Obviously something was attacking the goats.

She raced down the hall tugging her boots on, hopping first on one foot and then on the other. At the door, she paused only long enough to flip on the yard and barn lights. Bursting through the door, she immediately spotted Brutus, who was waging a battle against a pack of wild dogs. She raced for the barn, for the first time wishing she had invested in that rifle Josh wanted her to buy. There must be something she could use in the barn - a pitchfork, anything.

Once inside the barn, she grabbed the pitchfork and a flashlight and then darted out the barn door, screaming at the top of her lungs. The dogs scattered, leaving Brutus wounded on the ground. Outside the circle of light lay a small form, and a sweep of the flashlight revealed fur with copper highlights. A lump formed in her throat as she recognized Penny. Brandishing the pitchfork with renewed courage, she boldly strode to Brutus. One ear was torn half off and his fur was bloody around the collar. A gash in one leg prevented him from rising. He whined as she knelt beside him.

"Lay still, Brutus," she managed through a constricted throat. "I'll check on Penny."

Turning on the flashlight, she moved toward the goat. It was dead, its throat torn viciously. A dark form moved at the edge of the tree line and when she shined the flashlight in that direction, the light reflected off more than one pair of eyes. Were they waiting to devour Penny, or were they waiting to finish off Brutus? She slowly retreated and knelt beside Brutus again.

“Come on boy.” She tugged at his collar and he tried in vain to rise. “You’ve got to get up, boy. They’ll kill you if you stay out here.” He was too heavy to carry and the barn was at least a hundred feet away. She tugged at his collar again, but it was useless. If she ran to the house to call for help, the dogs would attack Brutus again. Somehow she had to take him with her . . . and soon. The forms were getting braver, darting out from the trees and then retreating when she flashed the light in that direction.

The wheelbarrow was in the barn, but even if she managed to get there and back, she couldn’t lift Brutus into it. It would be hard enough to get him on his rug once she had him in the barn. That gave her an idea. She backed away slowly, flashing the light on the forms. She ducked into the barn, grabbing a feed sack she remembered throwing beside the barn door. As she emerged from the barn, one of the forms was nearing the circle of light. She grabbed the pitchfork and poked it in his direction, screaming as she did so. The wild dog ran a few steps toward the trees and then stopped, his head low as he watched her. Better hurry, they were getting braver.

She raced over to Brutus and positioned the sack behind him. Ignoring his whines and growls, she grabbed his feet and rolled him over so that he was lying on the sack. It was going to take two hands to pull him - two hands and all her strength. She turned and threw the pitchfork toward the barn. Placing the flashlight on Brutus, she grabbed the sack with both hands and tugged. The sack and dog moved about two feet. Again she tugged and accomplished about the same. The wild dogs were gathering around the circle of light now, and two of them boldly began to devour Penny. She hated to leave the little doe for them, but maybe their interest in the goat would keep them occupied long enough to get Brutus into the barn. Three of the dogs ignored the feast, intent on her progress toward the barn. Where was the pitchfork?

She glanced around. Maybe five feet away. She turned back to find one of the dogs advancing. Grabbing the flashlight, she shined it into his eyes, screaming again. He backed up a few feet and stopped, lowering his head and growling in a way that made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. She lunged frantically again, dragging Brutus nearly four feet this time. Thank God for adrenaline. The smart thing to do would be to abandon Brutus for the safety of the barn. If the dogs got any closer, she would have to.

Tug, scream, shine the flashlight, throw the pitchfork toward the barn. Tug . . . the closer she got to the barn, the braver the wild dogs got.

The telephone buzzer rang. Who would be calling at this hour? Was it possible that Josh had heard the noise and was checking?

“Oh, please, God. Send me some help. Don’t let Brutus die.”

The dogs were distracted momentarily by the sound of the telephone, but when it stopped ringing, they advanced further. She jerked on the sack again. She was getting tired and her efforts were less productive. Two more tugs and then she saw lights coming down the drive.

“Thank you, God!”

She tugged again and one of the dogs moved closer, baring his teeth. She screamed at him and flashed the light in his eyes, but he wasn’t impressed. She stumbled back and grabbed the pitchfork, jabbing it at him. He fell back a few feet and snarled at her. A vehicle door slammed and Josh was yelling for her to get back.

“He’ll kill Brutus!” she screamed, refusing to take her eyes off the wild dog.

“Get out of the way and I’ll shoot him!”

She instantly leaped to the side and rolled away from the animal, glancing up as the

rifle belched flames. The wild dog cried out sharply once and dropped. The other wild dogs vanished.

"You fool!" Josh yelled at her as he approached Brutus. "He's only a dog. He can be replaced - *you* can't."

"They wouldn't have attacked me. They only wanted Brutus and the goats." It was something that had been at the back of her mind all the time, but it wasn't true. She had stood between the pack of wild dogs and what they wanted.

Josh grabbed the sack and pulled Brutus along. "It *looked* like they weren't going to attack you, didn't it?"

"Together they managed to get Brutus safely into the barn. He was in need of a veterinarian if he was going to live, and the closest one was nearly twenty miles away. Unless . . . did Alex spend the night with Katie? She started for the door.

"I'm going to call and see if Alex is at Katie's."

Josh stared at her.

"First you'd better call a veterinarian."

She paused with one hand on the door.

"Alex *is* a veterinarian, and Katie lives less than five miles away. If he's not there, I'll call someone else."

Without waiting for a response, she raced to the house and dialed Katie's number with shaking hands. The ordeal over, she was going to pieces.

The phone rang four times before a sleepy male voice answered.

"Hello, Bill? Is Alex there?"

A pause. "This *is* Alex . . . Carmen?" The voice had lost its sleepy sound. He was wide-awake now.

"Yes, do you have your medical equipment with you?"

"Some. What's wrong? Is one of the goats sick?"

Hearing his voice did something to hers. She struggled through a hiccup.

"Wild dogs. They attacked the herd. Brutus is torn up real bad. Could you come over here?"

"Wild dogs? Are you sure? Are you alright? Stay in the house and I'll be right over. Don't go out there."

"It's All right. Josh is here. He shot one of them and they ran off . . ." Too late, she realized what he would think. "He heard the noise and came down," she added quickly.

He gave her a list of supplies to round up and said he would be there in a few minutes. By the time she found everything, he was driving into the yard. Josh glanced around from his sentry duty at the barn door when they came in.

Alex went straight to Brutus and examined him.

"Can you give me a hand? He's going to need a lot of stitches, but other than that, I think he's all right."

They worked over Brutus for the better part of an hour and finally Alex leaned back and stretched.

"That should do it. You'll need to keep an eye on him and make sure he has plenty of water. Don't let him get up for a while."

He put his things away and glanced up at Carmen.

"Do you want me to stay here tonight to watch him?"

She gazed into his eyes, wanting desperately to tell him to stay. Yet there was more at stake here than Brutus. Saying yes would be setting him up for further hurt. It would be encouraging him - indicating there was still a chance. Saying no would be telling him to get out and never come back. She should tell him no, but she couldn't voice the

word. If he was the wrong man, why did it feel so right?

Josh strolled across the room and glanced down at her - misreading her expression, as usual.

"I'll stay. You can go on and get some rest."

His words were like a sharp object puncturing a water balloon, and her words gushed out in a wave of uninhibited emotion.

"No, I want Alex to stay."

Alex raised his brows in obvious surprise.

Josh was behind Alex, and he grinned at Carmen.

"Well, I know *I'll* feel better knowing he's here."

His words were spoken with sarcasm, but not for the reason Alex probably thought. Josh wasn't concerned about Alex making a pass at Carmen. He must have Lori at his place.

Josh left, not knowing what had come between them. Right now she wished she had someone to talk to, but she couldn't share this with anyone but Alex and God - and God wasn't listening.

They cleaned up the mess and then stood in awkward silence, watching Brutus. Finally Alex spoke.

"I changed my flights and I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm going to leave my truck here so you'll have something to drive."

"That isn't necessary. I can . . ."

"It is necessary and I don't want an argument. I'm going to be out of the country for a while, so I won't need it. When I get back, we'll discuss this thing again. I think we both need more time to consider what we want to do. It isn't like we don't love each other." He gazed down at her inquiringly. "Is it?"

She met his gaze and felt drawn by the warmth. Unable to trust her voice, she merely shook her head.

A slight smile touched the corners of his mouth. "Then you agree to give it some more thought?"

She nodded and cleared the lump from her throat. "I've been praying and praying, but I don't get an answer. I don't know what to do."

He tucked his thumbs in his hip pockets and turned away from her.

"When Tessa left me I prayed every night that she would come back. I was angry about what she had done, but I couldn't let loose of her. Then I was angry with God for ignoring my prayers."

He scraped the toe of his boot across the floor.

"It took me a couple of years to realize God *had* answered my prayer the first time. He said no."

He lifted his gaze to her intent face. "I couldn't see the future, so I thought there wasn't one. I don't want to waste any more time second-guessing God. He brought me to you for some reason. He made me love you for some reason. I can't believe it was to make you unhappy."

His words were like a ray of sunshine through the window on a cold winter morning. At first they only brightened her heart, but as they continued, they gradually chased the chill away. Was God sending her a message? Was she being greedy - insisting on having everything? Without Alex, she might never be truly happy. Without children she might never be truly happy. Must she choose? This very moment she would choose Alex - but what about twenty years from now, when it was too late to have children? Would she be sorry? Feel trapped? What if their marriage wasn't successful and she

lost both?

He held out his hand to her, and when she accepted it, he pulled her close in a comforting embrace.

“I’m not asking you to make a decision now. I’m asking you not to make a hasty decision. Think about it. Okay?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

It felt so safe and warm in his arms. He wasn’t demanding or pleading, he was reasoning with her. Believing in her ability to make a sound judgment and willing to accept her decision. With every day she knew him, he became more of a man. More of a friend she could trust.

Chapter Thirteen

The days grew warmer, and work on the house on the hill drew to a standstill. The new owner must have run out of money. The dry weather was perfect for building. She hacked at the dry earth with her hoe. It was terrible weather for growing things. Even so, she had managed to can thirty pints of green beans and twenty pints of tomatoes so far. Not bad.

She dropped the hoe and mopped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She glanced around the farm. The goats were staying close to the house today. Were the dogs out there someplace again? Josh, Bill and Alex had gone hunting for them the day after the attack, but they lost the trail in some rocks on her back 40 acres. It was rugged country back there - full of wild plums, too. This year she had been afraid to harvest them because of the dogs. Josh was certain it was a pack, not simply a gathering of neighbor dogs. She was inclined to agree. That put everyone at risk, but her goats were the easiest targets.

A gray truck stopped at the gate and she waved at Josh. Now what? She walked up to the road while he waited in the truck.

She lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the evening sun while she talked to him.

"What's going on? I haven't seen you in a while."

He nodded, obviously perturbed about something.

"I've been busy." He tapped the roof of his truck with his fingernails. "Your stud is back, and the first place he went was to see Lori. They didn't know I was around and I saw them. Him hugging her like they were old friends."

She smiled up at him. "Oh, Josh. You're such a worrier. Alex is affectionate – he probably hugs all the girls. It doesn't mean anything."

He shook his head in disgust. "What does it take to open your eyes about him? He's been globe trotting for the last three weeks. Don't you wonder what he's been doing?"

She shrugged. "He's been on a business trip. I trust him. What good would it do to get suspicious, anyway? It wouldn't change anything if he wanted to cheat. If you'd make an honest woman out of Lori, you wouldn't have to worry about all this."

His face turned red. "You're beginning to sound like Lori."

"So what are you waiting for?"

He snorted. "I'm waiting for her to stop making eyes at your stud."

She gave him a level look. "His name is Alex, and I don't want to hear you call him *stud* again. Alex isn't the problem between you and Lori, and he wasn't the problem between you and me. You turned me away with your suspicious actions, long before Alex came along. Keep it up and you'll lose Lori as well."

She turned and left him at the gate. She was sick of hearing him talk about Alex as though he was a testosterone driven wild man. None of which explained why Alex had stopped to see Lori first. She pushed it from her mind. The only thing jealousy did was make people miserable. Josh was living proof. The fact that Alex stopped to see Lori merely gave Carmen time to get cleaned up.

Behind her, Josh roared his engine as he turned the truck around, and slung gravel on

the road as he took off. He'd get glad the same way he got mad. Maybe he'd even think about what she said.

Three goats were on the porch. She glanced around to see if a gate was open. Nothing. There must be a bad spot in the fence. It couldn't be too far away from the house. They hadn't wandered that far today. She shooed the goat back into the pasture and grabbed a pair of linesman pliers and some bailing wire from the barn. Ed lifted his head and nickered, but he continued to work on the salt block when she didn't call him. By the time she could saddle him, she could be in the hills.

Somewhere in the distance a horn honked. Even eighty acres couldn't hold back the population growth in this area. She wandered along the fence line examining every post for possible weakness. No brush grew within three feet of the fence. Wasn't it like a goat? Twenty acres and they were always at the fence line, poking their heads through to eat the brush on the other side. Ed whinnied down by the barn, and then nickered in a higher tone. It was getting close to feeding time.

Some of the more friendly goats had followed her up the hill and they were ranging out ahead. Hopefully they wouldn't find the spot and get out again before she could fix it . . . and then she saw it - a wallowed out place under the fence. Some hunter's dog had probably dug it out. Dog? At that moment one of the goats darted by her, bleating in terror. She swung around to see what had frightened the goat and the hair lifted on the back of her neck. Four dogs were trotting across the low bluff on the other side of the fence. The lead dog was the Chow she had recognized the night the dogs attacked Brutus. Suddenly Brutus was at her side, snarling and trying to push her away. Her one thought was to plug the hole so the dogs couldn't get through. She searched around and found a large rock. Grabbing the edge of it, she tugged it toward the hole. It got hung up on a stump and she had to yank from another direction to dislodge it. She glanced up at the dogs. She wasn't going to make it.

"Come on, Brutus!" she yelled as she headed for the barn.

The proximity of the snarls behind told her she wasn't going to make it to the barn, either. She visually selected a tree ahead that looked easy to climb. Brutus was on his own. That was when she saw the red dog running through the trees. Obviously he had already been inside the fence when she found the hole. Running from it was probably the worst thing she could do, but panic had set in and her legs were under control of her mind. She screamed, racing for the tree and knowing she didn't have a chance of outrunning the dog. Suddenly Brutus was at her side again, lunging to meet the red dog.

It took her a moment to separate the pounding of her heart from the sound of hooves striking earth. Ed was running beside her, and then a strong arm was plucking her from the ground. Ed plunged to a stop and Alex pulled her up into the saddle with him. He jerked a rifle from its scabbard and swung it around with one arm, firing it into the air.

The sound echoed off the bluffs and the dogs retreated. Brutus started after them, snarling and barking his disgust.

"Are you all right?" Alex asked anxiously.

Too breathless to respond, she nodded, and he lowered her to the ground.

"Can you get Brutus to take the goats back to the barn?"

She nodded again. "Then do it. I'll be down in a few minutes. I want to see if I can track them this time."

"Be careful," she finally gasped.

"Go!"

"Brutus," she yelled. "Bring them in."

Brutus stopped and eyed the dogs reluctantly. Finally he abandoned the chase and started rounding up the goats. Together they got the goats in the barn and locked the doors. It was in her mind to go back up the hill and check on Alex when she saw Josh pull up at the gate. She ran up the drive toward him.

“Josh, hurry. The dogs are back. Alex went after them on Ed.”

Josh pulled his truck through the gate and leaped out, grabbing his shotgun from the rack behind the seat. “Did he have a gun?”

She nodded, and then stiffened as Ed came out of the hills - riderless. “Alex!” She screamed, and raced toward the field.

“Carmen!” Josh grabbed her arm. “Stay here. I’ll go after him.”

“Hurry!”

Josh vaulted the fence and raced up the hill, only to stop in surprise as Alex emerged from the trees riding a horse colored enough like Ed to be his twin. He shook his head and turned back to Carmen, leaping the fence again in a single bound. Together they watched as Alex put the horse down the hill, his body moving gracefully with the motion of the horse.

“I’ll give him one thing. Your little st . . . Texan is quite a horseman.”

Carmen glanced up at him and smiled. “He’s quite a man, and he just saved my life.” She shrugged. “For what it’s worth.”

He put an arm around her shoulder gazed down at her thoughtfully. “It’s worth a lot to me, little sister.”

She smiled and hugged his waist. “I can’t tell you how wonderful those words sound.”

He squeezed her shoulder. “I took your advice, and I got myself engaged. Now I’ve got me a score to settle.” He strode up to Alex as he joined them.

“Listen you little st . . .” he shot a quick look at Carmen. “Stay away from my girl.”

Alex raised his brows. “Your girl? Have you got a number stamped on every girl in the county? Why don’t you make up your mind and stick to just one?”

Then it was true. Alex was interested in Lori. Why not? They were the perfect couple – and Lori didn’t want children.

Well, at least she had been spared the embarrassment of telling him she still hadn’t figured out what God was trying to tell her. Poor Alex - out of the frying pan and into the fire.

“I’ve got my mind made up,” Josh responded testily. “And you’ve been horning in on the action. Now just to show you what a nice guy I can be, I’m inviting you to an engagement party tonight at Fred’s Hickory Inn. Six O’clock. You be there to show her what a good sport you are.”

Alex shifted his gaze to Carmen. “Is it true?”

She nodded. It didn’t give her much pleasure to win by default. Especially when she wasn’t sure she could hold him.

He grimaced as he jammed the rifle down into its boot. He shook his head. “My loss is your gain, Josh. I only hope you can make her happy. Don’t ask for my blessing, though, because you’re not going to get it.”

He swung the horse around and headed down the hill toward the creek. He’d be back after a while and they could talk. Maybe by then she could make up her mind - if he was still interested.

Alex didn’t come back. Maybe that was what finally opened her eyes. It hit her as she was dressing to go to the party. Neither Alex nor children were the key to

happiness - she was. She could go on feeling sorry for herself because she couldn't have children, or she could accept the cards that had been dealt her and settle for less than perfection. If she searched for the rest of her life, she might never find a better mate than Alex. After twenty or thirty years of marriage, they would still be alone together, whether or not they had any children. What she needed was a little of that stuff she had been pitching at Josh . . . trust. That was why everything was working out for everyone else. Planning ahead was a good thing up to a point. After that it was obsession. Somewhere, somehow, everyone had to release themselves to chance. Alex had learned that. Why was it so hard for *her*? Probably for the same reason it had been for him so many years. Because he didn't realize what he was doing.

Was it too late? Could she win back what she had thrown away? Katie was wrong. Alex could make her happy - if she would let him.

Chapter Fourteen

Under the circumstances, Carmen didn't want to drive Alex's truck, so she accepted Josh and Lori's invitation to ride with them. At a quarter to seven they were seated at a table with Bill and Katie. The waitress approached the table.

"Are you ready to order?"

"No," Josh answered, pointing to an empty chair beside Carmen. "We have one more guest."

The waitress nodded and left them. Carmen frowned at Josh.

"He won't be here."

Josh took a sip of his drink. "Sure he will. He squinted at his watch in the dim light. "He still has ten minutes." He patted Lori's hand. "He's full of surprises, isn't he?"

Lori laughed. "I still can't believe you did that. Poor Alex. Beating his brains out trying to get that log house built and you're suspecting him of courting me. When would he find the time? He was with Carmen almost every minute he was in the state. And then there's his latest venture."

The conversation was moving a little fast. Carmen stared at Lori. "What log house?"

Josh eyed Carmen skeptically. "*What house?* she says. As if you don't know. Don't play innocent with us. You've got to know he had that log house built." When she continued to stare at him blankly, he shook his head in disbelief. "And I thought *I* was the last to know. You've got to be joking - the house overlooking yours."

The log house on the hill? Why would Alex build a house there? Of course, he liked the land around her farm - but building a house was a major investment, especially *that* one. Apparently his relationship with Lori was mostly business. So why had he challenged Josh? And then she knew. Because he thought she and Josh were discussing *their* engagement, not Lori and Josh. Would he be here tonight? He said they weren't going to get his blessing, so it was highly unlikely. They might as well get started without him. The sooner they finished, the sooner she could find him and explain. What if he had gone back to Texas? No, he had the house - and whatever he was working on now. She glanced at Lori.

"What's this latest venture you mentioned?"

Lori smiled. "The clinic. I know he mentioned that to you because he told me he did."

Carmen glanced at Lori and then at Katie.

"Clinic? I knew he planned to build a clinic sometime, but I thought . . ."

Carmen felt her face getting hot. Did they think she was lying about the house? Obviously they thought there was something sordid to hide.

A disturbance at the entrance caught their attention and Carmen turned to see Alex striding purposefully across the floor toward them. His attention was riveted on her as he altered his course to stop at the table in front of her.

"I can't let you go through with this, Carmen. Not when you're still in love with me. We can work this thing out . . ."

His voice faded off as he realized that Lori and Josh were sitting at the opposite end

of the table from Carmen. His neck turned red.

“This is something you’ve all cooked up, isn’t it?”

Josh laughed. “Alex, have a seat there beside Carmen. This engagement dinner is for Lori and me.”

Alex glanced around at the interested faces at the tables near them, and pulled out the chair. He sat down beside Carmen and scooted his chair in. Sliding an arm across the back of Carmen’s chair, he leaned close, speaking softly in her ear.

“Fill me in. I’m making a fool of myself.”

All eyes were on them as Carmen turned to him.

“You’re in good company. It seems we were all a little lost. Briefly: Josh thought you were chasing Lori so he told you to knock it off. When you didn’t deny it, I thought it must be true. I didn’t know you thought Josh and I were engaged.” She paused and frowned at him. “It’s all your fault, you know. “Why didn’t you tell anybody about the house?”

He glanced at Lori and shrugged. “I wanted it to be a surprise. I didn’t know it was creating a problem.”

His gaze traveled around the faces at the table and came to rest on Carmen.

“I can’t believe you guys. I’ve been openly courting Carmen from day one, but all I have to do is see Lori a couple of times and you think we’re romantically involved.”

“Day one?” Katie said, giving Alex a scolding look. “You told me you were coming up to see the goats give birth.”

He shook his head. “No, you assumed that - and I merely kept my mouth shut.” His eyes twinkled with humor. “If you’d been doing that for the last year, I wouldn’t have thought about coming up here. The picture was the last straw.”

Katie stared at him. “I thought you were determined to remain a bachelor.” Her gaze sifted to Carmen. “I hope you two have considered all the problems.”

Carmen shot Katie a warning look. “We still have a lot to discuss.” She glanced back at Alex. “After dinner.”

The soft chocolate gaze met hers and the smooth lips tipped up slightly at the corners.

“My place or yours?”

She blushed. “Yours. I want to see this house everybody else knew about. Do you give tours?”

His hand found hers under the table and he laced his fingers through hers.

“I think we could work out something.” He glanced around the table again. “I believe this dinner is for Josh and Lori.”

The attention shifted back where it belonged and stayed there for the rest of the dinner. Carmen ate with her left hand, unwilling to let loose of Alex for one second.

When dinner was over, Alex escorted her out the door, leaving the rest of the party talking in low tones. His truck was in the parking lot, so he had been back to her house. Had he seen Josh pick her up? She smoothed the folds of her skirt nervously and waited for him to open the subject, but he was silent until they reached the log house.

He led her across the wide porch and unlocked the door, flipping on the light. Carmen gasped as they stepped into the empty living room. The room was large, with a hardwood floor and a huge fireplace. A large bay window sported a roomy window seat.

“I didn’t get any curtains or furniture yet. I thought those were things you might like to buy.”

She glanced up at him. Was that supposed to be a proposal? Surely Alex would come up with something better than that. Of course, a proposal of marriage was something that didn't come easy for him.

"It's beautiful," she responded. "I like the window seat. It overlooks my farm, doesn't it?"

"That it does." His voice was husky as he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the window seat. There he lowered her to the cushions. He kicked off his boots and sat down beside her, leaning back against the wall. "Come here." He pulled her next to him, so that her back was leaning against his chest. "Let's talk."

Comfortable as the position was, it was hard to relax. Her heart was knocking around inside her chest like an egg in a blender. Was he finally going to propose?

He kissed her neck softly. "About this problem of having children. There are other options. You could still have a child. It wouldn't physically be mine, but there's more to being a father than the time it takes to plant the seed."

She shook her head. "I could never do something like that. If God wants us to have children, it will happen. Otherwise, I can live with it. All I want is you."

He was silent a long time. Had she pushed him too far again? Was he working up the courage to ask? Why was it so difficult? Finally he cleared his throat.

"Let's not wait, Carmen. There's no reason to wait any longer. We love each other. That's what matters, not a formality that only creates more stress. I can't wait to make you mine - completely."

She stiffened. No wonder he was having so much trouble expressing himself. He wasn't proposing. He was propositioning her - again. And he must know what her answer would be.

"What do you say?" he asked softly.

She brought her elbow around into his ribs and the air escaped his lungs in a startled groan of protest. She jerked away from him.

"Honestly, Alex. How many times do you have to be told no?"

He stared at her, obviously puzzled by her refusal. "What ever happened to, *I just want you?* I wish you'd make up your mind."

"I have. I made up my mind when I was a young girl. I'm not going to go all the way until I get married."

He frowned. "Well, what did you think I was talking about?" Comprehension suddenly invaded the dark eyes and he shook his head. "Let me start all over - in a way I know you'll understand."

He rose from the window seat and turned to face her. Going down on one knee, he fished in his shirt pocket and came out with a diamond engagement ring.

Carmen caught her breath and waited. Finally!

He gazed up into her eyes. "Will you marry me, Carmen?"

Her heart skipped a beat. She closed her eyes and said a prayer of thanks before she answered him.

"Yes," she whispered.

He stood and pulled her into his arms.

"I promise you won't be sorry, Carmen. I'll make you happy. I'll love and cherish you - protect you."

She hugged him. "I know you will, and I'll never betray you."

He slipped the ring on her finger. "Now, I have something else for you."

He tugged on his boots and led her through a large formal dining room. She peeked into a sparkling kitchen with a dishwasher and range - and an overhead oven. Then he

led her out patio doors through a small courtyard, down steps and a concrete walkway to a tidy barn. There he introduced her to Princess, the horse he had been riding earlier.

"I bought her for you. She'll be the first horse on your ranch." He directed her to the next stall. She had this pretty little filly with her, and I didn't have the heart to separate them.

Carmen gasped, covering her mouth with both hands. "Oh my gosh, Alex!"

She held one hand out and the filly nickered, stretching her nose out to touch the hand cautiously. She was mostly white with freckles across her haunches and a few spots on her neck and chest. Brown eyes with long white lashes stared at Carmen with obvious curiosity.

"She's beautiful," Carmen finally said.

Alex chuckled. "Her name is Casper. The owner said she was friendly, but he hasn't had time to work with her. She's almost a year old. They're both registered Appaloosa's.

Carmen patted the mare on the neck. "They're both beautiful. Thank you." She hugged Alex again. "I didn't notice she was a female, today. I thought it was Ed. And when he came out of those trees without you . . ." her voice broke. "I thought the worst."

He stroked Carmen's hair. "And when I came out of those trees, I thought the worst too . . . when I saw you and Josh together."

Carmen gazed up at him. "I'm sorry. He was only comforting me, though." She leaned back and met his somber gaze. "I don't understand. If you were courting me from day one, as you said at the restaurant, then why were you so reluctant to get married?"

He squeezed her shoulders. "I wasn't reluctant to get married. I was concerned about marrying a woman who was obviously still interested in another man. Every time I set the scene to ask you, his name would crop up . . . or *he* would. And then when you said you didn't want to adopt children, I thought I didn't have a right to ask you."

She touched his lips with her fingers. "You were afraid I would drop you and marry Josh - because he could give me what I wanted, just like that Nashville agent could give Tessa what she wanted." She shook her head. "I'm not Tessa, Alex."

"I know. You're everything to me. She was using me to get everything she needed." He smiled tenderly. "And you wouldn't take anything from me."

"Does my independent nature trouble you?"

He laughed. "No, I love it. Sometimes it's kind of hard to figure you out, though. You have a habit of trying to hide your feelings - or disguise them. And then you're such a strange combination of the past and present. You want the man to wear the pants, but you're determined to do everything yourself."

She gazed up at him. "Oh Alex, I can't help but wonder if some day when I'm bloated and cranky, you'll wish you hadn't given up your freedom."

He chuckled softly and pulled her close. "Sweetheart, if I didn't feel sorry about that at some point during our marriage, I'd probably be the first man. There will be times like that for both of us. From now on we have to work at this relationship - harder than we've ever worked at anything. Determination will make it work - determination and love."

His lips pressed warmly against hers briefly and then he drew back to look into her eyes.

"Lucky thing for us - we have plenty of both."

They walked back to the house, their arms around each other's waist. He led her to the window seat again, and they sat there watching the sun set. It was so peaceful and she felt so content with his arms around her. They talked for hours about their plans together. This was the way she had always imagined it would be. He was the man she had always dreamed of, even though she had not met him yet. Still, what was the most amazing of all was that she fulfilled his dreams as well. Finally things were working out for both of them.

Epilogue

Alex replaced the last desk drawer and closed the box of personal items on his desk. Gerald leaned against the office wall with one shoulder, watching him absently.

"I can't believe you're actually going to do this."

Alex glanced up. "Get married?"

Gerald lifted sandy brows. "Quit this job and move to Arkansas to be a veterinarian. You're the best salesman we have."

Alex shrugged. "Being a veterinarian is my lifelong dream."

Gerald grunted. "Any second thoughts?"

Alex retrieved Carmen's picture from the desk and gazed at it, answering Gerald absently.

"About getting married?"

"About leaving the firm," Gerald said.

"None," Alex said confidently, his attention never leaving the picture.

"Okay," Gerald's said in a dry tone. "Do you have any second thoughts about getting married?"

Alex lifted his gaze from the picture and regarded Gerald reflectively.

"Not really."

He had plenty of concern about holding up his end of the bargain. He had promised to protect her, but Carmen didn't think she needed protection. She did, and deep inside she wanted to be protected – physically and emotionally. In some ways she was still a little girl.

Gerald's smile was sardonic. "Why did I get the feeling you wanted to talk about getting married?"

Alex gave his full attention to tucking the photo into the box through a gap in the top. "I have no idea."

"I can't figure you," Gerald said, moving away from the wall. "You're the one who taught me not to put all my eggs in one basket. You bought a clinic, built a house and now you're quitting your job to get married to a woman you've known for less than a year."

Alex gave up trying to fit the picture into the gap in the box and laid it on top of it. He looked up at Gerald.

"I didn't buy the clinic and build the house for her."

Gerald's tone was sarcastic. "I sure hope you didn't tell *her* that."

Alex shrugged. "I like the country and the laid-back people. Besides, my sister and her husband are there, you know."

There was no reason to tell Carmen that he had decided to purchase the land adjoining hers when Lori first told him about it – even before they had discussed the clinic.

Gerald eyed him with mild amusement. "So, what part are you doing for the bride?"

Alex smiled. "The marrying part."

Gerald laughed. "If you're too busy to take her on the honeymoon, let me know."

He stuck out a hand to Alex. "Well, buddy, I hope you're getting as good a deal as

she is.”

Alex shook his hand. “Thanks. I am. She’s quite a woman.”

Gerald walked to the door and then stopped, looking back at Alex. “Tell me, what’s the most intriguing thing about her?”

Alex thought about it for a minute. “There isn’t any one thing. She’s a beautiful, sweet, innocent girl.”

Gerald considered the information. “Girl . . .” He said reflectively. “She needs you.”

Alex eyed him thoughtfully. “Maybe we need each other. She needs someone to take care of her and I need someone to take care of.”

Gerald made a face. “There are lots of women out there who meet that requirement. They’ve been chasing you for a long time. Why this one?”

Alex lifted his brows and turned his palms up to the ceiling in defeat. “Beats me.”

Gerald turned to the door. “Love,” he said as he walked out of the office. “If I live to be a thousand years old, I’ll never understand it.”

After he left, Alex picked up the picture and sat down in the plush office chair for the last time. Leaning back, he studied the picture. She was the one. He knew it the day they met, but it was impossible to say exactly why. Something about the way she smiled up at him, as though no one else existed . . . and the way she watched him when she thought he wasn’t aware she was looking. That amethyst gaze openly displayed every emotion. Browsing her face told him everything he needed to know about her thoughts. The soft voice and the little dimple that played at the corner of her mouth when she teased him . . . she was so beautiful – and so utterly unaware of her charm.

He wasn’t entirely honest with Gerald, though. He did have second thoughts about this marriage. Carmen wasn’t the only one who wanted children so badly. He had long ago accepted the fact that he would have no biological children. In fact, he had already looked into adoption. Carmen would probably eventually warm to that alternative, but she needed time to adjust to the idea. He’d have to be patient with her.

As to Carmen’s idea about him being the final decision maker, he was still skeptical. For her, it was a romantic idea. All would go well until they had conflicting ideas about how something should be done. She was naïve enough to think that wouldn’t happen. To be honest, thinking about the responsibility of making those decisions was overwhelming at times. No one made good decisions 100% of the time.

Last, but not least, was Josh. Carmen expected him to switch to being a big brother now. Maybe that was what he planned to do, but the way he looked at her was hardly brotherly. From the expression on Lori’s face at those times, she didn’t think the romance was over either – at least not for Josh.

But Carmen was more than a beautiful face on an equally beautiful body. She was passionate . . . about everything. More than likely their marriage would be strained at times, but he couldn’t picture it ever being dull. In spite of her strict moral standards on premarital relationships, Carmen was obviously stirred deeply by desire. The way the pulse throbbed in her neck when he kissed it, and the way she sounded out of breath when she pushed him away – the feel of her breasts when she molded her body to his . . .

He stood and put the picture on top of the box. It was best not to think about those things. He could get into enough trouble without getting primed for it.

He grabbed the box and walked out of the room, shutting the door without looking back. A new and exciting life lay ahead of him. Few pleasant memories lay behind him in that office.

Alex turned toward the stairs, avoiding the front office. He'd already said good bye to all of them earlier. The last thing he wanted was another tear session with the girls. It was his wedding, not his funeral.

He put the box behind the seat in the truck and climbed in, laying the picture beside him. The movers had taken the last of his things from the apartment this morning and he had returned the key. Home was in Arkansas now, over five hundred miles away, and he planned to sleep there tonight.